



The Relevance of Conventional Reference Services in the Digital Age: A Case Study of the Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of the rapid development of information technology, libraries are required to transform in providing information services. However, conventional services based on printed collections still have an important role, especially in supporting specific and in-depth reference needs. This study aims to examine the existence and relevance of conventional reference services that are still organized at the Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia. The method used was qualitative research with a field study approach through direct observation and interviews with reference librarians. The results showed that printed collections such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and directories are still actively used, especially by final year students and lecturers who need valid references in scientific writing. The main challenges faced are the limited budget for collection renewal and the lack of user understanding of the benefits of printed collections. However, these services have the opportunity to continue to be relevant if integrated with digital approaches and the promotion of information literacy. This research confirms that conventional services do not lose relevance, but need to be adapted to the dynamics of user needs in the digital era.

Keywords: Reference Services; Printed Collections; Conventional Collection; Academic Library

1. INTRODUCTION

Rapid developments in information and communication technology have brought fundamental changes to various aspects of society, including the management and provision of information services in libraries (Lv & Li, 2021). Amidst the dynamics of user needs that increasingly demand fast and flexible access, many libraries around the world have switched to or integrated digital services (Oyedokun, 2025). This digital transformation is marked by the provision of access to electronic information sources, such as digital books (e-books), electronic journals (e-journals), online databases, and various other digital platforms (Mommoh & Emmanuel, 2024). This allows users to access

information anytime and from anywhere (Kato et al., 2021) . Undeniably, this phenomenon has transformed libraries from mere book repositories into technology-based information access centers (Febriyanti et al., 2024) .

However, despite the strong trend toward digitization and the dominance of electronic resources, print-based library services continue to play an important and relevant role, especially for certain user segments or for specific types of information (Lewis et al., 2022) . Printed reference collections such as authoritative dictionaries, comprehensive encyclopedias, specialized directories, and in-depth handbooks are often the first choice for users who need verified, credible, and independently accessible sources of information, without relying on digital infrastructure such as internet connections or electronic devices (Maharsi & Marintan, 2024) . This collection provides certainty and authority that is difficult to match with dynamic digital sources (Rahmi, 2019a) .

The Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia is one example of a higher education institution experiencing this hybrid situation. Although it has adopted and developed digital services to meet the demands of the times, this library still maintains conventional reference services based on print collections. The existence and utilization of well-managed print collections, as well as the support of professional librarians, contribute significantly to supporting the academic activities of students and lecturers. Therefore, it is important to examine more deeply how these conventional services are able to survive, how relevant they are in today's digital era, and the challenges and opportunities faced by institutions in maintaining a balance between digital and conventional services.

As stated by Keeler (Keeler, 2016) , even though digital transformation has become a global trend, conventional reference services, especially those based on print collections, continue to function as an important 'safety net' for users who may have limitations in digital literacy or require curated and stable sources, especially in academic environments. This finding is in line with what was conveyed by Irfandari and Sa'diyah(2024) that even though digital libraries provide a high degree of flexibility, the reliability and authority of physical collections remain irreplaceable in many situations. This finding is highly relevant to the conditions at Universitas Perintis Indonesia, where some users, especially final-year students working on their final assignments and lecturers, still rely on print collections for validation and in-depth scientific sources.

Based on this background, this study aims to specifically examine conventional reference services at the Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia. The focus of the study includes identifying the types of conventional services that are still actively used, analyzing the types of print collections that are most frequently used and the patterns of their use, and exploring the challenges and opportunities faced in maintaining and developing conventional services in the midst of the era of digitization. It is hoped that the results of this study can provide a comprehensive picture of the role and position of conventional services in the modern library ecosystem and contribute to the development of future library service strategies.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach (with the main objective of exploring and comprehensively describing the existence and relevance of conventional library services, particularly those based on printed collections, amid the rapid development of the digital era. The choice of a qualitative approach is based on its ability to capture the deeper meaning, interaction processes, and subjective views of librarians and service users regarding the dynamics of conventional services in an increasingly digital environment. The research focuses on collecting descriptive data through direct

interaction in the field, rather than numerical data analysis. The study location was set at the Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia, a university library located in Padang City that implements a centralized service system.

