

WHATSAPP AS A PLATFORM FOR THE DELIVERY OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SERVICES

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ABSTRACT: *This study investigated the use of WhatsApp as the platform for the delivery of library services at Mzuzu University Library in Malawi. The researchers conducted interviews with librarians and did content analysis of WhatsApp posts. Data was analysed thematically. Findings revealed that WhatsApp has successfully been used to deliver a number of user and reference services to students and staff. Notwithstanding this, a number of technical, human resource and service-related factors were discovered to be affecting the delivery of services hence these need to be addressed. It is therefore recommended that Library Management should take steps to address these challenges to ensure efficient and effective service delivery.*

KEYWORDS: *WhatsApp, library and information services, library reference services.*

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

WhatsApp is a cross-platform encrypted instant messaging application developed by Brian Acton and Jan Koum in 2009 Anderson (2016, 11) but owned by Facebook since 2014 Ansari and Tripathi (2017, 58). It is available for both PC and smartphones, and uses the Internet to send text messages, images, audio messages, videos, documents, user location, and contacts to other users. WhatsApp is free from adverts that inconvenience users in other social media technologies Aharony (2015, 137), and had over 1.5 billion users by August 2019 Lee (2019).

The popularity of WhatsApp, more especially amongst the younger generation Nyasulu and Chawinga (2019, 413), makes it an ideal platform for the delivery of library and information services. Moreover, Ansari and Tripathi (2017, 363) discovered that users' attitudes towards the use of WhatsApp in the delivery of library services are favourable as they view it as a vehicle for the provision of better services. There is also evidence that WhatsApp is increasingly being deployed in libraries. In India, for instance, WhatsApp has been used successfully by a number of academic libraries to promote library services and new acquisitions, to connect with potential users, to provide customer services and as a communication tool amongst librarians Sahu, (2016, 304-305). In the context of Malawi, the Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR), Kamuzu College of Nursing (KCN), The Polytechnic and Mzuzu University (MZUNI) libraries, all indicated that they were planning to offer their services through WhatsApp Chaputula and Mutula (2018, 58-59). The use of WhatsApp in the delivery of library services has several benefits. These include increasing the engagement and interaction among library staff and their users, helping in gathering feedback to enhance user services, increasing the utilisation of library content, maximising the utilisation of documents, and facilitating collaboration and promoting effective communication between library staff and their patrons Ansari and Tripathi (2017, 361).

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Mzuzu University Library was established in 1998 to serve the information needs of staff and students of its parent institution. The Library serves close to 6,000 undergraduate and postgraduate students pursuing their programmes through face to face and Open, Distance and eLearning (ODeL) modes plus over 200 academic members of staff Mzuzu University Enrolment Statistics August (2019, 1); Mzuzu University Staff List (2018, 2).

Mzuzu University Library introduced the Reference Desk in 2013 to assist in facilitating access to information and adequately serve the blossoming student population. The Reference Desk embraced the use of social media to better serve the needs of its clients. WhatsApp is one of the social media applications that was introduced in 2017 when the Library received a donation of 12 tablets from a US-based donor.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Several studies conducted in Malawi have reported on the use of social media and mobile instant messaging tools such as WhatsApp in academic activities and libraries. A study conducted by Chawinga (2016, 107-116) reported the general uses of social media in academic institutions. Another study conducted by Nyasulu and Chawinga (2019, 413–429) reported on the use of WhatsApp for academic activities. However, no study has reported on the use of WhatsApp in academic libraries in Malawi let alone the service which was recently introduced at the Mzuzu University Library. This means that very little is known about the service offering and its effectiveness. The use of WhatsApp in libraries has the potential to reach out to under-served distant clients 2777. This study was therefore undertaken to address the existing knowledge gap and the following objectives:

- To identify services that are offered using WhatsApp at the Mzuzu University Library Reference Desk;
- To assess the effectiveness of the services offered through WhatsApp; and
- To determine factors that affect the delivery of services offered through WhatsApp at the Mzuzu University Library Reference Desk.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used the Diffusion of Innovation (DOI) theory as an anchoring model. DOI theory describes the process through which new ideas, practices, or technologies are spread into a social system Rogers (2003, 11). DOI posits that there are four key elements that explain the diffusion of innovations within a particular context. These elements are: (1) innovation (2) communication channels (3) time and (4) social system. DOI has become such a popular theory that the book that introduced the theory is now in its 5th edition.

