The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Readers' Advisory Services in Southern Ontario Public Libraries

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Abstract

The aim of this research was to investigate the potential effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the readers' advisory services (RA) provided by southern Ontario public libraries. Its objectives were to determine whether there have been changes in patron demand for readers' advisory and whether libraries have responded to pandemic restrictions by changing their readers' advisory offerings. A final objective was to develop recommendations for public libraries wanting to improve their RA services.

A review of the literature found that there are many studies examining the history of readers' advisory, and the way RA is practised in North American public libraries. However, there has not yet been much research published exploring the ways in which the pandemic has affected readers' advisory services in public libraries, nor has there been a lot of research examining the ways in which public libraries have adapted these services to better serve the public during pandemic restrictions. This research was intended to address this gap in the literature.

A mixed-methods approach was chosen for this research as the best course to acquire both quantitative and qualitative data. First, a questionnaire was distributed to southern Ontario public library staff. The questionnaire explored various types of readers' advisory services and asked respondents about their library's responses to pandemic restrictions. Next, follow-up interviews were conducted with select questionnaire respondents to obtain more detailed and nuanced information regarding readers' advisory services at their libraries during the pandemic.

It was found that most libraries had found some changes in demand for RA services during the pandemic. More patrons were asking for books to be chosen for them when they were unable to visit the library during lockdowns or restrictions. Most libraries also implemented some type of new RA service during the pandemic.

Recommendations were made for public libraries to continue to adapt their RA services to better serve their patrons. These recommendations included better RA training for staff, fostering a culture of "booktalking" and advertising RA services more effectively.

Keywords

Keywords to describe this research topic: public libraries, readers' advisory, COVID- 19, COVID-19 pandemic, pandemic restrictions, Ontario.

1. Introduction

Public libraries, like so many other institutions, have been profoundly affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. At the time of this writing, the Canadian province of Ontario has experienced several lockdowns of various lengths and levels of severity. These public health measures have undoubtedly affected public libraries and their ability to provide services to the public. The aim of this research was to explore the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic might have affected the provision of readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries.

From a thorough review of the literature, it was found that, to date, there has been very little exploration of the possible impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on readers' advisory services. This is unsurprising, as the pandemic is ongoing, and research takes time to conduct and to be published. It was determined that this would be a timely and important topic to explore, because the pandemic has impacted many elements of public library service, and its ongoing effects are relatively unknown.

There is clearly a gap in the literature surrounding readers' advisory services and the COVID-19 pandemic, and this research project was intended to help fill that gap. Due to time and resource constraints, only southern Ontario public libraries are considered in this dissertation. The province of Ontario is geographically vast and there are significant cultural differences between northern and southern Ontario. Further, the researcher had better access to southern Ontario library staff as research subjects. For these reasons, it was decided that southern Ontario would be the focus of this research.

To explore this topic, a mixed-methods research approach was selected. First, a questionnaire was distributed to southern Ontario public library staff. Next, interviews were conducted with select respondents to gain more in-depth, qualitative data. The results of the questionnaire and interviews will be discussed in this report, and conclusions drawn from the research will be shared below. Recommendations for next steps will also be discussed.

1.1 Readers' advisory

Readers' advisory (RA) is a service that is regularly performed at public libraries in North America. In the early part of the 20th century, the reader's advisory services performed by librarians were typically intended to "improve" the reader. Pleasure reading was discouraged, and librarians prescribed either hefty literary classics or challenging non-fiction. Librarians would not recommend "lighter" forms of fiction such as romances, thrillers, or Westerns, believing that genre fiction was inferior and would not lead to intellectual or spiritual benefits to the reader.

The practice of readers' advisory waned in the middle of the 20th century, only to experience a renaissance in the 1980s. This renewal culminated in the publication of the ground-breaking readers' advisory text "Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library" by Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown in 1989.

After this publication, readers' advisory services, "became a much-discussed topic in North American public libraries. By 2005, almost every public library in the United States and Canada offered some form of readers' advisory service." (Dilevko 2007 p.3) Today, most North American public libraries offer several forms of readers' advisory service to their patrons.

Readers' advisory, as it is practised today, involves matching the right book (or reading material more generally) with the right reader at the right time. Cox (2012 p.285) writes that "public libraries represent many things to a community, but one of its most intrinsic functions is to simply help readers navigate

the world of leisure reading toward their next read."

Readers' advisory, as a service, "encompasses a range of techniques, from the personal and interactive (via an interview) to the impersonal and passive (such as displays or lists of suggested titles)" (Ross 2001 p.54).

To discover what a patron is looking for, staff are encouraged to conduct what is called an "RA interview", which is typically an informal set of questions to help discover what the patron might be looking for. Often, staff will ask the patron what authors or books they have read and enjoyed, what they are in the mood for, whether they enjoy fast-paced, or leisurely-paced stories, whether they value character-driven or plot-driven narratives, and more questions of this nature. These questions are meant to reveal the "appeal factors" that the patron values. While staff are often encouraged to conduct the RA interview without the use of computer assistance, there are databases and websites which can assist if the staff member finds the task too difficult to perform on their own. Readers' advisory is a cyclical process, with library workers providing options for patrons to choose from, and the patron coming back with feedback about how well they liked the recommended books. From that feedback, the library worker can further refine recommendations and improve their RA skills.

In recent years, there has been an increasing amount of research conducted on the role of readers' advisory services in public library settings. The literature review chapter of this dissertation will provide a comprehensive overview of the research conducted on this topic to date.

1.2 The COVID-19 pandemic

All Ontario public libraries closed their doors in mid-March of 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. For several weeks, all libraries in the province were completely closed to the public. By May of that year, however, public libraries began to resume various levels of service. And by the summer of 2020, some had reopened with public health measures in place, such as Plexiglas barriers and social distancing protocols. At the time of this writing, in the winter of 2022, the province is experiencing a COVID-19 surge due to the fast-spreading Omicron variant. Some libraries have closed their doors and others are only providing kerbside service for patrons to collect library materials safely. Other libraries remain open to the public.

Regardless of how individual libraries in southern Ontario have responded to the pandemic, every library has experienced an impact on its ability to deliver services to the public. Even libraries that have worked to remain open to the public have seen a dramatic drop in patron visits. The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly affected the ways in which public libraries can provide services to the public. What this research aims to do is to explore the ways in which this pandemic has affected readers' advisory services in southern Ontario in particular.

2. Aim and objectives

The following research aim and objectives served to shape and guide the research into the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries.

2.1 Research aim

The primary aim of this research is to determine whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on

readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries. Within this research, "impact" can be defined as an increase or reduction in demand for readers' advisory services by library patrons, a change in the types of reading material that library patrons are asking for, or a change in the ways that libraries are providing readers' advisory services. For instance, with lockdowns keeping many public libraries closed, have more libraries begun providing online readers' advisory services via their websites?

2.2 Research objectives

Libraries, along with many other institutions, have had to adapt to this new environment, with periodic lockdowns, mask mandates, vaccination requirements, and other unprecedented health measures. This research aims to examine one area of public library service provision, readers' advisory, and how it might have been changed by this new environment. The objectives of this research are:

1. To determine whether southern Ontario public libraries have responded to COVID-19 pandemic measures by changing the ways in which they offer readers' advisory services to the public.
2. To determine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the frequency or volume of patron demand for readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries.
3. To determine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the type of book recommendations being requested by patrons in southern Ontario public libraries.
4. To develop recommendations for potential next steps for public libraries providing readers' advisory services in the post-COVID-19 environment.

The primary method used to achieve the first objective is through a questionnaire distributed to southern Ontario public library staff. A thorough discussion of the conception and development of this questionnaire can be found in the methodology chapter of this dissertation.

The primary method used to achieve objectives 2 and 3 is an interview with select library staff who regularly provide readers' advisory services to patrons. As with the previous method, a thorough discussion of this interview process will be detailed in the methodology chapter. After a thorough analysis of the results of the questionnaire and interviews, recommendations for readers' advisory service provision in the post-COVID-19 environment will be discussed, thus achieving objective 4.

3.0 Literature review

This literature review will chart the progress of readers' advisory services in North American public libraries from the conception of RA through to the present day. It will also explore the ways in which readers' advisory is taught in library schools in North America, as well as the ways in which is it practised in North American public libraries. Finally, this literature review will explore the research around the potential future of readers' advisory services. It will also touch on what research exists at the moment of this writing (February 2022) on the subject of readers' advisory services and the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1 The history of readers' advisory in North America

As discussed above, readers' advisory began as a service that was intended to improve the spiritual and intellectual life of library users. In the first half of the 20th century, the "goal of this service was the self-improvement of participants through directed reading" (May et al. 2000 p.40). But when exactly did this service develop? In his article, *Rediscovering the History of Readers' Advisory Service,* Crowley (2005)

argues that determining when readers' advisory first began as a service in public libraries is likely too difficult to determine with much accuracy. Crowley writes that "it seems presumptuous to make sweeping generalizations about the precise genesis of readers advisory" (Crowley 2005 p.38). Yet it is possible to draw a broad picture of the development of readers' advisory in North American libraries over time. According to Crowley (2005) it is safe to assume that some form of casual readers' advisory was happening for as long as public librarians were talking to library patrons about books. Even if it wasn't yet being called "readers' advisory", this type of "booktalking" and the provision of recommendations likely began in the 19th century, when public libraries were cropping up around North America.

Crowley (2005) offers a more precise timeline and argues that it is possible to envision four periods of readers' advisory history.

-1876 to 1920 – Inventing RA
-1920 to 1940 – Privileging Non-Fiction RA
-1940 to 1984 – RA "Lost" in Adult Services
-1984 to Date – Reviving RA

According to Crowley (2005), readers' advisory services, as a more formal library practice, developed in the early part of the 20th, century, and during the interwar years evolved into a service that focused on promoting "improving" reading. After World War II, readers' advisory services were less popular in public libraries, for a variety of reasons. Authors such as Catherine Sheldrick Ross (2001) have suggested that some of these included a change in emphasis to more technical aspects of librarianship and a belief in this period that perhaps patrons should not be directed in their reading. In general, readers' advisory services tended to be subsumed into a larger category of "adult services" and the practice became less common in public libraries.

As mentioned above, readers' advisory services experienced a period of rejuvenation during the 1980s. Prior to that time "readers' advisory (RA) was not the robust field that it is today. There were few resources, fewer official RA librarians and scant professional attention" (Wyatt 2014 p.24).

According to Trott (2008 p.132) the period of rejuvenation began with three major events: "the publication of the first edition of *Genreflecting* under the editorship of Betty Rosenberg (1982); the establishment of the Chicago-area Adult Reading Roundtable (ARRT) (1984); and the publication of the first edition of *Readers' Advisory Service in the Public Library* by Joyce Saricks and Nancy Brown (1989)." Crowley supports this view, arguing that the ARRT was "northern-Illinois based but nationally influential" (2005 p.39) and that it renewed interest in readers' advisory as a service librarians should be developing. This period of revival not only saw an increase in the provision of readers' advisory services in North American public libraries, but a shift in focus from non-fiction to fiction. No longer was readers' advisory meant to "improve" readers' minds and spirits but was meant to match readers with the leisure materials they sought, regardless of genre or content.

