

Unlocking Library Potential: Insights into First-Year Undergraduate Students' Participation in Library User Education and Their Perceptions of University Libraries

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Abstract

In contemporary learning environments, effective library user education is crucial for enhancing undergraduate students' engagement and perception of library services. The world has witnessed rapid technological advancements, information digitization and increased availability of e-resources. Effective participation of the new library clientele in user education has become increasingly crucial in enabling students to navigate and utilize library resources. Despite these advancements, the university libraries in Meru County, Kenya, have experienced suboptimal usage, potentially due to students' perceptions of the library. The study investigates the role of undergraduate students' participation in library user education programs on the perceptions of library. The study was conducted in Meru County, focusing on two chartered universities: Kenya Methodist University (KeMU) and Meru University of Science and Technology (MUST). The study used descriptive survey design to collect data. The target population was 6138 first-year undergraduate students enrolled in the 2023/2024 academic year. The study employed stratified sampling techniques based on academic schools, and used the Krejcie and Morgan table to determine the sample size, which was 364 students. The researcher purposively sampled a total of 12 out of 46 library staff. Data was collected using questionnaire and interview schedule for the library staff. The study employed descriptive statistics, such as frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. The findings of the study indicated moderate participation in user education sessions. The correlation analysis revealed that the extent of students' participation in library user education has a substantially strong linear positive relationship in the assessment of university libraries in Meru County (p-value < 0.05, $r=0.740$). The study concludes that library user education significantly enhances student perception of library services. The study recommends the university library managers to aggressively integrate thorough, interesting, and easily available library user education programs into the general student orientation and academic development projects.

Keywords: *Library User Education, Perception, Resource Utilization, Library Orientation*

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1.0 Introduction

Library user education has gained significance with the rapid technological advancements, and the rise in e-resources. The purpose of library user education is to equip students with the skills needed to use library resources efficiently (Kumar & Kumar, 2020). This study focused on the library user education, and the undergraduate students' perceptions of the university libraries. Globally, user education is vital for enhancing students' information literacy and research skills. Factors such as technology interaction, collection diversity, and user-centered services play a significant role in shaping user education programs and their outcomes (Liu, 2019; Wickramanayake, 2016). In Africa, research in Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa highlights the importance of effective library user education programs (Adindu, 2020; Anyim, 2018). For instance, Abdulsalam et al. (2021) found that library user education positively impacted library usage at the Federal University of Lafia, although challenges like low turnout persisted.

The importance of library user education is underscored by its role in improving library utilization and student success (Negi et al., 2023). Comparative studies, such as those by Chaudhry et al. (2021) and Liu et al. (2016), demonstrated that user education influences library use as well as the user perceptions.

Cameron and Rideout (2020) noted that the first year of university is a tough period in academic and personal development for students. It is a time of substantial transition and adjustment. During this period of change,

feelings of loneliness, isolation, and lack of social connection may occur. Loneliness in first-year students has, in turn, been associated with higher levels of anxiety, depression, and stress. Kusi and Alunga (2018) added that first-year university students were reported to experience stress after being admitted to the university. They faced issues relating to money, the difficulty of departing from family and friends, academic anxiety, adjusting to new study habits, and the difficulty of appropriately adjusting to the new, unfamiliar surroundings. Cameron and Rideout (2020) aver that it is essential that first-year students are adequately supported in establishing a strong foundation for their learning, wellbeing, and success at the university and beyond.

The challenges experienced by the first year undergraduate students might have led to low participation in library user education, which was reported in the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Library (Eke et al., 2018). Research indicates that only 47 per cent of targeted students participated in the orientation programmes organized for various academic departments in the university (Moyane et al., 2015). Shai (2020) investigated user education in sampled colleges in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, and noted that user education was unsuccessful. The low turnout was attributable to inappropriate timing, as it was carried out before new students settled into the university. To ensure increased participation of students in library user education programs, some universities, like the International Islamic University in Malaysia, made participation in library user education

programs compulsory for every student (Suleiman, 2012)

In Kenya, a study by Wanja et al. (2022) indicates limited awareness and inconsistencies in the way library user education programs are offered, yet the Commission on University Education (2014) has mandated well-structured information literacy programs to support academic achievement. Mwangi (2006) studied user education programmes among undergraduate students in Kenyatta University and the University of Nairobi libraries. The study's findings showed that very few respondents were aware of the presence of library user education programs in both universities. Additionally, a study undertaken by Wanja et al. (2022) at the Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) Library, revealed that programs such as library orientation and bibliographic instruction were among those used to educate users. Wanja (2024) concluded that KRA's user education programs face a number of difficulties which need to be handled in order to address the problem of educating users in a fast-varying data environment. This situation provides a research gap which this study seeks to fill. The study is conducted in Meru County, Kenya, focusing on the Kenya Methodist University and Meru University of Science and Technology libraries. There is scanty literature on library user education and perception of undergraduate students in Kenya. This presents the main thrust to undertake this study which seeks to establish whether library user education programs impact students' perception of the university library, either positively or negatively.

