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## Considering "Atmosphere" when Facilitating Information Seeking by People with Invisible Disabilities in Public Libraries

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# Considering “atmosphere” in facilitating information seeking by people with invisible disabilities in public libraries

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## ABSTRACT

Twenty percent of Australians reported having a disability in 2015. Disability may occur at any time during the lifespan, however most disabilities are invisible. When a disability is invisible, or not immediately apparent to an outsider, individuals may need to self-identify to access inclusive services, or accommodation may never be offered at all.

When the perceived number of information seekers with a disability is low, information organisations may deem services unnecessary. Considering information access is a human right, information service providers and researchers need to seek low cost and low effort ways to facilitate information access and information seeking behaviours.

The research question was “how does the ambience, security, and mores (conceptualised as “atmosphere”) of information services facilitate, or create barriers to, information seeking by people with an invisible disability?”. Data from 23 semi-structured qualitative interviews were analysed to explore the experiences of people with an invisible disability as current or prospective library users.

## KEYWORDS

Invisible disabilities; Hidden disabilities; Latent disabilities; Semi-structured interviews; Public Libraries; Information services; Information seeking behaviour

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Public libraries; Information science

## INTRODUCTION

Based on the 2015 Survey of Disability, Ageing and Carers, one in five Australians report having a disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). It is a common misconception that disabilities are obvious or immediately recognizable (Ricci, 2016). While cues such as a wheelchair or white cane can assist in visualising disability (Pilling, 2013), the iconographical person in a wheelchair, used to indicate disability services or facilities, is a graphical representation that represents only 4.4 per cent of persons with a disability (Australian Network on Disability, 2019).

The library disability literature has predominately focused on visual disabilities such as vision loss; this is unsurprising considering the focus on text in libraries (Hill, 2013). In contrast, invisible disabilities such as learning disabilities are comparatively little researched. Invisible, hidden, or latent disabilities refer to any disability not immediately evident to another person such as acquired or traumatic brain injuries, physical disabilities such as spinal injuries, mental health disabilities, autism spectrum, chronic pain, chronic dizziness, and chronic fatigue (Autism Queensland, n.d.; Disabled World, 2018; House with No Steps, 2015).

While there is no official measure of the prevalence rates of invisible disabilities in Australia, disability organisations ‘House with No Steps’ (2017) and ‘Attitude Foundation’ (n.d.) suggest that between 70 and 90 per cent of people with a disability have or experience an invisible disability. Goldberg & Steury (2001) note that by 2020, depression is expected to be the second most common disease and will account for 15 per cent of the world-wide disease burden.

There are few circumstances where there is a legal obligation for an individual to disclose a disability in Australia (Ricci, 2016). An individual may decide not to disclose for several reasons, including the risk of stigma should the individual’s experience of disability not meet an onlooker’s expectation or experience (Brent, 2016; Feldman & Tegart, 2013; Invisible Disabilities Association, 2003). When an individual discloses a disability, the person disclosed to may believe that this opens the discussion to further questioning; an attempt to visualise the invisible through inquisition (Mullins & Preyde, 2013; Murphy, 2018).

The decision to disclose is a complex and personal one (Spirito Dalgin & Bellini, 2008). Yet people with a disability may be required to disclose to receive adjustments or services (e.g. Robertson, 2007). Non-disclosure may contribute to a sense that there is a low number of people with a disability in the community. Further, where services or staff may want to provide tailored disability services, resources, staffing, or facilities; they may not know how to provide for the needs of people with a disability, or what is required (Equity Research Centre, 2007).

Information organisations such as public libraries are not immune from these considerations. Public libraries contribute to the possibilities of active citizenship across social, economic, and ethnic differences; increasing community efficacy and enabling communities to engage and participate in problem solving and local issues (Aabo, 2011; Homelessness Australia, 2013; Houghton, 2014). Public libraries provide access to critical information such as employment, education, and government resources (Jaeger, Bertot, Thompson, Katz, & DeCoster, 2012).

