

PATTERN OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE PROFESSIONALS' PARTICIPATION IN THE NIGERIAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUM IN IMO STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigated the pattern of library and information science professionals' participation in the NLA online discussion forum in Imo State, Nigeria.

Methodology: The survey method was adopted for the study. The target population of this study consists of the library and information science professionals working in the various libraries in Imo State. The purposive sampling technique was used to select thirty-five (35) respondents from the members present in one of her quarterly meetings.

Findings: the study reveal that the forum is used mostly on daily basis for the purpose of asking questions for clarification, posting of advertisement, brainstorming on professional issues, soliciting for information from professional colleagues, making inquiries on conference / seminars as well as responding / reacting to postings made by others. Awareness of technological development in the profession and acquisition of new ideas for research amongst others were identified as reasons for using the NLA online forum. High cost of subscribing to the Internet access, limited access to computers / relevant technologies, slow internet connectivity and high cost of relevant technologies {laptops, personal computers} were identified as challenges to effective participation on the forum. The study recommends increase in bandwidth, provision of Internet facilities and orientation / sensitization of library and information science practitioners on the existence of such forum and the benefits derivable from participating in the forum.

Practical Implications: Librarians know the value of participating in online discussion forums.

Originality/ value of contribution: the originality of this paper is that it has provided empirical evidence on the patterns that library and information science professionals adopts when participating in the NLA online discussion forum in Imo State, Nigeria.

Keywords: Information Professionals, Information Science, Library Science, Online Discussion, Online Forum, Imo State, Nigeria

Introduction

The online environment has provided various platforms for library and information professional to explore when communicating. With the evolutionary trend of information and communication technologies (ICTs), library and information professional can now easily share ideas and information relating to their professional practices. Online communication is the process of sharing retrieving and storing of information, ideas, concepts, and knowledge via the use of device connected to the internet. There various channels for online communication such as video conferencing, e-mail, forum, chats, voice over IP, etc. Online

social networks connect like minded people who share information, ideas and feelings. Online social networking focuses on building online communities or people who share interests and/ or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. The proliferation of social networking sites in the mainstream media on the World Wide Web has led to an enormous increase in their popularity (Alserahy & Youbi, 2014).

The traditional ways of interacting among professionals in different fields is being altered with the penetrating influence of technological development. Library and information science is

not exempted. Communication between professionals in serve domain is very important (Anish & Vimal, 2013). The uses of web portals has a significant impact on the way libraries are organized, offer and facilitate access to information resources and services (Velez & Pagan, 2011). There are numbers of forums running based on different disciplines by different professionals, like an educational forum, marketing forum, entertainment forum, sports forum and many more (Dawngliana, 2018). Discussion forums are one of the key ways of promoting peer interaction in any profession.

Professional online forums are no doubt a big leap in the right direction as far as librarianship is concerned and with the introduction of NLA online forum, the Nigerian Library Association has demonstrated its willingness to promote professional development among librarians by providing an online environment through which members can share their expertise, discuss matters of professional or academic interest (Onuoha, Madukoma & Ikonne, 2012). Online discussion according to Tella and Isah (2011) citing Ho (2002) is the process where learners and educators are actively engaged in on-line text based communication with one another.

In online discussion forum, participants can either start a new discussion thread by creating a new post or continue an existing thread by replying others' post (Goncalves *et al*, 2017). As noted by Dawngliana (2018), earlier there existed very few opportunities for communication between LIS professionals, there were seminars, training programs, and periodical publications to gather and express their views and share messages. However, these traditional and convention methods were not interactive and were very time consuming. Online forums have evolved into a natural sharing of knowledge, resources, and interaction that makes thinking and learning publicly visible.

Online discussion forums (ODFs) are a form of text based technologies used in the online environment to foster collaboration among users for various purposes. The online discussion environment provides librarians opportunities for sharing of ideas, knowledge

and theories relating to the library practices. Through online forums, librarians "can have discussions with each other on professional-related issues. Using e-mail as the medium, forums enable informal communication among a group of people in a specific area, irrespective of their geographical locations (Dhanvandan & Tamizhchelvan, 2012). Online discussion forum refers to a website where a group of persons discuss issues related to their profession or subject areas. Online participation and content contribution are core issues in the present social networking practice (Ezeani & Igwesi, 2012). Online forum provides opportunities for participants to interact, exchange ideas and collaborate with people they may or may not know in real life (Onuoha, Madukoma & Ikonne, 2012). Forums have been popular for many years allowing users to post messages to a "thread" about a particular issue. Forums often cover circumscribed subject and can be used to make contacts, engage users who are interested in particular subjects, or as a way to ask question to a particular community.

