

Role of Greek Public Libraries: A Quantitative Study of Users' Perception

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore users' perceptions of librarians working in public libraries in Greece. Specifically, it aimed to investigate how much users value librarian's different roles; how often they seek assistance for performing specific tasks and how do they rate the assistance provided. The method of questionnaire was employed to meet the needs of this study. The relevant literature was used to inform the design of a questionnaire with overall fourteen questions. The questionnaire was handed out to users in seven public libraries located in different municipalities in the area of Attica and in total, 174 public library users participated. It was found that users perceived as more important the traditional roles of public librarians namely promoting reading, information retrieval, consultation in information search as well as providing instruction in the selection and use of information. Evolving roles of public librarian such as technology specialist, facilitating socialisation or providing support to people in e-government services, in seeking information regarding health issues as well as in job seeking were not highlighted as important. This research contributes in increasing our understanding of the way users perceive public librarians' roles and value the offered services. It is one of the few studies investigating users' perceptions of librarian's roles.

Keywords: Survey, Public Libraries, Roles, Users' Perception

Introduction

Libraries provide educational programmes, information services and resources to assist people to obtain the knowledge necessary to succeed in a fast-changing society. The continuous social and economic changes, along with rapid technological developments, create demands on public libraries to redefine their role and provide specific services to address the emerging needs of their customers.

The possibilities of public libraries today have been

addressed by several individuals. Public libraries, as lifelong learning institutions, have a central role to play by offering clients technology training; developing and promoting information literacy; delivering lifelong learning; contributing to diminishing the digital divide, thus encouraging effective participation in a digital society (Julien & Hoffman, 2008; Kinney, 2010; Real et al., 2015; Roy, Bolting & Brzozowski, 2010). Moreover, they provide services to assist individuals to access health information and improve health literacy (Chobot, 2010; Park, Luo & Rosidi, 2014; Luo & Park, 2013; Real et al., 2015; Rubenstein, 2016; Vardell & Charbonneau, 2017; Zions et al., 2010); they support people in e-government services and job-seeking activities (Bertot, Real & Jaeger, 2016; Gibson, Bertot & McClure, 2009; Jaeger & Berto, 2009; Jaeger & Fleischman, 2007); and they facilitate interactions between different groups (Aabo, Audunson & Varheim 2010; Fisher et al., 2007; Goulding 2005).

Public libraries, as social institutions, have a key role to play in creating social capital; offering assistance to users in dealing with the increased technological challenges; contributing to the improvement of individuals by reducing social isolations; creating social cohesion and trust in the community; thus facilitating the engagement of individuals in society (Aabo & Audunson, 2012; Aabo, Audunson & Varheim, 2010; Johnson, 2010; 2012; Ferguson, 2012; Miller, 2014; Yoshida, 2016).

With regards to Greece, public libraries as public institutions are affected by administrative, social and economic changes. Specifically, the re-organisation of local government structure resulted in the merging of many former municipalities and communities. This change led to a reduction of the number of municipalities which had implications on the administrative structure and operation of libraries (Vassilakaki, 2015). With respect to the current economic climate, the situation in Greece, with a GDP

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growth rate of 2% (2018)¹ and the current unemployment rate rising to 18.6%², places challenges for public libraries. Furthermore, the e-government Act of 2011 created a general framework for e-government in public administration and generated new conditions concerning communication and data exchange between legal entities and the public sector as well as citizens' access to e-government services (e-government in Greece, 2015); hence, public libraries have a vital role in facilitating access to government information.

Considering the changing administrative, technological, social and economic situation in Greece, public libraries are faced with the challenge of preserving and strengthening their role in the community and being a place, where people can meet and interact with librarians, individuals and resources. At this point, it should be noted that perceptions of users and governments affect public libraries by shaping their use and value. Furthermore, positive perceptions have an impact on library funding and allocation of resources (Could & Gomez, 2010; OCLC, 2010).

This paper aimed to explore users' perceptions of the different roles of librarians working in a public library. Specifically, the study has the following objectives:

- To investigate the importance users give to different roles.
- The frequency users ask for assistance to perform specific tasks.
- To identify possible differences or similarities among different groups of users.

This paper contributes to the existing literature by providing empirical evidence on how users perceive the roles of the public library and value the provided services.

Literature Review

A limited number of studies investigated the perceptions of specific users' groups, namely students regarding librarians' roles (Bickley & Corral, 2011; Fagan, 2003; Martin-Yeboah & Atuase, 2019; Polger & Okamoto 2010).

