

## **Social network as the enabler for library services: challenges of Nigerian academic libraries**

**Emezie, Nkeiru .A.<sup>1</sup> and Nwaohiri, Ngozi Maria<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>The Library, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>The Library, Federal University of Technology, Owerri, Nigeria

**Abstract.** Social networks have become new avenues for libraries to interact with their patrons. Social networks allow individuals to join and create a personal profile, then formally connect with other users of the system as social friend. This new concept is precipitated by the emergence of information and communication technologies which has ushered in web tools applications for libraries. In Nigeria, academic libraries are gradually engaging social networks to deliver library services to their patrons. This has become necessary because 21<sup>st</sup> century library users are resorting to the internet to seek information thus relegating libraries which are key players in information provisions and services. However, academic libraries are evolving and rebranding their services to re-establish their worth in the information landscape using social networks. This study seeks to examine the role of social networks in enabling library services with a focus on the library of the Federal University of Technology Owerri Nigeria. It discusses the types of services provided by libraries through social networks and further, investigates factors that undermine effective use of social networks in Nigerian academic libraries. A descriptive survey research was adopted for this study while questionnaire was used as data collection instrument. Also, data were analyzed and presented using percentages, charts and frequency tables.

**Keywords:** Social networks, Library services, web 2.0, Academic libraries. Nigeria

### **1. Introduction**

The advent of information and communication technologies and mobile devices have posed challenges for libraries as well as created new opportunities. One significant challenge is the low patronage being experienced in today's academic libraries. Library patronage is on the decline, mostly because users are exploiting alternative sources like the internet and mobile devices to meet their information needs. This change in information seeking behavior has foisted on libraries to explore new means of providing information and interacting with their users. It is no longer news that libraries are evolving to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century information seekers. The trend is that libraries are exploiting Web 2.0 technologies to re-establish connections with their users who have resorted

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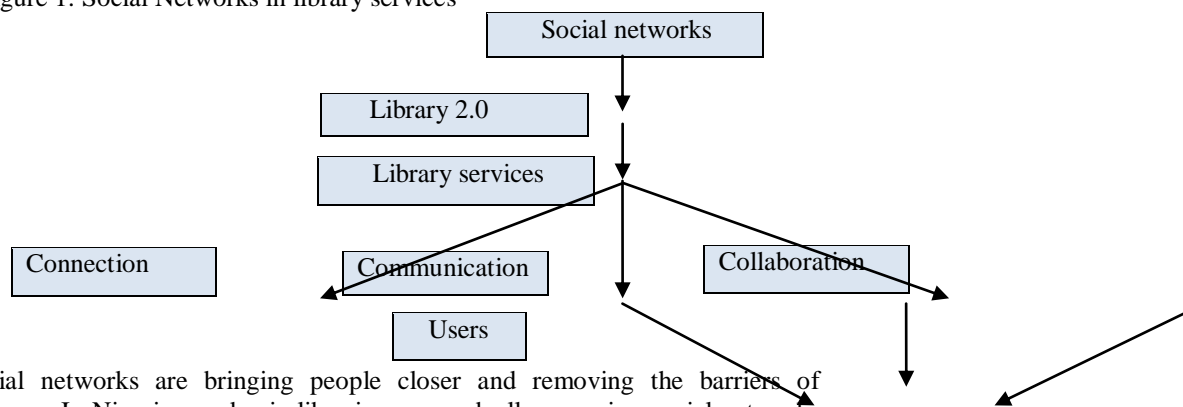
to the internet. Like the proverbial mountain going to Mohammed, today's libraries are taking their services to millennial patrons who now 'reside' on the net. To keep up with the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> c academic environment, academic libraries are incorporating new concepts to provide the needed services and retain their relevance. Social networks (SN) are among the new concepts that libraries are engaging to interact with their patrons.

## 2. Definition of term

Social networks have been variously defined and often used interchangeably with social media (SM) and social networking sites (SNS). A social network represents relationships and flows between people, groups, organizations, animals, computers or other information/knowledge processing entities (www.webopedia.com). Downes (2005) define social networks as a collection of individuals linked together by a set of relations. In a more elaborate term, Kempe, Kleinberg and Tardos (2003) define social network as a set of people, organizations or other social entities, connected by a set of socially meaningful relationships such as friendship, co-working or information exchange, and interactions to better achieve desired outcomes by sharing expertise, resources and information.

Social networks (SNs) are becoming an integral part of academic library services. It has been recognized that through the milieu of library 2.0 technologies, SNs enable library services via connection, communication and collaboration with the users.

