

# Fostering community empowerment through library social responsibility: A social capital approach in Malaysian academic libraries

Norhafizah Abdul Latif<sup>1,2\*</sup>, Samsul Farid Samsuddin<sup>1,3\*</sup> and Kiran Kaur<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Library & Information Science, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA

<sup>2</sup>Perpustakaan Sultan Abdul Samad, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Selangor, MALAYSIA

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Social Science, Universitas Negeri Malang, Negeri Malang, INDONESIA

e-mail: ab\_hafizah@upm.edu.my; \*samsulfarid@um.edu.my (corresponding author); kiran@um.edu.my

ORCID ID: Norhafizah Abul Latif: 0009-0007-1332-8223

Samsul Farid Samsuddin: 0000-0003-3759-5653

Kiran Kaur: 0000-0003-3021-2576

## ABSTRACT

*This study examines the understanding and implementation of social responsibility (SR) practices in Malaysian public academic libraries. Focusing on how these initiatives contribute to community development and empowerment through a social capital perspective, the inquiry was guided by two research questions: (i) How do academic librarians engage in social responsibility activities? (ii) How do academic library social responsibility practices foster community empowerment through the development of community social capital? Qualitative data were collected from 19 library administrator interviews and 19 focus group discussions with professional and non-professional library staff. The findings reveal that community empowerment does not result from isolated programmes but emerges through the interplay of structural networks, shared cognitive understanding, relational trust, and dimensions of social capital that operate synergistically. The study demonstrates that Library Social Responsibility (LSR) functions as a social capital-building process rather than a set of discrete charitable activities. Empirically, it specifies how partnership brokering, participatory needs alignment, and accumulative trust translate LSR into sustainable community capacity. Theoretically, it offers a moderated contribution: an empirically grounded elaboration of existing social capital theory applied to LSR contexts, rather than a new paradigm. Practically, the findings provide actionable insights for library managers and policymakers to design sustained, community-responsive LSR initiatives that position academic libraries as strategic agents of social inclusion and collaborative community development.*

**Keywords:** Library social responsibility; Social capital; Community empowerment; Academic Libraries; Malaysia.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Organisations in developing countries are increasingly engaging in social initiatives such as healthcare, education, economic welfare, infrastructure development, and environmental protection to enhance their reputation and secure societal legitimacy. Bowen (1953), in one of the earliest formal definitions of social responsibility, described it as pursuing policies, making decisions, and taking actions aligned with society's broader objectives and values. Within the corporate sector, this concept evolved into Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), reflecting an organisation's ethical commitment to contribute positively to society while meeting economic, legal, ethical, and environmental expectations (Carroll, 1991).

Extending this logic beyond for-profit entities, non-profit and public-sector institutions prioritise community well-being, empowerment, and social good over profit maximisation (Rudito et al., 2023). In the library context, Library Social Responsibility (LSR) applies Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) principles to foster equitable access to information, strengthen community engagement, and enhance social trust and societal well-being (Nair, 2024). Globally, libraries are increasingly seen as anchors for sustainable development, yet the operationalisation of LSR remains uneven and undertheorised, particularly in developing countries where institutional resources and community expectations differ markedly from Western contexts (Mensah & Onyancha, 2021).

CSR has been recognised as a mechanism for cultivating ethical relationships and social capital through commitment, trust, stakeholder interests, and shared values (Cesar & Jhony, 2020). Scholars have linked CSR with social capital to enhance organisational responsibility, networks, and shared norms. Similarly, LSR holds potential for fostering social capital within academic libraries, thereby supporting community empowerment. However, despite this potential, several interrelated gaps hinder the effective implementation of socially responsible practices in libraries.

First, there is no clear consensus on how CSR principles should be interpreted or adapted as LSR. Ferreira and Siebra (2021) found that many librarians learned to carry out socially responsible activities only through hands-on experience, lacking a clear understanding of how such actions aligned with the library's broader social mandate. This points to the absence of a shared conceptual framework. Second, socially responsible projects in libraries often lack coherent direction. As Rudito et al. (2023) noted, organisations must analyse a community's existing social capital before initiating empowerment initiatives, yet such assessments are frequently overlooked, leading to fragmented or unsustainable programmes. Third, although libraries are increasingly expected to act as agents of community empowerment, the practical meaning of this role remains ambiguous. Suharso et al. (2018) emphasised that libraries should serve as active centres educating and empowering communities, but translating this expectation into practice has proven challenging, contributing to ongoing uncertainty about how libraries can effectively fulfil this empowerment function. Recent LIS scholarship confirms that these challenges are not isolated but reflect a broader lack of theoretically grounded implementation models for LSR, especially in low-resource settings (Kosciejew, 2019).

Despite growing interest in LSR, existing research has primarily offered descriptive case studies or normative arguments rather than empirically testing how socially responsible activities build community relationships. Consequently, two critical gaps remain: (1) a

theoretical framework to explain the mechanisms through which LSR generates social capital, and (2) practical guidance for library managers and policymakers in developing countries to design, implement, and evaluate socially responsible programmes.

