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**Public libraries are for all?: The study of perception and (non) use of public libraries by working class adults in the city of Osijek**

**Tomislava Žilić,** Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia, [tzilic@ffos.hr](mailto:tzilic@ffos.hr)

**Jure Žilić,** Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia, [jzilic@ffos.hr](mailto:jzilic@ffos.hr)

**Sanjica Faletar Tanacković**, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia, [sfaletar@ffos.hr](mailto:sfaletar@ffos.hr)

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# Introduction

Public libraries are, as a rule, open to all members of the community but large portions of citizens are not using them. Furthermore, despite the fact that the role of public libraries in communities is changing and that they are taking over some non traditional roles, that they undergo the process of rebranding and some even abandon the very name of libraries to attract users, statistical evidence shows and some authors predict that the number of non-users world wide is substantial and that their number will grow (Sbaffi and Rowly 2014). The situation in Croatia and Osijek is not much different. For example, the number of library patrons in Osijek has dwindled over that past few years, and in 2016 in the city of Osijek, which is one of the five largest cities in the country with total population estimated at 108.048, a meagre 13% of the total population were members of the public library (Gabriel 2017).

**Theoretical background**

Although non users are difficult to identify, scholars agree that libraries should pay more attention to their non users i.e. their potential users and try to address their needs and interests (McCarthy 1994; Sin and Kim 2008; Ipsos MORI 2010). In a number of studies conducted internationally, a number of different reasons and barriers, of personal, financial, physical, psychological, institutional nature, have been identified at a root of library non use (May, 2009; Vondracek 2007; Ipsos MORI 2010). John Pateman, who builds his work upon Hales (1889), Wellard (1935), Usherwood (1970), Comedia (1993), Coles (1999), Muddiman (et. al. 2000), Hull (2001), Gehner (2010) and others, argues that there is an intrinsic link between social exclusion and social class, and that the class system pervades every aspect of society, including library usage. He further emphasizes that libraries themselves are a means of social control and are therefore alien to working class life and rejected by working class people (Pateman 2011, Pateman 2000).

**Methodology**

The aim of the study was to make a profile of a specific group of library non users in the city of Osijek and understand why they are not using the library. The study also sought to identify their perceptions and attitudes to the public library and the perceived relevance of its services to their lives. Further on, it investigated the barriers and challenges faced by these groups in using public libraries and how these may be overcome.

Although there are many groups in the community that tend not to use the public library (e. g. teenagers, people with disabilities, minority groups etc.) in this study authors focused on the working class adult, the social class with low education and income. The study employed a qualitative method (in person semi-structured interviews) and is running until the end of March this year. In the poster presentation the preliminary findings will be presented.

**Conclusion**

This is, to our knowledge, the first such study to be conducted in Croatia and will surely provide public library management (in particular in the city of Osijek) with useful data on which their future decisions and actions aimed at increasing the number of users from this social group could be based (e.g. regarding marketing of library services, collection development, outreach activities etc.). Also, it is believed that the study will develop and test the instrument which could be used in subsequent studies.

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