


# Teens' Vision of an Ideal Library Space: Insights from a Small Rural Public Library in the United States

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Article abstract

**Objective** – This study delves into the perspectives of teenagers regarding their desired teen space within a small rural public library in the United States.

**Methods** – To capture the richness of their thoughts, a visual data collection method was employed, wherein 27 8th-grade participants engaged in a drawing activity during an art class at a local middle school. Two additional teens were recruited for individual semi-structured interviews.

**Results** – Through this creative exercise, the study unveiled the various library activities, amenities, books, and visual designs that resonated with the teens, as they envisioned their ideal teen space.

**Conclusion** – The study's findings hold practical implications for librarians working with this population, offering valuable insights to enhance and optimize teen services at the library. By aligning the library's offerings with the desires of the young patrons, the potential for a thriving and engaging teen community within the library is enhanced.





*Research Article*

**Teens' Vision of an Ideal Library Space: Insights from a Small Rural Public Library in the United States**

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## Abstract

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## Introduction

Public libraries have long been essential providers of youth services, offering not only access to information and fostering multiple literacies, but also cultivating vital 21st-century competencies among young individuals (Abbas & Koh, 2015). While public libraries are prevalent across the United States, they exhibit notable variations in capacity and resources. Rural communities, in particular, confront distinct challenges, including poverty, digital divides, and resource limitations (Meyer, 2018; Perryman & Jeng, 2020; Real et al., 2014). Consequently, small rural libraries often grapple with reduced funding, limited collections, staffing, space, services, and programs.

Given these constraints, it becomes crucial for small rural public libraries to identify the unique needs of their community members, enabling them to provide services efficiently and effectively. Unfortunately, there has been a dearth of attention directed toward understanding the youth in rural areas and their utilization, or lack thereof, of public libraries. In light of this, in the present study, the researchers endeavored to explore the perspectives of teens regarding their aspirations for public libraries. By understanding what teens desire to see in these institutions, the researchers aimed to provide valuable guidance to practitioners and researchers seeking to build a resilient future for youth services in libraries, particularly in small rural settings. Through such understanding, libraries can adapt and thrive amidst the challenges, fostering an environment that caters to the evolving needs of the young generation.

## Literature Review

### *Teens and Public Libraries*

Public libraries have a long history of serving teens, dating back to the 1800s (Bernier, 2020). The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), a division of the American Library Association (ALA), was established in the 1960s to provide resources and support for librarians who work with teens. Public

libraries serve as key players in advancing teens' educational and well-being interests, as evidenced in research showing libraries' support for contemporary youths' connected learning experiences (Subramaniam et al., 2018), promotion of digital and data literacy (Bowler et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2023), and librarians addressing the health information needs of teens (Knapp et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2023).

Research in library and information science (LIS) has shed light on the multifaceted ways in which teenagers utilize public libraries, especially for the social opportunities afforded by public libraries. Surveys conducted in both urban and suburban areas of the United States have revealed that teens frequently turned to public libraries as invaluable hubs for accessing necessary information resources, fostering social connections within a safe space, and having a positive environment for other personal activities (Agosto, 2007). Teens in a semi-rural area in the United States reported that they use a public library makerspace to tinker, learn, socialize, and pursue their personal interests (Li & Todd, 2019). Furthermore, studies conducted in rural areas in Canada have demonstrated that teens visited public libraries for attending programs, hanging out, and participating in collaborative learning opportunities (Kelly et al., 2023; Reid & Howard, 2016).

To enhance the services for teens, researchers have delved into the various features that teens desire in public library spaces. In studying 25 newly constructed and renovated public libraries in the United States, Agosto et al. (2015) highlighted the importance of providing comfortable and inviting physical spaces, meeting teens' information needs, and offering many opportunities for both leisure and academic activities. Similarly, Cook et al. (2005) found that factors such as hosting teen-only events, providing food options, and offering general amenities were positively correlated with urban teens' positive perceptions of libraries. Teen librarians also shared a set of practices that contributed to a positive teen library experience, including building a welcoming teen space that fosters ownership and social interactions, treating teens with respect, and focusing on teens' interests (Ornstein & Reid, 2022).

