Public Library as a Safe Space: Users' Perceptions and Utilization

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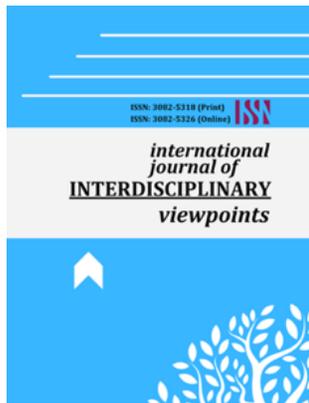
Research Article

ABSTRACT

Public libraries are becoming more and more like welcoming community spaces that help people get knowledge fairly and improve their mental and social health. Based on the Theory of Planned Behavior and the Psychological Safety Theory, this study examined how people in a public library in Bacolod City perceived it as a safe place and how they used it as such. The Safe Spaces Act, or Republic Act No. 11313, is a law that makes public places safer. However, there isn't much real-world research on how safe-space principles are used in Philippine public libraries. To fill this gap, the study used a quantitative, descriptive-correlational methodology and picked 106 library users at random. A questionnaire made by researchers and approved by five experts in research and library, and computer science was used. The Cronbach's alpha score for reliability testing with 30 users who were not part of the group was 0.932, indicating very high internal consistency. It was July through October 2025 when the data were gathered. This study used mean and standard deviation to assess how people perceived and used the information, the Mann–Whitney U test to examine differences between age and gender groups, and Spearman's rho to assess how the factors were related. Respondents strongly believed that the library was a safe place and said that it was always very busy. No significant differences were found between the groups. A strong, positive link was found between feeling safe in a place and using a library.

INTRODUCTION

Public libraries have long been important places that give community members access to knowledge, information, and opportunities to learn throughout their lives. In the past, however, early libraries often limited access to their collections and placed a high priority on keeping their spaces safe and organized. Librarianship has changed over time to focus on fair access and including everyone. Libraries are now seen as democratic institutions that support education, intellectual freedom, and community development. This change is reflected in laws such as the Library Bill of Rights, which states that libraries should ensure everyone has open and fair access to knowledge (Wexelbaum, 2016; Peterson, 2023). As libraries grew, they became places where people not only got information but also felt safe, like they belonged, and received social support. The idea of psychological safety is at the heart of this changing view. This is the feeling that someone can speak their mind, ask questions, and take part without worrying about being judged or embarrassed (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety makes people more likely to interact, work together, and use the tools available to them. This feeling of safety is created in libraries by policies that welcome everyone, helpful staff, and open spaces that encourage people to interact with information and learn. Studies suggest that libraries that cultivate such environments add significantly to users' well-being, sense of belonging, and trust in using information resources (Merga, 2021; Hughes et al., 2019; Karki et al., 2024). More and more people see libraries as more than places to find information. They are also social and educational hubs that encourage participation, acceptance, and connection within the community. Research shows that how a library is designed and how it feels have a big effect on how safe, easy to reach, and comfortable people feel there. Lighting, layout, quiet areas, collaborative spaces, and features that make the library easier to reach all affect how people feel about it overall (Cox, 2023; Ceccato et al., 2023). When libraries are purposefully designed to serve a wide range of users, they become places that promote teamwork, participation, and the sharing of information (Shoaib et al., 2021). Libraries are often safe places where students feel valued and supported, which gives them the confidence to explore ideas and take part in learning activities (Butler et al., 2017; Wittmann & Fisher-Allison, 2020; Slaby, 2025). Educational research shows that environments that encourage participation, collaboration, and fairness are crucial for meaningful learning (Cole, 2025; Lazaga, 2025). This shows how important it is to have welcoming learning spaces. Similarly, research on school problems emphasizes the importance of creating safe, welcoming places where everyone feels welcomed and encouraged to be an active part of learning communities (Cariaga et al., 2025). Inclusive environments become even better when institutions encourage stakeholders, such as teachers, families, and community members, to work together.

In the past few years, technological advances and global events have changed how people access knowledge, making libraries more than just places to read books. The COVID-19 outbreak accelerated the shift to online services and digital learning. As a result, libraries improved digital access, virtual reference services, and support for learning from afar. Users' concerns about safety began to extend beyond physical spaces as libraries adjusted to these changes. They included concerns about digital accessibility, privacy, and the creation of welcoming online spaces (Scoulas, 2021; Reed, 2025). Studies also show that how people feel about belonging and being included in libraries can change based on their demographics and the ways libraries operate, which affect their experiences (Duffin & Corrigan, 2023; Thomas & Houlihan, 2025). It is also important for library services to be easy for people to reach, provide high-quality services, and offer user-centered support systems

(Padohinog & Ariate, 2024); this is what studies on library services emphasize. Investigations into library anxiety further suggest that demographic differences may influence users' comfort levels and desire to engage with library settings (Coleman & Madler, 2025). Many studies have been conducted on libraries, but most have focused on college libraries or institutional settings. This means that public libraries, especially those serving diverse communities, are less often studied in empirical research.

