

From Gatekeepers to Guides: Librarianship in an Era of Self-Directed Information Seekers

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Abstract: *The role of the librarian has undergone a profound transformation globally, moving from the classical identity of gatekeeper, that is, the authoritative custodian and filter of information, toward that of a dynamic guide and research collaborator. In the Nigerian academic library context, this shift has been uneven, marked by professional inertia and inadequate digital adaptation in the face of rapidly evolving user behaviours. This paper examines the conceptual and practical dimensions of this transition, drawing on Kurt Lewin's Gatekeeping Theory (1947), Malcolm Knowles' framework of self-directed learning (1975), Thomas Wilson's Information Behaviour Model (1981, 1999), and Marc Prensky's concept of the Digital Native (2001). Through a qualitative conceptual review of relevant scholarly literature and policy documents, the paper interrogates the gap between the information-seeking realities of modern Nigerian university students and the professional responses of their librarians. It argues that survival and sustained relevance demand a deliberate, courageous reimagining of the librarian's professional identity, from custodian to collaborator, and from gatekeeper to guide.*

Keywords: gatekeeping theory, self-directed information seekers, Nigerian academic librarianship, digital natives, information literacy, professional transformation, embedded librarianship

INTRODUCTION

The professional identity of the librarian is at a crossroads, and this is not a metaphor conjured for rhetorical effect. Across the world, the institutional structures, user expectations, and information landscapes within which library professionals operate have shifted so dramatically over the past three decades that the traditional frameworks of the profession, frameworks built around custodianship, physical access, and mediated retrieval, no longer adequately describe what librarians do or what they ought to do. The library, once the unchallenged centre of knowledge

access in universities, hospitals, government ministries, and public communities, now competes with a constellation of digital platforms, artificial intelligence tools, and open-access repositories that deliver information instantaneously and without professional intermediation. This transformation is global in scope, but it is felt with particular urgency in Nigeria, where structural challenges in library infrastructure have coincided with an extraordinary leap in digital access among ordinary users. The central question this paper seeks to address is not simply whether the library remains relevant, because it is obvious the institution still does now more than ever. Rather, it is whether the librarian, as a professional figure, has sufficiently reimagined their own role to remain indispensable in a world that has already found its own ways to information. This question is neither rhetorical nor settled, and it deserves the serious, evidence-grounded examination this paper attempts to provide. The sections that follow trace the theoretical and historical foundations of this professional moment, and they chart a path toward what librarianship must become.

To understand the scale of the transformation the library profession now faces, it is necessary to begin with the paradigm that dominated librarianship for most of its modern history. The gatekeeping model, drawn from Kurt Lewin's foundational work in social psychology (1947) and subsequently applied to information institutions by Shera (1970) and others, positioned the librarian as the authoritative mediator between knowledge and the user. In this model, the librarian decided what was acquired, organised, and made available; the user approached the librarian with a need and received, in return, professionally filtered access to resources they could not independently obtain. This arrangement was not merely convenient, it was structurally necessary in a world where information was scarce, expensive, and physically contained. In Western library traditions, particularly in the United Kingdom and the United States, this model reached its institutional peak in the mid-twentieth century, when public and academic libraries functioned as primary centres of knowledge in their communities (Castells, 2001). Across Africa, and in Nigeria specifically, the same model arrived through colonial library systems that were established along explicitly custodial lines, with the Lagos Public Library (1932) and subsequent university libraries replicating the British tradition of mediated, print-centred service (Aguolu & Aguolu, 2002). That history matters because it explains why the gatekeeping identity became so deeply embedded in Nigerian library culture, and why its dismantlement has been so professionally disorienting.

The digital revolution did not merely supplement the gatekeeping model; it made it structurally obsolete. Beginning with the commercialisation of the World Wide Web (www) in the mid-1990s and accelerating sharply with the arrival of Google (1998), Google Scholar (2004), open-access repositories such as ResearchGate and Academia.edu, and most recently large language model artificial intelligence systems including ChatGPT, Perplexity, Claude and Google Gemini, the information environment has been fundamentally redrawn. Users who once depended on the librarian to locate, retrieve, and interpret information now have access to billions of documents, including peer-reviewed scholarly literature, through devices they carry in their pockets. Benkler (2006) articulated the structural logic of this shift with precision: networked information environments enable radically decentralised knowledge production and distribution, rendering traditional institutional gatekeepers not merely less necessary but architecturally marginal. In

Western academic library contexts, this reality prompted major professional recalibration at least two decades ago; the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) formally reoriented its value framework around information literacy, research impact, and user experience as early as 2010 (ACRL, 2010). In sub-Saharan Africa, the response has been more uneven, with some university libraries in South Africa and Kenya integrating digital literacy instruction and embedded librarianship models, while others have remained anchored in print-centred service paradigms (Aina, 2004). In Nigeria, the transition has been the most protracted and contested, not primarily because of a lack of awareness, but because of a combination of infrastructural constraints, underfunding, and professional inertia that this paper will examine in detail. Understanding the nature and depth of this gap requires a clear account of who the modern information seeker is and what they expect.

