Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008), approximately 14% of the population is between the ages of 10 and 19, with over half of those being between the ages of 14 and 19. This population represents an important market in public library systems, the future adult users and supporters of public libraries. These young adults are the future voters that will impact the future of public libraries. To ensure the future of public libraries as relevant and critical community resources, we must focus on making the public library a relevant and critical resource to today’s young adult population.

In his 2006 study of public library use and the impact of large bookstores, Hemmeter found that large bookstores have not impacted the use of public libraries for children. Households with young children use public libraries for story times, borrowing books, and other children-related activities. However, these children do not seem to remain patrons of public libraries as they become young adults. In a study of the perception of libraries by early teens, Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn (2002) found that public library use and acceptance greatly decreases as children become teenagers and that it continues to decline throughout their teenage years.

How can public libraries remain relevant to young adults, attracting them as patrons, and providing services that meet their needs, creating lifelong library patrons and supporters? The author attempts to address these questions through a review of the literature on young adults, their public library use, and the use of technology within public libraries. The author also
provide an analysis of one specific public library, how it is using technology, and what it is doing to attract young adults as patrons.

**Literature Review**

**Who Cares?**

As Bishop and Bauer (2002) reported, effective communication skills, technology and information literacy, lifelong learning, respect for all people, and confidence in their ability to make a positive impact, are all key factors in the success of young adults. These individuals are at a critical time in their personal development and need positive influences, including positive adult relationships, to assist them in becoming productive and contributing members of society as they move into adulthood. As Sullivan (2001) points out, this group of individuals often finds their relationships with adults to be adversarial, particularly with parents and teachers, and is “as much in need of nurturing as are children” (p. 77). Agosto (2007) also found that some young adults use the library as a refuge, a place to go that is safe.

Public libraries are in a unique position in being able to serve many of these needs of young adults. Public librarians can develop positive relationships with the young adult population, providing them a safe place where they can feel accepted and appreciated as individuals. Public libraries should be a place where young adults can express themselves, learn skills that will help them to succeed, and be encouraged to explore new ideas. Bishop and Bauer (2002) listed basic services that libraries can offer to decrease risk in this population including access to information and information literacy instruction, opportunities for participation and learning, and access to caring adults and helping networks.
If public libraries are in a position to serve the needs of young adults, then why aren’t more young adults using public libraries? The author believes that there are several reasons for this disconnect. One is the perception that young adults have of libraries. Another is a lack of public libraries that have met the challenge of engaging and supporting this group of vitally important patrons. Unfortunately, in spite of the needs that young adults have and the ability of public libraries to meet them, “libraries institutionally convey a belief that young people present more problems than they are worth” (Bernier, 2009, p. 34). Public libraries need to work to engage this group of patrons, changing their perceptions, giving them a place to hang out, someone to talk to, something to do, and the opportunity to see the public library as a place for more than books.

Perceptions

Young adults seem to have overwhelming negative perceptions of public libraries. Numerous studies, including Cook et al. (2002) and Agosto (2007), found that young adults thought public libraries were not “cool”, library staff was not friendly, spaces were not welcoming, young adult materials were poor, hours were inconvenient, library policies were unreasonable, and access to technology was limited. Current library use was largely focused on the need to get materials to complete homework assignments (Bishop & Bauer, 2002). Use of public libraries as a center for self-expression, nurturing relationships, lifelong learning, a place to “hang-out” or attend young adult programming is not a significant factor for young adults. How can public libraries step up to the challenge and change these perceptions, some of which may be realities, and meet the needs of young adults? Creating inviting spaces for young adults, encouraging positive staff interaction, and providing interesting young adult materials, technologies, and programming are all areas where public libraries need to increase focus.
However, this increased focus will not be enough on its own. Public libraries also need to reach out to their young adult patrons, through marketing, advisory boards, and volunteer opportunities, to work directly with this audience to change perceptions and increase service. The same young adults that had negative perceptions of public libraries, also wanted opportunities to work and volunteer within their public libraries and offered to help improve the libraries and their services (Cook et al.). Public libraries need to take them up on their offer.

