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REDEFINING RELEVANCE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UNIVERSITY LIBRARIANS IN THE DIGITAL ERA ACROSS FEDERAL, STATE, AND PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES IN ABIA STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The digital transformation of higher education has changed the expectations placed on university librarians and raised questions about how their professional relevance is sustained. This study examined the professional relevance of university librarians in the digital era across a federal, state and private university in Abia State, Nigeria. A comparative survey design was adopted. The study involved 47 librarians and 2,229 registered library users; 339 users were sampled, with 305 valid responses (89.97%). Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire and analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations Pearson Product-Moment Correlation, multiple regression and One-Way ANOVA. Findings showed that respondents positively assessed librarians' changing professional roles (grand mean = 3.27), with user guidance receiving the highest rating (M $\bar{x}$= 3.34) and ICT skills the lowest (M $\bar{x}$= 3.14). All identified factors influencing relevance exceeded the criterion mean, while ease of access recorded the highest rating (M $\bar{x}$= 3.39). Professional roles were strongly associated with perceived relevance ($r = .727$, $p < .001$). The regression model was significant and explained 41.5% of the variance in perceived relevance; librarians' attitude, availability of up-to-date resources and awareness of services were significant predictors. Although institutional means varied descriptively, the difference across federal, state and private universities was not statistically significant, $F(2, 302) = 0.830$, $p = .437$. The study concludes that professional relevance is better understood as a function of evolving roles,

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professional orientation and enabling institutional conditions than as an outcome of university ownership alone.

Keywords: academic librarians; professional relevance; digital era; university libraries; digital competencies; institutional ownership; Abia State

Introduction

University libraries remain central to the academic mission of higher education, but the basis of their value is changing. The growth of digital information, electronic resources, online learning environments, artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies has altered how students, researchers and lecturers discover, evaluate and use information. Consequently, the relevance of university librarians can no longer be judged only by traditional responsibilities such as collection development, cataloguing, reference service and circulation. Their continuing value increasingly depends on their capacity to support users within a rapidly changing scholarly and technological environment.

Digital transformation has expanded professional expectations. In addition to managing print and electronic resources, librarians are increasingly expected to provide digital literacy instruction, research support, electronic resource management, scholarly communication, data-related services and technology-mediated reference assistance. Nigerian scholarship similarly identifies technological expertise, digital literacy, research support and user-centred services as emerging dimensions of academic librarianship (Furfuri, 2025). Evidence also indicates that digital

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competencies are strengthened when librarians have access to appropriate infrastructure, training and institutional support (Ogunbodede & Atchrimi, 2024).

Professional relevance in this context is therefore more than the continued existence of librarians within the university structure. It concerns the extent to which their knowledge, skills, roles and services remain useful and responsive to the academic community. A librarian may retain traditional professional responsibilities while simultaneously acquiring new competencies in an environment where users can obtain information through search engines, academic databases, institutional repositories, social media and increasingly sophisticated artificial intelligence tools. Recent Nigerian research on librarians' professional identity further suggests that AI is creating new expectations for librarians as mediators of information quality, ethics and responsible technology use (Adewojo & Tella, 2026).

The institutional context is also relevant. Federal universities operate within national funding and policy structures; state universities function within sub-national administrative and funding arrangements; and private universities generally have greater institutional autonomy but distinct managerial and financial expectations. These differences may shape opportunities for staffing, professional development, technology adoption and service provision. Abia State provides a useful setting because its university system includes federal, state and private institutions. This study focuses on Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike (MOUAU), Abia State University, Uturu (ABSU), and Clifford University, Owerrinta.

Although previous studies have examined librarians' digital competencies, emerging roles and technology-related challenges, comparative evidence on professional relevance across different

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ownership contexts remains limited, particularly within Abia State. This study therefore examines changing professional roles, digital competencies, factors associated with professional relevance, differences across ownership categories, and strategies for sustaining librarians' contribution to contemporary university education.