While many studies have reported positive library experiences among teens, research also shows conflicting results. For instance, Howard (2011) showed that while teens were generally satisfied with their local public libraries, the focus group discussions among teens revealed some dissatisfaction. Howard argued that the status quo in teen spaces might meet what teens considered normal, but it may not be ideal for them. Multiple factors contributed to teen dissatisfaction with libraries. Abbas et al. (2008) surveyed over 4,000 teens in western New York state, revealing that one of the major contributing factors to library non-use was the lack of convenience. Outdated or irrelevant technology can be off-putting for teens in urban areas (Agosto et al., 2016; Meyers, 1999). Library staff who are distant, strict, or impatient with teens can negatively impact their impressions of the library and deter them from using it (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2010; Howard, 2011). In addition, library collections that do not address issues relevant to specific teen demographics and cultural identities can make teens feel disconnected from their libraries (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2010; Meyers, 1999). Teens and tweens who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color chose not to use public libraries because of perceived risks of not meeting institutional policies, rules, and behavioural expectations (Gibson et al., 2023).

The current literature further identifies a significant contributing factor to teens' non-use of libraries – library spaces. Meyers (1999) found that teens perceived library spaces as “dull”, morgue-like, “boring”, and not designed for teens' needs. Two decades later, research findings concerning teens' perceptions of library spaces remain consistent. Inadequate library spaces and equipment for teens continue to negatively affect teens' library use (Howard, 2011). Bishop and Bauer (2002) found that young adults in both urban and rural areas considered an attractive teen library space as the most important factor in their library use. Cook et al. (2005) found that early teens viewed inviting and teen-only areas as positive

indicators of libraries. This result was further supported by Bernier et al.'s (2014) survey of 411 libraries, which found a positive correlation between the amount of library space dedicated to young adults and the level of library participation from teens. Bernier (2010) emphasized the importance of youth input and participation in space design to meet their aesthetic needs. Therefore, it is crucial to consider teens' perspectives when designing library spaces to enhance their library use.

### ***Rural Public Libraries***

Public libraries are important institutions in rural communities, playing crucial roles beyond book repositories. Rural libraries are trusted resource providers for various information needs, assist patrons in finding print and digital resources, and serve as community centers where people gather and meet others (Grove & Brasher, 2020). Public libraries in rural areas also have the capacity to contribute to local economic growth by supporting job skills training and small businesses development (Hughes & Boss, 2021; Mehra et al., 2017; Real & Rose, 2017). Additionally, public libraries may be the only institutions in rural areas that provide free access to computers and the Internet, and support for technology skills (Real & Rose, 2017). Rural libraries offer health and wellness programs that make positive impacts on rural residents (Flaherty & Miller, 2016; Lenstra et al., 2022).

However, research has shown that rural libraries in the United States face many challenges. Staffing and funding are among the most often reported challenges. Fischer (2015) reported staffing challenges and limited funding in rural and small libraries, including a lack of librarians with master's degrees, even though the survey findings showed that there has been some improvement in conditions in these rural and small libraries. Access to technologies and the Internet is limited in rural communities. According to Real and Rose (2017), rural libraries offered the fewest public access computers overall, and Internet speed was often inadequate to meet the needs of patrons. Situated in this challenging environment, services to children and teens suffer tremendously. Real and Rose noted that rural libraries tended to have fewer programs related to science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM), and fewer formal after-school programs, like homework help, compared to their urban counterparts.

To tackle the challenges encountered by rural libraries, researchers underscore the importance of community engagement and the implementation of innovative outreach strategies. Reid and Howard (2016) highlighted the deployment of mobile library services, book delivery services, and the establishment of satellite library branches in serving community members in rural areas. Additionally, Kelly et al. (2023) demonstrated that a partnership between rural libraries and local community organizations provided local youth access to laptops, enabling their participation in coding clubs hosted by the libraries. Despite the longstanding tradition of public libraries serving teenagers, research focused on teen services is clearly limited, with an even greater scarcity of studies centered on rural teen populations. To address the identified research gap in the current literature in LIS, this study aims to explore the following research question:

RQ: How would teens design their desired teen space in a small rural public library?

