

The academic librarians' empowerment and engagement as research partners: a qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

Academic librarians are seen as information providers, even where their provision is beyond the simple rule of providing access to information. This perception had not changed in Nigeria, even when academic librarians were accorded academic status and adopted an embedded librarianship model, which allows them to collaborate with the faculty. The need arises for how optimal the academic librarians can partner with faculty members in research. As a result, this study explored the source of academic librarians' engagement with their work role and empowerment for effective participation and collaboration, and enhance performance. The study employed a qualitative approach and purposively sampled 21 academic librarians from a major university in Nigeria. Data were generated through focus group discussions and interviews. The findings were structured around six (6) sources of empowerment themes and four (4) sources of engagement themes. Since this is the first study in Nigeria that articulates a manifestation of academic librarians as research partners, it has provided academic librarians with the necessary authority to enhance their performance in a research partnership and has paved the way for further research.

Keywords: Academic librarians; Empowerment; Engagement; Research partnership; Embedded librarianship; Qualitative method

INTRODUCTION

Research is an emerging field of interest in librarianship, so focusing on research and publishing is topical (Bright, 2018). As a pathway to engagement and success, academic librarians collaborate with faculty academics to advance their careers (Mathews et al., 2018). Therefore, the need arises for how best the academic librarians can partner with the faculty members to showcase their relevance to their stakeholders, support the institutional mission, and advance their career development. As scholarly communication systems undergo significant transformation, the role of academic librarians in higher learning institutions is also evolving, increasingly positioning them as research partners. However, clear criteria for the transition from mere support to true partnership remains elusive. Literature addressing the emerging roles of academic librarians as research

collaborators is limited, particularly concerning their avenues for engagement and empowerment.

Established scholarship perceives empowerment as a pivotal factor enabling individuals, groups, or communities to assert control over their surroundings (AlKahtani et al., 2021; Hewagama et al., 2019). Equipping academic librarians with the necessary authority is deemed essential for achieving desired outcomes (Shalhub et al., 2020). Simultaneously, active engagement of academic librarians in their roles as research partners is seen as enhancing their performance within research collaborations. Consequently, the theories of engagement and empowerment bear significant implications for the evolving role of academic librarians, transitioning them from support to active partnership. However, while engagement theory, as described by Kwon and Park (2019), emphasizes the process of deeply involving employees in organizational culture to enhance productivity and reputation, its application alongside empowerment theory in academic librarianship literature remains largely unexplored, constituting a focal point for this study.

This paper is part of a more extensive study¹ that aims to better understand the academic librarians' responsibilities as research partners and the competencies required to enhance their performance in a research partnership. Specifically, this paper aims to explore academic librarians' sources of empowerment and engagement as research partners for effective participation, collaboration, and performance. The following research questions were formulated to shape the data collection and analyses:

- (a) How do academic librarians empower themselves as research partners?
- (b) How do academic librarians engage themselves as research partners?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study reviewed the substantive findings and previous studies' contributions to the topic to create a gap. The topical issues are twofold; empowerment and engagement of academic librarians as research partners.

Empowerment of academic librarians as research partners

Empowerment generally means gaining control in which an employee becomes more reliable and more confident in discharging their duties to achieve their primary objectives. The concept suggests that collaborating with others to attain goals, making efforts to access resources, and possessing some understanding of the socio-political environment are fundamental components of the construct (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). For instance, Shalhub et al. (2020) and Rupp et al. (2020) underscored the significance and influence of empowerment as a catalyst for fostering and improving employee performance to accomplish organizational objectives. Simultaneously, Rupp et al. (2020) characterized the theory as a process that empowers employees to exert control over their domain.

The works of literature (such as those by Hewagama et al., 2019; Irnawati & Prasetyo, 2020; Mathews et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2019) have utilized empowerment theory to craft a model aimed at enhancing employee empowerment for organizational success. Moreover, Joseph (2020) and Irnawati and Prasetyo (2020) notably illustrate that employees across all levels of intervention should adopt empowerment as a framework to enhance productivity.

¹ Doctoral research by the first author, supervised by the second author submitted to Universiti Malaya in 2022 entitled "Roles and competencies of academic librarians for the empowerment and engagement of research partnership".

