

Resource Sharing in Special Libraries: Identifying Barriers and Building Sustainable Strategies for the Digital Environment

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Abstract

Special libraries must provide broad information access despite narrowly focused collections, limited budgets, and strict confidentiality requirements. This paper identifies the obstacles that hinder resource sharing in special libraries and evaluates strategies that support practical, compliant collaboration. The study uses an integrative review of 47 peer-reviewed publications from 2000 to 2026, plus professional reports from library associations. Data were analyzed thematically to isolate issues specific to special library settings.

Findings: Six barrier categories emerged: (1) licensing and copyright limits, (2) technology and infrastructure gaps, (3) financial constraints, (4) lack of administrative policy, (5) confidentiality and staff attitudes, and (6) challenges with non-standard formats.

Strategies that mitigate these issues are organized into a four-pillar framework: governance, technology, licensing, and organizational culture.

Keywords: *Special libraries, resource sharing, interlibrary loan, consortia, copyright compliance, controlled digital lending*

Introduction

Special libraries exist to advance the goals of their host organization, whether that is a corporation, research institute, law office, hospital, or government agency. Their value is measured by the speed and accuracy with which they deliver information that informs decisions, supports compliance, or accelerates innovation (Murray, 2015). Because these libraries build deep, narrowly focused collections, no single special library can own every item its users may need.

Resource sharing refers to structured cooperation among libraries to exchange materials, services, and expertise. While the concept originated decades ago as a response to rising journal costs (Kent & Galvin, 1979), the digital shift has altered both the mechanisms and the constraints. For special libraries, electronic licensing terms, information security policies, and the prevalence of gray literature create conditions that differ markedly from academic interlibrary loan.

This article examines two questions: (1) What factors most often restrict resource sharing in special libraries? and (2) Which approaches have been shown to reduce those restrictions while respecting legal and organizational boundaries?

Review of related Literature

Gupta, R., & Sharma, S. (2024)-“Interoperability challenges in library resource sharing: A study of Indian special libraries”.This empirical study of 32 Indian corporate and government libraries reports that incompatible metadata standards and library systems prevent automated request routing.

Akporhonor, B. A., &Oke, A. I. (2023) -“Consortia and resource sharing among special libraries in Nigeria: Prospects and problems.” This study examines how special libraries in Nigeria use consortia to manage costs and access. Using survey data from 24 corporate and research libraries.

Kumar, V., & Singh, S. P. (2023) –“ Information sharing practices and barriers in Indian corporate libraries”. Through interviews with 25 corporate librarians, this study identifies confidentiality as the top barrier. Seventy-two percent would not lend internal technical reports due to NDAs and export-control laws. Licensing restrictions on commercial databases were the second major barrier.

Hansen, D. R., & Courtney, K. K. (2022)– “Controlled digital lending and copyright: Legal and practical considerations for libraries”.Hansen and Courtney analyze the legal framework for controlled digital lending (CDL) and its potential to expand resource sharing of print holdings. They argue that CDL aligns with fair use when one digital copy circulates for each physical copy owned.

Okoro, C. C., & Mole, A. J. C. (2022) – “ Sharing technical standards in Nigerian engineering libraries: Legal and practical constraints”. Focusing on engineering standards, the authors report that 68% could not be shared because publisher licenses prohibited reproduction and no digital lending options existed.

Ujakpa, M. M., Leonard, A., &Aina, L. O. (2022) – “ Barriers to information resource sharing among special libraries in Namibia”. Using a mixed-methods approach, the authors found that lack of MOUs, inadequate ICT infrastructure, and DRM restrictions were the top barriers. Even when libraries had e-resources, they could not lend due to technical and legal limits. The study recommends national-level policy and shared systems. It is relevant for understanding barriers in resource-constrained special library environments.

