

CIVICA

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Changing Landscape™ Report

The intrinsic value of libraries as public spaces



Physical-digital, communicating the new normal

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Introduction

Welcome to the second edition of Civica's intrinsic value of libraries as public spaces research series developed in collaboration with the Institute for Public Policy & Governance (UTS: IPPG) at the University of Technology Sydney.

The intrinsic value of libraries research series has examined the Australian and New Zealand library space over the past few years, noting the impact of digital on the traditional roles of these institutions. The first report in this series established that libraries have changed from being lenders of books to being thriving community hubs offering an array of services.

It provided initial thinking on the value of libraries as online public spaces in particular and also established that over the years, "online" will play a major role if these institutions are to remain relevant for their communities. It did this by focusing on the views of library and council employees; however, the current report goes a step further to include the users as well.



For the first time we have expanded our research outside Australia and New Zealand. This report examines the perspectives of both providers and users of library services from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, and the United Kingdom to decode the value of online library spaces and digital services from the users' perspective while noting their behaviour and preferences as they interact with their libraries and use their resources.

The second instalment of our intrinsic value of libraries as public spaces report also paints a positive picture of innovative library practice of the future. It suggests that even though libraries are adopting a hybrid physical-digital model of library service, there is a need to communicate this to the wider community.

Although libraries have been operating in this space for many years, for many users, libraries are still regarded as primarily physical spaces that contain books and other media. There needs to be a proactive shift that affirms their presence in the hybrid physical-digital space that could be addressed through partnerships and collaboration to promote greater user uptake of online library services.

Libraries are at the heart of thriving communities



Libraries not only provide safe and neutral spaces for people to spend time but also offer a myriad of services like internet access and community learning programmes. Libraries have continually evolved to respond to the changing needs of society, continuously innovating to deliver high level services.

Today, users access information at any time and from any device - such as a personal computer, laptop, mobile, and tablet. The likes of Google and Wikipedia have ensured that users get information as and when they need it with just a few taps on their device.

A proliferation of social media means that they can “share” their experiences with any service at any time, influencing decisions of others to use/not use the same.

Despite these changes, research shows that many library users still prefer to interact with librarians in physical spaces. Libraries have been undergoing change to become hybrid physical-digital spaces, but customers must be made aware of these changes.

We are keen to understand this new model as well as the factors that support its sustainability. To do this, we commissioned the Institute for Public Policy & Governance (UTS: IPPG) at the University of Technology Sydney to undertake research and analysis to understand the role of library management, user preferences and the impact of digital on libraries.

As providers of the world-class library management system, Spydus, we are grateful to have access to many passionate librarians who were willing to share their views and offer their communities to be part of this research.

I hope you find this report insightful and that you can use some of the findings to assist in your current and future projects. And remember, Civica is always here to help!

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Richard Fiddis'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized 'R' and 'F'.

Richard Fiddis
Managing Director, Civica International

The intrinsic value of libraries as public spaces: physical-digital, communicating the new normal

This research reveals insights for library service delivery, now and into the future, with a focus on the online library space (library websites and social media). It seeks to understand the users' experience of online libraries and explores their perceptions of the value of physical and online libraries, the activities undertaken in those spaces, and service expectations.

It also examines the librarians' perceptions of the overall changing landscape for libraries in an increasingly digital environment, including barriers and opportunities to innovate in online library spaces.¹

The research presents data in the following key areas:

- Users' perceptions of the value of, and engagement with online library spaces and digital services
- Perspectives of library staff on the challenges, opportunities, and future of library digital services
- Insights to inform strategies for the delivery of physical-digital libraries now and into the future

¹As the survey was administered online we assume the survey recipients have a certain level of comprehension and ability to use digital technologies that is not reflective of all library users. Similarly interview findings relate to this sample group of library professionals and are not representative of library perspectives across international jurisdictions.

Researchers at UTS: IPPG completed this research in four stages, starting with a review of selected literature that looks at how the presence of libraries extends beyond their physical spaces.

An online survey was completed by nearly 600 public and academic library users from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. Stage 3 included telephone interviews with librarians and library managers from public and academic sectors from the same countries.

The final stage involved an international online focus group discussion with representatives from across the international library sector to collect further qualitative data on the role of libraries in providing online spaces to their respective communities.