Statement of the Problem

The digital transformation of higher education has reshaped the expectations placed on university librarians. Beyond traditional responsibilities, librarians are expected to support digital literacy, research, electronic resource management and technology-driven information services. This shift raises an important question: how relevant are university librarians perceived to be in an academic environment in which information can increasingly be accessed without direct physical interaction with the library?

The challenge extends beyond individual competence to the institutional environments in which librarians work. Federal, state and private universities operate under different funding, administrative and technological conditions that may influence opportunities for professional development and the delivery of contemporary library services. Although existing literature establishes the importance of digital competencies and changing professional roles, less is known about whether these conditions translate into differences in perceived professional relevance across ownership categories in Abia State. The present study addresses this gap through a comparative assessment of MOUAU, ABSU and Clifford University.

Research Questions

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The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the changing professional roles of university librarians in the digital era?
2. What factors influence the professional relevance of university librarians?
3. Is there a significant difference in the perceived professional relevance of librarians across federal, state, and private universities?
4. What strategies can be adopted to sustain the professional relevance of university librarians in the digital era?

Research Hypotheses

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between the professional roles of university librarians and their perceived professional relevance in the digital era.

H_{02}: The identified factors—up-to-date resources, digital resources, internet connectivity, librarians' attitude, awareness of library services, and ease of access—do not significantly predict the perceived professional relevance of university librarians.

H_{03}: There is no significant difference in the perceived professional relevance of university librarians across federal, state, and private universities in Abia State, Nigeria.

Literature Review

University Libraries and the Changing Digital Information Environment

The transformation of the academic information environment has altered both the functions of university libraries and the expectations associated with librarianship. The growth of electronic resources, online learning platforms, remote access technologies, institutional repositories, data-

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intensive research and generative artificial intelligence has changed how members of the university community discover, evaluate, create and communicate scholarly information. Consequently, the contemporary university library is increasingly expected to function not merely as a repository of information resources but as an active component of teaching, learning and research. Furfuri (2025) identifies technological expertise, digital literacy, data management and curation, collaboration and user-centred services as important capabilities that enable librarians to respond to changing information environments.

These developments reflect how technology has reshaped the way university libraries operate and deliver services. Access to library resources is no longer necessarily tied to a physical visit, as users can increasingly consult electronic collections and other digital services remotely. The idea of a "library without walls" captures this shift, describing a library environment in which access to information extends beyond the physical building. This development has been made possible by technological tools that have transformed the academic information landscape and expanded the ways in which libraries connect users with scholarly resources. This transformation does not imply the disappearance of traditional librarianship. Rather, technology is redefining the knowledge and competencies through which established professional functions are performed. Reference and information services increasingly involve online enquiry platforms, virtual consultations, electronic databases and other technology-mediated channels. Information literacy instruction likewise extends beyond locating printed materials to helping users evaluate digital sources, navigate scholarly databases and make informed decisions about information obtained through online platforms. The implication is that professional relevance increasingly depends on the librarian's

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ability to connect established professional knowledge with contemporary technologies and changing user information behaviour.

The changing information environment has also expanded librarians' contribution to research. Academic librarians are increasingly involved in research support, electronic-resource management, scholarly communication, institutional repositories, data-related services and digital literacy. In South-East Nigeria, institutional-repository development has been constrained by gaps in ICT infrastructure and skilled personnel, illustrating the importance of research-support capacity in the digital university (Ezema & Eze, 2024). A systematic review by Dube, Rammutloa and Matatiele (2024) shows that the effective use of contemporary information technologies requires academic librarians to develop advanced digital skills and competencies, while poor infrastructure, limited technical knowledge, budget constraints and inadequate professional development remain recurring challenges. Professional relevance therefore depends not simply on the presence of technology, but on the capacity to translate technology into meaningful academic services.

