



# Assessing the Awareness of Public Libraries in Providing Sexual-Related Information for Adolescents

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**Abstract.** This paper is an attempt to describe the level of awareness among public libraries on their roles, challenges and the effort of the public libraries in providing sexual-related information for adolescents. Since the sexual-related information remains taboo in the context of this study, the public libraries seem not ready to provide such information to their users. In order to gather rich data, a qualitative type of study is chosen. Three participants purposively selected for interview sessions. The participants are librarians who work with public libraries; in charge of library activities. Further analysis shows that generally public libraries in Malaysia are not well prepared or ready to provide sexual related information due to cultural factor.

**Keywords.** Sex education; Public libraries; Adolescents; Sexual-related information

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, numerous news framing on social issues mostly are sexual-related issues involving adolescents. According to a statistic from Polis Diraja Malaysia (PDRM) in 2010, the issues involve 4097 teenagers aged between 13 to 17 years old escaped from home [1]. This number is increasing and worrisome. Escape from home may lead to any bigger and

more serious social issues such as premarital sexual activities, unmarried pregnancy and baby dumping. Furthermore, unmarried sexual activities are acceptable as part of adolescents' life. This scenario indirectly shows how serious the social issues involving adolescents' especially unmarried sex in our nation nowadays [2].

In Malaysia, the sexual-related information is considered a taboo in our community. Indirectly, information professionals are a part of the community that is bound by the cultural taboo, although their role is to provide information without prejudice irrespective to any group and any type of information. In order to be able to cater the information needs of society, information professionals should play their role to come forward together with the support groups and provide accurate information to the adolescents.

## **2. Library Services for Young Adults**

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has produced recommendations to enhance the Public Library Manifesto. The Federation states that public libraries need to connect with their communities and educate and train the people in the community [3]. Librarians and information professionals need to act as educators and personal knowledge advisors. In addition, public libraries need to work internationally to erode barriers and censorship whilst at the same time respecting all cultures.

In order for public libraries to provide sound service for young adults, [3] had published 'Guideline for Library Services for Young Adults'. The guideline provides the philosophical and practical ideas that help to improve the library services and to meet the educational, informational, cultural, and leisure needs of young adults. This guideline is used as a reference document for librarians, decision-makers, policy makers, library students and stakeholders to develop service for young people.

As written in the 1992's Charter of the Reader, International Book Committee and International Publishing Association,

Teenagers need special attention since many abandon voluntary reading at this stage in their lives. Their introductions to a wide array of books, compatible with their changing interests, should be encouraged by librarians and others who are aware of their psychological and emotional growth [4].

As young adults, they need support, guide and encouragement to attract their attention. At this age level, they prefer to receive information in a more attractive way to attract them.

## **3. Information needs and the role of Information Professional**

Librarians and information professionals need to play their role as educators and personal knowledge advisors towards their users. In addition, public libraries need to work internationally to reduce the barriers and censorship whilst at the same time respecting all cultures [3].

Young people get information about sex and sexuality from a wide range of sources including each other, through the media including advertising, television and magazines, as well as leaflets, books and websites [4]. Some information could be accurate and could be inaccurate.

Providing information through sex education is therefore about finding out what young people already know and adding to their existing knowledge and correcting any misinformation they may have. For example, young people may have heard that condoms are not effective against HIV or that there is a cure for AIDS. It is important to provide information, which corrects mistaken beliefs. Without correct information young people can put themselves at greater risk.

The issue of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is rampant among the young adults. These young adults should gather certain and credible information in order to assist their decision making and sexual preference. Frequently, in order to manage the uncertainty and anxiety associated with high risk of STIs, college students use the Internet to find information about sexual health [4]. Effective search tools and high health information literacy among contemporary online support group users enables them to search for and extract the information they exactly need an effective and efficient manner [5]. Users of online support groups can narrow a search and obtain required information tailored to their specific needs to reduce uncertainty and cope with anxiety about their concerns. On the other hand, for less literate young adults, they still rely on authoritative bodies such as public library, health center or health clinics to fulfil their information needs.

