

Sharpening the Future of Lifelong Learning in Public Libraries: Evidence from User Perspectives in Imo State Public Library

By

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Abstract

The world is being driven towards the knowledge economy, and public libraries are changing from mere stores of books into vibrant and inclusive learning centers, which require a constant process of up-skilling. The paper discusses the future of Lifelong Learning in Public Library from the perspective of users with emphasis on the Imo State Public Library, Nigeria. A qualitative research design was used with in-depth semi-structured interviews with 8 diverse users of the library to assess their views, expectations and problems related to lifelong learning services. This study is based on the principle that user needs play an important role to ensure relevance of libraries in the digital age. It offers simulated thematic results, discussions, and recommendations to assist library policy makers in Imo State and other developing situations in moving towards user-oriented innovations in digital and skill development.

Key Words: Imo State, Lifelong Learning, Public Libraries, User Perspectives

Introduction

The 21st century is marked by an unprecedented pace of technological progress, digitalization and expectations about the labor market, which have transformed the paradigm of education. Lifelong learning which involves all forms of purposeful learning that takes place continuously to enhance knowledge and skills is no longer limited to formal education (Aboobacker & Sanjeevi, 2026). Public libraries are established by international organizations, such as UNESCO and International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), as a key entry point to knowledge and a crucial place for democratic engagement, social inclusion, and lifelong learning from "cradle to grave" (Egamberdiyeva, 2025). Public libraries used to be a quiet place to store books. Today they are transforming into "learning commons" and as community hubs they are developing digital literacy, research skills and socio-emotional competencies (Onyiko et al 2024). The role of public libraries in Nigeria is massive, as they are expected to close the digital divide and cater for an increasing number of students, entrepreneurs and professionals. With the shift to digital, user-centered lifelong learning services, however, comes numerous challenges such as resource constraints and changing user expectations (Adewojo, Adefila & Amzat, 2023). It is important to explore the landscape from the user's point of view to reveal the potential future directions of these institutions. This study is based on the Imo State Public Library, looking at the perception of services by the local users as well as what they would like to see in the future for lifelong library learning.

Statement of the Problem

Although the world-wide demand for libraries to be active participants in the lifelong learning process (Häggström, 2004) the public libraries in developing parts of the world sometimes have problems to keep up with the digital era. While these are issues that plague the public library system as a whole in Nigeria, the situation is worse in Imo State, where there is generally a lack of digital infrastructure, funding and a low perception of the library as a skill acquisition and digital innovation hub. At the same time, users have changed their expectations. Today's learners are looking for personalized, flexible, and online resources (Adewojo et al., 2023). Without digital

literacy training, with or without a maker space, or with a customized online learning environment, libraries risk alienating users and exacerbating the digital divide (McHaney, 2023). The main issue is that there is a shortage of empirical and patron-centered data on what patron of Imo State Public Library is actually in need, what patron expects and experiences about lifelong learning. If user's viewpoints are not incorporated into the service design and formulation of the policies, the Imo State Public Library may fall into obsolescence and not be able to meet the socioeconomic and educational needs of its community in the digital era. The purpose of the study was to identify the following: The general problem of this study is to investigate user's view on the future of Lifelong learning services in Imo State public library for user-centered design and policy.

Objectives of the Study

These are as follows:

- i. Evaluate how different groups of users are using lifelong learning information in the Imo State Public Library.
- ii. Understand users' expectations and requirements for digital literacy, personalized learning and skill development.
- iii. Identify issues in accessing and using library services for lifelong learning.

Methodology:

The research design used in this study is qualitative-based type of phenomenological research. The method is well suited to investigating users' experiences, perceptions, and expectations about lifelong learning services because it facilitates understanding the phenomenon in a nuanced and deep way, from a user-centered perspective.

