Librarians Empathy: Visually Impaired Students’ Experiences Towards Inclusion and Sense of Belonging in an Academic Library

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A B S T R A C T

One of the key factors that fosters the creation of a sense of belonging is the sense of empathy. Indeed, it is considered to be one of the key skills for helping professionals, especially librarians. Nevertheless, previous studies were mostly library-focused. This paper approaches this issue from the visually impaired person’s (VIP) perspective. The questions this paper aims to answer are: “What have VIPs experienced in a University library regarding the degree of librarians’ sense of empathy” and, “How do they perceive it?” This study uses a qualitative approach. Data was collected through interviews and focus group discussions with eighteen VIPs who were registered in a university library. To determine the trustworthiness of the data, member checking, external audit, and reflexivity were used. The participants of the study perceived librarians’ greeting and friendly conversation, their tone of voice, sense of understanding regarding their limitations, and their communication regarding any changes in the circumstance of the library environment as key factors that illustrate their sense of empathy towards VIPs. Furthermore, VIPs expressed being afraid to ask for help from librarians, being disappointed, confused, uncomfortable, and not being understood due to a lack of librarians’ sense of empathy that influenced their professional behavior.

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The real meaning of an inclusive library environment is more than just a physical integration, it includes providing supportive systems, a welcoming culture, and an accepting atmosphere that is called, “creating a sense of belonging” (Peters, 2007; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009). A sense of belonging is affected when individuals with special needs connect with other members in the community. This can happen voluntarily or involuntarily by excluding or including themselves from the mainstream community (Burchardt, Le Grand, & Piachaud, 1999). Therefore, depending on their beliefs, experiences, and perceptions towards their surrounding environment, individuals with special needs can make a decision to remain in or leave the community (Oxoby, 2009).

One of the key factors that fosters the creation of a sense of belonging is the sense of empathy. Empathy is considered to be a key skill for all professionals helping others, especially librarians. Indeed, it influences the effectiveness of communication and the sense of understanding between librarians and library users. Empathic librarians can provide qualified services for their users. Nikolova (2004) noted that empathic skill is one of the core psychological skills, and it is an innate gift that has to be learned by individuals. Empathy can be considered one of the factors that can alleviate the negative experiences of students with special needs in the context of an academic library. Indeed, a librarian’s degree of empathy has an influence on a user with special needs and their sense of inclusion, integration, and belonging to the library environment. In this regard, equipping university librarians with sufficient empathic skills seems vital, especially when considering their main role in motivating students to continue their studies and to achieve their educational goals (Solomon, Battstich, Kim, & Watson, 1997).

This study depicts the perceptions and experiences of visually impaired students (VIPs) enrolled in a university library towards the librarians’ degree of empathy. The questions this paper aimed to answer are, “What have VIPs experienced in a university library towards degree of librarians’ sense of empathy” and “How do VIPs perceive the librarians’ sense of empathy?” In this study we hope to demonstrate to what extent the librarians’ sense of empathy can influence a VIP’s motivation to use the library services and the frequency of their library visits.

L I T E R A T U R E   R E V I E W

SENSE OF BELONGING

Inclusion is more than just a physical integration and includes providing supportive systems, a welcoming culture, and an accepting atmosphere (Peters, 2007; Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009). Therefore,
depending on their beliefs, experiences, and perceptions towards the policies of the environment, individuals with special needs could make a decision to include or exclude themselves from a community (Oxoby, 2009; Upton, 2010).

An individual’s sense of belonging affects his whole life, such as his perception, relationships, motivation, and learning process. A sense of belonging is not restricted to an individual’s situation, culture or age, and is one of the top psychological needs that should be considered throughout an individual’s lifespan (Deckers, 2005). In this respect, Maslow (1962) in his theory of hierarchy of needs introduced the need for a sense of belonging and love as a fundamental human need.

In our review of the literature, it is depicted that different scholars defined the sense of belonging from different perspectives. For example, Osterman (2000) defined it as the fundamental characteristic of creating and sustaining a community. Abedin, Daneshgar, and D’Ambra (2010) described the sense of belonging as an emotional connectedness of individuals with members of a group, such as caring ties and liking each other, which in the end bonds them with each other and creates the feeling of belonging to the community. Maestas, Vaquera, and Munoz (2007) emphasized that the meaning of sense of belonging is more than integration and it is mostly related to the individuals’ perception towards their place or association as real members of the community. A sense of belonging is formed based on an individual’s feeling, perception and experience of their integration into society. So, when individuals feel valued, connected, supported, and accepted by the system and their abilities to fit with the system, they feel like they belong (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bounswena, & Collier, 1992; Solomon et al., 1997; Ross, 2002).

The sense of belonging is one of the most discussed topics in the field of education. More specifically, sense of belonging is keenly studied from the perspective of teacher–student or peer–peer relationship via a variety of scales, such as Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM), Sense of School Community Scale (SSCS), Campus Connectedness Scale (CCS), The School Connectedness Scale (SCS), and the Belonging Scale (BS). In this regard, Solomon et al. (1997) demonstrated that students perceive a warm and supportive educational system as the main factor in creating a sense of belonging. Osterman (2000) and Salend (2004) pointed out that social and emotional support from teachers and peers in a school creates a welcoming, accepting and valued atmosphere, which results in a sense of belonging. Teachers or staff play important roles in the educational life of students with special needs (Kohn, 2005). The students spend much more time with teachers that teachers cannot help but play important roles in creating a sense of belonging among the students (Goodenow, 1993; Tinto, 1993; Osterman, 2000). Before the students can feel of a sense of connectedness with the whole educational system however, they have to feel a sense of attachment with their teachers (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fink & Resnick, 2001).