**A Place to Hang Out**

There has been little research done to-date on young adult spaces within public libraries, but what is clear from the research is that young adults do need to have their own space within libraries. Fortunately, young adult areas within public libraries are gaining in popularity. The percentage of libraries that have designated areas for young adult materials has risen from 58% in 1994 to 83.9% of main libraries and 72.2% of branch libraries in 2007 (Mustafoff & Teffeau, 2008). Also, many public libraries are including young adults in the design and planning of these young adult spaces (Bernier, 2009), engaging these patrons in creating a space that will meet their needs. Unfortunately, many of these spaces encompass a small percentage of total library space and many do not provide computers or other technologies within their young adult areas (Bernier). Young adults want their own areas with young adult materials, where they are allowed to eat and drink, listen to music, relax in comfortable seating, and access technology, all at hours that are convenient to them. As Cook et al. (2002) point out, for public library spaces to appeal to young adults, public libraries will need to “focus more on the social aspects of a teen’s life rather than simply helping them with their homework. More emphasis should be placed on cafés, technology, and making the teen feel comfortable in the library” (p. 160).
Someone to Talk To

For public libraries to be utilized by young adult patrons, they need to feel welcomed into public libraries. A 2002 study by Bishop and Bauer found that almost 20% of young adults that did not use public libraries felt that the staff was unhelpful. Other studies have also found that young adults find library staff to be unfriendly and unapproachable. Arguably, this may be partly due to a lack of librarians who focus on young adult services in public libraries today, but this situation may be changing. The percentage of public libraries with a young adult librarian rose from 11% in 1994 to 51.9% in 2007 (Mustafoff & Teffeau, 2008), showing an increased focus on providing library staff that are dedicated to meeting the needs of young adult patrons. However, having a dedicated young adult librarian is not enough. These librarians need to look for ways to positively engage young adult patrons through young adult programming, volunteer opportunities, teen advisory boards, and simple friendly conversations where young adults are treated as respected individuals who have something to contribute. This welcoming behavior needs to expand beyond the dedicated young adult librarians to all members of the library staff. As Sullivan (2001) points out all public library staff, regardless of their position or title, “have a unique opportunity to give teens exactly what they are craving: an impartial adult who will accept them for who they are; accord them the dignity and respect they deserve; care about their needs and wants; and welcome the contributions they can make” (p. 77).

Something to Do

In her study of why young adults use libraries, Agosto (2007) found that more than one-third of young adults who used public libraries went to for social or entertainment related activities, which included hanging out with library staff and friends, looking for entertainment unrelated to library programming, and participating in library programming. However, in their
survey Bishop and Bauer (2002) found that only 16% of young adults went to libraries for library programming for teens. While young adults may go to public libraries looking for entertainment, it seems that few are going for specific library programming. Much of library programming is focused on either children’s programming or programming for specific adult audiences. Little programming is focused on young adult audiences and their specific interests and needs. As Sullivan (2001) indicates, after children reach middle-school they are generally not provided with library programming which encourages recreational reading or further literacy development. To attract young adults to public libraries, we need to provide programming and activities that are appealing to young adults. As Agosto (2007) discusses, these activities can include clubs, programming, and entertainment materials. Clubs could include book clubs focused on popular young adult literature, knitting clubs, art clubs, gaming clubs, “based-on-the-book” book/movie clubs, and fantasy sport clubs. Library programming for teens can include instruction in technologies, movies, musical concerts, art shows, and video-game tournaments. Public libraries can provide entertainment materials for young adults such as board games and cards, online games, art materials, and downloadable audio books, music, and videos.

