

The emerging roles of academic librarians in Kenya: apomediaries or infomediaries?

Emerging roles
of academic
librarians

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Abstract

Purpose – The main purpose of this study was to investigate the emerging roles of academic librarians in Kenya, with a view to determining whether they perform better as apomediaries or infomediaries. The specific objectives were to: examine the characteristics of the changing information universe in which academic librarians in Kenya currently operate; analyse the information-seeking behaviour of academic library users in the new information universe and examine the emerging roles of academic librarians in Kenya.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopted a descriptive research design and used an online survey research technique to collect data from practising academic librarians. This study targeted senior librarians from all the 67 private and public universities in Kenya. One senior librarian per university was purposefully selected to fill the questionnaire owing to their experience and expertise. 33 out of the 67 senior librarians responded to the survey. The collected data were descriptively analysed using SPSS, and as per the study objectives.

Findings – This study established that most library users are digital independent and access library resources remotely. Nonetheless, many users still borrow and utilize print books despite the ubiquity of digital platforms. The findings revealed that academic librarians to a great extent now play the role of apomediaries, going beyond information giving to empowering their users.

Practical implications – There is need for academic librarians in Kenya to not only be aware of the characteristics of their current users but also to continuously develop professionally so as to be able to adequately cater for the needs of their clients.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the scholarship on librarians' roles in Kenya by demonstrating that most of them are transitioning to the apomediary roles.

Keywords Academic librarians, Apomediaries, Digital platforms, Intermediary, Infomediaries, Library 3.0, Patron 3.0

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The academic library is an integral part of a university. It exists to meet the information needs of students, staff members, researchers and other users in the community. According to [Association of College Research Libraries \(2010\)](#), the mission of academic libraries globally is



to support the teaching, learning and research activities of their parent institutions. The provision of services in academic libraries has been changing continuously and rapidly due to similarly changing needs of library patrons within the institutions of higher education (Boateng, 2015). Library services now need to be provided to users regardless of location, program or mode of study. Therefore, the role of the academic librarian has rapidly evolved in the digital age to meet the changing needs of their clients.

In the traditional “brick and mortar” libraries, the academic librarian stood in between the user and the information resource or service. It was absolutely necessary for the users to pass through them to get information or service (Eysenbach, 2008). The adoption of information and communication technologies in academic libraries has revolutionised and challenged the state of the intermediary services. Today, the academic librarian has to move from the central position (of being between users and information) to a position of apomediation (of standing by and supporting the users as they seek to access information) (Enakrire, 2019). Academic libraries now have digital collections, services and infrastructure to support lifelong learning, research, scholarly communication and archiving.

On the other hand, their users have greatly changed: they are techno savvy, demand instant gratification, are gadget-oriented, and feel entitled to access information round the clock (Chaputula and Mutula, 2018). Technology has given the user the ability to access, use, create and share information independently without relying on the librarian. For the academic librarians to serve this type of users, they need effective interpersonal competencies like practical customer service innovativeness, dynamism, pragmatic problem-solving skills, as well as effective technological competencies (Griffin and Taylor, 2017).

Technology uptake has been on the increase in Kenya, with recent reports indicating that there were 52 million Internet subscriptions as of December 2019 (CAK, 2019). The ubiquitous Internet in the country has meant that access to academic information and the role of libraries and librarians in the country has changed over time (Musangi *et al.*, 2019). In light of the changing context for librarians, it is important to examine if academic librarians in Kenya perform better as apomediators or as infomediators. This is the concern of the current study.

2. Literature review

This section presents a review of literature relevant to the themes of the study. These include emerging roles of academic librarians; information-seeking behaviour of academic library users; how librarians meet the information needs of their users; the changing role of academic librarians and the mediation framework suitable for the current academic environment in Kenya. The authors also identify and explain the gaps in literature which this study seeks to bridge.

2.1 *Emerging roles of academic librarians*

According to Bras and DeMillo (2017), we live in a time of great change driven by the exponential growth of new technology which has significantly affected learning, teaching and research in universities. Goetsch (2008) as well as Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2015) attributed the change in universities to technology, globalization and increasing competition for students, faculty members and research grants. These transformations demand that librarians and libraries reinvent themselves to be able to meet the new and emerging user needs. In early days, the librarian was in the middle of information sources and the library users (Goetsch, 2008). They acted as information intermediary and the users relied on the librarian to navigate the different databases and information sources.