Figure 1: Social Networks in library services



Social networks are bringing people closer and removing the barriers of distance. In Nigeria, academic libraries are gradually engaging social networks to deliver their services as well as transform the library into a more attractive area. The Federal University of Technology (FUTO) library has been playing supportive roles to actualize the missions and visions of her parent institution. In the bid to promote resources and services, FUTO library has engaged social networks to create knowledge, disseminate information and communicate with users in the university community and beyond. Several studies on social networks in Nigerian academic libraries have explored the use of social networks by libraries and librarians, their potentials, opportunities as well as

challenges. This study will focus on the library of the Federal University of Technology Owerri, Nigeria (FUTO), to determine how the emergence and use of social networks have enabled library services. However, there has been no study known to the researchers on how the emergence of social networks have enabled academic library services in Nigeria. Thus, this gap is what the present study seeks to fill.

### **3. Research Questions**

- i. What are the Social Networks used in Nigerian academic libraries?
- ii. What type of services are provided through Social Networks in Nigerian academic libraries?
- iii. In what ways have Social Networks enabled library services?
- iv. What are the challenges of Social Networks in Nigerian academic libraries?

### **4. Literature Review**

MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Delicious, Flickr, Blogs, Wikis, Youtube, Podcasts, Academia.edu and Hi5 are few examples of social networks being used by libraries to connect their users. Several studies however, revealed Facebook as the most commonly used site. (Ezeani 2012; Mausibau et al , 2011; Atuloma, 2011). One of the primary uses of Facebook by academic libraries is to market the library with a library fan page. By linking to the library's website, the Facebook page acts as a portal to the library (Farkas, 2007). Blogs and wikis have been recognized as ideal sources to disseminate news and information. Blogs in academic libraries are tools to reach out to students. Draper and Turnage (2008) in their survey found out that blogs were overwhelmingly used to market the library service. Twitter is a real-time communication platform. It allows users to create an account, post and receive messages to a network of contacts, as opposed to send bulk email messages (Musibau et al, 2011). There are libraries which use Twitter to connect themselves with important information sources (Milstein, 2009). Social networking sites help establish a cordial relationship with users while attracting them to the library environment.

### **5. Social networks and libraries**

Social networking sites allow librarians adopt a new role by placing themselves into a social realm with users (Ezeani, 2012 ). To provide the needed services, libraries are using social networks to connect, communicate as well as collaborate with users in an innovative way. It has often been stated that the major reason why libraries are using social networks is to connect with their patrons. De Rosa et al (2007) admit that librarians make use of social networking sites with the purpose of "being part of their communities". By reading blogs, group postings and message boards, the librarian becomes an active participant, who is able to anticipate and advise patrons as needs arise.

Linking to patrons profile also keeps the library within the consciousness of users, potentially increasing interaction (Courtney, 2007). Social networking sites allow libraries to reach out to patrons and vice versa.

In contributing to the importance of social networks to libraries, Suraweere et al (2011) admit that the use of online social networks by libraries and information organizations is increasingly prevalent and a growing tool that is being used to communicate with more potential library users. Ezeani (2012) add that social networking sites are two way transparent communications that encourage a feedback mechanism; connecting people with shared interest. Furthermore, in citing Steiner (2009), Ezeani states that the use of social networking tools enable librarians to identify library patrons on the social cyberspace and pro-actively provide the type of information that would normally result from reference service. Social networking tools are not only being used as a vehicle for promoting services, programs and new resources but they are also used for reference service. Students are using tools like Ask a Librarian, meebo and twitter to ask questions in “real time and this is assisting in promoting the library as a relevant, efficient and helpful place.

In the social networking platform, users are both consumers and producers of online content (Ezeani, 2012). Users add value to library services in social networks by creating knowledge repositories on Wikis, developing bibliographies through social bookmarking sites, building historical and cultural collections through media sharing applications, and forming relationships with like-minded individuals in social networking communities (Kroski, 2007). In this platform, users can help create new library services by contributing their knowledge through online network (Casey & Savastinuk, 2006). While, the library can be harvesting information from individual users for improving library services, academic research, etc. (Chu,2010 ). SNs in libraries act as information resource while supporting collaboration between students and libraries. Succintly put, social networks are rebranding the academic library and re-establishing their worth as key players in information dissemination and knowledge creation.

## **6. Challenges of social networks in library services**

Majority of users do not visit social networking sites for academic purposes rather they perceive that Social networking sites are mainly for fun and entertainment. Coyle & Vaughn (2008) noted in their study that users’ attitudes towards using SNS to enhance and encourage interaction for educational purposes are not very supportive. According to Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield (2008), students do not use Facebook to contact university personnel and do not expect to interact with faculty through SNSs. Librarians also exhibit poor attitude towards the use of SNs. It is expected that librarians should be at the fore of patronizing library’s sites yet a greater number are averse to the use of technology. Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007) surveyed the attitude of academic librarians towards facebook and found that most could be described as being apathetic.

