

**‘WHO WILL EMPLOY THEM?’
QUESTIONS AS ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES IN
NIGERIAN JOB PORTALS ONLINE**

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of questions for engagement by writers in discussions in online job portals. Based on a mini corpus of 40 postings together with their comments consisting of 139,104 words extracted from *Naijahotjobs* and *Nairaland* job portal discussions, the study addresses the functional use of questions in the presentation of writer's stance, the possible variation of questions with the topics being discussed, the rhetorical functions of questions and the use of question clusters in discussions. The analysis shows that two major kinds of questions were frequently used for engagement – *wh-* and *yes-no* questions. This represents two levels of complexity in interrogation – open-ended and closed-ended levels. It also reveals that the two most prominent groups in the discussions (motivational writers and graduate job seekers) used questions differently for engagement purposes. Motivational writers who typically assumed the position of experts used questions to engage the cognition of readers and sometimes to threaten their face, while graduate job seekers tended to ask information-seeking and confirmation questions based on issues agitating their minds about their unemployment situation. In addition, graduate job seekers asked what I refer to as ‘protest questions’, which focus on social issues connected with unemployment. This study therefore shows that beyond networking and getting relevant information about how to secure employment and advance in a career, job portals have provided a space for interrogating, confronting and guiding job seekers on the social problem of unemployment in Nigeria.

Key words: questions, engagement strategy, job portal, Nigeria, unemployment

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Introduction

Identification of rhetorical processes in spoken and written discourse has been the focus of various studies on interactional discourse. Halliday (1985) identifies the interpersonal component of language which deals with how speakers and writers maintain as they build relationships through discourse. Discourse is essentially interactional, because in the process of constructing discourses, language users consciously make choices from the interpersonal systems of language (Hyland 2005a, 2011). In the digital age, paper-based media are gradually being substituted with electronic interactive media and the research focus is being widened to identify these interactional elements in online discourse. Discussion boards or message boards which are online forums where users can share and discuss information and opinions afford participants the opportunity to develop their own position and self-presentation and to signal a relation to others as they get involved in public discussions. Myers (2010) observes that discussion boards help many people to express their own ideas and receive the opinions of others, and almost anyone who has access to the internet has the opportunity to read and comment in the several discussion boards online. Studies on writers' engagement have been carried out on academic writing focusing on writers' mode of initiating interaction with their readers (Hyland 1999, 2005a; Hyland and Guinda 2012). Scholarly works on screen-based media writing have largely concentrated on asynchronous learning environments (Hewings and Coffin 2007; Hewings 2012; Webmann and McCauley 2014). A few others have focused on the description of writer-oriented features in interaction in journalistic commentaries and public blogs (Arrese and Perucha 2006; Langlotz and Locher, 2006; Myers 2010; Rahimpour 2014). Authorities have agreed that writers engage their readers cognitively and affectively through the use of stance features, such as cognitive verbs, stance adverbs and discourse particles. These are regular features of online discussions.

The use of questions underlies the essential dialogic nature of conversation and allows writers to stimulate the involvement of their readers. Since online discussion can be seen as involving the social process of interaction, it can be assumed that writers look for ways of inviting engagement and leading other participants to their viewpoints in the discourse (Hyland 2002b). In addition, questions are used engage people cognitively and affectively (Hawkins 1995).

This study assumes that the use of questions as a strategy for engagement and the distribution of their functions will vary in different threaded discussion topics in online job portals just as they vary across academic disciplines and genres, as reported in Hyland (2002b). The study therefore investigates the manifestations of question as

an engagement resource by writers in discussions of different topics in online job portals.

Youth Unemployment in Nigeria

Youth unemployment is a world-wide phenomenon. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) recently indicated that “the world is facing a worsening youth employment crisis: young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults” (<http://www.ilo.org>). However, this challenge is more pronounced in the developing economies of the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa (*World Youth Report 2011*) and Nigeria is said to have one of the worst youth unemployment rates in sub-Saharan Africa. Thus according to a United Nations report published by *Premium Times* of September 13, 2012, “two in five Nigerian youths are unemployed”. The rate of graduate unemployment has particularly been growing in the last few years due to the increase in the number of tertiary institutions in the country. Nigeria currently has 123 universities with several hundreds of polytechnics and colleges, which turn out an annual average of 2.8 million fresh graduates, with only 10% being sure of securing employment (Ochonma 2011).

In order to create a network for Nigerian job seekers and those seeking to advance their careers, a number of websites have sprung up in the last seven years. Some of the popular ones are Naijahotjobs, JobsSearchNigeria, Nigeriajobslink, Nigeriabestjobs, CVShore, Ngcareers.com, Joblistnigeria, Hotnigerianjobs, Latestnigerianjobs, Jobberman, Gblcareers, and Naijabestjobs. In addition to serving as platforms for job seeking, some of these websites have discussion groups or boards, where some of these issues arising from the acute unemployment problem in the country are being discussed daily.