In the 21st century, readers' advisory has "moved from its second-wave renaissance during the late twentieth century…into an often underpromoted but bedrock mainstay of the public library" (Tarulli 2019 p.2). Readers' advisory services have continued to develop with the advent of various web-based tools to help librarians and library staff to provide the best and most precise recommendations to patrons.

Readers' advisory in North America has evolved significantly since its beginnings in the 19th century. What follows is a brief overview of the ways in which readers' advisory is taught to library and information science students at the postsecondary level in North America.

3.2 How readers' advisory is taught

Readers' advisory is often taught to students of library and information science at the graduate level, as well as students of library technician programmes at the community college level in North America. However, according to Anderson (2016 p.203), "since its beginnings, there has been confusion over what readers' advisory (RA) encompasses, how it should be practiced, and how it should be taught. Adult RA is an important part of modern public library service, but it is not a consistent part of modern library education or training." Not every library programme includes a course in readers' advisory, and those that do are not standardised by any governing body, such as the American Library Association.

Smith (2015) has also found that when library programmes are providing some readers' advisory education, it is often only a small part of a broader course. According to Smith (2015) most librarians are not learning how to perform readers' advisory during their educations, but rather are learning these skills on the job. Many researchers and academics find this trend troubling. Readers' advisory is widely considered to be a core service in public libraries in North America, however library education is not reflecting that importance.

Some researchers have studied how readers' advisory is practised in public libraries with the goal of discovering whether librarians with a master's degree in library and information science perform better at readers' advisory than paraprofessionals. Moyer (2005 p.226) found that in some studies, researchers have concluded that public library staff with master's degrees do not perform better than non-degreed staff at providing readers' advisory services. Moyer (2005 p.226) asserts that this finding "could have serious implications for library science education."

Researcher Loriene Roy (2010 p.357) argues that in library schools, it is important "to remember as we reaffirm our traditional services and the unique roles that librarians continue to play in meeting patron needs." Roy (2010 p.357) asserts that the future of readers' advisory education will be in the shift from a genre focus to one that "considers, more deeply, the intent of readers." What this means is that there is much more to readers' advisory than simply knowing what genres readers are interested in and learning more about their motivation in reading for pleasure. What do readers want to get out of their reading experience? This focus will improve the readers' advisory service of a library.

Looking toward the future, many researchers assert that library and information science programmes must confirm their commitment to providing good RA education to future librarians and library workers. Anderson (2016 p.203) writes that "moving forward, an improved connection between practitioners in public libraries and academics in LIS programs, as well as a profession-wide re-evaluation of the importance of RA to adult public library patrons, could finally lead RA education in a direction that will create meaningful change in the field…" (Anderson 2016 p.203).

Similarly, Trott (2012 p.62) argues that "in the best of worlds, Library and Information Science (LIS) programmes would incorporate readers' advisory as an integral piece of all introductory reference classes, as well as offering stand-alone readers' advisory classes for students interested in pursuing this area in more depth." Other researchers have found that LIS students do particularly well when there is a practical component to readers' advisory courses, such as having students organise an RA event (Roy 2012). Library and information science programmes would do well to offer more classes dedicated to readers' advisory, preferably with a practical element involved.

Public libraries and academics must work together to ensure that library education reflects the

importance of readers' advisory in modern public libraries.

3.3 How readers' advisory is practised in public libraries

According to Keren Dali (2013 p.507), a prominent RA researcher, "the practice of readers' advisory (RA) has been a crucial and integral part of public libraries' mission and daily activities in North America since the late nineteenth century." There have been several studies exploring the ways in which readers' advisory is practised in public libraries in North America. In 2013, Library Journal and NoveList surveyed RA librarians to uncover the state of RA service in North America, and then conducted a second study eight years later. The second study found "that RA service has become an embedded and expected service in libraries. 92 percent of respondents state that RA is either very important (60 percent) or important (32 percent) in their work" (Wyatt 2021 p.26). According to this study, "25 percent of respondents reported an increase in RA demand, while 39 percent report that there has been a slight increase" (Wyatt 2021 p. 31). Clearly, readers' advisory is a service that many patrons expect and that library workers feel is an important element of their work.

Readers' advisory as it is practised in contemporary North American libraries is meant to be non-judgemental and no longer elitist. Lawrence (2017) examined whether this is true in practice and found that there are still some elements of elitism in readers' advisory, despite the goal of being populist. Even the act of promoting reading itself could be interpreted as a type of "taste elevation" by preferring reading over other leisure activities. However, readers' advisors can endeavour to keep in mind that RA should be a non-judgemental and non-elitist activity to provide the best service to the patron.

Many in the library sector have come to believe that the main function of libraries is no longer simply to offer access to its collections. Kann-Rasmussen (2015) has argued that libraries must become more than simply their collections in order to thrive in a more connected, technological environment. One way that libraries are transforming is the shift from "collections to connections." Readers' advisory services are a way to increase engagement with patrons. The promotion of reading and the arts in people's lives is referred to as audience development and this practice of audience development can play an important role in keeping libraries relevant.

The most traditional, and most common form of readers' advisory is performed in-person, and face-to-face. Several researchers, including May (2000) have conducted experiments by sending undercover library students or researchers into libraries to pose as patrons and ask for book recommendations via this type of RA interview. May (2000) found that some library workers expressed annoyance at being asked to provide RA. Others were willing to perform RA but were uneasy about their ability to do it well. Out of 54 visits, only 3 library workers provided RA and then asked for feedback. Similarly, Moyer (2005 p.226) found that "most readers' advisory transactions fail to fully meet readers' needs." According to these experiments, public libraries are not performing particularly well at readers' advisory.

Catherine Sheldrick Ross of Western University also sent library students out to ask for readers' advisory services at local libraries. Ross (2001) and her students also found that many library staff were not comfortable providing RA services. Other researchers have also explored the reasons why some librarians and library workers are not comfortable providing RA services to patrons. Chase (2020) found that one of the largest obstacles to providing RA services was a fear of failure on the part of the staff member. Chase offers encouragement to library staff by stressing that RA is about the joy of discovery, and the importance of engaging with patrons, rather than providing "perfect" recommendations. Ross (2001) provides similar recommendations, suggesting that librarians can improve their RA services by gauging the reader's mood and by keeping up with publishing trends.

Readers' advisory can be practised and promoted through public library websites, and this type of activity is increasing in its prevalence. Burke (2015) conducted a study of over 300 public libraries in the United States to determine what libraries were offering patrons in terms of RA services via their websites. Burke (2015) looked for RA activities on library websites such as: book club announcements, new book alerts, specific readers' advisory pages, requests for patron reviews, RA blogs, and reading lists from staff. Most libraries sampled had at least one of these items, typically book club-related. All other items on the list were found on fewer than 20% of library websites. The authors found that several variables made it more likely that a library would have RA items on its website, including the presence of ALA-MLS librarians, larger size of a library and an urban rather than rural location. Burke (2015) also found that librarians reported enthusiastic responses from patrons to their RA endeavours online. However, librarians reported that time and resource constraints hindered their ability to provide RA online.

Some readers' advisors make use of the many computer-based tools meant to help match readers with the leisure reading they seek. Bartlett (2015) has found that there are many book recommendation websites, including Goodreads, LibraryThing, The Reading Room, Libib, What Should I Read Next? and whichbook, which all have various strengths and weaknesses. Despite the ready availability of so many computer-based tools, many researchers have found that library staff are often reluctant to use them during an RA interview.

Many libraries have success with readers' advisory that is form-based. Sievert (2018) has discussed a project called Book Matchmaking at an academic library that received positive feedback and ended up encouraging more engagement with the library. Wright (2011) examined a particular form-based readers' advisory tool that was offered at a library in the United States. It was in the form of a wiki, so it could be edited by multiple staff members to provide reading recommendations. It was well-used and received positive feedback from patrons. Form-based readers' advisory can be an excellent way to reach patrons who might be hesitant to approach a staff member, patrons who are unable to come into the library, and "virtual RA might even help bridge any schisms between your "book people" and your "tech people" (Wright 2011 p.9).

Some readers' advisors also use social media to promote and improve their readers' advisory services. Social media can be used to promote active readers' advisory services available at a library and can also be used to display passive readers' advisory, such as read-alike lists and staff picks. Some libraries post "unboxing" videos of new books being revealed. These types of social media posts can increase interest in a library and engagement with its patrons. Anwyll (2013) discusses social media and readers' advisory and finds that public libraries in New Zealand had some success in promoting their readers' advisory services when they used engaging efforts such as posting book covers online.

Readers' advisory, as it is practised in North American public libraries today, leaves something to be desired. The following section will explore some possible directions for the future of RA.

3.4 Future plans, pre-pandemic

As mentioned above, one of the barriers staff experience in providing good readers' advisory services is in feeling intimidated or inadequate. Many researchers have suggestions for helping staff to overcome this obstacle and to feel more confident in their RA abilities. Spratford (2016) suggests that creating a culture of casual readers' advisory conversations in a library can help library staff to practice with one another without the pressure of an RA interview with a patron. Spratford writes that "if you want your staff to be proactive in matching patrons with leisure reading/viewing items, you need to let them

practice so that their skills and confidence can grow." (Spratford 2016 p.8). Management must create a culture where staff are allowed to spend time speaking casually with one another about what they are watching and reading, essentially creating a culture of "booktalking" to improve everyone's readers' advisory skills. This culture building can be difficult in very small libraries or library branches. Tarulli (2017) offers suggestions to library workers in small libraries and proposes reaching out to wider networks of professionals when possible and to talk to one's community of users as much as possible to remain in the habit of "booktalking." While it can be tempting to cut short interactions when there are other tasks to complete, interacting with patrons is an effective way to keep readers' advisory skills sharp.

Keren Dali is one of the most prominent researchers in the subject area of readers' advisory, and Dali (2015) suggests that one way to move the practice forward is to change the terminology from "readers' advisory" to "Reading Experience (RE) librarianship." According to Dali (2015 p.259) "the new terminology will be more reflective of the work that reader service librarians currently do" and will "serve as an imperative and a motivator to further transform reader services from in-house interactions with and programs for avid readers into a true community engagement, with much broader goals, scope and reach."

One important area for future development in readers' advisory is in helping readers who speak languages other than English (and French in Canada). Many readers' advisors in North America have expressed frustration in not being able to provide good-quality readers' advisory services to populations who read in other languages. Bolick (2015) found that library workers surveyed found it difficult to help these patrons and felt frustrated. Better multilingual resources (web-based or otherwise) are an area for development and exploration in readers' advisory circles. Trott (2008 p.133) also asserts that serving non-English speakers well is an important area for development and suggests that public libraries begin by providing reading lists and other forms of passive readers' advisory as a first step.