To address these gaps, this study applies social capital theory (Bowles & Gintis, 2002), which examines how individuals connect, build trust, and adhere to shared norms. Specifically, it demonstrates how socially responsible library initiatives cultivate the structural (networks), cognitive (shared goals and values), and relational (trust and norms) dimensions of social capital. By making explicit the link between LSR activities and social capital outcomes, this study moves beyond prior work by offering an empirically grounded explanation of how libraries can operationalise their social responsibility mandate. The findings provide practical insights for library managers and policymakers to design socially responsible programmes that strengthen partnerships, promote inclusivity, and enhance sustainable community development, particularly in developing-country contexts.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Academic libraries are increasingly recognised not only as repositories of knowledge but also as socially engaged institutions that contribute to community well-being. The concept of social responsibility, widely studied in the corporate sector as CSR, provides a valuable foundation for understanding how organisations can ethically and strategically contribute to society. By adapting CSR principles to the library context, Library Social Responsibility (LSR) highlights libraries' roles in promoting equitable access to information, fostering social inclusion, and strengthening community networks. To frame this study, the literature review first examines CSR as a theoretical and ethical foundation for social engagement, followed by the emergence of LSR and its connection to social capital and community empowerment.

CSR has become a key paradigm for understanding organisations' ethical and social obligations. Introduced by Bowen (1953), CSR established the principle that business leaders are morally obligated to pursue policies, make decisions, or follow courses of action that are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of society. Carroll (1999) later refined this idea through his Pyramid of CSR, proposing four layers of responsibility – economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic – that collectively define an organisation's relationship with society. Matten and Moon (2008) emphasised that CSR reflects explicit corporate policies and practices aimed at societal good, linking ethics with organisational legitimacy. Recent studies highlight CSR's role in shaping trust, stakeholder engagement, and ethical governance (Abu Eid & Che Hussin, 2022; Cesar & Jhony, 2020).

LSR adapts CSR principles to libraries, positioning them as socially engaged institutions committed to community welfare, equity, ethical society, and sustainable development (Abu Eid & Che Hussin, 2022; Ferreira & Siebra, 2021; Enem et al., 2020). LSR emphasises equitable access to knowledge, digital inclusion, and community engagement. Studies show that socially responsible library practices foster professional ethics internally and extend outward through partnerships with schools, NGOs, and marginalised groups, promoting social equity and community empowerment (Abu Eid & Che Hussin, 2024; Enem et al., 2020).

LSR also aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the

Goals). Libraries can engage in CSR activities for sustainable development, such as providing relevant information services to members of the host community, sponsoring educational initiatives like internships and scholarships, and collaborating with stakeholders to raise public awareness of education (Enem et al., 2020).

Social capital theory is a broad, multidisciplinary concept developed by scholar such as Putnam (2000), offering distinct perspectives on how relationships, networks, and shared norms shape social life. Putnam (2000), for example, emphasises the importance of trust, reciprocity, and civic engagement in strengthening community cohesion, elements that are also relevant to socially responsible library practice. While these contributions illustrate the wide-ranging nature of social capital, this study adopts the more analytically structured model proposed by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998), who conceptualise social capital through three interrelated dimensions: structural, cognitive, and relational. Focusing on these dimensions allows for a clearer examination of how Library Social Responsibility (LSR) activities build networks and linkages (structural), foster shared understandings and community values (cognitive), and strengthen trust and reciprocity (relational). Although social capital theory encompasses many additional perspectives and applications, focusing on these three dimensions provides a coherent framework aligned with this research's objectives, enabling a more precise analysis of how LSR initiatives contribute to community empowerment.

LSR acts as a catalyst for developing social capital, connecting libraries with communities through collaborative engagement. Structural capital arises from networks with schools, NGOs, and government agencies; cognitive capital develops through shared learning and values; relational capital grows from trust and reciprocity built through repeated interactions (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Rudito et al., 2023). In line with Woolcock (2001), LSR initiatives generate bonding capital (strengthening internal community ties), bridging capital (linking diverse groups), and linking capital (connecting communities to institutional resources), collectively enhancing social inclusion and empowerment.

Social capital serves as both a resource and a process enabling communities to access opportunities, share knowledge, and participate in collective action (Putnam, 2000; Narayan, 1999; Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Empowerment is the process through which individuals and communities build the capacity to shape decisions and access the resources that influence their lives, thereby enhancing self-efficacy, agency, and opportunities (Zimmerman, 2000; Alsop et al., 2006). In the LSR context, empowerment emerges through the development of structural capital (networks), cognitive capital (shared values and learning), and relational capital (trust and reciprocity), which collectively strengthen communities' capacity to act (Varheim, 2014; Moxley & Abbas, 2016). Libraries serve as trusted spaces where individuals engage, co-create knowledge, and cultivate inclusion and collective identity (Cole & Stenström, 2020). Through these mechanisms, LSR initiatives expand access to resources, foster collaboration, and sustain long-term engagement, thereby translating social responsibility into tangible community empowerment (Mubofu & Mambo, 2021). Empowered communities, in turn, reinforce networks, shared norms, and trust, creating a positive cycle of participation, resilience, and sustainable social transformation (Woolcock, 2001).

## **METHOD**

The objective of this study is to examine the understanding and implementation of social responsibility practices in Malaysian public academic libraries, with a focus on how these initiatives contribute to community development and empowerment. Specifically, the research questions addressed are:

- How do academic librarians engage in social responsibility activities?
- How do academic library social responsibility practices foster community empowerment through the development of community social capital?