Historically, NLA online forum took off under the umbrella of Nigerian Library Association as a means of providing an online environment through which members can share their expertise with other members, discuss matters of professional or academic interest, and inform other members of events that would enhance professional development. Effective participation in online discussion as noted by Tella and Isah (2011) occurs where such on-line communication facilitates, amongst learners, the development of a deep understanding of the material through sharing, and critically evaluating one's own and others ideas.

However, in spite of the benefits of online discussion forums to library and information professionals, the extent to which librarians in Imo State participate in NLA online forums is yet to be empirically proven. Literature search clearly suggests that no research has been carried out ascertain the extent and pattern of participation of library and information science professionals in the NLA online forum. It is this gap in knowledge that this study is design to fill.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are, to:

- i. investigate the frequency of participation by library and information science professionals in Imo State in the NLA online forum;
- ii. ascertain the means by which library and information professionals in Imo State do access NLA online forum;
- iii. identify the purposes for participating in the NLA online forum among library and information professionals in Imo State;
- iv. determine the effects of participating in NLA online discussion forum among library and information professionals in Imo State; and
- v. establish the challenges to effective participation in the NLA online forum among library and information science professionals in Imo State.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- i. How often do library and information science professionals in Imo State participate in the NLA online forum?
- ii. What are the means through which NLA online forum is accessed amongst library and information science professionals in Imo State?
- iii. What are the purposes for which they participate in NLA online discussion forums?
- iv. What are the effects of participating in NLA online discussion forum among library and information science professionals in Imo State?
- v. What are the challenges to effective participation in the NLA online forum among library and information science professionals in Imo State?

Review of Related Literature

Library and information professionals are gradually enmeshed in the web of technologies. Various technological tools and devices are being utilized for professional practices. Even libraries as institutions are not left out, simply because librarians do not exist without libraries. Likewise, librarians cannot be overwhelmed with the penetrating influence of technologies without it showing off on the

library. According to Velez and Pagan (2011), “the websites of academic libraries are the main entrance to the information resources and services and provide a variety of possibilities to communicate with users”. Gbaje and Kotso (2014) point out that Nigerian academic libraries do not use their websites as platform to provide their patrons with online services, while very few libraries use their websites to encourage interactivities and collaboration between the library staff and patrons.

Online discussion forums (ODFs) are now integral component of many professional bodies. Library and information profession is not exempted. There are many online communication services provided by many online platform/search engines. These include Yahoo Groups, Google Groups, One Drive Group etc. Nigerian Library Association (NLA) manages their online forum platform using Yahoo Groups and Google Groups. Online discussion forums as an important opportunity for knowledge exchange (Lyu, 2018). According to Dhanvandan and Tamizhchelvan (2012), E-mail discussion forums are one of the early applications of e-mail developed on networks like Bitnet, which have become very popular on internet now.

Loncke, Dudding and Kim (2009) explain that discussion forum can be asynchronous, where everyone posts at a different time, or synchronous, in which everyone is present online at the same time. Discussion forums therefore are key ways of promoting peer interaction and collaborative learning. Onuoha, Madukoma and Ikonne (2012) in their study of librarian’s use of NLA online forum for collaborative activities revealed that the forum is used mainly by librarians working in the cataloguing and e-library departments.

Dawngliana (2018) posit that LIS online discussion forums /Groups act as an electronic forum (or conference) for library and information professionals and users of library and information systems and services. As a forum, it creates an opportunity to discuss issues related to library and information practices and act as an electronic medium for the quick exchange of information and experiences related to new initiatives, plans, projects, information sources and services.

Munshi (2018) in his study revealed that both university librarians use SNSs for several purposes such as posting different information e.g., new arrival of books and periodicals in the library, newspaper clipping services, schedule of orientation programs. They use Google Talk and LIS forum 24/7 for online discussions, suggestions and web file sharing to their user community.

