

The Immigrant Experience: Assessing the Common Trajectory of Subjective Life Satisfaction of Immigrants in Canada

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Introduction

There has been a dramatic increase in mass-migration

- By the end of 2014, nearly 60 million people were displaced from their homes and forced to relocate in another country.¹ That is almost twice the Canadian population.²

Experts suggest that this trend is far from over and predict that the number of migrants will continue to rise in the years to come.³

With increasing mobility between countries, it is important to assess the well-being of immigrants as they adjust to their new lives.

Present Research Objectives

- Assess the common themes that immigrants themselves generate when reflecting on their experiences of leaving home, coming to Canada and adjusting to their new life.
- Assess the common trajectory of immigrants' subjective life satisfaction throughout three key periods of their immigrant experience (their last year in their home-country, their first year in Canada and the present-day).
- Examine the possible links between the common themes generated by immigrants and the shifts in their subjective wellbeing during these three key periods.

Hypothesis

A common narrative in the field of human migration is that immigrants' levels of overall life satisfaction experience a significant upward shift as soon as they move from their heritage country to the receiving country⁴. The present research aims to test the extent to which the immigrant experience matches this common narrative.

Methodology

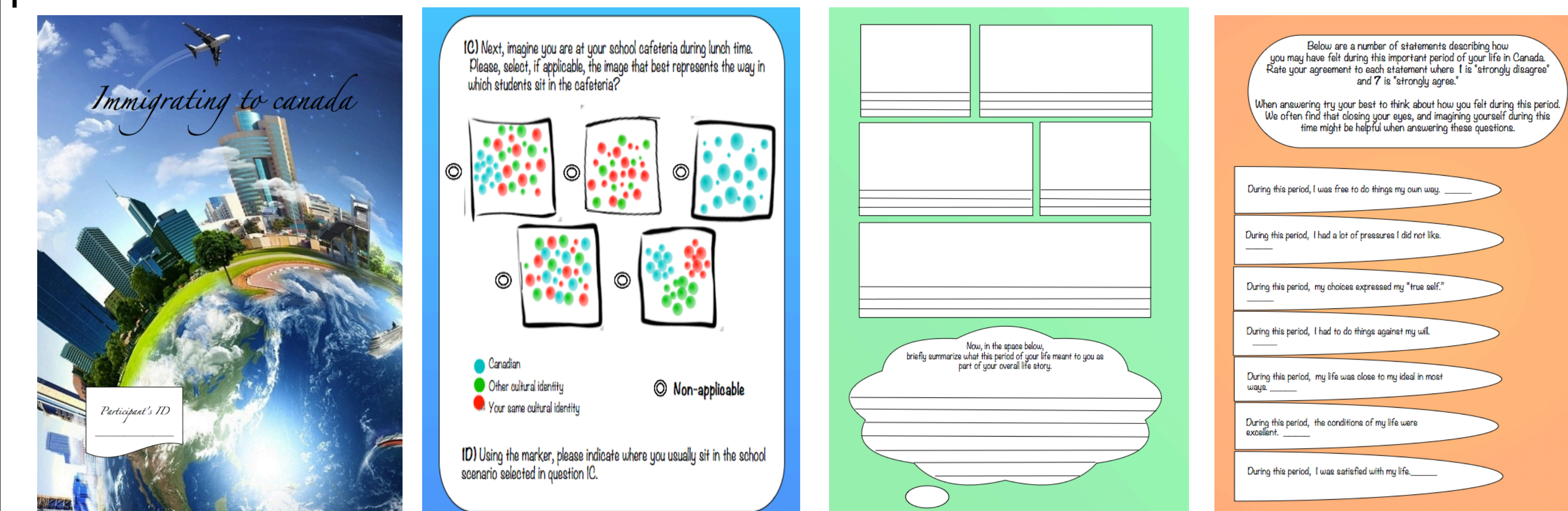
With the intention of gathering a representative sample of immigrants living in Montreal, we recruited participants through multiple mediums, including posting advertisements in community centers located in areas with high density of immigrant populations and Facebook groups belonging to diverse immigrant communities.

A total of 36 immigrants, aged between 18 and 30, participated in the study. The majority of the participants came from Spanish speaking countries.