The DOI theory was chosen to be used in this study because it is well established and widely used in information technology (IT) diffusion-related research. The popularity of the model is reflected in that it has been used and revised several times, and it is the basis of most of the models that attempt to explain the factors affecting whether an innovation will be shared and adopted by other individuals and organisations Aizstrauta, Ginters, and Eroles (2015, 73).

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the case-study research design that incorporated a convergent mixed methodological approach. Multiple data collection methods were used. Firstly, the researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with five librarians that were either working or had worked at the Reference Desk for a period of not less than 6 months. Secondly, the researchers conducted a detailed content analysis of WhatsApp posts for one of the two tablets deployed to the Reference Desk. The qualitative data realised from the interviews and document analysis were content analysed, and findings reported based on themes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies focussing on the use of WhatsApp abound in the literature, signalling a growing interest of researchers on the topic. Besides detailing how the application is used, the studies further discuss the benefits accrued through its usage but also tackle challenges associated with the usage of the mobile application. Abok and Kwanya (2016, 147-155) investigated how academic libraries in Kenya can maximise the potential of social media to deliver their services by using the Technical University of Kenya Library as a case study. Data was collected from students and librarians through interviews. Findings indicated that academic libraries in Kenya use a number of social media applications, WhatsApp included, to among others, facilitate the sharing of information resources, provide reference services, form professional networks, and promote library services. Some of the benefits associated with the use of WhatsApp in academic libraries in Kenya include saving of time for searching, accessing and using information, reduction in costs associated with space, and enhanced promotion of library services and products. However, lack of adequate ICT infrastructure, human resources and appropriate policies were discovered to be hampering the delivery of services through WhatsApp.

Chaputula and Mutula (2018, 52-69) carried out a mixed methods study that investigated the provision of library services through mobile phones in three Malawian universities. Findings revealed that only one library had fully implemented the provision of library services through the use of mobile phones while the rest were planning to introduce the same focusing on WhatsApp. Findings further revealed the existence of some factors that could impact the offering of library services through mobile phones. The major ones being network quality, high mobile telecommunications service costs, and availability of skilled staff. These challenges are similar to those that came up in an earlier study conducted by Abok and Kwanya (2016) in Kenya.

In yet another study, Sahu (2016, 302-308) employed a social survey approach to examine how librarians are adopting social media tools to promote a number of library activities. An online questionnaire was administered to a sample of 45 engineering college librarians, attracting a response rate was 88.9%. The study findings revealed that WhatsApp was one of the heavily used social media tools in the libraries studied. The application was used as a way of attracting new acquisitions in terms of library collections and enrolment of new users, provision of customer services, and for communication among librarians. The study concluded that while the use of social media tools was blossoming in libraries, it had not yet reached maturity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Services offered using WhatsApp at the Mzuzu University Library Reference Desk

The study found that Mzuzu University Library launched the WhatsApp service in 2018 although the “exact date is not known”. According to one of the librarians interviewed, the service was started “when Mzuzu University Library received tablets from a donor based in the United States [of America]” as part of the recovery effort of the fire disaster the Library experienced in the night of 18 December 2015.

An analysis of the interviews conducted shows that there were many reasons that were behind the establishment of the WhatsApp reference service. One librarian indicated that “a lot of people don’t like coming to the library and hence the library wanted to reach out to them.” Another stated that “the library is aware that each and every person has a mobile phone which they can use to access information from the library while they are in their homes.” Yet another librarian said that the aim was “to assist people who feel shy when requesting information physically [inside the library].” One more librarian indicated that “ODEL [Open, Distance and eLearning] users only access information through WhatsApp since they do not have libraries where they can get information when they are at their homes.”

Although a number of reasons were given as the reason behind the establishment of the WhatsApp service, all of them seem to be converging on one main theme: the library's desire to serve people from a distance. This is in line with current global trends in library service provision whereby libraries are deploying various information and communication technology gadgets with the aim of reaching out to distant users and also to provide around the clock accessibility to library services. This finding reflects other findings obtained in a study conducted by Abok and Kwanya (2016) where it was discovered that academic libraries in Kenya use WhatsApp in service provision. Some of the benefits accrued through the use of WhatsApp include the saving on time for searching, reduction in costs associated with space, and enhanced promotion of library services. It is hoped that the effective use of the WhatsApp service in the Mzuzu University Library can lead to the realisation of similar benefits.