Moreover, Noll (1997) believed that a sense of belonging is necessary for all students in an education system, especially for students with special needs who join an inclusive school system, but are lacking necessary for all students in an education system, especially for students with special needs in schools or colleges must be optimized to nurture a sense of acceptance and being valued through social networks and friendships to increase their sense of belonging (McLeskey & Waldron, 2000; Pavi & Monda Amaya, 2001). Kohn (2005) concluded that the feedback students with special needs received from their schools and teachers plays an important role in their life. Negative feedback causes them to feel slow or poor, which directly affects their self-esteem whereas positive feedback causes them to feel accepted as a real member of the school community with a valuable place in the school’s mainstream activities.

Accordingly, based on the similarities that exist between an educational and library setting, it can be concluded that one of the best and most effective strategies to provide a welcoming, accepting, and valued atmosphere for individuals with special needs is found in the library environment and through librarians, especially front-line librarians. In addition, librarians are a role model for non-disabled users. Hence, librarians’ attitudes and their behaviors (friendly, supportive, and empathic) play a key role in fostering a sense of belonging among users with special needs in the library context. Nevertheless, a glimpse into the LIS literature indicated that although the sense of belonging and the sense of empathy are the core criteria of an individuals’ psychological well-being, their relationships were overlooked. To continue, we will present a quick look at the concept of empathy and related studies in LIS.

**DEFINITION OF SENSE OF EMPATHY**

The word “empathy” or “einfühlung” is a new word coined by the German psychologist, Theodore Lipps in the 1880s (Verducci, 2000). During that period, empathy meant the intellectual ability of individuals to understand others’ feelings. Empathy is closely connected to kindness through understanding others’ emotions and how to look at the world in a way that will cause compassionate behavior (Gunther, Evans, Mefford, & Coe, 2007). Aldridge and Rigby (2001) defined empathy as an individual’s ability to observe and understand another person’s internal world and their perspectives. Halpern (2003) indicated that empathy is an attitude of life that can be learned and used to communicate with others to understand their feelings or experiences. Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, & Jolliffe (1997) described empathy as the ability of individuals to tune in to how others are feeling, what they are thinking of, and to understand their intentions in order to better predict behaviors that will result in effective social reactions. With a similar view, some of the investigators define it as the art of recognizing other people’s emotions and feelings, their thoughts, the cause of those feelings, and ability to participate in their experiences without being part of that experience, which is the foundation of successful interactions among people (Hakansson & Montgomery, 2003; Wilson, Birdi, & Cocker, 2008; Masten, Morelli & Eisenberger, 2011). Other scholars described empathy as a complex concept and divided it into three sections: knowing about other individuals’ feelings, feeling what they feel, and responding compassionately to them (Levenson & Ruef, 1992). Still other scholars describe empathy as an affective response such as feeling with others, and cognitive empathy (ability to distinguish between your feelings and those of others) (Davis, 1983; Day & Chambers, 1991; Wilson & Birdi, 2007; Woolfolk, Hughes, & Walkup, 2008; Roots of Empathy, 2012; 2012b). Furthermore, some scholars discussed the difference between empathy and sympathy. For example, Dyche and Zayas (2001) highlighted that empathy, unlike sympathy, is the ability of individuals to understand the feelings of others with an awareness of the boundaries existing between the self and others (Fairbairn, 2002; Tso, 2007).

Empathy is the factor which influences different aspects of psychological life, such as the development of emotions, social understanding, pro-social behavior, relationship skills, a sense of sympathy towards those in need, and reduced aggression (Findlay, Girardi, & Coplan, 2006; Spinrad & Eisenberg, 2009; Masterson & Kersey, 2013). Empathy acts like a “social glue” that enables individuals to understand each other during social relationships, an emotion that forms and sustains positive relationships (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaitdman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2011). Hence, due to the important role of empathy in the creation of pro-social behavior among individuals, considerable attention should be paid towards its development (Eisenberg, Miller, Shell, McNalley & Shae, 1991; Cairns, 2002; Beaudoin, 2011).
Empathy is considered a key component for helping professionals, such as psychiatrists, physicians, nurses, and librarians (Aldridge & Rigby, 2001; Ziguras, Klimidis, Lewis, & Stuart, 2003; Powell & Clarke, 2006). Wilson and Birdi (2007) highlighted the role of librarians and their attitudes towards inclusive services to be the most effective factor in presenting a sense of empathy towards users with special needs. In fact, creating an inclusive atmosphere in the context of a library without an appropriate level of librarians’ empathy towards library users is impossible (Wilson, Birdi, & Cocker, 2008). Indeed, empathic librarians, besides alleviating the negative experience of users with special needs in the library environment, can have an influence on their sense of belonging via effective communication (Tso, 2007; Birdi, Wilson, & Tso, 2009). According to the literature, effective communication is influenced by many external factors, such as the physical and social environment, social factors, cultural norms, and empathy. Indeed, empathy is the most vital aspect of effective communication, which acts as a facilitator in the communication process (Hartley, 1999; Hardee, 2003; Zhang, 2006). In this regard, Zhang (2006) noted that communication is a situation-based phenomenon (i.e. depends on the context) and having the same background, such as social, ethnic, or cultural establishes some cultural empathy (LeBaron, 2003), or ethno-cultural empathy (Wang, Bohman, & Jasper, 2003) that influences the quality of communication via providing a sense of mutual understanding. To enhance the level of empathy among librarians, therefore, it seems essential to equip librarians with sufficient levels of communication skills.

Although empathy exists in all aspects of LIS, such as reference interviews, research consultation, and networking (Taylor, 1968; Lawson, 2009), Tso (2007) declares that it is still a new concept in LIS. Nonetheless, a glimpse into the Library and Information Science (LIS) course syllabi or even completed investigations indicate that less attention has been paid to this issue. Unfortunately, less attention paid towards it means that there are a limited number of materials and courses in this regard to promote empathic skills among library professionals.

