



SUSTAINED RELEVANCE OF PUBLIC ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN RESEARCH SUPPORT DURING AND IN POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC ERA IN BENUE STATE: AN INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

This study investigated the sustained relevance of public academic libraries in research support during and in the post covid-19 pandemic era in Benue State. The study adopted a descriptive survey research design with a total population size of 100 professional librarians in ten public academic libraries in Benue State. The entire population was used as the researchers considered it manageable. Data was collected through questionnaire and analyzed with the use of frequencies, mean and standard deviation. Results of the study reveal among others that public academic libraries in Benue State sustain their relevance in research support through the provision of open access publishing. Ability to utilize functional ICT facility, ownership of functional ICT facilities and online presence are some of the factors that facilitate public academic libraries sustained relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in the state. Lack of online presence constitutes a major challenge of public academic libraries sustained relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in the state. The study therefore recommends among others that public academic libraries in the state should build functional, updated and interactive websites for enhanced online presence in the state.

Keywords: Covid-19, Research Support, Sustained Relevance, Public Academic Libraries, Benue State

Introduction

One of the core objectives of public academic libraries is to provide information resources and services that will support research activities of their parent institutions. Traditionally, public academic libraries were found to be relevant in their face to face provision and dissemination of information resources

and services. However, during and after covid-19 pandemic lockdown, public academic libraries were forcefully lockdown and traditional services with traditional services suspended as a precautionary measure of curbing the spread and death rates of public academic libraries information providers and their user communities.

In spite of the closure and suspension of public tertiary institutions activities including their libraries, it is pertinent to note that the emergence of COVID-19 pandemic has in no doubt placed online research and the hybrid provision of information for research support as a new normal in public academic libraries. While covid-19 has been a catalyst of public academic libraries with strong digital presence to sustain their relevance in research support, it has caused more harm than good for public academic libraries without strong digital presence. It is forcing academic libraries in general and public academic libraries in particular to engage in the diversification of information delivery skills and or training to addressing information accessibility and connectivity, online research design as well as developmental skills of digital researchers. This explain that in spite of the forceful closure and suspension of public academic libraries traditional activities, the knowledge research gate was not shut down or suspended and the research needs of users also increases and has to be satisfied. For the public academic libraries to sustain their relevance during and after covid-19 pandemic, they have to identify and utilize alternative measures of satisfying the research needs of their information users. Some universities across the globe as justified by Azolo (2019) run their academic programs including library services online. This is where the question of the place of sustain relevance of public academic libraries in research support comes into play.

Statement of the Problem

One of the major objectives of any academic library is to support research. To achieve this objective, public academic libraries select aid provide various kinds of materials that will support and satisfy the research information activities and needs of their host communities. This was in most cases done in the traditional way. However, with the emergence of covid-19 pandemic and the mandatory closure of public academic libraries as well as suspension of public academic libraries traditional activities, public academic libraries were forced to change their traditional method of proving information resources to support research activities of their host communities in order to remain relevant. In spite of this, no empirical evidence has been found to investigate the place of public academic libraries sustain relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in Benue State thereby necessitating the design of this research.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the sustained relevance of public academic libraries in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in Benue State with particular reference to

1. Determine how public academic libraries sustain their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in Benue State
2. Determine the factors that facilitate academic libraries sustained relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic
3. Determine the challenges faced by the public academic libraries in a bid to demonstrating their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic

Research Questions

The research was guided by the following research questions

1. How do the public academic libraries sustain their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic?
2. What are the challenges faced by the public academic libraries in demonstrating their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic?

Literature Reviews

The concept of corona virus popularly addressed as covid-19 is widely defined by different researchers, health professionals and professional bodies. According to Hamzat and Otulugbu (2020) covid-19 is a form of respiratory ailment that ravaged human health and social interaction. It is a novel virus that was identified in Wuham specifically in Hubei City of China on the 31st of December, 2019 (World Health Organization, 2020). Since its emergence, it has sporadically spread from person to person and affected every aspect of human endeavour without regard to public academic library services. The disease has according to dailypost.ng as cited by Ogonu, Alex-Nmecha and Fyneman (2020) caused the death of over 500,000 people in the world today and over 10,000,000 are said to have confirmed cases since the inception of the disease in China. As a result of its nature and spread that requirement human contact, many public tertiary institutions including their libraries close and suspend their traditional services in order to reduce its spread. This is justified by Nwako (2019) as a part of the World Health Organization (WHO) safety measure to observe social distancing.

