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The values of public libraries: A systematic review of empirical studies of stakeholder perceptions

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Abstract

Purpose – Public libraries' relevance and *raison d'être* towards society is an often discussed subject within public, politics and research. The objective of this systematic literature review is to provide a synthesis of empirical studies of stakeholders' perceived values of public libraries.

Design/methodology/approach – The review is based on a structured literature search that was conducted in seven databases. Two independent participants carried out a two-step screening of the identified studies. Firstly, the studies were screened on basis of title and abstract. Secondly, studies that were included in the title–abstract screening were full-text screened. Conflicting studies were discussed, and consensus between the reviewers was reached. Citation searches of each included study were conducted along with scrutinising cited literature. The included studies were subject to a risk of bias assessment on basis of a developed risk of the bias tool, and qualitative analysis was provided.

Findings – Of all, 4,086 studies were screened and 19 were retained for the review. The studies consisted of both quantitative and qualitative investigations of different stakeholders in a variety of countries. The reported values varied across the studies and stakeholders.

Originality/value – This is the first study that systematically reviews empirical literature that explores stakeholders' perceived values of public libraries. The paper suggests further recommendations for empirical research of values connected to public libraries.

Keywords: Public libraries, Stakeholders, Value analysis, Assessment, Systematic review, Value perception

Introduction

Universal access to information and communication is continuously subject to development. The opportunity for instant access to publishing, viewing and sharing information and communication changes people's social lives, and therefore also the way they communicate (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Additionally, the changing information and communication landscape affects and challenges the value of public libraries as gatekeepers of democracy and facilitators of democratic and public debate (Ragnar Audunson et al., 2019). This challenge is strongly connected to the issues of defining public libraries in times of changing needs and behaviour. Hence, public libraries are struggling to measure and demonstrate their impact and value in areas such as culture, society and information access.

A variety of studies have investigated public libraries with different approaches to outline the perception of values e.g. by describing the roles of public libraries (R. Audunson, 2005a; Smith, 2008), the outcomes (Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016), the benefits (Sin & Vakkari, 2015) or the values (Hawkins, Morris, & Sumsion, 2001; Paberza, 2010). Even though the approaches to values have been operationalised differently in research, a general definition of values can be defined as something that “[...] *tie[s] together how individuals think about the world and how they feel about the world*” (Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007). As a concept, value is dependent on perceptions of individuals or groups of stakeholders in their interactions with public libraries, whether this is embedded in the actual use of the library or in public discourse. The current definition contributes a qualitative perspective on how values are created in the minds of users when they reflect on or interact with public libraries.

Monetary values can also be associated with library impact. In a narrative literature review, Roxanne Missingham (2005) reports on three waves of studies that aim to assess the economic value of public libraries. The first wave demonstrates library efficiency in terms of financially responsible management (Wilson & Pitman, 1999). The second one focuses on demonstrating library success in lights of financial return (Griffiths & King, 1993; Marshall, 1993). The third wave considers the relative value related to groups of stakeholders. The latter perspective focuses on an economic valuation while assessing the perceived value of library services with a focus on return on investment and contingent valuation (Matarazzo & Prusak, 1995; Aabø, 2004).

Qualitative values of public libraries suggest values such as the public library as a public place (Alstad & Curry, 2003; R. Audunson, 2005b; Given & Leckie, 2003), the public library as a provider of digital means and facilitator of digital literacy (R. Audunson, 2005b; Bertol, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006; Jaeger & Fleischmann, 2007; Koscieljew, 2019), the public library as creator of social capital (Johnson, 2010, 2012; Vårheim, 2007, 2009; Vårheim, Steinmo, & Ide, 2008) and finally as a gatekeeper of values such as democracy and enlightenment, a space where cross-cultural citizens meet with open and free access to information, knowledge and culture (Alstad & Curry, 2003; Ragnar Audunson et al., 2019; Johnson, 2010, 2012; Vårheim, 2007, 2009; Vårheim et al., 2008; Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010).

Present research has established that public libraries are an institution that provides the society with instrumental and monetary impact (Aabø, 2004). Studies have shown that public libraries also persist of intangible values. Within research of cultural value, intangible values are described as intrinsic value (Holden 2004; Scott, 2006; Crossick & Kaszynska 2014). This term is transferable for public libraries, as these can be associated with cultural institutions (Audunson, 2005b). The studies mentioned above thoroughly describe these by demonstrating how public libraries function as not only an economical catalyst to the society, but also as a community asset in terms of its space. Miller (2017) is a multi-classification study of rural libraries of USA. It explored the differences in the asset holdings of public

libraries in terms of the distance from urbanised areas and urban clusters. The study specifically focuses on what the implications of potential differences in rural community development are and it found that small rural libraries sustained their economic contribution to the community. Blackburn (2011) discusses two examples of community engagement in Australian public libraries by the use of practitioner-research methods and finds that the community is vigorous and is willing to engage actively with public libraries. These findings acknowledge the potential for public libraries to act as more than just an economic impact factor, but as an institution that can provide both instrumental impact and intrinsic added value to society.

