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The importance of the physical spaces of NSW public libraries: What users miss, and why

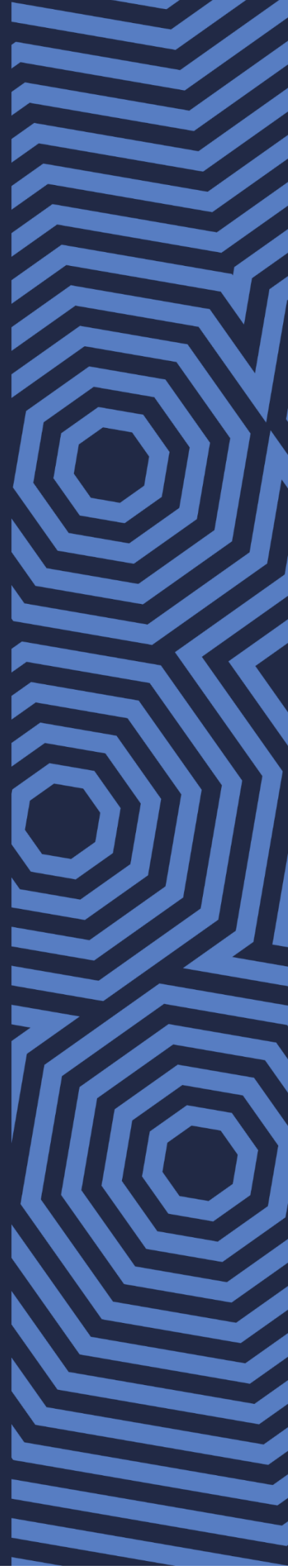
Report prepared for the State Library of
New South Wales

Charles Sturt University
Libraries Research Group

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Introduction

COVID-19 has caused great damage, and hugely affected all portions of Australian society. Federal and State government mandated lockdowns have led, at various times, to the enforced closure of library buildings across Australia. These lockdowns have, sadly, forced communities to experience life without their libraries. As damaging as these closures have been to library users and their communities, they have also afforded a unique opportunity to learn more about the role and function of public library spaces by asking users currently experiencing library closures to reflect on the extent to which they miss the physical library, and why. This research represents an important addition to previous studies which have focused on user perceptions of the library space. Such studies, while undoubtedly valuable, may have been clouded by recency bias, and a potential lack of appreciation for what at the time might have been considered a standard and ever-present service.

This report summarises the findings from work conducted by researchers from the Charles Sturt University Libraries Research Group. The research was funded by the State Library of New South Wales and was undertaken between October 2021 and January 2022. The project sought to answer two research questions:

- RQ1: How much do public library users miss visiting their physical libraries during the time of COVID-induced closures?
- RQ2: In what ways do users uniquely benefit from visiting public libraries' physical spaces?

Data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire sent to users of four library networks in NSW. In all cases library buildings were closed or had recently been closed at the point the questionnaire was distributed, meaning that respondents were reflecting directly on their current or recent experiences of life without a (physical) library.

The rest of this report is structured as follows: a *Method* section explains how data were collected and analysed; a *Findings* section reports the results of that analysis, and covers respondent characteristics, use of the physical library, and how and why users missed the public library during closures; a final *Conclusions* section highlights six key points to emerge from the research.

Readers should note that a more detailed report of this research can be found in a manuscript that has recently been submitted to an LIS journal for peer review. Following acceptance, the article's publication details can be provided on request.

Method

Data for this study were collected through an online questionnaire survey, which was distributed to users of four NSW public library networks. These networks were selected on the basis of the demographic characteristics of users (particularly to ensure a range of socio-economic conditions across the networks), their geographical location, and their willingness to partner in the research. A summary of the four networks (which we refer to as A, B, C and D) can be found in Table 1. Invitations to complete the questionnaire were sent to distributed to users by the participating libraries, using the methods shown in Table 1. The survey was open to all users over the age of 18, and the study received approval from the Charles Sturt University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Table 1: Participating libraries

Library network	Locale Type	Location	Number of library sites	Survey distribution	Survey responses
A	Regional	Southern NSW	One main and one branch library	Email Social media Word of mouth	825
B	Metropolitan	Sydney	One main library	Social media Newsletters Website	266
C	Metropolitan	Sydney	Multiple branch libraries	Social media Website	55
D	Regional	North-Eastern NSW	Multiple branch libraries	Email Social media Word of mouth	149
					1,295

The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions, covering the following areas:

- Details of respondents' visits to the physical library in the 12 months prior to its recent closure (including frequency and duration of visits)
- How much (if at all) respondents had missed visiting the library during the closure period, and why
- Particular activities respondents may have missed doing at the libraries, and expectations of future visits
- Demographic questions.

Multiple choice, scale and open questions were used. A separate survey was created for each library network, with some minor changes to wording and answer options to reflect its slightly different circumstances. Data were collected from mid-October to early November 2021.

As shown in Table 1 a total of 1,295 completed questionnaires were received from across the four participating library networks. Library A accounted for 825 of these (64%). Differences in response numbers are likely due to the different distribution methods employed by the libraries.

Responses to each of the four public library networks were treated separately to allow cross-network comparison. Responses to closed questions were analysed using standard statistical techniques, while responses to open questions were subjected to an inductive thematic analysis by the researchers.

Quotations reproduced below are presented with minor corrections for spelling and readability in some cases.

Findings

Respondent characteristics

Responses to demographic questions revealed differences in the characteristics of respondents from each library network (see Table 2). Respondents from library networks A and D were generally older than those from B and C; they were also much less likely to speak English as a second language. Network B also registered a much higher proportion of First Nations respondents (14%). These differences may be partially explained by the different distribution methods used by the libraires, but the fact that networks B and C are in Sydney, and A and D in regional NSW, is also likely to be relevant.