Generative artificial intelligence has further intensified this transformation. Adewojo and Tella (2026), studying Nigerian academic librarians, found that librarians are negotiating new professional identities as AI mediators who help users critically evaluate AI-generated information, while gaps in institutional policy, training resources and ethical guidance remain evident. This suggests that technological development may reduce the importance of some routine information-handling tasks while simultaneously increasing the value of professional judgement, critical evaluation and ethical information mediation. The changing environment therefore provides the broader context within which professional relevance should be understood. The relevant question

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is no longer whether technology has changed librarianship, but how librarians' roles and competencies are being transformed in ways that enable them to continue contributing meaningfully to the academic mission of the university.

Changing Professional Roles of University Librarians

The professional role of the academic librarian has historically centred on the acquisition, organization, preservation and provision of information resources. Digital transformation has expanded these responsibilities into more interactive, instructional and research-oriented functions. Contemporary librarians increasingly act as information-literacy educators, research-support specialists, digital-reference providers, electronic-resource managers and facilitators of scholarly communication. Furfuri (2024) describes the emerging Nigerian context as one in which technological expertise, digital literacy, data management, collaboration and user-centred practice are increasingly integral to librarianship. Recent Nigerian evidence on digital reference services similarly links digital library skills and professional competence with effective service delivery (Adegbore et al., 2025). The importance of these roles is also reflected in research on digital services. Atanda, Owolabi and Ugbala (2021) found that library personnel in selected Nigerian university libraries possessed basic computer proficiency, but that inadequate power supply constrained digital service delivery. Their findings reinforce the view that professional competence and service conditions jointly shape the ability of librarians to respond to contemporary information needs. Similarly, recent research on Nigerian university libraries has linked digital skills and professional competence with effective digital reference service delivery, indicating that technological capability acquires professional significance when it is translated into useful services.

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The literature also indicates that the contemporary librarian's role is increasingly relational. Research on digital reference librarianship in Southwest Nigeria further reports strong professional identity and competence in traditional digital reference work, alongside comparatively lower AI-mediated search competence and continuing training needs (Adewojo & Olatoye, 2026). Librarians are expected not only to provide access to information but also to guide users in identifying appropriate sources, evaluating information quality and navigating increasingly complex digital environments. This strengthens the importance of user guidance, information literacy and responsiveness as dimensions of professional relevance. The emergence of generative AI reinforces this relational role because users increasingly require assistance in assessing the accuracy, provenance and ethical implications of machine-generated information (Adewojo & Tella, 2026; Ebhonu et al., 2026). Literature reviewed, indicates that a broadening of professional roles rather than a simple replacement of traditional responsibilities. For the present study, this distinction is important because professional relevance is assessed through librarians' ability to perform contemporary roles—including user guidance, research support, information literacy and ICT-enabled services—while retaining the professional knowledge associated with academic librarianship.

Digital Competencies of Academic Librarians

The expansion of professional roles has created corresponding demands for digital competencies. Recent Nigerian evidence also links digital literacy with librarians' use of social media for professional engagement, reinforcing the breadth of contemporary digital practice (Makinde & Oyekale, 2026). Digital competence encompasses more than basic computer literacy; it

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includes the ability to use digital technologies for information retrieval, communication, resource management, research support, user education and other professional functions. Ojedokun and Okafor (2015) earlier demonstrated the importance of ICT skills for librarians' readiness to operate in Nigerian digital and electronic library environments, establishing a foundation for understanding digital competence as part of professional adequacy. More recent Nigerian evidence presents a mixed picture. Ogunbodede and Atchrimi (2024) found that librarians in university libraries in South-South Nigeria demonstrated a high level of basic digital competence, but inconsistent power supply, poor ICT facilities, limited training opportunities, high training costs, inadequate sponsorship and workload constrained further development. Adetunla and Chowdhury (2025), in a study of 453 Nigerian university library professionals, likewise identified gaps in digital skills for some operational tasks and showed that individual and career-related factors were associated with intentions to develop digital skills. Related evidence indicates moderate AI readiness among Nigerian university librarians and a positive relationship between digital literacy and AI readiness, reinforcing the need for targeted digital and AI capacity development (Ogunbodede & Ejitagha, 2026). It is a clarion call to librarians to take up the responsibility of improving their digital competencies in areas that may include emerging technologies like robotics within the technologies built around artificial intelligence.

