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An Evaluation of Reference Services Provision and Users' Satisfaction in University Libraries in Benue State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined reference service provision and users' satisfaction in university libraries in Benue State, Nigeria. The study adopted a descriptive survey design. A sample of 388 respondents was drawn from a population of 65,280 library users across three universities using stratified random sampling. Data were collected using a validated questionnaire (RSPUSULQ) with a reliability coefficient of 0.79. Descriptive statistics and chi-square analysis were used for data analysis. Findings revealed that university libraries provide diverse reference services, including bibliographic instruction, online reference services, face-to-face assistance, current awareness services, and selective dissemination of information. Users reported a high level of satisfaction, with online reference services recording the highest satisfaction level. Empirical evidence further indicates that responsiveness, accessibility, and technological support significantly influence satisfaction. The study concludes that effective reference service delivery enhances user satisfaction and recommends continuous service evaluation, improved digital infrastructure, and expanded electronic resource access.

Keywords: Reference services; user satisfaction; university libraries; digital reference; information literacy; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The provision of reference services in university libraries is a critical aspect of academic support that directly influences user satisfaction. In the context of higher education institutions, particularly in Benue State, Nigeria, university libraries serve as pivotal hubs for information retrieval, literacy development, and educational resource access (Ogunmodede, 2019). Effective reference services are essential in helping users navigate the vast amounts of information available and ensuring they receive appropriate support to meet their academic needs (Ojo, 2020). Reference services are the direct personal assistance library users receive to meet their information needs, constituting the range of services provided by librarians and information professionals to support users in their quest for information encompassing direct assistance with inquiries and educational efforts aimed at enhancing users' information literacy skills (Hernon & Altman, 2024).

Research consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between the quality and breadth of library services and resulting user satisfaction. Studies highlight how efficient resource access, helpful staff

interactions, robust digital offerings, and a conducive learning environment directly contribute to positive user experiences and perceived library value (Iwhiwhu & Ogwu, 2020; Adeniran & Ayo, 2023). Significant assessments of users' perceptions regarding reference services are crucial for libraries aiming to enhance their offerings and align them with user expectations, as user satisfaction serves as a key performance indicator reflecting a library's ability to meet the academic and informational needs of students and the university community (Chen & Gupta, 2023).

Reference services encompass a broad range, including in-person assistance, online chat, email responses, and specialized instructional resources. They aim to help users locate and utilise information efficiently and effectively. The demand for these services has evolved, especially with the rise of digital information, as users expect timely and accurate guidance aligning with increasingly complex research needs (Gordon, 2019). Modern reference service categories include ready reference, bibliographic research assistance, instruction and training, referrals, reader's advisory, technology assistance, long-range reference services, and research consulting (Bopp & Smith, 2021; Cassell & Hiremath, 2018). Each category targets different user needs, and their effective provision is fundamental to fostering information literacy and supporting academic excellence.

Despite the acknowledged importance of reference services, many students and researchers report dissatisfaction. The critical role of academic libraries in supporting research and learning frequently faces a significant challenge as user expectations regarding information access, guidance, and support diverge from actual services delivered, potentially impacting academic outcomes (Baker & McKenzie, 2021). This observed disparity is particularly concerning within university libraries in developing regions like Benue State, Nigeria, where unique infrastructural, technological, and resource constraints exacerbate the gap between desired and actual reference service provision (Okonkwo & Eze, 2023; Peters & Adebayo, 2024).

Personal observations at Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University Library and Information Services (ULIS), the Francis Suliemanu Idachaba Library of Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi, and the Asom Bur Library of the University of Mkar reveal that these institutions maintain limited empirical data on user satisfaction. This absence of data makes it impossible to explicitly measure the level of user satisfaction with services offered. Resource limitations, including inadequate funding for technological infrastructure, insufficient acquisition of current digital materials, and shortage of adequately trained professional staff, frequently hinder the provision of cutting-edge services. Consequently, users may encounter slower response times, limited access to specialised digital resources, and less personalized or technologically advanced assistance than desired, potentially impacting their academic success. It is against this background that this study investigated reference service provision and users' satisfaction in university libraries in Benue State in order to identify the reference services provided to users in university libraries in Benue State and ascertain the extent to which users are satisfied with the reference services provided in university libraries in Benue State, Nigeria.

Review of Literature

Reference Service

Reference services are much more than simply pointing someone in the direction of a book. They encompass a wide range of activities designed to empower users in their information-seeking journey. These activities include:

Answering Factual Questions: This is perhaps the most commonly understood aspect of reference services. Think of needing a specific date, a definition, or a statistical fact. Reference librarians are skilled at using a variety of resources, both print and digital, to quickly and accurately answer these types of questions (Ursachi, 2021).

