

Little Free Libraries: Creativity and Altruism as a Self-Healing Aid in the Time of COVID-19¹

Will M. Williams¹

1 Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ USA williamsw4@montclair.edu

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Abstract

Through a mixed-method research design, this study explores the Little Free Library (LFL) phenomenon from the perspective of the library's owner, or "steward." Specifically, the research interrogates the role LFLs play on a personal level at the intersection of the COVID-19 pandemic and the structural inequities exposed by the pandemic. The purpose of this investigation is to provide a foundational study for furthering the examination of how altruism, creativity, and cultural norms of "self-help" manifest themselves through materiality in our communities, influencing our relationships with one and another, both during times of crisis and normalcy. The effects of the pandemic and inextricably related social justice issues – of which the murder of George Floyd heightened the public's awareness – have created conditions of psychological suffering. Through altruism and creativity, this study explores LFLs' potential as a tool to alleviate some of the distress experienced by the library's owner and provide them a sense of meaning-making.

Keywords: Little Free Library, Community, Altruism, Pandemic, Identity, Equity

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Introduction

Books embody a sense of irony. As a solitary endeavor, reading transports individuals to personal worlds of the extraordinary, horrifying, or merely whimsical – with books, where one can go is endless. Yet, their alter ego has a profoundly social aspect; books have the potential to unite people and build interpersonal connections. We gather in book clubs, express our opinions in online book groups, and share our most beloved reads with friends. During times of unrest, public libraries have emerged as a haven for

community members. In the wake of the Michael Brown shooting, the Ferguson Municipal Public Library remained open, serving as an ad-hoc school while other public institutions remained closed (Chancellor 2017:7). Much of our social performance revolves around the physical object of books and their related localities.

This study examines the relatively recent Little Free Library (LFL) phenomenon, the book sharing and exchange movement boasting over 100,000 independent libraries in more than one hundred

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countries (Little Free Libraries 2020), and how their recent growth in North America can be understood as a reaction to pandemic isolation. Started in the garage of Todd Bol in 2009, the LFL organization has grown from the vision of "inspir[ing] a love of reading, build[ing] community, and spark[ing] creativity by fostering neighborhood book exchanges around the world" (Schmidt 2019:9 foreword by Todd Bol). These small, sometimes homemade structures often adorn the front of private residences in publicly accessible locations. Upon opening the typically windowed door, visitors or library "patrons" can peruse the library's collection and take free books deposited by other visitors or the library's owner, otherwise known as the "steward." In this paper, the growth of LFLs and individuals' stated goals to improve book access in disenfranchised communities will be contrasted against alternate perspectives of LFLs' function in communities and the psychological benefits stewards gain by hosting personal libraries.

Using the combined voices of social science scholars and LFL owners, the following discussion positions the impetus for prosocial actions along a spectrum of motivations. At one end, Illouz (2007) theorizes that individual self-improvement and self-help are motivated by cultural forces imposing the idea of the perpetual injured self. Further along the spectrum, Vollhardt (2009) expands this understanding system by examining prosocial behavior in relation to the suffering experienced by a person or community. These two positions provide an operational framework where we can begin to perceive how LFLs benefit their owners. An LFL owner's sense of meaning, self-efficacy, and strengthening of identity during the COVID-19 pandemic because of their discussed prosocial actions will serve as the foundation for future studies of how material objects function in the cultural landscape. Current and future research into this topic is necessary because it furthers our understanding of how altruistic performances and materiality help us navigate periods of uncertainty and how this behavior contributes to personal identity. As an exploratory study into the role community plays in our concept of self, the research presented situates LFLs between society and the individual during a period of social upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the related social issues.

Theoretical & Empirical Framework

Looking Beyond Current LFL Ideation

The LFL movement has caught the public and media's attention by focusing on the purported benefits to communities. According to the LFL organization's registration data, openings of new libraries accelerated

post-May 2020 as knowledge of the program spread (discussed below). In addition, USA Today highlighted the organization's program "Read in Color," an effort to place and promote books by people of color and marginalized communities (Oliver 2020). The exploration covered in the following pages goes beyond the examples of positive social impact characterized by the media and the LFL organization's stated objective of "increasing access to books for readers of all ages and backgrounds" (Little Free Libraries 2020). Alternatively, the research will approach LFLs from the steward's perspective, interrogating the relationship stewarding an LFL has with an individual's sense of agency and perception to shape their immediate and broader community through outlets such as their creativity. The study's exploratory nature requires investigating altruism and self-identity construction from multiple perspectives and introducing complementary theories that perceive LFL stewardship at individual and societal levels.

The commonly held assumption that negative experiences or suffering contribute to negative or antisocial behavior has been called into question by research proposing that periods of high altruism are instead born of suffering (Vollhardt 2009:53). Studies suggest that traumatic events often result in acts of altruism; helping or giving to others is a way for people to make sense of their shattered worlds (Vollhardt 2009:59). In the aftermath of stressful events, individual serving interests are temporally abandoned (Lemieux 2014:485) to support the impacted community, resulting in a "situational altruism" (Dynes 1994 as cited by Lemieux 2014:485). When people perform selflessly, coming to the assistance of those in need, they are trying to recapture their sense of power that has been wrenched away (Janoff-Bulman 1992, as cited by Vollhardt 2009:59). They assert their control over a situation to self-heal and restore what has been lost (59). The events of 2020 have done precisely this; the pandemic, raising awareness of racial disparities, and feelings of social anguish have physically and emotionally extracted people from their communities and cut off the connections people crave with each other (Netburn 2020; Kwai and Peltier 2021). Stewarding an LFL can be understood as an act of altruism, a form of giving back to the community LFL stewards associate themselves with. Data suggests these acts of altruism have accelerated during the crises of 2020, and the creativity of LFL stewards potentially benefits not only the patrons of personal libraries but the stewards as well, returning them a sense of agency or control in a world gone awry.

LFLs and Traditional Library Institutions

Todd Bol, the LFL organization's founder, set out in 2009 to emulate Andrew Carnegie's early 20th-century vision of placing 2,508 free public libraries in English-speaking countries, a goal surpassed at the end of 2013 (Little Free Libraries 2020). Embedded in the foundation's history is a comparison between LFLs and public libraries. With that comparison, the observer can infer Bol and the LFL organization view LFLs and public libraries through the same lens and believe they share similar social functions, such as building community engagement or improving book access in underserved areas¹. However, in the context of this study, any similarities between LFLs and public libraries end at a high-level distinction. As public institutions, libraries are more than the sum of their book catalogs; they function, among other things, like community centers building interpersonal relationships and providing a wide range of educational resources, including the Internet and broadband access. Alternatively, the discussion below will examine how perceived steward empowerment and self-healing are produced with LFLs. Building and managing a personal library potentially contributes to the self-realization narrative and provides stewards the capacity of meaning-making during a time of social upheaval.

