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# Authenticity Matters: The Reading Practices of Swedish Young Adults and Their Views of Public Libraries

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## ABSTRACT

Research speaks of a disconnect between young adults and library culture. Young adults, despite having overall low expectations, often show dissatisfaction with library services, while librarians perceive teens as both a prioritized user group, and a problematic group of users. Ninety-two young adults participated in a focus-group study. The interviews revolved around their views on reading and public library services. Results showed that young adults' choices to engage in reading practices are influenced by the context of the practice, the motivation for engaging in the practice and the format used.

## KEYWORDS

Young adults; reading practices; public libraries; reading

## Introduction

The reading practices of youth have long been a concern in society, but it is important to view the concerns critically because they tend to reproduce dominant notions of reading and youth in society (Williams and Zenger 3 ff). Historically, the concerns have shifted. For example, they found expression in media-panics about comic books in the 1950s as well as in discussions about video games and television in the 1980s and 1990s (Stauffer, 2007). A more recent concern is that the reading abilities of young adults seem to be declining and that pleasure reading is dropping (Lee 6). The proliferation of digital technology is another, sometimes concerning, aspect assumed to fundamentally affect the reading practices of youth, for example, influencing the variety of texts they encounter and blurring the distinction between reading for different purposes (Conradi et al.; Tveit and Mangen). Historically, children's librarians have viewed themselves as responsible for guiding and controlling what children and youths are reading. In the early 1900s, librarians described themselves as “superior parental figures, as careful teachers, and as doctors protecting youths from harm” (cited in Stauffer, 2014, 156). Although the profession has gone through significant changes in values and standards since the beginning of the 1900s, Lee states that there seems to be a *disconnect* between teens and library culture, where young adults, despite having overall low expectations, often show dissatisfaction with library services (7).

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Librarians, on the other hand, generally perceive teens as an important, prioritized user group, yet at the same time a problematic group of users – often noisy and disturbing other users (Hedemark, Hedman, and Sundin).

How can this, as Agosto et al. call it, uncertain relationship between teens and libraries be understood? Borrowing from Michael Buckland in his article “Five grand challenges for library research” from 2003 (see also Lee) an important question is how we can make library services more meaningful for teens. What role – if any – do public libraries play in the lives of young adults? These questions form the starting point of this study where the reading practices of 92 Swedish teens and their views toward public libraries were examined. The study was made in collaboration with the Swedish Library Association,<sup>1</sup> with the aim to examine young people’s experiences of reading in relation to library activities. The background for doing the study was to gain knowledge about young adults’ reading practices and how they perceive library services. A basic premise is that their experiences and notions of reading can be used to further develop public library activities for this user group. The study can thus be perceived as a user study and connects to a tradition in library- and information studies (LIS) called INSU (information, need, seeking and use), but with a practice-oriented approach (cf. Case and Given). The article at hand and the empirical study it entails is part of a developing area of research called Critical Studies of Reading. The purpose of these kinds of studies is to problematize how reading are practiced and can be understood in a particular social and historical setting, not to define the “right” kind of reading practice or whether a certain practice is more beneficial than another (e.g. Hedemark, 2020; Lindsköld, Hedemark, and Lundh; manuscript).

The following research questions have guided the study:

Q1: How do young adults in Sweden describe their reading practices?

Q2: How do young adults in Sweden describe their public library practices?

Q3: How may the insights about young adults’ reading practices and library practices inform library services?

The paper has the following structure: the subsequent section contains a selective review of related research followed by an explication of the theoretical framework that guided this study. Thereafter, the methodology and analyzed material are described and the findings are presented. The paper ends by a discussion followed by a conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup>The results of the entire study are published in a report written in Swedish called “Unga berättar. En studie av ungas syn på läsning och bibliotek” [Young people tell all. A study of young adults’ attitudes toward reading and libraries]. It is available through the Swedish Library Associations website <http://www.biblioteksforeningen.org>.

