

The Present Status of Public Libraries in the State of Kuwait: Librarians' Perspectives

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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, a descriptive analytical method was used. A random sample of 262 librarians was chosen to answer 42 questions in a questionnaire that was divided into six dimensions: the role and reality of public libraries (9 questions), the availability of information services (6 questions), the use of IT (6 questions), the library environment (7 questions), the administration and financial level (6 questions), and awareness of whole library activities (8 questions). The data were analyzed using SPSS Statistics to calculate correlations. The study found that public libraries must support users and offer advanced materials to meet a wide range of print and digital needs. Attention must be given to these materials, and the libraries' valuable contribution to society should be acknowledged. The value of this study lies in the exploration and understanding of librarians' perspectives, which are indispensable for improving the services and resources provided by public libraries.

Keywords: public library, librarians, librarians' perspectives, library status, Kuwait

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1. Introduction

Public libraries are free to their users and are the only type of repository of books, periodicals, and other media that serve all types of people. In the past, the library was a place to find a rare book or a place to read; now, libraries must adopt a new role as a place where the community finds new ideas, inspiration, and others on similar journeys. Improving such applications and services can strengthen the community (Ayre, 2016; Godin, 2016; Ayre & Craner, 2017). Hallberg and Sipos-Zackrisson (2016) believe that external activities are vital for the library, for example, maintaining contact with non-users through online services and connecting with the community. In 2001, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) stated that the main aim of a public library is to provide services and resources in a wide variety of media to meet the needs of the public. However, the role of the public library is not only to provide access to resources but also to support people in using those resources by developing opportunities to do so and offering practical support and guidance. It is a place that promotes the process of learning and gaining knowledge in response to local needs and issues (Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016 to 2021). For example, public libraries are highly interested in improving access to curriculum literature for universities and colleges (Undhjem & Tveikra, 2016).

Nevertheless, in recent years, librarians have seen a decrease in the use of library facilities due to potential users' reliance on personal technology for obtaining information and resources. In Kuwait, for instance, there is an ongoing debate about the importance of public libraries and their role in the community amid the rapid development of communication and information technology (IT). Newspaper articles on the topic note the low numbers of users and visitors, and questions such as "Are public libraries still fulfilling their role effectively?" and "Do we really need them?" are common.

In fact, questions regarding the need for public libraries are not new. In 2016, McLeay (2016) identified a similar situation, mentioning a "common and long-held idea that public libraries will soon become irrelevant in the digital age" (p. 21). Due to the decrease in user interest, a real crisis is facing public libraries. Financial support is also decreasing, creating uncertainty about the long-term survival of libraries. Salarelli (2014) and Al and Akılı (2016) stated that to survive, public libraries must change their structure. Therefore, the researchers of this study aim to explore librarians' perspectives on the current status of public libraries in the State of Kuwait.

2. Public Libraries in Kuwait

The first public library in Kuwait was established after suggestions from and meetings of educated citizens who believed in the need for a library as a cultural center for educated people to meet for reading and conducting research. Having an appreciation of the larger cultural role of the public library and its significance in supporting education, they collected donations for the library with that purpose in mind (Al-Hatem, 1980; Al-Tammar & Badawi, 1994; Al-Humood, 2007). The exact date of the establishment of the first public library in Kuwait has

been debated by researchers and historians. Some claim it was 1922 (Al-Hatem, 1980; Al-Nouri, 1988; Abdel-Motey, 2001), while others say it was 1924 (Al-Tammar & Badawi, 1994; Al-Ali, 2006; Al-Humood, 2007). However, all are in agreement that the date was 1341 in the Hijri calendar, which equals 1922 in the Gregorian calendar (based on Ihjri.com). Therefore, it can be said that the first public library in Kuwait City was established in 1922.

The library was the Al-Ahliyah Library (the “national library” or the “people’s library”), and its aim was to serve as a public forum during the cultural development movement in the early twentieth century. In 1936, the library was placed under the supervision of the government through the Department of Knowledge (later, the Ministry of Education), and with an increasing number of visitors, a branch library was opened in the cashiers’ market in 1953. Recognizing the importance of public libraries, the government opened a new library outside the city in the Al-Ahmadi area in 1960 (Al-Ali, 2006; Al-Humood, 2007). Thereafter, further libraries were established until they reached the current number of 51 public libraries throughout the country, as listed in Table 1 (Al-Otaibi, 2016).