**More than Books**

While young adults need to be recognized as important patrons of public libraries, with their own dedicated space, books, magazines, materials, and library programming, they also need more than books. Today’s young adults have grown up in an age of ever-increasing technology and are used to having ready access to that technology with data at their fingertips. To dispel the perception that libraries are dusty old buildings full of books, public libraries need to use the technologies that young adults use, and provide them access to that technology within public libraries.
In their 2002 study Bishop and Bauer found that technology use has had an impact on the use of public libraries by young adults as they use public libraries for internet access and other technology services. While 90% of those in the study used technology for school related assignments, 63% used the technology for entertainment related purposes as well. However, 86% preferred to use the internet at home where they could use it in privacy without time limits. With the boom in the availability and use of technology and the internet, and a technological-savvy generation of young adults, it is clear that internet access alone is not going to meet the needs of young adult library patrons. Cook et al. found that public libraries are seen as “lacking in terms of higher-level technology needs” (2002, p. 157). To engage young adults, public libraries need to change that perception by embracing technology and using young adults to help them do so. Public library websites, social networking tools, availability of downloadable music and videos, and video game resources are all ways to engage young adults in our public libraries through the use of technology.

As discussed by Agosto and Abbas (2009), social networking and other electronic communications are common in the lives of today’s young adults and over half of young adults utilize these forms of communication. Many public libraries today block social networking sites and disallow the use of cell phones within the library. Public libraries should embrace these technologies and use them to attract young adults to libraries, communicate public library events and promote public library usage, and to teach young adults how to use these communication mechanisms safely. Although young adults spend much more time on social networking sites than on websites (Agosto & Abbas), websites are another way to reach out to young adults. Reaching young adults with social networking sites and websites has to be an ongoing effort, simply creating a website or a Facebook profile is not enough. Websites and social networking
sites need to be updated continuously, providing interesting information, updated regularly, in formats that are appealing to young adults. Young adults often feel that public libraries are a place just for books, where technology is frowned upon, and where the activities that young adults enjoy (social networking, downloading music and videos, texting, online and video game playing, etc.) are considered to be a waste of time. Changing this perception to one where public libraries use and embrace the latest technologies and understand their worth in the social, emotional, and educational development of young adults is critical in attracting this audience to public libraries. As Hughes-Hassell and Miller (2003) point out, “If librarians want to attract young adults to their collections and services, they must become integral members of the online community” (p. 145). The author believes that they must do that and more, embracing a number of technologies used by today’s young adults.

Letting them Know

Public libraries that want to serve young adult patrons need to do more than provide them with comfortable places to interact, attend programming, be entertained, or use technology. Creating the perfect young adult environment is not enough to get young adults to use public libraries. Perceptions still need to be changed. To change perceptions, young adults need to begin actually using the young adult services that public libraries provide. One of the easiest and most beneficial ways to change perceptions with young adults is to engage them in the development of these services within their public libraries. Young adult advisory boards are a method to directly involve these patrons in the planning of young adult spaces, programming, and technology offerings. Another way to engage young adults is by developing opportunities for them to volunteer or work within libraries. Opportunities to update social networking sites, maintain websites, support children and young adult programming, give young adults a sense of
ownership in their public libraries which will make the advocates for library use with their peers. It also gives them a chance to contribute to their community and feel as if they are valued members of their community where their talents and interests are recognized and appreciated (Hughes-Hassell & Miller, 2003). These direct methods of engaging young adults are effective in reaching the young adult audience and then using their social networks to “spread the word” on the public library as a “cool place to hang out”. Technology is another way to reach out to this technology-savvy audience. Communicating effectively with young adults requires embracing the forms of communication they most commonly use. Text messages and email announcements can be used as well as websites and social networking sites to communicate with young adults and provide them information on upcoming library programming, links to relevant resources, blogs on books or popular authors, links to online games and author information, or just to remind them of something fun they can do at their public library.