Literature Review

The Evolving Role of Public Libraries in Lifelong Learning

Public libraries have become dynamic and inclusive centers for lifelong learning and community participation (Häggström, 2004). This is a sea change that has been caused by the digital era. In the modern context, the patrons' expectations of personalized

learning experiences, flexibility, and the availability of learning experiences through technology is cited as a major shift (Adewojo et al, 2023). To address these changing requirements, libraries are reimagining themselves as “learning commons” – spaces where people learn both inside and out. They now play a crucial role in offering essential training on digital literacy, information retrieval and workforce skills, seeking to address the gap in the digital divide that remains evident (Scicluna, 2025). In addition, it highlights the library's role as a community participant that is socially inclusive. Meesad and Mingkhwan (2024). Public libraries develop socio-emotional competencies, employment and civic engagement through diversity of educational programs, work spaces and intergenerational resources. By implementing this holistic strategy, they are able to meet the demands of the knowledge economy in today's society and facilitate learning from "cradle to grave" (McHaney, 2023). There are however some difficulties in the process of such development. Adewojo, (2026) have observed that there are factors that affect equitable participation in the library-based learning process; these include resource constraints, rapid technological changes and systemic inequality. Finally, it has been clear from the literature that all public libraries must become user centered, invest in high-tech systems, and engage in strategic community partnerships to be relevant in the 21st century, in order to facilitate lifelong learning (Dede et al., 2005).

User Perspectives and the Digital Shift

The digital revolution goes beyond technology; it's a strategic revolution in the way organizations engage and connect with their users and provide value to them (Schneider & Kokshagina 2021). In this new paradigm, users become not consumers but actors in complex, fluid information networks. Wang (2020) highlights that in the digital transformation era, it is critical for organizations to leverage these customer networks, and to convert the unstructured information they contain into assets. Today, the knowledge about users' perspectives has become a key to the success of digital transformation (Rogers, 2016), and it is even more crucial when it comes to B2B interactions. Therefore, user perspective is no longer a minor detail but a crucial success factor in digital transformation (Alshawaaf, and Alzougool 2025), particularly with B2B interactions.

In response to these shifting expectations, User Experience (UX) design has become the key way to capture and apply end-user insights to align digital services. According to Khalid and Helander, (2006) a good digital experience involves a balance between emotions and needs (the "Why"), features and functionality of the product (the "What") and seamless interactions (the "How"). This is supported by Chouki et al (2021), who states that digital solution providers see UX design as an iterative process, where one has to validate user needs to make sure digital services are relevant, personal and valuable.

In public institutions, like libraries, this digital change has completely reshaped the expectations and interactions of users. In the new learning landscape, people are seeking personalized, flexible, and accessibly digital resources instead of the traditional, static repository of information, as noted by Adewojo et al (2023). Likewise, Aboobacker and Sanjeevi (2026) assert that the digital age calls for the use of cutting-edge technology and user-centered design to overcome the digital divide and to support the continuous and lifelong learning process. This shows that the user view must be at the heart of the strategic and design approach to make the transition into the digital world successful, so that technological developments can be processed into user experiences that are meaningful, accessible, and empowering.

Skill Development, Digital Inclusion, and Challenges

The challenge of developing skills and of digital inclusion is now in the spotlight for the future of lifelong learning, especially in public libraries, which have been transformed from mere information hubs into public places where learning and innovation are fostered. Lifelong learning places a focus on the lifelong learning process and continuous acquisition of knowledge, competencies and skills needed to develop personal abilities, enhance employability and active citizenship (Ceschi et al 2021). Public libraries facilitate this process in offering equitable access to educational materials, digital technologies and learning opportunities to various user groups. For the Imo State Public Library, users' perceptions of the effectiveness of the library in fostering skill development and digital inclusion are important measures of the library's ability to be relevant in the digital age (Ike, et al 2023). Skill development is defined as acquiring knowledge, technical skills, digital literacy, vocational skills, and critical

thinking skills that support the ability for the individual to navigate shifting social and economic contexts (Ghare & Kastikar, 2024).

Wang and Si (2024) Modern public libraries play an important role in the development of skills, providing training on digital literacy, computer education, entrepreneurship, information literacy programmes, and access to online educational platforms. These services can enhance the employability of users of Imo State public library, promote self-directed learning, and promote continuous professional development. The demand for libraries as learning environments that enable people to learn digital skills and information literacy skills is growing, especially as digital technologies become more critical to lifelong learning (Onunka et al 2023). Libraries are expected to teach people old and new skills in information literacy and newly emerging digital skills, as lifelong learning increasingly relies on digital technologies.

The concept of digital inclusion is also crucial in the future of lifelong learning. It means providing everyone with access to digital technologies, reliable access to the internet, the skills to access and use these technologies and the confidence to use digital resources effectively (Arifin & Darmawan 2021). Public libraries are a vital part of digital inclusion, offering free or low-cost Internet access, computer equipment and electronic information resources and assistance with using digital tools. User-centric digital inclusion is a reflection of the ability of a library to successfully address the digital divide, especially for students, older adults, people who are out of the workforce or on the fringes and individuals who have limited access to digital technologies in other parts of their lives. In public libraries, the connection between skill development and digital inclusion holds even more importance because the lack of digital skills would not lead to a better use of technologies if they were not available.