In the context of this study, the word "community" is employed as a malleable definition describing groups who live within shared spatial boundaries, share similar cultural traits, or align with political or social ideals. These normative explanations of the word are fundamental for describing the human social experience; we are all familiar with the social collective. More importantly, however, is the word's "persuasive power" that "exerts itself as a powerful idea of belonging in every age," from the ancient Greeks to the modern era (Delanty 2003:11 as cited by Kuecker, Mulligan, and Nadarajah 2011). Structure and collective unity have appeal in times of uncertainty; we gravitate to each other and find solace in the familiarity of other people.

Relevant Research

These data were gathered in late September and early October 2020, a period when the "second peak" of the pandemic had subsided and the acute awareness of social injustice – enflamed by the death of George Floyd in May that year – was front and center of America's consciousness. This study occupies that liminal space described above. It resides between the pandemic crisis and the associated uncertainty. In what follows, I discuss some of the more relevant

theoretical scholarship that can contribute to these debates/issues.

For example, Eva Illouz provides a social psychological framework for interpreting the forms of self-healing, altruistic performances, and individual identity presented in this study. The contribution of Illouz's work is a perspective on self-healing dictating actions providing self-help are informed by self-improvement culture. The growth of psychological theories explicating self-help culture has evolved from Samuel Smiles's (1859) and Sigmund Freud (1919). Specifically, Illouz builds upon the optimistic Victorian virtues of capitalist individualism and self-determination presented by Smiles (Illouz 2007:40) and Freud's inevitability of "neurotic misery" caused by one's social class (40-41) to develop a version of self-help that is compatible with American culture, fusing the narratives of suffering, self-help, and capitalism. She argues that the union of these forces has produced a unique identity that permeates all strata of society (42); the product, self-improvement, demands an affliction to cure, perpetuating the notion that the idea of self is eternally injured (42). For every ailment, from overprotective parents to phobias, our capitalist society offers a path to recovery – for a price (42).

The work of Illouz outlined above is particularly relevant for contextualizing one possible function of LFLs. That is, they serve as a form of "self-help" and an identity-forming process for stewards when they erect a miniaturized library on their property. The addition of Illouz's work expands the conversation surrounding why humans are motivated to perform prosocially and that the origin of self-help to maintain a healthy psychological outlook has many sources. As material objects provide stewards a meaning-making method, LFLs supplement the idea that interactions with physical objects contribute to self-help. In this specific historical moment, LFLs can offer a means to remedy the steward's perceived psychological discomfort, whether that discomfort originates from the social fracturing caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns and social isolation, or because it arises from their concern for social inequity and injustice. Material objects embedded with prosocial qualities can also help to address feelings of "helplessness" that sometimes occur with significant calamities; as individual citizens, people may not be able to "fix" the pandemic or resolve inequity, but building an LFL is something, a tangible act, that people can do.

Kapoor and Kaufman's work, *Meaning-Making Through Creativity During COVID-19*, complements and expands on Illouz's intersecting capitalism and self-help theory by providing additional ideas on meaning-making during community and personal

crises. The premise of their paper proposes that creative acts are an adaptive response to changing and challenging situations and environments (Kapoor and Kaufman 2020:1-2). Through purpose, one can plan for the future and see beyond current obstacles (Marteka and Steger 2016, as cited by Kapoor and Kaufman 2020:2). Their study investigates parallel forms of creativity during the pandemic and how people have connected with others feeling the effects of quarantine isolation through creativity. Investigating the meaning-making formed by other creative acts is pertinent to the use of LFLs discussed below.

Johanna Vollhardt's (2009) study of prosocial behavior arising from a traumatic experience, otherwise identified as "altruism born of suffering," is a voice of dissent on the notion that violence begets violence or negative experiences cultivate negative behavior (53). Her research instead suggests that individuals seek ways to rebuild their shattered perception of the world (Janoff-Bulman 1992 as cited in Vollhardt 2009:59). Altruism and prosocial behavior help individuals understand their changing world; it places the new order into perspective and aligns their place within it. Charitable actions and helping others also build resilience; altruism is an action to reclaim power while providing "empathy training" and softening their attitudes to others (Vollhardt 2009:59-60). The ability for negative experiences to break down race, class, and ethnic barriers has been especially noted during natural disasters (Vollhardt 2009:80). Collectively experienced traumatic events such as hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes historically elicit stories of individual and community altruism. The 1906 San Francisco earthquake is one such example. Ordinary residents of the city, such as Mrs. Anna Amelia Holshouser, amid the chaos and destruction, stepped up to assist others' needs by establishing the Mizpah Café, a soup kitchen in the middle of Golden Gate Park (Solnit 2009:13-22).

This paper understands that LFLs perform in a similar way to the soup kitchen of Anna Holshouser. Their purpose, function, and unique physical form builds upon and connect the theories of Illouz, Kappor and Kaufman, and Vollhardt. Their materiality and semi-permanent presence in communities acknowledge the capitalist-driven, ongoing self-healing outlined in Illouz's work. Vollhardt augments this study's interpretation of LFLs by describing the prosocial, altruistic performance of creating a place for the community to share books as a response to perceived trauma or crisis affecting others. In return, they regain a sense of control over the situation and begin the process of meaning-making. The creativity expressed in creating an LFL (examined in detail

below) discussed by Kappor and Kaufman provides the functional glue uniting the works of Illouz and Vollhardt. As a preliminary investigation, I argue that establishing an LFL is simultaneously a creative and altruistic act conferring on their owners' psychosocial rewards during a time of crisis. Additionally, their presence and use are compatible within a self-help culture essential to contemporary American society.

