Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Female Public Library Patrons Value the Library for Services, Programs, and Technology

A Review of:

Fidishun, Dolores. "Women and the Public Library: Using Technology, Using the Library."
Library Trends 56.2 (2007): 328-43.

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Objective – This study attempts to give insight into why and how women use the public library and information technology, and how they learned to use the technology.

Design – Qualitative survey.

Setting – The research took place at the Chester County Library in Exton, Pennsylvania, USA.

Subjects – One hundred and eighty-four female library patrons 18 years and older.

Methods – An anonymous qualitative survey was handed out to all patrons at the Chester County Library 18 years of age and older who came into the library on four separate days and times. Times were chosen to obtain a good representation of library patrons, and included daytime, evening, and weekend hours. The survey consisted of questions about library use, information sought, information seeking behaviour, technology used, and how the respondents learned to use the technology. The surveys were collated and spreadsheets were created that reported answers to yes/no and other data questions. Word documents facilitated the listing of more qualitative answers. The data were analyzed using a thematic content analysis to find themes and patterns that emerged to create grounded theory. In thematic content analysis, "the coding

scheme is based on categories designed to capture the dominant themes in a text (Franzosi 184). There is no universal coding scheme, and this method requires extensive pre-testing of the scheme (Franzosi 184). Grounded theory "uses a prescribed set of procedures for analyzing data and constructing a theoretical model" from the data (Leedy and Ormrod 154).

Main Results – The survey asked questions about library use, reasons for library use, using technology, finding information, and learning to use online resources. A total of 465 surveys were distributed and 329 were returned. From the surveys returned, 184 were from female patrons, 127 from male patrons, and 18 did not report gender. The data for this article are primarily taken from the 184 female respondents who reported ages between 18 and 79 years. Seventy-one percent of these reported having a bachelor's degree or higher. The study uses some contrasting data from the men's responses where appropriate. In terms of library use, out of the 184 respondents, 42% came to the library monthly, while 36% visited the library weekly. Sixty-two percent of respondents knew they could email the library and 72% knew that they could call the library with questions. As for reasons for library use, the most prominent response was to borrow books rather than buying them. The second most common reason for using the library related to children's books and programming for children. Other common reasons for library use included research activities, using public computers, reading, use of services such as photocopying and tax forms, and to volunteer or tutor. The library was also used as a place of solitude, where women could find a place and time for themselves. The author compared the men's results to the women's responses, and found that coming to the library for books was lower on the list, and very few men mentioned children's

library services. Men came to the library more often than women to study or read.

In terms of using technology, the female respondents were fairly tech-savvy. Seventy-four percent of respondents felt comfortable using computers. Only 5% replied that using computers meant more work for them. Eighty-two percent said they used a computer on a regular basis, and 98% reported that they had used the Internet. Out of those who use the Internet, 91% used it at home, 64% used it at work, and 34% used it at the public library. Ninety-eight percent of women who used the Internet used a search engine such as Google or Yahoo to find information. Topics frequently mentioned were medical and travel information, information for their children, and shopping. Men, by contrast, listed shopping and finding medical information as their second reason for using the internet. General research topics were most frequently cited by men.

Seven survey questions focused on finding information. The Internet was the number one choice for finding health information, sports scores, the date of Thanksgiving, and the phone number of their state Senator. The library was the first place to find a good book. Results indicated that although women use libraries to find information, they use the Internet more, as libraries were at least third on the list of places women looked for most of the topics inquired about.

When asked about their computer use, 71% of respondents said they used a computer to gain information for work, 74% said they used it for hobbies, and 81% used it to access medical information on the Internet. Sixty-five percent of respondents used email and chat to keep in touch with family and friends. 30% of the women asked felt that books were more valuable than using a computer. Forty-six percent reported that being able to ask a librarian for help was an

appreciated service. The use of library technology figured in the survey. Seventy-two percent of respondents reported that they were comfortable using the online catalogue and 53% said they used the library's webpage. Only 19% said they used the library's databases. The comments section of the survey included evidence that the women either did not know these electronic resources existed, or they did not understand what databases are for. However, 47% said they had access to online databases from other sources, for example, higher education institutions, public schools, businesses.