Khan et al (2022) states that digital literacy provides learners with a way to access online resources for learning, with the capability to engage in virtual learning spaces and with the skills necessary to thrive in the knowledge economy. Hence, the future of lifelong learning in Imo State Public Library would rely not only in the provision of technological infrastructure but also in the continuous running of training programmes which would allow the users to utilize and maximize the available digital resources. Nevertheless, there are a number of obstacles likely to affect the impact of lifelong learning programs in public libraries. Limited technological infrastructure, such as

having too few computers, unreliable electric power, slow internet connection and limited access to current digital resources is one such major challenge (Ferri, et al 2020). Such shortcomings in the infrastructure may limit the users' capacity to engage in information activities in digital environment and diminish the value of the library as a lifelong learning center. Financial problems also have an adverse impact on investments in modern technologies and learning facilities in many public libraries in Nigeria.

The other challenge is the digital skills gap of the users and librarians. Many users have some level of digital literacy but do not have digital skills at a higher level which may be required for online learning, digital research, entrepreneurship and effective management of information (Nyale et al 2026). Likewise, librarians need to engage in ongoing professional learning to effectively provide innovative digital services. If public libraries do not have the capacity to support the needs of their communities for learning, then they will face difficulties in doing so in the future.

The future of the Imo State public library will largely depend on how much it is able to do to meet these challenges and provide more opportunities for skill building and digital inclusion from the users' point of view. The user will view the library as useful if the library has a reliable digital infrastructure, appropriate training programs, and access to online resources as well as ongoing professional guidance that encourage users to continue learning. Digital inclusion and skill development should therefore continue to be a high priority for public library management and policy makers. The Imo State Public Library will continue to be a functional institution that promotes lifelong learning and community development in the digital age with the use of modern technologies, staff skill development, digital literacy programmes and inclusive service delivery.

Gap in the Literature

This is because, although there are many books available on the issue of lifelong learning in the libraries globally and broadly in the Nigerian context particularly in Kwara State, there is a particular dearth of locally located qualitative research on the Imo State Public Library. This study aims to address this gap by offering direct empirical evidence from the user point of view which will enable future interventions to be based on the lived experience of the local population.

Empirical review

Adewojo et al. (2023) is a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) type of secondary research. The authors thoroughly reviewed all the major academic databases including PubMed, Scopus, and Web of Science, searching for peer-review papers from 2019 to 2023. While there are challenges like the digital divide and the lack of resources in the institution, they found that library users now demand more personalized and digital services. It recounted several original research projects dealing with library usage, library access, and user experiences.

Fu et al. (2023) conducted research to investigate the experiences of international library users and demonstrated modern libraries need to cater for various users. It demonstrated that library buildings and learning spaces impact learning outcomes. The redesign of library spaces in order to enhance informal learning and participation of users. Khan et al (2022) conducted research on connecting digital literacy in higher education to the 21st century workforce. Knowledge Management & E-Learning, they discovered that there was a high correlation between library design, learning spaces and student engagement. Additionally, Blackley (2018) noted that maker spaces and learning commons enhance STEM learning, robotics learning, and collaborative learning. The physical arrangement of libraries is found to be relevant to lifelong learning in the above-mentioned studies.

Besides, there are also large-scale surveys and statistical data in the documents. The report of the IFLA (2024) presented information from the UNESCO 1999 Statistical Yearbook and Libecon 2000, indicating that there are more than 267,000 public libraries in the world that contain more than 16 billion books and that serve more than 1.65 billion registered users, employing nearly 400,000 people. The report also covered a survey which took place at a conference of Spanish-speaking librarians in 2001 to find out about the cooperation between libraries and educational institutions. The survey identified a limited number of instances of formal partnerships but it was an important source of information about library support for lifelong learning.

Aboobacker & Sanjeevi, 2026 (2026) in the paper cited above on Role of Libraries in Lifelong Learning and Skill Development found that public libraries in India impart digital skills, e-government and digital banking skills. Holcomb et al (2019) found that

employment opportunities are enhanced through the use of library career services, including job portals and short training courses. The studies also revealed that three key characteristics of libraries are strengthening social trust and community relationships, through informal learning opportunities in well-designed library space, and tackling social and economic issues with targeted community services and evidence-based programs.

