The role of the libraries in bridging the digital divide: a case of Rivers State University Central Library, Port Harcourt

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Abstract

The study examined the role of the libraries in bridging digital divide: a case of Rivers State University Central Library Port-Harcourt, Rivers State. It further examined the bridging of the digital divide gap between socio-economic and digital information resources. Three objectives and three research questions guided the study. Descriptive research design was used for the study with a population of 11 professional librarians working with Rivers State University Central Library. The study sample size was the entire population using census sampling technique method. The research instrument used for data collection was a self-structured questionnaire. The instrument was a modified 2-point rating scale of Yes and No. The data analysis was done using frequency and percentage count for the research questions. The findings of the study revealed among other things that librarians in Rivers State University Central Library is making significant efforts to provide access to digital resources on socioeconomic divide. The study concluded that libraries play an ever-more-important role in promoting equality and closing socioeconomic divides as long as they remain vital hubs for digital information and resources. To make sure that these organizations continue to be successful in closing the digital divide and empowering their communities, more study and ongoing assessment of library services are crucial. It therefore recommended among others that the library should push for a larger budgetary allocation that is dedicated to digital resources.

Keywords: digital divide, information resources, librarians, digital citizen and digital emigrants, etc.

Introduction
The rapid advancement of technology has transformed the way information is accessed, processed, and disseminated, leading to a significant shift in the way societies function. But this technological revolution has also expanded already-existing social and economic disparities by widening the gap between those who have access to digital technology and those who do not (Afolabi, 2017). The digital divide is the term used to describe a process where digital citizens

knows how to technologically navigate access to information than the digital emigrants who struggles for accessibility to information because of lack of technological skills.The digital citizens are those born in the 80's and 90's while the emigrants are those born in 50-70's who struggles to learn how the computer works because in the days of their birth, computer was not much in the existence. It is this emigrant group that leads the Nigerian society and also creates the socio economic disparities between them and the digital citizens because of their lack of technological attainment. Due to their technological ineffeciencies, millions of Nigerians lack access to computers, the internet, and other digital technologies, making the country's digital divide a serious issue (Nwabueze, 2019). Due to lack of resources and infrastructure, this gap is most noticeable in rural areas. Only 36% of Nigerians in rural areas have internet connectivity, compared to 63% in metropolitan areas, according to the Nigerian Communications Commission (2020). For a long time, libraries have been essential in fostering social justice and closing information gaps. By offering internet connectivity, digital literacy training, and access to digital technologies, libraries are particularly positioned to solve the digital gap in the digital age (Igwe, 2018). By doing this, libraries can enable underserved areas to fully engage in the digital economy.

In Nigeria's past, libraries have played a significant role in advancing education and literacy. But in order to adapt to the shifting information world, their position has changed dramatically in recent years. Digital resources such as e-books, online databases, and digital repositories are currently available in Nigerian libraries (Okiy, 2020). These resources could help close the knowledge gap and democratize access to information. Despite these advancements, closing the digital divide remains a major concern for Nigerian libraries. These difficulties include a lack of infrastructure, limited funds, and a shortage of skilled workers (Uwaifo, 2019). Furthermore, resolving underlying social and economic disparities is necessary to overcome the digital divide, which is not just a technological problem. By offering specialized services and activities, libraries can significantly contribute to reducing these disparities, according to (Adeyemi, 2019). For example, libraries may empower entrepreneurs and small business owners by providing training in digital literacy, online skills development, and e-commerce.

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Nigeria's progress is significantly impacted by the digital divide. It has an impact on civic engagement, economic empowerment, healthcare, and education. For example, entrepreneurs and small business owners lack the internet skills necessary to grow their companies, and students without access to digital technology find it difficult to compete with their classmates (Igwe, 2018). Furthermore, because people without internet connection are unable to receive telemedicine services or critical health information, the digital gap makes health inequities worse. Libraries have traditionally been essential for fostering social justice and filling knowledge gaps. By giving people access to digital technologies, internet connectivity, and training in digital literacy, libraries are in a unique position to close the digital divide in the modern day (Igwe, 2018). Libraries may enable underserved areas to fully engage in the digital economy by doing this.