The modern information seeker, particularly in the context of Nigerian universities, is a figure who has been extensively theorised and documented in the scholarly literature, yet insufficiently understood within the day-to-day practice of Nigerian academic librarianship. Knowles (1975) described the self-directed learner as an individual who takes active, independent initiative in identifying learning needs, formulating goals, locating resources, and evaluating outcomes, without requiring professional mediation to complete these processes. Wilson's (1981, 1999) information behaviour model enriched this picture by situating the information seeker within a dynamic context of psychological, demographic, environmental, and situational variables, emphasising that information seeking is an active, purposeful, and context-shaped behaviour rather than a passive reception of librarian-provided resources. Prensky (2001) introduced the concept of the Digital Native to describe individuals who grew up surrounded by digital technologies and who approach information environments with qualitatively different expectations, competencies, and processing styles compared to those who adopted digital tools as adults. Tapscott (1998) characterised the same generation as the Net Generation, highlighting their preference for collaboration, speed, and visual engagement over the linear formats that traditional library instruction has historically privileged. Toffler's (1980) earlier concept of the Prosumer; someone who both produces and consumes information, captures the contemporary user's capacity to contribute to the information landscape rather than merely navigate it. Taken together, these frameworks describe a user who is autonomous, initiative-driven, technology-shaped, and fundamentally disinclined to wait at the door of a gatekeeper. In the Nigerian academic context, this profile is not a distant future scenario; it is the daily reality of the students sitting, or not sitting, in university library reading rooms.

The between where Nigerian library users are and where Nigerian library professionals remain is the central diagnostic concern of this paper. A significant body of scholarship has documented the persistence of outmoded professional frameworks in Nigerian library practice. Aina (2004) identified attitudinal resistance to information and communication technology (ICT) integration as a barrier as consequential as infrastructural deficiencies. Salaam and Fatuyi (2006) found that even where technology was available in Nigerian university libraries, its incorporation into service delivery was partial and inconsistent. More recent studies confirm that this pattern has not

substantially improved, with professional development conversations in many institutions still gravitating toward traditional cataloguing and acquisition concerns rather than toward digital literacy instruction, data management, user experience design, or embedded librarianship (Omeluzor, Akibu, Dika, & Ukangwa, 2012). Meanwhile, Nigerian users have not waited for their libraries to catch up. The rapid penetration of affordable Android smartphones and competitive mobile data pricing in Nigeria has enabled students and researchers to leapfrog institutional library systems entirely, accessing Google Scholar, Sci-Hub, and peer-sharing platforms such as WhatsApp study groups without any library involvement. This is not a uniquely Nigerian phenomenon: the same pattern of users bypassing library mediation in favour of direct digital access has been documented extensively in North American, European, and other African library contexts (De Rosa et al., 2011; OCLC, 2014). What distinguishes the Nigerian situation is the severity of the institutional response gap, the degree to which the profession has been slow to acknowledge and address the transformation in user behaviour. The paper now turns to an examination of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that provide analytical tools for understanding and responding to this professional challenge.

Objective of the Study

The general objective of this paper is to examine the transition of the librarian's role from gatekeeper to guide within the context of Nigerian academic libraries, in the light of the emergence of self-directed information seekers in the digital age. The specific objectives of this paper are to:

1. trace the historical development of the gatekeeping role in librarianship, with emphasis on its colonial origins in Nigeria.
2. profile the modern self-directed information seeker using the theoretical frameworks that explain their information behaviour.
3. identify the nature of the professional gap between current Nigerian library practice and the evolving expectations of contemporary users.
4. examine the evolved roles that are available to Nigerian academic librarians in the digital information environment.
5. propose strategies for sustainable professional development and institutional renewal in Nigerian university libraries.

Significance of the Study

This paper contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation about professional identity and institutional relevance in African librarianship. For practitioners, it provides a reflective framework for reassessing entrenched professional assumptions. For library administrators and policymakers in Nigerian universities, it offers a diagnostic account of the service-delivery gaps that must be addressed if academic libraries are to retain a central role in the scholarly enterprise. For library educators, it highlights the curricular gaps that formal library education must urgently close. More broadly, this paper speaks to any information professional operating in a context where the digital transformation of user behaviour has outpaced institutional and professional adaptation, a challenge that is by no means unique to Nigeria, though it manifests with particular urgency here.

Conceptual Framework

This paper is anchored in four interrelated frameworks that together provide a coherent lens for analysing the transition from gatekeeping to guidance in librarianship:

Gatekeeping Theory (Lewin, 1947; White, 1950)

Kurt Lewin's Gatekeeping Theory describes how information, decisions, and resources pass through controlled channels, with designated agents, the gatekeepers, exercising authority over what passes through and what is excluded. In library science, the librarian historically occupied this gatekeeper position, controlling access to knowledge through collection decisions, cataloguing, and mediated retrieval. David Manning White (1950) extended Lewin's framework to mass communication, demonstrating how editorial selection shapes public knowledge. Applied to librarianship, this theory explains both the historical legitimacy of the librarian's authority and the professional disorientation that follows when the gate, as a structural reality, is dismantled by technology. In this paper, Gatekeeping Theory functions as the historical anchor, explaining where the profession came from and why the transition to new roles is so challenging.