The adoption and use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the university libraries have greatly changed the way library users seek for information. Most

users can now easily search, retrieve, remotely access and use information independently (Wachira and Onyancha, 2016). However, this has come with a new set of roles and responsibilities for the librarian whose role has had to change from an intermediary to an apomediary (person providing support to the users) (Enakrire, 2019; Negi and Srivastava, 2014). Further, Kaur and Sharma (2018) argued that librarians are playing multiple roles in the present era working as information experts, information facilitators, knowledge managers or technology experts. The responsibilities in terms of packaging and repackaging of information, electronic publishing and advising users about the strategy to identify relevant electronic sources have also increased. For the librarians to be able to offer new services as apomediaries, they need to acquire new sets of skills such as technological ones, and competencies like strong interpersonal skills which will help them relate effectively with their clients.

Numerous studies on the emerging roles of academic librarians in different disciplines and locations point to the fact that the roles of libraries and librarians have changed (Goetsch, 2008; Makori, 2009; Cooper and Crum, 2013; Cherinet, 2018; Vassilakaki and Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015). In Kenya, a study by Makori (2009) pointed out that Kenyan libraries and librarians are faced with various challenges such as the changing information environment and media landscape, technological innovation, user expectations and economical forces. He further recommended that libraries should adopt innovative approaches to managing and delivering information products and services. Since then, a lot has changed in the Kenyan libraries; there is a new crop of librarians, improved infrastructure and increased number of academic libraries, amongst others. It is important, however, to check if the librarian's role has changed with the times or the status quo remains.

2.2 Information-seeking behaviour of academic library users

Pettigrew *et al.* (2001) defined information seeking behaviour as the study of how people need, seek, give and use information in different contexts, including in the workplace and in everyday living. University libraries have different categories of users: the undergraduate and graduate students, junior and senior faculty members, and members of the management, amongst others. Each category tends to have similar information needs and information-seeking behaviour. However, some information-seeking behaviour patterns have been established by various studies. For example, Howlader and Islam (2019) investigated the information-seeking behaviour of undergraduate students and established that they mostly needed information for academic and job-related functions, besides seeking for information on test preparation and competitive job exams. Most undergraduate students have poor information searching skills and are unaware of where to get relevant information (Hassan, 2017).

Ahmed *et al.* (2019) identified library awareness, information literacy, organizational and environmental issues, source characteristics and demographics as the significant factors that influence users' information-seeking behaviour. However, the way the users seek and use the information has kept changing over time. In the current digital age, academic researchers are increasingly referring to online sources to begin their research journey. Library users in the digital era need guidance to assist them to navigate the new infoverse that has lots of information sources and databases. Çoklar *et al.* (2017) noted that information literacy in the digital era is vital for researchers to be able to access and use information resources to meet their information needs. In the absence of the necessary guidance, researchers' use of library resources and services may be limited.

With such significant changes underway, it is essential that the role of librarians evolves to keep up with this shift in researcher behaviour. Adapting to the needs of the contemporary

user is one of the biggest challenges that academic librarians face today (Dewan, 2010; Mandal and Dasgupta, 2019). Previous studies investigated information-seeking behaviour on the traditional model and little discussion has occurred on the evolving information-seeking behaviour on digital generation.

2.3 How librarians meet information needs of the users

Today's library users want answers and want them now and in the most convenient manner. This has posed new challenges to libraries and librarians who play an important role in providing access to information, organizing it and helping users to find the information they need (Enakrere, 2019; Negi and Srivastava, 2014). Librarians are now to be more acquainted with the skill of handling new technologies related to collection, processing and dissemination of information (Sherpa, 2017). The librarians are however facing new challenges, competitors, demands, expectations and a variety of information services from users.

Academic library users today think about technology and information differently from the previous generations, and expect instant access to information (Musangi, 2015). For example, Trembach and Deng (2018, p. 304), in relation to this, have observed that:

Raised in what is traditionally defined as the digital age, millennials are highly dependent on technology for their social and, increasingly, educational needs. Consequently, they exhibit many character traits, competencies, information needs, and expectations that are not typical of any other generation.