Chukwueke, C., &Onwuchekwa, E. O. (2021)- “Resource sharing in Nigerian research libraries: Issues and challenges in the digital era.” This study elaborates based on interviews with 18 research library heads, this article identifies technology as a key barrier. Only 38% of libraries had web-accessible OPACs, preventing participation in union catalogs. The authors also found that staff lacked training in electronic ILL systems. The study is useful for special libraries because it links infrastructure gaps to low sharing rates, even when willingness exists.

Ikenwe, I. J., &Adegbilero-Iwari, I. (2021) -“Awareness and use of inter-library loan services by scientists in Nigerian research institutes” The study highlights behavioral barriers: even when systems exist, low user awareness and trust reduce participation. This is critical for special libraries that must promote services to time-pressured researchers.

Ojennus, P., &Torma, S. (2021) - “Resource sharing in law firm libraries: Policies, practices, and perceptions” found that 61% lacked a written resource sharing policy, leading to inconsistent decisions. Attorneys’ demands for speed conflicted with license restrictions on legal databases, and staff often denied requests to avoid risk. Chisita, C. T. (2020)- “Library consortia and the imperative for resource sharing in Zimbabwe”.This study documents the role of the Zimbabwe University Library Consortium during national economic collapse. Through case analysis, the author shows that joint licensing and shared platforms enabled continued access when individual budgets failed. Yusuf, F., &Owolabi, K. A. (2020) – “ Library consortia and subscription crisis in Nigerian university libraries”. This article documents 5–7% annual journal inflation and shows how consortia mitigate costs. However, the authors note that benefits accrue mainly to larger institutions; small special libraries struggle with fees and governance requirements. The study contextualizes financial barriers that persist despite sharing models.

From Cooperation to Structured Sharing

Early library cooperation relied on printed union lists and mail-based lending. Modern resource sharing encompasses electronic document delivery, shared purchasing, cooperative cataloging, and consortial licensing (Ratnayake, 2025). The underlying economic case has remained stable: sharing reduces redundant purchasing and widens the pool of available materials for all participants.

Characteristics of Special Libraries

Special libraries are typically embedded units with three distinguishing traits: collections that are subject-specific and depth-oriented; users who require fast response times; and parent organizations that impose rules about data protection and external communication (Special Libraries Association [SLA], 2023). These traits mean that workflows designed for academic interlibrary loan cannot be adopted without modification.

Impact of Digital Licensing

The move to electronic journals and books has produced new types of barriers. Sain and Negi (2024) observed that digital sharing can increase reach, but success depends on adequate infrastructure and clear rights. Many vendor agreements for electronic content are written for “authorized users” defined as employees of the purchasing organization, which excludes lending to other libraries (Panda & Mohanty, 2007). Digital rights management can also technically block the creation of copies for loan.

Table -1 Changes in Resource Sharing Context for Special Libraries

Period	Main Method	Enabling Tools	Central Constraint
1970–1990	Physical ILL, union lists	Telephone, fax, postal mail	Geographicdistance, slow delivery
1990–2010	Consortial e-journal packages	Email, web-based catalogs	Rising subscription costs
2010–2026	Cloud ILL platforms, CDL	OCLC World Share, Rapid ILL	License restrictions, data security

Methodology

An integrative literature review was performed between January and March 2026. The following databases were searched: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA), Scopus, Web of Science, and Library Literature & Information Science.

Inclusion criteria were: (1) English language, (2) publication date 2000–2026, (3) peer-reviewed article or association white paper, and (4) explicit discussion of challenges or strategies. After screening, 47 articles and 12 professional reports were retained.

Categories of Challenges

Analysis produced six recurring challenge areas. Table 2 summarizes how often each appeared across the 47 sources.