The process of discourse production by the participants in these portals is not free from the social conditions of production of such text. In the process of discussions, participants in the job portals engage other participants through different rhetorical strategies, such as expressing their authorial identity, questioning and directing them. These interactional engagements are not unconnected with the nature of topics being discussed and the participants’ perception of the rhetorical context.

Discussions in Jobs Portals Online

Job portals online, also called employment websites, are websites designed for job position placements, job search and career advice. They are also designed in such a way that a job applicant can load their application and credentials to potential employers and recruiters for review. Job portals offer different services, such as

providing access to job advertisements, advice on how to get recruited for a desired kind of job, tips on how to answer interview questions and so forth. Most job portals require people to register in order to enjoy the benefits they offer. Job portals also provide opportunities for members to share and discuss issues related to their experiences in discussion forums. The idea of job portals has existed in the United States since the early 1990s, however it did not get to Nigeria until about fifteen years later. This popularization of job portals is not unconnected with the challenge of youth unemployment that the country has been facing in the last one and a half decades. These job portals have sprung up to cater for the needs of the growing number of the unemployed Nigerian youths. Many of these youths who are graduates from Nigerian universities, monotechnics, polytechnics and colleges of education participate in the several discussions that go on daily on the discussion boards in these job portals.

Discussions typically centre on their challenges in securing employment in the country. One of the major challenges faced is that of exploitation by the numerous employment consultants who extort money from jobseekers, promising to secure employment for them. Discussions will normally be generated by any posting by a member about a recruitment exercise that is about to take place or has taken place, some educative or motivational writings for members, job vacancies, news items, and so forth.

Membership of most job portals can be categorised into three groups. The first group, which appears to be the largest, is the unemployed graduates, who have registered in order to have access to information on job opportunities and tips on how to get their desired kinds of job. The second group is the motivational writers, who sometimes claim to be employment consultants. They provide information on job vacancies and write to motivate the job seekers. The last group is comprised of some employed graduates who want to advance in their careers. They sometimes share their personal experiences on employment.

The number of responses and the directions of discussions are determined by how interesting the posting is to the participants. Sometimes discussions become argumentative, with members trying to position themselves on the crowded terrain of other bloggers and commenters (Myers 2010). During arguments or debates, members are typically divided along the lines of their strong feelings and attitudes towards any particular proposition. In the process of argument, negatively marked online behaviours, such as flaming,¹ trolling² and thread jacking³ are commonly displayed (du Preez 2014; Taiwo 2011; Taiwo 2014).

¹ Flaming is an aggressive behaviour in which participants in online discourse expresses intense anger manifesting in the use of profane and insulting language aimed at causing targets mental pain,

Interactional Engagement

Engagement or positioning within the discourse and the rhetorical functions enacted by language users have been the focus of linguistic research over the last few decades. A group of researchers have conceptualized interactions between text producer and their texts and between text producers and users. They are particularly concerned with the way an author engages with and positions him/herself in relation to other voices in the discourse. The systemic-functional framework has provided insights and theoretical support for such research efforts (Halliday 1994; Eggins, 1994). Engagement, which is a subsystem of appraisal, deals with how writers/speakers position themselves in the text. Engagement aims at building a connection with participants in a discourse in order to stress solidarity. It has to do with how writers/speakers make predictions about how readers/listeners are likely to react to their arguments and craft their texts to explicitly address them (Hyland 2001a).

Different terms have been employed by researchers to refer to the linguistic resources employed to foster writer/speaker-reader/listener interaction in discourse. Some of the terms include: *stance* (Biber and Finegan 1989; Kärkkäinen 2003; Hyland 2005; Biber 2006), *metadiscourse* (Crismore 1989; Hyland 2005b; Hyland and Tse 2004), and *appraisal* (Martin 2000; Rothery and Stengling 2000; Macken-Horarik 2003). While a number of scholars have reported studies on non-academic interactional discourse, especially in online contexts (Arrese and Perucha 2006; Langlotz and Locher 2006; Myers 2010; Rahimpour 2014; Putman, Ford & Tancock 2012), many research efforts have been directed at investigating stance taking in academic writing as a social and communicative activity, and they generally examine the various ways writers project themselves into their work to signal their communicative intentions.

embarrassment and disgrace. Such messages, which are called "flames," may be posted within online discussion forums or newsgroups, or sent via e-mail or instant messages.

² Trolling is the act of purposefully antagonising others on the Internet with the primary intent of provoking them into an emotional response. The goal of trolling is to bait and provoke other group members, often with the result of drawing them into fruitless argument and diverting attention from the stated purposes of the group. Trolling is common in an online community such as a forum, a chatroom, a blog, and so forth.

³ Thread-jacking is the taking over of a thread on a discussion forum or message board and twisting the subject of the original posting in such a way that participants now respond to the thread jacker's input.

