

AVAILABILITY AND USE OF DIGITAL REFERENCE SERVICES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the utilization of digital reference services in Academic libraries. The study adopted descriptive research design. Ten (10) Library staff was selected each from Baze University Abuja, Rivers State College of Health Science and Management Technology, P/H, and Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze. Checklist and structured questionnaire were used as data collection tools for the study. The instruments (checklist and questionnaire) were subjected to face validation and were also subjected to pilot test using Cronbach Alpha which gave a reliability coefficient value of 0.89. Data collected from the study were analyzed using mean scores. The study revealed that searching online databases, online internet search, ask a librarian, live chat services, short message service (SMS), and social media services were the available digital reference services in Academic libraries. The study also showed that majority of the digital reference service such as document delivery, referrals, bibliographic verification, searching web OPAC, referencing using reference management software, user education, online tutorial, online inter library loan, ask a librarian, live chat services, short message service (SMS), and social media services were used on a low extent in Academic libraries. Similarly, inadequate fund allocation, lack of library website, lack of ICT facilities such as computers, slow internet connectivity, and poor library use by staff and students were the challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries. Furthermore, adequate fund allocation, provision of adequate ICT facilities such as computers, presence of digital infrastructure i.e. e-library, and stable power supply were revealed as the solutions to the challenges of utilization of digital reference services in Academic libraries. The study concluded that some Academic libraries are still experimenting with digital reference service due to the fact that the innovation is still at its evolving stage in developing countries, such as Nigeria. The study recommended that there should be a functional library website in all Academic libraries Academic libraries to make digital reference sources and services easier and accessible to the students

Introduction

Academic libraries are established as parts and main organs of institutions of learning to foster research, teaching and learning. These are the core function of academic libraries and they are the hub of the institution (Agim, Obiekwe & Eneh, 2020). Fabunmi (2002) also described academic libraries from operationally perspective as organized collections of information resources (print and non-print) which form an integral part of tertiary institution. Besides that, Umoh (2017) defined academic library as a library that is attached to an academic institution above the secondary level, serving the teaching and research needs of students and staff. Part of the services that the academic library offers is the reference services. However,

with the advent of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), many libraries have seen the need to expand her reference services to an online or digitized format where users can have access to library services at the comfort of their house, hence the introduction of digital reference services

Digital reference services are the conversion of library reference services in a computerized or online format where users can locate and utilize the services of the library. Digital reference service, according to Anunobi and Edoka (2010) is the provision of direct, professional assistance to people who are seeking information, at the time and point of need. Digital reference services are conducted online, and the reference transaction is a computer-mediated communication. Digital reference services provide users with answers to questions in a computer-mediated database environment. These services utilize various media, including e-mail, web forms, chat, video, web customer call center software, and voice over internet protocol (VoIP) among others. Examples of digital reference services include finding information, answering questions, and otherwise fulfilling users' information needs, and disseminate information that is recorded, and may be in the form of a written document, printed materials, and digitized materials. A professional and trained librarian is expected to be well versed in ICT tools in the provision of these digital reference services so as to improve their utilization

Utilization is the application or the use of something. Gaur (2013) defined utilization as the action of making practical and effective use of something. Ifafesobi (2005) added that utilization is the action of using something, i.e., making practical and effective use of it. The utilization of digital reference services, according to Ifeka, Oghenetega and Nwabu (2013) provides a good introduction to a topic, brief factual information, summaries and clarify issues, define unfamiliar terms and identify additional relevant sources such as books and periodicals and titles. These digital reference services must however be readily available before they can be utilized in the provision of library services.

Jones (2016) reported that almost all libraries in United States of America offer access to the digital reference services. This may be as a result of steady library income and power supply in the country. Regrettably, for the library, only 45% of academic libraries and 12.8% of College libraries offer some type of digital reference sources and services (NUC, 2016). Unegbu (2013) also reported that many Academic libraries especially in South-South Nigeria do not have the available gadgets for provide these services. It may also appear that the extent to which digital reference services are offered in the academic library is low due to the lack of funding for the library and poor management support. Some of the information technologies available in the Academic libraries are very old and some are not in good condition and as such, cannot be effective in providing digital reference services. More so, the use of ICT in proving digital reference services is still relatively new to Nigeria academic libraries despite the fact that digital reference services has been for a while in developed countries (Ossai-Ugah, 2012). However, despite the perceived benefits of digital reference services for enhancing user access and utilization of digital reference services, poor staff ICT literacy and user poor ICT knowledge have been evidenced as part of the problems to the implementation of digital reference services in Academic libraries. Hence, it becomes needful to examine the utilization of digital reference services in Academic libraries in Nigeria.

Research Questions

1. Are there digital reference services in your Academic library?
2. What is the extent of using digital reference services by users in your Academic library?
3. What are the challenges of using digital reference services in your Academic library?
4. What are the solutions to the challenges of using digital reference services your Academic library?

