

THEORY ELABORATION AND THEORETICAL QUESTION...

THEORY ELABORATION AND THEORETICAL QUESTION FRAMING IN QUALITATIVE THESES AND DISSERTATIONS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF SELECTED LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE (LIS) POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH (2015-2024) AT AHMADU BELLO UNIVERSITY, ZARIA

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Abstract

This study examined the application of theory in postgraduate Library and Information Science (LIS) research at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of selected theses and dissertations from the university's repository, the analysis focused on how theoretical frameworks were employed, contextualized, and, in some cases, refined; and how inductive research questions are framed. The findings show that while most studies applied established theories, only a limited number adapted or extended them in line with local contexts. For example, the Perceived Attributes of Innovation Theory was narrowed to emphasize relative advantage and trialability, while Information Grounds Theory was expanded to account for community-based information practices in Samaru. The study also identified two distinct approaches to framing research questions: some engaged entire theoretical models, while others focused selectively on particular constructs. These patterns highlight both the strengths and gaps in postgraduate engagement with theory. The study recommends more structured training in theory use, clearer alignment between research questions and theoretical scope, and explicit reporting of theoretical contributions to enhance the visibility and impact of LIS scholarship from African universities.

Keywords: Theory, Elaboration, Research Questions, Qualitative Research, Postgraduate Research

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Introduction

In research, theory is more than a guiding framework; it influences how questions are posed, methods are chosen, evidence is interpreted, and knowledge is advanced. In qualitative studies, theory is adapted, refined, or re-situated to illuminate new empirical settings (Swedberg, 2014). This process is known as theory elaboration. It involves applying and reshaping existing frameworks so they better explain particular contexts or populations. Unlike traditional deductive testing, elaboration emphasizes a continual exchange between conceptual ideas and empirical realities, producing interpretations that are both grounded in participants' experiences and responsive to context (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). In doing so, it not only evaluates how well a theory fits but also strengthens it, generating richer insights and more nuanced refinements.

A central aspect of theory elaboration in qualitative research is the careful design of research questions. How these questions are framed not only demonstrates the researcher's engagement with existing scholarship but also signals the role of theory within the study's conceptual orientation. As Agee (2009) observes, qualitative research questions shape the direction of inquiry and indicate the analytical lens through which data are examined. Such questions are intended to explore, refine, or challenge theoretical propositions in ways that go beyond quantification. They often ask whether a theory is valid within a particular cultural or organizational setting, how individuals interpret or enact its constructs in practice, and which elements may require modification. When thoughtfully aligned with a theoretical framework, these questions provide a pathway for advancing and refining theory rather than simply applying it.

In Library and Information Science (LIS), theoretical frameworks such as Wilson's Information Behavior Model, Dervin's Sense-Making Theory, the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), Fisher's Information Grounds Theory, and the Diffusion of Innovation Theory are widely employed to investigate phenomena including information seeking, sense-making, digital technology adoption, information flow, and user engagement (Case & Given, 2016). While these theories have been extensively applied in Western and Asian contexts, their use and elaboration within qualitative research in sub-Saharan African institutions remain comparatively limited. This underrepresentation raises critical questions about the extent to which such theories reflect the socio-cultural, institutional, and infrastructural realities of African research environments. Without careful adaptation, there is a risk that theoretical applications may overlook local dynamics of information behavior, technology use, and knowledge practices. Exploring how postgraduate researchers in sub-Saharan Africa interpret, adapt, and extend these frameworks is therefore essential, not only for contextualizing global theories but also for enriching LIS scholarship with perspectives that capture diverse experiences and settings.

Although theory remains central to scholarly research, many postgraduate theses continue to exhibit weak theoretical integration, poorly framed questions, or only superficial

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engagement with conceptual frameworks (Mouton, 2015; Muchanga & Chalawila, 2022). This challenge is evident across disciplines and particularly in Nigerian universities, where students often reference theories without establishing clear theory-to-data connections or demonstrating critical adaptation (Okeke & Ume, 2015). In light of the growing emphasis on theoretical rigor in LIS research worldwide (Pickard, 2013), it is important to examine how postgraduate students at institutions such as Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, engage with theory in their qualitative work. As a leading center for LIS education in Nigeria, ABU provides a valuable case for assessing patterns of theory use and research design among emerging scholars, offering insights into their intellectual depth, methodological soundness, and academic maturity.