**Sullivan Free Library**

**Demographics**

The Sullivan Free Library is located in Chittenango, New York, a small village in Madison County located in rural central New York. Another small branch, located in the hamlet of Bridgeport, also serves the community and both are managed by the same Library Director. The Sullivan Free Library has issued over 13,400 library cards and approximately 140 people use the library each day, 60% of whom are children. According to the Sullivan Free Library website, while the population in the area has remained steady, the library has seen increased circulation and use of their services attributed to the downturn in the economy, with a 275% increase in the number of library cards issued between 2007 and 2008. The library is part of the
Mid-York Library System which is a consortium of forty-three libraries across Madison, Oneida, and Herkimer counties in central New York State. As a member of this consortium, the Sullivan Free Library has increased access to online and print materials.

The library serves the Town of Sullivan with a population of approximately 15,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Over 98% of the population of Sullivan is Caucasian, with small percentages of African-American, Native American, Asian, Hispanic, and other races within the population. 7.0% of individuals live below the poverty level, with 84.5% of individuals over the age of 25 having received minimally a high school diploma and 17.5% of those individuals having achieved a bachelor’s degree or higher. These statistics show a strong middle-class population, with below average poverty and higher education, but higher than average high school diploma achievement. Children under the age of 18 represented 27.1% of the population, with 8.1% being between the ages of 10 and 14, and 7.4% being between the ages of 15 and 19. These percentages are slightly higher than the national averages, making for a substantial young adult population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

**Survey Results**

The author surveyed the Director of the Sullivan Free Library to get her thoughts on technology use within public libraries, visited the library to personally investigate the young adult area within the library, and followed up with additional questions via email. The survey and email responses are included in Appendix A. While there is a large population of young adults in the Sullivan Free Library system, there is no area dedicated to young adult materials other than one section of shelving within the general adult fiction section of the library. This section contains one standard table with four chairs placed around it. Without asking one of the library staff, the area for young adult materials is not easy to find. Nothing within the area, other
than the books on the shelves, is targeted towards young adults. There are no posters, artwork, or special displays that will catch the eye of teenage patrons. In spite of having shelved young adult materials in their own small section, the library has not created a place for young adults to “hang out”.

The author observed several interactions between library staff members and young adults during her visit to the Sullivan Free Library. While the library staff was always courteous in answering the young adults’ questions, there was a noticeable lack of interaction between the library staff and the young adults. The library staff members seemed to spend time chat with adult patrons, talking about current events, the weather, upcoming library programming, and book suggestions. They interacted with children, asking them if they liked the books they were returning, commenting on the books they were checking out, and reminding them of upcoming story times at the library. However, when a young adult patron approached the desk or a library staff member with a question, there was no unnecessary communications or idle chit-chat. Their question was answered courteously and professionally, but the friendly personal interaction was missing. The Sullivan Free Library, being a small library, does not have a budget for a staff member dedicated to young adult programming so there is also no person dedicated to building and nurturing relationships with young adults. Although the staff is courteous to young adult patrons, they have not fostered an environment where young adults have “someone to talk to”.

The Director of the Sullivan Free Library admitted that the library has had difficulty in developing dedicated programming for young adults. The Director is responsible for adult programming and there is a children’s librarian who focuses on pre-school and elementary school age programming. Without the resources to dedicate someone to young adult programming, the library has struggled in providing consistent young adult focused
programming that will attract young adults. The programming where the library staff expected to have young adult participation, including Facebook classes and Wii gaming tournaments, have not had significant young adult participation. Arguably this programming may miss the mark since most young adults are already proficient in Facebook (and it’s their parents that need the training to know what their kids are doing) and most Wii games are targeted to younger children and adults. Focus on young adult programming, either by existing staff, or potentially an motivated volunteer, is needed to help give young adult patrons “something to do” at the public library.

