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WHAT DOES A LIBRARIAN LOOK LIKE? UNDERSTANDING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF LIBRARIANS (Work in progress)

Abstract
Enduring stereotypes and contemporary discourse surrounding librarianship as a profession may influence students' decisions to use the library and to consider librarianship as a viable career path. This pilot study explores undergraduate students' perceptions of librarians using a drawing activity. Participants were asked to draw a librarian and to provide a description of their drawing using the draw-and-tell or draw-and-write technique. They were also asked to complete a brief survey with questions focused on participant demographics and library use. Study findings may inform recruitment, marketing, and outreach efforts.

Introduction

Historically, representations of librarians in popular culture have relied heavily on stereotypes (e.g., librarian as old maid, shushing librarian, sexy librarian) that may not reflect the current composition, job responsibilities, or values of librarianship (see, for example, Attebury, 2010; Peresie & Alexander, 2005; Radford & Radford, 1997; Seale, 2008; Singh et al., 2020). Contemporary narratives surrounding book bans that position librarians as 'groomers' and 'pornographers' (e.g., Ennis, 2022; Gonzalez, 2023) may also influence perceptions of librarians and what their job responsibilities entail. On a community level, such perceptions have influenced decisions to reduce funding for public libraries (Ennis, 2022) and to propose legislation limiting the materials libraries can offer their patrons, in some cases penalizing librarians for their adherence to intellectual freedom (American Library Association, 2024). On an individual level, inaccurate perceptions of librarianship may influence the decision to use libraries or to consider it as a viable career path.

This study is modeled after the draw-a-scientist studies that began in the 1960s, originally focused on exploring children's gender science stereotypes (Miller et al., 2018). Researchers theorized that enduring gender stereotypes about scientists "might have restricted children's science-related educational and career aspirations, to the extent that children did not identify with such depictions" (Miller et al., 2018, p. 1943). Researchers have employed similar methods in investigating students' perceptions of teachers (e.g., Minogue, 2010; Sinclair et al., 2013), engineers (e.g., Kuvac & Koc, 2023; Thompson & Lyons, 2008), computer scientists (e.g., Pantic et al., 2018), and health professionals (e.g., Stephens et al., 2016). These studies have shed light on how students perceive these professions, including stereotypes related to job responsibilities, work environment, and personal characteristics.

Studies using the draw-and-write technique to explore perceptions of librarians have been conducted with graduate students enrolled in library science programs and with family and friends of students enrolled in such programs (Hartel & Hicks, 2020). We are not aware of any

study to date using either the draw-and-write or draw-and-tell technique to explore undergraduate students' perceptions of librarians.

Study Objectives

The objectives of this pilot study are to explore undergraduate students' perceptions of librarians, as well as to pilot the use of draw-and-tell and draw-and-write protocols and the use of various drawing utensils (pens, pencils, colored pencils, etc.) for the drawing activity, as advised by Hartel and Hicks (2020).

Methods

Participants

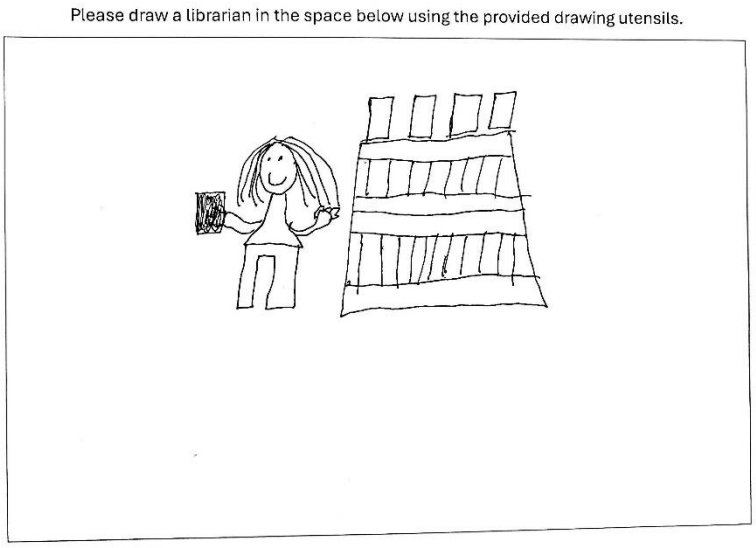
Participants were recruited from an undergraduate research subjects pool at the University of Kentucky during the Fall 2024 semester. Students enrolled in select courses in the College of Communication & Information are required to participate in research studies for course credit. Not all participating courses are restricted by major, meaning students from undergraduate programs across campus participate in the research subjects pool. To be eligible to participate in this study, students had to be 18 years of age or older; artistic skills and/or comfort/experience with drawing were not eligibility criteria.

A description of this study was made available on the research subjects pool website, along with the time allotted to complete the study and research credit amount. Students signed up to participate via this website. Participants included 100 undergraduate students ranging in age from 18 to 37 years ($M = 19.39$, $SD = 2.24$). All academic years were represented (47 freshmen, 19 sophomores, 21 juniors, and 13 seniors). Sixty-eight participants were female, thirty were male, and two were non-binary/gender fluid. Seventy-four participants were white, nine were Hispanic/Latinx, seven were African American/Black, one was American Indian/Native American, and nine reported being of multiple races/ethnicities.

Data Collection

During the data collection sessions, participants were provided with informed consent forms and given time to review the form and ask the researcher any questions they had about the study prior to participating. Students were randomly assigned to one of two protocols: the draw-and-tell protocol ($n = 20$) or the draw-and-write protocol ($n = 80$).