This study adopts a qualitative research paradigm, suitable for exploring librarians' understandings, interpretations, and lived experiences of social responsibility (SR) practices, and how these practices contribute to the development of social capital within academic libraries. A multiple-case study design was employed, focusing on public academic libraries in Malaysia involved in Library Social Responsibility (LSR) initiatives.

### **Sampling and participant selection**

Purposive sampling was used to select participants able to provide rich, relevant insights aligned with the study's objectives. The target population comprised personnel from public academic libraries in Malaysia conducting LSR initiatives involving the community. Inclusion criteria were:

- General: Employed at a public academic library in Malaysia.
- Interview participants: Library administrators (e.g., Chief Librarian or Deputy Chief Librarian) or senior librarians involved in decision-making and policy development.
- FGD participants: Staff with experience organising community-oriented LSR activities, including both professional and non-professional library staff.

### **Sample size**

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, the point at which no new insights, codes, or themes emerged from subsequent interviews and FGDs (Tight, 2024; Ahmed, 2025). Given the multiple-case study design and the comparable institutional characteristics of Malaysian public academic libraries, saturation was assessed by the consistency of themes across cases rather than by predefined numerical criteria. This approach ensures that the sample size is justified by information power and data adequacy.

### **Data collection methods**

Three data collection methods were used between May 2024 and October 2025 to enable methodological triangulation:

- Semi-structured interviews (19 participants) – explored LSR implementation and its role in fostering networks, shared understanding, and trust
- Focus group discussions (19 FGDs, 92 participants, with approximately 2–7 participants per group) – captured collective perspectives and group dynamics regarding community-oriented LSR activities
- Document analysis – reviewed library reports on social responsibility programmes to identify specific initiatives that build social capital and empower communities

Interviews lasted between 27 minutes and 2 hours (average 55 minutes). FGDs lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour 47 minutes (average 79 minutes). All sessions were audio-recorded with participant consent. Interview and FGD protocols are provided in Appendix 1.

Ethical approval was granted by the Universiti Malaya Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout.

Convergent findings across all three sources strengthened theme validity. In cases of divergence (e.g., documented programmes not mentioned by participants), these were noted as contextual nuances and explored further during interpretation.

### **Data analysis**

All interviews and FGDs were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was conducted using ATLAS.ti software, following an iterative six-phase process informed by Braun and Clarke (2021):

- Phase 1: Familiarisation: Transcripts were read and re-read multiple times, and initial observations were recorded.
- Phase 2: Initial coding (inductive): Using Saldaña's (2016) approach, initial codes were generated inductively from participants' narratives. Verbatim excerpts were labelled by data source ("ML" for management-level interview participants; "OL" for operational-level FGD participants).
- Phase 3: Category development: Conceptually similar codes were compared, evaluated, and grouped into categories. This involved continuous comparison and iterative refinement.
- Phase 4: Sub-theme formation: Categories were organised into sub-themes capturing common meanings and recurrent patterns across cases.
- Phase 5: Theme refinement and theoretical mapping: Sub-themes were synthesised into broader themes, then deductively organised according to the three dimensions of social capital theory: i) Structural (networks, connections); ii) Cognitive (shared goals, understanding); and iii) Relational (trust, norms). Each verbatim excerpt was coded under a single primary dimension based on its dominant analytical focus. Although these dimensions are conceptually interconnected, they were treated as distinct analytical categories during coding to ensure clarity and consistency, enabling a transparent audit trail.
- Phase 6: Integration and interpretation: Data from interviews, FGDs, and documents were triangulated to identify convergent and divergent patterns. Themes were continuously compared across data sources, with verbatim excerpts retained to ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Data from interviews, FGDs, and document analysis were integrated during the theme refinement phase (Phases 5–6).

### **Multiple coder procedure**

Two researchers independently coded 25% of the transcripts. Inter-coder agreement was discussed, and discrepancies were resolved through consensus. The remaining data were coded by the primary researcher using the finalised codebook. Four trustworthiness criteria – credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability – were used to ensure research rigour (Alexander, 2019).

Prior to data collection, the researcher reflected on potential biases, including a positive predisposition towards the value of LSR. To mitigate this, an analytical diary was maintained throughout coding and theme development, documenting interpretive decisions and

questioning assumptions. Regular debriefing sessions were held with a second researcher not involved in data collection to challenge emerging interpretations and ensure findings remained grounded in participant accounts. This reflexive process enhanced confirmability and reduced the risk of overstating the impact of LSR initiatives.

## **RESULTS**

### **i. Engagement in social responsibility activities**

#### **▪ *Patterns of LSR implementation***

Across the 19 Malaysian academic libraries, librarians engaged in social responsibility activities through three dominant patterns rather than isolated or ad hoc initiatives (see Appendix 2). First, educational and literacy programmes comprised most activities, particularly digital literacy training, reading promotion, and school resource centre development. Second, inclusion-focused initiatives targeted marginalised groups such as Indigenous communities, B40 low-income households, and individuals with disabilities. Third, community well-being activities addressed mental health awareness and environmental sustainability.

These patterns reveal a strategic orientation in which libraries are not simply offering generic outreach but are deliberately prioritising communities with documented educational or access deficits. This finding extends previous LSR literature (Rudito et al., 2023) by showing that engagement is need-based rather than opportunity-driven.

