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Examining Undergraduate Students' Priorities for Academic Library Services and Social Media Communication

Besiki Stvilia*, Leila Gibradze

School of Information, Florida State University, 142 Collegiate Loop, Tallahassee, FL 32306-2100, United States

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ABSTRACT

Academic libraries can effectively plan and market their services by identifying the value users perceive in their services and in their social media communications about those services. This study reports on findings of a survey of 104 undergraduate students in information technology courses at a large research university. Results of an ordered logistic regression analysis indicated that students considered access to information and computer resources and study support services as the most important library services offered. Likewise, students perceived library social media postings related to operations updates, study support services, and events as the most useful. Future related research will investigate the needs and priorities for library services of other key user populations of academic libraries, such as graduate students and online students, to assemble service repertoires that are tailored to individual user groups. In addition, future research will examine whether and how libraries can use the analysis of users' engagement with a library's social media postings to inexpensively gauge the value they perceive in library services.

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INTRODUCTION

Users are often among the first groups to conceive new, innovative uses of technology or develop workarounds to complete their changing work or engage in social activities (Gasser, 1986; Teece, 2007). Librarians must stay aligned with users' dynamic needs, innovative uses of information technologies and services, and perceived value of those services. This may help librarians identify new service opportunities and decide how to reconfigure and extend their existing service capabilities to support the new, changing needs and priorities of their key user groups. For instance, some academic libraries complement their existing digital library services with computational and text-mining capabilities to help their faculty and students integrate advanced content analysis methods into their research and teaching.¹

User-perceived value is usually assessed based on the perceived quality of a service or product received and the perceived sacrifice or price paid by the customer (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; Zeithaml, 1988). Quality is generally defined as "fitness for use" (Wang & Strong, 1996). Quality is contextual and dynamic, and it changes with changes in time and space. Ultimately, the problem of quality control, and quality assessment for that matter, is the ability to connect a change in the quality of a service or product to a change in an activity outcome and

the value of that activity outcome change. Ideally, the value of a library service should be evaluated by assessing the value of an activity outcome that used the service (Stvilia & Gasser, 2008). When multiple alternatives exist for the same type of service, quality-based selection of a product or service becomes a process of the consumer identifying an optimal service within a multidimensional search space where the dimensions are the quality criteria and the cost of using the service (Lesser et al., 1998). Because it has been difficult to assign a price value to library services (Nitecki, 1996), librarians have focused on determining the user-perceived quality of library services (Cook & Thompson, 2001). In addition, librarians have used indirect measures, such as the degree of use, to assess the value of a particular level of service quality (Oakleaf, 2010). Furthermore, the value of a quality change in a product is conditioned by the criticality or importance of that change to the activity(s) in which the product is used (Stvilia, 2006). The user-perceived importance of a library service can be thought of as a general, baseline priority the user assigns to the library service, which also takes into account any alternatives to which the user might have access. Hence, the user-perceived importance of a library service can be used as a general, subjective measure of the value of a service. Furthermore, a library resource or service can have different uses. Different user groups may engage in different sets of academic and social activities when using the same or different services (e.g., library space), may play different roles in the activities (Gardner & Eng, 2005; Lux, Snyder, & Boff, 2016; Oliveira, 2016), and, hence, may assign different priorities to those services.

Social media systems have become increasingly popular, and users are spending a growing amount of time using these systems to network,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bstvilia@fsu.edu (B. Stvilia).

¹ <http://er.educause.edu/articles/2016/5/the-hathitrust-research-center-exploring-the-full-text-frontier>

share information, learn, and engage in leisure activities (e.g., gaming). A recent Pew survey of social media use found that nearly 65% of American adults use some kind of social media and that young adults use social media pervasively. Ninety percent of adults ages 18 to 29 use social media (Perrin et al., 2015). Another survey from the Pew Center showed that 73% of Americans ages 16 and older would be willing to use an online Ask a Librarian-type service (Zickuhr, Rainie, & Purcell, 2013). Being aware of these trends, libraries try to promote and market their services to user populations through various social media platforms and the information and communication channels their users frequent (Chu & Du, 2013). However, users may not find all social media postings useful. One study found that users rated only 36% of Twitter postings as worth reading (André, Bernstein, & Luther, 2012). A different study of Facebook pages of 20 academic libraries found that <37% of postings on those pages had some user activity (e.g., likes or comments; Gerolimos, 2011). Librarians need to determine what type of social media communication is effective with and useful to their key user groups.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Libraries create value for their target user groups by providing services to support their needs. The value of those services, however, is conditioned by the criticality of those needs. Users' needs and priorities for academic library services are dynamic, and they change with changes in information technologies and the sets of academic and social activities in which users engage. Librarians need to determine how to allocate and reconfigure their limited resources to foster service innovations and to meet users' dynamic needs and priorities for their services effectively. They need to continuously monitor how their key user groups prioritize the existing services and identify unmet or new needs and opportunities for library services (Esson, Stevenson, Gildea, & Roberts, 2012; Spalding & Wang, 2006).

