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PERSATUAN PUSTAKAWAN MALAYSIA
P.O Box 12545
50782 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia

Edited, compiled and formatted by:

Dr. Nor Edzan Che Nasir
Dr. Ranita Hisham Shunmugam
Dr. Imilia Ibrahim
Dr. Mohd Ikhwan Ismail
Dr. Rosnani Ahmad
Cik Ramlah Che Jaafar
Noor Adilah Azmi
Dr. Noor Masliana Razlan
Dr. Saidatul Akmar Ismail

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Religious Libraries as Gateways to Inclusivity: Insights from Mosque and Church Libraries

Nur Leyni Nilam Putri Junurham[1], Mohamad Hafizuddin Mohamed Najid[2], Nor Azzah Momin[3]

[1,2]Department of Library and Information Science, Kulliyyah of Information and Communication Technology, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

[3]Islamic Science University of Malaysia, Bandar Baru Nilai, Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Religious libraries play a vital role in preserving, disseminating, and engaging with their respective traditions and communities. This study explores the similarities and differences between mosque libraries and church libraries to uncover meaningful insights into how these religious institutions fulfil their roles. The primary aim is to identify commonalities and distinctions in how mosque and church libraries operate, focusing on their collections, services, and community engagement. Interviews with library managers and users will offer firsthand insights. The findings show that the commonalities of mosque and church libraries are perceived variously by the congregations. The library becomes the place for education, social experiences, and recreational activity. Both religious libraries share a commitment to preserving sacred texts and fostering educational initiatives. Differences in governance, access policies, and community outreach will also be discussed. This study fills a gap in comparative library research by examining two distinct religious knowledge systems. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of religious libraries as agents of inclusivity, capable of connecting diverse communities and promoting harmony in society.

Keywords: Religious Libraries; Mosque Libraries; Church Libraries; Community Engagement; Comparative Analysis

INTRODUCTION

Religious libraries play a vital role in preserving, disseminating, and engaging with their respective traditions and communities. It is the religious libraries' responsibility to provide their users with authoritative resources suitable to be read. Not much research is being done on religious libraries, therefore, we decided to conduct this study to explore the similarities and differences between mosque libraries and church libraries to uncover meaningful insights into how these religious institutions fulfil their role.

Furthermore, the area of religious libraries has not been given adequate attention in the curricula of both undergraduate and in some instances, postgraduate studies thus creating a deficit in terms of knowledge and specialisation." It may be considered a sensitive topic or it may be considered as too broad to be taught in classes since there are many religions in the world (Chisita et al., 2020). Consequently, students in library and information science are not adequately equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively manage or conduct services in religious library settings.

Besides, they mentioned, "The religious groupings in the world are numerous ranging from but not limited to Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam and African Traditional Religion (ATR). These religious institutions including their libraries are affected by the seismic technological development in the Information and communication landscape and this is one motif that the article explores. Religious institutions rely on sacred texts to propagate their religious beliefs, for example, the bible for Christians, the Bhaghawad Geeta for the Hindu, the Koran for Islam, the Guru Granth for Sikhs and the Kebra Nagast used by Rastafarians among many others".

However, for this study we just focus on comparing the mosque library (for Islam), since we are from the Islamic Library Committee, Librarian Association of Malaysia; and church library (for Christians) for a start.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

This study concentrates on two main focus areas being considered to identify the role of mosque and church libraries in historical and modern perspectives. The literature has been reviewed, particularly in this topic area. The purpose of this literature review is to find out the

related work and review the previous work under this topic area to see if this problem or issue has been raised in any previous work.

