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A Study on the Current Status and Driving Force of Library Marketing in the Digital Age

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Abstract: In the context of the rapid evolution of digital technology and the growing demand for user-centered services, the question of how to effectively implement marketing strategies in libraries has become important in research. This article introduces the theoretical background and development process of domestic and international research on library marketing in the digital era, systematically combs through the current situation of domestic library marketing research, and puts forward the existing deficiencies and problems. Based on the discovery of library marketing strategy research insufficiency and other problems, this paper uses STP theory (segmentation, targeting, and positioning) to conduct a systematic strategy analysis of library operation and management and puts forward countermeasure suggestions for the cross-integration of disciplines, the improvement and optimization of the new theory of library marketing, the integration of STP theory and public library strategy, and the innovation of the research direction.

Keywords: library marketing; STP theory; digital era; driving force

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1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid development of library services has led to the emergence of new research directions in domestic librarianship, with library marketing becoming one of the more prominent fields. Although marketing concepts have been applied to library construction and promotion activities in developed countries for some time, yielding substantial research results and practical experience (Yu et al., 2023; Jing & Yu, 2023), the full integration of library science and marketing theory has yet to be realized (Hu, 2022). This challenge has become more pressing with the rise of advanced technologies such as the Internet, artificial intelligence, and new media, which have driven continuous innovation and adaptation in marketing strategies (Jin, 2016; Q. Chu, 2023). An important research issue in the field is how to foster a comprehensive cross-fertilization between library science and marketing to establish a new, interdisciplinary direction for library marketing (Nie, 2020; Ou, 2021).

Due to differences in economic and cultural development models, as well as the varying stages of academic progress, research on library marketing has lagged behind (N. Fan et al., 2022; Li & Lou, 2024). However, with the rapid advancement of digital technologies and the diversification of user needs (Jiang et al., 2023), library marketing has gradually become an emerging research focus (Cui, 2023). As non-profit organizations, libraries do not aim for profit generation but must still provide value and meet and create user needs (J. Chu & Wu, 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, it is essential to integrate modern

marketing concepts with the development models of libraries to drive service innovation and theoretical advancement.

It is important to emphasize that library marketing is not merely the direct application of commercial marketing theories. Instead, it represents a unique marketing approach for non-profit organizations, focused on public service objectives (J. Chu & Wu, 2021; Chen et al., 2021). This approach has emerged as a new direction within the context of interdisciplinary integration. As stated by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in its "Public Library Service Guidelines", libraries must go beyond offering collections and reading spaces. They also need to meet user needs through strategies such as publicity, promotion, and engagement (Y. Zhang & Chen, 2021; Liu et al., 2022). The American Library Association (ALA) defines library marketing as a series of activities that foster constructive and mutually beneficial relationships between libraries and both current and potential users, encompassing aspects such as products, costs, delivery methods, and promotional tactics (Feng, 2017; Qian, 2021).

For instance, the London City Library has utilized social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram to conduct digital marketing campaigns, such as the "#Library Of The Week" initiative. This not only showcases the library's unique collections and digital resources but also enhances user interaction through feedback data, optimizing content delivery strategies and increasing user engagement and the library's social influence (Wang, 2021). Similarly, the New York Public Library (NYPL) launched the "BookFace Friday" social media marketing campaign, creatively combining book covers with user selfies. This fun and engaging approach has successfully attracted younger users' attention to library resources (Yang et al., 2021).

In this context, digital technologies such as mobile internet, generative artificial intelligence, and social big data continue to drive transformations in the information environment (J. S. Fan, 2021). As libraries face changes in user behavior and a shift in service models, their marketing concepts and strategies also require urgent updates (J. Zhang & Guo, 2017). Therefore, a consideration of how library marketing can align with the development of digital technologies, respond to user needs, and establish a theoretical framework that reflects the characteristics of the digital age has become an important research topic in the field of library and information science.