Research data from the literature review, survey, and interviews presents the following key themes to consider:

- Users are less satisfied with online library spaces when compared to their experience of physical library spaces
- To be able to deliver the level of service required by communities using online spaces, library staff need appropriate training and development
- Collaboration and partnerships enable libraries to provide a wider array of services and keep up with the pace of technological change
- Physical and online library spaces both have their place in the library of the future

Findings from this research report offer insights for decision makers in the planning of library services that are relevant and useful for their communities in an increasingly digital landscape.

Library users: experiences of physical & online spaces

Libraries offer services in both physical and online spaces. Users have different preferences when engaging with these spaces.

According to the findings, the survey respondents physically visit libraries regularly with 32% visiting almost every week and 20% visiting daily.

Thirty one percent of the online users visit the library website almost every week with 24% of the users on library websites almost everyday. These users mainly access their library website through a personal computer at home (90%).

Frequency of visits to online and physical libraries

Approximately how often do you visit a physical library?



Approximately how often do you visit a library website?

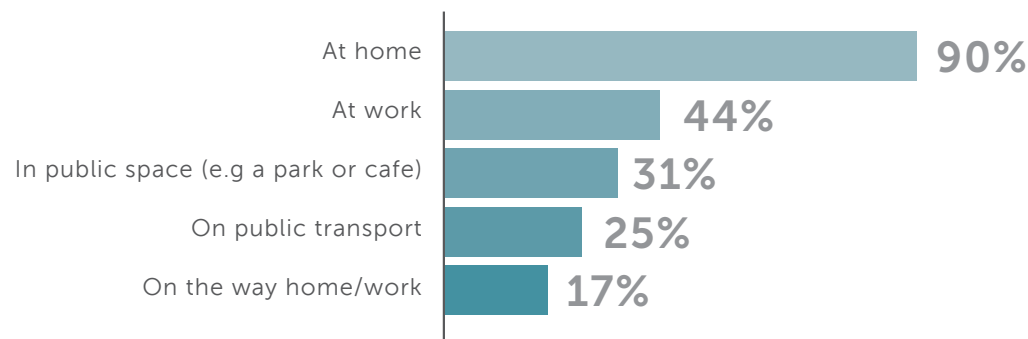


Legend:
■ Almost everyday
■ Almost every week
■ At least once a month
■ A few times a year
■ Hardly ever