Another area for development could be in incorporating user-generated content into OPACs, to add readers' advisory content into online catalogues. User generated content could be book reviews, such as the reader book reviews posted on social media sites such as Goodreads. Pecoskie (2014 p.432) explored this and argued that "it is necessary to explore the implication of user-generated content for readers' advisory, to strengthen RA services and to benefit readers who have become accustomed to sharing and benefiting from other users' suggestions." Many readers look to users' reviews before deciding whether to read a new book. Incorporating these reviews into a library's OPAC could add a valuable service to a library's catalogue. Adding user-generated reviews to OPACs provides "a rich data set that clearly connects to RA access points and, as such, has possible implications for users and RA professionals, as both of these parties can use them for RA-related decisions that are more informed and relevant to their pleasure reading and work, respectively" (Pecoskie 2014 p.451). Spiteri (2016) has also examined user-generated content in library catalogues and argues that user-generated reviews can greatly assist library staff in selecting items that correspond to a reader's interests.

A similar area for development of readers' advisory is in crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is the practice of obtaining information on a task from many people, typically over the internet. Schwartz (2021) has discussed ways in which librarians could come together to crowdsource as a means of improving everyone's readers' advisory services. Schwartz believes that this would mean "letting content out of the vendors' walled gardens, allowing libraries to make the RA work they host on each site searchable not only by other users of that platform but by users of any platform" (Schwartz 2021 p.8). Schwartz states plainly that this would likely take many years to achieve and would entail many challenges, both technical and legal, but that it would greatly improve RA services.

Another area of rapid change in readers' advisory is the blurring of gender lines, particularly among younger readers. Brendler (2014) argues that literature was once written, recommended, and analysed in terms of very strict cultural ideas about femininity and masculinity, but that these gender lines are no longer so stark. Brendler (2014) argues that if readers' advisors are to provide excellent service to patrons, it is best to discard these traditional ideas about gender when making recommendations.

In terms of engaging younger readers, a future endeavour for public libraries could be to participate in "Booktok" which is a reading community on the social media app TikTok. Merga (2021) believes that Booktok could be an effective way to attract young readers and to provide RA services to teenage patrons. Further research in this area could go into how these interventions are received by young patrons and whether they are indeed working to increase engagement.

In terms of collections, many libraries have moved toward 'genrefying' their fiction collections. Rather than having all fiction titles together and organised by author's surname, some libraries are moving toward a bookstore model, where titles are grouped together by genre. Sweeney (2013) found that when fiction was sorted into genres in their collection, the librarian was better able to track which genres were circulating and where there were gaps in the collection. Readers' advisory also improved because many patrons read only certain genres and it is easier to direct them to the right books in a 'genrefied' library.

3.5 The COVID-19 pandemic and readers' advisory

As mentioned above, the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent event that is ongoing at the time of this writing. Only a few research papers have been published to date on the topic of readers' advisory and the pandemic, but these will be discussed here. Stapleton (2021 p.15) observes that "as seen in 1918, and again now with COVID-19, library personnel have had to figure out how to navigate crises on the fly" and that they have done so admirably. Most public libraries have managed to continue to serve their communities well despite restrictions.

Ayeni (2021 p.88) remarked in their review of library services during the pandemic, that libraries "are providing several services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to meet the changing needs of their users" and found that this pivot was undertaken very quickly by most libraries. In a review of the response of Australian public libraries during the pandemic, Garner (2021 p.121) found "innovations in service provision" and stated that "their ability to work with agility and innovation to meet the evolving needs of their users during a crisis such as the COVID-19 library closures was a positive and impressive response from…public libraries."

In her article "One Year In: A Survey of Public Services Librarians on the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic", Todorinova (2021) explores the various ways in which the pandemic and its restrictions have affected public services librarians in the United States. While this article does not explore readers' advisory services in particular, some of its observations are applicable to that area of library service. Todorinova (2021) finds that the pandemic's effects have been widespread but have affected certain libraries and workers more harshly. Some libraries have been able to pivot more easily to online service, while others have struggled to make that change, often due to funding challenges. Some workers have been able to work from home safely, while others have had to come into work throughout the pandemic, despite the health risks. The pandemic has also increased worker stress levels. The author concludes by saying that it is too soon to know whether the pandemic will lead to a permanent shift in the ways in which libraries operate (e.g., more online engagement), but that it is certainly possible that this massive

event could have lasting effects of this nature.

Wahler (2022) explored one public library system and its patrons during the COVID- 19 pandemic. Wahler expects that as the pandemic runs its course, many library patrons will resume their former activities but that others will likely never go back completely to their former library habits. For this reason, libraries must continue to adapt and to offer some services and programmes in alternative formats, most notably online. This includes readers' advisory services, which can be provided online to meet patrons' needs.

A related study explored how public libraries used one social media platform, Twitter, in order to provide services to patrons. Alajmi (2021) found that New York City public libraries used this platform to engage with patrons, often with readers' advisory services, and that this continuation of service provision during the early stages of the pandemic helped to bring a sense of normality to patrons during a highly stressful and isolating time.

In the article "Readers' Advisory and the Pandemic", Lockley discusses the ways in which the pandemic and resulting quarantines affected how public libraries delivered readers' advisory services. Lockley (2021) found that public libraries had adapted by offering various readers' advisory services online, such as book groups via Zoom, form-based RA, cataloguing with elements of RA incorporated, and collection development informed by the pandemic (i.e., more funding for e-books).

While the COVID-19 pandemic is still ongoing, it will undoubtedly have effects upon societies in general for years and decades to come. Ciric (2021 p.54) remarks that "the devastating effects of pandemic outbreaks have, paradoxically, often paved the way for scientific and economical advancements" and that these advancements could help ensure the longevity of libraries. If public libraries can continue adapting their services to this "new normal" they may be better able to survive and thrive in a changing global landscape.

3.6 Conclusion

This literature review has provided a broad overview of the published research on the topic of readers' advisory. The following chapter will outline the methods taken in this research project in order to meet its aim and objectives.

4.0 Methodology

This chapter explores the methodological approaches chosen for this research project. This section will discuss the benefits of the mixed-methods approach, as well as the development of the data collection instruments.

4.1 Selection of research methods

For this research paper, a mixed-methods approach was selected as the most appropriate one. The first two research aims of this project could be achieved using a quantitative tool such as a questionnaire. These two aims (to determine whether southern Ontario public libraries have responded to COVID-19 pandemic measures by changing the ways in which they offer readers' advisory services to the public and to determine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the frequency or volume of patron demand for readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries) are measurable using a quantitative

instrument.

However, the nature of this research question benefits from qualitative methods as well. In particular, the third research aim (to determine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the type of book recommendations being requested by patrons in southern Ontario public libraries), is better explored using a qualitative tool, such as a more in-depth interview with readers' advisory providers. A mixed-methods approach such as this is intended to achieve a deeper understanding of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon readers' advisory services in Ontario public libraries.

More than one definition of mixed-methods research exists. However, most definitions agree that "researchers must deliberately combine two or more (usually qualitative and quantitative) research methods in a single study to provide the most comprehensive means of addressing the research problem and questions at hand" (Hayman 2020 p.108). In the case of this study, a questionnaire was first administered, followed by a more in-depth interview, in order to acquire more detailed information from participants. According to Hayman (2020 p.108), "mixing methods increases our ways of viewing issues, providing more evidence than we would using a single method." The questionnaire administered for this study produced valuable and interesting data, but there were many aspects of this research question that could only be explored fully via an interview.

4.2 Questionnaire

In library and information science research, "one of the most common approaches…is a large-scale survey followed up by a more detailed case study" (Pickard 2013 p.18). For this study, a similar approach was selected. A large-scale survey was designed to discover whether the COVID-19 pandemic had altered readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries, and if so, in what specific ways. This section outlines the development, distribution and analysis of this research instrument.

4.2.1 Selecting the questionnaire platform

For the data collection process, Jisc Online Surveys was selected as the most suitable tool for creating and distributing the questionnaire. Unlike some other survey building tools, Jisc is more secure and is better able to protect users' data.

Jisc allows the user to make certain questions mandatory, it allows a wide range of options for question format, including grids, Likert scales, multiple choice and multiple response formats. Jisc allows users to open with a definition (as was done in this case) and to close the questionnaire with a word of thanks. A progress bar allows respondents to see how far along they are in the survey process.

One major benefit of Jisc Online Surveys is that the account is linked to Robert Gordon University, which adds a level of legitimacy and may reassure hesitant respondents that the research is being overseen and approved by an academic institution.

Before launching a survey, there is an option to preview it so that any issues can be addressed before it is distributed. Once the questionnaire has been finalised, there is an option to set open and close dates and times. Jisc then provides the user with a custom URL which can be sent out to respondents. This makes responding simple and easy, as it is necessary only to click on the link to begin the survey.

Once the questionnaire has closed, the analyse function allows the user to see the results of the survey and to export those results into different software programmes, such as Excel or SPSS.

For all of these reasons, Jisc Online Surveys was an excellent tool for the development and distribution of the first data collection tool, the questionnaire.

4.2.2 Developing the questionnaire

In developing the questionnaire, it became clear that the survey should begin with a definition of readers' advisory, so that respondents would not be unsure about the meaning of the term. Not all library staff are provided with readers' advisory training, so it was important to be sure that respondents were approaching the questionnaire with an adequate understanding of the term.

The definition provided at the beginning of the questionnaire reads: "For the purposes of this study, 'readers' advisory' is defined as the act of matching books with readers. Reading recommendations can be active (e.g. conducting a reference interview and providing specific recommendations based on a reader's preferences) or passive (e.g. putting up book displays).

The first section of the survey is titled "About You" and its function is to glean some information about the respondent's position within the library, the number of years the respondent has worked in public libraries and their level of familiarity with and confidence in providing readers' advisory services. For the first question, "What is your role at the public library where you work?", respondents were provided with a free text box to specify their specific role. There are many different titles in public libraries, so in this case, free text was the most appropriate option for responses.

The second question, "How long have you worked in public libraries?" provided respondents with ranges of years from which to choose. This question was intended to help the researcher to determine whether library workers might become more confident in their readers' advisory skills over time spent working at a public library. The third question, "Have you taken part in any formal readers' advisory training?" provided four possible responses to the respondent: "Yes", "No", "Unsure" and "Prefer not to answer". This question was included in order to determine how many library staff learn readers' advisory skills through formal education or training, vs. "learning on the job." The option "Unsure" allows for respondents who have perhaps forgotten whether they have taken formal readers' advisory courses. The option "Prefer not to answer" was provided in this and several more cases throughout the questionnaire in order to allow respondents to choose not to provide a response for reasons of privacy or confidentiality but feel that they could still continue to fill out the questionnaire.

The next question in this first section would only appear if respondents selected "Yes" out of the previous question's answer options. Question 3a reads: "If you answered yes, where did you complete this training (click all that apply)? The purpose of this question was to determine how many library workers are learning readers' advisory techniques and skills in a formal, post-secondary educational setting, how many were participating in workplace training or learning on one's own. This question allowed for multiple responses, since many library staff learn readers' advisory skills in school, and then go on to complete workplace training later in their careers.