The Sullivan Free Library has significantly increased their use of technology over the last several years. The library maintains and regularly updates information on Facebook, Twitter, and their library website. Links to a recently started blog are available on their Facebook page and their website has a number of links to reference resources. They do find a number of young adults joining their Facebook page and hope that it will be a popular communication mechanism with that audience. However, it is clear from their website that there is not a focus on young adults. The programming link goes to a webpage which indicates that there is programming available for children and adults, with no mention of young adult programming. There is a children’s page which provides links to fun online resources, but no equivalent for young adult resources. While the Sullivan Free Library is moving forwarding in embracing technology, they have not yet used this technology effectively to reach out to young adults. The staff needs to look for ways to expand their use of technology to engage young adults and provide the services that interest them, including online gaming, links to popular young adult authors, and music and video downloads. To better meet the needs of young adult patrons, they need to do more to show them that the library is “more than books”.

- 12 -
Through the use of technologies such as Facebook and Twitter, the Sullivan Free Library is poised to better communicate with their young adult patrons. Unfortunately, there is still not much to tell these patrons about in terms of services and programming that are targeted to their interests and needs. While the use of a teen advisory board seemed unproductive in the past, the library’s consideration of readopting this board seems like a step in the right direction. For the board to be effective and active, it is necessary for the participants to feel like their opinions are being heard and making a difference in the library materials, programming, and services that are being made available. The Sullivan Free Library needs to display a commitment to young adult patrons and then they can focus more on “letting them know”.

Conclusion

Public libraries must become relevant to young adults, attracting them as library patrons, and providing services, materials, and programming that meet their needs and engages their interest. Young adults currently have negative perceptions of public libraries as dusty old rooms full of nothing but books and cranky librarians. Public libraries need to change these perceptions to create lifelong library patrons and supporters out of today’s young adults. Young adults have shown that they will respond positively to public libraries when these negative perceptions are addressed (Cook et al., 2002). Many of the changes are simple and many young adults are eager to participate in making the necessary changes. The key is in creating welcoming spaces for young adults to “hang out”, providing supportive library staff so that teens have a positive adult relationship and “someone to talk to”, creating focused young adult programming so that they have “something to do”, embracing technology and providing “more than books”, communicating to young adults using their communication mechanisms and “letting them know”
about what is available. As pointed out by Cook et al., “with appropriate strategies, public libraries can be relevant to young teen patrons. However, it will require the library to focus more on the social aspects of a teen’s life rather than simply helping them with their homework.” (p. 160). The work ahead may seem enormous to libraries that have not focused on young adult patrons, but much of the work ahead can be accomplished more effectively by using the talents and energy of young adults who want to feel as if their talents and contributions to their communities are welcomed and recognized.
References


Appendix A: Survey Results

Public Library Services Survey

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey about the future of public library services and about new technologies for library services. It should take you roughly 15-20 minutes to complete.

General Library Information
1. In what state (or country if outside of the U.S.) is your library located? (type in the box below)

   NY

2. How many people reside in your service population?
   - □ Less than 1,000
   - □ 1,000-2,499
   - □ 2,500-4,999
   - □ 5,000-9,999
   - ☒ 10,000-24,999
   - □ 25,000-49,999
   - □ 50,000-99,999
   - □ 100,000-249,999
   - □ 250,000-499,999
   - □ 500,000+
   - □ Not sure/Don’t know

Technology Training & Needs
3. Does your library use any of the following technologies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Yes, internally for staff</th>
<th>Yes, externally for patrons</th>
<th>No, not at all</th>
<th>Not sure/don’t know</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library website</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog(s)</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wiki(s)</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social networking (e.g. Facebook, MySpace)</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>☒</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online image sharing (e.g. Flickr)</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. What technologies do you feel are most critical to meeting your patrons’ needs online (including, but not limited to, those listed above)?

I think it is important for libraries to take advantage of social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter in order to reach out to patrons using the same technology they use.

5. Are there barriers that prevent you from implementing new technologies in your library, such as insufficient staff time, limited funds, or a lack of professional development opportunities for staff?

☒ Yes
☐ No
☐ Not sure

If yes, please explain.

A combination of all of the above. We generally teach ourselves how to use new technology; it would be great if there were more & affordable opportunities to attend workshops on emerging technologies.

