**Provision of Library Reference Service through Web 2.0 for Global Competitiveness: Report from Federal Polytechnic Ede, Osun State, Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

Part of the 12 cardinal pillars of the *World Economic Forum’s* Global Competitiveness Index are higher education and training, ability to harness existing technology and innovation. Consequently, information is needed for teaching, learning and technological development in the Polytechnic education sub-sector. Therefore, harnessing the current technology of Web 2.0, a Whatsapp platform was created for the students of the Department of Library and Information Science, Federal Polytechnic Ede to request for information they need for their academic endeavours. This paper therefore presents the report of a survey carried out on the assessment of the students’ use of the Online Reference Service platform. Using a total enumeration method, a self-designed questionnaire was administered on 221 students who constituted as population of the study. Findings revealed that majority of the students were satisfied with the reference services provided to them through the social media platform, and also found the information materials provided very useful. In view of this, they indicated that they would like the service to be replicated by their Main Library. Therefore, the study recommends that the Main Library should replicate the social media reference service and necessary resources and facilities should be provided. Also, awareness should be created to market the service while only dedicated and experienced staff should be appointed to handle the service.

**Keywords: Reference service, Web 2.0, Federal Polytechnic Ede, Global Competitiveness**

**Introduction**

Tracing the history of library and librarianship reveals that it is a profession that depends largely on using current technologies to function. Libraries from time immemorial use available current technologies to provide information and services to their users. From the clay tablets and papyrus of the ancient Egypt, to the parchments of the medieval libraries, and the widely use of paper from the mid-15th Century to date, and now electronic information resources; all points to the evidence that current technologies will continue to shape the mode of library operations in the libraries.

Academic libraries provide information resources and services that are necessary for teaching, learning, research and development to the entire academic community, which are part of the *World Economic Forum’s* Global Competitiveness Index. One of the services rendered by an academic library is reference service. Different approaches may be explored in offering reference service. These include providing the services offline (i.e. physically) or virtually (online). Online provision of library services can follow different dimensions or technologies such as: websites, Web 2.0 or social media, e-mail etc. Web 2.0 offers a myriad of consumer opportunities, principal of which is the synchronous/ instant messaging features and ability to send and receive multimedia messages (text, video, audio and images).

To bring library services closer to the users, an Online Reference Library was set up by the Officers in charge of the Training Library of the Department of Library and Information Science (DLIS) to provide reference service to the students of the Department. WhatsApp social media platform was used for this purpose and the service has been running for close to a year as at the time of writing this paper. This social media platform was created to render reference service and provide reference information to users, and also to assess their feedbacks based on the services rendered. This paper, therefore, provides an outlook on the use of the DLIS Online Reference Library among the students of the Department of Library and Information Science, Federal Polytechnic Ede, Osun State.

**Statement of the problem**

Social media is a consumer technology with wider penetration and use across households and ages, library inclusive. Due to its wide popularity, it is mostly used, coupled with the fact that many of the information users these days want a ready-made answer in a speed of light. Therefore, matching the use of social media with library services, such as the reference service, would be beneficiary in this digital age.

However, it has been observed that in spite of the global acceptability of Web 2.0, many libraries are repulsive to using this technology to provide some basic services such as reference to their users. Also, in some cases where they may be available, awareness level of the users about its availability may be low, therefore resulting into under-utilizaion. In addition, some users may not use the services due to certain reasons such as lack of smartphones and required technical skills, and also reference materials and services provided may not be useful and satisfactory enough respectively.

In view of the fore-going, this study was set out to assess the use of the DLIS Online Library social media reference service by the students of the Department of Library and Information Science, Federal Polytechnic Ede, Osun State.

**Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Identify the number of users that have used/benefited from the DLIS Online Reference Library
2. To identify the reasons for not using the DLIS Online Reference Library by the students of the Department of Library and Information Science, Federal Polytechnic Ede
3. Determine the level of usefulness of the materials/ information provided through the DLIS Online Reference Library social media reference service platform.
4. Assess the satisfactory level of the students of the Department of Library and Information Science, Federal Polytechnic Ede on the use of the DLIS Online Reference Library.

