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# RETHINKING LIBRARY PUBLIC RELATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF USER EDUCATION AND DIGITAL RESOURCE UTILIZATION

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**Abstract**

Academic libraries have put significant money into digital reference resources and electronic databases. Yet in Nigerian universities the returns remain uneven. Postgraduate students in Benue State use electronic theses, e-books and e-journals at high rates, but specialised databases such as AGORA and JSTOR stay below the accepted mark. At the Federal University of Technology, Minna, basic electronic reference tools; encyclopaedias, dictionaries, handbooks and directories, are missing entirely. Digital reference services are limited to email and text chat. This paper looks at the gap through three linked ideas: library public relations, user education and digital resource utilisation. Public relations work best when it sits inside teaching rather than standing alone as publicity. Orientation sessions, research clinics and database workshops let librarians show their skills, ease library anxiety and appear as research partners instead of book keepers. Web 2.0 tools and fuller digital reference services keep the contact going at low cost. What is needed is clear. Training must focus on the databases students under-use. Missing electronic reference materials must be bought. Digital reference options must expand beyond email and chat. Librarians need support to present themselves as approachable colleagues. Web 2.0 channels should be used


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systematically. Regular checks on utilisation figures and anxiety levels will show whether the investment is finally producing real research support.

**Keywords:** Library Public Relations, User Education, Digital Resource Utilization, Information Literacy, Academic Libraries, Digital Reference Services

## Introduction

The twenty-first-century academic landscape has transformed university libraries from physical repositories of printed collections into dynamic, technology-mediated digital knowledge hubs (Angereke, Songu & Obediah, 2026). Academic libraries continue to serve as the intellectual core of tertiary institutions, supporting teaching, learning, scholarly research, and community service. Fulfilment of this mandate requires sustained investment in electronic information resources and digital reference materials, including electronic theses and dissertations, e-books, e-journals, online encyclopaedias, and subject-specific databases such as AGORA, HINARI, and JSTOR (Angereke, Songu & Obediah, 2026; Gabriel, 2019). These investments reflect a strategic recognition that digital access is now indispensable to academic progress.

Digital reference resources provide distinct operational advantages over traditional print collections: remote 24/7 accessibility, simultaneous multi-user consultation, rapid full-text keyword retrieval, and the capacity for real-time updates. In principle, the expansion of digital information networks ought to enhance research productivity and promote user self-sufficiency. Yet empirical patterns across developing contexts, and particularly within Nigerian university libraries, reveal a persistent mismatch (Adamu & Iliyasu, 2019; Songu, Angereke & Obediah, 2026). Substantial financial commitments to digital databases


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frequently yield suboptimal levels of utilisation among both undergraduate and postgraduate researchers.

A central difficulty in academic librarianship in the global South lies in the assumption that technological infrastructure and digital subscriptions automatically secure user patronage. In practice, well-resourced library facilities and extensive electronic collections risk becoming under-utilised when patrons lack awareness or adequate retrieval skills. Many university libraries still struggle to communicate their value effectively (Gabriel, 2019), allowing students and faculty to retain outdated perceptions of the library as a passive storehouse of books rather than an active partner in academic work. Such misconceptions diminish the professional standing of librarians, lower staff morale, and encourage researchers to rely on commercial search engines and informal social networks for academic tasks. When users encounter complex database interfaces without structured guidance, the result is often information overload, techno-stress, and library anxiety that culminates in avoidance. Addressing this disconnect requires a deliberate shift in library public relations, from intermittent promotional activity toward the systematic integration of public relations within user education and instructional advocacy.

**Definitional and Conceptual Triad**

Understanding this utilization gap requires rigorous conceptual clarification of the three interconnecting constructs that anchor modern library management: Library Public Relations, User Education, and Digital Resource Utilization.