As shown, many researchers discuss the role and value of public libraries. The studies have each demonstrated parts of public libraries' overall value to society. In order to thoroughly understand the full aspect of public libraries value to society, there is a substantial need to gather and review empirical studies of values systematically. Only few studies have focused on synthesising what is already known about values of public libraries. Recently, Stenstrom, Cole and Hanson (2019) addressed the values of public libraries in a narrative literature review of 130 studies. With a basis in these studies they have found two aspects of value: financial value and social value of libraries. In a meta-analysis, Aabø (2009) investigated known aspects of the economic valuation of public libraries.

The aim of this study is to provide an overview of known and potentially unknown values of public libraries. This implies that the paper responds to the values on a general level by providing a qualitative overview of research that includes an assessment of bias and the overall quality of present research. Hence, the objective of this systematic literature review is to provide a synthesis of what is presently known in empirical documented studies of stakeholders' perceived values of public libraries in relation to i) study design, ii) method issues, iii) participants and iv) outcomes.

Methods

The methodology of systematic reviews is a suitable method for gathering and synthesising what is known about the perceived values of public libraries. A systematic review uses systematic methods to identify, select, describe and critically appraise research in order to provide evidence of a subject (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The, 2009). By approaching the review of literature by systematic means, the study minimises potential research bias in the search for studies, the selection of studies and in the quality assessment of the studies (Higgins & Green, 2011). This systematic review is conducted according to the statements of the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) 2009 checklist (Moher et al., 2009). The statements describe the content and structure of systematic reviews. The structure consists of systematic literature searches, a double-blinded selection process, data analysis and quality assessment of included research.

The quality assessment was conducted by appraising the risk of bias of each included study. The study focused on appraising methodological risk of bias, but it also focused on issues related to how the studies located the source of the investigated value. It considered whether the value was decided as object for research, before initiating the investigation (*a priori*), or if the values were found as a primary outcome of the study. A risk of bias tool was developed for the purpose of this assessment. It consisted of criteria that aimed to appraise the potential methodological issues and issues pertaining to the origin of values. The tool was developed with inspiration from the AMSTAR (Assessing the Methodological Quality of Systematic Reviews) measurement tool. The AMSTAR tool is built on previously developed tools, empirical evidence and expert opinions (Shea et al., 2007). It is designed to assess the quality of systematic reviews. Though

AMSTAR is developed for assessing systematic reviews, it consists of criteria that are applicable for appraising the studies that were included for this review. Specifically, the AMSTAR tool considers if the study design were decided a priori (Shea et al., 2007). The a priori concept can strongly be tied to bias associated to studies of values, as the results may be influenced knowingly or unknowingly by the desire of proving the existence of a certain value. This risk of bias also emphasizes the need to synthesise exploratively conducted studies as the risk of bias, regarding a priori decided values, is expected to be minimised.

Two reviewers independently performed the selection of studies. Disagreements were subject to discussions, and consensus in the decisions was reached. The selection of studies was carried out by using Covidence, a software program designed for literature screening and selecting studies for systematic reviews (Veritas Health Innovation, Melbourne, Australia, www.covidence.org). The author of this study carried out the extraction of data, risk of bias assessment and the qualitative analysis.

Search strategy

The search strategy was carried out in seven databases between 14 and 15 May 2019. Table 1 shows a search that was conducted in the Library Science database. The searches for the other databases were modified to fit the specific settings for each database, such as adjustment of thesaurus keywords and limitation settings. The following databases were accessed for searching academic articles: Scopus, Library Science Database, ERIC and Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts. Worldcat was searched for books and ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global was accessed for dissertations and theses. To identify other relevant studies, reference lists of the included studies were scrutinized and citation searches were carried out in Scopus on 4 July 2019.

Table 1: Search strategy modified for searching in Library Science database

	Search	Results
#1	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 valu*)	340
#2	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 purpose*)	146
#3	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 impact*)	167
#4	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 role*)	410
#5	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 relevance)	32
#6	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 contribut*)	131
#7	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 effect*)	168
#8	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 efficiency)	11
#9	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 benefit*)	129
#10	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 goal*)	77
#11	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 worth)	38
#12	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 vision*)	44
#13	noft(public NEAR/3 librar* NEAR/10 mission*)	96
#14	#1-#13/OR	1,489
#15	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Libraries")	46,139
#16	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Public libraries")	2,758
#17	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Small libraries")	27
#18	#15-#17/OR	48,603
#19	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Values")	1,132
#20	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Cultural values")	209

#21	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Valuation")	100
#22	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Assessed valuation")	3
#23	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Economic impact")	508
#24	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Effects")	488
#25	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Social impact")	1,432
#26	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Impact analysis")	597
#27	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Roles")	692
#28	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Relevance")	27
#29	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Contributions")	16
#30	MAINSUBJECT.EXACT("Efficiency")	509
#31	#19 - #30/OR	5,586
#31	#18 AND #31	410
#32	#14 OR #31 AND (at.exact("Feature" OR "Article" OR "Review" OR "Commentary" OR "Report" OR "Case Study" OR "Bibliography" OR "Literature Review") AND stype.exact("Scholarly Journals") AND la.exact("ENG") AND PEER(yes))	832

Selection of studies

The entire research process, from the initial literature search to the risk of bias assessment, has been conducted with precaution to prevent research bias. The selection process, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined to consistently identify eligible studies. Moreover, outcome measures were defined to ensure that relevant results in the studies were reported. To uphold consistency in the extraction of data, schemes were developed to systematically describe the content of the included literature. Lastly, a risk of bias assessment tool was developed in order to assess potential systematic methodological errors that could affect the results of the study.