Self-Directed Learning Theory (Knowles, 1975)

Malcolm Knowles' andragogical theory of self-directed learning describes the adult learner as one who takes initiative in diagnosing learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, and evaluating outcomes independently. The self-directed learner does not require or prefer professional mediation; they construct their own learning pathways. Applied to information behaviour, this theory explains the modern user's preference for independent information seeking and their reduced dependence on library intermediaries. It also provides a normative framework for the evolved role of the librarian: rather than mediating access, the librarian becomes a facilitator who enhances the self-directed learner's capacity for effective and critical information use.

Information Behaviour Model (Wilson, 1981, 1999)

Thomas Wilson's Information Behaviour Model situates information seeking within a rich ecological context of needs, barriers, and strategies. Wilson argued that information seeking is shaped by psychological, role-related, demographic, environmental, and source characteristics, and that it is an active, purposeful behaviour rather than a uniform or rational process. This model is particularly valuable for understanding why Nigerian academic library users behave as they do, navigating multiple platforms, applying workarounds such as Sci-Hub, and bypassing institutional systems, not out of disrespect for the library, but because the library's systems often fail to align with their actual information-seeking context and constraints.

Digital Native Concept (Prensky, 2001)

Marc Prensky's distinction between Digital Natives, those who grew up immersed in digital technology, and Digital Immigrants, those who adopted it as adults, highlights qualitative differences in how users approach information environments. While Prensky's framework has been critiqued for technological determinism (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008), its core insight remains practically relevant: many of the library users that Nigerian academic libraries serve have never

experienced a world without the internet, and their expectations, competencies, and preferences reflect this constitutively digital formation. Library services designed for a pre-digital user are structurally misaligned with the actual users they encounter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kurt Lewin, the German-American social psychologist credited as the founding figure of modern social psychology, first introduced the concept of gatekeeping in a 1943 unpublished manuscript that he later developed into his 1947 paper published in *Human Relations*. Lewin's original concern was deceptively practical: he sought to understand how food reached the family dinner table, observing that it travelled through distinct "channels," the grocery store, the market, the home kitchen, and that within each channel, a designated agent, typically identified in the gendered language of the era as the housewife, made decisions about what passed through and what was excluded. The gatekeeper, in Lewin's original model, is the agent of selection, inclusion, and exclusion at a decisional chokepoint in the flow of a commodity or idea. David Manning White (1950) extended this framework to mass communication in his landmark "gatekeeper study," examining how a newspaper wire editor selected, from a vast daily volume of stories received, which would actually reach the public, demonstrating that personal values, biases, and professional judgements shaped what readers ultimately encountered. The model subsequently became foundational in communication studies, organisational theory, and information science, applied to editors, publishers, broadcasters, and, with considerable theoretical yield, librarians. Its elegance lay in its transferability: wherever selection, mediation, and access control occurred within an information channel, a gatekeeper was at work. In library science, the conditions for gatekeeping were structurally complete, and the model found its most institutionally comprehensive expression there.

In library science, the gatekeeping metaphor achieved its most complete institutional embodiment. The librarian occupied the precise intersection of knowledge production and knowledge consumption, wielding professional authority over what was acquired, how it was organised, who could access it, and under what conditions. This was not incidental to library practice; it was constitutive of it. Collection development policies were, in the most direct sense, gatekeeping instruments: professional expressions of judgement about which knowledge deserved institutional validation and public availability. In Nigeria, this gatekeeping identity arrived embedded in colonial library infrastructure. The Lagos Public Library, established in 1932, was modelled explicitly on British public library traditions: custodial, print-centred, access-controlled, and mediated by professional staff trained in the classification and retrieval of physical collections (Aguolu & Aguolu, 2002). The post-independence expansion of university libraries across Nigeria, including the University of Ibadan (1948), Lagos, Ahmadu Bello, and the University of Nigeria Nsukka, replicated and entrenched this model within the academic context. Nigerian library education, formalised through programmes at the University of Ibadan and later at Ahmadu Bello University, trained successive generations of librarians in the philosophy and mechanics of the gatekeeper: classification systems such as the Dewey Decimal Classification and Library of

Congress, reference services, collection management, and bibliographic instruction, all premised on the assumption that the librarian's indispensable value lay in mediating access to resources the user could not independently reach. This model served its era well; the question is whether Nigerian library practice has fully reckoned with the era's end. Thus, the gatekeeping model served these contexts for as long as information remained scarce and access remained structurally dependent on institutional mediation; its limitations only became apparent when both conditions changed.