The next question, 3.a.i.: "If you selected Other, please specify" allows respondents to respond in a free text box. Respondents can elaborate on all of the scenarios in which they have learned their readers' advisory skills and techniques. This question only appears if the respondent selected "Other" to the previous question.

The final question in the "About You" section is this: "How confident do you feel in your ability to

provide readers' advisory services to library patrons?" This question was included to determine the level of confidence respondents felt in their abilities, and they were provided five possible answers on a Likert scale, ranging from "Not at all confident" to "Very confident."

The second section of the questionnaire is titled "Readers' Advisory at Your Library" and its function was to determine which readers' advisory services are being offered by public libraries, and whether these have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The first question in this section is as follows: "In your current role at the library, do you provide active reader's advisory services one-on-one with patrons?" Active readers' advisory was included in the definition at the beginning of the questionnaire, to be sure that no respondents were unclear about the meaning of that term. Respondents could choose "yes", "no", "unsure" or "prefer not to answer." Unsure was included in case respondents were still unclear about the meaning of active readers' advisory, despite the definition included in the questionnaire.

The next question was dependent upon a "yes" response. Question 5.a. was: "If you answered yes, are you offering this service more or less frequently since the COVID- 19 pandemic began?" Responses were on a scale from "less frequently" to "more frequently" with an option to respond "unsure."

The next question asked, "In your current role at the library, do you put together book displays as a form of passive readers' advisory?" As with active readers' advisory, the term "passive readers' advisory" was defined for respondents at the beginning of the questionnaire. The follow-up question, as above, was dependent upon a "yes" response and allowed respondents to indicate whether that activity had increased in frequency, remained constant, or decreased in frequency. As ever, respondents could also choose "unsure."

Question 7 asked "In your current role at the library, do you put forward staff picks or staff recommendations as a form of passive readers' advisory?" The follow-up question again asked about the frequency of this service in relation to COVID-19.

Question 8 read: "In your current role at the library, do you put together read-alike lists (e.g. If you loved this, you might like that) as a form of passive readers' advisory?" The follow up question again asked about frequency.

Question 9 asked "In your current role at the library, do you provide reading recommendations in response to submission of an online form?" The follow-up question again related to the frequency of this service.

Question 10 asked "Did your library put any new readers' advisory services in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. online form due to lockdowns and library closures)?" Respondents could choose "Yes", "No", "Unsure" and "Prefer not to answer."

The penultimate question asked, "If your library began offering a new readers' advisory service due to the pandemic, what was that service?" Respondents were provided with a free-text box to record their responses.

The final question was "In your opinion, is your library offering adequate readers' advisory services?" Here respondents were given the options of "Yes", "No", "Unsure" and "Prefer not to answer."

4.2.3 Sampling

The population sampled for this project was southern Ontario public library staff members. Due to the sheer size of the province of Ontario, and the limitations of this research project, only southern Ontario public library staff were surveyed. The researcher is employed at a southern Ontario public library, and therefore had greater access to other staff members due to personal and professional connections.

All staff members were eligible to complete the survey. The questionnaire was not limited to, say, public service or reference staff only. The reason for this is that in small libraries in particular, all members of a public library staff interact with the public and are called on to perform readers' advisory services, regardless of their positions or roles. Even in medium-sized libraries, all staff members, including CEOs and branch managers, often work on a reference desk periodically and are asked to perform readers' advisory for patrons. For these reasons, all library staff were sampled.

The sampling method used for this research project was convenience sampling. This was the most appropriate method given the time and resource restraints of the researcher. Simple random sampling was not considered feasible for this project, as it was not possible to acquire a complete and accurate list of all public library staff in southern Ontario.

4.2.4 Piloting the questionnaire

Once the questionnaire was written but before it was distributed to respondents, it was piloted among select staff members of the Collingwood Public Library in Collingwood, Ontario. This location was most convenient as it is the place of employment of the researcher. Staff at this library who regularly serve patrons at the circulation desk filled out the questionnaire and offered feedback. Five pilot questionnaires were sent out and all five were completed. Further, all five pilot questionnaire respondents provided feedback to the researcher. The researcher's supervisor, Dr. Alan MacLennan, also reviewed the questionnaire and provided feedback. Ultimately, only question nine was rephrased for greater clarity. Otherwise, the questionnaire was not altered before being distributed.

4.2.5 Distributing the questionnaire

The questionnaire was first distributed to staff working for public libraries in the Simcoe County Library Co-Operative, a consortium of twenty-eight libraries and branches in the county of Simcoe. To increase the chances of staff responding and completing the questionnaire, a letter was sent to CEOs and branch managers, asking for their support for a staff member conducting research for a master's dissertation. This letter was written by the researcher's employer.

Public library staff are often overworked, and this strategy was used to encourage staff to spend a few minutes responding to questions in order to help a researcher to discover how the COVID-19 pandemic had affected local libraries and to help to contribute to the body of knowledge in this field. No incentives, such as draws for gift cards, were considered for this research project. The intention was for library staff to respond without any further persuasion.

After staff of the Simcoe County Library Co-Operative were contacted, the CEOs of public libraries in other parts of southern Ontario were contacted by email. Several CEOs and branch managers emailed back to say that they approved of the researcher's objectives and would distribute the questionnaire to their staff members. Not all CEOs and branch managers responded, however. After two attempts, the

researcher moved on and did not attempt further contact, due to time constraints and the desire to maintain friendly professional relationships.

The questionnaire was open from November 5th until November 26th, 2021. In all, there were 78 responses from southern Ontario public library staff. While the researcher's objective was to obtain 100 responses, the final number was high enough to draw some preliminary conclusions about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries.

4.2.6 Analysing the questionnaire responses

None of the questions in the questionnaire were pre-coded, as there were no scales involved (e.g. 1 representing strongly agree and 5 representing strongly disagree). Most of the questionnaire responses were instead post-coded, with set responses given numerical values.

Once all of the questions were coded, they were imported into Excel. Results will be discussed in detail in the analysis chapter of this report.

4.3 Interviews

It was decided that follow-up interviews would be conducted with some of the questionnaire respondents. A longer-form interview would provide the researcher with more nuanced information about the impact that COVID-19 has had upon the provision of readers' advisory in southern Ontario public libraries.

Long form interviews "are used frequently in information and library research" (Pickard 2013 p.196) and allow researchers to acquire qualitative data to supplement the quantitative data collected in a mixed-method research project.

Unstructured interviews allow interviewees to speak freely, with little to no direction or interference from interviewers. Structured interviews follow a very strict script and do not allow interviewees much room to speak freely beyond the confines of the interviewer's parameters. However, "between these extreme poles it is possible to design an interview that is appropriate to the topic of the research, the nature of the participant and the experience of the researcher" (Pickard 2013 p.196). This is the semi-structured interview, which provides the interviewer with questions to ask a subject, while allowing the interviewee to elaborate when they would like to do so. Semi-structured interviews provide the best of both worlds, in the sense that they allow an interviewer to remain in control, and to ask all of their intended questions, while allowing the conversation to flow in interesting directions. For this reason, a semi-structured interview format was chosen for this research project.

4.3.1 Sampling and contacting participants

The researcher contacted the CEOs and Branch Managers who had responded positively to the initial email regarding the questionnaire and asked whether staff may be interested in participating in a longer interview regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries. Only three CEOs/Branch Managers responded to this email, indicating that some of their staff might be willing to participate. The researcher acquired a list of ten potential interview subjects and emailed them to ask them to participate. Out of those ten, three participated in an interview. The low response rate of CEOs and Branch Managers, as well as potential interviewees, can be explained by the high rate of stress, exhaustion and burnout at this point in the pandemic. As of this

writing, Ontario is experiencing a very high rate of new infections due to the Omicron variant, and new restrictions are in place. Unfortunately, this coincidence could not be avoided, as the timeline for the research was set out last year, well before there was a highly infectious variant spreading through the province. The researcher also did not provide any incentives for participants, which may have affected participation rates.

4.3.2 Interview themes and methodology

The follow-up interviews were designed to gather more in-depth information about the nature of readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews were also designed to follow-up on interesting themes that were discovered during the analysis of the questionnaires. For instance, many respondents felt confident performing readers' advisory services, but it wasn't clear whether that confidence came from taking courses or training, or whether staff developed that confidence by performing readers' advisory on the job. Question 2 of the interview was intended to find out more about this topic.

One of the objectives of this research was to not only discover whether the number of readers' advisory interactions has increased, decreased, or remained steady, but to discover whether the nature of those readers' advisory interactions has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was an objective that could not be adequately explored in the questionnaire. Therefore, question 4 of the interviews asked whether the interviewee performs readers' advisory services and, as a follow-up question, whether they have noticed any differences in the types of materials patrons are requesting.

The questionnaire asked respondents whether their libraries were offering certain readers' advisory services more or less frequently since pandemic began. The interview follows up by asking the interviewee whether they believe that any change in frequency is due to patron demand or not. Libraries might be offering more passive readers' advisory options (such as online forms), but it is difficult to know whether libraries are doing so due to patron demand or on their own initiative.

Another element of readers' advisory that was not possible to ascertain with any nuance is the issue of feedback. Question 7 of the interview asks whether the library is receiving feedback from patrons regarding their readers' advisory services. Are patrons satisfied with their RA offerings? Are they demanding more?

Question 7 of the interview was meant to learn more about whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had a detrimental or positive effect upon the interviewee's library overall, and whether it has been a challenge or an opportunity to adapt and grow. Questions 8 and 9 were meant to look toward the future and to help the researcher to develop some evidence-based recommendations for libraries going forward. These questions asked interviewees about ways in which their libraries could potentially improve their RA services, and about how libraries in general can continue to adapt and offer excellent RA services to patrons.

The researcher encouraged interviewees to speak freely about their experiences with readers' advisory during the interviews. The researcher maintained a neutral facial expression and avoided body language that could be perceived as encouraging certain responses, such as smiling and nodding when an interviewee gave a particular response. The interviewer also encouraged the interviewees to speak at length about their experiences and to elaborate as much as possible. Some interviewees were more willing to elaborate than others, and it was difficult to encourage more detailed responses without

seeming to be prompting or encouraging a certain response. Avoiding bias or leading questions was a challenge. Adding prompts to the questions, such as, "please describe that experience" helped to maintain this impartiality while encouraging more elaboration.

4.3.3 Analysing the interviews

The interviews were transcribed and analysed with the interviewees' written permission. Interviewees were explicitly told that they were free to change their minds about participating in the interview if they had any objections. Participants were also given the opportunity to review the transcripts to ensure that they had not been misinterpreted or misrepresented during the interview process. All of the interviewees signed a consent form and agreed to participate.

Interview responses were transcribed verbatim, and each transcript was analysed in order to find key themes emerging from these interviews. Open coding was used to initially analyse the interviews, since it was not clear which themes would be explored prior to the interviews being conducted. Open coding allowed the interview to explore each interview without any preconceived ideas about what themes might emerge, and to create some tentative labels for these themes based on the interviewees' responses.