Evidence from a broader systematic review reinforces these concerns. Dube et al. (2024) identified advanced technology skills, troubleshooting, digital literacy, technological awareness, digital-resource management, scholarly communication and continuous professional development among the competencies required in technology-driven academic libraries. The review also

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identified poor infrastructure, inadequate funding, limited technical knowledge, low internet bandwidth and ethical concerns as recurring barriers. Thus, digital competence should not be treated solely as an individual attribute; it is partly dependent on opportunities to acquire, practise and update professional skills.

For the present study, this distinction is particularly important. The study assesses respondents' perceptions of librarians' digital and professional competence rather than directly testing librarians' technical skills. Accordingly, findings on competence should be interpreted as users' assessments of librarians' capabilities as demonstrated through their professional services and interactions.

Factors Influencing the Professional Relevance of University Librarians

Professional relevance is unlikely to be determined by competence alone. The capacity of librarians to perform emerging roles is embedded within an institutional environment that provides—or fails to provide—the resources and conditions required for effective service delivery. Important conditions include the availability of current information resources, digital resources, reliable internet connectivity, appropriate ICT facilities, professional development opportunities and supportive management.

Nigerian evidence indicates that infrastructure remains a significant constraint. Recent studies likewise report funding, infrastructure, policy and management-support barriers to librarians' adoption of emerging technologies (Ofua & Umuerhi, 2025; Oladokun et al., 2025). Atanda et al. (2021) identified inadequate power supply as a major problem affecting digital services, while Ogunbodede and Atchrimi (2024) reported inadequate ICT facilities, limited training opportunities

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and insufficient sponsorship among the challenges to digital skills development. These findings suggest that professional relevance cannot be understood entirely in terms of what librarians know or are willing to do; the technological and organizational environment in which professional activities occur also matters. In fact, the availability and application of digitals technologies in university libraries are indication and suggestion of the relevance of the profession in this digital era.

Institutional support is equally important. Adetunla and Chowdhury (2025) show that digital-skills development is associated with individual and career characteristics, while Adewojo and Tella (2026) identify gaps in institutional policy, training resources and ethical guidance surrounding generative AI. These findings collectively indicate that professional adaptation is shaped by the extent to which universities create opportunities for librarians to develop and apply emerging competencies. The attitude and responsiveness of librarians introduce a user-centred dimension to relevance. Technical resources may be available, but users' perceptions of library value are likely to depend partly on whether librarians are approachable, responsive and willing to assist. Awareness of library services and ease of access are similarly important because even well-developed resources may have limited value if users are unaware of available services or encounter unnecessary barriers. Professional relevance is therefore demonstrated not simply by the existence of resources or skills but by the quality, visibility and accessibility of the services through which professional expertise reaches users. Taken together, the literature supports a multidimensional understanding of professional relevance in which resources, technology, infrastructure, professional competence, librarian attitudes, institutional support, service awareness and

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accessibility interact to shape users' experience of library value. This provides the conceptual basis for examining the factors included in the present study.

University Ownership and the Institutional Context of Professional Relevance

The institutional setting in which librarians work is an important but comparatively underexplored dimension of professional relevance. Federal, state and private universities operate within different governance, funding and administrative arrangements. Such differences may affect infrastructure, staff development opportunities, electronic resources, ICT facilities and managerial support. However, institutional ownership should not be treated as a direct proxy for library quality or professional relevance.

A federal university may possess extensive resources but simultaneously serve a large and diverse population with substantial service demands. A state university may operate under different financial and administrative constraints, while a private university may have greater managerial autonomy but different institutional priorities and resource-allocation practices. Consequently, ownership provides an institutional context for comparison rather than a predetermined hierarchy of professional performance.

