

Marginalized graduate students navigating the academy during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A phenomenological approach

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Title: Marginalized graduate students navigating the academy during the Covid-19 Pandemic: A phenomenological approach

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Abstract:

The aim of this study was to understand marginalized graduate students' use of academic libraries for research activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a phenomenological approach, this study investigated the challenges, barriers, and coping strategies of marginalized graduate students from three Canadian universities. Focus groups were conducted to stimulate discussions and gather rich data from participants. Based on findings, this study offers several recommendations for inclusive spaces, accessibility across institutions, bridging divides, and more to address service gaps and improve library access for all users.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges to the education sector and highlighted the barriers users experienced while accessing educational and research resources. Although all library users and researchers face challenges, marginalized students, with their already taxing lived experiences, face additional barriers exacerbated by the pandemic. Thiem & Dasgupta (2022) identified a series of connected barriers marginalized students experience when entering and persisting through higher education, which include insufficient social capital (which may cause students to struggle to understand campus norms and expectations), low utilization of campus resources, balancing paid work and classes, negative academic stereotypes and low faculty expectations, cultural mismatch, lack of representation on campus, and lack of access to high-value relationships with faculty and senior peers.

The aim of this study was to understand how marginalized graduate students used the library for research activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges, and barriers they experienced, and the coping strategies they developed to overcome these challenges and continue their research. The three participating university libraries, the University of Saskatchewan, the Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson), and the University of Victoria are all based in Canada and are members of the [Canadian Association of Research Libraries](#) (CARL). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these three university libraries adapted their services to support researchers working remotely and meet public health requirements, including offering print pick up and mail out, scanning resources, space booking, and offering more online support. A more

detailed description of library services created during the pandemic can be found in Appendix A.

The researchers' interests span many areas that dovetail with research on marginalized populations, including experience with qualitative research, as well as research on equity, diversity and inclusion topics in academic libraries. Researchers and the research assistant (RA) also have various intersecting identities. Their common interest in these research topics, care for marginalized communities, and the opportunity to conduct research related to the pandemic, resulted in this collaboration.

The definition of marginalized populations presented by the [National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health](#) (2022) was used for this study. As per this definition, marginalized students included:

- International students
- Indigenous students
- LGBTQIA+ students
- Students with disabilities
- Racialized/ethnic minority students
- First-generation students, and,
- Non-traditional students could be mature students, attend school part-time, have dependents, or struggle with financial issues.

Literature Review

The literature has demonstrated how the pandemic challenged academic library users by creating barriers to physical resources, physical spaces, technology, and expertise (Ashiq et al., 2022; Mohan Tej, M et al., 2021), and how academic libraries responded to these pandemic-related challenges with new services and support (Ayeni et al., 2021; Eva, 2021; Howes et al., 2021; Vogus, 2021).

When implementing these new services, academic institutions and libraries run the risk of excluding the perspectives of their users who exist in the margins, particularly since academic libraries typically reflect the ideologies of the dominant culture (Bales & Engle, 2012). In particular, marginalized students experienced these barriers in ways that were unique to the experiences of mainstream library users. For example, researchers (Herrera, 2016; Whitmire, 2003) have documented how students of colour experience academic libraries differently, often using library resources more than white undergraduates. Stone and Collins (2013) identified a similar trend at a UK university; noting that both Black and Asian students show more library visits and PC usage than white students and that a higher proportion of their e-resource use occurs on-campus.

A reliance on the library as an equalizer in terms of access to resources, positions the academic library as an important space for marginalized students. Thus, their experiences are particularly relevant to understanding the effect of the pandemic on academic library users.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was used to understand and capture the lived experiences of marginalized students' access and use of their libraries. As is the goal of any phenomenological study, this study aimed to elicit the essential characteristics of the COVID-19 phenomenon and its effects on students accessing library resources, spaces, and services to conduct research during a pandemic (Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Webb & Kevern, 2001).

Focus groups were used to access data through participant interactions which are a valid tool, as participants' data can be confirmed, reinforced, or contradicted within the group discussions. Focus groups "support the notion of collaboration and dialogue as being part of the phenomenological endeavour" (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009, p. 667). According to Bradbury-Jones et al., in a phenomenological inquiry focus groups will stimulate more discussions, provide new perspectives, and encourage exchanges among members to provide rich data.