Scholarly critiques of the librarian-as-gatekeeper model predate the digital revolution. Shera (1970) argued that the librarian's primary obligation was not to the collection but to the user, a subtle but consequential reframing that placed access and intellectual freedom above custodial control. Lancaster (1978) anticipated the structural displacement of print-based information systems, arguing that electronic information delivery would fundamentally alter the librarian's mediating function. These critiques were largely theoretical until the mid-1990s, when the commercialisation of the World Wide Web began dismantling the gatekeeping model with a speed and comprehensiveness that no theoretical argument could have achieved. Castells (2001) articulated the structural logic of this transformation: the internet fundamentally changes the topology of information flow, replacing hierarchical, mediated channels with distributed, horizontal networks in which the user, not the institutional intermediary, is the primary agent of navigation and selection. Benkler (2006) extended this analysis in "The Wealth of Networks," demonstrating how networked information environments enable radically decentralised knowledge production and distribution, rendering traditional institutional gatekeepers not merely less necessary but structurally marginal. The specific platforms that actualised this structural shift are now entirely familiar: Google and Google Scholar democratised scholarly search; ResearchGate and Academia.edu opened access to peer-reviewed research; Wikipedia made encyclopaedic knowledge universally available; and large language model AI systems have moved the frontier to the point where information can be synthesised and contextualised on demand, without any institutional intermediary. The gate, as a practically enforceable structure, no longer exists in the digital information environment

The scholarly literature on the impact of the digital revolution on library professional roles is extensive and largely convergent in its findings. Castells (2001) demonstrated that networked information environments structurally displace hierarchical, institution-mediated information flows, replacing them with distributed, user-controlled access that renders traditional gatekeepers architecturally redundant. Benkler (2006) extended this analysis to show how the network architecture of the internet enables radical decentralisation of knowledge production and distribution, fundamentally altering the comparative advantage of institutional libraries. In Western academic library contexts, these structural shifts prompted significant professional recalibration: the ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries framework (2010) explicitly repositioned the library's value proposition around information literacy outcomes, research support, and institutional scholarly impact rather than around collection size and circulation statistics. The embedded librarian model, documented extensively by Shumaker (2012), represents perhaps the

most structurally significant response to the digital shift, integrating library professionals into the research and teaching environments of their users rather than waiting for users to come to the library. In sub-Saharan Africa, the digital turn has produced a more differentiated picture, with South African university libraries, particularly those associated with research-intensive institutions, having made more substantial progress in digital integration than their counterparts in Nigeria, where structural barriers have been more persistently constraining (Aina, 2004; Nwalo, 2003).

Empirical documentation of the shift toward self-directed information seeking among university students has accumulated steadily over the past two decades. De Rosa et al. (2011) and the OCLC's (2014) "At a Tipping Point" report provided comprehensive survey data demonstrating that search engines, particularly Google, have become the default first step in the information-seeking process for the overwhelming majority of university students globally, with formal library systems consulted primarily as secondary or supplementary resources. Bennett, Maton, and Kervin (2008) offered a critical review of the Digital Native construct, cautioning against overgeneralisation while affirming the substantive finding that younger users bring qualitatively different information-seeking dispositions to academic environments. Tapscott (1998) documented the Net Generation's preference for participatory, collaborative, and visually rich information engagement, noting that these preferences are structurally misaligned with the predominantly text-heavy, instruction-centred approaches that traditional library services have employed. In the Nigerian academic context, the literature has documented both the extraordinary penetration of mobile internet access among students and the persistent failure of university library systems to adapt their services to mobile delivery (Okoye, 2011; Omeluzor et al., 2012). The evidence consistently points in one direction: Nigerian academic library users have become largely self-directed in their information behaviour, and the library profession's response to this reality has been insufficient. Scholarly debate about the future of the librarian's professional identity has been active for at least three decades, and it has grown considerably more urgent as the digital transformation has accelerated. Shera's (1970) early argument that the librarian's primary obligation is to the user rather than to the collection represents a foundational reorientation that anticipates much of the contemporary discourse. The UNESCO (2013) Global Media and Information Literacy Assessment Framework articulated a vision of the librarian as a media and information literacy educator, a role that positions library professionals as facilitators of critical, ethical, and effective information use rather than as custodians of physical resources. The ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2015) reinforced this positioning within the academic library context, providing a conceptual architecture for integrating information literacy instruction into disciplinary curricula. In Nigeria, scholarly literature on library professional development has tended to document the challenges, inadequate ICT infrastructure, low professional development investment, and resistance to change, more thoroughly than it has articulated and validated the paths forward (Salaam & Fatuyi, 2006; Omeluzor et al., 2012). This paper attempts to address that imbalance, drawing on the international literature on professional transformation while grounding its analysis in the specific conditions of Nigerian academic librarianship.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a qualitative conceptual review methodology, specifically a narrative synthesis and thematic analysis of relevant scholarly literature, institutional policy documents, and professional frameworks. The study is secondary in nature, drawing on existing published works rather than primary empirical data collection, which is appropriate given its objective of synthesising and interpreting existing knowledge about a professional transition rather than generating new field data.

Literature Selection

Sources were selected purposively to ensure relevance to the paper's central concerns: the theoretical foundations of gatekeeping in library science, the characteristics and behaviour of the modern information seeker, the professional transformation of librarianship in Western, African, and specifically Nigerian contexts, and strategies for professional and institutional renewal. Priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles, monographs from established academic publishers, and policy documents from recognised professional bodies such as the ACRL, UNESCO. Sources spanning from the mid-twentieth century foundational works (Lewin, 1947; Knowles, 1975; Wilson, 1981) to contemporary scholarship were included, with particular attention to literature published from 2000 onward to capture the impact of the digital revolution on professional practice.