Our aim was to facilitate participants' clear recollection of their past experiences by providing them with a medium to allow them to share their stories without constraints imposed by research expectations. We developed a new, open-ended "graphic novel" methodology, in which participants were guided through the narration of their experiences during three key periods:

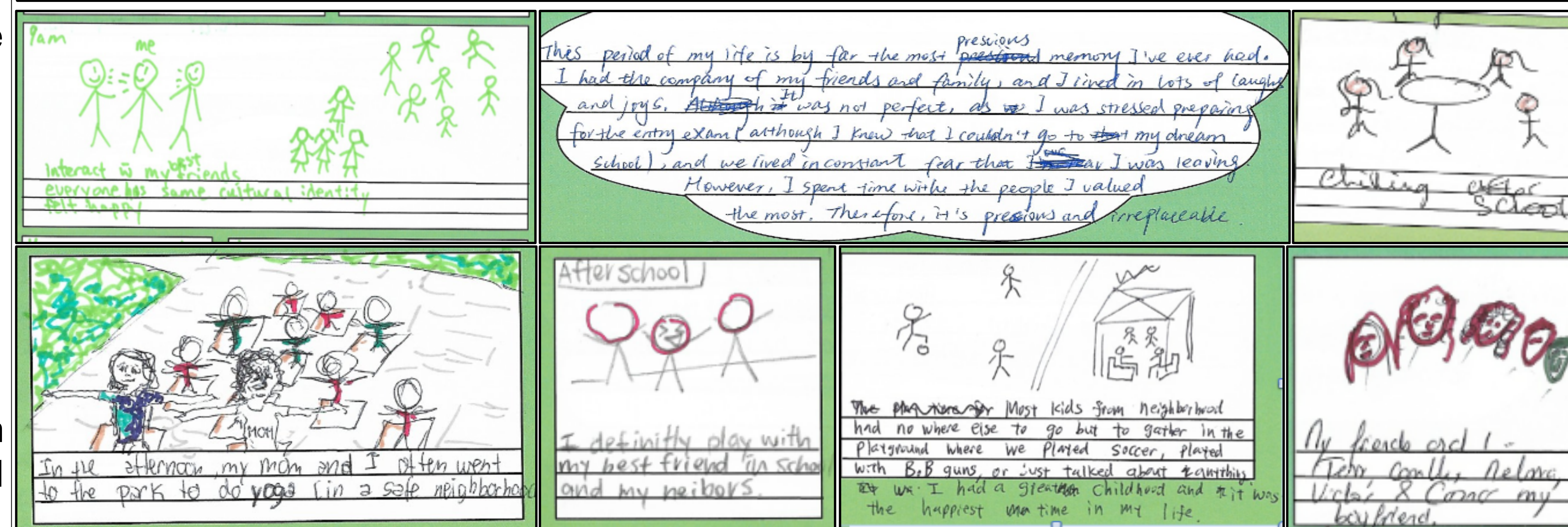
- Time 1:** Last year in home country.
- Time 2:** First year in Canada.
- Time 3:** Current life situation.

Our graphic novel approach asked participants to write in their own words and make drawings to illustrate their experiences for each of the key time periods.



Results

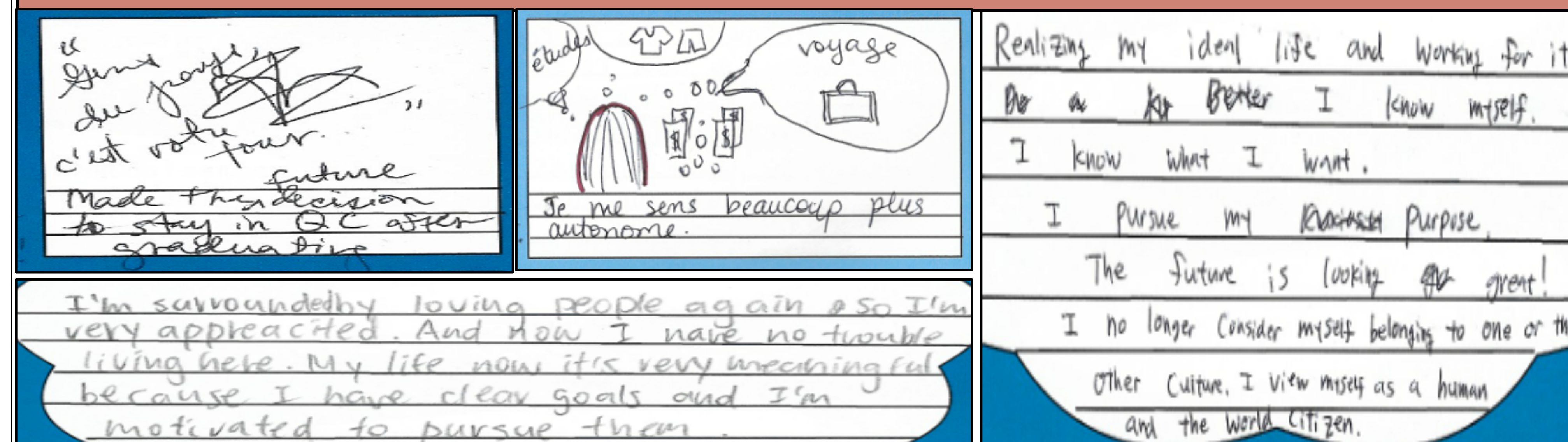
Theme at time 1: Spending time with friends and family (91%)