So far, there has been little discussion about users' perceptions of public librarians' role. Specifically, Brophy (2001) and Totterdell (2005) found that public libraries role is perceived more as related to the acquisition of information and knowledge together with the provision of access to culture, leisure and recreational activities. Nielsen and McKechnie (2002) investigated the way librarians are perceived by the users of Canadian public libraries and found that the majority of respondents misunderstood the work of librarians. In the same cultural context, May and Black (2010) explored the role of public libraries with the use of triangulated methods. In contrast with the previous study, their research revealed that libraries were perceived positively; users identified specific roles which included, in rank order, "the role of information provider", "provider of access to technology" and "provider of a social place" implying that the traditional role of providing books and information still prevailed. There seems to be an important interplay between the services provided and librarian's roles. The most important roles of libraries for individuals and for the community, as highlighted in OCLC study (2010), included material and information provider, provider of access to computers and supporter of literacy, while Spacey et al. (2015) stressed the extension of public library's role in the provision of access to online information. In the same line, Nzivo (2012) found that access to material and use of library resources in Kenyan public libraries were positively perceived by their users. Evjen & Audunson (2009) in Norway, examining, among other issues, the perceptions of library users and non-users in Norway found that many of the respondents perceived the library's role as "information provider" and "facilitating digital access to information and career counselling". They concluded that respondents' thoughts about the library's role were related to culture, information and knowledge. Research conducted by Oliphant (2014) examining the users' and non-users' perceptions of public libraries revealed that users and non-users were informed of public libraries in their communities. Public libraries were perceived as important public spaces where people go for different reasons as for finding information, seeking instruction in the identification of information as well as for socialising with other people and librarians. Further analysis of data by age revealed that people use the library for different activities; for example, the age group of 18–24 used more the library for "access to Internet" (42%) compared to age group "sixty-five or older" (22%) or for socialising (53%) compared to age groups "fifty-five and older" (31%).

¹ <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/GRC#countrydata>

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics

A recent study conducted by Appleton, Hall, Duff and Raeside (2018) over 2 years period highlighted the role of public libraries as providers of access to print information and of being a safe, important community space.

As it was previously shown, the research to date tends to focus on the challenges the public libraries face, the possibilities and values of public libraries. There is also an undermining link between information services offered and the roles public libraries strategically adopt. Although a substantial amount of research literature has focused upon the possibilities, the different roles and values of public libraries, few studies have examined users' perceptions about the role of the public library.

Methodology

Survey & Data collection

This study used the method of a questionnaire to inquire on users' perceptions of public librarians' role. Specifically, a questionnaire was designed based on the existing literature (e.g. Aabo, Audunson & Varheim 2010; Bertot, Real & Jaeger, 2016; May & Black, 2010; Real et al., 2015; Rubenstein, 2016; Yoshida, 2016) and was pretested and modified with a number of public librarians. It consisted of two main sections with overall 14 questions, seven for each. The first section aimed to collect demographic data, namely age, nationality, level of education and computer competence. The second section inquired on users' perceptions of the different roles of librarians, the frequency with which users ask librarians for specific services and level of their needs' coverage. Mainly, closed-type questions and tables with Likert scales were used.

The questionnaire was distributed in seven public libraries located in different municipalities in the area of Attica. The specific libraries were selected because they were in different regions (north, west, east and south) of Attica and served communities with different characteristics. The questionnaires were administered by the librarians to the active users of public libraries visiting the library throughout June-July 2016. Only users aged 15 years and older were eligible to participate in the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations. Data were then critically analysed to demonstrate how users perceive librarians' roles. Specifically, the data were analysed from different perspectives with the view to identify possible differences or similarities among different groups of users. The emphasis was placed on how participants perceived the role of librarians and therefore a focus was given on the questions inquiring about librarians' roles. In an attempt to identify and revile any differences among users' perceptions based on specific groups, data were crossed checked according to the educational level of the respondents, computer competence and by region. Finally, a table was created relating specific roles with the information services as it was highlighted by the relevant literature with the view to generalise the findings (see Figs. 5-7).

Results

Sample Characteristics

In total, 174 questionnaires were completed. The majority of the participants were female (75%) and of Greek nationality (92%). Most of the respondents belonged to the age groups of "31-40" (23%), "41-50" (29%) and "51 and above" (23%). In terms of their status, the majority are public officers (21%) followed by private officers (15%), retired and unemployed (12% each), self-employed (10%) and housewife/house-husband (9%). Most of the respondents hold a BA degree (41%) followed by those who have an Upper high school degree. In terms of computer competencies, the majority admitted to having elementary knowledge (40%) followed by basic (29%). Only 21% have advance knowledge of computer skills. Finally, the majority of the respondents visits the library "1-2 times a month" (53%) followed by 1-6 times a year (20%) whereas only a 17% visits the library on a more regular basis (2-3 times a week) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Respondents Demographics

