

Users' perspectives of public library for a knowledge-based society: Implications for developing countries

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Abstract

Rationale of Study – In today's fast-paced, ever-changing world, knowledge has become a commodity and a capital that provides the basis for a knowledge-based society (KBS). Public libraries, however, are trying to stay relevant as a knowledge hub in such societies by expanding their roles in local communities. This research investigated the relationship among demography, accessibility, environment, digitalisation, and the library's perceived role in a KBS.

Methodology – Following cross-sectional quantitative research design, data was collected from 112 respondents using a structured questionnaire survey on the premises of the Pabna Government Public Library in Bangladesh. The 9-item scale showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = .713$) and using SPSS 25, descriptive analyses, Chi-square test, and Spearman correlation were carried out.

Findings – The role of a public library in terms of readership and awareness in the community had a statistically significant (p -value < 0.001) positive correlation with accessibility ($\rho = .334$) and library environment ($\rho = .513$). At the same time, a negative association was observed with respondents' level of education ($\rho = -.265$, p -value < 0.01). However, a weak relationship existed between profession and perception of the library environment ($\rho = .186$, p -value < 0.05).

Implications – In similar developing country contexts, libraries must attract diverse users beyond educated youths and create a conducive library environment where it becomes a part of their community. Public libraries can consequently stay relevant and contribute to building a KBS.

Originality – This paper reports the findings of an original study regarding users' perceptions of public libraries in KBS from a developing country perspective.

Keywords

Library environment, library digitalisation, knowledge management, library and community development

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1 Introduction

Public libraries are locally based, universal institutions where citizens from all walks of life are welcomed despite their socio-economic, demographic, political, and cultural differences. In addition to their open nature, public libraries are physically present in most communities and are among the most trusted public institutions (Vårheim, 2017). Moreover, public libraries are among the most influential public establishments in developing and developed countries regarding information accumulation and distribution for research, education, and recreation using an organised collection of physical and digital resources (Uddin et al., 2016). In this fast-paced, ever-changing world, public libraries act as nodal points in a network of local communities and the world of information to meet knowledge management demands. By recognising public libraries as community development spaces, their roles and users' perceptions also transform from reactive to proactive. It has been reported that providing information resources is insufficient due to technological development and the possibility of users becoming knowledge producers (Aiyebilehin et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, public libraries' role in generating, preserving, and disseminating knowledge and informational resources has been indisputable for a long time. In recent decades, drastic changes were introduced in the functioning of public libraries due to changes in the social and technological environments (Reid & Howard, 2016). Perceiving a library as a physical space with collections of books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and other documents has changed since the 1990s when transformations in information and communications technologies made the acquisition, processing, storing, and distribution of information easier without the deterrence of location and time (Gupta, 2015). Furthermore, many public libraries are essential in promoting lifelong learning and community involvement (Fabris et al., 2010). Through the provision of vast informational resources and technologies, public libraries assist users' self-development and intellectual demands as part of their educational role (Noh & Lee, 2020). As a result, libraries contribute to developing and sustaining a society based on knowledge and information by providing its users with better services and prospects of community engagement.

At the same time, knowledge is considered a commodity and capital in the development of modern twenty-first-century societies (Gupta, 2015). According to scholars, knowledge has become a driving factor in the national economy, and information organisations like libraries have a role in meeting the information demands of a new society (Omopupa et

al., 2022). That society, dubbed a "knowledge-based society" or KBS, as foreseen by many authors (for example, see Krings, 2006), though lacking a theoretical and empirical foundation, is based on the notion that knowledge will take the place of labour and capital as forces behind capitalistic growth. In a knowledge society, knowledge is held as the "fundamental pillar", and the process of knowledge dissemination is most important (Afgan & Carvalho, 2010). Moreover, a knowledge society is a learning society continuously expanding throughout the globe, and libraries are performing a new role in it (Alam, 2016). However, previous research into public libraries' educational and informational roles suggested that developing countries like Bangladesh still lack a strong sense of "library culture" despite libraries offering free content and resources (Rahman & Islam, 2023).