Pfeil and Zaphiris (2007) indicated the key role of empathy in LIS is establishing a reliable foundation for trustworthy communication. In this context, Miller and Wallis (2011) highlighted the essential need for research in the field of empathy, especially in the context of a library environment. Indeed, due to the key role of human factors, such as empathy in constructing and shaping the social interaction structure, (i.e. traditional face-to-face interaction, or online), the need to recognize its nature seems vital, while at the same time noting that LIS stakeholders should develop their own awareness towards it. A glimpse at LIS literature created during the last decade demonstrates that it is obvious that despite the important role of front-line librarians in creating first impressions for the library organization, empathy is rarely considered to be a key skill for them. It is observed that librarians are reluctant to present a sense of empathy towards library users, especially with those from different backgrounds (Rogers, Clow & Kash, 1994; Tso, 2007; Wilson & Birdi, 2007). To support this in regard to the role of front-line librarians, the findings of the study conducted by Varca (2009) indicated that there is a positive relationship between front-line librarians’ empathic communication with users and librarians’ level of stress, which may highlight the reason that some librarians are reluctant to present empathic behavior. Hence, it seems LIS stakeholders should consider an appropriate degree of education to prepare the librarians for safe empathic communication. To support this, Burghardt and Gruenwald (2001) discussed empathy not as an innate skill, but rather it should be learned through educational systems. In addition, they believe librarians can promote the quality of services and present effective communications by equipping themselves with empathic techniques via education (Nikolova, 2004).

A review of literature in LIS indicates that a sense of empathy was mostly examined in the context of public libraries as the core of service quality and mostly from the perspective of librarians, human service, front-line service workers, and service providers, not the library users (Miller, 2007; Miller & Koersten, 2008; Wilson, Birdi & Cocker, 2008; Birdi, Wilson, & Tso, 2009; Cavanagh, 2009; Varca, 2009; Miller & Wallis, 2011). This research was conducted via service quality measurements such as LibQUAL+ (Wilson, Birdi, & Cocker, 2008; Birdi, Wilson, Tso, 2009; Cavanagh, 2009). The LibQUAL model defined empathy as the extent to which the librarians present their responsiveness and their individualized attention towards library users (Nitecki & Hernon, 2000; Cook, Heath, & Thompson, 2001). The Association of Research Libraries via the LibQUAL model highlighted the key role of empathy in evaluating library services by library users (LibQUAL+ (TM), 2007). Indeed, library users via the LibQUAL questionnaire declared their ideas towards librarians’ responsiveness, assurance, and reliable behaviors towards them (Cook et al., 2001).

As we enter the 21st century, emerging new technologies have completely changed the current nature of our world, even influencing disciplines such as LIS. Accordingly, professionals needed to apply new types of skills, like ICT skills to make librarians capable of adjusting to the new demands in new contexts (Mellis, Carvalho, & Thompson, 2013). A review of the literature illustrates the deep influence of emerging new technologies on librarians, and their professional work from single processes to complex processes (Miller & Wallis, 2011). These technologies include forms of information sharing including blogs, wikis, podcasts, instant messages, and RSS, not to mention Web 2.0 technologies, such as virtual reality (Second Life), and social networks (Facebook, and Twitter). New technologies provide new context (both virtual, and physical) for librarians to be more in contact with library users. Subsequently, with the growth of the usage of websites in society, some scholars in LIS evaluated service qualities in the context of a website based on four dimensions: empathy, playfulness, interactivity, and aesthetic appeal (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Malhotra, 2002). Previous scholars defined empathy similarly: the librarians’ degree of individualized attention, information, provision of mutual communication channels, and a sense of connectedness in chats or email (Chen & Yen, 2004). Recently, with the advent of Web 2.0 and its unique characteristics (i.e. ease of use or participatory nature), LIS professionals and users considered empathy to fall in the list of library service quality (Chua & Goh, 2010). Indeed, users perceived the existence of Web 2.0 features in a library website as a symbol of social connections between librarians and library users, in addition to individualized attention to library members.

Despite all the progress made in LIS in the form of applying emerging and new technologies in the library environment, one thing remained constant: the social, communicational, and interpersonal skills of librarians when communicating with library users. Indeed, librarians in different contexts (online, offline, virtual, or face-to-face) conduct effective conversation and, in addition to applying their interview skills, they need to combine communication with proper emotional support, such as empathy (Hakansson & Montgomery, 2003; Hiller, 2004; Nahl & Bilal, 2007; Pfeil & Zaphiris, 2007). Nevertheless, a glimpse of LIS literature towards the concept of empathy in the context of new technologies (social networking technologies), indicated that most investigations (especially information health) concentrated on the effect of technology on an individual’s sense of empathy, its capabilities to be experienced and learned via online interaction, and its ability for promoting positive change on an individual’s healthy behavior (Beard, Wilson, Morra, & Keelan, 2009). Hereupon, one aspect which received less attention is the relationship between librarians’ empathic behavior and its influence on library users’ psychological well-being, such as sense of belonging.

**METHOD AND MATERIALS**

This study applied a qualitative approach to data collection. Participants were VIPs who registered with the library at a research university in Malaysia. The research university is the oldest university in Malaysia.
and was purposely chosen since it was designated by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia as the one to which students with special needs are directed. The library of the university boasts the longest experience of providing special services, especially to VIPs. The Deputy Registrar’s Office of the university reported that according to the latest statistics collected in 2011, there were 79 VIPs registered at the university and of these, only 20 VIPs are registered with the library. This paper is based on responses from 18 VIPs (six females and twelve males) from different fields of study who volunteered to participate in this study. The VIPs comprise nine undergraduate (Bachelor level) and nine postgraduate students. Five of the VIPs have low vision but fit into the category of visually impaired because they have between 15 to 20% vision. This paper examines VIPs’ perceptions, experiences and feelings while interacting with librarians in the library. The study of the librarians themselves is not within the scope of this study.