In short, information is knowledge and knowledge is power. The level of growth and development of any individual or nation or system is largely associated with relevant information available to the individuals.

#### 4. Research Goals

The goal of the whole study is an attempt to determine the readiness of public libraries in providing sexual-related information for adolescents. This paper reports one of the objectives of this study, that is, to identify the level of awareness among public libraries on their roles, challenges and the effort of the public libraries in providing sexual-related information for adolescents. In Malaysia, information professionals as a part of the community members are afraid to go beyond the boundaries set by the cultural taboo. To cater to the information needs in information ages, information professionals should step out of these cultural boundaries and come forward together with the support groups to provide accurate and authoritative information to the adolescents.

As this sexual-related information still being a taboo in our culture, adolescents found that it is something hard for them to get appropriate information. This situation leads them to find information from unreliable sources such as peers and unreliable websites, which may lead to more serious social-related issues. In our community, the public libraries should play their role to promote appropriate sources of sex-related information to the adolescents, as they are more close to this group.

This study helps in appraising the role of the public library in providing reliable and appropriate sexual-related information or sex education for youths. The understanding of their roles will facilitate the users to feel comfortable and gain more reliable information to fulfill their information needs. Public libraries are influential entities by forming a plan to approach

youths with more fresh and open ways. The study identifies how public libraries were used by adolescents and what services were provided to contribute in building a better socially nation. This study hoped would contribute towards any gaps that exist in the research of public libraries services that encompasses the fields of sexual information and sex education among adolescents.

## 5. Methodology

The methodology of this study is qualitative in nature, by conducting interviews with information professionals who are working in public libraries. Three participants are purposively selected as the interviewees, based on their position as librarians and in-charged of their in-library's activities and promotional activities with the public. They are identified as CASE A, CASE B and CASE C. The selection of participants suited the objectives of this study, that is, to understand the way public libraries handle their activities with the public especially the young adults.

According to [6], "conceptual framework is a formal way of thinking about a process/system under study". Figure 1 illustrates how this research was undertaken in a step-by-step process. The research sites are the libraries located in Klang Valley and actively organizing activities with the surrounding communities. Prior to the interview sessions, the researchers developed an interview protocol as a guide. The protocol consisted of open-ended questions in order to obtain rich and meaningful data. The interview sessions were conducted on face-on-face basis at the participants working place in the library.

The interview guide was prepared in order to gather in-depth and rich data on the awareness of public libraries in providing sexual-related information for adolescents. All conversations were recorded for the purpose of documentation and data analysis. A smartphone was used for each interview to record the conversation with the permission granted from the participants.

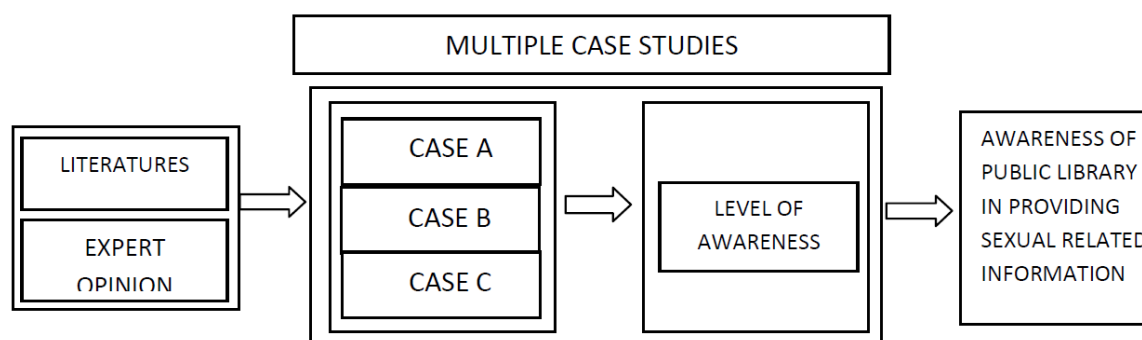


Figure 1. Step-by-step process of this research

## 6. Findings

### Role of public libraries in giving education to the users

The participants initially were asked about their opinion on public library's educational role. From the interview, all participants agreed on the role of a library in giving education to her users. Although no participants agreed that the library should give direct information on the

