IMPACT OF INTERNET ACCESS ON THE USE OF LAW LIBRARY INFORMATION RESOURCES BY STUDENTS AT AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of internet access on the utilization of law library information resources by students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. With the increasing shift toward digital information sources, traditional libraries especially academic law libraries face declining patronage. This study was guided by three research questions which are: Are law students of Ahmadu aware of the library resources in the department, and how often do students visit the library? What are the perception of law students in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria on the differences that exist between resources in the law library and those found online and What challenges do law students in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria encounter in using information resources from the law library? This study employed a qualitative research approach, using exploratory qualitative research design. The study population consisted of all 400-level law students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from seven final-year law students who were purposively sampled due to their willingness to participate in the study. A tape recorder was used to collect participants' opinions. Findings revealed that internet access has significantly influenced students' use of the law library, primarily due to ease of access, lack of awareness of available library resources, and the perception that the library is outdated. This study concludes that to remain relevant, law libraries must adopt digital strategies, improve service delivery, and actively promote their resources. Recommendations include the digitization of library collections, enhanced user education, and improved librarian-user engagement.

Keywords: Internet Access, Law Library, Library Utilization, Information Users, Digital Resources

Introduction

The rapid expansion of internet access has transformed the way information is sought, shared, and utilized across all sectors of society. In academic settings, this shift has had a particularly profound impact on libraries, challenging their traditional role as primary gateways to knowledge. Once considered indispensable "warehouses of information," academic law libraries now face declining use as students increasingly turn to the internet for faster, more convenient access to information.

Research suggests that the internet functions as a vast "virtual library" (Adegoke, 2009), offering a wide range of resources, including books, journals, legal databases, and multimedia content accessible anytime and anywhere. This convenience has led to a cultural shift among students who prefer online sources over physically visiting libraries, even when the quality or reliability of online information may vary. According to Ashiemar (2007), the spread of broadband and mobile connectivity has made internet use nearly ubiquitous, further reducing students' perceived need for library visits.

Law libraries traditionally hold specialized resources essential for legal scholarship and practice such as textbooks, law reports, legislation, digests, and legal databases (Biradar&Kumber, 2013). These curated, authoritative collections are critical for supporting legal education and ensuring that future lawyers can competently navigate complex legal materials. However, despite these resources, students often overlook their value due to lack of awareness, perceived obsolescence, or dissatisfaction with library services. These disconnect raises questions about the relevance of law libraries in the digital age.

At Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, the problem is particularly acute: many students report rarely visiting the law library or relying solely on internet searches to meet their academic needs. This trend is concerning given the essential role of accurate and up-to-date legal information in legal education and practice. Without strategic intervention, the law library risks further decline in relevance, despite ongoing investments from institutional sponsors such as the National Universities Commission (NUC) and the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund).

This study therefore investigates the impact of internet access on the utilization of law library information resources by law students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. It aims to understand students' information-seeking behaviors, perceptions of the library's relevance, and the challenges they face when using library resources. The ultimate goal is to identify strategies that can help the law library remain relevant and valuable in the 21st century.

To guide this study, the following research questions were raised:

1. Are law students of Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria aware of the library resources in the department, and how often do students visit the library?
2. What are the perception of law students in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria on the differences that exist between resources in the law library and those found online?
3. What challenges do law students in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria encounter in using information resources from the law library?

Literature Review

The emergence of the internet has transformed information-seeking behavior worldwide, challenging the traditional role of academic libraries. The concept of the internet as a "virtual library" (Adegoke, 2009) reflects its capacity to deliver vast amounts of information on demand. Students increasingly favor online resources for their ease of access, convenience, and immediacy qualities that traditional libraries often struggle to match. Ashiemar (2007) highlights how the proliferation of broadband and mobile internet has made online information nearly ubiquitous, encouraging users to bypass physical libraries entirely. This shift is particularly significant for law libraries, which historically have been vital for supporting legal education and practice.

