



Information Behaviour of Visually Impaired Users in the Era of COVID-19 Pandemic in Lagos State, Nigeria

Florence Otonekwa^{a*}, Tunde Oyedokun, Olabisi Adesina, Zainab Ambali

^a Babcock University, Ilisan, Ogun State, Nigeria.

* Corresponding author. e-mail: fotonekwa@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

There is a scarcity of research on the information behavior of visually impaired users during the COVID-19 epidemic, and people with visual impairment make up a significant portion of the population in Lagos State, Nigeria. Individuals living with one sort of visual impairment also needed knowledge to be productive and contribute positively to national development, which is why advocacy for equal access to information has been on the rise. This paper tends to document what information visually impaired persons sought after to cope with the current pandemic and life situation in general. Tips on how to address the information demands of the visually impaired efficiently using creative techniques and information technology are provided.

Keywords: Information Behaviour, Visually Impaired person, COVID-19 Pandemic, Lagos State, Nigeria.

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I. Introduction

It is an unavoidable fact that the globe is undergoing a significant demographic shift as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enormous number of people leaving with some type of impairment. The pandemic has sparked widespread worry, and people are in desperate need of accurate, well-curated information in order to remain calm, safe, and healthy. People would only be vulnerable to the pandemic's onslaught if they didn't have access to accurate information about the virus. Because of the pandemic and the following lockdown and health preventive measures put in place to combat the threat of the virulent coronavirus, access to information has become relatively difficult and restricted. Meanwhile, the entire process of providing information services revolves around fulfilling and satisfying the information demands of users, with information users being those who require information and hence utilize information services.

Access to information becomes the characteristic of a civilized and sane society as the new world order is propelled by knowledge. However, because of the

differences in their socioeconomic position, there is a gap in the supply of information services to different persons in society. Given the wide range of backgrounds, information needs, mental states, and physical mobility among information users, it goes without saying that information service providers must be better able to accommodate the different needs of all types of information users. It's also worth noting that information requirements aren't static; they might change depending on time, circumstances, and disasters and hardship, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Some information users are homogeneous, while others are highly diverse; some are highly educated, while others are semiliterate or illiterate. Some information users are city dwellers, while others are less-urban and rural settlers. Many are healthy, while only a few are mentally or physically impaired.

An increasing number of people are leaving with some sort of vision impairment or blindness, and their information needs are not being met in society. There is evidence that visually impaired people are stigmatized and at a disadvantage when it comes to access to information resources, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some visually impaired people are confined to

wheelchairs, while others have limited mobility, necessitating the use of specialized technology such as audio recordings, Braille, and screen reader software to meet their information requirements.

The focus of this research will be on the information behavior of visually impaired people in Lagos State, where Nigeria's first incidence of COVID-19 was discovered (NCDC, 2020). The information seeking behavior of a visually impaired person in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic is an emerging trend that must be addressed in a timely manner because the disabilities that come with being visually impaired make their information needs unique, and these information needs must be met just like those of other users who are able-bodied.

II. COVID-19 Pandemic and the First Case Index in Lagos, Nigeria and Government Response

COVID-19 was first discovered in the midst of a respiratory ailment outbreak in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. On December 31, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) received reports of the sickness. On March 11th, 2020, a global health emergency was announced and a global pandemic was declared based on a critical analysis of the outbreak and how quickly the virus moved across borders and territories (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Ramzy & McNeil, 2020; Zhu, Zhang, Wang, Li, Yang & Song, 2020). The Federal Government of Nigeria quickly establishes a multi-sectorial coronavirus preparedness group, known as the Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 (PTF COVID-19), which includes the Federal Ministry of Health, the Nigeria Center for Disease Control (NCDC), the Nigerian Institute of Medical Research, and other health-related sectors.

Meanwhile, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Nigeria on February 27, 2020 in Lagos State. The index patient is a foreigner working as an expatriate in Nigeria who travels to Italy and returns to Nigeria during the pandemic. Nigerian nationals with a history of travel to foreign countries, as well as individuals, who have had contact with previously confirmed cases, were added to the index. As a result, the Nigerian government stepped up efforts to control and contain the virus's spread, forming a national quick reaction team to conduct contact tracing and surveillance at entry points, focusing on visitors and citizens entering the country. Science and research, coordination, collaboration, surveillance, and solidarity across many sectors, international funders, and collaborations with corporate sectors and individuals have all aided the government's response.