## Literature review

The study is informed by previous studies from two different areas within LIS, studies on users' perceptions of public libraries on the one hand (e.g., [Agosto and Hughes-Hassell](#); [Hedemark, 2009](#)), and studies on reading practices, on the other (e.g. [Rothbauer et al.](#); [Sheldrick Ross et al.](#)). A relatively large number of studies focusing on young people's reading habits have been made. Many of those take their departure in quantitative methods and analyze, for example, which book titles and genres are the most popular and which factors have an impact on the reading habits of teens (e.g., [Conradi et al.](#); [Hughes-Hassell and Rodge](#); [Tveit and Mangen](#)). Other studies have a qualitative approach, examining, for example, young adults' attitudes to books and reading (e.g., [Howard](#); [Tveit](#)). Important findings from these studies show how teens use recreational reading of fiction as a means of information seeking in everyday life. Through their pleasure reading, they gain insights into "self-identification, self-construction and self-awareness ([Howard 53](#))."

There is another strand of research focusing on adolescent literacy in a large variety of settings (cf. [Christenbury, Bomer and Smagorinsky](#)), such as in school ([Cremin and Swann](#); [Marshall](#)), in the workplace ([Beaufort](#)), and in virtual worlds ([Black and Steinkuehler](#)). Knowledge drawn from this research shows that more research about young adults' literacies is needed. Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky stress that research already conducted merits further implementation and that there is a "consistent gap between what we know and what we are doing, and it is not acceptable" (12). A number of studies have been made of library services for young adults and their library practices ([Agosto and Hughes-Hassell](#); [Agosto et al.](#)). Shari Lee's article from 2014 is noteworthy, examining the history and development of library services to teens, finding that libraries often provide traditional services to teens, despite sufficient research showing existing barriers. Lee argues that there is an urgent need to change how librarians and researchers think about young adults and libraries (11).

The study draws inspiration from theoretical concepts found in new literacy studies, the main concept being *reading practices*<sup>2</sup> which entails reading activities but also includes historically, institutionally and materially grounded values and norms affecting the way things are done (cf. [Barton](#); [Street](#)). In other words, reading is in this paper understood as a social and cultural practice. As [Scribner and Cole](#) state, "Literacy is not simply knowing how to read and write a particular script but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use" (236). Reading practices can be described as a set of cultural and social ways of utilizing reading. One important aspect of the concept is that it is not the same in all contexts; rather – it is situated, –

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<sup>2</sup>The concept used in new literacy studies is *literacy practices*. In this study, reading is seen as a dimension of literacy and the concept reading practices are therefor used.

meaning that there are different ways of reading (Barton, Hamilton, and Ivanic). Reading is therefore, in this paper used as an empirical concept aimed to capture the informants' verbally expressed descriptions of their interactions with different kinds of texts – not only printed texts but also movies, computer games, social media and so forth – in different kinds of contexts. The guiding principle in the analysis is to understand reading from the perspective of the young adults and to analyze reading practices that are both recognizable and meaningful to the informants participating in this study.

### **Methodology and material**

The research questions have been addressed through the analysis of empirical data gathered from focus-group interviews with 92 young adults – ages 16 to 18 years. The interviews primarily revolved around their perceptions and experiences of the public library, but also around reading as such. The interviewees were recruited through the local library and through local sports clubs. The interviews, conducted in August and September in 2018 by librarians, took place in the public library and lasted on average for 30–60 minutes. The interviews were recorded by the interviewing librarians and transcribed by staff at the Swedish Library Association. The author made the main analysis, but discussed the results of the analysis with the librarians.

All informants volunteered to participate, and both boys and girls from different social groups and of varying ethnic backgrounds are included in the empirical material. Before the focus group interviews took place, the informants were encouraged to choose a name by which they wanted to be referred to during the interview and in the empirical material. This was motivated by two reasons: to ensure the participants full anonymity and to make them feel more comfortable when participating in the study. The chosen names do not always reveal their gender. Therefore, gender-neutral pseudonyms are used when quoting all the informants, and all quotations are reported verbatim after being translated into English by the author.

