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Bibliotherapy: Present-day marvel in Malaysia

Nur Syazwanie Zanal Abidin, Norshila Shaifuddin, Wan Satirah Wan Mohd Saman, Rafidah Abd Aziz

Faculty of Information Management,
Universiti Teknologi Mara, Puncak Perdana Campus, Shah Alam and 40150, Malaysia

nur_syazwanie@msu.edu.my, norshila06@gmail.com, assatirah@uitm.edu.my, rafidah3802@uitm.edu.my
Tel: 603-72529636

Abstract

This study explores the current trends of bibliotherapy within the public library community in Malaysia. A qualitative data collection approach using a structured interview was employed to elicit the opinions of five public librarians, two practitioners specializing in mental health, and a bibliotherapy writer. Eight (8) interview transcripts have been analyzed using theme-based analysis. This study shows that bibliotherapy in Malaysia is a new trend and concept. The public librarians were unnoticed that they had already practiced the technique due to the lack of bibliotherapy awareness among public librarians. There is a need to establish bibliotherapy education for future librarians.

Keywords: Public library; Bibliotherapy; Library education; Malaysia

1.0 Introduction

Bibliotherapy, which can be defined as the process of reading, reflecting on, and discussing books to progress a cognitive shift, is a non-pharmaceutical treatment delivered as psychological support (Monroy-Fraustro et al., 2021). In the same vein, in their study, Stip, Östlundh, and Abdel Aziz (2020) write that bibliotherapy can assist those in need of emotional support throughout the epidemic in verbalizing their sentiments and emotions and identifying new strategies for resolving challenges. In other words, bibliotherapy is a structured intervention involving carefully chosen reading materials to assist individuals in coping with stress and personal problems. Health practitioners, counsellors, and social workers have engaged in a debate about bibliotherapy and its implications for mental health with numerous contributors to the discussion who advocate for bibliotherapy support their position by stating that bibliotherapy can be used to address mental health difficulties (Zanal Abidin, Shaifuddin & Wan Mohd Saman, 2021). While public libraries were introduced to many bibliotherapy approaches, particularly in western countries, public libraries confront unique challenges: the standardization of bibliotherapy delivery. Furness and Casselden (2012) proposed establishing a nationwide standardized practice in which all public libraries provided bibliotherapy similarly. Therefore, the study seeks to explore contemporary bibliotherapy practices within the public library community in Malaysia.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Background context of Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy (BT) is derived from a couple of Greek words, biblion, which means book or material of reading. The word therapy comes from therapeia, which means healing or curing (De Vries, Brennan, Lankin, Morse, Rix & Beck, 2017; Janaviciene, 2010). BT has been alluded to by plenty of different names, including yet not constrained to reading therapy, book therapy, therapeutic reading, creative reading, bibliocounseling, biblioeducation, bibliopsychology, and library therapeutics and literatherapy (Gupta, Mishra & Saini, 2017). Bibliotherapy is frequently used as a treatment intercession to treat common mental health issues, for example, anxiety, stress, psychological disorders, and depression (Brewster and McNicol 2020). Some authors have explained the connection between mental health and bibliotherapy from more theoretical viewpoints (Brewster, 2011; Brewster, L., & McNicol, S. 2020). In library and information science, bibliotherapy is a concept that has been heard but may only partially be understood. The unclear definition of bibliotherapy resulted in the provision of different services under the same name. This terminology confusion led to uncertainty among staff, unsure if they provide bibliotherapy services even though they are aware of it (Brewster, Sen, and Cox 2013).

2.2 Effectiveness of Bibliotherapy
Previous studies have investigated the efficacy of BT on various types of health problems, particularly mental illness. Levin and Gildea (2013) stated that BT is commonly applied in cognitive behavioral therapy. BT has been broadly applied for problems like personal growth, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), child-rearing, depression, stress, anxiety, and sexuality or communication problems with partners (Tanrikulu, 2011).

Jokar, Baghban, and Ahmadi (2007) conducted a study on the efficiency of BT and counseling for stressed individuals, and they discovered the effectiveness of both methods despite differing in nature. In the study of the application of BT in asylums, Gildea and Levin (2007) found that BT is effective for hospitalized individuals. According to Gots (2016), BT is often utilized as a treatment intervention to treat common mental health problems, such as anxiety, stress, psychological disorders, and depression.

