



**EFFECT OF THE INTERNET ON REFERENCE
SERVICES IN MALAYSIAN ACADEMIC
LIBRARIES**

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ABSTRACT

The integration of Internet has affected all functions of the library, particularly the reference services. In the reference department, this integration has led to the utilization of new tools and methods for providing information to library users. It is a new trend that most of the libraries are following today. This study investigated the effect of the Internet on reference services in Malaysian academic libraries. The objective of the study was to find out how the integration of Internet into the library has affected reference professionals and services. The study also investigated the perception of respondents of the importance of Internet in the reference work.

The study used a questionnaire-based survey method for data collection. The instrument was pilot tested to ensure its reliability and effectiveness. Reference librarians of 9 Malaysian academic libraries participated in this study. Seventy questionnaires were distributed and 40 filled-in questionnaires were received back.

The study found that the Internet has positively contributed to reference services. A majority of the respondents affirmed the importance of the Internet in today's reference work. They believed that the Internet has enabled them to work more effectively and efficiently. However, the study found that the Internet as well as traditional reference sources were used by the respondents for answering reference queries. A majority of them disagreed that the Internet should replace traditional reference tools. It was also found that 95% of the respondents felt that reference librarians should possess good Internet use skills for providing effective reference services.

ملخص البحث


قد أثر تكامل المكتبة "بالإنترنت" على جميع الخدمات المكتبية وبالأخص الخدمة المرجعية؛ إذ أدى هذا التكامل بقسم المراجع إلى استخدام أدوات وأساليب حديثة لتوفير المعلومات إلى مستخدمي المكتبة. إنه توجه ملحوظ اليوم في غالبية المكتبات المعاصرة. بحثت هذه الدراسة أثر "الإنترنت" على الخدمات المرجعية في المكتبات الأكاديمية الماليزية؛ وكان الهدف لهذه الدراسة معرفة مدى تأثير تكامل "الإنترنت" في المكتبة على الموظفين والخدمات في قسم المراجع. وبحثت الدراسة أيضا وجهة نظر أفراد العينة حول أهمية "الإنترنت" في الخدمات المرجعية.

اعتمدت الدراسة أسلوب الاستبيان المسحي لجمع المعلومات؛ وأجريت دراسة تجريبية لأدوات الاستبيان؛ لمعرفة مدى فاعليتها وصلاحيته الاعتماد عليها. كما شارك في هذه الدراسة مكتبيون في قسم المراجع من تسع مكتبات أكاديمية ماليزية. بينما وُزع سبعون استبياناً، أربعون منها ردت معبأة.


وجدت الدراسة أن "الإنترنت" قد ساهم مساهمة إيجابية في الخدمات المرجعية، وأكدت غالبية أفراد العينة أهمية "الإنترنت" في الخدمات المرجعية المعاصرة، واعتقدوا أن الإنترنت مكنهم من أداء أعمالهم بكل فاعلية وكفاءة. ومع ذلك، وجدت الدراسة أن أفراد العينة استخدموا، بجانب "الإنترنت"، مصادر مرجعية تقليدية للإجابة عن الأسئلة المرجعية؛ وأبدت غالبية أفراد العينة عدم موافقتهم على استبدال أدوات المرجعية التقليدية "بالإنترنت". وأظهرت الدراسة أن 95 % من أفراد العينة يرون أنه ينبغي للمكتبيين في قسم المراجع اقتناء مهارة استخدام "الإنترنت" تمكنهم من توفير خدمات مرجعية مؤثرة.

APPROVAL PAGE

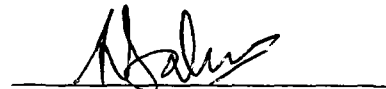
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is a result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by giving explicit references and a bibliography is appended.

Name: Kaba Abdoulaye

Signature. 

Date. 06/07/2000

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Effect of the Internet on Reference Services in Malaysian Academic Libraries

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TO

*My Beloved Parents Mamy & Mariama Kaba
Brothers & Sisters Whose Dream was to See me
Contributing to the Existing Body of Knowledge*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Background

Human need to information is unlimited and unbounded. Identification, selection, acquisition, processing, and utilization of information is now a routine activity for most individuals. Human beings seek information from different sources and places for undertaking a variety of jobs and tasks. They use information for decision making, discover new phenomenon, develop new techniques and technologies, and modify the existing knowledge and theories. Information also plays a vital role in shaping human thinking and character building, communication, and the pedagogy process. Tremendous growth in knowledge, rapid technological advancements and the quick changes in the modern world have led to an increased awareness of the importance of information in all aspects of human life.