<i>Gender</i>	
Female	71%
Male	24%
<i>Nationality</i>	
Greek	91%
Albanian	5%
Bulgarian	1%
<i>Age Group</i>	
15-19	6%
20-25	7%
26-30	11.5%
31-40	23%
41-50	29%
51 and above	23%
<i>Status</i>	
Student	5%
Undergraduate student	7%
Public servant	21%
Private servant	15%
Self-employed	14%
Retired	12%
Unemployed	12%
Housewife/house-husband	9%
<i>Degree</i>	
Elementary school	1%
High-school	10%
Upper high school	33%
University degree	41%
Master degree	12%
Doctorate	1%
<i>Computer Competence</i>	
No knowledge	9%
Basic	29%
Elementary	40%
Advanced	21%
<i>Frequency of Library Visits</i>	
Daily	6%
2-3 times a week	17%
1-2 times a month	53%
1-6 times a year	20%
Never	3%

Users' Perceptions

Users were asked to rate their perception of librarians' roles based on the provided scale. Overall, it was found that users rated as "very important" almost all the provided roles of librarian apart from the "technology specialist"

that is related to facilitation of access to digital resources, computer use, technological support and training. Among the ones that they indicated as "most important", in rank order, were "one to promote reading", "specialist in information retrieval" and "information consultant", "competence in promoting his role" and "instructor in information selection and use" (see Fig. 1).

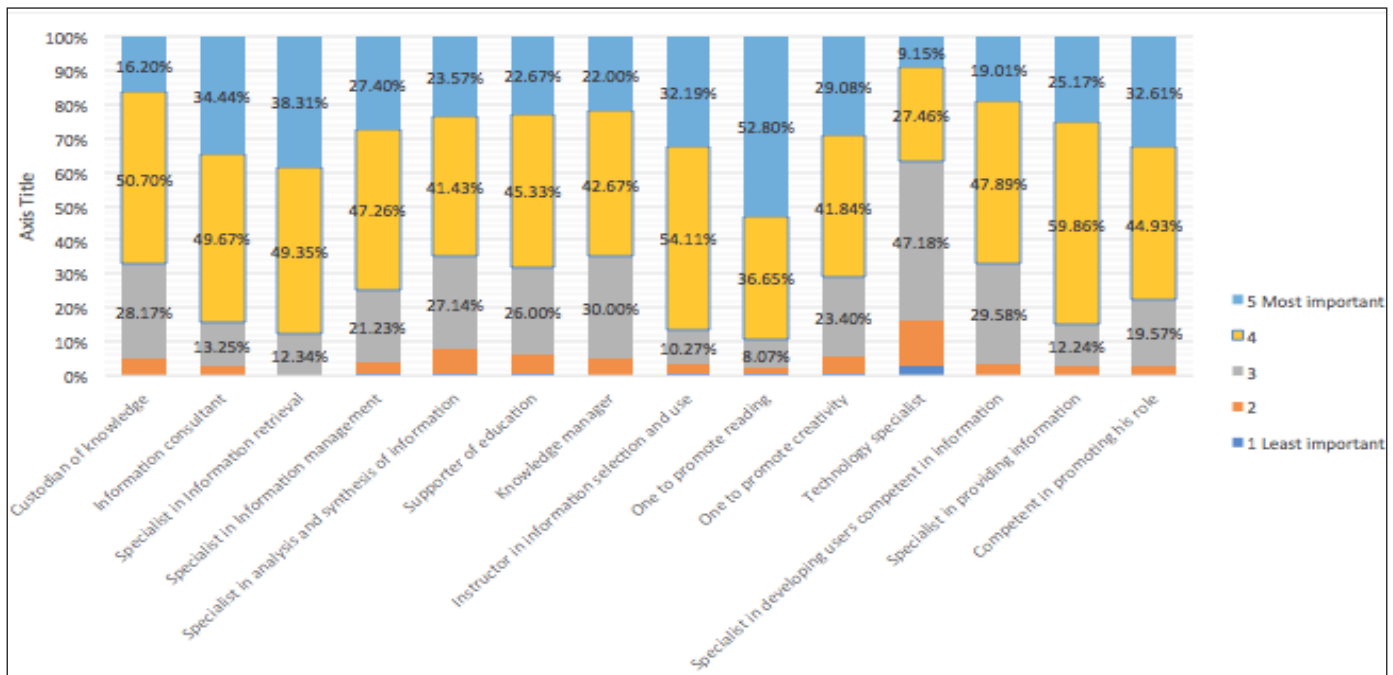


Fig. 1. Users' Perception of Librarians Different Roles

When the users were asked about the specific roles that librarians should promote more, the majority of the respondents indicated "specialist in information retrieval" and "one to promote reading" followed by "one to promote creativity", "instructor in information

selection and use" and "supporter of education". Users responses are consistent throughout the questionnaire, revealing as most important the roles of "information retrieval" and "promotion of reading and creativity" (see Fig. 2).