#### **▪ *Roles librarians perform***

In implementing these initiatives, librarians performed three interconnected roles: (1) facilitators of access to information resources, (2) brokers of collaborative partnerships with government agencies, schools, and NGOs, and (3) deliverers of targeted outreach programmes. Notably, the broker role emerged as analytically significant because it transformed libraries from service providers into network hubs, a finding that directly connects to the structural dimension of social capital examined under RQ2.

*“The lecturer helped open the pathway for us to enter and start the project there.” (FGD-OL02, U1)*

This excerpt illustrates how librarians actively leverage third-party relationships to reach communities otherwise inaccessible, a pattern observed in 15 of 19 libraries.

Librarians engage in social responsibility not as a peripheral activity but as a strategic, role-differentiated practice organised around educational access, inclusion, and well-being, with partnership brokering as a key mechanism. This finding addresses a gap in prior LSR research, which has largely described what libraries do without specifying how librarians operationalise engagement.

**ii. LSR and Social Capital**

To examine how LSR fosters community empowerment, this study adopts Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) social capital framework. Table 1 synthesises how the three dimensions – structural, cognitive, and relational – manifest across the 19 libraries.

Table 1: Dimensions and components of Social Capital in academic libraries

| Social capital dimension | Social capital component                   | Description of the component  |
|--------------------------|--|---|
| Structural dimension     | Networks and access                        | Partnership and collaboration network<br>Consistency in interaction<br>Collaborative infrastructure<br>Resource-sharing platforms<br>Rules and guidelines |
| Cognitive dimension      | Shared values and collective understanding | Information and digital literacy capacity<br>Shared mission and orientation<br>Community-centred programmes<br>Cultural competency and inclusivity        |
| Relational dimension     | Trust, reciprocity, and social bonds       | Community-library trust<br>Reciprocal partnerships<br>Community reputation capital<br>Community loyalty and advocacy                                      |

**(a) Structural dimension: Networks and access**

The structural dimension concerns the organised networks and institutional linkages that enable collaboration. Analysis shows that LSR initiatives strengthen this dimension through three mechanisms, not five as initially catalogued.

▪ **Partnership brokering as an access strategy**

Rather than operating independently, libraries systematically collaborate with schools, government agencies, and NGOs. This pattern was consistent across all 19 libraries. The quote illustrates more than infrastructure provision; it shows how structural capital is operationalised through tangible access tools, embedding the library into community routines. As one participant explained:

*“We built a simple library system for them... so they can search for what they need.” (FGD-OL03, U6)*

▪ **Programme continuity as network reinforcement**

Initiatives implemented as phased or recurring programmes (observed in 14 libraries) produced stronger structural ties than one-off events. Continuity transforms transactional interactions into relational ones, a finding consistent with social capital theory but previously undocumented in LSR research.

*“It is not something we do just once; it is ongoing, with continuity from one year to the next.”  
(INT-ML01, U15)*

▪ ***Collaborative infrastructure as a boundary object.***

Digital systems and shared learning spaces serve as “boundary objects” that sustain interaction beyond formal programme periods. LSR contributes to structural social capital not only through administrative formalisation but also through brokered access, temporal continuity, and material infrastructure – a more nuanced interpretation than previous descriptive accounts.

***(b) Cognitive dimension: Shared understanding***

The cognitive dimension refers to shared values, goals, and knowledge between libraries and communities. Findings indicate three core mechanisms, consolidating the original four components.

▪ ***Literacy capacity as a shared cognitive anchor***

Digital and information literacy programmes create common ground, enabling communities to participate on more equal terms. Literacy training functions not merely as skill transfer but as meaning making, aligning library and community understandings of what constitutes valuable knowledge.

*“We guided them on how to use basic digital tools and reading materials that suit their level.”  
(FGD-OL03, U6)*

▪ ***Participatory needs alignment.***

Libraries that invited communities to identify their own needs (observed in 12 libraries) developed stronger cognitive capital than those using top-down designs. This reverses the traditional library-as-expert model, replacing it with a co-constructive dynamic – a theoretically significant departure from earlier LSR conceptualisations.

*“We ask them what they need; that is what we will contribute to them.” (FGD-OL02, U17)*

▪ ***Cultural adaptation for inclusivity.***

Initiatives tailored to Indigenous or special-needs communities enabled full participation. Cognitive social capital develops when libraries relinquish unilateral expertise in favour of shared meaning making – a finding with direct implications for programme design.

*“Fully participate and understand.” (FGD-OL02, U12)*

***(iii) Relational dimension: Trust and reciprocity***

The relational dimension centres on trust, reciprocity, and sustained engagement. Analysis identifies three mechanisms, consolidating the original four components.

▪ ***Trust as an accumulative outcome***

Trust develops through repeated positive interactions and is not assumed at the outset of a programme. The “reluctance-to-realisation” trajectory is analytically important, as it

demonstrates that relational capital requires time and demonstrable value – a finding often assumed but rarely empirically shown in LIS contexts.

*“From being reluctant at first, they ended up realising that coming was worthwhile.” (FGD-OL03, U7)*

▪ **Reciprocal partnerships as mutual value creation**

Collaborations framed as mutually beneficial produced more durable relational ties. One participant described collaboration as:

*“A win-win situation.” (FGD-OL03, U15)*

▪ **Reputation-driven re-engagement**

A positive community reputation led to unsolicited requests for continued collaboration. Here, reputation functions as relational capital stored at the community level, not merely as individual librarian goodwill – a distinction with implications for sustainability.