Phenomenology-influenced questions are "generally broad and open-ended so that the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her viewpoint" (Giorgi, 1997, p. 245). Therefore, an open-ended semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix B) was used to get participants to start conversations. Questions were designed using a two-tiered model to obtain descriptions and elicit meaning from our participants and probe for context and descriptions with possibly a personal experience example. A group moderator guide (Appendix C) was designed to help the RA and the facilitator from Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research (CHASR) conduct focus groups.

Method

A [data management plan](#) (DMP) was created and ethics approvals were sought and cleared from all three institutions.

Two methods were used to gather data and identify participants for the study. First, participants were identified with a screening survey (Appendix D) that helped to ascertain a range of eligible marginalized students who were willing to participate in focus groups. Demographic information included the student's institution, as knowing the institution allowed focus groups to be conducted separately, as per ethics requirements, and helped understand the nuances between the three institutions. The

survey was designed and created using SurveyMonkey through the University of Saskatchewan, and the survey link that included the consent form (Appendix E) was sent to graduate student groups, liaison librarians and other relevant institutional units at all three institutions, along with an email request to participate. A link to the screening form was sent with two reminders at equal intervals. The screening survey collected 123 responses in total from all three institutions. Researchers chose a range of eligible students from the screening survey for sampling purposes for the second step. These students met a variety of selection criteria: marginalized identities, facing hardships, different types of graduate programs, their place within the length of the program, etc.

The second method of data collection involved focus groups that were arranged and conducted by a CHASR expert and the research assistant (RA), a graduate student from a marginalized group. The intent of having an RA was to have an insider approach and distance researchers from participants, so participants could share their perspectives openly, provide deep and rich data, and feel comfortable criticizing the library. In fact, their open criticism might help improve library policies and practices for marginalized users. Details of sample students from the survey were forwarded to the CHASR expert, who contacted the students and invited them to participate in focus groups.

A total of six focus groups were conducted and completed between February and March 2022. There were two focus groups for each institution for a total of 20 students: seven students from TMU, seven students from U of S and six students from UVic. Two students' names were drawn from the survey and offered a \$50 gift certificate for their participation.

Data Gathering, Coding, and Analysis

The focus group discussions occurred on web conferencing software, and recordings were transcribed by CHASR. Data were anonymized by CHASR, and the transcript files were emailed to participants, including the Transcript Release Forms, to elicit any edits, deletions, or additions from participants. This process of member-checking aided in capturing their experiences accurately. After confirmations from participants the RA, uploaded de-identified transcripts to OneDrive for further analysis and coding.

Transcripts were anonymized by the researchers to upload to an open repository, in accordance with the DMP.

Taguette, a free and open-source qualitative data analysis tool was used for coding and data analysis. The constant comparative method was used to develop a codebook collaboratively and to capture recurring and standalone themes.

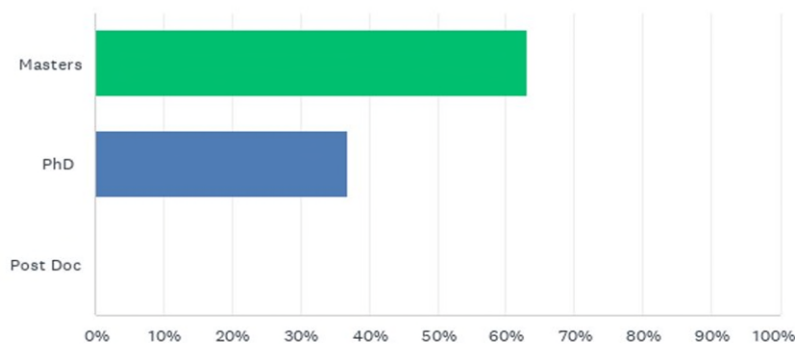
Two members of the research team developed the codebook (Researchers 3 & 4), with one conducting an initial assessment (3) and the other conducting a preliminary review and additional coding work (4). The two other members of the research team (Researchers 1 & 2) then conducted an additional review and further coding development. This approach allowed for reliability testing of the codebook, and the deep familiarity of all researchers with the data allowed for productive conversations about its analysis.

