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Cultural roots in crisis: the transformative role of libraries in rural Ukraine

Tetiana Matusevych[1,2], *Vitalii Stashuk*[1,3], *Denys Svyrydenko*[1,4]

Abstract. The article examines the value of the physical space of library as a cultural hub for community development, using Ukraine as a case study. The central point is the study of the social and cultural value of the physical space of library at the "beyond-books" level, and its changes amid social turbulence, digitalization, and the war in Ukraine. While providing access to information, a digital library does a great job and even offers new solutions and perspectives; the functions of a cultural hub and socialization space, along with related cultural practices, are lost, along with the disappearance of the physical space of library. Especially in small communities, this leads to significant negative effects (loss of jobs by librarians and other personnel, repurposing or destroying the library's physical space, the disappearance of certain cultural practices, etc.) and therefore requires a policy change. The analytical approach in this article is supplemented by data from a survey and in-depth interviews with Ukrainian librarians (representatives of rural libraries) conducted by the authors.

Keywords: physical space of library, cultural hub, local and community history event, community development, Ukraine, cultural heritage

Introduction

Functioning as a unique social and cultural institution, the public library serves as a vital catalyst for local community development and empowerment, playing a notable role in social and cultural advancement. The distinctive role of the library as a cultural platform is evident in critical areas of community development: local culture, succession, promotion of cultural heritage, support for local residents' cultural enjoyment, and the formation of community culture [1]. The library goes beyond its physical form to evolve into a lively and essential social institution [2]. Besides housing valuable literary gems, a library is a thriving center for human interaction, education, and community development. Moreover, public libraries act as dynamic hubs that not only provide access to an ever-expanding array of cultural resources but also foster cultural participation and a sense of community engagement, serve as mechanisms for social

[1] Dragomanov Ukrainian State University, Kyiv, Ukraine
[2] t.v.matusevych@udu.edu.ua, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3793-462X
[3] v.f.stashuk@udu.edu.ua, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1805-4176
[4] NC "Junior Academy of Sciences of Ukraine", Kyiv, Ukraine.
d.b.svyrydenko@udu.edu.ua, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6126-1747

cohesion [3], and support neighborhood regeneration [4]. This achievement is made possible through the primary attributive components of its operation: universal accessibility, a variety of services, and its role as a focal point for the community.

Libraries contribute significantly to cultivating community through their unwavering dedication to inclusivity [3]. The public library extends its services to individuals of all ages, genders, religions, educational backgrounds, and social statuses, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for everyone in the community. Anne Goulding emphasized that, in the context of public libraries, enabling cultural capital development can serve as a strategy to tackle social exclusion, foster social capital, and spur community engagement [5]. In this way, public libraries can add an extra dimension to their cultural role within communities. The public library is committed to fostering a truly inclusive environment, a trusted place where diversity is celebrated, and access to its resources remains open to individuals from various walks of life [6]. It serves as a democratic space, embracing people of different backgrounds and actively promoting the democratization of knowledge and cultural enrichment for the betterment of the entire community.

Public libraries play a pivotal role in cultivating and embodying culture by providing diverse and inclusive entry points that encompass knowledge, skills, tastes, and experiences across a broad spectrum of cultural forms and activities [7]. Within the local context, they should be recognized as key agencies responsible for collecting, preserving, and promoting the diverse aspects of local culture. They grant access to various forms of cultural expression, actively foster inter-cultural dialogue, advocate for cultural diversity, and support the preservation of oral traditions [8]. Through these efforts, they contribute not only to the conservation of cultural heritage but also to the ongoing evolution and enrichment of cultural expression within a community. Our research seeks to deepen the academic discourse on the role of libraries in preserving and developing Ukrainian culture. The librarians' community (Ukrainian Library Association, etc.) also takes many practical steps to advocate for libraries' social and cultural roles, especially in rural areas.

