

Describing the Stereotype Lift efforts of librarians: A case study of female librarians

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Abstract

Purpose. This research delves into the stereotype-laden environment faced by female librarians and the efforts undertaken to counteract these stereotypes. In situations where the worth or ability of an outgroup is questioned, stereotype lift makes people perform better.

Methodology. This study utilized qualitative research with a single-case study approach. The participants of the study were five female librarians working within the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines. The interview guide questions were used to gather their responses alongside observation and some documents. Permission from the school president was secured first before going to the library, which was also similarly done for online participants. The librarians were in terms of their physical characteristics, emotions, and how they catered to the patrons and researchers. In addition, ocular visits were conducted in which researchers took photos of what could help support the observation. After having the necessary data, Category Construction was utilized to analyze it.

Results and discussion. The findings revealed the stereotypes the respondents received: stern and sedentary workers. These stereotypes unveiled how it affects their work performance by remaining unaffected and becoming more approachable. With these effects encountered, the female librarians were able to come up with two strategies for dealing with the stereotypes: remaining calm and positively changing oneself. The librarians also promoted equity, diversity, and inclusion by providing equal treatment to all and organizing a club for book lovers.

Conclusions. The effect of stereotypes on librarians was not manifested since some of them perceived it as usual, while some let it change them to better librarians.

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1. Introduction

Stereotyping is when people put others into groups based on things they have in common, like how they look or act. People often think everyone in the group is the same and ignore that everyone is unique (Kunda & Oleson, 2020). Moreover, Hamilton & Sherman (2021) state that stereotyping can affect many facets of social perception, such as opinions, viewpoints, and actions toward specific people or groups. Stereotyping may result in prejudice, discrimination, bias, and the maintenance of inequalities.

Stereotyping exists in any field, like librarianship. Librarianship involves various tasks such as acquisition, organization, dissemination, preservation, and conservation of information. Librarians have always been considered the gatekeepers and fact-checkers of the information world, providing reliable, unbiased, and verifiable information to the

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public. Nevertheless, librarians have always been one of those professions who received constant typecasting from the users they served. It was found out in a study that librarians have been identified as gray-haired, single, white women, generally perceived with one or more of the following: cardigan, pearls, tweed skirt, hair in a bun, and spectacles perched on the nose (Ali et al., 2018; Borchard et al., 2018; Micle, 2014; Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2014). Additionally, librarians' appearance and personalities are summarized in the terms "mousy," "shy," "bookish," "spinster," "glasses," "bun," and "smart" (Garcia & Barbour, 2018; Wells, 2013). Regarding personality, they are generally labeled as distant, unfriendly, and introverted (McClellan & Beggan, 2019). These salient characteristics can influence library users' perception of librarians' approachability (Bonnet & McAlexander, 2013).

Meanwhile, the appearance and personality stereotypes also apply to male librarians. They are also perceived as wearing glasses, constantly telling patrons to be quiet through shushing, and favoring comic books, video games, and computer programming (Blackburn, 2015). Moreover, many people think that librarians are composed of female individuals, and if there is a man, they think he is "gay." An example of how women dominate librarianship is at the U.S. libraries. It was found in a study that in 1878, two-thirds of the library workforce was female, and by 1910, more than 75% of the library workers were women' (Rubin, 2016). The wrong stereotyping of librarians harms the enticement of librarianship as a profession to the new generation (Aparis et al., 2018; Hu, 2019). These librarians possess different qualities and are sharpening their skills to give the best services that the patrons deserve. Nevertheless, their efforts are overlooked by the negative stereotypes that still exist.

Similarly, many young people in the Philippines do not see librarianship as an appealing career due to outdated stereotypes. In fact, as per the observation of the researchers who lived in Zamboanga del Sur and conducted the research in the same province in Mindanao, Philippines, there are still some old women librarians who wear eyeglasses, possess a severe look, and are sensitive to noises like soft laughs from the patrons. In addition, there is only one higher education institution offering the program in the said province, with very few enrollees. The recently graduated students holding a bachelor's degree in library and information science are also not working in line with their program, contributing to the persistence and difficulty of reducing prevailing stereotypes.

To change this, patrons must embrace diversity and challenge these false ideas. When users create welcoming environments and recognize their expertise, librarians can better help us find information and encourage learning. The researchers delve into the typical stereotypes that librarians receive today and whether they have achieved the theory of Stereotype life (Walton & Cohen, 2003). It is how librarians do better when they challenge and break free from negative stereotypes about their profession.

