Revealing Perception Gaps between Users and Academic Libraries: A Public Relations Perspective

Xiaohua Zhu, Moonhee Cho, Mei Zhang, and Erin E. Whitaker*

Are academic libraries doing an effective job of public relations (PR)? This paper presents some of the preliminary findings from a research project on the PR in academic libraries. Using the in-depth interview method and the inductive data analysis strategy, this study provides a theoretical and empirical investigation of library-student relationship in two academic libraries. The analysis indicates some of the perception gaps between the two parties, including the roles of libraries and librarians, the depth of their relationship, the level and type of engagement expected, and the communication needs. The study not only reveals the perception gaps between librarians and one of their most important key publics, students, regarding the roles of academic libraries and the library-student relationship, but also demonstrates the importance of establishing a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of academic library PR in different institutions.

Introduction

In October 2017, an article in USA Today listed “Librarian” first on the list of disappearing careers, raising controversy among readers and posing piercing questions for library professionals. Academic libraries in particular, once considered the “heart of the academic enterprise”, now occupy a much more “behind-the-scenes” place as they strive to provide access to digital resources that users often do not realize are made possible through the library. This raises some important considerations: how can public relations (PR) in the library profession be improved? Also, how can libraries overcome gaps in perception by their users and potential users, and establish open, mutual communication with the wider communities that they serve? The concept of engagement is one that has recently gained attention as libraries try to answer these questions, but needs greater structure and depth in order to produce real change.

Public relations scholars underscore the importance of relationship management. Defined as “the patterns of interaction, transaction, exchange, and linkage between an organization and its public,” relationships between an organization and its publics are considered one of the most imperative assets of organization. Applying this concept to the academic library setting, quality relationships between the academic library and its users determine the sustainability of the library in this dynamic environment. Therefore, from a public relations perspective, we started a research study to explore the relationships between academic libraries and their pub-

* Xiaohua Zhu, Assistant Professor, School of Information Sciences, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, xzhu12@utk.edu. Moonhee Cho, Assistant Professor, School of Advertisement and Public Relations, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, mcho4@utk.edu. Mei Zhang, Ph.D. Candidate, School of Information, The University of Wisconsin-Madison, mzhang48@wisc.edu. Erin E. Whitaker, M.S. Student, School of Information Sciences, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, ewhitak7@vols.utk.edu

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lics, including faculty, students, staff, alumni, and the community. How do these different publics view the role of academic libraries? How do they perceive their relationship with academic libraries? What are the potential perception gaps between academic libraries and their publics on the role of libraries and the relationships? This conference paper reports the preliminary results of part of the larger research project that focuses on one of the publics—students, aiming to reveal some of the perceptions gaps between students and academic librarians.

This study is one of few attempts to investigate PR issues in academic libraries from a theoretical perspective, to emphasize relationship management. It addresses the importance of revealing the perception gaps between academic libraries and their publics, students in particular, to inform the development of more effective communication plans. We plan to develop a framework, a valuable tool for evaluating academic library PR in different institutions. In addition, the findings may also have practical implications for nurturing relationship with current students, who are potential donors and benefactors for academic libraries.

Background

Libraries have been using different terms to label their activities related to promoting patron awareness, attracting users, and building relationships, including publicity, advertising, public relations, marketing, promotion, communications, and more recently, student/community engagement. The library publicity activities can be traced back to the late 1890s, the time of John Cotten Data, the pioneer of open stacks and public library promotion activities. Since then, manuals, handbooks, and brochures on PR were created by libraries and library organizations to educate librarians. A special issue on library PR published in Library Trends in October 1958 exemplifies the early scholarly discussions of PR.

In the mid-1980s, the topic of PR drew more attention from the LIS scholars. The concept of marketing was also introduced into the field around that time and became one of the essential concepts in library PR related research in the 1990s. In the 1990s and 2000s, there was an increase in PR publications regarding academic libraries, emphasizing the importance of PR and introducing the best practices. Most of the articles are case studies, describing experiences from a single institution.

More recently, another concept got more attention from the LIS community—engagement, which seems to have replaced PR or is simply used interchangeably with PR. The concept of student engagement was likely borrowed from educational research, in which researchers have discussed it from multiple dimensions—behavioral/social engagement, emotional/affective engagement, cognitive, and academic/intellectual dimensions. In the LIS literature, however, as Schlak pointed out after a comprehensive and critical review of the concept, the term engagement is “variously defined and used” and “difficult to nail down.” Our literature review also suggests that library scholars often use this concept to refer to any library activities involving students without a deep, let alone theoretical, understanding.

