

Marginalized Graduate Students Navigating the Academy During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Approach

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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 and 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

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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 are:

- International students
- Indigenous students
- LGBTQIA+ students
- Students with disabilities
- Racialized/ethnic minority student
- First-generation students, and,
- Non-traditional students (e.g., mature students, students attending school part-time, students with dependents, and/or students struggling 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; Tej, M et al., 2021), and how academic libraries responded to these pandemic-related challenges with new services and support (Ayeeni 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 color 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 to 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 (<https://borealisdata.ca/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.5683/SP3/CKETHW>), 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, with one conducting an initial assessment and the other conducting a preliminary review and additional coding work. The two other members of the research team 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.

Results

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.

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

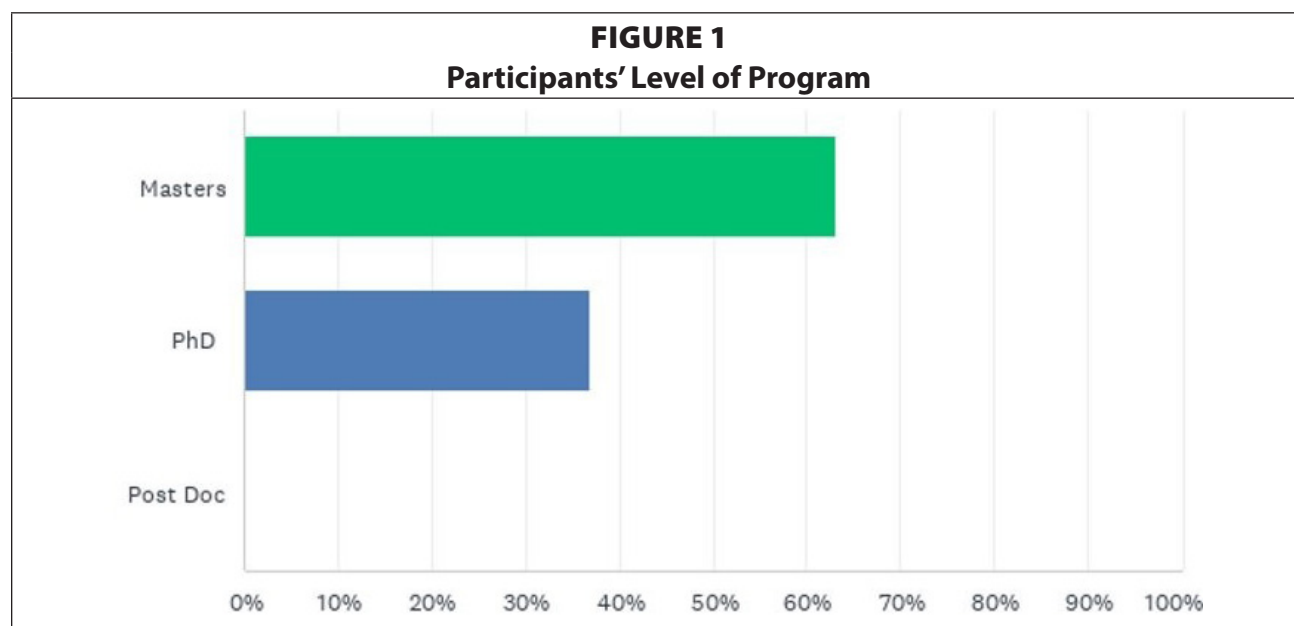
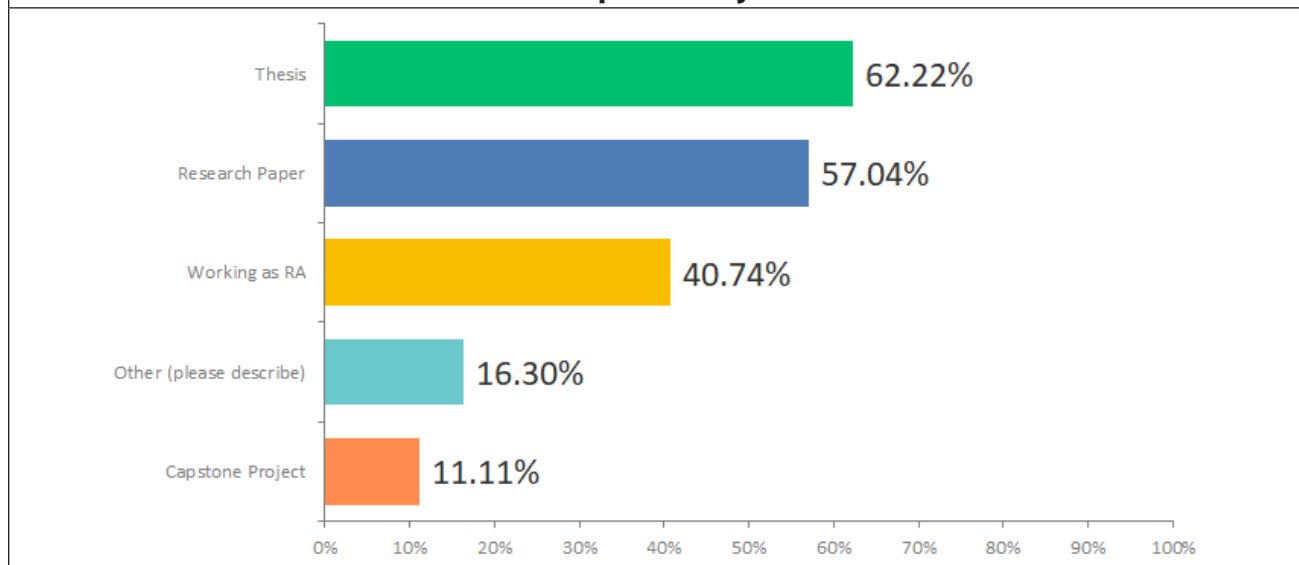