Data collated via interviews and focus group discussions were held at VIPs’ library carrels, a special laboratory in the library, and in students’ dormitories at a hall of residence. Communications were also exchanged via email since VIPs have access to computer screen reader software, such as JAWS or Window eye. Through email participants were informed of the aim of the study, what the researchers expected them to do during interviews and how the data was analyzed and reported. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the research at any stage. All VIPs signed the consent forms before the interview sessions began.

The interview questions were divided into two broad sections. The questions in the first section were related to the librarians, library services, and facilities that were provided for VIPs. The questions of this section started with general questions, such as “How often do you go to the library?”, “What is in the library that motivates you to make the visit?”, “What is the first thing that comes to your mind when thinking about the library?” Then, it continued with indirect questions regarding librarians, such as “If you encounter any problem in the library, who is the first person to whom you will consult and why?”, “How do you become aware of the new services and facilities that the library provided for you?” Based on the interviewee’s reply, the researcher then encouraged the participants to express their opinion about librarians and the degree of their disability awareness.

The second section of the interview questions included the concept of sense of belonging and participant’s perceptions towards the librarians who provide them a sense of comfort, acceptance, being valued, and belonging, such as “How do librarians show their respect towards VIPs?”, “How do librarians in the library make them feel like they have a place in the library?”, and “Would you please describe any situation in that you feel you are welcomed or belong to the library?”. The final question was “If you could change something in the library, what would you change?”

Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 min. The researchers divided the participants into four focus groups and each focus group discussion took 1 hr and 45 min to 2 hr. All interviews and focus group sessions were recorded with a digital audio recorder. In this study, data collection and analysis was carried out concurrently. For data analysis, significant statements were extracted and noted into meaningful units, which were consequently grouped into meaningful themes. Two main themes emerged with regards to VIPs’ perceptions and descriptions about librarians. To ensure trustworthiness of data, member checking, external audit, and peer reviews were undertaken.

The following section describes the five main themes explored and extracted from VIPs’ perceptions, experiences and feelings toward the librarians’ sense of empathy in the library. In this study, the names of all participants were changed to keep their anonymity.

**THEMES EMERGING FROM THE FINDINGS**

**LIBRARIANS’ GREETINGS AND FRIENDLY CONVERSATION**

In this study, greeting was one of the conditions in the library context that was perceived by VIPs to be a symbol of a librarian’s sense of empathy. When the librarians greet, they create a welcoming atmosphere and evoke positive experiences as a result of making the VIPs feel comfortable or at ease. In this situation, the VIPs would have no hesitation in requesting help when they encounter any difficulties in the library. To support this, Johnson (2001) explained that library users expect the librarians to be friendly, smiling, and to interact actively with users. Indeed, when the librarians are friendly, the users with special needs tend to feel more at ease and feel welcomed in the library.

“To have an ideal library we need a friendly, empathic librarian who would greet us with a ‘hi’ or ‘salam’ [peace]. Sometimes they come to our carrels and ask us how we are, what are we doing? We as visually impaired students don’t always need help; we need to be talked to. Once we feel more comfortable with the librarians, we could talk to them, and we can easily ask them for help if there was any problem” (Fahimeh, 23 years old).

“I feel that the librarians respected me because they make friendly conversation with me. This makes it easier for me to request for more help! I mean when I ask for some help, the librarians are willing to help without any umm or resentful questions! … when the librarians greet me, for example, they would ask me how I am and that they have not seen me for a long time. This shows (to me) that the librarians are familiar in handling visually impaired students” (Yacob, 37 years old).

“Some of the librarians are friendly. I mean when I see me in the library, they would greet me both inside and outside the library. Sometimes the librarians bring us some food to eat or maybe during the festival celebration or on Hari Raya, they bring us something to eat” (Amir, 31 years old).

“Actually, every morning when I come to my carrel, Encik Habib (one of the librarian) comes and sees me, So I can talk to him and he can help me” (Firooz, 21 years old).

“Imagine a situation where you have not come to the library for a long time and the librarians would enquire from our peers posing questions, such as why hasn’t this person come to the library? Has he graduated? Or imagine the moment you have finished your studies in university and suddenly encounter a problem and come to the library and the librarian would pay attention to you!” (Louvee, 28 years old).

Duckett (2004) pointed out that library users expected librarians to be knowledgeable, friendly and polite and provide services at the agreed time. Although information transfer is more important for librarians when compared with the quality of the relationship and the attitude of librarians, the users might have a totally different view. Indeed, the relationship with the librarians is more important for library users. In this study, the participants indicated that the amount and the quality of a librarian’s communication is important for them to feel like they belong to the library.

“To belong in the library, I like the librarians to be concerned about me. For example, if I ask for their help, the only thing I expect from them is to at the very least give me a smiling face! That is the first expression which I like to see and the second one is to help me whole-heartedly” (Nasir, 21 years old).

**LIBRARIANS TONE OF THE VOICE**

The communication process between people involves the use of both verbal and non-verbal communication channels. The non-verbal channels consist of facial expressions and tone of voice, both of which can reflect the communicators’ feelings, emotions, sense of empathy, and attitudes. Although visually impaired persons cannot see the facial expression of a person they are communicating with, they can perceive an individual’s expression from the tone of his voice (Laplane &
Ambady, 2003). Boas, Ferreira and Viola (2012) pointed out that in a communication process, the tone of the voice of an individual can convey a great deal of information about the individual’s attitudes, emotions, sense of empathy, and opinions. They pointed out that many of the visually impaired teachers are unaware of the power of their voice, and they do not know the extent to which their voices influence their professional performance. The visually impaired participants in this study indicated that they can gauge the librarians’ degree of willingness to help them and their sense of empathy based on their tone of voice.