Yet as government expenditure tightens, library budgets tighten, and competition continues to be fierce for funding, there may be challenges in providing staffing, resources, or facilities (Equity Research Centre, 2007; Public Libraries Victoria Network, 2013). The wider literature on libraries and homelessness notes that funding for specialist staff such as social workers may require successful completion of funding applications (e.g. Kelley, Riggleman, Clara, & Navarro, 2017). Public libraries may struggle to balance the needs of patron groups, including homeless patrons with serious psychiatric disorders who may have limited services, health points, or places to go (Torrey, Esposito, & Geller, 2009). Library staff may not know how to engage with library patrons who are in crisis or in need of specialist advice (Williams, 2016). Lastly, traditional library systems such as fines may result in poor or socially excluded populations determining that the library isn't "for them" – self-excluding even before entry into the space (Working Together Project, n.d.).

Libraries may themselves be limited in the type of access or inclusion that they provide. While public libraries have improved physical access to buildings, they reflect less progress in the consumption of assistive or adaptive technologies or devices (Burke, 2009; Small, Myhill, Herring-Harrington, 2015). Staff employed in school, academic, or council-controlled libraries may lack approval to make decisions around accessibility issues due to reporting and funding structures (Irvall & Nielsen, 2005). These reporting structures, funding, and knowledge limitations may limit what is focused on and developed in the library (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011; Morley, 2000; Quinn & McCallum, 2012).

The 'what' and 'how' of services for people with a disability, particularly invisible disabilities, is further complicated by a limited disability research literature in Australia. While literature exists on disability and public libraries, it has been noted as being predominately American focused (Burns & Gordon, 2010; Hill, 2013). The University of Sydney's 'Report of Audit of Disability Research in Australia' (2014, 2017) notes that there remain several research gap areas in the Australian literature; including, notably, that additional research is needed on the lived experiences of people with disabilities to bring these perspectives to policy.

Lastly, while overarching legislation exists such as the Disability Discrimination Act, this often makes no direct

reference to public libraries (Fitzgerald, Hawkins, Denison, & Kop, 2015). In this absence, libraries may implement their own policies around services for people with a disability. The professional association that provides standards and accreditation within the Australian library community - the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) - provides guidelines by which libraries may benchmark their services to ensure that a minimum level of service is provided; however, there are no obligations to apply these.

This lack of legislation means that public libraries provide varying services across costing, resourcing, and knowledge lines, with the result that public expectations of access for people with a disability are not always high (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011; Morley, 2000). This varied service may in turn impact on how people with a disability are served in libraries (Jaeger & Bowman, 2005).

Yet if the core of human rights holds that all individuals deserve equal rights as members of society, these rights are unattainable in the absence of free and equitable access to information (Hussain, 2000). It is not enough for public libraries to expect patrons to disclose the presence of a disability to provide services or resources. It is not practicable to wait on funding to provide services. Instead, libraries need to consider ways in which they may build upon their existing environment to facilitate information access and use by patrons with an invisible disability.

#### **Information seeking behaviour and information use**

Information behaviour explores how humans need, seek, manage, and use information in different contexts (Fisher, Erdelez, & McKechnie, 2005; Julien, 1992). Described by Spink (2010) as a critical evolutionary ability, information behaviour may be active, such as through the direct foraging for information; or passive, such as watching television advertisements without any intention to act on the information (Beverley, Bath, & Barber, 2007; Todaro, 2005).

Understanding user information behaviours has practical implications in respect to the library policies, rules, and regulations (Mutula & Majine, 2016; Todaro, 2005). As a community information centre, it is important that the public library responds to the changing information needs of their communities in a variety of formats (Irwin, 1995). This response includes ensuring that library collections, resources, services, and programs are accessible and meet the information needs of their communities (Craven & Booth, 2006; Gibson & Kaplan, 2017).

If public libraries are to utilise their potential to address social and educational inequalities within their communities (McKeown, 2016), all community members must have the same right to access information (Inglis & McAnelly, 2015). However, internal and external factors including the characteristics and needs of library users and the operating environments of the library may motivate and influence individual information needs and behaviour (Day, 2007; Hepworth, 2007; Wellstead, 2010). As noted by Samure and

Given (2004), marginalised groups may display different information behaviours than those viewed as ‘normal’ seekers of information.