Providing Research Assistance: Going beyond simple factual queries, research assistance involves helping users develop effective search strategies, identify relevant databases and resources, and evaluate the credibility of information (Cassell & Hiremath, 2016). This can involve teaching users how to use Boolean operators, understand controlled vocabulary, and critically analyze sources. Offering Readers'

Advisory: For those seeking recreational reading material, reference librarians can offer personalized recommendations based on individual interests, reading preferences, and past reading experiences. This is particularly helpful in navigating the overwhelming landscape of published content (Saricks, 2025).

Providing Information Literacy Instruction: One of the crucial components of reference services is educating users on how to effectively locate, evaluate, and utilize information. This goes beyond just finding a specific answer; it empowers users to become independent and critical consumers of information (College & Research Libraries, 2017). This can take the form of formal workshops, one-on-one consultations, or online tutorials. **Referrals to Other Resources:** Sometimes, a library may not be the best place to find the answer to a particular question. In these cases, reference librarians act as gateways to other relevant organizations, experts, or resources that can provide more specialized assistance (College & Research Libraries, 2017).

In a world of information overload, skilled information professionals offering reference services are invaluable in helping individuals navigate the information maze and reach their desired destinations. In today's digital age, where information seems readily available at our fingertips, it's easy to overlook the critical role of reference services. While search engines can provide a deluge of results, they often lack the nuance, accuracy, and personalized guidance that a skilled reference librarian or information professional can offer. This study explores the enduring importance of reference services, highlighting their continued relevance in empowering individuals and fostering informed decision-making.

Providing Access to Reliable Information: The core function of reference services lies in connecting users with reliable and relevant information. This goes beyond simply pointing individuals towards search engines. Reference professionals possess a deep understanding of information resources, from scholarly databases and specialized encyclopedias to government documents and community resources. They can expertly navigate these complex landscapes to identify credible and accurate sources, a crucial skill in an era plagued by misinformation (Caulfield, 2017). By employing their expertise, reference services ensure users are equipped with trustworthy information for research, personal development, or practical problem-solving. **Beyond the Search Box: Guidance and Instruction** reference services offer more than just a list of search results. They provide personalized guidance, helping users refine their search strategies and develop critical information literacy skills. Librarians can assist in formulating effective search queries, understanding database functionalities, and evaluating the credibility of sources (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2016). This instructional component is particularly valuable for students and researchers who are developing their research skills. Moreover, reference services can empower individuals to become more discerning consumers of information, capable of critically evaluating sources and identifying potential biases. **Addressing Complex Information Needs:** While search engines excel at handling straightforward queries, they often fall short when faced with complex or nuanced information needs. Reference professionals are skilled at understanding the underlying context of a request and identifying the most appropriate resources to address it. They can synthesize information from multiple sources, provide expert interpretations, and even offer alternative perspectives (Bopp & Smith, 2021). This personalized approach is particularly crucial for addressing unique or specialized research questions that may be difficult to answer using automated search tools.

From helping individuals learn a new skill to connecting them with local community organizations, reference services serve as invaluable resources for personal growth and community development (Johnson, 2020). They foster a culture of learning and empower individuals to become active and engaged citizens. In a world saturated with information, the importance of reference services is more critical than ever. By providing access to reliable information, offering personalized guidance, addressing complex information needs, bridging the digital divide, and supporting lifelong learning, reference services play a vital role in empowering individuals and fostering informed decision-making. As information landscapes continue to evolve, the expertise of reference professionals will remain essential for navigating the complexities of the digital age and ensuring that everyone has access to the information they need to thrive.

Reference Services Provision

Reference service provision is the proactive assistance offered by information professionals to users seeking information, encompassing a broad range of activities designed to help users locate, evaluate, and utilise information resources effectively (Ranganathan, 2022; Alvite & Barrionuevo, 2021). Traditionally, this involved face-to-face interactions at a reference desk, guiding users through print indexes and catalogs. The digital revolution has significantly broadened the scope and methods of reference service delivery. Modern reference services have evolved from predominantly in-person interactions to a dynamic, multi-channel approach driven by digital technologies and user demands for convenience and accessibility (Chen, 2023). Key components include asynchronous channels such as emails and web forms, real-time chat and instant messaging services, and video conferencing for complex queries and in-depth consultations (Rodriguez & Gupta, 2024; Kim, 2022). Indirect or self-service reference models, including comprehensive library guides, Online Public Access Catalogs (OPACs), and informational kiosks, further empower users to find information independently (Patel, 2023; Elbeshbishi, 2022; Kaur & Singh, 2022).

