

Library as Place: Evaluating Physical and Virtual Spaces. A Case Study of Two Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Informed by Pierre Bourdieu's theory on social capital, this paper examines how academic libraries might be considered places to create social capital. The study that directed this article utilised a qualitative approach and drew upon the perceptions of both the student population and library professionals at the University of Antwerp in Belgium and the University of Limpopo in South Africa. This study explored the similarities and differences in respondents' perceptions of their respective libraries. The study relied on semi-structured interviews comprising 34 participants: 30 students and four library professionals. To inform this study, data were collected on the perceptions of the libraries' physical and virtual spaces to ascertain differing views regarding academic libraries' social values and their contribution to creating social capital. Students use the physical space extensively as a gathering place for group discussions and independent academic work, and depend on library professionals to disseminate information effectively on reliable and suitable platforms. The differences in students' perceptions between the two academic libraries can be clarified based on their respective geographic settings, which influenced their perceptions and needs of the library. The article notes various restrictions at the University of Limpopo compared to current practices at the University of Antwerp in the context of social capital, physical space and technology, owing to uneven distribution of resources and autonomy.

Keywords: library as place; social capital; social media; academic libraries; Belgium; Limpopo



Introduction

Academic libraries create physical and virtual spaces to allow students access to a variety of information in various formats and platforms in an intellectually stimulating environment. Hybrid libraries are a mix of print and electronic collections and cater for students' needs to support their academic achievement. Students use many forms of collaborative learning, and academic libraries expose them to information via various communication methods as technology improves. A digital paradigm shift is occurring, and academic libraries and higher education institutions cannot ignore students' needs. The modern physical library must accommodate a growing array of services; therefore, academic libraries are evolving to meet students' and staff's changing needs in the digital era. The emphasis has shifted from physical book collections to services incorporating electronic resources, innovations in teaching, technology, and social media. Librarians must keep abreast of students' dynamic needs, the innovative use of information technology and services, and these services' perceived value. This can help librarians to identify new service opportunities and decide how to set up and expand existing service capabilities to support students' new, changing needs and priorities (Stvilia and Gibradze 2017, 257). Because of these changes, academic libraries have become social spaces, which McDonald (2007, 20) defines as interactive, easy-to-use, well-organised spaces that promote contact between users and services to create independence. This forms an integral part of the services that academic libraries offer, as their services are part of academic library practices in identifying "customer wants and needs and meeting those needs within the resources of the organisation" (Gupta, Koontz, and Massisimo 2013, 13).

In this changing context, social media is an ideal way to communicate with students. Romero (2011) notes that social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, are now the most attractive options when opening new channels of communication and relationship building with students. Librarians play a pivotal role in preparing students for the 21st century, ensuring they are exposed to different information sources and prioritising their needs. Therefore, academic libraries should be cognisant of students' information needs and meet these by innovative use of information technology and services (Stvilia and Gibradze 2017, 257). Sennyey, Ross, and Mills (2009, 253) support the continued relevance of academic libraries by stressing the importance of the library as a place that encourages research and intellectual activity.

This article explores physical and virtual spaces of academic libraries in a rural and an urban geographical setting to ascertain social capital creation and the impact thereof on academic library use. In order to understand the use of library spaces and preferred communication methods, the study investigated the interactions between library professionals and students. This article presents the "library as place" and discusses academic libraries' role in advancing and enriching students' educational experience.

To understand social capital, relationship building and the library as place, the study sought to answer two research questions: 1) How is social capital created in academic

libraries? 2) How is the digital environment used to create social capital? To answer these questions, two universities were studied: the rural University of Limpopo (UL) in South Africa and the urban University of Antwerp (UA) in Belgium, using one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with students and library professionals.

Theoretical Framework

Social Capital

Bourdieu (1996) highlights the value of social capital and views it as the resources individuals receive from social networks. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) note that social capital development begins with relationships, and access to resources and social networks emanate from them. Similarly, Putnam (1995, 664) defines social capital as the connections among individuals, such as social life, networks, norms, and trust that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives. Putnam (2000) provides statistical evidence to support his claim that social capital is essential to enable communities to work together towards common and individual goals. Putnam implies that communities with high social capital are better educated and more affluent than communities with low social capital (Putnam 2000, 321).

