

Academic Libraries Service Provision in the Digital Era: The Institute of Finance Management Library Experience with Social Media Adoption

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Abstract

Despite numerous challenges hampering the effective utilisation of electronic resources such as e-books and electronic journals in libraries, the demand for scholarly content and virtual reference services has steadily risen due to widespread application of information and communication technology. This study, therefore, explored social media platforms for academic libraries seeking to extend their presence beyond the traditional four walls using the Institute of Finance Management Library in Tanzania as a case study. Using a qualitative research approach, the study collected data using three focus group discussions held with purposively selected librarians and library staff at the IFM Library. Additionally, interviews were conducted with heads of department and section to obtain in-depth information. The study found that Facebook (95%, n=20), WhatsApp (90%, n=19), Instagram (81%, n=17), YouTube (67%, n=14), Twitter (57%, n=12) and Goodreads (29%, n=6) were the preferred social media platforms for providing services such as current awareness services, announcements and links to scholarly documents, video tutorials and virtual tours to the library, reference services and answering queries using mobile application (WhatsApp) as well as the establishment of the library book club to boost reading culture amongst students. Challenges included monetary costs, dormancy of accounts, trolling and bullying, and lack of management support. To remedy the situation, a library social media committee could be created in addition to advocacy for the selected social media, posting interesting and engaging content regularly, as well as blocking and reporting trolling and bullying.

Keywords: *library services, social media, academic libraries, Tanzania, virtual reference services, ICT in libraries*

1. Introduction

The decline of library users' physical visits to the library coupled with the proliferation of ICT and social media as a tool for accessing and sharing information has made many librarians and library staff re-think the traditional ways of service provision and instead, explore innovative ways to disseminate information digitally to be in sync with the demands of the digital age. After all, the 'dotcom' library users want information at their fingertips through their phones, tablets, laptops and computers while avoiding a physical trip to the library to access the information. They go to the library only when they need a quiet space to read. Kwanya and Stilwell (2010) further contend that the 'dotcom' library users are generally competent with technology, hence easily bored with traditional ways of obtaining information; moreover, they have limited tolerance with delays in the provision of services as they want to remain connected to new information happening in their surroundings. These

sophisticated users believe everything is on the Web and are comfortable and enthusiastic about technology and prefer downloading or getting information digitally—desiring easy access. This breed of library users has prompted many libraries to embrace technology and devise innovative ways for incorporating social media in providing library services to ensure library presence extends beyond the traditional four walls and into the digital space.

The availability of toxic and negative information via social media notwithstanding, one cannot ignore the positive side where it offers a platform to share knowledge and exchange information virtually, hence its suitability in marketing and crisis management (COVID 19 and social distancing requirements). This paper explores services that can be provided to library users via social media, preferably, Facebook, Twitter, Goodreads, WhatsApp and Instagram to inform, educate and communicate while exploring challenges to the utilisation of such social media platforms.

Several studies have been conducted in the context of Tanzania's academic libraries utilisation of social media tools for marketing library resources and services (Mashindano, 2020; Mosha & Holmner, 2019) as well as in other countries in Africa (Dickson & Holley, 2010; Chizwina *et al.*, 2017; Chapatula & Abdullah, 2020). However, the issue of using different social media platforms deserves particularised and scholarly scrutiny as very little is known about how social media can help in providing services to library users. This study therefore, intends to fill that knowledge gap by addressing the following objectives:

- To establish services that social media can provide at the Institute of Finance Management Library.
- To determine factors hindering effective service provision using social media at the Institute of Finance Management Library.

2. Literature Review

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has impacted significantly on the quality and speed of information provision in libraries. With ICT incorporation in libraries major activities, library routines and operations have changed, i.e. many activities that were once carried out manually are now computerised, implying the applications of ICT techniques have improved library services for the end users (Adebayo, Ahmed & Adeniran, 2018). Social media, on the other hand, refer to interactive technologies that allow for the creation or sharing/exchange of information, ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks (Merriam Webster, 2019). Common features of social media include user-generated-content whereby posts or comments through all online interactions serve as the lifeblood of social media. Mosha and Holmner (2019) note that social media include online technological tools that enable people to communicate, participate, share and collaborate easily via the internet. Additionally, social media tools provide a virtual space that inspires and facilitates formal interactions and the process of knowledge sharing among workers and their clientele.