Statement of the Problem

University libraries play a crucial role in supporting academic success, particularly for first-year students. However, at Kenya Methodist University and Meru University of Science and Technology, there is limited empirical data on how these students engage with library users' education programs, and how they perceive the relevance and accessibility of library services. This lack of insight hinders the library's ability to tailor its services to meet students' evolving academic needs; thereby affecting the full utilization of library resources. Consequently, the significance of user education in university libraries cannot be overstated. While libraries provide a wealth of resources and services, students may not have taken full advantage of them due to a lack of awareness or negative perceptions. This results in a disconnect between library resources and student needs; ultimately, diminishing the library's role in fostering academic excellence.

The study found that despite 74% library orientation attendance rate, subsequent attendance declined. This suggested endorsing strategies like social media, posters, and university websites to boosted participation.

This study's main purpose was to investigate the relationship between first-year undergraduate students' participation in library user education as an impetus to perception of university library. The specific objective of the study was to establish the extent of participation of undergraduate students in user education programs provided by university libraries in Meru County. There is no published research on user studies among students in Meru County, Kenya.

Literature Review

The study was guided by Expectation-Confirmation Theory (ECT). The librarians offer user services with an expectation that the users would be enlightened on how to make best use of the available resources, services and facilities in a library (Wanja, 2024). Perception refers to how students subjectively interpret, understand, and evaluate the library and its various facets (Oakleaf, 2010). Muszkiewicz (2017) notes that the initial perceptions students form of university libraries are long-lasting and can shape their attitudes towards library materials and services. Orientations for new students can foster positive correlations with the library and its staff. In accordance with this, Chiya et al. (2023) highlights the significance of library user education programs in bridging literacy gaps and equipping students with the necessary skills for effective gathering, assessing, and use of information.

According to Omeluzor et al. (2017), users' perceptions of library materials are important to a significant degree, since they define the level of the usage of information materials in

university libraries. Katlego et al. (2023) alleges that there are fewer studies focusing on library user education, and library user perceptions in the developing countries as compared to literature on library user education in developed nations.

Interestingly, Ngozi et al. (2023) observes that if library use is not introduced to secondary school students, there is greater likelihood that even when library orientation is organized in the university, such students do not see the need to participate. Consequently, this impacts their library usage in the future. Ngozi et al's study points to the fact that new students ought to be introduced to the library, as this experience could positively influence their perception of the library.

Amarasekara and Marasinghe (2020) view perception as the set of procedures by which a person develops consciousness of, and deduces information about the environment. They further observe that perception is an inner attitude towards something or an individual with a result that could be positive or negative. Measuring opinions and perceptions about university libraries and user education initiatives was deemed an effective method for developing new strategies and enhancing existing library services.

Akande (2009) opines that perception is related to comprehending problems. It is closely related to the psychological capacity to interpret or make use of data received from the sense organs. Liu et al. (2019), view perception as the way in which something is held, deduced, or construed. According to

Ranganathan (2012), an individual's perception is impacted by their engagement with the library, with the past learning experience having a substantial impact. In the global arena, Rowley et al. (2015) note that students who gain information literacy skills feel more competent to carry out assignments, write papers, and conduct research. This is because they feel more equipped to handle academic challenges, consequently students' perceptions of the university may improve as a result of their increased confidence.

Regionally, the findings of a study by Ashaver and Bem-Bura (2013) which focused on universities in Benue State, Nigeria, revealed that students had a negative attitude towards the university library services, and expressed a negative perception because they lacked knowledge on how to find information resources, and how to use retrieval procedures. This was attributable to a lack of library user education. Udem et al. (2020) stressed that quality library services are a legitimate expectation among users and a crucial factor for enhancing user satisfaction.

The interaction between librarians and students is a key factor in shaping student perceptions. Jameson et al. (2019) found that positive relationships between library staff and students can lead to more favorable perceptions of the library. However, Ali et al. (2018) noted that librarians' images can vary widely, from being seen as assertive and innovative, to being viewed as resistant to change and outdated. This variation underscores the need for librarians to actively engage with students and continuously improve their service delivery.

2.0 Materials and Methods

A descriptive survey design was employed in this study. The target population was 6138 first year undergraduate students from KeMU and MUST. A sample size of 364 was obtained using stratified random sampling technique aided by Krejcie and Morgan Table (1970). The sample was stratified on the basis of academic Schools from the two main campuses of the universities in Meru. The sample population was obtained in proportion to the School population. The study also targeted 46 library staff members; where 12 respondents were purposely sampled to participate in the study. Students' data were collected using a structured questionnaire, while an interview schedule was used to collect data from the library staff.

