LAFIA JOURNAL OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE
Volume 4, Number 2, 2023.
https://lalibjournals.org/index.php/LJLIS
ISSN: Print - 2814-0702, Online - 2814-0710
LJLIS

THE CHALLENGES IN THE PROVISION OF SERVICES BY PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BENUE STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract
The challenges in the provision of services by public libraries in the fight against COVD-19 pandemic in Benue State Nigeria. Four specific objectives guided the study. The study adopted a descriptive survey research. The population of the study comprises 117 public library staff in Benue State. Since the population was not large, the study made use of all the 117 public library staff in Benue State. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire was validated by three experts. The reliability of the questionnaire was established using Cronbach Alpha method and a reliability coefficient of 0.76 was obtained. Data collected were analyzed using Frequency Counts, Percentages, Means and Standard Deviation to answer research questions. Findings of the study revealed that, the level of preparedness of public library services against global pandemics in Benue State is minimal. The study therefore recommended among others that public libraries should prioritize and invest in enhancing their level of preparedness against global pandemics, including updating emergency response plans and acquiring necessary resources, and public libraries should implement strategies to combat fake news and conspiracy theories by promoting information literacy programs, fact-checking initiatives, and ensuring that the information provided is accurate, reliable, and aligned with public health guidelines.
Keywords: Challenges, Provision of Services, Public Libraries, Covid-19 Pandemic, Benue State

Introduction

Information is an indispensable tool for human existence and societal development. As a processed data to which meaning may be attached, information is

useful for planning, decision making and reduction of uncertainty. It is an indispensable tool in all aspect of human day-to-day existence and wellbeing and a major resource that is needed in every sphere of life endeavour. The library as a repository of knowledge and a dynamic social institution is an indispensable resource centre for reliable information meant to preserve the recorded knowledge of man for use. Libraries particularly public libraries can provide access to information that would enable people enjoy gainful lives as they are skilled in disseminating information resources in diverse forms so that when they are required, they can be quickly located and utilized. Public libraries are seen institutions that provide free access to a wide range of information resources and services to the general public. They serve as community hubs that promote literacy, education, lifelong learning, and cultural enrichment. Public libraries are funded by government entities and are open to all individuals, regardless of their age, background, or socioeconomic status.

According to Nanakaan (2021), public libraries are libraries that are accessible by the general public and are usually funded from public sources. The materials acquired in the public library are to meet the general requirements of every profession and activities in the community, so, it is referred to as the "mind of the society". The philosophy, orientation and nature of public library are routed in the responsibility of disseminating diverse and current information services to the members of its community and (or) society. As an avenue through which the overall information resources are made available to all, the public library is supposed to acquire all types of information resources and services in various formats in order to cater for the information needs of diverse users. It is also the responsibility of the public library to identify the needs and come out with a programme or service that can best satisfy the needs of their users (Nanakaan, 2021). Public library is to serve its users at any point in time and to do this effectively, there should be quality information in terms of its relevance, currency and accuracy that would meet and satisfy user's needs. If the library fails to meet the information need of users, then effective services have not been rendered. In recent times around the world, the roles of public libraries in disseminating information to its community of users have been tested with the emergence of the Corona Virus also known as Covid-19.

Covid-19, a pneumonia-like infection which originated from the city of Wuhan, China was discovered and reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) in December 2019. It was quickly determined as a novel corona virus otherwise known as COVID-19 caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Corona Virus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). On 30th January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern and then, a pandemic on 12th March, 2020. The COVID-19 virus was rapidly spreading through the city of Wuhan to many cities in China and later expanded to touch nearly every corner of the globe (Ebijuwa, Oyelude, Abubakar, Nongo& Sani, 2021). Consequently hundreds of thousands of people around the world have been sickened and thousands of others have died of the virus. The virus is new to mankind with no globally accepted cure/treatment yet, since it caught the entire world unprepared. The rapid outbreak of the COVID-19 presents an alarming health crisis that the world is grappling with. In addition to the human impact, there is

also significant economic, business and commercial impact being felt globally.