In libraries, Harrison *et al.* (2017) note that academic libraries are increasingly engaged in the use of ICT and social media to connect with diverse community groups and move

beyond the traditional bounds of the library. Anyira (2011) describes the anatomy of library users in the 21st century and defines a library user as anybody who visits the library to utilise its resources to satisfy information needs. However, in the 21st century, the underlined word “visits” includes remote access to the library portal or websites. In fact, the 21st century has turned everything virtual, thus the tag a “library without walls”. The author further notes that the library user requires 21st century technologies to access library resources; meanwhile, the access needs not be restricted to physical visits to the library building. As Shumaker (2012) contends, librarians need to be innovative to keep up with library users, as patterns of usage and modality of accessibility have changed:

People don't have to come into libraries to get information or use it. They obtain and use information at home, in the office, in dorms, and in restaurants. They gather information sitting down and standing up. They use desktops and laptops, smart phones and tablets. Moreover, they access every type of information this way – whether it's for business, personal interest, scholarship, or science. Thus, when people do come to a library, they don't come for the traditional reasons. They come for programs, a quiet place to work, group study spaces, or to use the computers. They don't come to ask for help from the reference librarians, and as a result, traditional reference activity is declining (ibid).

In Tanzania, the use of ICT in academic libraries was found to be high among library users as they mostly utilised the internet, audio devices, network computers, YouTube (audio/visual materials) and mobile phones in their learning process (Mungwabi, 2018). This finding is in line with Kemp (2020) who provides statistics of internet users in Tanzania and reveals that there were 14.72 million users as of January 2020 showing the penetration of internet usage stood at 25 percent. Regarding social media usage, 4.50 million people were social media users showing that social media penetration stood at 7.6 percent by January 2020.

Mutarubukwa and Mazana (2020) while exploring the use of social media as a teaching tool in selected higher learning institutions find that social media are attractive to youths who regard it as a platform and space for activities not possible in the face-to-face context. The authors further noted that research on how students use social media in Tanzania is limited. However, Kasika's (2017) study on social media usage to enhance collaborative learning in higher learning institutions in the country finds that social media is mostly used in sharing learning materials among groups, and for acquiring new knowledge and skills. Hence, libraries need to explore how social media can help to provide services to users in the digital era.

3. Methodology

The study used the qualitative method research design. Gray (2009) elaborated that this method is suitable for small samples of respondents, cases or phenomena nested in particularised contexts. To select respondents, purposive non-probability sampling was used. In this regard, three focus group discussions with library staff (6 respondents in each group to make a total of 18) were held at the IFM Library and semi-structured interviews were held with one head of department; one head of section and the director, making a total

of 21 respondents in the study. Subsequently, the obtained data were analysed thematically and organised based on the research objectives and emerging issues. The IFM Library was selected due to its devotion to incorporate social media as one of the tools to provide services and market library services to its academic community.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Services to be Offered via Social Media at the IFM Library

ICT has revolutionised the way information is acquired, processed, stored, accessed, disseminated and used. This transformation demands most services and content to be delivered online to interact with users in the digital era and inspire them to keep on using the library. During FGDs, six social media platforms were explored and found to be preferable by librarians at the IFM Library as follows: WhatsApp mobile application was favourable to 19 (90%) library staff; Facebook 20 (95%) library staff; YouTube/Video tutorials 14 (67%) library staff; Twitter 12 (57%) library staff; Goodreads 6 (29%) library staff; and Instagram 17 (81%) library staff, as Table 1 illustrates. Each of these social media platforms was explored and services to be provided through the said media were identified.

Table 1: Social Media Preferability at IFM Library

	WhatsApp	Facebook	YouTube	Twitter	Goodreads	Instagram
Frequency	19	20	14	12	6	17
Percentage	90%	95%	67%	57%	29%	81%

Source: Field Data (2021)

4.1.1 WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a mobile phone application that has grown in popularity within a short time of its existence (Chaputula & Abdullah, 2020). WhatsApp is a popular messaging application as of 2015 and has over 2 billion users as of February 2020 (Merriam Webster, 2021). It allows users to send text and voice messages as they share images, documents and other content. At the IFM Library, 19 (90%) of library staff reported this mobile application to be favourable; in fact, during FGDs, one librarian who deals with readers at the issuing desk noted that the IFM Library could utilise WhatsApp for creating groups in the library where customers can interact with librarians and have their queries answered. At the same time, library staff working at the issuing desk wanted to use the app to remind library users who have borrowed books and they are overdue. Reminders could be sent to library users to avoid unnecessary fines while at the same time notifying them when the reserved item is available. During interview with the head of section responsible for the issuing desk, he noted that:

...A library WhatsApp group chat could be created to facilitate constant academic interaction with users through sharing pictures of new acquired documents and links to scholarly contents. At the same time, notifications of overdue books could be sent to library users via their mobile phones and throughout working hours, queries could be answered through chatting.