There is limited research on the information behaviour of people with invisible disabilities in library settings. One study by Niedzwiedzka and Korycinska (2016) considered the information behaviours related to health information seeking by people with depression on online forums. The information need that prompted individuals to use this resource was shaped by the presence of a mental health condition in conjunction with the availability of an internet connection/knowledge of and access to the forum. The authors noted that participants “often have a problem with revealing their needs” (example: *I feel awful and the worst is that I can't stay that to anyone*) (p. 128). There were posts expressing social anxiety and shame related to disclosing their mental illness, or not feeling understood by their community. The manner in which anxious and depressed individuals process certain types of information and the impact of systematic bias, such as overestimation of threat and understatement of ability to cope, has been established in the literature (e.g., Beck & Clark, 1988).

Sambo, Rabiou and Shaba (2016) note that physical disabilities shape information behaviour through the paths of access into and through the information facility. Samure and Given (2004) undertook a pilot study on how blindness or partial sight influenced the information behaviour of participants while completing university studies. The university library environment, structured to cater for ‘typical’ information behaviour, turned the straightforward task for a sighted individual of locating and copying a research article into an exercise of several days, spanning two locations. Due to this, participants in the study expressed a preference for internet resources and supported the value of adaptive technologies rather than undertaking this lengthy investigation and process into the library.

A significant portion of the autism spectrum research relevant to information behaviour is focused on classroom learning and teaching environments; while not particular to the library setting, this knowledge translates across services providing a learning or education service. Individuals on the autism spectrum may not understand that questions can be used to gain information from others (Hurtig, Ensrud & Tomblin, 1982), potentially limiting their information access. Gray and Garland (1993) recommend that autistic individuals may need to be taught specifically how to ask questions and be instructed that others may have information that could be valuable to them. Creating appropriate classrooms, or educative library environments, can also aid students on the autism spectrum, as low-stimulus surroundings have strong implications for feelings of safety, calm, and inclusion (McAllister & Maguire, 2012)

A theme that weaves its way through the information literature is the consideration of how the environment affects information behaviour (e.g., Cordray & Romantch, 2005;

Niu & Hemminger, 2012). The physical domain is the tangible world that surrounds us and in which information is provided, stored, used. This tangible world in turn possesses its own “atmosphere” – the ambience, sense of security, and mores of the space that themselves support, inhibit, or encourage the individual in their information pursuits. Public libraries are not immune from this influence; and as services available to all members of their community, libraries need to consider how their own “atmosphere” can contribute to information access and use by their community members.

The primary research question for this study was “how does the ambience, security, and mores (conceptualised as “atmosphere”) of information services facilitate, or create barriers to, information seeking by people with an invisible disability?”. The study explores and contributes to the existing literature base by exploring how “atmosphere” can provide support for, or create barriers to, information access for library users with invisible disabilities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Epistemology**

An interpretivist epistemology was employed, holding that realities are multiple and individual, embedded in context (Pickard, 2013). Realities are socially based, local, specific and alterable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Using an interpretive framework, the researcher aims to describe, interpret, and understand (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor 1992).

### **Method**

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were undertaken with people with an invisible disability. Semi-structured interviews permit a responsive exploration of the context and views of participants, permitting questions to be tailored to each interviewee (deMarrais, 2003; Labuschagne, 2003; Babbie, 2005). The data provide the researcher’s understanding of the participant’s understanding of a subject (O’Hara, 2006). Participant quotations are reflected in the discussion by indented paragraphs, with the participant number listed in closed brackets following.

### **Participants**

Theoretical saturation was reached at the completion of 23 interviews. 70 per cent of interviews were conducted face to face; 17 per cent by phone; and 9 per cent via Skype. 18 participants were female; 5 were male. 12 participants were aged under 39 years; 10 were aged between 40 and 79. Most participants resided in a suburban area. 10 participants had completed, or were completing, a college or tertiary degree.

