GETTING IN THE (TEEN) ZONE: EVALUATING YOUNG ADULT SPACES IN PUBLIC LIBRAR- IES THROUGH A USER-EXPERIENCE FRAMEWORK

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Abstract:

Designated young adult spaces in public libraries, often called “teen zones,” are designed as spaces for young adults to engage in activities that support their developmental needs. These spaces are necessary for young adults in public libraries, who may feel unwelcome due to restrictive institutional policies and a lack of study spaces. While young adult spaces are designed following guidelines established by library associations, such as YALSA and OPLA, these facilities risk generalizing the varying interests and needs expressed by youth at different stages of adolescence. This report explores early, middle, and late adolescents’ expressed needs of library spaces compared to the guidelines used to create teen zones. Through a user-experience emphasis on the design and evaluation of young adult spaces, information professionals can design public library spaces that address the unique needs of all users, rather than a generalized few.

Keywords:

young adult librarianship, user-experience, public libraries

DOI

10.33137/ijournal.v6i1.35267

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Introduction

In 1998, professor of communications and former children's librarian Lynn Cockett wrote: "inviting young people into a library that is architecturally not prepared to handle normal adolescent behaviour can have some pretty negative consequences"(p. 176). At the time, Cockett was writing about the inclusion of designated young adult spaces in public libraries and their readiness to handle popular youth activities and interests, such as socializing and schoolwork. Today, public libraries serve communities of all ages through programming, services, collections, and spaces. Designated young adult spaces, often called "teen zones," aim to create space for adolescents to socialize, read, and engage in activities that support their developmental needs. Teen zones are critical for young adult services in public libraries, as, otherwise, adolescents may feel unwelcome in public libraries due to institutional policies such as no talking or eating and a lack of designated study spaces.

This report observes the design of designated young adult spaces in public libraries through a user-experience framework by evaluating the effectiveness and relevance of these spaces to young adults during their different stages of adolescence: early, middle, and late. A user-centered approach is relevant and necessary to young adult services and discussions in library and information science as the information needs of young adults throughout different stages of development is severely understudied (Bernier et al., 2014; Kuhlmann et al., 2014). Reputable library associations frequently define young adults as between 12 and 18 years of age and use this range when designing spaces to meet the needs of these youths (American Library Association, 2012; Ontario Public Library Association, 2018). This broad range of years captures different and important life stages of adolescents, each with unique information, entertainment, and educational needs; from exploring interests to job searching. The guidelines and recommendations for young adult spaces and services proposed by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) (American Library Association, 2012) and the Ontario Public Library Association (OPLA) (Ontario Public Library Association, 2018) can be observed through a user-experience framework to identify the effectiveness of these spaces in relation to the varying unique needs of young adults throughout

adolescence. Public libraries implicitly exclude the unique formative stages in adolescence in the creation of young adult spaces and services by following proposed guidelines, which generalize young adults' needs and experiences.

Methodology

The chosen user-experience framework to identify the effectiveness of young adult spaces in public libraries is adopted from Norman's (2004) *Emotional Design: Why We Love (or hate) Everyday Things* and identifies three levels of emotional processing between a user and a product or space: visceral, reflective, and behavioural. The behavioural level, which is relevant to young adult spaces and will be applied to the findings, refers to the interaction between the place and the user (Norman, 2004, p. 30). This stage is further subdivided into four principles: functionality, where the purpose of the space aligns with the needs of the user; usability, meaning the space can be used by all; understandability, referring to the creator's intent for the space and the purpose of the space as understood by the user; and physical feel (McArthur, 2015, p. 4; Norman, 2004, p. 70). The behavioural level evaluates the success of a space based on the user's expectations, needs, and experience.

Due to current restrictions on visiting indoor spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic, existing guidelines for creating young adult spaces and services will be used as a model to compare user needs and emotional processing. This assumes that libraries would have consulted these guidelines when designing spaces for young adults.

Specifically, the OPLA report and YALSA guidelines on young adult spaces and services are selected due to their reputable status within library and information science. Both OPLA and YALSA identify "teens" as between the ages of 12 and 18 (American Library Association, 2012; Bolan, 2016; Ontario Library Association, 2010; Ontario Public Library Association, 2018) and observe youth services and spaces broadly. Common themes identified as essential to building better young adult services include: creating opportunities for teen feedback and participation, collecting materials that are relevant to the unique needs of young adults, and creative inclusive places for teens to develop intellectual, creative, social, and emotional skills (American Library iJournal, Vol 6, No. 1,

Association, 2012; Ontario Public Library Association, 2018).

This report draws on three studies by LIS scholars to identify adolescents' views of their public library's young adult services and spaces, based on their adolescent stage, early (12-15) (Howard, 2011), middle (14-17) (Agosto, 2007), and late (16-18) (Lin et al., 2015). All studies identify the participants' typical usage of libraries and information seeking behaviours while also providing feedback about current public library services and spaces.

