



COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A SHARE EXPERIENCE OF ITS DEVASTATING EFFECTS ON THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY SERVICES PROVISION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

All academic libraries in Nigeria have been locked down owing to the rapid spread of the virus particularly in public institutions without any provision for sufficient and effective virtual information services on their websites or via social media platforms. This has left the Nigerian libraries in a state of not contributing significantly to the battle against the pandemic and the non-engagement of librarians in the fight against the corona virus. This paper discusses the devastating effects of corona virus on the service provision of the academic libraries in Nigeria and highlighted the responses of the academic libraries in the midst of covid-19 pandemic. It also discusses certain factors affecting the provision of needed information services to users by the academic libraries such as none readiness of academic libraries or parent institution to respond to any global outbreak of disease (epidemics), natural disaster and humanitarian crisis or insecurity in a bid to curb the menace it has on achieving the institutions' goals. The paper recommends among others that academic libraries or parent institution must be prepared to respond to any global outbreak of disease (epidemics) to curb the menace it has on achieving the institutions' goals.

Keyword: Academic Libraries, Library Services, Covid-19, Nigeria.

Introduction

The year 2020 will forever stand as a historical marker, drawing a line between what can be contrastively expressed as "normal" and "new normal" or "post COVID-19". Corona virus and/or COVID-19 have become recurring vocabularies in virtually all sector of the society because of its devastating blow on humanity as a whole. The academia is not left out; the lockdown across the globe gave a massive blow on education and learning as it is yet to find its footing. The general believe is that life after the lockdown will never remain the same considering the fact that there is yet to be any known cure for it. Like every other space that accommodates human activity and interaction, the library as both an entity and as a discipline has received its fair share of the devastating effect of the scourge. For example; results from the 2020 library survey of ithakos+ us library

survey provide a glimpse into how the pandemic has changed academic libraries in the United State. Similar and even more disturbing effects are felt across libraries around the world especially university libraries in developing countries where digitalization is mostly lacking. The notion of a "new normal" connotes life with the corona virus which according to student will never remain the same. Consequently, humanity is finding ways to live with but away from the virus.

The effect of corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic on library operations and services is undoubtedly negative. COVID-19 pandemic has grounded almost all walks of human life, academic libraries inclusive. This is a great threat to most aspect of national development the world over. The operations and services of libraries especially in Nigeria were completely down tooled. This is attributed to the fact that the novel corona virus as a deadly disease with high mortality rate on daily basis does not allow for free human interaction and thus, libraries as service-oriented organization which centers on team playing and face-to-face interaction between users and library personnel lack options but rather forced to become victims of this deadly disease by shutting down all their routine activities, because of high level of negligence, unpreparedness and unwillingness to deliver quality health care (Lawal, 2020). The development of librarianship in developing countries like Nigeria was thus hampered. In Nigeria, academic libraries are on a competitive race to meet up with global standards in terms of high quality information acquisitions, organization, retrieval and dissemination to enhance academic research activities and job productivity but because of the deplorable state of the academic libraries and traditional method of meeting the information needs of users have become redundant during the current pandemic and may remain so (Anasi, 2012). The global threat posed by corona virus pandemic to human activities and right to work put the libraries at the center of unexpected circumstance because libraries, especially in Nigeria, were either not prepared or not adequately prepared to overcome unforeseen challenges especially during global epidemics, other natural disaster or global humanitarian crisis.

Conceptual Clarification

Conceptually, covid-19 is a novel virus identified on December 31, 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei city of China (WHO, 2020). The virus according to Ishtiaq, Sehar and Shahid (2020) is highly contagious and has a death rate that is multiple times higher than the one of seasonal flu, fever, a dry cough, shortness of breath, and extreme tiredness. It is a global pandemic that has affected several countries of the world including Nigeria. This prompted WHO (2020) recommendation of social distancing, lockdown and isolation or quarantine as a reaction to prevent the spread of the pandemic. These recommendations force the closure of public

institutions including academic libraries as people meeting points where the virus can easily be transmitted. This made many countries of the world to quickly embrace the strategy of school closure and suspension of other academic library services that require physical contact so as to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Following this, academic library services have to be changed from in-person services to remote services mainly with the use of modern information and communication technologies. The question now is what are the devastating effects of covid-19 on the academic library services provision in Nigeria and the libraries expected responses?