Similarly, a body of literature reveals employee empowerment as an essential policy for enhancing the capabilities and participation of employees on the basis that empowered employees feel competent in their job responsibilities. (Alhozi et al., 2021; Ahmad & Manzoor, 2017; AlKahtani et al., 2021; Dahou & Hacini, 2018; Motamarri et al., 2020). For instance, AlKahtani et al. (2021) reveal that employee empowerment positively impacts employees' commitment to organisational success. To this extent, empowering academic librarians with the necessary authority will give them the power to discharge their duties as research partners effectively.

Furthermore, Alnadi et al. (2020) recognised the need for empowerment to improve employee performance planning, management, and performance evaluation. Similarly, Shalhub et al. (2020) used the empowerment theory to provide the administration with a partnership engagement framework. The literature postulates that the empowerment approach offers a method for people to become capable of engaging in struggling to change; these involve seeing themselves capable of discharging their responsibility effectively. Based on this setting, academic librarians' changing role from research support to partnership can be desirable when they see themselves capable of discharging their duties as research partners.

Hodgkiss (1986) views empowerment as a change agent that enables individuals, groups of individuals, or communities to control their environment. He also suggests that when people feel powerless, they tend to welcome and take any judgment that might not be conducive or even contrary to their best interest because they are optimistic that they can do nothing about the situation. This scenario depicts what will happen when academic librarians fail to empower themselves with the necessary authority as research partners.

Engagement of academic librarians as research partners

Engagement typically refers to an employee's emotional commitment to the organisation and the organisational goal. This study acknowledged the varied definitions of employee engagement provided by different authors. However, a common underlying theme emerges, indicating the employee's dedication and active participation in their work role to the extent that they find value, enjoyment, and belief in their tasks. A body of literature acknowledges that engaged employees consistently outperform their disengaged counterparts across various critical factors that influence organizational goals (Heisler et al., 2019; Kwon & Park, 2019; Mathews et al., 2018; Shrotryia & Dhanda, 2020a; Shrotryia & Dhanda, 2020b; Truss et al., 2013). For instance, Kwon and Park (2019) reported that employee engagement with their work role had helped them advance their careers by filling the gap between research and practice. Similarly, Truss et al. (2013) developed the employee engagement model using Kahn's (1990) work engagement theory, which proposed that personal engagement is assumed when an employee leaves out or brings in their selves during work role performance.

Rasool et al. (2021) demonstrate that employee well-being and corporate support significantly affect employee behaviors that enhance employee engagement with the organisation. Thus, employee engagement creates harmony in the organisation. Moreover, employee well-being increases the workers' work performance. While Heisler et al. (2019) examined and evaluated the importance of engagement to the West Canadian University practitioners' educational partnership and reported that the practitioners' culture of research participation dramatically influences the nature and quality of employment in scholarship. In a related development, Zepke and Leach (2018) argue that the institution's student engagement in research activities before conducting research was the best

research carried out in a critical reflection on a research partnership's contribution. The engagement enhances their self-belief, enables them to work autonomously, enjoys learning relationships with others, and feels competent enough to achieve their objective. Thus, the engagement will create an emotional feeling for the academic librarians toward their responsibilities as research partners.

METHOD

The study adopted a qualitative method and selected the University of Maiduguri, Nigeria, as the case study. This selection acknowledges the significance of examining Nigeria, particularly within the context of the University of Maiduguri, due to its distinct and multifaceted environment concerning the research responsibilities of academic librarians. In the University of Maiduguri, the University's Governing Council, at its 61st meeting held on the 25th November 1992, approved that "professional librarians in the university referred to as academic staff with effect from 1st June 1992". The Council added that "the Academic Librarians will perform professional duties in the library and teaching and researching." (University of Maiduguri 1992 official report) The "publish or perish" syndrome cut up with many academic librarians, which resulted in their stagnation in promotions because of their inability to acquire the required research publications that constituted the basic requirements for promotions of academic staff cadres. Thus, the need for the study.

The qualitative method allows the researchers to understand and interpret how the academic librarians can be empowered with the necessary authority and engaged with their responsibility as research partners for better participation, collaboration, and performance through interaction with the participants.

Purposive sampling was utilized, focusing specifically on academic librarians who either collaborate with faculty members in research endeavors or are directly engaged in research activities. This selection was made because these individuals are considered to be particularly knowledgeable and thus, better positioned to provide high-quality information relevant to the study. Flick (2009) suggested that the individuals or cases are selected as participants for a qualitative study not because they represent their population (and therefore, the issue of generalizability) but owing to their relevance to the research topic. The following characteristics are needed in the sample i.e.