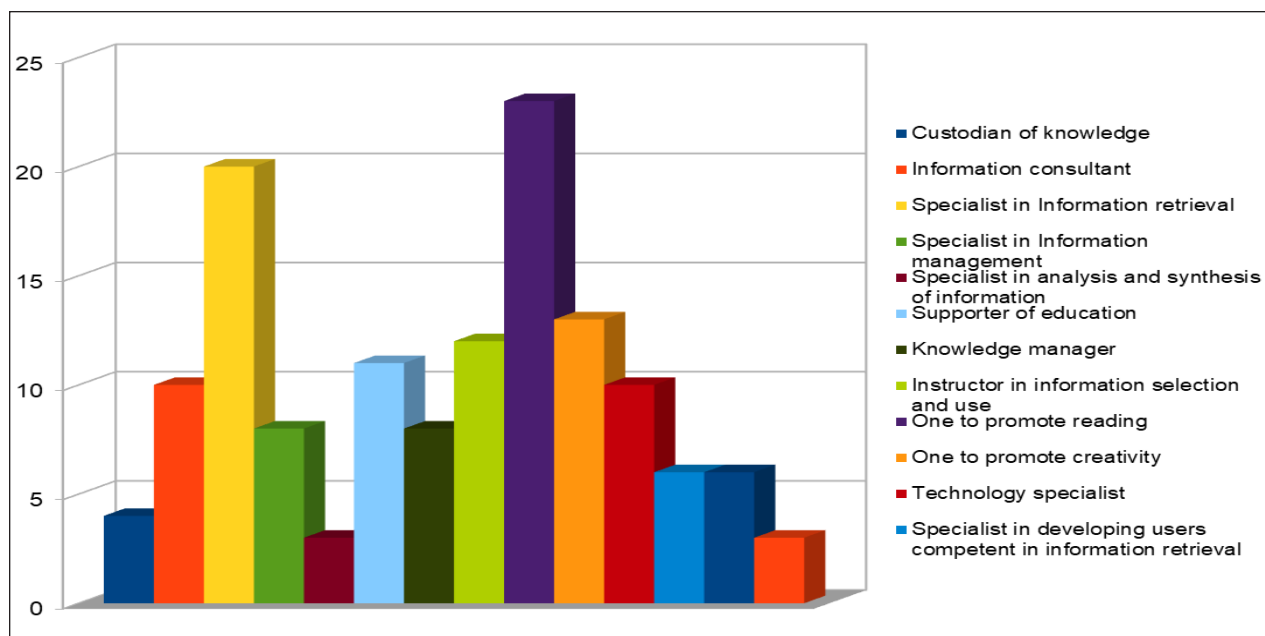


Fig. 2: Users' Perception of Librarians' Roles

In terms of how often users ask assistance from librarians to perform specific tasks, among the top five, were “lending of material”, “assistance in searching information”, “information on a subject”, “for leisure” and “assistance in defining an information need”. It is surprising that users rated very low a range of different services namely “support of the formal education” and “information on daily practical issues”, followed by “information related

to health issues”, “assistance in job hunting”, “assistance in the submission of job application” and “assistance in the use of e-government services” despite the significant body of literature highlighting those roles (see Fig. 3). The services the participants use, and the assistance asked from librarians relate to the provision of access and leisure, although the same users rated as very important a range of evolving roles.