Table 2: Respondent demographic characteristics

Library	Median age band	Female (%)	English as a second language (%)
A	55-64	73.5	11.5
B	35-44	63.8	50.4
C	35-44	75.7	60.4
D	65-74	60.0	10.7

Use of the physical library

There was considerable variation in the frequency with which respondents reported visiting their library in the previous year (Figure 1). More than a quarter of network C respondents said they visited more than once a week, while for network A this figure was just 5%. Network C had a relatively high number of respondents who have never visited its library, that figure being almost double the number of the next highest network.

Q1. In the 12 months prior to this, how often, on average, did you visit the library/ies?

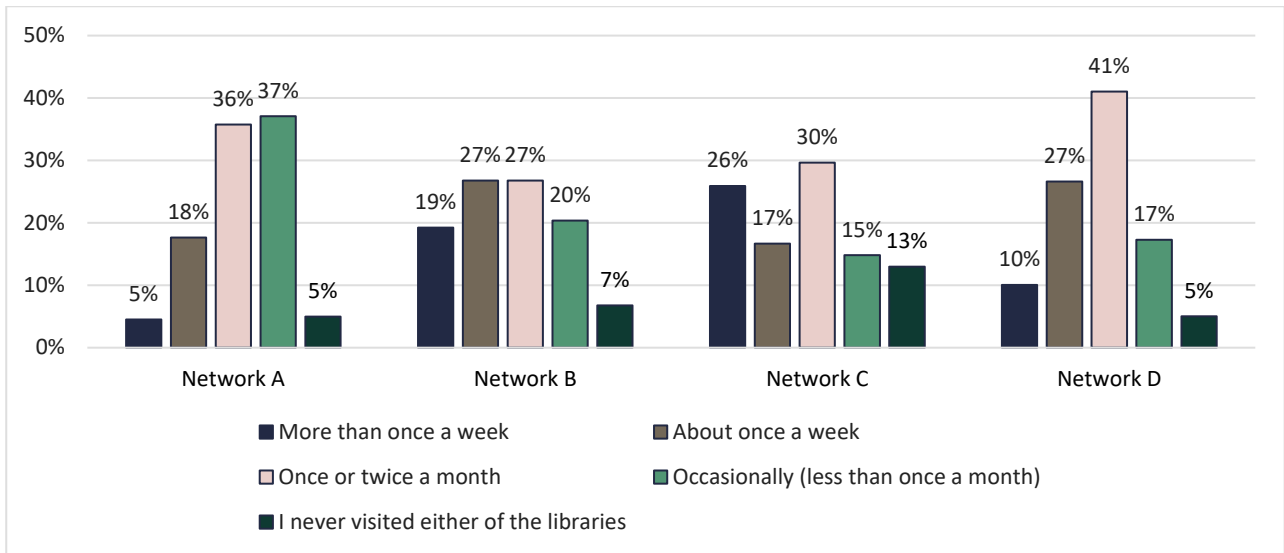


Figure 1: Q1. In the 12 months prior to this, how often, on average, did you visit the library/ies?

Participants were asked when they usually visited the library (Figure 2). For all libraries a high proportion of respondents stated that they usually visit the library on weekdays, with figures ranging from 47% for network B to 68% for network D. Respondents who visited only on weekends were in a clear (though significant) minority.

Q3. When did you usually visit the library?

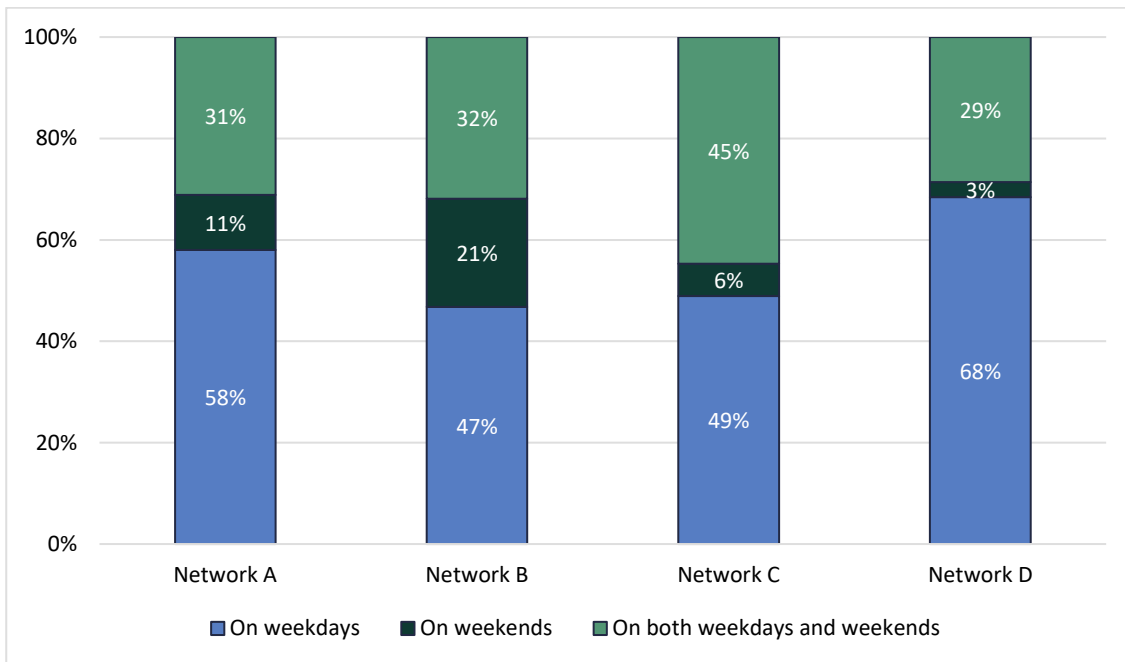


Figure 2: Q3. When did you usually visit the library?