### **Methods**

The use of surveys, focus groups, and interviews has been common in LIS research to explore the opinions and preferences of teenagers regarding libraries. However, visual participatory research, which involves gathering visual data like photographs and drawings created by the participants, has been an underutilized method (Weber, 2008). In LIS, there has been an increasing interest in employing

photography as a visual method to enhance qualitative data collection (e.g., Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2005; Barriage, 2021; Li & Todd, 2019). However, the application of drawings as a data collection method has received limited attention, with Hartel's (2014) research being an exception, wherein college students' drawings were used to illustrate their conceptualizations of information. The use of visual data collection methods has proven to be a valuable tool in research as it enables participants to engage more deeply with research questions (Gauntlett, 2005). In particular, young people tend to be more attentive and involved when visual activities are included (Hartel, 2014; Subramaniam, 2016). According to Weber (2008), images encourage participants to consider research questions from diverse perspectives, beyond what is possible with writing or speech. Researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of participants' viewpoints through visual data (Weber, 2008; Woodgate et al., 2017). In this study, we aimed to broaden previous research by employing this method to gain insight into the library images that young people aspire to have in their communities.

### ***Data Collection***

Data were collected in a small rural area in the United States. The researchers collaborated with the principal and art teacher at a local middle school to gather data. Consent forms were distributed to each homeroom in the middle school. In all, 27 8<sup>th</sup> graders (ages 13 to 14) were recruited to participate in a drawing activity during art class, during which the researchers were not present. Participants were asked to design their ideal public library space for teens and write responses to three prompts, which were to 1) describe the library as it was, 2) describe what you wished the public library to be, and 3) describe their drawings. These written responses were requested to help us understand their perceptions of the public library and what they wanted in their public library. All the drawings were submitted anonymously. Furthermore, to complement the visual and written data collected from the drawing activity, two additional teens (ages 13 to 14) were recruited through convenience sampling, which involved inviting individuals that the researchers had known, to participate in individual semi-structured interviews. These interviews allowed researchers to ask follow-up questions, providing further clarification and validation of emerging themes derived from the drawing activities. Each interview was conducted virtually and lasted approximately 30 minutes. See Appendix for the interview questions. This study was approved by the university's institutional review board.

### ***Data Analysis***

To analyze the data collected from the drawings, written responses, and interview transcripts, we imported them into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software. We used the constant comparison technique in the initial rounds of open coding and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Initially, we independently coded the same set of four participants' design activity sheets to examine the differences and similarities of our interpretations of the data. We discussed each code together and came up with 50 initial codes inductively (e.g., feeling irrelevant, not having many books, freedom of doing whatever they want, hanging out, gaming, a colorful place, etc.). These 50 codes were further grouped into 7 categories, including social interactions, being kids/freedom to express themselves, relevance, visual appeals, books/information, learning, and emotions. Then we used another set of six participants' data, which were randomly selected from the data, to test the shared understanding of these emergent themes. Using the Dedoose Training Center, the code application test results showed that the inter-coder reliability arrived at an overall Cohen's Kappa value of 0.46, indicating a fair agreement (Fleiss, 1971). Codes with a Cohen's Kappa value less than 0.65 were discussed to reach an agreement. During the discussion of different interpretations of the excerpts and codes, if a code was updated, the researchers went through all the data to compare them to the newly modified code. When a new code was generated, comparisons

between codes were also made. Through meetings and discussions, the researchers identified a total of four categories – activities, amenities, books, and visual design – that were collectively agreed upon to answer the research question explored in this study. When comparing the generated codes from drawings and written responses to those from the interviews, no discernible differences in results were observed between these two data collection methods. All names reported here are pseudonyms that were assigned by the researchers. All the quotations are verbatim.

## Findings

Overall, the data analysis revealed predominantly negative perceptions of the local public library among teens. For instance, Jordan succinctly stated, “not fun,” while Taylor commented on its “gloomy and boring [sic]” atmosphere. When prompted to share their ideas on redesigning the library to appeal to individuals like themselves, their suggestions were categorized into four themes: activities, amenities, books, and visual design. Each of these primary themes is described below, accompanied by illustrative examples.