- (a) They have shown interest in the study
- (b) They have no less than 15 years of working experience
- (c) They are involved in research collaborations
- (d) They have been publishing as research partners

A total of 21 out of 54 librarians population of the case setting (University of Maiduguri, 2021) fulfilled the aforementioned purposive criteria to provide sufficient contextual information about research partnership. Data were gathered from these 21 samples in two stages conducted sequentially, 14 academic librarians (AL1-AL14) through face-to-face interviews and 7 academic librarians through focus group discussions (FGD). The techniques have a unique characteristic that generates detailed data from the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Table 1 presents the demographics of the participants.

Permission was granted from the university management to conduct the study. A consent letter was served to all the study participants a few days before the interview's

commencement. The participants freely expressed their experiences and opinions during the interview without obstruction. They were presented with the format for data collection devices. The focus group interview questions were posed in English, audio-recorded, and transcript from audio to text for analysis. The questions posed during the interview are:

- (a) Describe a time when you successfully empowered yourself to carry out a research task.
- (b) What kind of skills and knowledge can empower academic librarians as research partners?
- (c) In your opinion, what behaviour can influence the empowerment of academic librarians as research partners?
- (d) How did you develop the necessary skills that enable you to partner with the faculty academics?
- (e) How does your engagement with the research community improve your performance as a research partner?
- (f) To what extent do you physically, emotionally, and mentally engage yourself with your research partner's research activities?

Table 1: Demographics Information of the Participants

S/N	Codes	Division/Faculty	Gender	Qualification
1	AL 1	Research	Male	PhD
2	AL 2	E-library	Male	PhD
3	AL 3	Information	Female	Masters
4	AL 4	Research & bibliographic service	Male	Masters
5	AL 5	E-library	Male	Masters
6	AL 6	E-library	Male	Masters
7	AL7	Collection development	Male	PhD
8	AL8	Readers services	Female	Masters
9	AL9	Cataloging	Female	Masters
10	AL10	Cataloging	Male	Masters
11	AL11	Serials	Male	Masters
12	AL12	Readers service	Male	Masters
13	AL13	Collection development	Male	Masters
14	AL14	Information	Male	Masters
15	FGD AL1	Agriculture	Male	Masters
16	FGD AL2	Education	Male	Masters
17	FGD AL3	Law	Female	PhD
18	FGD AL4	Science	Male	Masters
19	FGD AL5	Engineering	Male	Masters
20	FGD AL6	Pharmacy	Female	Masters
21	FGD AL7	Medical science	Female	Masters

The first author, serving as the lead researcher, acts as an instrument for both data collection and analysis. The data collected were analysed manually and inductively based on the study's objectives. The analyses were done in 4 stages: first, the researcher manually transcribed the data verbatim, from audio to text. In the second stage, the verbatim information was openly coded based on the participants' responses from the interviews, generating many notes that resulted in emerging themes that ran into hundreds. The procedure involves highlighting important statements from transcribed data.

Next, it was done by coding the data into categories and themes, from specific to general. In the third stage, open axial was employed to detect relationships among the available code to convert data into themes and sub-themes. The final phase involves compiling emerging themes from the first and second through the last coded documents. The data were aggregated into a few themes at the end of the process, as described in the Results section. The findings were structured around six (6) empowerment themes and four (4) engagement themes that emerged from the interviews.

RESULT

Empowerment of academic librarians as a research partner

The thematic analysis found six critical themes related to sources of empowerment in research partnership: (a) enhancing knowledge, skills, and attitude; (b) being mentored (c) having academic qualification in research (d) having social media presence and authority; (e) engaging in research projects; and (f) being a subject specialist.