Public libraries directly connect communities with cultural content and context, promote the library as both a trusted place to engage in familiar cultural behaviors and a vibrant space to experience new cultural forms, and involve local communities in local culture [7; 9]. Functioning as communal spaces and orchestrating cultural events, workshops, and discussions, public libraries facilitate occasions for individuals from diverse backgrounds to convene, share ideas, and collaboratively enrich the community's cultural richness. In the broader societal context, public libraries are instrumental in promoting lifelong learning, shaping cultural identity, and empowering individuals with the tools to navigate an increasingly complex cultural landscape. They serve as platforms for the exchange of ideas, encouraging intellectual growth, and promoting a culture of continuous learning that benefits individuals and the community at large. Scott [10], in his study on the role of libraries in community building, found five aspects of public libraries as agencies of community development. These aspects are (1) how libraries serve as a medium to access information and to learn, (2) how libraries support social inclusion and equity,

(3) how libraries promote community engagement, (4) how libraries create a bridge to resources and community participation, and (5) how libraries encourage economic vitality within the community [10].

Thereby, public libraries play a vital role within local communities, particularly in rural and disadvantaged areas, transcending their traditional perception as mere repositories of books. Instead, they function as dynamic entities offering a continuously evolving array of cultural resources for the community, transforming into essential social and cultural institutions [11; 12]. The significance of a village library extends beyond its material collection of books. In rural settings, these libraries embrace a critical social mission, serving as multifunctional spaces for work, communication, relaxation, and study. Therefore, the condition and vitality of a village library serve as a telling indicator of the broader development and well-being of the entire village [13].

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative insights from in-depth interviews with Ukrainian librarians with quantitative and qualitative data gathered through an online questionnaire. The research aims to comprehensively investigate the value of the physical space of library as a cultural hub for community development and the role of the library in preserving and promoting the community's living heritage, with a focus on Ukraine. Our approach in this study is not to apply predefined definitions, but rather to involve the librarians in designing their interpretations. Given the theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence discussed above, in the presented study it an attempt was made to answer the following research question:

> What is the role of the physical space of library as a cultural center, and how does it contribute to preserving and developing cultural practices within the rural communities?

A qualitative instrumental case study design was chosen as the methodology, which allows for explaining the range of concepts and for gaining valuable insights into librarians' perspectives. Employing a variety of data collection tools (in-depth semi-structured interviews, surveys) and different perspectives helps to triangulate the data and reinforces the legitimacy of the conclusions that will be drawn. Research procedures included analyzing existing research and available information on the subject; building a theoretical framework; developing the research design; selecting cases; collecting data; describing and analyzing the case; developing the survey methodology and tools (open- and closed-ended questions, Likert scale); and conducting semi-structured interviews.

Librarians were asked to complete the online questionnaire (shared within professional networks), and participation in an interview was optional. 188 librarians, representing 188 village and small-town libraries from all over Ukraine, completed the questionnaire, and 12 were interviewed. The answers were anonymous, and interviews were recorded for research purposes only.

Ethical Considerations

The research adheres to ethical guidelines, ensuring participant confidentiality, anonymity, and informed consent. Librarians participating in both interviews and the online survey are treated with respect, and their rights and well-being are prioritized.

Limitations

Acknowledging potential biases and the specific context of the Ukrainian case, the study's findings are presented with awareness of their contextual nature. The online survey's limitations include self-reporting biases and the inability to probe deeper into responses.

Participants

The total number of respondents in the provided dataset is 188 (2 men and 186 women). Among these respondents, the distribution of ages is as follows: 13.30% fall within the 30-40 age range, comprising 25 individuals; 29.79% are in the 41-50 age bracket, encompassing 56 individuals; 28.72% fall between the ages of 51 and 60, accounting for 54 individuals; and finally, 28.19% are above the age of 60, representing 53 individuals.

Among the librarians surveyed, 70.74% (133 individuals) work in village libraries, while the remaining 29.26% (55 individuals) work in small-town libraries.

The years of working experience among the surveyed librarians exhibit a diverse range of tenure within the profession. Approximately 20.21% of librarians have up to 1 year of experience, representing 38 individuals. A similar percentage, 19.15%, falls within the 2-5 years category, comprising 36 librarians. The 6-10 years group accounts for 17.55% (33 librarians), while 16.49% have been working in the field for 11-20 years, totaling 31 individuals. Librarians with 21-30 years of experience constitute 11.17% and are represented by 21 individuals. The above 30-year-old category comprises 15.43% and involves 29 librarians.