**Review of related literature**

**Global Competitiveness**

According to the World Economic Forum (2014), global competitiveness is the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country. This in turn set the level of prosperity that can be reached by an economy. Cann (2016) also emphasized the need for a competitive economy to be a productive one, which in turns leads to growth, increased income level and well-being of the citizens. This implies that for a country to be globally competitive, she must have the ability to deliver high levels of prosperity to her citizens through available resources and infrastructure. Global Competitiveness Index has been measure by the World Economic Forum since 2004 and published in Global Competitiveness Report where they rank countries according to certain parameters or variables, organized into twelve pillars. These include: institutions, appropriate infrastructure, stable macroeconomic framework, good health and primary education, higher education and training, ability to harness existing technology, innovation etc.

From the Global Competitiveness Report published for 2017 – 2018, updated in October 2018, Nigeria ranked 125 out of the 137 countries that were assessed with a 3.30 points out of the obtainable 7 points for year 2018 (See Figure 1). With this index, it is evident that more is left to be done, especially as it is a decline from 3.39 points recorded as at 2017. According to the Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), a higher average score means higher degree of competitiveness.

Information is needed to attain high competitiveness index. Each of the twelve pillars need informational input for them to be attainable. Information is needed for planning and decision making and a major ingredient to improve the stand of education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. School and academic libraries serve as major institutions responsible for providing information necessary for teaching, learning and research across schools and higher institutions respectively. Apart from providing access to different information resources, they also provide basic information services to facilitate optimal use of the resources they provide. One of the major services provided by the library is the reference service.



**Figure 1: Nigeria Competitiveness Index from 2008 – 2018.**

**Source: Trading Economics (2018)**

**Academic Library and its users**

Academic libraries are libraries that are attached to higher institutions of learning for proving information resources necessary for teaching, learning and research activities. Academic libraries can be found in Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Colleges of Agriculture and similar institutions. Aina (2004) opines that academic libraries are as varied and distinctive as the institutions that has them. This translates that academic libraries support the core mandates of their parent institutions and thus their collections, operations and services reflect such mandates. Materials they provide include reference collections, textbooks, and research collections like journals.

Users of academic libraries consist of both internal and external users. Internal users are the entire academic community. This include the lecturers, the non- teaching staff and the students, while external users consist of members of the host communities who may need special permission or clearance and researchers from other institutions or bodies as the case may be.

**Web 2.0 (Social Media)**

The term *Web 2.0* is often used interchangeably with the term *social media,* especially in librarianship. According to Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009), social media can be defined as applications that are available online, aiming at facilitating interactions, collaborations and content (information) sharing among participating members. Social media include: Whatsapp, Twitter, Weibo, Instagram, Facebook etc.

In the view of Constantinides and Fountain (2008), social media can be identified by the following principal categories:

* Blogs: This involves individuals’ or enterprises’ online journals often combined with audio or video podcasts.
* Social network: online applications that allows users to build virtual platforms that are accessible to other users for exchanging content.
* Content communities: Websites organizing and sharing particular types of content.
* Forums: Sites for exchanging ideas usually around special interests or fields of study.
* Content aggregators: Applications allowing users to fully customize the web contents they wish to access.

**Reference services**

Reference service can be defined as the direct personal assistance given by librarians to library patrons who are in pursuit of information for whatever purpose (Ifidon and Ifidon, 2008). They further stressed that reference service involves not only directing the users to where the information materials are located, but also locating what information is relevant from a mass of information resources available.

**Reference services in academic library**

Reference services in academic libraries can be categorized into three levels or layers:

1. Minimum level/ Ready reference
2. Middling level/ Directional
3. Maximum level/ Research

According to Ifidon and Ifidon (2008), minimum level of reference service emphasizes the self-help and self-education of the user with guidance from the librarian. It focuses on the librarian educating the user or giving him direction on how to solve his information problems by himself (i.e. the user).

Kumar (2009) posits that middling level of reference service focuses on the librarian giving additional efforts to solve the user’s information problem. This may include the librarian assisting further by retrieving the needed information resources for the clientele and instructing him on how to use it.

Maximum level focuses on an in-depth information request that needs provision of extra assistance by the librarian. In this case, the librarian looks for related information resources, packaged them in a useful way that directly answer the reference queries, and deliver them to the users in a ready-made format.

Provision of reference service can be carried out using two approaches. This can be offline (physically) or online (using information technology facilities). Online reference services can take the format of websites, e-mail or social media.