Role of Mosque Libraries: Historical and Modern Perspectives

Several studies have been done based on religious libraries by scholars in highlighting the roles and contributions of the libraries to the community. Related to mosque libraries, Surtikanti (2018) explores the historical development of libraries in Muslim societies during the Islamic Caliphate, highlighting the role of mosque libraries as centres of knowledge and education. Driven by Islamic values that emphasize learning and the dissemination of knowledge, mosque libraries flourished alongside economic prosperity, stable governance, and a strong book trade. Sudana (2022) identified in his study the development and academic interest in mosque libraries, highlighting their role as essential educational institutions within mosques. The mosque libraries are reaffirmed as vital waqf-based facilities that support religious learning and community empowerment in Muslim societies. According to Laugu (2007), from the time of Prophet Muhammad, mosque libraries have supported religious, educational, social, and political functions within Muslim societies. Renowned institutions like al-Azhar and Cordova's Grand Mosque Library exemplify their impact. Mosque libraries are vital community assets that shaped Islamic intellectual heritage while emphasizing the need for proper preservation and revitalization to sustain their legacy in modern times.

In the early days of Islam, a mosque was not just a place for spiritual activities and solace; it served as an educational and community service centre. Mosques were not only buildings dedicated for gathering, rather, the leaders of the communities also utilized the mosque as a place for dissemination of information, discussion, and for social activities. Idriz (2000) pointed out that mosques do not only function as religious sites to perform spiritual duties; they also serve as centres for learning and knowledge seeking. This makes the mosque very crucial to the Islamic educational system.

The primary function of the mosque (*masjid*) is its use as a sacred place for worship in Islam. It is a place where Muslims gather to offer their *salah* (prayer) daily. Muslims gather in the masjid to offer the obligatory *salah* five times a day. However, there are several other functions of the mosque besides being a place of worship. The multi-function nature of the mosque helps the development of the Muslim community in general. Several authors have discussed the mosque and its function (Farahati, 2011; Lanre et al., 2014; Laugu, 2007). They reported that the presence of the mosque in Islamic civilization has tremendous effects on education and the political and social realms of Islamic civilization. Across the Islamic civilizations and

through time, it has been the centre of not only religious rituals as stated in the Holy Quran (9:19), but also the hub of education and knowledge, the centre of administration and politics, social and community institutions and it has sometimes been used as a propaganda tool to spearhead the expansion of Islamic civilizations.

The first collections and library were located in the mosque (Sibai, 1987). Historical studies on mosque libraries have proven that there is an appreciable number of mosque libraries and this has contributed to the enhancement of the society in Islamic civilization (Alami, 2012). Further, Sibai (1987) stated that almost every mosque has its own libraries, especially *jami'* mosques (mosque which is used for observing *jumaah* prayer).

Mosque libraries, like western church and synagogue libraries, are established to serve the religious needs of the immediate congregation, are located in and supported by the mosque and are staffed by persons associated with it. (Harvey & Musafi, 1981).

Role of Church Libraries: Historical and Modern Perspectives

In a view on the church libraries as mentioned by Bolton (2014), the libraries serve a specialized role in supporting the religious and educational needs of their congregations while also offering resources to the broader public when possible. The collections insides are typically tailored to reflect the teachings, values, and theological perspectives of the specific denomination they represent. This focused approach to collection development differentiates church libraries from public libraries, which cater to diverse audiences with broader informational needs.

Kurniawan (2017) identified the role of church libraries in enhancing the spirituality of congregations, using the Pelita Library in Central Jakarta as a case study. It reveals that the library defines functions of worship place libraries, including serving as a centre for information, education, creativity, youth engagement, and social interaction. The library supports the church's mission to strengthen spirituality and family values. Strong internal motivation and external support help the library achieve its spiritual and educational goals.

Church libraries in the 1970s served current news and information to their users especially to the young who need information fast. Towns and Barber (1971) in their book entitled *Successful Church Libraries* wrote in their preface, "The church today faces the alternative of advancing to meet the problems of the 70s or regressing into the past. Christian young people are demanding up-to-date answers to up-to-date problems. The church is being squeezed by cultural pressures and bombarded by the knowledge explosion."

Librarians nowadays should consider the current needs of the user to ensure they are still relevant. Towns and Barber (1971) showed their concern “Some churches are ignoring today's problems and are thrusting their spiritual heads into their own church ghettoes. Others are on the cutting edge of today's world and see God at work in their churches”.