In order to sustain relevance in research support, IFLA (2020) exposes that the Anatolian University Libraries Consortium (ANKOS) has intensified resource sharing between its members through a single portal in order to accelerate access

to research and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia has produced a series of tutorials on how best to use library materials. In Iraq, Al-rawdha-Al-haydari Library has been utilizing its website in the promotion of its electronic resources while Diyala University Library is building new interfaces for access to materials. Academic libraries are also developing search engines for Open educational Research for researchers among others.

Empirically, Chakraborty, Kureshi, Gajbe, Upadhyay and Devi (2020) studied the role of LIS Professionals to provide authentic information sources during COVID-19 Pandemic crisis. Findings reveal that various Library and LIS professionals play an active role in the research community to provide library facilities in multiple ways so that no impact arises on their research on this nation lockdown situation. The contribution of the librarian is remarkable; in the various studies, we have found a librarian plays a vital role in all circumstances, and they are always ready to help the society. Adigun, Okuonghae, Mamudu, Suleiman and Haliru (2020) investigated the role of libraries in curtailing the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The study revealed that among the services delivered by Nigerian libraries amidst the global pandemic are COVID-19 awareness and sensitization creation, provision of digital contents to patron, organizing online streaming programs and connecting patrons/citizens to accurate and reliable data on COVID-19 cases around the world. Ifijeh and Yusuf (2020) examined the role of academic libraries in the evolving paradigm shift in teaching methodologies in Nigerian universities as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19. They identified responsive library website design and adoption, adoption of blended librarianship model and use of social networks among others as best practices to adopt in order to secure a place for libraries in Nigeria in the face of the eminent change in teaching methodologies post during Covid-19. Similarly, Zhou (2022) investigated the role libraries in distance learning during covid-19 and results demonstrated that COVID-19 responses of libraries in China went in a direction similar to those in Italy, but the final decisions varied because of different levels of technological development. It also shows that overwhelming majority of respondents reported that they had positive experience learning remotely and would not mind if distance learning programs continue to function after the pandemic is over.

Ale (2020) sought to develop a library-based model that will explain how libraries can make use of mobile technology devices to deliver information to their patrons regarding COVID-19. The results show that mobile technology devices such as cell phone, smart phones, smart watches, laptops, net book, etc can be used to effectively deliver information on COVID-19 to library users in Nigeria while facilitating conditions such as access to Internet connectivity, ownership of mobile

technology device, ability to operate mobile technology devices, as well as capacity to make provision for alternative Internet access determine the utilization of mobile technology for receiving information on COVID-19 through libraries among users in Nigeria.

Dadhe and Dubey (2020) surveyed library services provided during COVID-19 Pandemic in premier technological institutions of India. They found out that the libraries provides remote access to e-resources, free and expanded access, open access resources, resources related to COVID-19 and assistance in technological initiatives.

In their study of dissemination of information in the COVID-19 era in university libraries in Nigeria, Omeluzor, Nwaomah, Molukwu and Sambo (2021) reveal that libraries disseminated information and links to e-resources to support patrons' ongoing research. They moreover, revealed in the findings that lack of coordination, strike action by the Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and none subscription for data for librarians to work from home were challenges. In the study which sought to find out the role played by Librarians in information delivery in seasons of the dreaded pandemic in Kogi State, Alibi and Sani (2021) revealed that majority of the librarians in Kogi state work with academic libraries and majorly play the role of assisting their patrons in solving their queries, updating users with current information and providing selective information to special patrons. They however, identified the major challenge encountered as poor funding for effective service delivery, inadequate facilities and inadequate internet services. While Gboje and Katso (2014) identified the major challenge of adjusting to new normal as absence of library website, Mohammed et al (2016) in a related study reveals that many Nigeria University libraries do not have functional and updated websites.