(a) Enhancing new knowledge, skill, and attitude (KSA)

This refers to empowering the academic librarians with the new competencies required for an effective research partnership. The participant's responses indicated that the movement of academic librarians from support to partnership requires enlightenment programmes to enhance new KSA for better participation and performance. For instance, some participants pointed out that some academic librarians' skills as research partners are conventionally not acquired from library schools. Additionally, Furthermore, there are no strict entry requirements for the library profession, as expertise and professionalism in librarianship can be acquired through short courses and practical experience. For example, FGDFAL2 remarked, *"I gained the knowledge and skills I use to collaborate with faculty members through attending conferences and training sessions on research. However, as you may be aware, many research skills are not typically taught within library science programs. Even if some of these skills are covered, I have not had the opportunity to fully develop them, as I entered the profession through a non-traditional route. I'm sure you understand what I mean."* He further emphasized the necessity of acquiring additional skills and knowledge, stating, *"Certain skills must be acquired or possessed by academic librarians to effectively fulfill their responsibilities as research partners. Some of these include database management, evaluation, and retrieval".*

Similarly, AL1 said: *"you will agree that experience on the job is the primary entry point of most academic librarians in the library profession. However, especially in this University, many academic librarians in this institution did not possess a library and information science degree."* To this effect, AL2 added, *"Interpersonal skills are usually gained through faculty board meetings, workshops, and conferences. We need to engage in such activities because such a forum will significantly impact your engagement with the faculty academics."* Furthermore, he emphasized, *"We are living in the digital age, where the provision of research services, such as citations, analysis software, and references, has shifted to digital platforms. These tasks are no longer manual; therefore, acquiring ICT skills is crucial. These skills empower us as partners in the academic community."*

Participants' responses revealed that the academic librarians individually update their research knowledge and skills by attending enlightenment programmes such as training and retraining in the research field, workshops, conferences, talk shows, and seminars. For instance, AL6 disclosed that additional knowledge acquired through informal education

would empower the academic librarians in research as the traditional role is no longer sufficient to support the new position. AL1 further stated, *"Sometimes, I sponsor myself to attend workshops and seminars to develop and improve my performance level in my co-authored research."* Furthermore, the research data indicated that the evolving technology also creates a gap in understanding the research partnership's role, which can be filled through training. AL12 disclosed, *"Academic librarians need to be actively involved in research to bridge the gap caused by the evolving landscape of skills and knowledge, there is a need for academic librarians to follow the trend in the ever-changing technological environment."* Implicitly, when professionals undergo responsible change, the optimal approach is not to recruit new staff with the latest knowledge, but rather to equip existing staff with the resources needed to update their knowledge.

(b) Being mentored

Mentoring refers to shared learning and growth among intellectuals of the same profession or different professions. The participants' responses revealed mentorship as one source of empowerment for academic librarians as research partners. It promotes mutual benefit, interaction, and support for academic librarians. The data indicated that senior colleagues are mentoring academic librarians to a more significant extent. The element that constitutes mentoring from the participants' responses ranges from a career sponsor to peer counselor to senior colleagues coaching via teaching, counseling, and providing necessary support. Many participants acknowledge that they consult and interact with senior colleagues whenever they need or are in stock with the research issue. For instance, one participant mentioned: *"At times, I seek guidance from senior colleagues to clarify research-related issues and stay updated on research methodologies."* (AL6). These interactions underscore their efforts to demonstrate proficiency in conducting research.

Similarly, AL1 said, *"I am open to learning new things. I understand what to do in a research partnership through my senior colleague; I am always ready to learn what I don't know through interaction with old colleagues"*. AL5 emphasized the rapidly changing technological landscape and the importance for academic librarians to engage with senior colleagues to gain insights into past and future directions. *"I make an effort to engage in conversations with senior colleagues to learn from their experiences, and I believe this approach will empower academic librarians as research partners."* This assertion highlights how interacting with experienced colleagues in research can enhance the capabilities of academic librarians as research partners.

Furthermore, AL7 acknowledges the benefits of mentoring as an agent for a successful career and personal development. He explains, *"I believe that actively engaging in research activities and seeking guidance from senior colleagues has been instrumental in my growth as a research partner. These experiences have significantly expanded my understanding of research."* Thus, mentoring emerges as an important condition in gaining valuable experience in research activities.