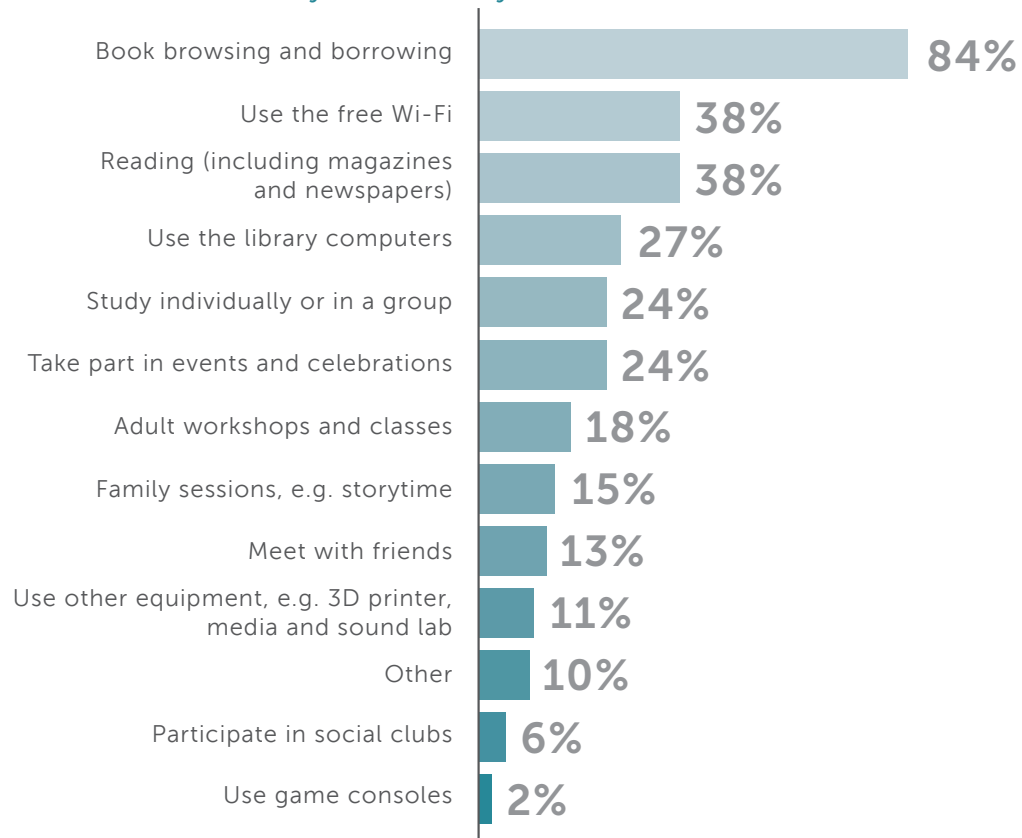
How users access online libraries



Location of access to online libraries

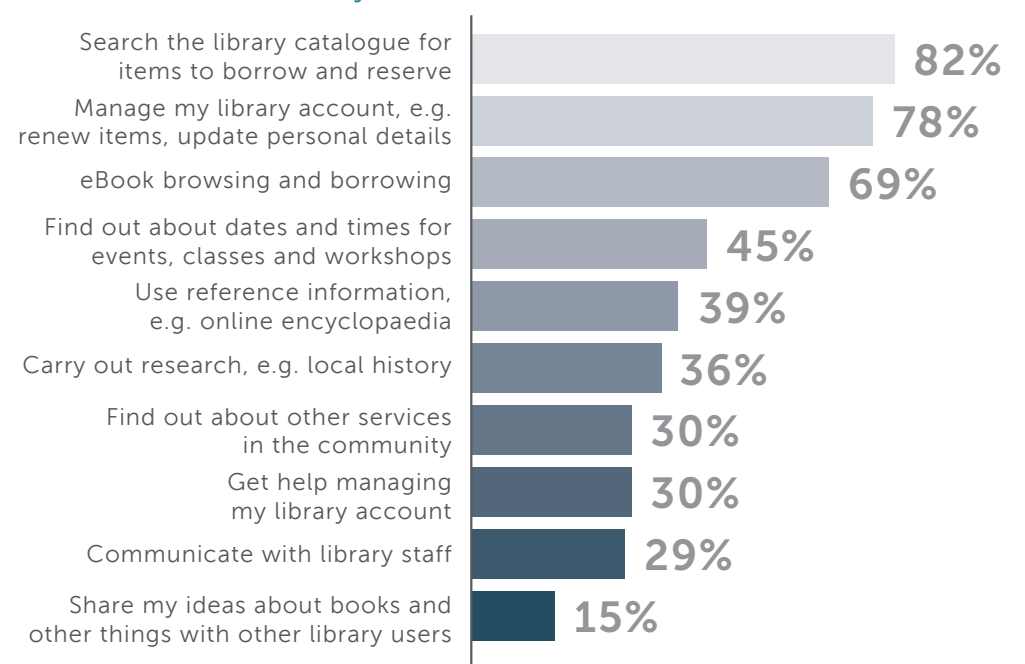


User activities: Physical library



Borrowing and browsing are the highest use activities in both online and physical spaces. A functional contrast is seen in user preferences for recreational reading that is more popular in physical libraries, while users prefer to access reference material online.

User activities: Library website



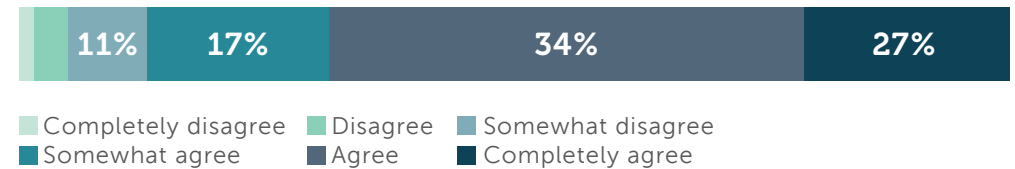
Library users: perceptions & satisfaction of online libraries

78% of library users are as happy to use online services as they are using services in the physical library. However, only 61% are satisfied with the online library experience compared to 85% of users being satisfied with the physical library experience.

