

OPEN ACCESS TOOLS AND ONLINE RESOURCES IN NIGERIAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: A THEORETICAL EXAMINATION OF STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE SERVICE DELIVERY

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper undertakes a theoretical re-examination of strategies for enhancing open-access tools and online resources to support effective service delivery in Nigerian academic libraries.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study grounds its analysis in three interrelated theoretical frameworks, Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and Equity of Access Theory, to examine the structural, institutional, and behavioural dimensions shaping the adoption and sustainability of open access in Nigerian academic library contexts. Drawing on original empirical observations from the Nigerian academic library environment, the paper is structured around an introduction to the Nigerian academic library landscape, a synthesis of relevant theoretical frameworks, an application of those frameworks to Nigerian library conditions, and a set of theory-informed recommendations.

Findings: The study contends that technological deficits, financial constraints, digital literacy gaps, and copyright complexities are not merely operational challenges but are manifestations of deeper theoretical tensions between innovation diffusion, user acceptance, and information equity. While prior scholarship has documented the challenges associated with open access in developing-country libraries, comparatively little attention has been given to theorising the underlying mechanisms that explain why certain adoption patterns emerge and persist.

Implication: By situating the Nigerian open access experience within established theoretical traditions, the paper advances theory-informed recommendations to address systemic barriers to open access adoption in Nigerian academic libraries, with implications for library policy, infrastructure investment, and professional capacity development.

Originality/Value: The paper contributes to both the global scholarship on open access and the regional literature on library development in sub-Saharan Africa by offering a theoretically grounded analytical lens that bridges innovation diffusion, user acceptance, and information equity in an under-examined regional context.

Keywords: open access; Nigerian academic libraries; Diffusion of Innovations; Technology Acceptance Model; equity of access; digital infrastructure; service delivery; institutional repositories

Paper type: Conceptual paper

Introduction

Academic libraries in Nigeria occupy a foundational position within the country's broader educational infrastructure, serving as primary gateways to scholarly knowledge and institutional anchors for research, teaching, and learning. These libraries serve students, faculty members, researchers, and

increasingly, the wider public, providing access to textbooks, journals, digital archives, and online databases that support intellectual inquiry across disciplines (Haleem et al., 2022). Their role extends beyond the custodianship of information resources; they function as collaborative spaces where ideas are exchanged, academic

discourse is cultivated, and the conditions for lifelong learning are sustained. In a country characterized by significant variation in the availability of educational resources, the academic library is one of the few institutional structures capable of delivering equitable access to scholarly content, regardless of a user's socioeconomic background or geographic location (Salisu, 2024).

The global shift towards open access has brought about a significant change in how scholarly information is created, shared, and consumed. Open-access tools and online resources, such as open-access journals, institutional repositories, open educational resources (OER), and publicly accessible databases, have become powerful means for democratizing knowledge. By removing the subscription barriers that have traditionally limited access to academic literature, open access models enable broader participation in scholarly discussions and facilitate the faster dissemination of research findings (Hoover, 2023; Suber, 2022). For institutions in the Global South, where library acquisition budgets are often very limited, these resources are especially important (Onaolapo et al., 2025). Open access provides a way for resource-constrained academic libraries to increase their

collections and enhance the quality of services they offer to their communities without substantial increases in costs (Farouk, 2025).

Although there are opportunities, Nigerian academic libraries face a complex array of challenges that prevent their effective use of open access tools and online resources. Limited technological infrastructure, ongoing financial constraints, gaps in digital literacy among staff and users, unreliable power supply, and unresolved copyright and licensing issues all hinder the adoption and optimal use of open access resources (Ezema & Eze, 2024; Osinulu, 2020; Salau, 2024; Idiedo, 2024). These problems are not unique to Nigeria; they are common across sub-Saharan Africa and other developing regions, but they are especially severe in Nigeria due to the size of its higher education system and the diversity of its institutions (Onaolapo et al., 2025; Mensah, 2024). Overcoming these challenges requires more than practical, policy-level solutions; it demands a theoretically informed understanding of the mechanisms that influence technology adoption, user behaviour, and equitable access to information.