Academic institutions have the obligation in the society to provide knowledge to the students, faculties, administrators, and staff. Libraries of these institutions provide information access and consultation to the distance learners as well as to campus users; support faculty, collect a variety of information sources and offer various services for meeting the information needs of their users (McCabe & Person, 1995).

Academic libraries also provide invaluable information support to administrators and managers for effective planning and decision making. They collect a variety of materials to support instruction, research and learning activities. Hence, the importance of libraries in academic institutions cannot be ignored and they are often

considered nucleus of academic activity. They are true switching center in the society and community roundabouts that furnish a variety of information sources. They develop and make information sources available for education and research that assist in the fulfillment of objectives for which academic institutions are established. Moreover, these libraries supplement curriculum and encourage students and teachers to broaden their knowledge.

Academic libraries employ information professionals in different specialized areas. Reference librarian is an individual who provides library users with information and materials required by them. Reference librarian plays the role of an intermediary between information sources and users. This person works in the public-service area of the library that has more interaction with the library users.

Reference service is the assistance given by reference librarian to the users through informational service, library instruction, and readers' advisory service. Informational service provides answer to users' questions, regardless of the complexity or the length of time taken to answer them. Library instruction involves teaching the patrons how to locate information, what reference tools are available and how to use them, how the library is organized and how to use it in a most effective manner. While readers' advisory service suggest specific titles and which will be appropriate and relevant for the user's particular interest (Moore, 1996).

To be more effective and efficient, the reference librarians rely on a variety of tools and information sources that help in providing relevant information to the inquiries.

This includes printed sources such as monographs, dictionaries, encyclopedias, reports, yearbooks, etc., and IT-based sources like CD-ROMs databases, Local Area Networks (LAN), online databases, etc.

Another source that is becoming more and more popular among reference librarians is the Internet. The term is usually applied to the global, publicly accessible computer networks that enable people to access universal information sources throughout the world. It enables the reference librarian to search, retrieve, request, receive, and download information from sources scattered all over the world. The Internet continues to have a profound effect in promoting the sharing of information, making rapid business transactions, and supporting global collaboration among individuals and organizations. As a result, a huge number of information sources are available through the Internet, coupled with the flexibility, speed and accuracy in information retrieval that have brought a revolution in information generation, access and utilization.

Many studies have investigated the effect of the Internet on library, however, the review of literature showed that only few studies have focused on the effect of Internet on reference services. There is a need for such research to be done in order to understand how the Internet has affected the reference work.

Statement of the Problem

The emergence of the Internet as a new information technology tool has had brought tremendous changes in many if not all aspects of human life. The Internet has forced people to change their way of communication, job designing, access and use of information, etc. The Internet has the ability to provide access to text, graphics and sound from any part of the world in few seconds. Because of these capabilities, organizations of all types and different categories of individuals are utilizing it to facilitate in performing their jobs and functions.

Libraries are also extensively using the Internet for improving their efficiency and effectiveness. Particularly, access to the Internet has revolutionized the reference services in academic libraries. Most of the studies on this topic have been conducted in the developed countries with different culture and work environment. Only a limited number of studies have been done in developing countries to understand how the integration of the Internet into the library has affected reference services. There is a need to undertake such a study in a developing country such as Malaysia to investigate that how reference staff of academic libraries are using the Internet and how their performance is being affected by it.

Objectives of the Study

Following were the major objectives of the study:

1. To understand the contribution of the Internet to reference services.
2. To investigate the perception of respondents on the importance of the Internet in reference services.

3. To understand the effect of the Internet on the performance of reference librarians.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives of this study, answers to four research questions were sought. They were:

1. How and to what extent the Internet has contributed to the reference services?
2. How reference librarians perceive the importance of the Internet in reference work?
3. What are the effects of the Internet on the performance of reference librarians?
4. What is the relationship between perception on Internet use in reference services and demographic characteristic of respondents?