FIGURE 2
Participants' Representation and Their Response Rates

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 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.

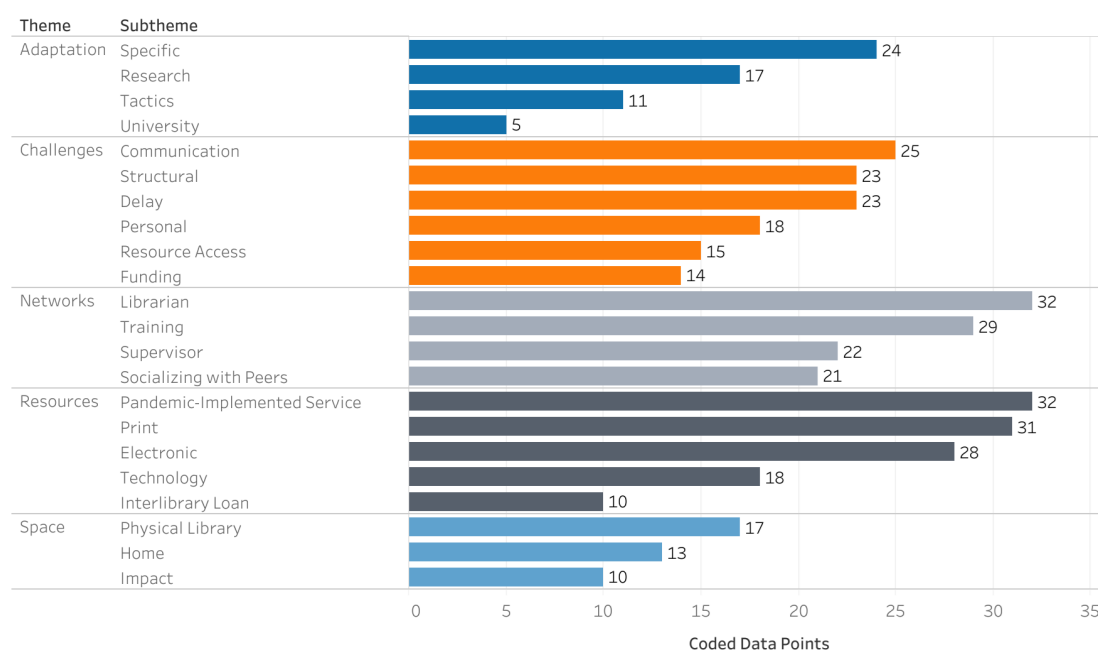
FIGURE 3
Participants' Projects



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, including public libraries or academic libraries accessed through an alumni account or a partner’s account, in addition to those available through their institution. 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 their tactics for avoiding 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, from 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." This was highlighted as a particular challenge for international students because they were unable to draw on pre-existing network connections, and for PhD 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 mentioned 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 spaces. 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 shared that one important adaptation was 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 experi-

ences 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 and 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