Interviews were conducted with youths in several cities in Sweden – both smaller as well as larger cities. Interviews conducted in smaller cities also included young adults from rural areas. The cities are anonymized in the study using fictional city names: Small Town, Suburb, and City. Quotes from participants from City 1 are used often, but this is explained by the fact that four interviews took place in this rather big city. Overall, twenty focus group interviews were conducted: seven focus groups in cities, seven focus groups in suburbs and six focus groups in small towns. In the focus group interviews the number of participants oscillated, in for example one session, three young adults' participated and in another session, there were

up to eight individuals. The study was made in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the [Swedish Research Council](#), which state, for example, that children over the age of 15 years can consent to participation in a study (27).

The analysis focuses primarily on the group's, rather than the individual participants', articulated perceptions. Using a discursive perspective, focus in the analysis is placed on the social and collective understandings of reading practices and library practices, as these are expressed in the focus group interviews. This analysis is very different from a more hermeneutic analytical approach, because the aim is not to analyze and identify statements on an individual level – on the contrary – discourse analysis is “indifferent toward individual speakers' intentions” (Talja 14). Instead, discourse analysis focuses on the collective interpretations and assumptions of a certain phenomenon that are produced during the interview and discernable in the empirical data. The empirical data were thus analyzed in order to understand how young adults describe their reading practices and their library practices; there was no objective to analyze the frequency of specific attitudes to reading or to the library; this kind of analysis is essentially qualitative. To identify the reading practices, the empirical data have been read repeatedly and examined with regard to certain dimensions or themes; one is the *context* where the reading practice are taking place, another dimension is how they describe the *purpose for reading* and the third dimension is *the medium* through which they read. Although the dimensions *context* and *purpose for reading* is to some extent applicable in the analysis of library practices, the dimensions have not been used in the analysis of young adult's library experiences. The focus in this part of the analysis is placed on the assumptions that seem to influence their use of the library.

## Findings

The presentation of the results is structured according to the first two research questions. The third research question addresses how knowledge derived from the previous research questions can be used and forms the basis for the discussion section.

### **Q1: how do young adults in Sweden describe their reading practices?**

The analysis shows that if the reading practice is taking place in an educational setting, their views toward the practice differs compared to the way they describe more recreational reading practices. In the excerpt below we can see how reading print fiction for recreational purposes is described in an entirely different way than reading print fiction at school. The statement illustrates the importance of the context of the reading practice and the

difference between reading a book at home and reading a book in school. Even if the book is by the same author it is perceived very differently due to the setting:

I know I have read the same author at school as at home and I really love her. At home the narrative has been so exciting that I hardly can put the book down before going to sleep, but in school it has been not at all as fun. (Alde, City 2)

The statement shows this young adult likes to read – she/he is not a reluctant reader in leisure-time but becomes one in school. One explanation for this is that in school another way of reading is encouraged; the young adults are, for example, expected to read fictional texts critically and to analyze them according to certain reading strategies. These reading practices are in a way forced upon them; they are mandatory, and this might explain the negative views toward reading taking place at school. Their recreational reading is sometimes described as evoking strong emotional reactions. One participant states, “I finished the book, and then I sat and cried for ten minutes because it hurt so much” (City 1). Another participant describes a strong sense of identification with one of the characters in a book:

I found everything in this book character, it is as if they are like me, they understand me and it was a great experience to feel that someone understands me. Ok, I know it is a book character, but she understands me. (Rio, City 3)

Participants preferring to read autobiographies and stories that are more realistic describe another type of reading experience. The purpose for reading in these instances is the fact that the narratives are based on real events and are realistic – “otherwise it is just made up,” – as one of the participants said. Some young adults claim they generally do not like to read fiction at all and only read with the intention to learn specific things. Jamie prefers to read factual texts in his/her spare time:

*Jamie: [I read] when I am looking for information about a problem I need to solve. If it is about technology you could always find it on the Internet.*

*Interviewer: And then you read and find knowledge there?*

*Jamie: Yes and it is easier to read such texts because you are interested. It is not just some stupid fairytale. (City 1)*

According to the statement above, the most important driving force behind reading is not to be entertained; it is the development of knowledge that motivates Jamie to engage in reading practices.