“… The ideal library for the visually impaired is a place, I guess, which has friendly librarians. When you talk to the librarians, they speak to you softly. You know, because we are blind we can listen, listen to your voice, so we can recognize and define whether someone is friendly or not. We recognize their expressions through the tone of their voice, from the way they talk to us when we ask a question. For example, we ask a question about keys. I forgot to bring my keys or I return the books quite late, and I want to borrow more books, so from the librarians’ tone of voice or words, which they use we can guess their reaction. When librarians answer our questions with one or two words, such as Yes, No, Uhhm, I don’t know, it does not sound friendly to us! So through their tone of voice, the way they talk, how willing they are to help and their reactions to our request for help, we can gauge the level of their friendliness and sense of understanding” (Hadi, 22 years old).

“… For me, librarians’ tone of voice is Ok but the majority of my visually impaired friends are sensitive. So maybe if the librarians speak a little loud, the visually impaired student thinks that he is shouting. I think librarians should learn how to talk nicely and in a friendly manner to visually impaired students” (Fahimeh, 23 years old).

“Ok! Let’s be frank! Yes, there are some librarians who I think talk nicely in a friendly manner — their voice creates in you such a nice feeling! Having good communication with the librarians is very important for us because it helps us feel comfortable to ask for their assistance. Good communication makes the librarians our friend!” (Yacob, 37 years old).

LIBRARIANS WHO ARE TOO BUSY TO HELP

The statements by some of the visually impaired students indicate their negative perception towards the support given by the librarians. They perceive the librarians to be constantly busy and do not have the time to help them.

“… Some of the librarians are very kind and helpful but some of them… I don’t know… just don’t like to help us! Sometimes for example when I ask them, sir can you search this book for me? Then they just tell me oh, sorry I am very busy or they just tell me I don’t know! Sometimes they also spend only two minutes to search for the book and then come back and tell me that the book is not there! Maybe somebody has borrowed it! Because of that, I think it is better not to ask them for help and it’s better to struggle by myself… I think it is mostly related to their attitudes” (Mostafa, 24 years old).

“The librarians are not helpful for searching the books or finding books on the shelves… They told us that we have to search for it with our volunteer readers. Also, they seem so busy that I don’t feel comfortable asking them to help!” (Laila, 23 years old).

According to Hatlen (1996), visually impaired people perceive their surrounding environment and their interactions with people differently from sighted people. Therefore, at the time they asked for help, the librarians may seem busy but the visually impaired users cannot really be sure because they cannot see. Such situations can evoke negative perceptions toward the librarians.

“Sometimes librarians reply to our needs a little late. Maybe they are too busy or maybe they think such complaint is just a small matter. Maybe our request for help is routine for them! … Nevertheless, if the librarians are free, they will help. If not, we cannot blame them because it is not part of their duty… I mean they have other formal duties” (Louvee, 28 years old).

“… We know helping visually impaired students is not the duty of librarians and even when they do something for us it is on their free will! For instance, if suddenly we need to fill in any form, we go directly to them and ask them to help us. If they are free they will help us, if not, we cannot blame or scold them why they don’t like to help us because this is not part of their duty… It is difficult to judge since we don’t know their job specifications. Maybe they have and may be they don’t! But if helping us is made compulsory as part of their work, it will be better!” (Amir, 31 years old).

We can infer from the “maybe” responses that these VIPs are trying to have a positive attitude towards the negative reactions they sometimes get from the librarian’s support. This way of justifying the librarians’ actions or non-actions is quite common and this might even help to reduce their discontentment. Indeed, the lack of a written and clear policy regarding the types of support librarians have to provide for VIPs caused them feel guilty to request more help from the librarians. Accordingly, over time such feelings spread among the VIP community from senior VIPs to junior ones to try to be independent, solve their problem through their volunteer readers, and avoid as much as possible requesting help from the librarians.

BEING AFRAID TO ASK FOR HELP

The participants of the study indicated that they were afraid to ask for help from the librarians and perceived that the librarians might get angry when they ask for help. They believe that librarians have a lot of things to do. Also, since searching for books is not their duty, they avoid asking for such an assistance unless they desperately need help.

“I never thought of asking the librarians to help me find books, you know, I think it is not their responsibility. I am afraid that if I ask for help, maybe they are going to feel hey, why you are asking me to help you…. Since finding books is not their job, I think probably they won’t help me! Also, I have never heard any of my blind friends asking for help from librarians” (Hadi, 22 years old).

“… You know I am very afraid of the librarian; (she laughs) afraid of them. They are like a boss. I am afraid they might get angry at me. Maybe because of their face you know I have low vision and can see a little!” (Laila, 23 years old).

“… Maybe I am very afraid to ask for help from the librarian or complain about something! Let me ask you a question, if I give you a chocolate and you ask me for more does it reflect my greediness? I mean some librarians think so. If I complain about the librarians’ lack of support to find books for me on shelves, maybe they think that I am not thankful for the other facilities or services, which the library is already providing for us!” (Ahdiyeh, 22 years old).

Sacks (2010) observed that because individuals with low vision may look normal, they often get into trouble when requesting for help. Because of this, most of them are very shy and easily frustrated. He found that sometimes low vision individuals have more difficulties in comparison with the visually impaired people. Indeed, they have low self-esteem. One low vision participant in this study expressed his feelings of being a person of low vision and the difficulties he faced when he asked for help.
“…I have heard from many of my visually impaired friends who ask the librarian easily at the floor for help but when I compare their situation with myself, see sometimes my situation is worse! I mean do I as low vision student have the right to ask for help since I look like a normal student, sometimes I feel shy to ask for help, I afraid maybe the librarians would refuse to help me…” (Nasir, 21 years old).

