Building libraries' attractiveness: a service-based perspective

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Abstract

Purpose: Libraries have been subject to two disruptive dynamics. On the one hand, digitalization put their traditional business at stake, expanding access to basic information to accomplish daily life activities. On the other hand, the advent of artificial intelligence facilitates the collection of information about how to realize basic functions in life, reducing the need for accessing information available in libraries. Acknoweldging these two dynamics, the article intends to investigate the main factors influencing the libraries' ability to attract users, shedding light on the management interventions that libraries can conceive to enhance their performance.

Methodology: Secondary data were collected from the census study accomplished by the ISTAT on the population of libraries operating in Italy. A linear regression analysis was designed to collect some evidence on the factors that contributed to explain the libraries' ability to attract users. We discriminated across large-sized, medium-sized, and small-sized libraries.

Findings: Our findings highlighted that the delivery of online services is critical to attract users, regardless of the dimensions of the libraries. While core services are instrumental to building libraries' attractiveness in small-sized libraries, advanced services serve the puporse of building the attractiveness of large-sized libraries. Accessibility and delivering tailored services to underprivileged groups of the community are both relevant to enhance libraries' reachability.

Research limitations/implications: Since our research exclusively focused on the Italian case, it is not possible to generalize the evidence reported in the manuscript at the international level. Nevertheless, our article has implications for theory and practice. First, it stresses the importance of discriminating the service experience in light of the libraries' dimensions. Second, it emphasizes the salience of online services, that add to the libraries' visibility. Third, it highlights that accessibility and serving the underprivileged communities make sense to integrate libraries in their communities and strengthen their attractiveness.

Originality/Value: Although they provide an essential public service, libraries' attractiveness is overlooked by scholars and practitioners. This article fills this gap, adding to the extant scientific knowledge.

Keywords: Attractiveness; Libraries; Municipal services; Service experience; Service quality.

Paper type: Empirical research

1. Introduction

The issue of the viability of libraries as generators of public value in the community is well-established in the scholarly debate (Goulding, 2006). In the last few years, this debate spiralled up in terms of salience and relevance. Two main drivers can be retrieved at the origin of such an upsurge of the scholarly and professional attention on this topic. On the one hand, digitalization enacts new ways of interaction between users and libraries (Yoon, 2016), recontextualizing the service exchange in the virtual setting (Chua & Goh, 2010). On the other hand, the advent and fast diffusion of artificial intelligence generates profound, yet ambiguous implications on libraries' functioning, that should be carefully monitored to check their ability to partake in public value generation (Lund & Wang, 2023). Alongside impacting on the way people perceive and use the servicescape that is hosted by libraries (Aabø & Audunson, 2012), these trends reconfigure the inner contents of the serive exchange between users and libraries, determining unprecedented challenges for users' attractiveness and engagement (Gede Mahatma Yuda Bakti & Sumaedi, 2013).

Investigating the organizational ability to attract users and to establish a direct and strong contact with them is in particular relevant as far as municipal libraries are concerned, since they are deeply embedded in their community (Schatteman & Liu, 2023). Municipal libraries can be understood as vital knowledge hub (Seppänen et al., 2017). Their contribution to the generation of public value arises from ensuring the community access to reliable, consistent and dependable information, impacting cognitively, socially, culturally and affectively on people (Huysmans & Oomes, 2013) and generating direct and indirect effects on collective wellbeing (Kwak & Yoo, 2012).

To the best of the authors' knowledge, there is little evidence available on the factors that make municipal libraries able to attract users, enhancing their service experience (Palumbo, 2022). This article attempts to fill this knowledge gap investigating the factors that affected the

ability of a large sample of Italian libraries to attract physical users. More specifically, attention is paid to the service offering of municipal libraries, providing evidence of the distinctive role of different components of the library service offering in enticing users and stimulating them to enter in contact with the library. The following research questions inspired the paper:

R.Q. 1: What are the components of the libraries' service offering

that are relevant to attracting people?

R.Q. 1: Does organizational size affect the service factors that are

important to building libraries' attractiveness?