The provision of effective reference services faces considerable challenges in developing regions. Systemic infrastructural and financial challenges limit the depth and immediacy of resource access (Okoro & Kalu, 2023). Inconsistent electricity supply, limited bandwidth capacity, and fluctuating currency exchange rates severely restrict the renewal or acquisition of expensive international digital subscriptions, necessitating reliance on open-access repositories and locally curated print collections (Ibrahim, 2022). The proliferation of online misinformation further demands that reference librarians possess strong critical evaluation skills to help users discern credible sources (ALA, 2024). Inadequate staffing, limited access to electronic resources, insufficient training opportunities, and the constant need for staff adaptation to new technologies compound these challenges (Johnson & Smith, 2023; NCES, 2023).

Users' Satisfaction with Reference Services

User satisfaction with reference services refers to the degree to which users perceive their interaction with a library's reference services as meeting or exceeding their expectations (Bertot et al., 2018). This encompasses accessibility of the service, the competence and helpfulness of librarians, and the ultimate resolution of information needs (Connaway & Radford, 2017). Hussain et al. (2021) describe user satisfaction as a multifaceted construct encompassing the accuracy and completeness of information provided, the approachability and helpfulness of the reference staff, and the efficiency with which queries are handled.

Several factors contribute to user satisfaction with reference services. First, the accuracy and completeness of information constitutes the cornerstone of any successful reference service, as users highly value the librarian's ability to deliver credible and timely answers (Connaway & Radford, 2017). Second, approachability and interpersonal skills of librarians including patience, genuine interest in understanding information needs, and a welcoming demeanour significantly enhance the user experience (Gross et al., 2023). Third, the efficiency and speed of response, whether in-person or online, are key determinants of satisfaction, as delayed responses lead to frustration (Lankes, 2023). Fourth, accessibility and convenience the availability of reference services during convenient hours, ease of navigating online platforms, and responsiveness across communication channels are critical to positive user experiences (Jaeger, 2022). Fifth, effective communication and instruction that empower users to become more effective information seekers, enhancing long-term information literacy, contribute significantly to sustained satisfaction (Oakleaf, 2020).

Khan et al. (2022) highlight that user satisfaction is significantly influenced by perceived ease of access to reference services, including both physical and virtual accessibility. Latham and Hensley (2020) found that libraries offering extended hours and multiple platforms for reference inquiries significantly improved user satisfaction. High satisfaction levels have documented benefits: satisfied users are more likely to return and use library services again (Kyrillidou & Giersch, 2020); positive word-of-mouth recommendations contribute to library reputation (Bates, 2025); demonstrated user satisfaction supports

justification of library budgets (Poll, 2023); and continuous satisfaction assessment allows for targeted service improvements.

METHODS

The study adopted a descriptive survey design, which enabled accurate representation of the population's views regarding reference service provision and user satisfaction. According to Smith and Jones, (2022), this design is appropriate for collecting data on the opinions and experiences of library users without establishing causal relationships, aligning with the study's objectives of identifying available reference services and measuring user satisfaction levels. The study was conducted in Benue State, Nigeria, covering three universities: Rev. Fr. Moses Orshio Adasu University (BSU), located along the Makurdi-Gboko Road; Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi (FUAM), located along Makurdi-Gbajimba Road; and the University of Mkar (UMM), located in Mkar, near Gboko. These institutions represent the diverse contexts of university library provision in Benue State, with varying levels of resources, staff capacity, and infrastructure. The population comprised 65,280 library users, students, faculty members, and administrative staff drawn from the three universities: MOAUM (62,579), FUAM (2,526), and UMM (175). A stratified random sampling technique was employed, dividing the population into subgroups based on user category (students, academic staff, and administrative staff) to ensure proportional representation. The sample size of 396 was determined using the Taro Yamane formula to ensure reliability and generalisability of findings. Data were collected using the Reference Services Provision and Users' Satisfaction in University Libraries Questionnaire (RSPUSULQ), a self-structured instrument with sections A–F. Section A captured demographic information. Sections B and C, each containing five items, were used to elicit responses on reference services provided and users' satisfaction with those services, respectively. A four point rating scale of measurement was used for decision making. The researchers visited the institutions to administer questionnaire themselves with the help of three research assistants, (one from each of the institutions).

Data were analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Descriptive statistics frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were used to address the research questions. Chi-square (χ^2) analysis was employed to test the hypothesis at $p < .05$ level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Research Question 1: Reference Services Provided to Users in University Libraries in Benue State

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of User Perceptions of Reference Services Provided in University Libraries in Benue State

S/N	Item Description (n=388)	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	S.D	Decision
6	Face-to-face reference assistance	39	154	65	130	2.56	1.03	Accepted
7	Online reference service (email, chat, etc.)	169	141	65	13	3.20	0.84	Accepted
8	Reference staff assist users with research and assignment help	65	141	130	52	2.56	0.92	Accepted
9	Bibliographic instruction is provided by reference staff	232	65	39	52	3.23	1.09	Accepted

S/N	Item Description (n=388)	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	S.D	Decision
10	Current awareness information is provided	78	206	39	65	2.77	0.96	Accepted
11	Selective dissemination of information (SDI) is provided	104	130	115	39	2.77	0.96	Accepted
Cluster Mean						2.85	0.97	Accepted

Note. Primary data (Researchers' field study).