This distinction is important because much of the existing Nigerian literature has examined digital competencies, technological challenges or emerging professional roles without directly comparing professional relevance across different university ownership categories within the same geographical environment. Existing studies provide evidence that infrastructure, training, professional competence and institutional support matter, but they do not establish whether

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librarians working in federal, state and private universities necessarily differ in perceived professional relevance.

The present study addresses this issue by comparing MOUAU, ABSU and Clifford University within Abia State. The common geographical setting provides a useful basis for examining whether professional relevance varies across institutional ownership categories. Importantly, the comparison is empirical rather than assumptive: the study does not presume that federal, state or private ownership produces superior professional relevance, but tests whether statistically significant differences exist among the three institutional settings.

Strategies for Sustaining Professional Relevance

The literature suggests that sustaining professional relevance requires continuous adaptation at both individual and institutional levels. Because technologies, information practices and research workflows continue to change, one-time acquisition of digital skills is unlikely to be sufficient. Continuous professional development, access to appropriate infrastructure and opportunities to experiment with emerging technologies are therefore important components of sustainable professional practice. Ogunbodede and Atchrimi (2024) recommend training and institutional support in response to identified gaps in digital competencies, while Adetunla and Chowdhury (2025) emphasise deliberate digital-capacity development among Nigerian university library professionals. Recent work also shows that emerging-technology adoption requires formal training, strategic policy and stronger management support (Ofua & Umuerhi, 2025). Dube et al. (2024) similarly identify continuous professional development as central to the ability of academic librarians to use evolving information technologies effectively. Newer technologies emerge

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periodically; this therefore implies that there is need for continuous acquisition new skills as well as improving on better ways of applying technology for service delivery.

The emerging AI environment further expands professional-development requirements. Adewojo and Tella (2026) highlight the importance of institutional policies, training and ethical guidance as librarians negotiate AI-related changes in professional practice. Professional development should therefore extend beyond technical training to include critical information evaluation, ethical technology use, AI literacy and the ability to integrate emerging tools into user-centred services. Sustaining relevance also requires stronger engagement with library users. Awareness programmes can improve users' understanding of available services, while effective librarian–user interaction enables librarians to identify changing information needs and adapt services accordingly. Improvements in internet facilities, digital resources and the library environment may likewise create conditions in which professional expertise can be translated into more effective services. Professional relevance should therefore be understood as a continuing process rather than a fixed professional status. Its sustainability depends on the interaction between competent professionals, supportive institutional environments, appropriate technologies and changing user expectations.

The reviewed literature establishes that digital transformation is reshaping academic librarianship in Nigeria. Recent African evidence also shows that academic-library digital-literacy initiatives are strengthened by infrastructure investment, partnerships and sustained capacity building, while unreliable power and limited funding remain persistent barriers (Adewojo, 2026). Three broad conclusions emerge. First, professional roles are expanding from traditional resource

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management toward digital information services, research support, information literacy, electronic-resource management and emerging technology-related functions. Second, digital competence has become increasingly important, but competence development is uneven and constrained by infrastructure, training and institutional support. Third, professional competence has implications for the quality and effectiveness of digitally mediated services (Atanda et al., 2021; Dube et al., 2024; Ogunbodede & Atchrimi, 2024; Adetunla & Chowdhury, 2025). Nevertheless, an important gap remains. Much of the existing literature examines digital competence, ICT skills, emerging roles or specific digital services as separate issues. Less attention has been given to professional relevance as a broader construct that brings together changing roles, competence, service responsiveness, institutional conditions and user perceptions. More importantly, there is limited comparative evidence on whether the professional relevance of librarians differs across federal, state and private university settings within a common geographical context.

The present study responds to this gap by examining the professional relevance of university librarians across three ownership categories in Abia State, Nigeria. It combines assessment of professional roles and perceived digital competence with examination of factors associated with relevance, comparison across ownership categories, and identification of strategies for sustaining relevance. The study therefore extends the literature from a predominantly technology- and competency-centred discussion toward a broader empirical examination of how university librarians continue to demonstrate professional value within changing institutional and digital environments.