The fact that almost a quarter of total respondents are less satisfied with the experience of using online spaces, suggests there are opportunities for improvements to this service, including greater interoperability between different platforms and improved user interfaces.

Happiness in using online and physical library services

I am as happy using library services online as I am using the service in the library.

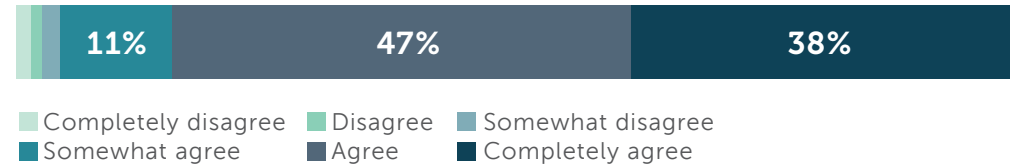


Satisfaction with the online and physical library experience

Overall, I am satisfied with the online library experience.



Overall, I am satisfied with the physical library experience.



Rating feature of online libraries

It links with other services I use



I can personalise it for my needs



Clear instructions are available to help me use the online library



The pages are quick to load



It is easy to navigate and find the information I need



I can access a wide range of content



The pages are easy enough to read on the digital devices I use



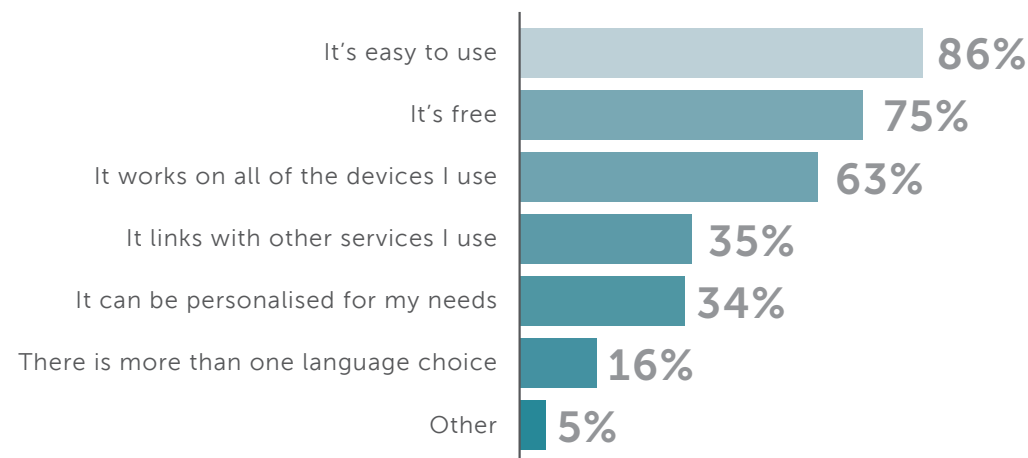
It is easy to access from the digital devices I use



Completely disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree
Somewhat agree Agree Completely agree

This is further highlighted through our research by the features most rated by users when visiting a library website. The responses reveal that usability, free availability and compatibility across devices are most valued.

Important features for library website





What users want from their online library experience

"A simple user experience. A simple menu, a huge database with a sweet search engine. Simple non-intrusive advertisements for local services. These should be easily distinguished from search results e.g. with colour coding."

"Mobile friendly and a better website that lets you find what you are looking for (from customer perspective). Less excessive information. I'm sure there are heaps of pages on the site that don't get seen at all. Relevant social media presence. A lot of library posts are for parents/kids - not really interesting or relevant to me."

User experience and new technologies

Communities expect libraries to offer a more user-friendly online experience, with better integration across the spectrum of services that is comparable to commercial services and that keep up with technological change.

Users already have experience visiting multiple physical libraries and hence expect a certain level of service or familiarity transferred to their digital versions. Libraries need to answer the following questions, while upgrading their interfaces to meet these expectations:

- What kind of user experience do we want to provide?
- What is the purpose of this experience? Whether educational, for exploration, or content creation?
- Can we engage better with users in new ways (such as design thinking methods) to ensure that users' expectations are met?
- What can we learn about popular and social media websites and platforms to encourage usage in library online digital spaces?

