

Public Libraries as Catalysts for Digital Empowerment: a Case Study of the Gampaha Public Library Computer Center

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The increasing reliance on digital technologies in all aspects of life has made digital literacy a fundamental skill for personal development and social participation. In this context, public libraries serve as vital institutions for narrowing the digital divide and fostering inclusive access to information and communication technologies. The study sets out to achieve three primary objectives: to identify the digital services provided by the computer section of Gampaha Public Library, to evaluate the impact of these services on enhancing digital literacy among users, and to assess the broader contribution of the library's digital initiatives toward community-level digital empowerment. A case study method approach was adopted, comprising the analysis of secondary data from the library annual statistics, action plans, and budget reports (2022–2025), along with primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 regular users of the computer section. Findings revealed a consistent increase in user engagement and digital participation by registered users by 3% of the total increment by 2024. The noticeable point was that unregistered users increased considerable amount and numbered 5061 participants were in virtual and physical mode. It was observed that annual action plans, computer literacy training (2022), professional development courses (2023), an educational YouTube channel (2024) were the major projects to increase these unregistered users in the library. According to interviews with the users, 12 participants reported improvements in their academic performance and 8 participants mentioned employment opportunities, while handling digital tasks such as e-banking, online payment, application completion and usage of artificial Intelligence through this unit. The study concludes that targeted investments, staff capacity building, and strategic collaborations with educational institutions are essential for maximizing the impact of library-based digital initiatives. Recommendations include expanding outreach to marginalized groups, upgrading digital infrastructure, and enhancing public awareness about available library services.

Keywords: *Community engagement; Digital empowerment; Digital literacy; Library services; Public libraries*