Therefore, this study explores the manner in which theory elaboration and theoretical question framing are reflected in qualitative postgraduate dissertations submitted to the Department of Library and Information Science at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Through a content analysis of selected theses, the study aims to contribute to improving theoretical practice and research quality in LIS postgraduate education.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the central role of theory in high-quality academic research, growing evidence (Kassim, 2025) indicates that many postgraduate students in Library and Information Science (LIS) struggle to engage with theory meaningfully in qualitative studies. Theses frequently reveal shallow conceptual foundations, poorly framed research questions, and minimal effort to adapt theoretical models to local contexts (Ukwoma & Ngulube, 2021). In Nigeria, LIS researchers commonly apply popular models such as TAM to study library-technology use. Although there is recognition among scholars (Adeoye & Olanrewaju, 2019) that such models have limitations particularly regarding institutional and contextual applicability much of this research still uses them without adequate adaptation. Studies that do attempt to adjust models to local conditions are relatively few. This surface-level use of theory weakens the analytical strength of postgraduate research and limits its potential to contribute to theoretical advancement in the LIS field.

At Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria, a leading center for LIS education in Nigeria, postgraduate research output is extensive, yet there has been no systematic assessment of how theory is elaborated or how theoretical research questions are framed in dissertations. This gap makes it difficult to evaluate whether postgraduate training is equipping students with the capacity for theory-driven qualitative inquiry. Addressing this issue is crucial, as strengthening theoretical integration and question framing can enhance research quality, improve supervision and training practices, and foster the development of context-sensitive LIS scholarship.

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To address this gap, the present study conducted a content analysis of qualitative postgraduate dissertations in the Department of Library and Information Science at ABU. Its purpose was to assess the extent and nature of theory elaboration and theoretical question framing, with the aim of strengthening research training, enhancing theoretical rigor, and promoting a stronger culture of theory development in LIS postgraduate education.

Objectives of the study

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine how theories are elaborated in the selected LIS, ABU, Zaria Postgraduate Researches (e.g., extended, modified, or contextualized).
2. To analyze how qualitative research questions are framed for theory testing in the selected LIS, ABU, Zaria Postgraduate Researches.

Literature Review

Theory plays a foundational role in shaping coherence and scholarly rigor across disciplines, including Library and Information Science (LIS). In qualitative inquiry, theory functions as both lens and scaffold, informing research questions, guiding data collection, and shaping interpretation (Maxwell, 2013). Unlike quantitative research, which often emphasizes hypothesis testing, qualitative approaches allow for theory generation and refinement. Swedberg (2014) stresses that theory in this context should evolve through interaction with empirical data, a perspective especially relevant in LIS where user behavior and technology use are embedded in diverse socio-cultural realities.

Within LIS, theory elaboration has been used to adapt foundational models such as Wilson's Information Behavior Model and the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) to specific user populations (Case & Given, 2016). However, evidence suggests that postgraduate LIS research, particularly in Africa, shows weak theoretical engagement. Ukwoma and Ngulube (2021) note that many theses adopt frameworks superficially, with little tailoring to context or integration into analysis. Similarly, Passey (2020) found a disconnect between theoretical frameworks and research questions, while Onyancha and Ocholla (2009) observed overreliance on borrowed theories with minimal justification.

Recent scholarship has called for stronger theory use and transparency in LIS research. Ngulube and Mosha's (2023) systematic review of 138 LIS journal articles revealed high transparency in identifying theoretical frameworks but limited justification for their selection. Roy and Mukhopadhyay (2023), analyzing Scopus-indexed articles (1970–2021), found LIS research heavily dependent on theories from sociology, psychology, and management, underscoring the lack of indigenous theoretical development. Both studies

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stress the importance of clearer rationale and innovation in theory use for advancing the discipline.

Despite these insights, little is known about how postgraduate students engage with theory in their dissertations. Most studies focus on journal publications, leaving a critical gap in understanding theoretical depth, clarity, and coherence at the thesis level in African universities. Addressing this gap, the present study conducts a content analysis of qualitative dissertations in the Department of Library and Information Science at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, to evaluate how theory elaboration and theoretically grounded research questions are employed. This contributes to ongoing debates on improving theoretical integration and research design in LIS scholarship.

Methodology

Qualitative Content Analysis was employed for the analysis of data collected for this study. This is because it provides a systematic and flexible way to interpret textual data such as interview transcripts, documents, reports, and research manuscripts by identifying patterns, meanings, and underlying themes. Data for this study were sourced from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria Institutional Repository (<https://kubanni.abu.edu.ng/home>), which serves as the official archive of postgraduate research outputs of the institution. The repository was selected because it provides comprehensive access to theses and dissertations submitted to the Department of Library and Information Science, thereby offering a reliable and representative dataset for examining postgraduate research practices.