Results and Discussion

Rural libraries in Ukraine: multifaceted crisis and new roles The evolution of Ukraine's public library landscape over recent decades has been characterized by substantial changes, particularly a notable decline in library numbers, especially in rural regions. In 1990, Ukraine boasted 25.6 thousand libraries, a figure that dwindled to 19.5 thousand by 2010 [14]. In recent years, particularly for rural institutions, a deteriorating situation has been witnessed. As of January 1, 2021, a total of 14,954 public libraries operated under the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy of Ukraine (MKIP). Notably, 81% of these were rural libraries, totaling 12,136. In 2020 alone, 368 rural libraries closed, with only 39 reorganized into library points [15]. The challenges facing public libraries escalated in 2021, resulting in the closure of 605 institutions compared to the previous year. A more in-depth analysis [15] revealed a concerning reality: 1,900 libraries did not complete electronic reporting, effectively reducing the network by 2,505 libraries. Such a sharp reduction in the network of public libraries in rural areas has the following negative consequences: a sig-

nificant reduction in the number of library workers, which, in turn, can lead to social protests, the loss of trained professionals, and the loss of library premises. From a strategic point of view, it is a loss of human capital development potential [16; 17].

Regions affected by armed conflict, such as Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhya, Kharkiv, Kherson, and Chernihiv, encountered severe constraints, including destruction, damage to infrastructure, and covert liquidation practices. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, the occupiers have destroyed more than 220 libraries and damaged about 400 [18]. The estimated volume of losses in the library's stock exceeds 187 million copies.

The majority of librarians (94%) who participated in our survey reported that library activities changed significantly during the war. During the war, libraries serve as multifaceted hubs, offering volunteer, social, psychological, and informational support to all user groups. It has become an integration point for internally displaced persons (IDPs), providing a space for community building and support. Additionally, the library acts as a source of psychological assistance, offering programs for those who have experienced war-related trauma or conflict-related hardships. Serving as an information center, the library provides not only literary resources but also up-to-date information on safety, medical assistance, and other crucial aspects of life during armed conflict. Furthermore, a significant number of librarians have transformed into a humanitarian hub, volunteer centers, and advisory points, actively delivering consultative aid and support for various user needs. This diverse range of functions allows the library to effectively engage with the community and address different requirements and challenges arising in the context of war.

Here are some quotations from the respondents' answers:

Women, 54 years old, 36 years of experience.

"When everyone united around the main national goal — to defend our country and win this war, library workers, most of whom changed their daily activities to volunteer: weaving camouflage nets, knitting socks, preparing medicinal herbs, and herbal teas, participating in charity fairs to help the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The role of library institutions, which during military operations are transformed into communication platforms that perform various functions, primarily the psychological relief of various categories of readers, is being strengthened."

Women, 52 years old, 33 years of experience.

"The war became a test for all of us; it broke our plans, but we are unbreakable. Libraries reformatted their work and changed the emphasis and forms of activities. From the first days, the library has actively volunteered, strengthened national-patriotic activities, and worked with internally displaced persons. At our library, there is a women's club called 'Soul Meetings' for internally displaced persons."

Women, 48 years old, 23 years of experience.

"*The war forced thousands of people to move to safer areas. A large number of IDPs settled in villages and towns where there are no other educational and cultural institutions apart from a school and a library. The school carries out an educational program for children, and the library has become the very center where users find their communities.*"

Another significant trend that influences rural library operations is digitalization. Modern libraries are changing because of new digital technologies and the rise of digital libraries. Ukrainian librarians are embracing these changes positively. Among those surveyed in the current study, only 17% said library activities haven't changed, while the remaining 83% reported improvements. Specifically, libraries are now becoming hubs for developing villagers' digital skills. Thanks to digital tools, they are also responding to user requests faster and more efficiently. Additionally, libraries actively share information about their activities through digital platforms and social networks. This makes their outreach more effective and keeps the community informed.