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Research has shown how library initiatives can help close the digital gap. For instance, Oyedipe (2016) discovered that digital literacy initiatives based in libraries greatly enhanced the online proficiency of Oyo State's rural residents. According to Adewale's (2018) research, libraries in Lagos State gave researchers and students vital access to digital resources. Libraries have a huge potential to close the digital gap. To fully grasp the unique opportunities and constraints that Nigerian libraries face, more research is necessary. By examining the difficulties, possibilities, and best practices in library-based digital projects. It is relation to this that the study seeks to examine the role that library play in bridging the digital divide in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

The digital divide remains a major barrier to Nigeria's social and economic growth, making existing inequalities worse and reducing opportunities for disadvantaged communities. Despite the critical role of libraries in bridging this divide, the Nigerian library sector faces numerous challenges in providing digital inclusion services, hindering its potential to address this pressing issue. The inadequate digital infrastructure in Nigerian libraries, characterized by insufficient computers, internet connectivity, and digital resources, severely constrains their ability to provide effective digital services. The limited digital literacy skills among library staff and users hinder the effective utilization of available digital resources, perpetuating the digital divide.
Insufficient funding allocated to Nigerian libraries exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult for libraries to acquire and maintain digital infrastructure, train staff, and develop relevant digital programs. This inadequate funding is compounded by ineffective policy and regulatory frameworks, which fail to provide adequate support for digital inclusion initiatives in libraries.

The consequences of this situation are far-reaching. Marginalized communities in Nigeria continue to face significant barriers to accessing information, education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. This perpetuates poverty, limits socio-economic mobility, and hinders national development. The digital divide also undermines Nigeria's ability to compete in the global digital economy, stifling innovation and entrepreneurship. The Nigerian government's efforts to promote digital inclusion and bridge the digital divide are hindered by the lack of effective library-based digital initiatives. This underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive study of the challenges and opportunities facing Nigerian libraries in addressing the digital divide. This study aims to investigate the role of the Rivers State University Central Library in bridging the digital divide gap**.**

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine the role of the Rivers State University Central Library in bridging the digital divide gap. Specifically, the study aims to:
1. Investigate the efforts made by Rivers State University Central Library to provide access to digital resources for users.
2. Identify the challenges faced by Rivers State University Central Library in addressing the digital divide.
3. Explore strategies Rivers State University Central Library can implement to enhance its role in reducing the digital divide.

Research Questions:

1. What efforts has Rivers State University Central Library made to provide access to digital resources for its users?
2. What challenges does Rivers State University Central Library face in addressing the digital divide?
3. What strategies can Rivers State University Central Library implement to enhance its role in reducing the digital divide?

Literature Review

Digital Divide

Digital divide refers to the gap between individuals or communities who have access to information and communication technology (ICT) and those who do not. It draws attention to differences in digital abilities and access to gadgets like computers, smartphones, and the internet. The digital divide, which is more noticeable across urban and rural areas, wealthy and low-income groups, and educated versus less educated people, is a significant problem in Nigeria that affects education, employment, healthcare, and social inclusion. Nigeria's digital divide is rooted in socioeconomic disparities. The infrastructure required to support digital technology, such as dependable electricity, is sometimes lacking in rural areas. According to Ajiboye and Tella (2017), the main reason for the gap is a lack of ICT infrastructure, which keeps many Nigerians from using government services, engaging in the digital economy, or obtaining online education. The high price of digital gadgets and internet services is another important consideration. Low-income households cannot afford the high cost of data plans, even in urban locations where internet connection is available.

According to Adomi (2019), a large number of Nigerians are unable to purchase laptops, smartphones, or data plans, which restricts their access to the abundance of online information. Digital inclusion is hampered by this, especially in a country where poverty is pervasive. Another important component of the divide is digital literacy, or the capacity to use digital tools efficiently. Having access to technology is vital, but so is being able to use it effectively. The disparity is widened by the fact that many Nigerians, particularly those living in rural regions, lack the requisite digital skills. Egbe (2022) emphasizes the importance of digital literacy, pointing out that people cannot take full advantage of the ICT infrastructure that is accessible to them without these abilities. This restricts their capacity to participate in the digital economy, access information, and study online.

Nigerian society has been significantly impacted by the digital divide. It has exacerbated disparities in schooling. Many rural students were unable to engage in online learning during the COVID-19 outbreak because they lacked access to digital devices and the internet. According to Nwegbu and Uwaifo (2019), the move to digital platforms disproportionately impacted kids from low-income families, hence exacerbating educational disparities. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that teachers frequently lack training in the use of digital tools. Disparities in professional growth and employment possibilities are brought about by the digital divide in the labor market. Those without access or expertise are left behind as companies use digital technologies more and more. According to John and et al (2020), people with digital literacy have an easier time finding employment, while others without these abilities are shut out of numerous chances, which explains socioeconomic disparities already in place.