An empirical quantitative research has been arranged to answer these research questions. The article proceeds as follows. The second section provides a brief conceptual background against which the research hypotheses were established. Next, the study findings are reported and then critically discussed in light of the extant scientific knowledge. The conclusion epitomize the originality of this paper, arguing its implications for theory and practice.

2. Conceptual background and hypotheses development

As service organizations, libraries are interested in improving their exchange with users, taking care of their experience and advancing the value they can extract from available services (Born et al., 2018). Drawing on Broady-Preston and Swain (2012), the libraries service offering basically contains core services and value-added services. On the one hand, core services primarily relate to the activities accomplished by libraries to facilitate the users' access to timely and relevant information to perform daily life activities (Atkinson, 2017). Alongside being delivered in the physical servicescape, core services can also be provided in the digital setting, being primarily aimed at empowering people in coping with pervasive digitalization (Mainka et al., 2013). On the other hand, value-added services expand the libraries' offering, with

additional activities that are intended at satisfying the information needs of users through conferences and seminars, guided tours, exhibitions, and live shows (Fouracre, 2015; Oling & Mach, 2002). Value added services fill with entertainment and socialization the conventional information services provided by libraries, serving as fundamental tools to attract the audience (Inayatullah, 2007). Previous research has highlighted that the libraries' attractiveness significantly depends on the contents and variety of the service offering (Kolderup Flaten, 2008). More specifically, the more libraries enrich their offering of core and value added services, the more they are attractive to users (Palumbo, 2023). Hence, it is assumed that:

H1: The variety of core services delivered by municipal libraries increase their attractiveness;

H2: The variety of value-added services delivered by municipal libraries increase their attractiveness;

Amidst the digital transition enacted by the continuous development and expansion of information and communication technologies, the libraries' involvement in the design and delivery of web-based services is an important component of their attractiveness (Ineˆs Cordeiro & De Carvalho, 2002). They include both initiatives intended to recontextualize the conventional services provided by libraries (*e.g.*, books' loan) in the digital environment (Madhusudhan & Nagabhushanam, 2012) and innovative interventions aimed at tailoring the service exchange to the evolving expectations expressed by users (Wang et al., 2012). Even though it is difficult to comprehensively identity the contents and attributes of web-based services (Buchanan & McMenemy, 2010), exploiting the potential of the web and making it a valuable setting to enter in contact with users expand the value generated by libraries and unleash their ability to entice the audicence, alluring it to the service offering (McMenemy, 2012). In line with these arguments, it is expected that:

H3: The delivery of web services increase the municipal libraries' attractiveness;

Lastly, yet importantly, the libraries' commitment to ensure the accessibility of their spaces and to address any barriers or obstables related to visible and invisible impairments brought by users is an important ingredient of the recipe for their attractiveness (Jaeger et al., 2015). Two main actions can be taken to advance the accessibility of libraries. First, a redesign of libraries' spaces and management practices is required to create awareness of the special needs reported by people with disability and to establish a positive environment where they can enter in contact with the libraries' service offering without any constraints (Kaeding et al., 2017; Kumbier & Starkey, 2016). Second, proactive interventions leveraging inter-organizational relationships with other public sector entities to specifically address the needs of disadvantaged groups of the population (e.g., inmates and people experiencing economic and social emargination) are critical to enhance the attractiveness of public libraries (Lilienthal, 2013; Prendergast, 2016). Beyond expanding the accessibility of the service offering, such initiatives enable public libraries to address the needs of conventionally underserved groups of the population, with positive implications on their attractiveness. In sum, it is argued that:

> H4: The design and delivery of services intended to overcome ostables in the access to the service offering increase the libraries' attractiveness;

> H5: The arrangement of inter-organizational partnerships intended to address the needs of underserved communities enhance the libraries' attractiveness.

3. Methods

We collected secondary data from the census study accomplished yearly by the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) to obtain evidence of the functioning of libraries operating in Italy. We decided to focus on a subsample of the libraries which were included in the census study. More specifically, since we were interested in getting insights on the public service factors that make libraries able to meet the evolving needs of users and to generate value for them, we decided to

include in our analysis only libraries which were owned by municipalities. This permitted us to specifically address the actions intended to public value generation of those libraries operating in direct contact with their target audience. To enhance the reliability of the study findings, we contemplated in the analysis municipally-owned libraries that were open at least five days per week and were closed for less than 100 days throughout 2023. We removed from the subsample the libraries that did not hire at least a librarian to accomplish their activities.