The concept of “social capital” has been adopted in library and information science literature (Naseri 2017; Ramsey 2016). Social capital was found to enhance access to information, enabling better self-support, better-informed decisions and more effective participation in educational activities (Ramsey 2016, 331). Academic libraries’ role in creating social capital is not limited to physical space; online and social media can also contribute as they constitute a network of partnerships incorporating students “with a weaker social capital” (Ramsey 2016, 331) to achieve their goals, which would have been difficult or impossible without those connections. Goulding (2004) asserts that an individual’s qualifications, skills, educational achievement, and physical capital such as property and finance, enable communities to achieve goals. Furthermore, she affirms that “libraries are beginning to explore their potential for building social capital and assert their value as a public space that brings together diverse populations into one community to learn, gather information and reflect” (Goulding 2004, 4). Naseri (2017, 17) explored the fundamentals of how social media contributes to social capital; his findings suggest that internet use is associated with an increase in social capital.

In relation to virtual space, Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2009, 895) found that Facebook contributes to engagement and social capital. Grieve et al. (2013) concur that Facebook use may provide opportunities to develop and maintain social connections in the virtual environment. Furthermore, Ramsey (2016, 332) contends that libraries can help form social connections by connecting users through traditional resources, which could make a lifelong impact on their lives. Academic libraries’ social media use provides an opportunity to attract students to the library, promote the library and its resources, and help students with information needs.

Library as Place¹

The sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1999) explored the concept “third place,” proposing that “first place” is home, “second place” is work, and “third places” offer safe public spaces for people to meet and establish bonds. An academic library’s physical design plays a role in drawing students together in its public spaces. Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality (Oldenburg 1999, 42). Discussing the design of new spaces to meet users’ changing needs, McDonald (2007, 13) explores the qualities of good library spaces to enhance creativity. Rather than replacing libraries with information technology, the technology moves into libraries. These new buildings provide places where students engage in various academic activities such as studying, group discussions, and accessing academic content remotely (McDonald 2007, 25). Furthermore, he notes that creating this type of space for students helps to bridge the “digital divide” by providing information access to the “information have-nots” in society.

A paradigm shift has been apparent since the inception of electronic resources, as the physical library’s role is changing. Electronic archives made back runs of previously printed articles obsolete (Sennyey et al. 2009, 253). However, academic libraries are not redundant, as library buildings remain essential for printed material (especially monographs) (MacWhinnie 2003, 242), which is widely used by undergraduate students. More and more books are published annually and academic libraries purchase these to add to their collections for ease of use (MacWhinnie 2003, 242). Khoo et al. (2016, 62) found that students need various factors to satisfy their needs: sound; temperature; the library’s ambience; cosy, quiet spaces; individual and group discussion rooms; and comfortable study carrels. Users expect access to information in many formats, including print, electronic, and multimedia, with a concomitant need for research assistance from librarians and information specialists to make the most of the resources available and find the information they need (MacWhinnie 2003, 242).

Methodology

To ascertain if social media supports social interactions between library staff and students, a qualitative research approach was selected. The study was carried out in two phases at both institutions. The population comprised library professionals and students. Library professionals were well suited to comment on social interactions between the library and students. In turn, students could provide their views on digital access for their needs.

The universities discussed in this article differ in terms of character and context, offering a suitable sample to draw comparisons. The lead author, an employee of the ULL and a

1 The main two themes of this article are “social capital” and “library as place.” In general descriptions, we use “library as *a* place”; however, as a description of the theme and abstract concept of space, we use “library as place.”

student at the UA, had the privilege of exploring both libraries as place and identified “social capital” and “library as place” as main themes. Questions relating to the library as place, based on the physical environment and virtual access experienced by respondents, attempted to ascertain if the library was conducive to students’ academic needs. Terms such as “social capital” were avoided in interviews; instead, simpler language was used to obtain information about their background, primary and secondary education, library physical and virtual space, internet connectivity, access to computers or laptops, and ownership of smartphones. Smartphones support various functions—once only available on computers—including easy access to the Internet, and they now serve as a convenient form of communication or interaction not provided by traditional cellular phones (Yi, You, and Bae 2016, 481).