Although the informants are constantly engaged in reading digital texts, for example, through social media, they prefer to read fiction using print books. One reason behind the preference for engaging in analogue fictional texts seems to be the material aspects of print books and the associations

books evoke among the young adults. Boo states, “I like turning the page and the feeling of holding a book” (Small Town 6), and Robin claims, “Real books bring a sense of coziness” (City 1). Another interesting notion expressed by the young adults is that analogue texts are associated with a sense of authenticity and trustworthiness. This might also explain why many of the informants prefer to read fiction in the original language the text is written in.

*Quinn: If I can get my hands on the English version, I prefer that one.*

*Interviewer: Is this also valid when it is a Swedish author translated into English?*

*Quinn: No, that is somewhat strange. It often gets mistranslated.*

*Interviewer: So, it is important? With an English author, – you want to read in English?*

*Chris: Yes, then it is more the author’s thoughts, – not the translator’s.*

*Quinn: It is more real. (City 1)*

The medium through which the young adults read clearly affects how they perceive the reading practices, where different media formats evoke different feelings. This is also evident when it comes to audiobooks and talking books. Some of the young adults describe how they like to listen to books, but this is referred to as a different kind of practice than reading a printed fictional text. Since they often listen to audiobooks or talking books while doing other things, it is not considered a “cozy reading session” (Vanja) and this is probably an explanation for why they choose to listen to other genres of books, – “more easygoing stories, not something you get wrapped up in” (Vanja, City 1). Frances talks about listening to the lyrics of a song as a kind of reading experience, and Jessie claims he/she likes to listen to music when reading and that the music is part of the reading experience affecting the reading practice. He/she states, “Because the song is high tempo and the narrative is high tempo I can escape easier into the narrative of the book” (Suburb 1). Movies seem to be gateways into reading, and several of the young adults claim to have seen a movie based on a book and then felt an urge to read the book. Thus, they seem to prefer to partake of the same story but in different media formats.

They read for recreational purposes when they have a book that is good enough for taking the time to read. Nilo explains how reading is dependent on whether he/she “has a good book, deserving the time and effort it takes to read it” (Suburb 1). The informants claim they sometimes do not feel they have the time to read, because school, homework and social media takes up all of their time. Toni says, “I sort of forget about reading. I wish I read more” (City 1),



and Bram expresses how, “I would like to read an hour a day, but it does not always happen” (Suburb 2). Some participants claim they would like to read more in their spare time but that they seldom feel they have the time for it.

The results show how young adults participate in a multitude of reading practices in different settings. The practices might appear similar to an outside observer, such as reading the same print book in school and outside of school, but the practices are perceived by the young adults as completely different, due to the different settings and motivations for reading. Other reading practices are closely entangled, for example, listening to music while reading, because the latter is perceived as enhancing the reading experience. Much of the young adults' dispositions and views toward different reading practices is dependent on the setting, the purpose, and motivation for reading and on the medium used for reading (see also [Conradi et al.](#)).

### **Q2: how do young adults in Sweden in the 2010s describe their library practices?**

The teens generally associate the library with old-fashioned print books and silence. A number of previous studies (see Hedemark, 2009, 2018) confirm these findings. Agosto and Hughes-Hassell state in their study of urban teens' attitudes to the library that “books is the library brand. There is no runner-up” (84). When discussing their actual use or nonuse of the library, the young adults tend to be more concrete and detailed in their descriptions. Some of the teens define the library as a place for younger children and describe how they visited the library more when they were younger, not so much now. This is illustrated in the following statement when the teens were asked if they use the library:

*Lo: Now, I don't, but I used to, when I was younger.*

*Eli: Almost never.*

*Mika: I don't use the library that often. Only if I am here with school and if you find an interesting book.*

*Boo: I borrowed more books when I was little. Now it is more that we hang out here [at the library]. (City 2)*

It is noticeable, as evident in Boo's statement, that when the young adults visit the library they often engage in activities other than borrowing books. They tend to use the library as a meeting place where they interact with each other, charge their mobile phones, or wait for the bus. It seems as if teens' library practices largely are connected to their social relationships, and libraries are not mainly associated with reading practices, although the informants claim to read and borrow books occasionally at the library (cf. [Agosto](#)

et al.). One aspect affecting teens' library use seems to be how they perceive librarians and the staff at the library. Several statements highlight the importance of feeling at home and welcomed at the library. In the following excerpt the young adults discuss this:

*Sam: At other libraries, I don't know, I just want to get out. It is not as comfortable.*

*Elia: We know the staff here [at this library].*

*Amal: They have seen us grow up. (Suburb 1)*

Here, the informants explain how it is crucial for them to have an established relationship with the librarians, and as Amal says, – they have known these librarians since childhood. Noticeable in the statement by Sam is the importance of a specific library when it comes to library use – judging from this statement, Sam does not attend other libraries, just the one he/she knows and feels comfortable at.