### *Desired Library Activities*

The data analysis highlighted a major concern among teens regarding the availability of engaging activities at the library. When the library failed to offer compelling programs, teens perceived the library as irrelevant to their interests and needs. For instance, one participant, Avery, described libraries as “A big buiding [sic] with really nothing to do for kids.” On the other hand, participants expressed their desires for a library that catered to their preferences, indicating a need for a space that allowed for free-choice fun activities, learning opportunities, and social interactions. For example, Morgan noted, “My drawing is a trendy library for teens 13-19 to socialize, study, and have fun.” See Figure 1 below. Similarly, Alex shared: “A fun place where kids can go to hang have fun and learn.”

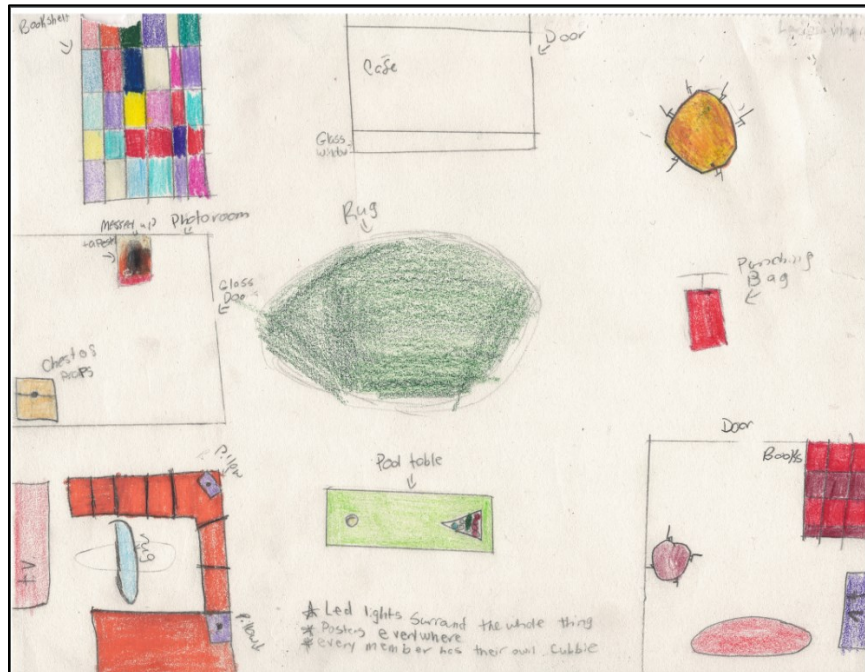


Figure 1  
Design for teen space (by Morgan).



Twelve teens emphasized the importance of having a dedicated study area in their ideal library, expressing a desire for study rooms with tutors and spaces suitable for schoolwork and group activities. Quinn, for instance, wrote: "I also thought a study room would be nice for doing schoolwork/group activities."

In their designs, participants emphasized the importance of offering spaces for creative expression and entertainment. The appeal of video games was evident among seven teens, who expressed a desire for a dedicated game room in the library. Cameron, for example, wrote: "Also a lot of kids my age like playing video games so I thought a game room would attract a lot of people." Charlie in the interview explained: "I think people would probably mostly play games. Maybe someone plays educational games... that'll be fun, like people can learn something and they can play games at the same time." Intriguingly, two teens included music rooms in their ideal library design. Cameron highlighted the popularity of music among young people, stating: "I know a lot of people (including myself) that enjoy listening/making music, so I thought a music room would be nice to have." Rowan expressed a specific desire for "rated-R music."

Social interactions were also crucial for eight teens who participated in the drawing activity and two interviewees. Finley expressed a wish for the library to be "1 cool place where I can go hang out with friends," while Skylar indicated that the library could serve as a place to "make new friends." In addition to having fun with friends, the teens also sought support from their peers, as Blake wrote: "Somewhere for teens can go to get support from other teens." This desire for a space to hang out and socialize was shown in their designs where they drew curved couches at the center of the teen space, for example, the design from Dakota in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2  
Design for teen space (by Dakota).