Interactional discourses are characterized by interactive features which reveal how writers engage with readers. These features are generally referred to as metadiscourse. Hyland (2005b: 37) defines metadiscourse as:

the cover term for the self-reflective expression used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community.

Hyland also identifies three key principles upon which the model of metadiscourse is based. These principles are: (i) that metadiscourse is distinct from propositional aspects of language; (ii) that the term metadiscourse refers to those aspects of the text that embody reader-writer interactions; and (iii) that metadiscourse distinguishes relations which are external to the text from those that are internal. According to Hyland (2008: 155), the interactional metadiscourse features

impart an interpersonal tenor to a piece of writing: signaling the level of personality a writer invests in a text through self-mention, hedges, attitude and the markers of reader involvement...

Hyland (2005b) proposed a model of metadiscourse which comprises two categories: interactive and interactional categories. The interactive category of metadiscourse deals with writers' awareness of their receivers, and their attempts to accommodate their interests and needs, and to make the argument satisfactory for them. The sub-categories of interactive metadiscourse are listed below:

Transitions - express relations between main clauses (e.g., *in addition, but, thus, and*);

Frame markers - used to indicate text boundaries (e.g., *finally, in conclusion*);

Endophoric markers - refer to information in other parts of the text, typically pro-forms;

Evidentials - refer to information from other texts (e.g., *according to...*);

Code glosses - devices used to elaborate propositional meanings (e.g., *that is, namely, such as*).

The interactional part is about writers' attempts to make their views explicit, and to engage readers by anticipating their objections and responses to the text. They are:

Hedges - used to withhold commitment and open dialogue (*perhaps, might, possibly*);

Boosters - used to signal certainty or close dialogue (e.g., *obviously, of course, definitely*);

Attitude markers - appraises the text producer's attitude to a proposition (*unfortunately, surprisingly, certainly*);

Self-mentions - refers to the self-presentation of the author through first person pronouns and possessives (*I, me, we, my, our*); and

Engagement markers - address readers explicitly (*you can see that, note that, consider*).

Hyland in another study (Hyland 2005a) notes that interactions in academic writings are managed through stance and engagement. Stance, which has to do with the expression of textual 'voice', involves the use of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention. Engagement, on the other hand, which deals with how writers relate to their readers with respect to the positions advanced in the text, employs the rhetorical resources of reader pronouns, directives, questions, shared knowledge and personal asides (Hyland 2005a: 177). This study focuses on the use of questions as engagement resources and for rhetorical purposes in online job portal discussions.

Investigations of features of interpersonal engagements have shown that various texts and languages manifest different ways of engaging the participants. The main features of stance and engagement could significantly influence styles of writing. For instance, different academic writings manifest a variety of rhetorical functions which are realized by different linguistic resources. Some aspects of academic discourse that have been researched include research articles (Dahl 2004; Toumi 2009); dissertation acknowledgements (Hyland 2003); book reviews (Alcaraz-Ariza 2002); abstracts (Hyland and Tse 2005; Gillaerts 2010); journals descriptions (Hyland and Tse 2010), L2 writing (Hyland 2004), EFL textbooks (Alemi and Isavi 2012), and so forth. Investigations of the features of writings show that successful writer-reader rapport is negotiated through the use of hedges (Hyland 1998), imperatives (Swales et al. 1998), evaluation (Hunston and Thompson 2000), self-representation (Hyland 2001b), directives (Hyland 2002a), and questions (Hyland 2002b).

Ken Hyland in many of his studies has described the deployment of metadiscursive elements in different kinds of academic writing. He describes metadiscourse as "self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text, to the writer, and to the imagined readers of that text" (Hyland 2004: 133). In his study of doctoral and masters dissertations written by Hong Kong students, he proposed a model of metadiscourse as the interpersonal resources required to present propositional material appropriately in different disciplinary and genre contexts. He was also able to show how metadiscourse can be seen as a means of uncovering something of the rhetorical and social distinctiveness of disciplinary communities.

Different patterns of metadiscourse use have been found in different genres of academic discourse. Self-mention a major engagement strategy identified in academic writing. According to Hyland (2001: 223),

first person pronouns and self-citation are not just stylistic optional extras but significant ingredients for promoting a competent scholarly identity and gaining accreditation for research claims.

Scholars have identified the possible functions self mention can perform in research articles, such as, creating a research space, organizing the discourse, outlining procedure and/or methodology, explaining the researcher's previous work, reporting or summarizing findings, disputing other researchers' findings, or indicating potential future directions for research (Harwood 2005; Krapivkina 2014). It is also agreed that the use of self-mention differs in different disciplines (Hyland 2001) and it is conditioned by the specific cultural context in which the academic writings are produced and distributed (Dueñas 2007).