Full analysis of the interviews can be found in the following chapter of this report.

5.0 Analysis and findings

This chapter will cover the analysis of the questionnaire and the follow-up interviews.

5.1 Analysis of the questionnaire responses

In total, 78 southern Ontario public library staff responded to the questionnaire. Respondents were asked about their roles at their libraries, their length of tenure at their libraries, and their experiences with readers' advisory education and training. They were also asked about readers' advisory practices at their libraries and the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on those practices.

5.1.1 Roles within library and length of tenure

Of the 78 respondents, 75 provided a position title or a description. The questionnaire provided a free text box for respondents to fill in their own roles or position titles. As public libraries in Ontario do not have a standard set of roles, it was decided that a free text box would be the best option to accurately capture the various positions respondents might occupy at their libraries. There were many different position titles used by respondents. To simplify and clarify these responses, various position titles were grouped together. For instance, in southern Ontario public libraries, the roles of "Library Assistant" and "Public Services Clerk" are virtually indistinguishable. These staff members work at a circulation desk and perform front-line duties. For these reasons, these positions were grouped together. In some libraries, children and teen services are separate departments, but in small libraries, they are coordinated by one staff member. For this reason, children and teen services roles were grouped together.

Table 1: Positions held by respondents

Position	Number of Respondents
Circulation Clerk/Library Assistant	19
Children/Teen Services Coordinator	8
CEO	7
Technical Services/Cataloguer	7
Public Service Manager	7
Programmer	6
Student Collection Assistant/Page	6
Other	6
Technology Coordinator	3
Marketing Coordinator	3
Branch Manager	3

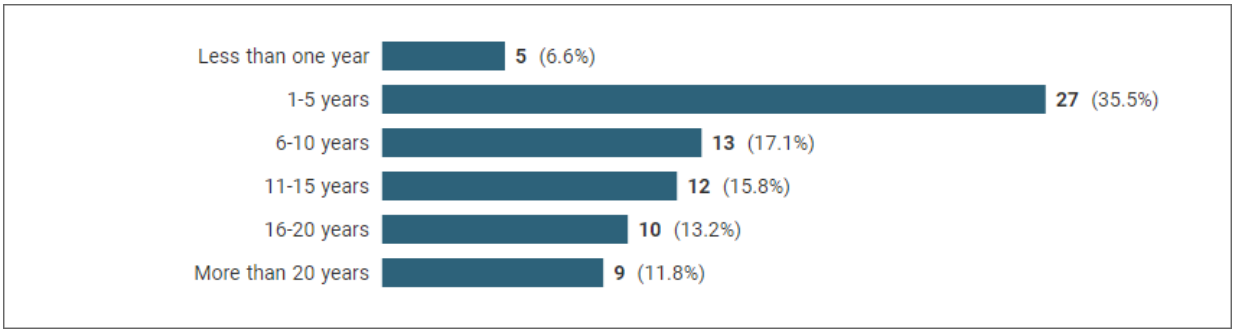
Source: Author (2022)

7 CEOs and 3 branch managers responded to the questionnaire. There were 19 circulation clerks/library assistants, and 8 children or teen services coordinators. There were 7 respondents working in technical services (or cataloguing), 7 public service managers, and 6 programmers. 6 student collection assistants or pages responded, along with 3 technology coordinators and 3 marketing coordinators. There were 6 respondents who worked a variety of roles that could not be easily categorised with other roles, such as simply "staff" or "branch staff." As previously mentioned, these are not strict or precise categories. In small libraries and library branches, staff often do a variety of work and fill many roles. These categories simply give a snapshot of the types of roles filled by the questionnaire respondents.

5.1.2 Length of time in position

The next question asked respondents how long they had been working in public libraries. The majority of respondents (35%) answered that they had been working in libraries for 1-5 years. The next most common response was 6-10 years at 17%, followed by 11-15 years at 15%, 16-20 at 13%, and more than 20 years at 12%. Only 6% of respondents indicated that they had been working in libraries for less than a year and 3% declined to answer.

Table 2: Length of time in position

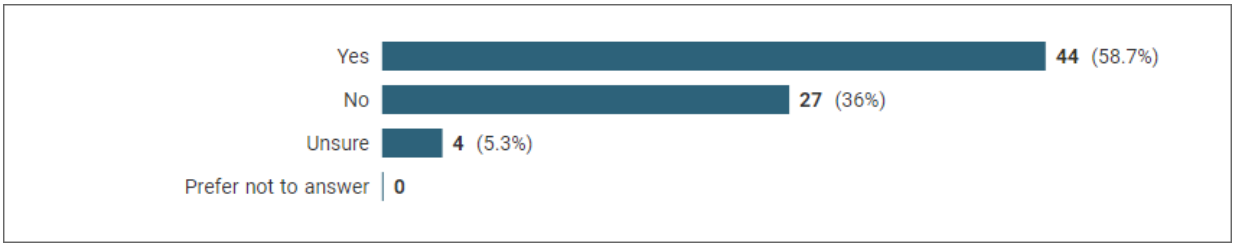


Source: Author (2022)

5.1.3 Readers' advisory training

Most respondents (58%) indicated that they had taken part in some sort of readers' advisory training. 27 respondents (36%) indicated that they had never taken part in any form of readers' advisory training at all. And 4 respondents (5%) were unsure about whether they had taken part in any kind of formal readers' advisory training.

Table 3: Formal Readers' Advisory Training

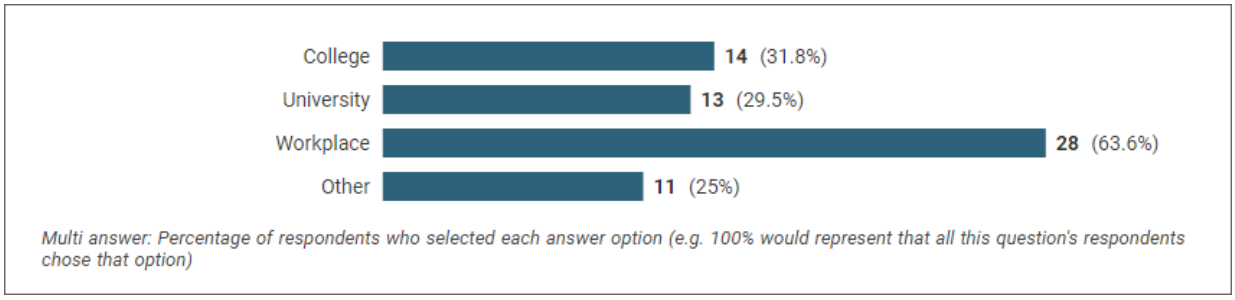


Source: Author (2022)

At first glance, it seems surprising that such a large number of public library staff have not taken part in any readers' advisory training at all. However, it should be noted that all staff were invited to participate, including casual and part-time staff. Student pages, who are secondary school students primarily tasked with shelving and collection assistance, were also invited to respond. With that in mind, it might be less surprising that so many staff had no training or education experience with readers' advisory.

Of those respondents who indicated that they had taken readers' advisory courses or training, 31% took those courses in college (which in Canada means a community college, rather than a university). Thirteen respondents (29%) took readers' advisory courses in university. And the vast majority of respondents (63%) indicated that they had participated in readers' advisory training in their workplace.

Table 4: Where respondents took their RA training



Source: Author (2022)

A further 11 respondents (25%) responded with "other" and provided follow-up information. A free-text box allowed these respondents to elaborate on where they received readers' advisory training. Popular responses included: Ontario Library Association (OLA) training, Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS) training, NoveList genre training, courses through the Dewey Divas and Dudes, and training offered at the annual OLA conference.

Table 5: Readers' Advisory Training

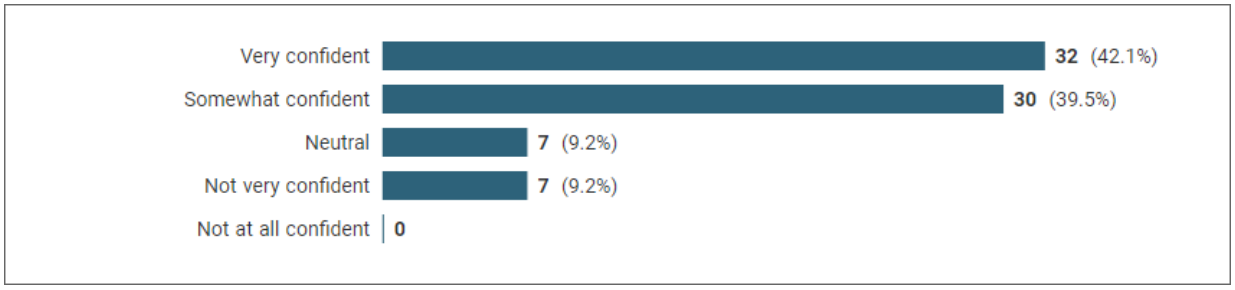
Readers' Advisory Training	Number of Respondents
SOLS/EXCEL Training	4
OLA Conference Training	3
NoveList Genre Training	2
RA in a Day (OLA)	1
Dewey Divas & Dudes	1

Source: Author (2022)

5.1.4 Confidence in providing readers' advisory services

Question 4 asked library staff about how confident they felt in providing readers' advisory services to library patrons. Respondents were provided with a Likert scale, ranging from "Very confident" to "Not at all confident" as response options. Most respondents (42%) indicated that they felt very confident providing readers' advisory services and a further (39%) felt confident. Only 9% of respondents felt neutrally about their confidence and another 9% felt not very confident. Zero respondents indicated that they felt not at all confident.

Table 6: Confidence in providing RA services



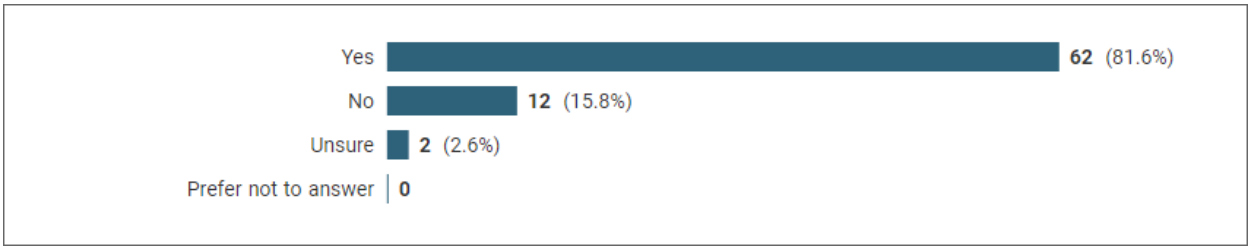
Source: Author (2022)

These results clearly show that most southern Ontario library staff sampled for this questionnaire feel confident in their readers' advisory abilities.

