From Book Talks to BookTok: An Examination of School Librarians' Usage of Online Book Communities

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Introduction

The advent of the internet introduced new resources and unprecedented means of direct engagement with readers; the social web later allowed additional, bidirectional, interactive possibilities.

Statement of the Research Problem

We report the findings of a study exploring school librarians' usage of social media tools and additional information channels, answering these research questions:

- To what extent do school librarians use online book communities and book-related information channels in their personal lives and professional work?
- To what extent do school librarians encourage children and young adults' engagement with online book communities and book-related information channels?

Literature Review

Since the professionalization of librarianship in the late 19th Century America, youth-serving librarians have been advising children and teens in choosing books for informational needs and pleasure reading (Hearne & Jenkins, 1999). Historically librarians have carefully curated collections, utilizing book reviews, recommended reading lists from reliable sources, book awards, bestseller lists, and patron suggestions to identify potential titles (Chamberlain, 2019).

Scholarly research has explored librarians using social media to market library resources and services, to engage the community (Burkhart 2010; Price 2011; Phillips 2015), and to serve as an outreach tool to connect with youth (Phillips 2015; Agosto & Abbas 2011). Less studied is the librarian's use of social media to identify and promote new reads for youth patrons.

Book loving subcultures have emerged within most every multimedia, social networking site. In 2010, BookTube, known as the "bookish" YouTube community, formed (Ellis, 2021), featuring carefully crafted book recommendation videos. Within the photo and video sharing platform Instagram, a variety of book related content has been shared with the hashtag #Bookstagram, including appealing photos of books, book reviews, and book discussions (Barron, 2021). In the "BookTok" subculture of the video sharing platform TikTok, an increasingly diverse range of readers can quickly create and view content, making BookTok popular with teen readers who claim their participation has made their reading experiences more entertaining (Flood, 2021; Martens, Balling, & Higgason, 2022). Library conference sessions and online webinars suggest a growing number of librarians are engaging in book-related social media.

Methodology

A convenience sample of former and current school librarian certification students at [University Name Withheld] were contacted via social media, the departmental email listserv, and online course announcements, with 625 participants completing the survey: alumni

58.1% (n=363) and current students 41.7% (n=260). Participants completed an online, researcher-developed 21-question survey. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Findings

Online Book Community: Utilization and Encouragement

Participants were provided with a list of fourteen resources specific to the online book community, including social media and reader-focused social sites, as well as other places such as publisher websites and online book stores. Participants identified which resources they used for finding information about books for their patrons and for themselves, as well as ones they did not use. Approximately 40%-60% reported using each resource for patrons and themselves, and fewer than 10% reported not using each source. For patrons, respondents were more likely to use reader-focused social sites (57.4%, n=359), Twitter (57.1%, n=357), TikTok (55.0%, 344), and Facebook (55.0%, 344). For their own reading choices, respondents were more likely to use Twitter (58.2%, n=364), TikTok (55.7%, n=348), blogs about books (53.8%, n=336), and online bookstores (53.4%, n=334).

Participants also identified which resources they use when sharing or presenting information about books to patrons and to friends/colleagues. Approximately 40%-60% reported using each resource for both groups, and fewer than 10% reported not using each source. When sharing with patrons, participants preferred Twitter (56.0%, n=350), professional review publications (51.2%, n=320), online bookstores (49.8%, n=311), and Instagram (49.0%, n=306). When sharing with friends and colleagues, participants preferred TikTok (64.5%, n=403), reader-focused social sites (60.3%, n=377), Twitter (58.6%, n=366), and publishers' catalogs/digital galley sites (58.1%, n=363).

A lower percentage of participants overall reported encouraging students to use digital tools to find potential books to read. The primary ones recommended include reader-focused social sites (39.3%, n=246), professional review publications (37.4%, n=234), Instagram (36.5%, n=228), and publishers' catalogs/digital galley sites (36.5%, n=228). Conversely, a higher percentage of participants overall reported encouraging students to share information about books they read. The digital resources most frequently recommended include TikTok

(69.1%, n=432), Twitter (66.7%, n=417), Facebook (64.3%, n=402), and online bookstores (63.5%, n=397).

Book-Related Activities

Participants were provided with three types of book reviews that their students create: book review without graphics or media; book review with graphics (e.g. drawings) or media (e.g. audio and/or video); and a physical product related to a book (e.g. a diorama, book cover, comic, etc.). The majority of participants across both age groups (>80%, n=>500) reported using a minimum of one activity sometimes, often, or always.

Participants recommend their patrons share book reviews in physical and digital spaces. School librarians working with older students encouraged their patrons to share reviews in both physical (73.1%, n=457) and digital spaces (75-81%, n=486) more than participants working with younger students who encouraged students to share in physical spaces 37.8% (n=236) and in digital spaces 27-40% (n=217).

Discussion & Implications

Librarians widely utilize traditional resources and new multimedia technologies for book-related content for both personal and professional use. When finding information for patrons and themselves, when sharing with patrons and friends/colleagues, and when encouraging their students to find and share information about books, participants use, promote, and value social media resources more frequently than the more traditional sources. Social media communities allow for bidirectional, interactive communication and thus potentially more meaningful engagement with other members of book communities. Additionally, accessing book-centric communities removes irrelevant distractions found in generic social media arenas. While participants encourage their students to use social media to find and share information about books, they do so more with their older students, which is logical considering most social media sites require users to be 13-years or older to create accounts.

Using a variety of resource formats builds information literacy skills as participants encourage their students to use a variety of outlets for book reviews, including basic text, media-enhanced works, and physical objects.

Conclusions

Survey results indicate that school librarians use a robust set of online book communities and book-related information channels in their personal lives and professional work and encourage and develop literacy skills by encouraging children and young adults' engagement with online book communities and book-related information channels.

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