Role of Libraries in Bridging the Digital Divide

By giving people access to information and communication technologies (ICT) and resources that aid in the development of critical digital skills, libraries play a critical role in closing the digital gap. Libraries play a vital role in ensuring that underprivileged populations in Nigeria, where socioeconomic disparities fuel the digital divide, have access to digital resources and can make use of the opportunities presented by the digital era. Providing free or inexpensive computer and internet access is one important method libraries can close this gap. Libraries are crucial for public access because many Nigerians cannot afford these technologies. According to Nwabueze (2019), libraries in both urban and rural areas facilitate ICT use, which is crucial for job seekers, students, and those who use online government services. Libraries not only facilitate access but also promote digital literacy. This is important since simply having access to technology is insufficient without the requisite abilities. Libraries provide workshops and training courses to help patrons learn how to efficiently navigate and use digital tools. According to Egbe (2021), these literacy initiatives help close the gap by enabling people to engage in the digital economy.

Libraries serve as information and learning centers for the community, making them accessible to rural or low-income communities. They offer a variety of resources, such as online databases and e-books, which are crucial for users who might not have access at home. Libraries contribute to the fight against information inequality by making digital content more accessible. By giving students access to the digital resources they need for their studies, libraries help promote education. Accessing online learning tools is extremely difficult for many students from underprivileged homes, particularly in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. By enabling students to use computers and the internet for their academic work, libraries helped to lessen this problem, according to Uwaifo and Nwegbu (2019).

Libraries provides all kind of information resources to cater for all fields of endeavor to have access to their information needs both for businesses and job seekers thereby bridging the gap in the labor market. To succeed in the modern digital economy, one must have access to online job boards, networking platforms, and e-resources for skill development. According to Omekwu (2020), libraries promote economic growth by providing the tools required for job seekers to succeed. Libraries' capacity to completely solve the digital divide is hampered by issues

including insufficient financing and poor infrastructure. In addition to struggling to maintain modern digital equipment and operating on tight budgets, many libraries also frequently face challenges including unstable electricity and inadequate internet connectivity. To effectively serve their communities, libraries must invest in ICT capabilities, according to Egbe (2021). More government funding and support for libraries are crucial to overcoming these obstacles. The government may contribute to expanding digital access for all residents by enhancing the resources and infrastructure that libraries have access to. In underprivileged communities, partnerships among libraries, non-governmental organizations, and the commercial sector can also aid in increasing access to ICT and training in digital literacy.

Methodology

Descriptive research design was used for this study with a population of 11 librarians working in the Rivers State University Central Library. The library is located in the university's main campus in Nkpolu-Oroworukwo, Port Harcourt, Rivers State. The sample size was the entire population as sampling technique used was census. The research instrument used for data collection was a self-structure questionnaire. The instrument was a questionnaire with a modified 2-point rating scale of Yes and No. The data analysis was done using frequency and percentage count for the research questions.

Result and Findings

Research question 1: What efforts Rivers State University Central Library made to provide access to digital resources for its users?

Table 1: Frequency and percentage rating on the efforts Rivers State University Central Library has made to provide access to digital resources for its users

S/N	Efforts Rivers State University Central Library has made to provide access to digital resources for its users N=11	YES	%	NO	%
1	E-books are available for access at Rivers State University Central Library.	8	72.7	3	27.3
2	The library provides access to online journals and databases.	7	63.6	4	36.4
3	The library has invested in improving its internet connectivity to facilitate access to digital resources	6	56.4	5	43.6
4	Workshops or seminars are held to promote digital literacy among users.	9	81.8	2	18.2
5	The library collaborates with other institutions to enhance its digital resource offerings.	8	72.7	3	27.3
	Total Percentage Rating	**7**	**63.4**	**4**	**36.6**

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage rating of the efforts made by Rivers State University Central Library to provide access to digital resources for its users, showing an overall percentage rating of 7(65.2%) for "yes" and 4(50.9%) for "no." The overall findings suggest that

a majority of respondents believe that Rivers State University Central Library is making significant efforts to provide access to digital resources.

Research question 2: What challenges Rivers State University Central Library face in addressing the digital divide?

Table 2: Frequency and percentage rating on the challenges Rivers State University Central Library face in addressing the digital divide.

S/N	Challenges Rivers State University Central Library face in addressing the digital divide N=11	YES	%	NO	%
1	The library faces budget constraints that limit its ability to enhance digital resources.	5	45.5	6	54.5
2	Inadequate infrastructure affects the library's ability to provide reliable internet access.	9	81.8	2	18.2
3	The library lacks sufficient training programs for staff to effectively assist users with digital resources	7	63.6	4	36.4
4	Users encounter difficulties in accessing digital resources due to limited digital literacy skills.	9	81.8	2	18.2
5	The library experiences technical issues that disrupt access to digital resources.	6	54.5	5	45.5
	Total Percentage Rating	**8**	**72.7**	**3**	**27.3**

Table 2 outlines the frequency and percentage ratings regarding the challenges faced by Rivers State University Central Library in addressing the digital divide, revealing an overall percentage rating of 8(65.4%) for "yes" and 3(34.5%) for "no.". Overall, the majority of respondents agree that the library faces significant challenges in addressing the digital divide, suggesting a need for Strategic improvements in these areas to enhance access to digital resources effectively.