**Library Public Relations (PR) and Advocacy**


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Public relations in the library setting is a planned and continuous management activity aimed at building mutual understanding, acceptance and goodwill between the library and its various publics (Gabriel, 2019). This definition stresses the sustained, deliberate character of the work rather than isolated promotional gestures. The same concept is expanded by later writers who emphasise strategic relationship marketing, institutional branding and stakeholder engagement as essential tools for securing political, financial and administrative support from parent institutions (Okube, Mole & Ede, 2023). Their framing moves PR beyond posters and press releases into the realm of long-term advocacy. Taken together, these perspectives show that effective library PR aligns institutional mission with user expectations while projecting a coherent professional image.

**User Education and Information Literacy**

User education refers to a planned series of instructional activities that give library patrons the ability to identify, locate, evaluate and use information across different formats (Golenko, 2023). The emphasis falls equally on understanding how information works and on the practical skills needed to handle it. Earlier work by Popoola (2008) described it as a progression that begins with orientation tours and moves through bibliographic instruction to database searching. Those stages still form the backbone of most programmes. Standards issued by the Association of College and Research Libraries have also influenced how such programmes are structured, connecting local efforts to broader competency frameworks (Partridge, Lee & Munro, 2010). The overall aim


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remains the shift from passive reliance on ready-made information to independent and critical research practice.

**Digital Resource Utilization**

Digital resource utilization measures the actual frequency, depth and effectiveness of patron interaction with electronic content and virtual reference services (Angereke, Songu & Obediah, 2026). The concept covers consultation of e-theses, e-books, e-journals and full-text databases as well as participation in computer-mediated reference channels. Parallel work by the same research group confirms that utilisation rates often lag behind the scale of institutional investment (Songu, Angereke & Obediah, 2026). Related studies have documented the same pattern in the uptake of digital reference services such as email enquiries, web forms and instant messaging (Oluwabiyi, 2017). These findings indicate that access alone does not guarantee meaningful use; the quality and extent of interaction must also be assessed.

**Reconceptualizing Public Relations as an Extension of User Education**

From Transactional Marketing to Pedagogical Advocacy

Library professionals once viewed marketing and public relations with suspicion. Many regarded these practices as commercial tactics that involved persuasion or manipulation, ideas that seemed at odds with the public-service tradition of free and open access (Heinze, 2017). That earlier resistance reflected a genuine concern for professional values. Later work has reframed the same concepts. Philip Kotler's Marketing 3.0 model, for instance, presents marketing as a human-centred approach that seeks solutions to social


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needs rather than simple product promotion (Kotler, Kartajaya & Setiawan, 2010). Under this view the task is no longer limited to distributing leaflets or posting notices. It involves every point of contact through which the library creates and delivers value to its users, a shift that aligns more closely with the service ethos of academic libraries. When public relations operate through user education the exchange changes character. Orientation sessions, research clinics and database workshops become occasions where the library demonstrates its usefulness in real time (Gabriel, 2019). The instructional setting itself carries the message. Heinze (2017) notes that heavy reliance on publicity without corresponding instructional support rarely produces lasting value. Embedding public relations inside teaching encounters builds trust, encourages repeated use and gradually creates a reservoir of goodwill between the library and its academic community that extends well beyond any single campaign.

**Overcoming Image Stereotypes Through Instructional Competency**

The way librarians interact with users shapes how the profession is perceived. Direct contact remains the strongest influence on public image (Langridge, Rigby & Pagowski, 2014). Studies conducted in federal university libraries in North-Central Nigeria show that when librarians combine public-relations effort with instructional communication, user attitudes shift noticeably (Gabriel, 2019). Patrons begin to see staff as skilled information specialists and research partners rather than as keepers of books. In structured education sessions librarians routinely display competence in indexing, Boolean searching, citation


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tools and database evaluation. These visible skills weaken long-standing stereotypes and help reposition librarians as active contributors to the university's research environment.

**Mitigating Library Anxiety and Information Stress**

Many first-year and postgraduate students arrive with a specific form of anxiety linked to the library. The feeling combines fear, helplessness and a sense of intimidation when they consider using library services or spaces (Sawe, Nakitare & Kwanya, 2025). Later measurement tools identified several recurring sources: difficulty approaching staff, doubts about personal research ability, discomfort with the physical environment, limited knowledge of library systems, and problems with technology (Onwuegbuzie, Jiao & Bostick, 2004). When these anxieties go unaddressed, students often avoid asking questions for fear of appearing incompetent and remain stuck at low levels of information literacy. User-education programmes that treat public relations as an expression of care offer a practical response. Orientation sessions designed to introduce librarians as approachable colleagues have been shown to lower reported anxiety sharply (Muszkiewicz, 2017). Once staff are seen as supportive rather than distant, affective barriers ease, confidence rises, and students become more willing to engage with complex digital resources.