Table 1: Public libraries in Kuwait (Al-Otaibi, 2016).

Area	Number of libraries
Al-Asima (Capital)	16
Hawally	9
Al-Farwaniya	8
Mubarak Al-Kabeer	4
Al-Ahmadi	10
Al-Jahra	4
Total	51

3. Literature Review

The importance of existing public libraries on the internet or in the 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 in internet provision; specifically, librarians in public libraries can act as guides to the internet, and they offer services that the internet cannot. Also, 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, job-finding tips, 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. Also, public libraries are of huge value to society, often defined in terms of reading materials and the services the library provides to individuals 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, the selection of furniture, lighting, materials, and interior finishes conducive to creating an attractive physical interior environment. Such considerations help public libraries establish a positive reputation that can contribute to their survival.

Bertot and Jaeger (2008) examined the ways that the internet access delivered by public libraries affects their communities. Having recognized the existence of a digital divide, Othman (2015) investigated the role of the public library in reducing such, while suggesting that the availability of computers and the internet have assisted the community in overcoming the substantial information divide and developing its culture. Kinney (2010) addressed the issue of why the internet matters for public libraries. The study found no disparity in the number of public computers available in areas with high and low incomes but identified 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, over the past 20 years, 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 IT (Al-Qallaf & Al-Azmi, 2002). They have also covered the status and condition of public libraries, the difficulties and obstacles that libraries and librarians encounter, and the decreasing number of visitors to public libraries, while 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 (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, an unexplored topic for 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.

4. Research Methodology

To achieve the objectives of the study, a descriptive analytical method was used to investigate the state of public libraries in Kuwait. A random sample of 262 librarians was chosen to answer 42 questions in a questionnaire that was divided into six dimensions: the role and reality of public libraries (9 questions), the availability of information services (6 questions), the use of IT (6 questions), the library environment (7 questions), the administration and financial level (6 questions), and the awareness of whole library activities (8 questions), as shown in Appendix 1. The questionnaire also included four demographic variables: gender, age, qualification, and experience. The participants answered using a five-point Likert scale. The data were analyzed using SPSS software for the mean standard deviation and the generalized linear model (GLM) multivariate procedure, which provides regression analysis and analysis of variance.

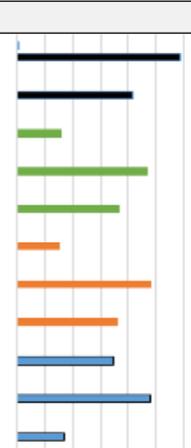
The questionnaire was reviewed by examiners, all specialists in library and information sciences, and modified according to their suggestions. The reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, where the collected data showed a high level of internal consistency, as Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.89, where a coefficient of 0.7 or higher is considered acceptable by most social science researchers (DeVellis, 2012), which indicates that the results of the questionnaire can be generalized based on the sample.

4.1 Demographic Characteristics

Table 2 shows the distribution of the participants according to their demographic characteristics. Males dominated the sample, comprising 58.4% of the 262 librarians who participated in the study. In turn, diploma or bachelor degree holders had a share of 46.9%, those aged 30–40 had a share of 48.5%, and those with experience of 5–10 years had a share of 48.1%.

Table 2: Distribution of study sample participants according to demographic variables

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	153	58.4
	Female	109	41.6
Qualifications	Secondary and less	43	16.4
	Diploma or bachelor degree	123	46.9
	Higher studies	96	36.6
Age	Less than 30 years	40	15.3
	45–30 years	127	48.5
	More than 45 years	95	36.3
Experience	less than 5 years	91	34.7
	5–10 years	126	48.1
	More than 10 years	45	17.2



5. Results

To explore the perspectives of librarians, the researchers calculated the percentages, statistical means, and standard deviations of the responses concerning the six different aspects of public libraries in Kuwait, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 1.