Screening Survey Results

The screening survey had 123 responses. There were 51 participants from the University of Saskatchewan; 34 from Toronto Metropolitan University; and 38 from the University of Victoria. A majority of the participants were in a Masters' program (Figure 1), and most participants had been at their institutions for over six years and in their current programs for over three years.

Figure 1:

Participants' Level of Program



Over 50 percent (n=64) of participants identified as racialized or ethnic minority students. As indicated in Figure 2, over 30 percent of participants self-identified as international students; 10 percent as Indigenous; over 22 percent as sexual minorities; and close to 24 percent self-identified as students with disabilities. In addition, almost 29 percent were first-generation students. Close to 38 percent of students identified as non-traditional students.

Figure 2:

Participants' Representation and Their Response Rates

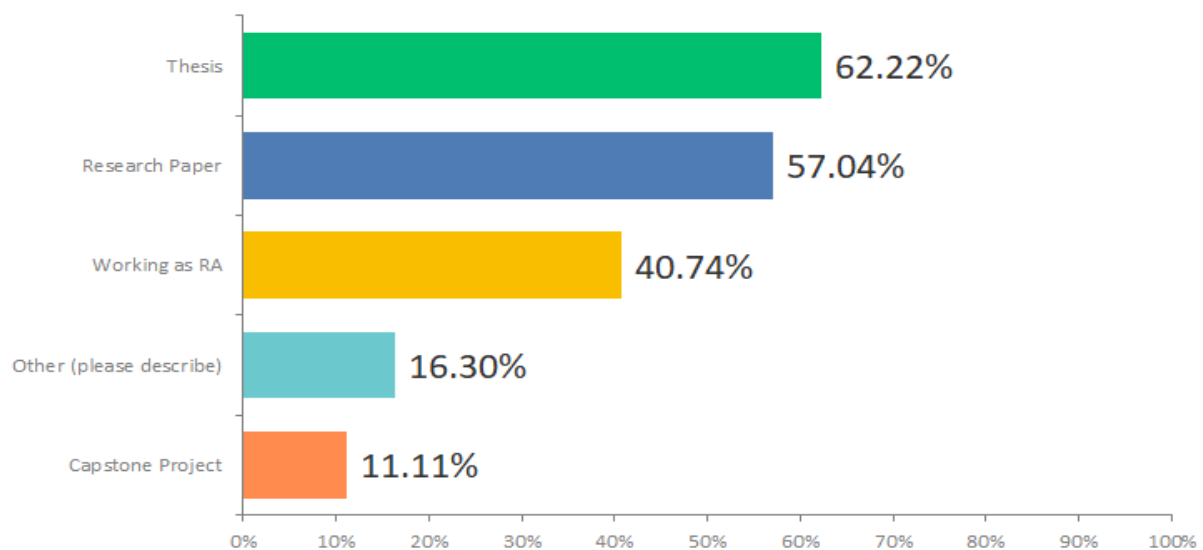
ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
International student	38.53% 42
Indigenous student	10.09% 11
LGBTQIA+ student	22.94% 25
Student with a disability	23.85% 26
First-generation student (first to go to university)	28.44% 31
Non-traditional student (eg: mature student, attend university part-time, have dependents).	37.61% 41
Total Respondents: 109	

Around 119 participants shared their hardships as the following: personal finances (71.43%; N=85); self-health (55.46%; N=66); family member's health (33.61%; N=40); family responsibilities (37.82%; N=45); childcare (12.61%; N=15); difficult living situations (32.77%; N=39); and other COVID-19 related issues (42.02%; N=50).

Participants were working on various kinds of projects such as theses, research papers, capstone projects, working as research assistants for faculty or someone else, or other activities (Figure 3) at the time of the study.