### **Interview duration, inclusion criteria, and confidentiality**

Interviews averaged 29.4 minutes in duration and were conducted in public locations, including cafes and libraries. The inclusion criteria were that the participant resided in Victoria, was over 18 years old, and had an invisible disability. All participants indicated that they had visited a public library, however not all participants were current library users. Participants were recruited via promotion through disability advocacy organisations online through

their social media and newsletters; through the researcher's Facebook account; via snowball sampling; and in the case of a supported workplace, through the employer. The interviewer did not seek disclosure apart from confirming that the participant identified as having an invisible disability. Of participants who self-disclosed, participants included people with mental health, intellectual or learning disabilities, acquired or traumatic brain injury, autism spectrum, and sensory disabilities.

Several interviews were undertaken at a supported workplace with the consent of the employer. Names were provided to the interviewer for participation in the study. The interviewer did not approach any person outside of this list for participation in the study; where approached by persons outside this list to participate in the study, the researcher declined the request. It was not possible to maintain confidentiality of participation from the employer or fellow employees. Instead, confidentiality of the interview was maintained by conducting interviews in an enclosed area and in pausing recordings and the interview if interrupted.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Data was collected via interview and audio recorded. On the conclusion of the interview the recorded session was transcribed by the interviewer and analysed establish themes, using NVivo software for data organization.

Written interviews were conducted with two participants at their request. One of these two participants also completed an audio interview, with some parts of this recording utilised in the data analysis; however, much of the information from this participant was drawn from the written interview. One participant attended the interview with a support person and provided consent for this person to be present.

### **Positioning of researcher**

The interviewer approaches the study as an insider, sharing a characteristic, role, or experience with participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). While there are advantages to undertaking research in a field to which the researcher is already familiar, there can be perceived disadvantages such as a loss of objectivity or an illusion of sameness (Breen, 2007).

As noted by Alvesson (2003), when undertaking self-ethnographic research the researcher must be cautious to not see all things in only a specific light. It cannot be assumed that the researcher's experience is generic and identical to participants' (Nandhakumar & Jones, 1997). To reduce the possibility of assuming generic experiences, no identifying information was sought about the library services used by participants or about the nature of their invisible disability.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Defining "atmosphere"**

The concept of "atmosphere" draws inductively from thematic analysis of the interview data. As defined by and conceptualised by the researcher from the interview data, "atmosphere" incorporates ambience; perceptions of safety; and staff behaviours and attitudes. These were often

discussed by interview participants around their sense of welcome in the library and may in turn influence their information behaviours and seeking.

Each of these concepts also appears in the wider library literature, though not under the umbrella term of "atmosphere" and seldom in discussion around information behaviour in libraries by people with invisible disabilities. Ambience, or sound and noise, has been both lauded and criticised in the library environment (Ashcroft, 2003; Schomberg & Cole, 2017; University Wire, 2018); while the psychological and ergonomics literature has debated the value of colour therapy (Acking & Kuller, 1972; Kodama, 1990; Kuller, Ballal, Laike, Mikellides, & Tonello, 2006).

Perception of safety remains topical; particularly security in public places and the fear of crime (Bialek, n.d.; Yavuz & Welch, 2010; Johnson, 2012; McBride, 2017; Kovach, 2018). Library mores and staff and public attitudes have been considered in the literature around social policing and behaviour in the wider community and in public libraries (Coldron, Cripps, & Shipton, 2010; Shaffer, Vardaman, & Miller, 2010; Ingraham, 2015; Feldshuh, 2018).

The previous section has emphasised the importance of considering how libraries can facilitate information behaviour in low cost and low effort ways. "Atmosphere" is one way that libraries may be able to facilitate their whole community in their information behaviours, without requiring disability disclosure.

### **Ambience**

Ambience encapsulated light, colour, and sound. While participants did discuss temperature and lighting such as windows and overhead lights, the data analysis revealed additional thoughts on sound and colour use.

