

The present status of public libraries in the state of Kuwait: librarians' perspectives

Research – Literature review

Received: 15.02.2023

Accepted: 29.03.2023

Published: 31.08.2023

Dr. Awadh Alharbi

Associate professor, Department of Library and Information Science, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait
ah.alharbi@paaet.edu.kw

Dr. Talal Alazemi

Assistant professor, Department of Library and Information Science, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait
tr.alazemi@paaet.edu.kw

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Talal Alazemi, Dakhil Alhouti

Dr. Dakhil Alhouti

Assistant professor, Department of Library and Information Science, Public Authority for Applied Education and Training, Kuwait
da.alhouti@paaet.edu.kw



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Abstract

This study aims to explore librarians' perspectives regarding the present status of public libraries and their activities to serve the community in Kuwait. To achieve the objectives of the study, the descriptive analytical method was used. A random sample of 262 librarians was chosen to answer 42 questions in a questionnaire that was

divided into five dimensions: the role of public libraries (9 questions), the availability of information services (6 questions), using information technology (6 questions), library environment (7 questions), the administration and financial level (6 questions) and awareness of whole library activities (8 questions). The data were analysed using SPSS Statistics to calculate the estimate of the librarians' responses and the significant statistical differences in their responses using General linear model. The study found a low level for all axes of the study, with statistically significant differences in the librarians' estimates due to the variable gender, age, educational qualification and number of years of experience. The study recommended the need to support libraries for users, especially with regard to providing advanced materials to meet a wide range of print and digital needs and providing the appropriate environment with a focus on awareness of library activities. The value of this study lies in exploring and understanding the perspectives of librarians, which is indispensable for improving services and resources offered by public libraries.

Keywords

public library; librarians' perspectives; library status, Kuwait

Literature Review

The importance of existing public libraries in the Internet or digital age has been debated not only in Kuwait, but also globally, as mentioned by McLeay (2016). Nevertheless, Kinney (2010) indicates that libraries remain important and play an effective role regarding Internet provision; specifically, librarians in public libraries can act as guides to the Internet, and they offer services that the Internet cannot. In addition, McClure and Jaeger (2009) stated that librarians are Internet access providers, teachers and trainers and provide information services such as financial information, health care information, and job seeking and so on.

According to Faulkner (2018), public libraries often support entrepreneurs in their communities. A majority of libraries provide print and digital resources to these users, including databases, online research guides and online courses. In addition, public libraries have a huge value to society, often defined in terms of reading materials and the services the library provides to the individual and the whole society (Faulkner, 2018). Brewster (2014) explained that 'the empowerment associated with being able to make non-commercial, unpressured decisions

about what to read all contributed to the opportunity to conduct an act of self-care by withdrawing from stressful situations into the public library space' (p. 99). Similarly, Sufar, Talib and Hambali (2012) considered space planning, selection of furniture, lighting, materials and finishes conducive to creating an attractive physical interior environment. Such considerations help public libraries to gain a positive reputation that can contribute to their survival.

Bertot and Jaeger (2008) examined the ways in which the Internet access delivered by public libraries affects their communities. Othman (2015) investigated the role of the public library in reducing the digital divide and indicated the existence of a digital divide, but also suggested that the availability of computers and Internet have assisted the community to overcome the substantial information divide and develop its culture. Bo Kinney (2010) addressed the issue of why the Internet matters for public libraries. The analysis finds no disparity in the number of public computers available in areas with high and low incomes but finds a significant—and widening—disparity in the number of computers available in areas with a higher versus lower percentage of non-white and non-English-speaking households.

In Kuwait, Public libraries have received limited attention from scholars. Indeed, in the past 20 years, very few scholars have carried out research related to public libraries in Kuwait. Most of the studies that have been conducted discussed similar issues, such as librarians' capabilities and what they need to gain to improve their performance (Abdel-Motey, 2001; Al-Humood, 2007) and the availability and use of information technology (Al-Qallaf & Al-Azmi, 2002). They have also covered the status and reality of public libraries, difficulties and obstacles that libraries and librarians encounter and the decreasing number of visitors to public libraries, as well as providing recommendations to address these issues (Al-Asari et al., 1999; Abdel-Motey, 2001; Abdel-Motey & Al-Ansari, 2003; Alenezi, 2004; Al-Humood, 2007). However, there has been only one study on public libraries in Kuwait. That study was carried out by Ghuloum and Alyacoub's (2016) who investigated the role of public libraries in serving individuals with autism spectrum disorder and their families in particular. Therefore, this study will help fill the gap for a more general study by exploring librarians' perspectives and awareness regarding the present status of public libraries and their activities to serve the community in this new era, a topic never before investigated by academic studies.

The literature has covered various aspects of the issues faced by public libraries both locally and internationally, and the issues discussed in those studies were, to some extent, relevant to this study. However, none of the studies discussed

these issues from librarians' perspectives which will be the main focus of this study.