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“Part of my Daily Life”: The Importance of Public Libraries as Physical Spaces

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“Part of my Daily Life”: The Importance of Public Libraries as Physical Spaces

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a unique opportunity to gauge how much, and why, people value visiting public libraries by asking them about the impact of the library closures. A questionnaire survey was administered to users of four library networks in New South Wales, Australia. About 19% of 1,295 respondents missed their library “a great deal”, another 28% “quite a lot”. Most commonly respondents missed browsing the shelves, taking children for visits, studying, reading, and socializing there. They also missed the quiet, relaxing, and friendly environment, and the resources provided. For many, the closures impacted their lives in a critical way.

Keywords: Public libraries; Library closures; COVID-19 pandemic; Library visits; Value

Introduction

Despite the growing use of public libraries' online collections and services, the physical spaces public libraries provide their communities remain key to the fulfilment of their mission. This is indicated by the centrality of 'library as place' in public library mission statements (Hider et al. 2022), and in the prominence of the concepts of "place" and "space" in the professional and scholarly discourse over the past two decades concerned with the role and value of public libraries (Elmborg 2011; Audunson et al. 2019). While the evidence points to physical public libraries being used in a wide range of ways for a wide range of benefits, it is less clear in which ways users most value these spaces. It may not simply be a question of which associated use is most pervasive, and, in any case, some of the ways in which physical libraries are most important to users may not be associated with specific activities.

To gauge the ways in which public library spaces are particularly important to users, it is necessary to ask them. Typically, this has been done through surveys or interviews, with participants asked about their uses and experiences of various elements of a public library service. The accuracy of this self-reporting can never be guaranteed however, particularly in relation to any generalized values that are assigned. More recent experiences may cloud overall judgements, and responses may be influenced by the perceived politics of particular answers. Moreover, participants may not have given their responses a great deal of thought and may not be able to clearly distinguish between their evaluation of the physical library with that of the library's resources and services as a whole.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has been disastrous in many ways for many people, and has presented major challenges for many libraries, the closure of library sites as part of "lockdown" measures has provided researchers with an opportunity to

explore how end-users value these spaces in ways that may achieve more accurate responses from participants. Instead of asking users why they visit public libraries, in this situation it is pertinent to ask them if and why they *missed* visiting them. People may be better placed to evaluate services that are temporarily absent than those that are readily available. Whereas ongoing services can be taken for granted, the reasons why services are important to people are likely to come to the fore when they are no longer on offer.

The authors' earlier study of Australian public libraries' response to the COVID-19 pandemic suggested that while many users valued the extended online collections and services that libraries put in place to offset the restrictions around access to the physical library, some users nevertheless had missed visiting the physical library (Wakeling et al. 2022). Even with innovations such as "click and collect" services, users looked forward to their libraries reopening; indeed, some were "desperate" to return, just as they were "devastated" about being unable to visit. However, the study did not specifically set out to explore the ways in which users were missing their physical libraries, focusing instead on what the libraries were still able to provide.

The second round of lockdowns in New South Wales, Australia that occurred in the middle of 2021 presented the authors with a new opportunity to ask users about the extent and reasons why they missed visiting their physical libraries. Different parts of the state were locked down for different periods of time; various suburbs of Sydney had their libraries closed for two or three months, whereas libraries in some of the regional and rural areas were closed for shorter periods, but all communities experienced at least a few weeks in which their libraries could not be visited. Four public library networks from across the state took part in this new study, reaching out to their users either while their libraries were closed, or shortly after they reopened. Various open- and closed-

ended questions were included in a questionnaire survey distributed by the four networks, but it was the respondents' free-text comments about why they had missed visiting their libraries which were the focus of the analysis and account for a large portion of this article.

Literature Review

Interest in the use and value of the physical spaces of public libraries has if anything grown since libraries started establishing alternative, virtual spaces with their own collections and services. No longer were libraries defined so completely by bricks and mortar, which raised the question about the specific value, and future, of their physical spaces. This question was explored in books such as *The Library as Place* (Buschman and Leckie 2006) and addressed by a growing emphasis placed by many public libraries on their role as “community hubs”, with their physical spaces being venues for social activity and “connection”, i.e., meeting places, as well as places offering books and other physical materials.

While their physical collections remain well used, public libraries are now held up as an important element of the “public sphere” that enables democracy and civic engagement. Their spaces have thus been associated with terms such as “public square” and “community living room”, and perhaps most of all, the concept, developed by Oldenburg (1999), of the “third place”, a place where people share and discuss different views and values safely and constructively, beyond their homes and workplaces. Thus Buschman (2005, 9-10), for example, advocated for the public library as “a place where the ideal of unfettered communication and investigation exists in rudimentary form, hosting the turbulent discourse of a democracy and its culture.” Similarly, Klinenberg (2018) advocates for more investment in community spaces such as public libraries,

which provide the “social infrastructure” needed to heal divisions and move society forward, in a way that will allow it to effectively tackle the pressing issues of our times.

The cynic might argue that this growing mission of public libraries to connect their community members and build “social capital” is a response to a decline in importance of their physical collections and a corresponding need to bolster the justification for their physical infrastructures. On the other hand, social interaction clearly occurs in public library buildings, and has done ever since they were built. Indeed, Begg (2009) has noted how British public libraries included “non-book space” and catered for “social” activities well before the advent of online collections. Yet, while this space may have grown proportionately, there remained a very significant amount of space given over to physical collections.

This mix of spaces is reflective of much of the research about how physical public libraries are actually used, including in recent times. Aabø and Audunson (2012) observed and interviewed visitors to three libraries in Oslo to paint a picture of very varied use, ranging from “high intensity” activities that are important to the user, to “low intensity” activities that are more incidental (but from which they could nevertheless potentially benefit). A single visit might well include both types, as well as activities that could be considered extensions of home or work/study activities, and as such extensions of the “first” or “second” place, as well as some activities that might represent those of the ‘third’ place. However, the authors report that most activities were private in nature, despite occurring in a public setting.

Work at about the same time as the Oslo study led scholars in Denmark to develop a model for the optimal public library that featured four types of space-- inspiration space, learning space, meeting space, and performative space—which were used to excite, explore, participate, and create, respectively. The model thus also

recognizes the varied activities that public library spaces can support, and the equally varied benefits that can be derived from these activities (Jochumsen, Rasmussen and Skot-Hansen 2012).

An earlier study by Black and Crann (2002) that used the “autobiographical diary” method to collect participants’ impressions and attitudes toward UK public libraries, as well as reports on how they were used, concluded that the libraries were generally seen in a positive light, often regarded as “havens” in which people could go about their private study in optimal conditions, including that of tranquility. Nevertheless, the diaries also pointed to the importance of the libraries’ social dimension: they were places to meet and make friends, not just to borrow and read books.