Study Area

The study took place in Imo State Public Library Board headquarters, Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria. It is the hub of all public library services in the state of New South Wales, and is used by a diverse user base, including students, researchers, civil servants and the wider public.

Population and Sampling Technique

The target population is users of the activities of Imo State public library. To consider maximum variation and representation of diverse user groups, 8 users were selected using purposive sampling methods in keeping with the literature which highlighted a need to design programs for a variety of user groups. The 8 participants included: Undergraduate Student (Learning academic and digital skills), Postgraduate Researcher (Learning advanced information literacy), Civil Servant (Learning policy documents and digital governance), Small Business Entrepreneur (Learning financial and market research skills), Retiree / Older Adult (Learning leisurely information, health information, and basic digital skills), and Freelance Digital Creator (Learning internet access and digital skills in creative software).

Data Collection Instrument

A semi-structured in-depth interview guide was used to collect data. The guide was based on the themes found during the literature search, which are: Adewojo et al., 2023; Aboobacker & Sanjeevi, 2026). Some of the main questions asked were:

What are you currently doing in the library to learn for yourself or for your work?

What electronic and/or skill resources would you like the library to offer?

What are some of the struggles you have in learning here and/or learning about?

Interviews were held in a comfortable and private reading room in the library. With the participants' consent, sessions were audio-recorded and lasted between 5 to 20 minutes. Non-verbal notes were also recorded to capture non-verbal cues. All audio recordings were transcribed word for word. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis. Thematic analysis of transcripts was used to identify common themes, and these themes were linked to larger themes that represent the users' views on lifelong learning, digital needs and institutional challenges.

Results

Three main themes were identified from the qualitative analysis of 8 semi-structured interviews, which directly address the research objectives. Each theme reveals a snapshot of how users in the public library are using resources for lifelong learning, how they think about their digital and skill development needs, and how they experience systemic barriers in the public library. Findings are presented in a thematic fashion, verbatim quotes from the participants and their interpretations are linked to the theoretical approach of user-centered design, the digital transformation and digital inclusion.

Theme 1: Current involvement with library resources

This theme focuses on the first objective by highlighting that user engagement is still largely driven by traditional, physical resources verses dynamic digital environments. Repeatedly, participants indicated a lack of engagement with the library and its users' need to remain in the library environment for quiet study, rather than to engage in the collaborative learning common that they desired to see established in their own library.

” I mostly visit here for the physical textbooks, and past project materials as my department does not have them, the internet is there more or less for basic searches but not really for in-depth learning databases or virtual learning environments.

At the library, I read the news and health magazines, but have not used the computers as I don't know how to operate them, and the atmosphere is more of a book warehouse than a place to pick up new and modern things to do.”

Most of the answers indicate that these people visit the library primarily to read, physical books or for a quiet study spot. They come because they are at ease with the traditional library. Despite this, the library is not yet a coherent, modern learning centre, due to the lack of modern technology and working spaces. This is a barrier to the library helping people learn new practical skills that they need today.

Theme 2: What is expected of personalized and skill-based learning?

In relation to the second goal, participants recognized a need for the library to shift from being a place to learn to being a place to acquire skills. Users voiced desires for more sophisticated digital literacy sessions, innovative software instruction, and customizable remote learning, signaling a move away from the traditional methods of information delivery and towards individualized, hands-on learning experiences.

"I don't just want a computer I want to know how to use it to help me build my business. I wish the library provides workshops on digital marketing, e-commerce, how to access online financial grants, etc., all I want is to know how to use the internet to learn something new to grow my business."

As a digital creator, I would like to have access to design software and rendering tools that my own laptop doesn't provide, and I would like to have a mobile app I can use at home to access e-journals and learning modules instead of always traveling to the headquarters for customized research assistance."

These results correspond to the theoretical aspects of the digital transformation and user experience design. The user is no longer merely a consumer; they are expecting the library to leverage their network and bring structure to their needs and make them strategic assets. There is a need for remote access and customized workshops which suggest users will want the library to juggle their needs for employment and development with easy, individual digital access.

Theme 3: Systemic barriers to inclusion: Infrastructural deficits and the digital skills gap

This theme addresses the third objective by showing the ways in which infrastructure deterioration and capacities constraints negatively affect lifelong learning. Participants often mentioned unreliable power, outdated equipment, and a lack of advanced digital

skills of librarians as the major factors that exacerbate the digital divide and not reduce it.