Research question 3: What strategies can Rivers State University Central Library implement to enhance its role in reducing the digital divide?

Table 3: Frequency and percentage rating on the strategies Rivers State University Central Library can implement to enhance its role in reducing the digital divide

S/N	Strategies Rivers State University Central Library can implement to enhance its role in reducing the digital divide N=11	YES	%	NO	%
1	The library should increase its budget allocation for digital resources.	4	36.4	7	63.6
2	Expanding internet access within the library is essential for improving digital resource availability	7	63.6	4	36.4
3	Offering regular training programs on digital literacy for users is crucial.	6	54.5	5	45.5

4	The library should invest in acquiring more digital devices for user access.	7	63.6	4	36.4
5	The library should enhance its website to provide easier access to digital resources.	9	81.8	2	18.2
	Total Percentage Rating	**6**	**59.9**	**5**	**40.1**

Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage ratings of the strategies that Rivers State University Central Library can implement to enhance its role in reducing the digital divide, with an overall percentage rating of 6(59.9%) for "yes" and 4(40.0%) for "no.". Overall, the results indicate that while there is considerable support for strategies like expanding internet access, investing in digital devices, and enhancing the library's website, there is less consensus on increasing the budget for digital resources and the need for regular training programs. These findings highlight areas where the library can focus its efforts to effectively reduce the digital divide and improve access to digital resources for its users.

Discussion of Findings

Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage rating of the efforts made by Rivers State University Central Library to provide access to digital resources for its users, showing an overall percentage rating of 7(65.2%) for "yes" and 4(50.9%) for "no." The overall findings suggest that a majority of respondents believe that Rivers State University Central Library is making significant efforts to provide access to digital resources. These results are consistent with those of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) (IFLA, 2018), which highlights how libraries greatly improve resource access and user satisfaction by offering digital materials and internet connectivity. According to the survey, libraries that provide internet access and provide instruction in digital literacy have a beneficial influence on patrons' capacity to make efficient use of digital resources.

Table 2 outlines the frequency and percentage ratings regarding the challenges faced by Rivers State University Central Library in addressing the digital divide, revealing an overall percentage rating of 8(65.4%) for "yes" and 3(34.5%) for "no.". Overall, the majority of respondents agree that the library faces significant challenges in addressing the digital divide, suggesting a need for strategic improvements in these areas to enhance access to digital resources effectively. The outcome is consistent with research by Nwabueze (2019), which found that poor infrastructure and low user digital literacy are major obstacles to efficient library services in Nigeria.

Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage ratings of the strategies that Rivers State University Central Library can implement to enhance its role in reducing the digital divide, with an overall percentage rating of 6(59.9%) for "yes" and 4(40.0%) for "no." Overall, the results indicate that while there is considerable support for strategies like expanding internet access, investing in digital devices, and enhancing the library's website, there are fewer consensuses on increasing the budget for digital resources and the need for regular training programs. These findings highlight areas where the library can focus its efforts to effectively reduce the digital divide and improve access to digital resources for its users. The results are consistent with those

of Adeyomi (2019), who highlighted the value of user-centered digital literacy training as a key tactic for libraries looking to successfully close the digital gap.

Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated how important it is for Rivers State University Central Library to help close the digital gap by making digital materials accessible. The findings show the library's dedication to boosting internet connectivity, developing digital literacy, and working with other organizations. To maximize these efforts, however, issues including financial limitations, poor infrastructure, and the requirement for further staff training must be resolved.

Even though most respondents supported the library's efforts, it is imperative that the organization continuously modify its tactics to satisfy the changing demands of its patrons. In order to strengthen the library's role in closing the digital gap, it is imperative that focused training programs be put into place, budgetary allocations be increased, and digital resource offerings be improved. The study's ramifications go beyond the Rivers State University Central Library, emphasizing the more general difficulties that libraries in Nigeria and other comparable situations face. Libraries will play an ever-more-important role in promoting equality and closing socioeconomic divides as long as they remain vital hubs for digital information and resources. To make sure that these organizations continue to be successful in closing the digital divide and empowering their communities, more study and ongoing assessment of library services are crucial.

Recommendations

1. The library should push for a larger budgetary allocation that is dedicated to digital resources. More e-books, online journals, and other digital resources can be purchased with this financing, expanding the library's collection and improving user access to information.
2. Enhancing the library's internet connectivity is crucial to guaranteeing uninterrupted access to digital resources.
3. The library should give its users the skills they need to successfully explore and use digital resources, regular training programs centered on digital literacy should be implemented.

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