



## **Gen Z Loves Libraries**

### **Interview with**

**Dr. Kathi Inman Berens & Dr. Rachel Noorda  
Portland State University**

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**KENNEALLY:** If you think that libraries are just for books and that kids today care only about digital media, then you should read a new report from the American Library Association.

Welcome to CCC's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

*Gen Z and Millennials: How They Use Libraries and Identify Through Media Use* details where and how American young people read books and consume other media. Based on a survey of more than 2,000 respondents, the report identifies libraries as critical cultural spaces for individuals and for communities. It also finds these public spaces could offer publishers a welcome sanctuary in the midst of digital disruption.

The coauthors of the ALA report join me now to share their insights. Dr. Rachel Noorda is director and associate professor of publishing at Portland State University. Welcome, Dr. Noorda.

**NOORDA:** Thanks, Chris.

**KENNEALLY:** And Dr. Kathi Inman Berens is a US Fulbright Scholar of digital culture, a former Annenberg Innovation Lab fellow, an associate professor of book publishing and digital humanities at Portland State University. Welcome to Velocity of Content, Dr. Inman Berens.

**INMAN BERENS:** Hello, Chris.

**KENNEALLY:** A fascinating insight of the report concerns identity and the ways that people and places today have roles that are fluid and exchangeable, Dr. Kathi Inman Berens. Your work took you to public libraries, where you met with young people and discussed their reading habits and media preferences. What did you expect to find, and what surprised you?



INMAN BERENS: Well, Chris, we didn't go into the library visits with any preconceptions. We knew from our survey data that 54% of Gen Zs and Millennials are visiting libraries, which is consistent with Pew data from 2017 about Millennials visiting libraries. What's surprising is that it's been a big five years since the Pew data. We didn't expect equivalent proportions of the population today to be visiting libraries like they were in 2017. After all, in the five years since Pew's survey, people across all age demographics have been more online than they were. Our own data showed that 92% of Gen Zs and Millennials check social media daily. 25% check multiple times per hour. They're on sites like YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram. Talent and influencers hold sway with them. 32% get book recommendations from talent, like authors and livestreamers. 28% get book recommendations from influencers.

Gen Z in particular likes printed books. It's their number-one format. And public libraries are showrooms for printed books. It makes sense that Gen Zs and Millennials feel at home at libraries. Libraries are places where we observed young people moving seamlessly between engagement with their phones and then with other people in the library and the library collections around them. Libraries also typically offer free Wi-Fi, making it a perfect place for people to be digitally dual, engaging both in person and online at the same time.

Perhaps the hallmark of Gen Zs' and Millennials' media use is that they are media-omnivorous and context-agnostic. They'll find a story they like in one setting and pursue it across media. Think of the *Bridgerton* example. After the popular Netflix series, sales of printed *Bridgerton* books shot up 3,000%, and even more significantly, ebooks shot up 8,000%. I think Rachel's going to say more about cross-media discovery.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, Dr. Rachel Noorda, describe the ways that Gen Z and Millennials identify themselves in the context of media. How do they manage these various roles, and what's important to them?

NOORDA: Well, we already knew going into the research that readers are, as Kathi said, media omnivores. So they're not just reading, but they have many other media identities. They are gaming. They are writing, podcasting, etc. And we've talked on this podcast previously about our 2020 data, which was a precursor to our current research, which showed that readers are context-agnostic. So they're discovering something one place, buying it in another. We also see that Gen Z and Millennials are maybe what we might call media-agnostic or discovering via cross-media, because the number-two preferred way that they discover books is from streaming TV and movies that were adapted from books. So cross-media is very important to media discovery, and Gen Z and Millennials hold multiple media identities simultaneously.



Ours is the first project to really capture this cross-media identity data, which is really exciting. The top media identities Gen Z and Millennials have are as readers, gamers, and fans. So 57% identify as readers, 53% as gamers, and 52% as fans. 25% of Gen Z and Millennials also identify as writers. So what's really interesting about this identity data is that it's about community rather than just strictly the media behavior. For example, we found that Gen Z and Millennials who don't identify as readers are still reading. Pew Research found that even though 49% of Americans game, only 10% of them consider themselves gamers. So there are some important questions to ask, like who feels empowered to hold a media identity like reader or gamer, and what are the barriers that keep certain Gen Z and Millennials who read or game from those identities, since we know that identities shape perception of self and the communities that we build and tap into?

**KENNEALLY:** Libraries are about more than books, according to ALA President Emily Drabinski. How do Gen Z and Millennials view the library space, Dr. Kathi Inman Berens, and what else do they do in libraries besides read?

**INMAN BERENS:** In our ethnographic research for this report, we observed Gen Z patrons using libraries as third spaces, those places apart from major domains like home, school, or work. Public libraries are places where kids can relax after school. Public libraries are less task-oriented than school libraries, for example, where kids do homework or make up exams. Public libraries are cozy and allow for unstructured sociability. We saw middle schoolers wandering from gaming spaces to crafting tables to comfy beanbag chairs where they looked at their phones and then came back into in-person community. Trusted adults were there, too. A female librarian, a male mentor – these adults are a source of interpersonal validation, even if it's as simple as looking at a kid's crafted bookmark or a keychain and noticing something about it that they like.