Findings

Vivian Howard's (2011) study of early adolescents aged 12 to 15 in Eastern Canada identifies the unique needs of younger adolescents relating to public libraries. Howard (2011) found that most participants used the library sparsely over a year, visiting less than once a month, but nevertheless maintained a positive image of the library (pp. 323–328). Upon further investigation as to why teenagers were not using the library, Howard identified that their apathetic views of programming and spaces were major drivers in low usage. Of the participants surveyed, 47% stated that library programs were uninteresting, 31% stated it was difficult to get to the library, and 36.8% expressed that there were not enough computers throughout the library (Howard, 2011, p. 322). Additionally, Howard (2011) found that youth satisfaction ratings with respect to library environments designed for teenagers was relatively low, as spaces were described as outdated or unequipped with proper furniture to study or socialize (p. 340). Almost all participants emphasized that having space to socialize was the most important to them (Howard, 2011, p. 340). A social space for young adults synthesizes other elements teens hoped to see in their library: bright colours, comfy furniture, and fewer restrictions on noise levels and food. Some participants complained that the young adult area was too close to the children's area, and that they frequently took books out from stacks outside of both areas (Howard, 2011, p. 340). Overall, the findings in Howard's study shows that younger adolescents use the library sparingly, but the creation of programming and spaces relating to the expressed needs of young adults, such as areas for socializing, would likely increase library usage by this group.

While the information needs of middle and late adolescents is not widely researched,

Agosto's (2007) survey of library usage by middle-aged adolescents and Lin et al.'s (2015) study of older adolescents revealed that these two groups frequently use the library as a social, informational, and beneficial physical space for their behavioural needs. Specifically, Agosto's (2007) survey of 97 teenagers between the ages of 14 and 17 revealed that these youth frequently use the library once a week (69% of participants), a few times a month (14.4%), or a few times a year (13.4%) (p. 58). Continued analysis found that 52% of teens used the library as an information gateway, 38.7% used it as a social space, and 9.2% found it as a beneficial physical environment (Agosto, 2007, pp. 59-60). This study can be compared to Lin et al.'s (2015) research of late adolescents' use of the public library, which also identified that the library is viewed by young adults between 16 and 18 as an ideal place to socialize and study (p. 152). Compared to Howard's (2011) study, participants in Agosto's (2007) and Lin et al.'s (2015) studies were active users of the library (Fig. 1). Young adults in these two studies used library spaces that were designated for teens to socialize and work without distractions from home. Notably, Agosto's (2007) report found that teens used "unorganized entertainment" (p. 59), such as programming, frequently, whereas Lin et al.'s (2015) participants did not mention programming as part of their library experience.

AGE GROUP	Early (12-15) (Howard, 2011)	Middle (14-17) (Agosto, 2007)	Late (16-18) (Lin et al., 2015)
LIBRARY USAGE	Participants visited less than once per month.	Majority of participants visited once a week.	Study did not specify usage.
PRIORITIES	Virtually all participants expressed that a space to socialize was the top priority.	Viewed the library as an information gateway and social space.	The ability to socialize and work without distractions from home.
COMPLAINTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of the participants surveyed, 47% said programs were not interesting. • Spaces were outdated and unequipped to support user needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Library spaces are not age appropriate or relevant to their needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacked relevant services for their needs, which included information on post-secondary applications and entering the workforce (Anderson, 2004, p. 12).

Figure 1: Comparison of trends in library usage at different adolescent stages. All studies interviewed participants who were active library users, therefore the library usage findings only reflect current library users' thoughts.

Discussion

Based on the findings from the aforementioned studies, there are slight differences in the needs of early, middle, and late adolescents, with middle and late adolescents having similar needs. Specifically, Howard's (2011) study found that 12-to-15-year-old teenagers desired having spaces to socialize, which included comfortable furniture and less governance and restrictions on noise and food. Howard's (2011) participants also emphasized that young adult programming was not relevant to their needs. Positive social interactions with other peers and adults is a developmental need of young adults, and therefore the library has a responsibility to service this area through available facilities (Ontario Library Association, 2010). Creating effective places for socialization is also recognized in YALSA's guidelines (American Library Association, 2012). The libraries visited by Howard's (2011) participants failed to create an effective behavioural design within their young adult spaces based on function, usability, understandability, and physical feel, as youth viewed the spaces as not age-appropriate or designed to support their desired activities, therefore creating a negative view of young adult spaces in public libraries and reducing usage.