Nandi, Chang and Balbo (2009) point out that forums are used for posting comments on readings, prior to submitting a formal (to be marked) review of the reading, as a memory trigger (looking back at old discussions), to find role models, to get some form of immediate peer review, or for making connections with colleagues. Onuoha, Madukoma and Ikonne (2012) stated that the reasons for using the forum are associated with acquiring information about the library profession, getting ideas for research and identifying experts. They pointed out that improved visibility, cross fertilization of ideas, access to data and widening knowledge of a particular topic are stronger motivations for members of the forum to engage in collaborative activities when compared to factors like access to equipment and funding. Still on the reasons for participating in online forums, Nandi, Chang and Balbo (2009) point out that there are many reasons behind the wide adoption of online discussion forum, but the major attribute of a discussion forum is its asynchronous nature that enables learners and instructors to communicate with each other at anytime of the day, and without having to find the time for person to person interaction.

Tella and Isah (2011) empirically examined the pattern of undergraduate participation in the online discussion forum and found a high participatory rate among the subjects. Prominent patterns of participation identified include: Socratic questioning, sharing of personal opinion and experiences, reaction positing and brainstorming. Their study revealed a great extent of participation in the online forum with the majority making postings on a daily basis.

Onuoha, Madukoma and Ikonne (2012) observe that major hindrances to use of the

forum were lack of familiarity with online technologies, lack of access to computers with internet connectivity, and incessant power outage. Hammond (1999) notes that five major issues emerged as affecting the degree of participation and these include: time, access to the technology, learners' attitudes and expectations, pedagogy (including the role of the tutor) and the nature of the medium.

Gbaje and Kotso (2012) posit that it is pertinent that many Nigerian academic libraries redesign their websites to make them more functional, interactive and effective by: using the library website to point their patrons to electronic resources and provide online services that will enable their patrons use the library remotely; using the library website to provide information about the activities of the library, and providing contact information of the library in the library website to enable and incorporate the use of web 2.0 services in library and information service delivery. Mokoena (2013) explained the reason for non-participation in online forums which include technical problem, unclear expectations and providing feedback. Soyemi and Babahola (2018) affirmed that lack of time and slow internet connections were major reasons for librarians' inactive participation in open online courses. This therefore implies that availability of time and fast internet connection contributes to active participation in open online course. Lima *et al* (2019) revealed three categories of difficulties related to the forum: difficulties in following the debate, difficulties with the structure of the forum, and difficulties in motivating students.

Research methodology

For this study, survey research method was used to ascertain the Pattern of Library and Information Science Professionals' Participation in the NLA Online Discussion Forum in Imo State, Nigeria. The target population of this study consisted of the Library and Information Professionals working in the various libraries in Imo state, who make use of NLA Online Forum. The purposive sampling technique was used to select thirty-five library and information science professionals out of the 56 members present

for the Quarterly Chapter Meeting of Imo State NLA. Only those that have joined the National NLA platform were selected for the study. Thus, 35 library and information professionals constituted the sample. The questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection. Out of the thirty five copies of the questionnaires distributed, twenty-nine were properly filled and found valid for the study. The data were

collected and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The simple percentage were used in analyzing data relating to objectives 1 and 2, while the mean score was used to analyze data relating to objectives 3 -5. Those who are aware of the NLA online forum but do not participate in it were asked to discontinue with the questions after question one.

Findings

Table 1: Frequency of participation in the NLA forum

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	12	41.4
Weekly	7	24.1
Fortnightly	5	17.2
Monthly	5	17.2
Total	29	100%

On the frequency of participation in the forum, Table 1 indicates that 12 (41.4%) of the subjects participate on the forum on daily basis. 7 (24.1%) participate on weekly basis, 5 (17.2%) participate fortnightly while 5 (17.2%) participate on the NLA forum on monthly basis.

This implies that library and information science professionals do participate on the NLA forum mainly on daily and weekly basis. That majority of the subjects participate on the online forum on daily basis could not be unconnected with the reality of proliferation of Smartphone's, which also can easily be connected online.

Table 2: Means of participating in the forum

Means	Frequency	Percentage
Use of smartphones / iPad	17	58.6
Use of personal laptop	24	82.6
Use of personal desktop computers	8	27.6
Use of official computers /laptops	7	24.1
Visiting of cybercafes / business centres	6	20.7

N.B. Multiple options were ticked.

Analysis from Table 2 shows that library and information professionals use different channels for accessing the NLA online forum. Use of personal laptop 24 (82.6%) is the most predominant channel for accessing the NLA online forum. This was closely followed by the use of smartphones / iPad 17 (58.6%). Other channels include use of personal desktop

computers 8 (27.6%), use of official computers /laptops 7 (24.1%) and visiting of cybercafés and business centres 6 (20.7%). Evidence from the analysis clearly revealed that use of smartphones, iPad and personal laptop is the predominant means through which professionals from Imo State Chapter of NLA participate in online discussion forum.