While an increasing number of studies have examined the practical aspects of open access in Nigerian academic

libraries, the theoretical foundations of this discussion remain underdeveloped. Existing research often lists challenges and provides recommendations without contextualising these findings within established theoretical frameworks that could offer explanatory and predictive insights (Abdu, 2025; Salisu, 2024). This paper aims to address that gap by introducing and applying three interconnected theoretical models, Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003), the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989), and Equity of Access Theory (Shera, 1970; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2016), to analyse open access adoption and service delivery in Nigerian academic libraries. Collectively, these frameworks illuminate the social, behavioural, and structural aspects of the open access challenge, providing a more comprehensive foundation for understanding the observed patterns and developing theoretically informed interventions.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section introduces and elaborates on the three theoretical frameworks, describing their origins, core propositions, and relevance to library and information science. The following section applies these frameworks to the Nigerian academic library context, drawing on empirical observations

and existing literature to demonstrate how theoretical insights can deepen understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with open access. The final section offers a theoretically grounded conclusion that synthesizes the key arguments and provides recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. Throughout, the paper remains faithful to the original empirical findings and the specific context of the Nigerian academic library environment, while enriching them with theoretical rigour and scholarly depth.

Theoretical Frameworks

The present study is based on three interconnected theoretical frameworks that collectively explain the adoption, acceptance, and fair distribution of open access tools and online resources in Nigerian academic libraries: Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), and Equity of Access Theory. These frameworks address the process of innovation diffusion, individual behaviours related to technology acceptance, and the normative need for equitable access to information, respectively. Each theory is presented below as originally developed by its creator(s), with relevant modifications or

extensions noted where applicable, followed by its direct relevance to the current study.

Diffusion of Innovations Theory

Diffusion of Innovations Theory, originally developed by Everett M. Rogers in 1962 and extensively revised in the fifth edition of his key work (Rogers, 2003), defines diffusion as "the process by which an innovation is communicated through specific channels over time among members of a social system" (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). The theory identifies five adopter categories (innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards) based on individuals' or organisations' relative readiness to adopt innovations, and five key attributes of innovations that influence adoption rates: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. An innovation perceived as having a clear relative advantage, high compatibility with existing values and practices, low complexity, high trialability, and high observability is more likely to diffuse quickly within a social system.

No major modifications have been made to the core propositions of Rogers's original Theory; however, subsequent scholars have extended its application to specific domains, such as library and information science, and have incorporated contextual variables, such as organisational

readiness and inter-institutional networks (Shoroma, 2023).

In relation to the present study, Diffusion of Innovations Theory provides a robust explanatory lens for understanding the patterns and pace of adoption of open-access tools across Nigerian academic libraries. It illuminates why certain libraries act as early adopters of institutional repositories and open educational resources while others remain laggards, highlights compatibility gaps between globally designed open access platforms and local infrastructural realities (such as erratic power supply and low bandwidth), and underscores the role of professional networks (e.g., the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Nigeria) as communication channels that can accelerate diffusion (Ezema & Eze, 2024; Idiedo, 2024; Salisu, 2024).

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model was introduced by Fred D. Davis in 1989. As originally presented, TAM suggests that an individual's behavioural intention to use a specific information technology is mainly determined by two cognitive constructs: perceived usefulness (the extent to which a person believes that using the system would improve their job performance) and perceived ease of use (the extent to which a

person believes that using the system would require no effort) (Davis, 1989). These two perceptions directly shape attitudes towards using the technology, which, in turn, predict actual system usage.

The original TAM has undergone several extensions and modifications. Davis and colleagues later developed TAM2 and TAM3 to include additional external variables such as subjective norms and experience. A more comprehensive evolution is the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), proposed by Venkatesh et al. (2003), which combines elements from TAM and seven other models and introduces four core constructs (performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, and facilitating conditions) along with moderating variables (gender, age, experience, and voluntariness of use).

In this study, TAM (and its UTAUT extension) explains why library staff and users in Nigerian academic institutions may underutilize open access tools even when they are technically available. Low digital literacy often diminishes perceived ease of use, which then reduces perceived usefulness, leading to limited adoption. The framework also highlights the essential role of targeted training programmes and

institutional support as facilitating conditions that can influence user perceptions and boost actual usage of open access platforms (Agina-Obu & Okwu, 2023; Oladokun, 2025; Sambo et al., 2022).