The research at Mzuzu University Library in Malawi on the use of WhatsApp for providing services found that the application was successful in providing reference services through answering user's queries promptly hence ensuring customer support to students and staff members who are off-campus around the clock leading to resource utilisation, awareness and greater satisfaction among library users (Chapatula & Abdullah, 2020).

4.1.2 Facebook

Findings revealed that 20 (95%) library staff found Facebook to be suitable for providing current and up-to-date information to users. During FGDs, many library staff noted that a Facebook page would be appropriate in providing IFM Library users and staff members with current awareness services (CAS). The current awareness services aim to inform users about the new acquisitions in their libraries. As of current moment, the IFM Library uses display tables/boards, shelves and staff members WhatsApp group chats to draw attention to recent additions to the library, something that at times is inadequate.

With ICT developments, many researchers are overwhelmed by the overflowing information making them susceptible to fake news articles, plagiarised articles and predatory journals. This is because many users try to keep themselves up-to-date with new publications while they are not savvy enough to detect inauthenticity in some of the information sought. Against this backdrop, librarians who are information gatekeepers try to devise innovative ways to help and prevent users from drowning in overflowing information by providing them access using current awareness services as one of the library staff said during FGDs:

...through electronic resources' subscriptions, librarians receive updates of new journal articles published and new books released. By using the Library's Facebook page, librarians can share this information with faculty members and students, thereby supporting research and ensure academicians are up to date in their field of researches. Also, the platform can be used to serve users when they are off campus and during the time of crisis, for instance the COVID 19 pandemic.

Tak Hei Lam, Hang Au and Chiu (2019) conducted a research at Hong Kong University Libraries and found that most libraries use Facebook as a marketing tool, yet user engagement in these pages was low while communication-related posts and videos attracted the most attention from patrons. In South Africa, on the other hand, Chizwina *et al.* (2017) found out that social media can be used in libraries during crises and revealed that indeed Facebook can be used in a university setting during crises to inform, educate and communicate as it was during students' protests (#FeeMustFall campaign in their research on social media usage in libraries).

4.1.3 YouTube

Sorka (2014) noted that the popularity of social media has prompted academic libraries to turn to video tutorials to host and promote usage of library resources and upload them to YouTube for accessibility. At the IFM Library, 14 (67%) library staff found video tutorials and YouTube to be the best way to familiarise patrons with the library services despite the fact that it was expensive and needed modern equipment to take quality videos for

academic purposes. In fact, many library staff were enthusiastic to adopt video tutorials to promote the usage of the library. During FGDs, one librarian noted:

...it's hard to get students to come to the library during orientation programme and at times many are embarrassed to ask for assistance from the librarians once they come to the library. Video tutorials could be helpful where librarians provide tutorials on the library setting and sections (virtual tours), tutorials on how to search electronic resources in the subscribed journals, demonstration of services offered and how to use the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC). Many students and faculty members will watch the uploaded videos and learn at their own pace thereby bringing more awareness into the library services and resources.

Similarly, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) History, Philosophy and Newspaper Library (HPNL) begun to produce a series of video tutorials on “American Newspaper, 1800-1860”. Their approach was successful as video instructions allow students to learn at their own pace. At the same time, videos facilitate and provide support for teaching, encourage discovery and use of information while raising awareness on library resources and support services in a library (Sorka, 2014). Yi (2016), on the other hand, noted that academic libraries in Australia use video tutorials (YouTube) as a way of promoting library services and resources, thereby attracting clients, generating non-user awareness and raising awareness on the resources available in a library. Zhu (2017) investigated the academics’ active and passive use of YouTube for research and leisure and found that majority of them have watched YouTube videos for leisure purposes with almost half of them also having watched YouTube videos for academic purposes. Generally, many academics had a positive attitude towards YouTube as a means for disseminating academic materials.