LIBRARIANS NOT COMMUNICATING ABOUT LIBRARY RENOVATIONS

It is very important that visually impaired users are informed about the changes in the library environment. This information can affect a sense of being safe among visually impaired users (Moore, 2003). When the librarians fail to inform them of such changes, the visually impaired users perceived the staff as not being empathetic.

“…Last week I came to my carrel with my visually impaired friend when suddenly we saw the librarian angrily calling us don’t go, don’t go there! We didn’t know what was happening! We are visually impaired and cannot see, we didn’t know there was renovation taking place! How could we know! I don’t know why they didn’t inform us about the renovation…” (Rahman, 22 years old).

“One thing which annoys me in the library is when the library does some renovations! So imagine the situation if the librarian didn’t tell me about the renovation and I came to the library and it was the lunch break and workers leave all their stuff on the floor! I mean those woods and nails are dangerous for us! Luckily the last time the library had renovation, I was with my volunteer reader and she told me to be careful!” (Hadi, 22 years old).

“…We expect the librarian to inform us about any new changes or plans for renovation. Changes in the layout cause us to get confused and we need time to get ourselves familiarised with the new layout. Like just now, I think they have put a carpet in front of the room because now there is some renovation for the staff office. So when I came to the library suddenly felt what is this? Why have they put such a thing in front of my carrel room and have blocked my path? Why they didn’t inform us about the renovation! So I asked somebody and they told me there is renovation (he stopped for a second). I am sure if I asked the librarian why they didn’t inform us, they will say so sorry, we forgot to tell you!” (Louvee, 28 years old).

“I just came to the library and asked what happened? Oh, some renovation! The librarian never informed us. Maybe they think it is not very important like a fire drill” (Mostafa, 24 years old).

“…The problem is that they never inform us about changes in library layout. Sometimes I feel depressed. Anyway I have to face such problems and have to come to the library” (Sedigeh, 29 years old).

Indeed, the lack of information regarding any changes in the library, such as renovation causes creation of negative perception among VIPs about their place or association to be a real member of the community (Maestas et al., 2007), their emotional connectedness with library community (Abedin et al., 2010), and community support and care towards them (Osterman, 2000; Ross, 2002; Salend, 2004). In this respect, Birdi et al. (2009) emphasized that librarians must have empathy and understanding towards the disadvantaged groups through catering to their needs, and providing relevant information and facilities as part of the efforts to ensure quality of services in libraries.

Accordingly, the lack of librarians’ empathic behavior that forms a negative feeling, perception, and experiences among VIPs will influence the creation of sense of belonging regarding the library community.

LIBRARIANS WHO DO NOT UNDERSTAND

Understanding is part of the feeling of empathy that encourages the creation of a sense of belonging (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002). When librarians show that they understand the physical conditions of the visually impaired students, this improves the VIP’s perception that the librarians are empathetic towards them and this can affect their sense of belonging. In this regard, Kohn (2005) discussed that the types of feedback that the students with special needs received from their educational setting plays an important role in their life, such as their self-esteem, feel acceptance, being real member of the community, and having valuable place in the education’s mainstream.

“… Librarians can show their respect and value to me by understanding that I am blind! Understand my situation. Sometimes, I put my keys on the table but because I am blind, I cannot see, right! So, I didn’t know where the keys are. I forgot to take my keys and leave the room. So I expect the librarians to understand why I left the keys. I didn’t do it purposely… When I return books late; I hope the librarians understand my situation. I am blind and cannot really look at the receipt; I mean the paper they give me which indicate when I should return the book. I expect them to understand my situation and not blame or scold me, I don’t break rules purposely!” (Hadi, 22 years old).

“…I have no problem paying a fine when I return books late, which is my mistake, but when the librarians blame and chide me as being careless, I get upset! They should understand my situation! The receipt is in print format, sometimes since we cannot read or there isn’t any person to read it for us or because there isn’t any other alarm for overdue of book we return the books late! We know there are such rules and don’t need the libraries staff to scold us!” (Amir, 31 years old).

“When we come across librarians who understand my situation, that we need volunteer readers to read the books for us and they would extend the borrowing time from one day to three days, I feel very proud of them!” (Amir, 31 years old).

Sacks (2010) explained most students with low vision appear sighted and this is often not recognized by their sighted peers and the librarians. Sacks observed that people with low vision may look normal and often get into trouble when requesting help.

“As you know I have low vision, I remember the time I was looking for a book in the shelves but couldn’t find it on the shelves, the place for the book was empty. So, asked for help from the librarian. She told me go to the second floor, there were librarians who were re shelving books on shelves… It was one of my worst experiences in the library! I don’t know, I don’t want to point fingers at who is right or who is wrong. Anyway, I asked the person who was shelving the books where the book was as I couldn’t find the book. Maybe I sound a bit rude! So that person guided me and showed me the book. He told me why I didn’t see the book on shelf? Can’t I see! Of course I cannot see; I have low vision! Maybe I look like a normal person but I cannot see all things, my vision is very low. At that moment I was so disappointed because they should, as librarians understand my situation. They should show some respect! They need to understand us! Yeah that is very important, sense of understanding…” (Nasir, 21 years old).

“I feel there are some problems that we face in the library, which have arisen because of the lack of understanding of library authorities and lack of empathy. I mean may be it is difficult for the librarians to put themselves in our situations and understand our needs. Maybe librarians are too busy, or maybe there are some policies, financial or bureaucracy problems, which hamper library authorities from fulfilling all of our needs” (Yacob, 37 years old).