For all the collections to be accessible to the users, Nimer (2017) suggested that, “the librarian was responsible for organizing and making them available to Church members. Therefore, basic classification systems were also recommended for arranging materials on the shelves.”

Studies on Comparative Studies Between Mosque and Church Libraries

To the best of the researchers’ knowledge, only one comparative study between mosque and church libraries has been identified in the existing literature, Harvey and Azar’s (1981) work titled *Tehran Mosque Libraries and a Comparison with American Church Libraries*. Since the publication of that study, no further research appears to have been conducted on this specific topic, highlighting a significant gap in the literature.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to explore the inclusive roles of religious libraries, specifically mosque and church libraries, within their respective communities. This methodology combines both survey and semi-structured interviews to gain a comprehensive understanding of the selected libraries' management practices.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select prominent mosque and church libraries known for their institutional significance and public engagement. However, we faced some obstacles due to bureaucracy, especially in getting official permission from the management of the mosque and church.

Five religious libraries were involved in this study based on their accessibility, institutional status, and known community involvement:

1. Masjid Negara Library (Malaysia) – Affiliated with Malaysia's national mosque, representing a central hub for Islamic knowledge dissemination.

2. Masjid Istiqlal Library (Indonesia) – Located within Indonesia's largest mosque, known for its role in national and interfaith programmes.
3. Masjid Muktafi Billah Library (Malaysia) – Recognized nationally as one of the best mosque libraries in Malaysia in 2015.
4. Holy Cross Theological College Library (Myanmar) - considered as the oldest Anglican Church in Myanmar and served to train Myanmar Anglican priests.
5. Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library (Malaysia) – A research centre on church and mission history, serving theological scholars and clergy.

A structured survey questionnaire was developed to collect baseline data from the selected libraries. The survey comprised seven key items, each targeting a specific functional aspect of library operation:

a) Library management – Structure, staffing, policies and budget.
b) Acquisition – Type of collection, subject, and purchasing process.
c) Cataloguing and classification – Standards used.
d) Library system – Use of integrated library systems (ILS).
e) Facilities – Physical infrastructure and technology access.
f) Services – Target user, services given.
g) Activities – Promotion, activities.

The survey was disseminated electronically and followed up via email and telephone to encourage responses. To complement the survey data and gain deeper contextual insights, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key personnel, at least one representative for the mosque and one from the church library. The interviews focused on elaborating the survey responses and uncovering qualitative dimensions related to policies referred to collection and, activities.

This study was conducted within a constrained time frame, which limited the scope of data collection. Thereefore, only three mosque libraries and two church libraries were involved. These institutions were chosen based on their prominence, accessibility, and willingness to collaborate within the research timeline. While the limited sample size may not allow for broad

generalization, it offers valuable insights into their management practices and roles in promoting inclusivity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Management of the Library

All participating libraries reported having designated staff to handle library operations. However, the number of staff varies significantly across institutions. The institutional status of the libraries also highlights variation, two are government-affiliated (Masjid Negara and Masjid Al-Muktafi Billah Shah), while the other three are private (Masjid Istiqlal Library, Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library, and Holy Cross Theological College). This distinction may influence not only staffing and budget allocation but also the degree of autonomy in decision-making, collection development, and community engagement strategies.

Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library, a private church-affiliated library, has the largest team, comprising five staff members, likely driven by its academic and research-orientated mission. In contrast, Masjid Al-Muktafi Billah Shah and Masjid Negara, both mosque libraries under government administration, operate with only one staff member each. This limited human resource capacity could pose challenges in delivering comprehensive library services, especially if one individual is expected to manage all operational, technical, and user engagement functions. Meanwhile, the Istiqlal Library in Indonesia, despite being privately managed, employs four staff members, indicating relatively stronger resource allocation, possibly linked to its affiliation with Indonesia's largest mosque and its visibility in interfaith initiatives.

All five libraries affirm that they operate based on established policies or guidelines, reflecting a commitment to structured management practices and adherence to professional standards. Among the policies identified are membership policies, which define user eligibility and borrowing privileges, as well as collection development policies, which guide the selection, acquisition, and maintenance of library materials. However, the depth and implementation of these policies were not examined in detail and are likely to vary depending on the library's governance structure, institutional priorities, and available resources.