Consideration of the Unintended Effects of LFLs

Schmidt and Hale offered a voice of dissent questioning the beneficence of LFLs on the social landscape in their 2017 study, titled Little Free Libraries® : Interrogating the impact of the branded book exchange. They note that most current literature on LFLs presents their presence as overwhelmingly positively (Ramírez 2020; Oliver 2020; Jones 2017; Ulin 2015). Yet, Schmidt and Hale's interrogation of the LFL movement concluded that, contrary to their stated purpose, LFLs were counterproductive and detracted from the public library's central position within the community. In an age of austerity, Schmidt and Hale propose LFLs are unwittingly reinforcing neoliberal politics. As local governments introduce economic cutbacks, LFLs are seen as a device to offset the financial burden from the public onto private community members. An example of this behavior was identified in the Village of Vinton, Texas, whose public library was subject to budget cutbacks. The responsibility for stocking Vinton's publically funded LFLs fell on private individuals (Schmidt and Hale 2017:21). The neoliberal transformation of institutions typically financed by the public, such as libraries, has given rise to the concept of financial self-help (Fridman 2016:32). Defined by Daniel Fridman, financial self-help expands the idea of self-help outlined by Illouz and furthers the concept of LFLs as an individualistic enterprise. In his broad explanation, financial self-help, amongst other definitions, has a sociological component. It provides theories about how the intersections of society influence what an individual's financial goals should be (24) and what their financial wellness should look like. A steward's attempt to correct the perceived failings of publicly funded libraries adds financial self-help to the broad spectrum of how individuals heal themselves.

The unintended consequences of the LFL movement are an essential dimension to consider when the societal impact of LFLs and public libraries are placed into conversation; however, that is not the focus of this study. Whatever positive or negative functions LFLs offer to the community, as noted by Schmidt and Hale and other scholars, these studies omit the role LFLs play in individual healing, expression of self-efficacy, and community

symbolism amid a crisis. My understanding of LFLs pivots from Schmidt and Hale's description of a "performative act of literary philanthropy" (Schmidt and Hale 2017:24) towards understanding LFLs as material manifestations of a social psychological response to dual social crises: the double pandemic of COVID and racism.

Data and Methods

The findings presented here were based on a mixed-methods research design. The Little Free Library Facebook community completed one hundred thirty-three surveys, and the Little Free Library organization provided global LFL registration data from October 2018 to October 2020. In addition, to contextualize and gather detail on ideas presented in the survey, four exploratory interviews were conducted with LFL stewards. All data were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Both the interview guide and the survey are attached as appendices.

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews augmented the steward Facebook group quantitative survey. This project utilized a close-ended ten-question survey with limited response options (see appendix), sent to the entire LFL Facebook Group (over 10,000 members). These questions – such as “How long has your LFL been active?”, “Who do you consider are the primary audience of your LFL?” and “Do you seek out and stock books with social justice content?” – allowed me to analyze respondents' opinions and rank their attitudes on a Likert scale. Unlike the qualitative data collected (below), the survey was open to all LFL stewards regardless of their stewardship duration or when they opened their library. The number of responses to the study was 133 from the group's population size of 10,635ⁱⁱ as of November 23, 2020. This sample size equates to an 8% margin of errorⁱⁱⁱ and functions as a compass pointing toward trending behavior. The Facebook group's total membership does not represent the 100,000 or more LFLs worldwide (Little Free Libraries 2020). All interview content collected was validated by the survey data.

Global data from October 2018 to October 2020 showing the number of LFLs registered weekly was graciously made available by the LFL organization. This primary source information provides a foundation for qualitative and quantitative research. The visible correlation between LFL stewardship at the applied level and the macro view of high-level statistics will complement each other. However, most of the content about stewards and their motivation for opening an LFL came from individual, open-ended qualitative interviews.

Three separate interviews with four LFL stewards from across the United States were conducted in September 2020. Subjects were selected from respondents to a post requesting interview participants on an LFL steward Facebook group. Little Free Library Stewards Facebook group is a private space established by the LFL organization. Entry to the group is restricted to only stewards; a registered LFL charter number must be supplied to gain admittance. The critical criterion for interview participation was their status as a “recent” steward (i.e., less than six months at the time of response to the advertisement and who opened an LFL after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic).

The interviews were designed and conducted to support an exploratory investigation. Questions were open-ended (see “Interview Information” in appendix) and were conversational, where the interviewee was permitted to express what they felt was pertinent. Typically, only minor direction was provided to keep the discussion within the topics of their perceived impact on the community and the personal significance of LFLs. Interviewees were questioned about their introduction to LFLs, their motivation to establish a library, and their thoughts on how their LFL interacts with or impacts the community. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes and produced about 20 pages of transcribed transcript per interview.

Conversations were conducted through the Zoom conferencing software. The wide acceptance and knowledge of applications such as Zoom – a result of the COVID-19 pandemic – have facilitated and contributed to this study's production. Amid the social disruption caused by the pandemic, this new communication norm has offered expanded possibilities for interaction. Increased connectivity and the growing acceptance of online communication have been a positive aspect amid the turbulence of 2020 and allowed me to conduct interviews with participants/LFL stewards across the entire nation, without travel costs or safety concerns.

The interview transcripts were analyzed for thematic code structures to accentuate commonalities in the interviewee's responses, using the MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. The participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identities; throughout this study, they will be known as Joseph and Sarah^{iv}, Janice, and Michael. This small group of survey respondents would be described as having homogeneous qualities. Three of the four voluntarily disclosed having graduate-level education while living in or nearby less economically affluent neighborhoods and all are described as having white ethnicity. One respondent was retired yet highly involved in community building projects, and the other three were

still employed despite the pandemic triggered economic downturn.

Limitations

A global pandemic has not been documented in modern history. Thus, understanding how altruism manifests itself under pandemic conditions may not be a fair comparison to other human and non-human-made crises.

Notably, the population sampled in this study is limited. Both the Facebook survey and the interview data may not represent the entire LFL community. More specifically, regarding the qualitative interviews, the responses from participants who established their LFL within the first six months of the pandemic might have been overly motivated to respond out of enthusiasm for their new LFL. Likewise, the excitement of the informants could obfuscate unseen trends or behaviors. Gauging motivation for establishing an LFL and directly attributing data trends to the effects of the pandemic is challenging and remains subjective without equivalent pre-COVID data. Considering this limitation, the findings of this study will remain exploratory and hopefully serve future researchers investigating the societal role of LFLs in unforeseen circumstances.