Methodology

The researcher adopted descriptive research design. According to Nworgu (2015), descriptive survey design is a study that aims at collecting data from a particular study group that share similar characteristics and draw inferences using a systematic manner. The sample population was 30 selected librarians working in the Academic libraries of Baze University Abuja, Rivers State College of Health Science and Management Technology, P/H, and Federal College of Education (Technical) Umunze. A checklist and structured questionnaire on a four (4) – point Likert scale were used for collection of data for this study. The instruments (checklist and questionnaire) were subjected to face validation and were also

subjected to pilot test using Cronbach Alpha which gave a reliability coefficient value of 0.89. The researchers used direct method of data collection to distribute and collect the data from the respondents at the selected Academic libraries. Data collected from the study were analyzed using mean scores

Data Analysis

Research Question 1: Are there digital reference services in Academic Library?

Table 1: Checklist on available digital reference services

S/N	Items	Available	Not Available
1	Searching Online Databases	√	
2	Identifying and locating Materials	√	
3	Document Delivery	√	
4	Literature Search	√	
5	Referrals	√	
6	Library Directions	√	
7	Bibliographic Verification	√	
8	Searching Web OPAC,	√	
9	Searching Open Web	√	
10	Referencing using reference management software	√	
11	User education	√	
12	Online tutorial	√	
13	Online internet search	√	
14	Online inter library loan	√	
15	Ask a librarian	√	
16	Live Chat Services	√	
17	Short Message Service (SMS)	√	
18	Social Media services	√	

Table 1 was a checklist that showed the available digital reference services in Academic libraries. The results showed that searching online databases, identifying and locating materials, document delivery, literature search, referrals, library directions, bibliographic verification, searching web OPAC, searching open web, referencing using reference management software, user education, online tutorial, online internet search, online inter library loan, ask a librarian, live chat services, short message service (SMS), and social media services were the available digital reference services.

Research Question 2: What is the extent of using digital reference services by users in your Academic library?

Table 2: Extent of using of digital reference services by users

Items	Mean (X)	Remarks
1 Searching Online Databases	3.1	High extent
2 Identifying and locating Materials	3.3	High extent
3 Document Delivery	2.2	Low extent
4 Literature Search	2.8	High extent
5 Referrals	2.1	Low extent
6 Library Directions	3.2	High extent

7	Bibliographic Verification	2.3	Low extent
8	Searching Web OPAC,	2.0	Low extent
9	Searching Open Web	2.8	High extent
10	Referencing using reference management software	2.3	Low extent
11	Online User education	2.0	Low extent
12	Online tutorial	2.3	Low extent
13	Online internet search	3.2	High extent
14	Online inter library loan	2.4	Low extent
15	Ask a librarian	2.1	Low extent
16	Live Chat Services	2.2	Low extent
17	Short Message Service (SMS)	2.3	Low extent
18	Social Media services	2.1	Low extent

Table 2 shows the extent of using digital reference services by library users in Academic libraries. The results revealed that the respondents agreed that searching online databases, identifying and locating materials, literature search, library directions, searching open web, and online internet search were used to a high extent. However, majority of the DRS such as document delivery, referrals, bibliographic verification, searching web OPAC, referencing using reference management software, user education, online tutorial, online inter library loan, ask a librarian, live chat services, short message service (SMS), and social media services were used on a low extent in Academic libraries.

Research Question 3: What are the challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries?

Table 3: Challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries

S/N	Items	Mean (X)	Remarks
1	Inadequate fund allocation	3.3	Agreed
2	Lack of Library website	3.2	Agreed
3	Lack of ICT facilities such as computers	3.5	Agreed
4	Poor Website development	3.2	Agreed
5	No digital infrastructure i.e. e-library	3.4	Agreed
6	Poor subscription to information resources and databases	3.5	Agreed
7	Slow internet connectivity	3.0	Agreed
8	Lack of skilled manpower	3.1	Agreed
9	Unstable power supply	3.3	Agreed
10	Poor Library use by staff and students	3.6	Agreed

Table 3 shows the challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries. The results showed respondents agreeing that inadequate fund allocation, lack of library website, lack of ICT facilities such as computers, poor website development, no digital infrastructure i.e. e-library, poor subscription to information resources and databases, slow internet connectivity, lack of skilled manpower, unstable power supply, and poor library use by staff and students were the challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries.

Research Question 4: What are the solutions to the challenges of using digital reference services Academic libraries?