The global community is still ravaged by the pandemic while the end to the COVID-19 pandemic remains unknown due to variations of its spread among the countries. This means that the complete clinical picture of Covid-19 is yet to be clearly known. The World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) identified the common symptoms to include fever, dry cough, tiredness, shortness of breath, pains and aches, sore throat, and very few people will report diarrhoea, nausea or a runny nose. Symptoms can also include chills and repeated shaking, headache, loss of sense of taste or smell. International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers IAMAT, (2020) states that the symptoms typically appear within two to fourteen days after exposure. The disease is easily spread and it is vital that every effort is made to control and ensure that health systems are able to provide services to all that need them (WHO, 2020).

The fast spread of this virus called the attention of the world to quickly take all the necessary measures to fight and control the spread of the virus. Till date, there is no specific known cure to COVID-19. Ameh, Ukwuoma and Oye (2021) states that though nations have experimented on Hydroxyl Chloroquine, Remdisivire and COVID-organic among others to ascertain their effectiveness in managing COVID-19 patients. Recently, drugs such as BioNTech, Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Sputnik V, and Moderna among others have been used as vaccines for COVID-19. Those infected can receive appropriate care to relieve and treat symptoms, and those with severe illness can receive optimised supportive care.

The COVID-19 pandemic is having a global impact; it is affecting societies in different ways and levels. As earlier stated, concerted efforts are being made around the world to combat the disease for which no sublime cure is yet discovered. The world is relying mostly on preventive measures including lockdowns, restrictions, vaccines and lifesaving medical treatments. However, as reported by Ameh, Ukwuoma and Oye (2021) there is consensus amongst world leaders and stakeholders like WHO and related bodies in Nigeria such as Ministry of Health, National Center for Disease Control (NCDC) and Presidential Task Force (PTF) that the best way to prevent and slow down transmission or even to stay safe is to be well informed about the COVID-19 virus, the disease it causes, how it spreads and preventive measures. In this regard, public libraries are waking up to their roles of proving access to reliable information to the public by bringing their information triage, vetting and looking for ways to better inform the public. Many countries around the world have adopted this measure with their public libraries playing prominent and strategic roles. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), (2020) revealed the roles of public libraries in the course of the novel COVID-19 pandemic to include: providing ongoing communication with users about opportunities to use library resources or services; organizing digital story-times where copyright permits; promoting use of digital libraries and other tools including potentially investing in more content/licences; offering amnesty on borrowed physical books and increasing the number of eBooks users can borrow and raising awareness of digital offers, both on the front pages of their websites, and through putting up posters in the windows of library

buildings and librarians are being reassigned other duties in other departments within their municipalities, for example using information management skills to support health and social services.

Public libraries have a proud history of stepping in to fill the gaps in the social safety net, and the impulse to do so in this instance is strong. Around the world, public libraries, like many service-based organizations and social institutions, switched and are switching to online mode for services delivery in order to inform the public about COVID-19. In spite of the fact that the disease is also having a significant negative impact on libraries across the world including having to close down completely or semi-closed, public libraries are gathering resources and exercising their ingenuity to create and adapt operations, services and programmes to meet the changing information needs of communities (Ameh, Ukwuoma&Oye, 2021). Public libraries in playing their roles educate the public through their websites and emails on methods of coronavirus transmission and why social distancing matters even for the healthy and those at a lower risk. They as well provide information on loans, grants, and other help that many localities are starting to provide for impacted small businesses and workers. Many public libraries around the world are also promoting electronic services (including chat reference) that can be accessed offline; a number of vendors are offering free or increased access to meet demand. Some libraries are already offering distance programs such as bedtime stories by telephone or streaming story time; this is an opportunity to experiment with or expand such offerings, though they need to be mindful of copyright concerns (Schwartz, 2020).