Equity of Access Theory

The Equity of Access Theory has its foundational roots in the philosophy of library science articulated by Jesse H. Shera in 1970. Shera argued that the library's primary social mission is to provide equal access to information and knowledge for all individuals, regardless of social position, economic circumstances, or geographic location, thereby supporting informed citizenship and democratic participation (Shera, 1970). Contemporary scholars have elaborated and contextualised this theory for the digital era. Widdersheim and Koizumi (2016), for instance, developed a social legitimacy theory of the public library that emphasises the institutional and structural dimensions of information equity, arguing that libraries must actively mitigate existing social inequalities through deliberate service design and resource allocation.

While the core normative proposition remains unchanged, recent modifications have extended the Theory to digital environments, incorporating analyses of the

digital divide, open access publishing models, and global intellectual property regimes (Suber, 2022; Onaolapo et al., 2025). For this study, Equity of Access Theory offers the normative and ethical foundation for assessing open-access initiatives in Nigerian academic libraries. It views technological gaps, financial constraints, and copyright issues not just as operational hurdles but as signs of deeper structural inequalities that libraries have a professional obligation to tackle. The theory insists that strategies for enhancing open access should be assessed on their capacity to ensure equitable sharing of benefits among federal, state, and privately funded institutions, urban and rural areas, and privileged versus disadvantaged user groups (Ebijuwa, 2023; Salau, 2024; Salisu, 2024).

Application of Theory to the Nigerian Context

Diffusion of Open Access Innovations in Nigerian Academic Libraries

Applying Diffusion of Innovations Theory to the Nigerian academic library context provides valuable insights into the patterns and pace of open access adoption across the country's higher education system (Shoroma, 2023). Rogers's framework suggests that the rate at which Nigerian libraries adopt open access tools will be influenced by the perceived relative

advantage of these tools over existing information provision methods, their compatibility with traditional library practices and institutional cultures, and the availability of reliable communication channels through which awareness and knowledge about open access resources can be disseminated (Rogers, 2003). In the Nigerian context, the relative advantage of open access tools is evident; they offer access to scholarly literature that many libraries could not otherwise afford.

However, this benefit is often offset by technological barriers that hinder reliable access to online resources, including poor internet infrastructure, outdated hardware, and erratic power supply (Ezema & Eze, 2024; Farouk, 2025; Idiedo, 2024). The theoretical framework thus helps explain why awareness of open-access resources does not automatically lead to their adoption and use (Abdu, 2025).

The compatibility aspect of Rogers's model is especially insightful here. Open access tools and platforms are often designed with the infrastructure realities of high-income countries in mind, featuring assumptions about bandwidth, hardware quality, and digital literacy that are not always present in many Nigerian academic settings. This compatibility gap presents a significant structural obstacle to diffusion

(Kato et al., 2021; Salau, 2024). Overcoming this gap involves adaptation strategies such as creating offline access options, mobile-friendly interfaces, and low-bandwidth solutions for widely used open-access repositories (Mensah, 2024).

The Diffusion Theory framework also emphasizes the vital role of inter-institutional networks and partnerships in speeding up the dissemination of open access innovations within the Nigerian academic library sector. Formal networks such as the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Nigeria, along with informal professional networks among librarians, serve as important channels for diffusion (Lynch et al., 2022; Salisu, 2024). Collaborative initiatives to develop and populate institutional repositories further illustrate network-based diffusion mechanisms (Ezema & Eze, 2024; Idiedo, 2024).

User Acceptance and Digital Literacy in the TAM Framework

The Technology Acceptance Model offers a detailed theoretical explanation of the behavioural and attitudinal factors that impact whether library staff and users in Nigerian academic institutions effectively engage with open access tools and online resources. TAM's core idea helps clarify

why tools that are technically available are still underused (Osinulu, 2020; Agina-Obu & Okwu, 2023). In the Nigerian academic library context, both perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use are often limited by the digital literacy gap affecting many library users and some staff (Sambo et al., 2022; Oladokun, 2025; Mudassir & Muhammad, 2025).

This sequence, from low digital literacy to low perceived ease of use, then to low perceived usefulness, and finally to low adoption, provides a consistent explanation for the underutilisation patterns seen in recent Nigerian research (Omorobi et al., 2021; Adewojo, 2026). Targeted training programmes can disrupt this cycle by enhancing perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness (Lawal, 2017; Mungwabi, 2019).