To ascertain students’ demographic information and background, they were questioned about their financial situation, living conditions, type of settlement and number of occupants, owning a laptop or desktop computer, and having access to the Internet and smartphone technology. During the second part of interviews, the questions pertaining to social media were slightly altered for students at the UL, as the University of Limpopo library (ULL) had not adopted social media, and to ascertain students’ perceptions regarding the use of social media as opposed to the University of Antwerp Libraries (UAL) where social media was used. Respondents were questioned about their awareness and use of social media, and their preferences compared to traditional methods of communication between students and the library (email, notice boards, the library’s webpage, brochures, electronic flat screens, and social media). Most importantly, respondents were asked to identify limitations or challenges regarding social media as a communication tool.

Background

The UA is situated in an urban area in Flanders in the Dutch-speaking northern part of Belgium, and serves students from urban areas, with many international students. According to its mission statement, the UA was founded in 2003 after the merger of three smaller universities, offering innovative academic teaching to over 20 812 students enrolled for the 2020 academic year (University of Antwerp 2020a).

The UL is a historically disadvantaged institution, situated in a rural area in South Africa, serving students from surrounding rural areas. Although enrolment figures for undergraduates and postgraduates are similar to those of the UA (21 867 for the academic year 2020) (University of Limpopo 2020b, 13), the institution’s profile and history are radically different from the UA. In the past, the UL was famous for its activities in the struggle against apartheid, but since 1994 it has earned itself a reputation as an institution struggling to survive. The digital divide is a deep-rooted problem as South African students in remote rural areas have limited access to the Internet, technology, computers and computer laboratories (Oyedemi 2012, 303). In emphasising the importance of equality and redressing inequalities, academic libraries are familiar with the problem of under-prepared students, educated at schools with few resources

and teachers often ill equipped to incorporate resources into their teaching (Nkondo et al. 2014, 72).

Sampling

English was chosen to communicate with students, as both Dutch and English are used as languages of instruction at the UA (University of Antwerp 2019). The language of instruction at the UL is English (University of Limpopo 2020a, 2). Interviews were conducted in English at both universities. The sampling population of this study comprised two types of respondents: library professionals and students. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques was selected. Purposive sampling uses special knowledge to intentionally “hand pick” (Ruane 2016, 248) respondents, using various criteria, including willingness to participate in the study. The research used purposive sampling, which involved four respondents from two different geographic regions based on the respondents’ job profiles, responsibility for managing and updating social media content, or knowledge on one or more social media platforms.

The first phase of the study involved semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with library professionals involved in the management and daily operations of various library sections. Interviews at UAL were conducted in June 2015; one interviewee was male and one female. UAL had two social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter). Similarly, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted in September 2015 with two female library professionals managing daily operations at ULL. ULL had not adopted social media at the time of writing this article. Although the UL had institutional social media accounts (Facebook and Twitter), managed by the Marketing and Communication Division, respondents’ interviews were based on their perception of social media, knowledge of how academic libraries use communication methods, and the use of the physical and virtual library environments.

The second phase of the research used interviews with 15 student respondents from the UA and 15 from the UL, aiming for the same sample per university for comparability. An invitation to participate in the study was sent to registered students at each university via email, using students’ listserve. The first call for participation was made to registered students at the UA. The lead author, residing in Belgium at the time of data collection, conducted face-to-face interviews with respondents in Belgium, and initially intended to conduct Skype interviews with respondents in South Africa. The call for participation at the UL was submitted several times but only three students responded due to technological problems, inactive email addresses, intermittent internet connectivity and slow responses. The lead author travelled to South Africa to conduct face-to-face interviews. The snowball technique, using face-to-face interviews, was used to attract additional respondents. Snowball sampling is a convenience sampling method used when it is difficult to access subjects with the required characteristics. In this method, the existing study subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances (Naderifar, Goli, and Ghaljaie 2017). To get the sample started, the researcher finds an initial contact and asks if that contact can provide leads to other possible participants

(Ruane 2016, 227). In this way, the quota of 15 students was soon reached and 12 students were interviewed face-to-face.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the UA, and the UL granted permission to collect data. No risks were perceived, informed consent was obtained from voluntary respondents, and their rights were respected. Participants' identities were kept confidential and codes were used to ensure no identifying information was recorded. The information sheets for participants gave an overview of the research and each sheet was marked as University of Antwerp Library Professional (UALP) or University of Limpopo Library Professional (ULLP), followed by the participant number, for example, UALP#1 or ULLP#1. The same process was followed for student respondents, and marked as University of Antwerp student (UAS) or University of Limpopo student (ULS) followed by the respondent number, for example, UAS#1 to 15 or ULS#16 to 30. These numbers were assigned in the order of the interviews conducted.