Altogether, our study sample consisted of 1919 libraries. We grouped them in three categories, based on their organizational size. The number of seats available in the libraries was used as a proxy to gauge the organizational size of the units of analysis. Libraries with 10 or less seats represented the small-sized organizations, while libraries having a minimum of 11 and a maximum of 49 seats were considered medium-sized libraries. Large-sized libraries had more than 50 seats available. The different types of libraries per organizational size were evenly represented, with small-sized institutions covering 10.4% of the sample, medium sized libraries 55.9%, and large-sized organizations 33.7%.

We run a simple linear regression to test the research hypotheses depicted above. The number of people who physically accessed the library in 2023 was used as the dependent variable of our statistical analysis. To enhance the calculation, we implemented a logarithmic transformation of the dependent variable. On average, 3,550 people physically enjoyed the services delivered by small-sized libraries, 7366 users visited medium-sized libraries, and 26,708 visitors accessed large-size libraries.

In line with the conceptual background reported above, five explicative variables were run in the linear refression. More specifically, we referred to the variety of core services delivered by municipal libraries (e.g., reading promotion, information and digital literacy training), value-added services (e.g., live shows, seminars, and guided tours), web-based services (e.g., digital loan and online public access catalogue), accessibility initiatives (e.g.,

actions intended at removing obstacles to the access of the library spaces), and inter-organizational partnerships intended to enhance the service accessibility to underserved groups of the population (e.g., inmates and people suffering from economic and financial emargination). All the explanatory variables were assessed as interval score variables, with '0' indicating the the library paid limited attention to the service factors and '1' that the library paid a significant attention to the service factors. We run three iterations of the linear regression analysis, which targeted the three groups of libraries per organizational size.

4. Findings

The findings of the regression analysis that targeted small-sized libraries is reported in Table 1 below. The statistical model displayed adequate explanatory power.

Table 1: the service factors contributing to the attractiveness of small-sized libraries

Model summary

R	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Standard error of estimate
0.45	0.20	0.18	0.54

ANOVA

Model	Sum of squares	gl	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	14.27	5	2.85	9,94	.000
Residual	55.7	194	0.29		
Total	69.98	199			

Coefficients

	Unstd coefficients		Std coefficients		
	B	Std error	β	t	Sig.
Const.	2.50	0.13		19.84	.000
CS*	0.42	0.19	0.18	2.21	0.03
AS	-0.01	0.16	-0.01	-0.08	0.94
WS***	0.83	0.15	0.35	5.33	.000
AC	0.03	0.24	0.01	0.11	0.91
IOR	0.16	0.17	0.07	0.94	0.35

Legenda: CS=Core Services; AS=Value-Added Services; WS=Web Services; AC=Accessibility; IOR=Inter-organizational partnerships targeted to disadvantaged groups.
***=significant at the 0.001 level; **=significant to the 0.01 level; *=significant at the 0.05 level.

While core services were found to be statistically associated with the attractiveness of small-sized libraries ($\beta = 0.42$, significant at the 0.05 level), value-added services were not found to advance the ability of the organizations to meet the expectations of their audience. While initiatives intended to boost the accessibility of libraries did not seem to have an impact on the attractiveness of small-sized libraries, the availability of web-based services was instrumental to enticing users, prompting them to physically visit the library ($\beta = 0.83$, significant at the 0.001 level).

Table 2 summarizes the result of the regression analysis which focused on medium-sized libraries. Some interesting evidence were obtained from the regression coefficients.