The study has established that there is a large number of services that are offered through the WhatsApp service. One librarian commented that WhatsApp is used for "downloading information especially past papers, books and other research works from the institutional repository". What happens is that students make requests for past papers and e-books which are downloaded from the Mzuzu University Institutional Repository and open source websites respectively. After downloading, the items are sent to the students through WhatsApp. Another librarian stated that the service is used for "screen shooting pdf documents for sharing with users" and "to find information from electronic journals." Yet another librarian commented that "the services offered include answering users' queries and inquiries using WhatsApp at the Reference Desk." This could be termed general research advice. Other services offered through the WhatsApp service include "citation and many other things", "providing information services such as pdf documents", "answering clients queries", "teaching users how to search information", and "downloading information for research for 3rd and 4th level students."

With regards to the main users of the services provided through WhatsApp, one librarian indicated that the "main users are students especially ODeL students who are far away from campus." However, responses given by two other librarians show that the range of patrons is broader as one librarian said that "ODeL, face to face students, and lecturers" patronise the service whilst another stated that "staff members including ODeL students and face-to-face students" patronise the service. One other librarian stated that "generic students especially level ones" patronise the service and another librarian was of the opinion that "ODeL students outnumber face to face students." These findings show that the WhatsApp service has a large number of patrons that include students (face to face and ODeL) and academic staff. Much as this is the case, ODeL students seem to be the main users of the service.

The researcher conducted content analysis of one of the tablets deployed to the Reference Desk to determine the kind of queries that are received. Findings are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Analysis of the queries received through WhatsApp at the Reference Desk

Programme of study	Level of study	Types of queries received	Total queries received
BAE	1	28 e-books + 58 Exam past papers.	86
	2	12 e-books + 35 Exam past papers.	47
	3	31 Exam past papers.	31
	Level of Study Unknown	7 e-books	7
BScE	1	6 e-books + 3 Exam past papers.	9
	2	1 Exam past paper.	1
	3	3 Exam past papers.	3
BICT	2	8 Exam past papers.	8

BLIS	3	1 e-book	1
Forestry	2	5 Exam past papers.	5
Nursing	2	4 e-books + 2 Exam past papers.	6
Security Studies	4	1 e-book	1
MLIS	Masters	9 e-books	9
MSWRM	Masters	2 e-books	2
Total		66 e-books + 150 past exam papers	216

An analysis of the data captured in Table 1 shows that most of the queries received through WhatsApp at the Reference Desk were in the form of examination past papers (150) and e-books (66). These findings correspond with those obtained through interviews that identified past examination papers and e-books as the main services accessed through WhatsApp. Further analysis of the data revealed that a vast number of the queries (171; 79.2%) originated from BAE (Bachelor of Arts Education) students with those in Level 1 (86; 39.8%) and Level 2 (47; 21.8%) making the most requests. BScE (Bachelor of Science Education) students made the second highest number of queries 13 (6%). Although the study did not establish how students accessing services through WhatsApp were pursuing their studies, data shows that the BAE and BScE programmes have more students pursuing their studies through the Open, Distance and eLearning mode Mzuzu University Enrolment Statistics September (2018, 1). It is therefore possible that most of these queries were filed by ODeL students who have been found to be the main users of the service.

Effectiveness of the services offered through WhatsApp

The researchers posed a number of questions to the librarians that were aimed at gauging the effectiveness of the WhatsApp service. As the study had already established that ODeL students were the main users of the WhatsApp service, the researchers sought to find out why and when students do not use the service. In this regard, one respondent stated that “generic students rarely use WhatsApp because they come to the library on their own to ask questions, they may have at the Reference Desk or download [materials they need] themselves.” It was also indicated that ODeL students do not use the WhatsApp service much “when they are on campus because they think it is not necessary.” This implies that perception about the effectiveness of the WhatsApp service is determined by programme of study, time and location.

The researchers further sought to find out the type of feedback librarians managing the Reference Desk get pertaining to the effectiveness of the WhatsApp service. It was found that mixed reactions are expressed by users of the service, and this is determined by one’s experience, with others exhibiting positive views whilst others displayed negative sentiments. On the positive side, one librarian remarked that “students give positive feedback congratulating Mzuzu University Management for starting the WhatsApp Service.” Another librarian commented that “students appreciate due to lower cost of accessing information from the library through the use of WhatsApp.” Yet another librarian stated that “students’ express thankfulness when they are assisted.” On mixed feedback was noted that “users are appreciative of the service but they complain that they receive feedback very late.” Another librarian remarked that: “In most of the cases if they are satisfied, they appreciate, but in most of the cases they do not give feedback.” On the negative side, the following findings were made: “We receive negative comments when you [librarian] take days to respond to the queries.” Another librarian said that “not many students give feedback when assisted.” Although the feedback received on the operation of the WhatsApp service is mixed, much of it leans on the positive side. It can therefore be said that the service is largely effective.

