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Why Should I Go to the Library? A Qualitative Approach to the Student's Perspective

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Abstract

The early studies concerning library users were focused on identifying general patterns of research and retrieval of information. Along the years, the studies have shifted towards measuring the degree of satisfaction with library services. The present study is taking into consideration both approaches and investigates aspects related to the reasons for frequenting the library. In February 2018, on the premises of "Carol I" Central University Library of Bucharest, we have conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with the new users of the library. Our main findings are the following: the main reason for coming to the library is studying for or writing a paper, users have a rather stereotypical representation of the library and the users regard the library as a place with a potential for interaction with fellow students.

Keywords: library users, interviews, users' motivations, qualitative research

Introduction

According to the 2016 Cultural Consumption Barometer (Ceobanu & Becuț, 2017), over 90% of Bucharest citizens are not subscribed to any library. At national level, only 1% have mentioned library loan as the first means to get a book, while most respondents prefer to buy them. On an international level, according to the Special Eurobarometer 399: Cultural access and participation (European Commission, 2013, p. 12), only 17% of Romanian respondents said they have visited a library in the last year, while the European average was 31%. These data indicate an acute lack of attractiveness of the library institution, which is associated with an archaic space where the distinctive smell of old books prevails in rooms guarded by old ladies wearing glasses (Micle, 2014), stereotypes encountered worldwide (Hernon & Pastine, 1977) (Luthmann, 2007) (Dupré, 2001).

In the last few years, the Romanian public library system has tried to formulate an adequate response to this situation. Thus, in order to increase their attractiveness and their involvement in the community, the libraries have started to broaden their spectrum of activities: summer workshops for pupils, campaigns for preventing anti-social behaviours, computer classes for the elderly, or various training courses for people from disadvantaged categories¹.

Without undermining the importance of these adaptive strategies, this study will focus on a particular segment of the Romanian library system: the university libraries. Upon a quick examination, the situation described above should not affect to a great extent this kind of institution. Since they are directly linked to the higher education system, have a clear mission and their users from a homogenous segment, the university libraries should not be gravely affected by structural crises. Even so, both the managers' preoccupations and the literature indicate a real sensitivity to the crisis. The demographic decline of the student population along with the shift to the virtual world of the information have elicited a response. While at first only in rhetoric, this response has materialized in a reorientation of the library services towards the users². Despite being a constant concern over the past decade, the issue of the library user has not yet been exhausted. This study is a contribution to the analysis of the interaction between the users and the library. The overall tendency in the Romanian studies was to conceive the user as an inert and passive subject, who has to be modelled by the information science specialist. Our hypothesis is quite different: far from being passive subjects, the library users, even before interacting with the library, have certain representations (usually stereotypical) and, consequently, expectations.

The studies concerning library users have developed mostly after the Second World War. If at the beginning of the 1950s the focus was on identifying general patterns of research and retrieval of information, along the years, the studies have shifted towards measuring the degree of satisfaction with library services. In our view, both approaches suffer from certain limitations. While the first is restricted only to the traditional role of the library, this being a view too narrow, the second is at risk to lose the essence and specificity of the library, regarding it as any other commercial service. For these reasons, the present study is taking into consideration both approaches, and investigates aspects on finding information, as well as satisfaction with the services.

Methodology

The present study was conducted in February 2018, on the premises of "Carol I" Central University Library of Bucharest. As research method, we have opted for semi-structured interviews, thus, the results of this study are not statistically representative for the entirety of the library users, but provide an adequate picture of the structure of the opinions and behaviours investigated.