Findings from the research suggest that designing a better user experience should be a high priority for libraries looking to improve digital services.


"With the advancement of technology, the utilization of online libraries will be in greater demand. New advancements in social media such as the use of augmented reality and artificial intelligence will automate many of the common services in a physical library."

Libraries are continually improving experiences by leveraging new technologies. Advancements in technologies such as augmented reality, virtual reality), and artificial intelligence, are changing the world we live in and libraries are leveraging these to their benefit.

Artificial Intelligence is improving user experience on library websites by providing reading recommendations based on borrowing histories. Through 'linked data' libraries are also making their collections visible in search engines like Google, again adding to user experience by bringing the library to the user.

Additionally, investments are taking place in developing software Application Programming Interfaces to enable a seamless transition between third party library services such as library systems and eBooks platforms.¹

¹ <https://www.civica.com/en-AU/container---insights-library/spydu-technology-outlook-2018/>



"I'm not sure that they should get too involved with social media... I think staff time is better spent on programming, developing better digital services, and collection management."

"They could engage with customers/communities rather than just talking at them. They could push links to catalogue/resource discovery records so that instead of saying: 'We've got Fred Bloggs at today's author event!' they could say: 'We've got Fred Bloggs at today's author event and this link tells you where to find his books in our libraries.' They could make it easy for readers to build and share their own lists from the catalogue."

Community engagement

Libraries are not one-way communicators online, but function more as a community platform that opens up greater opportunity for conversations with users.

The research findings align with the broader literature of the online landscape where users want to engage more strongly with libraries. This requires redesigning online library interfaces to be more socially focused.¹

When asked an open question on how libraries could make better use of social media services, many survey recipients strongly requested more active 2-way engagement, that is more than providing or reposting information or announcing events.

“Engage more actively and use different communication styles across the platforms – don’t just repost the same content. Vary the approach to reach a wider audience and provide a taste of what the user may experience.”

For these respondents, social media is regarded as an opportunity to enable online interactions between libraries and users and between different members of the community.

Libraries are encouraged to use different communication styles across different platforms to reach and engage with wider audiences.

“Be part of the right conversations in the right groups not out there on their own posting or tweeting into a void.”

“Have special days in the week for different aspects of the library services that they want to post about, so that say, FB users know that every Friday is the local history post, every Monday there is something about the newest books into the library etc.”

Users also want libraries to be consistent and clear with their use of social media to make it easier for users to connect with them.

They suggest it could be a tool to incentivise users to advocate for library resources.

“Libraries could use social media to inform on their new arrival books and programs. The users are invited to give online reviews on certain books, attached with some rewards or tokens of appreciation. Thus it will help to increase book circulation.”

While users invite libraries to engage better on social media, respondents also expressed an awareness about the limitations of this type of communication channel for libraries. There is recognition that this type of engagement can be time-consuming which is compounded by stretched resources and budgets and a lack of library staff expertise in this area. This can mean that for some users, library social media is perceived as rushed and tokenistic.

Given the tight budgets that libraries can face, another perspective is that social media should not be prioritised over other activities and that resources are better utilised on improving library services.

¹ Pomerantz, J. and Marchionini, G., 2007. The digital library as place. *Journal of Documentation*, 63(4), pp.505-533.

The challenges of digital change: the librarian's perspective

While expectations to constantly innovate remain, libraries are aware that what worked previously, may no longer work today, and may become obsolete tomorrow. This is due to factors such as changing user attitudes, advancements in technologies, and the pressure on resources that generate a push to evolve.

As a result, they have been continually looking at innovative ways to effectively service users. Libraries are also experiencing some roadblocks to change:

1. **Competing with commercial platforms:** Though many respondents viewed digital change as an opportunity for innovating their service delivery, they felt that deployment of technology was complicated particularly when digitally literate users expected libraries to match the interfaces of commercial platforms.