As of month end of December 2021, amidst the fourth wave of the coronavirus, Lagos State has registered over 72,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19. In December 2021, the optimism rate was 6%, up from 0.1 percent in November 2021. As a result, the Lagos State Government has set a goal of vaccinating 30% of the population by December 25th, 2021, as part of the Count Me In Campaign.

Information Services during COVID-19 Pandemic

Because the COVID-19 protocol and directive encourage social distance and prevent physical contact, contactless services had to be imposed as a matter of necessity. Information service providers all over the world

had no choice than to keep a few physical services and move the majority of their services to online settings via web-based information services. The pandemic is life-threatening, and it has resulted in a situation in which physical access to the collection is restricted. Library and information science workers play a critical role in informing and educating the COVID-19 pandemic community about new developments, advances, and discoveries. Being a part of vital frontline workers explains why a means to keep information services running indefinitely was sought. A renewed mission for digital literacy was reborn on the occasion of the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic. The epidemic demonstrates the necessity for digital and virtual information sources and services. Going digital aligns with the information package, but going virtual pinpoints the distribution and communication medium.

On the positive side of the pandemic, users were frequently provided with actionable instructions and information such as where to seek help in an emergency, information about test centers and isolation centers, and where to get palliative and other support programs, resulting in a new vision of services that foster active relationships and constant communication. Facebook, Twitter, Google meetings, webinars, Zoom conference sessions, WhatsApp chat, blog entries, and other social networking sites are used to disseminate information and communicate with users.

III. Information Behaviour of Visually Impaired Person

Visual disability is having a binocular vision disorder or a narrow vision that cannot be restricted through drugs, surgery, or other treatments that hinder them from engaging in activities that ordinarily people with clear vision do with ease without assistance whatsoever. Individuals with poor eyesight and blur vision are included in this category (Wang & Yu, 2017). People with disabilities are neglected minority in society who are underrepresented due to the uniqueness of their disability, and their information requirements are not fully met, even when they hunger and crave it. People with visual difficulties, on the other hand, confront numerous societal challenges, including inequities, isolation, discrimination, stigmatization, educational backwardness, and limited work possibilities. However, a visually impaired person, like everyone else, requires information for a variety of reasons, including general knowledge development, specific reading for examination and study, current awareness, information about blind health and welfare programs, and so on.

Visually challenged persons spend the most of their time at home, with little mobility. Despite this, their information requirements are similar to those of persons who have good vision. Visually impaired people's information demands are more focused on real-life issues and opportunities. The degree of impairment, degree of freedom, aids and support from friends and family, and awareness of information sources and information providers all influence a visually impaired person's information behavior. A visually impaired person's information search method and query formulation are influenced by the lack of visual clues

(Sahib, Tombros & Stockman, 2012). The information demands and behavior of visually impaired people are stabilized by the life situations they are exposed to.

Meanwhile, the majority of visually impaired people get their knowledge from family, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, as well as radio and television shows. They go to the library and now the internet when they require sophisticated and detailed information, but they are at a disadvantage because they can't read via computer and phone screens without assistive devices and software. Because proper provision to accommodate their special needs has yet to be put in place, and where they are available, the pandemic situation has distanced them from using the library due to the nature and pattern of library development in third world and less-developed countries, most visually impaired barely use the library. Visually impaired people's information behavior is influenced by their confinement and limited world lifestyle; however, information technology is helping to break the confinement.

The visually handicapped live in an isolated, narrow world created by deliberate and imposed social alienation, and as a result, they have a strong sense of intimate community and rely heavily on it for information. They are a diverse group of people with varying information requirements. Their narrow world perspective determines what information is needed, what is important, what to believe and what not to believe, and how to act on that knowledge. Visually impaired people sort information in libraries and other information-gathering institutions on a rare, incidental, and last-resort basis.

IV. Information Services Designed for the Visually Impaired in Lagos State

Lagos is Nigeria's largest city and Africa's most populous, with a population of around 23.5 million people, including persons who have some sort of visual impairment. The Nigerian Society for the Blind Vocational Training Centre at Oshodi in Lagos, Nigeria, has a particular library for the visually impaired named Inlaks Library that caters mostly to the blind. Another is the Anglo-Nigerian Welfare Association for the Blind, which is based in Lagos and publishes Braille literature. In 2010, a non-governmental organization named the Soroptimist International of Eko established a Braille center as part of the library building expansion at the University of Lagos Main Library in Akoka (Zaid, 2017).