**Use of Web 2.0 for reference services in academic library**

Social networking sites are extremely popular across age groups and are dominant forums for accessing and sharing information. LIS Professionals are responding to the popularity of social networking sites and their expanding role in the creation, use, and sharing of information by engaging them as a central medium for interacting with library patrons and providing services to meet their information needs (Andrews, Preece and Turoff, 2011). Social media mostly used in academic libraries for providing reference service include WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube. According to Kumar (2015), the choice of social media to select depends on the kind of service or level of reference service to provide as well as what is requested by the users. For instance, while Facebook may be used for connecting with the reference librarian, WhatsApp will be better used for instant messaging and sharing of information resources such as electronic information resources. Youtube is used for streaming videos, while Instagram is used mostly for sharing pictures.

**Requirements for Web 2.0 (social media) reference service**

To carry out reference service in the library, the following skills and characteristics need to be met by the librarians: subject specialization; digital fluency/ ICT skills; information literacy skills; time management skills; good internet connectivity; social media skills; power supply; dedicated staff; multi-tasking skill; and critical thinking skills.

**Methodology**

The study adopted a social survey research design. Using a total enumeration technique, questionnaire was administered on a study population of 221 students, comprising of ND I and ND II students of the Department of Library and Information Science, Federal Polytechnic Ede who are the direct users of the WhatsApp Online Reference Library. The questionnaire consisted of both open and close ended questions. Quantitative data collected were analysed using frequency count and simple percentage, while qualitative data were described accordingly. However, from the 221 questionnaires administered, 196 were duly completed and returned valid for the study. This represents a response rate of 88.69%.

**Data analysis**

**Table 1: Distribution of respondents according to Gender, Age and Academic level**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** | **ND I** | **ND II** | **Total** |
| Male | 55 (28.06%) | 42 (21.43%) | 97 (49.49%) |
| Female | 52 (26.53%) | 47 (23.98%) | 99 (50.51%) |
| **Total** | **107 (54.59%)** | **89 (45.41%)** | **196 (100%)** |
| **Age** |  |  |  |
| 15-17 years | 45 (22.96%) | 42 (21.43%) | 87 (44.39%) |
| 18-20 years | 48 (24.49%) | 35 (17.86%) | 83 (42.35%) |
| 21 years - above | 14 (7.14%) | 12 (6.12%) | 26 (13.26%) |
| **Total** | **107 (54.59%)** | **89 (45.41%)** | **196 (100%)** |

**Respondents Biodata**

Table 1 shows that from the 196 respondents that duly completed and returned their questionnaires for analysis, 107 (54.59%) are from NDI while the remaining 89 (45.41%) are from ND II. The Table also shows that 50.51% of the respondents are female while the remaining 49.49% are male; and majority of 44.39% are between the age range of 15 -17 years, followed by some 42.35% who are between 18 -20 years of age, while the remaining 13.26% are 21 years and above.

A question was asked if the respondents have used or benefited from the Whatsapp Online Library reference service before. The responses are tabulated in Table 2.

**Table 2: Response rate on the number of users that have used /benefitted from the Online Library**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Yes** | **No** | **Total** |
| Have you used/ benefited from the Online Library (Social Media) reference service before? | 163 (83.16%) | 33 (16.84%) | 196 (100%) |

From Table 2, it is evident that majority of 83.16% of respondents have used/ benefitted from the social media reference service while the remaining 16.84% have not used it.

**Table 3: Reasons for not using the service**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **SN** | **Reasons** | **No. of Respondents** |
| 1  2  3 | No browsing phone  Not aware of the service  No need for using it yet | 13 (39.39%)  7 (21.21%)  13 (39.39%) |
|  | **TOTAL** | 33 (100.00%) |

Table 3 indicates the reasons for not using the service by the 33 respondents who claimed not to have used or benefitted from it before. 39.39% of respondents respectively claimed that they have not used the service because they did not have internet-enabled phones, and also that there is no need for using the service yet. However, some 21.21% respondents claimed that they were not aware of the service.