Today, dwindling economic resources and tightening budgets have brought a demand for accountability of the value of the services the library offers. Libraries are charged with the task to embed a set of activities into their services that fall under the umbrella of “engagement,” in which they focus on promoting awareness, attracting users, and building relationships with the wider community. Academic libraries are practicing strategies for engagement such as placing librarians in liaison roles with academic departments, restructuring information literacy programs, and hiring marketing and communications specialists to help with these activities. However, there is a paucity of scholarly efforts to explore the relationship between academic libraries and their publics from a theoretical perspective. Numerous library use and user studies have shed light on how to better serve users, but they often neglect the question of how people perceive academic libraries and librarians. Without a deep understanding of these perceptions, academic libraries’ efforts to boost community engagement may not be as productive as they could be.
Research Design

The on-going, larger research project will employ both qualitative and quantitative research methods and will collect data from three large public universities to address the research questions. This paper reports the data collection and preliminary finding in the first phase of the project using the qualitative method. In the current stage, we used in-depth interviews with librarians and student users in two large research universities (one is in US Midwest and the other in US Southeast). We recruited and interviewed forty-three participants in two months (November to December 2018), including six librarians from each site and a total of thirty students. The librarian participants held positions in public services, administration, or library communication. The students included twenty-one undergraduate students and nine graduate students from various disciplines, and only one of them had LIS background. We used a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions to elicit the perceptions of both parties, including the roles of libraries and librarians, the interactive relationships between libraries and users, and the effectiveness of libraries’ communication efforts.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and all four researchers were involved in interviews and the coding process. We used the inductive data analysis method, starting with open coding, and followed by axial coding. Each interview was coded by at least two researchers. After individual coding, the research team gathered to discuss the codes and memos we had each developed, and major themes emerged from the coding process. The following section provides a brief description of the findings from the open coding stage and before the axial coding stage, that is, the major themes in academic library PR and the differences/commonalities in both parties’ perceptions.

Preliminary Findings

Roles of Academic Libraries

“Library as a place” is a theme that nearly every participant brought up in the interview, except a few students who barely went to any libraries. Students in particular emphasized the importance of the libraries’ space in their decision to go to the libraries. Some of them depicted the academic library as “a quiet, peaceful place” where they could concentrate on their study, while others considered their academic libraries as social spaces where they could relax and hang out with friends. To some students, the functions of libraries had been split into two—physical and digital. One student said: “The physical library serves more as a social place instead of work and study and like actually getting books. So like, the library—you can put air quotes in the transcription—is mainly digital for me, but the physical library—you can put italics for that one—is more of a social space where I can sit and hang out.” The word “library” is increasingly like a metaphor in terms of access resources for some students; majority of the students, especially the undergraduate ones, still associated libraries with physical books and knowledge.

Librarians we interviewed fully recognized how students, especially undergraduate students, value the library space, and they were still trying to make better space for every patron. However, these service-minded participants were more interested in providing resources and mitigate the access barrier, offering services and instructions, playing an advocate role, sharing knowledge, and using the space to promote dialogue and building community. As one librarian put it: “I can think more globally about the library’s spaces, services, and different engagement, and really help, I don’t want to say lead, but I like to think of it as facilitate kind of those conversations about engagement with students and faculty, and help faculty kind of see the place as learning and teaching space.”

These purposes and goals were not noticed by most of the students we interviewed, with the exception of some graduate students, who had stronger attachment with and deeper appreciation of their academic libraries.
The following quote is representative:

Because this is a place almost where I feel as an academic, as a college student, I have the most access to information and that empowers me. Because I believe as a college student that's your biggest, like, you know, resource. It's more than...it's everything. It's the people, all the librarians who are willing to help you. It is the information that is readily available from, uh, a print book or, or, even the Internet and nowadays, very important, the library's collection of the electronic and all those resources. And even as a place for like relaxing. ...Because this is a place where you can sit down maybe just to listen to music or watch a YouTube video. That just relaxes you more than anywhere else.

It is worth mentioning, however, although students were less likely to associate libraries with community, our conversations with students sometimes indicated a sense of community in the library space. For example, “I don't feel left out because in a library everyone's on their own and unlike other places, um, in other places people usually sit in groups. Maybe I would feel isolated then, but in the library I don't… [T]he environment around me makes me focus on just me and my work and I don't feel isolated.”

Roles of Academic Librarians
Not surprisingly, many students still held the stereotypic images of librarians, people who “go behind a computer ...have to check the return book bins, put them up on a cart, return the cart” and “order new books and make sure that everything is good.” One student who noticed a certain event happening in the library suspected “that might be initiated by them [librarians].”