In the selection process, studies were included following their operationalization of the public library. The existing research suggest that the public library is a cultural institution of free and open access to information, knowledge (e.g. physical and digital book collections, journals, media) and leisure pursuits (R. Audunson, 2005b; Sunniva Evjen, 2012; Jochumsen, Hvenegaard Rasmussen, & Skot-Hansen, 2012; Laitinen, 2019; Aabø, 2005). Additionally, the roles of public libraries are active in *"Promoting literacy, learning and cultural consumption"* (Vårheim et al., 2008, p. 880).

Furthermore, all primary studies were considered eligible for inclusion if they explored stakeholders' perceptions of values connected to public libraries. In this matter, stakeholders are defined as "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives" (Freeman, 1984, p. 25). Present studies have investigated stakeholders such as library staff (Barniskis, 2016; Smith, 2008), users (Appleton, Hall, Duff, & Raeside, 2018; Hawkins et al., 2001; Usherwood, 2002), non-users (Oliphant, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012), media (Seiser, 1974) and decision and policymakers (R. Audunson, 2005a; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; Gazo, 2011).

Studies were excluded if the written language was other than English or if they were not peer-reviewed. Hence, editorials, news, opinion papers and speeches were excluded from the searches due to the minimal academic content. Furthermore, studies on specific positions (e.g. collection librarians or subject librarians), events (e.g. presentations or courses), services (e.g. interlibrary loans) were excluded as being outside the scope of this review, as the purpose of this study is to investigate the larger picture of the public library.

The outcome measures were perceived values of public libraries. The definition of the ISO 16439 standard was followed: “[value is] *the importance that stakeholders (funding institutions, politicians, the public, users, staff) attach to libraries and which is related to the perception of actual or potential benefit*” (ISO 16439:2014, definition 3.75). Studies were excluded if they were concerned with user satisfaction or library use.

In the data extraction process, data related to the objectives of this review were noted by author, year, title, study design, methods descriptions, selection of participants and outcomes.

The risk of bias assessment was performed in order to critically appraise the included studies. Essentially, “a bias is a systematic error, or deviation from the truth, in results or inferences” (Higgins & Green, 2011). The risk of bias is an important factor in systematic reviews, as the overall evidence of the review is dependent on the validity of the included studies. For instance, if the results among the studies are consistent, it is significant to be aware of potential systematic errors, as these potentially affect the overall results of the review, and thereby also the evidence of the review-conclusions (Higgins & Green, 2011). As this review is concerned with establishing trusted evidence of values, it focusses on bias tied to methods that have been applied and bias connected to how the researchers have established the value(s) that was subjected to the research. To meet these points of interest, four criteria were developed inspired by the quality standards described in the AMSTAR measurement tool (Shea et al., 2007). The criteria are presented in Table 2: i) recruitment bias, ii) segmentation of stakeholder groups bias, iii) a priori values bias and iv) value outlier bias. In the risk of bias assessment, the studies were considered in terms of “low risk of bias”, “high risk of bias” or “unclear risk bias”.

(i) Recruitment methods of participants. The study was considered as having a high risk of bias if it did not consider or insufficiently considered the how, where, when and whom being subjected to data collection. For example, in the data collection of active library users located at the libraries, it is desirable to consider the time of day in relation to which segments use the library at that specific time.

(ii) Segmentation of stakeholder groups. The study was considered as having a high risk of bias if the segmentation of stakeholder groups was not sufficiently considered or if the study design did not retrieve data from a representative sample of a stakeholder group. For example, it is insufficient not to consider the representation of e.g. gender, ethnicity or age-groups in a sample of library users, as this will affect the stated perceived outcomes.

(iii) A priori established values. This criterion concerns values which are established or decided prior to conducting the study. The study was considered as having a high risk of bias if it applied predetermined values to the assessment of perceived values, as this will influence the results in terms of missing aspects of values or a lack of exploration of undefined values.

(IV) Value outlier bias. This criterion evaluates whether the study provided listings or rankings of stated values e.g. by percentages or frequency. The study was considered as having a high risk of bias if it did not pay attention to the possibility of value-outliers. For instance, if a study finds that the public library is associated with coffee shops, but does not consider the possibilities of value-outliers, the stated value is at a high risk of being biased.