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 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. Libraries should prioritize employing UX best practices on library websites and investing in strategies for proactive outreach and communication of librarian skills and expertise.

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. Libraries in particular 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, the lived experiences of marginalized graduate students clearly 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 reimagined their use of library spaces, services, and personnel. Similarly, libraries reimagined 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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Appendix A

Focus Group Questionnaire for: From the Margins: How Marginalized Students Navigate the Academy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Research (could be a research paper, capstone project, thesis, or working as RA for faculty)

- Tell us about your research project you are working on?
 - **Prompts:**
 - What is your research topic/field of study/research question?
 - What kind of research do you have to conduct for this project?
 - How long have you been working on it?
 - What makes you interested in this topic?

Library Access

- Tell us about what access to your library has been like during COVID-19?
 - **Prompts:**
 - Are there closures to the physical space?
 - Do you use online resources, course materials, interlibrary loan?
 - Have you contacted the library/a librarian for help?
- Before COVID-19, what was your use of the library?
 - **Prompts:**
 - Did you visit the library to find resources, speak to a librarian, etc?
 - What resources did you use?
 - How about use of the library for Internet access, printing, borrowing technology, quiet study, workshops, writing help, etc?
- What challenges did you face in using the library pre-COVID? Have you received library instruction or any training in finding and accessing different types of resources online? When (since COVID, long before COVID?)
 - **Prompts:**
 - Library homepage
 - Finding books
 - Finding articles
 - Finding journals
 - Historical or special collections
 - Other?

Challenges during COVID

- What kinds of challenges or obstacles have you faced due to Covid that have affected your research?
 - **Prompts:**
 - Access to people (cohorts, faculty, library employees to use as sound-board for ideas)
 - Access to print resources
 - Access to online resources
 - Spontaneous access to resources, to on campus help, etc.
- What services/resources/spaces were/are not available to you due to covid and how did/does this impede your research? Did you find it challenging to not have access to the library during COVID-19?
 - **Prompts:** print, borrow AV/laptops, quiet study, access writing/communication centre, attend workshops

Strategies they developed to overcome these challenges

- What changes did you have to make to conduct your research in an online environment?
- What kind of strategies did you adopt to overcome some of the challenges you mentioned above?
- Have any of these strategies included the use of the library?
 - **Prompts:**
 - Did you use the library to find material for your research or for completing your thesis/dissertation?
 - E.g. interlibrary loans, curbside pickup, use study spaces, technology?
- What kind of support did you receive from the library to conduct your research in an online environment?
- If you couldn't access the library, where else did you go?
 - **Prompts:**
 - Borrow materials from faculty?
 - Find open access resources?
 - To another library
 - Buy materials?

Final Question

Is there anything else you want to share with us related to the pandemic and library access?

Appendix B—Moderator Guide

Researchers

Names	Contact Positions	Universities	Positions
Maha Kumaran (PI)	maha.kumaran@usask.ca 306-966-7779	University of Saskatchewan	Librarian, Education & Music Library
Cecile Farnum (Co-PI)	cfarnum@ryerson.ca ; 416-735-9151	Toronto Metropolitan University	Liaison Librarian
Lisa Levesque (Co-PI)	lisa.levesque@ryerson.ca ; 647-216-5862	Toronto Metropolitan University	Assessment Librarian
Aditi Gupta (Co-PI)	aditig@uvic.ca ; 250-721-6085	University of Victoria	Engineering & Science Librarian
Marla Roger	marla.rogers@usask.ca	CHASR, University of Saskatchewan	
Darcia Roache	dar446@mail.usask.ca	University of Saskatchewan	Research Assistant

Purpose of the Study:

The purpose is to understand how marginalized graduate students at three CARL (Canadian Association of Research Libraries) institutions have adapted to the pandemic situation, particularly in their research activities. The three institutions are the librarian researchers' institutions: University of Saskatchewan, Ryerson University, and the University of Victoria.