Librarians were aware of the often-time misconception and oversight, as one librarian participant mentioned, “I think students tend to think that we are here to check out books and maybe unlock rooms, and I think that's probably the perception.” Librarians thought of themselves as many different roles, including teachers, counselors, therapists, and advocates. Most of the librarians we interviewed would compare library services with customer services, but they refused to treat students as customers; instead, they would call students patrons. One librarian stated:

I think people sometimes have the stereotype of librarians as you know, the cardigan wearing, cat owning, glasses, that we're very fussy and you know, making people be quiet. I'm so hoping that the stereotype is being displaced by something that's more accurate in that we're the library that has house parties or we're the library that has, that gives away pizza or cupcakes, that we are not stick in the mud, that we're not all about making people conform to our rules, but we are here to help, to be of service. And I think sometimes students can find that intimidating. I know this idea that I am here to help you and I have no other agenda can be kind of, you know like, I think a lot of students or just people who grow up in America, only see themselves as consumers.

In fact, a number of student participants did realize other roles of librarians. Most of the student participants did not have direct interactions with their librarians, but a few of them still thought librarians could “do all kinds of cool stuff.” Students who had experience interacting with librarians had more appreciation. One participant said,

I think the job of a librarian is to make sure that people have access to knowledge, whether it be books, or online resources. And I think to facilitate the retrieval of that knowledge. And to serve as
Identifying Relationship

In the data analysis process, we tried to identify both parties’ perceptions of the library-student relationship. Most of the participants had not considered this issue seriously, but apparently librarians were far more responsive than students were. In general, both librarians and students had similar perceptions of the ideal relationship, which could be characterized as being reliable, mutually beneficial for success, and positive attitude.

From librarians’ perspective, “the ideal relationship is one of respect, one of appreciation, one of value, but it’s on both sides.” Some librarians also valued reliability and trustworthiness. A librarian in a leadership position pointed out that the ideal relationship should be a mutually beneficial relationship, stating, “the ideal relationship is synergistic and where we benefit from our relationship with them and they benefit from our relationship with us.” This view resonated the core value of the organizational PR proposed by public relations scholars. Many librarians indicated that engagement was an important part of building relationships, not “the little interactions.” In addition, librarians working at larger libraries realized that students usually would not establish a “personal” relationship with librarians, and the key for libraries was to show their relevance.

As for students’ perspectives, they often simply described the ideal relationship as satisfaction. One student specified the ideal relationship as being comfortable, stating that “[d]on’t do anything out of control. And like, like…treat it like your home. Like, when people always tell you, like would you do that in your home, like with your mom? Like, do that with the library.”

Overall, most students interviewed in this study were satisfied with their current relationship with their libraries. “Good” was the word that most students used to describe the relationship—superficial, yet positive. It is noteworthy that library-student relationship was also influenced by students’ relationship with the academic library’s parent institution. For example, a student who felt very disconnected from the university for various reasons, could not separate those feelings about the university from those toward the academic library.

Most librarians noticed a gap between the ideal relationship and the current state. They identified room for improvement, including enhancing the image of librarians and effective communication of library activities to support student success. They also mentioned the challenges in measuring the impact of relationship—despite the need for improving the relationship, it was difficult to assess how close they were to the ideal. In addition, the aforementioned predominance of transactional interaction or customer mindset in a service industry was considered another barrier to build an ideal relationship:

*I think a lot of students or just people who grow up in America, only see themselves as consumers. That everything is kind of a transaction that’s bought and sold. And so to be in a service industry where there’s nothing that I can gain from this interaction other than the satisfaction of helping you can seem almost like what do you want from me, how come you’re being so nice? And to break down that first weird obstacle is sometimes, I think, almost…it can be disconcerting for students and so that’s one of the things that is not every student and we get a lot of people who are like oh, my mom’s a librarian, so they know.*
Student Engagement

Engagement was a theme often raised in our interviews with librarians. Similar to Schlak’s (2018) finding, our participants “use engagement to refer to a number of activities, interactions, and outcomes” (p. 137), in particular, instructions, events, exhibits, and other non-academic activities. One of the librarians defined student engagement elegantly:

*I think about student engagement ...is about providing students, through a series of strategies and operational activities, the sense, opportunities to develop their whole person, develop intellectually, emotionally, maybe even spiritually, artistically, creatively, and through those activities, they like employees, feel more fulfilled, have a higher sense of purpose, feel more in control in their lives and their course study and the things that they're learning. I think that would be a broad definition.*

With a strong motivation for encouraging/facilitating conversations on campus and building communities, most of the librarian participants emphasized engagement in the following dimensions: (1) behavioral/trans-actional engagement, which included raising awareness, attracting more students to come to the libraries, and involving students in more activities; (2) academic/intellectual engagement, which was mainly through promoting student learning and research through instructional programs; (3) community engagement, that is, making libraries engaging places for conversations and dialogs among different groups of stakeholders.