5.1.5 Active readers' advisory services

The next set of questions aimed to determine whether readers' advisory services have increased, decreased or remained constant during the COVID-19 pandemic. Question 5 asked respondents whether they provide active readers' advisory services one-on-one with patrons in their current roles, and the vast majority (81%) responded that yes, they did. Only 15% indicated that they did not perform this service in the course of their jobs, and 2% were unsure. While the questionnaire did include a definition of the term "active readers' advisory", it is possible that some respondents were still not certain about the meaning of this term.

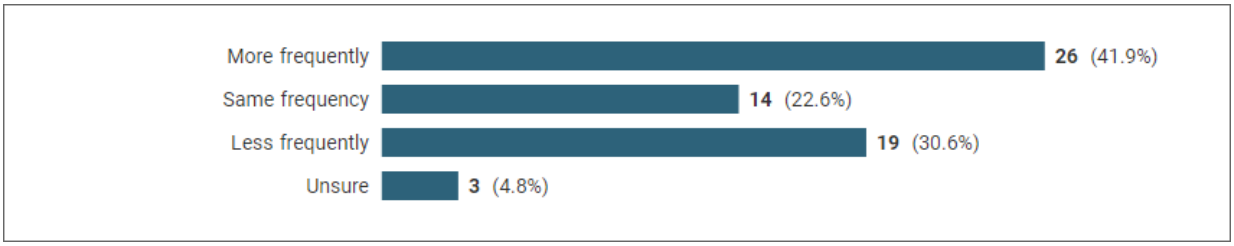
Table 7: Active readers' advisory



Source: Author (2022)

For those respondents who indicate that they did perform active readers' advisory one-on-one with patrons, there was a follow up question asking whether they believed they were performing this service more or less frequently since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Of these respondents, 41% believed that they were performing this service more frequently. By contrast, 30% of respondents believed that they were performing this service less frequently, and a further 22% believed that they were performing this service at the same rate as they were before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Table 8: Frequency of active RA services



Source: Author (2022)

It is difficult to draw any conclusions from this data since the responses across the Likert scale are so similar. It is possible that some libraries are performing more active readers' advisory with patrons because they have kept their doors open throughout the pandemic, while other libraries have been closed to the public. This possibility warrants further investigation.

5.1.6 Passive readers' advisory services

The next 4 questions (questions 6-9) asked respondents whether they perform various forms of passive readers' advisory in their current roles.

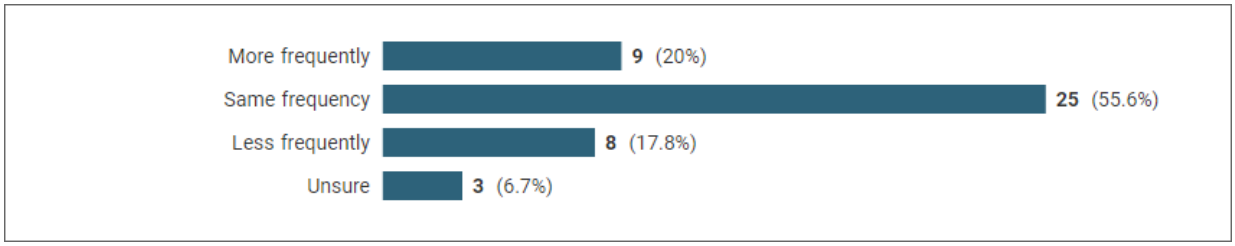
Question 6 asked staff whether they put together book displays, and the majority of respondents answered that yes, they did (59%).

Table 9: Book displays as a form of readers' advisory

Source: Author (2022)

The follow-up question (6.a) asked those respondents whether they were performing this service more or less frequently as before the COVID-19 pandemic began and the majority (55%) indicated that they were performing this service at the same rate as before the pandemic. Only 20% believed that they were performing this service more frequently, and 17% answered that they were performing this service less frequently.

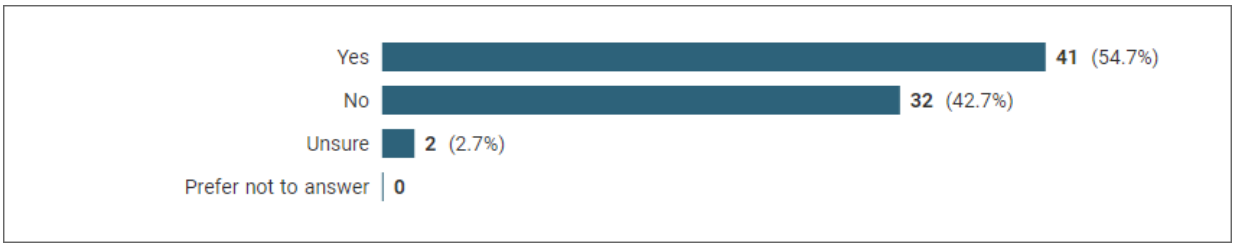
Table 10: Frequency of book displays since the pandemic began



Source: Author (2022)

Question 7 asked staff whether they put together staff picks or staff recommendations during the course of their work, and 54% of respondents indicated that they did.

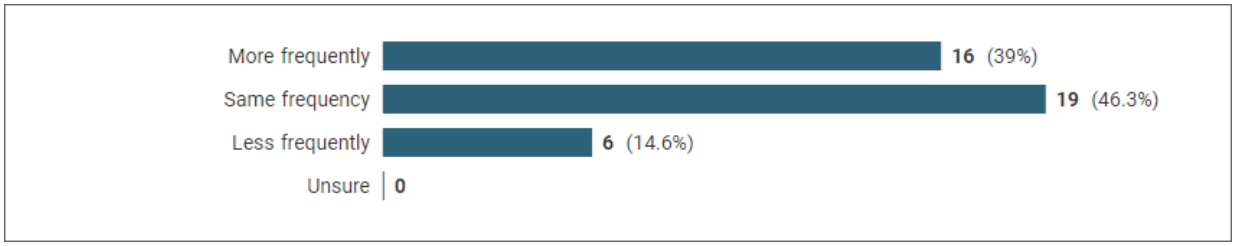
Table 11: Staff recommendations as a form of readers' advisory



Source: Author (2022)

Of those respondents, 46% believed that they were performing this service at the same rate of frequency as they were before the pandemic began. However, 39% answered that they were performing this service more frequently. Only 14% answered that they were performing this service less frequently than before the pandemic.

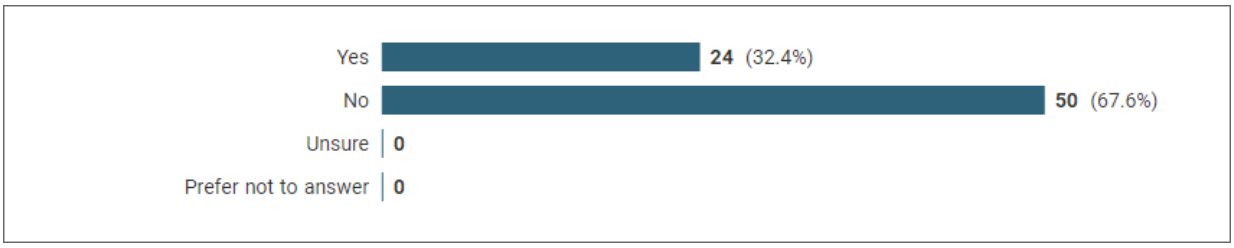
Table 12: Frequency of staff recommendations since the pandemic began



Source: Author (2022)

Question 8 asked staff whether they put together read-alike lists as a form of passive readers' advisory. Only 32% responded that they did, which is not particularly surprising. This is the most labour-intensive form of passive readers' advisory, requiring frequent updates and a large amount of staff time.

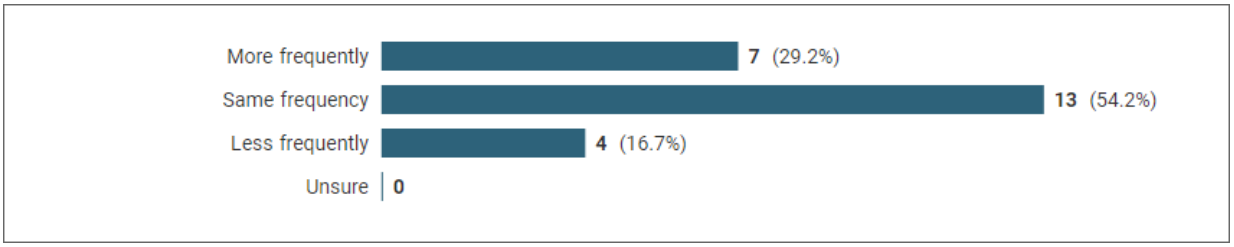
Table 13: Read-alike lists as a form of readers' advisory



Source: Author (2022)

Of the 32% of respondents who responded "yes", the majority (54%) indicated that they were performing this service at the same rate of frequency as they were before the pandemic. Perhaps what is more surprising, due to the aforementioned labour-intensive nature of the service, is that 30% of these respondents indicated that they were performing this service more frequently than they were before the pandemic.

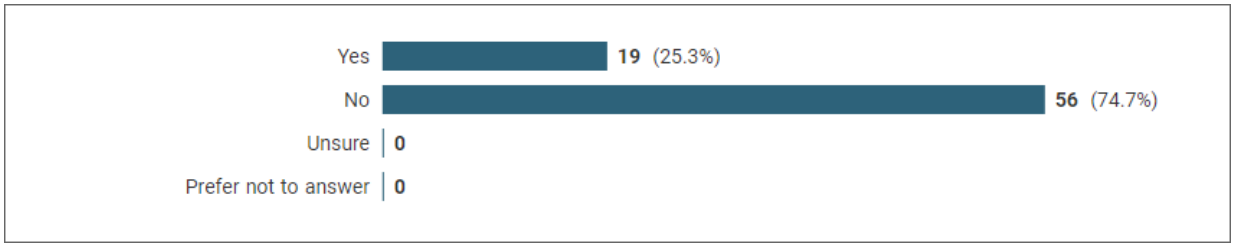
Table 14: Frequency of read-alike lists since the pandemic began



Source: Author (2022)

Question 9 yielded more interesting results, as it asked whether respondents provide reading recommendations in response to submission of an online form. Only 25% of respondents said yes, while many more (74%) said no, they did not.

