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**Mobile devices and interpersonal communication in academic library: the changing narrative of communication between library staff and library users**

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**Introduction**

Proper, clear and accurate communication between library staff and library users has an overall impact on effective service delivery as well as on establishing a healthy foundation for future communication and cooperation between users and librarians. Over the last decade, mobile technologies, especially smart phones, have influenced how we communicate, how we search, access and disseminate information. The increasing use of mobile technology has introduced cell phones and smart phones as interface not only between users and information, but between users and library staff. This is especially evident amongst younger population of users who most often use the screens of their phones as a tool for the initial part of their information-seeking activity, i.e. to communicate their query/request to the library staff.

**Theoretical background**

Though most of the literature and research on mobile devices in academic libraries are focused on developing mobile library services, there are also authors (Aharony, 2014; Barnett-Ellis and Vann, 2014; Booth, 2009; Quan Liu and Briggs, 2015; Pažur, 2019) who emphasize the increasing number of students who use their mobile devices to communicate with the library staff, i.e. as their information-seeking behaviour tool.

Communicating with users is an essential part of librarian’s work and clear interpersonal communication where users formulate correct reference queries enables librarians to better assess, understand and meet users’ needs while promoting library reference and information services (Afkhami et al., 2019; Anyim, 2018; Fallon, 2016; Huizing, 2014; Owoeye and Dahunsi, 2014). Efficient and effective service delivery is hinged on effective communication skills of both parties (Aliu and Eneh, 2011). Academic and college libraries are a specific ecosystem because majority of their patrons today are Digital Natives who rely on mobile technologies, audiovisual information, technology mediated interactions and electronic/digital communication (Barnett-Ellis and Vann, 2014; Fairfield, 2017; Martins, Cortês and Gabriel, 2011). But, as Fairfield (2017) concludes, reducing the communication process to techniques and devices for the information transfer impoverishes communication between librarians and users, while reducing communicative aspects of users’ information literacy (Špiranec, 2014).

In the context of mobile devices, and their implications for libraries and users’ behaviour (Abdul Rafik, 2017; Pažur, 2019), some authors (Owoeye and Dahunsi, 2014; Pažur, 2019) suggest that libraries should take advantage of new technologies and thus improve the communication model of information exchange for optimum service delivering in the mobile environment. This will enable different future for libraries where they become more a place of relations, i.e. creating relationships and more value for users, than transactions, i.e. lending and returning books (Paraschiv, 2018).

**Research questions**

The aim of this research is to find how mobile devices impact interpersonal communication between library staff and users in the academic library, how they impact students’ information-seeking behaviour, i.e. how they formulate the query, and, eventually, how they impact library service delivery. Thus, the following research questions were raised:

* What is the extent of students’ use of mobile devices when communicating their query/request to the librarian?
* What impact do mobile devices have on students’ ability to accurately and clearly formulate their request?
* What is the effect of using mobile devices in communication with the library staff, i.e. to formulate the query/request, on librarian's success to provide reference and information services and satisfying users’ needs?
* What effect do mobile devices have on interpersonal communication between academic library staff and users?

**Approach**

Inductive research approach was used in this research. After identifying the aim, objectives and research questions, the next step in the research process was the observation, collecting data and identifying patterns in user-librarian communication and students’ information seeking behaviour.

**Method**

The research was conducted using the combination of a case study and participant observation.

The case study part of the research refers to selecting a particular group of users (undergraduate, graduate and PhD students) and collecting and analysing the data on the first part of their information seeking behaviour, i.e. how they formulate the query/request (how clear and accurate they are concerning the bibliographical data), and how they communicate with the librarian (e.g. they talk to the librarian, they point the phone screen with the screenshot of bibliographical data, catalogue record or the book title/cover page, etc.).

Case study of systematic observation without affecting users included 185 students of which is 74 third year undergraduate students, 46 second year undergraduate students and 54 first year undergraduate students. There were only 3 students in first year graduate programme and 4 teachers of Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, participating in postgraduate programme. There was 119 female students and 65 male students. Participant in observation case study didn’t know that they were in a research questionary collecting data. Librarian behaviour while working at the information-desk didn’t interfere with the communications with students.

In the participant observation part of the research, the librarian was observing ‘the search part’ of the information-seeking behaviour of an individual, i.e. how he/she formulated and proceeded with the query/request and does he/she provide any additional information or explanation if asked to, as well as the features of the situation itself, i.e. user-librarian interpersonal communication (eye-contact and verbal communication) and how it impacts their (professional) relationship and the process of answering user’s needs.

**(Expected) results**

It is expected that majority of students will use mobile devices (cell phones and smart phones) to communicate their query/request to the librarian, either by reading the bibliographical data from the screen (lack of eye-contact) or, more often, by pointing the screen to the librarian (lack of verbal communication). It is expected that this type of reference request delivery will have a negative impact on the clarity and accuracy of the request itself as well as on librarian’s ability to asses and understand users’ information needs.

It is also expected that interpersonal communication will be poor and it will mostly be initiated by the staff through questions for additional information or clarification. This kind of communication will affect the service delivery both in quality and in time, i.e. it will prolong the process of answering users’ needs. But using the image can improve communication between students and librarian, according to three aspects of query formulation. Students who have speech difficulties, congenital or acquired, students who are unsure of how to properly ask a librarian, or students in the first year of undergraduate study. In such communication, without eye contact (non-verbal communication, librarian does not influence their behaviour. Using the image can

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Most of the students’ reference queries are made by using mobile devices, most notably ‘visual’ communication through pictures and screenshots of book covers, catalogue record, bibliographical data, etc. Almost all queries are successfully answered but mostly thanks to librarian’s additional questions that led to clearer and more accurate request formulation. This prolonged the information seeking process and, in some cases, disturbed the communication and relationship between librarian and user.

The lack of eye contact and verbal communication has a negative impact on interpersonal communication between library staff and users, while the lack of face-to-face communication and users’ inability to formulate queries correctly on their own have a negative impact on both library reference and information services.

Good interpersonal communication enhances the understanding of users’ needs and enables successful delivery of services. It sets up a strong foundation for anticipation of users’ needs and for enriching and improving their overall experience. Lastly, it creates an added value to library services by expanding the possibilities to meet users’ needs. This is why the process of interpersonal communication in academic libraries needs to be re-examined and reshaped within the context of mobile devices.

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