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Bridging the gap: Using webinars for effective university library outreach and community empowerment

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Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the role of webinars in bridging the gap between library outreach and community empowerment, focusing on their impact as a research support service. By examining their influence on accessibility, digital literacy, and community engagement, the research evaluates the effectiveness of webinars conducted by the Wayamba University Library Network (WULN) from November 2021 to June 2024. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study integrates quantitative data on participation levels with qualitative insights derived from post-webinar surveys and interviews to assess participant experiences and outcomes. The findings, visualized through a word cloud, highlight the transformative potential of webinars in university library outreach. Key themes emerging from the analysis highlight the centrality of information literacy, resource utilization, and the effectiveness of webinars in knowledge dissemination, emphasizing the pivotal role of webinars in academic settings, in enhancing digital literacy, research skills, and fostering an engaging learning environment. Furthermore, the word cloud analysis reinforces the significance of webinars in promoting accessibility, community empowerment, and academic support. Despite their benefits, the study identifies potential challenges, including technological barriers, uneven participant engagement, and the need for strategies to enhance webinar effectiveness. These findings suggest that while webinars are instrumental in the digital transformation of information services, their effectiveness can be further enhanced. The research contributes to the discourse on the evolving role of digital tools in academic libraries, emphasizing the importance of continuous evaluation and adaptation to meet the diverse needs of academic communities.

Keywords: Webinars, Library outreach, Community empowerment, Digital literacy, Mixed-methods research, Academic libraries

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Introduction

Webinars, short for "web-based seminars," emerged in the 1990s with the advent of the first webinar software. They provide a dynamic platform for real-time interaction and communication across global audiences, enabling the sharing of presentations, multimedia content, and live discussions. The term "webinar" encompasses a wide range of online sessions, including eLearning, employee training, and various educational activities (Smith & Doe, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the adoption of webinars as a primary mode of communication and education, particularly within university settings (Alvarez & Corcuera, 2021; Bond et al., 2021). This shift underscored the potential of webinars to bridge geographical and logistical barriers, making them an indispensable tool for knowledge dissemination and community engagement.

This paper focuses on the Wayamba University Library Network's (WULN) use of webinars, examining their types, tools, and associated challenges. Among the various types of webinars, those centred on eLearning and continuing education hold particular significance for university libraries. These webinars serve as powerful tools for libraries to expand their outreach, offering workshops and lectures on a wide range of topics, from research skills to digital literacy. For instance, WULN has effectively utilized webinars to improve access to resources and support academic success among students and faculty. This study investigates the effectiveness of webinars as an outreach tool for university libraries, using WULN as a case study to highlight best practices and lessons learned.

Despite the growing adoption of webinars in academic settings, there is a deficiency of comprehensive research on their effectiveness as a tool for library outreach and community empowerment, particularly in developing regions such as Sri Lanka. While webinars have been widely recognized for their potential to enhance accessibility and digital literacy, their impact on fostering long-term engagement and academic success remains underexplored. Furthermore, challenges such as technological barriers, varying digital literacy levels, and participant's continuing engagement limit the optimum potential of webinars as a transformative tool for university libraries (Weidlich & Kalz, 2021). This study addresses these gaps by examining the role of webinars in bridging the gap between library outreach and community empowerment, with a specific focus on their impact on accessibility, digital literacy, and community engagement at Wayamba University.

The rationale for this study is rooted in the evolving role of university libraries in the digital age. As academic institutions increasingly rely on digital tools to support teaching, learning, and research, libraries must adapt their outreach strategies to meet the changing needs of their communities (Baker et al., 2023). Webinars offer a unique opportunity for libraries to extend their services beyond physical spaces, reaching a broader audience and fostering a culture of lifelong learning (Alvarez & Corcuera, 2021). However, the effectiveness of webinars as a tool for library outreach and community empowerment remains unexplored, particularly in contexts where resources and technological infrastructure may be limited.

The study on WULN aims to explore the challenges and opportunities associated with webinars used for library outreach in a developing country. The findings will contribute to the broader discourse on the role of digital tools in academic libraries, offering practical recommendations for enhancing webinar effectiveness and maximizing their impact on community engagement and academic success. Moreover, this research will highlight the transformative potential of webinars in bridging the gap between library services and community needs, ultimately supporting the mission of university libraries to empower their users through access to knowledge and resources.

The existing literature on the evolution and application of webinars highlights their transition from a temporary solution to a permanent and integral component of educational and professional domains (Bond et al., 2021). As technological advancements continue to enhance interactivity and engagement, webinars are expected to evolve further, offering increasingly immersive experiences. This study seeks to contribute to this evolving field by providing a comprehensive analysis of the role of webinars in transforming university library services and supporting academic communities.