2.3 BT for Mental Wellbeing
A bibliotherapy is an approach that contributes toward a better mental well-being index. Chamberlain, Heaps, and Robert (2008) remark on the advantages of bibliotherapy and presume that abundant evidence supports the bibliotherapy approach for a mass of mental health disorders. Bibliotherapy and mental well-being or mental health are terms that often come together. Pehrsson and McMillen's (2010, 2009, 2008) study stated that mental health providers often utilize books and literature in their clinical work with patients, as indicated by past studies. For instance, Russell (2012) regarded BT as a technique for dealing with emotional or psychological issues through books that guide people in adapting, yet recognizes that life lessons can be found in a book that purely narrates a good story.

3.0 Methodology
This study was carried out with the use of qualitative methods. Because this study focused on the experts' opinions, a qualitative method is appropriate compared to the quantitative method. This study uses a case study approach as an inquiry strategy to explore a process or activity. For this study, the phenomenon under investigation was public libraries' response to the status quo of bibliotherapy in Malaysian public libraries, specifically, the trends, the concept, and the librarians' understanding. In this study, the data were collected using in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted to explore participants' values and beliefs in bibliotherapy.

The participants comprised five public librarians, two practitioners specializing in mental health, and a bibliotherapy writer. A possible explanation for this relatively small sample is that bibliotherapy is a new concept and not yet widely explored in the Malaysian landscape. In order to obtain valid information on its application in public libraries for mental health and well-being purposes, these two groups of the sample were identified. With a total of 14 Malaysian State Public Libraries, it is found that only several libraries have conducted bibliotherapy programs or plan to do so. To establish the validity and reliability of information obtained, samples must possess the knowledge or have experienced bibliotherapy. This applies to the latter group, in which the selected informants must be professionals that are well-equipped with bibliotherapy knowledge and experience. As this study covers mental health and well-being, it is reasonable to include professionals, particularly health practitioners, who practice bibliotherapy in their treatment sphere. Thus, they are crucial to be recruited as they possess the knowledge and are well-informed of the current bibliotherapy status in Malaysia. In general, the information extracted from these samples is exquisite in making sense of this study.

Selected participants were reached by e-mail. The e-mail contained the interview guidelines, which explained the study's objectives, questions for interviews, and the consent form. In this study, the informed consent documentation in the form of Google Forms was e-mailed to the informant beforehand, after which an appointment was set up between the researcher and the informant via telephone and e-mail, during which the research process was discussed.

In order to develop the interview guide, a review of the literature was conducted. The interview guide is prepared before the interview sessions and sent in advance to the informants. Two broad aspects of open-ended questions are explained in the guide, and it is intended to give the informants some ideas about the research under study:
1.   Informants are asked to provide their views on the status quo of bibliotherapy in Malaysia.
2.   Informants are also asked to provide their views on the suggestions for bibliotherapy practices in Malaysian public libraries.

The data gathered from the individual interviews were analyzed using the qualitative software Atlas Ti. To begin this process, the interviews were transcribed and placed the data in the MS Word document. The second step was to check the accuracy of the transcription by sending it back to each participant to ensure that the transcripts were also accurate. Once the transcription process was completed, the transcripts were analyzed by looking at the repeated statements and coding them in the smallest unit related to the research questions being studied. The data were coded in sentences, with some sections coded several times for emergent themes.

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4.0 Findings

Eight in-depth interviews were conducted with five public librarians from five states, two practitioners specializing in mental health, and a bibliotherapy writer. The study results include a descriptive analysis of the informants' background, the status quo of bibliotherapy in the Malaysian context, the suggestion for education programs in the university, and the merits in the education context. The results of the interview coding revealed several recurring themes. They were separated into categories and subsequently analyzed to supplement the conclusions drawn from the literature review.