4.1.4 Twitter

Twitter is a ‘microblogging’ system that allows the sending and receiving of short posts called tweets. Tweets can be up to 140 characters long and may include links to relevant websites and resources. Twitter has recently become popular with academics as well as students, policy-makers, politicians and the public. This tool is suitable for smart-phone users who do not want to read long on-screen content (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2021). At the IFM Library, 12 (57%) library staff were in support of using twitter for announcements and provision of useful tips and information that readers can follow by clicking on the links provided. During an FGD, one librarian said:

...we have a hard time letting users know when the library schedule changes unexpectedly. Twitter could be one of the quickest ways of making such announcements to our patrons together with links to academic documents that may benefit them in their academic journey. At the same time, educational [thought provoking] quotations could be posted as a way of engaging readers and inspire students in their academic journey.

Al-Daihani and AlAwadhi (2015) explored academic libraries' use of twitter and found that many academic libraries used it for news and announcements. Additionally, their findings also showed that academic libraries used twitter as a marketing and promotional tool, with academic libraries posting links to useful sites for more targeted content.

Moreover, the Economic and Social Research Council further notes that in academic context, twitter can help promote research by providing links to journal articles and new researches; fostering information sharing through tweets and retweets with a large number of people, keeping abreast of latest news and developments and experts in certain fields; and provision of feedback on services (Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 2021), something that the IFM Library can also use and gain from the academic benefits that the twitter platform engenders.

4.1.5 Goodreads

Among the least known social media is Goodreads as indicated by 6 (29%) library staff. Goodreads is an American social cataloguing website that allows individuals to search its database of books, annotations, quotes and reviews. Users can sign up and register books to generate library catalogues and reading lists. They can also create their own groups of book suggestions, surveys, polls, blogs and discussions (McClary, 2016). McClary (ibid) explores how public libraries can connect with readers on Goodreads and notes that it is an excellent tool for learning about new books and making decisions on what to read next. The platform also enables readers to track new upcoming books and access book reviews and recommendations from other book lovers. Hence, academic library can utilise this popular site with more than 10 million books in its catalogue to promote their collections, engage with readers and encourage reading culture by offering their insights and recommendations since reading culture in many developing countries is generally poor, Tanzania being no exception in this matter (Masabo, 2015; Wema, 2018; Gabriel, 2020). During FGDs, one librarian noted that:

...many students don't like reading. They only read for examinations and tests and they prefer notes, lecturers' pamphlets and recommended books. Using Goodreads, the IFM Library could establish a library reading group where 'book of the month' could be voted for, selected and library staff and users could read and discuss the book together, making it fun and meliorating. This in turn will pique students' interest in reading for leisure, exposure and enriching their knowledge as opposed to the poor reading culture that is seen currently.

Through the established book club, the IFM Library could also establish their own reading lists known as 'bookshelves'. The Goodreads' groups feature allows the establishment of an online book club, which could be one of the best ways to promote a reading culture through engagement, discussions and group reading. Similarly, the New Jersey State Library has a group named '*Online Book Cafe*' that shares new books and encourages discussions and library users to read their recommended book of the month (McClary, 2016).

4.1.6 Instagram

Findings indicate that 17 (81%) of the Library staff at IFM wanted to establish an Instagram page primarily for marketing the library's newly-acquired resources. Instead of putting new books, newspapers, magazines and hard copy journals on display shelves; pictures of these new acquisitions could be uploaded onto the site for the library users to see them. Librarians could also provide a synopsis for each book in the caption to pitch the items to readers' interests. Additionally, pictures of library activities and events such as trainings' conducted, seminars attended, webinars and useful links to scholarly articles could be provided to ensure widespread awareness and use amongst readers of library resources and services. During the interview with the head of technical services, it was noted that:

...the library receives a lot of new information that is processed and shelved, making it harder for readers to see them. Through Instagram, library users and faculty members could be able to see all new acquired library documents. At the same time, library trainings could be advertised and pictures of events such seminars, short courses, and links to scholarly content and events could be shared via this platform.

Verishagen and Elliot (2021) in their article on Instagram tout it as a novel way of connecting with students via the library Instagram page i.e. Saskatchewan Polytechnic Library in Canada (@saskpolytech) enriched with posts of wide variety content wise. The library also posted pictures of librarians to connect with users and assure them that their visit to the library would be met by a friendly and warm smile. Moreover, the book displays, library and campus events, holiday closures and hour changes, informational posts and promotional posts for online resources all strived to gain more followers and keep them engaged (Verishagen & Elliot, 2021).