Colour was used by participants as a way of identifying how to use the library, or how the library perceived itself. Colour referred both to wall paint and to furniture colour as visible indicators of space utilisation. Such choices did not need to include all furniture; the use of a red table or chairs to indicate a silent area was enough. Colour was seen by some participants as a way of identifying what was allowed in an area (for example, children's areas using more vibrant and energetic colours than those used in the calmer adult reading areas), what was permissible in the space, and how space could be utilised. Where libraries maintained the continuous use of the one colour throughout, this monotony could cause confusion when individuals attempted to independently decode how to use the library space:

[I]f everything's all the one colour and looks kind of the same and the desks are the same over here and over there, and I've been told that I can sit here, I'm not sure if I can sit there. That can retrigger and then I have to go ask the same 32 questions of the [staff]. (007)

Colour could play a role in a participant's decision around which library branch to visit, and how long to stay in the

library. The “reassuring suburban (council) colour” scheme of mint green – colours that may be seen at hospitals and council offices – could subsume the identity of the library as a council, county, or city owned space; a place only to visit, as opposed to staying in. This was also the case with sound; participants recognised that sometimes they, as human beings, may make noise, incidentally drawing attention to themselves. The reverent silence of the library – not dissimilar to a church – could demand a suppression of the human to favour the pursuit of knowledge. For some, the quiet was calming:

[If] I haven’t visited [local library] in several years and I remember it being a very **quiet** – not dark but shadowed kind of place where I could go to relax and I walk in there several years later and have the same thing. A lot of things that mental illness sufferers look for is a constant [...] in their life (001, own emphasis)

For others, it led to anxiety:

... if you think about the way **silence** is used in films it is always to terrify. Tension, it’s used to build tensions ... [i]f I’m in a space where I feel like you can’t make a single noise, that builds and builds, and it’s such a huge pressure on me to hold that in, and it’s actually a cycle that makes it more likely that I’m going to tic – and then the embarrassment that follows, and that makes it a very uncomfortable position for me to be in. (007, own emphasis)

The distinction became evident in perception of the library as a quiet place, versus a silent place. Having quiet background noise permitted a return of humanity; a place of reflection and knowledge that people could stay in. This was not to say, however, that participants necessarily favoured the contemporary version of the library as a “community living-room”; the noise of children screaming, jarring hold music, and people swearing were noted by participants as detrimental to their experiences in the library.

The data from this study suggested a rethink of the library as a silent space, or as a noisy space, to have a *spaces* model. In this library space, there would be areas set aside for different usage, with colour-facilitated and signed user information behaviour cues. Where an environment does not match needs, library users may take familiar paths to find known information and then leave the library; removing the opportunity to find different information, address other information needs, or to build information seeking skills. This model also impacts on individual’s decisions to approach staff for information assistance.

In having discussed ambience, library practitioners or researchers might ask: How do we communicate to individuals what our spaces are for? How do we address the needs of our patronage for differing levels of sound? How do we communicate how library furniture may be used, as a social gathering space or a quiet study space? How do the colours of the library or wall art communicate to patrons,

particularly with communication or mental health disabilities, what the library is and how both the library and its space can be used by individuals?

### **Perceptions of safety**

Safety covered the perception of security both internal and external to the library, the existence of mores or rules, and social policing.

There is a debate in the public library sector as to whether a security presence in the library is necessary (e.g., McBride, 2017). There can be a perception that security may make library visitors feel that the library is not “their” space; versus that security may make library users feel safer in the public sphere. Where security was mentioned by participants, either internal or external to the library space such as on roadways or carparks, it was spoken about in a positive manner: “And they also have a security guard there as well, so you feel safe. The security guard is just at the front door, when you walk in, it’s one of those rotation door things” (018).

Establishing and enforcing clear mores was also discussed favourably. It was noted that people may choose to self-exclude themselves from the public library, and that this choice may derive from the individual. However, it was also noted that there was a practical aspect that exclusions were on occasion necessary to ensure the operation of the library:

I was talking before about reasons for visiting a library that were on the library side but on the personal side [...] you could be excluded by choice. That kind of self-exclusion. I acknowledge that there is that, people who will not visit and that’s by choice [...] the practical aspect as well are that exclusions are sometimes necessary for the library to function, I wouldn’t say harmoniously because it doesn’t...harmony isn’t always what you’re striking (009)