Table 3: The perspective of librarians

Dimensions	Mean	Std. Deviation
Role and reality of public libraries	2.3247	.41892
Availability of information services	2.4663	.76828
Administration and financial level	2.5354	.81149
Library environment	2.5420	.76930
Awareness of whole library activities	2.5623	.47987
Using IT	2.6496	.71628
Total Scale	2.5134	.38565

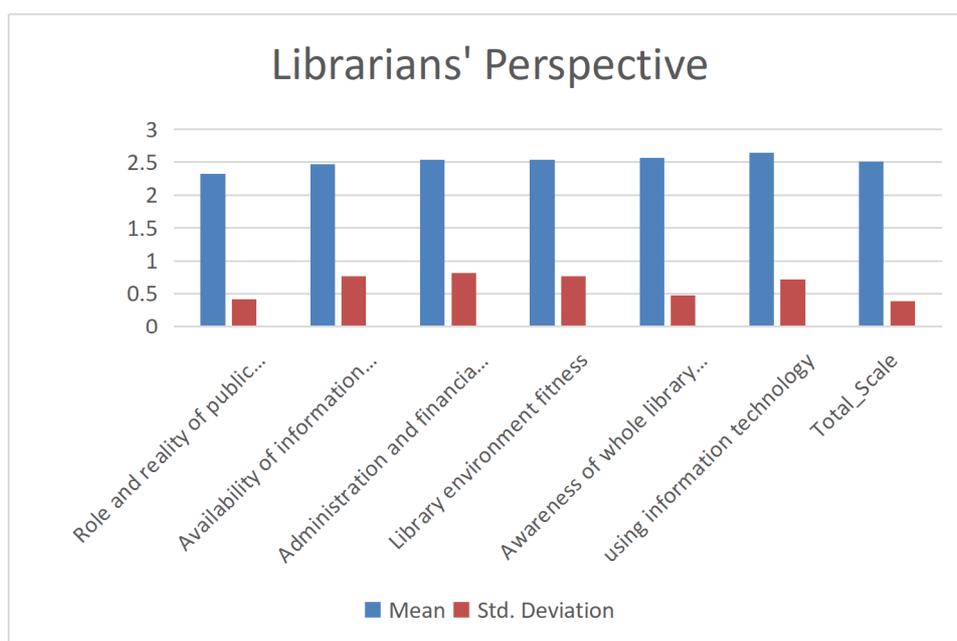


Figure 1: Librarians' Answers

Table 3 shows the perspectives of librarians regarding the present status of public libraries in Kuwait. The cultural role of public libraries scored the lowest rate, with a mean of 2.3 and .41892 standard deviation, availability of information services scored a mean of 2.5 and .76828 standard deviation, and administration and financial level scored a mean of 2.5 and .81149 standard deviation. Also, the library environment scored a mean of 2.5 and .76930, awareness of whole library activities scored a mean of 2.6 and .47987 standard deviation, and the usage of the public libraries scored the highest mean of 2.6496 with .71628 standard deviation.

5.1 Significant Statistical Differences

The GLM multivariate procedure provides an analysis of variance for multiple dependent variables by one or more factor variables or covariates. A GLM procedure can test null hypotheses about the effects of factor variables on the means of various groupings of a joint distribution of dependent variables. However, for the effects of factor variables on the means of various groupings of a joint distribution of dependent variables, tests of between-subjects effects gave results that showed only dimensions with significant effects, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender	The role of public libraries	3.768	1	3.768	37.110	.000	.127
	Role of the public library	4.883	2	2.441	24.043	.000	.159
Age	Admin. and financial	6.879	2	3.439	5.468	.005	.041
	Total scale	1.377	2	.688	5.218	.006	.039
Qualifications	Role of the public library	1.064	2	.532	5.241	.006	.040
	Role of the public library	.871	2	.436	4.289	.015	.033
Experience	Library environment	5.166	2	2.583	4.610	.011	.035
	services	4.808	2	2.404	4.181	.016	.032

It seems that different categories of gender, age, qualifications, and experience differentiate the role of the public library. Also, it seems that different categories of experience differentiate the library environment, but not so much for gender, age, and qualification. Moreover, it seems that different categories of age differentiate the administration and financial level of public libraries, but not so much for gender, qualification, and experience. More importantly, it seems that the significant difference on the total scale is due to age but not so much for gender, qualifications, and experience. Figure 2 clearly shows the estimated marginal means of the total scale at each level of gender, age, qualifications, and experience.