In the interest of full disclosure, this paper's author is a charter registered LFL owner. The author's town is heavily populated with LFLs; approximately 20 have been counted, with more frequently being added. While the town would be considered somewhat ethnically diverse^v, its inhabitants' economic resources are above the national average^{vi}. This economic differential supports Schmidt and Hale's (2017) observation that despite intentions to alleviate book deserts, LFLs typically "encourage literacy" in neighborhoods with significant financial means (Schmidt and Hale 2017:24). Programs run by the non-profit Little Free Library organization, such as the Impact Library Program, promotes the organization's literacy mission in neighborhoods considered 'book deserts' by providing no-cost book exchange boxes to qualifying neighborhoods (Little Free Library 2021). What should be reemphasized, however, is the objective of this study. What is not being analyzed is the book exchange program's efficacy to correct social inequity, but rather the function LFLs serve individual stewards as providers of self-help during psychological distress and material proxies for the steward's prosocial attitudes during the COVID-19 crisis that they feel affect positive change. The preponderance and rapid spread of libraries in the author's neighborhood and status as an LFL charter member influenced this study's motivation. However,

to remain objective, no data was collected from the author's neighborhood.

Results

Survey data from the Facebook LFL group and the LFL organization charter registration data helps to contextualize the observations and opinions presented from the interviews. Each interviewee cited children's limited access to reading materials as a prime motivation for building an LFL. The broader LFL community corroborates this sentiment; 26% of stewards consider children their primary audience, plus a further 63% cater to all age groups. Furthermore, 68% of new LFL stewards strongly (11%) and emphatically (57%) believe LFLs support literacy efforts during the closure of schools and libraries. Further, the interviewees' responses help explain the substantial growth of the LFL community since March 2020. The significant rise in popularity of the movement can be tied to several factors, including most notably, pandemic conditions – not only were people feeling the effects of social isolation, but for many, the pandemic exposed society's racial inequality and inequity, such as the disproportionate hospitalization of people of color (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). The informants reiterate this sentiment in the following discussion: they describe the impact of institutional closure, specifically impacting children of more impoverished, often non-white communities. The societal effects of the pandemic cannot be thoroughly discussed without also examining how social justice interacts with the disease in our social landscape (Fortuna, Tolou-Shams and Robles-Ramamurthy 2020:443-444). It is the convergence of these two factors that have contributed to the psychological distress discussed below.

Power to Affect Change

All four stewards interviewed responded to their perceived societal problems through creativity. Three of the respondents asserted their skills as woodworkers or engineers. "I'm a woodworker, so building a Little Free Library just kinda[sic] made sense ... I'm retired in 17 years. I retired on a Friday, and on Monday, I was at Habitat [for Humanity], and I've been there ever since. I enjoy the people, enjoy what we do, and learning about building everything up" (Michael 2020). The power Michael leverages over witnessed societal problems is the construction of things for the community's betterment. Likewise, Joseph and Sarah both have a background in architecture. They are proficient engineers, "so, I'm making a bench, and it's gonna[sic] have wheels so whenever it is a nice day outside, we're gonna[sic] put the extra books under the

opening of the bench and then we'll roll it out there, so that way it's a place for people to sit at" (Joseph and Sarah 2020). Like Michael, they choose to express their power over the uncertainty caused by the pandemic and related social inequity through their individual strengths. Lastly, Janice did not build her LFL but did apply her creativity to the painting and decoration of her library, an action that garnered attention in her community. Her actions may be viewed as a personal investment in the book sharing box and anticipation of the library's success.

As stated above, the physical act of creating an LFL or creatively customizing the book sharing box also serves a psychological purpose. Creativity is an adaptive process in response to adversity (Metzl and Morrell 2008 as cited by Kapoor & Kaufman 2020:5), building mental resilience against crisis (Kapoor and Kaufman 2020:5). The psychological benefits gained from creatively investing in their LFLs are not specific to the form or purpose of book sharing boxes. At any time, 22% percent of people are engaged in a creative activity (Kapoor & Kaufman 2020:3). Simply the act of being creative has been proposed as a method "to cope with uncertainty and [to] tolerate ambiguity" (Kapoor & Kaufman 2020:3). Further research into how creativity and creative outlets, in general, interact with Illouz's theories would progress the understanding of how intangible culture becomes commodified.

Connecting with Community

When two interviewees were asked to describe their motivation for installing their LFL and the events contributing to its creation, Joseph and Sarah were forthcoming to acknowledge the impact of the pandemic. "I realized how many neighborhood kids we have. And that's kind of why it was like, I see them outside all the time, especially with the pandemic happening. It's going to be harder for people to get books and everything, and so we kind of just decided to build one and stick it outside" (Joseph and Sarah 2020). Immediately evident in this quote is the observation of how many children reside in their predominantly rental neighborhood and the book access implications the pandemic presents. A similar expression of concern was conveyed a few minutes later, "and then the kids lost the access to [books] in schools and so I think that was kind of a big point for it as well. Making sure they still had access to more reading material" (Joseph and Sarah 2020). Their community awareness and its needs during the pandemic prompted action. Being self-professed, technically capable builders, they utilized their skills to effect change on their community to remedy the situation. Joseph and Sarah's decision to build an LFL

required the use of their creativity; this decision was made during the worst of the pandemic lockdowns when closures were at their height. This intersection of situation and response operates in conversation with the study's research question examining the relationship of creativity, altruism, and a sense of agency in the face of social issues.

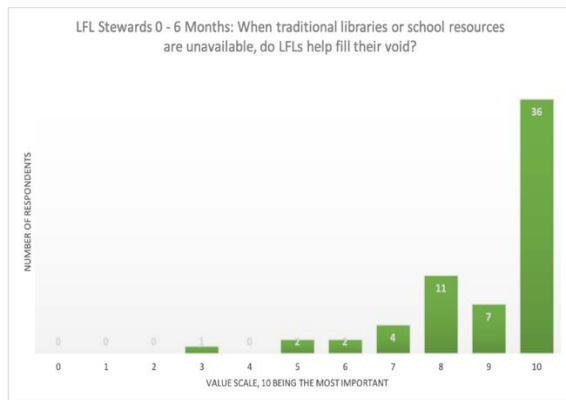
Living in an industrialized urban center, Janice observed a similar situation in her neighborhood. The social inequity communicated by Joseph and Sarah was likewise present where she lives. She described that "there's a very clear socioeconomic difference. And the more socioeconomically advantaged side of the city has Little Free Libraries everywhere. They're like in every neighborhood, like sometimes more than one for a neighborhood" (Janice 2020). As the conversation continued, Janice commented it was the neighborhood's children she was most concerned about. Janice articulated another commonality shared with Joseph and Sarah: "why did they [kids in affluent areas] always get the nice stuff like you know, like the kids in my neighborhood should have. You know the same access and opportunities to those kinds of things like the kids in those [affluent] neighborhoods have" (Janice 2020). Sentiments of inequality, inequity, and who is impacted are consistent in both interviews. Informants report that library closures caused by the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities, "the library's hours have kind of been cut ... but like our section [of the city], as far as I'm aware, doesn't have a library ... people's access is probably limited, to begin with, but even more, limited because of the hours changing and everything" (Janice 2020). With this statement, Janice is affirming her social identity. Her part of the city, the community she belongs to, is impacted by structural inequalities. Building the LFL in front of her house supports the community she feels a connection with, an essential factor when considering the purpose of prosocial behavior. Her altruism can also be viewed as an adaptive process giving more significant meaning to her identity when viewed as a part of a broader social collective than if her identity was considered isolated (Turner 1987:67; see also Durkheim on mechanical solidarity, 1893).