The growing reliance on digital communication technologies has positioned webinars as an indispensable tool across various sectors, particularly education. Existing literature provides a comprehensive overview of the benefits, challenges, and applications of webinars, highlighting their transformative potential in fostering engagement, accessibility, and knowledge dissemination (Al-Naabi et al., 2021).

Webinars offer numerous advantages, particularly in educational settings. They provide a platform for real-time interaction, enabling participants to engage directly with presenters and content, fostering a sense of immediacy and connection (Smith & Doe, 2020). This interactive element is crucial for maintaining participant engagement and facilitating active learning. The flexibility of webinars allows participants to join sessions from any location, eliminating geographical barriers and reducing travel costs (Gegenfurtner & Ebner, 2019). This feature is especially beneficial for professional development, as webinars can reach a broad audience without the limitation in physical space (Anderson & Kumar, 2024). Additionally, webinars can be recorded and made available for later viewing, allowing participants to revisit the material and catch up on missed sessions (Nguyen & Kim, 2023). This asynchronous access enhances the accessibility and inclusivity of webinar content, accommodating diverse learning needs and schedules.

In higher education, webinars have become a valuable tool for delivering content, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated a rapid shift to online learning (Brown & Tan, 2022). Webinars have been used for various purposes, including academic orientations, skill development workshops, and research presentations (Lee & Park, 2023). For instance, academic libraries have leveraged webinars to conduct orientation programs, teach information literacy skills, and provide training on research tools and methodologies (Zhang & Liu, 2023). These applications underscore the versatility of webinars as a medium for both foundational and specialized education.

Beyond education, webinars have also found applications in professional development and corporate training. They offer a cost-effective solution for organizations to conduct training sessions, share knowledge, and update employees on new developments (Wong & Li, 2024). The scalability of webinars makes them an attractive option for organizations seeking to disseminate information efficiently and consistently across large and dispersed teams. Furthermore, the interactive nature of webinars facilitates real-time feedback and discussion, enhancing the learning experience and promoting knowledge retention (Martinez & Carter, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the adoption of webinars in educational institutions worldwide, including in Sri Lanka (Ohiri, 2024). A notable example is the U.S. Embassy's "Sri Lanka @ 100: Exponential Growth Webinar" in 2020, which set a precedent for the widespread use of webinars in the country (U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka, 2021). Subsequently, the Wayamba University Library Network (WULN) implemented a series of webinars addressing various academic and professional development topics. These initiatives highlight the potential of webinars to bridge gaps in access to education and professional development, particularly in regions with limited resources and infrastructure.

Despite their numerous benefits, webinars are not without challenges. Technological barriers, such as unreliable internet connectivity and limited access to digital devices, can hinder participation, particularly in developing regions (Afzal et al., 2023). Additionally, varying levels of digital literacy among participants can affect their ability to engage effectively with webinar content (Patel & Singh, 2024). To address these challenges, researchers and practitioners have emphasized the importance of providing technical support and training to participants, as well as designing user-friendly webinar platforms (Moorefield-Lang, 2017).

The future of webinars awaits further innovation, with advancements in technology enabling more interactive and immersive experiences. Emerging trends such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) are expected to enhance the interactivity and engagement of webinars, offering new possibilities for education and professional development (Harris & Thompson, 2024). Moreover, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into webinar platforms could facilitate personalized learning experiences, tailoring content to individual participants' needs and preferences (Chen & Wang, 2024).

The literature emphasizes the transformative potential of webinars in education and professional development, highlighting their ability to enhance accessibility, engagement, and knowledge dissemination. However, challenges such as technological barriers and varying levels of digital literacy must be addressed to maximize their impact. As webinars continue to evolve, they offer exciting opportunities for innovation and growth, particularly in regions with limited resources and infrastructure.

Methodology

To evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the webinars conducted by the WULN, a robust data collection process was implemented from November 2021 to June 2024. The study employed a mixed-methods research design, which is widely recognized for its ability to provide a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena by integrating quantitative and qualitative

data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach allowed for a nuanced analysis of participant engagement and the qualitative benefits of the webinar sessions.