subject matter, they agreed a library has a responsibility to educate the users on finding correct information. They also agreed that a library stores information and a librarian as an information professional has an obligation to assist the users to find the needed information.

According to Case A, the role of library was not to directly spoon-feed the users on the subject matter. The library's role is to provide information literacy, which means to teach the users on how to find information efficiently and accurately.

In addition, according to Case C, a librarian is specialized in information not on subject matter. A library is a 'tool' to gather, store and disseminate information. So, for them, their role in educating the user is only on searching and retrieving information.

### Awareness of the library as a medium of educating the community

The participants were also asked about the medium to educate library users. Generally, all participants are aware that a library as a medium of educating the community. They are well agreed on their role in educating the users. Each of them actually explained to the researcher on the initiatives they have done for educating their users. Table 1 illustrates the initiatives of the librarians to attract public interest.

**Table 1.** List of librarian's initiatives

<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>INITIATIVES</b>
CASE A	Provide information literacy talk, workshop and seminar
CASE B	Provide reference desk for users to ask
CASE C	Educate on moral value, encourage library culture in users

### Awareness of users' needs

The participants were then asked about their approaches getting feedback on the information needs of their users. All participants provided almost similar answer, which they generally have to know their users' needs basically from the feedback provided by users. There are several methods they are using in order to get the feedback as illustrated in Table 2. All of them use the suggestion box as the medium for their users giving feedback. However, some of the participants have their own extra efforts like for example; CASE A, his library they also using social media accounts like 'Facebook' and 'Instagram' for them to reach their users. By having social media accounts, it is an opportunity for them apart from being a medium for them to communicate with the users and getting feedback from them; they will easily market their library as well. From the social media account, they are able to share the latest updates they have in the library like new collections and activities. On the other hands, CASE B opined that as a library, they must be alert with the passage of time and modernization. They make their own effort to gain attention from their users by having a modern look design, provide facilities that meet people's interest like gymnasium, and 6D Cinema Theater.

**Table 2.** Feedback medium

<b>PARTICIPANTS</b>	<b>MEDIUM TO GET FEEDBACK</b>
CASE A	Suggestion box, social media
CASE B	Suggestion box
CASE C	Suggestion box and questionnaire

### **Library contributions on curbing social issues**

The participants were also asked about their views on social issues and role of public library to curb the issues. Pertaining to the library contribution to curbing social issues, only two participants gave almost similar opinion. CASE B and CASE C both explained that they usually monitor the behavior and intercommunications between users in their library. This is included to avoid inappropriate manner among the users. Indirectly, it helps to educate the users on the appropriate manner to curb social issues. On the other hands, according to CASE A, he got a different view on this because of his opinion, libraries and schools only play a small role in child's and adolescents' life. For him, the parents should play a bigger role in curbing social issues among adolescents. For him also, it is all about parenting. The learning process should begin at home since childhood.

### **Library roles in providing sex education to the community**

The participants were enquired about their service to provide credible sex-related information to the users. All participants opined differently in this matter. For CASE A, his library did provide reading materials pertaining to sex education topics, just those materials being kept in "red spot" area so they are able to monitor the usage of the users. This is due to previously they received few complaints and feedback from users on the content of those materials are not suitable to be displayed at the open shelves as it might lead to misuse of it. In contra to CASE A, for CASE B, she strictly disagreed with sex education in general as she claimed it is against our eastern culture to openly discuss on sexual information. For CASE C, he is quite lenient on this issue as according to him, he agreed that sex education is important for our society to curb social issues that become more serious and worrisome nowadays. However, although he agreed that the sex education is important, he still opined that an in-depth discussion on this matter need to be done before it could be implemented.