Table 2: Risk of bias criteria

<i>Criterion</i>	<i>Support for judgment</i>	<i>Review authors' judgment</i>
<i>Recruitment method of participants (e.g. phone, mail, visitors)</i>	Describe the process of participant-recruitment.	Selection bias due to insufficient methodological considerations on how to reach a representative sample group.
<i>Segmentation of stakeholder groups (e.g. gender, ethnicity, users, non-users, library staff, politicians)</i>	Describe the incitement for choosing participants, including the relevance of the chosen subjects such as demography, interest or role regarding public libraries.	Selection bias due to unconsidered segmentation of stakeholder groups that induce overrepresentation of specific subjects such as males vs. females.
<i>A priori values bias</i>	Describe whether the values are stated in the study or defined a priori.	Bias towards validation of a priori values. Fails to explore unknowns of current aspects of values.
<i>Value outlier bias (e.g. according to central versus periphery values)</i>	Describe if the study is ranking the values in lists of priorities or states centrality of values.	The study does not consider the significance of values found. This entails that the findings might include non-representative value-outliers.

Analysis

Higgins and Green (2011) points out that providing a narrative assessment of evidence can be problematic due to the amount of included studies and due to the differences in applied study designs, sample size and findings amongst the studies. Hence, this review has provided a qualitative analysis that strictly reports on i) time aspects with focus on when was the first study conducted and how has the field evolved, ii) study design, iii) study size, iv) stakeholders investigated v) countries and vi) stated values. A further discussion of the qualitative analysis is presented in the discussion section.

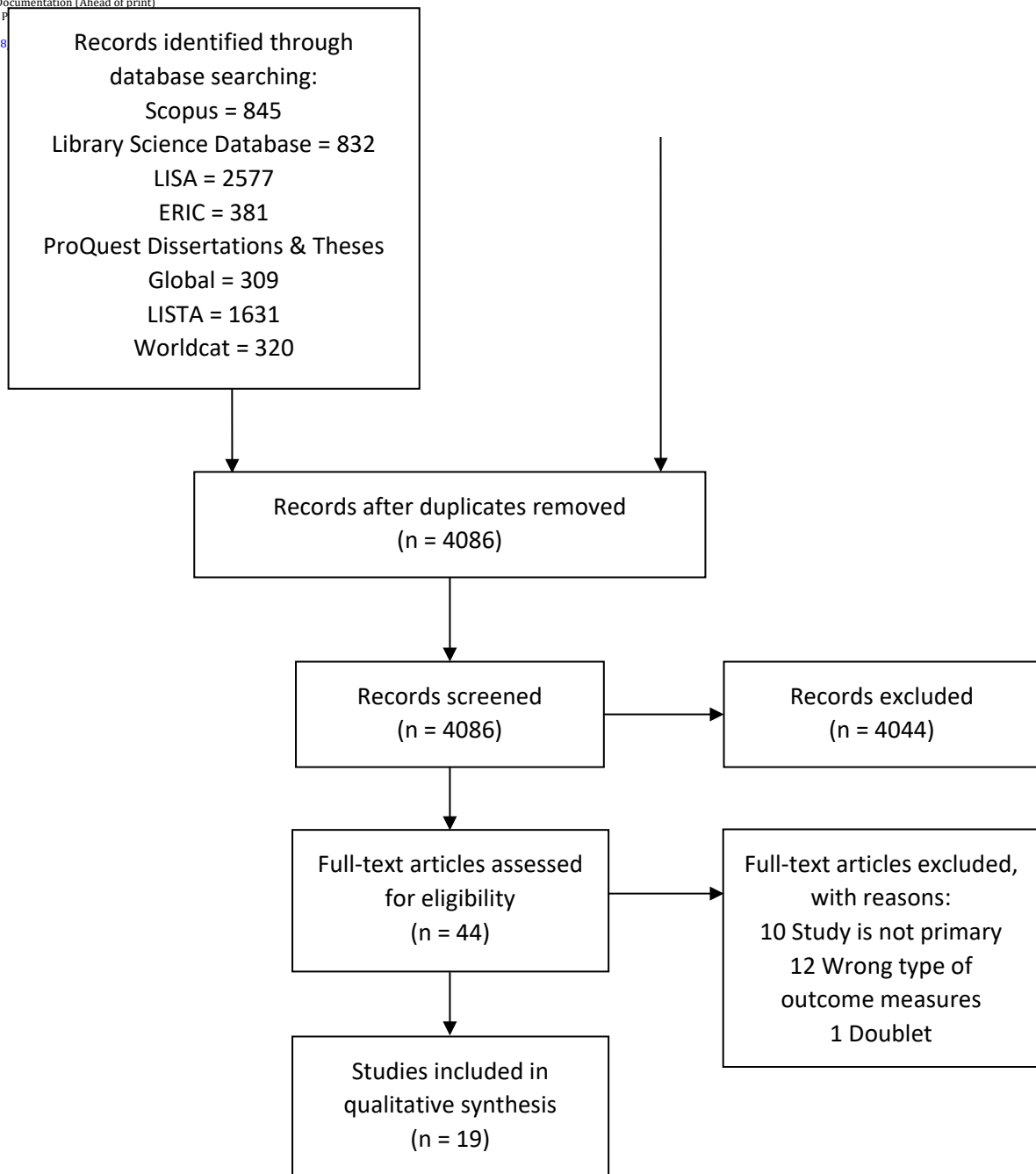
Moreover, the analysis reports on the results of each risk of bias criteria presented in table 2.