Fifteen students were interviewed at the UA between September and December 2016: seven male and eight female, four undergraduates and 11 graduates. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) is a technology that can transmit video and audio data over the Internet (Chakraborty, Misra, and Prasad 2019, 2). At the UL, both face-to-face and VoIP methods were used to conduct semi-structured interviews with 15 students between December 2016 and November 2017: eight male and seven female, seven undergraduates and eight graduates. Participants had similar experiences with the research questions posed; therefore, saturation was quickly reached.

Data Coding and Analysis

The semi-structured interviews provided in-depth information from library professionals, who were knowledgeable about the subject matter and understood the institutions' strategic planning and vision. The student respondents provided their views, insights, and experience of the libraries' physical and virtual appearance and discussed developments to suit their current needs. Interviews lasted between 30 and 70 minutes for library professionals and between 35 and 45 minutes for student respondents, which were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The interview questions for the two types of respondents differed, as the interviews sought information from an end-user perspective among the students, and from a provider perspective among the library professionals.

The lead author conducted the interviews, took notes and identified important information and possible themes. The research followed a deductive approach as it relied predominantly on applying pre-identified themes. Thereafter, she scrutinised the qualitative raw data and highlighted keywords and texts pertaining to pre-identified themes based on the library as a welcoming place. The following step in the coding was identifying similarities and differences in responses. She reread the transcripts and highlighted similarities and differences, using different colour shadings on a Microsoft

Word document. These texts were labelled and grouped by theme; for example, text pertaining to the background, electronic resources and social media was grouped under the digital phrases linking social capital, and text pertaining to the library (such as technology, computers and physical space) was grouped under the physical library as place. Using this process, the themes were refined and similar concepts were clustered. Thereafter, portions of texts were grouped according to social capital in the virtual context and social capital in the physical context, linked to library as place.

Results

During the data-analysis process, the lead author observed similarities and differences in the transcribed data. Exploring differences in their perceptions may enable academic library management to address the challenges that hinder library professionals from delivering effective and efficient library services to students. Two main themes were identified: 1) social capital and academic libraries: physical space; and 2) changing roles and relationships: virtual space.

Theme 1: Social Capital and Academic Libraries: Physical Space

The first theme was built around the first research question: “How is social capital created in academic libraries?” This theme covered library professionals’ and students’ responses regarding the physical library as place to encourage relationship building, facilitate browsing, enable liaison with library professionals, and be conducive to scholarly research.

University of Antwerp

The question was posed: “Does UAL have the necessary resources in place?” Both library professionals stated the library building was conducive to learning and had the necessary resources. Furthermore, they noted that students used the library as meeting place, for browsing physical material and for individual learning. The main library had modern features and was an architectural attraction, but also an ideal location to study and collect the materials needed to complete research (University of Antwerp 2020b). One library professional explained these features:

There is an overhead information screen at the entrance to the library. We use this to post interesting or important information. So too the seminar rooms were in high demand use where group discussions were encouraged. (UALP#2)

Although academic libraries have changed over time and material can be sourced electronically, one library professional explained the social connection of students gathering in the library for group work, meetings, consultation or independent work. He noted that the physical space plays an important role:

Librarians have face-to-face contact with users through instructional classes, service desk queries and individual consultation. Therefore, the library is not just a storage space

for books; it is a place where students gather to socialise and find required information. (UALP#1)

From the responses, the library played an important role in connecting with peers as meeting place for students and in interacting with library staff, all of which constitute social behaviour. It seemed the UAL created an environment conducive to research and learning, through study space and discussion areas.

Student respondents concurred with UAL professionals that the library was much used, that the physical space was conducive to learning and had the required equipment and furniture. The library is used for research, as one student noted:

I browse the collection and borrow books for research purposes. (UAS#13)

Students use the library for various reasons as outlined below. Many students work on their research or study in the library.