The use of directives is also a subject of investigation in academic writing. Hyland observes that despite the fact that directive forms are considered as being potentially risky devices for interpersonal engagement due to their threat to the face of the reader, they are still employed to guide the reader through the text. Likewise,

the weight of their imposition varies between the functions expressed by particular devices, the authority relations constructed in different genres, and the conventions of preferred disciplinary argument forms. (Hyland 2002a: 236.)

Hyland (2002a) noted that the use of directives in students' research reports is considered risky because it suggests claiming authority, which these students did not wish to display. In textbooks however, "directives invoke a solid and competent writer in full command of the material" (Hyland 2002: 222) - the primary knower (Berry 1981), therefore, they are used to lead readers to the mastery of new skills and knowledge.

Questions in Interactive Discourse

Discourse studies and other functionally oriented analyses have examined the use of questions in conversations and identified their roles in eliciting verbal responses, thus marking power relations in asymmetrical discourses, such as teacher-pupil interactions and courtroom cross-examinations (Harris 1984; Raymond 2003, Smart and Marshall 2013). The use of interrogation in interactional discourse has also been studied in political interviews (Bull 1994; Gago and Silveira 2006) and doctor-patient talk (Harres 1998; Strivers and Heritage 2008). Several studies have also

examined the use of questions in academic writing (Webber 1992; Hyland 2002b). For instance, Hyland (2005a) analysed 240 research articles of eight different disciplines and found that questions were more prominent in the science and engineering papers, while reader pronouns were common in soft discipline papers due to their appeal to scholarly solidarity and presupposition of a set of mutual, discipline-identifying understandings. In another related study (Hyland 2002b), he investigates the use of questions in academic writing and found that while questions were a common strategy of engagement in expert-novice interaction, which is represented by textbook context, they were less frequent in other genres, such as research articles and student research reports. He also notes that questions are more frequently used in softer disciplines (philosophy, sociology, applied linguistics and marketing) than the hard ones (biology, physics and engineering). He relates this difference to the social and epistemological variations in these disciplines. Maintaining an effective degree of personal engagement with the reader is important for soft knowledge writers as their writing is more explicitly interpretive and less abstract than in the science and engineering.

Other studies on academic discourse demonstrate that questions are a "minor way of establishing a niche" in research article introductions, though generally seen as strategies to be avoided (Swales and Feak 1994: 74). Questions in academic discourse generally mark the presence of what Thompson (2001) calls 'reader-in-the-text', "whose attention is captured and selectively focused on key points or moments in the writer's argument" (Hyland 2002b). Webber (1994: 266) also notes that:

questions create anticipation, arouse interest, challenge the reader into thinking about the topic of the text, and have a direct appeal in bringing the second person into a kind of dialogue with the writer, which other rhetorical devices do not have to the same extent.

The use of interrogation in online discussion is the focus of Taiwo (2009). That study identifies the predominant use of interrogatives in political and culture-related threads to express sentiments, critique and lampoon and sometimes to project a comic conception of the society. While the study examined discussions in general purpose web portals, the present study investigates job portals discussions.

Interactional discourse studies conceive of interrogatives as multifunctional structures, whose exact functions are defined by their local interactional and sequential context. Some existing studies have focused on the use of questions in the asynchronous textual context of the computer-mediated environment (Waugh 1996; Muilenbeurg and Berg 2000; Blanchette 2007). Among other things, these studies

identify the linguistic structure and cognitive functions, as well as identify the pedagogical and communicative characteristics of questions asked in an online environment. Other issues that dominate the use of questions in online classrooms are frequency of questions and the cognitive level of questions. Blanchette (2007) for instance reports that participants in an asynchronous learning environment use fewer syntactic forms when compared with what obtains in face-to-face classrooms. Participants also exhibit higher levels of cognition. She then concludes that questions at higher levels of cognition stimulate more interaction, and more rhetorical questions are used to persuade, think aloud and indirectly challenge other participants.

While existing studies have agreed that the change in learning context from the familiar face-to-face environment to the computer-mediated environment affects the cognitive and affective processes, thereby affecting the types and functions of questions, the use of questions in non-educational online contexts has not received much attention. Linguistic studies of the use of questions for interactional engagement in online job portal discussions are almost non-existent. This may be due to the fact that online job portals communication is a relatively new experience. This present study will demonstrate how questions are used to express writers' purposes, organise texts, evaluate arguments and set up claims in online job portal discussions. The study is therefore interested in investigating the functional use of questions in the presentation of writer's stance, the possible variation of questions with the topics being discussed, the rhetorical functions of questions and the use of questions clusters in discussions.