Results

Of the 4,086 retrieved studies, 19 are included for the qualitative analysis (figure 1). An overview of the 19 included studies is presented in table 3.

Figure 1. Study selection flow diagram.

Additional records identified
 through citation search
 Scopus = 61



Qualitative analysis

The qualitative analysis of the included studies is strictly reported with respect to i) time aspects, ii) study design, iii) study size, iv) stakeholders v) countries and vi) values.

Table 3: Characteristics of 19 included studies in a systematic review of perceived values tied to public libraries.

Study (first author, year)	Study design	Stakeholder	Participants	Institution or country/city ("-" if none was reported)	Reported values
Appleton 2018	Focus group	Users	53 participants, active users of public libraries	3 county libraries (Devon, Essex, Lincolnshire), 3 city libraries (Edinburgh, Liverpool, Newcastle), 2 metropolitan borough councils (Redbridge, Sutton)	Social inclusivity Access to information in print and online formats Access to expert knowledge in the form of library staff Community ownership
Audunson 2005	Interview	Politicians; Bureaucrats; Library in lib-association	11 respondents	-	Essential public good Education Social integration Democratic contributor Promoter of reading, literary and cultural canon
Barniskis 2016	Content analysis	Staff; Mission statements	32 mission statements	Public libraries of Wisconsin	Access (m=15 (mentions)) Quality of services or materials (m=12) Diversity of community or materials (m=5) Equity (m=5) Responsiveness, Balance/non-bias/trustworthiness (m=4) Freedom (m=3) ALA principles (m=2) Efficiency (m=2) Ecology (m=1)
Boughey 2010	Analysis of literature and	Users Central and local government	-	-	Civic: Books Well-regarded staff Physical environment

	survey results				<p>To representatives of the public: Building communities Building culture Building literacy Accessible, visited facilities, with public IT Book stock, successful information provision Helpful knowledgeable staff</p>
Elbert 2012	Survey and Interview	Users; Non-users; Local and national officials; Librarians	Survey of users (2000), non-users (1201), public librarians/officials (283), national stakeholders (112) and local stakeholders (278)	Public libraries in Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe	<p>Civic: Education Economic development Health communication Culture Social inclusion and community development Citizen empowerment, democracy and e-government Agricultural outcomes Information society and digital divide</p> <p>To representatives of the public and staff: Educational purposes Information on health issue Local, national and international news or Information Entertainment Information and use of electronic government services To help children do homework Financial or investment news or information Contact with distant friends or relatives</p>
Evjen 2015	Interviews	Politicians	17 local culture politicians	Oslo, Birmingham and Aarhus	<p>The library as a place for knowledge and learning Cultural institution Meeting place and community space Facilitator of knowledge production; Equal access to knowledge and culture</p>
Evjen 2009	Focus group	Users; Non-users	Two groups with users, two with non-users and one with different stakeholders	Oslo (five focus groups) and Drammen (four focus groups)	<p>Library as meeting place Promoter of reading and literature; Equal access Democracy Non-commercial space Library as a house of culture Library as a young woman, trendy and sociable</p>

Gazo 2011	Interviews	City councillors	12 city councillors	Quebec	Quality of service Accessibility Reading
Hawkins 2001	Survey	Users	CIPFA PLUS data	CIPFA PLUS data	Borrowing of material Access to an extensive information environment Lifelong learning Public values/benefits Lifelong learning Book lending Information
Oliphant 2014	Survey	Users; Non-users	600 females/601 males: users and non-users	Alberta: metropolitan Edmonton, metropolitan Calgary (the two largest cities in Alberta), and the province (which includes both rural and urban areas).	Build community Centre for community discussion Safe space where individuals seek information An ethical institution that radiates trust
Paberza 2010	Survey Focus groups	Users; Non-users	Survey: N=2016 Focused discussion groups: 10-12 Participants, ten groups	Latvia	Providing books Helping finding information Education
Seiser 1974	Content analysis	Local opinion papers	Collected from 5 newspapers	Newark, New Jersey Lexington, Kentucky Multnomah County, Oregon	Existence of libraries in general (fr=3.5 (frequency rank)) General Welfare for the young (fr=5.3) Education (fr=5.8) Books and reading & quality (fr=6.3) General welfare for all (fr=6.7) Use (fr=10.5) Good management(fr=12.5) Culture (fr=12.7) Recreation & general welfare for other groups (fr=13.2) Treatment of employees & fairness (fr=14.5) Community life (fr=14.8)