In such a developing country context, the lack of enthusiasm regarding knowledge acquisition through reading, learning, and research in the premises of a public library hurts the growth of an emerging KBS. Moreover, in the age of digitalisation and electronic tools for knowledge production, documentation, and delivery, public libraries are trying to stay relevant as knowledge hubs in such societies by expanding their roles in local communities. Considering the importance of public libraries in society, this study aimed to investigate users' perceptions regarding those libraries and their roles in a KBS. More specifically, this study aimed to explore the relationship among users' demographic characteristics, the library's physical and digital accessibilities, and the users' perceptions regarding the public library's role to meet knowledge and informational needs of a KBS. The perspectives of the public library's role and its relationships with other variables would provide a basis for the justification of possible measures for public libraries' efforts in advancing KBS in Bangladesh and other developing nations.

2 Literature review

The local or central governments finance most public libraries. Compared with private libraries, they cater services to all citizens irrespective of social or economic status. Besides becoming more democratic, libraries in modern societies have attuned to user-centeredness to improve their quality and services (Nuut, 2004). On the other hand, major features of a knowledge society are the importance of knowledge in the global value chain, the spread of information technologies, and the growing role of knowledge managers and experts in decision-making (Krings, 2006). In a knowledge society, according to its first proponent, Peter F. Drucker, knowledge is the principal source of the economy, and it

becomes the crucial form of production. In contrast, other factors of production such as land and labour become secondary (Drucker, 1993). In this context, Shuva and Akter (2012) argue that public libraries are one of the critical social institutions to create a society entirely built on knowledge.

According to Savenije (2011), three components are vital to a KBS's success: an investment in knowledge, setting standards for education and training, and innovations. Public libraries hold implications for all these elements as a form of investment in knowledge curation, while playing a role in the distribution of training and educational materials and acting as a personal and community space to inspire users' innovativeness. Research has shown that public libraries are viewed as having contributed to knowledge societies through the identification, creation, processing, transformation, diffusion, and application of information to build and apply human development knowledge (Omopupa et al., 2022). Moreover, since the objectives of a KBS are about fulfilling social expectations, creating wealth, and increasing living standards, public libraries are critical components of a society to promote those transitions with emphasis on the development and curation of knowledge (Mishra, 2016; Shin, 2016).

In addition to libraries' role in knowledge and information infrastructure, Uddin et al. (2016) argued that they are crucial to the progress and preservation of an academic and research-based society. Besides, libraries function as memory repositories, education and research spaces, and cultural and socialisation interfaces (Nuut, 2004). Additionally, Shin (2016) described public libraries in Korea as a "cultural playground" where users can access library resources and acquire information and knowledge, creating an immersive environment for KBS and community development. The intersectionality of public libraries and knowledge societies is also present in North American Communities where, according to Cavanagh (2009), a library's communal identity, culture, structure, and values shape its learning, social and informational spaces. This means that demographic identities and social values play a part in users' perception of the library and its role in KBS.

Notwithstanding users' demographic characteristics, the provision of the enabling environment (Aiyebilehin et al., 2018), library collection, technological facilities (Uddin et al., 2016), physical location (Mainka et al., 2013), and accessibility (Hector et al., 2018) are among factors that influence users' perceptions of public libraries in modern society. However, there is a dearth of research on the intersectionality between building a knowledge society and the effect of public libraries' role in that society (for example, Bhue

et al., 2015; Chatterjee et al., 2023; Gupta et al., 2021; Gupta, 2015; Mainka et al., 2013; Mishra, 2016; Nuut, 2004; Omopupa et al., 2022; Savenije, 2011; Vikas, 2005); particularly no study explored users' perspectives regarding public library that is suitable for a KBS in developing country context. Therefore, the current study addressed the research gap by examining users' perceptions regarding the public library's role in the community and how it is related to the user's demographic variables, library's location accessibility, staff behaviours, reading environment, and digital services.