4.1 Informant profile

The sample population of eight individuals consisted of four men and four women. Most informants had undergraduate education, followed by professional, postgraduate, and secondary education. More than half of the informants are librarians, of five people, followed by two health practitioners and a writer. The informant profile is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Informant Profile

Categories		Frequency (n=8)
Gender	Female	4
	Male	4
Education	Secondary	1
	Undergraduate	5
	Postgraduate	1
	Professional	1
Job	Librarian	5
	Health Practitioner	2
	Writer	1

4.2 Bibliotherapy status quo

Four sub-themes that emerged under this category are discussed below:

4.2.1 Bibliotherapy a new trend

The first sub-status and most prominent finding are that bibliotherapy is a new trend in Malaysia, as indicated by the responses of five informants. When asked about the status of bibliotherapy in Malaysia, one informant stated: *"In Malaysia, it is still in its infancy despite decades of practice abroad. I believe bibliotherapy in Malaysia is not yet developed and robust."* According to another informant, *"Even though bibliotherapy has been practiced for decades in other countries, it is still a relatively new concept in Malaysia. Few people know about it."*

4.2.2 Bibliotherapy a new concept

The second sub-status is that participants are unfamiliar with bibliotherapy; six informants shared this sentiment. For instance, one informant stated, *"Many people are still unaware of bibliotherapy and its potential."* Moreover, another said, *"We have books on the shelves for people who need them to heal themselves, but neither they nor we are aware of bibliotherapy or the available books."*

4.2.3 Bibliotherapy the unnoticed practice

The third sub-status concerns the unrecognized practice of bibliotherapy in public libraries. Four informants stated that they had practiced bibliotherapy in their workplace without being aware of it until they were exposed. One informant responded, *"The activity has been completed before, but we did not recognize it as bibliotherapy at the time. For instance, we held a community service with the elderly and the disabled. As stated, we performed the activity without knowledge. It was a component of bibliotherapy, but we did not know it."* Another informant said, *"Since a long time ago, we have practiced bibliotherapy because some users come to us with suggestions for activities. We take the children outside and engage in outdoor activities. However, it is not until much later that we realize it was bibliotherapy."*

4.2.4 Librarians' lack of bibliotherapy awareness

The fourth sub-status that has emerged is that librarians lack exposure to bibliotherapy. Three informants shared the same viewpoint. One remarked, *"When I was instructed to attend the workshop, I was unaware of what bibliotherapy is."* One informant stated, *"Even in this library, we are not subject to bibliotherapy. Thus, our knowledge and understanding of bibliotherapy are limited. We cannot respond if users approach us and ask. We are only able to refer them to librarians with bibliotherapy expertise."*

What stands out in the finding statements is the glaring status quo of bibliotherapy in Malaysia, which leads to the next section, which emphasizes how bibliotherapy can be introduced to the public library communities through the education systems in Malaysia,

4.3 Bibliotherapy education

Three sub-themes that emerged under this category are explained below.

4.3.1 Unavailability of formal bibliotherapy education

This theme was brought up in six interviews with informants. One stated, *"I was never formally exposed to bibliotherapy."* Another informant remarked, *"If everyone agreed that bibliotherapy is suitable for librarians, I proposed that this course be offered to future librarians. In addition to cataloging and other subjects, they might be able to find two credit hours for bibliotherapy."* All six informants expressed concern regarding the librarians' lack of knowledge and expertise in bibliotherapy.

4.3.2 Requisite knowledge

Five sources highlighted the significance of bibliotherapy knowledge for librarians. "Without bibliotherapy knowledge, the available books cannot be utilized optimally," according to one informant. Similarly, another informant stated, "*A librarian must have at least fundamental bibliotherapy knowledge*."

Several librarianship-related competencies were also mentioned. One informant stated, *"...knowledge of suitable books for bibliotherapy."* Another informant stated, *"...librarians must be able to distinguish bibliotherapy books from the thousands of other books available in the library."* Some also mentioned that librarians must know the complete contents of books.

When asked about other potential knowledge, informants unanimously agreed that bibliotherapy requires librarians to know at least psychology, psychiatry, and counseling. As one informant stated, *"Librarians need only have a basic understanding of psychology and counseling." "Even if we lean toward mental health and psychology books, we are not to delve as deeply as a psychologist or psychiatrist*," according to another informant. *"In other words, the ability to distinguish between mild and severe cases of mental illness,"* said another informant.