**increasing online
services**

2. **Dealing with change:** The impact of increasing digital and online service delivery has meant that staff roles are changing. The expectation of library users, is that staff will always have the answers to their multitude of technical questions and issues.
3. **Changing digital landscape:** Navigating these changes can be difficult due to a range of factors including lack of clarity about digital direction from leaders, cost-shifting of resources from other government services to libraries, resistance by some staff to evolve their roles and the difficulty of providing a cohesive experience especially when compared to commercial offerings.

"(the shift) can create tensions as it takes away from the core services of a traditional library."

"There is a fear of technology or of breaking something. Staff are not feeling confident. There needs to be a changing role of library staff that gives them skills for the future."

4. **Infrastructure challenges:** Digital access to library services is broadly uneven and difficult to plan for because of regional and national technology and infrastructural developments, and the often poor provision of digital services. This can be seen in the Australian National Broadband Network (NBN) and its selective outlay¹ impacts uptake of online services.


“More staffing, resources and funding in the online digital space would help to get strategically ahead.”

5. **Fiscal pressures:** The speed of changes occurring in the library landscape combined with spreading smaller financial resources over a larger service portfolio can limit the introduction of new digital services.
6. **Understanding the needs of users:** Libraries are now juggling a range of activities including maintaining physical collections and spaces, developing online interfaces, raising awareness of new services, and educating users in new digital processes. Understanding the needs of diverse communities and users is a complex engagement process.

¹ Wyatt, D., McQuire, S., Butt, D. and University of Melbourne. Research Unit in Public Cultures, 2015. Public Libraries in a Digital Culture. University of Melbourne.

“Digital experience should be simpler, clearer about purpose and what our users want. We have been trying to customise the digital experience, we should provide users the opportunity to personalise the interface how they want.”





*"We need to build capacity for
change and change management.
Building resilience, skills and
knowledge to handle the change."*

The role of library leadership in delivering digital

The challenges of innovating in an evolving digital landscape can be mitigated by strong leadership, a culture of learning and clear digital strategy and vision.

Leadership drives the digital agenda

Our previous Civica report *The Changing Landscape for the Public Sector: the challenges of building digital bridges* explains that leaders need to champion a strong vision for the future in order to be digital enablers for their organisations.

Whilst many employees see digital transformation as an opportunity, they also require their organisations to lead by example. For example, encouraging staff to use digital technologies requires demonstrated leadership, support to innovate and advocacy of digital services.

In the changing library landscape, library organisations need to invest in their teams by giving them opportunities to upskill and achieve their professional development goals. A strong supportive culture across the organisation that fosters a digital mindset and favours opportunity and innovation can help alleviate job insecurities and fear of obsolescence for library staff.

Continual professional development

The rapid pace of digital change means that library staff require the skills to assist and educate users in online services. As digital technologies become more normalised, library staff need to become champions of this technology to better meet community expectations and needs.

Some library managers interviewed for this research reported a general mismatch between the current skills of library staff and the required skills in order to better service the constantly evolving digital needs of the community, while others identified how staff are learning to respond to the increased use of digital services.

Professional development has always been a focus for library organisations, and by continuing to ensure that library staff have the right skills they can continue to remain relevant and function as advocates of digital evolution.

"They (users) think we know how to do everything with technology – they come in to us to learn how to use devices. We actively provide training in how to use the technology particularly in using our online services and should be able to show our members how to access the digital world. We need to give staff skills and confidence to do this and keep up with change."





Partnerships and collaboration in delivering online services

Responses from the interviews and focus group found that many libraries are already involved in partnerships to delivery content and services. The respondents identified that partnerships with vendors and commercial providers can help them remain relevant in a fast moving digital space.

Consortia arrangements: These have been in place in libraries for many years now, with libraries joining to leverage their numbers to lock in better deals, and to take advantage of collection sharing across organisations.

The consortia model has allowed groups of libraries to achieve greater economies of scale and the ability to access services that would not otherwise be available. Examples of benefits include better prices on online collections and library management systems, and a greater ability to influence service providers.

Recently, the Great Southern West Australian Public Library Consortium was formed to take advantage of a lower cost library system with shared technical expertise across the member libraries.

This consortium, headed by the City of Albany, consists of nine councils including City of Albany, the Shires of Broomehill-Tambellup, Cranbrook, Denmark, Gnowangerup, Jerramungup, Katanning, Kojunup, and Plantagenet.