The TAM framework also illuminates the importance of institutional and social factors. Extensions such as UTAUT emphasizes social influence and facilitating conditions (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Where university leadership actively endorses open access initiatives, librarians and users are more likely to perceive adoption as professionally advantageous (Salisu, 2024).

Equity of Access and the Structural Dimensions of the Open Access Gap

Equity of Access Theory provides the most morally urgent perspective for examining the challenges facing open access in Nigerian academic libraries (Shera, 1970; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2016). In Nigeria, ongoing inequalities in technological infrastructure, manifested through disparities between elite federal universities and less-resourced state and private institutions directly result in inequalities in access to open access resources (Ezema & Eze, 2024; Salau, 2024). These inequalities are further exacerbated by financial constraints and the digital divide between urban and rural or peri-urban areas (Joyce & Cartwright, 2020; Ebijuwa, 2023).

The equity framework also emphasises copyright and licensing systems as key factors influencing access inequality. Nigerian academic libraries often lack sufficient legal support or training in copyright law, creating a challenge that discourages wider sharing of open access resources (Suber, 2022; Vollmer, 2022; Onaolapo et al., 2025). The theory requires strategies such as copyright education, advocacy for Creative Commons licensing, and engagement with national policymakers (Hotsonyame, 2023).

Theory-Informed Strategies for Enhancing Open Access in Nigerian Libraries

The theoretical frameworks outlined above provide a multifaceted foundation for evaluating and enhancing strategies to improve open-access tools and online resources in Nigerian academic libraries. From the perspective of Diffusion of Innovations Theory, effective strategies should improve compatibility, utilise professional networks, and support early adopters and champions (Rogers, 2003; Shoroma, 2023). Investing in robust digital infrastructure, reliable internet connectivity, modern hardware, alternative power sources, and technical support represents a theoretically grounded intervention (Olubiyo, 2022; Ogungbenro, 2025). Promoting inter-institutional collaboration through consortia remains essential (Lynch et al., 2022; Idiedo, 2024).

From a TAM perspective, capacity-building and training initiatives play a key role. Targeted programmes that enhance digital literacy, demonstrate practical benefits, and lower cognitive effort can significantly boost perceived usefulness and ease of use (Lawal, 2017; Mungwabi, 2019; Agina-Obu & Okwu, 2023; Mudassir & Muhammad, 2025). Open access tool developers should focus on usability and

low-bandwidth designs suitable for Nigerian contexts.

The Equity of Access Theory emphasises the importance of institutional and national policies that actively promote fair access. Libraries should establish comprehensive open-access guidelines that cover copyright, data sharing, preservation, and resource distribution (Hotsonyame, 2023; Vollmer, 2022; Ebijuwa, 2023). At the national level, consistent funding models and copyright reforms that broaden fair use provisions are urgently required, especially for underprivileged institutions (Salisu, 2024; Onaolapo et al., 2025).

Conclusion

This paper aims to reframe the discourse on open access tools and online resources in Nigerian academic libraries through three complementary theoretical frameworks: Diffusion of Innovations Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model, and Equity of Access Theory. By grounding the analysis in theory, the paper moves beyond the descriptive and prescriptive tendencies of much existing literature to offer a more explanatory and normatively nuanced account of the challenges and opportunities facing Nigerian academic libraries as they endeavour to improve service delivery through open access. The

analysis demonstrates that the commonly identified challenges, inadequate technological infrastructure, financial limitations, digital literacy gaps, and copyright complexities, are interconnected effects of deeper theoretical tensions between innovation diffusion, user acceptance, and information equity.

The implications for practice are considerable. Library administrators, policymakers, and academic leaders must commit to investing in digital infrastructure, implementing comprehensive training programmes, fostering inter-institutional collaboration, and developing clear, equitably oriented open access policies. These initiatives must be designed with an understanding of the theoretical mechanisms they aim to activate: enhancing compatibility to speed up diffusion, increasing perceived usefulness and ease of use to promote technology acceptance, and redistributing access to meet the equity goals of the library profession. Future research should empirically test the explanatory and predictive power of these theoretical frameworks within the Nigerian context, creating locally adapted models that reflect the specific cultural, institutional, and infrastructural conditions of Nigerian academic libraries. By investing in

theoretically grounded scholarship and practice, Nigerian academic libraries can bolster their capacity to serve their communities effectively and contribute to the country's intellectual and social development in fair, sustainable ways.

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