### Desired Library Amenities

Data analysis revealed that teens expressed a strong desire for convenient and appealing amenities in the library. These amenities encompassed a range of facilities, including vending machines, food services, arts and craft tables, ping-pong tables, large TVs, and comfortable furniture. The teens' input offered valuable insights into their vision of the ideal library space, where they could enjoy various activities and feel comfortable spending time.

Five participants specifically mentioned the inclusion of food services, such as a “snack bar” or a “café,” in their designs for the ideal library. For instance, Emerson creatively envisioned a “secret door” leading to a pantry filled with an abundant variety of snacks from around the world, highlighting the appeal of convenient food options within the library setting. The participants' feedback underscores the importance of offering diverse amenities that cater to their interests and needs. As exemplified below in Figure 3, the amenities featured a café in the top left corner, a flat screen TV and bean bags in the middle right-hand section, and lockers for instruments in the bottom right corner of the dedicated teen space.

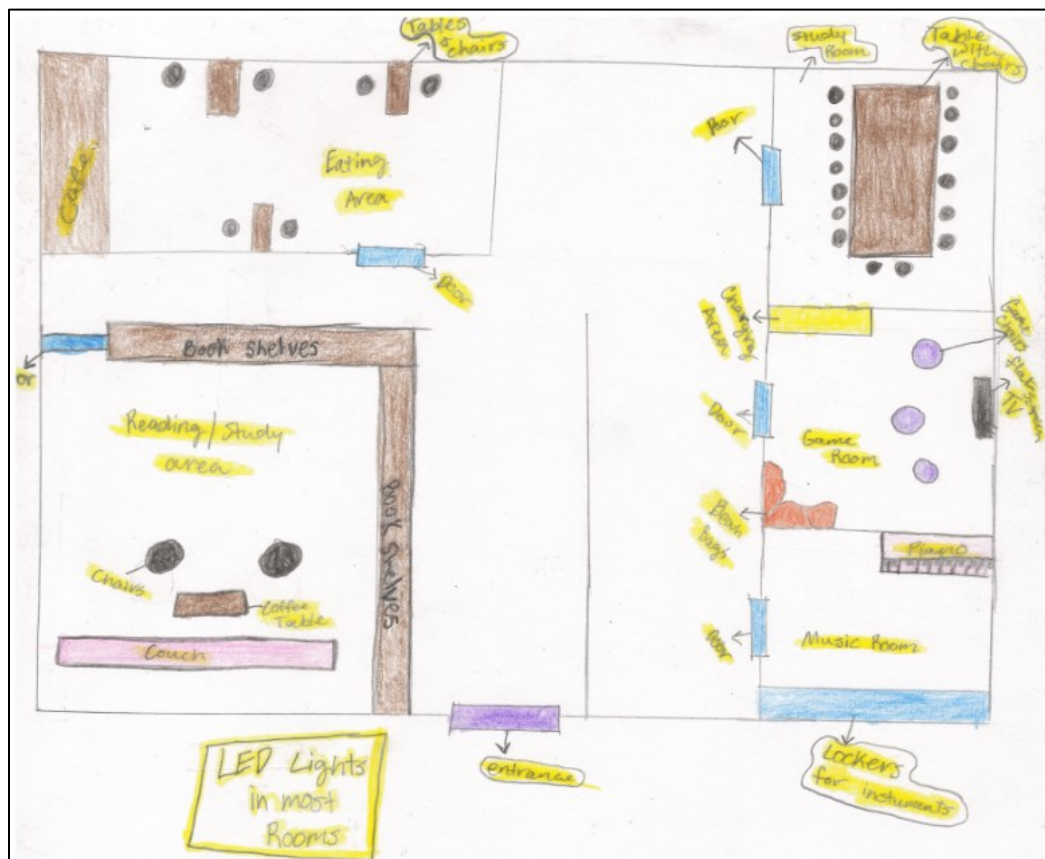


Figure 3  
Design for teen space (by Cameron).