The Future of Public Libraries

6. Over the past few years, have online library services, such as chat reference and online renewals, affected the services that you provide within the library building? If so, how?

The ability to offer online services enhances what we can offer our patrons and makes the library more appealing to technologically savvy users.
7. Has the recent increase in the kinds and amount of information that is available online affected your work over the past few years? If so, how?

Yes! It is becoming a larger and larger part of our jobs to keep our websites and social networking sites updated.

8. Does your library provide any services via online social networking tools, such as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube? If so, please describe these services.

Our library has a Facebook page and a Twitter account, we use these to promote events, take surveys, share information, etc.

9. How do you think your job is likely to change over the next five years?

10. How do you think your library’s collection is likely to change over the next five years?

More materials in electronic format, such as ebooks, online databases.

11. How do you think your library’s public services are likely to change over the next five years?

More emphasis on computers and self-service options for patrons.

12. What do you see as the likely future trends for public library services in general?

The library will continue to provide access to information using a variety of formats.

13. What do you see as the major roles of the public library in today’s society?

The role of the library is to provide access to information and technology to everyone who needs it. Computers play an increasingly important role in our lives, yet not everyone is able to afford a computer/internet service in their homes. Libraries make it possible for everyone, regardless of income or education background, to have the same level of access to information.

14. How, if at all, do you think these roles of the public library might change in the future?
I think public libraries are community centers for information sharing. People may not be using libraries in the same ways they did 50 yrs ago, but as long as libraries evolve to meet new needs, we will continue to be an essential part of our communities.

Demographics

15. What are your areas of specialization? (Check all that apply.)

- Reference services (e.g., information assistance, readers’ advisory, etc.)
- Technical services (e.g., cataloging, acquisitions, etc.)
- Systems, database or network management (e.g., website maintenance, IT support, etc.)
- Library administration
- Children’s or young adult services
- Other (please specify): Special Services to the older population—book discussion

16. How long have you been a librarian in a professional-level position?

- Less than a year
- 1-3 years
- 4-9 years
- 10-20 years
- More than 20 years

17. What is your highest educational degree?

- Bachelor’s degree
- Master’s degree
- Doctorate
- Other (please specify):

18. Age:

- 25 and under
- 26-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65 and over

19. Are you:

- Male
- Female
**Additional questions asked via later email:**

**How do you/do you engage young adults directly in the library? For example, do you have a teen-advisory board, teen volunteers, etc?**

This is one of the toughest age groups to reach. We've had teen advisory boards in the past but didn't get much participation. We've thought of trying it again. We do get teen volunteers--mostly kids who need to do service for class projects or National Honor Society, also some court-ordered community service. We usually get them for specific projects, like our book sale, mailings, etc. We've also had one Eagle Scout do his project (building a gazebo for the library) and another who plans to do his this year.

**Do you have any thoughts on the current young adult usage of the library? Is it a group of patrons that you feel uses the library a lot? For mostly school work? Do they attend library programming?**

We do get a lot of teens in the library--mostly for use of the computer and home work. There are also quite a few kids who are tutored in the library--their parents or the school make arrangements with private tutors and then they meet in the library. Some hang out because they don't have any place else to go.

We do not get a lot of teens attending library programming--even with our new Wii gaming programs, facebook classes, movies, etc. This age group doesn't seem interested in group activities (other than hanging out with their friends!)

**With some of the technology you have been using (facebook, websites, Wii gaming, etc) have you seen young adults participating?**

We've had quite a few teens/young adults add us on FB, but not a lot of feedback otherwise. No one over 12 has come to a wii gaming program.

**What are areas where you would think the library could do more to engage this group?**

I wish I knew! It's hard because we are a small-med library and don't have a staff person dedicated to Young Adult services. Our children's program coordinators try to include teens or do a few teen-specific programs, but their efforts are mostly geared toward pre- and elementary-schoolers. I do the Adult programs and it's the same situation. If we had a staff person dedicated to YA services and more consistent programming efforts that might help.