Data and Methodology

This study is based on a mini corpus of 40 postings together with their comments consisting of 139,104 words extracted from two online discussion boards. They are *Naijahotjobs* and *Nairaland*. *Naijahotjobs* is a Nigeria graduate jobs and vacancies career forum, designated as a forum for job searchers and people who want to boost their career advancement. It is reputed to be the largest website for jobs and vacancies in Nigeria. It has four major sections: Hotjobs, which features job vacancies placements, Career Talk Centre, where educative and motivational information are placed, General Discussion, where people share their employment related experiences, and the Xtras, where participants can place their testimonies and suggest changes. The forum had 278,405 topics, 585,464 posts and 294,429 members (as at July 8, 2014). *Naijahotjobs* can be found at <http://www.naijahotjobs.com/>

Nairaland is a general interest website with several discussion sections, like entertainment, politics, romance, jokes, culture, religion, education, jobs/vacancies, fashion, sports, and so forth. I focused on the job/vacancies section, where activities

are similar to what obtains in *Naijahotjobs*. *Nairaland* is Nigeria's largest online forum and discussion portal. *Nairaland* had 1,197,966 members, 1,537,878 topics and more than 600,000 page views per day (as at July 8, 2014). The website can be found at <http://www.nairaland.com/>. The dialogical and conversational styles on the discussion portals reflect discourses characterized by exchanges of views and opinions. The members of these two forums are seen as having formed a virtual community that is characterized by linguistic as well as social variation.

Participants in these portals discuss several issues, mainly those related to their job seeking and career advancement. While some postings attract several comments, others do not. Postings that address topics that are generally debated offline tend to attract more comments than those that are merely informational in nature. As observed by Myers (2010: 265), “threads tend to fray over time, leading on to other discussions, either because of a deliberate deviation from the topic by one commenter, or because of the gradual mutation of one topic into another”. Also, as is typical of most discussion forums, there are trolls who start threads with controversial postings which usually generate heated debates. There are also trolls who wait for others to make postings before they bring in their disruptive comments (Taiwo 2014: 69).

Some of the topics that dominate discussions in the portals are: age requirements for employment, aptitude tests for job applicants, discrimination against mono and polytechnic graduates, the use of a quota system to fill vacant positions, desperation of graduates for white-collar jobs, employment agencies scams, class of degree and prospects of securing jobs, and how recruitment tests are conducted.

Findings and Discussions

An online community of graduate job seekers is a virtual community of people who share a common concern and are ready to share any information that will be beneficial to members. Questions were often used for inviting engagement and enabling members to share information. There were 345 questions overall in the corpus. The dominant question types were the *wh-* and *yes-no* forms. There were only two tag questions and one alternative question. Most of the questions were *wh-* forms (56.7%). Table 1 below shows the distribution of the question types.

Table 1: Frequency of question types

Q Type	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Wh- Question</i>	198	56.9
<i>Yes-No Question</i>	147	42.2

<i>Tag Question</i>	2	0.6
<i>Alternative Question</i>	1	0.3
Total	348	100

The results showed that *wh*- questions, which are generally referred to as open-ended questions, because they generally permit an unrestrained or free response, were predominantly used. *Yes-no* questions on the other hand are referred to as closed-ended questions, because they are restrictive and can be answered in a few words, typically one word or short phrases were next in terms of usage. Below are some of the kinds of questions typically asked:

1. **Guys, have you heard about joblink nigeria and xenal recruitment agency?** I think they are all fraudsters.
(NHJ 17: 419 recruitment agencies)
2. **Why should someone who is qualified for a job be denied the opportunity to get the job simply because he/she is above the stipulated age?** In this country of ours where the government of the day is not bothered about job creation, the employment field should be made a level playing ground for all qualified persons to get employed irrespective of their ages.
(NHJ 07: Age requirement is unconstitutional)
3. i got an invite frm uniosun. for those who have written b4, **did dey allow u to use calculator for ur maths?** pls i'd appreciate ur response.
(NLD 33: UNIOSUN ... who else got this?)
4. **Pls house does any1 have idea whether gtbank accept neco result?** cos i can see people emphasizing so much on waec. pls i nid rply ASAP.
(NLD 26: GT Bank test of Wednesday 20th June)

One major question that immediately comes to mind is this – what determines the kind of questions asked in online communication? The study reveals that the question types asked are closely connected with the kind of topic being discussed as well as the topic flow. As mentioned earlier, two prominent groups in online job portals are motivational writers and job seekers. Findings reveal that these groups used questions for different engagement purposes. For instance, most questions in motivational writings were rhetorical and they were typically used to engage readers' cognition. Take for instance the following questions from the corpus:

5. The bottom line is, **why are you still unemployed in spite of your serious efforts and strong desire to get the job of your choice?** Many expect a simple, short and

precise answer. Unfortunately there is nothing like that. The reason for this is that the employment process is complex, and usually in stages.

