

Competitive Intelligence Practices: A Case Study of a South African Academic Library Setting

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Abstract: The study explored and identified several competitive strategies employed by academic libraries to maintain and enhance their competitive edge. The presence of these strategies highlights the multifaceted approach required to stay relevant and effective in a rapidly evolving information landscape, also in an academic information support landscape. Qualitative data were collected from managers by means of semi-structured interviews. Participants emphasized the use of benchmarking exercises to stay abreast of trends and developments in the field. By comparing their practices against top institutions, libraries can identify areas for improvement and adopt best practices. Findings of the study show the importance of benchmarking as a tool for gathering competitive intelligence. Benchmarking helps libraries to align their services and resources with industry standards, ensuring they remain competitive. The study found that financial constraints impact the ability of libraries to be competitive. Participants noted that while they strive to build capacity, financial limitations hinder their efforts. Collaboration and partnerships were emphasized as critical for building capacity and maintaining international standards. Participants discussed the importance of establishing partnerships with other academic institutions, both nationally and internationally. The concept of "scrums" or interdepartmental collaboration within the academic institution is emphasized to bring together staff from different divisions to work on common goals of partnerships in enhancing library services and resources.

Keywords: Competitive intelligence, Competitive intelligence strategies, Academic libraries, Library strategy, Information services

1. Introduction

The increasingly competitive landscape of information provision necessitates a strategic approach for organisations to maintain relevance and effectiveness (Moyane *et al.*, 2020). Academic libraries, central to higher education institutions, are no exception. As pillars of academic success, these libraries archive bodies of knowledge essential for teaching, research, and community service (Chopra, 2018). However, they face growing competition from alternative information providers, including online databases and search engines (Yaya, Ochonna & Osisanwo, 2014; Adesina *et al.*, 2022). This competition challenges traditional library services and highlights the need for proactive strategic planning.

Competitive intelligence (CI) is described as a formalised, evolving process by which organisations assess their operational progress and the capabilities of existing and potential competitors to maintain a competitive edge (g, 2022). It involves the ethical and legal collection, analysis, and dissemination of actionable information about the competitive environment, which is crucial for informed strategic decision-making across diverse sectors (Heppes & Du Toit, 2009; Chawinga & Selemani, 2017; Maluleka & Chummun, 2023). While CI's benefits are well-established in industries like banking and pharmaceuticals, its adoption and application within the library and information science field, particularly in academic libraries, remain less explored (Yaya *et al.*, 2014; Madukoma *et al.*, 2015; Jerome *et al.*, 2017).

Academic libraries, traditionally central to higher education, are facing a significant transformation driven by digital technologies and alternative information providers. These competitors, such as online databases and search engines, offer readily accessible information directly to students, often bypassing traditional library services (Moyane *et al.*, 2020; Cox, 2023). This shift highlights the need for libraries to adapt and develop proactive strategies to ensure their continued relevance (Bergeron & Hiller, 2005; Yaya *et al.*, 2014).

Despite a growing awareness of CI's potential within the library sector, a significant knowledge gap exists concerning its practical application in South African academic libraries (Gichohi, 2015; Ojo & Olaniyi, 2017; Iwu-James *et al.*, 2019; Moyane *et al.*, 2020). This study directly addresses this gap by investigating the current practices, processes, and levels of awareness surrounding CI within a specific South African academic library. By examining these aspects, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights into the practical implementation of CI within a South African academic library context, providing a foundation for future research and potentially informing the development of best practices for enhancing competitiveness and service delivery.