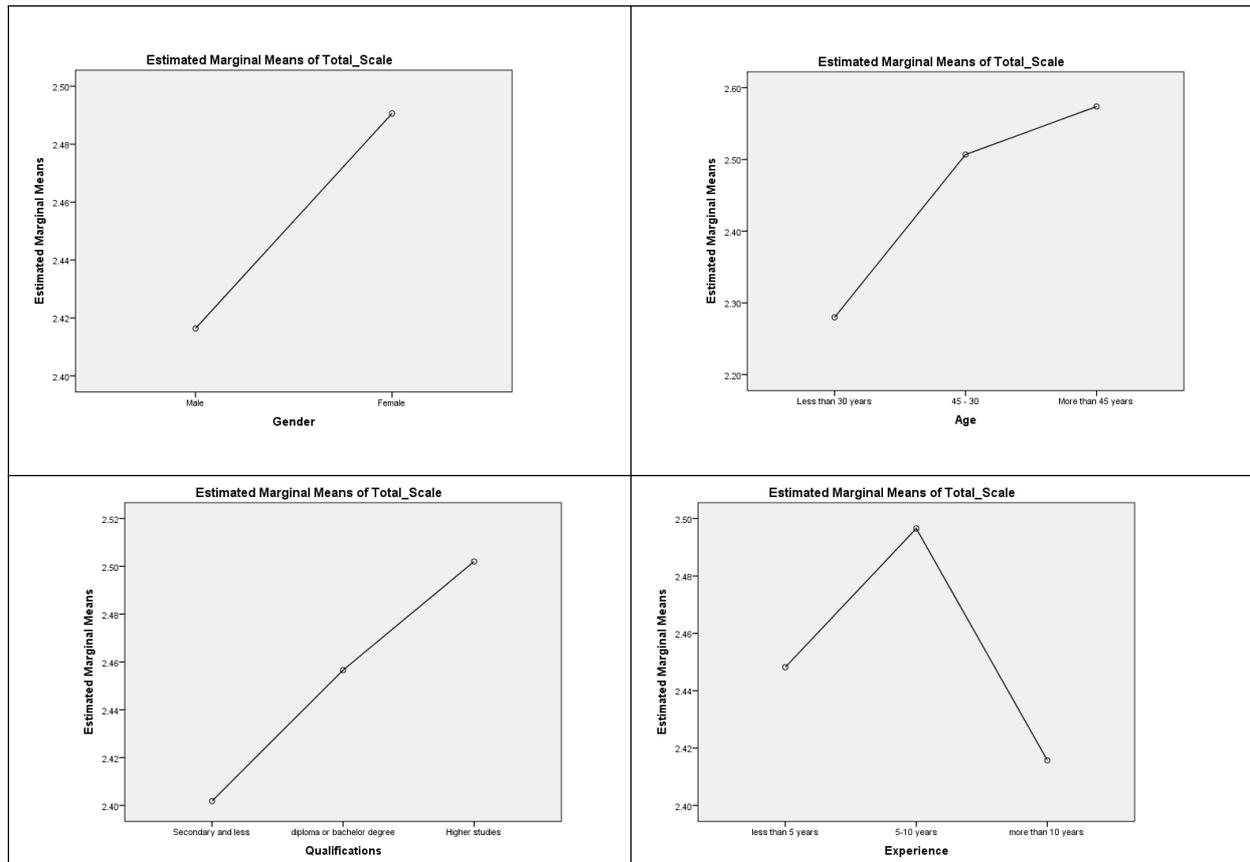


Figure 2: Estimated marginal means at each level of the independent variables

Table 5: Percentages, statistical means and standard deviations of the responses concerning the reality of public libraries.