Figure 3:

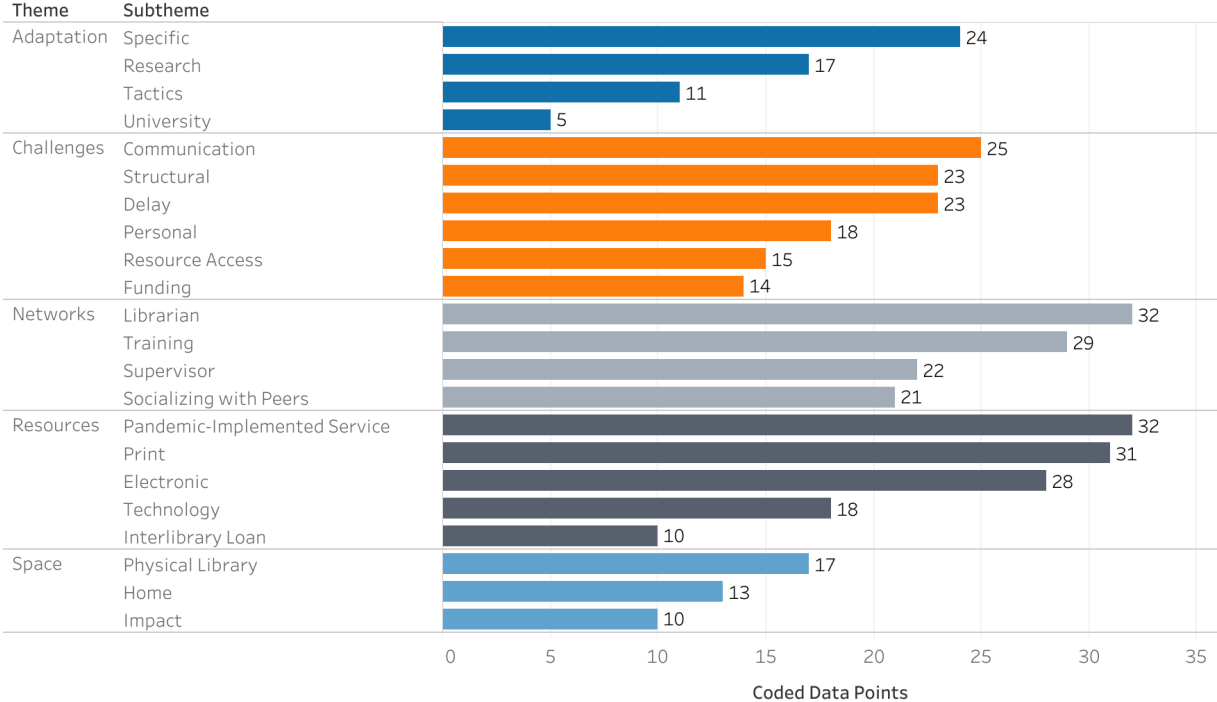
Participants' Projects



Focus Group Results

Five themes emerged through the two data analysis phases. The broad themes were: adaptation, challenges, networks, resources, and space. The data visualization provided in Figure 4 demonstrates the various themes and subthemes, as well as the corresponding number of data points coded during analysis.

Figure 4:
From the Margins: Coded Results



Adaptation

Participants faced different types of distractions, including different living conditions with family members and roommates, pets, background noise, and other issues. These distractions required adaptations that were specific to participant needs. For example, one participant described their challenge in switching between English and the language spoken at home as one of several distractions which eventually resulted in them moving out. In another instance, a neurodivergent respondent described how they have flourished in a virtual space but their extroverted friends “are pulling their hair out.” Participants emphasized the need for openness, creativity and flexibility in adaptations, and acknowledged that adaptations are easier for some than others.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic students experienced significant changes to their academic work due to emergency remote learning. The student participants described their adaptations as having both positive and negative impacts on their research. For example, two participants (10%) could not access their research population groups (e.g., long-term care residents) and needed to adjust data collection practices or choose another population. Others needed to change their research process as they now solely relied on electronic resources. One of the participants mentioned having to prepare for a comprehensive exam solely using electronic resources and stated, "I had to figure out how to write the entirety of my comps paper without actually using any [physical] books that we didn't have online access to...it definitely shifted some of how I ended up thinking about what I was doing academically, especially with my first comp." A common adaptation described by participants (n=6, 30%) was to use nearby libraries in addition to those available through their institution, including public libraries or academic libraries accessed through an alumni account or a partner's account. When students had access to multiple libraries they would compare levels of access during the pandemic, ease of use, and describe the benefits of one library over another.