2. Background

Academic libraries, traditionally central to higher education, are facing a period of significant transformation. Their core function; providing access to information resources and supporting teaching, learning, and research, is increasingly challenged by a rapidly evolving information landscape (Haliso & Aina, 2012; Jerome *et al.*, 2017). The rise of digital technologies and the proliferation of alternative information providers, including online databases, search engines, and commercial publishers, present both opportunities and threats (Du Plessis & Mabunda, 2016; Harland *et al.*, 2017; Hamad, Fakhuri & Jabbar, 2020). These competitors often offer readily accessible, sometimes free, information directly to students, bypassing traditional library services and potentially diminishing library usage (Bell, 2002; Moyane *et al.*, 2020). This shift highlights the need for academic libraries to adapt and develop proactive strategies to ensure their continued relevance and value within the higher education ecosystem (Bergeron & Hiller, 2005; Yaya *et al.*, 2014).

The competitive pressures faced by academic libraries are multifaceted. They include competition from other libraries (both within and outside the institution), the availability of free online resources, and the rise of commercial information providers who often sell directly to the library's constituency (Moyane *et al.*, 2020; Adesina *et al.*, 2022). These competitors often possess greater technological capabilities, more extensive resources, and more flexible funding models, making it difficult for traditional academic libraries to compete solely on the basis of their established services (Ewu-James *et al.*, 2020; Cox, 2023). The resulting challenge necessitates a strategic shift towards a more proactive and competitive approach to information management and service delivery.

In response to these challenges, the adoption of competitive intelligence (CI) methodologies is increasingly recognised as a crucial strategy for academic libraries (Moyane *et al.*, 2020). CI, encompassing the ethical and legal collection, analysis, and dissemination of information relevant to the competitive environment (Pellissier & Nenzhelele, 2013; Maungwa & Fourie, 2018; Iroaganachi, 2022), empowers libraries to make informed strategic decisions, anticipate future trends, and adapt to the changing needs of their users (Diyaolu, 2019; Moyane *et al.*, 2020; Adegbite, 2020). However, little is known about how CI is practiced in South African libraries, the extent of its use, and whether information professionals have embraced CI as a strategic tool (Gichohi, 2015; Ojo & Olaniyi, 2017; Iwu-James *et al.*, 2019). This lack of empirical evidence underscores the need for further investigation into the implementation and effectiveness of CI strategies within these crucial institutions. The research aims to understand:

- The level of understanding and awareness of CI among library managers;
- The identification and analysis of the library's key competitors;
- The extent to which CI informs strategic decision-making within the library;
- The methods employed for collecting and analysing CI within the library.

3. Research Methodology

Table 1 presents a summary of the research methodology, which includes the research paradigm, research approach, the time frame of data collection, research method, methods of data collection, sample method and participants.

Table 1: Summary of the research methodology

Research paradigm	The study was placed in interpretivist paradigm, which is particularly suited for exploring the subjective meanings and interpretations of competitive intelligence (CI) practices within an academic library setting.
Research approach	The study followed a qualitative research approach
Research methods	A case study design was chosen for this research to facilitate an in-depth exploration of CI practices within a specific South African academic library (Pickard, 2017).
Time taken to collect data	Data collection took place between November 2023 until April 2024.
Data collection instruments	Data was collected through semi-structured interviews conducted. Twelve (12) interviews were held remotely via Zoom and Google Meet to accommodate participants' time constraints and preferences.

Sampling methods and participants	The study's participants include a library director, deputy directors, and librarians, totalling twelve individuals engaged in activities related to CI. Participants were selected using convenience sampling.
Ethical clearance and Consent	Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria, where the researchers are registered, and from another South African university (name omitted for confidentiality) where data collection took place. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who voluntarily agreed to participate and be recorded, with pseudonyms used to ensure confidentiality and anonymity in all reporting (Kandeh et al., 2018).

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts, identifying key themes in CI practices and perceptions (Given, 2008). Guided by the adapted CI cycle and Porter's five forces model, the analysis structured insights on CI collection, analysis, and the library's competitive landscape.

4. Models and Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning the Study

Conceptually, the study is informed by two theoretical frameworks. The adapted competitive intelligence cycle, as outlined by Muller (2002), Botha and Boon (2008), and Bose (2008), guided the exploration of CI processes, including the collection, analysis, and application of intelligence. Porter's five forces model, as interpreted by Grundy (2006), offered a framework for examining the competitive dynamics influencing the academic library sector. These frameworks ensured that the data analysis remained aligned with the study's objectives and provided a comprehensive understanding of CI practices.