2. Research Status

An analysis of the previous literature reveals that research on library marketing primarily focuses on the following key areas. Firstly, it explores the application and adaptation of marketing strategy frameworks, such as the 4P (product, price, place, and promotion), 4C (consumer, cost, convenience, and communication), and 4V (variation, versatility, value, and vibration) models, in the context of libraries. This includes the use of the 4P marketing mix to promote reading activities, a comparison of the 4P and 4C approaches in library marketing, the application of the 4C framework in live library services, and the role of the 4V concept in promoting reading (Yu et al., 2023; Hu, 2022; Q. Chu, 2023). Secondly, it examines the operation and use of new media in libraries (J. Zhang & Ren, 2022), focusing on the application of new media marketing tools (Dai & Zhai, 2020). Key areas of research include the new marketing models for libraries in a new media context, the integration of online and offline library marketing (Gong, 2021; Robinson, 2012), and the impact of short video marketing on library business and service innovation (Singh, 2009; Taks et al., 2020). Thirdly, comprehensive research on library marketing has been conducted with a focus on the IFLA International Library Marketing Award. For instance, Nie (2020) highlights the value and significance of marketing in the transformation and development of libraries through a systematic review of the IFLA Library Marketing

Award. Q. Chu (2023) traces the history and practices of library marketing in China by analyzing award-winning projects from the IFLA International Library Marketing Award. J. S. Fan (2021) examined the breakthroughs in marketing concepts and practices in public libraries, using the example of the 'Neighborhood Library', which won first prize in the IFLA International Marketing Award.

Previous studies have significantly contributed to theoretical integration and innovation in library marketing. However, a comprehensive review reveals that most research in this field focuses on 'marketing tactics' rather than 'marketing strategy'. For example, J. Zhang and Ren (2022) are among the few who explored strategic planning in public library marketing, analyzing foreign libraries' strategies and offering recommendations. Other studies on library marketing strategy remain scarce.

Within the broader framework of marketing theory, strategy remains a central element, while tactics are a breakdown and continuation of strategic planning. Without a clear strategic layout, the effectiveness and significance of marketing tactics diminish. In light of the research gap regarding library marketing strategies in the digital age, the core objective of this study is to explore and establish the theoretical applicability and practical significance of the STP strategic model in library marketing. Through a systematic integration of existing literature and theories, the research aims to clarify the strategic analysis of libraries in areas such as user segmentation, target group identification, and market positioning. The study also seeks to address the current gap in the strategic construction of library marketing theory, providing theoretical insights for the integration of library and marketing theories. In turn, this will contribute to the development of a new direction in the research and advancement of library marketing as an emerging academic field.

3. Research Design

3.1. Method Selection

This study adopts a narrative literature review approach, aiming to systematically examine and theoretically integrate the applicability of the STP strategic model in library marketing within the context of the digital age. The specific steps are as follows:

(1) A comprehensive search is conducted across databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, CNKI, and Google Scholar, with keywords and topics covering multiple dimensions, including "STP theory", "strategic marketing", "library marketing", "digital transformation", and "user behavior".

(2) Based on established literature selection criteria, high-quality research articles published between 2000 and 2024 are chosen. These articles must present a theoretical framework, strategic guidance, or insights into interdisciplinary integration, while outdated literature, studies with insufficient theoretical depth, or those with low relevance to the topic are excluded.

(3) Following the writing standards for high-quality narrative reviews proposed by Bodolica and Spraggon (2018), the selected literature is categorized by theme, analyzed in content, and summarized in terms of trends. This process leads to a comprehensive analysis of current trends in library marketing research, its theoretical foundations, and development pathways.

3.2. Strategic Analysis of STP Theory for Library Marketing

3.2.1. The Emergence and Content of STP Theory

STP theory (segmentation, targeting, and positioning), also known as the classic marketing trilogy, is one of the core elements of marketing strategy. In 1956, Wendell Smith introduced the concept of market segmentation, emphasizing the need for companies to divide the market based on consumers' varying needs and characteristics. This concept laid

the foundation for the formation of STP theory. Later, McKinsey & Company conducted an in-depth analysis of target market selection, establishing strategies for selecting target markets. In the 1970s, Al Ries introduced the concept of market positioning, focusing on how to create a unique product image in consumers' minds and find a distinct competitive position in the market (Dai & Zhai, 2020; Gong, 2021). Eventually, Philip Kotler developed these concepts into a cohesive framework, integrating them into a systematic marketing model. Kotler's work promoted STP theory as the cornerstone of strategic marketing, widely adopted across various organizations in their marketing practices.