3 Methodology

In this research, a quantitative approach was utilised as it provides for the analysis and presentation of numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) while identifying relationships among variables (Mehrad & Zangeneh, 2019). A cross-sectional design was followed for this study as, according to Levin (2006), it allows for short-term studies but offers generalisable results. Many researchers also use such designs because of the flexibility in sample sizes. Keeping that in mind, this research was carried out in the Pabna district in Bangladesh, a developing country. Furthermore, the obtained sample size of $N = 112$ was adequate for linear correlation analysis considering a minimum sample of 109 which was calculated $[(1-\beta) = 90\%, f^2 = 0.3, \alpha = 0.05]$ using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al., 2009).

The data for this study was gathered from primary sources using a structured questionnaire survey at the Pabna Government Public Library premises in January 2023. The respondents for this study were selected following a simple random sampling technique from the library users who visited the library during office hours (9 am – 4 pm) between 7th and 20th January 2023. During that period, a total of 112 users of the Pabna Public Library participated in this study. Using an Android smartphone, an electronic version of the questionnaire via *Google Forms* was employed to gather the data. The researchers ensured informed consent and the respondents' autonomy to withdraw from filling out the surveys at any time. However, no one declined to participate in this study, and each survey took around 15 minutes to complete. Besides, participants were given explanations on using the data for research purposes only, and all the data obtained remained anonymous during the subsequent data organisation and analysis process.

The data-gathering tool contained a total of 13 questions in five sections, and the first section contained four questions in which demographic characteristics such as gender, age group, level of education, and present profession were investigated. For the remaining sections, the researchers used a two-point categorical scale to measure the indicators of

accessibility and digitalisation, and a five-point Likert scale for the indicators of the environment and role of the library in KBS. The 9-item scale showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha, $\alpha = .713$) (Cortina, 1993; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Using SPSS version 25, data was processed, organised, and analysed for presentation. A descriptive analysis was conducted for the demographic characteristics of the respondents, and to find out significant differences in demographic attributes, a Chi-square test was conducted (see Table 1). Moreover, the Spearman correlation was carried out and presented in Table 2 to identify relationships among study variables.

4 Results

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the respondents in this study. According to the table, most respondents were male (61.6%) and aged between 20 and 30 (87%), indicating a dominance of young adults in Bangladesh's library premises. In terms of educational level, more than two-thirds (68%) already had or pursuing a bachelor's degree level education, while the next highest group had higher education (17%) than a bachelor's degree. Based on profession or occupational status, it was revealed that the highest number of respondents were students (85.7%), while the next highest were job holders (7.1%). The Chi-square statistics confirmed that the differences within the demographic characteristics, namely gender, age, education level, and profession, were at least statistically significant at p -value < 0.01 , and the largest deviation is seen in terms of profession.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the respondents

	<i>Attributes</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>χ^2 statistics</i>
Gender	Female	43	38.4	6.04**
	Male	69	61.6	
Age	<20	11	9.8	181.57***
	20-25	79	70.5	
	25-30	13	11.6	
	30-35	3	2.7	
	35<	6	5.4	
Education	Primary	7	6.3	167.20***
	Secondary	2	1.8	
	Higher Secondary	8	7.1	
	Bachelor's degree	76	67.9	
	Masters/above	19	17.0	
Profession	Student	96	85.7	303.63***
	Job holder	8	7.1	
	Business/Entrepreneur	5	4.5	
	Unemployed	2	1.8	
	Teacher	1	.9	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

As illustrated in Table 2, which describes the correlation coefficient throughout the variables of this study, among demographic variables, an education level ($\rho = .623$) and profession ($\rho = .636$) had a highly positive and statistically significant (p -value < 0.001) relationship with the age group of the respondents. In contrast, gender had a very low association ($\rho = .191$, p -value < 0.05). It signifies that an increase in the age group was strongly related to their education and profession, as indicated in the distribution of the demographic characteristics depicted in Table 1. However, among other variables, the role of the library had a statistically significant (p -value < 0.001) positive correlation with accessibility ($\rho = .334$) and a very strong positive relationship with the library environment ($\rho = .513$). In other words, the role of libraries in a knowledge-based society can depend on the level of accessibility and the library environment for knowledge management. However, there was a weak relationship between the profession of the respondent and the library environment ($\rho = .186$, p -value < 0.05) and a negative association between the role of the library and the level of education of the respondents ($\rho = -.265$, p -value < 0.01). It implies that as the education level of library users increases, they view that the role of a library decreases in a knowledge-based society as educated users are more capable of making knowledgeable decisions.