In addition to helping alleviate the perceived inequity, Janice's actions could be perceived as building community bonds, "I would like for [the LFL] to become a location for community sharing. Ultimately, I feel like right now it's more book distribution. You know, I'm hoping that that develops" (Janice 2020). In times of uncertainty or when faced with a threat, a sense of community provides the structure human groups need to overcome problems (Kuecker, Mulligan, and Nadarajah 2011:247). Delanty's (2003) description of the community that "exerts itself as a powerful idea of belonging in every

age... [and] as the most ‘social’ aspect of society” (Delanty 2003:11) is attested by Janice’s vision of community and her actions.

Janice’s concern for the effects of institutional closures such as libraries can also be perceived in data collected from the broader community of LFL stewards. Survey respondents who had been LFL stewards for six months or less, the period that corresponds to when the COVID-19 pandemic commenced, and the time the survey was conducted, overwhelmingly felt (57%) that LFLs are a vital resource to augment traditional library and school services when they are unavailable (Figure 1). However, how the community felt about LFLs as a replacement for traditional library services is out of this discussion’s scope.

Figure 1: Bar Graph representing the value LFL stewards place on Little Free Libraries when unavailable traditional education institutions.



Constructing LFLs in the neighborhoods where the interview subjects live or have close connections can be regarded as a statement of belonging to that space and place. This hypothesis is complemented by the language of belonging used by informants. When Janice discusses how “her” part of the city is devoid of public libraries, she includes herself in the community living and working in that part of the city; there is no distinction between her and “others.” This study postulates that this type of thinking is critical for acts of altruism. Self-categorization theory sees ingroup identification as essential for prosocial behavior. Turner (1987) presents the social psychological theory as an adaptive process permitting cooperative or altruistic acts (67).

Furthermore, shared group membership will ultimately result in altruism or prosocial behavior when ingroup members face a common fate or problem (Vollhardt 2009:69), such as the COVID-19 pandemic. When people perform as a psychological group assisting one another, they are freeing

themselves of the individual’s limitations, collectively overcoming obstacles (Turner 1987:67). Becoming an LFL steward does not constitute being part of a collective of LFL owners; instead, an individual’s actions may be viewed as an announcement of symbolic membership to a community in which the steward lives. The “common fate” in the context of this study is the COVID-19 pandemic and its societal ramifications. Thus, a “mechanical solidarity” evolves, an increased identification amongst society members sharing a common threat (Eränen and Liebkind 1993:959; see also Durkheim 1893).

Prosocial behavior and the self-help derived from stewarding an LFL can also be contextualized within the framework of the commodification of psychological distress exacerbated by a public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic. Illouz (2007) presents the impulse of self-help as the product of capitalism (62) and the American belief that people shape their destiny through their actions (43). The intersection of cultural individualism and the individualistic performance of altruism attained through hosting an LFL and the subsequent benefit of self-help may be perceived as driving factors leading some people to choose LFLs as their tool to address personal psychological distress while within the framework of Illouz’s theory. LFLs’ ability to operate within this framework is possibly one factor contributing to the attractiveness of the book-sharing boxes. If LFLs accomplished their book sharing through non-material means, or if stewarding an LFL was less of an individualistic endeavor, would LFLs have the same appeal to those looking for a self-help outlet as defined by Illouz?

Similarly, if the community or creative aspect of LFLs was nonexistent, would we see “altruism born of suffering” (Vollhardt 2009:59) evident in the growth observed in this study’s data occurring during the social and pandemic created crises? The impact of the pandemic on communities and the prosocial responses implied in the data could be viewed as having similarities to the rise of prosocial activities transpiring during and after other crises, as documented by Vollhardt and other researchers. How altruism manifests itself during and after a crisis is as varied as the needs of those affected. What has become apparent is the malleability of LFLs to operate as an outlet for altruistic behavior. Removing or altering one of the LFL’s aspects mentioned above would fundamentally impact how LFLs fit into the broad spectrum of why people perform prosocially.

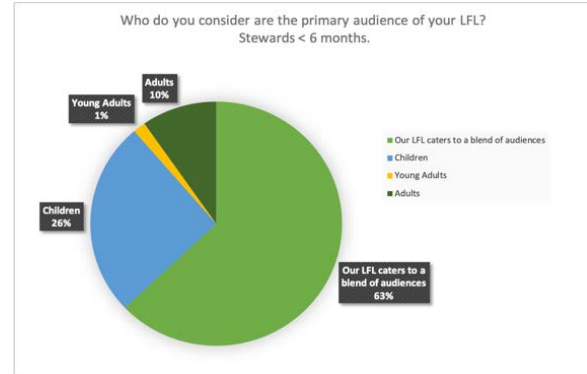
Interestingly, none of the interview subjects conveyed the pandemic directly or adversely impacted them. In sociological studies analyzing crises with rapid onset, where suffering is experienced at a community or national level, those responding with

prosocial behavior were not always directly impacted by events (Vollhardt 2009:74). People are inspired to help others because of a perceived connection to those suffering; the catalyst for action can simply be awareness of traumatic events. The national solidarity witnessed post 9/11 with the victims of the attacks confirms this behavior. The psychological effect of mass violence from the terror attacks and the suffering of the pandemic are relatable through the lens of the mass media.

2020 news consumption in the United States has increased by 32 percent over the period before the pandemic (Casero-Ripollés 2020:9). This increase is most notably reflected in younger and occasional news media consumers (Casero-Ripollés 2020:9). Pandemic news reporting exposing the virus's asymmetrical impact on people of color has received substantial media coverage (Gody 2020; Laviertes, Lopez and Wulforth 2020), compounding the argument that at the societal level, the pandemic, and racial inequity and inequalities are fundamentally connected. Hospitalization rates for Hispanic or Latino and Black or African American individuals are 4.1 and 3.7 times higher than whites (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). Likewise, the mortality rate for non-whites is 2.8 times higher than the white population (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). These statistics and imbalances are resonating with the media's expanded audience. The 24/7 news cycle and hyper pandemic awareness could, in part, be attributed to the rapidly declining mental health of the United States. 25% of Americans report experiencing severe depression, a rate three times higher than pre-COVID conditions and higher than other traumatic events such as 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina (Chatterjee 2020).