Data collection instruments were pre-tested for content validity, and reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha Correlation Coefficient, with an acceptable alpha of 0.70 or higher (Mallery & George, 2010). The Cronbach's Alpha (α) value for the variable was 0.839. Implying the data collection instrument was reliable. Descriptive statistics were employed for analyzing quantitative data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 27). Thematic analysis was utilized to analyze qualitative data, guided by the research objective. The findings were presented using descriptive tables and narratives for ease of understanding of the results. Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality and anonymity

of the participants were maintained, and the data collected was used solely for academic purposes. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional research review boards.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Response rate

Out of 364 questionnaires distributed to undergraduate students in the two universities

in Meru County, 201 were returned fully completed, representing 55.2% response rate. During the research, a majority of MUST students had taken a long holiday break. Babbie (2001) indicates that a response rate of at least 50% is appropriate for surveys and anything above this is generally considered good. The study interviewed 10 library staff, representing 83.4% response rate; as shown in Table 1 and 2 below.

Table 1

Students Response Rate

School	Sample Size	Frequency	Percentage
Business and Economics	75	25	6.9
Education and Social Sciences	76	21	5.8
Agriculture and Food Science	44	35	9.6
Medicine and Health Sciences	17	17	4.7
Nursing	44	45	12.4
Engineering and Architecture	31	24	6.6
Computing and Informatics/Technology	77	34	9.3
Total	364	201	55.2

Table 2

Staff Response Rate

Position	Targeted Population	Frequency	Percentage
Librarian	1	0	0
Senior Library Assistants	9	8	66.7
Library assistants	2	2	16.7
Total	12	10	83.40%

Participation in User Education Programs

The research sought to evaluate the extent of undergraduate students' participation in user

education programs provided by university libraries in Meru County. Respondents rated their agreement with various statements about their participation Using a 5-level Likert scale;

where: SD = strongly disagree (1); D = disagree (2); N = neutral (3); A = agree (4);

and SA = strongly agree (5). The findings are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Participation in User Education Programs

Statements	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Mean
I participated in the library orientation	18 (9%)	19 (10%)	13 (7%)	72 (35%)	79 (39%)	3.85
An attendance register is provided for all attendees of user programs	22 (11%)	25 (12%)	42 (21%)	44 (22%)	68 (34%)	3.56
I attended all the programs lined up for new library users during orientation	23 (11%)	34 (17%)	40 (20%)	54 (27%)	50 (25%)	3.38
I actively participate in the user education programs	19 (10%)	30 (15%)	51 (25%)	67 (33%)	34 (17%)	3.32
Library user education programs attendance was made compulsory by the university	39 (19%)	38 (19%)	50 (25%)	28 (14%)	46 (23%)	3.02

The results show that a significant proportion of students (74%) participated in the library orientation (mean = 3.85). This high participation rate aligns with the importance of library orientations in familiarizing students with library services and resources, as highlighted by previous studies

However, the attendance at all programs during orientation was lower, with only 52% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that they attended all programs (mean = 3.38). Active participation in user education programs was also moderate, with a mean score of 3.32, indicating that while some students are engaged, there is room for improvement in encouraging broader participation.

The statement about the compulsory nature of user education programs had a lower mean

score of 3.02, suggesting that not all students perceived these programs as mandatory, which may affect attendance rates. Providing an attendance register for all attendees received a higher agreement (mean = 3.56), indicating a structured approach to tracking participation. These findings concur with studies conducted earlier by Okoye, (2013) where user education courses were examined; hence, providing an opportunity to evaluate library user education.

The library staff interview on their opinion and observation, how they rated the attendance of new undergraduate students during the library's user education program offered by the library to the students.

The library's user education programs are deemed positive by 90% of new undergraduate students, with a 4/5 rating and

positive turnout. However, a 60% turnout suggests that a substantial proportion of students may not have had the opportunity to participate in these user education programmes. Despite this, the programs are well-received and beneficial to those who participate, but there is potential for improvement in attendance rates to ensure greater student involvement. Overall, the

library's user education programs are well-received and effective with its students.