Where there was an absence of understood rules, or where the cues of the environment may result in conflicting expectations of space usage, social policing became an issue. Social policing is the situation wherein the community is aware of rules or policies that apply to a given space or process and so members of the community keep on the lookout for violators of those policies. As humans, we seek predictable patterns and engage in normative behaviours (e.g., Chatman, 2000). Policies and rules inform the community of behavioural expectations of varying environments. Seeing others behaving in unexpected ways, that may be “breaking a rule” (using mobile phones, eating, speaking loudly, running, not wearing shoes, etc.) can lead to discomfort, annoyance, and even anger by other library users. Shushing of noisy library users (by other users) is a stereotypical library social policing activity. Even when the policy of imposed reverence is discontinued, not everyone is likely to be immediately aware of (or happy with) the policy change, and so may continue to feel justified in correcting the behaviours of others. This was a social concern and safety concern for some participants in this study:

[A] man came up and was excessively rude to us and very patronising and kind of yelled at us [...] I gave him my friendliest smile, and just said 'look I'm so sorry, I asked the staff, this is where they told us to go, they've obviously made a mistake' [...] I remember thinking 'there's a disconnect between the way the staff want this space to be used and the way it's being used' (007)

I have an anxiety disorder. At the moment I feel quite well but when something catastrophic goes wrong in my life [...] it would be really hard to use a library where I felt unsafe in. And so I think having places where you're not sort of looked at by staff as though you shouldn't be there, you're left to your own devices (005)

When this social policing occurs in a negative manner, and where there is not a security element such as a staff member to mitigate this occurrence, the desire of the individual to frequent social information spaces such as the public library can be unfavourably influenced. In having considered this, the library practitioner or researcher may ask: How are we maintaining and establishing the function of the library? How are we communicating our expectations for behaviour? Do our social expectations still allow our users to feel this is a safe place? Can users choose different areas in the library; are there desks positioned where patrons can place their back to the wall or see out windows or doors? If there is a security guard, how do they demonstrate their presence? If there is not a security guard, do library staff fulfil this function? If so, how is this role enacted and how do library staff understand and communicate the mores of the space? Are there areas in the library that are regularly unmonitored?

While libraries should be inclusive to all, some exclusions that are communicated to individuals – such as around behaviour and safety – can facilitate a library environment that is supportive of information seeking and information behaviour around discovery.

### **Staff behaviour and attitudes**

Perceptions of staff behaviour and attitudes can shape patron's information behaviour around seeking and discovery. Some participants noted their invisible disability may impact on their communication patterns, or that staff attention could be difficult to either gain or to retain:

[F]or me with the brain injury, there's reading from a screen, I really have to print everything off, then again there's the concentration thing, the noise. Then there's aphasia, so if someone says 'questions? Do you have any questions?' it might be in my head, coming out of my mouth could be a 24 hour delay, and they just think I'm an idiot (002)

I know I can be overly precise – which irritates people. But [...] it's like 'I want this thing, and this is the one I need, and this is the edition I need, and this is where I need it from', and it's like – I think what autistic people find hard to understand is, 'I'm giving you all the information you want, very clearly.' That irritates people.

They want to have small talk and kind of fluff all round those facts (003)

Imposed rules such as late fees could also be seen as a barrier:

It's just about getting there really [...] I read a lot so it makes a lot of sense to go to a public library, but it's just about getting there and then returning the books in a timely manner [...] it's just a bit of a challenge and I don't ever, I can't ever guarantee that I'll be able to do it (010)

Patrons can have a variety of information needs before they enter the library. When looking at staff attitudes and beliefs, information professionals might consider their own beliefs about their patron groups with questions including: Do we have our opening hours available online, and our busy or quiet periods? Do we have clear instructions on how to travel to the library via public transportation? Do we communicate to our community what our accessibility services include – and are we equipped to address the needs of community members in a thorough, meaningful way that is not tokenistic? Are library rules flexible, and are services available such as home delivery or quiet consultation rooms for staff and patrons? Are these services actively promoted to community members, or do we rely on community members to ask us? Are inclusive services created as a thoughtful and considered part of our programming, layout, and services, not an add-on?