Further evidence of awareness of the suffering of others caused by pandemic psychological stressors and the growing cognizance of social injustice is seen through the identification of vulnerable community members, most notably children. Responses to a survey administered on the LFL steward Facebook page reflect this sentiment, showing that 26% of LFL stewards who joined the LFL movement since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic consider their library's primary audience be children (Figure 2). However, 63% feel their library caters to a blend of audiences.

Figure 2: Distribution of primary LFL audiences for stewards of six months or less, the period that incorporates stewards since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.



The Pandemic's Effect on Community and Steward Motivations

The Facebook survey results support the theory of "altruism born from a concern for community" and the collective stress hypotheses. A data slice reflecting the period between the pandemic's onset and survey completion was extracted from the dataset to illuminate steward attitudes toward the pandemic's effects on their community, their motivation for stewarding an LFL, and their perceived role of their library. The data reveals a trend that corroborates the hypothesis of community importance to individuals, and (Figure 3) a noticeable pattern emerges in the stewards' responses when the effect of events in 2020 are juxtaposed against the reason for hosting an LFL (Figure 3). From the perspective of LFL stewards, the data demonstrates the perceived role LFLs have in developing communities. Both questions' responses trend together and are rated high (10) and moderately high (8), and to a slightly lesser extent, so does their motivation to host an LFL (Figure 3). The downward shift of very high (9) confirms the values' interrelatedness while also highlighting some respondents' possible reluctance to view their values in the extreme. For new LFL stewards, 80% of respondents claim the events of 2020 have had a moderately high (8) to extremely high (10) impact on their community. This corresponds with an almost identical 78% response for the assumed role of LFLs in building community connections.

Data from the Little Free Library organization suggests the views derived from this study's informants and the Facebook Group survey respondents are not an anomaly. Data representing LFL charter number registration for 2018 to 2020 shows a repeating pattern at the commencement of 2019 and 2020. As the northern hemisphere dips into the colder months of January and February, registrations drop and recommence in March and peak in July. However, by May 2020, the number of registrations already equaled the peak in July 2019. As

the pandemic and infrastructure closures persisted, the number of LFL registrations continued to climb (Figure 4). One possible explanation for this growth is: LFL stewardship is understood as a creative response to the adversity and social fragmentation caused by lockdowns and social isolation. The book-sharing boxes allow individuals to connect passively and reciprocally with others in their neighborhood.

The closure of institutions, such as public libraries, was evident in the interviewees' neighborhoods, "Two months ago the schools closed down and the only way [kids] could do any kind of research was if the teacher or someone had sent out readings and they didn't have access to the library itself anymore" (Joseph and Sarah 2020). To solve this problem, interviewees and survey respondents consider providing private, supplemental library services through an LFL as one possible solution. 61% of LFL community survey respondents^{vii} strongly^{viii}, and 24% highly^{ix} believe LFLs substitute for public libraries during the pandemic. The efficacy of LFLs as an option to augment traditional library services is outside the scope of this study but has been thoroughly discussed by Schmidt and Hale (2017). This data suggests at an individual level, LFLs possess a perceived social value, an idea that complements the narrative LFLs function as a mechanism for self-help through the performance of altruism.

Explaining LFL Growth

One could argue that the upward trajectory of LFL charter registrations is a product of the movement's burgeoning popularity, evident in social media posts and the national media. Supporting this argument is the rising search popularity for the organization, "Little Free Library." Google trend data indicates a steadily growing interest in the organization between October 2018 and October 2020, with a sharp increase starting in March 2020 and maintaining over the summer months (Figure 5). Efforts by the LFL organization to promote their cause and programs fostering literacy may be contributing to the success of LFLs. However, likely multiple factors are supporting the growth of LFLs. As a preliminary investigation into LFLs' function as an aid for psychological self-healing, this paper views LFLs' hypothesized intersecting attributes of creativity, identity formation, and meaning-making as embedded qualities, making LFLs seemingly seem to be a natural choice for alleviating pandemic related psychological distress.

All three interview groups described their initial exposure to LFLs occurring through either word of mouth or observing them in neighborhoods they commuted through. Sarah recounted, "I remember seeing some of them around [my state], but I was

seeing more on I guess the south side of [my city]. Like if I go to work and everything but [that was] right before the pandemic started" (Sarah 2020). Likewise, Janice was seeing LFLs appearing in parts of her city. "And the more socioeconomically advantaged side of the city has little free libraries everywhere. They're like in every neighborhood, like sometimes more than one for [each] neighborhood. Lots of families have them out there" (Janice 2020). When we interpret these statements within the context of the interviewees' established capacity for creativity, we might deduce that LFLs appeared as the natural remedy for the inequities they observed and pandemic related stress.

Discussion and Conclusions

Few have been immune to the societal impact of COVID-19; however, some more than others have borne the brunt of institution closures and job loss (Waller 2020; Terrell 2021; Pappas 2020). Even if a person is not directly affected by the pandemic's disruption, they may still be afflicted by psychological damage from witnessing the suffering of others in their community or farther afield (Eränen and Liebkind 1993:959). Presented in this study were complementary and intersecting ideas exploring how people help themselves and others when faced with psychological trauma. People's preference for creativity to create meaning-making was presented by Kapoor and Kaufman (2020). This work was significant because it specifically addressed creativity during COVID-19. Vollhardt (2009) expanded psychological healing beyond the personal sphere by describing altruism as a product born of suffering. We could theorize the combination of altruism and creativity would carry significant healing potential, if not directly for the community it was intended for, then likely for its creator. Evidence from all sources implies people who have become LFL stewards since the pandemic started are engaging in their venture because of a personal desire to help children impacted by the pandemic and social injustice. Stewards are not establishing LFLs because personal libraries solve problems they see; they do so because of the perception of need and the potential for healing for both the community and themselves.