The reality is that the lack of librarians’ degree of disability awareness prevents them from presenting empathic behavior that subsequently affects their sense of understanding towards VIPs and low vision students’ conditions. Accordingly, a lack of librarians’ empathic
behavior creates negative experiences and feelings for VIPs towards their place and distance from other members in the community. Krill, Platek, and Wathne (2008) highlighted that individuals' psychological perceptions, experiences, and tangible distance from other members in the community have a negative effect on the creation of a sense of belonging and finding their own place in the community. In summary, VIPs demonstrated that the origin of all types of challenges they encounter in the context of library in contact with librarians comes back to their lack of disability awareness that prevents librarians from providing user friendly support besides expressing their sense of empathy towards them. Accordingly, such negative experiences directly influence their sense of being welcomed, respected, valued, and connected towards the library environment that has an effect on their sense of belonging. Table 1 summarizes VIPs' feeling about the librarians, and how types of librarian behavior encouraged or diminished their sense of belonging.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

This paper highlighted the visually impaired students' feelings, perceptions, and experiences toward librarians' sense of empathy and understanding. From the feedback given by the VIPs, librarians are judged to be friendly and empathetic based on their greetings, friendly conversation, tone of voice, and their willingness to find books for them from shelves. The participants of the study remarked that the librarians' friendly, empathic behavior provides them with the sense of being accepted, valued, cared, respected, and welcomed that not only influenced their positive attitudes towards librarians, but also fostered the creation of a sense of inclusion or belonging to the library environment.

On the other hand, they perceived librarians' careless behavior regarding information about library renovation and changes in physical layout, their lack of understanding concerning their limitations, in addition to scolding when they leave their belongings on the table or return the books they borrowed late to be negative experiences that hamper them from feeling being welcomed, accepted, valued, and feeling that they belong in the library. Moreover, the lack of librarian's empathetic and friendly behavior in combination with their lack of disability awareness and communication skills caused the participants of the study to perceive that librarians are too busy to assist them. As a consequence, some of the participants of the study are even afraid to ask for help from the librarians. Indeed, such feelings, perceptions, and

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**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emerging themes about librarians' empathy</th>
<th>Situations</th>
<th>Types of feelings</th>
<th>Feeling that foster or hamper sense of belonging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Librarians' greetings and friendly conversation</strong></td>
<td>Staff greetings, Salutations upon meeting (Hi/Salam), Friendly conversation, Staff willing to help, Staff bring gifts during festivities</td>
<td>Feel welcomed, Feel comfortable, Respected by librarians, Feel easier to ask for help, Cared for or thought of by staff who are aware of those with special needs</td>
<td>Sense of being included/considered, Sense of being respected/value, Sense of being accepted/being important, Positive attitude towards librarians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Librarians' tone of voice</strong></td>
<td>Communicate in soft tone of voice, Reply with smiling faces, Answer questions using just one or two words, Staff willing to help, Talk loudly, Good communication</td>
<td>Happy and have a sense of belonging, Feel welcomed, Touched by friendliness, Nice and warm feeling, Feel comfortable, Feel embarrassed, Feel angry, Feel afraid</td>
<td>Positive attitude towards librarians, Feel being accepted/respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Librarians who are too busy to help</strong></td>
<td>Librarians refuse to find books on OPAC or shelves, Inability to find books on shelves, Perceive librarians to be busy, Cold treatment by librarians, Librarians spend very little time to search for books needed, Librarians unwilling to fill in the forms, Librarians delay in responding to requests</td>
<td>Negative attitude towards librarians, Indolent librarians, Become disillusioned, Feel uncomfortable, Being in minority/sense of not being considered, Feel requests are inconsequential, Feel not treated equally, Suspicious towards librarians, Negative attitudes of librarians towards individuals with special needs</td>
<td>Negative attitudes towards library policy and librarians, Sense of exclusion, Sense of not being considered, Sense of not being valued/respected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Being afraid to ask for help</strong></td>
<td>Reluctant to request for help, Avoid complaining about their difficulties</td>
<td>Afraid of angering librarians, Feel librarians are too superior entertain request for help, Unfriendly faces, Afraid that librarians might think they are greedy/ungrateful, Feel shy to ask, Feel afraid of being rejected</td>
<td>Negative attitude towards library and librarians, Avoid asking for help, Not interested to be in contact with librarians, Uncomfortable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Librarians not communicating about library renovation</strong></td>
<td>Sudden encounter with renovations, Not being informed about changes to the library layout, Workers who leave dangerous tools around in the library, Not being informed of library renovations, Blocked from entering their carrels, Forgetting to take keys left in carrel rooms, Scolded by librarians for returning books late, Librarians who are willing to support, Librarians who extend borrowing period, Lack of awareness of low vision students' need, or visually impaired people's limitations/situations</td>
<td>Feel confused/surprised, Depressed, Inconsiderate librarians, Feel annoyed/uncomfortable, Feel hampered, Feel insecure/alarm about dangerous tools left around, Expect librarians to understand their conditions, Discomfort and anger at being scolded, Feeling upset, Perceived lack of empathy/understanding among librarians</td>
<td>Negative perception towards library and librarians, Negative perception towards librarians' empathy, Sense of being excluded/not being considered, Sense of not being valued/respected, Negative attitude towards librarians, Sense of not being considered/value, Sense of being included/respected, Feel as legitimate member of library, Sense of being excluded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Librarians who do not understand</strong></td>
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</table>
experiences over time transferred (through word of mouth) from senior VIPs to junior students to try to be independent, to solve their problems with the assistance of volunteer readers, and to avoid requesting help from librarians as much as possible.

Of interest is that even when the participants of the study voiced their complaints, most were apologetic, always trying to rationalize the actions of the librarians, giving reasons why the librarians treated them (on some occasions) in an unpleasant manner. Perhaps they realized that they might be asking for too much help and attention, which might be beyond the role of the librarians, especially front-line librarians who are too busy with their other formal duties. In fact, one of the reasons that caused such feelings among VIPs is the lack of written and formal policies regarding librarians’ duties in providing VIPs with friendly support. In this respect, the Royal National College for the Blind (1997) highlighted the key role of a written library policy to service users who are visually impaired. The institute recommended that a policy dedicated to supporting the needs of the visually impaired users should be translated in terms of budget allocations for equipment and clear roles and functions in a written policy for librarians. A written policy would be a promotional instrument to indicate commitment with clear key performance indicators for all librarians serving users with special needs. In this study, the researcher could not find any special policy formulated for VIPs in the context of the university under study.