We have conducted 13 interviews with the new users of the library, as soon as they have finished the orientation tour³. We have considered that 13 interviews are sufficient for the following reasons: the information obtained was starting to be repetitive and we have encountered no contradictions, thus it was possible to formulate conclusions, the theoretical models obtained being consistent. The average duration of an interview was 15 minutes. We have varied the hours during which the interviewees were selected, from 10:30 to 15:30, as well as the days, covering every day of the week. Before the interview, we have explained to the participants the purpose of the study, and then they were asked to fill a form with socio-demographic information. They were assured of the anonymity of their responses. We have not remarked considerable differences among the

respondents, all of them being students, aged from 18 to 30, among which 2 persons resided in student dorms, and 11 resided in owned or rented apartments, 3 were men and 10 women. All the interviews were conducted in Romanian, and the fragments that will be later discussed were translated in English for the purpose of this paper.

As a limit of our research, we mention the fact that we could not interview users from other categories than students, because the professors, researchers and the rest come in much smaller numbers.

Expectations before the interviews

Our expectations were as follows: (1) rather students who live in student dorms are more inclined to frequent the library, by taking into consideration a lack of personal working space; (2) the main reason for frequenting the library is to study for or write papers; (3) the students have a rather generic representation of the library, and not necessarily precise expectations of its services; (4) students perceive the library as a space for socializing and interacting with their peers.

Results

Reasons for frequenting the library

A general reason identified is the writing of a paper, especially the bachelor's thesis, since most of the interviewees were in their final year of study. Frequenting the library becomes an incentive for studying, and also facilitates the access to informational and scientific resources relevant for the university.

"I need a lot of information for my thesis and on the internet, at home, I can't really find what I need."

"the environment helps you to stay focused on your activity"

But the library is thought of beyond the context of the final thesis:

"I need information for writing the bachelor's thesis and I believe I will use it in the future too, when the need will present."

Thus, the main motivation of writing the final thesis can be divided into two distinct components: a) informational resource and b) location and environment.

- Informational resource – the books and articles available in scientific databases:
 - Immediate access:

"It is faster to get to the library to have access to information than it is to order and wait for a few days"

- The multitude of documents:

"the right place where you can find the most books, moreover, for your specialty"

- Location and environment:
 - Encouraging reading and learning processes:

“I find the library as a place where you can’t do anything but read”
“an environment where you can stay and learn, I mean you come here and you can learn anything, even if you don’t necessarily need the informational resources from here

- The location of the library – proximity or central area:

“it is close to the university and this is a big plus”
“I have a window between the courses and rather than lose the time to get home by the subway and so on, it is better to come here and do part of the homework and learn for projects and then go back to courses”
“I live pretty far from the center and I feel like I don’t even live in Bucharest, and this is a good opportunity to discover new places”

At the opposite end there are factors which can lead to non-frequenting the library: we find here the profile of the student scared of the library’s complexity, of the large number of rules, of the laborious ways to find the information, phenomenon which in the literature is called library anxiety (Katopol, 2005)

“I, for example, went to (a different library), only the experience there was very dubious, I didn’t get a guiding tour, I got there, I got to the reading room with the help of a guardian. I said that I would not come a second time, it is not my place, I don’t belong. [...] Coming from the province, I was used to the library in my city. I went to the library, I told the librarian what book I wanted and she brought it from the shelf. When you come to university and you have a different library, your perspective totally changes, because you don’t know what is a call number, you don’t know how to find the book, you don’t know where the reading room is”
“And we are students who come from the province and we have certain reservations ... we are scared that we can’t find our way around an institution, I mean I am.”

Without restricting this observation only to the persons who come from a different city or village, we emphasize the intuitive fear of the unknown, of the new, to describe the process of interacting with an institution we have never interacted before, whose procedures we do not yet know. Once the institution, in this case the library, becomes familiar and “human” at the same time, we establish personal relations with the people who work there, this initial obstacle is crossed, we are no longer intimidated.

The representation of the library

We tried to capture the representation of the library in the users' imagination by asking about the distinctive features of the library reader versus the non-reader and the spontaneous associations with the library.

Frequenting the library becomes synonymous to a vast general knowledge and a richer vocabulary.