4.2 Challenges to the Provision of Services in the Digital Era

Monetary costs and long-term sustainable financial base of keeping pace with technological advancements of using social media applications emerged in the study as some of the major concerns. To ensure sustained online presence, modern tablets are a must. In addition, there was a need to set aside monthly budgets for buying internet bundles that will ensure library presence beyond the traditional four walls. During FGDs, one Librarian noted that:

...monetary costs are still a challenge for the library miscellaneous expenditures for at times months pass without subscription fees being paid for TV monthly packages, hence one worries the same may happen to bundle requests hence derailing constant and uninterrupted presence of the library in the social media platforms chosen.

An uninterrupted, constant and consistent quality service is a prerequisite to engaging readers actively in a social media platform in addition to ensuring that their queries were answered timely. On the other hand, amidst major cuts in library budgets and expenditure, sustainability of these value-adding social media platforms could face an axe once monetary expenses become unbearable. Furthermore, developing content that keeps readers engaged also emerged as a challenge that the IFM Library envisaged and faces. To keep readers on

a platform, one is ought to create interesting and engaging content daily. However, in the middle of the semester when books have already been bought, services reach a form of plateau as one librarian noted:

...what kind of content will be posted to keep readers engaged and glued to the page without being bored when the library has reached plateau or in the middle of the semester? And who will be responsible for choosing the said content? It's easy to start but maintaining and sustaining is a huge onus.

On the other hand, one [librarian responsible for social media] must be innovative, humorous and intellectually stimulating to keep readers interested and attract followers to the platform. At times, lack of motivation and imagination cripples most social media as users end up being bored as the content becomes too unpalatable or outdated particularly when information updates take too long to materialise. Additionally, trolling and bullying were some of other challenges many library staff feared at the IFM Library. Trolling is an internet jargon for making random unsolicited or controversial comments on various platforms with intent to provoke a negative reaction. During FGDs, one of the library staff said:

...one cannot control what users [followers] of the said platform will comment once a post is uploaded. However, some people are negative and will say negative, offensive things while others will advertise content that does not even relate to the objective of the page with the intent to instigate negative dialogue.

This trolling could result in negative publicity for the library or library staff aimed to bully the activities or the institution. Many of the respondents at IFM feared this kind of negative attention, an evil that comes with the utilisation of social media. Many also noted that staying positive or ignoring could never dilute negative comments already made. Furthermore, the respondents identified lack of management support as one of the challenges facing the library's social media platform exploitation. They reported that many institutions did not support social media use for library activities as they feared that their presence on such platforms could come into conflict with institutional needs and safeguards. At the same time, most [institutions/organizations] have established that the Public Relations Officer (PRO) is the official spokesperson for the said institution hence cutting a slice for library to own their own social media pages is met with reservations. In consequence, it was increasingly hard to invest in library social media platforms and, at times, even individual efforts towards such ends are swatted and discouraged, which explained why many social media platforms [for libraries] remain largely dormant.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study findings show that the IFM Library preferred Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter as social media platforms that can provide services to the academic staff and students. Goodreads though largely unknown to many at IFM emerged as another equally important platform that the IFM Library could exploit. Overall, these social media platforms could come in handy for current awareness services; reference services and answering queries; video tutorials and virtual library tours; and sharing links to scholarly

articles and announcements. Moreover, the platforms could foster marketing of library resources, activities, schedules and upcoming events. Ultimately, no type of library—be it academic or public or special library—can ignore the benefits accruing from ICT and social media use in terms of bettering service provision and extending the library’s influence beyond its traditional four walls. The study also identified challenges that IFM Library faces in the provision of services in the digital era to include lack of management support when it comes to social media usage and sustainability; content and readers’ engagement challenge; trolling and bullying that occur on many social media platforms, hence resulting in negative feedback; and soaring monetary costs.

To be successful in incorporating ICT and social media as tools in service provision, the study calls for the establishment of social media committees (which will include PROs as members) tasked with selecting social media platforms suitable for the library usage, helping in branding the library’s image digitally and guiding purposeful steps towards engaging in and commitment amongst libraries when it comes to social media usage to avoid dormancy. There is also a need to post frequently and ensure active online presence by providing engaging and exciting content. Trolling and bullying can be reduced by blocking and reporting wayward content to social media platform administrators. Additionally, committed library staff—who are tech-savvy and have the wisdom and patience to remain professional while engaging with readers on a social media platforms; and can be responsible for ensuring the library’s presence in the digital world is lively and positive without neglecting prompt response to queries and interacting with readers—have to be chosen intentionally. Such an operational environment can ensure the sustainability of subscriptions for social media pages and management, which could further be consolidated after seeing readership rate rises in these media.

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