Table 2: the service factors contributing to the attractiveness of medium-sized libraries

Model summary

R	R2	Adjusted R2	Standard error of estimate
0.35	0.12	0.12	0.51

ANOVA

Model	Sum of squares	gl	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	37.55	5	7.51	28.99	.000
Residual	276.20	1,066	0.26		
Total	313.75	1,071			

Coefficients

	Unstd coefficients		Std coefficients		
	B	Std error	B	t	Sig.
Const.	2.84	0.64		44.34	.000
CS	-0.12	0.07	-0,05	-1.59	0.11
AS***	0.23	0.06	0.12	3.76	.000
WS***	0.58	0.71	0.24	8.23	.000
AC***	0.52	0.11	0.15	4.91	.000
IOR*	0.13	0.07	0,06	2.01	0.04

Legenda: CS=Core Services; AS=Value-Added Services; WS=Web Services; AC=Accessibility; IOR=Inter-organizational partnerships targeted to disadvantaged groups.
***=significant at the 0.001 level; **=significant to the 0.01 level; *=significant at the 0.05 level.

Core services were not capable of propelling the medium-sized libraries attractiveness. Conversely, value-added services played a relevant role in arousing the audience interest (β = 0.23, significant at the 0.001 level). Similarly, web-based services were positively associate with the number of people who visited physically medium-sized libraries in 2023 (β = 0.58, significant at the 0.001 level). Also, initiatives intended to advance the accessibility of medium-sized libraries were relevant in attracting the audience. On the one hand, interventions intended to improve the spatial accessibility of medium-sized libraries contributed to their attractiveness (β = 0.52, significant at the 0.001 level). On the other hand, inter-organizational relationships aimed at attracting underserved groups of the population to the library service offering were found to be instrumental in enhancing their ability to attract users (β = 0.13, significant at the 0.05 level).

Table 3: the service factors contributing to the attractiveness of large-sized libraries

Model summary

R	R2	Adjusted R2	Standard error of estimate
0.37	0.13	0.13	0.50

ANOVA

Model	Sum of squares	gl	Mean square	F	Sig.
Regression	24.78	5	4.96	19.88	.000
Residual	159.76	641	0.25		
Total	184.54	646			

Coefficients

	Unstd coefficients		Std coefficients		
	B	Std error	B	t	Sig.
Const.	3.28	0.10		32.35	.000
CS	-0.03	0.10	-0.01	-0.26	0.79
AS**	0.26	0.08	0.13	3.16	.002
WS***	0.37	0,10	0.14	3.76	.000
AC***	0.74	0,15	0.20	4.99	.000
IOR**	0.23	0.07	0.12	3.15	.002

Legenda: CS=Core Services; AS=Value-Added Services; WS=Web Services; AC=Accessibility; IOR=Inter-organizational partnerships targeted to disadvantaged groups.
***=significant at the 0.001 level; **=significant to the 0.01 level; *=significant at the 0.05 level.

Table 3 concludes the report of the study findings, focusing on large-sized municipal libraries. The evidence collected from the regression model reiterated the evidence obtained for medium-sized institutions. Core services did not build organizational attractiveness. Conversely, value-added services ($\beta = 0.26$, significant at the 0.01 level) and web-based services ($\beta = 0.37$, significant at the 0.001 level) were crucial to entice the audience. Besides, both physical accessibility ($\beta = 0.74$, significant at the 0.001 level) and inter-organizational partnerships targeted to underprivileged groups of the population ($\beta = 0.23$, significant at the 0.01 level) had a significant impact on the ability of large-sized libraries to attract users.

5. Discussion, limitations, and implications for theory and practice

Table 4 summarizes the results of the research hypotheses' testing, taking into account the organizational size of the libraries which were involved in this empirical research.

Table 4: An overview of the research hypotheses' testing

H	Content	Confirmed for small-sized institutions	Confirmed for medium-sized institutions	Confirmed for large-sized institutions
H1	The variety of core services delivered by municipal libraries increase their attractiveness;	Yes	No	No
H2	The variety of value-added services delivered by municipal libraries increase their attractiveness;	No	Yes	Yes
H3	The delivery of web services increase the municipal libraries' attractiveness;	Yes	Yes	Yes
H4	The design and delivery of services intended to overcome ostables in the access to the service offering increase the libraries' attractiveness;	No	Yes	Yes
H5	The arrangement of inter-organizational partnerships intended to address the needs of underserved communities enhance the libraries' attractiveness.	No	Yes	Yes

H1 and H3 were confirmed for small-sized libraries. In light of the limited heterogeneity of their audience, the attractiveness of small-sized municipal libraries primarily rely on their ability to provide core services to the community. Moreover, the expansion of the service

encounted in the digital domain further increases their attractiveness, contributing to making them a valued setting for users to satisfy their information need. Conversely, H2, H4 and H5 were not supported in the sub-sample of small-sized libraries. While value-added services do not meet the basic needs perceived by users, accessibility issues are generally considered to be out of scope, since the limited budget available does not enable small-sized libraries to address them.