A single search was conducted using the phrase “*Qualitative Research and Library and Information Science*”, which returned thirty-three theses and dissertations. The inclusion criteria required that studies explicitly employed qualitative research designs and were situated within the field of Library and Information Science. Works that were purely quantitative, mixed-methods without substantive qualitative emphasis, or outside LIS were excluded. After applying these criteria, thirty-three works were retained for screening.

Subsequent Content analysis revealed that only three theses and three dissertations contained substantive elaboration on the theories employed, either through contextual adaptation, critical reflection, or theoretical extension. The remaining works either mentioned theoretical models superficially or omitted them altogether. This screening process ensured that the dataset was focused on works that demonstrated an explicit attempt at theory engagement, consistent with the objectives of the study.

Result

Table 1 shows the result of the analysis, it shows authors' name, theory used, research question phrasing, nature of theoretical application, degree of elaboration and the URL of the theses and dissertations.

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Table 1: Review of theses and dissertations

Author	Theory Used	Research Question phrasing	Nature of Theoretical Application	Degree of theory elaboration	URL
Mohammed (2017)	Perceived Attributes of innovation Theory (PAIT)	How do the constructs of PAIT explain the experiences of Faculty Members in ABU on the nonuse of Digital Library Resources and Services?	Testing, refining and contextualizing	Two constructs of PAIT explained participants' nonuse of Digital Library Resources and Services (DLRS) in ABU. These are relative advantage and trialability. The PAIT consists of five constructs: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability. From the participants responses, it was clear that three of the constructs; compatibility, complexity and observability are not a reason for nonuse of DLRS	https://kubanni.abu.edu.ng/bitstreams/68d0708a-abbb-4c31-95b0-d26ff3e985a4/download
Hayatu (2018)	Fisher's Information Grounds Theory	How will propositions of Information Grounds Theory describe the social spaces for information activities and actions of individuals in Samaru Community?	Testing, refining and contextualizing	Four of the seven propositions of Information Grounds theory described the typologies of social spaces in Samaru community while two explained the actions of individuals in Samaru Community. The four propositions that described social spaces include; the temporal setting proposition, the social types proposition, the social interaction proposition and the informal and formal information flow propositions. While the two propositions of the theory that explained actions of individuals in Samaru Community include the alternative forms of information use and benefits proposition and the context rich proposition.	https://kubanni.abu.edu.ng/bitstreams/292bd6ff-f925-4a2a-a733-0ecd27ad3573/download
Lakan (2019)	Social Exchange Theory	How the two constructs, "reciprocity" and "trust" of Social Exchange Theory explain the perception of public health professionals about knowledge sharing in managing zoonotic disease in Plateau State, Nigeria?	Testing and Contextualizing	The two Constructs "reciprocity" and "trust" of Social Exchange Theory explained the perception of public health professionals about knowledge sharing in managing zoonotic diseases.	https://kubanni.abu.edu.ng/bitstreams/f5f2c4d2-c842-4d92-9153-90f18988f436/download

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Muhammad (2018)	Chatman's Theory of Normative Behaviour	How does Chatman's Theory of Normative Behaviour explain the information behaviour of adolescent females suffering from primary dysmenorrhea in Giwa Local Government Area?	Testing and Contextualizing	The findings conform with the constructs of Chatman's Theory of Normative Behaviour, in areas like collective understanding of issues related to sexuality and menstruation.	https://kubanni.abu.edu.ng/bitstreams/979eca2e-e65e-445e-8737-16d84616e73c/download
Okeowo (2018)	Chatman's Theory of Normative Behaviour	How does the constructs of Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior, social norms, worldview, social type and information explain knowledge utilization by policy makers in the health sector in Nigeria?	Testing and Contextualizing	Four constructs of TNB social norms, Social Type, Worldview and Information Behaviour explain factors that influence the use of knowledge by policy makers in the Federal Ministry of Health in the management of Hepatitis B in Nigeria.	https://kubanni.abu.edu.ng/bitstreams/8ae0c1e7-9441-4d71-9e31-b1ff5129350c/download
Abdurrahman (2016)	Theory of Planned Behaviour	How does the theory of planned behaviour explain the perceptions of postgraduate students on librarians' expertise in Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria?	Testing and Contextualizing	This study was in agreement with the constructs of the theory of planned behavior. Subjective norms, and attitudes in relation to how the postgraduate students view and understand librarians as people that engaged in arranging of books and administering of other office work in the libraries.	https://kubanni.abu.edu.ng/bitstreams/7c826f71-6e90-4c1a-98de-705d7fa8f273/download

All the studies reviewed tested and contextualized the theories adopted in the studies. However, only two of the theses refined their theoretical frameworks in line with the context of the studies.