Initiatives in the Philippines that aim to make public places safer and more welcoming demonstrate the importance of understanding how community spaces encourage engagement and participation. The Safe Spaces Act, or Republic Act No. 11313, aims to protect people from harassment and encourage safe spaces in public and school settings. This set of laws aligns with the broader idea of libraries as safe, welcoming places that help community members stay healthy. Even though libraries are becoming more and more known as places that make people feel safe, like they belong, and like they can get involved, there have not been many studies done in Philippine public libraries that look at how these ideas affect how people use libraries. Most studies to date have focused on service quality or institutional practices rather than on how users' feelings about safety affect their use of library spaces and services. There is also not much research on how these ideas work in community-centered public libraries, even though studies on inclusive education and supportive learning environments emphasize the importance of safety, participation, and teamwork (Cariaga et al., 2025; Cole, 2025; Lazaga, 2025).

To fill this gap, this study examines how people in a certain Bacolod City public library feel about it as a safe place. It looks at the link between these ideas and how much people use libraries. The study is based on the idea of psychological safety, which says that how safe and accepted we feel affects our ability to participate and act in social situations (Edmondson, 1999). The research also uses the Theory of Planned Behavior, which states that how people act is influenced by their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control over their actions (Ajzen, 1991). In terms of library use, these theoretical views help us understand how people's feelings of safety, belonging, and acceptance shape their plans and actions when using library services and resources. By examining how people's feelings about safety affect their use of libraries, this study adds to the growing body of research suggesting that libraries can be welcoming community places that help people of all backgrounds learn, get involved, and feel good about their health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Design
A quantitative, descriptive-correlational research design was employed to examine users' perceptions and utilization of a public library in Bacolod City as a safe space. The design was used to describe users' perceptions and the extent of their utilization, test differences across demographic groups, and explore relationships between users' perceptions and their utilization.

Research Locale and Participants
The respondents in the study were 106 library users aged 18 to 59 years from the selected public library in Bacolod City. The respondents were selected using convenience sampling. Sample size was determined a priori using G*Power.

Research Instruments
The researcher-made questionnaire underwent content validation by five experts in research and library and information science using Lawshe's Content Validity Ratio, ensuring that all items were relevant and appropriate. The instrument was further subjected to a reliability test involving 30 non-sample users, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of 0.932, indicating very high internal consistency and ensuring accurate measurement. Construct validity was examined through Factor Analysis, which confirmed the intended factor structure (perceptions and utilization) of the instrument and its alignment with Psychological Safety and the Theory of Planned Behavior.

Validity and Reliability
Content validity was established through expert review. The initial draft of the questionnaire was evaluated by subject-matter experts. Revisions were made based on their recommendations to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Pilot testing was subsequently conducted to determine internal consistency reliability.

Data Collection Procedure
Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Before data collection, the researcher sought the librarian's approval at the selected public library. The researcher informed the respondents about the research's objectives, that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Additionally, informed consent was secured from all respondents. Data were collected between July and October 2025 and were handled with confidentiality and anonymity. Responses were encoded and stored securely. SPSS was used for data analysis, with the assistance of a statistics expert, to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the results. All collected data were used solely for academic and research purposes.

Data Analysis
Descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to analyze the data using statistical tools such as the mean, standard deviation, Mann-Whitney U Test, and Spearman's rho.

Ethical Considerations
The study complied with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173), ensuring secure storage and responsible handling of research data. Academic integrity was upheld through adherence to APA 7th edition citation standards and the use of plagiarism detection tools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Table 1 presents the mean and standard deviation scores indicating users' perceptions of the library as a safe space. The data show that respondents strongly agree that the library is a safe, respectful, and welcoming environment, with an overall mean score of 4.81 and a standard deviation of 0.31. Standard deviations also confirm its high consistency across positive perceptions of feeling safe, staff responsiveness, a comfortable environment, equitable treatment, and compliance with the Safe Space Act. Beyond the result affirmation, the finding indicates that psychological safety is embedded in users' interactions, which reflects the Psychological Safety concept of an environment free from fear of humiliation or exclusion. From the results, the highest mean score was item 1, I feel safe when I am in the library (M = 4.87, SD = 0.39), item 3, I feel respected by library staff and other patrons (M = 4.87, SD = 0.34), and item 5, the library environment makes me feel welcome (M = 4.87, SD = 0.37). However, the item with the lowest mean score was item 2, I feel a sense of belonging when I am in the library (M = 4.66, SD = 0.69), which is also interpreted as strongly agree. While the majority of respondents feel safe and respected, belongingness involves a more profound relational attachment that may require sustained participatory engagement rather than policy compliance alone. Psychological safety may therefore serve as a foundation, but not a guarantee of belonging (Reed, 2025). The findings are consistent with the research suggesting that libraries are widely considered as inclusive social spaces where people feel accepted and secure. Duffin & Corrigan (2023) reported that respondents often view their libraries as having welcoming environments that meet social and emotional needs, extending beyond mere access to materials to support feelings of comfort, welcome, and safety. In addition, Peterson (2023) described public libraries