These adaptations were positive, in that they prompted new questions and modes of research, but also negative in that they did not allow for students' original research plans to be completed. For participants whose original research plans included location-specific research, such as visiting a foreign library, or location-specific methods, such as land-based research, these modes of research were not possible.

Some participants (n=6, 30%) described using tactics to avoid distractions. For example, they set routines, used the Pomodoro technique to learn, listened to music, turned off notifications, physically removed themselves from distractions, and kept their hands occupied during online calls with activities such as crocheting, colouring, or a fidget toy. Although tactics differed between participants they commented on one another's tactics and agreed that having tactics to prevent distraction was important.

Students also described how, in their perspective, the university adapted to COVID-19. Professors adjusted syllabi and their expectations for assignments, reduced group work, and offered extensions. One student described assignment leniency as not always being positive for their time management. Students also described variable attitudes from professors, with empathy waning over time.

Challenges

Participants spoke of communication difficulties with the university and library. They did not always know what services were available, who to contact, or how to go about finding this information. They described university and library websites as challenging to

navigate. Participants felt that the lack of communication was pronounced at the beginning of the pandemic when changes were made abruptly, and communication planning was probably still developing and ongoing at institutions and libraries. One student asked us to “just connect between the dots of IT at [this] university, IT, the library, and different programs,” emphatically requesting that university units need to “Get out of your goddamn silos.” Despite these frustrations, participants acknowledged that librarians were making efforts to ease the transition to online and remote access and learning. One student wrote: “I feel like the librarians really tried to take the pressure off, I don’t know if that’s how they operate normally or if they’re just being really super understanding...but I found them to be super easy to work with and really easy to communicate with.”

Delays to their research were another significant challenge encountered by students. Practicums and internships were delayed, as were ethics applications and grants. Overall, students described the delays as frustrating and as extending their period of time in school, with one student writing: “I’m on my third year of a two year program because of the pandemic, it’s been really challenging.” Delays were described as compounding and having downstream effects on communication and funding.

Participants also identified how the pandemic revealed structural inequities around library access. Participants with accessibility needs described their pre-pandemic challenges that were largely unknown to able-bodied library users (n=2, 10%). One student sarcastically described this phenomenon when physical books were no longer accessible to anyone: “They’re like ‘Oh, wow, whoa, imagine not being able to physically go in and grab a book,’ and I’m like, ‘Yeah, a bunch of people have been feeling like that this whole entire time and nobody cared.’” Structural issues identified also included university bureaucracies, a lack of readily available supports, and even challenges with the physical university infrastructure that caused injuries. For example, one participant who uses a wheelchair injured themselves traveling to the library on an uneven sidewalk.

Students framed their personal struggles as existing within the larger context of graduate study. A student remarked that graduate school was challenging even without the COVID-19 context and framed their personal challenges accordingly: “When I started my master’s degree, one of my instructors said, ‘It takes a lot of tenacity,’ without even knowing about COVID, to be able just to learn, I mean it was a lot of extra learning for me.” Other personal but also communal challenges that came up were imposter syndrome, shared living situations, and productivity guilt. Marginalization also arose as a personal challenge affecting some students more than others. For instance, one participant described how every student in their program was engaged in building networks and as an international student, they were at a disadvantage.

Resource access was a significant challenge, specifically access to print resources, out-of-subscription resources, resources that would reflect diverse viewpoints, and difficulties accessing resources from their home libraries when they moved away to different geographic locations. Funding challenges came in the form of delays or simply unavailable resources. Participants acknowledged the help available through services such as interlibrary loans (n=6, 30%), but they mentioned going into debt over living spaces, food needs, and other service changes such as the removal of hotspot lending.

Networks

All participants (n=20, 100%) indicated how highly valued academic networks of support were to them as graduate students. Academic networks could include other peers, supervisors, professors, librarians, and other academic staff who play a role in their academic and research work.