Aim of the Study:

The aim of the study is to address the three main research questions:

1. How have marginalized graduate students used the library for research activities during the pandemic?
2. What are the challenges faced by marginalized graduate students in their library research activities during this pandemic?
3. What strategies have they developed to overcome these challenges and continue their research?

Introduction

At the focus group interviews researcher(s) should introduce themselves, inform participants about the critical components of the research such as purpose of the research, critical information on the consent form, duration of the interview, that session will be recorded, etc.

Forms: The researcher(s) would need to ask participants to sign a consent form and/or a non-disclosure agreement in keeping with ethics approval.

Participants information regarding the study (What they will be asked/told)

- *"In order to participate in the study we will ask [you] participant to confirm that [you] they are a graduate student who is from a marginalized group who has experienced hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic.*
- *The study will consist of focus groups with questions about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected your research. Focus group conversations will take no more than 75-90 mins of your time.*

Questions will include challenges you have faced during COVID-19, your use of library resources, and strategies you have used to overcome challenges

- *This study is being facilitated by [CHASR](#), research support and consulting service at the University of Saskatchewan. The focus group interview will be conducted in an online environment using the Zoom Platform available through the University of Saskatchewan.*
- *After the interview, the recording will be stored in a secure online environment and all data will be de-identified. The data will then be transcribed and you will be given an opportunity to review the transcripts of your interview, and, to add, alter, or delete any information from the transcript as you see fit.*
- *Please feel free to ask for clarifications or any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role"*

Research questions: These questions differ from the actual questions that will be asked of participants. They are the questions the researchers want to be ultimately answered with the qualitative data to be gathered in the interviews. Researcher(s) should inform participants on the number of questions to be answered at the outset of the focus groups.

Research Method

Focus Group

Focus groups are a form of group interview, though not in the sense of a backwards and forwards interviewer and group, rather, the reliance is on the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher (Morgan, 1988, p. 9). It is often used as a qualitative approach in gaining an in-depth understanding of social issues. The method aims to obtain data from a purposely selected group of individuals rather than from a statistically representative sample of a broader population (Nyumba et al., 2018)

- It yields a collective response instead of an individual and of such participants should interact with each other than with the interviewer (Cohen et al., 2011)
- From the interaction of the group that data emerge (Cohen et al., 2011)
- Focus groups are useful (Bailey, 1994; Krueger, 1988; Morgan, 1988) for: -
 - orientation to a particular field
 - gathering and evaluating data from different sub-group of a population
 - empowering participants to speak out, and in their own words
 - gathering data on attitude, value, and opinion
 - encouraging group rather than individuals to voice opinion
 - gathering qualitative data
 - developing themes, topics and schedules. Flexibly for subsequent interviews and/or questionnaires.

Moderator's Role in Focus Group

Focus groups should be clear on the agenda and the focus, take place in a setting that is conducive for discussion, have a skilled moderator who can prompt people to speak, promote thinking and reflection, and should have a record kept (Newby, 2010, p. 350).

Checklist Step 1: Getting Started: Prior to the Focus Group Session:

- Decide on the meeting particulars (e.g., where and when)

- Ensure that the questions are prepared, determine roles and responsibilities of those conducting the meeting
- Start to recruit participants (e.g., who and why)

Checklist Step 2: At the Focus Group Session

When people arrive:

- Thank people for coming and then review research purpose and objectives.
- Outline how the meeting will proceed, administrative details and let participants know how they can contribute.
- **Recording Permission:** The researcher should ask the participants for their permission to record the session and explain what and how you are recording and who will it be shared with.
- **Questions:** Ask warm-up questions to get the participant comfortable. The questions you ask in the beginning can help you later on in the session and give you additional context. Start with an easy question and lead them to tell you a story about their experience.
- **Participant Questions:** Participants should be given a chance to ask questions. It could also be a chance to eliminate confusion and, where possible, get answers to some questions.