**Usefulness of the materials/ information provided**

The respondents were asked to rate the level of the usefulness of the materials or information provided to them by the Online Library on a scale of 1 – 3 (1 = Very Useful, 2 = Useful and 3 = Not useful). The result is presented in Fig 2. It shows that majority of 72.39% of the respondents claimed that the materials and information provided to them by the Online Library were very useful, while the remaining 27.61% claimed that they were useful. However, no respondents claimed that the materials provided were not useful.

**n = 163 Fig. 2:**  **Usefulness of the materials/ information provided**

**Respondents’ Level of Satisfaction on the reference service provided**

Respondents were also asked to rate the level of their satisfaction on the reference service provided to them through the WhatsApp platform on a scale of 1 – 3 (1 = Very satisfied, 2 = Satisfied and 3 = Not satisfied). The result is presented in Fig 3.

**n = 163 Fig. 3: Respondents’ Level of Satisfaction on the reference service provided through the CGNS Online Library Platform**

Figure 3 shows that majority (71.17%) of the respondents claimed to be *very satisfied* with the reference service provided to them through the Whatsapp Online Library social media platform, while the remaining 28.83% also claimed to *be satisfied* with the service. However, no respondent claimed not to be satisfied with the service.

**Table 4: Request for continuation of the reference service through the Social Media Platform of the Institution Main Library**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Yes** | **No** | **No response** | **Total** |
| Do you want to continue having access to this kind of service in your Institution’s Main Library? | 183 (93.37%) | 0 (0%) | 13 (6.63%) | 196 (100%) |

**n = 196**

From Table 4, it is evident that majority of 93.37% respondents want to continue having access to reference service through social media platforms from the Institution’s Main Library, while the remaining 6.63% respondents did not respond to this question. The 6.63% who did not respond to the question were from the 33 respondents who claimed not to have used the service before. (see Table 2).

**Suggestions for Improvement**

Respondents were asked to suggest measures for improving the social media reference service, and the following suggestions were made:

Improved Internet connectivity and power supply, creating awareness through orientation and seminars and other means appropriate, the service handlers should do more to increase the number of resources provided to their users.

**Discussion of findings**

The study revealed that majority of the respondents have used/ benefited from the WhatsApp Online Library reference service. This signaled that the service enjoyed a wide acceptability among the respondents. However, some reasons for not using the service yet include non-availability of smartphones and lack of awareness of the availability of the service, and no need for using it yet. This is in line with Okoroma (2017) findings that lack of awareness, infrastructural and technological problems are part of the reasons for not using social media for reference services among librarians.

The study also revealed that all the respondents that have used the service found the materials provided to them to be useful and satisfied with it. This may not be unconnected with the experience of the service handlers to identify quality sources in such areas requested by the respondents, and their abilities to deliver on timely basis.

However, due to the respondents above- average level of satisfaction about the social media reference service, majority of them indicated that they want the service to be replicated by the Institution’s Main Library. This may not be unconnected with Olajide and Alao (2016) submission that majority of young ones in this generation want social media services in the library due to the numerous benefits the technology offers.

**Conclusion**

The study has established that majority of the students of the Department of Library and Information Science of the Federal Polytechnic Ede, Osun State want social media services from the Library because of the benefits they stand to derive from such, and the advantage that social media has over other similar technologies, which facilitates instant messaging. The students were satisfied with the services and information materials provided to them through the WhatsApp Online Library and they want it continued.

**Recommendations**

In line with the findings of the study, the following recommendations are hereby put forward:

1. The Federal Polytechnic Ede Main Library should replicate/ commence similar service and put in place human, material and financial resources; technologies and facilities, necessary for the success of the service. *Telegram* social media platform can be used because of its ability to accommodate so many users in a group.
2. Awareness should be created to market the service. In doing this, the library need to change the traditional approach of creating awareness during orientation programmes for newly admitted students. They can improve on this through notice boards, posters in reading rooms, appointing liaison officers for faculties that will relate directly with students from those faculties, create special classes to teach Use of Library and familiarize users with library use skills, library tours/ open-days etc.
3. Only dedicated and experienced staff should be appointed to handle this kind of service, as it is time consuming and entails possession of certain technical and subject skills to cope with the high and challenging demands of the task.
4. There is need for more studies on the use of social media for library services as it affects library users, as this study identified that there is a research gap in this area. Many of the related literature found concentrated on the use of social media among the librarians, and just few focused on the library users.

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