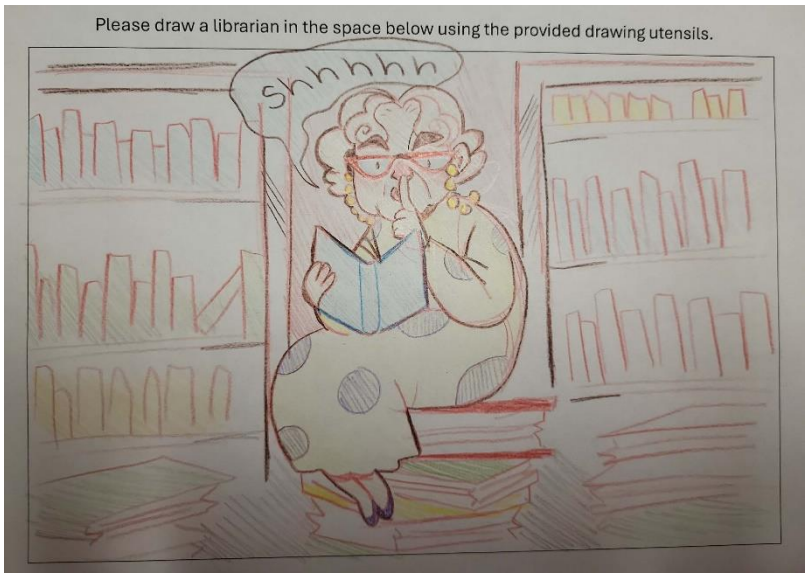
Students assigned to the draw-and-tell protocol were given a piece of paper with the following prompt: "Please draw a librarian in the space below using the provided drawing utensils." Students were randomly assigned to use either a black Sharpie gel pen ($n = 5$), Crayola crayons ($n = 5$), Crayola markers ($n = 5$), or Crayola colored pencils ($n = 5$) to complete their drawing. Students who were provided with Crayola products were given a package of traditional assorted colors and a package of "Colors of the World" skin tone colors. Once their drawings were complete, the students were asked to briefly describe their drawings verbally to the researcher, who asked follow-up questions about the content of the drawings. The verbal descriptions were audio recorded. Students completed the draw-and-tell protocol one-on-one with the researcher. See Figure 1 for an example of a drawing and partial description generated following the draw-and-tell protocol.



Honestly, the first thing when it comes to librarians, my mom. My mom's a librarian. So, I mean all my life I've been working on the library with her. So like, I mean, it's like the displayed books and the shelves and stuff. So, this is like first thing that came to my mind.

Figure 1. Drawing and partial description from participant in draw-and-tell protocol.

Students who were assigned to the draw-and-write technique were provided with a piece of paper with the prompt: “On the reverse side of the paper, please draw a librarian. Then, in the space below, provide a caption that helps us understand your drawing.” The reverse side of the paper included the same prompt as used in the draw-and-tell technique. Students were again randomly assigned to use a gel pen (n = 20), crayons (n = 20), markers (n = 20), or colored pencils (n = 20) to complete their drawings. Up to 20 students at a time completed the draw-and-write protocol in a single session. See Figure 2 for an example of a drawing and caption generated following the draw-and-write protocol.



In my drawing, I depicted an old female librarian sitting atop giant books (for comedic effect). I depicted my librarian as a combination of the 2 tropes I usually see: a sweet old lady and a woman with big glasses nagging about being too loud. ;P

Figure 2. Drawing and caption from participant in draw-and-write protocol.

After their drawings and descriptions (either written or verbal) were complete, all students were asked to complete a brief survey consisting of questions related to demographic information and frequency of current library use. Data collection took place in classrooms and conference rooms on campus, and all study procedures took participants no more than 30 minutes to complete. All drawings and captions were digitized, and captions, audio recordings, and survey responses were transcribed.

Data Analysis

Caption and interview transcripts and scans of all drawings will be uploaded to Dedoose,[1] a collaborative data analysis application suitable for analyzing image- and text-based data. Dedoose allows coders to highlight sections of images or text and apply user-generated codes to those sections.

Data will be analyzed using content analysis (Rose, 2016). Drawings will be coded for the presence of the following: human characteristics (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity), other stereotype indicators (e.g., eyeglasses, shushing action, books, cardigans), activity (e.g., sitting behind a desk, shelving books), other people (e.g., children, students) and technology (e.g., computers). These preliminary categories were established a priori based on prior relevant studies (e.g., Bozzato et al, 2021; Hartel & Hicks, 2020). Additional categories and specific codes within these categories will be developed inductively. In alignment with prior studies, participants' descriptions of their drawings will inform the coding of the drawings (for example,

[1] https://www.dedoose.com/

the use of gendered pronouns in participants' descriptions will inform how gender is coded). Descriptive statistics and multivariate analyses will be conducted in order to determine differences based on student demographics.

Discussion

The findings of this pilot study will provide critical insights into the evolving stereotypes and potential stigmatizations of librarians as viewed by the next generation of users. This exploration aids in understanding how perceptions of librarians are shaped, underpinning the need for adaptive educational strategies and inclusive communication practices that resonate with diverse audiences. These findings will guide further exploration into aligning professional values in library and information science with the evolving expectations of future generations, ensuring that our practices shape and reflect contemporary societal values.

Additionally, insight about undergraduate students' perceptions of librarians will similarly provide a foundation for future research exploring such perceptions among younger populations, as well as the impact of such perceptions on library use and career aspirations.

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