For instance, the seminar rooms are on a first-come first-served basis and when my group meets, we have to be in the library early to secure a seminar room. (UAS#10)

Another student responded:

The library becomes busy during the examination periods, then it is hard to find a quiet spot to study. (UAS#12)

Five student respondents described the library as welcoming. One said:

Studying in the library creates an atmosphere of unity. (UAS#4)

Not all respondents were in favour of using the library. Three students said they preferred studying at their own residences and only used the library to find print monographs.

Based on the increased levels of use, the UAL offered a physical space conducive to individual study purposes and group discussions.

University of Limpopo

The same question posed to UAL professionals was posed to ULL professionals. ULL provided a quiet study space and group-discussion areas, which strengthened relationship building between library staff and students—a vital way in which academic libraries contribute to social capital. Social engagement with peers and the library was perceived as important. Librarians liaise proactively with students and provide information services and research assistance across faculties. Students spend considerable time in the library, participating in educational activities such as training interventions, browsing physical books, individual learning, and group discussions.

ULLP#1 felt that relationship building was strengthened, as students are encouraged to consult their librarian for assistance in finding information:

Librarians are inundated with reference queries and training provided which gave them a perfect opportunity to have reference interviews and so getting to know each other and building a professional relationship.

Students use the library and physical collections. Interviewee ULLP#2 stated that students use the library's physical collection a great deal. She responded:

Yes, we do have the necessary resources in place but the physical book seems more accessible to students coming from the rural areas as they do not have the necessary electronic resources to work remotely.

ULLP#2 described the displays containing a selection of subject-related and popular books that attract students to the library.

The physical library was discussed, and ULLP#2 mentioned that although the chairs were not comfortable, it seemed students did not have the means to study remotely, complete assignments or have group discussions at home. ULLP#2 also observed the need for students to use the library, as there is usually a queue waiting for the library to open in the morning.

Although the need was expressed previously to extend operational hours irrespective of the library's poor condition, ULLP#1 noted:

Students are not aware that an increase of users in the library creates extra strain on the building. When the library was built it was designed for a certain number of students with fewer operational hours.

The library professional mentioned that, at the time of this research, there were plans to refurbish the library to cater for more students. Students were encouraged to use the library's services, computers, quiet study areas and group-discussion seminar rooms.

Based on the interviews with student respondents, the library's role was mostly seen as providing information, access and space for students to conduct their studies. Students were asked: "What is your perception of the physical library?" One respondent felt the library was supportive and catered for students' needs:

Yes, I feel like the library is supportive and has the necessary books for our research.
(ULS#26)

Most student respondents felt the physical space is as important as the virtual space, and provided negative views of the library's physical space, equipment, and furniture. Two students stated:

The library lacks adequate resources like useful books and furniture. (ULS#20)

The library doesn't have the latest editions and some of them lack the information that we need because they are old. Some of the books are from the 1990s. (ULS#23)

Concerns were raised:

The library provides a space where we can get together, have discussions and work together on projects ... but there is a need to upgrade the physical space. (ULS#25)

Health and safety were also noted. Students were unhappy that the library does not have water fountains and that water bottles should be left outside, as the lockers provided are broken, insufficient or unhygienic:

Safety is also an issue as we are forced to leave our water bottles and food items outside the library. I really hope there will be improvement in our library in terms of standards, updated information and access to information. (ULS#23)

Comparison

In reviewing this first theme, with regard to UAL, it was observed that the university's executive management provided administrative and financial support to provide the necessary resources to students. Students use the physical library extensively for study and research purposes, and based on students' responses, UAL seemed to positively impact students' academic achievement, as the required physical resources are available. UAL supports the creation of social capital, as most student respondents felt the ambience in the library was motivational, as everyone contributed to academia. UAL made the library conducive to learning and connecting. However, ULL had to reconsider its library spaces and modernise common areas to create a 21st century academic library. As ULL was rated as outdated in its use of modern resources, the library should be upgraded to provide high-quality educational resources and service delivery to be conducive to creating more connections and stronger social capital among users.