Theoretical Framework

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The study is anchored in Role Theory, particularly the organizational perspective associated with Katz and Kahn (1978) and the subsequent development of the theory by Biddle (1979, 1986). Role Theory explains how behaviour and performance are shaped by expectations associated with positions within social and organizational systems. Katz and Kahn (1978) conceptualized organizations as social systems in which individuals occupy positions associated with expectations, responsibilities and patterns of behaviour, while Biddle (1979, 1986) emphasized the relationship between social positions, role expectations, role performance and the interactions through which expectations are communicated and enacted.

The theory is relevant to the present study because professional relevance is closely related to the changing expectations attached to the librarian's professional role. Traditionally, librarians have been expected to acquire, organize, preserve and provide access to information resources. Digital transformation has expanded these expectations to include digital information services, information-literacy instruction, research support, electronic-resource management, digital reference and emerging technology-related services. From a Role Theory perspective, professional relevance can therefore be understood partly in terms of the degree to which librarians respond effectively to changing expectations associated with their professional positions.

Competence is important because new roles require new knowledge and skills, while institutional context matters because role performance takes place within organizational structures that can facilitate or constrain the enactment of professional expectations. The theory also supports the comparative dimension of the study: although librarians share a broad professional identity, their roles are performed within different organizational environments. Federal, state and private

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universities may differ in administrative structures, resource conditions, institutional priorities and expectations, which may influence how professional roles are enacted and experienced.

Role Theory therefore connects the principal elements of the study—changing professional roles, required competencies, institutional context and professional relevance—and provides a theoretical basis for examining whether librarians' capacity to respond to changing professional expectations is reflected in users' perceptions of their relevance across different university ownership contexts.

Methodology

The study adopted a comparative survey design to examine the professional relevance of university librarians in selected federal, state and private universities in Abia State, Nigeria. The study population comprised 47 librarians and 2,229 registered library users during the 2025/2026 academic session. The institutions were MOUAU (federal), ABSU (state) and Clifford University (private). All 47 librarians were selected through census sampling, while 339 library users were determined using Yamane's formula at 5% precision and proportionately allocated to MOUAU (152), ABSU (111) and Clifford University (76).

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed from the study objectives and relevant literature and administered using Google Forms. The questionnaire measured respondents' assessments of librarians' roles, digital competence, factors influencing relevance and strategies for sustaining relevance. Responses were analyzed using frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation examined the relationship

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between professional roles and perceived relevance; multiple regression assessed the independent contribution of the identified factors; and One-Way ANOVA tested differences in professional relevance across the three institutional ownership categories. Tukey's HSD was specified for post-hoc comparison where ANOVA differences were significant. Decisions were made at the 0.05 significance level, with 2.50 adopted as the criterion mean.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 Response Rate and Respondent Distribution

Institutional ownership	University	Administered	Valid	Response rate (%)
Federal	MOUAU	152	146	96.05
State	ABSU	111	98	88.29
Private	Clifford University	76	61	80.26
Total		**339**	**305**	**89.97**

The 305 valid responses represented an overall response rate of 89.97% and constituted the analytical sample of library users. MOUAU contributed the largest number of valid responses, followed by ABSU and Clifford University. The unequal numbers reflect the proportional allocation and response pattern rather than differences in professional relevance.

What are the changing professional roles of university librarians in the digital era?

Table 2 Changing Professional Roles

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Role indicator	SA%	A%	D%	SD%	M □	SD	Rank
Knowledgeable in information services	124 (40.66)	162 (53.11)	12 (3.93)	7 (2.30)	3.32	.66	3
Guide users effectively	136 (44.59)	144 (47.21)	18 (5.90)	7 (2.30)	3.34	.69	1
Possess relevant ICT skills	98 (32.13)	159 (52.13)	41 (13.44)	7 (2.30)	3.14	.73	6
Support research activities	68 (22.30)	230 (75.41)	0 (0.00)	7 (2.30)	3.18	.53	5
Approachable/responsive	126 (41.31)	155 (50.82)	11 (3.61)	13 (4.26)	3.29	.73	4
Promote information literacy	110 (36.07)	183 (60.00)	12 (3.93)	0 (0.00)	3.32	.55	3
Grand Mean					**3.27**		