Students described challenges accessing support during online learning. For example, without access to the physical library space, they experienced difficulties accessing help from librarians, or were confused about how to contact them. Those that were able to access librarians remotely, found their support to be extremely impactful in accessing resources, developing search strategies, accessing older and hard-to-find materials, and navigating processes such as recalls. They appreciated the willingness of librarians to go above and beyond in supporting their research, with one student stating that: “one of my closest supporters is [librarian] and I don’t know where I would be without him, to be honest...reach out to librarians because honestly, they are so passionate about their work and they will just do whatever they can to help you”. Students also described their increased reliance on librarians as they advanced in their studies.

Many libraries offered new or enhanced online learning opportunities during the pandemic, such as online workshops and skill-building opportunities. Students described attending workshops on various topics. Two students remarked that the library had been the most “consistent” and had done a better job “pivoting” to online workshops than other units. Students described having an attendance requirement for workshops or needing to complete a certificate to be motivators for attending workshops.

Students describe their supervisor as an important support (n=13, 65%). Supervisors provided lists of resources, including lengthy ones which formed the basis of student research, provided ethics recommendations, and offered support and guidance. Students even used supervisors for direct access to hard-to-find resources, including print materials and scans, which indicates some overlap in the supervisor and librarian roles. Two students were significantly impacted by their supervisors’ absence: one took a stress leave, while another’s supervisor died due to COVID-related health issues. The

student who lost her supervisor to COVID stated: “I think about her every day.” This particular disruption resulted in a personal, emotional loss, as well as a required change in research focus.

Students described their peer network as being an important part of the academic experience (n=9, 45%). They called socializing with their peers a way to learn how to navigate academia and the development of future “professional connections.” Particularly, this was highlighted as a challenge for international students because they were unable to draw on pre-existing network connections, and for Ph.D. students who had a “solitary” experience of research compared to master’s students. Another described the important role peers can have when navigating the hidden curriculum, as well as the burdens associated with this kind of mentorship: “So you have to find your cranky, mature grad student who can help you figure things out, but then that’s unpaid labour, which is already something I know all about from being in the precariat.” Participants felt socializing opportunities were not adequately provided by the university.

Resources

Participants described having accessed many of the pandemic-implemented library services (n=12, 60%). They commented on internet hotpots, mail-out services, curbside print pickup, scan and deliver, advance booking of accessible spaces, online workshops, fine waiving, and support that helped them navigate the use of the library systems. Scanning services were noted as “life changer[s]”, and print pick-up was noted as “really special,” especially if their niche research area required print materials. They noted that these services were fast, convenient, helpful, and impactful, and also highlighted the value of long-term access to resources through scanned copies or extended loans. The accessibility gains made by libraries during the pandemic did not go unnoticed by participants and they hoped that some of these new ways of doing things would stay post-pandemic: “I think that the library actually has done a really great job of pivoting and offering those services online, and I’m honestly hoping that, now that things are sort of shifting back, that they don’t just stop all of that because I think that it has a lot of benefits.” One neurodivergent participant felt that Zoom interactions with librarians were leveling the playing field for all library users. A participant called librarians “can-doers” because of their willingness to offer new services, and another noted that their experience with the library improved drastically after the pandemic started.

Access to print and electronic resources was often mentioned as related. Some had a strong preference for using print resources or electronic, and few others valued both formats. One student found it easier to use the online resources, so they do not have to “get confused by stuff at the library.” And in sharp contrast, another stated their

enjoyment of borrowing print books helped them find other nearby materials. Participants also commented on delays in receiving scanned materials and emphasized specific ways of navigating within electronic resources, using tools such as searching within a text, annotating resources, or a browser extension for authentication. Library print loans normally alleviated the cost of textbooks, and so reduced access to print during the pandemic made these costs a concern. Participants were cognizant that those who could afford to pay for access did so.

Participants tried workarounds during lockdown periods in terms of access to technology. They used software trials rather than purchasing the full package and accessing resources through VPNs. However, trial versions had limitations and VPNs would time out. Accessibility softwares and open education resources were also described as challenging to access. Interlibrary loan access was considered an important resource for their research work. Participants who relocated due to work placements mentioned challenges with receiving interlibrary loans during the pandemic; it was also a challenge when everything was shut down during the pandemic and interlibrary loans were also suspended for a short time.