Theme 2: Changing Roles and Relationships: The Virtual Space

Social capital can be created through community engagement and online resources, generating a virtual environment where the library is present in the online realm. To answer the second research question: "How is the digital environment used to create social capital?" we used the data collected from library professionals and students and their perceptions regarding online resources.

University of Antwerp

Library professionals at the UA viewed social media as an innovative tool in the 21st century academic library and revelled in their open platforms for information sharing, as they created social networking sites to communicate with the university community. Using these platforms (Facebook and Twitter) as innovative means of communication

makes the library visible on platforms that are accessible by students and peers globally. In their view, they were reaching students via channels acceptable to them and ensuring a changing environment to serve students. The rise of the Internet simplified access to information. One library professional mentioned its simplicity:

Interacting with the students on Facebook provides a virtual connection where students can turn to for information. I also think it is an easy way of requesting information where students can post a question. (UALP#2)

Providing online access to special and rare library material, one library professional explained using Twitter to share content:

I like the use of Twitter and the option to interact with people. I wanted to have a steady communication for Special Collections, which is more on the level of students, so when I see something that is interesting, that is representative of our collection, I would tweet about it to draw students. (UALP#1)

Some students appreciated the sharing of information on social media and viewed it as academically viable. Two students thought it essential for academic libraries to keep abreast of innovative technology. In support of social media, they noted:

The university needs to know where the students are going [what social media platforms they are using]. (UAS#1)

Social media channels can be used to communicate directly from the university library to students and it is so much faster and easy to share information. (UAS#14)

However, not all students shared these sentiments, in particular three UA students who were not in favour of using non-professional platforms for academic purposes, to the extent that they resisted the use of social media on an academic library platform. These students felt that the library should communicate with students using more traditional means, such as email and messages on their webpage to portray a professional image. They viewed social media as a personal tool and used it to connect with friends, not with the university library. Another student was neutral in her responses and thought the use of social media could not benefit her, stating:

I only use social media to view things pertaining to my field of profession. (UAS#7)

University of Limpopo

At ULL, library professionals recognised the need for innovation. Although the Marketing and Communication Division manages the university's social media platforms, library professionals could submit posts to the centralised platforms. Library professionals were reluctant and noted:

I use my own social media accounts. (ULLP#2)

Regarding the type of content shared with students, one respondent noted:

I share library-related topics, information about conferences, and information literacy training programmes. (ULLP#2)

To promote the library, ULLP#1 noted:

Social media are essential resources in reaching a broader number of students but it would be easier if the library created and managed its own platforms.

ULL perceived social media as an important communication tool to disseminate information and for future development.

Students at ULL had similar views to those of library professionals. Using Facebook and Twitter for information sharing and promoting library services was gaining popularity in academic libraries. Student respondents in this research were up to date with innovative technology and adapted to it easily. Social media had its advantages. One respondent suggested:

The library can use social media to inform students about new books and training interventions, as it is a platform that we use. (ULS#22)

Students perceived social media as important for their studies, but limitations were voiced:

The library needs to be improved and it is important for the library to have a social media page so that we are informed about new developments in the library. (ULS#21)

The library is not visible on social media, and she stated:

Staff are not reaching out to students and social media will increase our interest to come to the library. (ULS#21)

One student agreed:

I use the computers in the library to access electronic resources but we are facing a challenge, as the Wi-Fi is not working and 75% of our lecturers use Blackboard; therefore, we need internet connectivity. (ULS#24)

Comparison

In reviewing the second theme, this research provided an understanding of social media usage and library personnel's and students' preferences at both institutions. The UAL students had mixed views on the adoption and use of social media for academic purposes. Although perceived as a faster method of communication, few students were in favour of social media and viewed communication from academic libraries to be in

line with other professional communication methods. Contrastingly, respondents for the ULL welcomed innovative means of communication, and library professionals recognised the need to implement social media to prevent libraries from becoming stagnant and archaic. Furthermore, using personal social media accounts has negative implications, as in this way, fewer students are reached.

Discussion

Although social media is a relatively new concept for disseminating information, it seems to have gained considerable presence among academic libraries. Both academic libraries' interview data generated useful findings regarding how library professionals and student respondents perceived the use of social media in academic libraries.