Other studies that have looked at users’ attitudes toward their physical libraries have employed interviews and/or surveys. May and Black (2010) studied the way patrons used and experienced space in six Canadian libraries, employing interviews, questionnaires, and observation (seating sweeps). Their findings point to three particular roles that the libraries were fulfilling through these spaces: “provider of books and information, provider of access to technology and provider of a social space where members of the public are welcome.” Meanwhile, Wortman (2012) analyzed responses from a questionnaire survey completed by users of Edmonton Public Library. Borrowing and browsing materials were the top reasons for visiting the library, with “finding specific items” third and “using library computer” fourth. The more “social” attendance of a program featured about half-way down the list, with 17.3% of respondents giving it as a reason. Many respondents wanted quiet spaces, and many did not readily differentiate between the space and the library service in general.

A more recent study from Canada was based on a survey distributed to users of two branch libraries in a suburb of Vancouver. Shepherd, Petrillo and Wilson (2019) report that the top five benefits respondents thought their libraries provided, chosen from a list suggested on the questionnaire, were: an affordable place to read books, magazines, etc.; a safe and welcoming place to relax; connection with their community; a place to study or do their school assignments; and a place to meet people and make friends.

In Australia, a case study of Concord Library in New South Wales by Houghton, Forth and Miller (2013) yielded slightly different results. While some users wanted a quiet space to read and study, others appreciated the opportunities the new library provided for informal interaction. Many enjoyed the space, noting especially its brightness and spaciousness (compared with the old building).

A more detailed study of a particular case employed the ethnographic method to explore the way in which the public library in Queens, New York, served as a “moral underground space” to resist the dominant capitalistic forces of the city and assist members of the predominantly working-class neighborhood to navigate the largely hostile world in which they found themselves. Aptekar (2019) paints a picture of a space where users and staff work together to make the most of the library’s limited resources, with the librarians less concerned about applying rules and policies than about their patrons’ welfare. In general, the library was a place of inclusivity, safety, and comfort. The research did not focus on the reasons why individual users visited the library, but common activities mentioned by the author included homework (with which library staff and other patrons often helped), filling out online job applications, and socializing.

The space depicted by Aptekar (2019) may be akin to the “third space” that Elmborg (2011) advocates public libraries develop, a space in which users explore and share their own worldviews, rather than conform to the hegemonic ideology of late capitalism. Elmborg (2011) contrasts this third space with the third *place* of cafes, bookstores and other commercially oriented institutions, which constitute a public sphere dominated by bourgeois elites instead of one that supports genuine democracy. Rather than competing with bookstores, with spaces that have become increasingly abstract and devoid of meaning due to capitalism’s push to eliminate anything that slows down commerce, including physical space, librarians should create spaces that foster meaning for their patrons independent of that imposed by the surrounding neoliberal culture.

Other studies of the value of public library spaces have focused either on particular user groups, such as teenagers (Agosto et al. 2015), or on a particular kind of value—for example, their value as performative spaces (Jochumsen, Skot-Hansen and Rasmussen 2015)—or on both, as in the case of the research of Audunson, Essmat and Aabø (2011), which looked at the public library as a meeting place for immigrant women. These studies have shown how public libraries can fulfil the particular needs of specific user groups; in order to do so, they may need to provide a variety of spaces.

Some of the research on the value of public libraries in general has singled out their physical spaces as a component of that value, although typically it has not, even more recently when they can be distinguished from their online manifestations. A case in point is the international study by Vakkari et al. (2016), which examined the broader benefits and impact of public library use across five countries. They concluded that the nature of the impact of public libraries varied considerably across Finland, Norway, The Netherlands, South Korea, and the USA, but the breadth of the study’s ‘benefits’ (e.g.,

“Travel and vacation” and “Health”) and the lack of separation between the online and physical, make it difficult to discern the ways in which the physical spaces specifically are valued.

One recent study of the impact of public libraries in general did, however, look at the value of their physical facilities in particular, along with that of their collections, events and staff guidance (Seismonaut and Roskilde Central Library 2021). Employing the framework developed in the Cultural Value Project for the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK (Crossick and Kaszynska 2016), the research company Seismonaut gauged the impact of Danish public libraries across the four dimensions of being an immersive “haven”, providing different perspectives, developing creativity, and supporting community life. It found that “the libraries’ physical facilities have a varied level of impact on their users. In addition to creating a space for concentration and immersion, the facilities also contribute to the users’ well-being, creativity, and the ability to reflect. Furthermore, these facilities also create a truly special atmosphere according to the users” (Seismonaut and Roskilde Central Library 2021, 9).

While most research has shown that modern public library spaces are used for a wide range of activities and reasons, the relative importance of these activities to their users, and the benefits derived from them remains unclear and under-researched. The aforementioned study from Denmark does provide one answer, but it is limited by its conceptual framework and by its survey instrument, which consisted of closed-ended, Likert-scale-based questions. Some of the other studies that have asked participants about how and why they use public library spaces have been more qualitative in approach, but with all this research, the participants’ capacity to provide accurate overviews of use and value may be imperfect, as noted in the introductory section. Whereas the studies cite above, with the possible exception of the Seismonaut study,

were conducted when the public libraries were open, this study asks questions to respondents who *cannot* use, or have recently not been able to, their physical libraries. We contend that respondents are likely to have a more accurate idea as to why they missed visiting their libraries, if they did, than they would have about why they visited libraries that were not closed.

Method

Circumstances, including the COVID-19 pandemic, did not allow the researchers to explore in-depth the impact of the lockdown-induced public library closures on particular communities or user groups through the use, for example, of unstructured interviews. We did, however, have the opportunity to collect mid-level data through open-ended questions in a survey that enabled us to construct a general picture of what public library users in New South Wales were missing out on due the closures, and thus a picture of why users valued their physical libraries.

The questionnaire survey was administered to users of four public library networks that will be coded, for the purposes of this article, as A, B, C and D. They were chosen on the basis of their willingness to partner in the research, and because of the demographic differences between their communities; in combination they represented a mix of urban and rural, different socioeconomic groupings, and different library configurations. All four networks were located in the state of New South Wales, with the research being supported by the State Library. Network A consisted of one main and one branch library in a regional, southern area of the state; B consisted of a single library in a suburb in Greater Western Sydney; C consisted of several branch libraries in another local government area of Greater Western Sydney; D consisted of

several branches (and a mobile library) located in a regional, north-eastern area of the state.

The questionnaire was administered online due to the practical difficulties of distributing paper copies, even where the physical libraries had reopened. Although this mode would have biased responses toward those users who were more active online and may have thus limited representation from certain kinds of user of the physical libraries, it was assumed that most users would have been sufficiently active online to have had reasonable capacity to answer the survey. Nevertheless, this limitation of the research is acknowledged. Ideally, a follow-up, paper-based survey would be distributed in the future when circumstances permit.

The questions in the survey started with a set that asked about the respondents' visits to the physical library (or libraries) in the 12 months prior to its recent closure (the previous round of closures in New South Wales occurred shortly after the pandemic reached Australia, about 18 months prior). Questions covered, amongst other things, the frequency and duration of their visits, and how they travelled to the library when it was open. In the second section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked first to rate how much, if at all, they missed the library, and, if they did, to explain why; they were then asked another question about particular activities that they may or may not have missed doing, and about their expectations around future visits. The last section of the survey consisted of some demographic questions and an invitation to make any other comments about their public library service. The survey was open to users over the age of 18. On submission of their answers, respondents were invited to enter their details into a separate form for the chance to win an e-gift card in a lucky draw.