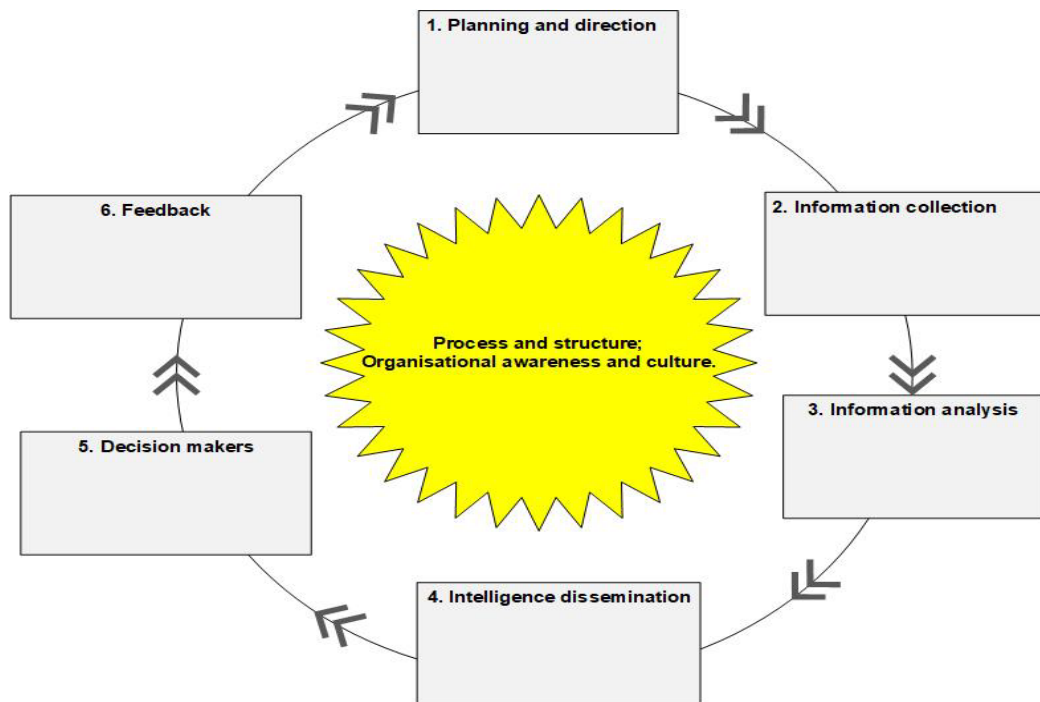


Figure 1: CI cycle adapted from Muller (2002), Boon & Botha, (2008), Bose, (2008)

4.1 Participant Roles and Professional Context

Although demographic data such as age, gender, and years of experience were not collected, as they were not expected to influence the outcomes of the study, participants were asked to describe their professional roles within the academic library. This provided essential contextual insights relevant to the study's objectives. The sample comprised 12 librarians occupying a variety of leadership and specialist roles. These included:

- Director of Library Services, responsible for strategic oversight and alignment with institutional goals
- Deputy Directors, who led key domains such as Collection Development, Teaching and Learning, and Digital Scholarship
- Faculty Librarians, who support academic departments by aligning library services with teaching and research

- Research Librarians, who provide specialised research support to students and faculty
- Information Librarians, who promote information literacy and ensure effective access to library resources

By capturing the responsibilities and functions of each role, the study ensured a well-rounded understanding of competitive intelligence practices within the operational structure of academic libraries.

4.2 Overview of Emergent Themes

The study was guided by 14 semi-structured interview questions, which yielded a rich and diverse set of responses. Through thematic analysis, a wide range of themes and sub-themes emerged, reflecting the complex landscape of CI practices within academic libraries. These included, among others, themes such as leadership roles, navigating competitive environments, maintaining relevance, technological integration, strategic decision-making, benchmarking, ethical considerations, and stakeholder communication.