Table 4: Solutions to the challenges of using digital reference services

S/N	Items	Mean (X)	Remarks
1	Adequate fund allocation	3.4	Agreed
2	Availability of Library website	3.5	Agreed

3	Sufficiency of ICT facilities such as computers	3.2	Agreed
4	Good Website development	3.1	Agreed
5	Presence of digital infrastructure i.e. e-library	3.2	Agreed
6	Good subscription to information resources and databases	3.8	Agreed
7	Fast and reliable internet connectivity	3.1	Agreed
8	Use of skilled manpower	3.3	Agreed
9	Stable power supply	3.1	Agreed
10	Effective library use by staff and students	3.3	Agreed

The table above revealed the solutions to challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries. The results from the table showed that the respondents agreed that adequate fund allocation, availability of library website, sufficiency of ICT facilities such as computers, good website development, presence of digital infrastructure i.e. e-library, good subscription to information resources and databases, fast and reliable internet connectivity, use of skilled manpower, stable power supply, and effective library use by staff and students were solutions to the challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries

Discussion of Findings

The study was on the availability and use of digital reference services in Academic libraries. The result shows that searching online databases, identifying and locating materials, document delivery, literature search, referrals, library directions, bibliographic verification, searching web OPAC, searching open web, referencing using reference management software, user education, online tutorial, online internet search, online inter library loan, ask a librarian, live chat services, short message service (SMS), and social media services were the available digital reference services in Academic libraries. These findings upholds that of Nkanu (2017) which stated that digital reference services available in academic libraries are, online tutorial, searching online databases, online internet search, document delivery, literature search, online inter library loan among others. In addition the study revealed that the extent of using digital reference services by users in Academic libraries was low as the majority of the DRS such as document delivery, referrals, bibliographic verification, searching web OPAC, referencing using reference management software, user education, online tutorial, online inter library loan, ask a librarian, live chat services, short message service (SMS), and social media services were used on a low extent in Academic libraries. This revelation from the study corroborates that of Urhiewhu, Okeke, and Nwafor (2015) that students do not often make use of digital reference services in libraries. Similarly, the challenges of using digital reference services in Academic libraries, the study affirmed were inadequate fund allocation, lack of library website, lack of ICT facilities such as computers, poor website development, no digital infrastructure i.e. e-library, poor subscription to information resources and databases, slow internet connectivity, lack of skilled manpower, unstable power supply, and poor library use by staff and students. In agreement with these findings, Urhiewhu, Okeke, and Nwafor (2015) attested that the constraints encountered by students towards the utilization of digital reference services are epileptic power supply, none availability of online databases, lack of formal training in Internet skills among students, slow bandwidth and among others. Furthermore, the study revealed solutions to the challenges mitigating the use of digital reference services amongst library users in universities to include adequate fund allocation, availability of library website, sufficiency of ICT facilities such as computers, good website development, presence of digital infrastructure i.e. e-library, good subscription to information resources and databases, fast and reliable internet connectivity, use of skilled manpower, stable power supply, and effective library use by staff and students. In agreement with these findings, these results however justifies the position of Urhiewhu, Okeke, and Nwafor (2015) that the ways of solving the constraints encountered by students towards using of digital reference services are to ensure good power supply, availability of online databases, formal training in internet skills among students and librarians, among others.

Conclusion

Arising from the study findings, digital platforms engineered by the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) have become very viable tools for delivering reference services in university libraries, as have become evident in this present study carried out in Academic libraries. However, observation of some Academic libraries revealed that they are still experimenting with digital reference service due to the fact that the innovation i.e digital reference service is still at its evolving stage in developing countries, such as Nigeria. Academic libraries lack the resources and funding to provide an effective digital reference service to the core for its users and this has led to the low extent usage of DRS in Academic libraries. Many academic libraries have not been rendering reference services since its inception as a medium of information dissemination to improve user access. Using digital reference services in Academic libraries could be a time saver for users who may not see the need to visit the physical library or seek support from a reference services librarian. However, the very few digital reference services such as searching online databases, literature search, searching open web, and online internet search among others that were used by users in academic libraries should be improved and efforts should be put in place to sustain their access. The challenges such as inadequate fund allocation, lack of library website, lack of ICT facilities such as computers, and poor website development among others that are militating against digital reference services in academic libraries needs to be harnessed so as to encourage its use

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following are recommended:

1. Adequate and stable power supply for the university libraries should be provided by the government to support the use of digital reference services.
2. Library management should ensure that they subscribe to fast internet connectivity.
3. Staff training and development in Academic libraries should be given due attention so that users can get the needed support from the librarian
4. The library management should ensure adequate subscription to information resources and databases that will improve the utilization of digital reference services.
5. There should be a functional library website in all Academic libraries Academic libraries to make digital reference sources and services easier and accessible to the students.
6. There should be adequate fund allocation to Academic libraries so as to enable them develop and sustain the use of digital reference services
7. There should be an adequate provision of ICT facilities such as computers etc, to ensure the sustainability of digital reference services in the Academic libraries.
8. There should be digital infrastructure such as electronic resources and other sources for effective digital reference services in the Academic libraries.

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