(c) Having an academic qualification in research

Some participants have identified academic qualifications as a source of empowerment for academic librarians as research partners. This includes attaining the highest qualification in the LIS profession, such as a Master of Library Science (MLS) or a Ph.D. in any specialized field. For example, in FGD AL1, it was highlighted that *"an academic institution is a hierarchical environment where hierarchy matters. Educational qualifications serve as a potent agent that empowers researchers, as the level of degree now determines the status*

of your performance. I personally gained significant knowledge in research when I obtained my Ph.D. Therefore, I believe qualification is one of the essential empowering factors." Similarly, in FGD AL2, the participant proudly highlighted Ph.D. degree as the primary factor that shaped librarians as a research partner. *"Well, for me, it's the Ph.D. But most importantly, I have gained empowering attributes because I developed my research confidence after earning my Ph.D. degree."*

AL4 recounted a pivotal moment when he perceived faculty members viewing academic librarians with less regard. *"I realised the faculty members were down looking at us (academic librarians), so I decided to obtain a higher degree."* (AL4). Through this educational journey, academic librarians not only gained insight into the research process but also applied it practically and enhanced their personal development. Consequently, AL4 emphasized the importance for academic librarians to attain higher educational qualifications, such as an MLS, to effectively engage in research collaborations with faculty members.

(d) Having social media presence and authority

Social media are online websites and applications that enable users to create and share content on social networking. Research findings indicate that active engagement with social media channels such as blogs, X (formerly Twitter), and YouTube empowers academic librarians, enabling them to fulfill their roles effectively in research partnerships. This is particularly crucial in today's rapidly evolving information landscape. AL7 emphasized, *"Online platforms have made knowledge acquisition more comfortable and convenient to the extent that one need not go to classrooms or training centres to acquire knowledge or information on some research issues."* This sentiment is echoed by AL5, who shared; *"Whenever I encounter research issues that I am not conversant with, I turn to the video on the YouTube for practical tutorials"*.

Similarly, AL3 said, *"I sign up with a Twitter platform using my e-mail to get notifications from the site whenever there is new information on the topic of interest. And sometimes joint to having a real-time conversation gives me a lot of information that updates my skills and research knowledge"* Furthermore, AL5 disclosed that Twitter efficiently promotes research and activities by linking blog stories, journal articles, and news on exciting topics. *"Therefore, it gives me many opportunities to empower myself when needed. Consequently, one can take advantage of Twitter to follow the work of other experts in the research field."* (AL5)

In a similar vein, many participants expressed that they rely on social media platforms to access information resources, with over half utilizing these channels to enhance their individual capacities. For example, FGD AL7 mentioned: *"Sometimes, I use social media networks such as YouTube and Twitter to enlighten myself regarding research"* Similarly, AL6 said, *"I used YouTube as the most popular social networking platform to educate myself on various research activities"*. Hence, academic librarians leverage emerging technologies, such as social media, to strengthen their roles as research partners.

(e) Engaging in a research project

Academic librarians play a crucial role in supporting faculty research through various activities, which, while not equivalent to direct research collaboration, still involve a significant level of engagement. Research data indicates that academic librarians provide essential services such as reference desk assistance to the research community on a daily basis. These routine tasks not only enhance their research knowledge but also strengthen

their partnerships with researchers. The interview data suggests that the provision of research support services by academic librarians empowers them to serve as valuable research partners. Their active involvement in research activities while providing these services enhances their understanding of scholarly work. For instance, AL7 highlighted his participation in numerous research endeavors with scholars, students, and researchers both within and outside the faculty. *"By granting access to research materials, these services add to my advantage of being a research partner"* (AL5).

Similarly, AL10 mentioned, *"I actively participate in various faculty research initiatives aimed at supporting their endeavors. This includes tasks such as locating specific resources for faculty members, providing general research consultations, offering suggestions for search terms or relevant databases, assisting with journal selection for publication, providing training on citation management software, and offering pre-publication editing services."* Meanwhile, AL13 stated, *"I am consistently involved in research activities, acting as a research assistant for both faculty members and students. Through these engagements, I have developed expertise in the research domain."* Implicitly, aiding the research community with their informational needs is crucial for enhancing the involvement of academic librarians in research partnerships.

(f) Being a subject specialist

AL1 has recognized subject specialisation as another crucial factor in empowering academic librarians as research partners. The interview data suggests that expertise in disciplines beyond LIS can significantly boost the effectiveness of academic librarians in research collaborations. AL1 emphasizes that librarianship is inherently multidisciplinary, requiring *"partnerships with professionals across disciplines, such as medical doctors, legal professionals, engineers, and other professionals."* He further pointed out that academic librarians should have diverse backgrounds to collaborate effectively with such professionals. Thus, it underscores the importance for academic librarians to have substantial knowledge of various academic disciplines within their institutions. Validating this assertion, FGDA2 disclosed that academic librarians are not confined to researching a specific field; rather, they are open to research in all areas of endeavor to advance the institutional research mission.

