

PewResearch Internet Project

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Younger Americans and Public Libraries

How those under 30 engage with libraries and think about libraries' role in their lives and communities

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Summary of Findings

Younger Americans—those ages 16-29—especially fascinate researchers and organizations because of their advanced technology habits, their racial and ethnic diversity, their looser relationships to institutions such as political parties and organized religion, and the ways in which their social attitudes differ from their elders

(<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/millennials-in-adulthood/>).

This report pulls together several years of research into the role of libraries in the lives of Americans and their communities with a special focus on Millennials, a key stakeholder group affecting the future of communities, libraries, book publishers and media makers of all kinds, as well as the tone of the broader culture.

Following are some of the noteworthy insights from this research.

There are actually three different “generations” of younger Americans with distinct book reading habits, library usage patterns, and attitudes about libraries. One “generation” is comprised of high schoolers (ages 16-17); another is college-aged (18-24), though many do not attend college; and a third generation is 25-29.

Millennials’ lives are full of technology, but they are more likely than their elders to say that important information is not available on the internet. Some 98% of those under 30 use the internet, and 90% of those internet users say they use social networking sites. Over three-quarters (77%) of younger Americans have a smartphone, and many also have a tablet (38%) or e-reader (24%). Despite their embrace of technology, 62% of Americans under age 30 agree there is “a lot of useful, important information that is not available on the internet,” compared with 53% of older Americans who believe that. At the same time, 79% of Millennials believe that people without internet access are at a real disadvantage.

Millennials are quite similar to their elders when it comes to the amount of book reading they do, but young adults are more likely to have read a book in the past 12 months. Some 43% report reading a book—in any format—on a daily basis, a rate similar to older adults. Overall, 88% of Americans under 30 read a book in the past year, compared with 79% of those age 30 and older. Young adults have caught up to those in their thirties and forties in e-reading, with 37% of adults ages 18-29 reporting that they have read an e-book in the past year.

The community and general media-use activities of younger adults are different from older adults. Those under age 30 are more likely to attend sporting events or concerts than older adults. They are also more likely to listen to music, the radio, or a podcast in some format on a daily or near-daily basis, and socialize with friends or family daily. Older adults, in turn, are more likely to visit museums or galleries, watch television or movies, or read the news on a daily basis.

As a group, Millennials are as likely as older adults to have used a library in the past 12 months, and more

likely to have used a library website. Among those ages 16-29, 50% reported having used a library or bookmobile in the course of the past year in a September 2013 survey. Some 47% of those 30 and older had done so. Some 36% of younger Americans used a library website in that time frame, compared with 28% of those 30 and older. Despite their relatively high use of libraries, younger Americans are among the least likely to say that libraries are important. Some 19% of those under 30 say their library's closing would have a major impact on them and their family, compared with 32% of older adults, and 51% of younger Americans say it would have a major impact on their community, compared with 67% of those 30 and older.

As with the general population, most younger Americans know where their local library is, but many say they are unfamiliar with all the services it may offer: 36% of Millennials say they know little or nothing about the local library's services, compared with 29% of those 30 and older. At the same time, most younger Americans feel they can easily navigate their local library, and the vast majority would describe libraries as warm, welcoming places, though younger patrons are less likely to rate libraries' physical conditions highly.

While previous reports from Pew Research have focused on younger Americans' e-reading habits (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/10/23/younger-americans-reading-and-library-habits/>) and library usage (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/06/25/younger-americans-library-services/>), this report will explore in their attitudes towards public libraries in greater detail, as well as the extent to which they value libraries' roles in their communities. To better understand the context of younger Americans' engagement with libraries (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/12/11/libraries-in-communities/>), this report will also explore their broader attitudes about technology and the role of libraries in the digital age.

It is important to note that age is not the only factor in Americans' engagement with public libraries, nor the most important. Our library engagement typology found (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/library-engagement-typology/>) that Americans' relationships with public libraries are part of their broader information and social landscapes, as people who have extensive economic, social, technological, and cultural resources are also more likely to use and value libraries as part of those networks. Deeper connections with public libraries are also often associated with key life moments such as having a child, seeking a job, being a student, and going through a situation in which research and data can help inform a decision. As a result, the picture of younger Americans' engagement with public libraries is complex and sometimes contradictory, as we examine their habits and attitudes at different life stages.

Even among those under 30, age groups differ in habits and attitudes

Though there are often many differences between Americans under 30 and older adults, younger age groups often have many differences that tie to their age and stage of adulthood.

Our surveys have found that **older teens (ages 16-17)** are more likely to read (particularly print books) (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/06/25/part-1-a-portrait-of-younger-americans-reading-habits-and-technology-use/>), more likely to read for work or school (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/10/23/part-1-younger-americans-changing-reading-habits/>), and more likely to use the library for books and research (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/10/23/part-3-library-use-and-importance/>) than older age groups. They are the only age group more likely to borrow most of the books they read instead of purchasing them, and are also more likely to get reading recommendations at the library (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/10/23/part-2-where-young-people-discover-and-get-their-books/>). Yet despite their closer relationship with public libraries, 16-17 year-olds are less likely to say they highly value public libraries, both as a personal and community resource. Older adults, by contrast, are more likely to place a high level of importance on libraries' roles in their communities—even age groups that are less likely to use libraries overall, such as those ages 65 and older.