**The Web 2.0 Paradigm and Participatory Library Networks**

The term Web 2.0, introduced by O'Reilly Media in 2004, marked a clear shift in how the internet operates. What had been largely a static, read-only environment became a space where users could create, evaluate, tag and share content (Pandey, 2015). This change turned passive browsing into active participation. Academic libraries responded by adopting


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the idea of Library 2.0, treating their online platforms as places for conversation rather than one-way information delivery (Maness, 2006). The approach opened low-cost routes for public relations and instructional outreach that traditional channels could not match. Social media tools now form part of everyday library practice. Their use can be organised around four practical elements: the people libraries serve, the material shared, the setting in which it appears, and the platforms chosen (Brenner, 2010). Each element shapes how messages reach different audiences. As the applications listed in Table 1 below shows, these tools support distinct public-relations and teaching purposes across university libraries today

**Table 1: Strategic Mapping of Web 2.0 Channels for Library PR and User Education**

| Web 2.0 Tool / Category | Operational Library Application | Public Relations & Instructional Benefit |
|---|---|---|
| Social Networking Sites (Facebook, LinkedIn, Ning) | Creating official library pages, posting operating hours, advertising new resource trials, and hosting Q&A forums. | Enhances institutional visibility, fosters online user communities, and facilitates direct feedback (Wan, 2011; David, 2021). |
| Microblogging Platforms (Twitter / X) | Broadcasting real-time announcements, instant alerts on database additions, live chat assistance, and research tips. | Delivers concise, point-of-need outreach, engages tech-savvy patrons, and drives web traffic (Waddell, Barnes, & Khan-Kernahan, 2012; Ekart, 2011). |
| Multimedia Sharing (YouTube, Flickr, Podcasts) | Publishing video search tutorials, virtual library tours, recordings of inaugural lectures, and visual guidebooks. | Provides asynchronous, visual instruction, reduces search friction, and showcases library events (Khan, 2012; Vucovich et al., 2013). |
| Synchronous Web Chat (WhatsApp, Live Chat) | Delivering instant Ask-a-Librarian reference assistance, remote search help, and real-time query resolution. | Overcomes physical barriers, offers immediate point-of-need research assistance, and builds trust (Ezeani & Igwesi, 2012; Horsfall, 2020). |


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|---|---|---|
| Syndication & Weblogs (RSS Feeds, Library Blogs) | Automating updates on newly cataloged books, research callouts, literature highlights, and subject bibliographies. | Keeps faculty and postgraduate researchers continuously informed without cluttering email (Breeding, 2009; Pandey, 2015). |

**Digital Reference Services (DRS) and Virtual User Engagement**

Digital Reference Service extends traditional face-to-face help into computer-mediated forms. It removes the limits of place and opening hours so that users at a distance can still reach professional librarians (Bera, 2016). The service first appeared in the 1980s and grew through early projects such as the Internet Public Library and the Collaborative Digital Reference Service of the Library of Congress. Both asynchronous channels; email, web forms and knowledge bases, and synchronous ones; live chat, instant messaging and video are now routine. Success depends on a careful virtual reference interview that uncovers the real information need behind a query (Oluwabiyi, 2017). Without the cues of body language, the librarian's speed, clarity and tone become the main signals of service quality. Prompt and accurate replies save the user's time and strengthen the library's standing as a dependable digital provider.