Analytical Approach

Thematic grouping was applied to organise the selected literature around the paper's key analytical categories: the historical gatekeeper model, the emergence of the self-directed information seeker, the professional gap in Nigerian librarianship, evolved librarian roles, and strategies for professional renewal. Within each thematic category, interpretive synthesis was employed, moving beyond description to draw analytical connections between ideas, identify convergences and tensions in the literature, and generate conceptually coherent arguments. Contextual analysis focused specifically on the conditions of Nigerian academic librarianship was applied throughout, ensuring that global and Western perspectives were consistently examined for their applicability to, and divergence from, the Nigerian situation.

THE MODERN INFORMATION SEEKER: PROFILE, NOMENCLATURE, AND BEHAVIOUR

Theoretical Nomenclature

The individual who has replaced the library-dependent user of the gatekeeping era has been conceptualised across several distinct but related scholarly traditions, and understanding this nomenclature is not merely an academic exercise. It is a prerequisite for the kind of empathetic, user-centred practice that modern librarianship demands. The most foundational conceptualisation is Knowles' (1975) Self-Directed Learner, developed within his theory of andragogy, the art and science of adult learning. Knowles argued that adult learners are fundamentally self-directing: they

take initiative in identifying learning needs, formulating goals, selecting resources, and evaluating outcomes, and they do not wait to be taught. Wilson's (1981, 1999) Information Behaviour Model provides a complementary ecological framework, situating the information seeker within a dynamic context of needs, barriers, and seeking strategies shaped by psychological, demographic, role-related, environmental, and source characteristics. Prensky's (2001) Digital Native concept, though critiqued for its technological determinism (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008), introduced a culturally influential distinction between those who grew up surrounded by digital technology and those who adopted it as adults, highlighting the qualitatively different expectations and competencies that digital-native users bring to information environments. Tapscott's (1998) Net Generation characterisation highlights this cohort's preference for collaboration, speed, and visual engagement over the linear, text-heavy formats that traditional library instruction has privileged. Toffler's (1980) Prosumer concept captures the contemporary user's capacity to both produce and consume information, describing a user who does not merely navigate the information landscape but contributes to it through blogging, sharing, uploading, and collaborative knowledge construction. These frameworks, taken together, describe a user whose relationship to information is constitutively active, technology-mediated, and largely independent of institutional gatekeeping, a description that applies with full force to the typical Nigerian university student of 2025.

Characteristics of the Self-Directed Information Seeker

Across these theoretical frameworks, a composite profile of the modern information seeker emerges that has direct implications for library service design. Autonomy is the foundational characteristic: the self-directed seeker independently identifies information needs, formulates search strategies, selects platforms and resources, and evaluates the quality and relevance of findings without requiring or necessarily welcoming professional intervention. This autonomy is not arrogance; it is competence cultivated by years of digital navigation in information-rich environments. Initiative complements autonomy: these users are proactive rather than reactive, seeking information in anticipation of needs rather than waiting for institutional provision. They are goal-oriented, driven by specific questions and projects, and they are constitutively lifelong learners who do not conceptualise learning as confined to formal educational settings but who learn continuously through platforms, peer interaction, and experiential engagement. In practical terms, within the Nigerian academic library context, the self-directed user independently navigates institutional databases when they are aware of them, and is equally likely to rely on open-access alternatives that they have discovered independently. They use citation management tools such as Zotero or Mendeley without requiring library instruction. They take courses on platforms such as Coursera, edX, and Khan Academy to supplement or supplant formal university instruction. They expect information services to be available on their terms: mobile-accessible, instantaneous, and seamlessly integrated into the digital ecosystems they already inhabit. The library that cannot meet these expectations is, from their perspective, simply less useful than the alternatives available to them, and they will act on that assessment without hesitation or apology.

The Shift Away from Print and Physical Library Dependence

One of the most consequential realities of the contemporary information landscape, and one of the most reluctantly acknowledged in many Nigerian library institutions, is the decisive shift away from print and physical materials as the preferred mode of information access. This is not a matter of conjecture. De Rosa et al. (2011) and the OCLC (2014) report documented through comprehensive survey data that the overwhelming majority of university library users globally now begin their information-seeking process with a search engine rather than a library catalogue or resource, and that physical library visits have declined sharply across most categories of academic library. In Nigeria, this shift is compounded by the quality issues that have historically plagued physical library collections: outdated stock, inadequate acquisition budgets, poor physical maintenance, and a chronic shortage of current editions in high-demand disciplines. Nigerian students who once had no alternative but to use whatever the physical library held now have access, through mobile internet, to more current, more diverse, and often more relevant resources than the physical collection can provide. A library strategy premised on the primacy of print is not merely conservative in this environment; it is a strategy for accelerating the library's institutional irrelevance. The examination of the gap between this reality and current Nigerian library practice, which forms the subject of the following section, requires exactly this understanding of who the modern user is and what they now expect as a baseline.