The foregoing observation suggests that librarians and libraries today need to adjust their operations so as to meet the needs of the current users. Libraries are thus reinventing themselves as content becomes more accessible online and their roles become less about housing volumes of sources, but more about connecting learners and constructing knowledge (Sewell and Kingsley, 2017). Library patrons no longer need a library simply for access; instead, they require a place that encourages participatory learning and allows for co-construction of understanding from a variety of sources. Most previous studies have seemingly focussed on the future of libraries centred on paper as opposed to e-books, or have dealt with physical as compared digital formats of information sources.

2.4 The changing role of academic librarians

The role of the librarian in the university setup is undisputable. The new library environment necessitates the adoption of new roles, skills and attitudes by librarians (Cherinet, 2018). The academic librarians are now clearly experiencing a difference in the trends of users whereby they work in groups around a computer, to a more informal approach with preference even to work in a noisy and bustling environment (Trembach and Deng, 2018).

Besides the existing roles of librarians such as the responsibility to manage the full life cycle of information (from creation or acquisition to disposal); build collections of all formats through ownership, access and other means; develop in-depth knowledge of the content of the collection; provide best access to the collection physically and virtually and maintain the collection through suitable preservation and conservation techniques, there are other emerging roles of librarians (Boateng, 2015; Cooper and Crum, 2013; Wachira and Onyancha, 2016). Some of these emerging include those related to teaching, research, advisory as well as those related to legal and ethical aspects (González-Alcaide and Poveda-Pastor, 2018). From the reviewed literature so far, there is little discussion on the evolving roles of academic librarians in Africa and Kenya to be specific. Most studies have focussed on the challenges such librarians and libraries are facing, and few if any have focussed on the librarians in view of apomediation and infomediation roles.

2.5.5 The mediation framework suitable for the current academic environment in Kenya

The integration of ICT in the academic libraries in Kenya has revolutionised the role of academic librarians. The technologies in use in libraries have been changing over time, for example, from library 1.0 to library 2.0, to library 3.0 and some now to library 4.0. According to Kwanya *et al.* (2015, p. 28):

The use of version numbers to represent perceived improvement of library services is currently closely tied to the application of the corresponding labels of the World Wide Web. Thus, Library 1.0 is associated with Web 1.0; in the same way Library 2.0, 3.0 and 4.0 are linked to the corresponding versions of the web.

The foregoing authors further observed that Library 3.0 is intelligent (adaptive); organized; a federated network of information pathways, apomediated and is personalised. Consequently, a Library 3.0 “user”, exhibits unique information-seeking behaviour such as heavy reliance on ICT and peers, multitasking, an enjoyment of infotainment, love for adventure and discovery, seeking instant gratification and intolerance of any form of delay (van Wyk and Geldenhuys, 2018).

The role of the academic librarian has also kept changing with the technological progress. Traditionally, librarians interacted with users as “middlemen or “gatekeepers”, where the user had to express their need and the librarian would check through the shelves for the relevant information (Ilesanmi, 2013). This interaction is described as infomediation and the librarians applying it as infomediaries. The quality of the information users received was based on qualities of the intermediary. The second possibility for users is to bypass the “middlemen” completely, which is commonly referred to as disintermediation. Today, with the mass of information in the infosphere, great premium attached to the librarian’s role is now shifting (Kaur and Sharma, 2018; Mandal and Dasgupta, 2019).

Eysenbach (2008) came up with the term “apomediation”, a socio-technological term is referring to the approach where users rely on trustworthy agents standing by to guide them to their needed information. In the library context, librarian stands by or next to the users to support them to access relevant information in the shortest time possible, hence acting as apomediaries (Kwanya *et al.*, 2013). In the apomediated environment, apomediary credibility is more important than the source credibility (Eysenbach, 2008). On the other hand, infomediaries, who are often viewed as “gate-keepers” or “key-informants”, may be limited in their librarian roles especially where digital technologies are employed (Gould and Gomez, 2012). There are multiple apomediaries in any apomediated environment hence the assertion by Kwanya *et al.* (2013) that in the Library 3.0 context, library users do not just select information sources but also librarians who have the potential and history of consistently meeting their information needs.

3. Role theory

Role theory is based on the theatrical notion of a play, and suggests that individuals behave depending on what is expected of them, as well as based on how they perceive their roles are defined (Hindin, 2007; Mech, 1998). Şeşen (2015) noted that this theory is predictive as individuals live up to their defined roles, which only changes if they adopt newer ones. On the other hand, Zai (2015) observed that this theory can be viewed as functional role theory with societal scripts being stable and cultural values being shared, or symbolic interaction role theory where individual roles evolve over time through interactions. Further, Zai (2015) revealed that librarians within the pre-IT era are likely to be viewed within the lens of the functional role theory, while those of post-IT librarian’s role is in transition.