The survey was open from mid-October until early November 2021. The four networks distributed links to slightly different versions of the questionnaire in order to

accommodate their slightly different situations, which required variations in the wording. (Those which had already reopened their libraries required some questions to be in the past tense; those which had not required them in the present tense. In the case of one network, the question about the use of the different branches was dropped, as it consisted of only one library site.)

The networks also distributed the links in slightly different ways, according to their differing outreach options. A and D both promoted the survey via social media and email, as well as through word of mouth. B used social media, newsletters, and its website, while C also used its website, as well as social media.

Responses to each of the four public library networks were treated separately to allow cross-network comparison. Where quotations from respondents' comments have been provided in this article, the letter A, B, C or D has been appended to indicate the network of the quoted respondent; for the readability of the quotations, typographical errors have been corrected, and in some cases punctuation and capitalization have been varied. Responses to the closed-ended questions were analyzed in standard statistical ways; the free-text comments were analyzed thematically and manually.

Findings

A total of 1,295 respondents completed the survey across the four networks: 825 in A, 266 in B, 55 in C, and 149 in D. The large variation in sample size would likely be due, at least in part, to the differences in the ways the survey was distributed across the networks. These differences may well have also contributed to some of the differences in the networks' respondent profiles, though in some cases the latter may also be due to underlying differences across the four populations of library users. A particularly marked difference can be seen across the respondent profiles' ages, with the median age

varying from 35-44 in the case of B and C, through 55-64 in the case of A, to 65-74 in the case of D. Table 1 shows the age distributions for the four networks.

Table 1. Age of respondents

Age	A		B		C		D		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
18-24	2.9	24	18.9	50	16.7	9	0.7	1	6.5	84
25-34	6.8	56	26.0	69	20.4	11	6.4	9	11.3	145
35-44	17.1	141	20.8	55	33.3	18	7.9	11	17.5	225
45-54	18.2	150	10.6	28	7.4	4	15.0	21	15.8	203
55-64	19.5	161	10.9	29	5.6	3	24.3	34	17.7	227
65-74	25.1	207	9.8	26	9.3	5	33.6	47	22.2	285
75-84	8.5	70	2.3	6	5.6	3	10.0	14	7.2	93
85+	1.2	10	0	0	1.9	1	2.1	3	1.1	14
Not stated	0.7	6	0.8	2	0	0	0	0	0.6	8

The gender of respondents varied less across the networks, with females outnumbering males in all four cases, accounting for between 60% (C) and 76% (D). Network B had a much larger Indigenous representation amongst its respondents, accounting for about 14%. Also of note was the large difference between the regional and metropolitan networks' representation of non-native English speakers: around 10% for A and D, but 50% and 60% for B and C, respectively.

The extent to which respondents visited their physical libraries prior to the recent closures is indicated in tables 2 and 3. Again, the figures show considerable variation across the networks. Whereas about a quarter of C's respondents visited more than once a week, less than 5% of A's respondents did. A's respondents generally visited less, with their highest number visiting only occasionally, i.e., less than once a month; for the other three networks, a visit once or twice a month was typical, though

getting on for half of B's respondents visited at least once a week. C had twice as many respondents who had never visited the physical library during the previous 12 months.

The typical length of visits also varied across networks, with a much larger proportion of C's respondents visiting for durations of more than 30 minutes, and a much smaller proportion visiting for less than 30 minutes. Across all networks, however, the length of each respondent's visits tended not to vary all that much, with only about a quarter of respondents sometimes visiting for more and sometimes for less than 30 minutes. Overall, the median length of visits would appear to be about 30 minutes, with large numbers (usually) visiting for both less and more than 30 minutes.

Table 2. Frequency of visits prior to closures

Frequency	A		B		C		D		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
More than once a week	4.5	37	19.3	51	25.9	14	10.1	14	9.1	116
About once a week	17.6	145	26.8	71	16.7	9	26.6	37	20.5	262
Once or twice a month	35.8	294	26.8	71	29.6	16	41	57	34.2	438
Less than once a month	37.1	305	20.4	54	14.8	8	17.3	24	30.5	391
Never visited	5	41	6.8	18	13	7	5	7	5.7	73

Table 3. Length of visits prior to closures

Length	A		B		C		D		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Usually < 30 mins	41.4	324	34.0	84	14.9	7	46.6	62	39.5	477
Sometimes less and sometimes more	27.4	214	17.0	42	21.3	10	25.6	34	24.8	300

Usually > 30 mins | 31.2 244 | 49.0 121 | 63.8 30 | 27.8 37 | 35.7 432

Those respondents who had visited their library (or libraries) in the 12 months prior were presented with a scale to rate how much they missed visiting during the closures. Their answers are summarized in table 4. For networks A, B and D, about half of respondents missed their visits either quite a lot or a great deal, with the percentage giving the highest rating ranging from 16% to 27%. Again, network C was an outlier, with a full 40% missing their visits a great deal, and another 40% missing them quite a lot. Not surprisingly, those who had visited more frequently and for longer durations tended to give a higher rating. Overall, around 90% of respondents missed their visits at least a little, despite the relatively short periods of closure and the provision of alternative, including online, services.

Table 4. Extent to which library visits were missed

Rating	A		B		C		D		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Not at all	11.8	92	7.7	19	2.1	1	7.5	10	10.1	122
A little	20.1	157	14.9	37	4.3	2	10.5	14	17.4	210
Somewhat	26.1	204	27.4	68	12.8	6	25.6	34	25.8	312
Quite a lot	26	203	29.4	73	40.4	19	29.3	39	27.6	334
A great deal	16	125	20.6	51	40.4	19	27.1	36	19.1	231

Respondents were also asked about whether the frequency of their visits was likely to change after the pandemic had passed. Most thought they would continue to visit about as often as they used to, but significant numbers, particularly in the cases of B and D, thought they would visit more, as table 5 shows. The different demographic profiles of B and D respondents do not suggest a common explanation for the greater

orientation toward future visits, compared with A and C respondents; it is also not the case that either B or D respondents had previously been visiting their libraries less frequently, which would have allowed more room for an increase (A respondents had been visiting the least).

Table 5. Frequency of visits after COVID

Frequency	A		B		C		D		Total	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
More frequently	15.2	125	30.8	82	18.6	8	25.9	36	19.8	251
About the same	76.2	626	57.1	152	74.4	32	64.8	90	70.9	900
Less frequently	8.6	71	12	32	7	3	9.4	13	9.4	119

Instead, the free-text comments indicate that the main reason why users from across the networks planned to visit their libraries more after COVID revolved around how they now appreciated them, and their contents, more. Typical comments along these lines include:

“I became more aware of the value of the library space when I was unable to use it” [A]

“Took them for granted. They are the best community resource” [A]

“Didn't realise how much I enjoyed it until I couldn't go, so now I'll go more often” [A]

“Because I have realised what an amazing resource it is especially as I homeschool my child. I will make more of an effort to drive into town to visit the library” [A]

“Having access cut makes you realize how important physically going to the library is” [B]

“I will visit more frequently because before I took for granted the availability of such a space. But when it was closed, I missed it so much and now will utilise it more” [B]

“When we were unable to visit the library on a whim, we realised how much a part of our week it was” [D].