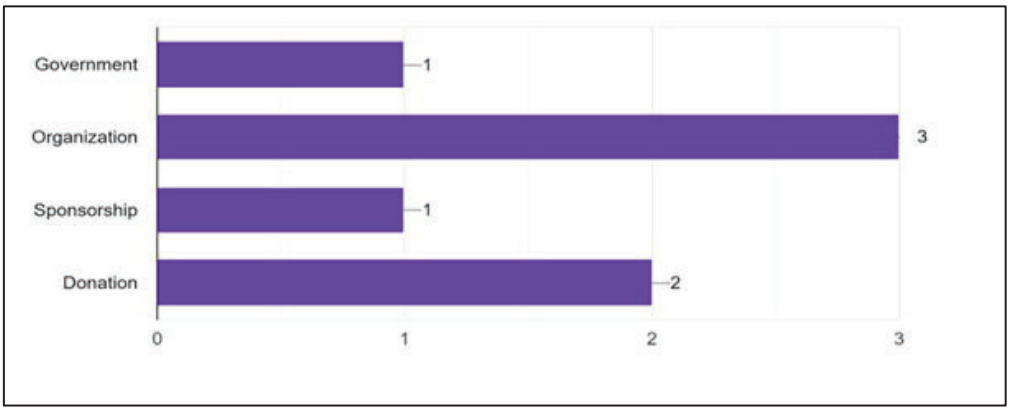

Figure 1: Sources of library budget

The data (Figure 1) show that religious libraries receive funding from various sources depending on their institutional background. Most church-affiliated libraries, such as Seminari Theoloji Malaysia and Holy Cross Theological College, rely on organizational support, with some also receiving sponsorships and donations. The Istiqlal Mosque Library in Indonesia is also supported by its parent religious organization, indicating stable institutional funding despite being a mosque library. In contrast, Masjid Al-Muktafi Billah Shah depends solely on community donations, while Masjid Negara is fully government-funded. This suggests that church libraries and larger mosque institutions like Istiqlal tend to have more structured financial support, while smaller mosque libraries rely heavily on public or community contributions, which may limit flexibility in planning and development.

Acquisition

Materials in a library can be acquired through purchasing, exchange, gift, donation or *wakaf*. The findings indicate that all participating religious libraries employ multiple methods of acquiring library materials, with varying levels of reliance depending on institutional capacity and resource availability. The most common method of acquisition, reported by 100% of the libraries, is through purchasing. This suggests a strong institutional emphasis on maintaining relevance, quality, and control over the selection of library resources.

In addition to purchases, donations and gifts emerge as significant secondary acquisition methods, reported by several libraries, including Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library, Holy Cross Theological College, and Masjid Istiqlal Library. These contributions reflect community support and institutional networks, which often supplement limited budgets, especially in

private or religiously funded institutions. *Wakaf* (endowment), used by Masjid Al-Muktafi Billah Shah, represents a culturally and religiously significant means of enriching the collection through charitable acts, rooted in Islamic philanthropic traditions. Meanwhile, exchange, practiced by Seminari Theologi Malaysia, may indicate academic partnerships and resource-sharing among theological institutions.

The data show that books are the core resource across all five religious libraries, confirming their continued relevance as foundational materials in religious and educational contexts. In addition to books, some libraries provide additional formats to support user needs. For example, Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library and Holy Cross Theological College offer a variety of resources including magazines, newsletters, bulletins, and online materials, manuscripts, rare book materials reflecting their academic orientation. The findings also highlight the growing presence of online materials as a secondary type of collection, which are Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library, Holy Cross Theological College, and Masjid Al-Muktafi Billah Shah reported the inclusion of online resources in their collections, indicating a gradual shift toward digital content to support remote access, scholarly research, and wider user engagement.