The table above indicates that university libraries in Benue State provide a variety of reference services that are generally well accepted by users. Bibliographic instruction, provided by reference staff, recorded the highest mean score ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.09$), suggesting most users find this service particularly valuable, though with some variation in responses. Online reference services via email or chat also scored highly ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.84$), highlighting the importance of digital assistance. Current awareness services and selective dissemination of information (SDI) received moderate but consistent ratings ($M = 2.77$, $SD = 0.96$ for both), while face-to-face reference assistance and research/assignment help each returned means of 2.56, with standard deviations of 1.03 and 0.92 respectively, indicating that these services are available but with variable user perceptions. The overall cluster mean of 2.85 ($SD = 0.97$) confirms that these reference services are generally regarded as necessary and beneficial across the libraries surveyed.

Research Question 2: Extent of Users' Satisfaction with Reference Services

Table 3. Mean and Standard Deviation of Users' Satisfaction Levels with Reference Services in University Libraries in Benue State, Nigeria

S/N	Item Description (n=388)	VHE	HE	LE	VLE	Mean	S.D	Decision
12	Face-to-face reference assistance	104	130	115	39	2.60	1.02	HE
13	Online reference service (email, chat, etc.)	78	155	77	78	3.27	0.68	HE
14	Bibliographic instruction	143	219	13	13	2.73	0.97	HE
15	Current Awareness Services (CAS)	78	193	52	65	2.84	1.04	HE
16	Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI)	130	117	89	52	2.57	0.81	HE
Cluster Mean						2.80	0.90	HE

Note. Primary data (Researchers' field study).

The information in the table above demonstrates that users are generally highly satisfied with the reference services provided across university libraries in Benue State, as all items fell within the High Extent (HE) satisfaction category. Online reference services recorded the highest satisfaction mean ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.68$), indicating that users are particularly pleased with email and chat-based support. Current Awareness Services (CAS) also received favourable ratings ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.04$). Bibliographic instruction yielded a mean satisfaction score of 2.73 ($SD = 0.97$), reflecting consistent positive perceptions. Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) and face-to-face reference assistance recorded means of 2.57 ($SD = 0.81$) and 2.60 ($SD = 1.02$) respectively, indicating slightly lower but still high satisfaction levels, with face-to-face assistance showing higher variability among users. The overall cluster mean of 2.80 ($SD = 0.90$) confirms that users are largely satisfied with the reference services across all sampled libraries.

FINDINGS

The finding revealed that, university libraries in Benue State provide a range of reference services, including bibliographic instruction, online reference, face-to-face assistance, current awareness services, and selective dissemination of information (cluster A = 2.85), which is consistent with the views of Bopp and Smith (2021) and Cassell and Hiremath (2018), who document these as core categories of modern reference service provision. Similarly, bibliographic instruction recording the highest acceptance mean ($M = 3.23$) aligns with Oakleaf's (2020) assertion that information literacy instruction constitutes one of the most critical and valued reference functions, empowering users to become independent researchers.

The finding also revealed that users are generally highly satisfied with reference services across university libraries in Benue State (cluster B = 2.80, classified as High Extent) aligns with Adebayo and Popoola (2011), who found that library users in Oyo State held positive perceptions of reference services, though areas for improvement remained. The cluster mean observed in the current study is consistent with the general trend documented by Khan *et al.* (2015) at the University of Punjab, where users generally expressed satisfaction with the quality and accessibility of reference services despite identifying needs for improvement in specific areas. The particularly high satisfaction with online reference services ($M = 3.27$) is consistent with Tenopir and Zhang (2017), who demonstrated that users strongly prefer digital reference channels for their immediacy and convenience, and with Smith and Jones (2022), who highlighted the increasing importance of digital literacy support within reference interactions.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated reference service provision and users' satisfaction in university libraries in Benue State, Nigeria, focusing on two objectives: identifying reference services provided and ascertaining users' satisfaction levels. The findings revealed that university libraries in Benue State provide a range of reference services encompassing bibliographic instruction, online reference, face-to-face assistance, current awareness services, and SDI. Users demonstrate a high level of satisfaction with the services provided, with online reference services eliciting the greatest satisfaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. University library management in Benue State should conduct regular evaluation and maintenance of installed reference services to sustain and enhance user satisfaction, as identified by of respondents as the most critical improvement strategy.
2. Libraries should invest in robust automation systems and expanded access to electronic resources to strengthen online reference services.

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