When asked how libraries could develop their services to young adults, arguments are raised for the improvement of the physical environment, illustrating perhaps teens' main use of the library as a meeting place. Kendal explains that it is vital that the library has a good selection of books, but equally important is having good places to sit, such as “nice armchairs, cozy and such things. You have to make it cozy” (City 1). Other suggestions for improving library services include providing more game consoles, billiards, computers, and newly published books. Requested activities are for example writing workshops, book clubs, author visits, and lectures. It is striking that interviewees request activities that often are already implemented at most libraries. One aspect, highlighted by some of the informants, is the demand for more dialogue and participation. Charlie makes this argument in the following statement:

We want to say what we think when it comes to books, both to the library but also to the authors. Because it feels like many authors think they know what we want. They think “we liked this when we were young.” Only that was 40 years ago. They try to make it [the narrative] modern, and it feels like many books are meant to be for us, but they are not relatable. (City 1)

The impression is that the young adults articulate a longing for authenticity, genuineness and trustworthiness. One of the reasons they prefer to read traditional print books is because the material aspects of these evoke a sense of authenticity. As stated in the earlier section, the notion of authenticity was evident in their choice of reading language, and the notions of genuineness and trustworthiness are noticeable when they talk about the librarians and the importance of knowing and trusting them, if they are to visit the library at all. What Charlie is advocating in the quote above is that adults – authors as

well as librarians – consider young people's perspectives. To have updated knowledge about teens and their needs seems to be paramount, if young people are to be able to relate to books, narratives, and the library, as such. This notion of authenticity, as well as of genuineness and trustworthiness, is a recurring theme in the empirical material. Genuineness is, for example, pronounced when they describe traditional books, as in this statement by Noel:

Books are so much more complex [than movies]. You understand so much more. That is, sort of, why you bother to read. Because you want a genuine feeling. You can relate so much more as well. (City 1)

Since the library is associated with print books, it is presumed that the library could be understood as something genuine. However, there are no statements where this is explicitly expressed. To sum up, the young adults use the library in a number of different ways, but mainly as a meeting place. Some of the young adults take part in library programs and borrow books, but the driving force behind library use in many instances tends to be social relationships. The dominant perception of the library is traditional, that is, that libraries are generally associated with print books and stillness.

## Discussion

### ***Q3: how may the insights about young adult's reading practices and library practices inform library services?***

The insights about young adults' reading practices and library practices presented in the previous section will be problematized and discussed here. The focus is on understanding how these insights may inform library services and how the *disconnect* between teens and library culture, mentioned by Lee, can be made less pronounced. The participants participate in a number of reading practices – both in school and out of school – and they seem to move easily between different texts, media formats, and narratives. One important result that may inform library services is that the different reading practices the young adults engage in often are overlapping. The practices are integrated, and one practice many times supports another practice. Watching a movie based on a book inspires reading. Listening to music while reading enhances the reading experience. At the same time, the young adults' views toward these practices differ, due to the context, the purpose of engaging in a particular practice, and the medium used (cf. [Conradi et al.](#)). Reading with one's ears is not the same as reading with one's eyes. Reading a printed book brings a different experience than reading a narrative digitally. When planning library programs, it is essential to acknowledge that young adults' reading

practices are entangled in many aspects, but it is also essential to bear in mind that the practices are perceived differently depending on context, format, and purpose of reading.