					Economic reward (fr=15.8) Convenience (fr=16.3) Civic pride (fr=16.5) General welfare for other agencies (fr=17.5) General welfare for low income (fr=18.2) Tradition (fr=18.5) General welfare for non-residents (fr=19.5) Democracy (fr=19.7) Information (fr=20.2) Miscellaneous standards (fr=21.7) Behavioural guidance (fr=22.8) Existence of contemporary needs & self-actualization (fr=23.2) Miscellaneous goals (fr=23.7) General welfare for the elderly (fr=23.8)
Sin 2015	Survey	Users; Non-users	N=1010	America	Everyday activities and interests Reading and self-education Work and formal education
Smith 2008	Survey, focus groups and interviews	Librarians	Survey: N = 479	America	Variety of Ideas and Viewpoints (62%) Last Stand for Democracy (19%) University of the People (14%) Community Centre (2%)
Usherwood 2002	Social audits: Focus groups and interviews	Users	-	GB: Newcastle and rural county in south	Personal development Social cohesion Community empowerment Local culture Local identity Imagination and creativity Health and well being
Vakkari 2012	Survey	Users; Non-users	N = 899, age 15 +	Finland	Benefits in everyday activities; Benefits in cultural interests; Career benefits
Vakkari et al 2014	Survey	Users; Non-users	Finland: 805 between 18 and 80	Finland, Norway, Netherlands	Education; Everyday activities; Cultural activities

			years of age was drawn. Norway: 1001 between 18-80 years		
			Netherlands: 68742 between 18-80 years		
Vakkari 2014	Survey	Users; Non-users	1,000 adults ranging from 15 to 79 years	Finland	Benefits in everyday activities; Benefits in cultural interests; Career benefits
Vakkari 2016	Survey	Users; Non-users	Adult population who were between 18 and 80 years old.	South Korea, Finland, Norway, Netherlands, USA	Benefits in everyday activities; Benefits in cultural interests; Career benefits
			Finland: N=777 Norway: N=538 Netherlands: N=887 USA: N=625 South Korea: N =629		

I) Time aspects. When considering the included studies over time, there is a period from the first study that reports values (Seiser, 1974) to 2001 where nothing is found. From 2001 until today 18 eligible studies are retained (Appleton et al., 2018; R. Audunson, 2005a; Barniskis, 2016; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; Elbert, Fuegi, & Lipeikaite, 2012; S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Gazo, 2011; Hawkins et al., 2001; Oliphant, 2014; Paberza, 2010; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Smith, 2008; Usherwood, 2002; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; P. Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari, Aabø, Audunson, Huysmans, & Oomes, 2014).

II) Study design. The studies apply different approaches to gather data related to stakeholders' perception of the values of public libraries. Three studies use a mixed-method approach combining qualitative and quantitative study designs (Elbert et al., 2012; Paberza, 2010; Smith, 2008), two studies apply multiple methods within the qualitative study design (Smith, 2008; Usherwood, 2002), nine studies use a single method approach related to qualitative study design (Appleton et al., 2018; R. Audunson, 2005a; Barniskis, 2016; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Gazo, 2011; Seiser, 1974; Usherwood, 2002) and seven studies use a single method approach related to quantitative study designs (Hawkins et al., 2001; Oliphant, 2014; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; P. Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014).

Five studies use focus group interviews as a method for data collection (Appleton et al., 2018; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Paberza, 2010; Smith, 2008; Usherwood, 2002). Four studies approach data collection using interviews as a method (R. Audunson, 2005a; S. Evjen, 2015; Smith, 2008; Usherwood, 2002). One study uses social audits as a method (Usherwood, 2002). Three studies conduct content analysis respective of newspaper statements (Seiser, 1974), reports (Boughey & Cooper, 2010) and mission statements of public libraries (Barniskis, 2016). Finally, eleven studies apply surveys as method for data collection (Boughey 2010; Elbert et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 2001; Oliphant, 2014; Paberza, 2010; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Smith, 2008; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; P. Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014).

III) Study size. The size of the studies varies from small-scale studies of 11-100 participants (Appleton et al., 2018; R. Audunson, 2005a; Barniskis, 2016; S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Gazo, 2011; Seiser, 1974) to large-scale studies with more than 470 participants (Elbert et al., 2012; Oliphant, 2014; Paberza, 2010; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Smith, 2008; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016). One study includes a large dataset from Nederland, comprising more than 68,000 participants (Vakkari et al., 2014).

The small-scale studies are characterized by their qualitative study designs, consisting of methods like interviews, focus groups and content analysis. In the large-scale studies, they either apply a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods (Elbert et al., 2012; Paberza, 2010; Smith, 2008) or singular quantitative study designs.

IV) Stakeholders. Nine studies investigate values perceived by both users and non-users (Elbert et al., 2012; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Oliphant, 2014; Paberza, 2010; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; P. Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014). Four studies investigate values pertaining to the users' perception (Appleton et al., 2018; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2001; Usherwood, 2002). One study explores the media's perception of the values of public libraries (Seiser, 1974). Five studies focus on stakeholders that respectively represent central and local governments (Boughey & Cooper, 2010; S. Evjen, 2015), city councillors (Gazo, 2011), local and national officials (Elbert et al., 2012) and the library association (R. Audunson, 2005a). Lastly, two studies focused on value perceptions in the eyes of librarians (Smith, 2008) and in mission statements created by librarians (Barniskis, 2016).