Did students feel engaged? Students seldom talked about their “engagement” experience explicitly. As stated, their descriptions of their relationship with libraries were usually vague and superficial—they simply had not pondered this topic. However, a close examination of our conversation indicated that students’ engagement with libraries was at the academic, the emotional, and the cognitive dimensions. They talked much less about the behavioral or community dimensions. For example, the following quote is a typical example of academic and cognitive engagement: “Seeing, I mean even if you were not motivated maybe seeing others working so hard will get you motivated. So I think libraries definitely help you focus which leads you to study more effectively and performing better. So yeah, I think they’re very important for academic success.” When a PhD student talked about the library, he said, “[I]t’s a love affair almost... I’ve been in the Academy for a long time, I did my bachelor and masters and in my PhD, and the library has always been a place of like, you know, a great comfort for me, I’d say.”

Communications

Most of the librarians we interviewed shared that the goal of their communications efforts was to raise awareness about the library. They discussed social media campaigns centering on recent social and political issues as well as events in the library, bulletin boards that students used for requesting advice and answering questions, and going from door to door in dorms and handing out flyers. Creating a voice for the library that lead to interaction on social media was also the goal of one librarian: “it’s about just putting your best face forward and understanding the role of creating almost a persona for the library.” Furthermore, one librarian we interviewed stated that the role of social media communication should not just be to inform students of what is happening in the library, but also to interact with students more meaningfully:

*...But we do kind of realize that social media isn’t all about teaching and broadcasting out, it’s about creating a dialogue that we’re inviting people to kind of chat back to us, or to tweet back at us, and creating that sense of engagement, that sense of community is really the purpose of social media. It’s not about broadcasting library initiatives or trying to be the voice of anything, but that the purpose or intent really should be about community and dialogue.*
In attempting to create this dialogue through communications with students, this librarian aimed to increase awareness and engagement within the student body, and emphasized that building relationships with students was the goal of that kind of communication.

Some of the librarians we interviewed discussed the challenges they faced when communicating with students, particularly online, and many wished they could be doing more:

_I would love to do way more. We're doing better with, we're trying to get better at social media, so that's been a hurdle, we're trying to do meaningful things with our social media so that it's not just like, we've posted the same view out the windows of the library 30 times in the last year or whatever._

So, creating meaningful content has been a challenge for librarians, even though the libraries we researched have communications specialists, committees, and various initiatives. One librarian stated that “we're definitely communicating, whether or not they're engaging with it is a whole different thing” and maintained that word of mouth was the most valuable form of communication for libraries.

One of the biggest challenges to library communications is students’ lack of awareness of communication methods. For example, many of the students interviewed were unaware that the libraries had a social media presence and many did not recall ever receiving an email from the library. Many of the students, however, thought that the library was doing a good job of communicating with them regardless of their lack of awareness. They thought that they could find the information they needed from the library and “they don't send like 100 emails a day, but also they’re just letting you know what’s happening.” Another student stated that the library was “not nagging” and yet another said, “if I feel like it's annoying I’ll unsubscribe it, so far I think it's good, every time I get it I check it.” Overall, students either thought that the library’s communication efforts were adequate, or they simply thought they did not need to be communicated with:

_I mean it doesn’t really occur to me that the library needs to communicate with me so much, like they could post it on their website and I could check if I needed to. I think they do well when they need to communicate. I don’t know that they need to communicate more often than they do. I don’t usually think about like, what does the library need to communicate with me. I don’t usually think about that. I typically use it as a resource for research._

**Next Step**

The preliminary findings from the in-depth interviews with both librarians and students indicate some of the perception gaps between the two parties—the roles of libraries and librarians, the depth of their relationship, the level and type of engagement expected, and the communication needs. These findings reveal the importance of effective relationship management for sustainable relationships that offer mutual benefits for both library and students. More specifically, the study highlights the additional essential role of librarians in building and cultivating relationships with students. Without being informed (communication) or being engaged with libraries, students, one of the most important publics of academic library, are less likely to consider and value their relationships with their academic libraries.

In the next step of data analysis, we will use the interview data to adapt PR theories, especially Hon and Grunig’s Organization Public Relationship (OPR) framework to the academic library-user context. This framework views public relations as the management of a relationship between an organization and its publics, rather than simply a set of messaging, publicity, and media relations activities. We will analyze the relationship quality dimensions and types, and based on the revised framework, we will develop questionnaires to survey
both librarians and the different publics. The quantitative data analysis will adopt the co-orientation model, which is useful to compare views on an issue between an organization and its publics, to reveal any existing perception gaps between the two parties.

Ultimately, the larger research project will address the following questions: What are the perception gaps between librarians and their publics? Using information about their publics’ perceptions, how can academic libraries better implement community engagement initiatives that engage the different sectors of the communities that they serve? Additionally, how can they step up these efforts to create and nurture a symbiotic, meaningful relationship with their communities in which their value is recognized and understood? The preliminary findings from the first stage of the project provided important insights for the future investigation of these research questions.

Endnotes