Start with more general questions and then additional questions in the same general manner:

- When all your questions have been asked, it's time for open comments, so be sure to ask if anyone has any other comments to make.
- Tell the group about any next steps that will occur and what they can expect to happen now (e.g., processing information, sharing the aggregated responses) and where the information will be going (e.g., knowledge dissemination in publications, presentations, etc.).

Checklist: Step 3: After the Focus Group Session

- Make a transcript or written summary of the meeting.
- Save the material (audio and transcripts) to the W: Drive folder.

Next Session: Step 4: Data Analysis

- Examine the data for patterns, themes, new questions, and conclusions.
- Share the results with the group.
- Knowledge mobilization (sharing) the findings.

Moderator's skills: non-judgmental, respectful, relaxed and sets the tone of the session.

Moderator Script—Focus Group Interviews

Hello everyone,

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to participate in these focus groups—we appreciate it. Through these focus groups, the research team would like to hear from graduate students from marginalized groups who have experienced hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, we want to hear about challenges you have faced during the pandemic and strategies you used to overcome them. By hearing from marginalized students and students undergoing hardship, it is a goal of our study to improve library policies and services.

The data from the focus groups will be compiled by the study investigators in order to come to broader conclusions about how teaching is currently experienced by Librarians and how this relates to understandings of success in instruction and appointments.

A focus group is a research method for structuring conversations. This structure includes having individuals play distinct roles. The **notetaker** (one of the investigators) is here to take field notes and assist with any technical issues we might have. I will be acting as the **moderator**. As the moderator it is my job to ask questions to the group and keep the conversation on track. Keeping the conversation on track means:

- Ensuring we have a respectful discussion, including respect for one another's perspectives, time, and expertise
- Making sure everyone gets a chance to speak. If you haven't spoken much I might ask you for your opinion.
- Working through the study questions. This is a semi-structured format, meaning that we don't have to strictly talk about only these questions but we should try to answer all of them.
- Keeping track of time. This focus group should last an hour, but if the discussion is going well it can extend slightly longer.

Another part of my role as moderator is to ask that everyone here consents to participate in this study and consents for their participation to be recorded. This is an internal study and the recordings will only be reviewed by the investigators and deleted once they have analyzed the results. Comments will be anonymized before being included in any shared results.

Share consent form and ask for verbal confirmation that everyone has read it and agrees to it

Are there any questions?

Ok, let's get started with the questions. I'll now hit record.

Questionnaires for Participants

Focus Group Interview Questions

Research (could be a research paper, capstone project, thesis, or working as RA for faculty)

Question 1: Tell us about your research project you are working on?

○ Prompts:

- What is your research topic/field of study/research question?
- What kind of research do you have to conduct for this project?
- How long have you been working on it?

Library Access

Question 2: Before COVID-19, how would you describe your use of the library?

○ Prompts:

- Did you access the physical space?
- Did you access materials online?
- Did you visit the library to find resources, speak to a librarian/library staff?

- Use the library for Internet access, printing, borrowing technology, quiet study, workshops, Interlibrary loan, writing help, etc?

Question 3: Tell us about what access to your library has been like during COVID-19?

○ **Prompts:**

- Did you access the physical space, when possible?
- Did you use the library's resources?
- Virtual appointments with a librarian or other library staff?
- Did you use any additional library services? (e.g., mobile internet access, laptops)

Question 4: Have you received library instruction or any training in finding and accessing different types of resources online?

If yes, when (since COVID, long before COVID?)

○ **Prompts:**

- Library homepage
- Finding books
- Finding articles
- Finding journals
- Historical or special collections
- Other?

Challenges during COVID

Question 5: What kinds of challenges or obstacles have you faced due to Covid that have affected your research?

○ **Prompts:**

- Access to people (cohorts, faculty, library employees to use as sound-board for ideas)
- Access to spaces
- Access to print resources
- Access to online resources
- Spontaneous access to resources, to on campus help, etc.

Strategies they developed to overcome these challenges

Question 6: What kind of strategies did you adopt to overcome some of the challenges you mentioned above?