Given the breadth of data and the exploratory nature of this research, only a selection of the most prominent and relevant themes has been included in this article. The following themes were identified as particularly significant to the study's objectives and are discussed in detail:

- Understanding and Awareness of Competitive Intelligence
- Identification of Competitors
- Extent of CI Use in Strategic Decision-Making
- Methods of CI Collection and Analysis

These themes were selected for their centrality to the research questions and their recurring emphasis across participant responses.

5. Findings From the Interviews

5.1 Understanding and Awareness of Competitive Intelligence

The study revealed a spectrum of understanding and awareness of CI among library managers. While some managers demonstrated a clear grasp of CI's potential, others expressed the need for further education on the subject. From the study, participants generally hold a positive view of CI but often engage in CI activities without explicitly recognising them as such. For instance, Fredricks, the Deputy Director for Teaching and Learning, emphasised the use of "disruptive innovation" over formal CI, indicating a preference for proactive adaptation of emerging trends. Similarly, Vusani, the Director of the Library, expressed a desire to learn more about CI, highlighting opportunities for targeted training to enhance CI understanding and application.

5.2 Identification of Competitors

Participants identified a range of competitors, primarily other academic libraries and higher education institutions within South Africa. Bonga and Dakalo pointed to other academic libraries as their main competitors, while Fredricks specified "top leading universities in the country" as benchmarks. Interestingly, some participants, such as Vusani and Siyabonga, reframed competition in terms of collaboration, viewing other institutions as "colleagues" rather than competitors. This dual perspective of competition and collaboration suggests a nuanced understanding of the competitive landscape within the academic library sector.

5.3 Extent of CI Use in Strategic Decision-Making

CI plays a crucial role in informing strategic decisions within the library. Fredricks highlighted its importance in aligning services with strategic goals and user needs, stating that CI aids in "decision-making, budgeting, and forecasting for new technologies and human resources." Vusani emphasised CI's role in identifying service gaps to create a "seamless experience" for users, while Dakalo noted its value in prioritising tasks amidst digital developments. These insights demonstrate the multifaceted value of CI in supporting innovation, relevance, and efficiency in library operations.

5.4 Methods of CI Collection and Analysis

The library employs a diverse range of methods for CI collection, blending formal and informal approaches. Networking and professional engagement are key strategies, with librarians actively participating in professional associations and conferences to stay informed about industry trends. User surveys, such as first-year experience surveys, are utilised to gather feedback and understand evolving user needs. Benchmarking and collaboration with other institutions are also prevalent, as evidenced by Vusani's and Dakalo's emphasis on international

benchmarking and collaborative projects. Engagement with suppliers further provides valuable insights into new products and solutions.

5.4.1 Frequency of information collection

Information collection occurs on a continuous basis, with specific methods varying in frequency. Dakalo described ongoing engagement in digital scholarship trends, while Fredricks noted plans for more frequent user surveys. Bonga emphasised an opportunistic approach, always seeking innovative practices. This flexible approach to information collection allows the library to balance continuous awareness with resource constraints.

5.4.2 Adherence to ethical principles

Participants consistently emphasised a commitment to ethical principles in CI activities. Ethical clearance is obtained for formal research, and confidentiality is respected in all interactions. Fredricks and Vusani highlighted the role of the university's Ethics Committee in ensuring compliance, while Dakalo and Bonga described transparent communication and permission-seeking processes. This strong ethical foundation ensures responsible information gathering and use.

5.4.3 Analysis

CI data is analysed using a variety of tools and methods. Vusani mentioned the use of software tools like NVivo and SPSS, complemented by manual analysis for contextual relevance. Dakalo described pragmatic use of Excel and OpenRefine, while Bonga focused on comparative analysis without specific software reliance. These diverse approaches reflect adaptability in extracting meaningful insights from CI data.