as a comfortable, welcoming, and warm atmosphere. Thus, atmospheres of comfort and welcome foster a feeling of belongingness. However, although the majority of users declared feeling safe in the library, perceptions vary according to the library's environment and their individual characteristics (Ceccato et al., 2023).

Table 1. Users' Perceptions of the Library as a Safe Space

Indicators	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
I feel safe when I am in the library.	4.87	0.39	Strongly Agree
I feel a sense of belonging when I am in the library.	4.66	0.69	Strongly Agree
I feel respected by library staff and other patrons.	4.87	0.34	Strongly Agree
I feel comfortable using the library facilities.	4.83	0.38	Strongly Agree
The library environment makes me feel welcome.	4.87	0.37	Strongly Agree
The library promotes diversity and inclusion.	4.78	0.41	Strongly Agree
The library handles complaints or issues regarding safety effectively.	4.77	0.46	Strongly Agree
The library is a place where everyone is treated equally.	4.85	0.45	Strongly Agree
The library policies, rules, and regulations promote the Safe Space Act.	4.82	0.51	Strongly Agree
Overall Mean	4.81	0.31	Strongly Agree

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation scores, indicating the extent to which users utilize the library as a safe space. The data show that respondents always utilize the library with an overall mean score of 4.80 and a standard deviation of 0.40. Standard deviation also confirm its high consistency in library utilization. The result aligns with Ajzen's (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior, suggesting that positive safety perceptions likely strengthen attitudes and perceived behavioral control, thereby encouraging utilization. From the results, the highest mean score was for item 7: "I utilize the library as a safe space for learning and social engagement" (M = 4.87, SD = 0.42). However, the item with the lowest mean score was item 3, I utilize the library as a place where I can freely express my thoughts and ideas without fear of judgment or harm (M = 4.71, SD = 0.60), which is also interpreted as always. The findings suggest that the public library serves as a highly utilized safe space that supports learning and social interaction. Users' comfort in expressing ideas can vary depending on prior experiences and perceived social dynamics within the library space (Thomas & Houlihan, 2025). Thus, there is a need to promote further inclusive programs and activities, as well as to enhance user-centered spaces that encourage users to express their thoughts and ideas freely and to actively participate in engaging library activities. While Shoaib et al. (2025) and Slaby (2025) associate library design and environments with user engagement, Padohinog and Ariate (2024) argued that utilization may be driven more by resource access than safety perceptions alone. This suggests that safety is not solely a determinant; it also facilitates conditions that interact with service quality and accessibility.

Table 2. Extent of the Users' Utilization of the Library as a Safe Space

Indicators	Mean	Standard Deviation	Verbal Interpretation
I utilize the library as a harassment-free space where I feel safe from any form of gender-based discrimination.	4.80	0.51	Always
I utilize the library to seek assistance from library personnel without fear of being discriminated.	4.77	0.50	Always
I utilize the library as a place where I can freely express my thoughts and ideas without fear of judgment or harm.	4.71	0.60	Always
I utilize the library because it observes and promotes respectful interactions among fellow library users and library personnel.	4.83	0.45	Always
I utilize the library because it upholds the principles of the Safe Spaces Act.	4.82	0.45	Always
I utilize the library to participate in activities that promote gender equality.	4.77	0.50	Always
I utilize the library as a safe space for learning and social engagement.	4.87	0.42	Always
Overall Mean	4.80	0.40	Always

Table 3 presents differences in users' perceptions of the library as a safe space, grouped by sex and age. The data show a U-ratio of 1141.500 with a p-value of 0.872, obtained using the Mann-Whitney U Test to determine whether there is a significant difference in users' perceptions of the library as a safe space across sex groups. The findings revealed no significant difference in the perceptions of the library as a safe space between the two sex groups since the p-value is greater than the 0.05 level of significance. In terms of age, the data show a U-ratio of 1211.50 with a p-value of 0.180, obtained using the Mann-Whitney U Test to determine whether there is a significant difference in users' perceptions of the library as a safe space across age groups. The findings revealed no significant difference in perceptions of the library as a safe space between the two age groups, as the p-value is greater than 0.05. The findings align with recent library usability research, which shows that sex does not affect comfort levels in academic settings (Coleman, 2025). Such uniformity supports gender-neutral strategies for enhancing library inclusivity. Moreover, Merga's (2025) results in school library studies confirm age-independent views of libraries as welcoming environments. This suggests that libraries universally foster a sense of safety across demographics.