Summarily, literature exists on the role or place of libraries sustain relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic. However, none has been found on the place of public academic libraries sustain relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic and this create a gap that the present study is designed to bridge.

Methodology

This study adopted descriptive survey research design with the population of 100 public academic library professionals. The entire population was used as the sample of the study. Data was gathered through questionnaire and analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics such as frequencies, mean and standard deviation. The researchers considered the average mean of 3.50-4.00 as SA, 2.50-3.00 as A, 1.50-2.49 as D and 0.50-1.49 as SD. This means that only means of 2.50

and above was acceptable while the mean below 2.50 was not acceptable.

Results

The results of the study are tabulated below and analyzed in line with the research objectives and questions that guide the study.

Table 1: Mean Responses of Respondents on how Public Academic Libraries Sustain their Relevance in Research Support During and After Covid-19 Pandemic in Benue State

S/ N	Item Statement	SA	S	D	SD	??	Std Deviation	Remark
1	Open access publishing	62	31	3	2	3.56	.65906	Agree
2	Intensified resource sharing	54	37	4	3	3.44	.71971	Agree
3	Advocate for open research and open data in federal grants	34	35	11	7	3.10	.91543	Agree
4	Educating faculty members about how to retain their publication rights.	16	21	6	5	3.00	.94531	Agree
5	Seeking greater control of the research being produced at their institutions	17	16	12	6	2.86	1.02019	Agree
6	Development of online environments for faculty members research collaborate from a distance	20	42	16	9	2.83	.90056	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Analysis of results in table 4 reveals that respondents are in agreement with all the presented items (1-6) as different ways academic libraries in Benue State can support research during and after covid-19 pandemic. The most rated among the items in the table is that of open access publishing with mean and standard deviation of 3.56 (.65906).

Table 2: Mean Responses of Respondents on Factors that Facilitate Public Academic Libraries Sustained Relevance in Research Support During and After Covid-19 Pandemic

S/ N	Item Statement	SA	S	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	Std Deviation n	Remark
7	Ability to utilize functional ICT facility	43	29	12	3	3.28	.83399	Agree
8	Ownership of functional ICT facilities (laptop, mobile phone, etc)	39	32	11	4	3.23	.84956	Agree
9	Online presence	37	34	15	1	3.22	.77311	Agree
10	Ability to connect to the internet	43	22	13	9	3.13	1.02495	Agree
11	Ability to connect to the internet network	38	29	12	8	3.11	.96960	Agree
12	Ability to provide for alternative Internet access	28	30	20	9	2.88	.98152	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Analysis of results in table 2 show that responses of respondents on the six (6) items presented are skewed to the affirmative with mean and standard deviation of 3.28 (.83399), 3.23 (.84956), 3.22 (.77311), 3.13 (1.02495), 3.11 (.96960) and 2.88 (.98152) respectively. This means all the presented items are the factors that facilitate public academic libraries sustained relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in Benue State.

Table 3: Mean responses of Respondents on Challenges Faced by the Public Academic Libraries in a bid to Demonstrating their Sustained Relevance in Research Support During and After Covid-19 pandemic

S/ N	Item Statement	SA	S	D	SD	$\bar{x}$	Std Deviation n	Remark
13	Lack of online presence	48	25	12	2	3.36	.80860	Agree
14	Lack of network availability and stability	45	30	10	2	3.35	.77725	Agree
15	Inability to connect to the internet	38	33	11	5	3.19	.87390	Agree
16	Inability to utilize functional ICT facility	34	33	14	5	3.11	.88675	Agree
17	Lack of functional ownership of ICT facilities (laptop, mobile phone, etc)	31	39	12	5	3.10	.84955	Agree
18	Inability to provide alternative Internet access	32	37	12	6	3.09	.88439	Agree

Source: Fieldwork, 2022

Analysis of results in Table 3 reveal respondents' agreement on the six (6) items presented with their mean scores and standard deviating of 3.36 (.80860), 3.35 (.77725), 3.19 (.87390), 3.11 (.88675), 3.10 (.84055) as well as 3.09 (.88349) as challenges faced by the public academic libraries in Benue State in a bid to demonstrating their sustained relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic.