Effects of Covid-19 Pandemic on Academic Library Services Provision in Nigeria

In every academic institution, the major services of academic libraries are to support the mission and vision of the parent institution through provision of adequate, relevant and current information resources to aid teaching, learning and research. Academic libraries thus, serve as the nerve center for overall academic activities. In Nigeria, the novel epidemic called COVID-19 played greater negative roles in the service provision of academic libraries beginning from March, 2020 to January, 2021.

When all public places were announced to be closed for the indefinite time, the libraries were also shut down in haste. As the library employees had no prior intimation about the temporary but immediate shut down, no plans could be made for meeting the challenges of the times. The books had been issued to the users for definite time, but now those books could not be returned. Now, due to the unannounced and indefinite shut down, the cleanliness and maintenance of hygiene of the libraries was not possible. More worryingly, the needs of the users or the information seekers could not be fulfilled, which further meant that libraries could be perceived as non-existent during the times of pandemic. Till date, it has been a huge challenge for the librarians and other library staff to maintain the relevance of libraries during these times of crisis (Navneet and Khushpreet, 2021).

However, in some other part of the globe, academic libraries are still faced with the challenges of rendering services to users successfully especially where virtual or digitalized library services have not been put in place. Many academic libraries in Nigeria and some other developing countries were completely handicapped in a bid to responding to threat posed by COVID-19 in terms of providing information services to their numerous clients. The inadequacy of or non-compliance to adoption of ICTs to library operations and services have kept many Nigerian academic libraries stagnant in terms of development. Moreover, in this dynamic world where computers and related technologies are taking up human responsibility, the developed libraries found it easier to cope or respond to

any disease outbreak or natural disaster that can hinder free movement of human from one place to another by switching to any alternative technology-driven services. Ali and Gatti (2020) gave insight into what many libraries in Pakistan managed to provide virtual support to their users through the provision of reference service, document delivery and literature searches, systematic reviews, and other libraries initiated online seminar (webinar) sessions using web platform like goggle classroom, goggle hangouts, Skype or zoom during the lockdown. For any library to be successful in its services, it must adopt the most important ways of reaching out to ever-changing needs of its numerous clients "successful libraries will determine what platforms most effectively reach their target audience and build sustainable presence there" (Bizzle, 2017)

Application of social networking tools is essential to the global visibility of library operations and services. It is exclusively a dependable tool for curtailing the menace of lost access to information especially during epidemics, global crisis or natural disasters. Social networking is a range of web based software through which people interact and collaborates with other people. It is a network environment where a user can surf, create personal profiles, invite and connect with other people called social friends. In social media, a user interact, share view, comment, from discussion group and sub-group, share audio and video files, text messages, graphic and performs a range of other mutual interaction on the internet (Kasim, Mohammed and Garba, 2018). Kasa and Yusuf (2020) posit that use of social media is among the new platforms that facilitate dissemination and interaction of the new normal during the COVID-19 era. Institutions of learning and research needed to be salvaged, and organ such as academic libraries are failing in their statutory responsibility which should not be allowed to persist.

Academic Libraries Responses in the Midst of Covid-19 Pandemic

Several opinions were made by researchers as regards what measures libraries are expected to deploy in the midst of global crisis or epidemics. A comprehensive list of approaches or responses that libraries need to put in place in the event of global emergencies is outlined by Mabe and Ashley (2017) as being a safe haven, offering normal services, operating as information hubs and improvising.

Being a Safe Haven: In response to covid-19 pandemic, academic libraries are comparatively "safe haven" in their architect and the safety measures taken in the process of their construction. Therefore, whenever any natural calamities such as earthquake, hurricanes or floods etc occur, libraries can be used as the shelters for the nearby community. The basic facility such as shelter, water, toilets and

electricity are provided within the premises of libraries.

Provision of Normal Services: In response to covid-19 pandemic, academic libraries were still consistent in their provision of normal services to the user community. The teachers, students and especially researchers were provided with maximum support so that they can accomplish their assignment without any hindrances. Medawar and Tabet (2021) attested that online resources were now more visible and were promoted in the constant need to reach out to the users.