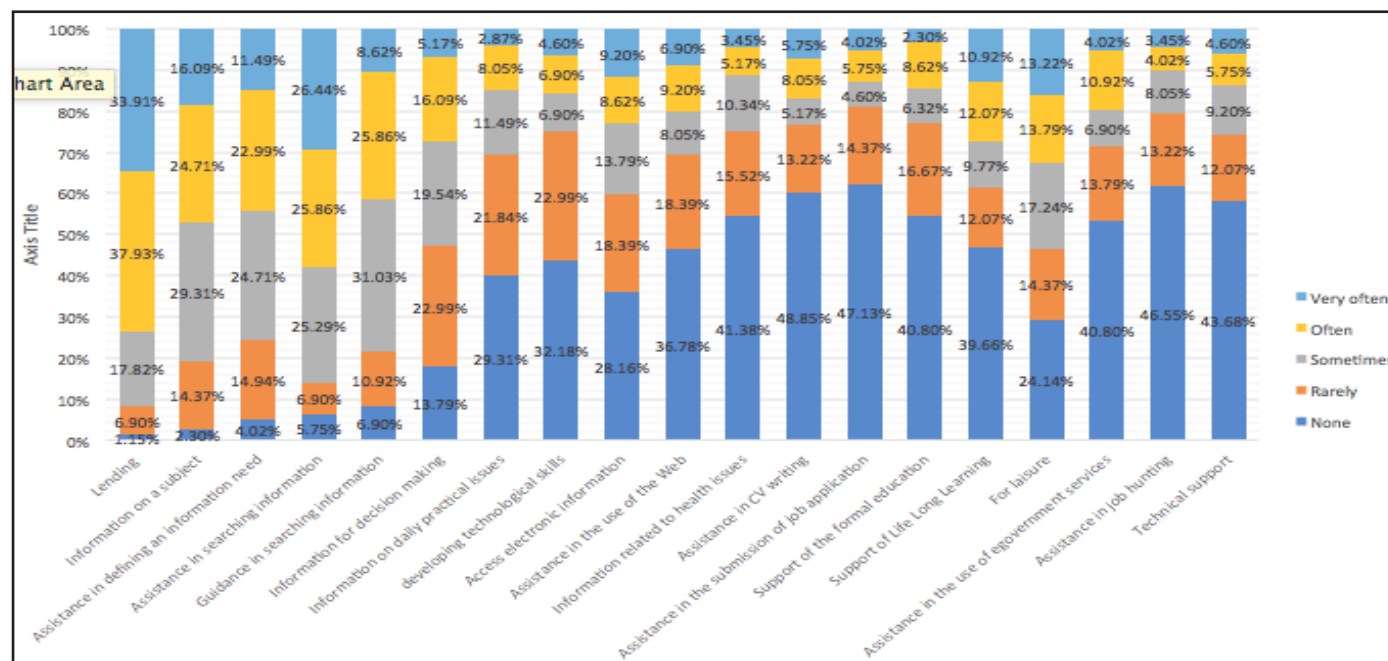


Fig. 3: Users' Rates of Asking Librarians Assistance for Different Tasks

Finally, users were asked to rate the degree librarians assisted them to meet specific types of needs. It was found that users were helped “very much” from librarians to meeting “informative”, “leisure”, “participation in the regional events”, “educational” and “research” needs. However, they reported that librarians were least help-

ful with “solving problems related to e-government services”, “professional” and “socialising” issues (see Fig. 4). These findings further verify users’ ratings in terms of how often they ask librarians’ assistance to use specific services. Users again rated low any services relevant to e-government and job-seeking activities.