○ **Prompts:**

- Borrow materials from faculty?
- Find open access resources?
- Try another library
- Buy materials?

Question 7: Is there anything else you want to share with us related to the pandemic and library access?

Thank: Always thank participants for their time and inform them that their insights will help.

Appendix C. Screening Survey

This form collects personal information that will only be used for the purpose of organizing research focus groups. It will be stored confidentially at the PI's Institutional OneDrive, separate from the data used for analysis, interpretation, and publications.

- Name:
- Email (only for the purpose of contacting you, if you are eligible for this study):
- Name of Institution:
- Level of program: (Type? (Masters/PhD?))
- Length of time at institution as student:
- Length of time with current program
- Do you identify as Racialized/ethnic minority student
Survey branching logic: if they select this, If you are comfortable doing so, please tell us your racial/ethnic identity.
- Do you identify as any of the following (select all that apply):
 - International student
 - Indigenous student
 - LGBTQIA+ student
 - Student with a disability
 - First-generation student, and,
 - Non-traditional student (e.g.: mature student, attend university part-time, have dependents).
- Which of the following hardships have been an obstacle to your graduate research during the COVID-19 pandemic? (select all that apply):
 - Personal finances
 - Health (self)
 - Health (family member)
 - Family (other issues)
 - Childcare
 - Difficult living situations, and,
 - Other issues that are the result of COVID-19
- What sorts of research projects have you worked on in the past year? (select all that apply):
 - Thesis
 - Research Paper
 - Capstone Project
 - Working as RA for faculty or someone else's research
 - Other, please describe
- In your opinion, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected university library services?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your use of the university library services?
- What other challenges have you faced during the COVID-19 pandemic that have affected your research?
- What strategies have you used to overcome these challenges?

Appendix D - Consent Form

Researcher(s):

Maha Kumaran (PI), Associate Librarian, Education & Music Library, University of Saskatchewan, maha.kumaran@usask.ca; 306-966-7779

Cecile Farnum (Co-PI), Liaison Librarian, Ryerson University, cfarnum@ryerson.ca; 416-735-9151

Lisa Levesque (Co-PI), Assessment Librarian, Ryerson University, lisa.levesque@ryerson.ca; 647-216-5862

Aditi Gupta (Co-PI), Engineering and Science Librarian, University of Victoria, 250-721-6085; aditig@uvic.ca;

Purpose and Objective of the Research:

In this research project we aim to understand how marginalized graduate students at three CARL (Canadian Association of Research Libraries) institutions have adapted to the pandemic situation, particularly in their research activities. The three institutions are the librarian researchers' institutions - University of Saskatchewan, Ryerson University, and the University of Victoria. This proposed study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How have marginalized graduate students used the library for research activities during the pandemic?
2. What are the challenges faced by marginalized graduate students in their library research activities during this pandemic?
3. What strategies have they developed to overcome these challenges and continue their research?.

Procedures:

This study is being facilitated by The Canadian Hub for Applied and Social Research (CHASR), research support and consulting service at the University of Saskatchewan. The focus group interview will be conducted in an online environment, it will then be recorded and no personal information will be collected. Your participation in this study will include an interview with CHASR, who will ask for your consent prior to recording of the interview. We hope that you will participate in the online focus groups from a private area of your home so that no individuals outside of the research team hear your conversations.

After receiving your screening eligibility input, if you meet the criteria for the study, we will contact you to participate in the focus group.

The focus group interview will be conducted in an online environment using the Zoom Platform available through the University of Saskatchewan

Please find the Zoom privacy policy here <https://explore.zoom.us/en/trust/privacy/>

All recordings will be saved in password-protected computers and shared using the PIs institutional OneDrive.

After the study, your data will remain de-identified and will only be shared in an aggregated and de-identified format. We will anonymize and use pseudonyms in all publications and presentations. All data will be transmitted via password-protected files

in a secure environment between the researchers. Data will be disposed of five years after the end of the study.

Funded by:

This study is funded by the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL). The University of Saskatchewan, Ryerson University and the University of Victoria also funded this project. There are no conflicts of interests to be declared.