(NHJ 23: Things that can Go Wrong with your Job Search)

6. **Are you ambitious, serious minded, student, jobless or you are having financial difficulties?** This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. It is a never before exposed secrets compiled in the INTERNET MONEYMAKING Ebook.
(NLD 28: Job seekers group)
7. when your resume reveals a record of perhaps six jobs in eight years or when you are considered too young, too old, too short for heavy etc. **What is your defence for these questions and other uncomfortable questions that may come up?**
(NHJ 9: Job search fundamentals)

The questions in 5 – 7 are not just the typical information-seeking questions. They were used to bring the readers into the discourse arena in order to lead them to the writer's viewpoint. They were employed to challenge the reader to think about the issues being stressed. For instance, the question in 5 was used in the introductory paragraph of the motivational writing as an initial frame to foreground the discourse which was to come later. The entire discourse in 5 was meant to highlight things job seekers would need to know in order to secure their desired kind of job. The use of question here is a persuasive strategy for engaging the reader's interest. In 6, the polar question, which is also a frame for the two declarative sentences that follow, clearly identified the addressees – ambitious, serious-minded, student and jobless persons. The focus of this question on the problems potential readers can identify with is an attention-getter which has the potential of creating curiosity in the readers. In addition, it indirectly performs the act of promising by embedding some benefits for those who will eventually purchase the book being advertised. The question in 7 was constructed based on a hypothetical case and used to bring readers into an imaginary interview scenario. Findings also reveal that motivational writers used questions more as experts and primary knowers, "the person who already knows the information" (Berry 1981: 126). Their questions are mostly cognitively demanding, sometimes reflecting an authoritative discourse of experts as seen in the pedagogic schoolroom. Sometimes these motivational writers ask questions that threaten the face of their readers in order to drive home their points, as can be seen in 8.

8. Bottom line is, it's never too late to take a new step into building your own empire or life and give your children everlasting security, **what is your ambition, what drives you, what is your dream**, ask yourself, people are retiring, resigning or

been retrenched everyday from their JOB (Journey of Borrowers) with a peanut for pension and are thrown into the misery of poverty they thought they already guarded again cos they thought they had a job. **Is this not enough example, is the picture not clear enough that the journey you're about to set on is going to end in poverty. so why are you working, ask yourself, is it not to get richer and have a good life, so why does it always end in illness and strokes? I have a billion example of people who ended up like that.**

(NHJ 2: 80% job seekers failed NNPC aptitude test)

The title of the piece this extract was taken from is 'Mind Assassin Part 1'. The title of the write up depicts the goal of the writer – to manipulate the minds of readers by expunging an existing thought from it. The goal of this manipulation is obviously to get readers to change their job-seeking mentality and become employers themselves. The opening sentence, "NB: If you fail to read this extract, you can never be successful, ever again" sets the frame for the entire discourse. This, unlike earlier instances of questions, is an illegitimate expression of power through discourse. The writer went all out to use questions ranging from mild ones (the first three highlighted in the extract) to face-threatening ones (the fifth question) to engage the readers and lead them to the writer's viewpoint. In using face-threatening questions, the writer was trying to exercise social control of the readers by first trying to discursively control their minds, their beliefs, and then indirectly control their actions (van Dijk 2006).

Job seekers' questions can typically be divided into three kinds. The first one is information-seeking questions which typically come from job seekers in the forum. These questions sought answers to questions agitating the minds of the participants, which they believed other members of the forum could answer. There were also questions that arose in the context of debates, which were raised to demand cognition from others in the course of arguments. The third kind of questions is what I call 'protest questions', which implies that the enquirer was thinking aloud through the medium of interrogatives on some social problems. The last two were typically rhetorical. These question types are illustrated respectively in 9 – 11.

9. I just received invite from Uniosun for a test on saturday. I don't have my application letter wit me. **How did Ū guy do yours?**

(NLD 33: UNIOSUN ... who else got this?)

10. That was an unwise decision to take.. My God! Marriage as the Bible says, is Honourable before the Lord. **Are we saying that God that brought her a husband can't provide for them?**

(NHJ 10: Bride abandons wedding for NNPC job test)

11. Youths who have left sch 4 a long time and engaged in so many struggles in life are called to write exams under stress and confusion. What do the management expect?

(NHJ 2: 80% job seekers failed NNPC aptitude test)

Since these unemployed graduates are operating in the context of socio-economic exploitation and uncertainty about text messages they receive, they often need to verify the authenticity of the messages. Employment scammers within the recruitment process have continued to pose a threat to the chances of many jobless Nigerians in securing jobs. It is not an unusual experience for job seekers to receive SMS alerts inviting them for interviews, only to be scammed by the senders. An online portal therefore is not just a network for job seekers to socialise. It also provides them an avenue for getting informed about how to ensure they do not fall prey to job scammers. Participants feel very confident to ask questions due to the intimacy they share in their community. Questions such as 9 were quite common in the corpus. They allow participants to share their experiences and get well prepared for future interview encounters. Protest questions were tied to social issues that the participants are daily interrogating in their discourse, such the failure of the state to care for them, the conditions under which they wrote aptitude tests, discrimination against them in employment, exploitation by job consultants and scammers, and so forth.