In line with the current study, role theory can be used to explain the emerging roles of academic librarians. With progressive digitalization, academic librarians need to move from

their predictive and functional roles, and adjust their knowledge and services so as to meet the needs of their current users (Enakrire, 2019; Şeşen, 2015; Zai, 2015). This move to newer roles will happen through interaction both with technology, as well as tech-savvy users (Wachira and Onyancha, 2016).

4. Research problem

There is a mismatch today between what academic libraries are offering and the users' expectations. The rapid changes in the technology world have empowered the library user and greatly changed their information-seeking behaviour (Lo *et al.*, 2017). For instance, according to Wachira and Onyancha (2016), most users now do not want to come to libraries at all. This has forced librarians to remotely and digitally provide materials or services to users. The changing library user therefore suggests that there is need to re-examine the roles librarians play in Kenyan libraries.

Unfortunately, academic librarians are not changing at the same pace as the users; some still hold onto their old professional training which does not accommodate new technological developments (Enakrire, 2019; Mandal and Dasgupta, 2019). This leads to poor satisfaction of the information needs of the users which results in user flight, for example, by seeking alternative options to accessing information. This threatens the existence of academic libraries (Martin-Yeboah and Atuase, 2019; Salman, 2017; Thomas *et al.*, 2017). Academic libraries therefore have to reinvent themselves to remain relevant, for example, through re-aligning their vision to the changing technological world, and user expectations (Harland, 2017), failure to which they will be obsolete and out of business (Düren *et al.*, 2017).

Further, while technology keeps progressing, the need for human mediation in the provision of library services has been documented (Bandyopadhyay and Boyd-Byrnes, 2016). Librarians act as apomediaries in the current information age by helping library users to access the information they need in the shortest time possible (Eysenbach, 2008; Kwanya *et al.*, 2013). This suggests that librarians should be aware of the needs of their users, and how to effectively meet them (Fakoya-Michael and Fakoya, 2020).

This study therefore investigates the changing role of academic librarians in Kenya. The specific objectives of the study were to: examine the emerging information universe in which academic librarians in Kenya currently operate; analyze, from the perspective of librarians, the information seeking behavior of current academic library users and investigate the emerging roles of the academic librarians in Kenya.

5. Methodology

The current study adopted an interpretivist research paradigm. A research paradigm, which is a world view or how researchers make sense of the complexities in the world, leads to the adoption of a qualitative or quantitative approach (Patton, 2015). An interpretivist research paradigm believes in subjective reality where individuals develop individual meaning to their varied experiences (Creswell, 2015; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). The research approach adopted was therefore a qualitative one as it was in line with the interpretivism research paradigm (Creswell, 2015; Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Further, a qualitative research approach was suitable in answering the stated research questions.

A descriptive research design, which seeks to portray a clear picture of the phenomena under study, was adopted for this study (Saunders *et al.*, 2016). Data were collected using structured questionnaires to capture the experiences of the academic librarians. The study population was all senior librarians from the 67 private and public universities in Kenya, hence this was a census study. There is hardly a study in Kenya that has used a census approach to get the views of senior librarians on library users. Online questionnaires were

thus sent to all the 67 respondents to gather both opinions and experiences from these practicing academic librarians in Kenya. 33 out of 67 senior librarians responded to the survey. Web response rates depend on the purpose of the study, but are generally 11% lower than those from studies using other survey methods (Fan and Yan, 2010; Nulty, 2008).

6. Findings and discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study. The first section presents the response rate and background characteristics of the participating staff members. The rest of the sections are presented based on the research objectives.

6.1 Demographic information

Sixty-seven questionnaires were emailed to respondents out of which 33 (49.3%) were correctly filled and returned. While some studies show that response rates in emails is lower, others have achieved higher response rates (Baruch and Holtom, 2008). According to Meterko *et al.* (2015) response rates should be viewed more from their merits rather than “adequacy”. In our case, the homogeneity of the respondents (that is, all working in the higher education) is one of the merits.