Among the knowledge mentioned above, three informants highlighted the need for librarians to possess communication knowledge. This knowledge is necessary because librarians are expected to communicate effectively with users suffering from mental health issues.

4.3.3 Requisite skills

Six informants concurred that librarians require three skills: interpersonal skills, librarianship skills, and psychology, psychiatry, and counseling skills. One informant stated, *"If we are not skilled in communication and in delivering the message, using proper language politely, etc., the person in front of us may not want to hear what we have to say."* An informant stated, *"Communication skills are necessary if we wish to persuade and convince users that bibliotherapy is a technique that can alleviate their depression."* These factors alone highlighted the significance of communication skills. As emphasized by the informants, listening is a necessary interpersonal skill for librarians. An informant stated, *"Be attentive while listening - the capacity to listen to users expressing their emotions and respond as necessary. Most mild cases, such as anxiety, require someone to be present and listen."*

The librarianship skills were a recurring skill that surfaced throughout the interview. One informant stated, *"Reader's Advisory is one of the most important skills librarians must possess, train, and practice when working with users with mental health issues."* According to one informant, *"Librarians can use the skill to elaborate the book character, entice clients to read, and ask users questions about the book."* Other responses to this question included, *"I can only recognize the appropriate book for the user after speaking with him and learning a bit about him and his problem."* Daily, librarians utilize these skills as they work with books and interact with users.

When the informants were asked what skills librarians should possess, psychology, psychiatry, and counseling were frequently mentioned. It is uncommon for librarians to have these abilities, as they are prevalent in the field. For example, one informant stated, *"Librarians who wish to engage in bibliotherapy must possess therapy skills."* Another informant states, *"Librarians need therapy skills because some patrons ask questions to overcome mental health issues."* The six informants list counseling skills, persuasion skills, and problem identification skills among the skills librarians need to possess.

4.3.4 Bibliotherapy merits

Two merits are extracted and explained below based on the analysis of findings.

4.3.5 Debunking librarian stereotypes

The debunking of librarian stereotypes is a perspective shared by all five informants. Public perception of librarians is frequently negative, especially among young people. One informant explained, *"They are unaware that we exist. They know we work at the counter stamping books."* Some believed that to alter the public's perception of librarians, they should explore and promote bibliotherapy. One informant stated, *"We must use this opportunity to educate the public about this unknown endeavor."* First and foremost, bibliotherapy belongs to librarians; therefore, it is part of their responsibility to disseminate it.

4.3.6 New job market

Bibliotherapy librarian emerged as one merit of bibliotherapy, as highlighted by five informants. For example, one informant said, *"From job designation prospect, there is a need for a bibliotherapy librarian in libraries, especially public libraries*." One informant stated, *"Bibliotherapy librarian is significant to ensure a smooth process, and the librarian is to be dedicated and equipped with the required skills."* This opens a new job market for library and information science graduates.

5.0 Discussion

The current study found that bibliotherapy is still in its infancy phase. This finding was also reported by Husaini, Noordin, and Shuhidan (2015) and Chik, Razifah, Hassan, Roni, Azurah, Manan, and Othman (2014). According to them, bibliotherapy is new to the Malaysian landscape, and public libraries can play a more competitive role in the process.

Due to its novelty, few people are familiar with bibliotherapy, and those who have only recently heard of it find it unfamiliar. This result is consistent with the findings of Brewster, Sen, and Cox (2013), who found that bibliotherapy is a concept that has been heard of but may not be fully grasped. The lack of clarity surrounding the definition of bibliotherapy resulted in the provision of different services under the same name. This terminology ambiguity led to confusion among staff who were unsure if they provided bibliotherapy services despite their awareness.

This finding is consistent with that of Hutchinson (2014), who stated that each authority provides the service differently, with some personnel uncertain whether or not what they provide is technically bibliotherapy. In addition, some librarians oppose their participation in bibliotherapy despite its immense public benefits. While training is considered essential, library staff demonstrates a degree of willingness to engage in additional training, such as the training on how to assist individuals with mental health issues, even though "we are not medical professionals, we are librarians" (Robertson et al., 2008).