STP in marketing theory refers to three interconnected components: market segmentation, target market selection, and market positioning. These elements are not isolated but form a logically linked system, where each step builds on the previous one. STP theory has become central to strategic marketing and is widely applied across various businesses and non-profit organizations in strategic planning and analysis. As an essential aspect of marketing for non-profit organizations, library marketing in China urgently requires a comprehensive STP analysis to provide a unified framework and theoretical foundation for research and innovation in the field.

3.2.2. Library Market Segmentation

Market segmentation refers to the process of dividing user groups based on specific variables, with the goal of developing products and services that better meet the needs of these groups. In the context of libraries, market segmentation involves identifying and categorizing different reader groups based on factors such as age, educational background, reading preferences, and usage habits. For instance, reader groups can be segmented into students, the general public, researchers, and retirees based on their occupations and identities (Gong, 2021). Each group may require different services and resources, allowing for the provision of targeted offerings that better fulfill their knowledge needs. Specific details are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of the library market segmentation.

Segmentation Variables	Variable Description	Segmentation Examples
Geographic location	Depending on geographic location, there are significant differences in the coverage of library services and user groups.	City libraries, country libraries, university libraries, specialized libraries, etc.
Population statistics	Segmentation is based on demographic characteristics such as age, gender, income level, educational background, and occupation.	Children, adolescents, adults, seniors. General readers, professionals, advanced researchers, etc.
Consumer behavior	Segmentation is based on behavioral characteristics such as users' habits, frequency, and preferences for library services.	Frequent users, occasional users; online service users, offline visitors.
Psychological characteristic	Psychographics such as user's lifestyle, personality and habit preferences.	Research readers, leisure readers, professional development readers, etc.
Type of requirement	Specific user needs for library services and resources.	Academic research, data search, cultural recreation, cognitive learning, continuing education, etc.

By implementing the market segmentation process, libraries can avoid duplication and ineffective competition, thereby maximizing their advantages and balancing overall user resources. This approach enables libraries to more accurately identify and target

their users, improve their services, and even develop customized programs tailored to specific user needs. Consequently, libraries can provide more diverse and personalized knowledge services, ultimately enhancing their brand influence and the level of social service they offer.

3.2.3. Selection of Target Markets for Libraries

Target market selection involves choosing a sub-market that aligns with an organization's strengths and development goals to meet consumer needs, based on market segmentation. In the context of libraries, target market selection refers to identifying one or more sub-markets as the primary focus for service delivery (Robinson, 2012). This process should consider the library's resources, capabilities, and strategic planning to select market areas that align with its long-term development goals and resource advantages.

For example, a university library might identify its primary target market as faculty, students, and researchers. However, it must take into account factors such as the institution's nature, orientation, subject specialties, and historical resource foundation to implement targeted and focused service activities. While university libraries have clearer and more concentrated target users, public libraries face more complex demographics. They must consider factors like geographic location, regional economic development, cultural preferences, and consumption habits. By weighing the characteristics and needs of various target consumer groups within the constraints of limited resources, public libraries can develop reasonable service policies.

According to the STP marketing theory, target market selection strategies can be categorized into three types: undifferentiated market strategy, differentiated market strategy, and concentrated market strategy, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. Selection of target markets for libraries.

Target Market Strategy	Description of Theoretical Concepts	Specific Example
Non-differentiated marketing strategy	Implementing the same marketing strategy for all consumer groups in a given area, using undifferentiated and unified marketing.	The National Library of China covers almost all fields of user readers and provides unified user service standards.
Differentiated market strategies	Adopt different marketing strategies and brand promotion appeal points for different groups in the target consumer market.	Certain local public libraries have adopted the practice of targeting the same target market and providing different services according to the needs of users.
Centralized market strategy	A marketing strategy that concentrates on satisfying a single market segment, mostly a niche market.	The University Library caters to the information needs of all students and faculty.

