

# Evaluating Community Hubs as Social Networking Sites for Recent Immigrants

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## **Purpose of Research Project**

The Tamil community is an emerging immigrant population in Ontario with a lack of research on the settlement experiences of this community. This project explored whether immigrant interactions facilitated by community hubs led to the formation of bridging social networks. This was done by examining participant perceptions around community hubs as social networking sites. The transition of these individuals will be understood and will help community providers understand the needs of this ethno-racial group in service delivery.

## **Background**

Research has been done on immigrants and bonded social capital, whereby immigrants settle in communities where individuals from similar backgrounds to themselves already live. However, not all immigrants settle in areas with individuals from their country of origin. Bridging social capital are networks of individuals from different backgrounds. New immigrants without pre-existing social networks can face social isolation when settling in a new country. A method of easing this transition exists in Community Hubs.

## **What is a Community Hub?**

Community hubs provide a central access point for a range of needed health and social services, along with cultural, recreational, and green spaces to nourish community life.

Community hubs are meeting places. They provides a focal point for people with similar interests to connect and collaborate, fostering social networks that improve the quality of life in the community where the hub is located. The services provided by each hub are catered to the needs of the neighbourhood it is located in and the diverse population it is providing services for. Beyond offering programs and meeting local needs, they act as spaces for users to connect with others and develop friendships.

## **Dorset Park Community Hub**

The hub provides programs and services for a wide variety of ages and backgrounds. There is a newcomer centre that offers ESL classes and settlement services, mental health services, a food bank, an Early Years program for young children and their caregivers, employment services and an eye clinic among other things. Find out more at: <http://www.dorsetpark.com/>

## **Eligibility Criteria**

- 18 years of age or older
- Migrated to Canada within the last 5 years
- Conversational knowledge of English

## **Methodology**

Conduct a one-time, private interview with interested community hub users who met the study criteria and provided informed consent.

## **Findings**

All participants were female, 55+ years old and lived with one of their children. Participants were all married, though some were widowed.

They identified the hub as a meeting place for people of varying ages who came from diverse backgrounds that were the same and different from their own. All participants felt welcome at the hub and felt the hub supported them in building their social networks as all participants said they had met new people they did not previously know. They all said that the hub made it easy to meet new people. All participants also said they had made new friends through the use of hub services and programs, despite most of these individuals not interacting with other hub users outside of the hub. One participant stated that the people she met at the hub were closer friends than the ones she had in her native country. This same participant stated she is alone when at home, but has many people to interact with at the hub.

While most of the participants said they do not view Scarborough as home, they all said that the hub helped them in their settlement to the Scarborough community. All participants wished they could spend more time at the hub but faced challenges due to familial obligations (such as helping with the care of grandchildren) and transportation difficulties. There were suggestions of networking with other hubs and that a transportation service would increase their involvement in hub programs. All participants said the hub provided good services and the hub was very receptive to their feedback and sought the involvement of users to improve their program delivery.

## **Limitations**

The hub reduces services during the summer, which narrowed the recruitment pool. There was a 50% rate of participation from people who met the study criteria and were interested in hearing more about the study. The common reason given by those who opted not to participate in the study was a lack of interest. Time constraints limited the pool of potential participants, along with the time of year. Performing this study at another may allow for a greater demographic range which may lead to different responses.

## **Conclusions**

Community hubs fulfill their mandate of nurturing strong communities through program delivery, and also foster the building of social networks via both bonded and bridging social capital. This is important for the senior recent immigrant demographic as the only people these people know prior to migrating are their own family.

## RESOURCE LIST

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