This study confirms the findings of a 2010 study by Janaviciene that the main barrier to bibliotherapy provision among librarians is a lack of knowledge and skills and mistrust. Similarly, Gupta, Mishra, and Saini (2017) stated that a limitation of bibliotherapy is the need for more appropriately trained library professionals to carry out the work. However, this issue may be resolved by the following finding, which emphasizes the importance of bibliotherapy education.

Another important finding is that bibliotherapy education is recommended to be established at the university to prepare future librarians before entering the working world. These results further support Kinney's (1962) suggestion that Library Schools incorporate a bibliotherapy program into graduate-level courses that emphasize library work experience, a broad knowledge of literature, the study of psychology, report analysis, writing, and group dynamics.

The bibliotherapy process demanded the capabilities of librarians relating to information management which comprised information searching, reading motivation of readers, thematic classification, empathic reading skills, and word impact analysis (Janavičienė, 2010). Also, librarians who decide to deliver bibliotherapy services should deepen the communication of psychology and other particular knowledge on issues whose solution is subjected to it. As a result of the bibliotherapy education provided, future librarians will be polished and equipped with all the necessary knowledge before entering the workforce.

Aside from that, providing services to the reader in a modern library requires the interpersonal skills of librarians, such as empathic dialogue, smooth communication, reasoning skills for reading selections, and the discussion of reading texts. To be successful in implementing bibliotherapy, librarians must develop appropriate skills (Khoeini, Noruzi, & Fahimnia, 2019) and a "counseling" mindset dedicated to assisting individuals with mental health issues (Hasfera, 2018).

Librarians have struggled for a long time to combat certain negative stereotypes regarding their image and profession. This study found that bibliotherapy is a successful strategy for expanding their territory and improving the public's perception of them. Similarly, Ingham (2014) stresses that librarians should reinforce and expand their role as reliable health information providers.

In general, librarians' activities are not restricted to libraries themselves, as public librarians consider themselves embedded community activists with unrivaled abilities in literacy and reading. They can effectively loan this ability to venture with the community and public health services, hospitals, and other healthcare settings and become imperative cohorts in bibliotherapy programs (Brewster, 2011; Bolitho, 2011; Brewster, Sen & Cox, 2012; Walwyn & Rowley, 2011), which may also include the participation from special and school librarians. With so many new prospects librarians can join, this demonstrates the new career opportunity for new generations to undertake.

6.0 Conclusion and recommendation

This study explored the status quo of bibliotherapy in the Malaysian public libraries context, emphasizing its trends, concept, knowledge, and skills required by librarians. A qualitative case study was carried out to describe the status quo of bibliotherapy in Malaysia from four different perspectives: a new trend, a new concept, an unnoticed practice, and a lack of awareness among public librarians. The findings contribute to a broader view and a better understanding of what strategies could take to introduce bibliotherapy to the public library communities. In addition, it also creates a new perspective for librarians to support people with mental health and substance use conditions.

Based on the current perspectives, the findings of this research provide insight into the possible actions concerning bibliotherapy knowledge and skills to be considered for preparing future librarians before entering the working world. This work contributes to existing knowledge of bibliotherapy by providing the area of knowledge needed by a future librarian in providing bibliotherapy services in public library. Future librarians must include themselves with the required knowledge and skills if the bibliotherapy is part of their library services. It was suggested that librarians' knowledge covers the specific areas of bibliotherapy, librarianship, psychology, psychiatry, and counseling. Meanwhile, the skills required to conduct bibliotherapy should cover the areas of interpersonal, librarianship and psychology, psychiatry, and counseling skills. It can be used as a guideline to develop a bibliotherapy service for public libraries and the stakeholders, specifically the top management, the policymakers, and the educators.

Unfortunately, the study did not include library educators as participants to provide insights from the library education context. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests that active participation from public libraries and LIS schools is required to ensure that relevant institutions gradually adopt bibliotherapy, particularly for the benefit of the disadvantaged. Further research with a greater emphasis on bibliotherapy education in universities is suggested.

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