### 7. Methodology

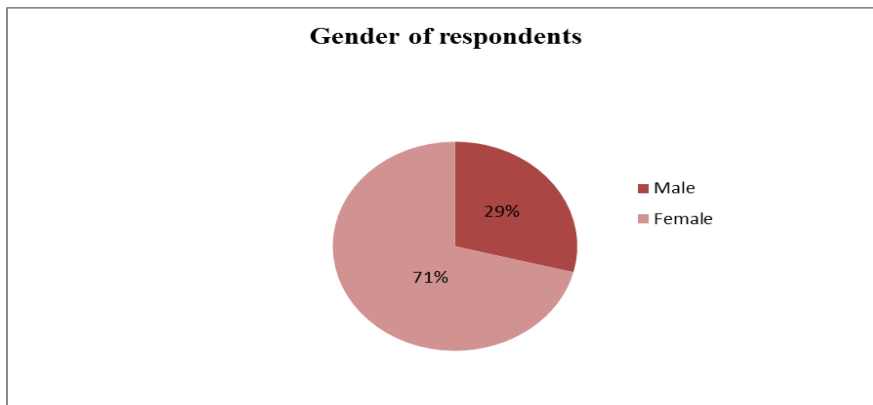
The study employed descriptive survey as research design while questionnaire was used as data collection instrument and distributed to thirty – two (32) academic librarians in Federal University of Technology library Owerri. Data was analyzed and presented using charts, frequency table and percentages.

### 8. Data analysis and presentation

Thirty (32) copies of questionnaires were distributed to all academic librarians in FUTO library, twenty eight (28) were returned and found usable for analysis representing 93% of the response rate.

#### Gender of respondents

*Figure 2: Gender of respondents.*



Out of the 28 respondents, 8 (29%) were male while 20 (71%) were female.

#### Social Networks used in Nigerian academic libraries.

*Figure 3: Social networks in Nigerian academic libraries.*

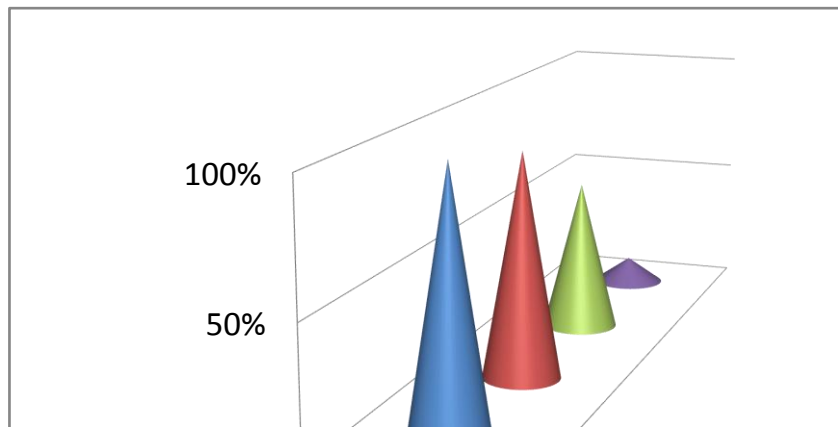
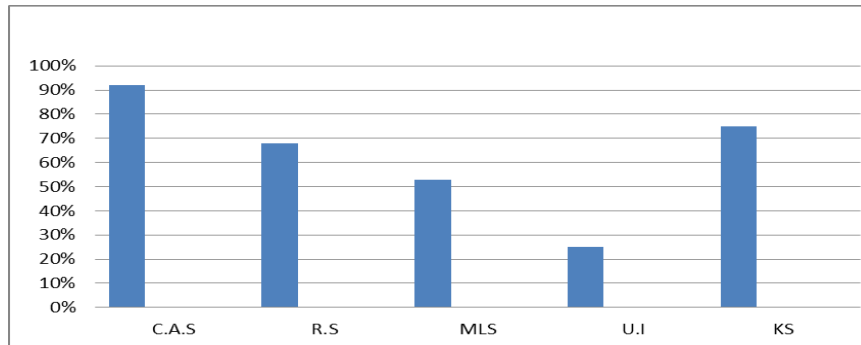


Figure 3 shows the social networks used in Nigerian academic libraries. They include Facebook 28(100%), Blogs 25(89%), Twitter 17(61%) and Flickr 3(11%). All respondents indicated that Facebook is the most common social network used in academic libraries in Nigeria.