### *Desired Books*

Teens' perceptions of the books housed in the library were diverse, with some expressing satisfaction with the library's book collection, while others voiced concerns about the relevance and variety of books available. The majority of teens described libraries as having an adequate number of books, with Tom mentioning, "There are a lot of bookshelves everywhere." However, one teen pointed out the limitations, stating, "The teen space is very small...There aren't many books in it." Sage further elaborated that the library should strive to be "a fun place with better books." This desire for "better books" might explain the conflicting perceptions, as teens recognized that libraries contained books, but these books did not always align with their interests and preferences. In the interview, Charlie explained: "People still like non-fiction books more...so informational books might be good." Hayden expressed an interest in books related to debate and cooking skills in their ideal library design (see Figure 4 below), highlighting the importance of relevant and engaging content.

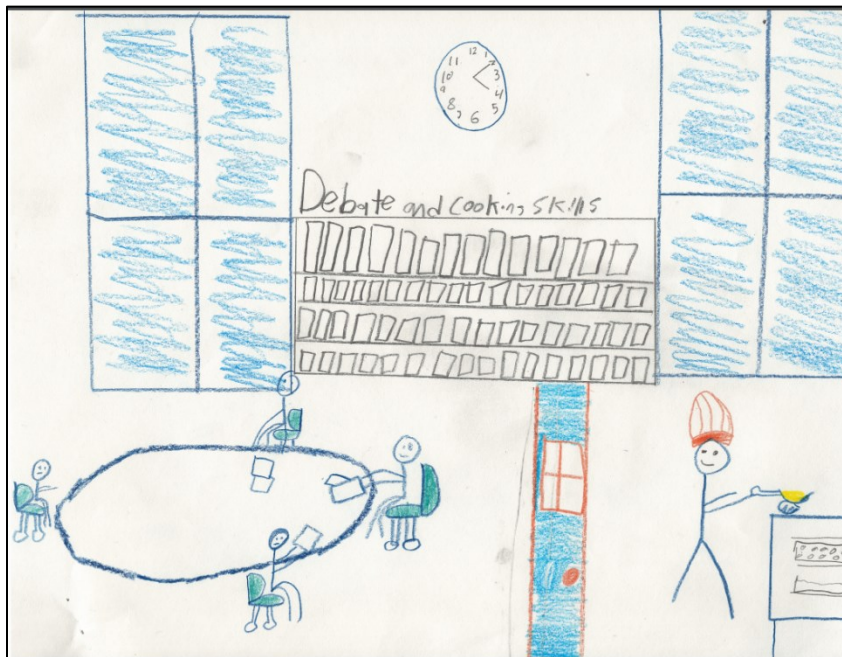


Figure 4  
Design for teen space (by Hayden).

It also became apparent that teens' interests in reading influenced their perception of libraries. Quinn, for instance, stated: "I thought the library was only a place for reading and at the time I didn't like to read at all." This showed how a lack of interest in reading during a particular period led them to perceive the library solely as a place for reading, reflecting a limited perspective at the time.

### *Desired Visual Design*

Five teens expressed the view that libraries were perceived as outdated. Samuel succinctly described libraries as "bland" and "old," while Sage shared a similar sentiment, stating, "In my opinion, it's kinda vintage and bland." Conversely, when prompted to envision their ideal libraries, six teens expressed a

strong desire for libraries to be “trendy” and modern. Blake mentioned the inclusion of “nice big cool lighting,” while Quinn specifically highlighted a wish for a “colorful carpet.” Similarly, Morgan wrote “Libraries could be boring to the eyes; you should also add some color so it can pop eyes.” See Figure 5 below for an example design that highlighted the desire for colors in the teen space.

