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PATTERNS OF CHAT USERS: ANALYZING REPEAT USERS OF A CONSORTIUM-LEVEL VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICE

Abstract

Virtual reference chat service is an essential part of reference service in academic libraries, providing busy students, staff, and faculty with a chance to access remote help in their time of need. Our research team consists of librarians and virtual reference service coordinators from several Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL) chat consortium partners, and we wanted to leverage the data that we already collect through our chat platform to better understand the behaviour and information needs of patrons who utilized the service multiple times throughout the academic year 2022-2023. We undertook a literature review to identify what was already known about repeat chat users and found that this is an understudied area of virtual reference services. This poster presents early insights from a transcript analysis of repeat users' interactions during the above timeframe from 16 different Ontario academic institutions.

Our study reviewed a total of 1,419 transcripts (1,180 web chat, 239 SMS) of patrons who used our consortial chat service three or more times during the 2022-23 academic year, for a total of 360 unique users. Our two primary research questions were: 1) what types of reference transactions do repeat users engage in? and 2) do repeat users of virtual reference display indicators of library anxiety in their chat communications?

Our methodology involved a mixed-methods analysis where we coded transcripts according to a variety of categories, including transaction type (i.e. citation questions, research assistance, technical support, or non-library question), whether or not the chat operator provided instruction, and user behaviour themes such as indicators of library anxiety, frustration, evolution of query complexity over time, and more. Transcripts were anonymized by removing all personally identifying information, in accordance with the Scholars Portal Data Privacy Policy and our institutional ethics board approvals.

Our preliminary findings show patterns in how repeat users leverage virtual reference services that will have an important impact on virtual reference service design, instructional delivery, operator training, and perhaps even marketing and promotion.

The poster will present:

- Quantitative data visualization of transaction type distribution
- Qualitative theme analysis of usage patterns
- Summary of user behaviour, and
- Recommendations for service enhancement

This research helps our understanding of virtual reference services by examining the unique characteristics and needs of repeat users, helping libraries to better adapt their services to support sustained engagement and build stronger relationships with users.

This study aligns with the "Information seeking and behaviour" theme of Canadian Association for Information Science, offering insights into how users repeatedly engage with virtual reference services and how their information-seeking behavior evolves over multiple interactions.