Themes at time 2: Loneliness and depression (35%)

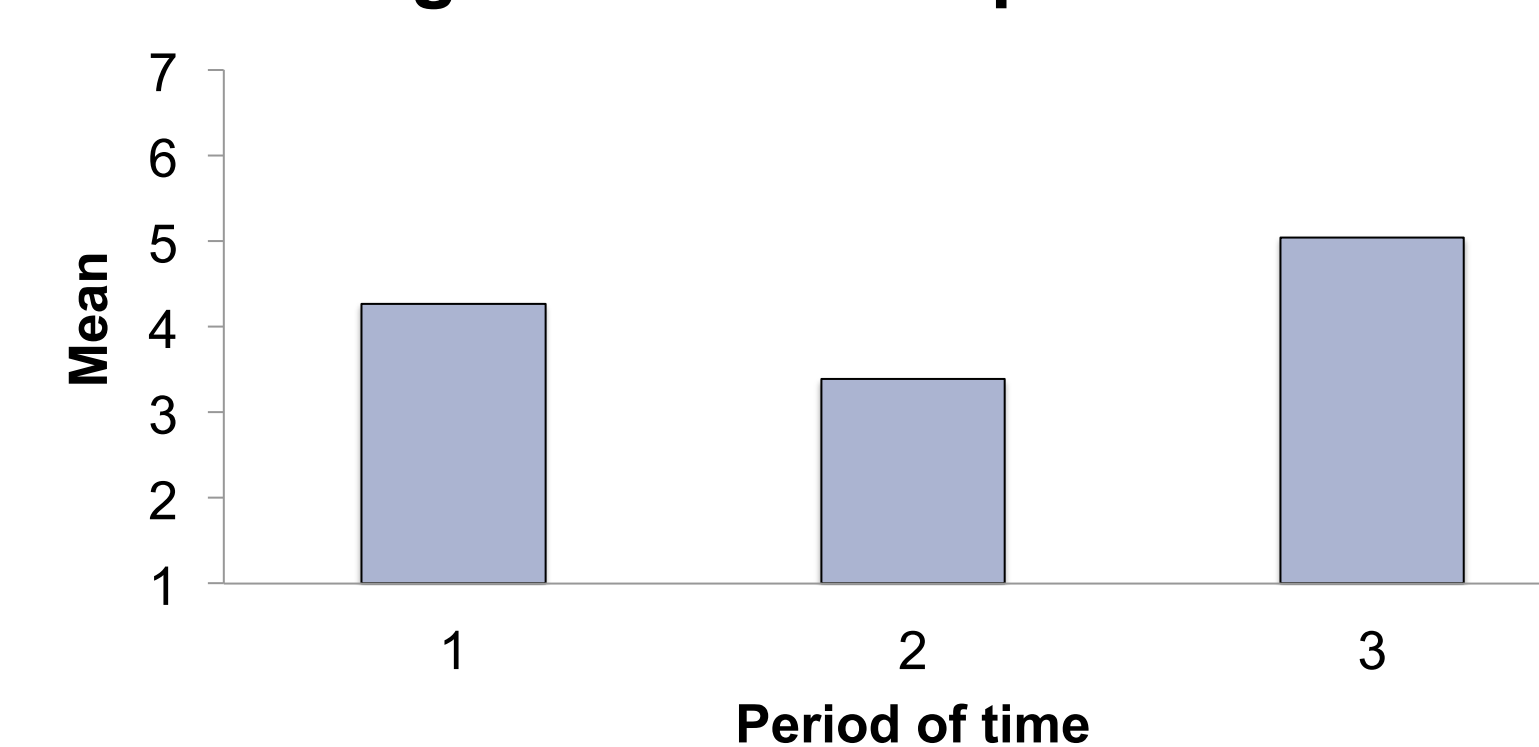


Themes at time 3: Clearer direction in life and greater autonomy (41%)