Together, they will benefit from Civica's world-class Spydus integrated library management system (ILMS) with expertise and knowledge shared by officers from City of Albany library.

Library respondents also indentified issues in consortia purchasing, for example, not being offered the titles their users actually want. Further dialogue between consortia and service providers will help to work out how to maintain differentiation while still achieving the economies of scale that large partnerships offer.

External partnerships and collaborations: Library respondents are aware that with the amount of change and impending change, there is a need to consider partnerships with industry, vendors and external contractors to help get things done. Libraries will continue to consider partnerships with industry, vendors and external contractors with the right technical expertise to help deliver services quickly and reliably.

"Partnerships with industry enable us to do more. They have to be the right type of relationship and we all need to agree with the business model."

Physical-digital is the new normal

The evolution of ICT services has changed the physical structure of the library to be more reliant on these technologies to support day to day operations. Digitisation, online databases and eBooks, as well as the Internet and Wi-Fi access, amongst other things, have expanded the library 'space' and function to not only encompass the library building, but further afield. Furthermore, as our daily lives are now as much online as they are physical, it makes sense that the library experience should reflect this.

"The future library will be a hybrid service, with a physical presence, but different, providing exposure to digital services."

The hybrid physical-digital model of service delivery

Through our survey and interviews it is clear that physical and online libraries are both regarded as important by users. Both physical and virtual libraries are highly rated with 91% of survey respondents agreeing that physical libraries are important, and 89% agreeing that the library website is important.

Values and perceptions of physical and online libraries

The library website is important



The physical library is important

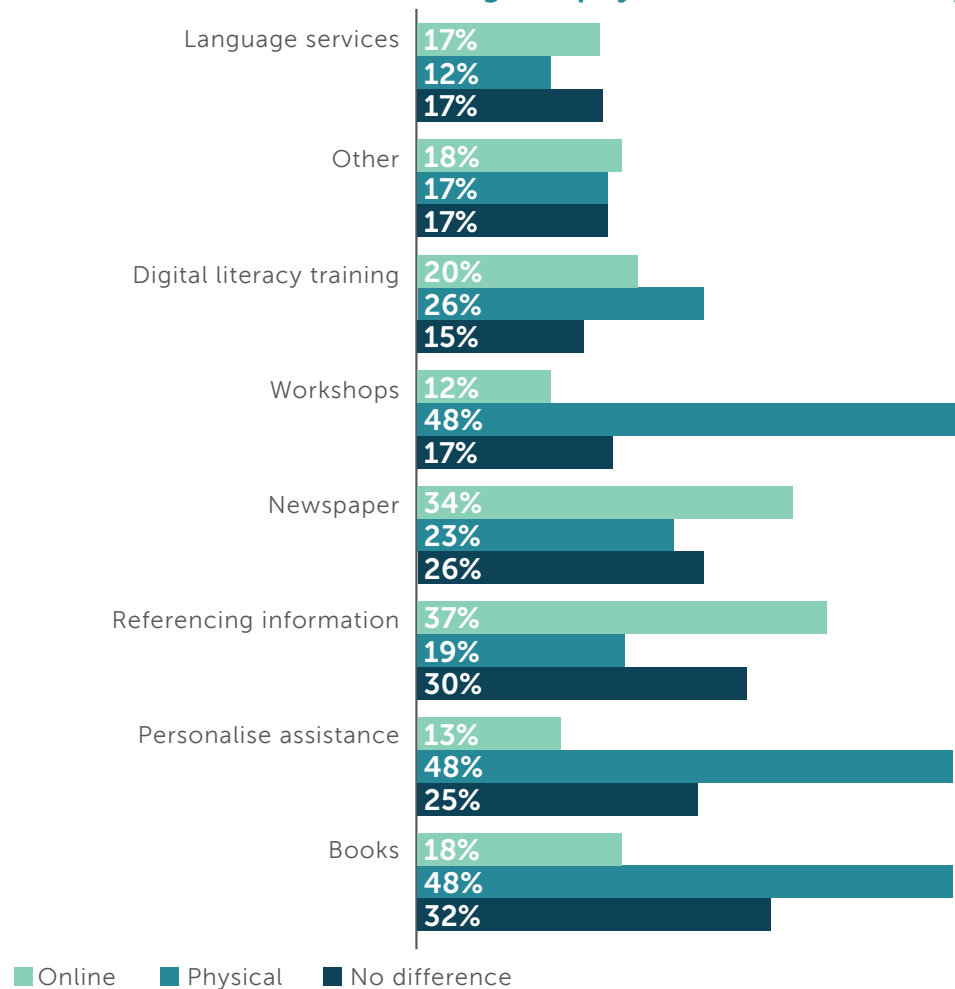


Completely disagree Disagree Somewhat disagree
Somewhat agree Agree Completely agree