Scope and Limitation

This study had the following scopes and limitations:

1. Only professional librarians working in the reference department of Malaysian academic libraries were included in the study.
2. The study did not include non-professional librarians, part-time staff and trainees working in the reference department or staff from other departments.
3. Only ten public academic libraries were included in the study.
4. All academic libraries in the private sector were excluded due to their small size and recent establishment.

Definition of Important Terms

Computer use skills: Skills that enable a person to use computer without difficulties.

Internet service: Assistance, help or literature searches done by reference librarians through the Internet.

Internet use skills: Capability of using the Internet for searching, selecting, retrieving, requesting, and downloading the desired information.

Malaysian academic libraries: Ten public sector university libraries comprising IIUM, MMU, UM, UTM, UPM, UKM, UUM, UNIMAS, UMS, and USM.

Reference department: Department within the library responsible for providing informational, instruction and reader's advisory service to the library users.

Reference librarians: Professional librarians who help or assist users to get the needed information.

Reference services: Informational, instruction and reader's advisory assistance provided to library users.

Significance of the Study

Besides other operations, Malaysian academic libraries are using the Internet for reference service. Although the Internet use in reference work is a new phenomenon in these libraries, however, it is becoming increasingly popular in providing information services to users. The literature review highlighted the dearth of information on the Internet use in Malaysian academic libraries. Only a few studies have addressed the issue of changes brought by the Internet in Malaysian academic libraries.

This study investigated the effects of the Internet on reference service in Malaysian academic libraries. Findings of the study will contribute to the existing knowledge concerning reference service in libraries. Results of the study may help understand effects of the Internet on reference librarians as well as its impact on their performance. Findings will also provide insight on perception of reference librarians of the importance of the Internet in reference service. The study is also expected to act as a starting-point for conducting further research in the subject area. Findings of this study may also be useful for other Malaysian libraries and libraries in the Muslim world and other developing countries to evaluate and assess the utility of the Internet in their reference service.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter reviews various studies dealing with different aspects covered by this study such as Internet use in libraries, Internet use by library professionals, effect of the Internet on libraries, effect of the Internet on the performance of librarians, and effect of the Internet on reference services.

Internet Use in Libraries

Creating a new way of communicating in 1960s, led the American military to come up with a miracle tool of information technology today known as the Internet (Lynch & Preston, 1990). This was followed by internationalization of the Internet use in 1970s, linking more academic networks into the system (Bradley, 1997). It was the time when libraries began using the Internet to provide users with computer-based retrieval systems for library materials. During the early years, communication, database searching, and accessing bibliographic records were the major use of the Internet, however, today the Internet is changing traditional functions of the library (Abbas, 1997). A library of any type using the Internet can access social services and health agencies, legal aid sources, museum and travel information, government sites, company information, and much more (Dewey, 1999).

Recently, the use of the Internet in libraries has attracted the attention of library and information researchers all over the world. Several authors have discussed the general use of the Internet in libraries. Ormes and Dempsey (1995) conducted a study in the

United Kingdom (England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland) to investigate how many public libraries had Internet access and how they were using it. They found that 53% of the public libraries in UK were connected to the Internet. Ninety-three percent of the public libraries were using certain popular Internet access tools such as WWW and gopher and 282 workstations were dedicated for use by these libraries for performing different operations (260 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and 22 in Scotland). Thirty-nine workstations were dedicated to public access (30 in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, and 9 in Scotland). However, the survey revealed general low connectivity to the Internet and the low use of networked services. Newton et al. (1998) also found that 14 out of 25 Scottish public libraries were making use of the Internet, while only eight of them provided Internet access to the public. Those libraries that were not connected reported that they would be doing it soon.

Jokitalo (1997) carried out a similar study in Finland to investigate the nature of Internet use at public libraries. He found that in 1994, 14 out of 439 public libraries were connected to the Internet, whilst only three libraries provided public access to the Internet. However, these figures increased during the year 1996 and 40% of the public libraries started using the Internet and 30% provided public access. The most frequent uses of the Internet were information retrieval, inter-library lending tasks and communication between libraries. The Internet was also used to inform patrons about the services, collections, opening hours and other activities of the libraries.