Quantitative data were systematically collected through detailed attendance records for each webinar session. Metrics such as the number of participants, session duration, and attendance rates were meticulously documented for webinars on topics including "How to Use OPAC," "Library Services in WULN," and "Information Literacy for Academic Purposes." Across the study period, webinars recorded an average attendance rate of approximately 81%, calculated by dividing the number of attendees by the registrants per session. These quantitative measures provided a clear indicator of engagement levels across different webinar themes and allowed for the identification of trends in participation (Smith & Doe, 2020). The use of attendance data as a proxy for engagement is well-supported in the literature, as it offers an objective measure of reach and interest in educational interventions (Gegenfurtner & Ebner, 2019).

Qualitative insights were gathered using post-webinar surveys and feedback forms, which were distributed to participants immediately following each session. The overall survey responses rate across all webinars was approximately 81%, which is consistent with response rates reported in comparable online educational studies. To enhance data validity, survey items were reviewed by two experts in Library and Information Science, and pilot tested with a small group of participants with informed consent prior to full deployment. The surveys included a combination of Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions, designed to capture participants' perceptions of the relevance, clarity, and applicability of the webinar content. Open-ended questions were particularly valuable for capturing detailed responses, which provided insights into participants' perceptions while Likert-scale items were included to structure participant responses and provide an overall indication of trends, the present study primarily reports qualitative findings derived from open-ended survey responses and focus group discussions. These qualitative data were analyzed thematically to generate in-depth insights into participants' experiences and to identify areas for improvement, consistent with established practices in educational research (Brown & Tan, 2022; Nguyen & Kim, 2023).

To complement the survey data, focus group discussions were conducted with purposive sample of webinar participants were selected based on their consistent attendance (participation in at least two webinars) and willingness to engage in follow-up discussions as indicated in the post-webinar survey to explore their experiences in greater depth. These discussions were structured around key themes identified in the survey responses, such as the effectiveness of the webinar content, the usability of digital tools, and suggestions for improving future sessions. Each focus group consisted of 8-10 participants and was conducted online to ensure accessibility to an interactive platform for participants to share their perspectives, fostering a collaborative environment for generating rich, contextual insights (Lee & Park, 2023). This approach is supported by literature that highlights the value of focus groups in uncovering nuanced participant experiences and identifying underlying motivations and challenges (Martinez & Carter, 2023).

The collected data were analyzed using a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to identify trends in attendance and engagement across different webinar topics. Given the case study nature of the research and the absence of inferential objectives, advanced statistical analyses such as

regression were not applied. Descriptive analysis was considered sufficient to address the study objectives by providing a clear overview of participation trends rather than testing causal relationships. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically to contextualize and complement the quantitative findings, thereby ensuring a coherent and appropriate analytical approach consistent with the study design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Qualitative data from surveys and focus group discussions were analyzed thematically using NVivo software. This involved coding and categorizing codes into key themes and patterns, such as perceived value, areas for improvement, and suggestions for future webinars. Thematic analysis is a widely accepted method for interpreting qualitative data, as it allows researchers to identify recurring patterns and draw meaningful conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings provided a comprehensive understanding of the impact and effectiveness of the webinars, ensuring that the analysis was rigorous and contextually rich.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for educational research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the commencement of data collection through circulation of a formal consent form. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any negative consequences. Measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all participant responses, and data were handled responsibly to protect participants' privacy, in line with recommended ethical research practices (Moorefield-Lang, 2017).

Results

The mixed-methods design of this study is a significant strength, as it allows for a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of webinar by combining quantitative metrics with qualitative insights. However, the study is not without limitations. The reliance on self-reported data in surveys and focus groups may introduce bias, and the generalizability of the findings may be limited by the specific context of WULN. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating additional data sources, such as observational data or longitudinal studies, which are needed for the generalization of the findings (Patel & Singh, 2024).

Table 1 presents participation trends across 13 webinar sessions conducted between November 2021- June 2024. The data indicate constantly higher attendance for webinars targeting undergraduate students, particularly, Library Orientation programme and introductory sessions related to library services and Information Literacy (IL). Notably, the "Library Orientation Program for Intake 2021/2022 of Faculty of Business Studies and Finance (FBSF)" emerged as the most attended session, attracting 598 participants. This high level of engagement underscores the critical importance of orientation programs for new students, particularly in facilitating their transition into academic life. Followed by 231 participants from Faculty of Technology (FoT) and 171 from the Faculty of Applied Sciences (FAS). This trend logically reflects immediate informational needs of newly enrolled students, for whom orientation webinars serve as a

primary gateway to understanding library resources and services. Orientation sessions provide a foundational understanding of library resources and services, which are essential for academic success (Tinto, 2012). The significant interest in these sessions highlights their role as a gateway to academic literacy and resource utilization, aligning with findings from other studies that emphasize the value of orientation programs in fostering student engagement and retention (Kuh, 2008).