The Nigerian Paradox: Institutional Delay and User Advancement

Nigeria presents an instructive case study in the tension between institutional inertia and user-driven adaptation. The adoption of digital technologies in Nigerian university libraries has been shaped by well-documented structural challenges: erratic electricity supply, insufficient bandwidth, inadequate ICT infrastructure, chronic underfunding, and understaffing (Aina, 2004; Nwalo, 2003; Salaam & Fatuyi, 2006). These barriers are real, and they explain in part why Nigerian library institutions have lagged in digital transition relative to their counterparts in Western Europe, North America, and even some other sub-Saharan African countries. The profound irony, however, is that while Nigerian libraries debated and delayed their digital transformation, Nigerian library users moved on, through the device they already carried in their pockets. The extraordinary penetration of mobile internet in Nigeria, driven by affordable smartphones and competitive mobile data pricing, meant that students, researchers, and lifelong learners leapfrogged institutional library systems entirely. A final-year student at the University of Jos does not require the library's internet connection; they have their own. A postgraduate researcher at the same University does not need the reference librarian to retrieve literature; they have Google Scholar, Sci-Hub, and WhatsApp study-group document sharing on their mobile device. The users adapted; the institutions, by and large, are largely playing catch up.

THE GAP: WHERE NIGERIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP IS FALLING SHORT

The Crisis of Professional Self-Denial

There is a phenomenon in professional life that occurs when practitioners know, at some level, that their field requires transformation, yet choose, through a combination of institutional comfort,

change fatigue, and structural inertia, to proceed as though it does not. This phenomenon describes with uncomfortable precision the dominant posture of a significant segment of Nigerian academic library practice in the face of the digital transformation. The evidence is not subtle. It is visible in library development plans that prioritise physical acquisitions over digital subscriptions and institutional repository development. It is audible in professional conversations that frame technology as a threat to library employment rather than as a tool for service innovation. It is measurable in the widening gap between the digital literacy competencies Nigerian library graduates possess at the point of entry into the profession and those that contemporary library users and institutional employers actually demand. Aina (2004) documented, more than two decades ago, that attitudinal barriers to ICT integration among Nigerian library professionals were as consequential as the infrastructural ones, a finding that subsequent scholarship has consistently reinforced rather than refuted (Omeluzor et al., 2012; Okiy, 2011). Salaam and Fatuyi (2006) found that even in Nigerian university libraries where technology was available, its integration into service delivery was partial, inconsistent, and frequently superficial. The persistence of this pattern across two decades of documentation suggests that the problem is not merely one of resources or infrastructure; it is one of professional culture and collective will.

The Fatalistic Narrative: Technology as Professional Threat

Perhaps the most professionally destructive narrative in circulation among a segment of Nigerian library professionals is the fatalistic assertion that ICT, and in its most contemporary form, artificial intelligence, has rendered the librarian redundant. This narrative is understandable: technology has visibly displaced many tasks that were once the exclusive domain of library professionals. Digital catalogues replaced card catalogues. Automated databases replaced manual reference searches. AI tools can now generate literature summaries and suggest relevant sources with a competence that would once have required hours of professional input. These displacements are real, and they are genuinely disorienting for professionals whose training emphasised precisely the tasks being automated. However, the conclusion drawn from these observations, that the librarian is therefore no longer necessary, reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what technology displaces and what it creates. Technology displaces the mechanical, routine, and algorithmically replicable dimensions of professional work. It intensifies, rather than diminishes, the demand for the irreducibly human dimensions: critical evaluation of source credibility in an environment saturated with misinformation; ethical guidance on data use and intellectual property; the design of information literacy programmes that develop genuine analytical competence rather than mere search proficiency; and the empathetic, contextually sensitive support that helps information seekers navigate not just databases but the cognitive and emotional challenges of research and learning. The librarian who believes that artificial intelligence has replaced their professional role is, in a meaningful sense, describing a version of that role that was always going to be displaced, because it was premised on mechanical information retrieval rather than on the intellectual, pedagogical, and relational dimensions of professional librarianship that technology cannot replicate.

The Persistence of Outmoded Institutional Frameworks

Beyond professional fatalism, a more pervasive challenge is the straightforward persistence of outdated institutional frameworks in Nigerian university libraries, even among practitioners who are neither passive nor resistant to change in their personal outlook. The reference desk remains the central organising feature of many Nigerian university library service models, even as evidence consistently demonstrates that contemporary users prefer self-directed digital search over professional mediation and consult library staff only as a secondary or supplementary resource, when they consult them at all. Collection development practices in many Nigerian libraries continue to prioritise print acquisitions and physical circulation statistics as primary indicators of library value, at precisely the moment when the international library community has shifted to measuring value through digital access metrics, information literacy outcomes, research support impact, and user experience indicators (ACRL, 2010). Library orientation programmes in Nigerian universities frequently resemble, in structure and content, the bibliographic instruction sessions of an earlier era, introducing students to physical spaces and print finding tools rather than to the critical digital literacies and research methodologies that will determine their academic success. These are not merely inefficiencies. They represent a structural misalignment between what Nigerian libraries offer and what Nigerian library users need, a misalignment that, if it persists, will complete a process of institutional marginalisation that is already visibly underway in the declining footfall, reduced consultation rates, and diminishing institutional priority that characterise a growing number of Nigerian university library settings.