Wayne Wiegand cites in an article a quote by Doug Zweizig claiming that library professionals for too long have “looked at the user in the life of the library, rather than the library in the life of the user” (Zweizig, cited by Wiegand 21). He is advocating a shift in perspective whereby more focus is concentrated on understanding the user and the practices he/she is engaged in – not only at the library; it is especially important to study practices taking place outside the library. To develop existing library services, but also to identify new ways of serving and connecting with young adults, it is necessary to gain knowledge of the reading practices that are meaningful for them. It is suggested that library services would benefit from a *broad perspective* where the various reading practices young adults are involved in are taken into consideration.

As the results show, the library is not the first place the young adults turn to when they need information, fiction, and other kinds of texts. Several other studies support these results, such as Vivian Howard’s study, showing how teens find library services lacking. Denise Agosto et al. found in a study that students perceived libraries as outdated, with little connection to their everyday information practices. One finding from the study at hand is that the library practices young adults do engage in are related to reading, but are largely characterized by being socially interactive, including practices such as hanging out, socializing and relaxing. When young adults are encouraged to suggest improvements of library services, they often state that the physical environment at the library should develop to better suit their needs. For example, they ask for comfortable, “cozy” places, not disturbed by young children, where they can relax and socially interact. An overall impression of the participants in this study is that they often and in many different contexts, – at home and at school, – are expected to perform. They express in the focus-group interviews how they seldom have time to read because they are so busy with school, friends, sports, and other leisure activities. In fact, Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky claim that “adolescents are the most tested group of young people in history, in most middle-class households the most regulated and scheduled, and a group that, as a whole, faces some real insecurity regarding societal stability, expectations, and pressures (5).” Against this backdrop, it is not difficult to understand why young adults are asking for comfortable and relaxing spaces in the library – it can perhaps be perceived as a desire to find a kind of free zone (cf. Lieberg, 1994, 1995), that is, an inviting and peaceful environment where they can socialize and hang out, without having to deal with the demands and expectations of the outside world. This result suggests that libraries should continue to manage and to develop their important role as a *free zone*.

Finally, one result standing out as particularly consistent is the overall expressed longing for authenticity, genuineness and trustworthiness concerning different formats, narratives, and the language used in these. Shared testimonies of the importance of knowing the library staff and feeling at ease at the library could be understood as an expression of a need of trust. If teens are to use the library, it seems vital that they feel trust for librarians and the library. To succeed in this endeavor, it is essential the teens perceive librarians and library services as *trustworthy*. The results indicate that although print books (with which the library is associated) are seen as somewhat out of date, they are perceived as more trustworthy than digital texts. Even though the young adults see libraries as somewhat antiquated, they generally describe libraries as safe places, and the participants often state their experiences of interactions with librarians are rewarding. The overall positive connotations the library is evoking among young adults is a good thing and a starting point for the further development of library services.

This study provides rich understandings of how teens perceive reading and use libraries – the double insight into their relationship with reading and libraries is especially valuable – but there are limitations. Even though 92 teens were interviewed, the number is too small to claim universal validity and is not generalizable to the full range of Swedish teen populations. Since participation in this study was voluntary and many of the young adults were recruited through the library, presumably a high number of the informants had some kind of relation with the library and perhaps with reading – skewing the results slightly in favor of reading and using the library than among teens in general.

## Conclusion

Despite the limitations of the study, there are results in this study that stand out as consistent. Overall, the study shows how young adults' reading practices often are overlapping, although some aspects seem to affect how they are experienced, namely, the context of the practice, the motivation for engaging in the practice, and the format used. The library is associated with print books and seen as somewhat out of date. Some of the teens claim to use the library for lending books and for their information needs, but many of them do not use the library as a provider of resources but as a physical place where they can hang out at and socialize with their peers. One important aspect if they are to engage in reading and/or library practices is authenticity. Whether describing different texts, formats, narratives, libraries, or their relationships with librarians, it seems pertinent they find these *trustworthy* and genuine. The study suggests libraries consider a *broad perspective* where the various reading practices young adults are involved in are taken into consideration. It is

further suggested that libraries manage and develop their role as a provider of a physical space where young adults can relax and interact socially. Libraries could establish themselves as *free zones* for teens, supporting social gathering. The study sheds light on young adults' reading practices and their relation to libraries. However, the results call for further investigation, for example, to explore the elusive nonusers of the library and their attitudes toward library services.

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