“they have a richer vocabulary, you can discuss almost anything with them” (the readers)

“by their behaviour, by the way they talk, they enrich their vocabulary because here, when you come here to read, to get information, you get more general knowledge”

“the student who comes frequently possesses much more knowledge and when you come to the library you automatically read, even if you read 2 pages, 5 pages, you walk away with an information, you don't come to stay on social media or to play with your phone”

Thus, the students who frequent libraries get the etiquette of passionate and devoted students:

“the students who are really devoted to studying come here to dive deeper, to develop themselves, to read...”

“without thorough studying, without information that you usually cannot access from other environments, it is quite difficult to advance without the help of the library”

It should be noted, however, that there are opinions that argue that not frequenting the library leaves impressions, but the act of reading in itself, which is not so closely related to a library, since people can have their own collection of books. The associations presented above are rather stereotypical. This stereotypical value can be observed from the impersonal or generic way of speaking used in most cases. Although asked about his or her personal opinion, the respondent talks about the students in general, not about his or her personal experiences or expectations. Probably, they have appropriated the stereotype of the “bookworm” this time with a positive, desirable, connotation:

“I believe that once you start frequenting the library, you will discipline yourself [...] and you will prefer to get the information first-hand [...] and then you will discover that there are some advantages to come to the library than get bits of information from the online environment”

This is, of course, just a possible explanation, a way of interpreting. At the same time it is possible that using this impersonal and generic way of talking derives from the presence and influence of the interviewer, the respondents being inclined to answer desirably, by

expressing established or intuitive truths, which apply to the students in general. They may fear that they can answer wrongly, even though at the beginning of the interview they were assured that there are no right or wrong answers, just opinions.

Analysing the responses from the question regarding the spontaneous association with the library, we have found that in most cases the word was books, denoting an association with reading. Another words mentioned were information, study and quiet. To summarize, we can say that the library is generally associated with the massive presence of books, knowledge through rigorous study and a quiet ambient, which derive from the general desirable, stereotypical image of space devoted to reading.

Is the library a place to socialize?

The mentions about the socialization function of the library, understood as an interaction in this case, can indicate the importance of belonging to the group of library users, which becomes a status indicator. In the sociological sense, the status indicator reveals identification with a certain behavioural set, in this case the library user becoming the dedicated student, who surrounds himself or herself with similar persons:

“it is not necessary to come here and stay alone, I mean you can find people who share your passions, or who study a similar subject, which you also want to study and then you start discussing”

“it is a good occasion to socialize, because you never know who you’re going to meet, who you’re going to talk to and share ideas with”

Still, a question remains unanswered. Does aspiring to be viewed as a studious person determine your coming to the library or is the other way around?

“it is a good environment to meet new people. But first you come to the library to study, then to interact”

Conclusions

Our first expectation, that the students who live in student dorms are more inclined to frequent the library is invalidated. Most of the interviewees lived in owned or rented apartments, which leads us to believe that frequenting the library is not necessarily linked to a lack of space dedicated to studying. Still, we have to consider the fact that this study is not statistically representative, and it is possible that a quantitative approach will show different results. The second hypothesis, that the main reason for coming to the library is studying for or writing a paper is confirmed. The hypothesis according to which the students have a rather generic representation of the library is also confirmed. The analysis shows that the students have a rather stereotypical representation of the library and its users. Our fourth expectation is confirmed as well, the students regard the library as a place with a potential for socialization.

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Notes

¹ The enumeration of these activities is based on the analysis of the activity reports of various libraries such as: Astra Library from Sibiu, Municipal Library from Bucharest, "Octavian Goga" Library from Cluj-Napoca.

² Romanian university libraries pay more attention to the needs and expectations of users and try to have an interaction, a communication and even better collaboration with them in order to provide quality information services. (Madge, 2017, p. 54)

³ At "Carol I" Central University Library, the procedure for acquiring a permit requires this guided tour that enables users to learn how to use library services, such as accessing and using the catalogue, retrieving or requesting documents, the distribution of the reading rooms and other aspects and facilities provided by the institution.

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