*“The school called us back... they really liked the first programme.” (FGD-OL02, U8)*

LSR fosters relational social capital when libraries invest in repeated interactions, mutual benefit framing, and reputation management, rather than one-off charitable acts. Community empowerment emerged as the cumulative outcome of all three social capital dimensions operating together, not from any single dimension in isolation.

**iii. Community empowerment**

Empowerment was evident in communities' ability to sustain initiatives independently after the library's withdrawal. This shifts LSR from service provision to capacity building.

*“We taught the resource teachers... later they would continue updating it.” (FGD-OL02, U1)*

*“We do not want to upgrade everything and see it decline again... they must know, so they can keep it going.” (FGD-OL03, U6)*

These excerpts reveal an empowerment paradox. Empowerment requires the deliberate withdrawal of library support. Libraries that continued indefinite support inadvertently perpetuated dependency, whereas those that transferred knowledge and responsibility fostered sustainable community capacity. Table 2 shows the three dimensions of empowerment. Empowerment fails when one of the dimensions is weak.

Table 2: Three dimensions of empowerment

| <b>Dimension</b>  | <b>Contribution to empowerment</b>                                       |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>Structural</b> | Provides access, networks, and infrastructure                            |
| <b>Cognitive</b>  | Builds shared knowledge and skills for independent action                |
| <b>Relational</b> | Creates trust that enables communities to take risks and sustain efforts |

For example, strong structural access without cognitive skills leads to passive service use rather than agency. Strong cognitive skills without relational trust result in capability without the confidence to act. The convergence of all three dimensions was observed in 11 of 19 libraries. This distinguishes sustainable empowerment from episodic programme success.

## **DISCUSSIONS**

Libraries build social capital through trust, networks, and shared understanding, which aligns with established LIS scholarship. Varheim (2011) demonstrated that public libraries function as social infrastructures that promote trust and social inclusion, particularly in community settings. Wojciechowska (2023) extended this to academic libraries, showing they serve as inclusive environments supporting diverse user communities. The present findings confirm and extend this body of work by specifying which LSR activities (partnership brokering, participatory needs alignment, accumulative trust) generate which dimensions of social capital – a level of granularity largely absent in prior studies. Additionally, the finding that empowerment requires transferring knowledge and responsibility to communities, rather than providing indefinite library support, resonates with empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 1995) and recent LIS work by Rabasa and Abrizah (2022), who emphasised capacity-building over service provision.

Some researchers have cautioned that community engagement efforts by libraries may remain symbolic or short-term without long-term institutional commitment (Cao, 2021; Williment & Jones-Grant, 2012). However, the present findings indicate that 14 of 19 Malaysian academic libraries adopted structured and continuous phased programmes rather than one-off events, strengthening relationships over time. This divergence may be explained by contextual factors. Malaysian public universities operate within a national higher education framework that explicitly rewards community engagement as a performance indicator, creating institutional incentives for sustained LSR. In contrast, libraries in systems without such incentives may indeed produce more episodic engagement.

Ferreira and Siebra (2021) found that librarians learned LSR primarily through hands-on experience, lacking formal guidelines or shared frameworks. The present study similarly found that formal rules and guidelines were emergent rather than dominant. However, unlike Ferreira and Siebra's implication that this absence is problematic, the present findings suggest that Malaysian libraries compensated through relational governance – trust, reciprocity, and shared norms – rather than formal rules. This raises an important theoretical question: is formal codification necessary for LSR effectiveness, or can relational governance suffice in contexts with strong collectivist cultural orientations? The present study cannot definitively answer this, but it challenges the assumption that the absence of formal frameworks necessarily indicates deficiency.

Rudito et al. (2023) emphasised the importance of analysing community social capital before initiating empowerment programmes. The present findings confirm this but add a critical element: culture. However, cultural adaptation alone was insufficient. Libraries that achieved sustainable empowerment (11 of 19) combined cultural adaptation with participatory needs alignment (asking communities what they need) and trust accumulation over time. Libraries that used cultural adaptation without participatory design generated

initial engagement but not sustained independence. This suggests a hierarchical relationship, in which cultural adaptation is necessary but not sufficient for empowerment. This pattern resonates with international evidence, though with contextual variations. In Scandinavian settings, where high social trust and robust welfare infrastructures exist, cultural adaptation has been shown to operate effectively even with minimal participatory design (Varheim, 2011), suggesting that strong pre-existing relational capital can substitute for participatory mechanisms. Conversely, in several African LIS contexts, researchers have documented that cultural adaptation alone proves insufficient due to resource constraints, infrastructure gaps, and weak institutional support for sustained engagement (Omweri, 2024), aligning closely with the Malaysian finding that cultural adaptation requires reinforcement through participatory and trust-building mechanisms. The present study contributes to this global conversation by positioning Malaysia as an intermediate case, neither as resource-rich as Scandinavian systems nor as resource-constrained as some African counterparts yet demonstrating that the insufficiency of cultural adaptation as a standalone strategy holds across diverse economic and institutional contexts. This cross-regional convergence suggests a potentially transferable principle: cultural adaptation functions as an enabler, not a driver, of sustainable empowerment, requiring active reinforcement through participatory design and relational trust-building regardless of national context.