The distribution of the respondents in regard to parent institutions were 20 (60.6%) from public universities while 13 (39.4%) were from private universities. The majority of the respondents' level of education was master's degree (69.7%), seven (21.2%) had bachelor's degree while only three (9.1%) had PhDs. With regard to job designation, the majority (33.3%) were at the level of Director of Library Services/University Librarian/Chief Librarian, seven (21.2%) were senior librarian and senior library assistant, five (15.2%) were librarians, two (6.1%) were Deputy University Librarian and only one (3.0%) was assistant librarian. Pertaining to work experience, the majority of the respondents (48.5%) had a working experience of 11–20 years; 33.3% had 0–10 years of experience whereas six (18.2%) had 21 to 30 years of experience. These findings indicate that the majority of librarians had adequate working experience with the institutions and therefore possessed the necessary knowledge and information which was considered useful for this study.

6.2 The emerging information universe in which academic librarians in Kenya currently operate

The first objective examined the characteristics of the emerging information universe in which academic librarians in Kenya currently operate. Questions were asked on several areas as shown in Table 1. The findings showed that librarians still consider their roles indispensable despite the fact that most users are now tech savvy, fairly independent and are able to access library resources remotely. Respondents further observed that librarians offered more capacity building than direct information, and that librarians do indeed need new skills to attend to their current users.

The findings from the first objective supported the view by scholars that most current library users are tech-savvy, independent and are able to access library resources remotely (Wachira and Onyancha, 2016). Further, findings from the study revealed that librarians in Kenya do need new skills, and most indeed are already offering capacity building rather than direct information to their users (Cherinet, 2018; Enakrire, 2019; Kaur and Sharma, 2018).

It must however be remembered that while most library users are tech savvy and seem independent, they still need help from librarians as most of them may be ignorant on their exact library needs (Hassan, 2017). From the Kenyan context thus, the preceding findings show that librarians are not only cognizant of the need to have new skills to attend to their current users but they are also already a step ahead by offering more capacity building than

Emerging information universe		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Librarians' role in information search and retrieval is indispensable	Freq	25	5	1	2
	%	75.8	15.2	3.0	6.0
Users' prefer remote access	Freq	14	17	2	0
	%	42.4	51.5	6.1	0
Users use of library resources despite credibility	Freq	12	19	1	1
	%	36.4	57.6	3	3
Search does not begin with librarians	Freq	13	15	4	1
	%	39.4	45.5	12.1	3.0
Reduction in the number of library users	Freq	10	12	11	0
	%	30.3	36.4	33.3	0
Users depend on technology	Freq	21	11	1	0
	%	63.6	33.3	3.1	0
Advice from peers than librarians	Freq	7	12	10	4
	%	21.2	36.3	30.3	12.1
Users prefer to self-serve	Freq	11	18	4	0
	%	33.3	54.5	12.1	0
Librarians provide more capacity building than direct information	Freq	12	14	7	0
	%	36.4	42.4	21.1	0
Librarians need new skills to support users	Freq	24	8	1	0
	%	72.7	24.2	3	0

Table 1. Emerging information universe librarians operate in

mere information to their users. Librarians are therefore taking up the apomediation role as observed by scholar such as [Eysenbach \(2008\)](#) and [Enakrire \(2019\)](#), as well as challenging the functional role theory as they are not serving by the predictive script of traditional librarians.

6.3 Information-seeking behavior of current academic library users

The opinions of the respondents were also sought regarding current library users. On information-seeking behavior, respondents were asked how often library users sought information from print books, electronic journals, magazines, computer/digital laboratory, and library catalogue and library social media pages. The findings (in [Table 2](#)) revealed that on daily basis, the library users consulted computers/digital laboratory as well as electronic journals and catalogues the most. Further, print books were also sought more on a daily basis, suggesting that these resources are still relevant to current library users.

Information sought from		Daily	Weekly	Rarely
Print books	Freq	16	15	2
	%	48.5	45.5	10
Electronic journals	Freq	14	17	2
	%	42.4	51.5	6.1
Magazines	Freq	5	16	12
	%	15.2	48.5	36.4
Computer/digital laboratory	Freq	23	6	4
	%	69.7	18.2	12.2
Library catalogue	Freq	11	16	6
	%	33.3	48.5	18.2
Library social media pages	Freq	13	14	6
	%	39.4	42.4	18.2

Table 2. Frequency of resources sought from the library

Relatedly, this study sought to establish how different services are sought by users from the library (as shown in Table 3). The findings showed that some of the most sought services on a daily basis include borrowing and returning of books and reference services. The least sought services (sought on weekly, and sometimes rarely) are those on abstracting and promotion of products and services.