Respondents also mentioned specific facilities their libraries offered which they anticipated needing more of in the future, including a place to study or work in which they could concentrate. One respondent commented, “I have really come to value the ability to study etc. in a designated workspace that is properly set up for productive work sessions” [A], while another explained, “I have become overwhelmed being at home all the time and enjoy having distance from it. I also focus a lot better and enjoy that it’s never truly busy when I go” [A]. Just a place to go that got them out of the house was something that other respondents would be wanting more of:

“I think when things calm down parents like myself would love to be able to have somewhere educational and fun to take the kids. That's outside of the home environment” [A]

“More frequently as I have become overwhelmed being at home all the time and enjoy having distance from it” [B].

The library was also perceived by some respondents to be a relatively safe place to go in these COVID times. “It is a quiet space, not crowded. Since COVID I am fearful of too many people being around” [A] commented one, and another, “Just the safer feeling of more people being double vaxed” [D]. On the other hand, reasons why

(other) respondents expected to visit less frequently in the future also centered on contagion. One respondent declared that they would be “avoiding public places, busy places—I’m not sure I will ever go there again,” while another was cautious “due to COVID physically touching of books and surfaces.”

Why users missed their libraries

Respondents who indicated that they missed visiting their libraries at least a little during the closures were then asked why this was the case. A total of 1,027 respondents offered a free-text answer to this question, with many providing multiple reasons, and almost all providing at least one. A summary of these reasons is set out below, broken down firstly into the kinds of thing that were missed: certain activities respondents would otherwise have done in the library, aspects of the library’s environment, and the sorts of resources the physical library offered. This is followed by short sections on how respondents also missed their visits as events in and of themselves, and on how their comments to this question provide further information about the extent to which they missed their libraries.

Even though the libraries were not closed for many months, the fullness of the respondents’ comments indicates that not only were many users significantly affected by the library closures, but that the closures had highlighted to many the importance of what their libraries have to offer, which might otherwise be taken for granted. As one user noted, “Although I do not use the library very often, when the opportunity was reduced, I was aware of how much I considered it as an option” [A].

For the most part, the same sorts of reasons for missing the physical library were cited across the four groups of participants from the four library networks. In a few cases, there were some differences of emphasis, proportionately, and these cases are

briefly mentioned and discussed within the relevant sub-sections below.

Activities

Browsing the shelves

Over half of respondents mentioned one or more activities that they had missed doing in their library. By far the most common activity, cited by nearly a third of respondents, was the physical act of browsing the shelves, typically to select some books to borrow. While respondents noted that the library offered ebooks obtainable online, they pointed out that they could not ‘inspect’ or “preview” ebooks in the same way they could printed books while browsing, and that ebooks were more suitable to source when they knew in advance the specific title that they were looking for. Several respondents referred explicitly to the pleasure of the serendipitous discovery that could result from browsing. As well as browsing the book stacks, users also valued being able to browse other components of the physical collections, such as the magazines and DVDs, and the new-item displays.

The experience of physical browsing could be more “satisfying and relaxing” than its online counterpart, as well as potentially more effective. One user commented on how they “missed the physical tactile choosing of a book to read” [D], while another reported that they “missed browsing the shelves. The app is good, but it’s not the same” [D]. A third user explained: “Just the physical experience of picking up a book, flicking through it, and deciding whether you would read it or not” [A]. The activity could thus be pleasurable in and of itself: one user wrote of “the joy of walking around the shelves of books and seeing topics and themes of broad interest that I might not normally think to engage with” [A]. Again, users highlighted the greater chance of serendipity amidst

the shelves. One commented, “I prefer to browse in person, creating an opportunity to stumble across something that may not be what you were looking for” [A].

In the same way that many people still like to go to physical stores (when not in lockdown), notwithstanding the option to shop online now so often available, many users still enjoy the experience of physically “shopping” for library books. “I love the idea of “shopping” for whatever books I want” [A], commented one respondent, while another noted how they “loved visiting the library and leaving with an armful of books” [C].

For a sizable number of users, “selecting suitable books is very difficult from home” [A]. Those for whom selecting and ordering books online may be “challenging and cumbersome” include younger children: “The kids enjoy looking at and choosing their own books. They find it a bit harder trying to locate [them] online with [the] browse function” [A]. As well as technological barriers that ordering and downloading online presented to some users, the inability to inspect the full contents was sometimes a major issue. One respondent “missed being able to look at books before borrowing them, particularly in terms of assessing appropriateness (content, reading level) for my children” [A]. Some users also mentioned how they missed the input and advice from the librarians.

The “click and collect” services put in place in the wake of the closures and restrictions partly addressed the preference for print books on the part of some users, and in some cases were “a life saver”, but they “could not replace the experience of being there.” This experience included the immediacy of access to the books. One respondent commented, “I missed just browsing and leisurely looking around and sitting down looking at a book” [A], whereas another missed “being able to browse the shelf collection and take the book home straightaway” [B]. However, while many

respondents talked about how they missed the actual books, and being able to borrow and read them, even more talked about the initial step of browsing the shelves.

A place to take children

Although the survey was directed at adult users, well over 10% of respondents mentioned how they missed being able to take their children or grandchildren to the library. In many cases, it was reported that the children also enjoyed choosing books and other materials, as well as attending “story time” sessions and being involved in various other activities (such as playing with Lego or joining a craft session), and that they too were missing their visits to the library. One parent noted, for example, how her “2-year-old was devastated at not being able to get books and attend story time” [A]. Similarly, another user reported: “My kids love being able to look at and pick books in person. They also loved the Lego and play dough clubs and were devastated to miss those” [D]. In the words of a network A user, the public library “is a great place to take my children to read, draw and play.”

Children benefited not only from the various activities and resources on offer, but also from the opportunities for interaction with other children. Furthermore, visits could constitute some valuable “quality time” for child and parent or grandparent to share. For instance, one respondent said that they “always come with my son for reading books. He likes to read books sitting at the back of the library in children’s area. We cherish that time being together and reading together” [A]. Similarly, another respondent’s “daughter loves the library. She can play and we can sit together exploring books” [A]. Meanwhile, a network A user missed their “kids running around talking to other kids.”

Sometimes, these visits had become very much part of the family schedule: “I would take my kids after school to the library to borrow books of their choosing so it was part of our weekly routine which we missed” [B]. As such, they could represent important components of the children’s development: “I bring my grandson, it is a social outing for him that he completely loves. It is major adventure weekly. He was developing a range of skills and it was helping him be more independent from mum, which has been a ‘growing up’ process for him” [B].

The value of the physical library to parents was heightened during the pandemic because of the school and pre-school closures. For one user, their “children were bored at home and the only respite of going to the library was not available” [B]. Yet even in non-pandemic times, the library might represent the most convenient place to take children for an outing, particularly on rainy days when places like parks were not an option.