V) *Country*. Various countries are represented among the included studies. Five studies do comparative perception analysis between two or several countries (Elbert et al., 2012; S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; P. Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014) and twelve studies measure stakeholders' perception on national scales (Appleton et al., 2018; Barniskis, 2016; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Gazo, 2011; Oliphant, 2014; Paberza, 2010; Seiser, 1974; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Smith, 2008; Usherwood, 2002; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012).

The countries where stakeholders' perception of values are explored represent segments of the continents of:

- Africa
- Asia
- Europe
- North America

One study encompasses the African segment by including stakeholders' perceptions from Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe (Elbert et al., 2012).

One study includes a South Korean perspective as a subset of five countries' perceptions of the benefits of public libraries (P. Vakkari et al., 2016).

In all, eight studies embrace the European perspective. They can be divided into Scandinavian studies, studies from the British Islands, one study on Western Europe and one study from Eastern Europe. The Scandinavian perspectives include four studies of stakeholders from Finland (Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; P. Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014), four studies of the perceptions from Norwegian stakeholders (S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; P. Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014) and one study that explores Danish perceptions (Evjen, 2015). Two studies explore the perspectives from the UK (Appleton et al., 2018; Usherwood, 2002), one study explores perspectives from the Netherlands (P. Vakkari et al., 2016) and one study explores the perceived values in Latvia (Paberza, 2010).

In the North American perspectives, two studies provide insight into Canadian perspectives (Gazo, 2011; Oliphant, 2014) and five studies investigate the perspectives of the United States (Barniskis, 2016; Seiser, 1974; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Smith, 2008; P. Vakkari et al., 2016).

VI) *Perceived values*. The included studies report on a wide range of values across the stakeholders. In general, the values are reported on different levels. For example, the general promotion of culture (Elbert et al., 2012; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014) and aspects of culture such as the promotion of cultural canon (R. Audunson, 2005a). In relation to the stakeholder segments, it is challenging to affiliate unique perceptions of values across segments, as similar values are stated across stakeholder segments such as the public libraries' provision of books (Boughey & Cooper, 2010; Paberza, 2010) or their social role for their users (Elbert et al., 2012; S. Evjen, 2015; Usherwood, 2002).

Risk of bias assessment

The risk of bias assessment was conducted on basis of four criteria: recruitment method bias, segmentation bias, a priori bias and outlier bias (Table 4). The documentation for this risk of bias assessment can be found in the supplementary materials: Data extraction form and risk of bias assessment.

Table 4: Overview of the risk of bias assessment of each of the included studies with basis of the risk of bias criteria.

Study	Recruitment method of participants	Segmentation of stakeholder groups	A priori values bias	Outlier bias
Appleton et al (2018)	Unclear	Low	Low	High
Audunson (2005)	Low	Low	High	High
Barniskis (2016)	Low	Unclear	Low	Low
Boughey et al (2010)	Unclear	Unclear	High	High
Elbert (2012)	Low	Low	High	Low
Evjen (2015)	Unclear	Low	Low	High
Evjen et al (2009)	Unclear	Low	Unclear	High
Gazo (2011)	Low	Low	Low	High
Hawkins et al (2001)	Unclear	Unclear	High	Low
Oliphant (2014)	Low	Low	Unclear	High
Paberza (2010)	Low	Low	High	Low
Seiser (1974)	Unclear	Unclear	Low	Low
Sin et al. (2015)	Low	Low	High	Low
Smith (2008)	Low	Unclear	Low	Low
Usherwood (2002)	Unclear	Unclear	High	High
Vakkari (2014)	Low	Low	High	Low
Vakkari et al. (2012)	Low	Low	High	Low
Vakkari et al. (2014)	Low	Low	High	Low
Vakkari et al. (2016)	Low	Low	High	Low

In general, there were cases of unclear risk of bias and high risk of bias in the overall study assessment.

Recruitment bias. In the bias assessment of recruitment methods, seven of the studies are judged as having an unclear risk of bias (Appleton et al., 2018; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Hawkins et al., 2001; Seiser, 1974; Usherwood, 2002) and twelve studies are considered as having a low risk of bias (R. Audunson, 2005a; Barniskis, 2016; Elbert et al., 2012; Gazo, 2011; Oliphant, 2014; Paberza, 2010; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Smith, 2008; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014).

Segmentation bias. In the assessment of segmentation of stakeholder groups, six studies were considered as having an unclear risk of bias (Barniskis, 2016; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; Hawkins et al., 2001; Seiser, 1974; Smith, 2008; Usherwood, 2002), while thirteen were evaluated as having a low risk of bias (Appleton et al., 2018; R. Audunson, 2005a; Elbert et al., 2012; S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Gazo, 2011;

Oliphant, 2014; Paberza, 2010; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014). In the results of the recruitment bias and segmentation bias, no studies were considered as having a high risk of bias.

A priori bias. Eleven studies were judged as having a high risk of bias (R. Audunson, 2005a; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; Elbert et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 2001; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Usherwood, 2002; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014), two studies were considered as having an unclear risk of bias (S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Oliphant, 2014) and six studies were considered as having a low risk of bias (Appleton et al., 2018; Barniskis, 2016; S. Evjen, 2015; Gazo, 2011; Seiser, 1974; Smith, 2008).