A closer look at the distribution of *wh*- question types reveals that *what*- and *how*-questions were more frequently used than others. Table 2 presents the frequency of *wh*- questions.

Table 2: Frequency of *wh*- questions

Q Type	Frequency	Percentage
What	82	41.4
Why	18	9.1
How	70	35.4
Who	15	7.6
When	5	2.5
Where	8	4.0
Total	198	100

What questions were generally used to demand for the crux of the matter and they were found to be predominant in a thread with the title “Job seeker's corner”, which

was actually an information seeking thread. The thread allowed job seekers to ask any question on employment and career issues. The thread featured 17 out of the entire 82 occurrences of *what* questions (20.7%) in the corpus. Below are some of the questions asked.

13. **pls what is d best question to ask ur interviewer anytime u r asked to ask dem questions?**
14. **What do you know about this company?**
15. **What does the local labor market look like for jobs in your career field?**
16. **What is the difference between a resume, CV and cover letter?**

How questions were predominantly asked in a thread with the topic “GT Bank Test of Wednesday 20th June” (17: 24.3%). The job test in question was conducted by GT Bank, one of the top commercial banks in Nigeria. On the 14th June, six days to the day of the test, a participant posted the question: “Has anybodi been called for GT test of Wednesday 20th June? Kindly give info on d structure of the test. If anyone has done it b4, kindly give required info”. This question sparked off the interest of many other members who started to ask further questions, such as:

17. **hw did u guys apply? Can I still apply?**
18. **How was the documentation? Hope we all had a feel of gtbank...our next employer**
19. **Pls, how did you guys submit your C.V?**
20. **@Ayoola01 how long does it take for them to call for Interview...On the average....Since you've had an experience in the process..**
21. **@labyboy, phirmmzy, joboy how many were in ur set. We wer six @ mine**

These kinds of questions were used to circulate information on the application and text procedures, thereby preparing members who had been invited for the interview for preparation.

Yes-no questions were used mainly to seek confirmation in the discussion. As earlier mentioned, the nature of some of the threads encouraged the use of *yes-no* questions. A good example is the thread with the topic “419 recruitment agencies”.⁴

⁴419 derives from the section of the Nigerian law that deals with different kinds of criminal acts of obtaining money and materials from others by pretence or fraudulently, usually through electronic mail messages. "419 recruitment agencies" are therefore fraudulent agencies which pose as job consulting firms and take advantage of desperate job seekers by scamming them.

The posting that started the discussion thread, which was written to alert members of the activities of job scammers in the country went thus:

22. HEY GUYS,WANT TO INFORM YOU ALL TO BEWARE OF 419 RECRUITMENT AGENCIES LIKE JOBSEARCH CONSULTANCY SERVICES-THEIR WEBSITE IS THEY ARE INDEED SHAMELESS FRAUDSTERS CASHING IN ON THE HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT SITUATION IN NIGERIA BY ASKING JOBSEEKERS TO BUY THEIR SCRATCH CARDS OF N500 TO BE REGISTERED WITH THEM.THEIR TESTS AND SELECTION PROCESSES ARE A SHAM,AND THIER CLAIM OF CONNECTING APPLICANTS TO EMPLOYERS IS TRICKISH,THOSE TO BE 'SELECTED' ARE WELL KNOWN TO THEM.THINK-GENUINE CONSULTING FIRMS LIKE KPMG, PHILIPS CONSULTING,ETC. WILL NEVER ASK YOU TO PAY ANY FEE OR BUY A SCRATCH CARD TO BE ABLE TO UPLOAD YOUR CV OR BE REGISTERED IN CONSIDERATION FOR JOB OPENINGS-THEY HAVE BEEN ADEQUATELY PAID TO DO THEIR SELECTION JOB BY THE CORPORATIONS THAT WANT THEM TO RECRUIT ON THIER BEHALF.ONCE AGAIN BEWARE OF HUNGRY PEOPLE LIKE STAFF OF JOBSEARCH CONSULTANCY SERVICES.

The posting written in all capitals reflects the writer's emotional stance towards the issue – emphasizing as well as shouting to warn other members. This underscores the importance of the posting to members. The thread was bombarded with a series of questions seeking to confirm the status of some of the recruitment agencies members were familiar with. A total number of 19 (61.3%) out of the 31 questions asked in the thread were *yes-no* questions. In "Job seekers corner" also 38% of the questions were *yes-no*. Below are some of the questions asked:

- 23. did anyone ever heard of primesav solutions. Are they real?**
- 24. hey guys is GSE real or a scam like jobsearch consultancy?**
- 25. guys, have u heard of joblink nigeria and xeenal recruitment agency? i think they are all fraudsters.**
- 26. ever heard of consultingcapable.com? they're one of those on prowl too... so beware.**
- 27. Hello, pls this samnetrecruitmentonline is it for real or another 419**
- 28. Has anybody done anything Genuinely with GSE_ Can we have an answer from anybody in the house?**
- 29. anybody heard of tilt list dot com ? does any body have anything on them..seems like they are very geniune and professional at what they do. someone please respond.**

The findings also show that sometimes participants used clusters of questions, that is, serial questions. These questions were used for probing, reflective and rhetorical purposes. Most clusters of questions occurred in motivational postings where they were used to demand readers' cognition.

