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A challenges for libraries in a digital age: how to attract young generations to library events?

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# Introduction

In their mission and purpose, public libraries strive to provide access to lifelong learning as well as create a meeting place for members of the community (Koontz and Gubin 2010). But sometimes, the library is only one of many hubs for social and cultural life of the community, therefore it is important how they attract and reach people in the community. Library events are becoming one of their more visible activities for doing this. In Slovenia, the number of events (25.487 events in 2018) as well as the total number of their visitors (855.046) in public libraries has increased significantly over the last 10 years (Bibsist Online 2019). Considering that public libraries are only one of the many providers and organisers of (free) events, it seems justified to ask who those visitors are and what kind of library events attract them most. While libraries collect some general statistics connected to events for children and for the adult population, these data cannot give us an insight into who the visitors of these events are or what their opinion of events is. To get an insight into the structure, the characteristics and the user experience of event visitors, we used a combination of different research methods. In this paper we specifically focus on the results connected to the young generation that public libraries find so difficult to attract.

# Theoretical framework

It is important for the library to be in touch with the needs, desires and interests of young generations. The term “young generation” is typically used for teens and young adults, but there is no single definition or age boundary defining this group. In literature, for example, young adults are defined between 12-17 years of age (Joiner and Swanzy, 2016), 15-24 (United Nation 2013) or even 15-29 (Eurostat 2019). In this paper we take the definition of United nations where the range is large in terms of age, psychosocial development and status (high school students, students or employees), but the members of this group live in the same digital age, more than 90 % of them owns a smartphone and their common habit is spending a lot of their leisure time for television, smartphone and social media (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019; Smith 2017).

The results of research and observations in libraries confirm that the place for young people should be designed differently - librarians should ask young people what they want in “their space”, treat them with respect and exploit the technology that young people use to promote events (Joiner and Swanzy 2016; Snowball 2008; Bolan 2006; Fisher 2003). Therefore, programming for the young generation can be more complicated to execute successfully than other types of programming, requiring more time and resources (Joiner and Swanzy 2016). Joiner and Swanzy (2016) suggest that one of the possible solutions is also to actively involve young people to help organize events and volunteer during these events.

# Research questions and methodology

A broader study of events was performed at Ljubljana City Library (MKL) in 2016, which included semi-structured interviews with visitors, observations of visitor structure, a survey at library events and interviews with programming librarians. This paper takes the collected data and focuses specifically on in-depth analysis of responses by and about the young generation of visitors. In our analysis we wish to seek answers to the following research questions:

* What is the proportion the young generation among event visitors and what types of events do they attend?
* How do young generations view library events in comparison to other visitors?
* What are the characteristics of young generations visiting library programs?
* What can programming librarians tell us about the younger generations in connection to library events?

Interviews with visitors took place between March and May 2016. We interviewed 17 visitors at 10 different events (small and large, from lectures to travel related events and do-it-yourself crafts), asking them about aspects such as event impressions and motivation for attending the event. 3 out of 17 interviewees can be classified as representatives of young generation. During this time, several branches of the library also tracked visitor structure at every event over the period of one month through observations. The third investigation was made in summer 2016 through 10 in-depth interviews with librarians responsible for programming in their library. In those interviews several questions were also connected to the young generation as the audience of library events. As the last step in data collection, a large survey was carried out in November 2016 at 54 events where we obtained 790 responses, out of which 65 responses were given by visitors under 25. Besides the typical statistical survey analysis and content analysis of interviews, the collected data was also used to create personas, representing the different types of visitors at MKL programs.

# Research Results

The results show that the young generation under the age of 25 represents only a small percent of visitors at the MKL public library events. In the interviews, librarians admitted that they had troubles finding the most appropriate format of events for this age group. Some of them explained that they tried to find ways to attract the young while others avoided organising events targeted at this age group. Observations in selected branches over a one month period showed that typically around 10 % of visitors belonged to this group. A similar result was obtained also through surveys, where 9 % of questionnaires was filled out by this group of visitors. Both, observations and surveys also showed that about half of the events in our sample did not attract any representative of this age group and that larger numbers of young was found in film and music related events, the more attractive travel events with well-known presenters and, interestingly, the philosophy event cycle. Not only were they quite selective about the events, they were also more critical than the other age groups regarding individual events as well as the overall library programming, and more prone to pointing out an event as “not meeting their expectations”, uninteresting or confusing and a presenter as annoying or full of self-praise. Compared to others, they are also significantly more interested in topics connected to culture and more likely to find out about a library event through a friend or a presenter than via any type of library promotion. While a smaller percent (15 %) of surveyed young visitors attends library events often, as many as 40 % answered that is was their first library event even through almost half of them were library members.

Interestingly, most of these survey results are well in line with the personas of event visitors we created based on interviews carried out prior to the survey. Out of the 7 personas, one (Curious and demanding Ema) falls in the category under the age of 25. She is an active and curious student living in the centre of Ljubljana. She is a member of the library, but this is her first library event which she attends alone. She is interested in attending other quality lectures the library has to offer as she find them motivating and intellectually stimulating, but they would really have to attract and persuade her in order to take the time to come. Since she forgets to actively follow the event schedule, she would need notifications of events relevant for her. Besides Ema, many characteristics of this young generation of event visitors are reflected also in two other personas – Iztok, 33 and Matija, 28.

# Discussion & Conclusion

The results of our studies show that the young generation under 25 is a challenging audience when it comes to library events. They are difficult to reach, attract, and satisfy, which is why libraries tend to focus more on events for children and adults (especially seniors) who are a more grateful audience. However, public libraries should make an effort to reach also this group of users not only to attract them to the library but also to give them a high quality forum and place to gain knowledge, inspire learning, promote culture, connect with the community as well as enjoy their leisure time. This seems especially important in university cities such as Ljubljana, where there is a high concentration of students which is currently not well reflected in the structure of event visitors or the library programs.

In order to do this, libraries need to evaluate their programmes to see how well they are serving this generation, identify the characteristics and profiles of young they are reaching and those they are not, and strategically plan their future event activities. Personas seem like an interesting tool that could support this process and inform the library of the needs, wants, motivations and ways of reaching and attracting this population. In our study we clearly identified one persona that characterises current visitors of events in Ljubljana public library, but with a larger sample and a study targeting specifically the younger generations and reaching beyond existing events and visitors, it would be possible to create several different personas for this user group.

In the time of the digital age, libraries need to rethink several aspects of event programming for the young generation, such as finding new ways of reaching and communicating with (potential) users outside the library walls, identifying new types, formats and places (physical and virtual) of library events, and organising events together with the young. And last but not least, in order to make an impact, libraries need to clearly identify the goals and outcomes of library events for this particular generation.

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