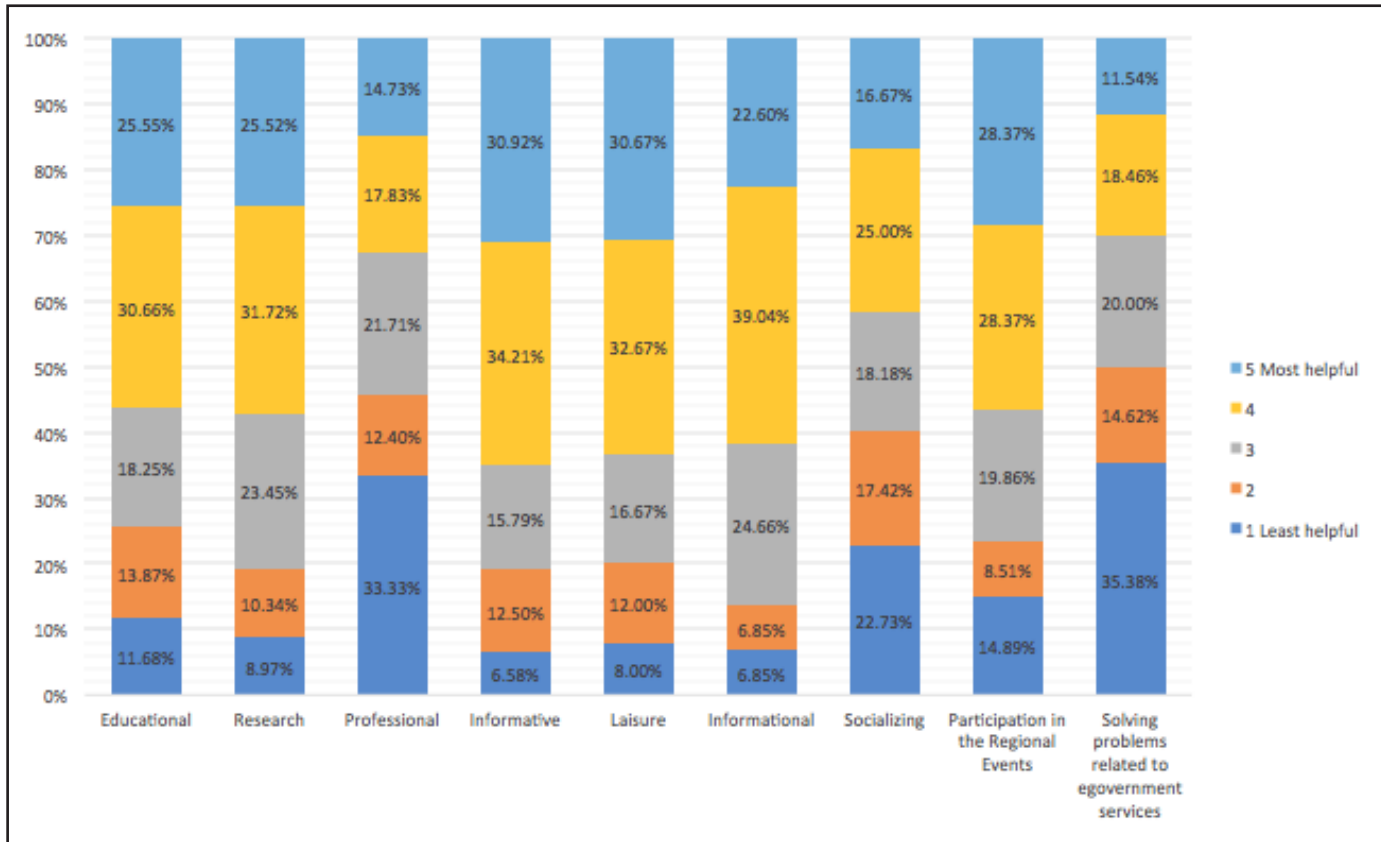


Fig. 4: Users Ratings of How Much Librarians have Supported Them to Meet Specific Needs

Discussion

The literature on the roles of public librarians focused mainly upon the challenges, possibilities and the value of public libraries in the communities they serve. The main aim of this study is to examine the perceptions of public libraries’ users in a fast-changing environment in Greece and investigate if there are any differences and/or similarities in their perceptions according to their educational level and computer competence. Further analysis regarding the roles based on the educational level, computer competence of the participants and region of the libraries did not reveal any differences.

One of the main findings of the study is that although users recognise all the important roles of public libraries, they

value more the traditional roles of promoting reading, information retrieval, consultation in information search as well as providing instruction in the selection and use of information. It appears that access to information is perceived as an important role for public librarians that is in line with studies conducted by Evjen & Audunson (2009); May & Black (2010) and OCLC (2010). The fact that users indicated as important role the promotion of reading, in agreement also with the study of Evjen & Audunson (2009), could be the result of public libraries organising events (Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2016) as well as of the reading campaigns organised the last 3 years by the National Library of Greece and funded by Stavros Niarchos Foundation³. However, taking into account that the majority of participants belong to the

³ www.network.gr

age groups of 31 and above, it could be said that public libraries need to further strengthen this role as their clientele grows older and find ways to attract new customers.

One unanticipated finding was that the role of the librarian as technology specialist was the least recognised in contrast to May & Black (2010) and Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou (2015). It is worth noting that only 22% of respondents indicated an advance knowledge of computer skills illustrating the need for technology training. A possible explanation for this could be librarians not supporting users to access digital resources and use computers mainly because of staff reductions, and restrictions in replacing retired staff (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou & Triantafyllou, 2015). At this point, it is worth noting that in contrast to the current study, a number of public libraries in Greece (i.e., Nafpaktos, Levadia and Veria) are known examples of staying up to date with recent technological developments offering technology-based and education-related services with a great impact in the community they serve (Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2016).

Lending of material was the most commonly reported information service confirming the findings of May & Black (2010) but in contrast to studies conducted in Denmark and Norway (Aabo & Audunson, 2012) where the majority of users (55–60%) do not use the library to borrow or return material, but for other activities. However, Appleton et al. (2018) found that primarily “public library is a place to access print information held in books”. The support of formal education was rated very low although users valued the instructional role of librarian. If combining individuals’ responses about the reasons why they seek assistance (“for searching information”, “information on a subject” and “for defining an information need”) and the contradictions in their opinions about librarian’s educational role, we could conclude that public librarians have a vital role to play in organising and promoting information literacy programmes.

It is somewhat surprising that users do not recognise the role of public libraries, to facilitate socialisation, in contrast to May & Black (2010) and Oliphant (2014) and the role of public libraries to support people in e-government services as highlighted in the literature. The roles of assisting people in seeking information

regarding health issues as well as in job-seeking were not highlighted in the present study, roles that one might think especially important in the current conditions in Greece. This unexpected finding could be attributed to the challenging external factors the Greek public libraries face.

In an attempt to justify generalisation, the findings from the questionnaire were further analysed. In this context, the services used in the questionnaire as reported in the relevant literature were assigned to specific roles again employed in the questionnaire (see Figs. 5-7). These roles were further generalised and thus seven main roles were identified out of 15. The most important roles seem to correlate with the highlighted roles corroborating the finding that the Information Consultant, Educational/supporter of education and Facilitator of access are the prevailed roles (see Figs. 5-7).