There was some variation in the duration of library visits reported by participants in response to Q4 (Figure 3). Network C had the largest proportion of longer visits, with 64% of respondents usually staying for more than 30 minutes. In contrast, just 28% of respondents from network D reported such long visits. Around a quarter of respondents across all four networks stated that their visits varied in length, being sometimes more and sometimes less than 30 minutes.

Q4. How long were your visits to the library?

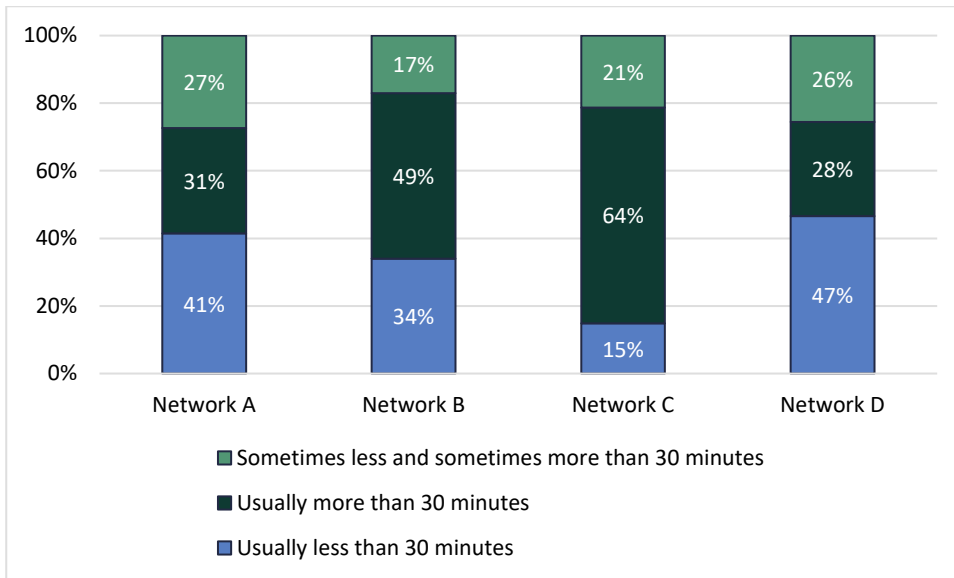


Figure 3: Q4. How long were your visits to the library?

As might be expected there were clear differences between metropolitan and regional libraries with regard to how respondents travelled to the library (Figure 4). For the regional libraries (A and D) a clear majority of participants (over 80%) reported travelling by car. For the Sydney libraries (B and C) respondents most commonly travelled to the library on foot.

Q5. How did you most commonly travel to the library? (excluding "Other answers")

