

**SERVING THE LIBRARY USER COMMUNITY THROUGH FACEBOOK DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC; WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SRI LANKAN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES**

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**Abstract**

The current situation with the Covid-19 pandemic limits the libraries from reaching their users traditionally. It leads to a trend in many sectors to search for other alternatives where libraries can reach out to their users safely. Facebook is such a social media platform that has many benefits to offer for free services. It is also helpful to reach a wider user community. No pre-established social media guideline or system for libraries in Sri Lanka is a problem associated with the usage of Facebook. The Exploration of the possibilities, limitations, and constraints of currently available library Facebook profiles will provide a proper understanding and vision for future developments. The research objective was to explore the practices of using the Facebook online platform by university libraries in Sri Lanka to continue connections with their user community during the COVID pandemic. Libraries in Sri Lanka use Facebook pages to promote their services and to share beneficial information. About 88% have more than one profile for their main libraries. Some of them maintain separate Facebook profiles for different Faculty and institutional libraries. The study suggests a policy for the safe and appropriate use of social media, inclusive of Facebook. Moreover, the study suggests promoting the library's Facebook profiles among users and encouraging the establishment and maintenance of Facebook accounts by librarians.

**Keywords:** Facebook, University Libraries, Social Media, COVID 19 pandemic

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**Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a global challenge. Many countries have been imposing strict regulations to diminish the spread of the virus from time to time, such as suggesting, conducting activities from home, and implementing physical or social distancing policies. Consequently, academic libraries, especially their services and user connections, have undergone diminishing demand. In this context, Facebook is one of the most potential platforms to continue the interrelation with their user community, sharing all possible information to fulfill user's demands (Nicola et al., 2020).

Web 2.0 is directed towards the increased use of Internet services (Harrison et al., 2017). Hence, academic libraries have started to increase social media engagement with users and assist them in creating a community of users with increased engagement with various groups of outside community and enable the user to be more accessible on resources and services which are user friendly (Chatten, Z. and Roughley, S., 2016). It has been effectively supporting different applications or tools that have been introduced from modern social media online platforms to users for networking with each other, video and photo sharing and post, tag, dig, blogs, etc. Therefore, libraries integrate social media into their marketing strategies (Siddike et al., 2015).

In their studies, Siddike et al. (2015) and Chizwina et al. (2017) recommended Facebook as the most effective way of marketing their library services on social media online platforms. Another study done by Chizwina et al. (2017) proposes a social media policy for safe and appropriate use of social media and developing user awareness associated with protocols to engage with social communication. (Al-Daihani and AlAwadhi, 2015).

It is observed that the use of Facebook page for serving the library user community and continuing the library services by the academic libraries during the pandemic in Sri Lanka is not investigated in depth. This research aims to fill that gap in the research literature.

**Scope and Limitation of the Study**

The scope of the present study is limited to examine the use of social media by the Academic Libraries of Sri Lanka for providing library services during lockdown due to COVID-19. The scope is further limited to below Universities of Sri Lanka and their institutional Libraries.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant as the findings would help libraries in the formulation of proper Social Media Policies and effective strategies for using Facebook for delivering library services more effectively during pandemics in the future.

## Objectives

The main objective of this study was to explore the methods of using Facebook online platforms by university libraries in Sri Lanka to continue the connections with their user community during the COVID 19 pandemic.

Exploring the official Facebook use of academic libraries in Sri Lanka, the user interactions and user interest towards these accounts, the types of information shared by these accounts, and the other interactive resources used to share this information were the specific objectives.

## Methodology

The current study explored the use of Facebook online platforms by university libraries in Sri Lanka to continue the connections with their user community to share the updated information of library services. The study population consisted of all the academic libraries governed under the University Grant Commission (UGC), Sri Lanka. Official Facebook accounts of these libraries were examined to investigate the types of services they promote through Facebook. Facebook accounts were surveyed using Keyword combinations; *Library, University, Sri Lanka*, and specific University names, and **content analysis** technique was carried out to analyze gathered data.

## Results and Discussion

As per the findings, 88% of the Academic Main Libraries in Sri Lanka use Facebook pages to promote their libraries and services and share information. All the libraries share links to freely available digital resources through these pages. Moreover, they share information regarding webinars and training programs useful for their user community. Almost all the pages provided Messenger access to its followers to contact the page administrators. All the pages provide contact details and access details of Universities, such as web page links. As security measures, the user community is not allowed to comment openly on posts and post anything. These steps are taken to regulate what is posted on these pages. Observing post reshares, it was noticed that users reshare the content available in these sites on their profiles. According to this study, two-thirds of the selected library profiles have more than 1000 likes and followers. The study also reveals that non-users of the library reach the profiles and share information through Facebook among the Sri Lankan community. Moreover, information resources are also shared among the Facebook profiles of libraries and information centers. The libraries further expanded their services by utilizing Facebook tools and creating specific groups and online events for their services. According to this study, two-thirds of the selected library profiles have more than 1000 likes and followers. The study also reveals that non-users of the library reach the profiles and share information through Facebook among the Sri Lankan community. In addition, information resources are also

shared among the Facebook profiles of libraries and information centers. The libraries further expanded their services by utilizing Facebook tools and creating specific groups and online events for their services.

## Conclusion

Social networks allow students to connect with students on Facebook. Since it is a widely used platform where the user community is already virtually available, it provides the libraries free and easy ways of connection. Sri Lanka's Academic Library Facebook profiles are reaching its target users to promote services and disseminate knowledge. Library Users and interested other Facebook users can also get instant information relating to the research with social media.

## Suggestions and Recommendations

Facebook can be recognized as a promising ground to promote and expand library services. Library professionals can adopt new strategies for sharing information. Facebook will help to inculcate the habit of using these sites for academic work. Student communities will have access to much-needed and accurate information through Facebook through the involvement of library professionals. The University Libraries should formulate suitable policies for implementing and operating social media-based services. It is also important to inculcate a positive attitude among the library professionals and the users towards the potential positive use of Facebook. Hence optimum use of social media for academic and social development and share accurate, timely information. It is also necessary to educate and spread awareness regarding the risks involved with social media.

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