Both spaces are valued and provide different and distinct uses. For example using online libraries for research purposes, and physical libraries for pleasure, recreation and social space.

In terms of ease of access, our survey respondents preferred physical spaces for services such as workshops, personalised assistance and reading and online spaces for activities such as referencing information and accessing news.

Ease of access to the following in a physical or online library



Regardless of location, the research suggests that libraries should be seeking a type of hybrid service delivery model where a physical presence is maintained but also leverages a strong array of online services.

"We once wanted to replicate the physical experience in digital libraries but have moved away from this now. We focus on designing digital journeys, learning journeys."

Conclusion

The digital outlook is always evolving with technological advancements and innovations. In this physical-digital continuum, online libraries have an increasing presence in library service portfolios. This research confirms that both physical *and* online spaces are valued by library users and staff. Despite the challenges of resources and change, opportunities remain for libraries to engage with communities and providers to improve online experiences and raise the profile of the online library space to their users.

The sometimes cited belief that digital can replace physical is not true for libraries, demonstrated through the intrinsic value of physical library spaces in supporting social wellbeing and a sense of community.

Even though online use is increasing, library users want to interact with both physical and digital platforms to satisfy different needs. This is a common theme resonated by all those participating in this study, and suggests that the library will continue to evolve and remain open to digital and physical change, designed in close conjunction with users to deliver relevant and sustainable library spaces.

The success of libraries will also depend on effective partnerships and support from government and industry, strong leadership from organisations to empower their teams into what is often a digital unknown, and the delivery of online spaces where User Experience and Interfaces are a priority.

Our research shows that both libraries and library users value the online experience. To deliver transformative change an open dialogue between libraries and their stakeholders is essential for a physical-digital future.

This final section is left for our library users to explain their libraries of the future where both the digital and online experience satisfies their needs and expectations:

These are library users, both public and academic, from Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and the U.K. on the library of the future. Their comments reflected the high level of community support of libraries, and the strong support of both their online and physical forms.

"A library should be a free space where the community can gather to interact, study, learn and easily locate their preference in reading material be it physical or digital. A connection to the world of information databases etc. A place for all of the community to learn and grow."

"While online spaces are important I believe that physical spaces are more important. We need to connect with people physically to maintain good emotional and physical health - physical spaces are vital for this. Online spaces should simply be an adjunct, something that adds to the physical space - not an alternative to it."

“Frankly speaking, the future of online libraries is all about their ability to effectively use the tools they need to provide an overall satisfactory service as a whole rather than the presence of such online tools themselves.

You don't need a lot to be a successful digital experience (see: Twitter & Snapchat) but rather libraries will be able to identify the exact need that they can satisfy using online tools. Perhaps a good future forward online library would be one with a good mobile interface and the equipment necessary for users to perform on the spot searches and services.”

“Online libraries could be integrated with other online information services so that materials are more accessible e.g. that needed as a post-graduate student. For groups to participate virtually in events and activities on a broader scale - regionally, nationally and globally.

Offer a greater range of life-long learning programs that are self-paced and fully online. Maintain the current tradition uses in regards to physical core services e.g. reserving and renewing printed material.”

“With the advancement of technology, the utilization of online libraries will be in greater demand. Users will prefer the use of eBooks and interactive videos to aid their understanding and learning needs. Other than that, new advancements in social media such as the use of augmented reality and artificial intelligence will automate many of the common services in a physical library. I still believe that the environment of the physical library is paramount in engaging the user to visit more often and embrace a fruitful and learning experience.”



Start the conversation and get in touch with Civica

If you would like to know more about Civica and our Library Services, please speak to your Civica Account Manager or contact us.

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