**Type of library services in social networks**

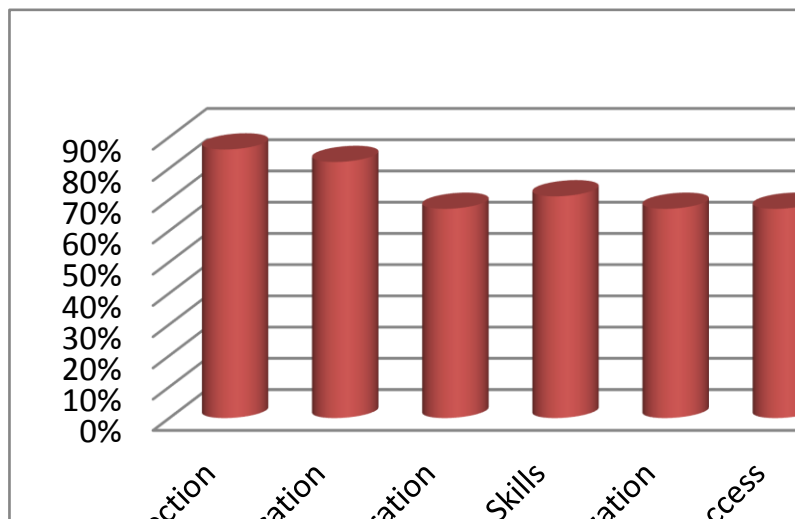
**Figure 4: Library services in Social Networks**



Key: C.A.S – Current Awareness Services, R.S – Reference Services, MLS – Marketing Library Services, U.I – User Instruction, KS – Knowledge Sharing. Figure 4 reveals that the services library renders through Social Networks include Current Awareness Services 26(92%), Reference services 19(68%), Marketing Library Services 15(53%), User Instruction 7(25%), and Knowledge Sharing 21(75%).

**Social Networks as enablers of library services.**

**Figure 5: Social Networks and Library services**



In figure 5 above, 24(86%) of the respondents reveal that social networks enable connection between library and users, while 23( 82%) viewed that SNs enable communication between library and users. 20(71%) affirm that SNs improve internet skills of librarians. Also, 17(61%) of the respondents agree that SNs enable collaboration between library and users; open access and library digitization whereas (15)57% of the respondents are of the view that the presence of social networks improve internet connectivity in academic libraries.

**Challenges of Social Networks in Nigerian academic libraries?**

**Table 1: Challenges of Social Networks in Nigerian academic libraries**

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Unskilled staff	20	71%
Poor internet connection	28	100%
Low user engagement	17	61%
Low awareness of the library’s presence in social networks	22	78%
Library’s information update is slow	11	39%
Insufficient power supply	28	100%

All the 28(100%) respondents indicated that poor internet connection and insufficient power supply were major challenges to social networks in Nigerian academic libraries. 20(71%) indicated that unskilled staff contributed to challenges of social networks whereas 61% viewed that low user engagement and low awareness of the library’s presence in SNs hinder effective use of SNs. However, 11(35%) are of the view that the slow pace of information update on library SNs is also a constraint.

**9. Discussion**

The study corroborates with the findings of Ezeani (2012), Akintunde et al, (2011) and Atuloma (2011) that Facebook is the most common social network used in Nigerian academic libraries as indicated by all the respondents. Academic libraries engage social networks for Current Awareness Services, Reference services, marketing of the library and Knowledge sharing. Few respondents however, agreed that the library renders User Instruction on Social networks.

The study sought to find out how social networks enable library services. Based on the findings, social networks enable connection, communication and collaboration between libraries and users. In other words, social networks are making libraries re-establish contact and reconnect with their users whose attention has hitherto been diverted to the WWW. Social networks enable librarians improve their internet skills as they participate and interact with users in the social media. This assertion confirms the views of Courtney (2007) that, by reading blogs, group postings and message boards, the librarian becomes an active participant, who is able to anticipate and advise patrons as needs arise.

Linking to patrons profile also keeps the library within the consciousness of users, potentially increasing interaction. Furthermore, social networks enable digitization of library materials and open access to library resources. This finding tallies with Ezeani's (2012) report that social networks are used mostly to provide current and up to date information to clients and provide links to other open source library resources.

Insufficient power supply and poor internet connectivity were indicated among others as major challenges hindering effective use of social networks in Nigerian academic libraries. Electricity remains the life blood of ICT. Social networks can only thrive where electricity and powerful internet connections are adequately provided.

### **10. Conclusions and recommendations**

Social networks have permeated our lives and are assuming a center stage as indispensable tools for connection, communication and collaboration. Nigerian academic libraries have joined their counterparts in other countries of the world to engage SNs in library services through the library 2.0 technology milieu. This new concept is rebranding the library into an attractive area for patrons. Unfortunately, Nigerian academic environment is constantly challenged with insufficient funds, incessant power outage or lack of it at all coupled with poor internet connectivity where they exist. This anomaly has constantly frustrated laudable ICT projects in Nigerian universities and academic libraries in particular.

This paper therefore recommends a robust technological infrastructure, adequate provision of electricity and skilled personnel who are the facilitators of social media services in libraries. These three essential elements (technology, power and personnel) form a tripod upon which a viable social network can stand.

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