In this system, various types of collections—reference, monographs, and general collections—are integrated into a single service space, making it easier for users to access a variety of library materials efficiently. To collect the necessary data, this study used several techniques, including direct observation of reference service activities and semi-structured interviews with librarians in charge to obtain information about the types of services, patterns of collection utilization, challenges faced, and their views on the future of conventional services in the digital age. In addition, documentation of existing print collections and collection of statistical data related to their utilization were conducted. The data collected was then analyzed descriptively to identify service patterns, the level of print collection utilization, and significant challenges and opportunities faced by libraries in their efforts to maintain and develop conventional services in this digital era.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reference Services

Reference services are one of the main activities carried out in libraries that specialize in serving/presenting reference collections to library visitors. Reference services are one of the library services provided to users to help them find the information they need (Rodin & Clarita, 2021). Reference services are an important part of the library's function, especially in helping visitors find and obtain information efficiently (Ma'ani, 2025). The main purpose of this service is to provide solutions to information questions asked by users, either directly, through digital platforms, or through various methods of guidance and information literacy education.

Conventional reference services are services provided by libraries to help library users search for and find the information they need, either directly or face-to-face with the users themselves (Misbah, 2021). However, in this era of technological development, many libraries are keeping up with these developments, causing most libraries to switch from conventional libraries to digital libraries.

Like the UPERTIS library, the UPERTIS Library is part of the Central Library, so the collections are combined into one room and classified based on existing study programs. However, the library provides various digital facilities such as online OPAC, access to electronic books, and plagiarism checks. The main reason users choose printed collections is the comfort of reading and the durability of information (Iqbal & Peramita, 2023). The Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia also continues to maintain and manage a number of conventional services based on printed collections that are still actively used by library users. The main reason users prefer printed books despite the availability of digital sources is the comfort of reading. Staring at a laptop/mobile phone screen for too long is indeed not good for eye health.

Conventional reference services at the UPERTIS Library include direct access to collections such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, and other reference materials. These collections cannot be borrowed, but must be used on site. This approach shows that physical collections remain relevant amid the onslaught of online information (Wulandari & Muchtarom, 2021). The role of librarians in guiding users also remains important, especially when users have difficulty adjusting to digital interfaces.

In addition, circulation services based on printed collections are still active, where library users can borrow and return books directly at the service desk. This circulation system remains important, especially for students who prefer to read printed sources rather than electronic versions. Reading rooms

equipped with full Wi-Fi facilities maintain a conventional service atmosphere, where users read printed materials directly. This shows that modern facilities are used to support, not replace, access to physical collections.

In addition to these main services, librarians also continue to provide direct information assistance. Although some users have become accustomed to using online OPAC, many of them still ask librarians for face-to-face assistance in finding specific library materials, especially collections that are not yet available in digital form. This is in line with [Oktavia's findings\(2024\)](#) , which state that digital transformation does not completely eliminate the need for manual services, but encourages collaboration between traditional and modern approaches. The implementation of a centralized system, where all types of collections—reference, general, and electronic—are placed in one space, makes conventional services easily accessible. This integration supports efficiency, allowing library users to move from one type of collection to another without location barriers.

Observations show that there are obstacles that may arise when students want to access printed collections using conventional services, namely when flooding causes damage to printed collections because the floodwater reaches a small portion of the bookshelves. To deal with this, librarians can only save books that are affected and located on higher shelves. In addition, the limited number of copies is also an obstacle for conventional services at present, so users must wait for the book to be returned by the borrower.

Service innovation in library management

The influence of technology in library management has created new opportunities and challenges in providing services to library users. One of the main challenges is the need to implement interactive service innovations. By integrating interactive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), libraries can increase user engagement and create a more dynamic experience. According to the Machine Assisted Reference Section (MARS) in the Virtual Reference Service Guidelines quoted by [Rahmi \(2019b\)](#) , it states that:

"Virtual Reference is a reference service initiated electronically, often in real time, where users employ computers or other Internet technology to communicate with librarians without being physically present. Communication channels frequently used in virtual reference include chat, videoconferencing, Voice over IP, e-mail, and instant messaging. While online sources are often utilized in the provision of virtual reference, the use of electronic sources in seeking answers is not in itself virtual reference. Virtual reference queries are often followed up by telephone, fax, and regular e-mail, even though these modes of communication are not considered virtual."

Virtual Reference Services are initiated electronically, where users utilize computers or other internet technologies to communicate with librarians without physically visiting the library. Communication channels frequently used in virtual reference include *video conferencing, Voice Over IP, email*, and instant messaging. *Reference queries* are often followed up via telephone, fax, and regular email, even though these modes of communication are considered virtual.

