



Evidence Summary

National Differences in Perceived Benefit of Libraries May Be Due to Their Investments in Libraries, Library Supply, and Cultural Factors

A Review of:

Vakkari, P., Aabø, S., Audunson, R., Huysmans, F, Kwon, N., Oomes, M., & Sin, S. (2016). Patterns of perceived public library outcomes in five countries. *Journal of Documentation*, 72(2), 342–361. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JD-08-2015-0103>

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Abstract

Objective – To compare citizens' perceptions of the benefits of libraries in five culturally diverse countries.

Design – Postal survey to a random stratified sample and web surveys (some with a sampling plan).

Setting – Surveys were administered in Finland (by post), Norway, the Netherlands, the United States of America, and South Korea (online).

Subjects – Selected or self-selected members of the general adult population in the specified

countries who had used a public library within the past year.

Methods – Surveys were administered and data were collected in each of the five countries. A dependent variable representing perceived outcomes was calculated from 19 outcome measures (related to life experiences). Within this, 4 indices were calculated from subsets of the 19 measures, relating to work, education, everyday activities, and leisure activities. Five independent variables were used: frequency of library use, number of services used, gender, age, and education level. Respondent country was also entered into analyses. Descriptive statistics and analysis of covariance results were presented.

Main Results – It was noted that each country's sample was skewed in some way towards one or more of the variables of gender, age, and education, and some statistical corrections were employed. While patterns within countries are similar, library users from Finland, the United States of America, and South Korea reported higher levels of benefits overall. "Fun in reading" and "self-education" were the two outcomes with the highest scores by respondents. Higher numbers of visits and greater use of services may account for the higher perceived benefits in the three countries reporting them. In fact, these two factors appear to explain a substantial portion of the variance in perceptions of benefits between countries, meaning that between-country variation in library resources and supply plays a role in perception of benefit. There were varied rather than linear patterns of benefit reporting along age and education continua, with those at the lowest education levels deriving the most perceived benefits in all spheres. By gender, women derived fewer perceived benefits in the work sphere than men.

Conclusions – There is variation across countries in the level of public library benefits reported, as well as variation across individual measures, creating different profiles of response by country. Even when respondent demographic characteristics and library usage are controlled for, country differences remain. These may be explained by the differences in investment in – and hence supply of – libraries by country, types of investment (e.g., according to the authors, Finland invests in services, Norway in collections, and the USA in staffing), and cultural factors such as the propensity of USA respondents to have a more extreme response style. Future research may profitably concentrate on policy contexts of libraries in each country. In the nineteenth century libraries provided social welfare services and in the twentieth they provided human rights through equitable access to information, so research should focus, by country, on what libraries will provide in the twenty-first century. Future studies might also address how differences in demographic patterns

among respondents play out in benefit perceptions between countries.

Commentary

Library valuation is an essential tool for political advocacy, as libraries are vulnerable to threats from budget reductions in times of financial downturn. In her much-cited meta-analysis, Aabø (2009) showed that \$1 invested in a public library brings 4 to 5 times that in societal returns, but library valuation research is moving from a focus on performance measures such as circulation to impact measures such as behavior change attributable to libraries (Micka, 2013; Streatfield, 2012). There is fertile ground for considering cross-cultural differences and similarities in perceptions of library benefits.

For this evidence summary, methodologies were systematically assessed using Glynn's critical appraisal checklist (2006). A wide range of issues undermines the usefulness of this work as an unbiased source of evidence about populations. Important concerns include: only people who had used a library in the last year were sampled, rather than the general public, and in a way (in four of five countries) that may have excluded non-Internet users; survey questions were not identical in each of the five countries; countries were chosen on the basis of interest from researchers from the nations studied (except the United States of America) without an advance strategy for representation, with choices defended after the fact; responses were collected over a wide time period; random stratification was used for respondent selection in only one of the countries; and samples showed skewedness on several dimensions, especially favoring more highly educated respondents. In addition, there was important information that the authors did not provide, including: the survey questionnaires; information about how the Finnish survey was modified for use in other countries (so, it is unknown how concepts were understood across languages); the specifics about how web panels were recruited and selected in the four countries in which they were used; and information about informed consent and ethics approvals. The

omission of the survey questionnaires is notable; the authors cite the work of Harzing (2006) on cross-country differences in response styles, and it is hoped that they took her suggestions for employing careful instrument design, as "response bias is a serious threat to valid comparisons across countries" (p. 27). Without the inclusion of the instruments, there is no way to tell.

The authors conclude that there are cross-country variations even when all other factors are controlled for, and surmise that these may be the result of differences in investments in libraries, supply of libraries and staff availability. If this study had been more rigorously constructed and hypothesis-driven, these findings would have more power and interest. As it is, they are inconclusive; it is to be hoped that as the authors pursue their future research agenda of examining policy contexts, that these issues will be addressed.

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