In terms of subject focus, the findings show that the majority of the libraries reported that the main subject in their collections is religion. This is expected, as these libraries are based in religious institutions such as mosques and churches. Some libraries, like Masjid Istiqlal Library and Holy Cross Theological College, also include other subjects such as history, culture, but religious materials remain the primary focus across all libraries.

Cataloging and Classification

The data (Figure 2) show that the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system is the most widely used among the surveyed religious libraries, with 80% of the respondents adopting it. This reflects DDC's long-standing global acceptance and its simplicity, which makes it especially suitable for small to medium-sized libraries, including those in religious institutions. Interestingly, only one library (25%), Masjid Negara Malaysia, reported using the Ziauddin Sardar Classification Scheme.

The absence of other classification systems, such as the Library of Congress and IIUM Islamic classification scheme, suggests that religious libraries tend to rely on more conventional and widely understood systems, possibly due to staffing limitations or institutional standardization. This result highlights a need to explore and promote context-sensitive classification systems in religious libraries that better reflect the structure of knowledge within faith-based traditions.

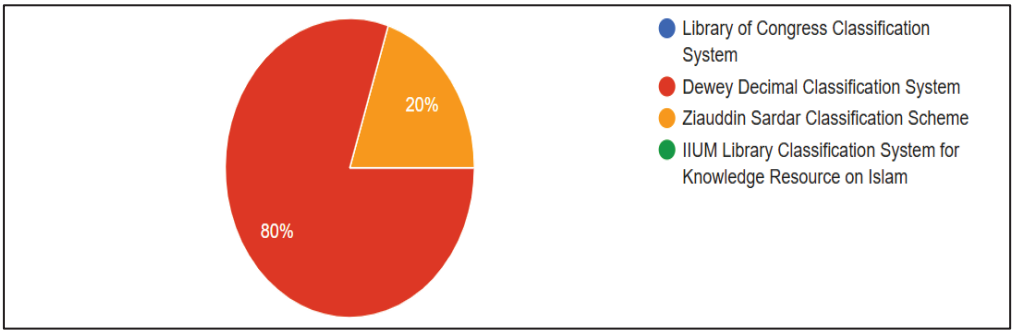

Figure 2: Cataloguing and classification practices

The exclusive reliance on DDC by Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library, Masjid Al-Muktafi Billah Shah, and Masjid Istiqlal Library may also reflect institutional preferences for systems that support interoperability, ease of training, and access to existing bibliographic records.

Library System

The data (Figure 3) indicate that the majority of the religious libraries surveyed (80%) have adopted KOHA, an open-source Integrated Library Management System (ILMS), to manage their collections and services. KOHA's popularity among the libraries studied, particularly those in Malaysia, can be attributed to its flexibility, cost-effectiveness, and support for multilingual and MARC-compliant cataloguing, making it especially suitable for small to medium-sized religious libraries with limited budgets.

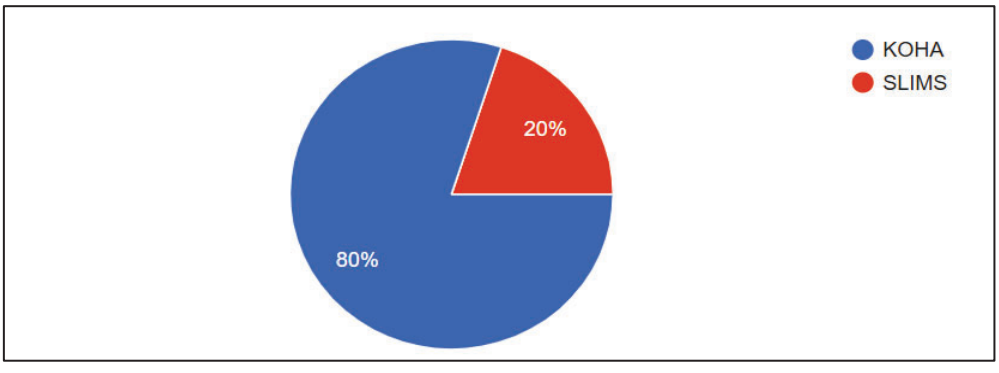

Figure 3: Library management system usage

However, one institution which is the Masjid Istiqlal Library in Indonesia, reported using SLIMS (Senayan Library Management System), which is also an open-source LMS developed specifically in Indonesia. SLIMS offers localized support, a user-friendly interface, and customizable modules, making it a preferred choice for Indonesian institutions seeking to align with national standards and language requirements. The use of SLIMS by Masjid Istiqlal Library highlights a contextual preference, likely based on local familiarity, institutional policy, or government support for homegrown technologies.