Case Study: Review of the Indonesian Pioneer University Library Service (UPERTIS) in the Digital Age

1. Conventional Services Still in Use

Through observation and interviews with librarians, the Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia (UPERTIS) still provides several traditional services. Circulation services, including

borrowing and returning physical books, remain the primary choice for students and lecturers, especially for textbooks and reference books required in the curriculum. Manual reference services, which offer access to collections such as encyclopedias and dictionaries for use on site, also remain important. In addition, students utilize on-site reading services to quickly access print collections without going through the borrowing process. Librarians also provide direct information retrieval services, which help users find data on open shelves or in catalogs. Photocopying or document reproduction services are a solution to overcome digital access limitations. Finally, *user education* services are provided directly by librarians, especially at the beginning of the semester, to introduce the library and information sources.

2. Obstacles in the Print Collection

One of the main obstacles in conventional services is the risk of damage to collections due to natural disasters such as floods, which can destroy print collections. Haryanto(2016) states that natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions, and fires are real threats to the sustainability of library collections. In addition, the limited number of copies is also a problem, so users have to wait to borrow books that are currently being borrowed by other users. This is in line with the findings of [Jumiati, Indrayanti, and Royanti\(2024\)](#) that there are failed borrowing transactions due to the insufficient number of copies in the library collection.

3. Utilization of Print Collections and Supporting Facilities

As the main library, UPERTIS groups its collections based on study programs in one room. Supporting facilities include:

- a. Lockers.
- b. PC access.
- c. Online OPAC.
- d. Reading room with Wi-Fi connection.
- e. Computers.
- f. Access to e-books.
- g. Plagiarism check.

Some frequently used books include:

- a. Introduction to Epidemiology by Hairil Akbar.
- b. Health Research Methodology by Cecep Dani Sucipto.
- c. Basic Biomedical Science by Upik Rahmi.
- d. Health Research Methodology by Arif Sumantri.

Meanwhile, books that are rarely used include:

- a. Anatomy and Physiology for Paramedics by Evelyn C. Pearce.
- b. Patient Safety Management by Nunung Rachmawati and Yayang Harigustian.

4. Analysis of Challenges and Opportunities for Conventional Services in the Digital Age.

Conventional services at the UPERTIS Library face major challenges in the digital age, including shifts in user behavior that tend to favor online access to information, limited funds and manpower for digital service development, and competition with digital platforms such as Google Scholar and ResearchGate. One of the challenges faced is the risk of damage to print collections due to flooding and the limited number of copies available, which can lead to queues for borrowing. However, there are opportunities to combine hybrid services (physical

and digital), improve information literacy for users, and utilize institutional repositories to improve accessibility and the impact of research. With the right strategy, the UPERTIS library can remain relevant and contribute to supporting academic activities in the digital age.

4. CONCLUSION

A study on conventional reference services at the Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia has revealed that printed collections, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, and reference books, still play a vital role in supporting academic needs, especially for lecturers and final-year students. Services based on physical collections, which include book circulation, on-site use, and user guidance, continue to function well despite facing a number of significant obstacles. The main obstacles faced include a shift in user behavior, with users now more inclined to choose digital resources, limited budgets for collection renewal, and competition with digital platforms such as Google Scholar. However, on the other hand, there is potential to develop hybrid services that combine print and digital collections, improve information literacy competencies, and adopt new technologies to enrich the accessibility and relevance of library offerings in the digital age. In order to maintain and improve the quality of conventional reference services, the Library of Universitas Perintis Indonesia can implement several important strategies.

The first step is to integrate hybrid services by providing digital access to popular collections while maintaining their print versions. Second, libraries need to increase funding allocated for collection updates and capacity building for librarians in the field of information technology management. Third, it is advisable to implement physical risk mitigation measures, including storing collections in secure locations and creating digital copies of documents that are susceptible to damage. Fourth, libraries can proactively promote print collections by organizing workshops or providing online guides to increase user understanding of their benefits. Finally, it is important to adopt technological innovations, such as *augmented reality* (AR) or the development of institutional repositories, in an effort to expand the scope of services and accommodate the evolving needs of users. Through the implementation of these measures, libraries are expected to maintain their relevance amid changing times, while preserving the important value of their conventional services.

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