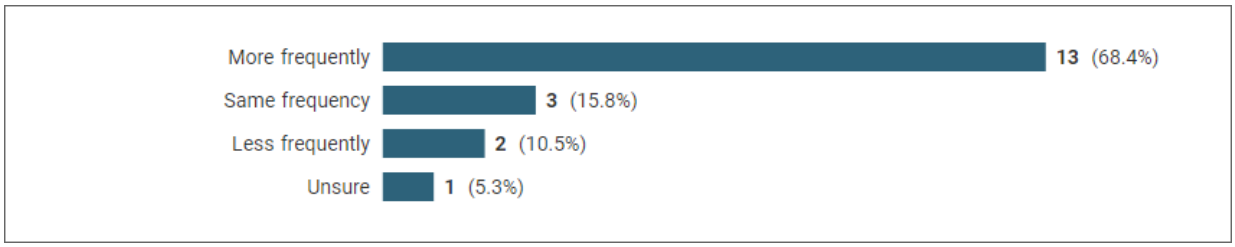
Table 15: Reading recommendations in response to an online form



Source: Author (2022)

This is not particularly surprising, as online readers' advisory services are a relatively recent development in Ontario public libraries. What is more interesting are the results of the follow up question, 9.a, which asks those respondents who indicated "yes", whether they are performing this service more or less frequently since the pandemic began. In contrast to the other forms of readers' advisory, the majority of these respondents (68%) responded that they were performing this service more frequently now. Only 10% were performing this service less frequently and 15% were performing this service at the same rate of frequency as they were before the pandemic began. It makes sense that of the various forms of passive readers' advisory, one that can be performed remotely has increased in popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 16: Frequency of reading recommendations in response to an online form

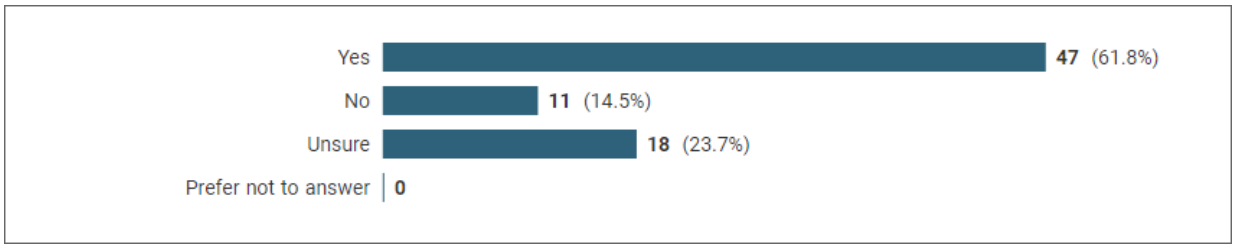


Source: Author (2022)

5.1.7 New forms of readers' advisory service during the pandemic

Question 10 asks respondents whether their library put any new readers' advisory services in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its resulting restrictions. The majority of respondents (61%) indicated that yes, their library did so. Fewer respondents (14%) said that no, their library did not put any new RA services in place, and 23% of respondents were unsure. As not all staff members work with the public or with RA services directly, it is understandable that not all staff would be aware of what RA services might have been put in place.

Table 17: New readers' advisory services put in place in response to the pandemic



Source: Author (2022)

Respondents who answered "yes" to question 10 were provided with a free-text box to elaborate on what new RA service had been put in place at their library. Common responses include: online readers'

advisory form, new read-alikes, video recommendations on social media channels such as YouTube and Instagram, curated book bags, and window displays so patrons could "window shop" for new recommendations.

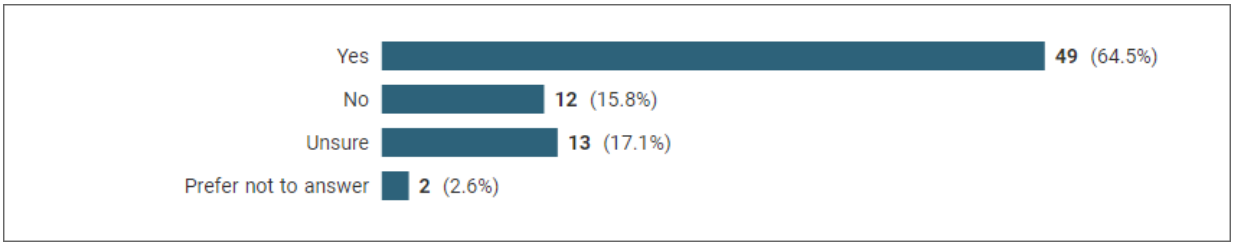
Table 18: New readers' advisory services

New Readers' Advisory Service	Number of Responses
Curated book bags	18
Online readers' advisory form	17
Other	4
Personalised recommendations by email	2
Window displays	2
Video recommendations online	1
Read-alike lists	1
RA connected to online catalogue	1
Staff book reviews on website	1
RA Newsletter	1

Source: Author (2022)

The final question, number 12, on the questionnaire was "In your opinion, is your library offering adequate readers' advisory services?" 64 percent of respondents answered that yes, in their opinion their library was offering adequate RA services. 15 percent responded in the negative, believing their library was not offering adequate RA services. A fairly large proportion (17%) of respondents were unsure, and 2 (2%) of respondents preferred not to answer the question.

Table 19: Adequacy of readers' advisory services



Source: Author (2022)

5.2 Analysis of interviews

Three Ontario public library staff were interviewed as a more in-depth follow-up to the questionnaires. The interview questions were drawn up to learn more about the themes that emerged during the analysis of the questionnaire.

All interviews were transcribed, and the analysis below is based upon the open coding that was conducted after the conclusion of the interview process. The major themes of the interviews will be discussed in greater detail below.

All of the interviewees work at southern Ontario public libraries, but in very different roles. Interviewee 1 supervises a public services/circulation desk, Interviewee 2 is a CEO who has also recently worked as a children's librarian, and Interviewee 3 coordinates adult programming.

Table 20: Interviewee Profiles

Interviewee	Information
Interviewee 1	Current supervisor of a public services department at an Ontario public library. Previous experience working in a book shop where readers' advisory is a significant part of the job.
Interviewee 2	Current CEO of an Ontario public library. Has previously worked as a children's librarian. Holds a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree from an Ontario university.
Interviewee 3	Currently the coordinator of adult programming at an Ontario public library. Previously worked for many years on the circulation desk at the same library.

Source: Author (2022)

5.2.1 Importance of readers' advisory training

This research project is concerned with the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on readers' advisory in southern Ontario public libraries, but in order to ascertain that impact, it was important to understand how southern Ontario public library staff are trained in readers' advisory. The questionnaire asked staff how confident they felt in providing readers' advisory services, but it was difficult to determine whether that confidence was in any way related to the training or education they may have received in RA practices in school. The interview was able to explore this question more deeply.

Interviewee 1 had not taken any post-secondary courses in readers' advisory. This interviewee had taken some post-secondary courses toward a library and information technician diploma, but none had

provided any readers' advisory content. This interviewee did express interest in taking one in the future, however. Interviewee 2 holds a master's degree in Library and Information Science but only had some exposure to readers' advisory during that course of study. The readers' advisory interview process was touched upon in a Reference Services course, but they did not take any courses that were specifically related to readers' advisory during that academic programme. This interviewee did not feel that this post-secondary content was particularly helpful and did not think that it increased their confidence providing RA services later in their career. Their reasoning was that in order to perform RA well, it is necessary to know your library's patrons and your library's collection. Interviewee 3 did not have any post-secondary experiences with readers' advisory.

The three interviewees also had a variety of experiences with non-post-secondary readers' advisory training. Interviewee 1 had no experience with any formal readers' advisory training. Interviewee 2 had participated in Southern Ontario Library Service (SOLS) readers' advisory training, as well as webinars and training sessions with the Dewey Divas and Dudes. Interviewee 3 had undertaken SOLS readers' advisory training as well as NoveList training.

As Interviewee 1 had no experience with RA training, they had no opinion on the value of this type of training. Interviewee 2 felt that the Dewey Divas and Dudes were able to provide good RA training but had a low opinion of other sources of training, such as NoveList. Interviewee 3 had very positive experiences with both SOLS training and NoveList and felt that they provided good preparation but did stress that that best way to improve in skill and confidence was with on-the-job experience.

There was a wide variety of training experiences with readers' advisory within this group of three interviewees. This, as we will see in the next section, does not appear to have much of an impact upon a library staff member's confidence in performing readers' advisory services in a library setting.

5.2.2 Importance of on-the-job readers' advisory practice

A similar theme to the one above is the importance of on-the-job readers' advisory practice. To determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on readers' advisory, it is important to have a complete view of how library staff feel about their training in RA services.

All three interviewees felt that on-the-job practice provided the best training to perform the job well and to improve in confidence. Interviewee 1 felt that performing RA allows one to practice making recommendations outside of one's own preferences or preferred genres. This interviewee also noted that it is possible to ask patrons for feedback, and that the process of receiving feedback is a great way to measure one's progress and to improve one's skills. Interviewee 2 again noted that the best way to improve in RA is to get to know one's patrons and one's collection. This interviewee argued that it is not possible to perform adequate readers' advisory without knowing those two elements very well. Interviewee 3 also felt that on-the-job practice is the best way to improve and said that talking to people with different preferences and expanding one's knowledge through those interactions is key to expanding one's horizons.

5.2.3 Readers' advisory practices during the pandemic

All three interviewees described shifting readers' advisory practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the aims of this research project was to determine whether libraries had changed their readers' advisory practices in some way in order to adapt to pandemic restrictions and it would appear to be the case, based on both the questionnaire responses and the interviews.

Interviewee 1 described adding a readers' advisory service on their library's website, which would allow patrons to fill out a form to receive personalised reading recommendations that they could then pick up at the library. This service was put in place as a direct result of the strict COVID-19 restrictions in Ontario in the spring of 2020, in the early stages of the pandemic. This interviewee also described having to shift some of their passive readers' advisory practices during less severe lockdowns. Once patrons were allowed back into the building, and could browse the stacks, there were still concerns about touchpoints. At this stage in the pandemic, it was still unclear whether the virus could be spread via surface touchpoints. Due to these concerns, book displays were no longer put out, but rather there were posters produced with recommendations (e.g. What to Read in September). These posters were displayed on the library's website, social media channels, and the television in the lobby of the library.

Interviewee 2 was working as a children's librarian during the early stages of the pandemic and described having to pivot from in-person readers' advisory to putting together bundles of books for patrons to pick up during lockdowns. This interviewee felt that patrons were very appreciative of these readers' advisory efforts and that most patrons expressed gratitude for including books that they might not have sought out on their own.

Interviewee 3 was already providing many readers' advisory services that were virtual before the pandemic struck. For instance, this staff member coordinated the Books on Wheels programme to provide books to older adults in residential care. In these cases, the pandemic did not have much of an impact on services as these books were still able to be dropped off to patrons. However, other readers' advisory services that this staff member was involved in, including the library book clubs, were moved online in response to pandemic restrictions. Interviewee 3 felt that most changes to their library's readers' advisory activities were put in place due to restrictions, rather than patron demand. They did mention, however, that their library did begin to provide RA services via email as a result of patron demand after the first lockdown in March of 2020.

All three interviewees felt that the readers' advisory changes at their libraries were put in place partly due to patron demand. Despite lockdowns, patrons were still requesting reading recommendations from staff and wanting staff to suggest books for them.