In both contexts, libraries exemplify their pivotal role in fostering community resilience, support, and cohesion during challenging times, proving their essential role in community development. Moreover, rural libraries are willing to adapt, be flexible, and open to the community's needs. That is why closing physical spaces of libraries often causes negative effects on the social and cultural life of rural communities. Answering the open question, "What cultural practices disappear in the community with the closure of the physical spaces of libraries?" 65,4% of respondents (123 librarians) mentioned that "all cultural practices will disappear," "collective gatherings, discussions, celebrations" — were mentioned by 29 2% (55 librarians), and "access to information" — 24,4% (46 librarians).

Here are some quotations from interviews:

Women, 45 years old, 13 years of experience.

"For a significant part of the population, primarily for rural residents of Ukraine, libraries are the most accessible, and in many cases, the only means of obtaining the necessary information. Citizens' rights to access information are violated. When, for example, a library is closed in a village, the place of the cultural center of this community also disappears."

Women, 58 years old, 17 years of experience.

"Very often we hear from our users the following words: 'How good it is that we have a library! You can take and read your favorite books, and periodicals for free, and also visit a needlework club, and many different library activities, both for children and adults and young people.' We believe that with the closure of the physical space of library, the development of the community, cultural values and assets of our community, and the connection between generations will disappear."

Women, 52 years old, 24 years of experience.

"Libraries in communities perform various functions: they become centers for the exchange of ideas, for conducting trainings and meetings. A modern library is not only an opportunity for the intellectual and cultural development of the community, but also a platform that unites active and caring residents and helps them create joint projects. Therefore, with the closure of the library, all these functions will disappear and, as a rule, the cultural life of the village will stop."

Women, 33 years old, 2 years of experience.

"*The sense of community cohesion is disappearing, currently for our village - the library is the only place where readers can share their thoughts and find something new for themselves, discussing various topical topics, for chil-*

dren it is a place of fun and pleasant leisure. Closing the library leaves people without books, periodicals, an archive of local history materials, opportunities to communicate and develop. It's like forever saying goodbye to what happened in the lives of our parents, us and our children. People no longer have a place to gather to communicate,Cultural collective immunity against the degradation of society is disappearing"

The findings illustrate the multifaceted roles that rural libraries play in the cultural and social fabric of Ukrainian communities, especially in the face of significant challenges such as war, economic hardship, and digital transformation. Libraries are not only hubs for accessing information but also vital spaces for fostering resilience, cultural preservation, and community bonding.

Their ability to adapt to crises—by serving as volunteer centers, providing psychological support, and embracing digital tools—demonstrates their importance in ensuring community cohesion. However, the closure of physical spaces of libraries poses severe risks, including the erosion of cultural practices, the loss of shared spaces for dialogue and creativity, and the diminishing of access to essential services in rural areas.

This study highlights the urgent need for targeted policies and strategic investments to sustain the functions of rural libraries. By preserving these essential institutions, communities can maintain their cultural heritage, strengthen social ties, and ensure equitable access to resources, even in the most challenging times. Rural libraries are not merely repositories of knowledge; they are lifelines for the cultural and social vitality of the regions they serve.

Conclusion

The transformative potential of libraries in rural Ukraine underscores their irreplaceable role as cultural hubs and community cultural roots, particularly during times of crisis. As the research demonstrates, rural libraries are far more than repositories of books; they are vital institutions fostering cultural preservation, community resilience, and social cohesion. Their ability to adapt—providing digital education and psychological support and serving as volunteer hubs during the war—highlights their unique capacity to meet evolving community needs.

However, the closure of physical spaces of libraries disrupts this delicate ecosystem, leading to the loss of cultural practices, social gathering spaces, and essential services for rural populations. These closures risk dismantling the cultural and social frameworks that bind communities together. Addressing these challenges requires urgent policy interventions and strategic investments to safeguard the existence and operations of rural libraries.

Sustaining these institutions is not just an investment in knowledge but in the preservation of cultural heritage, the empowerment of rural communities, and the promotion of equity in access to resources. By supporting and reimagining rural libraries as dynamic, multifunctional spaces, Ukraine can ensure that these vital cultural roots continue to thrive, fostering resilience and cultural enrichment for generations to come.

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