The performance of stewarding a Little Free Library is the creative and altruistic product mentioned above. All the interview subjects disclosed without direct questioning their creativity and how it was used to help others by creating their LFLs. This idea generates further lines of inquiry into the nature of material objects inhabiting our physical landscape and how the meaning or intent behind these objects influences our relationship with one another, both

during times of crisis and normalcy. Illouz's (2007) narrative of contemporary identity juxtaposes this potential research, fusing materiality with individualistic self-help and a narrative of suffering from capitalist ideology.

For many around the world, physical interactions have not been possible for much of 2020. It would not be unreasonable to assume the isolation and institutional closures experienced because of the pandemic's lockdowns would deepen social division or widen the socioeconomic rift existing in America. In many ways – that are out of this study's scope – it likely has. However, the small group of stewards interviewed – and probably many more who have become stewards since the onset of the pandemic – appear to have found a way to start the healing. Through books and sharing books, these people are reaching out to others because they are concerned for the communities with which they identify.

Figure 3: Line graph representing LFL stewards' values of their LFL and the impact of 2020's events on their community.

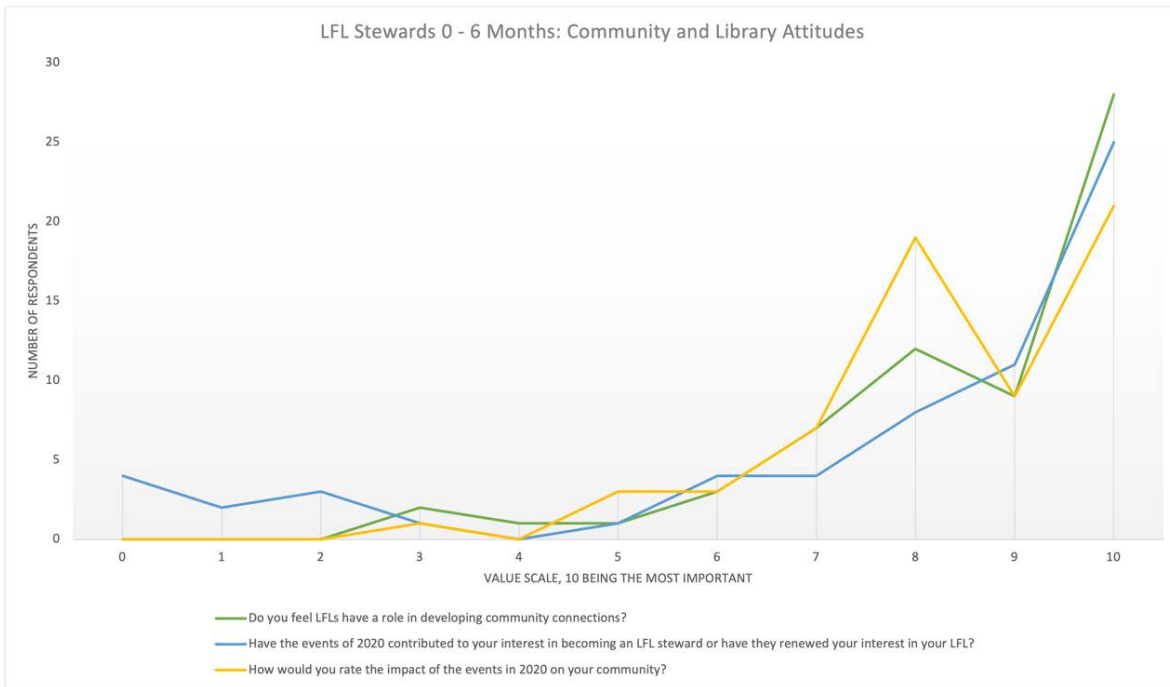


Figure 4: Line graph illustrating LFL charter number registrations from October 2018 to October 2020. Data courtesy of the Little Free Library (2020).