The study showcased that librarianship is similar to other fields that have experienced difficulties. The researchers wanted to recognize the ways that these librarians are doing to fight stereotyping. This study benefited society in a way that they understood librarians' point of view. They had an idea that librarians shaped themselves to become a service-centered person to make the library meaningful. Users will know that librarianship is similar to other professions that do not deserve belittling. By that, the patrons were able to understand and respect it more.

2. Methods

This research employed a qualitative approach with a single-case study design, exploring the real-life experiences of registered female librarians in the Zamboanga

Peninsula, Philippines. The study aimed to understand their encounters with stereotypes and their efforts to overcome them. Data collection involved multiple sources, including in-depth interviews with five librarians, observations of their work environments, and analysis of relevant reports, documents, and case descriptions (Creswell, 2014).

Participants were carefully selected based on specific criteria: They were all female librarians working in either public or academic libraries, had at least three years of experience, and had encountered stereotyping in their profession. Additionally, all participants were licensed librarians.

Data collection employed various methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the librarians' experiences. Semi-structured interviews in English explored their experiences with stereotyping, the impact on their work performance, coping mechanisms, and efforts to promote equity, diversity, and inclusivity in the field. Additionally, observations focused on physical characteristics, emotions, interactions with patrons, and responses to research inquiries. Documents and reports provided further context and details. This was successfully transpired through a letter of permission to conduct the study sent to the school president of each academic institution. Additionally, informed consent provided the purpose and objectives of the study, and the duration of the interview guide which helped ensure that participants comprehended the conditions and scope of the study.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, triangulation was employed through interviews with library staff, some family members, and students. Their perspectives helped corroborate and enrich the data gathered from the librarians themselves.

Data analysis relied on the Category Construction method outlined by Merriam & Tisdell (2016). This involved examining interview transcripts, reviewing field notes and documents, and applying initial and then analytical coding to identify key themes and patterns. Finally, these themes were refined into well-defined categories that aligned with the research questions and ensured comprehensiveness, exclusivity, and conceptual coherence.

3. Results and Discussion

This section provides a thorough analysis and explanations to shed light on the data acquired from the selected librarians within the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines. This study aimed to discover if they experience stereotype lift while working in the library. The participants are the five selected registered female librarians who are working within the Zamboanga Peninsula, Philippines. Each participant was designated a code to maintain the confidentiality of their profiles, and they are FL1, FL2, FL3, FL4, and FL5. From the analysis related to female librarians' efforts in Stereotype lift, categories and subcategories emerged as follows:

3.1 Different Stereotypes Received by the Librarians

After analyzing the transcripts, two stereotypes appeared that the librarians received while working in librarianship. Nevertheless, despite the stereotypes, they still deliver services to the users until now. They showed that librarianship is more than what they think.

The chosen female librarians from different libraries shared their experiences regarding stereotypes. The subcategories emerged: librarians as stern individuals and librarians as sedentary workers.

3.4.1 Librarians as Stern Individuals

It emphasizes that librarians are too particular about the allowed and prohibited acts inside the library. When librarians rebuked the student's behavior, it was the time when students called her strict or mean. The following are the statements of the female participants that provide evidence for this:

During my stay in private and government libraries, the librarians were mean because, as librarians, we deal with many people with different attitudes. They are good and kind; some are respectful, and some are harsh. That is why they can tell that the librarians are mean because of the person they deal with. Especially for modern students, most of them are careless and young, so it is time for the librarian to intervene to rebuke them. That is when they will tell us whether they are mean or strict. (FL1)

When I meet the students, we are already close to each other; their first impression is strict, though it is true since you are in your work. Of course, to be able to be adhered to, you should act strictly because if you always smile, they will not obey. (FL2)

In my first job as a librarian, I was strict. I will not let someone borrow. My first job was in Cagayan, where I was assigned to the Engineering medical library. I was strict when it came to borrowing. If it will bring in a boarding house, there was a policy about borrowing. Since I was not a boss, I was scared of my boss, so I needed to wait for my boss's decision. Those times, I was called mean. (FL4)

Commonly, librarians were mean in the past. I also experienced it before, but it was gone in today's librarian. Back then, they thought I was strict. It was their perception because I have a mean face, so they were intimidated to approach me. (FL5)

According to the library staff, most agreed that the chosen librarians are strict and mean, but it depends on how the user comprehends it. Upon observation, most of them are old, have wrinkles, and wear eyeglasses.