Those who did use online databases were asked how they learned to use them. Sixteen percent were self-taught. Only a few had formal training, including 3% who were taught by a public library staff member. Sixty percent of respondents indicated they would like formal training: 23% preferred individual training, while 77% preferred training in a class setting.

The survey attempted to discern the value of participants' library experience by using positive and negative critical incidents. The participants responded to questions about their best and worst experiences using the library. Best experiences included those involving books; children's literature, programs, and family projects; library technology; access to non-print materials; the library as a place for solitude; other library services; and library staff. The negative experiences included library issues such as having to return books on time, getting an overdue notice or fine on an item already returned, and desired books being out of the library, noise in the library. The number of positive experiences reported was higher than the number of negative experiences.

Conclusions – Although definitive conclusions are difficult to make using qualitative analysis, Fidishun summarizes

her findings by reporting that her study of women public library patrons found that technology features prominently in women's lives, and that they regularly use the Internet to find information. However, many women were not aware of the databases available at the public library. Books were an important part of the library experience for these women, as were traditional library services, such as asking a librarian for help. Women often are the ones who bring children to the library and seek information for them. And the women surveyed valued the library as place.

Commentary

This is an interesting study with a robust sample size that reveals some useful information about women and how they use the public library and technology. The author discusses the trustworthiness of her study. Trustworthiness in qualitative research is akin to validity, reliability, and credibility in quantitative research. In order to attempt to ensure the trustworthiness of the data, the author employed triangulation. As she states herself, triangulation involves "multiple forms of evaluation," that is, more than one data collection method being used in a study (331). It appears that the only method used in this study was the survey method. The survey included questions posed in more than one way, which is not how triangulation is usually applied. Post-survey, the author discussed the results with a number of public librarians to obtain a verification of the information, but she does not suggest that talking with the librarians after the survey was completed was actually a separate data collection method. More elaboration on this process would have been helpful and the researcher should have described her use of triangulation in more detail. It also would have been useful to know if she pre-tested her instrument to

ascertain that her safeguards for data trustworthiness were on the mark.

The researcher mentions the use of grounded theory as part of her methodology. There is a lack of discussion around grounded theory in the article, and it is unclear if the proper grounded theory approach has been used. Although grounded theory requires extensive pre-testing of the data analysis scheme, there is no evidence of pre-testing in the article. The author acknowledges that as a qualitative study, the results cannot be generalizable to the entire public, but are reflective of the patrons who were surveyed.

There are a few other points to make note of in this research article. The researcher, admittedly not employed as a public librarian, attempted to put herself into a frame of mind that reflected the mission and clientele of the public library. The literature review is not especially robust, and it is quite outdated. It is unknown whether there were no previous studies to be found, or whether the reviewer did not flesh out the literature review piece of the article, but some mention should have been made about previous studies: their availability or lack thereof. The researcher mentions the diversity of public library patrons. However, 71% of the sample had bachelor's degrees or higher. There should be some discussion on how this influences the findings, or at the very least, an acknowledgement of this fact.

The delivery of the results of the survey was problematic in that some of the data were reported in percentages and some were described in more nebulous terms such as "a few," "some," "several," "a fairly large number," and "the most prominent response." As well, five tables were provided in the article, reporting on questionnaire results. It is unclear whether these tables are meant to encompass the totality of the survey, or if they just include a few key

details. It would have been helpful had the author included the survey instrument as an appendix to the paper, not only for possible replication purposes, but so the reader could perhaps have a clearer understanding of the data analysis.

The discussion and conclusion sections of the paper were light, consisting mainly of paraphrasing and further summarization of the data analysis section. The author concludes that libraries and librarians are still viable and necessary; women are driven by their traditional familial roles to visit and use the library; and women use technology in variety of settings, including the public library. More discussion on the setting of the library would have been helpful in providing more context for the women surveyed. Although stronger conclusions were not made, this paper can be useful for public libraries and librarians who are interested in knowing more about how their female patrons are using their services. In particular, results around how female patrons would like training delivered, their lack of understanding of databases, and their use of the library as it reflects their familial role, can all be helpful when planning public library programming.

Works Cited

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