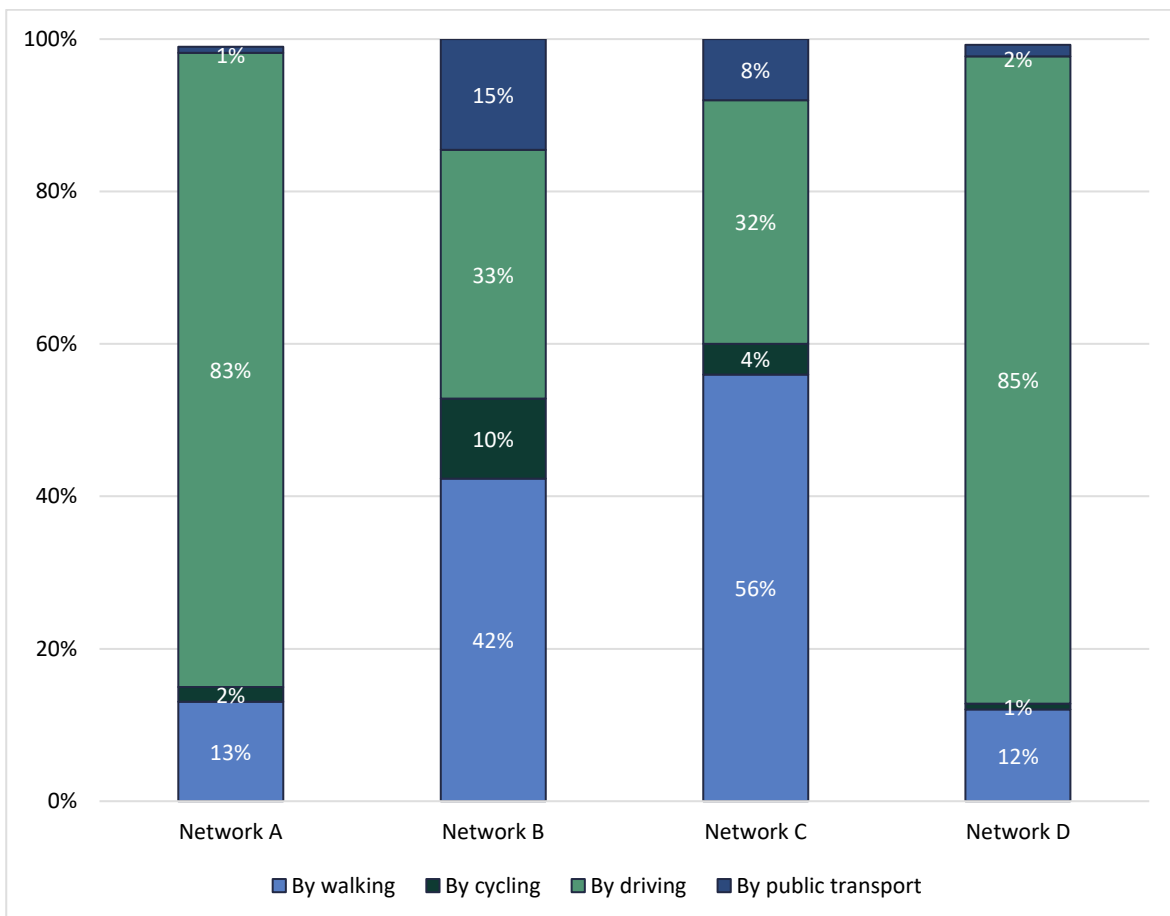


Figure 4: Q5. How did you most commonly travel to the library? (excluding "Other" answers)

Participants were also asked how long it took to travel to their library (Figure 5). While the proportion of respondents who lived less than 10 minutes from the library varied, overall there was consistency across in terms of the number of participants who lived within 30 minutes travel of their library, this figure being around 90% for all libraries.

Q6. How long did it typically take you to travel to the library (if you didn't stop on the way for something)?

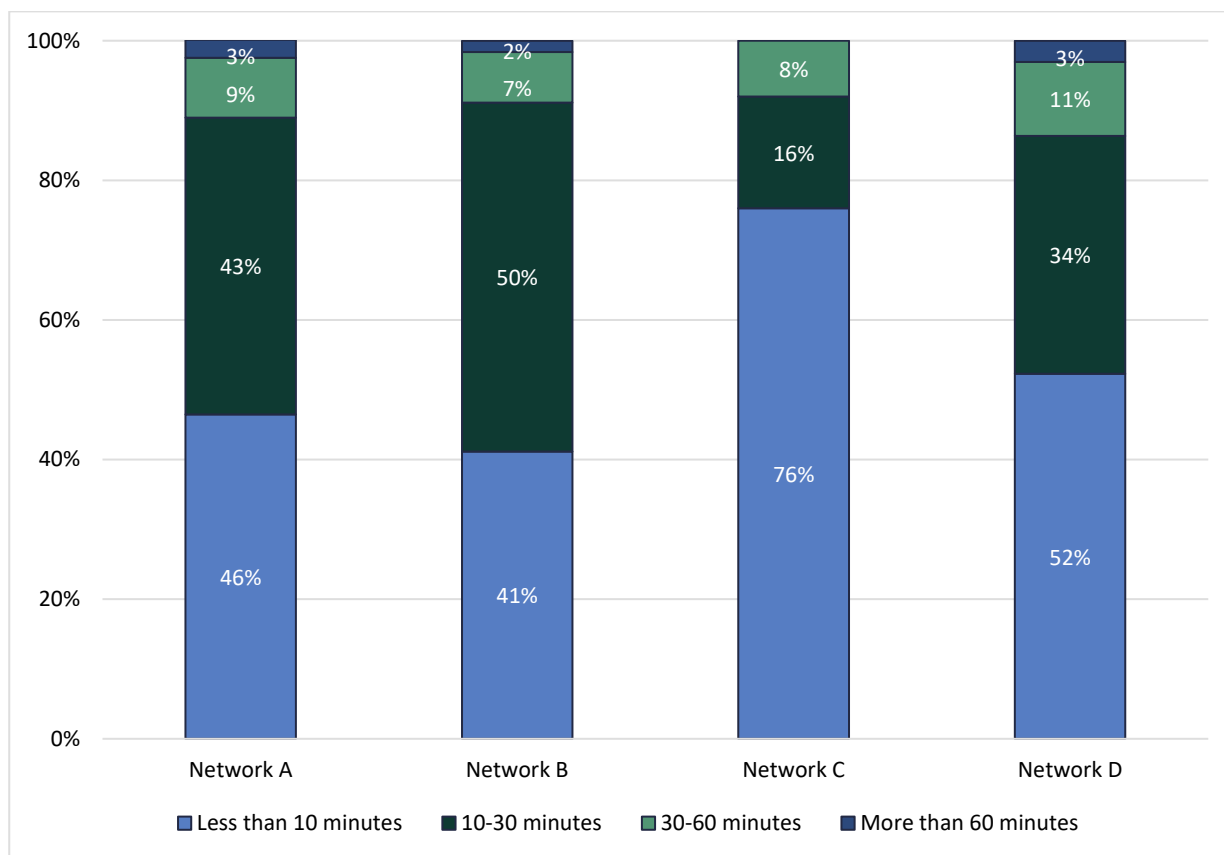


Figure 5: Q6. How long did it typically take you to travel to the library (if you didn't stop on the way for something)?

Q7 asked whether respondents typically combined trips to the library with the use of other services. There was large variation across the four library networks (Figure 6). For regional libraries (A and D) almost three quarters of respondents reported combining library visits with some other activity or services, but this figure was less than 50% for network B, and just 20% for network C.

Respondents who answered Yes to Q7 were invited to name the services they typically combined with a library visit. For all four libraries shopping was the most common 'service', included in between 72% and 83% of responses. The next most common was dining, included in between 5% (network D) and 20% (network B) of responses. Other answers included health services, post office, cafes and banking, but these were listed in fewer than 5% of responses.

Q7. Did you typically combine your trips to and from the library with shopping, dining out or the use of other services?