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Items sorted by mean
A1	Society sees libraries as bookstores.	3.46	1.104	5
A2	Rapid social and cultural changes in life have affected visits to public libraries.	4.30	0.920	3
A3	Visitors to public libraries are satisfied with the role of libraries towards society.	3.04	1.050	7
A4	Society believes that libraries play an effective role in serving it.	3.29	1.062	6
A5	Public libraries are essential for society.	4.35	0.812	2
A6	Public libraries will not exist in the future, as information will be available on the Internet.	2.70	1.370	8
A7	Public libraries should exist even though information is available on the Internet.	4.40	0.902	1
A8	Information can be easily obtained without public libraries.	3.54	1.097	4
A9	The country pays a lot of money for public libraries even though they are not useful.	2.24	1.180	9

Table 5 shows the responses related to the first theme – the reality of public libraries and their cultural role – which consisted of nine statements. The results presented in Table 5 shows that the five most important statements regarding the reality of public libraries and their cultural role. They were: (1) ‘Public libraries should exist even though information is available on the Internet’ (mean = 4.40), (2) ‘Public libraries are essential for society’ (mean = 4.35), (3) ‘Rapid social and cultural changes in life have affected visits to public libraries’ (mean = 4.30), (4) ‘Information can be easily obtained without public libraries’ (mean = 3.54), and (5) ‘Society sees libraries as bookstores’ (mean = 3.46). Interestingly, the statement that ‘The country pays a lot of money for public libraries even though they are not useful’ was deemed to be the least important by the librarians (mean =

2.24).

Table 6: Percentages, statistics means and standard deviations of the responses concerning the awareness of public libraries' role and their activities to serve society.

No.	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Items sorted by means
F1	The public library offers activities for the public, including children. It plays a cultural role by showing patriotic and documentary films and hosting exhibitions.	2.79	1.276	4
F2	Visitors can contact the public library through social media, email and chats.	2.25	1.148	8
F3	The public library gives lectures, holds seminars, establishes exhibitions, or participates in mass media for various patriotic occasions (such as summer activities).	2.75	1.285	5
F4	The public library has suitable signage to help visitors use the facilities easily.	3.40	1.143	1
F5	The public library has guide booklets to help find information.	2.96	1.204	3
F6	The website of the public library has electronic guide services and advertisements to attract visitors.	2.42	1.171	6
F7	The public library distributes brochures outside the library to announce its cultural seminars and meetings.	2.41	1.178	7
F8	Schools of the Ministry of Education encourage their students to use the public libraries by doing their homework there.	3.13	1.266	2

As Table 6 illustrates, the sixth theme is awareness of the role and activities of public libraries to serve society, containing eight statements. The results presented in Table 6 shows that the five most important statements regarding the awareness of the role and activities of public libraries to serve society. They were: (1) 'The public library has suitable signage to help visitors use the facilities easily' (mean = 3.40), (2) 'Schools of the Ministry of Education encourage their students to use the public libraries by doing their homework there' (mean = 3.13), (3) 'The public library has guide booklets to help find information' (mean = 2.96), (4) 'The public library offers activities for the public, including children. It plays a cultural role by showing patriotic and documentary films and hosting exhibitions' (mean = 2.79), and (5) 'The public library gives lectures, holds seminars, establishes exhibitions, or participates in mass media for various patriotic occasions (such as summer activities)' (mean = 2.75). Interestingly, the statement that 'The public library distributes brochures outside the library to announce its cultural seminars and meetings' was considered to be the least important by the librarians (mean = 2.41).

6. Discussion and Conclusions

According to the findings in Table 3 concerning the role and reality of public libraries, most librarians disagreed on the positive role and situation of public libraries regarding society. At most, they thought that the internet is an effective alternative for libraries. This may be because the information available in libraries is available for any users on the internet and accessible and can be easily obtained without public libraries, which means they are not essential for society, especially given the rapid social and cultural changes taking place. This is reflected in their opinion that libraries are not particularly useful and that they are not different from bookstores, which means that, for them, public libraries will not exist in the future. This is very clear, as, according to librarians, the public library offers fewer services and sources than social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and blogs, whereas the level of information services available in public libraries is inadequate. To keep public libraries ongoing, electronic information should be provided for visitors to make their interests in public libraries gained successfully.

However, this is not in agreement with Kinney (2010), who indicated that libraries remain important and play an effective role in internet provision. Specifically, librarians in public libraries can act as guides to the internet, while providing more personalized services. This also contradicts the findings of McClure and Jaeger (2009) about the librarians and their internet access roles.