**Empirical Utilisation Patterns and Interface Friction**

Even with these services in place, use of digital resources remains uneven. A survey of 269 postgraduate students in university libraries across Benue State supplies clear figures on the extent of that use (Angereke, Songu & Obediah, 2026). Table 2 below shows high mean scores for electronic theses (3.52), electronic books (3.33) and electronic journals (3.02). Reference librarians themselves also score highly (3.00), confirming that students still turn


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to human expertise when navigating complex systems. CD-ROM databases and general internet facilities likewise fall in the high-utilisation range. In contrast, specialised academic databases such as AGORA and JSTOR record a mean of only 2.41, below the 2.50 benchmark, while telephone reference and hardware peripherals such as scanners and printers also remain low. The pattern indicates that core electronic content is well used, yet more specialised tools and certain support services continue to attract limited attention.

**Table 2: Empirical Extent of Digital Reference Resource Utilisation Among Postgraduate Students**

| **Digital Reference Resource** | **Mean Score (x)** | **Std. Deviation (SD)** | **Empirical Decision Benchmark** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Electronic Theses and Dissertations (e-thesis) | 3.52 | 0.92 | High Extent Utilisation |
| Electronic Books (e-books) | 3.33 | 0.88 | High Extent Utilisation |
| Electronic Journals (e-journals) | 3.02 | 1.01 | High Extent Utilisation |
| Humanware (Reference Librarians) | 3.00 | 1.02 | High Extent Utilisation |
| CD-ROM Databases | 2.98 | 0.78 | High Extent Utilisation |
| Internet Facilities | 2.68 | 0.92 | High Extent Utilisation |
| Telephone Reference | 2.47 | 0.97 | **Low Extent Utilisation** |
| Specialized Academic Databases (AGORA, JSTOR) | 2.41 | 1.10 | **Low Extent Utilisation** |
| Hardware Peripherals (Scanners) | 2.41 | 0.88 | **Low Extent Utilisation** |


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|---|---|---|---|
| Hardware Peripherals (Printers) | 2.34 | 0.99 | **Low Extent Utilisation** |

**Empirical Realities and Operational Bottlenecks in Academic Libraries**

**Institutional Insights from Federal University of Technology (FUT) Minna**

Work at the Federal University of Technology Library in Minna offers a concrete view of how digital reference actually functions in a Nigerian university setting. Adamu and Iliyasu (2019) questioned all 28 academic librarians on site and found clear gaps in what the library could offer. Table 3 below records that, standard electronic reference tools; encyclopaedias, dictionaries, biographical sources, handbooks, directories and almanacs in digital form, were missing entirely. Email reference and simple text-chat services were in place and used. Web forms for reference enquiries, video or webcam consultations, and any link to collaborative digital reference networks were not available. The result is a service that handles basic remote contact yet lacks both core electronic reference materials and more interactive options.

**Table 3: Availability of Digital Reference Resources and Services at FUT Minna Library**

| **Resource / Service Category** | **Operational Status at FUT Minna** | **Empirical Findings (Adamu & Iliyasu, 2019)** |
|---|---|---|
| Electronic Reference Books (e-encyclopedias, e-dictionaries) | **NOT AVAILABLE (0%)** | Complete absence of basic digital reference tools in the library collection. |
| Electronic Handbooks & Directories (e-almanacs, e-biographies) | **NOT AVAILABLE (0%)** | Lack of subscribed digital background reference materials. |
| E-mail Reference Service | **PROVIDED (100%)** | Operational asynchronous communication channel for handling remote inquiries. |


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|---|---|---|
| Text Chat / Instant Messaging | **PROVIDED (100%)** | Basic text-based messaging implemented for student interaction. |
| Web Reference & Web Forms | **NOT PROVIDED (0%)** | No structured interactive web intake form on the university/library portal. |
| Video Conferencing / Webcam Help | **NOT PROVIDED (0%)** | Absence of real-time visual reference consulting infrastructure. |
| Collaborative Digital Reference (CDRS) | **NOT PROVIDED (0%)** | Lack of integration with regional or international collaborative reference networks. |