The finding that formal rules and guidelines were emergent rather than dominant (present in only 25–50% of libraries) challenges Ferreira and Siebra's (2021) implication that formalisation is necessary. Interpreted through institutional theory, this suggests that the cultural-cognitive and normative pillars of institutions (Scott, 2014) may substitute for the regulative pillar in collectivist contexts. Malaysian libraries relied on shared norms (gotong-royong, or mutual assistance) and relational trust rather than written procedures. This does not mean formalisation is unimportant globally, but it does mean LSR frameworks should be culturally situated rather than universally prescribed.

The finding of this study, which highlights librarians' roles as brokers connecting communities with government agencies, schools, and NGOs, is clearly described but remains insufficiently explored from an analytical perspective within LIS literature. Brokering transformed libraries from service providers to network hubs, representing a qualitative shift in organisational identity. This finding aligns with Burt's (2004) structural hole theory, in which librarians who bridged disconnected community sectors created social capital not available through direct library-community relationships alone. This suggests that LSR effectiveness may depend less on library resources and more on librarians' network-brokering competencies, a practical implication with theoretical grounding.

The conceptual model synthesises the core findings into a visual representation showing how LSR initiatives, through the interrelated structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions of social capital, produce community empowerment as an integrative outcome (Figure 1).

These dimensions converge to produce Community Empowerment, defined as independent sustainability, knowledge transfer, and the deliberate withdrawal of dependency. The model is recursive, as empowerment outcomes may feed back into structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions for future initiatives. This conceptual model is an empirically grounded elaboration of social capital theory by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998). It does not replace or fundamentally challenge the original theory but specifies mechanisms and boundary

conditions (the necessity of all three dimensions; the empowerment paradox) that prior LIS research has not systematically articulated.

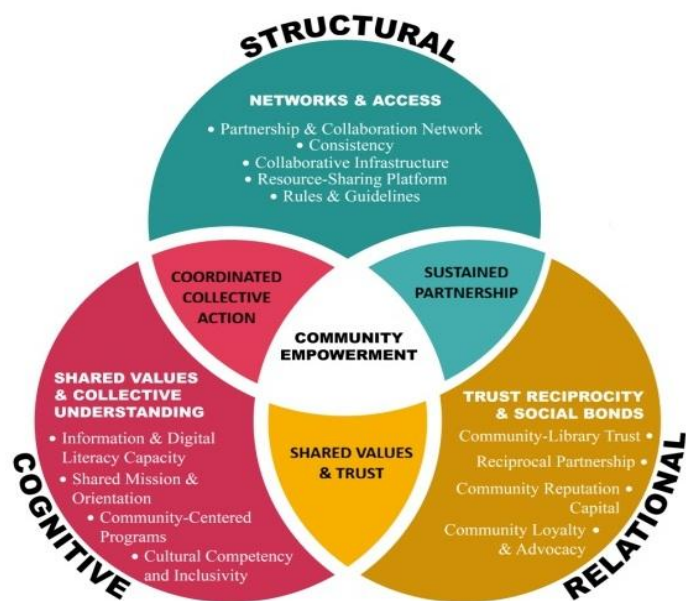


Figure 1: Conceptual model of LSR contributions to social capital and community empowerment

Previous LIS research has established that libraries build social capital (Wojciechowska & Topolski, 2024) but has not systematically specified which LSR activities produce which social capital dimensions. This study identifies specific mechanisms such as partnership brokering (structural), participatory needs alignment (cognitive), and accumulative trust (relational). This is an empirical contribution, not a theoretical paradigm shift. The finding that empowerment requires the convergence of all three dimensions, and that the absence of any dimension produces dependency, offers a diagnostic tool for library practitioners. This refines, rather than replaces, existing social capital theory by specifying boundary conditions for empowerment outcomes. By demonstrating that formal governance is not necessary for LSR effectiveness in collectivist contexts, this study challenges the implicit Western assumption that formalisation precedes effectiveness. This suggests that LSR frameworks developed in individualist cultural contexts may require adaptation when applied elsewhere.

The findings confirmed Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) three-dimensional social capital framework as applicable to LSR contexts. The study elaborates this framework by showing how each dimension is operationalised through specific LSR activities and what occurs when dimensions are missing. Figure 1 visually synthesises this elaboration as an emergent framework derived from the data, not as an a priori theory.

A theoretically significant finding that requires deeper interpretation is the empowerment paradox. Sustainable community empowerment required libraries to deliberately withdraw support after building community capacity. This finding emerged across 11 libraries that achieved sustained outcomes.

*“We do not want to upgrade everything and see it decline again... they must know so they can keep it going.” (FGD-OL03, U6)*

Interpreted through critical empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 1995), this paradox reveals that empowerment is not a unidirectional transfer of resources from library to community but a relational reconfiguration of agency. Libraries that continued indefinite support inadvertently produced dependency, a form of benevolent paternalism. Libraries that explicitly framed their role as temporary capacity-builders produced autonomous community action. This finding has not been prominently discussed in LIS LSR literature, which tends to emphasise service provision rather than service withdrawal.