Therefore, libraries must provide external and internal improvements and activities for society. As stated by Hallberg and Sipos-Zackrisson (2016), external activities are vital for the library, for example, maintaining contact with non-users through online services and connecting with the community. However, as stated by Salarelli (2014) and Al and Akilli (2016), public libraries must address the reduction of financial support so that they can survive, which can best be done in cooperation with local governments and the information management departments of universities and professional associations.

Regarding the environment of public libraries, from the librarians' points of view, the building design is not suitable for future technological developments; in particular, public libraries do not have sufficient hall space designed for learning and group lessons to meet visitors' needs. Also, for librarians, library entrances, exits, elevators, car parks, and furniture are often not suitable for providing information services for people with special needs. This includes air-conditioning and lighting levels. These findings are in line with what Sufar, Talib, and Hambali (2012) mentioned when they stated what can create an attractive physical interior environment.

Also, using IT in public libraries may not be practical, as most librarians opined that the public computers and programs provided by libraries for visitors for searching and printing are insufficient. Furthermore, public libraries have no professional social media accounts for staying in touch with visitors. Also, librarians complain that the services offered by the library website are poor, as is the automatic management system, while internet access services for visitors and the tools for people with special needs (deaf devices, projectors, magnification devices, and assistive listening devices) are either inadequate or nonexistent. This finding supports a study by Ghuloum and Alyacoub (2016), which found that public libraries do not pay sufficient attention to people with special needs.

It is known that technology has changed the view of public libraries and will continue to change on working and delivering services to society. Public libraries are considered as an institution that is concerned of the information resources. It enables the society to reach culture, literature, and art. To achieve this, its cultural role must grow and obtain scientific production using modern technology. Emerging technology trends can help reform library services.

In terms of the administration and financial levels, most librarians stated that current or future (short- or long-term) plans exist to develop the public library, where the annual budget for the public library is not adequate. However, according to librarians, the upper management of the public library is not fully aware of the role of libraries as cultural centers in society. From their point of view, this could be the reason that the public library's upper management does not provide a suitable and satisfactory work environment for its employees or encourage its employees by giving them bonuses and incentives when they offer various cultural activities to the society. This could be the reason why the administration of the public library does not meet the professional requirements of its employees.

More importantly, most librarians stated that public libraries do not have suitable signage to help visitors use the facilities easily, and that visitors cannot contact the public library through social media, email, and chats. Furthermore, the website of the public library has no guide booklets or electronic guide services, nor does the library offer advertisement brochures announcing its lectures, cultural seminars, and meetings to attract visitors. Moreover, the schools of the Ministry of Education do not encourage their students to use public libraries. The study participants further stated that the public library does not offer activities for the public, including children. However, it does play a cultural role by showing patriotic and documentary films and hosting exhibitions. These findings align with the results of other studies, such as those conducted by Ayre (2016), Godin (2016), and Ayre and Craner (2017), which argued that libraries must adopt a new role as a place where the community finds new ideas, inspiration, and others on similar journeys. Improving such applications and services can strengthen the community. Public libraries should recognize and understand the importance of identifying community needs, designing impact measures to demonstrate how libraries can help address those needs, and the variety of ways in which the evidence of such impacts can be used to effectively support public libraries.

7. Recommendations

The study recommends that librarians' perspectives toward public libraries should be taken into consideration to improve public libraries and that the obstacles and difficulties confronting public libraries be described to help decision makers improve public libraries in the future. Also, the country should support public libraries so that they can provide users with advanced materials for any print and digital needs. More importantly, the researchers recommend that public libraries need to provide facilities to help users with special needs.

The authors demand public libraries to spread benefits that serve the community. Connecting the library with the community, to reach inside homes. Furthermore, a site that helps people to easily find books and information. Not only easy to find but also, easy to use, fast access, a lot of information, instant results when searching, trustworthy information and you can share your opinions and reviews.

7.1 Suggested Future Studies

- This research suggests further studies that focus on the users of the public library, as this study was limited to the perspectives of librarians.
- This research suggests further studies that focus on why and how libraries can make a difference in communities.

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