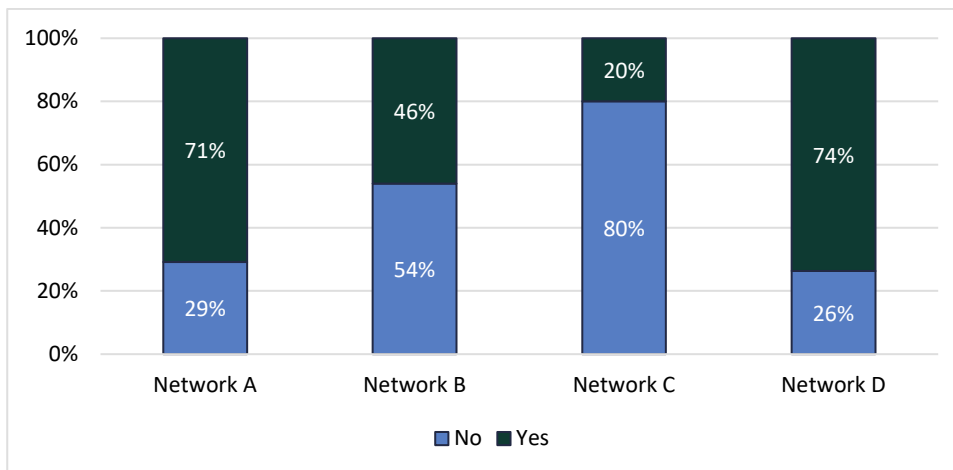


Figure 6: Q7. Did you typically combine your trips to and from the library with shopping, dining out or the use of other services?

Missing the library during closure periods

Participants who had visited their library in the previous year were asked to indicate the extent to which they had missed visiting during the recent enforced COVID-19 closures (Figure 7). For networks A, B and D around half of respondents reported that they had missed visiting either ‘quite a lot’ or ‘a great deal’. For library C, however, this figure was 80%. Cross-checking responses to this question with earlier questions revealed that respondents who typically visited their libraries more frequently, and for longer, were likely to miss their visits more. It is also worth noting that in total around 90% of respondents indicated that they missed visiting the library at least a little, despite the closure period being relatively short.

Q8. Did you miss visiting the physical library during these [closure] periods?

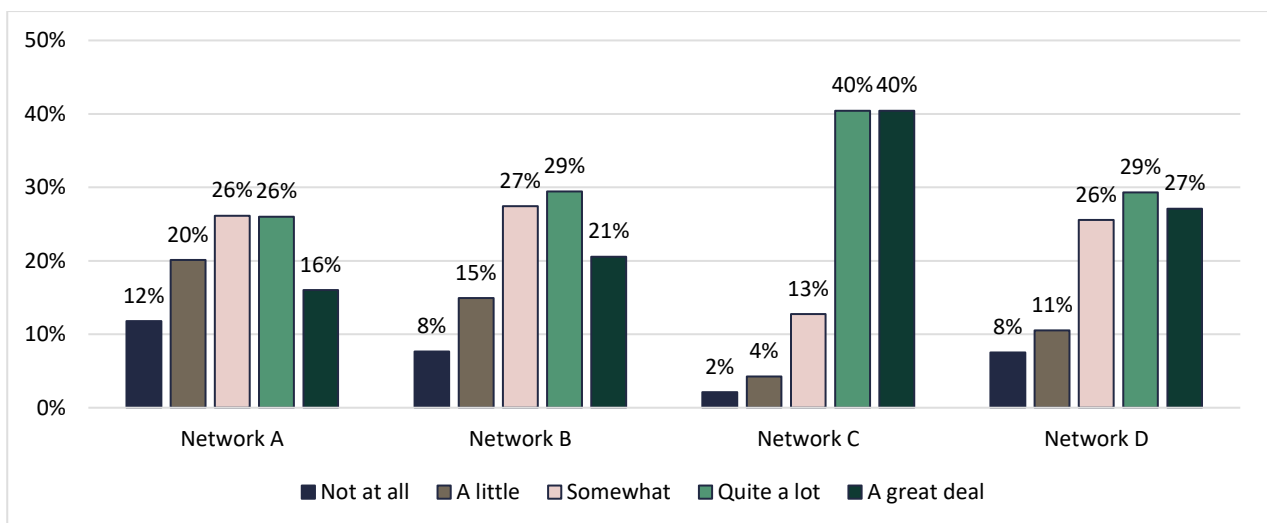


Figure 7: Q8. Did you miss visiting the physical library during these [closure] periods?

Respondents who indicated that they had missed visiting the library were asked to provide a free text response explaining why. An inductive analysis of these text responses revealed the following themes. In almost all cases similar reasons for missing the library were given by respondents at all four networks. Themes are organised into three groups: Activities, Environment, and Resources.

Activities		
Theme	Description of what was missed	Illustrative quotations
Browsing the shelves	The physical act of browsing the shelves, typically to select some books to borrow.	“Just the physical experience of picking up a book, flicking through it, and deciding whether you would read it or not” [A] “I prefer to browse in person, creating an opportunity to stumble across something that may not be what you were looking for” [A]
A place to take children	Having a place to take children or grandchildren, including to choose books and attend events and programs	“I would take my kids after school to the library to borrow books of their choosing so it was part of our weekly routine which we missed” [B] “My kids love being able to look at and pick books in person. They also loved the Lego and play dough clubs and were devastated to miss those” [D]
Studying	A place to undertake study, research and related activities	“missed the library as a quiet space to get assessment work done as it’s not quiet at home” [A] “Having a concentrated study space, physical resources and reliable internet at the library were invaluable. All these were really missed during lockdowns” [A]
Social interaction	Interacting with library staff and/or other library users	“The library also represented a place where I could catch up with friends” [B] “I live alone, and they also had community activities that made me feel happy and included in the community” [A]
Reading	The supply of material to read, and reading specifically in the library building	I missed being able to browse books and have a place to quietly read outside of my home as the atmosphere is just not the same” [B] “sitting at the windowsill and reading books” [B]
As an outing	Visiting the library as a special event	“Visiting the library is not just about borrowing books, it is an outing” [A]

As well as these frequently mentioned activities, a variety of other activities were occasionally mentioned by respondents. These included missing the use of the library as a virtual office, using library computers, book clubs, and classes and other tuition sessions.