Being strict or mean is the typical stereotype female librarians receive because users do not understand why. Being strict or mean allows them to have power over the patrons, making it easier for them to be followed and disciplined when their users do inappropriate behaviors inside the library. Moreover, users need to understand that when someone is new in the field, there is a possibility that someone will do anything to please the leader, such as being strict in terms of borrowing books. Also, some people do nothing, but their faces make them intimidating.

Discipline could negatively affect librarians and the library profession, convincing patrons that all librarians are strict sticklers there to serve the books rather than the people (Baxter, 2014). Thus, a study found that librarians and staff have the adaptable mindset necessary to provide patrons with dependable service. Some qualities may significantly impact how they provide their service (Ojei & Popoola, 2023).

3.4.2 Librarians as Sedentary Workers

Sedentary workers are people with jobs that do not require much standing and significant movements and have light tasks. They do not use too much energy while

working.

As revealed during the analysis of the transcripts, the "female librarian five (FL5)" revealed that others typically described librarians as someone who is "comfortably sitting and always watching books."

According to the co-workers, most of them emphasized that the librarians always sit because most tasks are done on computers. Upon observing the librarians, most sit all day while facing computers. They only stand when some users need assistance, go to the comfort room, get a snack, return the book to the shelf, and roam to observe the students.

There needs to be more clarification about librarians' jobs because users need to learn that it is more in-depth. They needed the details of the books to be input into computers for easy searching. One of the librarian's tasks, namely cataloging, will only require librarians to sit and encode or copy-paste the details of the books.

Thus, library patrons' attitudes toward librarians in a library revealed that they do have negative perceptions of librarians in terms of their reputation, level of expertise, and type of employment, which basically because there is a lack of knowledge of the program and one of the external factors as to why librarianship was not a popular first choice of profession is because of the stereotypical views of librarians (Ali et al., 2018).

One of the factors that someone may experience stereotype lift is when someone is stereotyped by their appearance, behavior, work, and state of life (Walton & Cohen, 2003). In the case of female librarians, most of them are stereotyped in their behaviors, followed by their work and appearance. These factors may lead to stereotype lifts for their worth were questioned.

The librarians, especially the future librarians, may experience hasty generalization because the user perceives them as strict or mean. Moreover, librarianship may still need more recognition because users view it poorly. Being perceived as part of sedentary work may not attract an individual to enroll in the Bachelor in Library and Information Science (BLIS) program because of inferiority from other programs, which may cause demotivation to the BLIS students.

3.2 Effects of Stereotypes on the Work Performance of the Librarians

After analyzing the transcripts, the emerging subcategories remain unaffected and more approachable. Most of them did not let it affect their work negatively; instead, they continued giving services to the students.

3.2.1 Remaining Unaffected

Librarians do not care about the stereotypes that are surrounding them. In fact, "FL1" understands that as a librarian, "it is the nature of [her] job that [she] has to deal with people inside the library in terms of how they react and work." While "FL2" response to stereotypes is "do not take it personally," which was supported by "FL3" through still "be kind and do not mind it," for she also understands that patrons have different attitudes.

The statements were affirmed by their library staff because they did not hear the said participants leave their work nor stop giving services to the people because of stereotypes.

Librarians may not be affected by stereotypes simply because they think it is just normal to encounter them while working. They cannot satisfy everyone, so they ignore the words thrown at them.

The study of Baxter (2014) emphasized that the stereotypes that the librarians received would negatively affect librarians, and their library profession has been deemed not applicable to all librarians. Since then, others have taken stereotypes about librarianship

positively, and others do not make it affect them as librarians. Instead, stereotypes empower them, and they benefit from it.

3.2.2 Becoming More Approachable

Librarians effectively manage patron interactions in the library, making it easy for students to approach them without hesitation. The following are the statements of the participants that provide evidence for this:

Because of the bad connotations to me before, it made me a better librarian with better services for my students. It changed me in a way that made me more of an approachable librarian; it strives me to be a better librarian. (FL4)

There is an effect because they told me I am strict, so I changed it. So now, I have lessened my strictness. Someone says, "Hi, ma'am!" I would respond, "Hi!" because it is not good if no child will interact with you. At least I have become aware of myself. (FL5)

The library staff have different points of view concerning their approachability. Some of them agreed that the interviewed participants were welcoming. On the other hand, one staff member divulged that when they first met one of the librarians, she felt intimidated because of her mean face. From the observation, it was noticeable that the participants radiated different auras during the first meeting. One of them displays an amiable demeanor, while the other, in contrast, initially showed no reactions but eventually smiled when recalling her early days in the library.