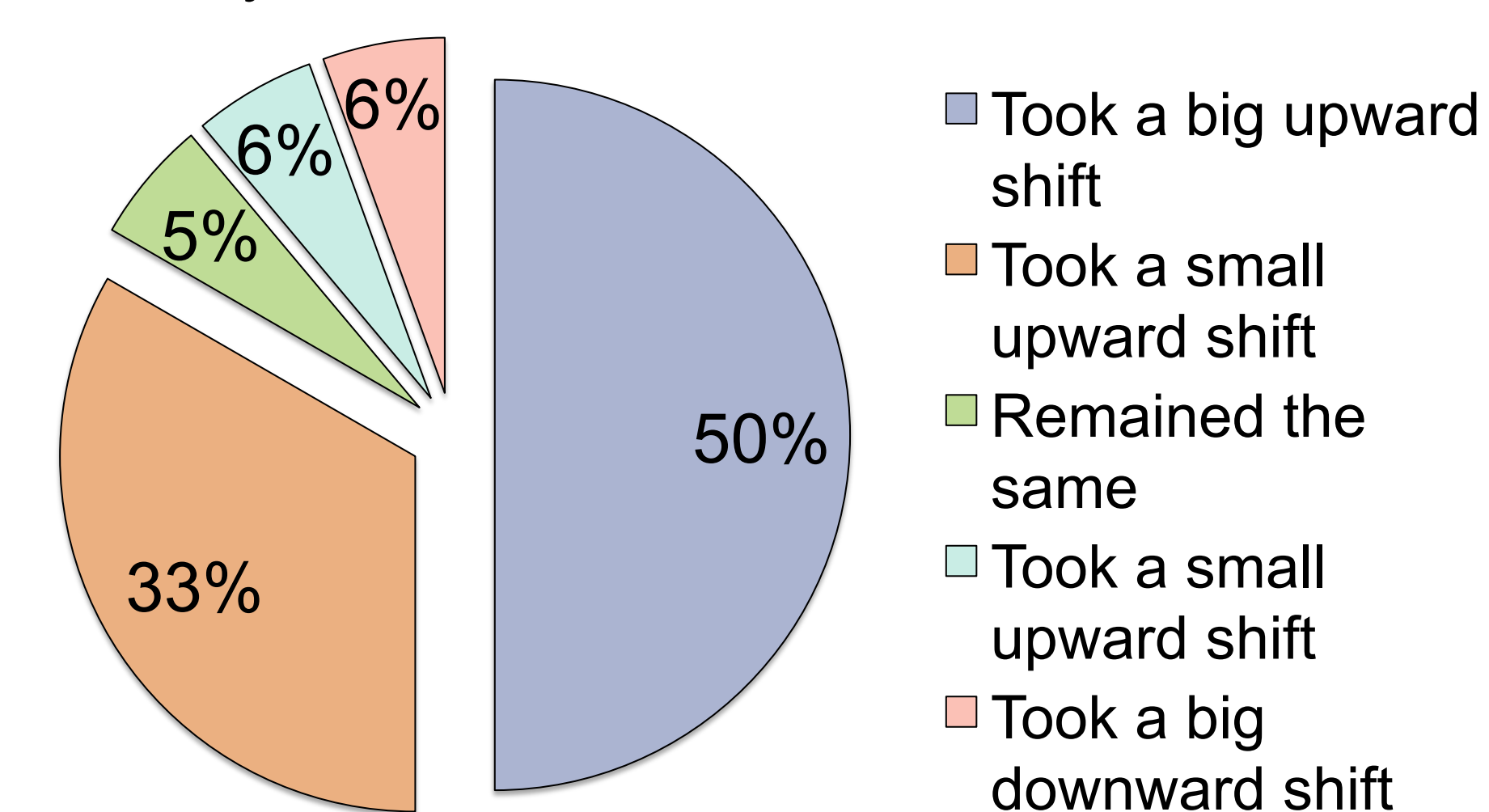
Common trajectory of immigrants' subjective life satisfaction