High schoolers were crafting, chatting, gaming, dreaming up business ideas, and using library maker spaces to record music. The gaming pod was its own glass-enclosed contained space, where the gamers could be loud and chat as they were gaming and watching livestreamers. Back at the crafting table, one teen mom brought her toddler and then let her mom take the child while she, the teen mom, crafted with friends and chatted.

In our work with the Michigan Library Association, we learned about intergenerational library space uses. For example, one library system in northern Michigan offers Grandma's Got Game, a program born during the 2008 recession when young families moved back in with their parents. The library offered Wii games where familiar activities such as bowling or tennis are played as video games, a way for grandparents and grandchildren to bond. This program is still going strong 15 years later.



We know from our survey data that Gen Z and Millennials are media makers as well as consumers. Libraries offer outlets for both activities, with dedicated gaming spaces, manga clubs, support for podcasting and music making. Libraries also offer language acquisition, résumé workshops, library of things, and mentoring of various kinds.

**KENNEALLY:** Libraries fit within a robust sampling culture that Gen Z and Millennials know very well from digital subscription models. Dr. Noorda, how can publishers possibly leverage this?

**NOORDA:** Well, at the very top level, it's about publishers changing their mindset. Publishers could benefit from viewing libraries as allies and partners. And some publishers do view libraries this way. But there are many whose relationship with libraries is more about seeing libraries as competition rather than as complementary. Libraries have so much to offer publishers. In addition to the robust sampling that libraries offer Gen Z and Millennials to discover new books, libraries have a free community space for author events. They are incredibly aware of the needs of their communities and their readers. Libraries can be especially important for independent publishers beyond the big five and for authors beyond the mega-blockbuster titles, authors like midlist authors and even self-published authors.

**KENNEALLY:** A third of Gen Z and Millennials admitted to reading pirated ebooks for free from unlicensed sources. What conditions in the current library ebook market may encourage this, Dr. Inman Berens? Who are the most avid ebook readers?

**INMAN BERENS:** Chris, reducing wait times for library ebooks is a strong way publishers can discourage piracy. 75% of our survey respondents said that a wait of one week or more is long. Millennials are the generation reading the most ebooks. In our interview with the digital collections manager at the Cuyahoga Public Library in Ohio, she observed that Millennials are the most avid ebook consumers across all generations. However, in our survey, 63% of Millennials and Gen Zs reported not using digital collections. Yet we know from use data that Millennials in particular are using digital collections.

How to explain the delta between ebook perception of use and actual use? We speculate that people are not connecting Libby to their local public libraries. They're using the Libby app to access ebooks and audiobooks, but they're not aware that their local tax dollars supporting local libraries are funding Libby ebooks and audiobooks or their access to them. Libby commands 90%-plus of the digital library ebook market. The app is remarkably easy to use and reliable. But Libby's branding doesn't make it easy for people to associate Libby with their local public libraries. This might help to explain the delta between Gen Z and Millennials' perception of ebook use and their actual use. People who want to read more about this can check out our Digital Public Library Ecosystem report,



also published by ALA. The Digital Public Library Ecosystem report launched one month ago, in December 2023, and it's free to read.

To combat piracy, publishers and ebook distributors have an opportunity to train Gen Z and Millennials to seek books from legitimate, paid-for sources, like public libraries. But this training will require experimentation and testing. Publishers might experiment, for example, with less-expensive licensing prices for a subset of titles. This would make that subset more affordable for libraries and cut down on patron wait times.

Does increased library access harm publisher sales, as the current market logic assumes to be the case? Or might faster patron access give titles a marketing boost in a crowded marketplace? Those are big questions. It's worth an experiment to intervene in Gen Z and Millennials' habit of turning to piracy to access books that they must wait for.

**KENNEALLY:** Kids love their phones, Dr. Rachel Noorda, but your research reveals they also love print books. In the spaces where print books are found – not just libraries, but also bookstores – what do Gen Z and Millennials enjoy most? Should libraries start serving coffee?

**NOORDA:** Gen Z and Millennials love print. They read and buy nearly twice as many print books per month as they do ebooks or audiobooks. So you're right, Chris. They do love print. But more than anything, this love of print should tell us that digital and analog media can coexist. Young people are still going to be on their phones, but it's for that reason that a digital detox is really appealing – a couple of hours just to sit undistracted and uninterrupted with a printed object.

Gen Z and Millennials like browsing physical shelves for a number of reasons, but one of them is for immediacy. 26% of our respondents bought a book from a physical bookstore because they could get it faster that way, rather than waiting for it to ship from Amazon or other retailers. Similarly, young people can browse the library shelves and check out the physical books they find immediately and for free. Bookstores and libraries are calm, quiet spaces with knowledgeable staff, and this also contributes to their appeal for Gen Z and Millennials.

Actually, some libraries have started serving coffee. (laughter) My local library in Tigard, Oregon, has a spot where you walk into the library and right there is a little restaurant/café. They give the space to small business owners who are trying to start out, and library patrons can get a coffee there and sit at one of the many tables and sip and chat before they go in to grab their books.



KENNEALLY: Dr. Rachel Noorda, director and associate professor of publishing at Portland State University, thank you for speaking with me.

NOORDA: Thank you, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And Dr. Kathi Inman Berens, associate professor of book publishing and digital humanities at Portland State University, thank you for speaking with me, too.

INMAN BERENS: It's always a pleasure, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for joining me.

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