Birkenes (1997) reported that in 1995 the first Norwegian public library was connected to the Internet. Nevertheless, the number increased substantially in the

coming years and during 1997 out of 435 libraries 140 were connected to the Internet. Most of the Norwegian public libraries used UNINET or TELENOR as Internet access provider. Tenopir and Neufang (1995) surveyed the academic library members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in 1994. Eighty-five percent of the 113 university library members of ARL responded to the survey. It was found that patron access to the Internet was the newest popular service in ARL university libraries, where 74 out of 113 libraries provided this service. Patron access to the Internet increased by over three-quarters during a period between 1991 to 1993 that demonstrated the potential and value of the Internet resources as well as the willingness of university libraries to quickly add new services. A major change occurred in 1994 when 77% of the ARL libraries offered patron access to the Internet. Most of them also extended Internet access to undergraduates (93%), faculty (95%), graduate students (95%) and community users (68%). Only 35% of the libraries provided Internet access through their OPAC terminals, while 53% of them provided dedicated workstations for this purpose.

Begum and Jean (1999) described the use of Internet in the Southeast Asian libraries, including Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, and Brunei. The study revealed that all major academic libraries in the surveyed countries have developed homepages. Twenty-eight academic libraries were identified as using the Internet to make their presence in the global networking structure. Almost one half of the surveyed libraries were providing access to their OPAC via the homepage. While 57% of the libraries provided hyperlinks to other sites with relevant external information sources. Azwer (1997) also conducted an exploratory study to investigate the use of Internet in

Malaysian academic libraries. Nine academic libraries were chosen and a questionnaire was used to collect data. The results showed that all the surveyed libraries were using the Internet and it has become an essential element of most library services.

Clyde (1996) surveyed libraries in Iceland to investigate their use of the Internet and the type of information provided by them through their home page. She found that 42 (77.8%) of the 54 libraries had Internet access. All the academic libraries had Internet access compared to 62.5% public libraries and 85% special libraries.

In 1995, the Department of Informatics of the Turkish Scientific and Technical Research Council conducted a survey comprising 25 institutional libraries in Ankara (Dener, 1995). It was found that 10 of the 25 institutional libraries had Internet connections, two of them provided database access through the Internet. A survey sponsored by the Canadian Library Association (CLA) showed that public considered libraries as the top place to access the Internet. The finding was supported by another survey by Ekos Research Associates (Rogers, 1999).

Most of the above reviewed studies were conducted between 1990 and 1999, which showed different level of Internet connectivity and use in libraries. It is evident that libraries were using the Internet to improve their public service and efficiency in a variety of ways (Dowlin, 1999). Although libraries today are using the Internet in one way or another to further enhance their services, however, additional efforts are needed to enhance Internet connectivity and use.

Internet Use by Library Professionals

Ladner and Tillman (1992) used an electronic questionnaire to study the use of the Internet by special librarians. Fifty-four special librarians from profit and non-profit sectors participated in the study. It was found that librarians used the Internet for various library services. However, the e-mail was the most popular use of the Internet among librarians. Ninety-three percent of the respondents used the Internet for work-related communication and e-mail to colleagues and friends. Thirty-nine percent used the Internet to access remote databases or Telnet, while 37% used it to transfer files and data exchange. Ladner and Tillman further emphasized the use of Internet for communication:

The librarians...use the Internet to talk to each other and to their patrons-fielding enquiries, finding answers, identifying resources, and solving problems. They use the Internet primarily for communicating, not for building or even accessing collections (p. 214).

Cromer and Johnson (1994) found that the most common reason for using the Internet by reference librarians was to communicate with colleagues and friends. Ghidiu (1993) used the Internet listservs to determine how well librarians were adapted to the Internet. Respondents were asked to indicate their use of Internet resources, training received, and frequency of the Internet access. The results showed that of the 75 respondents, 62 (82.7%) were self-taught, while only 13 (17.3%) got formal training. The Internet was used daily by 10 respondents, and 17 used it weekly.

Singh (1998) conducted an exploratory study to determine how Malaysian librarians were using the Internet for work-related purposes. His findings showed that 90% of