5.4.4 Challenges impacting CI practice

Several challenges impact the practice of CI within the library. While information sharing is generally positive, accessing sensitive competitor information remains difficult. Lesedi noted that "competitors always protect their sensitive information," posing a barrier to comprehensive CI. Dakalo highlighted the challenge of ensuring data relevance and comparability, emphasising the need for strategic selection of benchmarking partners. Despite these challenges, the library remains committed to ethical conduct and continuous improvement in CI practices.

6. Discussion of the Main FindINGS

6.1 Understanding and Awareness of Competitive Intelligence

Library managers' understanding of CI presents both opportunities and challenges for strategic development. While some recognise its potential for innovation and alignment, the lack of formal CI frameworks highlights the need for targeted training. This aligns with research emphasising CI skills for informed decision-making (Iwu-James *et al.*, 2019). Fredricks' preference for "disruptive innovation" over traditional CI suggests that proactive adaptation is key in today's evolving landscape. A structured CI approach could enhance this mindset by offering systematic insights into competition and user needs.

The study reveals that while participants engaged in CI-related activities like benchmarking and technology adoption, they rarely used the term "Competitive Intelligence." This suggests an implicit understanding, supporting Nenzhelele's (2012) view that awareness is essential for CI adoption. However, this contrasts with Moyane *et al.* (2020), who found higher explicit CI awareness among South African library directors—possibly due to differences in sample populations or question specificity.

Findings highlight a gap between intuitive CI practice and formal knowledge, presenting an opportunity for professional development. By integrating structured CI methodologies, libraries can strengthen strategic planning. Positive attitudes toward CI and engagement in related practices indicate a receptive environment for cultivating a CI culture. However, diverse interpretations of CI (Adenekan *et al.*, 2024; Nenzhelele, 2013) underscore the need for standardised terminology to enhance communication and strategic growth in the field.

6.2 Competitors and Collaborative Perspectives

Academic libraries face competitive pressures from other institutions, particularly well-funded universities. This aligns with Haliso and Aina (2012), who highlight intense competition between public and private university libraries. Study participants emphasised benchmarking against top universities to maintain competitiveness.

Beyond academic libraries, participants identified private information providers, including internet and telecom companies, e-resource platforms like EBSCOhost, and open-access search engines like Google, as key competitors. These alternatives challenge the perceived value of traditional libraries (Madukoma *et al.*, 2015; Moyane *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, publishers bypassing libraries to sell directly to students and researchers further intensify competition (Iwu-James *et al.*, 2020; Adegbite, 2020). To remain relevant, libraries must enhance service quality, resource attractiveness, and operational efficiency.

Interestingly, internal competition within institutions was not mentioned, though literature suggests it affects funding and resource allocation (Iwu-James *et al.*, 2020). Despite competitive pressures, some participants, like Vusani, noted a growing collaborative approach. Collaboration enables resource sharing and problem-solving, especially in resource-limited environments (Chawinga & Selemani, 2017). Arsanti *et al.* (2024) argue that collaboration enhances knowledge absorption, supporting this shift.

The study suggests a dual approach where competition and collaboration coexist, challenging traditional views. This balance allows libraries to adapt to the evolving information landscape while maintaining strategic relevance.

6.3 Strategic Application of Competitive Intelligence

Competitive Intelligence (CI) plays a crucial role in academic libraries, guiding budgeting, technology adoption, and service improvements to enhance user satisfaction. CI enables libraries to anticipate trends and align services with institutional goals (Maluleka & Chummun, 2023), fostering a user-centric model. Library directors leverage CI data to align decisions with institutional strategies, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ensuring services remain relevant in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. CI also supports evidence-based budgeting, helping libraries allocate resources effectively to support research and innovation. Studies highlight the risks of uninformed decision-making (Ambali *et al.*, 2012; Olayemi *et al.*, 2022), while Moyane *et al.* (2020) show South African libraries using CI for service innovation, though with varying formality. This study provides concrete examples of CI applications in resource allocation and strategic planning. It also reveals a rigorous evaluation process, incorporating performance management frameworks, user surveys, and usage statistics to assess and refine strategies based on empirical data. By integrating CI into decision-making, libraries can enhance efficiency, remain competitive, and better serve their communities.