### **Readiness of health and sex education activities**

The participants were also enquired about their readiness to involve in providing sex-related information and educating the users. From three participants, only CASE A responded that he was ready for sex education activities. He believes he and his management are ready for this but something that plays in his mind is about the participation. According to him, the measurement of the successfulness of any activities of the program is the number of participations and positive impact for the participants. However, vice versa on the other two participants. They both have a different perspective, which they do not think their library is ready for now due to the cultural taboos. CASE B strongly disagreed with the idea as she claimed it is against eastern culture.

For CASE C, although he is quite lenient and tolerates with this issue, he still could not provide further opinion since there is no discussion done on this matter with his management.

## 7. Discussions

Based on the report of the findings, the interpretation of the findings is discussed below.

### Public library awareness on sexual-related information service

The results of the study indicated that public libraries generally did not have awareness on the importance of promoting sex-related information and education to the society. The librarians did aware of the worsening social problems involving adolescents. But, for them, it is not their role to raise the awareness.

### Challenges Faced in Providing Sexual-related Information

The researchers believed that the public libraries were paranoid when discussing the sexual-related matters and still being bounded by the cultural taboos. Over all, the librarians were not ready and prepared for being a mediator to provide sexual-related information yet to the society and to educate them.

### Efforts Implemented by Public Libraries

Finding showed that there was no effort from the participants to provide sexual-related information and to promote the awareness and/or the importance of sex education. One of them provided health science collections that indirectly included sex education. However, the collections did not adequate to meet the actual goal in raising awareness itself.

## 8. Recommendations

The following is the practical advice and recommendations to further improve the provision of services in relation to the sexual-related information for the young adults.

### Passion on daily job

In any field of job, passion is the primary key. By having passion in daily job, each employee will perform to the maximum, and provide extra efforts on their tasks. In this case, being information professional, a librarian needs to keep abreast with the current issues, and makes an effort to help the society via library resources educating and raising awareness. As an information professional, they have to be a step ahead from the users. In recent years, their functions are not only being in the library and provide collections, their functions supposed to be beyond that. They are the closest entities to the society and definitely the most right medium to supply that awareness.

### Establishing networking

Networking is the normal means by which most people obtain information most of the time. A library is an information center. They store information like reading materials and, at the same

time, the librarians educate users via information literacy workshops and activities, to find information needed. Libraries usually build networking within and among libraries to share any information or service when needed. However, they also need to collaborate with other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and government organizations to reach the targeted society members, such as, on an awareness raising campaign.

### **Engage with current issues**

As an information provider, libraries need to be alerted and engaged with contemporary issues. Libraries need to ensure they are always ready for new information and the latest issues. Libraries are the look up point for the society or users to get the needed information. They need to be a step ahead of the users in order for them to cater all inquiries from users.

## **9. Future Research**

Built on the finding, it was revealed that no research is done previously in Malaysia pertaining to this issue. Libraries themselves do not aware of their roles in raising awareness among society pertaining to social issues. The libraries appear to be vital agent in the society together with the NGOs and government to curb social issues. Further research in the future can be done in a bigger scope in Malaysia as a whole, not limited to Klang Valley only and the topic might be more in depth as compared to this study.

## **10. Conclusions**

Public libraries are aware of their role to provide information based on the users' needs. They are already possessed sufficient materials in the library for the users. They even frequently organize programs to attract users to the library and also other efforts to meet their community. Unfortunately, they are only concerned with the existing collections and activities, instead of, going full length to make an impact on the society. In other words, they are not aware of their role to curb social issues. They do not realize that they can provide the platform for the NGOs and government to raise awareness on safe sex and sex education.

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### **Competing Interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

### **Authors' Contributions**

All the authors contributed significantly in writing this article. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.



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