Space

Students described the importance of the physical library, describing it as a neutral, quiet space for study and academic work. One student mentioned: "Libraries are just great places to work in, I feel like I'm more productive if I'm in a library, so not being able to have that physical space has not been very great". The lack of access to the physical library during the pandemic created hardships for students who were living in shared spaces and did not have access to quiet study. For instance, students found studying at home was difficult. They described the library as an "active space" that created an ambience suitable for study, where they were surrounded by collections, people, and work-related resources. Libraries offered limited distractions, and they enjoyed the opportunity to work collaboratively, share ideas and thoughts on the whiteboards and interact with peers.

In contrast, studying at home could be both isolating and distracting. One student mentioned, "I really appreciated having the space to work at the library where I could just buckle down and focus on doing my work for a few set hours in a day, rather than being at home with these distractions or having to shuffle around space." Isolation was also a hardship experienced by many, and the inability to maintain a division between work and home.

Students describe an important adaptation as adjusting to their physical space. Some described trying to create a quiet space at home, including coordinating with their housemates. One respondent described moving locations within their household in

order to feel that they were in a different space; another respondent described hiking and working in nature as an adaptation.

Participants also discussed the use of online resources and using Zoom to organize study groups and discussion forums. Zoom burnout, the lack of social interactions in their surroundings, and the loss of opportunities to do focused research led to anxiety. Ironically, the return to campus and some normalcy led to more issues of access than those experienced during the pandemic. For example, students had access to certain services which were withdrawn after the pandemic, and this created issues for students with disabilities who then had to make an extra effort to visit the library in person to use library services. Similarly, as libraries opened, one student mentioned feeling anxious when visiting the library, as they were fearful of contracting COVID. As a result, they eventually avoided using the library in person and continued accessing library services from home.

Limitations

As with any research study, some limitations may have impacted the results. For example, the sample experiences of these students may not represent those of students in different programs.

Similarly, over half of the research participants (n=11, 55%) in this study were engaged in research related to a marginalized topic, which could have affected their research experiences during the pandemic. As the resources required for this type of research may have been harder to access online, this could have impacted their pandemic-related observations.

Since this study was conducted during the pandemic when policies were still changing, and communication about library services was fractured, this may have impacted participants' usage and awareness of library services. Furthermore, the study results may not be representative of all academic libraries in Canada, given that the participating institutions do not include the local contexts of French language and Atlantic institutions.

Reflections & Recommendations

This study found a variety of barriers and challenges experienced by marginalized graduate students, including barriers to accessing networks, limited access to library and research spaces, and a lack of access to library resources and technology. As a result of these challenges, participants adapted to their circumstances by altering their research, workspaces, and learning tactics to complete their work.

As libraries move into a post-COVID-19 landscape, it is important that they learn from these experiences. As mentioned by one participant, “it is really important that we take the best things from the pandemic and move them forward.” It is clear that many services and approaches created during the pandemic benefited users, and could inform how libraries move forward.

Recommendations for academic libraries based on study findings include:

Reduce institutional barriers between academic libraries Many library users highlighted the importance of being able to access multiple library spaces, services, and personnel during the pandemic. Given the evolution of remote and flexible learning in the academic sector, creating more fluidity of access between libraries will be important to users. Such fluidity could be coordinated at provincial or national levels through governing library bodies (e.g., CARL, library consortiums - COPPUL, OCUL, etc.) or by examining existing reciprocal relationships between academic libraries. Less fragmentation between library associations and other relevant bodies could enable coordination and collaboration to help users.

Keep accessibility as a priority As pandemic restrictions have eased or been removed, libraries could consider how new services might be maintained to benefit all library users. For example, users with accessibility challenges may appreciate the continuity of all online services going forward. Similarly, the opportunity to book library spaces in advance rather than having a first come first served practice benefits all library users but especially those with accessibility concerns .. Libraries should employ a point-person for accessibility and provide comprehensive training for all staff in the library to educate users on available services and support.

Bridge the rural/urban/global divides Students relocating to smaller cities and rural areas during the pandemic were not as well-resourced as students in larger cities with better infrastructure, additional libraries, and high-speed Internet. For international students who returned to their home countries, time zone issues impacted their ability to access services and support. While some libraries already had distance education services in place to deliver resources to many parts of Canada others did not. These types of services, while designed for specific student populations, can help all students, particularly if they experience a change in location or circumstance during their studies. Libraries should consider eligibility for these services beyond their initial scope in order to be more inclusive of the needs of students facing their own unique challenges.