Outlier bias. Eight studies were judged as having a high risk of bias (Appleton et al., 2018; R. Audunson, 2005a; Boughey & Cooper, 2010; S. Evjen, 2015; S. Evjen & Audunson, 2009; Gazo, 2011; Oliphant, 2014; Usherwood, 2002) and eleven studies were considered to have a low risk of bias (Barniskis, 2016; Elbert et al., 2012; Hawkins et al., 2001; Paberza, 2010; Seiser, 1974; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Smith, 2008; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014).

No studies were solely considered as having a low risk of bias. However, the assessment of bias shows that studies with a mixed-use of quantitative and qualitative methods (Elbert et al., 2012; Paberza, 2010; Smith, 2008) were amongst the best-rated studies along with the majority of quantitative studies (Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014). The quantitative studies were primarily considered as having a low risk of bias on all parameters except the *a priori* bias.

Discussion

This study is the first that systematically reviews the empirical studies of stakeholders' perceived values of public libraries. The included studies were conducted in fifteen different countries located on four continents. The studies varied in size ranging from small-scale studies of 11 participants to large-scale studies with more than 60,000 participants.

In general, the value of public libraries is a challenging aspect to measure. This review has shown that multiple approaches to study designs and methods exist and the reported values vary considerably across the studies (table 3). In most of the quantitative approaches, the studies were biased towards *a priori* values (Hawkins et al., 2001; Sin & Vakkari, 2015; Vakkari, 2014; Vakkari & Serola, 2012; Pertti Vakkari et al., 2016; Vakkari et al., 2014). The studies succeeded in comparing values between various stakeholder segments but missed explorative aspects in the investigation of the values. However, the quantitative study designs consist of useful approaches to validating *a priori* stated values and comparing values across representative samples of stakeholders, branches or even on a larger scale in terms of comparative studies of countries.

On the other hand, the values stated in the qualitative studies were generally results of explorative approaches. However, it is challenging to validate the found values by approaching the topic exclusively using qualitative study designs, and the results only give pieces of a full understanding of the values of public libraries. When combining small-scale qualitative approaches with extensive quantitative studies, there are opportunities to work exploratively, validate the results and compare them with other variables. Three of the included studies used a mixed approach to the methods, and one of these studies successfully did a quantitative validation of values found in a qualitative study (Smith, 2008), hence providing the area with results that can be subjected to further research.

In spite of the methodological challenges found in explorative research of values, the reported values support the diverse understanding of value concepts, that previously have been demonstrated within the field of LIS-research (Alstad & Curry, 2003; Ragnar Audunson et al., 2019; Johnson, 2010, 2012; Vårheim, 2007, 2009; Vårheim et al., 2008; Aabø, Audunson, & Vårheim, 2010) and within the field of cultural-value research (Holden 2004; Scott, 2006; Crossick & Kaszynska 2014). This work has reported exclusively on intrinsic values, as evidence of the instrumental impact of public libraries thoroughly have been provided (Aabø, 2009).

This paper has drawn attention to intangible values that can be tied to public libraries. It finds that the intrinsic nature of values consists of many shades. For instances, the library as a place (Audunson, 2005) or a community centre (Smith, 2008) that contributes to the overall provision of community empowerment and development. The library as a place enhances culture and uphold democratic values by providing a centre where citizens equally can meet across demography and culture (Audunson, 2005; Boughey, 2010; Evjen, 2009).

Practical limitations

A number of limitations were identified in the conduct of this study. Firstly, the search for books in WorldCat was limited due to the search functions available. Secondly, it would be desirable to have two reviewers participating in the data extraction process and the risk of bias assessment. Firstly, to ensure that the judgment and data extraction are reproducible. Secondly, to avoid potential assessment bias due to pre-formed opinions (Higgins & Green, 2011). Unfortunately, it was not possible to involve several reviewers at the time of this project. Lastly, no validated tools for risk of bias assessment exist within this field. Therefore, a risk of bias tool was developed taking inspiration from existing ones. It is worth noting that the tool has not been previously validated. Ideally, it would have been preferred to ensure the quality of the bias assessment.

Conclusion

This study has identified 19 eligible studies consisting of quantitative and qualitative study designs. It has been demonstrated that explorative studies primarily are concerned with intrinsic values, as introduced and discussed in this paper. This implies that values of public libraries generally are perceived as an overall asset to the community, whether this is understood in instrumental and monetary means (Miller 2017; Aabø, 2006) or in societal concepts of values (Blackburn 2017; Stenstrom et al. 2019).

Furthermore, a list of values based on the stakeholders' perceptions have been provided. It showed that perceived values vary across the studies, and the picture of present values indicates that the question of values of public libraries is a challenging area within LIS research. In order to evolve our understanding of stakeholders' perceptions of public libraries, future approaches to studies need to consider the explorative nature of qualitative studies of values before continuing to validate and compare values in large-scale quantitative studies.

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