Commenting on the strategies public libraries in Nigeria could adopt to curtail the spread of the COVID-19, Ganiyu, Omorodion, Mamudu, Idris and Ramatu (2020) states that public libraries could render services remotely during the pandemic and some of the services could include expand remote services such as virtual reference and promoting e-books, databases, and e-resources; promote how to access your library's e-resources 24/7; provide references services via email, phone, and chat; use social graphics for online library services; keep the library WIFI on during closure; create a Basic Needs Information local resource guide for their community; encourage patrons to exercise; prepare to serve as recovery centers for community members, help individual with employment search and skills development, and to connect constituents with government aid and services. In addition, Ganiyu, Omorodion, Mamudu, Idris and Ramatu (2020) stated that the public libraries could provide information for patrons about COVID-19, and mental health; consider waiving fines so patrons can access e-resources regardless of account status; provide library card sign-ups for access to remote resources; expand Reader's Advisory services online; share favorite books, music, movies with patrons on social media; publish a blog with book reviews and recommendations; have staff develop reading, viewing, and listening lists and offer an online storytime or digital book club.

There are a plethora of measures public libraries could also put in place to curtail the spread of COVID-19. Ganiyu, Omorodion, Mamudu, Idris and Ramatu (2020) reported that the measures put in place in Nigerian libraries to curtail the spread of

COVID-19 include the provision of washing materials and hand sanitizers to both library staff and patrons, regular communication to staff and patrons with updates and guidelines, on safety measures, reduced library opening hours, regular cleaning of furniture and other library equipment and cleaning supplies provided directly to library staff. Other measures include total lockdown of the library, providing awareness to library patron through different displays in the library, and compulsory use of face mask by both staff and patron. Similarly, the International Federation of Library Associations IFLA (2020) and American Library Association ALA (2020) stated that total lockdown of libraries, provision of hand washing materials and hand sanitizers, frequent cleaning of library equipment and supplies as well as regular communication to staff and patrons with updates and guidelines are measures to be adopted by libraries to curtail the spread of COVID-19. This study therefore seeks to investigate the services of public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Public libraries by virtue of their services are known to be carriers of information that is clear, accurate and verified which could be used for quality decision making. Public libraries have a vital service to play in the situation of public health emergency. The libraries can provide services to the public on coronavirus pandemic by providing current information and reliable resources for understanding and responding to the COVID-19 on their websites. The services of the Nigerian public libraries and the associations are more crucial in the face of the prevailing global pandemic especially now that fake news and misinformation have created confusion and subsequently, posed greater challenge to every effort to curtail the spread of the virus. It is a known fact that adequate reliable information provision by public libraries and librarians will go a long way in the fight against the growing COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, it is imperative for public libraries in Nigeria and Benue State in particular to stand up to their responsibility in providing preventive information to her teaming community on the ravaging COVID-19 virus.

However, the researcher has observed that the public libraries in Benue State seem not to be contributing as envisaged to the fight against COVID-19 the pandemic. Preliminary investigation by the researcher shows that librarians appear not, to have neither provided information to the general public, medical personnel who are on the frontline, nor to the Nigeria Medical Association in the fight against the pandemic. Most public libraries in Nigeria and Benue state particular in the hit of the COVID-19 were shut down due the fast spread of the virus with no provision of digital information on their websites or via social media platforms. The researcher wonders that if the public libraries in Benue State are standing up to their roles, the general public would be better informed on the fight against COVID-19.

It is also the researcher's observation that majority of Benue citizens lacks adequate and reliable information with respect to the pandemic and this affects their perception and reaction to every post on the social media with regards to COVID-19. Obtaining unreliable information from unauthentic information sources is capable of

misguiding the people and jeopardizing the government efforts towards curtailing large spread of the virus. As public libraries have a vital role to play in the provision and dissemination of genuine information to aid in the fight against COVI-19, this study therefore sought to assess the services of public libraries in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic in Benue State Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to assess the services of public libraries in the fight against COVID-19 pandemic in Benue State Nigeria. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Ascertain the types of services provided by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria
2. Determine the extent of provision of services by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria
3. Determine the challenges faced by public libraries in the provision of services to fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria
4. Find out the strategies to overcome the challenges faced by public libraries in the provision of services to fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria