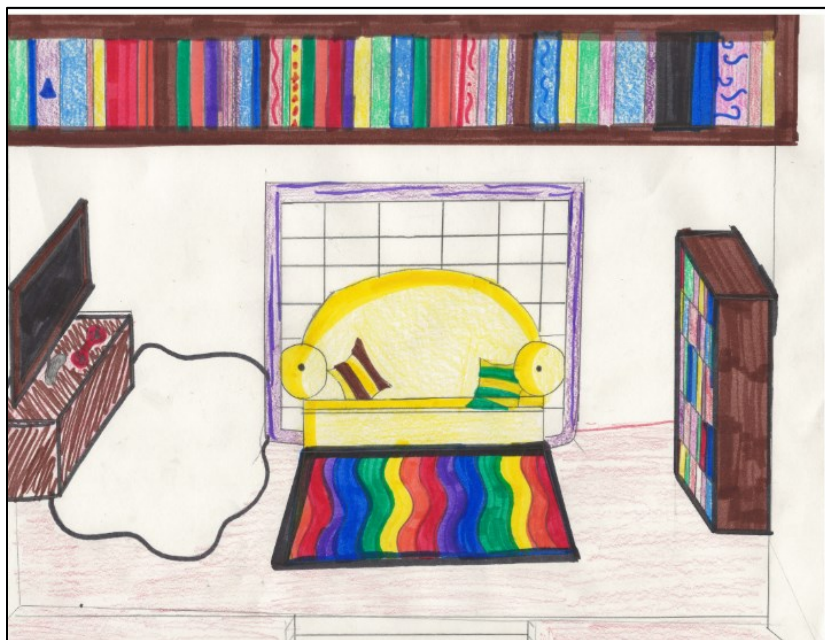


Figure 5  
Design for teen space (by Alan).

## Discussion

The present study aimed to understand teenagers’ views on designing the teen space in a small rural public library in the United States. The desired activities reported by the teens in this study emphasized the importance of creating a library space that allows them the freedom to engage in activities that interest them, such as studying, socializing with friends, playing video games, and enjoying music. Teens’ insights suggested that the availability of books is only one aspect influencing teens’ perceptions of libraries. The content of these books and how well they cater to the diverse interests and passions of young patrons were equally crucial. The sentiments expressed among teen participants emphasized the importance of creating visually appealing and dynamic library spaces for teens. By incorporating engaging activities, well-thought-out amenities, diverse book collections, and visually appealing designs, libraries have the potential to attract and resonate with the younger generation. Particularly in rural libraries that commonly face challenges such as limited staff and budgeting, knowing teens’ preferences becomes critical for libraries to prioritize their budget and services to create an inclusive and appealing environment that meets the needs and desires of their teen patrons.

Overall, the findings of this study showed that teens in rural areas shared many commonalities with teens in urban and suburban areas regarding their desired library space and library uses (Agosto, 2007). Teens’ desire for an attractive teen space reported in this study aligns with the insights presented by Bishop and Bauer (2002). Additionally, the findings underscored the importance of providing a more

relevant collection for teens, echoing previous research that highlighted the disconnect between teens and library collections that fail to represent their interests and identities (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2010; Meyers, 1999).

While this study confirmed many findings from previous research, the researchers noted that teens in this present study did not strongly express their desires for libraries to meet their information needs. This finding is different from previous research in which teens used libraries for information resources (Agosto, 2007; Agosto et al., 2015). One possible explanation for this difference could be the limited availability of public transportation options for teens in rural areas, making it challenging for them to physically visit libraries, especially when considering the impractical walking distances involved. Another possible explanation could be rural teens might have other readily accessible information sources such as online websites, local community centers, and school libraries. Further research is needed to understand rural teens' information practices in their everyday life, so that rural libraries can provide services that cater to the needs of rural communities.

The findings of this study have practical implications for youth services librarians to consider when developing teen spaces and engaging with rural teens. Given the common challenges of limited resources faced by small and rural libraries, it's crucial for librarians to understand the interests and needs of their local teens, so that tailored programs and services for teens can be provided. Forming a teen advisory council where teens have a platform to share their interests and needs can be helpful, and also encourages teens to take on leadership roles in the ownership of their libraries. Low-cost assessment methods, such as informal interviews and drawing activities as utilized in this present study, can also help librarians understand teens' preferences of library spaces (e.g., preferences of snack areas and aesthetic design elements), desired activities (e.g., studying, socializing, gaming, and relaxation), and reading preferences. Additionally, recognizing the limited public transportation options in rural communities, libraries can implement bookmobiles and outreach programs to bring library resources directly to rural teens and leverage social media sites and virtual programs to connect with teens. Lastly, as suggested in previous research (Kelly et al., 2023; Reid & Howard, 2016), rural libraries should build partnerships with local schools, homeschoolers, and local community organizations to promote library programs and services for teens, and seek additional resources, funding, and support for teen programs and services.