All indicators exceeded the 2.50 criterion mean. User guidance ranked first (M $\bar{x}\bar{x}$= 3.34), followed by professional knowledge and information-literacy promotion (M $\bar{x}$= 3.32 each). ICT skills recorded the lowest mean (M $\bar{x}$= 3.14), although the rating remained positive. The finding supports Furfuri's (2024) view that academic librarians' roles increasingly encompass user-centred and technology-related functions. It also aligns with Dube et al. (2024), who identify information technology competencies as an important component of librarians' contemporary professional practice.

What factors influence the professional relevance of university librarians?

Table 3 Factors Influencing Professional Relevance

Factor	SA%	A%	D%	SD%	M □	SD	Rank

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Up-to-date resources	40 (13.11)	212 (69.51)	53 (17.38)	0	2.96	.55	4
Digital resources	50 (16.39)	174 (57.05)	74 (24.26)	7 (2.30)	2.88	.70	5
Internet connectivity	61 (20.00)	142 (46.56)	83 (27.21)	19 (6.23)	2.80	.83	6
Librarians' attitude	115 (37.70)	144 (47.21)	40 (13.11)	6 (1.97)	3.21	.74	2
Awareness of services	80 (26.23)	207 (67.87)	18 (5.90)	0	3.20	.53	3
Ease of access	119 (39.02)	186 (60.98)	0	0	3.39	.49	1
Grand Mean					3.07		

All six factors exceeded the criterion mean. Ease of access recorded the highest mean (M $\bar{x}$= 3.39), followed by librarians' attitude (M $\bar{x}$= 3.21) and awareness of services (M $\bar{x}$= 3.20), while internet connectivity was lowest (M $\bar{x}$= 2.80). The pattern indicates that relevance is shaped by both professional interaction and the environment in which services are delivered. This is consistent with Ogunbodede and Atchrimi (2024), who identify infrastructure, training and institutional support as continuing conditions for effective digital practice.

Is there a significant difference in the perceived professional relevance of librarians across federal, state, and private universities?

Table 4 Comparative Professional Relevance by Institutional Ownership

Ownership	**University**	**N**	**M □**	**SD**
Federal	MOUAU	146	3.29	.53
State	ABSU	98	3.21	.56
Private	Clifford University	61	3.31	.52
Overall		305	3.27	.54

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Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Between groups	.475	2	.238	.830	.437
Within groups	86.457	302	.286		
Total	86.933	304			

The descriptive means show only small differences among the three institutions. These means should not be interpreted as an institutional ranking because they represent respondents' perceptions within the study sample. The decisive inferential result is the One-Way ANOVA, $F(2, 302) = 0.830$, $p = .437$. Since $p > .05$, the observed differences were not statistically significant. The evidence therefore does not support the conclusion that federal, state or private ownership determines librarians' professional relevance.

The small descriptive differences may reflect variation in respondent experience, institutional environment or other unmeasured conditions. Possible contextual influences include funding arrangements, management practices, staffing, ICT infrastructure, electricity and internet access, digital-resource provision, library facilities and professional-development opportunities. These factors were not tested as institutional-level causal variables in this study and are therefore presented only as plausible explanations. This cautious interpretation is consistent with literature emphasizing the role of institutional support and infrastructure in librarians' digital practice (Ogunbodede & Atchrimi, 2024; Adewojo &Tella, 2026).

Table 5 Relationship Between Professional Roles and Perceived Relevance

Variables	N	r	p	Decision
Professional roles and perceived relevance	305	.727	< .001	Significant

A strong positive relationship exists between perceptions of librarians' professional roles and perceived professional relevance ($r = .727$, $p < .001$). Thus, stronger recognition of librarians' roles is associated with stronger perceptions of their relevance. The finding supports the literature's

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emphasis on professional competence, technology-related skills and evolving roles as dimensions through which librarians demonstrate value (Dube et al., 2024; Furfuri, 2024).