Law libraries house specialized resources such as textbooks, law reports, legislation, digests, legal databases, and reference tools (Biradar&Kumber, 2013). These curated, authoritative materials are essential for training legal professionals who must navigate complex and precise legal systems. However, the increasing reliance on internet sources threatens to undermine the role of law libraries, as students may turn to unverified or non-authoritative online resources instead. Previous research has emphasized the indispensability of law libraries to the legal profession. Dada (2011) and Ogunfolu (2006) describe the law library as the "laboratory" of legal education, underscoring its role in supporting legal research, client counseling, advocacy, and scholarly work. Yet despite this importance, many libraries in Nigeria face declining patronage. Factors contributing to this decline include outdated collections, limited digitization, insufficient user education, and poor service quality.

Studies also highlight user behavior as a critical factor in library utilization. Uhegbu (cited in the original paper) notes that information-seeking behavior varies across user groups, shaped by factors such as profession, education level, and information needs. For university students, especially those in their final year of law studies, the expectation of fast, reliable, and convenient access to information often leads them to prefer online sources over in-person library visits. At the same time, the quality of internet resources poses challenges. Unlike law library collections that prioritize authoritative, up-to-date, and jurisdiction-specific legal materials, the internet hosts a wide range of sources with varying degrees of credibility. Bhardwaj (2012) points out that online legal information systems, while convenient, require careful evaluation to ensure reliability a skill not all students possess. Given these tensions, academic law libraries face a critical need to modernize. Belniak (2014) emphasizes the importance of integrating digital legal databases into library services to meet user expectations and maintain relevance.

Efforts to digitize collections, subscribe to online legal databases such as Westlaw, HeinOnline, or LexisNexis, and provide remote access are crucial strategies for competing with the convenience of the internet. However, technological solutions alone are insufficient. User education and outreach are equally important. Librarians must proactively raise awareness of the library's resources, train students in effective legal research skills, and provide welcoming, high-quality service to counter negative perceptions of libraries as "old-fashioned" or inaccessible. This study builds on these insights by examining how internet access affects the use of law library resources among final-year law students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. By exploring students' perceptions, usage patterns, and challenges, the study seeks to identify practical strategies for ensuring that the law library remains an essential resource in an era of widespread internet access.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, using a descriptive, exploratory qualitative design. This design allowed the researcher to capture rich, detailed accounts of students' experiences and perspectives that would be difficult to quantify. The study population consisted of all 400-level law students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. To select participants, purposive sampling was used, focusing on students with sufficient experience of both the internet and the law library.

Seven students were selected based on their willingness to participate and their ability to provide diverse perspectives on the research questions. Data were collected using an interview guide. Interviews were conducted in person at times convenient for participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription. Data collected was analyzed using narrative and thematic approach.

Results and Discussions of the findings

The following section presents the results of this study. It is presented in line with the research questions which are as follow:

Are law students of Ahmadu aware of the library resources in the department, and how often do students visit the library?

This research question sought to determine if students of law department are aware of the library resources and how often do students visit the library. From analysis of the collected data to answer this question, a theme emerged from the narratives of the participants of this study which is: Lack of awareness of law Library resources and not visiting the library often. A prominent theme among participants was their limited awareness of the breadth and depth of resources available in the law library. Many students admitted to either never visiting the library or using it solely as a reading space without exploring its collections which suggests a significant communication gap between the library and its users.

> *"I have never been to the law library, simply because I feel the library has nothing to offer me. It's just full of old books."* (*P6, p2, p7)*

> *"I visit the library to read, but I don't really know much about what resources are there apart from newspapers and textbooks."* (*P1, p4, p5, p6)*

What are the perception of law students in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria on the differences that exist between resources in the law library and those found online?

This research question sought to determine the perception on the differences that exist between resources in the library and those found online by law students in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The themes that emerged from the data analysed are; Preference for Internet Due to Ease of Access and perception of the law library as outdated and irrelevant.

Students overwhelmingly reported that the internet offers a more convenient, efficient, and accessible platform for retrieving information compared to the information resources found at the law library. They expressed that the convenience of remote access and search speed has made the internet the preferred option for many.

> *"When I can lie in bed and get what I'm looking for online, why go to the library?"* (*p5, P3, p2)*

"The process of borrowing from the library is long and tiring. With the internet, I can get more options faster." (*p2. P7, p5, p4)*

Perception of the Law Library as Outdated or Irrelevant

Several participants described the library as "old-fashioned," noting that many of its materials appear outdated, brittle, or irrelevant to contemporary legal studies. This perception contributes to a decline in library patronage and trust in the relevance of its holdings.