6.4 Methods of CI Collection and Analysis

The library remains responsive to the evolving information landscape through diverse competitive intelligence (CI) collection and analysis methods, including networking, surveys, and benchmarking. This strategic mix of formal and informal approaches enhances adaptability. However, reliance on manual analysis and limited use of advanced analytical tools highlight areas for improvement. Integrating sophisticated data analytics could refine insights and align with data-driven decision-making trends (Botha & Boon, 2008).

Participants employ various CI collection methods, such as attending conferences (e.g., IFLA, LIASA), conducting user surveys, benchmarking, and collaborating with libraries and suppliers. These practices align with Yaya *et al.*'s (2014) CI collection techniques and Moyane *et al.*'s (2020) emphasis on digitisation and web-based services. Ethical considerations are integral, with participants stressing adherence to data privacy regulations (e.g., POPIA) and ethical clearance for formal research.

The library utilises tools like NVivo, SPSS, Excel, and OpenRefine alongside manual methods for CI analysis. While these tools support qualitative and quantitative insights, further investment in advanced analytics and staff training could enhance efficiency. Additionally, structured annual reviews and dedicated quality assurance personnel ensure proactive CI collection, contributing to strategic decision-making and continuous improvement.

6.5 Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Accessing sensitive competitor information and ensuring data relevance remain persistent challenges in competitive intelligence (CI) practices within academic libraries. These obstacles align with broader CI literature, which highlights the difficulty of obtaining high-quality, comprehensive data for strategic decision-making (Heppes & Du Toit, 2009). Despite these challenges, the library demonstrates a strong ethical commitment to information gathering, ensuring responsible CI practices that maintain trust with stakeholders and align with best practices in library management (Kandeh *et al.*, 2018).

The study presents a nuanced view of CI challenges. Some participants reported minimal difficulty in gathering competitor intelligence, suggesting positive inter-institutional collaboration and a willingness to share information among academic libraries. However, others identified significant challenges, particularly in accessing sensitive competitor data, highlighting the tension between obtaining strategic insights and respecting confidentiality. Additionally, participants noted the difficulty of engaging with the right institutions for benchmarking, as transparency levels and information-sharing policies vary across organisations.

Internal coordination with faculty and aligning CI efforts with institutional priorities emerged as another challenge. While existing literature primarily focuses on external CI barriers, such as budget constraints, lack of skilled personnel, and poor ICT infrastructure (Haliso & Aina, 2012; Madukoma *et al.*, 2015; Unobe, 2019; Adegbite, 2020; Moyane *et al.*, 2020; Adetayo *et al.*, 2021), this study highlights internal organisational challenges that can impact CI effectiveness. Interestingly, while the literature often cites a reluctance to share strategic information, participants in this study generally reported positive experiences with inter-library collaboration, suggesting a potential shift towards greater cooperation within the academic sector.

The findings suggest that while some traditional CI challenges persist, the evolving information landscape presents opportunities for improved practices. Addressing both external and internal barriers, through targeted training, enhanced internal coordination, and investment in analytical tools, can further strengthen CI effectiveness, ensuring that academic libraries remain competitive and responsive to emerging trends.

6.6 Implications for Practice

The findings of this study have significant implications for academic library practices and future research in competitive intelligence (CI).

6.7 Practical Implications

The study highlights the need to formalize CI practices in academic libraries, bridging the gap between intuitive CI use and structured frameworks. Establishing formal CI methodologies will enhance strategic planning and decision-making while fostering a culture of intelligence aligned with institutional goals. To achieve this, targeted training and professional development are essential, equipping librarians with CI skills and proficiency in advanced analytical tools.