Environment		
Theme	Description of what was missed	Illustrative quotations
Quiet	The library as a quiet, calm, soothing or peaceful place	<p>“Libraries have such a lovely and hushed sense of peace” [A]</p> <p>“I generally took my girl who is non-verbal, and wheelchair bound. We would spend time there and I would read to her and borrow talking books for her. It was quiet in there which she likes” [A]</p>
Relaxing	The library as a relaxing place for respite, to unwind and “de-stress”	<p>“the quiet and refreshing environment ... provides a meditative state for me” [C]</p> <p>“a peaceful and welcoming retreat” [A]</p>
Friendly	The library as a friendly and warm place to visit, due to staff and the environment’s relative informality.	“friendly and bright place to visit”
Physical aspects	The library as a pleasant place to visit (e.g. heated during winter, air conditioning during summer, safe, comfortable)	“I am disabled and find noisy environments overwhelming. Many calm places (such as the river) are not suitable for me to go on my own, due to my physical vulnerability. The library is safe.” [A]
Alternative to home	The library as an alternative place to home for some activities.	<p>“Often my home environment is busy and chaotic, so it is a place of sensory respite” [A]</p> <p>“the library was my second home” [B]</p>
Communal aspects	The library as a place to feel connected to the community	<p>“missed the sense of physical closeness to the community that you can get when you are in a public place of learning” [A]</p> <p>“missed the feeling of belonging” [B]</p>
Surrounded by books	The experience of being around physical books	<p>“Books have always been an essential part of my life and being amongst them is very important to me” [A]</p> <p>“I enjoy actually seeing books” [A]</p>

Resources		
Theme	Description of what was missed	Illustrative quotations
"Real" books	The opportunity to handle, borrow and read real books (as opposed to ebooks)	<p>"I enjoyed the opportunity of seeing physical hard copy books without looking at a digital screen. Knowing that some hidden tech algorithm wasn't collecting my data and trying to analyze my interest etc." [A]</p> <p>"We rely on resources from the library for schooling and it's part of our weekly routine" [A]</p> <p>"having access to books is important. Books provide valuable nourishment for minds" [B]</p>
Other materials	The opportunity to borrow and use/read newspapers, magazines, DVDs and audiobooks.	"Catching up on periodicals" [A]
Computers and internet	The opportunity to use the library's computers and/or wifi.	<p>"I don't have a computer at home so missed being able to apply for jobs and using it for other things" [A]</p> <p>"I use the library for self-education, entertainment, mostly via computer usage. I am physically disabled due to severe arthritis and like to keep up with news, particularly politics and environment. Loss of access to the library left me feeling isolated and out of touch" [D]</p>

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they missed undertaking certain activities during their library visits. By excluding “not applicable” responses, and aggregating the remainder, we can calculate the percentage of respondents who engage in these activities (Figure 8). A majority of participants across all libraries reported that they browsed and read books, asked librarians for help and advice, and socialised and met friends. Over two-thirds of respondents from the two Sydney libraries (B and C) also used the library’s wifi – a substantially higher number than for the two regional libraries. This is perhaps a consequence of the younger demographics of the Sydney library respondents.

Q10. To what extent did you miss the following activities while the library was closed (% who did not respond “Not applicable”)