Visual impairment has had a long-term negative impact on people's capacity to carry out typical day-to-day tasks. As a result, the visually handicapped have been left out of some benefits that should be available to everyone due to their social exclusion in society's developmental plans. The internet of things and digital library services, which were the hallmark of library services during and after the COVID-19 epidemic, are one such benefit. Information services have grown in a way that makes it difficult for visually impaired people to use them. The visually impaired can be productive and contribute to national development with special education and rehabilitation, which is why it is critical to make information resources available to them in a format that meets their specific information demands.

Due to their incapacity to read via their eyes without the use of specific eye help equipment, the visually impaired face difficulties in their search for information. As more and more information is delivered over the internet, particularly in light of the COVID-19 global pandemic, universal design must be applied to information services, which means that information services must be able to meet the varying and diverse information needs of all users, taking into account the fact that users may have learning, speech, hearing, or visual impairment.

Various types of assistive technology are available to help visually impaired people access information; however, the nature and severity of the fuzzy vision or blindness must be considered. There is computer software and applications that have been designated. Magnifiers, Braille materials, Braille keyboards, audiobooks, book talk, voice output devices, and adaptable equipment are all examples of assistive visual technologies that make information more accessible. The older generation of visually impaired people relied on braille, a recorder, and an audio player, whereas the current age relied on smartphones and computers to listen to audiobooks and recordings. To listen to text on the screen, screen reader software is utilized. Some people have only lately connected to the internet and are now participating in online activities. For the blind, the digital revolution has offered freedom, information accessibility, and social inclusion.

V. Conclusion

The deadly COVID-19 virus is still wreaking havoc around the globe. Unfortunately, we have observed the virus's unrestricted global spread. Information services appear to have been hampered. We need to think about dynamic, inventive approaches to improve information access, taking a cue from the pandemic's experience. Digital services allow for a larger number of users to be engaged at once, as well as a wider range of material. The functional capacity of human sensory organs plays a big role in information seeking. A human's natural method of acquiring information is through sight. Similarly, information resources for visually impaired people can only be useful if they are both readable and audible.

VI. Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is growing gaps in information access for visually impaired people:

1. The essential information infrastructure and facilities should be bought and built in order to provide superior information services that satisfy the needs of visually impaired people.
2. Broadcast media, networked sources, and organizational sources should all be made available to visually impaired people.
3. The government, information providers, and other stakeholders should reconsider their roles through policy design and action to ensure that underserved populations, such as the visually impaired, have unfettered access to information.

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Florence Onyeisi, OTENEKWU, bags a Diploma in Administrative Management, a Bachelor's Degree in Library Science, and a Master's in Library and Information Science. She is a Chartered Librarian of Nigeria (CLN), a member of the Nigerian Library Association (NLA), and a member of the Nigerian Library Association (National) Cataloguing, Classification, and Indexing Section. She works at the University of Ilorin Library as an academic librarian. She had worked in several sections of the library, and served as head of the reference, cataloguing and classification, and acquisitions sections. She also served on several committees within the library and the university. She taught the use of the library to undergraduate students, and has several publications in local, national, and international journal outlets. She is currently a PhD candidate at Babcock University, Ilesan, Ogun State, Nigeria.



Tunde Toyese, OYEDOKUN, a Certified Librarian of Nigeria (CLN), Member of the Nigerian Institute of Management, bags a National Diploma in Accountancy from Kwara State Polytechnic, a B.Sc. in Library and Information Science and a Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. He is a research scholar and PhD candidate at the University of Ilorin's Department of Library and Information Science, Faculty of Communication and Information Sciences. He has several publications in both local and international journals.



Olabisi Fadeke, ADESINA, bags a Diploma in Librarianship, a Bachelor of Library and Information Science, and a Master of Library and Information Science, all from the premier University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. She is a Senior Librarian and Head, Electronic Support Services Division, University of Ilorin Library, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. She is currently a PhD candidate at Babcock University, Ilesan, Ogun State, Nigeria.



Zainab Olanihun, AMBALL, Bachelor of Library and Information Science and Master of Library Science from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria. She is an academic librarian at the University of Ilorin Library, Ilorin, Nigeria and is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Library and Information Science, Faculty of Communication and Information Sciences, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria. She has several publications in both local and international journals.