## **CONCLUSION**

By developing social capital, this study examines how Library Social Responsibility (LSR) initiatives in Malaysian public academic libraries foster community empowerment. The results indicate that empowerment does not stem from isolated actions; rather, it emerges from the interplay of structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions. LSR initiatives expand structural networks through partnerships and resource sharing, promote cognitive alignment through shared learning and digital literacy, and build relational trust through ongoing engagement and cooperation. This integrated approach enables communities to move from being passive recipients of resources to active contributors to community development and education. These findings suggest that academic libraries play a significant role in supporting social inclusion and community engagement by facilitating access, knowledge-sharing, and collaborative relationships. Rather than functioning solely as information providers, libraries serve as enabling spaces that support participation and capacity-building within communities.

For this study, data were collected exclusively from Malaysian public academic libraries. Findings may not be transferable to private academic libraries, public libraries, special libraries, or libraries in other national contexts with different governance structures, performance incentives, or cultural norms. Additionally, data were collected from librarians, not community members. Community perceptions of empowerment, trust, and social capital may differ from library-reported outcomes. Future research should incorporate community perspectives, which may reveal divergent interpretations. Due to the cross-sectional design, data were collected between May 2024 and October 2025. Empowerment and social capital development are longitudinal processes. This study captures librarians' accounts of these processes but cannot empirically track changes over time. Longitudinal designs (e.g., pre-post community surveys) are needed to establish temporal ordering. Despite reflexivity practices documented in the methodology, qualitative analysis involves researcher interpretation. A different research team might code or interpret certain excerpts differently. Multiple-site, multi-researcher designs could mitigate this. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in Malay (Bahasa Malaysia) and translated into English for publication. Despite back-translation checks, nuanced cultural meanings may be lost or flattened in translation. Regarding social desirability bias, librarians may have overstated the success or intentionality of LSR initiatives, given the study's focus on social responsibility. Triangulation with document analysis partially mitigated this, but community validation would strengthen future research.

Malaysian public universities operate under a performance framework that rewards community engagement. Findings may not generalise to contexts without such incentives, where LSR may be episodic or symbolic. Regarding cultural specificity, Malaysian collectivist norms (e.g., gotong-royong, musyawarah for consensus-building) may enable relational governance mechanisms less available in individualist cultural contexts. Claims about “substituting relational for formal governance” should be tested cross-culturally. Malaysian public academic libraries are relatively well-resourced compared to many developing-country contexts (e.g., parts of sub-Saharan Africa), but less resourced than their Nordic or North American counterparts. The finding that sustained engagement is possible despite resource constraints may be specific to middle-income country contexts.

This work contributes conceptually by demonstrating how LSR practices operationalise social capital through the combination of structural, cognitive, and relational dimensions in academic library contexts. This provides an empirical perspective on how these dimensions are simultaneously enacted through LSR activities to enhance community empowerment, even though current social capital theory treats them as interrelated. In this way, the findings extend existing perspectives by illustrating LSR as a practical mechanism for activating and sustaining social capital in real-world library settings.

For library managers, the framework can be used diagnostically. Assess which social capital dimension is weakest in current LSR initiatives. If structural ties are strong but communities remain dependent, strengthen cognitive mechanisms (participatory design, literacy capacity). If skills exist but trust is low, prioritise relational mechanisms (repeated interactions, reciprocal framing). For policymakers, institutional incentives matter. Malaysian libraries achieved sustained engagement partly because national performance frameworks rewarded community outreach. Without such incentives, even well-designed LSR may remain episodic. For LIS education, broker competencies (networking, partnership development) should be explicitly taught, not assumed as incidental to librarianship.

To better understand how social capital and empowerment change over time, future research might examine LSR practices across various institutional contexts. A more thorough understanding of the broader effects of LSR efforts would be possible by incorporating community perspectives and comparative methodologies.

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## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## **ETHICAL APPROVAL AND INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENTS**

The present study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical) at Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. The study was assigned the identification number UM.TNC2/UMREC\_3231.

## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Conceptualisation: [all authors]; Methodology: [all authors]; Formal analysis and investigation: [Norhafizah, A.L.]; Writing - original draft preparation: [Norhafizah, A.L.]; Writing - review and editing: [all authors].

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**Appendix 1: Structure and content of the semi-structured interview and focus group discussion schedule**

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| <b>Section</b> | <b>Structure and content of questions</b>  |
|----------------|--|
| Section 1      | <b>Opening Remarks and Rapport Building</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Introduction of the researcher and purpose of the study</li><li>▪ Explanation of the interview/FGD process</li><li>▪ Assurance of confidentiality and anonymity</li><li>▪ Obtaining consent to participate and to record the session</li><li>▪ Brief background of participants</li></ul>  |
| Section 2      | <b>Research Question 1: Understanding of Library Social Responsibility (LSR)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Participants' understanding and interpretation of Library Social Responsibility</li><li>▪ Perceived roles and responsibilities of academic libraries in society</li><li>▪ Importance and relevance of LSR within the academic library context</li></ul>   |
| Section 3      | <b>Research Question 1: Engagement in Social Responsibility Activities</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Types of LSR activities implemented by the library</li><li>▪ Participants' roles and involvement in LSR initiatives</li><li>▪ Forms of engagement with communities outside the university</li><li>▪ Motivations and drivers for conducting LSR activities</li></ul>   |
| Section 4      | <b>Research Question 2: LSR and Community Social Capital</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ LSR activities related to the structural dimension of social capital (networks, partnerships, collaboration)</li><li>▪ LSR activities related to the cognitive dimension (shared values, awareness, understanding)</li><li>▪ LSR activities related to the relational dimension (trust, reciprocity, long-term relationships)</li></ul> |
| Section 5      | <b>Closing Remarks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Open-ended questions for additional comments or reflections</li><li>▪ Clarification or follow-up questions, if necessary</li><li>▪ Permission to be contacted again for verification or clarification (member checking)</li><li>▪ Appreciation of participants' time and contributions</li></ul>  |