Potential Risks:

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. If a question, or the discussion, makes you uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer. The research results will only be shared in aggregated data format.

Potential Benefits:

The knowledge gathered through this research will be of benefit to the libraries and other key stakeholders to help inform social justice and equity-based decision-making on access to research resources. We will also use our evidence-based findings to provide recommendations for the library or academic institution policy creation or policy enhancements on creating an inclusive research access environment for all students.

Incentive:

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. All participants will be entered into a prize draw to win one of the two \$50 gift cards.

Confidentiality:

You can turn off your computer's microphone and/or camera at any time. The research team will run transcripts by all participants and ask you to sign a transcript release form. Only after this, will the transcript be used for data analysis. The data from this research project will be published and presented with stakeholders and colleagues at academic conferences and via peer-reviewed publications. However, collected data will be stored confidentially and anonymized prior to result sharing and publication. Pseudonyms will also be used. Although direct quotations may be reported from the interview, all identifying information will be removed from the report. We will ask you to review our documents prior to publication for accuracy and confidentiality. No new content will be added at this stage of the research process. This anonymization will include removing participant names and other information that could identify them by context or the nature of the sample. The researchers will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion. This survey is conducted using Survey Monkey. Please visit the privacy policy here https://www.surveymonkey.com/mp/legal/privacy/?ut_source=footer However researchers do not have control of participants' recording content. Please find the Zoom privacy policy here <https://explore.zoom.us/en/trust/privacy/> All data will be stored for 5 years post publication (with the exception of the Master list or email contacts which will be deleted after the completion of data analysis).

Storage of Data:

The focus group interviews will be conducted in an online environment using the Zoom platform from the University of Saskatchewan. Interviews will be recorded, and videos of

the focus groups will be retained by CHASR during data analysis. CHASR will delete videos and audio recordings based on timelines required by ethics (5 years) after which all videos will be deleted. After the study, your data will remain de-identified and will only be shared in an aggregated and de-identified format. Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer during analyses and transmitted between researchers using password driven OneDrive. Data will be disposed of five years after the end of the study. Consent forms will be stored separately from the study. A Data Management Plan (DMP) has been created, with further details around the collection, storage, and de-identification and anonymization of the research data, and is accessible upon request. A de-identified dataset will be prepared for public sharing in a data repository.

Right to Withdraw:

Your participation is voluntary, and you can participate in only those discussions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, without explanation or penalty of any sort. Should you wish to withdraw, you may leave the group meeting at any time; however, data that have already been collected cannot be withdrawn as it forms part of the context for information provided by other participants.

Psychological or Emotional Trauma Help:

These focus groups are designed in a way that we hope participants feel comfortable, psychologically safe, and in control of the information they choose to share. However, they will include discussion of personal identity and hardship experienced during COVID-19, which are challenging subjects. If you believe you will need assistance due to psychological or emotional trauma due to any unforeseen recollection of past experiences, here is a list of places you may contact for further help.

- Student Wellness Centre at the University of Saskatchewan
student.wellness@usask.ca
- Student Wellbeing at Ryerson University
- Student Wellness Centre at the University of Victoria
- Mindyourmind: focus on resources in Canada, the US
- Resources for Marginalized Communities and Allies (Crisis Services Canada)
- Therapy Route: an extensive list of helplines, crisis lines, and suicide hotlines from all around the world.
- Good2Talk provides confidential support services for students in Ontario and Nova Scotia

Follow up:

If you are interested in learning about publications or dissemination, contact the PI, Maha Kumaran at maha.kumaran@usask.ca

Questions or Concerns:

Contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural

Research Ethics Board, Ryerson's Research Ethics Board (REB), and Human Research Ethics at the University of Victoria. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the PI's Research Ethics Office: ethics.office@usask.ca; 306-966-2975; out of town participants may call toll free 1-888-966-2975. You may also contact Ryerson Ethics Board at rebchair@ryerson.ca, <https://www.ryerson.ca/research/resources/ethics/>; Or, University of Victoria Human Research Ethics at ethics@uvic.ca

By completing and submitting this questionnaire, your free and informed consent is implied and indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study.