



Evidence Summary

Thematic Analysis of Videos Suggests That YA Space Design Should Be User-Driven, User-Centered, and Flexible Enough to Enable Multiple Uses

A Review of:

Agosto, D. E., Bell, J. P., Bernier, A. & Kuhlmann, M. (2015). "This is our library, and it's a pretty cool place": A user-centered study of public library YA spaces. *Public Library Quarterly*, 34(1), 23-43. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01616846.2015.1000777>

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Objective – To add empirical evidence to the study of young adult (YA) spaces and creation of related guidelines by investigating librarians' and teens' perceptions of YA spaces and their use in public libraries.

Design – Qualitative thematic analysis of video data content.

Setting – 25 public libraries in the United States of America.

Subjects – A librarian, and a teen of their choosing, at each of the 25 selected libraries.

Methods – The researchers chose 25 public libraries randomly from a list of 257 libraries profiled from 2005-2010 in *Library Journal's*

annual index of new and renovated libraries. Each of the 25 libraries was sent a video camera, and the selected librarian and teen each recorded a narrated tour of their library's YA space. The cameras were returned to the researchers, who had the audio of the recordings transcribed, referring back to the video for any narration that needed clarification. Thematic analysis was performed on the transcriptions to identify major- and sub-categories of space and space-use characteristics. Empirical results were reported as a numerical figure representing the number of videos (n=42 total usable videos) in which a particular theme was mentioned at least once.

Main Results – Five main categories of YA space characteristics recommended by teens

and librarians emerged from the thematic analysis. YA spaces need to facilitate: physical comfort; both leisure activity and information needs; both academic activity and information needs; a sense of ownership by teens; and improved marketing of the spaces as well as clear displays of library policies regarding the spaces. Sub-categories were also listed in each instance, as were counts and percentages of numbers of videos in which a theme was mentioned at least once.

Conclusion – YA spaces in public libraries need to be user-centered, and the arrangements need to be flexible enough to be used for multiple purposes. Teens need to be involved in and drivers of their design and ongoing use. In addition, teens’ needs for social interaction, and leisure as well as academic support, must be explicitly incorporated into any planning. Librarians and libraries must adjust their focus on resources to better mirror teens’ focus on the activities that happen in YA spaces, both online and in person. In order to serve YA patrons, libraries must also actively promote YA spaces. This initial exploratory empirical investigation can inform future much-needed research on improving YA space planning. Research is also needed to examine the evolution of libraries’ YA investments as teen patrons’ needs change over time.

Commentary

This study is an admittedly initial exploration of the ways in which empirical research into the development and maintenance of YA spaces might be conducted. With empiricism as their stated goal, the authors could have profitably used existing non-evidence-based practitioner literature as a basis for their exploration, for example, asking participants to rate a list of known YA space characteristics. Instead they started from scratch, although excellent publications from the practitioner world exist, one of which has a list of characteristics which almost exactly match the results of this study, and another of which is cited and appreciated in a paper by this study’s third author (Gorman & Suellentrop,

2009; Farrelly, 2011; Bernier, Males & Rickman, 2014).

For this evidence summary, these methodologies were systematically assessed using the critical appraisal checklist by Glynn (Glynn, 2006). There are multiple inherent limitations in the research method chosen. The authors indicate that analyzing video-based data is “notoriously difficult”. For example, due to Institutional Review Board concerns, they weren’t able to film minor subjects’ faces, so they had to rely on audio transcripts, and thus did not have facial expressions or any sense of demographics. Librarian subjects chose the teen subjects for the study, and this, as well as the subjects’ knowledge of participating in the study, created bias. Furthermore, the empirical reporting could only go as far as presenting the number of videos in which a theme occurred, not its emphasis within a video — and the details of the methodology for the thematic analysis were not discussed. In the end, given these methodological limitations, the contention that the research findings related to YA space planning are now empirically supported seems uncertain.

However, research of this kind has to start somewhere and this study was carefully crafted and reported, with a useful section on how these findings can be followed up in future research.

This study is one arm of a multi-armed project and it may be worth reading some of the papers published by the project’s other researchers. In fact, Kuhlmann, Agosto, Bell and Bernier published a more informal piece about the same data as in the study reviewed here (2014). The Kuhlmann et al. article presents this study’s methods and findings more accessibly, and so may be a good access point for understanding its implications. Interestingly, Kuhlmann and colleagues imply that both librarians and teens “may not be fully aware of what to expect from public spaces in general or the full range of possible improvements their library could provide”. They suggest that tools be developed to help librarians and teens give “meaningful

feedback” as to what is working and what is not. This is a focus that was not included in the article reviewed here, and which would have been a useful addition.

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