Mohammed (2017):

Two constructs of PAIT explained participants' nonuse of Digital Library Resources and Services (DLRS) in ABU. These are relative advantage and trialability. The PAIT consists of five constructs: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability. From the participants responses, it was

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clear that three of the constructs; compatibility, complexity and observability are not a reason for nonuse of DLRS.

Hayatu (2018):

Four of the seven propositions of Information Grounds theory described the typologies of social spaces in Samaru community while two explained the actions of individuals in Samaru Community. The four propositions that described social spaces include; the temporal setting proposition, the social types proposition, the social interaction proposition and the informal and formal information flow propositions. While the two propositions of the theory that explained actions of individuals in Samaru Community include the alternative forms of information use and benefits proposition and the context rich proposition.

Similarly, the analysis from the table shows the two different ways inductive research questions are framed in the theses and dissertations. Some of the inductive questions tested the whole constructs or propositions of the theories while one study targeted specific constructs of the theories.

Okeowo (2018) tested all the constructs of Chatman's theory of Normative behaviour by phrasing the inductive research question as "*How does the constructs of Chatman's Theory of Normative Behavior, social norms, worldview, social type and information explain knowledge utilization by policy makers in the health sector in Nigeria?*" Similarly, Muhammad (2018) phrased the inductive research question as "*How does Chatman's Theory of Normative Behaviour explains the information behaviour of adolescent females suffering from primary dysmenorrhea in Giwa Local Government Area?*"

On the other hand, Lakan (2019) targeted specific constructs of the Social Exchange theory. "*How the two constructs, "reciprocity" and "trust" of Social Exchange Theory explain the perception of public health professionals about knowledge sharing in managing zoonotic disease in Plateau State, Nigeria?*"

Discussion

The review of postgraduate theses and dissertations highlights a persistent gap in the use of theory within qualitative research in Library and Information Science (LIS). Although most studies tested and contextualized theoretical frameworks, only a few engaged in genuine theory refinement or adaptation to suit local realities. Notable exceptions, such as Mohammed (2017) and Hayatu (2018), demonstrated how theoretical constructs can be interrogated, modified, and extended, thereby advancing theory beyond descriptive applications. This finding differs from much of the global LIS literature, which often criticizes the field for relying on borrowed theories without contributing new ones (Ngulube, 2019; Pettigrew & McKechnie, 2001).

Two distinct patterns of inductive research question framing emerged: broad adoption of entire theoretical frameworks and focused exploration of specific constructs. Each approach offers benefits and risks, reflecting broader methodological debates on whether theory

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should be applied as a comprehensive lens or as a sensitizing concept (Charmaz, 2014). Importantly, the findings reinforce the need for postgraduate research training to move beyond superficial engagement with theory. Programs should emphasize strategies for theory refinement and transparent documentation of how constructs are tested, adapted, or dismissed. Doing so would not only strengthen intellectual rigor in LIS research but also enhance the global recognition of contributions from African scholarship.

Conclusion

The analysis of postgraduate theses and dissertations from Ahmadu Bello University reveals both the promise and the limitations of theory use in qualitative LIS research. While a few studies demonstrated commendable efforts at refining, contextualizing, or extending theoretical frameworks, the broader pattern reflects a tendency toward descriptive rather than generative application. This uneven engagement highlights critical gaps in research training, particularly in equipping students with the methodological and conceptual skills necessary for theory elaboration. Addressing these gaps requires deliberate curricular and supervisory interventions that foreground theory as a dynamic tool for inquiry rather than a static backdrop. By cultivating a culture of critical and innovative theorizing, LIS programs in Nigeria and across Africa can not only strengthen the intellectual foundations of their postgraduate research but also position their scholarship as meaningful contributors to global theoretical debates in the discipline.

Recommendations

In light of the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen theoretical engagement and research practice in postgraduate LIS scholarship

1. Postgraduate LIS programs should enrich their curriculum with structured modules, seminars, and workshops on theory application, adaptation, and development. At the same time, supervisors must offer clear guidance on aligning research questions with the appropriate theoretical scope, whether using full theory-driven frameworks or selected constructs as sensitizing concepts. Together, these measures will equip students with the skills needed to move beyond confirmatory use of theory toward meaningful elaboration, contextual refinement, and theoretical innovation.
2. Postgraduate research should require explicit documentation of how theoretical constructs are applied, tested, refined, or challenged within the study. Such transparency strengthens the credibility of individual theses and contributes to a cumulative repository of theoretical insights that future scholars can build on. This practice will enhance the global relevance and visibility of African LIS research and support systematic theory elaboration and improved framing of qualitative research questions.

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