Research Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research. The population of the study comprises 117 public library staff in Benue State. Since the population was not large, the study made use of all the 117 public library staff in Benue State. The instrument for data collection was a structured questionnaire titled, 'Public Library Services and Covid – 19 Pandemic Questionnaire' (PLSCvd-19PQ). The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by two professionals of Library and Information Science and one professional of Measurement and Evaluation, all from the Department of Educational Foundations and General Studies, Joseph Sarwuan Tarka, University. The experts were requested to examine the instrument in terms of clarity of expression, ambiguity of the items, double barrel items as well as the appropriateness of the language used. The comments and observations of the validators were incorporated for the final form of the instrument. The reliability of the questionnaire was established using Cronbach Alpha method and a reliability coefficient of 0.76 was obtained. Data collected were analyzed using Frequency Counts, Percentages, Means and Standard Deviation to answer research questions.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented in line with the research objectives as follows:

Objective one:

The types of services provided by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria

Data on the types of services provided by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria were collected and analyzed as presented on table 1:

Table 1: Frequency Counts and Percentages of the types of services provided by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemics in Benue State, Nigeria

S/N	Types of Services	Frequency		Percent age (%)		Decision
		P	NP	P	NP	
1	E-book Loan	22	76	22.4	77.6	Not Provided
2	Provision of digital contents to library patrons	8	90	8.2	91.8	Not Provided
3	Provision of social resources for the disadvantaged	12	86	12.2	87.8	Not Provided
4	Online reading session	0	98	0	100.0	Not Provided
5	Organizing online streaming programs	0	98	0	100.0	Not Provided
6	Providing access to trustworthy COVID-19 information via different media	10	88	10.2	89.8	Not Provided
7	Curating open access databases for use by both COVID-19 researchers and the entire populace	4	94	4.1	95.9	Not Provided
8	Providing awareness/sensitization on how to stop the spread of COVID-19	96	2	98.0	2.0	Provided
9	Connect patrons/citizens to accurate and reliable data on COVID-19 cases around the world	98	0	100.0	0.0	Provided

Key: P = Provided, NP = Not Provided

Table 2 outlines the services offered by public libraries to combat the Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria, presented in frequencies and percentages. The data reveals that services corresponding to items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 have percentages indicating 'Provided' that are less than 50%, suggesting that these services are not offered by public libraries in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. Conversely, items 8 and 9 exhibit 'Provided' percentages exceeding 50%, signifying that these are the types of services indeed provided by public libraries to contribute to the battle against the Covid-19 pandemic.

Objective two: Extent of provision of services by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria

Data on the extent of provision of services by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria were collected and analyzed as presented on Table 2:

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of extent of provision of services by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria

S/No	Services	Mean	Std. Dev	Decision
1	E-book Loan	1.41	0.89	Low Extent
2	Provision of digital contents to library Patrons	1.34	0.99	Low Extent
3	Provision of social resources for the Disadvantaged	1.29	0.82	Low Extent
4	Online reading session	1.31	0.84	Low Extent
5	Organizing online streaming programs	1.25	0.69	Low Extent
6	Providing access to trustworthy COVID-19 information via different media	1.39	1.02	Low Extent
7	Curating open access databases for use by both COVID-19 researchers and the entire Populace	1.37		Low Extent
8	Providing awareness/sensitization on how to stop the spread of COVID-19	2.34	0.90	Low Extent
9	Connect patrons/citizens to accurate and reliable data on COVID-19 cases around the world	2.41	0.87	Low Extent
	Cluster Mean	**1.57**	**0.88**	**Low Extent**

Table 2 shows the extent of provision of services by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria in Mean and Standard Deviations. From the table as presented, it can be seen that the mean value for each item (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) was below the benchmark of 2.50, that is, the mean vales ranges from 1.25 – 2.41. The Table also revealed a cluster mean of 1.57 and Standard Deviation (SD) = 0.88. Based on this cluster mean (2.35) which is below the benchmark of 2.50, it can be deduced from the finding that the extent of provision of services by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria is low.