The attractiveness puzzle is solved in a different way when medium-sized and large-sized municipal libraries are contemplated. Alongside web-based services, value-added initiatives are particularly relevant to entice and engage the audience to the service offering of these libraries. They confront a larger and more heterogeneous audience, whose quality expectations towards libraries are compounded by their greater exposure to diversified and consumer-based services. Accessibility turns out to be a meaningful issue for medium-sized and large-sized libraries: the more they are involved in positive actions intended to facilitate the access to their services to the underprivileged population, the stronger their ability to attract users. In sum, while H1 was not supported among medium-sized and large-sized libraries, H2, H3, H4, and H5 were confirmed.

From our point of view, the need for libraries to redesign competitive strategies,based on size, in order to increase their attractiveness clearly emerges.

Perhaps even further upstream is in the "role" of the library which must be rewritten starting from a twofold aspect:

The first linked to what historically identifies it in its core business such as:

A.   "Place of research", exchange, enrichment of the most diverse cultural aspects,

B.   "Welcoming Place", both Personal,who helps customers to find what they are looking for and Physical, related to the facilities available to readers such ad tables, chairs etc.

C.   "Place of conservation" of both "physical" e.g. culture, books and "instistutional" e.g. silence and community of intent whengoing to the library (suding, upadating etc.)

In order to customize this remarks it is important to specify that points A. and B. are particularly relevant for medium and large libraries, while point C. is significant for small ones.

The second aspect, related to the adaptation to what the evolution linked in, Digitization and Artificial Intelligence has brough about, in terms of new elements which must be seen, as described in the paper, as complementary -aggregative of high added values services which can allow libraries to redefine their modus operandi and thus considered as opportunities and not threats.

Several limitations affected this study. First, since our research is specifically focused on municipally-owned libraries operating in Italy, it is not possible to claim the study findings' generalization at the sectoral or international level. Nevertheless, we were able to target a fundamental group of libraries, whose contribution to the generation of public value is essential. Second, the cross-sectional nature of this empirical research prevents us from maintaining the directionality of the relationship between the study variables. Nevertheless, the secondary sources of information delivered by the ISTAT census study were completely fit with the purpose of our research and permitted us to obtain relevant evidence of the service factors affecting the libraries' attractiveness. Lastly, yet importantly, additional statistical checks should be implemented to test the dependability of the study findings, taking into account the specific service focus embraced by libraries and the primary groups of users (e.g., primary students, graduates, job seekers) accessing the libraries.

Further research is necessitated to overcome these study limitations and advance what we know of the initiatives that are valuable in building the attractiveness of municipal libraries and in enabling them to establish a co-creating exchange with users. First, international studies

– either adopting a comparative or an explanatory perspective – should be accomplished, in order to identify any sources of cultural, social, and/or institutional bias affecting the attractiveness of municipal libraries. Secondly, longitudinal studies are necessitated, providing us with additional evidence of how the evolution and the transformation of the municipal libraries service offering influence their attractiveness. Finally, future research should shed light on the distinctive factors that are conducive to public libraries' attractiveness towards special categories of users, who may obtain particular advantages from the value generated by municipal libraries.

This research has implications for theory and practice. From a conceptual perspective, it highlights that service quality has different shapes in light of the specific expectations and needs perceived by the audience. When they interact with small-sized libraries, visitors are primarily interested in satisfying basic information services and they do not take into consideration the organizational readiness to expand their service offering. Conversely, medium and large-sized municipal libraries face greater challenges in attracting users and they need to rely on edutainment to advance their capability to entice the audience. From a practical perspective, librarians should customize their interventions intended to boost libraries' attractiveness to their particular role in society. Small-sized libraries are expected not to benefit from the adoption of a customer-centered perspective. Rather, an information centered-perspective seems to be more effective, focusing on the users access to literacy promotion initiatives.

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