Furthermore, a library may not meet the needs of its users if it lacks the appropriate services. Users also may not be aware of services the library offers, or they may not know how to use those services to support their academic or social activities (Nitecki, 1996). Hence, it is essential that academic libraries assess their users' awareness of their services and devise mechanisms to increase that awareness (Chu & Meulemans, 2008). This includes gaining a better understanding of what sorts of library communication with particular media types are useful to specific target user groups.

This study contributes to addressing the above needs by examining the following questions:

What is the perceived importance of different types of academic library services among undergraduate students?

What is the perceived importance of different types of social media communication from academic libraries among undergraduate students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The value of services can be conceptualized and measured based on the benefits or quality received and the cost or sacrifice incurred (Zeithaml, 1988). Assessing service quality can be complex because it may include the use of multiple products as well as the process of service delivery (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). In addition, the value of a change in product or service quality can be conditioned by the criticality of the change to the outcome of the activity(s) in which the service is used or the criticality of the need that motivates or incites that activity (Maslow, 1943; Stvilia, 2006). This also implies that the criticality or value of a service can be affected if the activity can be completed by an alternative service (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002).

Libraries provide value to their target groups through their services. The user-perceived benefits or the quality of those services may differ from one user group to another. Because libraries do not sell their

services directly to their user groups, they may not be able to quantify the amount of sacrifice or the price their users are willing to pay for those services (Oakleaf, 2010). It has been difficult to estimate the price users are willing to pay for a library service, and use it to assess the value of that service. Therefore, academic libraries focus on the quality assessment part of the service value equation and conduct regular surveys to assess the user-perceived quality of library services (e.g., Cook & Thompson, 2001; Cook, Heath, Kyrrillidou, Thompson, & Roebuck, 2014).

To justify the cost of providing a service, a library should ideally be able to connect the use of the service to the outcome of an activity(s) that uses the service, and the value of that outcome. Librarians have been trying to capture possible traces of those relationships by identifying correlations between the use of library services and the outcomes of their user groups' academic and social activities. For instance, Goodall and Pattern (2011) found a positive correlation between students' use of printed and electronic resources in a library and their grades. Similarly, Stone and Ramsden (2013) reported statistically significant correlations among students' degree of E-resource use, library borrowing statistics, library gate entries, and academic attainment.

The literature also discusses the difference between customer satisfaction and customer-perceived value. Customer satisfaction is defined as an affective construct that reflects a customer's postpurchase perspective on a particular supplier's offerings. It is oriented toward existing customers. Customer-perceived value, on the other hand, is a cognitive construct. It can reflect both the customer's pre- and postpurchase perspectives and the offerings of both a particular supplier and its competitors. Customer-perceived value can be used to assess how the supplier's offerings can generate value and how the supplier can strategize to retain existing customers and attract new ones. Thus, the supplier can use customer satisfaction to correct the customers' existing problems with the current service offerings, whereas it can use customer-perceived value for strategic planning (Eggert & Ulaga, 2002; Herson & Nitecki, 2001).

Identifying users' needs and priorities for library services and determining when and how to communicate about and promote those services to users should be components of the strategic marketing plan of any library (Spalding & Wang, 2006). Oliveira (2016) found that students may have different preferences for different services or for components of individual services within a particular service category (e.g., study space preferences). Furthermore, academic libraries provide a dynamic set of services that evolve over time (Nitecki, 1996). They have been using modified versions of the SERVQUAL instrument (Parasuraman et al., 1985) to examine the user-perceived quality of their services. The SERVQUAL framework consists of five dimensions or constructs: tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Nitecki (1996) examined the user-perceived quality of three groups of services: interlibrary loan, reference, and graduate reserves. Cook and Thompson (2001) seem to have examined the quality of a library as space and the collection access services, based on the list of factors identified in their report. In a 2014 iteration of the same library survey, they substituted the name of the collection access scale with information control. Interestingly, individual libraries and consortia added local questions to the instrument that referred to some additional services, such as interlibrary loan and library instruction (Cook et al., 2014).

As with any other communication system, libraries can use Twitter and other social media systems for different communication purposes and activities. Stvilia and Gibradze (2014) analyzed the content of Twitter streams at six large academic libraries in the United States. Their analysis revealed nine content types, with the event and resource categories being the most frequent. The other categories were community building, operations updates, study support, Q&A, surveys, staff, and clubs. In addition, their analysis showed that tweets related to study support services and building and maintaining connections with the community were the most frequently retweeted and selected as favorites.

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