Overall, there was less of an emphasis on taking children to the library amongst users of the most rural library network (R), which could be due to demographic differences in its respondent profile, with a much larger proportion over the age of 54, and thus likely proportionately fewer with young children (though perhaps more with grandchildren).

Studying

Studying, researching and related activities were the next most common of activities respondents mentioned when answering this question. As the survey was restricted to adult participation, few if any respondents would have been studying at school; instead, several specifically mentioned their tertiary studies, while it is very possible that others were studying informally. Some users stated explicitly that they preferred to study in the

public library than at home. One noted that “it is hard to study at home where there are lots of distractions” [C]. Similarly, another missed “the library as a quiet space to get assessment work done as it’s not quiet at home” [A]. As well as the quietness and lack of distractions in the library, in some cases there was greater comfort. One user explained, “I don’t have a desk at my house so having the choice of many desks and sitting places was ideal for study” [A], while another went further: “My room in [my] share accommodation does not offer a conducive environment to place me in the mood to be productive – no large display computer, no comfortable lighting, no comfortable desk and no comfortable chair. These are basic necessities that we all take for granted” [B]. There was a similar response from a network A user: “As a distance uni student, having a concentrated study space, physical resources and reliable internet at the library were invaluable. All these were really missed during lockdowns and made studying, assignment writing, lectures and exams far more difficult.”

There was a particular emphasis on missing the library as a place for study amongst users of the metropolitan networks, which had far higher proportions of respondents in the younger age groups, and probably therefore proportionately more undertaking tertiary courses of education.

Social interaction

Another reason commonly cited by respondents for missing their library was the opportunity it gave them for social interaction. This could involve interacting with other users or staff, or both. In some cases, the interaction might occur through the users’ participation in particular activities or events, in other cases simply by saying “hello” and having a chat: “Incidental contact with other readers is often enjoyable,” observed one network A user. Not being able to visit the library had resulted in some users

feeling more isolated and had affected their mental health. One user commented, “I live alone, and they also had community activities that made me feel happy and included in the community” [A]. Other users from network A put what they missed more succinctly: “human contact” in one case, “company” in another.

Some respondents mentioned the names of particular people whom they had befriended in the library, “such as [G.], who always sits near the window and reads the paper” [A]. In some cases, these people included staff: respondents missed chatting to them, not just the information or advice they provided. The library could provide some users with a social life even where this involved little or no direct interaction: one respondent missed, most of all, “just the social aspect of being out and around people.” (Feeling part of a community is a valued affective aspect of library visits reported further below.) At the other end of the spectrum, the library could be used for more specific and planned interaction, that is, as a designated meeting place for friends or families. For instance, one user noted how “the library also represented a place where I could catch up with friends while also studying” [B].

Social interaction was more emphasized as a valuable aspect of library visits amongst respondents in the regional networks and less so amongst those in the metropolitan networks. Again, this may be a function, at least partly, of the older demographic profile of the regional networks’ respondents, with older people enjoying, in general, fewer outlets for social interaction, both in-person and online.

Reading

One other activity that respondents commonly missed was reading. While some talked about how they were avid readers and as such missed their libraries’ supply of materials that they would typically borrow to read at home, others noted how they missed reading

specifically in the library. Some materials, such as newspapers and magazines, could perhaps only be read in the library, but some users also spent their visits, or some of their visits, reading books and other materials that could be borrowed, and this was not always just for study. For some users, the library was an especially conducive environment for immersive reading. One user commented, “I missed being able to browse books and have a place to quietly read outside of my home as the atmosphere is just not the same” [B]. Particular spaces within the library were sometimes associated with the activity: a network B user, for instance, missed “sitting at the windowsill and reading books.”

Other activities

Respondents missed doing a wide range of other activities in their libraries. Some used the library as a workspace or “virtual office”, probably for similar reasons to those who used it for study. In a few cases, where the library was used as a place to tutor students, the study and work functions were combined. A significant number of respondents missed using their libraries’ computers, for a wide range of purposes, as reported further in the Resources section below.

Many of the sorts of activity formally hosted or supported by public libraires are represented in the responses to this question. Several users missed attending their book club meetings, or author talks, or other kinds of talk, or their “tech classes”, or other kinds of class, or their support group, or the events and activities on offer at the library in general. While some of these sessions might have moved online, even then, and even when accessed, the experience might not have been the same or as satisfying.

Finally, several respondents reported more idiosyncratic activities they missed doing, including “doing something noisy” and *returning* books, as part of an effort to “declutter” their home.

Environment

Many of the activities that users value doing in public libraries are supported, clearly, by the resources to be found in the libraries, but many are also supported by certain aspects of the libraries’ environment, beyond these resources. Well over 10% of respondents mentioned one or more aspects when describing what they missed about their library visits. Sometimes, they linked particular aspects to particular activities. For example, as mentioned above, many who missed studying in the library noted this in conjunction with the quiet spaces it offered. Other times, respondents reported on how they missed the library environment not in terms of any particular activity, or any particular resources housed within it for that matter, but rather in terms of how it enhanced their visits generally. An illustration of how the physical library’s value could be independent of its physical collections was the way in which one respondent missed using their library’s *online* resources within its physical space: ‘I like visiting the library for quiet time. I like sitting there listening to audio books on my phone from Borrow Box’ [A].

Exactly what respondents appreciated about the environment was not always fully articulated. Nevertheless, noted one network C user, “There is a feel to a library that you can’t replicate.” Others talked about its special “atmosphere” or “ambience”, or even “culture”. More often than not, however, respondents attributed one or more adjectives to describe the library atmosphere, or mentioned some other specific aspect about the environment they missed and valued. The libraries’ key environmental

qualities, according to the respondents, are outlined in the following sections, beginning with those pertaining to “atmosphere”.

Quiet

Over 5% of respondents used the word “quiet”. Adjectives with similar meanings that were also used, include “calm”, “soothing” and “peaceful”. A typical comment in this vein was: “Libraries have such a lovely and hushed sense of peace” [A]. More specifically, several users contrasted the library’s peaceful environment with the distractions they experienced at home; in this way, the library was more conducive to doing focused activities such as study. One respondent reported, ‘I get a lot more done when I’m at the library” [A], while another commented: “I love the quiet nature about [the library] and being around others studying as well. I am a uni student and would always come [to] the library to study/do assignments when I found being at home was too distracting. I missed not having an alternative place to study” [B].

Libraries were thus considered to provide a “productive environment” for activities such as study, but their tranquility was also important in other ways. One user explained: “I generally took my girl who is non-verbal, and wheelchair bound. We would spend time there and I would read to her and borrow talking books for her. It was quiet in there which she likes” [A]. The quietness could likewise be conducive for a range of activities: “They are quiet places where you can sit down and think, read and write” [C].

Relaxing

Another adjective used by a significant number of respondents was “relaxing”. This was sometimes linked to activities such as reading, including immersive reading, or

contrasted with the busyness of the outside world. Libraries provided respite and a place to unwind and “de-stress”. For one user, the library represented “a peaceful and welcoming retreat” [A], while another user commented that “the quiet and refreshing environment ... provides a meditative state for me” [C].