Operating as Information Hubs: The library staff is always trained and hence, expert in accumulating relevant information and communicating the same to various seeker of the information. In the case of emergency, the library staff can spread out in public the information about adopting various measures to prevent the ill-effects of emergency. In case of getting struck in any emergency situation, the escape routes and the remedies can also be disseminated by the library staff. To this end, Adigun, Okuonghae, Mamudu, Suleiman and Haliru (2020) 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.

Improvising: The library staff has a formal training as well as availability of sources in keeping the community engage in positive activities. In case of emergency, the library staff can contribute in boosting the morale of vulnerable and effected groups and community by sharing with them positive case studies, stories and motivational talks through various online and web sources. Neog (2020) in his use of social media by the university libraries of Assam for delivering different library services in the pandemic situation caused by COVID-19 revealed that WhatsApp is the most used social media for delivering library services during lockdown. Also in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, Aghadiuno, Amidu and Zaccheaus (2021) revealed that Facebook is the most used social media platforms to obtain information about COVID-19 among librarians in universities in Nasarawa State. Alibi and Sani (2021) in their information service delivery during covid-19 in Kogi State, Nigeria revealed that the major types of information services provided by librarians during COVID -19 seasons include Current Awareness Services (CAS), online Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) services and Electronic Document Delivery Services, which are delivered majorly through social media platforms, emails and library websites.

Hassles to Academic Library Services during Covid-19 Pandemic

There is no doubt that the academic libraries were hampered by certain factors during corona virus era. A number of researchers on the subject matter such as Rahiem (2020) and Gomina and Sambe (2021) identified the technology barriers and challenges in using ICT in information dissemination to include device issues, internet connectivity, technology costs, and lack of technology skills, cyber insecurity, constant monitoring and stay on the job, slow nature of information dissemination and accessibility, disappearance of skill work, unfamiliarity of with new technology and lack of system development according to the new environment. However, the following factors were observed to be responsible for lack of roles or responses expected of the academic libraries during epidemics.

1. None readiness of academic libraries or parent institution to respond to any global outbreak of disease (epidemics), natural disaster and humanitarian crisis or insecurity in a bid to curb the menace it has on achieving the institutions' goals.
2. Paucity of funds emanating from insufficient national budget to ameliorate any unforeseen negativity to library services and national development.
3. Inadequate compliance to ICT adaption in Library operations and services: Libraries are not adequately complying with the adaption of ICTs to their operations and services. This limits the services of such libraries to traditional or manual method and therefore, cannot render services outside the library environment.
4. Restriction of movement: In order to prevent the spread of the corona virus from public gathering, there was restriction of movement which causes a threat to any possible skeletal services by the academic libraries.
5. Rampant power outages: Consistent power outages have greatly threatens service delivery by the academic libraries in Nigeria in the provision of virtual or online services during covid-19 pandemic.
6. Slow or uneasy access to the internet: Academic libraries also suffered slow and uneasy access to the internet due to power outages or unfriendly weather such as heavy rain fall or wind storms which has direct effect on network masts and other ICT infrastructure.
7. Related to the above is the inability of user to subscribe to adequate data bundles due to financial threat posed by lockdown during the epidemic.

Recommendations

Based on the discussed challenges of academic library services provision during covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria, the following are the recommendations

made

1. Academic libraries or parent institution must be prepared to respond to any global outbreak of disease (epidemics) to curb the menace it has on achieving the institutions' goals.
2. Adequate funds should be provided to the academic libraries to ameliorate any unforeseen negativity to library services and national development.
3. Academic libraries should adequately comply with ICT adaption in library operations and services.
4. Academic libraries should integrate the use of social media such as facebook, Whatsapp, Twitter, Gmail chat, Telegram, Instagram among others to break the barrier of movement restriction and enhance service delivery.
5. Other sources of power supply such as standby generators and installation of solar energy in academic libraries should be considered to stabilize power outages and enhance service delivery during the pandemic
6. There should be stability in power supply and friendly weather condition to enhance easy access to the internet or network masts and other ICT infrastructures.
7. Network providers should make provision for subsidize rate of daily, weekly, monthly and even yearly data subscriptions for academic library service delivery during the lockdown.

Conclusion

The novel corona virus which has shut down almost all aspect of human endeavour during its outbreak is still in existence and that libraries must sit up to their responsibility in order to ensure quick responses to emergency situations that hinder human interaction as well as halting the operations of libraries. As a result, this paper recommends the following strategy for the academic library to adopt in terms of providing effective services to library users in situations of pandemic.

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