The study also emphasizes the dual role of competition and collaboration in the library sector. Libraries can enhance resource sharing and problem-solving by fostering partnerships with other institutions and information providers. Such collaborative strategies are particularly valuable in resource-limited environments. Ethical considerations remain a key component of CI practice. Libraries must ensure responsible information gathering, maintain transparency, and obtain ethical clearance when necessary. Strengthening ethical guidelines will uphold stakeholder trust and compliance with data privacy standards. To reduce reliance on manual analysis, libraries should invest in advanced analytical tools and train staff in data-driven decision-making. This will improve the depth and accuracy of CI insights.

6.8 Research Implications and Future Research

Future studies should explore factors influencing CI awareness and adoption across diverse institutions. Research could also examine the impact of collaborative CI practices on library performance and user satisfaction. Additionally, evaluating CI training programs can identify best practices for integrating intelligence methodologies effectively. Further investigation into ethical challenges, particularly concerning data privacy, would help develop comprehensive CI guidelines.

With increasing reliance on technology, future research should assess the role of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and big data analytics in CI. Understanding these technologies' impact will provide insights into emerging trends and opportunities. By addressing these implications, academic libraries can strengthen their strategic capabilities, enhance service quality, and navigate an evolving information landscape more effectively.

7. Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the study's findings, several recommendations can enhance CI practices in academic libraries.

7.1 Formalizing CI Practices

Libraries should develop structured CI frameworks, integrating them systematically into strategic planning. Establishing clear protocols and guidelines ensures alignment with institutional goals. To support this, targeted training and professional development programs should be implemented, building both theoretical knowledge

and practical skills. Training should focus on advanced analytical tools and techniques, equipping staff to apply CI effectively and foster a culture of innovation.

7.2 Collaboration and Ethical Considerations

Libraries should actively pursue partnerships with other institutions and information providers to facilitate resource sharing and collective problem-solving. Enhanced inter-library cooperation can strengthen competitive positioning and improve service delivery. Ethical considerations must remain central, ensuring CI practices respect data privacy and confidentiality. Establishing clear ethical guidelines and securing necessary clearances will help maintain trust with stakeholders and uphold integrity.

7.3 Investment in Analytical Tools

Reducing reliance on manual analysis is crucial. Libraries should invest in advanced analytical tools and provide staff training to enhance data analysis capabilities, leading to more informed strategic decisions.

7.4 Conclusion and Future Research

In conclusion, this study highlights the critical role of CI in enhancing the strategic capabilities of academic libraries. The findings reveal a nuanced understanding of CI among library managers, characterised by both intuitive application and a need for formalised frameworks. By formalising CI practices and investing in targeted training, libraries can effectively integrate CI into their strategic planning processes, driving innovation and improving decision-making. The study also underscores the importance of collaboration in navigating the competitive landscape. By fostering partnerships and sharing resources, libraries can enhance their service offerings and better meet the needs of their communities. Ethical considerations remain paramount, with libraries needing to ensure responsible information gathering that respects confidentiality and maintains stakeholder trust. Future research should continue to explore the factors influencing CI awareness and adoption, as well as the impact of collaborative CI practices on library performance. As libraries increasingly embrace technology-driven approaches, further investigation into the role of emerging technologies in CI practices will provide valuable insights into future trends and opportunities. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on CI in academic libraries, offering practical recommendations and highlighting areas for future exploration. By addressing the challenges and opportunities identified, libraries can enhance their strategic capabilities and better navigate the evolving information landscape.

Ethical Considerations: Ethical considerations were prioritised throughout the research process. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Pretoria Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment, and IT Faculty Committee for Research Ethics and Integrity, as well as the participating institution.

AI Declaration: This is to declare that this work is based on Master's study conducted by Dzhavhelo Tshidaho (The University of Pretoria), the article was not generated using AI tools.

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