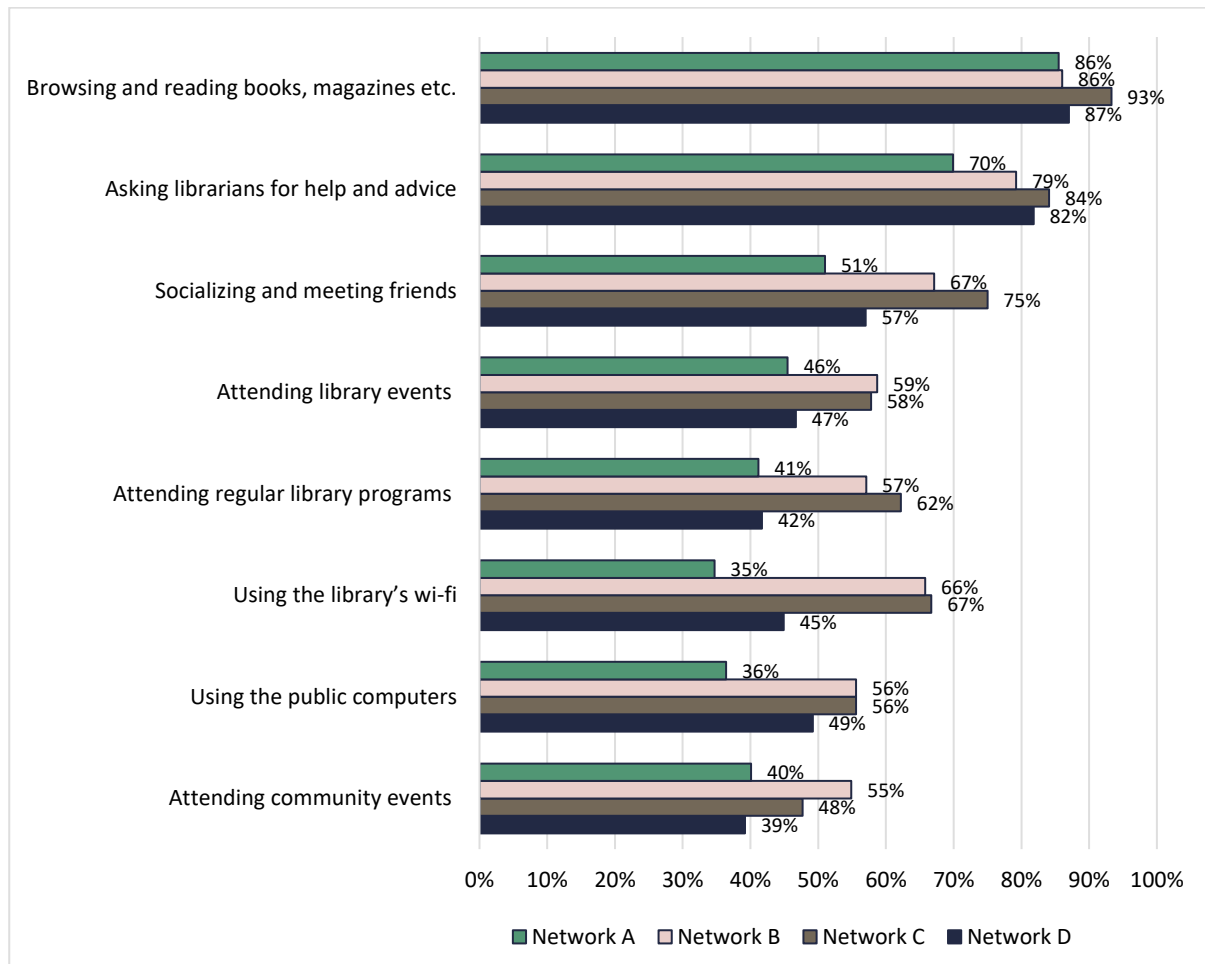


Figure 8: Q10. To what extent did you miss the following activities while the library was closed (% who did not respond “Not applicable”)

When we consider those who responded “quite a lot” or more (Figure 9), browsing and reading books was the most missed activity for all libraries. Overall, socialising and meeting friends, and asking librarians for help, were the next most missed activities.

Q10. To what extent did you miss the following activities while the library was closed (% responding quite a lot or more)?

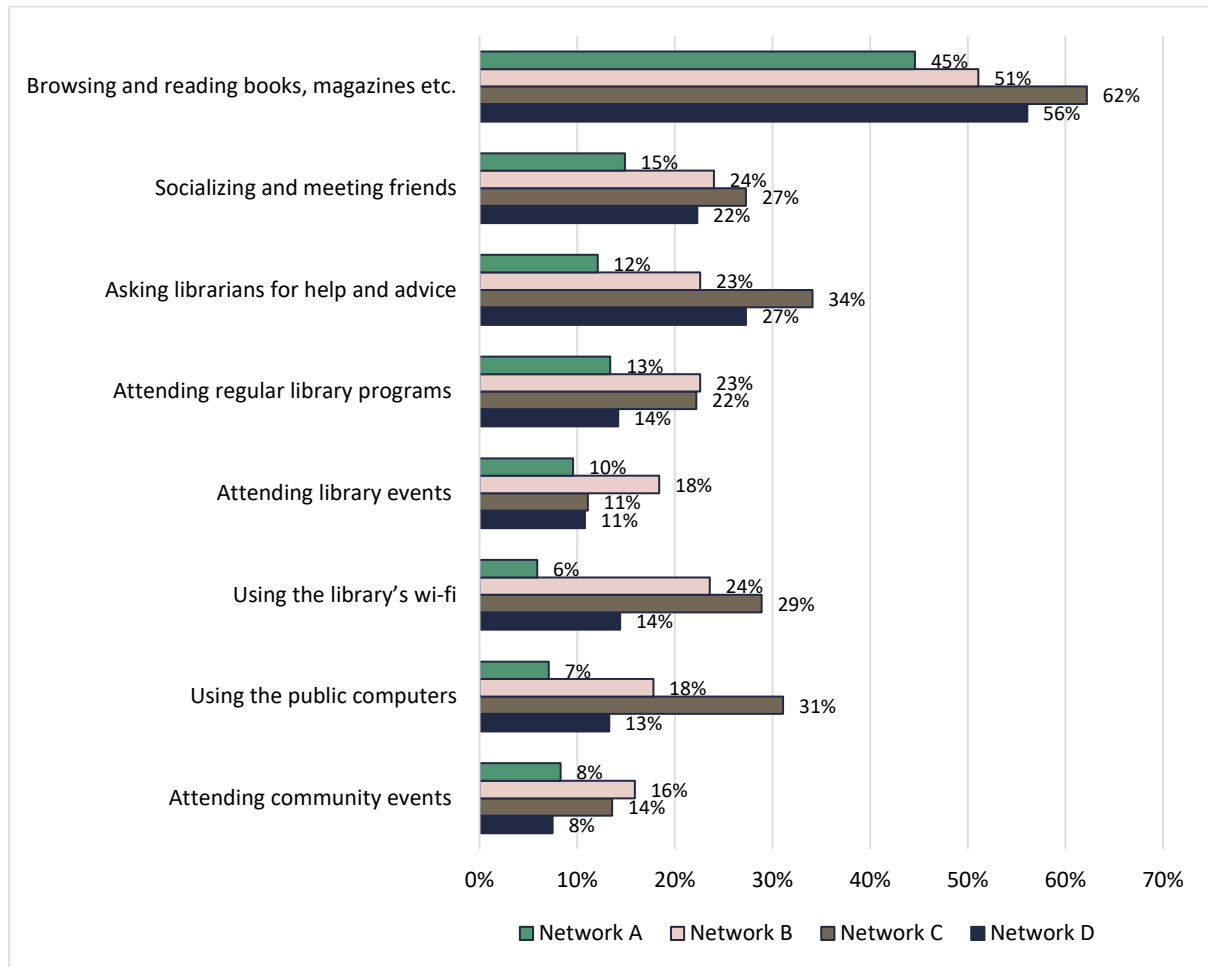


Figure 9: To what extent did you miss the following activities while the library was closed (% responding quite a lot or more)?