Strategies to Improve Participation in User Education Programs

The study was interested in the views of the participants in enhancing participation of undergraduate students in library user education as presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Strategies to Improve Participation in User Education Programs

Statements	SD (1)	D (2)	N (3)	A (4)	SA (5)	Mean
The library should use social media platforms to reach out	8 (4%)	4 (2%)	12 (6%)	62 (31%)	115 (57%)	4.34
The library should put posters on noticeboards to publicize the user programs	7 (4%)	5 (3%)	8 (4%)	70 (35%)	111 (55%)	4.33
Use of university website to invite users for library user education programs	5 (3%)	5 (3%)	21 (10%)	66 (33%)	104 (52%)	4.27
Use of class representatives and student leaders to reach out to new students	12 (6%)	9 (5%)	14 (7%)	62 (31%)	104 (52%)	4.18
The course lecturers can be used in sensitization of the programs	3 (2%)	9 (5%)	28 (14%)	79 (39%)	82 (41%)	4.11
The university should include library orientation in the mandatory scheduled university orientation programs	14 (7%)	13 (7%)	17 (9%)	55 (27%)	102 (51%)	4.07
The library should send SMS to new students	13 (7%)	15 (8%)	25 (12%)	55 (27%)	93 (46%)	3.98

The suggested strategies to improve participation received strong support, particularly using posters (mean = 4.33) and social media platforms (mean = 4.34) for publicizing programs. This aligns with contemporary research that underscores the effectiveness of digital communication and

social media in reaching and engaging students (Jones & Murphy, 2023).

Students also strongly agreed that the course lecturers could be used to sensitize them about the programs (mean = 4.11), indicating a potential partnership between faculty and library staff to boost participation. The use of class representatives and student leaders

(mean = 4.18) was another highly endorsed strategy, reflecting the value of peer influence in promoting educational activities (Brown, 2021).

The findings show that while there is a decent level of involvement in user education programs, there are opportunities for further engagement. Aligning with previous studies, integrating digital communication tools such as the social media, SMS, and university websites can significantly improve program visibility and participation (Jones & Murphy, 2023; Leong, 2020). Additionally, leveraging faculty and student leaders as advocates can create a more supportive and encouraging environment for new students to participate in these essential programs (Oliver, 2022).

Enhancing the extent of participation in user education programs requires a diverse approach that combines conventional approaches and current digital strategies. By implementing these recommendations, university libraries in Meru County can better

support students' academic success and lifelong learning; thereby satisfying the CUE's requirements.

Librarian 3 had this to say about attendance:

“The participation of new undergraduate students in the library's orientation events for the academic year 2023/2024 demonstrates high overall engagement levels. The most precise number shows that 2506 out of 2894 students, or 86.59%, attended the orientation sessions, indicating a high turnout”.

Relationship between the study variables

Correlation analysis was conducted to determine the degree and direction of the relationship between the research variables. The Pearson correlation coefficient was the statistical measure used. Holcomb, (2021) states that a correlation must fall between -1 and +1, where -1 indicates a perfect negative association, and +1 indicates a perfect positive relationship. The results of the correlation analysis are shown in Table 5.

Table 5
Correlation

		Extent of Participation	Perception of University Libraries
Extent of Participation	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N		
	Pearson Correlation	1	
Perception of University Libraries	Sig. (2-tailed)		
	N	201	
	Pearson Correlation	0.740**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
		N	201

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The study found a considerable favorable correlation ($p\text{-value} < 0.05$, $r=0.740$) between student engagement in user education and perception of university libraries. The positive connection suggests an increase in the student's view of the university library, which is affected by an increase in the predictor variable (the level of participation in user education).

The majority of the first-year respondents use the library, indicating active engagement with library resources, which highly correlates with a high level of attendance during user education programs. The visits of at least once per week stood at 69% among the respondents who participated. This response is above 50%, and it is indicative that students have a positive perception of the library. The contrary would have been low rates of library visits and not valuing user education. It can be concluded that indeed, user education influences undergraduate perception of the library. There was high positivity towards the library, as affirmed by the respondents involved in this study.

4.0 Conclusion

The study found that despite 74% library orientation attendance rate, subsequent attendance declined, suggesting strong initial interest, but diminishing sustained engagement. Students endorsed strategies like social media, posters, and university

websites to boost participation. A strong positive correlation between user education participation and students' perceptions of university libraries suggests enhanced engagement.

5.0 Recommendations

The study recommends the use of attendance data and engagement metrics to assess the performance of various library user education programs to inform future changes and ensure that programs attract students' participation. In addition to tracking attendance and engagement, regular feedback surveys should be used to evaluate students' experiences, and inform improvements to user education content and delivery. Libraries should consider offering optional, but highly motivating user education programs that cater to a variety of learning styles and schedules. Balancing compulsory and elective elements can accommodate varied degrees of student commitment, while increasing total involvement.

Universities should introduce a Library User Education course taught by librarians to masters and doctorate degrees to enhance their library usage skills and improve their perception of the library. Further, studies could explore the adoption of the SERVQUAL model in user education to improve service delivery and user participation.

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