## **Limitations**

The researchers acknowledge several limitations that may impact the scope and depth of the findings. First, it is important to note that the overall number of drawings collected from a single grade within a rural school was small and limited, which may restrict the transferability of the findings to other age groups and geographic areas. Future research should consider a more diverse sample by encompassing young people from different age groups and various rural areas.

Second, while the two interview participants were asked about their use of the local library and possession of a library card, these questions were not presented to the participants in the drawing activity. Future research could investigate whether existing library usage is related to the themes identified in this study's findings.

Third, the study relied mainly on data collected from drawings and accompanying texts, which may offer valuable information but may lack the richness of in-depth interviews. Visual data, as noted by Literat (2013), can be highly interpretable, and understanding the context surrounding the creation of the drawings becomes crucial. Gauntlett (2005) highlighted the importance of participants interpreting and

sharing the meanings of their drawings to avoid overinterpretation or incorrect interpretation by researchers. Future research could address this limitation by engaging in more comprehensive interviews to encourage participants to elaborate on their designs and provide deeper insights into their perspectives. For instance, understanding what teens specifically mean by “better collection” would provide a more nuanced understanding of their desires for library resources.

Last, the study did not clearly identify which of the four identified categories mattered the most to the teens. While it is evident that teens desired a variety of amenities, activities, visually appealing elements, and relevant collections, the study did not prioritize or rank these preferences. Future research could invite teens to rank these categories according to their importance, which would aid librarians in efficiently prioritizing their efforts when developing teen spaces. Given the potential challenges of limited budgets in small rural libraries, such rankings would offer valuable guidance for decision making and resource allocation.

## **Conclusion**

In this exploratory study, we aimed to uncover the preferences of teens in a rural community regarding their desired features for the teen space in their local public library. By engaging the teens in designing their ideal library space, the study identified four major categories that hold significance for librarians when developing teen spaces. These categories encompassed activities, amenities, books, and visual designs, offering valuable insights into teens’ needs and expectations.

The study revealed that teens expressed a strong desire for a versatile space that can accommodate various activities, including studying, socializing, gaming, and relaxation. They sought amenities like food and comfortable furniture to enhance their overall experience. Teens also yearned for library collections that better align with their interests and needs, reflecting a desire for resources that resonate with their preferences. Teens emphasized the importance of a bright and visually appealing space within the public library. This aesthetic consideration is seen as pivotal in creating an inviting and attractive environment for teen patrons.

Youth services librarians can utilize these findings to guide the development of teen spaces that effectively cater to the preferences of their young patrons. By incorporating the desired activities, amenities, books, and visually appealing elements, librarians can create an engaging and relevant library environment that speaks directly to the needs of teens. Ultimately, the researchers aimed to ensure that teens find their local public library appealing, inclusive, and meaningful, a space that enhances their connection with the library and fosters a sense of belonging within the community.

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## Author Contributions

**Xiaofeng Li:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis (equal), Funding acquisition (equal), Methodology (equal), Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing (lead) **YooJin Ha:** Data curation, Formal analysis (equal), Funding acquisition (equal), Methodology (equal), Writing – review & editing **Simon Aristeguieta:** Formal analysis (equal), Funding acquisition (equal), Methodology (equal), Writing – review & editing

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. Tell us a little bit about yourself. What grade are you in?
2. How do you usually use your local public library? And why? Do you have a library card?
3. Show and tell us what you drew. Let the participants lead the talk. The interviewer will follow up with the why questions.
  - a. Pay attention to the space and design elements - what materials and furniture do they want to see in the space? What kind of space design and arrangement?
  - b. Pay attention to the service/programming elements - what kinds of services and programs do they mention when they talk about their pictures?
4. Tell us one thing that you want to see or want to do in our public library.