Middle and older adolescents shared similarities in their use of young adult spaces in libraries. Both groups enjoyed using these designated spaces for studying and getting information (Agosto, 2007; Lin et al., 2015). While these groups also viewed libraries as social places, these cohorts more commonly used the young adult spaces and libraries as information-rich places to either study or borrow books. The need for a space to gather information and engage in schoolwork corresponds to the developmental need of attaining competence and achievement (Ontario Library Association, 2010). YALSA's guidelines respond to this need by suggesting libraries create spaces to fit the educational and leisure needs of teens (American Library Association, 2012). Teenagers in these groups are more likely to require information on preparing post-secondary applications and information on entering the workforce (Anderson, 2004, p. 12).

While the YALSA guidelines for teen spaces in libraries meet the needs expressed by early,

middle, and late adolescents, the youth services librarian must consider each stage and the related identified needs when designing spaces to achieve effective emotional processing by young adults. Specifically, the obvious function of the space should be a direct response to expressed needs, rather than requiring teens to negotiate use of the space with their needs. Also, in theory, librarians should address the specific needs of each group to create a space that is understood by all users, rather than designing for a specific few who may prefer solitary study areas compared to social and interactive spaces. In practice, librarians may face limitations including space and funding, which requires prioritization of specific user groups. In these cases, the librarian should still encourage youth participation and feedback to generate an understanding of specific user needs, so that the space is still usable by and beneficial to its users.

The commonality between early, middle, and older adolescents is the interest and enthusiasm all groups expressed in contributing ideas to what their ideal young adult space should include. Notably, all guidelines promote the collection of young adult voices when designing spaces for this demographic. In the past, librarians have assumed or misunderstood the needs of adolescent users when designing young adult spaces. For example, a study from Public Libraries found that 55% of librarians were likely to assume that young adults preferred library spaces to socialize in groups, whereas only 25% of older youth discussed using this space for socializing (Kuhlmann et al., 2014). The generic guidelines prepared by library organizations should be applied to each stage of adolescence, and librarians can synthesize the needs expressed by youth. Through an awareness of the varying needs of youth, librarians avoid generalizing adolescents' interests and the understandability principle of behavioural emotional processing is achieved, as librarians will no longer incorrectly assume the priorities of youth without considering their stated needs. The discrepancy between teen expectations and the librarian's intent emphasizes the need for user-centered design approaches to ensure all young adults have a dynamic space that is understood, usable, and functional. User-centered environments can lead to meaningful contributions in community development through teen skill-building (Bolan, 2016). By involving user-feedback in the design of young adult spaces, a positive behavioural emotional processing of the space can be achieved, resulting in increased meaningful use of library spaces by young adults.

Opportunities for youth engagement in planning young adult spaces and services lead to higher usage of these spaces by young adults. Youth engagement within libraries has been measured in a 2014 study by Bernier et al. In their study of 257 American public libraries, researchers evaluated levels of engagements using the Youth Participation Index (YPI), which measures youth participation in the design and execution of young adult spaces in public libraries (Bernier et al., 2014, p. 167). Moreover, Bernier et al. (2014) identify trends where libraries with a high YPI had new or renovated young adult spaces (p. 173). In these cases, young adults were critical members in the process of advocating for, creating, and governing young adult spaces through participation in teen advisory groups (Bernier et al., 2014, pp. 172-174). The feedback from the groups resulted in policies suitable for young adults, including more lenient rules concerning privacy, governance, and food in young adult spaces (Bernier et al., 2014, p. 174). By creating youth involvement opportunities in the design of library spaces, young adults feel more ownership over the space and usage of the space increases (Bernier et al., 2014, p. 174). Notably, the sources outlined in Bernier et al.'s study do not discuss the age demographics of these groups, which may leave opportunities for unequal design. This oversight could be avoided by having representatives from each adolescent stage be present on a committee, which ensures all age groups are heard. By creating opportunities for young adults to engage in planning library spaces, young adults are encouraged to become lifelong library users and supporters of the institution.

Conclusion

Research within the realm of library and information science concerning the activities and needs of each group of young adults was limited, as was research on young adult spaces (Bernier et al., 2014). The generalization of the stages of adolescence within research and guidelines potentially limits the ability and depth of identifying specific information needs of each group as they related to the unique life stages. Further research within this area may include original field research on the different informational needs and library usage of each adolescent stage. Developing appropriate young adult spaces in public libraries is crucial as youth build skills to benefit them in school and life. A user-experience framework is necessary for creating positive experiences between young adults and their library spaces, as Norman's framework prioritizes creating effective

relationships between spaces and users at the emotional, functional, and behavioural level. The inclusion of young adults in the planning of library spaces, which results in higher library usage by this demographic, benefits the library as well, since it encourages young adults to become lifelong library users and supporters of the institution. Through a user-centered design approach, which considers feedback on young adult spaces by adolescents, librarians can create spaces that are functional, usable, understandable, and appealing to teens as they develop critical literacy, independence, collaboration, and creative skills that will serve them later on in life.

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