"Most of the books are old and torn. My lecturers even tell us not to use materials older than five years." (*P4, p5, p1)*

"Only old people still use the library. It feels like it hasn't changed with the times." (*P1, p2, p3. P5)*

What challenges do students of law Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria encounter when using the Library

This research question sought to identify the challenges encountered by students of law department Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria while using the information resources in the library. Participants detailed that various structural, operational, and interpersonal challenges are what discouraged them from using the library. These included disorganized shelving, unhelpful or unfriendly staff, and outdated search systems. These operational difficulties contribute to students' preference for online resources. Though some participants still recognize the law library's potential value.

"Finding a book can take forever, especially if it's not in the OPAC. You have to ask around or search manually." C*P2, p3, p4, p5, p6*,)

"Some librarians act like you're bothering them. It's discouraging." (*P1, p2, p3, p5)*
"The library is far and uncomfortable. I'd rather use my phone." (P2, p6, p7)

Recognition of the Law Library's Potential Value

Despite criticism, some respondents acknowledged that the law library contains valuable resources that are not easily accessible online, such as local law reports, government publications, and institutional theses. This indicates that with modernization and improved outreach, the law library can still serve a vital academic function.

"If the library can digitize its materials and make them easier to access, I think more people would use it." (*p2, p3*,)

"Law reports and legal digests are important, and I know they're better accessed through the library." (*P1, p2, p5, p6)*

Discussions of the findings

This study explored the impact of internet access on the use of law library information resources by law students at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The findings highlight a clear shift in student behavior, with internet use largely displacing traditional library use. A major theme that emerged was lack of awareness about the library's collections. Many students did not know the range of resources available, using the space only for reading or ignoring it entirely. This confirms Uhegbu's (2004) argument that information users' behavior depends on their awareness and understanding of available resources. It suggests the library has not effectively communicated its value or educated users on how to navigate its holdings.

Ease of access emerged as a decisive factor. Students overwhelmingly preferred the Internet for its speed, convenience, and 24/7 availability. This aligns with Adegoke's (2009) description of the internet as a "virtual library" offering vast, accessible information. While these features appeal to users, they pose a serious competitive challenge to traditional libraries, which have more limited hours, slower search processes, and physical access barriers. Participants' perception of the library as outdated is also significant. The idea that the library is "old-fashioned," with aging, brittle books and irrelevant materials, undermines its authority and relevance. As Ashiemar (2007) and Bhardwaj (2012) note, libraries must adapt to the digital age by updating and digitizing collections to compete with online alternatives. Failure to do so reinforces the perception that the internet is superior, even if its information is not always authoritative.

The challenges in using the library includes complex search systems, poor shelving, staff attitudes, and inconvenient distance which further discourage the use of the library. Participants described frustrating, time-consuming processes and unfriendly service, echoing literature that identifies poor user experience as a barrier to library utilization (Biradar&Kumber, 2013). Despite these criticisms, respondents recognized the value of specialized legal resources available in the library, such as law reports, digests, and theses.

These resources often cannot be reliably replaced by general internet searches. This finding suggests that the law library retains critical relevance, but must modernize, improve access, and promote its unique strengths to regain user trust. Overall, the study reveals that while internet access provides convenience and breadth of resources, it also challenges the library to reimagine its services. Libraries must not only digitize their collections but also invest in user education, staff training, and marketing to remain essential components of academic life.

Conclusion

This study concludes that to remain relevant in the 21st century, the law library must evolve into a modern information center that competes with the convenience of the internet while showcasing its unique, authoritative resources. The findings of this study highlights a critical gap between the potential value of the law library and students' actual use of it. Therefore, bridging this gap requires not only technological solutions but also improved service delivery, user education, and proactive outreach.

Recommendations

The following recommends were provided by this study:

1. Librarians should conduct workshops, seminars, and targeted campaigns to raise awareness of available resources and train students in effective legal research.
2. Libraries should digitize its collections and enable remote access to meet users' expectations for convenience.
3. The library should simplify its search and lending processes to reduce user frustration and time spent locating materials and also staff should be trained to provide respectful, friendly, and helpful service that encourages repeat visits.

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