Librarians had several strategies to contradict the perspective that views the librarian as intimidating and enhance their approachability to alter patrons' expectations of them. Librarians adapted and changed in response to the stereotypes to create a more positive and effective work environment. Thus, librarians ought to go the extra mile and think outside the box to modify their attitudes and behavior to win their patrons' hearts to a more significant extent ([Ali et al., 2018](#); [Onwubiko, 2022](#)).

Stereotype lift, which involves performance improvements in response to stereotypes, is observed among most librarians. They welcome the stereotypes because they see it as a factor to change themselves positively and set examples that today's librarians are different from the past.

Librarians may use this research to promote self-reflection, embracing stereotypes as opportunities for professional development and as catalysts for positive change within their work environments. They can also strategically utilize stereotypes for maintaining discipline, provided it is done ethically. Lastly, remaining unaffected by stereotypes is crucial for maintaining professionalism. Academic institutions offering BLIS programs may ensure inclusive curricula, provide practical training, offer mentorship programs, and encourage research into addressing stereotypes in library settings.

3.3 Dealing With Stereotypes

The two subcategories surfaced, namely, remaining calm and changing oneself positively, as shown when examining the transcripts. The majority of them still do not treat stereotypes as a big thing.

3.3.1 Remaining Calm

It does not catch their interest, and they think it is not worth it to be given attention, so they do not give negative emotions. When someone called them mean, "FL1" emphasized that "[she] will not be angered because [she] is not mean in [their] home." She added that she was just mean because of "work" and depends on who [she] deals with." On the other hand, "FL2" does not mind their negative comments, for she thinks that "it is just okay. It is [their] job," which was agreed by "FL3" because "as long as you are still doing your job, it is just all right. [She] still addresses their queries."

Some family members disclosed that some participants were strict before when they were children, but it was gone when they had their own families. Some of them also revealed that some participants expose their mean side, especially when they do things that can stress their mothers. In the ocular visit, it was seen that most of them were into clarifying questions from the users. There were no reactions on their face when facing patrons, or sometimes, their eyebrows would just be furrowed while listening to the concerns of the students.

The librarians are aware of the stereotypes associated with their profession but choose to respond professionally, pragmatically, and customer-focused. They do not let the stereotypes affect their performance or personal well-being, focusing on fulfilling their responsibilities.

Not doing anything to debunk this stereotyping is more likely to harm the enticement of librarianship as a profession to the new generation, thus creating an image that those stereotypes are trustworthy, making stereotyping still persistent today (Aparis et al., 2018).

3.3.2 Changing Oneself Positively

Stereotypes became their reference to know whether they were doing good inside the library. For instance, "FL5" shared that she did "adjust [herself]" when she knew that there were people who perceived her as mean. Moreover, another statement from the participant provides evidence for this:

I accepted the critique and negative comments and dealt with it positively. If you are bad, I am the good one, and I will not stoop down on your level because we are not the same. I choose to become a better person than your negative perspective on me. I approached it differently, evaluated myself and why I was told that, and strove to become good. (FL4)

Most library staff should have exposed the negative side of the librarians they are working with. They admire the librarians because, despite the different behaviors of the users, they still manage to give services and understand the different needs. The participants' behavior was observed, and they answered the message immediately.

Resilience and determination pushed some librarians to overcome stereotypes by working on their personal development and maintaining a positive self-image. They do not allow negative perceptions or comments to define their self or behavior.

One of the ways to contradict their perspective is to enhance their approachability to alter patrons' expectations of the librarians (McClellan & Beggan, 2019). Characteristics influence library users' perception of librarians' approachability, and factors associated with effect and attire, like facial expression, gaze direction, clothing formality, and clothing color, influence perception of approachability (Bonnet & McAlexander, 2013).

In the context of exploring the efforts of librarians in Stereotype Lift, there was little effort because these stereotypes were treated as part of the job. Regardless of their

personality, profession, and image becoming undervalued and disrespected, these factors did not push the majority of the female librarians to use it to perform better in their field since they just continued what they gave to the users until now. For some of the librarians, these stereotypes are essential to assess themselves. The increased number of students who go inside the library and approach them became an achievement for them after becoming better community servants.