This variation reflects a broader trend in library automation within Southeast Asia, where open-source platforms are favored due to their adaptability and cost-efficiency. As noted by Muneer and Harun (2019), many religious and community libraries in the region adopt KOHA and SLIMS not only for their affordability but also for the growing ecosystem of technical support and documentation available in local languages.

Facilities

The findings indicate that all five religious libraries prioritize providing a basic reading area, reaffirming their foundational role in supporting personal study, reflection, and access to printed materials. This common provision reflects the central function of religious libraries as quiet, contemplative spaces for both individual and group learning.

Beyond reading spaces, several libraries extend their support through additional user-centred facilities. Discussion rooms are available in four out of five libraries, demonstrating a commitment to fostering collaborative learning. Similarly, computer or laptop access is available in four libraries, which is crucial for supporting access to online resources, digital catalogues, and academic research particularly in theological institutions such as Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library and Holy Cross Theological College.

Certain libraries also offer more specialized or extended facilities. For example, Maktabah Al-Ghazali, Masjid Al-Muktafi Billah Shah provides a broad range of services, including carrel rooms, printers, a photostat machine, and even a "little free library", highlighting efforts to support both structured and informal learning. Masjid Istiqlal Library offers a meeting room, which may serve for workshops, community discussions, and reinforcing the library’s broader community role.

The data also highlight that private religious institutions like Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library and Masjid Istiqlal Library provide a more structured set of services, while government-affiliated libraries such as Masjid Negara offer more basic facilities. These discrepancies may reflect differences in budget, staffing, and institutional priorities.

Services

The findings reveal that all five religious libraries surveyed provide book loan services, positioning themselves as accessible knowledge hubs for their communities. In addition, some libraries extend their services to include interlibrary loan, user education, and reading spaces, reflecting their broader role in knowledge dissemination, lifelong learning, and fostering information literacy. For instance, Maktabah Al-Ghazali is notably active, offering all four services indicating a proactive service aimed at a wide audience including government and institutional users. Similarly, Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library incorporates user education, suggesting a structured approach to developing information-seeking skills among its patrons, especially those engaged in academic and theological studies.

Interlibrary loan services are available in three libraries, including Masjid Negara, Masjid Istiqlal Library, and Maktabah Al-Ghazali, demonstrating collaboration with other institutions and efforts to expand user access to a broader range of materials. Such services are crucial in resource-limited libraries, particularly in religious institutions where specialized materials may not always be available in-house. User education, reported by three libraries, reflects an awareness of the need to guide users in effectively locating, evaluating, and using information aligning with the inclusive mission of religious libraries as learning and spiritual development centres.

Target Users

Regarding target users, the data (Figure 4) show that all libraries serve a broad demographic, with 100% of respondents indicating they cater to young adults (20-40), adults (41-55), and elders (56 and above). This demonstrates that religious libraries are primarily orientated toward adult and mature users, many of whom may be engaged in religious education, professional development, or community leadership roles. Teenagers (40%) and children (20%) are served by fewer libraries, which may reflect limitations in resources or programming for younger age groups.