The study was guided by Bourdieu's concept of social capital (Bourdieu 1996) who views it as the resources individuals receive from social networks. In the context of academic libraries, social media activities can be used to communicate and connect with the library and its student community by encouraging information sharing on platforms recognisable by students, creating online and virtual connections. Naseri (2017, 17) states that online communication through social media activities generates social capital, noting that social media introduces a newer form of virtual socialising in which relationships are created offline and then move to online spaces or vice versa. Grieve et al. (2013, 608) confirm the value of social connections in online contexts, using Facebook as a social hub.

The data collected during this study showed that one of the two academic libraries promotes strong relations with the student community. UAL demonstrated its intent to build relationships by ensuring the needed technology, electronic resources, remote access and social media are available to staff and students. Respondents showed an awareness of the role UAL played by commenting on the clear guidance given to library professionals, who use social media as a method to communicate with the student community.

UAL exhibited qualities that support Bourdieu's concept of social capital to attract students in the 21st century. They used videos, general notifications and invitations to attend database training, suggesting the effectiveness of relationship building, thus contributing to social capital. The library's Facebook and Twitter accounts had a good strategic vision and dedicated personnel managing these platforms, and "offered opportunities for interaction" (Young and Rossmann 2015, 29). UAL provided remote access to electronic resources where registered students could access content remotely. Young and Rossmann (2015, 30) state that social media can help a community of users via the library's social media platforms, while Kibugi (2013, 118) notes, "relationship building translates into improved services and confidence" with regard to both library professionals and students.

At ULL, respondents agreed that an academic library should be welcoming and comfortable. Oldenburg (1999) notes the importance of the library as place, as it plays an important role in relationship building and social capital creation. Of significance is that the two library professionals exhibited confidence in their abilities to adopt and use social media platforms in future. Using social media to communicate is time consuming, and library professionals need to plan the implementation process of these platforms strategically. The data revealed some advantages, as seen by library professionals and student respondents, of the academic use of social media to enhance awareness of the library's virtual space. Students were interested in familiarising themselves with their immediate liaison, their subject librarian, and they thought social media could improve communication between library professionals and students. Lack of support is a challenge to be addressed if social media were adopted. Additional challenges and critical issues for the library are unstable internet access and the blocking of social media during core business hours to prevent an influx of network traffic (Williams, Dhoest, and Saunderson 2019, 491). If the library adopts social media, it is important to establish if using social media will add value to the library, improve socio-economic conditions and assist in social capital creation. Based on our research, it seems that ULL has the potential to increase social capital by encouraging interaction and the exchange of ideas between librarians and students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore the perceptions of library professionals and students at two academic libraries regarding the use of social media to deliver library services and improve social capital. Library professionals acknowledged the importance of using Facebook and Twitter, and by redesigning academic library spaces for the 21st century, they formed relationships with the student population to promote the library.

UAL indicated that the physical and virtual environments should be conducive to teaching, learning and research. Therefore, academic libraries and library professionals should re-invent themselves to align with new environments to support students' changing needs. However, ULL did not keep abreast of innovative changes and major challenges, such as poor infrastructure and controlled access to Facebook and Twitter.

The data indicated that student respondents at the UL, especially those from highly disadvantaged backgrounds, were marginalised as they lacked access to information. The study concluded that social media could help with social capital among students in rural environments. Based on this study, students at the UL were skilled in using smartphones, but not in innovative technology or computers. However, they were eager to learn and bridge the digital divide. Libraries must ensure that students, especially entry-level students, are appropriately skilled. Respondents from the UL felt the situation was exacerbated by the university's lack of initiative to improve the ICT environment to facilitate access to social media for educational purposes. The results showed the importance of social capital to improve skills to allow students and library

professionals to function better in an academic environment. Adapting to innovative technology is perceived as beneficial to personal and corporate growth.

An academic library should be well designed to conform to national and international standards and should benchmark library architecture and the requisite resources. Furthermore, it transpired that library professionals are able to facilitate access to information, promote library resources, provide training, and present new developments by communicating through social media. Library management plays an important role in ensuring there are measures to adopt, use and facilitate communication through social media. Using social media allowed library professionals at UAL to communicate with students through these platforms, opening two-way communication channels and improving the library's social capital in the online realm, which ULL will hopefully also implement soon.

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