The Bachelor in Library and Information Science may remain undervalued as long as the stereotypes are not lessened. In addition, the number of graduates may lessen as time passes because if the librarians are stereotyped, how much more can the students still be encouraged to shift to other programs?

3.4 Efforts to Promote Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The data gathered by the researchers during the interview divulged the efforts of librarians in promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion. Mostly, they are more into treatment than programs.

The female librarians from different libraries shared their efforts to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion. The subcategories that occurred after examining the transcripts were providing equal treatment to all and organizing a club for book lovers.

3.4.1 Providing Equal Treatment to All

It emphasizes the fair treatment of librarians to students inside the library. Regardless of close tie relationships, gender, and religion, all patrons are treated equally, especially when providing services to them. The participant "FL3" gives "same respect" to all users inside the library. Furthermore, "FL2" agreed with this in a way that "[she] does not give special treatment. All are equal because they are just students, no favoritism. Reservation of books is not allowed." Moreover, other statements from the participants provide evidence for this:

Students are just equal. For example, someone will reserve a book because that is your friend, I will not allow it. How you treat others should be similar to others. Favoritism is not allowed in the library. Just treat others the same since we are all created by God. (FL1)

It provides equal opportunity to all valued clientele. Our library aims to provide the correct information to the right person at the right time. Whatever gender issues he or she has, even if they are being mean or not, it is your priority to provide the correct information. That is your goal as a librarian. (FL4)

The equal treatment of all patrons, regardless of their backgrounds, relationships, or behavior, establishes a setting in the library where everyone may have equitable access to resources and services.

Implementing fair and equal treatment to all patrons inside the library would create a good impression since they may feel that they are not being discriminated against and are free to utilize library collections. These efforts of the librarians could minimize the negative stereotypes coming from the patrons. It creates a perspective and views that the library and librarians are manageable. It enhances the student's approachability and alters patrons' expectations of the negative image of librarians (McClellan & Beggan, 2019).

3.4.2 Organizing a Club for Book Lovers

The organization served as a way to have a close relationship with the students and learn their diverse needs and tastes in books. The last participant, "FL5," revealed that "she created a book lover club with 60 above students. [She] teaches them and conducts activities."

Teaching and organizing activities within the club provide equitable educational opportunities and foster a sense of community, promoting inclusivity. These actions collectively make the club a diverse and inclusive space for all members. Creating the club itself fosters inclusion among the students with a shared interest.

Truthfully, stereotype lift is not a factor in why it exists in libraries because they choose to give it when they start working. Respect is essential in an organization where services are one of its products. Furthermore, the initiative to make an organization, despite the chance that it can have a small population, is not also due to the stereotype lift. It is the will of the librarian to do it as part of expanding the library services.

The image of librarians can be saved by how they equally give services to the users and the initiative to reach out to them, especially those who love books through a club. It entails that the said professionals are really into the goodness of the community they serve. Despite that, librarians may always have a negative image because fair treatment and club creation are not noticeable. Patrons may find it part of their job, leading to stereotypes still existing.

4. Conclusion

The data gathered from this study revealed some stereotypes that female librarians received, such as being stern and sedentary workers. Despite this, most did not let it affect their work performance because they saw stereotypes as usual. Nevertheless, stereotypes pushed some librarians to change their attitude so that they would become more welcoming to the students. They treated stereotypes as constructive criticism. It also unveiled the methods of female librarians in dealing with stereotypes, in which most librarians do not treat stereotypes as something that needs a response because their jobs are more important than that. However, some librarians let stereotypes change themselves positively. Lastly, this study also revealed the fair treatment and initiative to form a club that the librarians are doing to promote Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the libraries. Thus, there is minimal effort by female librarians to achieve stereotype lift since, in the first place, most of them distinguished stereotypes as part of their work that only needs a little attention.

Consequently, suggestions were made, including providing female librarians with enough funds to attend seminars and training concerning patrons' management. Moreover, a shift from the traditional setup to a learning-commons may be done to lessen the stereotypes. Furthermore, the BLIS program coordinator may be active and collaborate with the department's dean for activities that can highlight the relevance of the librarians in the community. Finally, librarians may formulate a specific program or activities that will help promote Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, such as having multicultural reading events wherein librarians host regular reading events or book fairs highlighting literature from different cultures and regions.

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