Table 6 Predictors of Professional Relevance

Predictor	β	t	p	Decision
Up-to-date resources	.326	5.402	< .001	Significant
Digital resources	-.105	-1.669	.096	Not significant
Internet connectivity	-.007	-.120	.905	Not significant
Librarians' attitude	.367	6.442	< .001	Significant
Awareness of services	.145	2.121	.035	Significant
Ease of access	.062	.940	.348	Not significant

Model summary: R = .644; R^2 = .415; Adjusted R^2 = .403; F(6, 298) = 35.161, p < .001.

The regression model was significant and explained 41.5% of the variance in perceived professional relevance. Librarians' attitude (β = .367), availability of up-to-date resources (β = .326) and awareness of services (β = .145) made significant positive contributions. Digital resources, internet connectivity and ease of access did not make significant independent contributions when the six predictors were considered simultaneously. The result reinforces the view that professional relevance involves both the librarian's professional orientation and the quality of the information environment. It also suggests that infrastructure alone may not be sufficient without professional and user-facing capabilities.

What strategies can be adopted to sustain the professional relevance of university librarians in the digital era?

Table 7 Strategies for Sustaining Professional Relevance

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Strategy	SA%	A%	D%	SD%	M □	SD	Rank
Improve digital resources	225 (73.77)	69 (22.62)	11 (3.61)	0	3.70	.53	2
Improve internet facilities	248 (81.31)	50 (16.39)	7 (2.30)	0	3.79	.46	1
Increase awareness campaigns	219 (71.80)	62 (20.33)	24 (7.87)	0	3.64	.62	3
Train librarians in ICT	196 (64.26)	72 (23.61)	25 (8.20)	12 (3.93)	3.48	.81	6
Improve library environment	202 (66.23)	89 (29.18)	14 (4.59)	0	3.62	.57	4
Increase librarian-user engagement	183 (60.00)	110 (36.07)	12 (3.93)	0	3.56	.57	5
Grand Mean					**3.63**		

All strategies were accepted. Improving internet facilities ranked first (M $\bar{x}$= 3.79), followed by digital resources (M $\bar{x}$= 3.70) and awareness campaigns (M $\bar{x}$= 3.64). ICT training recorded the lowest mean (M $\bar{x}$= 3.48), but remained strongly supported. The findings suggest that sustaining relevance requires a combined approach involving infrastructure, resources, professional development and user engagement. This is consistent with Ogunbodede and Atchrimi (2024), who identify ICT facilities and training as continuing needs in Nigerian university libraries.

Recommendations

1. The university libraries should make their services to be all inclusive. There should be an intentional effort to assist, guide and direct users to meet their information need not just making information resources available, they should be proactive in assisting users in locating the needed information in their subject areas.
2. Easy accessibility to needed information resources shaping the perception of the professional relevance of librarians. Therefore, university library management should

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improve the physical and technological library environment to support easy access, responsive and user-centred services.

3. Federal, state and private universities should benchmark effective practices without assuming that any ownership category is inherently superior.
4. Continuous professional development should be institutionalized, with emphasis on providing access to the Internet, ICT facility improvement, digital scholarship, emerging technologies, information literacy and technology-mediated reference services.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that university librarians remain professionally relevant in the digital era across the selected federal, state and private universities in Abia State. Their relevance is most strongly reflected in user guidance, professional knowledge, information literacy and responsive service. ICT competence is recognized but remains a comparatively weaker dimension, indicating the need for continuing digital skills development.

The study further shows that professional relevance is associated with both professional and institutional conditions. Librarians' attitude, availability of up-to-date resources and awareness of services significantly predicted perceived relevance. Although descriptive means differed slightly across MOUAU, ABSU and Clifford University, the ANOVA showed no statistically significant difference. Institutional ownership should therefore not be treated as a determinant of professional relevance on the evidence generated by this study.

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