Discussion

The findings of this study are discussed in line with the research objectives and questions that guided the study. In the question of the place for public academic libraries sustained their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, the study revealed that public academic libraries sustain their relevance in research support through the provision of open access publishing, intensified resource sharing, advocating for open research and open data in federal grants, educating faculty members about how to retain their publication rights, seeking greater control of the research being produced at their institutions as well as through the development of online environments for faculty members' research collaborate from a distance. This finding is in agreement with the result of Omeluzor, Nwaomah, Molukwu and Sambo (2021) who reveal that libraries disseminated information and links to e-resources to support patrons' ongoing research. It is also in line with IFLA (2020) which reported that the Anatolian University Libraries Consortium (ANKOS) has intensified resource sharing between its members through a single portal in order to accelerate access to research and the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology in Saudi Arabia has produced a series of tutorials on how best to use library materials.

On the basis of factors that facilitate public academic libraries sustained relevance in research support, the study reveals that there are different factors that facilitate public academic libraries to sustain their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic in Benue State. These include ability to utilize functional ICT facility, ownership of functional ICT facilities (laptop, mobile phone, etc), online presence, ability to connect to the internet network and ability to provide for alternative Internet access. This finding is in consonance with finding of Chakraborty, Kureshi, Gajbe, Upadhyay and Devi (2020) that various library and library and information services professionals play an active role in the research community to provide library facilities in multiple ways so that no impact arises on their research on this nation lockdown situation. It also concurs with the finding of Dadhe and Dubey (2020) that the libraries provides remote access to e-resources, free and expanded access, open access resources, resources related to COVID-19 and assistance in technological initiatives.

In view of the challenges, the study recorded several challenges faced by the public academic libraries in a bid to demonstrating their sustained relevance to research support during and after covid-19 in Benue State. These include lack of online presence, lack of availability and network stability, inability to connect to the internet, inability to utilize functional ICT facility, lack of functional ownership of ICT facilities (laptop, mobile phone, etc) and inability to provide alternative Internet access. The findings agree with Mohammed et al (2016) who reveal that many Nigerian university libraries do not have functional and updated websites. It is also in collaboration with Alibi and Sani (2021) who identified the major challenge encountered as poor funding for effective service delivery, inadequate facilities and inadequate internet services. In the same vein, the findings of Oyelude, Ebijuwa, Ahmad, Abba, and Nongo (2022) affirms the need to for government and non governmental agencies could assist with funding in the new normal which brought lots of changes to information processing and dissemination. Librarians and libraries would thrive in this new reality and remain more responsive to disseminate information more than ever before.

Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations based on the findings of the study.

1. There should be functional, updated and interactive online presence in the public academic libraries
2. There should be availability and stability in the public academic libraries
3. Public academic libraries and their professionals should be educated on how to connect to the internet
4. Public academic libraries and their professionals should be able to utilize the available and functional ICT facility to sustain their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 pandemic
5. Public academic libraries should provide adequate and functional ICT facilities (laptop, mobile phone, etc) for their sustenance of relevance in research support during and after covid-19
6. Public academic libraries and their professionals should be able to provide alternative Internet access to maintain their place in research support during and after covid-19

Conclusion

The importance of research support is to be emphasized particularly during and after covid-19 pandemic. It helps in the design of online research and the development of skills for digital researchers. Based on this, public academic libraries must fast engage in the diversification of information delivery skills in order to support research and maintain their place of relevance. To achieve this, the place of public academic libraries in Benue State sustained their relevance in research support during and after covid-19 through the provision of open access publishing and intensified resource sharing. This is facilitated by the ability of public academic library professionals to own and utilize functional ICT facility available such as laptop and mobile phone as well as online presence. This is however, challenged with the lack of online presence as well as lack of network availability and stability. It concludes that for public academic libraries to sustain their place of relevance in research support, they must embrace the culture and practice of functional, updated and interactive online presence.

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