Librarians were further asked to rate the performance of the WhatsApp service. Again, findings show mixed views pertaining to the performance of the service. One librarian indicated that the service is “timely and helpful”. Another librarian commented that the service “is good.” Yet another librarian indicated that the service is “not quite good since only a small percentage [of users] were beneficiaries.” Still another librarian

commented that the service is “still in the developing stage.” The feedback received shows that the service has lots of potential but still needs some perfecting. Just as it has been noted in other mobile library services Chaputula and Mutula (2018, 58-59), the WhatsApp service may be facing some of these challenges probably because it may not have reached maturity stage.

The researcher did a content analysis of the interactions between librarians and users using WhatsApp. Results revealed that 177 queries of the 216 received representing 81.9% were responded to. Only 39 (18.06%) queries were not responded to. Further analysis shows that 129 (72.9%) users expressed satisfaction with the assistance they received. On the contrary, 48 (27.1%) users expressed dissatisfaction. These findings signify that the service was better managed hence effective.

Factors affecting the delivery of services offered through WhatsApp at the Mzuzu University Library Reference Desk

The researcher asked respondents to indicate the factors that are affecting the delivery of services through WhatsApp. An analysis of the responses shows that the factors fall into three main categories: Technical, human resource and service-related factors. However, the technical-related factors were many, and were frequently cited by almost all the librarians interviewed.

Some of the technical-related factors raised were that the “computer does not have enough space to enable us to download information.” [Here reference was made to the desktop computer stationed at the Reference Desk which librarians use to download some of the content requested by users before transferring it to the tablet for onward delivery to users through WhatsApp]. Still on the same, another librarian stated that “it seems like the space of the computer is running out so it gives us problems to download.” Other technical-related comments received focussed on the tablet and network connectivity. With regards to the tablets, one librarian indicated that “one tablet had challenges in connecting to the network” whilst another librarian observed that “one tablet has developed a fault and users who used to access library services [through that line] cannot reach library staff.” Yet another librarian emphatically stated that “gadgets [tablets] are not enough.” A number of other comments were raised in relation to the network. One librarian complained that “in most cases the network drags and this makes us to take more time to respond to users’ queries.” Another librarian said, “Internet connectivity becomes very slow when providing responses to user queries.”

Similarly, a number of service-related factors were raised by the respondents that affected the operations of the WhatsApp service. One librarian bemoaned the nature of requests received indicating that they are repetitive, thus saying: “Students ask for the same service each and every day instead of doing it on their own i.e. downloading past papers today and they come tomorrow to ask for the same information.” Findings displayed in Table 1 have shown this to be true. A probable explanation to this scenario is what was expressed by another librarian who indicated that “some people do not understand what we provide at the Reference Desk.” Considering that a number of other services such as “general research advice” and “proper citation styles” are offered, if this explanation does not hold then it is possible that users do not find the other services to be of value to them. Another service-related factor that came up in the study is failure to receive and respond to user queries on time due to network challenges. It was also noted that some students do not share their numbers because they are shy. On the human resource factors, it was noted that staff is inadequate which makes it difficult for them to serve clients at the Reference Desk in addition to those who post their requests through WhatsApp. It was further noted that the staff have challenges in search techniques which needs to be addressed. Similarly, a study by Chaputula and Mutula (2018, 58-59) that investigated the provision of library services through mobile phones in public universities in Malawi noted that technical, human resource and service-related factors need to be overcome to ensure smooth delivery of services through mobile phones.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the use of WhatsApp as the platform for the delivery of library services in the Mzuzu University Library in Malawi. The researcher conducted interviews with librarians and also did content analysis of WhatsApp posts. Data was analysed thematically. Findings revealed that WhatsApp has successfully been used to deliver a number of user and reference services to students and staff. Notwithstanding this, a number of technical, human resource and service-related factors were discovered to be affecting the delivery of services hence need to be addressed. It is therefore recommended that Library Management should take steps to address these challenges to ensure efficient and effective service delivery.

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