Engagement of academic librarians as research partners.

This section presents how academic librarians engage with their work role as research partners. The thematic analysis found four key themes related to engagement in research: (a) Responsiveness- being empowered, (b) Anticipation – willingness and expectation, (c) Initiation – interaction with faculty, and (d) investigation – doing research.

(a) Responsiveness - Being empowered (Having confidence)

The research findings highlighted the significance of confidence in shaping the role of academic librarians as research partners. Participants were queried about their confidence levels while fulfilling their responsibilities in research partnerships, shedding light on the factors contributing to their engagement in this capacity. Their responses underscored a notable level of confidence, with many expressing assurance in their ability to collaborate effectively with faculty members. For instance, during the FDG AL1, AL1 emphasized the correlation between confidence and possessing the necessary knowledge and skills for the role. He remarked, *"Confidence stems from competence and proficiency in executing tasks, and as a research partner, I have both. Confidence arises from being equipped with the requisite skills, knowledge, and expertise to contribute meaningfully to research endeavors. Conversely, lacking these elements can lead to feelings of inadequacy and reluctance to*

actively participate in partnerships. You feel shy and inferior when you don't have what it takes to partner. You become subservient in the partnership; skills, knowledge, understanding, and utilising them give me confidence." His remarks suggest that confidence in fulfilling duties is closely linked to possessing the requisite skills and expertise

Similarly, FGD AL2 said, *"I feel confident discharging my responsibility as a research partner because I have the required skill, knowledge, and qualification, with these, I felt confident enough to partner with academics at a different level.* The participants' responses reflected their enthusiasm for their evolving role as research partners, indicating their confidence in their ability to collaborate effectively with the academic community. This sense of competence serves as a driving force, motivating them to actively embrace their responsibilities in research partnerships and showing their dedication and preparedness to contribute to the achievement of institutional objectives and further their career development.

(b) Anticipation - Willingness and expectation

The responses from participants indicate that academic librarians are eager to engage in faculty research activities, demonstrating their commitment to their role as research partners. For example, one participant expressed their willingness to collaborate with faculty members to advance their career and gain recognition within the research community. *"It offers me the chance to advance my career in promotion, recognition, and visibility to the research community* (FGD AL1). Similarly, FGD AL2 mentioned his active involvement in all stages of research and daily interactions with faculty members, emphasizing his readiness to contribute to improving institutional research outcomes. *"I'm willing to participate in three research stages: pre-research, research, and post-research. My office is in the faculty. I have been with the faculty members daily. I discussed the research activities with them, showing my willingness to partner with the faculty members to improve the institutional research output and positively change."*

Likewise, FGD AL4 highlighted his willingness to collaborate with researchers from various departments, showcasing their dedication as a faculty librarian to collaborate with academic colleagues. *"I can comfortably say that I am engaged with my role as a research partner and inclined to collaborate with other faculty academics, from other departments."* (FGD AL4). Overall, the willingness of academic librarians to participate in research activities with their community demonstrates their high level of emotional engagement in their role as research partners.

(c) Initiation - Interaction with faculty

The study data suggest that academic librarians enhance their research knowledge and performance as research partners through interactions with colleagues. More than half of the participants acknowledged that such interactions contribute to their effectiveness in research partnerships. Additionally, participants noted that academic librarians have diverse educational backgrounds and specialisations, allowing for discussions across various disciplines. These interactions enlighten and broaden their knowledge, further improving their research performance. According to AL2, FGD AL6, and FGD AL4, engaging with colleagues significantly empowers them as research partners. For example, FGD AL6 expressed, *"I found value in interacting with colleagues as I believed it would enhance my research knowledge and professional skills, thereby improving my research partnerships."* Likewise, AL12 concurred with these assertions, stating, *"Interacting with faculty members*

allows me to fulfill their research information needs, thus enhancing my proficiency in information retrieval and improving my performance as a researcher."