Acquire technology tools to support the use of e-resources Given the increased use of electronic resources during the pandemic, a recommendation for libraries is to acquire and promote resources that enhance online browsing or mapping of collections, e.g., browzine, research rabbit, etc. Libraries could also prioritize their digitizing efforts,

especially for collections that would be used often and widely for research but only currently available in print. Similarly, educating students about additional ways of accessing electronic resources, such as ezproxy browser extensions, or tools for locating open versions of articles, would be beneficial to their academic work.

Prioritize mental health With many students describing the isolation and loss they experienced during the pandemic, the limited opportunities to connect with peers and the resulting impact on their mental health, academic institutions need to properly fund mental health resources on campuses. Ultimately, greater visibility and accessibility of these resources are required, with targeted approaches for specific communities to reflect their unique needs and circumstances.

Trauma-informed librarianship and building for empathy There has been a recognition that empathetic approaches to service may be missing from educational institutions. As a result, since the pandemic and during the endemic, many academic libraries have adopted the trauma-informed principles outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) with a focus on understanding how trauma can adversely affect the well-being of students and how to support their emotional and psychological well-being (Richardson et al., 2021). Providing workshops and other professional development opportunities for library staff to build empathetic approaches to service delivery and student engagement should be a high priority for all libraries.

Better visibility and accessibility of librarians Many participants spoke positively about working with librarians when they were able to make the connection. The visibility and accessibility of librarians were severely diminished when both the physical library closed, and academic networks declined. Therefore, maximizing efforts to make librarians accessible and reachable to students would benefit all users. Relying on users to find and reach out to a librarian is a barrier that many students, for a variety of reasons, will not be able to overcome easily. Libraries should elevate access to librarians' contact information to top-level pages of their websites, in easy, transparent ways that will allow users easier connections to librarians. Employing UX best practices on library websites and investing in strategies for proactive outreach and communication of librarian skills and expertise should be to be prioritized.

Improve communication and transparency Many study participants emphasized the need for better communication and transparency from all units of the university, including libraries. The impact of silos and the resulting lack of coordinated communication and collaboration impacted the student experience negatively. In particular, libraries need to consider ways to proactively communicate and reach out to graduate students and build those connections early on in their academic careers. If

libraries have research guides or other skill-building resources these must be made prominent, or reminders should be sent so students have these tools on top of their minds.

Libraries should also consider the challenges inherent in online communication, without tone, intention and body language being visible to the recipient. This may particularly affect students from diverse cultural backgrounds. An awareness of best practices with respect to online cross-cultural communication should be considered.

Audit and assess the continued value of pandemic-implemented services To ensure that libraries learn from the pandemic experience, libraries are encouraged to undergo audits of pandemic-implemented services, with the goal of assessing their value. Currently, some libraries have continued pandemic-implemented services while others have not. Many library users experienced challenges accessing libraries prior to the implementation of these services and would continue to use these services if they were available. In fact, it may encourage the use of the library from a cohort of students who otherwise would have considered alternatives.

Conclusion

The use of a phenomenological approach helped identify and delve into their experiences about where and how their experiences with the library could be improved. The focus group data reinforced the importance of the library as a distinct place that unifies and provides access to many key services: research collections, learning, collaboration and social spaces, technology, and expertise.

As libraries move forward with planning for a time when COVID-19 is endemic, it is clear that the lived experiences of marginalized graduate students have a good deal to teach them about “how to take the best things from the pandemic and move them forward”. As libraries adapted to these challenges, students retooled and reimaged their use of library spaces, services, and personnel. Similarly, libraries reimaged how they could support users in this new environment by developing or enhancing services to bridge the gaps brought on by the pandemic. This level of creative thinking and exploration of new ways of doing things should not stop now. As many of our study participants noted, barriers to accessing library resources and services existed before the pandemic; re-establishing the pre-pandemic library will only serve to retrench these barriers for many students. Through the recommendations, we hope to influence policy changes and empower libraries with what is possible when building inclusive and equitable library spaces and services.

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