The User-Librarian Disconnect and the Marginalisation Risk

The compounding effect of professional denial, technological fatalism, and the persistence of outmoded institutional frameworks is a deepening disconnect between Nigerian library professionals and the users they exist to serve, a disconnect that carries existential institutional consequences. Users who find the library institutionally unhelpful, digitally inadequate, or physically inconvenient do not typically protest; they simply stop coming, and they find their information needs met elsewhere. The declining footfall in many Nigerian university library buildings is the clearest market signal of this disconnect, even when institutional reports rarely foreground it as a strategic concern. At the university administration level, libraries that cannot demonstrate strategic value through research support, digital literacy development, scholarly communication services, or compelling user experience are vulnerable to the budget reductions, staffing cuts, and progressive institutional marginalisation that remove the library from the centre of academic life to its periphery. This risk is not hypothetical. It is the trajectory that a refusal to reimagine professional identity creates, and it is the trajectory that the evolved roles explored in the following section represent a genuine and evidence-based alternative to.

EVOLVED ROLES OF THE CONTEMPORARY ACADEMIC LIBRARIAN

Research Partner

The role of Research Partner positions the librarian as a co-investigator in the scholarly enterprise, actively collaborating with researchers across the entire research lifecycle: from identifying

research questions and conducting systematic literature reviews, to managing data, navigating the scholarly publication process, and ensuring that research outputs achieve maximum visibility and measurable impact. This role demands deep subject knowledge, familiarity with discipline-specific databases and methodologies, proficiency in bibliometric and altmetric analysis, and the interpersonal competencies necessary to function credibly within academic research teams. In Nigerian universities, where research output remains comparatively low relative to peer institutions in other African countries, and where researchers frequently lack systematic professional support in navigating the increasingly complex scholarly publishing landscape, the Research Partner role represents an area of genuinely substantial and largely underexploited librarian value. Institutions such as the University of Cape Town and several South African research universities have demonstrated that embedded research librarianship, in which library professionals are attached to specific faculties and research programmes, produces measurable improvements in research productivity and researcher satisfaction (Shumaker, 2012). Though there some Nigerian universities that operate similar structures known as subject (faculty) librarians, they still need to position their library professionals not at the margins of the academic enterprise but at its productive centre in all the academic activities of the faculties they are duty bound.

Digital Coach and Information Literacy Educator

The Digital Coach role addresses one of the most consequential failures of the information age: the widespread assumption, common among educators and library administrators alike, that digital access automatically confers digital competence. Nigerian university students who use Google fluently, navigate WhatsApp with ease, and consume social media continuously are not automatically equipped to critically evaluate the credibility of scholarly sources, navigate paywalled academic databases, construct systematic and reproducible literature search strategies, manage citations effectively, or understand the ethical dimensions of information use including plagiarism, intellectual property, and data privacy. These are the competencies that constitute genuine information literacy, and they represent the librarian's most durable and most irreplaceable contribution to educational outcomes. The information literacy educator role, recognised by UNESCO (2013) as a core dimension of the librarian's twenty-first-century mandate and articulated in the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (2015), demands that Nigerian librarians develop substantive instructional design skills, not merely the ability to deliver a one-off library orientation session during the first week of the academic year, but to design, deliver, and formally assess integrated information literacy programmes that are embedded in the curriculum and explicitly connected to students' disciplinary learning goals. This is a role that no algorithm currently replaces, and it is one that Nigerian library educators should be claiming with confidence.

User Experience Designer

The User Experience (UX) Designer role applies design thinking to library service delivery, asking not what services the library offers but how users actually experience those services and how that experience can be made more intuitive, more satisfying, and more precisely aligned with users'

real information behaviours and contexts. This role requires Nigerian librarians to develop competencies in user research methods, including observational studies, usability testing, focus groups, and survey analysis, as practical tools for understanding and responding to users' actual needs rather than their assumed ones. The UX Designer role also requires the capacity to advocate effectively within institutional structures for service redesigns that are grounded in evidence rather than in professional tradition, and it requires a fundamental reorientation from inside-out thinking, what the library provides, to outside-in thinking, what the user actually experiences and needs. In practical terms, this might mean redesigning the library's physical spaces to support collaborative digital work rather than silent individual reading; it might mean replacing a complex institutional discovery interface with a mobile-first, single-search platform; or it might mean introducing roaming library assistance rather than confining professional support to a stationary reference desk. In each case, the design decision is driven by evidence of user experience rather than by institutional habit.