Friendly

Several respondents highlighted the “friendly” and “warm” nature of their libraries’ environment. It was a “friendly and bright place to visit,” a place that made them feel welcome. This would have been partly due to the demeanor of the staff, but no doubt there were other inclusive elements at play, such as the environment’s relative informality.

Physical aspects

Other respondents used the adjective “warm” in a literal sense, as in “It’s warmer than my house and therefore nicer to read in over the winter” [B]. The library was likewise seen as “comfortable”. It was bright, and its furniture was commented on favorably by several users. The air-conditioning in the summer was also appreciated. More fundamentally, the library was an indoor space; indeed, according to one user, it was the “only indoor free space in town to relax or study” [A]. It also offered safety. One network A user explained, “I am disabled and find noisy environments overwhelming. Many calm places (such as the river) are not suitable for me to go on my own, due to my physical vulnerability. The library is safe.”

Alternative to home

All of the above attributes can be associated with the feel of “home”, and a significant

number of respondents talked about the library as somewhere to go as an alternative to staying at home. As noted above, the library was sometimes preferred to home for certain activities, such as study. One user commented, “Often my home environment is busy and chaotic, so it is a place of sensory respite” [A], while another said, “I just like the feeling of the library. It’s a lot more calming than my home situation’ [A]. For a network B user, the library “was my second home.” The library was also an alternative workplace for some, or even an alternative place to “work from home”. For others, it was a place “just to hang out”.

Communal aspects

The public library environment comprised two other key ingredients that were important to some respondents, namely people and books. Several noted how they enjoyed just “being around people” [B] and how this made them feel part of the community and connected: they “missed the feeling of belonging” [B] and “being ‘in’ the community” [A]. One user commented on how they “missed the sense of physical closeness to the community that you can get when you are in a public place of learning” [A]. As such, the library had a certain “vibe” or “community feel about it.”

Surrounded by books

Some respondents valued being around other “book lovers”, and some pointed to the happy feelings they experienced when in the vicinity of the books themselves. One commented, “I love libraries and miss being able to relax in an area where I feel very comfortable surrounded by books” [A]. Another user put it even more strongly: “Books have always been an essential part of my life and being amongst them is very important to me” [A]. For one respondent, browsing the shelves amounted to “wandering around

the literature,” akin, perhaps, to feeling part of the community by being “around people”. One user put it more simply: “I enjoy actually seeing books” [A]. Another missed “just the physical holding [of] the books” [A].

Resources

As well as spaces to do various activities, or just to “hang out” in, public libraries contain resources that many of the respondents—about a third of them, in fact—clearly valued. Most commonly, users missed being able to directly access the collections of physical materials, but a significant number mentioned other types of resource, including the libraries’ computers, their wi-fi, as well as access to the Internet via the computers, their reprographic services, and their displays and exhibitions.

“Real” books

While respondents missed a range of resources offered in the library’s physical spaces, by far the most common resource they mentioned was the most traditional one: the printed book. A significant number of users explained how they preferred to read “real books”, rather than e-books, or how it was easier to read a printed book with their children. As well as the comfort and familiarity of printed books, they were also favored by a few respondents for more ideological reasons: “I enjoyed the opportunity of seeing physical hard copy books without looking at a digital screen. Knowing that some hidden tech algorithm wasn’t collecting my data and trying to analyze my interest etc.” [A].

Many respondents reported borrowing books for their children and other family members; likewise, respondents noted how their children also missed the books. One parent reported: “My son and I go to the library to get books to read at bedtime, with the closure we couldn’t get new books, and he was very upset. Couldn’t access kid content

easily and didn't want to read anything with him through a small screen on a phone" [B]. Parents of slightly older children also valued their libraries' resources: "We rely on resources from the library for schooling and it's part of our weekly routine" [A].

Many other respondents noted that by no means all printed books were offered in digital format, and that the libraries' e-book collections were narrower in range. Indeed, some kinds of book available in the physical library were not represented at all in the online platforms, such as children's board books and materials in certain non-English languages.

In theory, printed books could alternatively have been purchased online and home delivered, even during the pandemic, but of course this is not an affordable option, or one that necessarily makes economic sense, for many library users, particularly those who are avid readers, or who are obtaining books for their young children. One parent explained: "We have a now 7-year-old who is a fabulous reader [and] we cannot keep up with her reading needs. COVID has been dreadfully expensive for us – try \$150 / month for new books. Libraries are 1000 times better! Sharing IS caring" [A].

Wherever they wanted to read their library books, many respondents highlighted the importance of reading in their lives. "It is almost a security thing to know that I have a book to read" [A], commented one user, while another noted that "having access to books is important. Books provide valuable nourishment for minds" [B]. Similar sentiments were expressed by network D users: "As a single person living on my own, books are imperative to my mental health"; "With no books, I find it difficult to cope"; "Can't stand being without a book to read, horrible situation like having your right hand cut off." Another network D put it this way: "Just being able to see, touch and appreciate the books. Not in a weird way, but a physical book is much more exciting

than an online book.” Books were in fact especially needed during the lockdown period, when some users, at least, “had more time for reading, [but] no books.” For one R network user, a lack of access to the library meant that “I had nothing to read.”

Other materials

Some of the other materials that were missed had to be read in the library, as they were not available for loan. In particular, users valued their libraries’ newspapers and magazines. Also noted by respondents were the DVDs and audiobooks, as well as family and local history materials. The relative numbers of these responses broadly reflected the various materials’ likely preponderance in the collections. More unusual kinds of “material” were mentioned by one or two respondents, such as cake tins and seeds.

Computers and Internet

Around 5% of respondents mentioned how they missed using the computers in their library. For many of these users, there was no computer at home, or not one with a good and reliable Internet connection. In such cases, access to the library computers could become very important, even critical. One respondent reported: “I use the library for self-education, entertainment, mostly via computer usage. I am physically disabled due to severe arthritis and like to keep up with news, particularly politics and environment. Loss of access to the library left me feeling isolated and out of touch” [D]. As well as providing a window to the outside world, sometimes the library computers are needed to actively thrive in it: “I don’t have a computer at home so missed being able to apply for jobs and using it for other things” [A]. The users of the most rural of the four networks particularly missed this service, probably due to a combination of the older

demographic and geography (Internet connections in the more regional and remote areas of Australia are not always the best).

As an outing

The extent to which users valued their library visits, and what these visits afforded them, was also indicated by the way in which some respondents talked about their visits as autonomous events. They were not just something incidental, like, say, an occasional add-on to a trip into town, nor were they merely a means to an end. For one user, “Visiting the library is not just about borrowing books, it is an outing” [A]. Library visits thus had intrinsic value, and for some they were an integral part of their routine. Indeed, for one network B user, the “library is part of my daily life,” while for another, “it is a highlight of the week.” Likewise, a network A user reported: “My 5-year-old son and I would go the library once a week to get new books, do story time or Lego club. It is always a lovely outing for us, and we missed this routine and having a steady supply of books to read together.”