It could be suggested that users’ perceptions of librarian’s roles in the public libraries are related to leisure, culture and information. Although these roles remain important, new and evolving roles are identified in the relevant literature the last decade. This evidence is important to library managers mainly for two reasons: a) to improve the services related to traditional roles and based on this information and b) to implement reforms in the organisation in order to expand their roles meeting the needs of the changing society. They should also take into account that the actual uses of library services as well as the possibility for implementing reforms is often affected by public perceptions of the institution (Evyen & Audunson, 2009; Gould & Gomez, 2010). The evidence also suggests that it could be beneficial for users as for the organisation to formulate a marketing strategy which will advocate their contribution to the community and the evolving roles they can assume, especially in times of shifting social conditions. The study also demonstrated some limitations. Further research is needed with the use of qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups to understand better users’ perceptions in terms of why they rate as most important the traditional roles, why they only ask assistance for those ones and under which circumstances they turn to public libraries and librarians for assistance. In addition, interviews with library staff would indicate possible differentiations in the way users and librarians perceive their role.

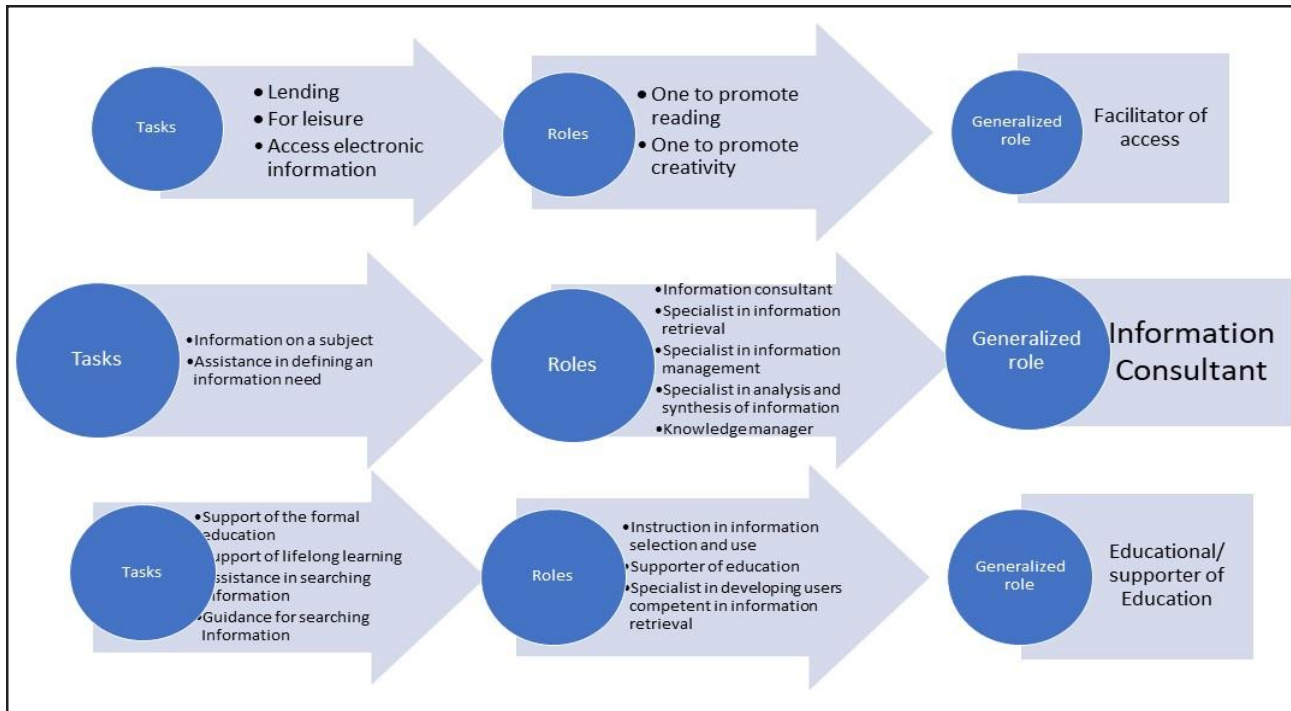


Fig. 5

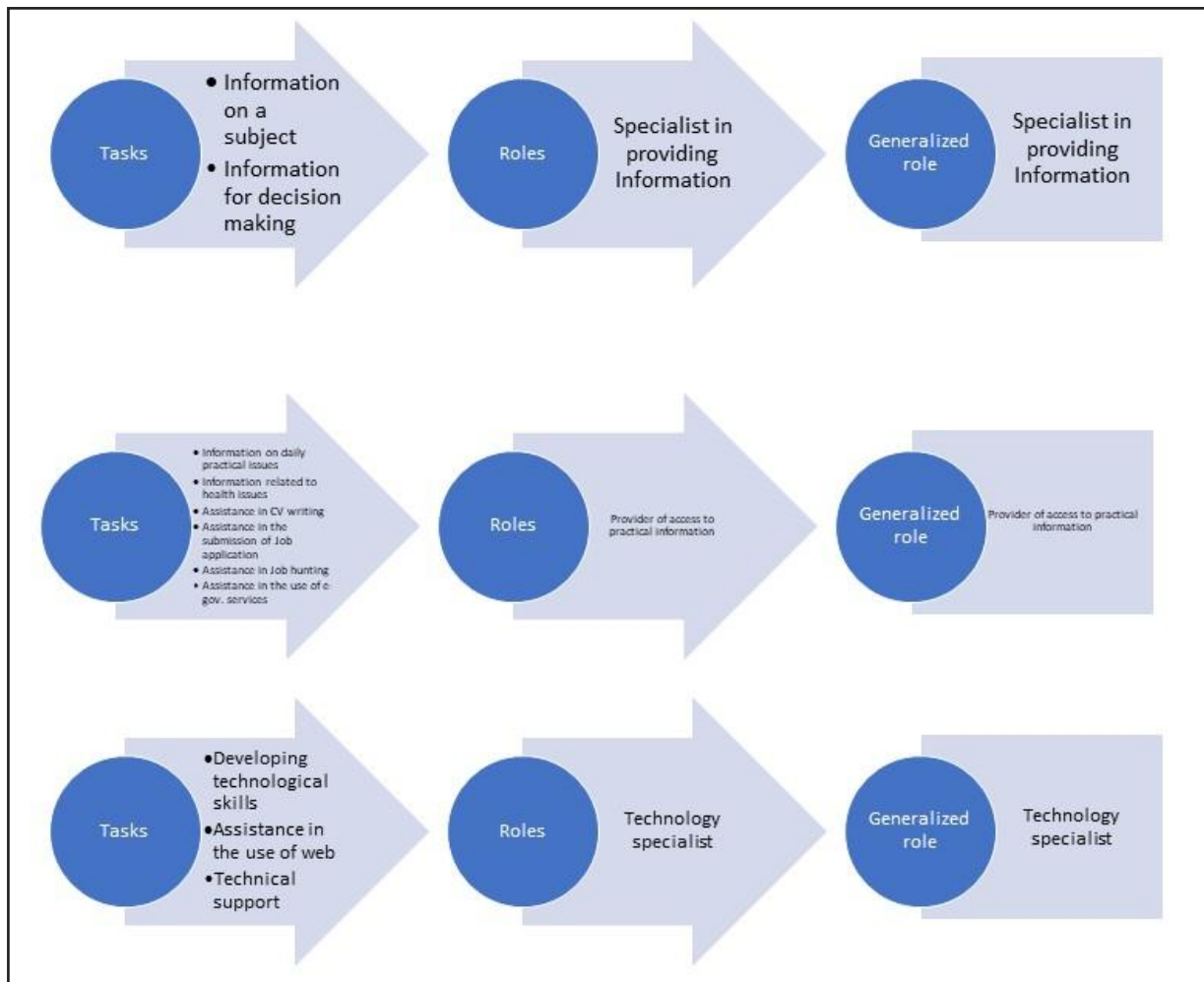


Fig. 6

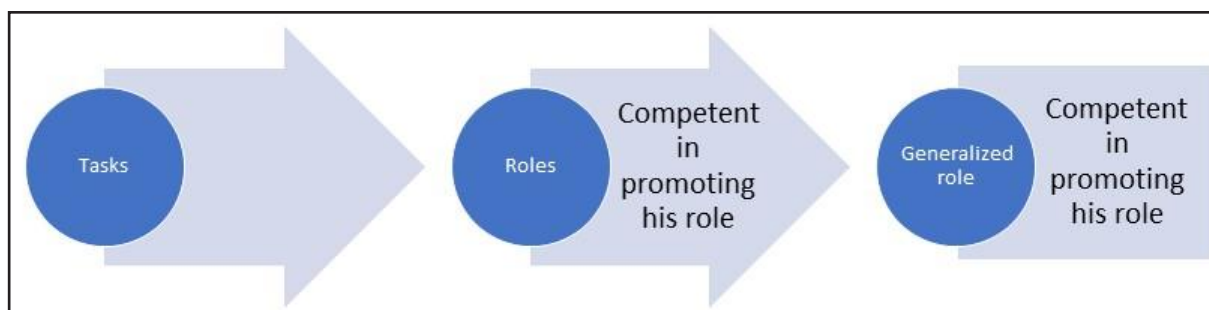


Fig. 7

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