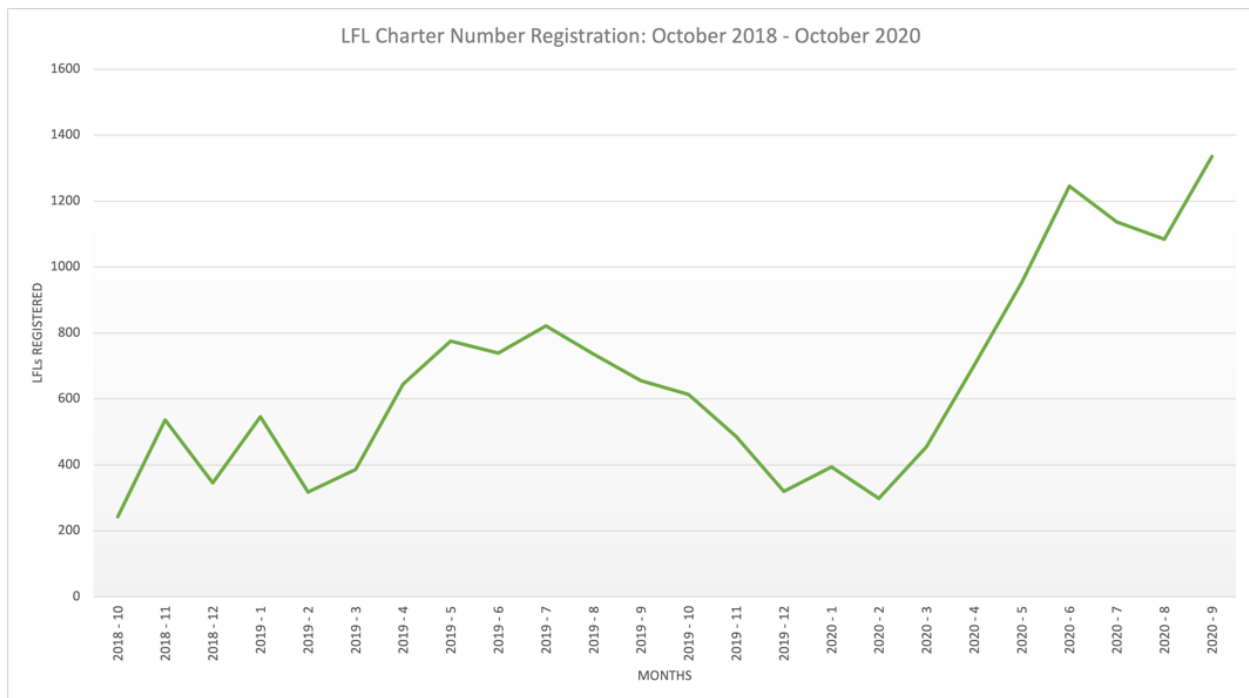
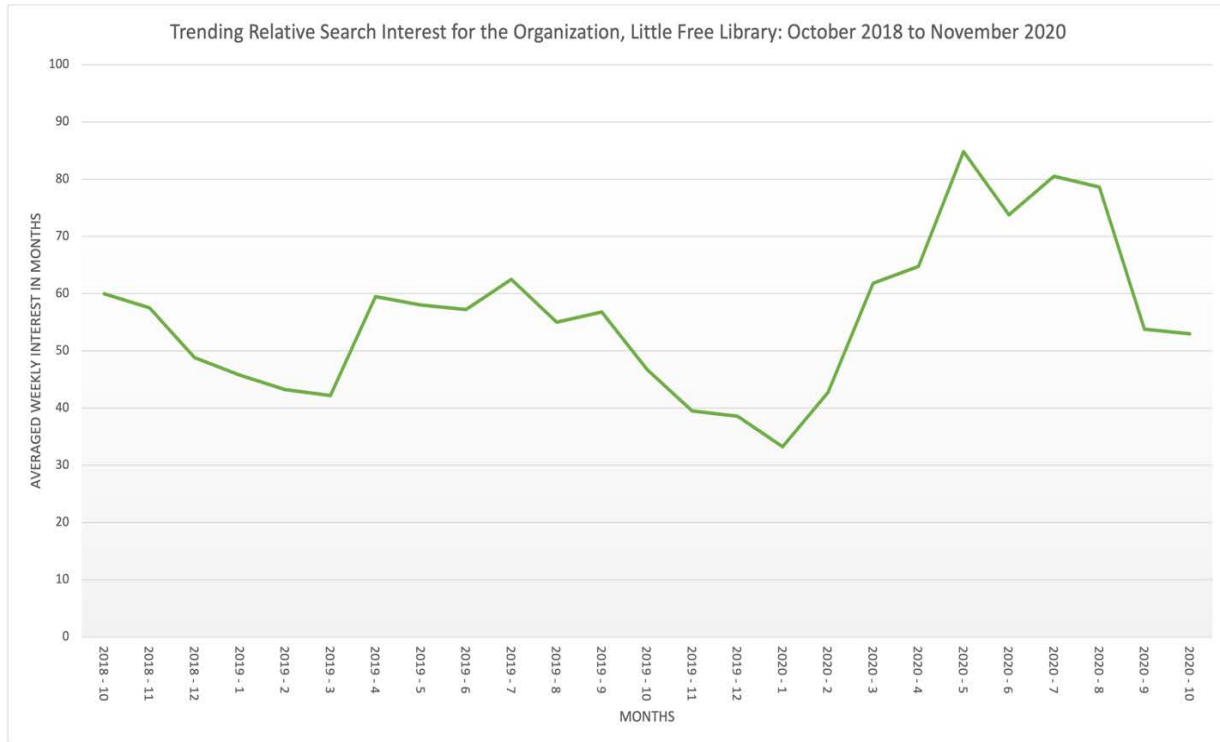


Figure 5: Popularity of web searches for the Little Free Library organization, October 2018 to October 2020. The trend is ranked on a scale of 0 to 10. (Data from Google Trends, 2020).



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Appendix

Interview information

The following open-ended questions were used to promote conversation with the interviewed LFL stewards. They were used as an informal guide to steer informants during the interview.

- How did you first become aware of Little Free Libraries, and what was your initial reaction to seeing them?
- Can you describe your journey to setting up an LFL? In other words, what prompted you to host a library, and how much consideration does setting it up require?
- Were there any external factors, events happening in the world, or your community contributing to your decision?
- What has been your community's response to your library? Can you recall any specific examples of community or patron feedback?
- How do you stock your library? Do you rely on exchanges to keep it well stocked? Is there a demographic you try to cater to?
- What does the book exchange program or the motto "take a book, share a book" mean to you? How do these concepts speak to you on a personal level?
- How would you describe your neighborhood? Would you say it is diverse, economically, and ethnically?
- How have people in your community reacted to the events unfolding in the world? How has the rising awareness of racial inequalities and the effects of COVID-19 impacted your community?
 - How have these events impacted you and your family?
- Do you or other people ever put other items in the LFL?

Survey questions

- How long has your LFL been active?
- Who do you consider are the primary audience of your LFL?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being the most frequent. How often, if at all, do you actively seek books for your library? For example, yard sales, library book sales, or bulk book purchases.
- Do you seek out and stock books with social justice content?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being the strongest feeling. Do you feel LFLs have a role in developing community connections?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being the strongest feeling. Have the events of 2020 contributed to your interest in becoming an LFL steward, or have they renewed your interest in your LFL?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, 10 being the strongest feeling. How would you rate the impact of the events in 2020 on your community?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being little or no change and 10 being the greatest change. Has your view of the importance of community changed during 2020?
- On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being not at all and 10 being very frequent. Do you or your LFL visitors stock essential items in your library? For example, food or facemasks.
- On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being not at all and 10 being the strongest feeling. When traditional libraries or school resources are unavailable, do LFLs help fill their void?

ⁱ This interpretation is supported the LFL organization's active programs, such as the Impact Library Program (<https://littlefreelibrary.org/impact-about/>) and the Read in Color program (<https://littlefreelibrary.org/read-in-color/>).

ⁱⁱ The *Facebook* group membership size represents a LFL charter number that is associated with a single Facebook user. Multiple members of a household or organization may join the group with the same charter number.

ⁱⁱⁱ Using the AAPOR standard confidence level of 95% (<https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/Election-Polling-Resources/Margin-of-Sampling-Error-Credibility-Interval.aspx>), the survey data represents the opinions of the overall Facebook group with +/- 8% accuracy.

^{iv} A simultaneously interviewed couple.

^v 2019 US Census estimates predict 60% of the town's residents identify as white (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/montclairtownshipsexcountynewjersey>).

^{vi} The town's median household income for 2019 is estimated to be \$126,844 (<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/montclairtownshipsexsexcountynewjersey>), compared to the U.S. national median of \$65,712 (<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/2019-median-household-income.html>).

^{vii} Based on a Likert scale of 0 to 10. Answers were in response to the question, "On a scale of 0 to 10, 0 being not at all and 10 being the strongest feeling. When traditional libraries or school resources are unavailable, do LFLs help fill their void?"

^{viii} 10 on a scale of 0 to 10.

^{ix} 11.3% reported 9 on a scale of 0 to 10. And 12.8% reported 8 on a scale of 0 to 10.