As non-profit organizations dedicated to providing public services and cultural knowledge, libraries have traditionally lacked awareness of market competition, relying primarily on financial allocations as their main source of funding. However, the development of libraries worldwide is increasingly challenged by rapid technological advancements and the widespread availability of information. This has particularly affected funding sources, which have become significant constraints on library operations. To uphold their fundamental goal of public knowledge service and cultural dissemination, libraries must continually reduce costs, improve their operational models, and enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of their services to society and readers. Thus, it is essential to clarify market segmentation using STP theory, select target markets that align with their development

goals, and prioritize quality products and services. Libraries should serve key user groups more efficiently while also considering the needs of other users, ultimately maximizing service effectiveness.

3.2.4. Library Market Positioning

Market positioning involves shaping a distinct image within the target audience based on market segmentation and target market selection, taking into account the characteristics of the target market as well as the advantages of the products and services offered by the organization. As the third step in the STP strategy, market positioning serves as a crucial link and implementation point.

Unlike for-profit enterprises, the market positioning of non-profit organizations, such as libraries, is characterized by unique objectives, pathways, and methods (Singh, 2009). While businesses must consider competitive dynamics and market fluctuations, non-profit organizations primarily focus on user needs and brand image (Taks et al., 2020). Library market positioning typically refers to determining the roles and development directions of various types of libraries within the social and cultural service system based on their functions, target audiences, and service offerings. This process aims to establish a unique brand image and service characteristics for each library.

When libraries employ STP theory, their positioning strategies must comprehensively account for a variety of factors, as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3. Library positioning strategy.

Positioning Type	Theoretical Description	Concrete Example
Positioning of service recipients	Define and target the library's main service recipients, personalize services to specific groups, and build a specific image.	School libraries primarily serve students and teachers, public libraries cater to the entire local population, and national libraries may be more focused on research and the preservation of cultural heritage.
Functional difference positioning	The functional positioning of libraries involves knowledge dissemination, cultural heritage, information services, learning support, leisure and entertainment, etc., and forms a specific positioning according to its different functional focuses.	Public libraries may focus more on popular reading and cultural activities, professional libraries may focus more on providing specialized information services, and private libraries may provide customized and personalized services.
Regional strategic positioning	The libraries' location in different regions has a significant impact on their long-term development and they need to be fully integrated into and leverage the development strategies of the regions in which they are located and integrate with the overall regional development strategies.	Libraries in innovative cities need to emphasize innovative features, new technologies, new cultures, etc.; historical capitals need to emphasize the cultural weight and heritage of libraries; and rural areas need to focus on beautiful villages and non-genetic inheritance.
Technology and environmental positioning	In line with the development trend of new technology and green environmental protection concept to develop positioning, to create a new type of library and a new experience.	The use of Internet of Things, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, and other technologies to provide services, located in the smart library; the use of digital resources to create digital libraries; the use of low-carbon environmental protection concepts to create green libraries.

Market positioning effectively conveys the library's brand concept and value proposition, creating a unique brand image in the minds of users. This approach establishes a clear strategic path and identifies the user base essential for the sustainable and differentiated development of libraries. Furthermore, by providing users with a distinctive value experience, libraries can enhance cultural literacy and elevate public cultural standards. Ultimately, this significantly contributes to expanding overall social benefits and improving national quality.

4. Discussion

4.1. Library Marketing Is Not Merely the Application of Marketing Theory Within the Library Sector; Rather, It Represents a New Research Direction That Emerges from the Cross-Fertilization of Various Disciplines

The discipline of marketing possesses strong extensibility and adaptability, allowing it to cross-fertilize with various fields and establish new research directions. Library marketing exemplifies this phenomenon; however, it is more than a simple application of marketing knowledge within libraries. Instead, it represents a profound integration of marketing principles tailored to the unique context of libraries as independent research areas.

As non-profit organizations, libraries differ from enterprises and for-profit entities, possessing distinct organizational characteristics and operational principles. They must adhere not only to the general marketing principles applicable to non-profits but also to their specific positioning as knowledge repositories and providers of public cultural services.