Table 3: Purposes for participating in the NLA online forum

S/N	Items	S/A(4)	A(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	Total	Mean	Decision
1.	Asking questions for clarification	9 (36)	16 (48)	-	3 (3)	29 (87)	3.00	Accepted
2.	Posting of advertisement /publicity	6 (24)	14 (42)	6 (12)	3 (3)	29 (81)	2.79	Accepted
3.	Sharing of personal opinion	7 (28)	18 (54)	2 (4)	2 (2)	29 (88)	3.03	Accepted
4.	Brainstorming on professional issues	18 (72)	8 (24)	-	3 (3)	29 (99)	3.41	Accepted
5.	Responding/ reacting to postings made by others	8 (32)	16 (48)	1 (2)	4 (4)	29 (86)	2.96	Accepted
6.	Making inquiries on conference / seminars	5 (20)	19 (57)	2 (4)	3 (3)	29 (84)	2.89	Accepted
7.	Soliciting for information from professionals on research matters	14 (56)	11 (33)	1 (2)	3 (3)	29 (94)	3.24	Accepted

Table 3, shows that library and information science professionals participate in the NLA online forum by asking questions for clarification (3.00), posting of advertisement /publicity (2.79), sharing of personal opinion

(3.03), brainstorming on professional issues (3.03), responding / reacting to postings made by others, making inquiries on conference /seminars (2.89) and soliciting for information from professionals on research matters (3.24).

Table 4: Effects of participating in online forum

S/N	Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Total	Mean	Decision
1.	It has helped me to become more aware of technological development in library and information services	12 (48)	16 (48)	2 (4)	3 (3)	29 (103)	3.55	Accepted
2.	It has helped me to discover new platforms for publication	5 (20)	18 (54)	4 (8)	2 (2)	29 (84)	2.89	Accepted
3.	It has exposed me to professional conferences / workshops	11 (44)	9 (27)	6 (12)	3 (3)	29 (86)	2.96	Accepted
4.	It has helped to deepen my professional knowledge and skills	8 (32)	16 (48)	5 (10)	- (0)	29 (90)	3.10	Accepted
5.	It has helped to boost my publication output	5 (20)	11 (33)	11 (22)	2 (2)	29 (77)	2.65	Accepted
6.	It has helped me to acquire new ideas for research	8 (32)	16 (48)	2 (4)	3 (3)	29 (87)	3.00	Accepted
7.	It has helped me to collaborate with professional colleagues effectively	6 (24)	17 (51)	2 (4)	4 (4)	29 (83)	2.86	Accepted
8.	It has helped me to get access to current /timely information	8 (32)	16 (48)	1 (2)	5 (5)	29 (87)	3.00	Accepted
9.	It has increased my social interactions with members	9 (36)	14 (42)	3 (6)	3 (3)	29 (87)	3.00	Accepted

Table 4 reveals the effects of participating in online forum. Results in the above table indicated that all the items in 1-9 have mean

score ranging from 2.65 to 3.10 meaning that participating in the online forums by library and Information professionals have positive impacts in the areas identified by the items

Table 5: Challenges to effective participation in the NLA online forum

S/N		SA(4)	A(3)	D(2)	SD(1)	Total	Mean	Decision
1.	High cost of subscribing to the Internet access	5 (20)	15 (45)	3 (6)	6 (6)	29 (77)	2.65	Accepted
2.	Limited access to computers / relevant technologies	15 (60)	12 (36)	-	2 (2)	29 (98)	3.62	Accepted
3.	Slow internet connectivity	7 (28)	11 (33)	9 (18)	2 (2)	29 (81)	2.79	Accepted
4.	Lack of skills to use the internet facilities	5 (20)	2 (6)	14 (28)	8 (8)	29 (62)	2.13	Rejected
5.	Pressure of work	6 (24)	14 (42)	6 (12)	3 (3)	29 (81)	2.97	Accepted
	High cost of relevant technologies	6	12	8	3	29		Accepted
6.	{laptops, personal computers}	(24)	(36)	(16)	(3)	(79)	2.72	
7.	Unethical conduct of some members on some issues	2 (8)	6 (18)	10 (20)	11 (11)	29 (57)	1.96	Rejected

Table 5 reveals the challenges to effective participation in the NLA online forum amongst library and information science professionals. 6 out of the 7 challenges have mean score ratings from 2.65 to 3.62.