Unsurprisingly, a higher number of library users (according to the respondents) consulted the computer/digital laboratory as well as electronic journals on daily basis. This suggests that most library users prefer digital platforms to seek information resources (Chaputula and Mutula, 2018). Notably, as Çoklar *et al.* (2017) argued, there is therefore need to ensure that users are equipped with information literacy so as to make the most of the digital platforms they are using. However, the findings also showed that many users still consult print books on daily basis (evidenced as well by the number of borrowed and returned books). This implies that even though digital platforms are ubiquitous, print books still hold a special position in the dissemination of information. Some studies have suggested that learners who use print books gain more than those who use digital platforms (Delgado *et al.*, 2018). This probably explains the reason why print books are still on demand despite technological advancement.

6.4 Emerging roles of academic librarians

The first two objectives have demonstrated that current library users, according to study respondents, are digital and independent, access library resources remotely, and access digital platforms on a regular basis. Further, these users now rely on other parties such as their peers than on librarians for their information needs. A good number of users would ideally have begun their information search before getting to the librarians for assistance, meaning that they recognize and utilize other individuals within their reach for their information resource needs. These findings mirror arguments by scholars such as

Services sought		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Rarely
Selective Dissemination of Information	Freq	3	12	4	14
	%	9.1	36.4	12.1	42.5
Current awareness	Freq	8	9	7	9
	%	24.2	27.3	21.2	27.3
Training of users	Freq	2	10	9	12
	%	6.1	30.3	27.3	36.4
Reference services	Freq	8	20	2	3
	%	24.2	60.6	6.1	9.1
Promotion of products and services	Freq	0	8	6	19
	%	0	24.2	18.2	57.5
Advice on scholarly communication	Freq	2	11	11	9
	%	6.1	33.3	33.3	27.3
Citation and reference management	Freq	2	12	6	13
	%	6.1	36.4	18.2	39.4
Abstracting	Freq	0	3	4	26
	%	0	9.1	12.1	78.8
Guided literature search	Freq	4	10	7	12
	%	12.1	30.3	21.2	36.4
Borrowing and returning of books	Freq	26	7	0	0
	%	78.8	21.2	0	0
Open space for discussion or group work (maker space)	Freq	7	13	2	11
	%	21.2	39.4	6.1	31.3

Table 3.
Frequency of services
sought from the library

Chaputula and Mutula (2018) who observed that current library users are heavily reliant on technology. This then suggests that librarians need to change with the times so as to adequately meet the needs of their users. For example, as this study shows, librarians now need to offer more capacity building to users rather than mere information on resources, which agrees with studies such as that by Sewell and Kingsley (2017).

Further, as Enakrire (2019) and Eysenbach (2008) observed, librarians have to move from being infomediaries to being apomediaries, where they are on the standby to offer support to their users that such users may make the most of their library resources. This also suggests the need for relevant on-going professional development of librarians for them to meet the needs of their users as they cannot fully understand the needs of the current users if they merely rely on their initial training. Librarians' training has to be in tandem with technological developments (Mandal and Dasgupta, 2019), failure to which they (and their institutions) will face difficulties in meeting the needs of their current clients (Düren *et al.*, 2017; Martin-Yeboah and Atuase, 2019; Salman, 2017).

Table 4, which is a synthesis of the results from Tables 1–3 as well as content from past literature, summarizes the contribution of our study by comparing the roles of academic librarians in Kenya, previously as infomediaries and now as apomediaries. Further, Table shows that some apomediary roles that have been studied in the Kenyan context, as well as those from our study include their support for users, being tech-savvy and seeking opportunities to grow professionally, and academic librarians working in partnerships with their users.

7. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate the emerging roles of academic librarians in Kenya with an aim of establishing if they perform better as apomediaries or infomediaries. The first objective of this study examined the characteristics of the changing information universe in which academic librarians in Kenya currently operate. The findings revealed that the current library users are tech-savvy and can not only access information resources remotely but also that they do not entirely rely on the academic librarians for their information resource needs. Even then, the respondents were in agreement that academic librarians' roles were indispensable in the wake of advancing technologies.