Table 1: Participants in the Webinar Sessions (From Nov. 2021 to June 2024)

Session No.	Topic	Year	Time Duration	No. of participants*	Target Group
1	How to Use OPAC	2021	1 hour	124	Undergraduates
2	Library Services in WULN	2021	1 hour	144	Undergraduates
3	Information Literacy for Academic Purposes	2022	1 hour	78	Undergraduates
4	Book Publishing Process	2022	1 ½ hours	60	Academic scholars
5	Mendeley: Reference Management Tools for scientific writing	2023	2 hours	52	Undergraduates (FQM-External)
6	Smart Searching Techniques for Online Resources	2023	2 hours	52	Undergraduates (FQM-External)
7	Smart Searching Techniques for Researchers	2023	2 hours	52	Scholars, researchers, young academics & postgraduate students
8	Mendeley: Reference Management Tools for Scientific Writing	2023	2 hours	14	Scholars, researchers, young academics & postgraduate students
9	Library Orientation Programme for Intake 2021/2022 of FAS	2023	2 hours	171	New entrants of FAS
10	Library Orientation Programme for Intake 2021/2022 of FBSF	2023	2 hours	598	New entrants of FBSF
11	Library Orientation Programme for Intake 2021/2022 of FoT	2023	2 hours	231	New entrants of FoT
12	Mastering Smart Search Techniques for Scientific Discovery	2024	2 hours	50	Undergraduates (FQM-External)
13	Reference Management Tool: Zotero for Scientific Writing	2024	2 hours	50	Undergraduates (FQM-External)

*Participants being in the session for more than 45 minutes, (Abbreviations used: OPAC – Online Public Access Catalogue, WULN – Wayamba University Library Network, FQM – Food Quality Management, FAS – Faculty of Applied Sciences, FBSF – Faculty of Business Studies and Finance, FoT – Faculty of Technology)

The word cloud generated through NVivo analysis from Group 1 (Figure 1) provides a visual representation of the most frequently occurring terms, in participants' qualitative feedback and complements the participation trends presented in Table 1. This emphasize aligns with offering

as dynamic spaces for academic exchange, skill development, and professional growth. This aligns with research that highlights the collaborative and interactive nature of webinars, which can foster a sense of community and shared learning among participants (Lee & Park, 2023).

In brief, the word cloud visually reinforces the transformative role of webinars in university library outreach, emphasizing their significance in knowledge sharing, accessibility, and community empowerment. The findings suggest that webinars are not only effective tools for disseminating information but also powerful platforms for fostering engagement and collaboration among academic communities. This is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has accelerated the adoption of digital tools in higher education and highlighted the need for innovative approaches to library outreach (Ohiri, 2024).

The high attendance at orientation sessions, coupled with the thematic insights from the word cloud, underscores the importance of tailoring webinar content to meet the specific needs of different user groups. For instance, while orientation programs are highly valued by new students, specialized sessions on topics such as "Smart Searching Techniques" and "Reference Management Tools" may require more targeted promotion to attract participants from specific academic disciplines or research backgrounds (Nguyen & Kim, 2023). This highlights the need for a strategic approach to webinar design and delivery, ensuring that content is relevant, accessible, and engaging for diverse audiences.

Despite their many benefits, webinars are not without challenges. The lower attendance at specialized sessions suggests potential barriers to engagement, such as a lack of awareness, competing priorities, or varying levels of digital literacy among participants (Patel & Singh, 2024). Addressing these challenges will require a multifaceted approach, including improved promotion, user-friendly platforms, and tailored content that meets the specific needs of different user groups. Additionally, the integration of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI), could enhance the interactivity and accessibility of webinars, offering new opportunities for innovation and engagement (Harris & Thompson, 2024).

Conclusions

In conclusion, the findings from the participation data and word cloud analysis highlight the transformative potential of webinars in university library outreach. By enhancing information literacy, fostering engagement, and promoting community empowerment, webinars serve as powerful tools for supporting academic success and lifelong learning. However, to maximize their impact, it is essential to address the challenges associated with webinar delivery and ensure that content is tailored to the needs of diverse user groups. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of digital tools in higher education, offering valuable insights and recommendations for practitioners and researchers.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Data available could be able to provide on request.

Author Contribution

Conceptualization. study design and methodology development: WMT and MKW; Data collection: WMT; Qualitative content analysis using NVivo, word frequency analysis and word cloud: WMT; Interpretation of results: MKW; Writing – original draft preparation: WMT; Reviewing, editing and supervision: MKW

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