Findings and Discussion

The data generated and analyzed reveal that majority of the participants in the study participate on the NLA online forum on daily basis. This seems to corroborate the findings of Tella and Isah (2011) where their study revealed a great extent of participation in the online forum with the majority making postings on a daily basis. The responses in table 2 which aimed at determining the means (channels) through which library and information science professionals in Imo state participate in the NLA online forum show that use of personal laptop ranked highest, followed by use of smartphones / iPad. This is a clear indication that the participants hardly visit cybercafes / business centre. The reason could not be far from the fact that personal laptop and smartphones / iPad are more or less alternatives to visiting to cyber cafes and also use of these personal devices gives the participants room for privacy and it enables them to access the forum anytime anywhere.

It was also observed from the responses that the participants do participate in the NLA forum in order to ask questions for clarification, post advertisement, brainstorm on professional issues, solicit for information from professionals, make inquiries on conference / seminars as well as respond / react to postings

made by others. This finding is in agreement with Dawngliana (2018) position that LIS online discussion forums /Groups creates an opportunity to discuss issues related to library and information practices and act as an electronic medium for the quick exchange of information and experiences related to new initiatives, plans, projects, information sources and services. These findings seem to support the findings of Onuoha, Madukoma and Ikonne (2012) who identify reasons for using the forum to be associated with acquisition of information about the library profession, getting ideas for research and identifying experts. It also supports the position of Nandi, Chang and Balbo (2009) that forums are used for posting comments. The finding agrees with Tella and Isah (2011) on the patterns of participation such as sharing of personal opinion, reaction, posting and brainstorming.

A critical look at Table 4 indicates that participating on the NLA online forum has a lot of impacts on the participants, such as creating awareness of developments in the profession, they become more aware on new platforms for publication, conferences and seminars. It also facilitates collaboration amongst library and information science professionals and above all, has helped the professionals to deepen their professional knowledge.

Table 5 shows the challenges to effective participation in the forum, however, that limited access to computers / relevant technologies has the highest mean score of 3.62 is surprising as most of the participants had

earlier on indicated that they access the NLA online forum through the use of personal laptop. However, that high cost of subscribing to the Internet access is a challenge seems to corroborate the fact that the participants really make use of personal laptop. This finding agrees with the findings of Onuoha, Madukoma and Ikonne (2012) to some extent that lack of access to computers with internet connectivity was part of the hindrances to use of the forum. On the other hand, the findings to some extent contradicts the findings of Onuoha, Madukoma and Ikonne (2012) that lack of familiarity with online technologies was a major hindrance to the use of the forum.

It has been observed that most library and information science practitioners in Imo state have little or no knowledge about the existence and benefit associated with participation in the forum. This therefore underscores the need for proper orientation and sensitization of library and information science professionals in Imo state especially during general meeting. This if effectively carried out will help in increasing and attracting librarians to the forum.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals a very low level of participation in the NLA online forum amongst library and information professionals in Imo state. It was quite disheartening that most of the library and information science professionals expected to participate in the study declined on the basis that they do not participate while others claim ignorance of the forum. There was clear indication of high level low knowledge of the existence of the platform. However those who participated seem to be more at home using their personal laptop /smartphones as against visiting cyber cafes / business centres. It is clear from the study that NLA online forum is a viable platform for deepening one's professional knowledge through the interactions in the forum. Thus one could conclude that active participation in the forum will no doubt pave the way for awareness of trends and technological developments in the profession and as well lead to discovery of platforms for research publications which also is a requisite for ascending the professional ladder.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were put forward:

Orientation /sensitization on the existence of the NLA online forum: It is important that LIPs in Imo State are properly sensitized on the inherent benefits of participating in the NLA online discussion forums

Provision of Internet access / facilities: There is need for heads of libraries and information centres in the state to provide internet access/facilities for their institution libraries as this will help in alleviating the huge amount spent in subscribing to Internet access especially those that make use of personal laptop.

Increased in bandwidth: for institutions that have Internet facilities, it is pertinent that their bandwidth should be increased in order to make the signals and connectivity stronger and reliable. Availability of strong Internet connectivity will motivate librarians to participate in online discussion forums.

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