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**Appendix 2: Library Social Responsibility (LSR) initiatives implemented by academic libraries**

| <b>Institution code</b> | <b>Institution name</b>                        | <b>Library initiative description</b>  | <b>Target community</b>                                |
|-------------------------|--|--|--|
| U1                      | Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) Library   | Established a library space and system to support education and rehabilitation programmes at the Sekolah Integriti Malaysia (Puncak Alam Correctional Centre)  | Young offenders at the correctional centre             |
| U2                      | Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Library     | Educational support and recreational activities for students, sponsored by the American Corner   | School students  |
| U3                      | Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP) Library    | Inclusive education and information access support for individuals with autism through the establishment of the Autism Hub for Educational Resources and Training (A-HEART)  | Children with autism and their families                |
| U4                      | Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) Library | Collaborative program with the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences and counsellors, offering educational and emotional support sessions, and a resource centre makeover to enhance the learning environment at Rumah Kanak-Kanak Rembau (RKKR) | Children from the Rumah Kanak-Kanak await court orders |
| U5                      | Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT) Library   | Collaborative programmes with multiple adopted schools, supported by corporate partners, focusing on school refurbishment and community improvement in affected areas  | School students  |
| U6                      | Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Library        | Outreach and educational support programmes for the Jahai Orang Asli community at Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Tiang, including the development of a library system and infrastructural improvement at the school                                     | Jahai Orang Asli students and teachers                 |
| U7                      | Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)                | Community outreach program with SK Rampayan, Menggatal, Sabah, involving the post-flood restoration of the school resource centre to support students' learning environment  | School students and teachers affected by floods        |
| U8                      | Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM)     | Implementation of the PETIK (Program Eksplorasi Transformasi Ilmu dan Kepimpinan) program is designed to nurture student leadership and soft   | School students  |

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|     |  | skills through workshops and activities tailored to school needs, developed in collaboration with teachers   |   |
| U9  | Universiti Teknikal Malaysia (UTeM) Library    | Community service and knowledge-sharing program with Sekolah Kebangsaan Sungai Udang, Melaka, providing advisory support and assistance to ensure the School Resource Centre is managed systematically and efficiently   | School teachers and resource center coordinators              |
| U10 | Universiti Pertahanan Nasional Malaysia (UPNM) | Early literacy and learning support program for Indigenous (Orang Asli) preschool children, focusing on reading activities, educational games, and creative learning sessions to nurture early interest in education   | Indigenous (Orang Asli) preschool children                    |
| U11 | Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniZA)        | Collaborative outreach with partner universities to deliver digital and creative skills modules such as Canva, TikTok, and bookbinding—tailored to school needs and educational priorities   | School students   |
| U12 | Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI)      | Literacy and reading activities for Orang Asli children  | Indigenous children   |
| U13 | Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) Library        | Community engagement activity where library staff and shelter workers collaboratively cleaned and maintained the campus cat shelter to promote compassion and social responsibility  | Cats, shelter workers, and the shelter owner                  |
| U14 | Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Library       | Culture Outreach Program promotes literacy development through nationwide engagement with schools, providing training for teachers and school resource center coordinators on library management, cataloguing, and information organization to strengthen the reading and learning culture | School teachers and students                                  |
| U15 | Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) Library    | Collaborative initiative with special education schools to develop and provide Braille collections, supporting literacy and learning among students with visual impairments.   | Students with visual impairments in special education schools |
| U16 | International Islamic                          | An initiative that encouraged students, staff, and faculty to donate   | Local communities   |

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|     | University Malaysia (IIUM) Library           | books and denim clothing. Donated books were distributed to new owners, while used denim was creatively upcycled into chair covers for the library, promoting sustainability and social responsibility   |   |
| U17 | Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) Library | UNIMAS Library contributed used books to a mini library project in Kampung Meriyu, Kota Samarahan, in collaboration with the Faculty of Engineering. The initiative supported the B40 (low-income) community by promoting reading and educational access | Village residents   |
| U18 | Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)              | Collaboration with Sekolah Dato' Abdul Razak (SDAR) to develop a digital library portal and conduct knowledge-sharing and learning activities to enhance students' access to educational resources   | Boarding school students and teachers at Sekolah Dato' Abdul Razak (SDAR) |
| U19 | Universiti Malaya (UM) Library               | Motivational and mental health awareness program for tahfiz and orphaned students, combined with educational activities such as the InfoHunt to promote learning engagement and emotional well-being   | Tahfiz students and orphans of military personnel                         |

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*(Note: The initiatives were identified through interviews and focus group discussions with library representatives from 19 participating academic libraries.)*