Value of what was missed

The responses to this question clearly indicate not only a wide range of things users of the four networks missed, but also, in line with the closed responses to the previous question, that many users missed these things deeply. Respondents expressed how keen they were to be able to get back into the library. “We just can’t wait to go back again,” wrote a network B user, while a network A user’s “kids love the library! ... They were desperate to get back when the libraries reopened!” For a network D user, “Visiting my library is a big part of my fam’s life. I enjoy the atmosphere. I know all the staff as friends and missed seeing and chatting to them. Losing access to the library because of

Covid was just another blow, loss and stress for me. I was SO happy when I was able to go back into my library again.”

Enthusiasm for their local library was sometimes spelt out by respondents very directly. One user commented, “It is always a pleasure to visit... and it was one of the main reasons we decided to live in [D] seven and a half years ago. And we haven’t been disappointed” [D], while another wrote plainly, “Physical libraries are very important and should not be replaced with digital alternatives” [A].

Many respondents valued their physical libraries in multiple ways, with visits seen as multidimensional experiences. Typical responses that pointed to this multidimensionality include the following from users across the four networks:

“Libraries are for browsing, looking at the latest exhibition, seeing people you know, going for a coffee. Lots of things” [A]

“I missed saying hello to the friendly librarians, browsing the books, sitting down and enjoying a bit of reading and using the community hub” [B]

“Storytelling, borrowing books, meeting friends, browsing books and newspapers” [C]

“I missed being able to drop in and grab a new book, letting my kids collect baskets of books to read at their leisure, print something off I required, having a chat with the staff” [D].

A few respondents offered especially eloquent and lengthy commentaries on how they missed and valued the physical library. Part of one network A user’s response was pitched at a notably high level, and will serve as the final quote for this summary:

“Just being in the library is a nice tranquil place to be, to sit and read a book and just being surrounded [by] like-minded people doing their own thing. To be an open library is extremely important and it also teaches children to enjoy books in general and the whole experience [of] being in a library is vital experience for the next generation.”

Activities the users missed doing

While respondents mentioned the various activities summarized in the previous sections as some of the things they missed about their closed libraries, they were also presented with a list of specific activities in a subsequent question and asked to rate the extent to which they missed doing them, if at all, and if they had been doing them in the library prior to the closures. The rating scale consisted of the same five points as in the question about the overall extent the libraries were missed: not at all; a little; somewhat; quite a lot; a great deal.

Based on the percentages of ‘non-applicable’ responses, table 6 shows how all the activity types listed were undertaken by large numbers of public library visitors, with majorities browsing the physical collections, interacting with staff, and socializing with friends. Interestingly, the percentages using the wi-fi are particularly high for B and C, the metropolitan networks, where Internet connectivity in general might be better. It may well be that the younger demographic profile of networks B and C was a key contributor to their greater use of the library wi-fi, with the younger generations being more likely to want to access the Internet while visiting, including through their own devices. More of the visitors to the metropolitan libraries were also socializing with friends, which again may be due to generational differences: younger people might have wider circles of friends to meet in the library, as well as elsewhere.

Table 6. Activities undertaken in the library (%)

Activity	A	B	C	D	Total
Browsing and reading books, magazines etc.	85.5	86.0	93.3	87.0	86.1
Using the public computers	36.4	55.6	55.6	49.2	42.7
Using the library's wi-fi	34.7	65.8	66.7	44.9	43.8
Asking librarians for help and advice	69.9	79.2	84.1	81.8	73.8
Attending regular library programs	41.2	57.1	62.2	41.7	45.5
Attending library events	45.5	58.7	57.8	46.7	48.9
Attending community events	40.1	54.9	47.7	39.2	43.4
Socializing and meeting friends	51.0	67.1	75.0	57.0	56.1

Table 7 gives the percentage of respondents who missed doing the various types of library activity either “a great deal” or “quite a lot”. The percentages are based on all responses, including those who had not been doing the activity. Browsing and reading the physical collections was strongly missed by almost half of the total sample, a figure that aligns with the findings from the qualitative analysis summarized in the previous section. All the other activities were also strongly missed by significant numbers to respondents, with socializing with friends coming in second at 18%. The particularly high figures for network C correlate with the stronger ratings its respondents gave for their visits in general, and their greater use of the physical library.

Table 7. Percentage missing activity quite a lot or more

Activity	A	B	C	D	Total
Browsing and reading books, magazines etc.	44.6	51.1	62.2	56.1	48.0
Using the public computers	7.1	17.8	31.1	13.3	11.0
Using the library's wi-fi	5.9	23.6	28.9	14.4	11.6
Asking librarians for help and advice	12.1	22.6	34.1	27.3	16.9
Attending regular library programs	13.4	22.6	22.2	14.2	15.8
Attending library events	9.6	18.4	11.1	10.8	11.6
Attending community events	8.3	15.9	13.6	7.5	10.0
Socializing and meeting friends	14.9	24.0	27.3	22.3	18.2

The extent to which the activities were missed, when they had been undertaken, is indicated in table 8, which gives the median rating assigned, with 1 being “not at all” and 5 being “a great deal”. We can see that the activities were not missed equally in this sense either, with browsing and reading the physical collections missed most—“quite a lot” on average—and the regular programming and socializing coming in second, rated “somewhat” on average. These activities are clearly important for a lot of visitors, and in ways that make them not so easy to replace.

Table 8. Median rating for activity

Activity	A	B	C	D	Total
Browsing and reading books, magazines etc.	4	4	4	4	4
Using the public computers	2	3	4	2	2
Using the library’s wi-fi	2	3	3	2	2
Asking librarians for help and advice	2	2.5	3	3	2
Attending regular library programs	3	3	3	2	3
Attending library events	2	3	2	3	2
Attending community events	2	2	2.5	3	2
Socializing and meeting friends	3	3	3	3	3

Other comments

Many of the final comments that respondents provided, for the survey, when asked about the library services in general, reinforced many of the themes that emerged around the reasons why the respondents had missed visiting their libraries. Typical examples include:

“Miss the ambience of being physically in the library environs. Can’t wait for things to return to ‘normal’” [A]

“I guess I consider my library as an extension of my living space i.e., a reading area outside my home. When I was unable to go to the library, even though I had an excess of online reading material, I missed the contact of people and physical tactile books that gives me so much pleasure” [D]

“I enjoy visiting the library and grab my books and chat with other patrons” [A]

“We love picking new books and borrowing them. We also love combining our library trip with a coffee or lunch at retro cafe. It’s a fun way to spend a morning or afternoon.” [A]

“They are a safe place to go for many I imagine and in fact my teenage children will go and sit there and read while I am at appointments and I know they are happy and safe” [A]

“I find the library services an integral community service, they are much more like a community hub, that is much broader than just borrowing books” [C]

“I miss terribly the feel of a paper book. I miss the atmosphere of the library & the helpful librarians” [A].