Table 2: Correlation among the study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1 Gender	1.000							
2 Age group	.191*	1.000						
3 Education Level	.056	.623***	1.000					
4 Profession	.165	.636***	.259**	1.000				
5 Accessibility	.056	-.020	-.161	-.018	1.000			
6 Environment	.044	.041	-.087	.186*	.120	1.000		
7 Digitalisation	-.081	-.135	-.131	-.060	.163	.145	1.000	
8 Library in KBS	-.004	-.100	-.265**	.030	.334***	.513***	.040	1.000

Note: Spearman's Correlations (ρ); * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

5 Discussion

The current study explored the users' perceptions of public libraries in their efforts to generate KBS in a developing country based on a questionnaire survey from Pabna, Bangladesh. It particularly investigated how the implicit roles of the public library, the demographic characteristics of the users, library accessibility, environment, and digitalisation of the library in a KBS correlated to each other. According to study results,

the environment inside the library, including the physical environment, the library's collection of materials and resources, how library staff behaves with users, accessibility of the library location and difficulty in library management systems (e.g., acquiring membership), influences the users' perception toward the public library and its perceived role in a knowledge society. While a public library is a place for knowledge gathering, it is also a place for social awareness of issues and a platform to educate its citizens through engagement. Omopupa et al. (2022) made a similar observation, suggesting that public libraries act as "gateways to knowledge and culture" by performing an embedded role in society and helping accumulate and preserve generational knowledge. However, the results suggested that the role of public libraries in a KBS can benefit illiterate or less educated people because by educating them and creating a knowledge platform, public libraries play a crucial role in promoting knowledge and helping them make knowledgeable decisions. Such inference aligns with the primary goal of a knowledge society, as argued by Afgan and Carvalho (2010).

Furthermore, scholars have suggested that public libraries should follow technological advancements to make them accessible and bridge knowledge gaps in order to have social impacts in KBS (Mishra, 2016; Vikas, 2005). Based on the results, it can be argued that in the current scenario of public libraries in a developing country such as Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas, the digitisation of those libraries' systems was not a significant variable for the roles of libraries in a KBS. Similar circumstances have been observed in India, where the information services and library sector "has not kept pace with the paradigmatic changes taking place in society", according to Mishra (2016). Additionally, Bangladesh's public libraries resemble those in Nigeria, where Adeyemo (2020) noted that "public libraries are experiencing low patronage and are not technologically equipped with computers, scanners, photocopying machines, and internet facilities." On the other hand, citing reforms in Korean libraries, Shin (2016) contended that public libraries must closely examine how people's consciousness is changing to develop and explore new ways to serve library users better. Meanwhile, public libraries must also face challenges caused by changes in artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), and the structure of information systems in developing countries (Barsha & Munshi, 2023). Thus, it can be conferred that although digitalisation was not associated with any variables in this study, meeting the demands of a KBS will require more digitalised and technologically advanced libraries in the future.

Interestingly, based on correlations of the library's role in KBS and other variables, the public library will play its part in creating a knowledge-based society provided that users' opinions of its atmosphere and accessibility improve and successfully draw in illiterate or less educated segments of the population. This assumption can be validated by the findings of Basak and Bandyopadhyay (2016), who analysed the information literacy programs of public libraries in West Bengal, India, stating that the role of public libraries had a significant impact on the development of society, especially underprivileged sections with various innovative services. Notwithstanding, Rahman and Islam (2022) acknowledged that, like many developing countries, Bangladesh is trying to address the problems of developing a knowledge-based society through private and public initiatives. They argued that the overall process is trailing despite efforts from the government, along with several NGOs and other charitable organisations, to set up more libraries to educate the unprivileged sections of the society without access to higher education and scientific information (Rahman & Islam, 2022). Also, libraries in Bangladesh, like many other developing worlds, generally suffer from financial crises, weak infrastructure, low government and local authority support, a lack of training, and a lack of information about funds (Shuva & Akter, 2012). Still, based on the analysis of data from the current study, it can be argued that the level of education of library users, the library environment, and the accessibility to the library are the main factors affecting the perceived role of public libraries in generating and meeting the demands of a knowledge-based society in a developing country such as Bangladesh according to the library users. Thus, attracting users from the less educated section of society and improving the environment and accessibility to the library will be beneficial for creating a knowledge society in Bangladesh or a similar context.

