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CANADIAN LIBRARIES USE BY IMMIGRANTS FROM UKRAINE

Abstract

This presentation addresses the use of libraries by Ukrainian immigrants in Canada based on a mixed methods study conducted primarily in Saskatchewan and Alberta, Canada. The objectives are to investigate the frequency and purpose of library use by the participants, and their preference for library type and services. The findings are important for improving library services to immigrants and refugees.

Introduction and Research Questions

This presentation is part of a large-scale research study “Sociocultural and linguistic practices and needs of immigrant communities: the pandemic impact and post-pandemic recovery” funded by New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF, Government of Canada), and reports the findings regarding library use by participants. We employ an Intersectionality perspective on library service which focuses on equity and social justice in contemporary library services (Mehra & Irvin, 2024, p. 476). In particular, we consider the library needs of an immigrant minority: Ukrainians residing in Canada.

Many Ukrainian immigrants around the world are highly educated (Kubiciel-Lodzińska & Duda-Mikulín, 2024), and new library resources have been designated for Ukrainian immigrants and war refugees in many countries (Jonston et al., 2024) including Canada (Lechat et al., 2023). However, no study so far has directly investigated the Ukrainian immigrants’ use of libraries as cultural institutions in Canada. The research questions asked are: How often do Ukrainian immigrants attend libraries in Canada? What are the purposes of library use by the group? What kind of libraries do the participants use? Did the participants employ libraries to search for COVID-19 information during the pandemic? The goal of the research is the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data produced by the study participants and preliminary recommendations to libraries to enhance their services to immigrant and refugee groups.

Methods and participants

This research project is a mixed-methods study conducted primarily in Saskatchewan and Alberta, Canada, the provinces with sizable populations of Ukrainian immigrants, based on responses to surveys (92 participants) and interviews (20 participants). All participants were first-generation immigrants from Ukraine. Among other questions, the study contained three questions focusing on library use, and one question about information searching in general, which are discussed below.

Results

Frequency of Library Use

The frequency of library use by the participants is summarized in Table 1 below. As Table 1 demonstrates, the largest group of participants (over one-third) does not use libraries at all. A quarter of participants employ library services once a few months, and 17.4% of participants do so once a few years. Frequent use of libraries (once a month or more frequently) is reported by 9% of the respondents. Overall, libraries are not used very often.

Table 1. Frequency of Library Use by Immigrants from Ukraine

Frequency of Library Use	N of responses	% of responses
once a week or more	6	6.5
once a month or more	2	2.2
once a few months	23	25
once or twice a year	12	13
once a few years	16	17.4
not at all	33	35.9
Total participants	92	100

The participants provided a total of 16 clarifications of the reasons they do not employ library services, as represented in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Reasons for **not** using libraries

Reasons not to use libraries	N of responses
online reading suffices	5
don't need to	4
no time	4
have books at home	1
look after a small child at home	1
live too far from a library	1
Total responses	16

Five participants explained that they read books, news, and other materials online. Four participants indicated that they have no need to attend libraries without specifying details. Four more participants stated that they had no time to go to libraries with two of them specifying that this lack of time is a consequence of their employment. One participant explained that she had to look after a small child at home, and another participant lived too far from a library.

Since there were more participants who did not use library at all, there were half as many reasons identified by the participants (eight in total) to attend the libraries, rather than not to, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Reasons for using libraries

Reasons to use libraries	N of responses
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borrow books to read	2
new literature	1
look for books, audiobooks, films, and serials	1
accessing public information and printers	1
lots of interesting and entertaining stuff for kids	1
the kid reads books	1
for studying	1
Total responses	8

Participants went to libraries to borrow books to read for pleasure or for study, to get acquainted with the new literature, browse for books, audiobooks, films, and serials. One of the participants accessed public information and printers. Two participants attended libraries to borrow books for children or access other services for children.

One participant whose response was not included in the table above, illustrated the changes that occurred over time in her library use explaining the reasons for discontinuing library visits: “Now all the information is available through the Internet. I have a printer at home. Earlier, I was taking my son to a club at the library. (Зараз уся інформація доступна через інтернет. Принтер є вдома. Раніше возила сина в гурток при бібліотеці)”. Presumably, with COVID restrictions and the respondent’s son growing up, she no longer needed to go to the library.

The responses considered above were added by participants as explanations of why they went to libraries in Canada, or not. The next section will address the purpose of library visits in general.