In a similar vein, AL4 expressed, *"My interactions with fellow academics have enriched my understanding of research practices, broadening my perspective and enhancing my research capabilities. Engaging with faculty members in research endeavors enables the exchange of ideas and viewpoints."* Additionally, FGD AL2 revealed that collaborating with colleagues elevates the academic librarian's research skills and knowledge to a point where they can independently pursue research initiatives without relying on faculty partnerships. Moreover, another participant shared, *"I've learned by doing, which instills a sense of accomplishment through active involvement in research activities."* (AL8). Evidently, academic librarians fulfill their roles as research partners by actively interacting with the academic community.

(d) Investigation - Doing research

The responses from participants highlighted the significant role of academic librarians' physical presence in fostering effective partnerships with faculty members. Notably, active involvement in faculty board meetings, departmental gatherings, and faculty seminars demonstrates their commitment to supporting research endeavors. AL1 emphasized that academic librarians engage directly in faculty research activities, contributing to the attainment of institutional goals.

FGD AL4 vividly illustrates his dedication to the role of a research partner: *"I can confidently state that I am equally committed to this position. My willingness to collaborate with researchers across various departments underscores my engagement with this role."* He expressed confidence in his ability to fulfill his research duties and maintain his position as a librarian. Similarly, FGD AL3, FGD AL5, and FGD AL2 demonstrated a strong commitment to fulfilling their responsibilities as research partners. They reported engaging in tasks such as conducting literature reviews, identifying top-tier journals in their respective fields, and providing guidance to faculty members on publication strategies and related responsibilities.

FGD AL1 shared his perspective, emphasizing how his active involvement with faculty members significantly enhances his effectiveness as a research partner. He noted his consistent physical presence and active participation in faculty research affairs, underlining his deep psychological attachment to his role. He finds fulfillment in being a research partner. In contrast, FGD AL2 expressed an even stronger commitment to research activities, proudly stating, *"I have never faltered in fulfilling my responsibilities as a research partner."* Similarly, AL5 emphasized the excitement and fulfillment derived from engaging in research activities. They highlighted the crucial role of librarians in supporting academic research, stressing the symbiotic relationship between academics and librarians. This scenario underscores the physical engagement of librarians in research activities at the faculty level and their satisfaction in contributing to institutional research development. Consequently, the satisfaction derived from their careers poses an opportunity for their professional and institutional growth.

DISCUSSION

The study aims to delve into the intellectual empowerment necessary to uphold the value of academic librarians as research partners. Its primary focus lies in uncovering the roots of

academic librarians' empowerment in their role as research partners and identifying factors that foster their engagement with their work, thereby enhancing their involvement in research partnerships. Qualitative research, by its very nature, thrives on capturing the voices of participants through probing questions, allowing them ample space to articulate their perspectives fully and authentically. Participants were queried about the sources of knowledge and skills that empower them to function effectively as research partners. Consequently, six themes related to empowerment and four themes related to engagement in research partnerships emerged from the data. Figure 1 visually represents these findings.