Participants suggested that instead of requiring the individual to disclose their disability for assistance, staff indicate their disability awareness. This could be through an addition to staff name badges – such as "Ask me, I'm disability aware" or "Autism Ally". Libraries could also have posters or door signs indicating invisible disability awareness:

Sometimes I've been in shops before, very, very rarely, but they'll have an 'autism awareness' sticker or poster and you'll think 'good, someone in this shop knows about autism', and it makes you feel - even if nothing happens and you don't need it and you don't find that person, it makes you feel a little bit better that people in that shop, somewhere, are thinking about autism and trying to understand it (003)

Signage could also be used to reduce the need for disability disclosure. Having signage indicating what an area was for, or where the toilets were, could reduce anxiety in visiting the public space. Tying back into the literature, signage could help users feel that they were able to ask for help:

[I]f you had signage, like if you can't stand talk to our stuff, or this is a quiet area over here if you've got sensitivity. Just things to let people know that you can ask for help. I think if you ask for assistance, it can be a bit like a 'well maybe this person's never thought of a healthy person asking for assistance before', like not healthy but looking healthy, do I have to do the whole education thing and is that even worth it for the support

that I'll get? I think that even just something that lets you know that you can ask for help and it won't be seen as strange (010)

Libraries could also indicate invisible disability awareness and support via posters for support services for invisible disabilities in the toilet cubicles, such as for BeyondBlue or Black Dog--both free mental health services provided throughout Australia:

When you have invisible mental illnesses like anxiety and depression you spend most of your time trying to believe that you actually have them and it's not just your fault. And I always, always love to see the reminder, any reminder, that depression is a real thing; that anxiety is a real thing; that chronic fatigue exists. It sounds really strange [...] I have absolutely no problem supporting, understanding, and acknowledging someone else with it but I cannot believe that of myself. So any reminder that it is a real thing that exists in the real world and that other people know it exists as well, just that sort of awareness that people do have it and visual signs of that are always helpful. (007)

Signage served three roles in the library; indicating staff awareness and knowledge, as an invitation to ask questions, and as a way to show library support for invisible disabilities. Confidence could therefore be generated by the environment, supporting the choice of the user to approach the library. Perceiving that staff were aware and experienced in invisible disabilities may positively influence the decision to consult.

## CONCLUSION

Contemporary public libraries face several challenges when providing services to their communities. Invisible disabilities are prevalent in Australian communities; and as such, it is likely that a person with an invisible disability will at some time visit a public library. As one of the last free public services, libraries are increasingly serving a diverse demographic with a variety of needs, challenges, and expectations. As funding and staffing levels tighten, libraries need to consider how they can meet the information needs of their communities in low-cost, low-effort ways.

The paper has presented a variety of questions that library practitioners, researchers, and managers may ask themselves in considering how their library can contribute to information behaviours, including information seeking and information use. Additional questions that library managers may ask are: How does the library provide training in disability awareness to its staff, and what disabilities are considered? If the library has a disability inclusion or access plan, how does it discuss disability? How do libraries train new staff to understand accessibility and inclusion in the library? How are the voices of people with an invisible disability incorporated in strategic plans or in creating or revising library policy or mores?

Through these questions, the study has indicated ways that libraries can incorporate low-cost, low-effort means to enrich customer experiences of the library and better facilitate

information seeking and discovery. As the experience of disability is personal these findings will not be applicable to all people with an invisible disability; however, this study aims to contribute to the field of library and information studies in several ways. First, the study contributes to the professional library literature on the experiences and needs of people with an invisible disability in the library sector. Second, the study contributes to the current literature on information behaviour of people with a disability by exploring the little-documented area of people with an invisible disability. In view of the University of Sydney's Report on disability research, the predominate contribution of the study is in exploring the voices of people with an invisible disability as service users. The study aimed to increase awareness for staff, practitioners, and researchers on how libraries may present barriers for information seeking and use that they may not necessarily experience themselves.

Libraries cannot solely expect patrons to identify if they have a disability. Libraries must provide a holistic service to all people in their communities, if they are to fulfil their stated purpose and mission of being truly inclusive to all.

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