**Observed Shortfalls in Digital Resources and Services**

The three tables give a clear view of how digital reference resources and services work in the libraries investigated. Table 1 shows the Web 2.0 tools available for public relations and user instruction. Table 2 records how often postgraduate students in Benue State universities use different digital resources. Table 3 shows what was present and what was missing at the Federal University of Technology Library in Minna. Table 2 shows high use of electronic theses, e-books and e-journals. Specialised databases such as AGORA and JSTOR scored below the 2.50 mark. Reference librarians also scored highly, which suggests students still need staff help with complex searches. Table 3 shows that basic electronic reference tools; encyclopedias, dictionaries, handbooks, directories and almanacs, were not available at FUT Minna. Only email and text-chat services were running. Web forms, video help and collaborative reference services were absent. When the three tables are read together, a clear pattern emerges. Libraries may possess platforms and tools that could support outreach and instruction (Table 1), yet core electronic reference materials are often


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missing (Table 3) and more specialised databases remain under-used (Table 2). This shows that, some digital resources are used well, while others are either missing or rarely used.

**Challenges**

The core problem running through the work is the gap between heavy spending on electronic resources and the actual use students make of them. Universities buy access to e-theses, e-books, e-journals and specialised databases, yet utilisation stays uneven as documented by Angereke, Songu and Obediah (2026). Postgraduate students in Benue State universities rate electronic theses, books and journals highly (means above 3.00), but specialised databases such as AGORA and JSTOR sit at 2.41, below the accepted benchmark. The same pattern appears at FUT Minna, where basic electronic reference tools; encyclopaedias, dictionaries, handbooks, directories and almanacs, are simply not present according to Adamu and Iliyasu (2019). Only email and text-chat services operate; web forms, video consultations and collaborative networks do not.

This under-use is not mainly a technology problem. Many users still see the library as a storehouse of printed books rather than an active research partner, a perception Gabriel (2019) links to weak communication of the library's value. When students meet complex database interfaces without guided instruction they experience overload, techno-stress and library anxiety of the kind described by Sawe, Nakitare and Kwanya (2025) and earlier measured by Onwuegbuzie, Jiao and Bostick (2004). The anxiety shows up as reluctance to approach staff, doubt about their own research ability, and discomfort with both the physical and digital environment. As a result, they turn to commercial search engines and informal


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networks instead. Librarians' professional image suffers, staff morale drops, and the investment in digital collections produces less value than it should

**Strategies**

- Integrate public relations into user-education programmes Orientation sessions, research clinics and database workshops become the main occasions for demonstrating Boolean searching, citation tools and specialised databases so that students experience the library's value directly and begin using the resources that currently show low uptake.
- Reduce library anxiety by repositioning librarians as approachable colleagues Structured introductions that normalise asking for help lower the fear of appearing incompetent and gradually raise students' confidence with complex digital interfaces.
- Complete the missing digital reference infrastructure Libraries add web forms, video consultation and collaborative networks where only email and text chat exist, while also acquiring the absent electronic encyclopaedias, dictionaries, handbooks and directories so that basic tools match the advanced databases already on subscription.
- Deploy Web 2.0 channels for continuous outreach and instruction Official library pages, microblogging alerts, video tutorials and live chat keep users informed of new resources and supply point-of-need guidance, steadily replacing the outdated image of the library as a passive storehouse of books.


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## Conclusion

The evidence shows a clear and persistent gap between the money spent on digital resources and the actual use students make of them. Specialised databases remain under-used, basic electronic reference tools are often missing, and many students still carry anxiety and an outdated picture of the library as a quiet storehouse of books. When these problems are left unaddressed, the investment yields limited returns, librarians' professional standing suffers, and researchers drift toward commercial search engines. Closing the gap requires treating public relations as an everyday part of user education rather than a separate promotional activity. Only through this combined approach, visible instructional expertise, reduced affective barriers, completed digital infrastructure and continuous Web 2.0 contact, can the library move from under-utilised facility to genuine research partner.

## Recommendations

- Redesign orientation and advanced training so every session teaches the specialised databases that currently show low use
- Acquire the missing electronic encyclopaedias, dictionaries, handbooks and directories
- Expand digital reference beyond email and text chat by adding web forms, video consultation and collaborative networks
- Present librarians as approachable colleagues in every user encounter
- Map Web 2.0 channels deliberately to different user groups for continuous outreach

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