The members of the next oldest age group, **college-aged adults (ages 18-24)**, are less likely to use public libraries than many other age groups, and are significantly less likely to have visited a library recently than in our previous survey: Some 56% of 18-24 year-olds said they had visited a library in the past year in November 2012, while just 46% said this in September 2013. They are more likely to purchase most of the books they read than borrow them, and are more likely to read the news regularly than 16-17 year-olds. In addition, like the next oldest age group, 25-29 year-olds, most of those in the college-aged cohort have lived in their current neighborhood five years or less.

Finally, many of the library habits and views of **adults in their late twenties (ages 25-29)** are often more similar to members of older age groups than their younger counterparts. They are less likely than college-aged adults to have read a book in the past year, but are more likely to keep up with the news. In addition, a large proportion (42%) are parents, a group with particularly high rates (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/05/01/parents-children-libraries-and-reading/>) of library usage. Additionally, library users in this group are less likely than younger patrons to say their library use has decreased, and they are much more likely to say that various library services are very important to them and their family.

Younger Americans' community activities, and media and technology landscapes

As a group, the library usage of younger Americans ages 16-29 fits into the larger context of their social activities and community engagement, as well as their broader media and technological environment. Those under age 30 are more likely to attend sporting events or concerts than older adults. They are also more likely to listen to music, the radio, or a podcast in some format on a daily or near-daily basis, and socialize with friends or family daily. Older adults, in turn, are more likely to visit museums or galleries, watch television or movies, or read the news on a daily basis.

About four in ten younger Americans (43%) reported reading a book—in any format—on a daily basis, a rate similar to older adults. Overall, 88% of Americans under 30 read a book in the past year, making them more likely to do so than older adults. Among younger Americans who did read at least one book, the median or typical number read in the past year was 10.

Younger Americans typically have higher rates of technology adoption than older adults, with 98% of those under 30 using the internet, and 90% of those internet users saying they using social networking sites. Over three-quarters (77%) of younger Americans have a smartphone, and many also have a tablet (38%) or e-reader (24%).

Respondents of all age groups generally agree that the internet makes it much easier to find information today than in the past, and most Americans feel that it's easy to separate the good information from bad online. However, Americans under age 30 are actually a little more likely than older adults to say that there is a lot of useful, important information that is *not* available on the internet. They are also somewhat more likely to agree that people without internet access are at a real disadvantage because of all the information they might be missing.

Relationships with public libraries

Younger Americans are significantly more likely than older adults to have used a library in the past year, including using a library website. Overall, the percentage of all Americans who visited a library in person in the previous year fell from our 2012 to 2013 surveys, but the percentage who used a library website increased; the same is true for younger Americans. Few library users made use of a library website without also visiting a library in person in that time, however, so overall library usage rates did not increase:

- Among those ages 16-29, the percentage who visited a public library in person in the previous year dropped from 58% in November 2012 to 50% in September 2013, with the largest drop occurring among 18-24 year-olds.
- 36% of younger Americans used a library website in the previous year, up from 28% in 2012, with the largest growth occurring among 16-17 year-olds (from 23% to 35%).

Despite their higher rates of library usage overall, younger Americans—particularly those under age 25—continue to be less likely than older adults to say that if their local public library closed it would have a major impact on either them and their family or on their community. Patrons ages 16-29 are also less likely than those ages 30 and older to say that several services are “very important” to them and their family, though those in their late twenties are more likely than younger age groups to strongly value most services.

As with the general population, most younger Americans know where their local library is, but many are unfamiliar with all the services they offer. However, most younger Americans feel they can easily navigate their local library, and the vast majority would describe libraries as warm, welcoming places, though younger patrons are less likely to rate

libraries' physical conditions highly.

Views about technology in libraries

Looking specifically at technology use at libraries, we found that as a group, patrons under age 30 are more likely than older patrons to use libraries' computers and internet connections (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/06/25/part-3-library-patrons-activities-and-expectations/>), but less likely to say these resources are very important to them and their families—particularly the youngest patrons, ages 16-17. Even though they are not as likely to say libraries are important, young adults do give libraries credit for embracing technology. Yet while younger age groups are often more ambivalent about the role an importance of libraries today than older adults, they do not necessarily believe that libraries have fallen behind in the technological sphere. Though respondents ages 16-29 were more likely than those ages 30 and older to agree that “public libraries have not done a good job keeping up with newer technologies” (43% vs. 31%), a majority of younger Americans (52%) disagreed with that statement overall.

About these surveys

This report covers the core findings from three major national surveys of Americans ages 16 and older. Many of the findings come from a survey of 6,224 Americans ages 16+ conducted in the fall of 2013. A full statement of the survey method and details can be found here: <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/methods-27/> (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/13/methods-27/>).

The details and methods of the two other surveys can be found at:

<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/01/22/methodology-8/> (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2013/01/22/methodology-8/>)

<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/04/04/methodology-2/> (<http://libraries.pewinternet.org/2012/04/04/methodology-2/>)

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