Embedded Expert and Data Literacy Educator

The Embedded Expert role involves the physical and intellectual integration of the librarian into the academic and professional environments of their users, participating in departmental seminars, contributing to research team meetings, offering consultancy within the user's own work environment rather than waiting for the user to come to the library building. This model, extensively documented in the international literature as highly effective in both academic and special library settings (Shumaker, 2012), remains almost entirely unrealised in Nigerian university libraries, where the prevailing architectural assumption of library service is that users must come to the library rather than the library coming to the user. The Data Literacy Educator dimension of this role is increasingly critical as research in all disciplines becomes more data-intensive. The capacity to understand, manage, analyse, and ethically use data is becoming a core scholarly competency that Nigerian undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are not systematically developing. Nigerian librarians who acquire expertise in research data management, data curation, open data policy, and data ethics will occupy a position of genuine, growing, and practically irreplaceable institutional value, serving a need that no other professional group within Nigerian universities currently addresses systematically.

STRATEGIES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL RENEWAL

Continuous Personal Professional Development

The most immediate response any Nigerian library professional can make to the challenges this paper documents is to model, in their own practice, the self-directed learning behaviour that characterises the users they serve. The librarian who completes an online course in data visualisation, teaches themselves user experience research methodology through available platforms, or earns a certification in instructional design through a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) is not merely acquiring skills; they are embodying a professional philosophy. MOOCs, offered through platforms such as Coursera, edX, FutureLearn, and the Africa-focused ALX

platform, represent a transformative resource for Nigerian library professionals seeking to develop competencies that formal library education has not yet systematically incorporated into its curriculum. Courses in data science, digital humanities, scholarly communication, user experience research, and artificial intelligence literacy are freely or inexpensively available, internationally credentialed, and directly applicable to the evolved roles described in the preceding section. The professional who argues that they lack the resources for development, in an era when substantial competency development is available at minimal or no cost through these platforms, is making an argument that the information environment no longer supports. This is not to diminish the real structural constraints facing Nigerian library professionals; it is to insist that within those constraints, agency and initiative remain available and necessary.

Institutional Investment and Professional Body Leadership

Individual professional commitment, however admirable, cannot substitute for institutional investment in the transformation of Nigerian library practice. The Nigerian Library Association (NLA) and its state chapters have a critical and insufficiently exercised leadership role to play in articulating a compelling, evidence-grounded vision for twenty-first-century librarianship in Nigeria, establishing meaningful continuing professional development requirements, facilitating peer learning networks that connect innovative practitioners across institutions, advocating for improved library resourcing in university budgets, and creating publications and professional platforms that disseminate and celebrate innovative practice. At the institutional level, Nigerian universities must invest in structured programmes of professional re-skilling that go beyond attendance at occasional workshops. Effective institutional strategies include peer learning circles in which librarians share newly acquired competencies with colleagues; formal mentorship programmes pairing emerging professionals with practitioners who have demonstrated innovative service development; and the systematic incorporation of user feedback through surveys, focus groups, and usability studies into service development decisions. Libraries that make evidence of user experience a genuine driver of institutional practice demonstrate, in concrete rather than rhetorical terms, that they take their users' evolving needs seriously.

Building a Culture of Agility

Beyond specific skills and institutional programmes, the deepest professional need of Nigerian academic librarianship at this historical moment is a cultural transformation: from a professional culture oriented toward the preservation of established practice, toward one that prizes agility, disciplined experimentation, and continuous collective learning. Agility, in this context, does not mean the uncritical embrace of every technological novelty or the abandonment of professional standards. It means the cultivated institutional capacity to recognise when a practice has served its purpose and must be reimaged; to experiment with new service models without requiring certainty of success before committing to the experiment; to extract learning from failure without treating it as professional failure; and to remain genuinely curious about the evolving needs of the communities one exists to serve. This is the professional culture that the best library systems in the world, from Singapore's National Library Board to the British Library, from the New York Public Library to the University of Cape Town Libraries, have cultivated as the foundation of their

sustained relevance in a digital environment that continues to evolve at a pace that no institution can predict with precision. It is a culture that Nigerian librarianship must consciously choose and collectively build, not as a distant aspiration but as an immediate, practical institutional commitment.

CONCLUSION

The unfinished project of professional reinvention that confronts Nigerian academic librarianship today is not merely historical, it is existential, describing the trajectory of a profession navigating the most profound transformation in its institutional history. The gap this paper has documented between where Nigerian library users are and where too many Nigerian library professionals remain, is real, wide, and consequentially growing. Closing it will require not goodwill alone but deliberate, courageous, and sometimes uncomfortable professional transformation: in thinking, in practice, in institutional architecture, and in professional culture. Yet this paper has not been written as a lament. It is grounded in the conviction that the library profession possesses, in its best practitioners and its deepest traditions, precisely the capacities that the contemporary information environment most urgently needs. The commitment to equitable access, the dedication to intellectual freedom, the expertise in information evaluation, the pedagogical vocation, and the relational wisdom to guide individuals through increasingly complex information landscapes: none of these diminish in the digital age. They become more, not less, essential. The gate is gone. It served its era honourably. The future, however, belongs to the guide, the collaborator, the educator, the embedded expert, and the designer of meaningful information experiences. Nigerian academic librarianship must choose, urgently and collectively, to become these things.

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