According to published literature, inclusion is a process, not an outcome, and occurs when individuals feel connected through types of support received from other members of the community in various forms, such as interaction and communication with other members of the community. Indeed, social inclusion and a sense of belonging occur in situations where students with special needs feel accepted because of the types of support that they receive from all members of the community (Stainback & Stainback, 1990). A sense of belonging refers to a condition when an individual feels that his needs are important for the social system and he receives appropriate support and care from other members of the group (Osterman, 2000). Sense of belonging is a mixture of cognitive and affective dimension in that one dimension influences the other. An individual’s perceptions and feelings towards his/her position in the community has an effect on his/her behavior (Hagerty et al., 1992; Strayhorn, 2008). Hence, an individual’s perceptions of being valued, respected and accepted by the members of their community are expressions of their feeling of being connected, and feeling of belonging to the community. As a matter of fact, an appropriate degree of support defined by library stakeholders, such as written policies, and social or emotional support (such as empathic behavior of librarians), is an important sign from the library community towards VIPs to be important for the library community. These would make them feel welcomed, valued, and accepted by members of the community. Accordingly, the outcome of such a warm and supportive environment would be increased interaction between members of a community as well as across groups (Solomon et al., 1997). Indeed, students who experience caring and supportive environments feel more connected to the system they are in and thus feel a sense of belonging, which in turn influences the frequency of their participation and interactions within the environment (Salend, 2004). In this respect, Moore (2003) pointed out that the success of students with special needs in an educational system, (such as a library) is mostly related to the type of emotional and social support they received. Emotional support, such as the empathic behavior of librarians helps students with special needs to use all their potential talents to reach their educational goals. Accordingly, to support such a feeling, an educational system should, besides optimizing the physical aspect, consider how students with special needs are treated by the staff, librarians, and peers in the system.

Furthermore, according to the last version of the social model of disability, disability occurs not only because of the interaction of an individual’s physical or mental limitations with structural barriers, but because of psycho-emotional barriers which refer to the degree and quality of their interactions with the non-disabled. Psycho-emotional barriers reflect the barriers that arise from the relationship between individuals in the society based on their daily experiences. Indeed, negative experiences through prolonged or repetitive experiences can influence and restrict the psycho-emotional needs of individuals with special needs, including their sense of belonging. Moreover, it can internalize the concept of disability and oppression (Thomas, 1999; Reeve, 2006). Hence, some scholars note that the value of the psycho-emotional well-being of individuals with special needs is more important than their integration or participation in the context of the society (Reeve, 2006; Thomas, 2007; Hanisch, 2011). Hereupon, it can be concluded that the careless behavior of librarians (as a role model for non-disabled) with users with special needs, such as VIPs, will surely strengthen their sense of being worthless, invalid, devalued, and ashamed.

Therefore, librarians should equip themselves with three main components to interact and enhance user efficiency. These are congruence (refers to their honest behavior with users), empathy (view the world through user’s perspective, and understanding their feelings), and respect (refers to librarian’s unconditional acceptance of library users) (Higgins, 2007). In this respect, Heaphey (2006) remarked that according to the Jean Watson Human Care Theory, librarians’ work can be defined as servant-leaders who listen to users well, empathize with them, encourage them to develop their knowledge, focus on the community, and most importantly care about the users. The central idea of Watson’s Human Caring Theory is human values, such as concern, kindness, love of self and others. She discussed that love of self reflects an individual’s sensitivity toward their feelings, thoughts, cultural and personal beliefs, (e.g. racism, classism, and sexism) and experiences achieved during work in their professional context. Indeed, such sensitivity provides a proper foundation for them to fully present themselves to the users instead of hiding behind their notion of professional detachment (Watson, 1999). On the other hand, love of others refers to an individual’s awareness regarding their caring relation (empathy, and warmth that depict their respect and acceptance regarding users), and interpersonal communication with users that will facilitate their authentic communication, influence the establishment of a helping-trust relation, and enable the users to express their emotions (Watson, 1997). Therefore, librarians are expected to improve the culture of listening to the voice of users, provide more support, consider more ways to deal with the users, and develop qualities of human caring among librarians in the context of library.

The findings of this study indicate the important role of librarians’ empathetic behavior and communication skills in creating a sense of welcome and belonging among VIPs. However, it should be noted that increasing VIP awareness among librarians, especially front-line librarians who are constantly in contact with them, is vital. Indeed, knowledgeable librarians, besides providing supportive services, showing their sense of understanding, and using appropriate skills to communicate with visually impaired users, reflect an empathetic library system. Furthermore, due to the current societal shift from the information age to the conceptual age, and proliferation of the usage of online pedagogies among people, creative interaction and communication between LIS professionals and their clients seem more necessary than before (Maness, 2006; Mills & Lodge, 2006), which highlight the key role of empathy (Pink, 2005). Indeed, it seems that LIS stakeholders should equip their future educators with the essential transferable attributes, such as empathy, and more specifically in university libraries to motivate the users with special needs to achieve their educational goals (Miller & Vallis, 2011). Hence, the LIS stakeholders based on their context characteristics (social, cultural, ecological, and economic) not only should equip librarians with communication skills, and soft skills such as empathy, but also should promote future LIS educator’s degree of awareness regarding individuals with special needs. In this respect, the participants of the study suggested developing courses for LIS educators regarding the nature of special needs and the real needs of...
individuals with special needs. In this regard, they noted that conducting training workshops, and consideration of the specific pro-
motion of librarians who are familiar with the real needs of individuals
with special needs can be useful.

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