Finally, participants were asked about the likely frequency of visits to the library once it reopened (Figure 10). A majority of respondents suggested that they would visit the library with around the same frequency as before, but a significant number indicated that their visits would be more frequent.

Q11. Do you think you will visit the library more or less frequently, or about the same, after the COVID pandemic has passed, compared with before the COVID pandemic?

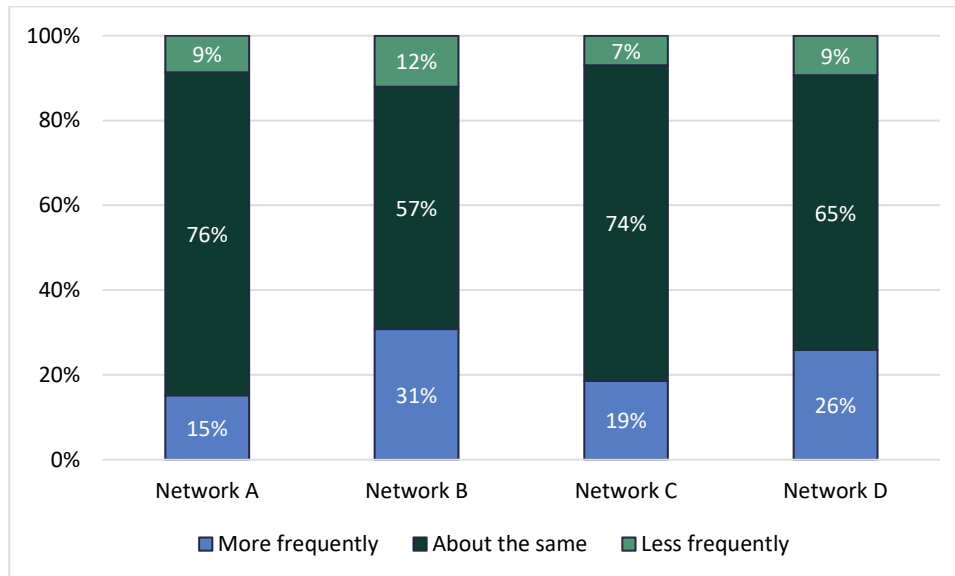


Figure 10: Q11. Do you think you will visit the library more or less frequently, or about the same, after the COVID pandemic has passed, compared with before the COVID pandemic?

Conclusions

Data collected through this survey research provide a rich picture of public library use in the four library networks, the extent to which users have missed their public libraries during closure periods, and why. We highlight six key points that can inform future public library planning and advocacy.

1. The overall value of public library buildings

The survey findings clearly demonstrate that the four library networks provide places and spaces that are highly valued by their communities. Overall, more than 90% of respondents reported that they missed visiting their library to some degree during the closure period. While we note that our sample sizes are relatively small, and we cannot assume that they are representative of all community members, the findings do strongly indicate that all aspects of a typical contemporary Australian library are valued by at least some community members. The survey findings also demonstrate that library spaces are valued in many ways, with user visits often combining several purposes and activities. This represents important support for the efforts that libraries have made to refine and develop their services, spaces and resources, both during COVID and before.

2. Serving diverse communities

While the survey respondents represent only a small proportion of the total user population, they nonetheless included individuals from a diverse range of groups including the elderly and home-bound, the physically and mentally disabled, children, non-native English speakers, and those on low or no income. For many people, particularly those in disadvantaged groups, the library represents an integral part of their life, for which there may be no obvious alternative.

3. The library as a site of affective experiences

Many respondents told us about their library visits using language that described their feelings and emotions. Libraries were seen as “havens”, soothing places apart from the stresses of daily life, affording opportunities for relaxation, play, and reflection. There is a sense in which the value of library visits was linked, for many users, to a *lack* of purpose. Libraries provide an opportunity to engage in meaningful but undirected activities like browsing, reading, and surfing the internet. Visitors may come with the intent to relax and enjoy some leisure time, but do so without explicit objectives or goals they are seeking to achieve. In an increasingly stressful world, it is important that libraries recognise their role as a place of escape and ensure that their spaces support this function.

4. The library as a community hub

The survey findings provide support for the increasingly accepted view of libraries as important community hubs. Respondents described missing interaction with friends and other library users, and with staff. Libraries offer the opportunity for connection in a variety of ways – from formal group events (clubs, programs, classes) to incidental meetings. A key factor in facilitating these opportunities is the flexibility of the library – users are able to engage with the space in whatever way works for them.

5. The value of library resources

While the value of the library as a community hub is important to recognise, it is notable that the thing users reported missing most was access to the library collection, and the ability to browse and borrow material. This will no doubt come as no surprise to those working in libraries, but it is perhaps worth emphasising the fundamental role of collections, and the physical experience of interacting with them. While moves towards optimising libraries as places for community and connection are welcome, there

should clearly remain a complimentary and fundamental emphasis on the provision of physical access to books and other resources.

6. The positive impact of library staff

Many survey responses included positive comments about library staff. Respondents valued not only their professionalism and expertise, but also their engagement and friendliness. It is clear that the value of public library spaces is inextricably linked to the people who work in them.