Purpose of libraries use

The participants were asked the question “What are usually the main purposes of your in-person visits to libraries in Canada?” They could select the response from a few options with multiple selections being allowed. The options were as follows: “Borrowing books for work, studies, or upskilling”, “Bringing my children”, “Attending adult programs (e.g., hobby groups, conversation groups, tax preparation sessions)”, “Seeking information or help from a member of library staff”, “N/A do not use libraries”, and “Other”. The participants’ selection of these options is reflected in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Major purposes of libraries use

Purpose of Library Use	N of responses	% of responses
borrowing books for pleasure	36	25.3
borrowing books for work/study/upskilling	16	11.3
bringing children	30	21.2
adult programs	6	4.2
access to computers or printers	15	10.6
information or help from staff	3	2.1
N/A (do not use libraries)	32	22.5
other	4	2.8
Total responses	142	100

As Table 4 demonstrates, one-quarter of participants (25.3%) attended libraries to borrow books for recreation or pleasure. About one-fifth of participants (21.2%) brought their children to the libraries. A smaller proportion of the immigrants (11.3%) borrowed books for work. Ten percent of them were interested in gaining access to computers or printers. Only a few participants (four percent) attended adult programs offered by libraries. Among the participants who named ‘other’ reason, two worked in the library, and one indicated that they use a library for plug access and for studying. It should be noted that 22.5% of responses came from participants who never used libraries.

Library use by library type

The participants were also asked the question about the type of libraries that they used. The options provided and response frequencies are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Library use by library type

Library Type	N of responses	% of responses
Local public library	55	46.6
School library	9	7.6
University or college library	19	16.1
Hospital library	0	0
N/A	32	27.1
Other	3	2.5
Total responses	118	100

Close to half of the participants used local public libraries, with 16.1% being patrons of university or college libraries. Nine more participants reported the use of school (K12) libraries, and three more participants visited ‘other’ libraries. Of those, one participant indicated that they worked in an academic library, another one noted library attendance ‘only with children’, and one more did not specify the kind of library. No participants had experience with hospital libraries, and 27.1% did not use any libraries at all.

Libraries use by participants during COVID-19 pandemic

The survey included one general question, “Where (in what sources or media) did you look for COVID-19 information?” The participants could select any answers from the list that applied in their case. The options provided and the response frequencies are shown in Table 6 below.

Table 6. COVID information sources

Sources of information about COVID	N of responses	% of responses
Internet in Canada	57	61.9
my friends	46	50
social media	40	42.4
Canadian local government online sources	33	35.8
media in my home country	31	33.6
Internet in my home country	31	33.6

Canadian TV	27	29.3
Canadian online newspapers	18	19.5
Canadian local municipality sources	8	8.6
other Canadian mass media	4	4.3
other sources	3	3.2
university or college library	1	1
other library	1	1
None (not concerned about COVID)	1	1
Local public library	0	27.1
Total participants	92	100

As Table 6 demonstrates, the major sources of COVID information search for the participants were the Internet in Canada, friends, and social media. Online sources by provincial governments (such as Ministries of Health websites), home country media, Internet in the home country, and Canadian TV were the second preferred choice of information. 'Other sources' identified by participants included 'Facebook', 'Reddit', and 'consultations with a family doctor'. Libraries were at the bottom of the resources selection, with only one participant reporting searching for COVID information in a university or college library and one more in the 'other library' (unspecified). No participants resorted to local public libraries to search for COVID-related information.

Discussion

Earlier research has identified the need for libraries to contribute to assisting immigrant families with both children’s (Echols, 2024) and adult literacy (Mehra and Irvin, 2024). The scope of services offered by libraries to immigrants internationally is wide, and it may include English conversation practice, immigration resources, assistance with legal issues, collections in languages other than English, etc. (Kozłowska & Creed-Dikeogu, 2024). However, most accounts of library services for immigrants deal with ESL or other dominant language literacy or conversation skills (e.g., Weintraub, 2023). Our results highlight the importance of library collections in immigrant languages, home language maintenance, and the need to diversify available activities to attract immigrants to libraries.

Conclusion

The preliminary findings from the study (based on survey responses, interviews analysis pending) indicate a fairly low use of libraries by Ukrainian immigrants in Canada, and their negligible use as source of information about COVID. This indicates a need for libraries to improve the availability and promotion of library resources for immigrants and refugees.

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