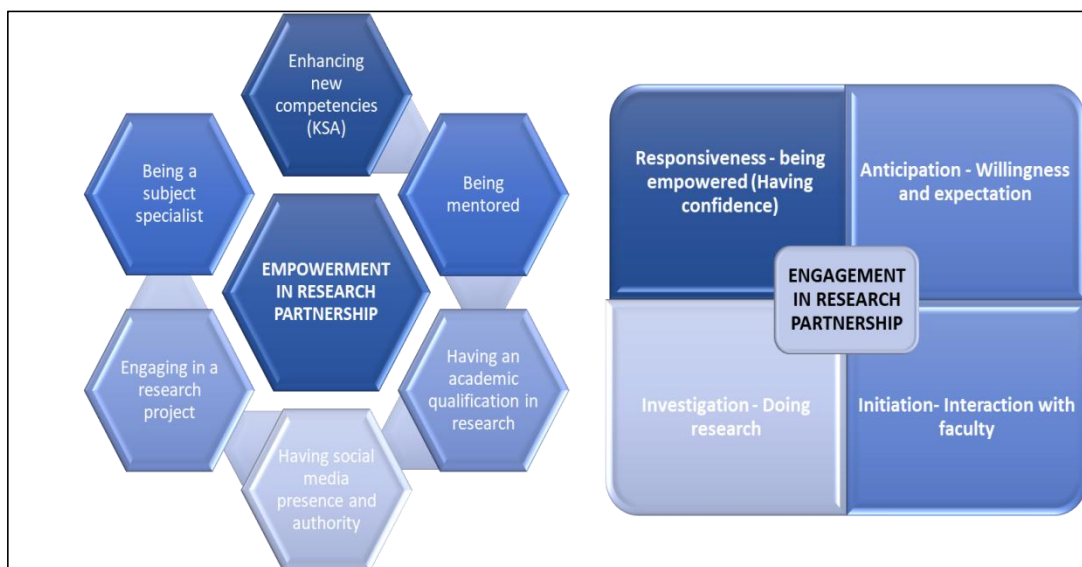


Figure 1: Themes Related to Empowerment and Engagement in a Research Partnership

The participants' responses unveiled empowerment as a concept characterized by the elements that empower academic librarians to effectively collaborate with faculty members. This empowerment is achieved through practical engagement in research activities, such as conducting personal research, providing research assistance to scholars, and actively participating in faculty research endeavors. In terms of physical engagement, the study data indicates that academic librarians are actively involved in their role as research partners by participating in research activities and interacting with the research community. Their emotional engagement is evidenced by their willingness to fulfill their duties within the research partnership, their confidence in their role as research partners, and their steadfast commitment to their responsibilities. The collected data suggests that many academic librarians involved in research partnerships with faculty members demonstrate a high level of engagement with their responsibilities, showing genuine interest and involvement in research activities. These findings indicate that the majority of participants feel comfortable with their roles as research partners

Previous empirical studies examined did not explicitly delineate the six themes uncovered in this study. Nonetheless, existing literature does highlight the evolving readiness of librarians to engage in research (Mazure & Alpi, 2015) and deliberates on strategies to empower academic librarians to independently take charge of their roles as research collaborators (Hewagama et al., 2019; Mathews et al., 2018; Zimmerman, 2000). For example, studies conducted by Shalhub et al. (2020) and Zimmerman (2000) underscored the significance of empowerment as a catalyst for driving and elevating employee performance towards achieving organizational objectives. It is implied that empowered

academic librarians are better equipped to effectively collaborate with faculty members. Similarly, the literature review did not explicitly identify the four emerging themes of engagement. Nevertheless, existing literature suggests that academic librarians can actively engage with their role as research partners to enhance their performance. For instance, Albrech (2011) highlighted engagement theory as a process that deeply involves employees in organizational culture, ultimately boosting productivity and enhancing the organization's reputation. This implies that academic librarians' engagement with their role as research partners can lead to improved performance in research partnerships, thereby fostering institutional, professional, and career development. The findings indicate that academic librarians' responsiveness, anticipation, initiation, and investigation are integral conditions influencing their engagement with their role as research partners

CONCLUSIONS

This study delves into the ways academic librarians in a university in Nigeria can actively engage and empower themselves as research partners. Themes of empowerment equip academic librarians with the knowledge necessary to effectively carry out their research partnerships. The study suggests that academic librarians become more engaged in their responsibilities when they feel empowered, motivated, and actively involved in research activities. Consequently, it becomes imperative for academic librarians to assess their current knowledge and skills, bridging any gap between acquired and required competencies. The findings demonstrate that academic librarians' engagement with their role as research partners encompasses physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of behavior. Identified sources of empowerment include acquiring new knowledge, skills, and attitudes, mentorship opportunities, educational qualifications, establishing a presence and authority on social media platforms, participation in research projects, and specialization in particular subjects.

At the same time, participation in research activities and interaction with colleagues emerged as the practical engagement of the academic librarians with their duty in a research partnership. While responsiveness -having confidence, anticipation -willingness to participate, and initiation- interaction with faculty members was revealed as the source capable of emotionally engaging the academic librarians with their responsibility as research partners. Some of the librarians under study showed their emotional connection with their responsibilities as research partners, showing genuine interest and engagement with the research activities. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the study, such as the small sample size and potential biases inherent in self-reporting data. Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into the sources of empowerment and engagement for academic librarians in research partnerships. By highlighting these conditions, the study may provide a framework for enhancing the effectiveness of academic librarians in supporting research endeavors. Ultimately, the findings underscore the importance of recognising and nurturing the empowerment and engagement of academic librarians as integral contributors to successful research outcomes

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AUTHORS DECLARATION

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTION

Conceptualization: [both authors], Methodology: [both authors], Formal analysis and investigation: [T.Rabasa], Writing - original draft preparation: [T.Rabasa]; Writing - review and editing: [A.Abrizah]

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