Thus, fully integrating marketing theory with library management theory holds significant value for advancing library research. This integration fosters theoretical innovation and establishes new research directions within this cross-disciplinary field. Future studies should encourage deeper integration between marketing and library theory, paving the way for a distinct library marketing direction that accommodates the production, storage, and dissemination of knowledge in the new era.

4.2. Emphasize Not Only the Integration of Tactical Marketing' with Library Practices but Also the Long-Term Value of Strategic Marketing' in Library Marketing

Previous studies have primarily focused on the tactical aspects of marketing theory in library research, often neglecting the application and significance of strategic marketing. However, within the broader marketing theory framework, the strategic component remains central. Importantly, strategy is about 'doing the right things', while tactics pertain to 'doing things correctly'. A well-defined marketing strategy provides clear direction and pathways for organizational development, emphasizing ideas and planning, whereas marketing tactics concentrate on implementation.

Therefore, the library marketing process must recognize the value and significance of marketing strategy. Integrating marketing strategy theory with library development provides solid theoretical support and innovative direction for the library's sustainable operation and long-term growth.

4.3. Strengthen the Application of STP Theory in Library Marketing to Enhance the Scientific Rigor and Forward-Looking Nature of Strategic Planning Within Libraries

STP theory is a crucial component of strategic marketing, offering significant strategic guidance for both enterprises and non-profit organizations. In the context of library development and innovation, it is essential to emphasize scientific and forward-looking strategic planning. The emerging direction of library marketing research should focus on deepening the integration and cross-innovation between strategic marketing theory and library operations and management.

STP theory enables the effective segmentation of user groups, allowing libraries to accurately identify target users, establish a specific brand image, and successfully position and communicate brand value. This approach facilitates the provision of more precise and professional services to users, ultimately enhancing the public's cultural literacy and promoting greater equality in public cultural access.

The integration of STP theory with library operations and management offers valuable insights and potential pathways for future research into the intersection of library marketing, contributing to the integration, expansion, and innovation of library marketing theory.

5. Conclusions and Outlook

5.1. Research Conclusions

In the context of rapid advancements in the Internet and artificial intelligence, new social management models, lifestyles, knowledge production and dissemination methods, and learning paradigms are continuously emerging. As key organizations for knowledge storage and dissemination, libraries must undergo constant transformation to meet the demands of the new era. In this scenario, library operations and management face significant opportunities and challenges. Library marketing, as an important area of future library theory, plays a crucial role in promoting the integration of marketing theory with library management, thereby forming new research directions and fields with both theoretical and practical value.

In particular, given the current lack of in-depth research on strategic marketing within library marketing theory, it is essential to explore library marketing strategies in greater detail. This study applies the STP theory from marketing to conduct a strategic analysis of the library field, emphasizing the intersection of STP theory and library operations management. It provides valuable insights and direction for developing a comprehensive library marketing theory, where strategy and tactics complement and support each other. Moving forward, it is essential to deepen the complementary integration of STP theory with library operations, continuing to explore the intersections and points of convergence between marketing and library studies, contributing marginally to the refinement and optimization of library marketing theory.

5.2. Limitations and Prospects

This study aims to explore the theoretical applicability of the STP strategic model in library marketing in the digital age, systematically reviewing and distilling key elements such as market segmentation, target group positioning, and driving forces within library marketing. However, this paper primarily integrates existing literature and theoretical research and has not conducted empirical quantitative analysis. Furthermore, it does not establish specific research hypotheses or data support, which limits the objectivity and verifiability of the research findings.

Therefore, future research could build upon the theoretical framework constructed in this study, further clarifying research objectives, proposing targeted research questions and hypotheses, and employing diverse methods such as surveys, user behavior data analysis, and case studies to develop a systematic, problem-oriented empirical research path. For example, the effectiveness of each stage of the STP strategy in actual library operations could be data-validated and strategically optimized, thereby enhancing the practical applicability and external validity of the research.

In conclusion, although this study primarily focuses on theoretical exploration and does not involve empirical research, the analysis of research limitations and the outlook for future research has provided a clear logical starting point and theoretical support for subsequent empirical studies and case applications.

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