The positive interactions respondents enjoyed with library staff as part of their experiences at the physical library came through strongly in these comments too. Other examples of this include:

“My library was a big part of my life. Apart from all the incredible books and movies, which thankfully I can still access, I really miss the knowledgeable and helpful librarians” [A]

“The staff are always patient and helpful, and it has a great peaceful atmosphere” [A]

“The librarians help me to pick books for my two kids based on their age group and interests during lockdown which is great” [B]

“[A] is a great instructor and has helped many of us old timers learn how to navigate both cell phones and computers. The young ladies at the counter are also very helpful” [A].

“The staff are very welcoming and extremely helpful with technical questions as I don’t know much about Internet and using it, but need it to perform a lot of tasks” [A]

“All the craft sessions and author talks were online but it's not the same as connecting especially with all the friendly staff” [D].

The severity of the impact of the library closures was also emphasized by respondents. For some, it was in times like COVID when the library was most needed.

“My family loves the library, and their closure was one of the hardest things for us in lockdown” [A]

“I miss their friendly faces and the books, and services the library has offered me. I am now isolated at home recovering from illness alone. I really do miss it. I don't even have enough income due to job loss to be

able to afford to go out and buy a new book to read. Whereas the library I could just borrow” [A]

“There are people who depend on library wi-fi and other computer things” [C]

“I really missed the library enormously as I am studying and looking for work, and the service they offer is invaluable to me at this time” [D]

“[The pandemic] really opened my eyes to how isolation can kill people's souls, hearts and minds. People need libraries as a vital source of connection, happiness, and peace. Libraries are a sanctuary in a brutal world.” [A].

The importance of the physical library space to the community as a whole—both functionally and symbolically—was noted in several responses, including these:

“I believe the library complex is a magnificent community space which brings great pride to the community” [A]

“A library is not just a book shop, it's more like a Town Hall or CWA meeting place” [D]

“All the craft sessions and author talks were online but it's not the same as connecting especially with all the friendly staff. Long live libraries: they are the lifeblood of so many small towns.” [D].

Lastly, the communal element of the physical libraries was poignantly highlighted by the following comment, with patrons building relationships with their

fellow patrons beyond the incidental: “It is a community place and very social. I have missed that a lot. I hope [G.] is alright. I haven't seen him at the window lately if I walk by the Library” [A].

Discussion

The survey responses clearly show that the four networks had been providing places and spaces of considerable value to diverse groups of people when their libraries were forced to close. Of course, we cannot gauge from these findings how well these places and spaces have been serving the whole of their communities: most community members did not respond to the survey, and this could well include many non-users, as well as some less engaged users (perhaps more likely not to have responded to the survey), who had *not* been in any way affected by the library closures. What the findings do indicate, however, is that virtually all the physical elements typical of the contemporary Australian public library are greatly appreciated and much valued by at least some users. Libraries have been refining their services, spaces and resources for many years, and this refinement has been paying off.

The survey results also demonstrate that the networks' physical libraries are commonly valued in multiple ways, with visits often consisting of several activities and several purposes. While in some cases, these purposes may be of a more practical nature (as exemplified by the “click and collect” service that libraries introduced during the lockdown periods), many visits include more affective experiences: visiting the library, for example, can help people feel more part of their communities, or provide them with an opportunity for some “quality time” with their children, or give them a sense of safety or wellbeing, or provide some respite from their busy lives.

The diversity of ways in which library visits are valued is matched by the diversity of users benefiting from these visits. Even though the survey was limited to what would be quite a small percentage of the total user populations and would have likely missed some users of the physical libraries with little or no access to the Internet (beyond the library), the comments indicate that the libraries were valued by a range of people from vulnerable groups, including the elderly and home-bound, the physically and mentally disabled, children, and those on low or no income. Those unaccustomed to living in a shared house, or without a job, or with no Internet access, may too readily dismiss the public library as a “nice to have” and classify it as a non-essential service, as it typically has been classified during the COVID pandemic. Yet for many people, particularly in some of the more disadvantaged groups, visiting the public library is an important component of their lives, for which there may be no adequate substitute. Library books, or even library computers, may not be as lifesaving as a COVID vaccine, but this does not make libraries, in their totality, *inessential*—certainly not for everyone.

While a wide range of things were missed by the library visitors, they were not all missed equally, however. Most mentioned were the books and the ability to browse the libraries’ collections and pick out new materials, whether to take home or consume in the library. This result is in line with some of the findings reported in the literature review section above, including those from the Canadian studies (May and Black 2010; Wortman 2012; Shepherd, Petrillo and Wilson 2019). Although public libraries may be as focused on “connection” as they are on “collection” nowadays, “real” books are still important for a lot of people. Again, while reading might be viewed as a hobby by some, for others it is an important part of their daily lives, one of the things that their lives worth living, even.

The public library was also particularly valued as a place to take children and as a place to study. Various benefits were mentioned in relation to visits involving children, which were seen as assisting both their social and learning development. The popularity of the public library spaces for study, particularly by online and part-time students, was another finding from the literature strongly echoed here, and perhaps would have been even more so had the survey been open to teenagers. Public libraries provide comfortable and quiet study spaces that were keenly sought by some students.

Also of importance was the public library as a community hub and meeting place, although this function did not necessarily represent that of the “third place”. Instead, users missed various flavors of interaction and connection, from the indirect and incidental to the planned and formal. Perhaps the most important feature of the library space in relation to this connecting role was its flexibility. Like the public library visitors in Oslo, as described by Aabø and Audunson (2012), the public library visitors in New South Wales were able to choose the type and level of interaction that worked for them.

As well as offering a quiet environment for students and others who appreciated the tranquility, the four library networks offered spaces that were, for many, relaxing. They were havens from the outside world, places that allowed visitors to play, chat, read for leisure (as well as study), or just “hang out”. They were places without the strictures of work or the duties of home, or even the itinerary of the shopping trip. They were, in this sense, valued because of their very *lack* of purpose. Instead, visitors were able to take a break, while nevertheless making good use of their time: they browsed shelves, read magazines, borrowed books, surfed on a computer, doing things that were worthwhile, but not necessarily in an overly directed way.

As well as the books, there were other resources housed in the physical libraries particularly valued by the survey respondents, including the computers and wi-fi. The COVID pandemic has highlighted how dependent most of us now are on access to the Internet, and on the technology and skills that allow us to function successfully as digital citizens. Yet even in developed countries such as Australia, there are many people who struggle because of insufficient access, technology, and skills, and for whom the computing resources and support offered by public libraries is more than just convenient—it can be critical.

Finally, we should note that the survey responses included many positive comments about the staff on hand in the libraries. Just like the libraries themselves, the staff fulfilled a range of functions, from providing technical support to just a friendly face and a chance to have a chat. While they could and did perform some of these functions remotely, on the phone or online, they likewise played an important role in helping make library visits as rewarding as they were reported to be. Along with the spaces, activities, and resources, library staff were also missed.

This research has provided a snapshot of how the recent public library closures in New South Wales has been felt on the ground, by individual users. A more in-depth investigation of the impact of public libraries, and of their absence, might follow up on this survey by interviewing some of the users most affected by the closures, perhaps focusing on a particular branch library as a case study. While public library commentators and managers may not need to be told that their libraries are important places for many people, there is nothing like taking these places away from people to demonstrate just *how* important they are.

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