“The problems are the power supply and the network: When the generator is down, the computers are down, and, when I ask the staff for assistance in more sophisticated policy databases, they are only trained in physical cataloging and can't assist me with the digital resources”.

“The infrastructure is not up to date; the systems get stuck when I attempt to open several files; when I try to research, I don't have the information and communication technology training, and the staff is well intentioned but they don't know how to teach me to use modern ICT research skills”.

These experiences are closely related to theories of digital inclusion and skill development. Having access to technology alone is not enough; it needs the infrastructure to be reliable, and the human capacity to use it effectively. The digital skills gap within the library workforce poses as a hidden obstacle, and must be addressed to ensure the library can continue to play its role as a knowledge equalizer in an information-rich world and to realize the need for ongoing professional development and investment in infrastructure.

Discussion of Findings

The first findings revealed that users still predominantly used the public library for traditional services like access to printed books, newspapers and quiet reading rooms, but had limited involvement in online learning activities. While these traditional services are still useful, the participants reported that the library is still in the process of becoming a modern learning environment that can serve the needs of lifelong learning by providing digital resources and collaborative learning spaces. This is in line with Häggström's (2004) assertion that the public library's function should go beyond being a repository of information to being an active facilitator of lifelong learning. It is also in tandem with the finding by Adewojo et al (2023) that the Nigerian public libraries are still predominantly resource-oriented and service-oriented instead of user-oriented, which hinders the ability of such libraries in meeting the changing educational and professional needs of the users in the modern era. The discovery therefore indicates

that in order to be able to support continuous learning in the digital age, public libraries should shift their roles to become dynamic learning centers.

The second findings were that library users are more and more expecting personalized, technology-based and skills-based service to support career development, entrepreneurship and lifelong learning. The need for digital literacy programmes, online learning platforms, remote access to electronic resources and practical training in digital marketing and creative software were noted. This discovery reinforces the study of Aboobacker and Sanjeevi (2026) which called for opportunities for digital skills acquisition and continuous learning in public libraries. This also resonates with Chouki et al., (2021) who maintain that user-centered design approach emphasizes the design of the library services based on the users' changing needs and experiences. The results show that users no longer want the library just to give them access to information but want it also to help them learn practical skills and to grow as individuals in the context of flexible and innovative service delivery.

The third finding revealed that a lack of infrastructure and digital skills were significant challenges to effective lifelong learning for the library staff. The factors that they found to be affecting their learning experience were unreliable electricity supply, poor internet connectivity, outdated computer systems and lack of staff expertise in digital resources. The results corroborate with those of Ike et al (2023) who revealed that the inadequate provision of ICT facilities is still limiting the provision of digital services in public libraries in Nigeria. Likewise, Adewojo (2026) argued that librarians' continuous professional development is needed to serve their users well in the current digital information era. The results additionally corroborate the digital inclusion view taken by Wang and Si (2024), who argue that digital inclusion is not only about the technological infrastructure but also the presence of qualified staff to assist users. Therefore, addressing these gaps in infrastructure and human capacities is crucial if public libraries are to perform their function of inclusive centers for lifelong learning.

Conclusion

This study investigated users' perception of lifelong learning services in Imo State Public Library and reveals that users perceive that the library is still a source of traditional information services, even though it is still not fully embracing the current

fast changing digital learning environment. Users are now demanding services that go beyond the traditional printed material to the digital literacy, entrepreneurship assistance, online learning platforms, remote access to electronic resources, and personalized learning opportunities. However, the poor ICT infrastructure, weak electrical power supply, weak Internet connectivity, outmoded equipment and lack of digital skills among the library personnel are still limiting the good service delivery.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested based on the results of this study:

1. There is a need for government and library management to provide reliable internet connectivity, uninterrupted power supply, development of modern computer systems, and provision of good digital learning facilities to enhance the concept of lifelong learning.
2. Continuous professional development should be provided for librarians. Staff members should be trained regularly in digital literacy, using AI tools, managing electronic resources.
3. Lifelong learning programmes should be extended to meet the needs of users. The need of the users keeps changing and, in this regard, public libraries should hold workshops on digital literacy, entrepreneurship, financial literacy, coding, digital marketing, online research, career development and emerging technologies.

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