Subjective life satisfaction throughout the three periods of time

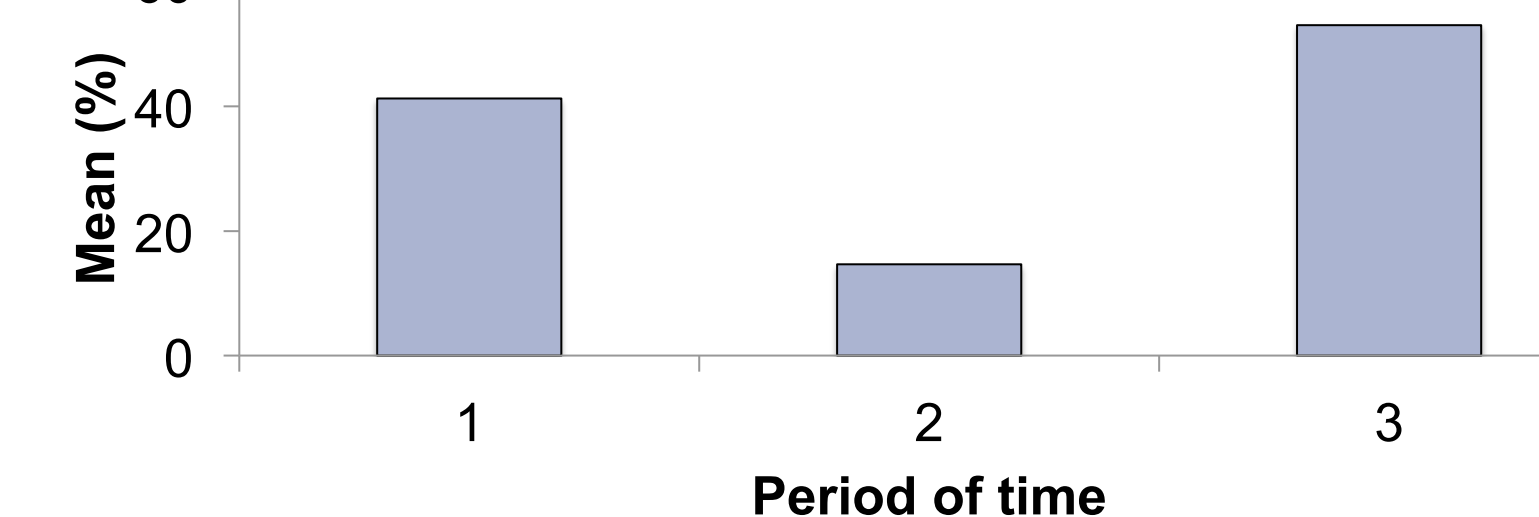


Overall changes in life satisfaction over time

"Compared to when you lived in your heritage country, would you say that when you moved to Canada your overall life satisfaction..."



Percentage of participants that expressed feelings of happiness during each of the different periods of time



Discussion

Life-satisfaction follows a U-Shaped Trajectory. Our findings suggest that, while not always the case for all immigrants, the subjective life satisfaction of immigrants in Canada tends to follow a U-shape trajectory. Indeed, participants' levels of subjective life satisfaction were reported to be high during their last year in their home country, low during their first year in Canada and high again in the present-day.

What accounted for immigrants' life satisfaction at each key time period?

Time 1 (Last year in home-country):

- The central theme at time 1 (91% of participants) was participants' *ability to spend time with friends and family* (high social embeddedness). This may explain the high levels of life satisfaction seen during this period of time, as social embeddedness has been shown to be related to individuals' subjective wellbeing⁵.

Time 2 (First year in Canada):

- Feelings of loneliness and depression* were the most commonly reported themes for this period of time (35% of participants). It is likely that after having had to leave most of their friends and family behind in their heritage country, participants' levels of social embeddedness decreased, and as a result, their subjective life satisfaction experienced a downward shift. Language and cultural barriers also posed obstacles for young immigrants to connect to their Western peer group.

Time 3 (Present-day):

- The most commonly reported themes for this period of time (41% of participants) were *having a clear direction in life and enjoying greater autonomy*. The current high levels of life satisfaction experienced by participants may be the result of them acquiring a more defined purpose in life and greater autonomy, which are both important dimensions of an individuals' overall life satisfaction⁶.

Implications and Future Directions

The present study provides us with rich and open-ended data concerning immigrants' experiences as they adjusted to their new life in Canada. Using a new and engaging *graphic novel approach* we facilitated immigrants to share their experiences and express their emotions with respect to their immigrant experience.

Contrary to previous assumptions in the field, immigrants' did not always experience an immediate increase in life-satisfaction upon arriving to Canada. Rather, the first year proved challenging to many immigrants. Thus social interventions for young immigrants may seek to provide immigrants with a friend or companion to help them transition to their new environment.

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