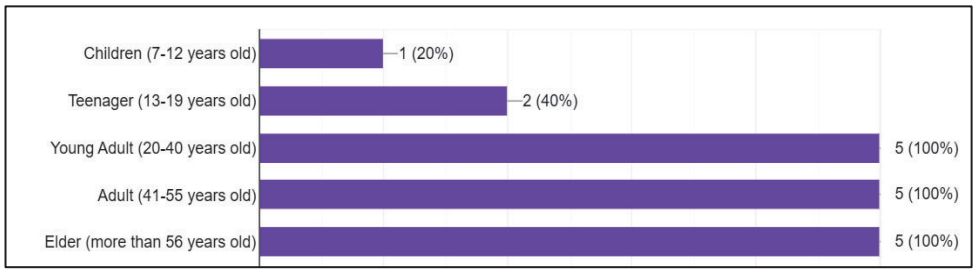

Figure 4: Target Users of Religious Libraries

Activities

The data show that all four religious libraries actively promote their services and activities through multiple communication platforms, demonstrating a commitment to outreach and engagement. The most commonly used platforms are Facebook and WhatsApp, utilized by all five libraries. These platforms are likely due to their widespread use, cost-effectiveness, and ability to reach various demographic groups, especially in Southeast Asian communities where mobile messaging and social networking are deeply integrated into daily communication (Abdullah & Rahim, 2022). In addition, Instagram is used by all mosque libraries likely to reach younger audiences with more visual content. Traditional channels such as bulletin boards, newsletters, and notice boards are also reported, particularly in Seminari Theologi Malaysia Library and Maktabah Al-Ghazali, reflecting a hybrid approach that combines digital and physical methods to ensure inclusivity for users who may not be digitally connected. This balance highlights an understanding of diverse user needs and communication preferences within religious communities.

All libraries indicated that they organize activities, showcasing their dynamic role in community development and not merely functioning as static information repositories, except Holy Cross Theological College. The types of activities vary across institutions:

1. Maktabah Al-Ghazali demonstrates a broad and inclusive engagement model, organizing book talks, writing competitions, intellectual talks, children's programmes, and literacy activities. This variety reflects its strong community-centered mission and alignment with mosque-based educational values.
2. Masjid Negara organizes the national-level literacy initiative "*Jom Baca Bersama Untuk 10 Minit*", supporting reading culture and public participation.

3. Perpustakaan Masjid Istiqlal conducts seminars and specialized sessions such as surgical book discussions, which may reflect its broader educational mandate and efforts to attract diverse users beyond religious circles.

The variety of community-based activities organized ranging from literacy campaigns and book reviews to academic workshops and children's events demonstrates the evolving role of religious libraries as inclusive, educational, and culturally vibrant institutions. These efforts not only promote information access but also foster social interaction and intellectual growth within faith-based communities.

CONCLUSION

This study offers meaningful insights into the roles and operations of religious libraries both mosque and church libraries, focusing on seven key areas: library management, collection acquisition, cataloguing practices, library systems, facilities, services, and activities. Despite variations in size, funding, and affiliation, the libraries surveyed demonstrate a collective effort to support inclusive access to knowledge. All libraries have designated staff and follow formal guidelines, though staffing number and funding sources differ. Collection development is primarily done through purchases, supplemented by donations, gifts, and in one case, *wakaf* contributions. Most libraries use the Dewey Decimal Classification System and open-source integrated library systems such as KOHA and SLIMS, which are both cost-effective and user-friendly. However, there is emerging interest such as at Masjid Negara in using classification schemes like the Ziauddin Sardar.

In addition to their operational functions, these religious libraries serve as active community spaces. All libraries provide essential facilities like reading areas, followed by discussion rooms and computer access, while some also offer carrels, and printing services. Their services include book lending, interlibrary loans, user education, and more. They cater primarily to young adults, adults, and elderly users, though engagement with children and institutional users is more limited. Importantly, each library organizes a variety of activities such as book talks, literacy programmes, seminars, and orientation workshops, which are promoted through platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, newsletters, and notice boards. These findings affirm that religious libraries are playing an increasingly important role as inclusive, educational, and community-oriented institutions.

To enhance their societal contribution, future efforts should focus on diversifying user services, activities, strengthening staff support, budget and promotion. Future research should consider expanding the scope to include a broader range of religious libraries, including those affiliated with other faith traditions such as Buddhism and Hinduism to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different religious libraries contribute to inclusivity, community engagement, and knowledge access across diverse religious contexts.

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