6 Implications for developing nations

According to Owoeye and Abolarinwa (2016), the library is an important institution that can significantly influence the knowledge society if an effective information policy is strictly followed and managed. Furthermore, by guaranteeing that people from all walks of life have regular access to the knowledge they seek, libraries contribute significantly to closing the information gap between the information rich and the poor (Gupta, 2015). From a developing country's perspective, libraries are one of the largest information infrastructures. Therefore, libraries' networked resource-sharing activities and cultural platforms can implicate the development and sustainability of a knowledge-based society in such a context. Additionally, public libraries are supposed to be developing in a way that supports the current information society and serves the entire population by providing the

necessary amount of information resources (Nuut, 2004). Thus, public libraries must present themselves so that their services are tailored to all social groups by providing pertinent content or resources and tailoring their amenities to any specific target group (Savenije, 2011). Moreover, modifications to knowledge management environments will also be required as developing nations transition from relying solely on natural resources and agriculture to industry and, increasingly, knowledge-based services, as well as maintaining indigenous knowledge and making it globally accessible (Wand, 2016). Public libraries are invaluable because they are crucial to a nation's future socio-political, cultural, educational, and intellectual advancement (Uddin, 2012).

Nevertheless, knowledge society gave rise to contemporary societal change driven by institutional change, technical innovation, human development, and knowledge generation (Gupta et al., 2021). Creating a knowledge society has several positive development consequences, such as raising educational standards by creating public spaces for learning, sharing, and utilising ICTs. It boosts the capacity to access knowledge and create income in the community (Alnafrah & Mouselli, 2019). Thus, public libraries in communities must be acknowledged as sources of knowledge generation by the government and the public. A public library provides these services for free, and the public should be encouraged to use them effectively (Adeyemo, 2020). The implications of this study in a similar context to that of a developing country are that libraries must attract and retain more readership and generate a library culture where libraries become a part of their community. In that way, libraries can create awareness and contribute to lifelong learning and developing knowledge societies, especially through literacy programs for the less-educated section of society. Though digitalisation was not perceived as impactful, improving the library's environment and accessibility to wider populations will be comparatively effective. Finally, based on this study, it can be argued that establishing more user-friendly public libraries is the way for a developing country to be a knowledge-based society.

7 Conclusions and limitations

Examining users' perspectives of a public library in a knowledge-based society was the primary objective of this study. A correlation analysis among variables was performed to identify their effect size and direction of the association. The findings of this study showed that the level of education of the library user, the library environment, and the accessibility to the library had significant correlations with the perception of the library's role in a KBS. However, the public library's environment and accessibility were positively associated with

the roles, but the impact on library users' education level was negative. It can be argued that while improving the physical environment of the library, the collection of resources and the behaviour of the staff, as well as the convenience of the location and the library systems, including the membership process, can improve the awareness of social issues and the acquisition and retention of the readership by public libraries, only the presence of educated library users will not help those roles. Thus, diversifying the readership to include an illiterate and less educated section of society is important if the library is to play an impactful role in generating a knowledge-based society in Bangladesh and similar contexts.

Despite honest efforts, this study has several limitations, including the number of variables considered for this study. Only a few variables were examined for their correlations because of the dearth of literature on this intersection between the library's role in a KBS. Additionally, this study considered cross-sectional and quantitative data, limiting the scope of the analysis beyond the mentioned variables. Moreover, its exclusive focus may have impacted the results of this study on rural settings, and the outcomes of a similar study conducted in an urban environment, such as Dhaka, may differ. Future research can address these limitations by expanding these concepts and investigating qualitative aspects of the library's role in KBS. Nevertheless, the findings and implications of this study will be helpful for future researchers and policymakers interested in the intersectionality of the library and knowledge society.

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