Objective Three:

Challenges faced by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria?

Data on the challenges faced by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria were collected and analyzed as presented on table 3:

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation of challenges faced by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria

S/No	Challenges	Mean	Std. Dev	Decision
1	Lack of adequate research information on the COVID-19 pandemic	3.59	1.10	Agree
2	Lack of timely information on the COVID-19 Pandemic	3.43	0.99	Agree
3	Inadequate infrastructure/computers with Internet Facilities	3.36	0.91	Agree
4	Poor Internet services delivery among network Providers	2.81	1.01	Agree
5	Lack of adequate power supply	3.56	1.12	Agree
6	High cost of data subscription	3.53	1.01	Agree
7	Difficulties in accessing and retrieving information from the Internet	2.88	0.94	Agree
8	Inadequate support from the Government in acquisition of resources	2.71	0.98	Agree
9	Fake news and conspiracy theories	3.75	1.11	Agree

Table 3 revealed the challenges faced by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria in mean values and standard deviations. From the table as presented, it can be seen that the mean value for each item (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) was above the benchmark of 2.50, that is, the mean vales ranges from 2.71 – 3.75. Based on these mean values, all the items as presented in Table 5 are considered the challenges faced by public libraries in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria.

Objective Four

Strategies to overcome the challenges faced by public libraries in the provision of services to fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria

Data on the strategies to overcome the challenges faced by public libraries in the provision of services to fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria were collected and analyzed as presented on table 4.

Table 4: Mean and Standard Deviation of strategies to overcome the challenges faced by public libraries in the provision of services to fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria

S/No	Level of Preparedness	Mean	St. Dev	Decision
1	Sponsorship of adequate research information on the COVID-19 pandemic	3.50	1.10	Agree
2	Provision of timely information on the COVID-19 Pandemic	3.48	0.87	Agree
3	Provision of adequate infrastructure/computers with Internet facilities	3.54	0.82	Agree
4	Adequate provision of Internet services by network Providers	3.56	0.88	Agree
5	Constant supply of power	3.44	1.12	Agree
6	Reduction in the cost of data subscription	3.57	1.01	Agree
7	Ensuring ease in accessing and retrieving information from the Internet	3.51	0.91	Agree
8	Provision of adequate support from the Government in acquisition of resources	3.50	0.90	Agree
9	Elimination of fake news and conspiracy theories	3.46	0.87	Agree

Table 4 revealed the strategies to overcome the challenges faced by public libraries in the provision of services to fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria in mean values and standard deviations. From the table as presented, it can be seen that the mean value for each item (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9) was above the benchmark of 2.50, that is, the mean vales ranges from 2.71 – 3.75. Based on these mean values, all the items as presented in Table 5 are considered the strategies to overcome the challenges faced by public libraries in the provision of services to fight against Covid-19 pandemic in Benue State, Nigeria.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher concluded that public libraries in Benue State, Nigeria, currently exhibit a low level of preparedness in their services against global pandemics and their contribution to the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic was minimal. There is a pressing need for substantial improvements in the preparedness, services, and support mechanisms for public libraries in Benue State to effectively contribute to the fight against COVID-19 pandemic and other pandemics generally.

Recommendations

1. Public libraries should implement strategies to combat fake news and conspiracy theories by promoting information literacy programs, fact-checking initiatives, and ensuring that the information provided is accurate, reliable, and aligned with

public health guidelines.

2. Public libraries should invest in modern technology, computers with internet facilities, and reliable internet services that will enable them to provide up-to-date and easily accessible information to patrons.
3. Public libraries should actively seek collaboration with government agencies, NGOs, and other stakeholders to secure adequate support and resources. This includes financial assistance, access to research materials, and the acquisition of necessary equipment.
4. Public libraries should engage in advocacy efforts to highlight their role in public health education and information dissemination. This can help garner increased government support in terms of funding, policy support, and recognition of the vital role libraries play during health crises.

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