Table 3.Differences in the Users' Perception of the Library as a Safe Space when Grouped According to Demographic Profile

Grouping Variables	Category	N	Mean Ranks	Sum of Ranks	U-ratio	W	Z	p
Sex	Male	31	52.82	1637.50	1141.500	1637.500	-0.161	0.872
	Female	75	53.78	4033.50				
Age	18–22 years old	54	49.94	2696.50	1211.50	2696.500	-1.340	0.180
	23–58 years old	52	57.20	2974.50				

Table 4 presents differences in the utilization of the library as a safe space grouped by demographic profile. In terms of sex, the data shows the U-ratio of 1056.500 with a p-value of 0.404 obtained through the Mann-Whitney U Test to determine whether there is a significant difference in the utilization of the library as a safe space when grouped according to sex. The findings revealed no significant difference in library utilization between the two sex groups, as the p-value was greater than 0.05. In terms of age, the data show a U-ratio of 1233.000 with

a p-value of 0.220, obtained using the Mann-Whitney U Test to determine whether there is a significant difference in the utilization of the library as a safe space across age groups. The findings revealed no significant difference in the utilization of the library as a safe space between the two age groups, as the p-value is greater than 0.05. The findings support Karki et al. (2024) in their observation on similar engagement in public libraries promoting health and well-being across sexes and age groups, with no significant differences noted. Similarly, Cox (2023) highlighted the role of academic libraries as safe spaces valued equally by diverse users, including those across sex and age, with no notable differences in preferences or utilization.

Table 4. Differences in the Utilization of the Library as a Safe Space when Grouped According to Demographic Profile

Grouping Variables	Category	N	Mean Ranks	Sum of Ranks	U-ratio	W	Z	p
Sex	Male	31	56.92	1764.50	1056.500	3906.500	-0.835	0.404
	Female	75	52.09	3906.50				
Age	18–22 years old	54	50.33	2718.00	1233.000	2718.000	-1.226	0.220
	23–58 years old	52	56.79	2953.00				

Table 5 presents the relationship between users' perceptions of the library as a safe space and their extent of utilization. The computed r-value of 0.566 shows a moderate positive correlation between perceptions and utilization. The result suggests that as users' perception of the library as a safe space increases, their use of the library also increases. The p-value of 0.000, which is less than the 0.01 level of significance, indicates that the relationship is statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis stating that there is no significant relationship between users' perception and utilization is rejected. Beyond statistical significance, the effect size further strengthens the importance of this finding. It shows a substantial practical effect, indicating that the perception of the library as a safe space is considered a meaningful predictor of users' utilization behavior. This result implies that users who perceive the library as a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment are more likely to use its services and spaces frequently. It highlights the significance of maintaining a safe and inclusive library environment to encourage active engagement and sustained utilization. The results contradict the report by Ceccato et al. (2023), which states that while most public library users feel safe, perceptions of safety vary due to environmental factors and do not predict usage frequency, suggesting a weaker relationship. Moreover, Padohinog and Ariate (2024) claimed that user satisfaction with library services and usage stems more from access to resources than safety perceptions alone, indicating that safety may contribute but not dominate the extent of utilization.

Table 5. Relationship between Users' Perception of the Library as a Safe Space and their Extent of Utilization

Variables	r-value	p-value	Remarks
Users' Perception and their Extent of Utilization	0.566	0.000	Significant

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that the chosen public library provides its users with a safe, friendly, and inclusive space. Based on the idea of psychological safety, the results show that users need to feel safe, comfortable, and able to interact with others in a positive way to be fully engaged with library spaces and services. The fact that there aren't any significant differences in how people of different ages and genders see and use the library shows that it operates as a fair organization, providing all its users with a consistent and welcoming experience. This means that the library's rules, services, and setting effectively support equal access and involvement for all people, regardless of their demographics. More importantly, the strong positive link between how much people use the library and how they think it is a safe place shows that psychological safety is a key factor in getting people to use library services and participate in activities.

Based on these results, the study suggests that library leaders improve safe space programs by implementing ongoing staff development programs that emphasize polite communication, understanding diversity, and responsive service. Libraries should also support programs that allow everyone to take part and make people feel like they belong. These programs should also support free speech by promoting group activities and community involvement. Also, library buildings should be improved to include user-centered areas that encourage conversation, innovation, and the free sharing of ideas. Future research on psychological safety is needed to expand this study to more public libraries and examine other factors, such as level of education, socioeconomic class, how often people use the library, and the reasons they go there. Using qualitative, mixed-method, or comparative study designs could help us learn more about how safe space principles shape how people use libraries and engage with their communities.

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