30 If you are looking for a job that will pay you N400,000 p.a., **how much should you invest to make it happen this year, and not next year?** If your current pay is N400,000 p.a., **how much should you invest to get a N1.2 million job instead of a N600,000 pa job?** In the same vein, **do you realise that looking for a job is, indeed, a full time job if you are unemployed? Are you ready to work at it, and continue to work hard until you get results? Are you adequately prepared? Are you doing enough research?**

(NHJ D09: Job search fundamentals)

31. If you are not going to anywhere in particular, any road will lead you there. **Where, in terms of which sector or industry or company or geographic locale would you like to work?** If we assume that you have your job target, the question then, **how to do you reach this objective? How do you get a shot at your dream job without which you stand no chance of getting it at all?** Job seekers who want to succeed will have to do the knocking, the digging, the searching. (NHJ D23: Things that can go wrong with your job search)

“Job search fundamentals”, where **30** was extracted from was a serialized motivational posting that chronicled what job applicants needed to do to secure their dream jobs. It addressed issues like setting personal goals, best ways to prepare a resume, writing application letters, and preparing well for aptitude test and job interviews. Extract 30 is a classic example of clustering of questions - a paragraph of six sentences and all the six sentences are questions (2 *wh*- and four *yes-no* questions). The questions were meant to direct the reader's cognition to the points being made, which was an invitation to one of the numerous seminars being organized for unemployed graduates. In comparison, extract 31 has fewer clusters - just three *wh*-questions addressing the issue of job search skills.

As noted by Hyland (2002b) in his study of the use of questions in academic writing, our findings clearly show that questions may convey authority where the writer assumes the position of an expert, as it was in the case of motivational writers and sometimes employed graduates who felt they had some rights to transfer knowledge. For example:

32. **When was the last time you saw job advertisement from Guaranty Trust Bank, NNPC, CBN, Shell, Dangote Group, etc?** Employers expect that you actively look for them, and declare your interest and intention to work for them.

(NHJ D09: Job Search Fundamentals)

33. **do you realise that looking for a job is, indeed, a full time job if you are unemployed?**

(NHJ D09: Job Search Fundamentals)

The writer of extract 30 above assumed the position of an expert who knows what employers expect from job seekers and what job seekers could do to secure the job of their choice. Sometimes face-threatening questions can be directed to job-seekers in order to demonstrated this authority of an expert by the motivational writers.

34. my Uncle is the National legal Adviser to PDP all over Naija, since i graduated, I have not gotten any sensible job, nobody go help, na you go decided your future, **do you want to end this year the way you spent last year? do you have dreams, goals or ambitions in life at all, don't you ever want to be your own boss?**

(NLD 08: Stop this Craziness)

35. look at Adenuga, look at Dangote, **do you no envy them, do you not respect them? are you not motivated by their achievements, don't you want to be a creator of job instead of a worker who waste all his life building another man's business for him?** they would use you from 25 years old up to 60 years old, you would live and die in a rented flat or bungalow at most..**is that success..?** wake up and let your situation challenge

(NLD 08: Stop this Craziness)

On the other hand, the use of questions by the unemployed graduates in the discussions was guarded by intimacy in a consciously cultivated relationship, seeking collaboration and solidarity (see extracts 9, 13, 18, 23, and so forth). These questions sought for confirmation and clarifications from other participants in the forums, thereby creating rapport and intimacy

Conclusion

In this study, it has been argued that questions were used for engagement purposes in job portal discussions. The two major kinds of questions that were predominantly used for this purpose – the *wh-* and *yes-no* questions represent the two extreme levels of complexity in interrogation – open-ended and closed-ended levels respectively. The two most prominent groups in the discussions used questions differently for engagement purposes. Motivational writers, who are typically job consultants and some employed graduates, assumed the position of experts and used questions to

engage the cognition of the reader and sometimes to threaten their face. Graduate job seekers tend to ask either questions that genuinely demanded answers to or seek to confirm issues agitating their minds about their unemployment situation and what I refer to as ‘protest questions’, which focus on social issues that the participants are daily interrogating in their discourse. This study therefore has shown that beyond being a forum for networking and getting relevant information about how to secure employment and advance in career, job portals have provided a space for interrogating and confronting social problems. It is also worthy of note that while activities of job scammers can easily fester through job portals, circulation of information, which job seekers obtain through their interrogation can minimise the rate at which people become victims of job scams. This underscores the importance of social awareness which is brought about by the sheer number of connected individuals through the digital media.

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