Table 2- Reported Barriers to Resource Sharing in Special Libraries

Barrier Category	Sources Citing	%	Common Examples
Licensing and copyright	39	83%	E-resource contracts forbid ILL; DRM blocks copying; ambiguity about Section 108
Technology and infrastructure	31	66%	No web OPAC; incompatible metadata; IT firewalls block cloud ILL
Financial constraints	29	62%	High subscription inflation; membership fees; staff time
Administrative/policy gaps	27	57%	No written sharing policy; unclear approval lines; no MOUs
Confidentiality and behavioral	25	53%	Proprietary reports cannot leave organization; reluctance to lend unique items
Collection/format limitations	22	47%	Standards, patents, datasets not covered by ILL; gray literature hard to discover

Licensing and copyright: Igbo et al. (2017) reported that several Nigerian university libraries owned electronic resources but could not participate in sharing because they lacked both management software and institutional policy. In corporate contexts, vendor agreements often define access narrowly, making legal sharing impossible without renegotiation.

Confidentiality: Unlike academic libraries, special libraries may hold internal research, client data, or export-controlled technical documents. Sharing such items can violate nondisclosure agreements or national regulations, so staff must filter requests carefully.

Strategies Identified: Table 3 organizes strategies by the barrier they address and notes relative difficulty of implementation.

Table 3 Strategies Reported for Improving Resource Sharing

Strategy	Targets Barrier	Reported Outcome	Implementation Level
Consortial purchasing/licensing	Financial, licensing	40–70% cost savings vs. individual	Moderate
Cloud-based ILL platforms	Technology, administrative	Standard 24–48 hr turnaround	Low to moderate
Controlled digital lending	Licensing, format	Enables sharing of print holdings	Moderate
Formal policy + MOUs	Administrative, behavioral	Reduces ad-hoc denials	Low
License negotiation with model language	Licensing	ILL rights secured at purchase	Moderate to high
Emphasis on open access	Licensing, financial	Eliminates permission step	Low to moderate
Staff training and ROI tracking	Behavioral, financial	Increases internal support	Low

Consortia: Chisita (2020) described how a university library consortium in Zimbabwe allowed members to maintain service during severe budget reductions. Discipline-specific consortia in engineering, health, and law report similar benefits because members have overlapping information needs.

Controlled Digital Lending (CDL): This approach circulates a digitized version of a physical item while ensuring the physical copy is not simultaneously available, which aligns with fair use interpretations in several jurisdictions and expands sharing of older print materials.

Discussion: A Four-Pillar Framework for Practice

The results indicate that special libraries need a framework that prioritizes governance and risk management rather than maximizing volume of loans. The proposed framework has four interacting pillars:

Governance: A written policy specifies what may be shared, under what conditions, and who approves exceptions. Memoranda of understanding with partners define liability, timelines, and confidentiality safeguards.

Technology: Participation in a shared ILL network removes the need for local system development. Adoption of standard metadata and contribution to union catalogs improves discoverability.

Licensing: Reviewing agreements before purchase and inserting language that permits interlibrary loan or document delivery is essential. Maintaining a rights database prevents inadvertent violations.

Culture: Tracking the cost avoided through borrowing versus purchasing, and communicating that value to management, builds support. Regular staff training reduces inconsistent decision-making.

This framework is selective by design. Not every item can or should be shared, and turnaround time plus confidentiality must remain primary considerations

Conclusion and Recommendations

Resource sharing remains necessary for special libraries because comprehensive ownership is unattainable. The most significant structural obstacle is restrictive licensing, while the most tractable obstacles are absence of policy and lack of shared technology.

Recommendations for Practitioners:

1. Draft and secure management approval for a resource sharing policy within one fiscal quarter.
2. Audit the ten most-requested electronic titles for ILL rights and renegotiate at renewal.
3. Select one cloud-based ILL service and begin as a borrower to demonstrate value.
4. Report quarterly on items borrowed, turnaround time, and estimated cost avoidance.

Directions for Future Research:

Studies are needed on (1) the legal application of controlled digital lending in corporate settings, (2) return-on-investment metrics that resonate with financial officers, and (3) workflows for sharing datasets, standards, and other non-bibliographic materials

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