The second objective analyzed the information-seeking behavior of academic library users in the new information universe and concluded that most library users prefer digital platforms to access their information resources. However, it was evident from the respondents that many users still utilize print books for their needs, suggesting that digital platforms have not completely eroded the culture of borrowing and reading print books.

The last objective examined the emerging roles of academic librarians in Kenya. All the 33 respondents revealed that, to a large extent, they play the apomediary role by supporting their users to access the information resources they need. Generally, while infomediaries act as "gate-keepers" to knowledge, apomediaries act as stand-by and support their users to get the information resources they need.

8. Implications for research and practice

In line with role theory which suggests that academic librarians can play a predictive role (functional role theory) or that of symbolic interaction one in a given context, the current study demonstrates the need for a shift in the way academic libraries do their work. As these librarians interact with technology as well with tech-savvy users, it is important that their skills and knowledge is also enhanced so that the librarians can be more effective in their work.

Emerging roles of academic librarians

No.	Area	Infomediary	Apomediary	Past studies/current study contribution
1	Position relevant to the user	Librarians acted as gatekeepers or middlemen who stood between information resources and users	Librarians act as stand-by actors who support users to independently get to their information needs	(Eysenbach, 2008; Gould and Gomez, 2012; Kwanya <i>et al.</i> , 2013)
2	Expertise	Librarians were expected to be experts library and information resources as users looked to them for all solutions	Librarians are learners – they are constantly acquiring new skills and competencies which will help them be more useful as guides to their users	(Goetsch, 2008; Cherinet, 2018; Musangi <i>et al.</i> , 2019)
3	Technology use	Technology use was basic and limited by the librarians	There is advanced technology use by the librarians both to guide their users as well as for librarians' skill development	(Boateng, 2015; Griffin and Taylor, 2017; Sherpa, 2017)
4	User characteristic	This role worked and created a dependent library user who looked to the librarian for their information sources	The apomediary role works with and enhances the independence of the library user who only has to look to the librarian for guidance	(Goetsch, 2008; Chaputula and Mutula, 2018; Kwanya <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Hassan, 2017)
5	Relationship with users	Considered the users as passive consumers of library services who contribute little	Consider users as valuable collaborators or partners in the design and delivery of library services	(Kaur and Sharma, 2018; Sherpa, 2017)
6	Library ecosystem	Hierarchical and clearly demarcated ecosystem where librarian and user roles are clearly defined	Distributed ecosystem where the roles of the users and librarians are not clearly demarcated; are emergent and interchanging	(Dewan, 2010; Mandal and Dasgupta, 2019)
7	Library systems	Library systems were rigid and strictly controlled by librarians	Library systems are emergent and controlled collaboratively by users and librarians	(Enakrire, 2019; Makori, 2009; Musangi <i>et al.</i> , 2019)
8	Solutions to problems	Librarians, like expert doctors, prescribed solutions to information needs	Librarians, as partners with users, suggest solutions to be validated by the users	(Çoklar <i>et al.</i> , 2017; Wachira and Onyancha, 2016)
9	Attitude to the "long tail"	Service and collection tailored to the needs of the majority; library resources cannot meet all the needs of all the users	Librarians work with users to co-create services and content which users personalize and customize to meet individual information needs affordably	(Cherinet, 2018; Kaur and Sharma, 2018)
10	User orientation	Library users should fit their lifestyles to the library policies, rules and regulations	Librarians are actively fitting the library policies, rules and regulations to the lifestyles of the library users	(Mandal and Dasgupta, 2019)

Table 4.
New roles of academic librarians (infomediaries vs apomediaries) in Kenya

The finding that library still prefer print books despite being digital suggests that consideration should be given by institutions and libraries to both avenues of accessing knowledge. Further, it implies that while everything is shifting online, library users could still be encouraged and guided on borrowing and making the best use of print books and related resources.

Finally, and also related to role theory, academics as apomediaries play a constantly evolving role. As users keep changing and as technologies keep evolving, so should these library professionals. This then has implications on institutions training librarians which can equip such professionals with skills necessary to engage oneself in lifelong learning. With this, the library professional can face any “season” while prepared.

9. Study limitation

In as much as the aim of the current study was to gain the views of senior librarians on information behavior of their current users, the exclusion of actual users from the study, and more so for the second objective is a potential area of weakness. Future studies could include library users so that their actual views are captured.

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