5.2.4 Effect of the pandemic on patrons' requests

It is difficult to determine with precision whether patrons have been seeking different types of materials as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The three interviewees had different opinions about whether patron requests had changed since the pandemic began. Interviewee 1 believed that patrons were requesting the same types of materials as they were before the pandemic began. According to this interviewee, patrons had their preferred genres and tended not to diverge very far from those preferred genres. This interview did note, however, that during lockdowns, patrons were sometimes forced to rely on staff to choose books for them, and that some patrons did try new authors or genres that they might never have sought out on their own. Interviewee 2 had a similar impression and echoed Interviewee 1's opinion that during lockdowns, patrons were so grateful to be receiving books at all, that they were more open to reading new genres or authors that staff had chosen for them. This interviewee felt that this unprecedented situation did help to broaden some patrons' horizons in this regard.

Interviewee 3 had a very different view with regard to this question. According to this staff member, in the early months of the pandemic, many patrons were requesting titles related to epidemiology, public health, and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. Then, according to this interviewee, this shifted and as

the pandemic wore on, patrons were requesting lighter titles: romances, uplifting and gentle reads, or self-help.

It is not possible to draw any conclusions from these interviews about whether patrons are requesting different titles since the beginning of the pandemic. It is interesting to consider that library closures have increased patrons' gratitude when they do receive books and that this gratitude might result in an open mind regarding new genres or authors. This could be a potential avenue for further research.

5.2.5 Challenges and opportunities created by the pandemic

Interviewees were asked about whether the pandemic had a detrimental or positive effect upon their readers' advisory services. They were also asked about the challenges and opportunities created by pandemic restrictions.

Interviewee 1 expressed a belief that the pandemic increased the use of readers' advisory services, especially during lockdown periods when patrons were unable to browse the stacks themselves. This staff member felt that pandemic restrictions had created an opportunity for staff to rethink the ways in which they had been offering readers' advisory services and to see whether there were ways to improve. For instance, an online form is a great way to offer personalised reading recommendations for patrons who are unable to browse the stacks themselves, but this service was only put in place once lockdowns made it impossible for any patron to enter the stacks.

Interviewee 2 also felt that the pandemic had provided an opportunity to improve readers' advisory services at their library. This staff member felt that their library had pivoted well to providing personalised book bundles to patrons who could not come in and choose their own books. This interviewee also expressed the belief that patrons were now reading genres that they would not have tried before, simply because they were exposed to them by the librarians putting together the book bundles.

Interviewee 3 also felt that the pandemic had presented an opportunity, rather than a challenge. This staff member felt that pandemic restrictions gave the library a chance to really come through for patrons in a way that they would appreciate. When patrons could not browse the stacks on their own, they would approach the staff at the front counter and ask for books. This helped many patrons to get over their apprehension about asking staff to help them to find books. It broke down a barrier with some of the more introverted or hesitant patrons and helped to build relationships with them. This staff member felt that the RA services offered by their library during the pandemic built a great deal of goodwill and gratitude among the public toward their library.

All three interviewees perceived the pandemic and its accompanying restrictions not as a blow to their library's RA services, but rather as an opportunity to adapt and grow. All three also felt that their libraries rose to the occasion very well and served their patrons during an extremely challenging and isolating time.

5.2.6 The future of readers' advisory

Interviewees were asked about the ways in which their libraries could improve their RA services and were also asked about how libraries in general can continue to adapt and to offer excellent readers' advisory services.

Interviewee 1 felt that their library staff were not providing consistently excellent RA services to patrons.

Some staff were quite skilled and confident while others were not. This interviewee felt that better training should be provided to staff once they began working at a library, so that they were familiar with the techniques of readers' advisory. This staff member felt that adequate training would involve teaching the different genres and authors to staff who were perhaps not readers themselves. This interviewee stressed multiple times that staff needed to keep up with genres and publishing trends to be able to make good recommendations.

Interviewee 2 felt that overall, their library's staff was providing good RA services to patrons, but still had some ideas for improvement. One initiative that this staff member was working on was a type of Bookmobile (in this case a Book-Bike) that would be able to reach members of the community who did not or could not come into the library itself. This Book-Bike would increase accessibility and would be able to reach library non-users. This expansion of the library's reach would also help to provide readers' advisory services to people who might never approach a staff member at a circulation desk.

Interviewee 2 also discussed the possibility of putting together read-alike lists that would suggest books to regular DVD-watchers and vice versa. The list would suggest books similar to popular television programmes or movies, to perhaps encourage patrons who only check out DVDs to try a book. The opposite would also be encouraged, with lists of DVDs that are similar to popular books or book series. The interviewee was hoping to bridge this gap and to help patrons to try formats they had not checked out before.

Interviewee 3 felt that their library could improve their readers' advisory culture overall. This staff member believed that their library needed a culture of booktalking with one another for all staff to be able to hone their RA skills. Interviewee 3 felt that staff should practise booktalking and making recommendations with each other and even suggested that this become a practice taking place at the end of each staff meeting: a brief discussion of what books or movies each staff member is enjoying. This could help staff to become familiar with new genres or formats.

Interviewee 3 also argued that libraries in general could improve their RA practices by encouraging staff to stay abreast of developments and trends in publishing. Overall, all three interviewees felt that their particular libraries were doing well with their RA services but that there were still areas for improvement. The three interviewees all had suggestions for libraries wanting to improve their RA services and to adapt to a changing library landscape.

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

This research project has explored the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected southern Ontario public libraries and the various ways that those libraries have endeavoured to meet this unprecedented challenge. What follows are some conclusions, discussion of limitations, potential avenues for future research and recommendations.

6.1 Conclusions

This research project met its research aim of determining whether the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on readers' advisory services in southern Ontario public libraries.

The questionnaire found that most respondents reported that they were providing as much RA or more RA to patrons since the beginning of the pandemic. The most dramatic result was around the topic of

online RA. The vast majority of respondents reported that they were seeing much more use of that type of RA since the beginning of the pandemic. According to this survey, patron demand for RA services has not decreased in southern Ontario public libraries since March of 2020.

Similarly, a large majority of respondents reported that their libraries had put a new RA service in place since the beginning of the pandemic, demonstrating that southern Ontario public libraries were attempting to adapt their RA services to the new normal. And finally, most questionnaire respondents reported that they believed that their libraries were providing good RA service to their patrons, providing further evidence that southern Ontario public libraries are adapting well to these new circumstances.

Interviewees also reported that they believed that their libraries were adapting well to COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. These interviewees elaborated further on the themes identified in the questionnaire responses and provided qualitative data that reinforced the conclusion that southern Ontario public libraries are working hard to provide good-quality RA to their patrons, despite the many challenges that came along with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The results of the questionnaire and interviews found that the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on southern Ontario public libraries, but that these libraries have risen to the challenge and continued to serve their patrons well.

In terms of the four research objectives:

1. Southern Ontario public libraries have indeed changed the ways in which they offer readers' advisory services, most by offering more RA services online and by offering curated book bags/bundles for kerbside pickup.

2. The frequency or volume of patron demand for RA has remained constant or even increased at certain libraries, according to questionnaire respondents.

3. It is unclear whether there have been any changes in the types of books requested by patrons. This would require further study.

4. Recommendations for potential next steps will be discussed below.

6.2 Limitations of the study

The scope of this research was quite limited, as discussed above. Only southern Ontario public libraries were surveyed, due to time and resource constraints, and there were only 78 respondents to the questionnaire and 3 interview subjects. Further research in this area could endeavour to sample more subjects.

The questionnaire in this study could have been improved by including a variable. For instance, it might have been useful to know whether staff who indicated that they had training in readers' advisory had higher levels of confidence in their RA skills. The questionnaire might have produced more interesting results with a variable such as this included.

It is more reasonable to draw conclusions from a simple random sample of a population, but the limitations of this study did not allow the researcher to use this sampling method. Future researchers

could use this method in order to be able to draw more reliable conclusions on this topic.

While there were limitations to this research project, it is still possible to draw some conclusions and to suggest potential for future research, as will be seen in the following section.

6.3 Potential for further research

As identified in the literature, there is not, as yet, much research into the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic may have had on readers' advisory services in public libraries, and even less research that is specific to Canada. There is scope for further research into the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on readers' advisory services generally and in the ways in which public libraries have adapted. This research only investigates a small geographic area (southern Ontario) and certainly public libraries all over the world have had to grapple with the disruptions and challenges brought by the pandemic.

Further research could investigate whether readers' advisory services or practices that were introduced during the pandemic have continued after restrictions have loosened.

6.4 Recommendations for public libraries

Based on the results of the questionnaire and the interviews, several recommendations for public libraries can be proposed.

Firstly, public libraries can work toward cultivating a culture of booktalking amongst their staff members. This type of work culture has been discussed in research papers and was mentioned by an interviewee as a way to allow staff to practice their RA skills in a low-stress, casual setting. When staff are in the habit of discussing what they are reading, watching and enjoying, they practice their readers' advisory skills and learn to make recommendations to others and to gather feedback in a low-stakes manner. They are also exposed to various genres and tastes that differ from their own. It is a relatively simple and inexpensive way to allow all staff to improve their RA skills.

Public libraries can also be more proactive in offering RA training opportunities to staff. As we have seen from the questionnaire responses, most library staff members do not learn RA skills in school. If public libraries want to ensure that all staff understand the importance of readers' advisory services and are provided with some tools to offer those services effectively, offering training opportunities to those staff is a valuable option. Offering training to all staff also signals to staff that their public library considers readers' advisory to be an important element of its service provision. One questionnaire respondent explained that at their library, a form was created to help any library staff member to provide readers' advisory over the phone. The form was a type of flow chart, which would help to guide the conversation so that any staff member could provide RA, regardless of their skill or confidence level.

According to respondents and interviewees, there are many different ways libraries can adapt to a changing landscape and to provide excellent readers' advisory, during and after a devastating pandemic. Clearly, internet resources are an important resource and libraries who embrace new technologies will be able to adapt more easily. Many respondents encouraged the use of Instagram and TikTok as a means of providing the public, particularly younger patrons, with reading recommendations. These platforms allow library staff to make engaging videos that can reach a lot of users quickly. Online staff book reviews are another way to reach patrons who cannot physically come into the library space. Similarly, library e-newsletters can reach patrons who sign up and provide them with reading

recommendations on a regular basis. These can be based on genres (e.g. romance, historical fiction), or on the time of year. While an e-newsletter can be time-consuming for staff, it can also provide subscribers with perpetually evolving and up-to-date recommendations.

Several questionnaire respondents also proposed integrating readers' advisory tools into a library's online public access catalogue (OPAC) so that patrons can benefit from RA services when they are searching for books online. One way this could be integrated would be to allow users to provide reviews or recommendations on a library's OPAC, to help other patrons to find items they might like and to promote engagement. Another way RA could be integrated into an OPAC could be to link a service such as NoveList into an OPAC so that if patrons search for a title and it is not available (either it is not owned, checked out, or on a holds list), they will be provided with other titles they might like. These innovations could provide a much more engaging, helpful and interesting user experience for patrons.

Finally, though this may seem obvious, it is essential that readers' advisory services are well advertised. Some respondents indicated that there were readers' advisory services that their libraries had already been providing, but until the pandemic forced patrons to stay home, they were not well-used. The pandemic restrictions nudged libraries to advertise their remote RA services more widely and they became more popular.

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