

Libraries, reading and youth well-being in the digital age

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Abstract

Libraries play a central role in the well-being of young people, offering inclusive spaces where culture, relationships, and care intertwine. In a complex digital ecosystem, they become hubs of cultural engagement capable of supporting and promoting public health. Through reading, community groups, social prescription practices, and Health Humanities, libraries are becoming integrated infrastructures for young people and communities, rethinking prevention beyond the healthcare system.

Key words: libraries; library services; reading; adolescent health; digital media; health humanities.

Introduction

Today, for young people, the future often seems elusive and difficult to imagine. We live in an accelerated and omnipresent time, in which the possibility of planning for the future seems to be weakening: a condition that we could define as “afuturalgie”, or the pain of feeling deprived of a possible horizon (1). This generation is suspended between possibility and confusion, growing up in a world that is both evolving and in danger. Surveys conducted also in Italy in recent years (2-6), especially after the Covid-19 pandemic, show worrying signs: anxiety, silence, extreme behaviour, a weariness of life that affects bodies and relationships. For many, growing up seems to have become an exercise in emotional survival, often in families who struggle to find words for their children’s pain.

In this scenario the authors of this paper propose the construction of a symbolic, social and cultural framework to accompany young people on their journey of growth, to help them develop imaginative skills and tools to inhabit our time. To build their health. They will focus on a specific aspect of this framework: the social and cultural one that libraries embody.

Libraries as places of alliance between culture and care

Libraries represent the most widespread cultural institution in many countries including Italy. Their open,

inclusive and relational nature makes them places where knowledge and care come together and culture and well-being intertwine (7).

Furthermore, libraries are the home of reading, understood not as a cognitive exercise or skill, but as a practice that is deeply preparatory to well-being, capable of educating people about complexity, relationships and imagination. It is a practice that acts as a powerful tool for community cohesion and development.

To fully understand this role, it is necessary to bring into dialogue two paradigm shifts that are occurring simultaneously. The first concerns the world of culture and reading, where there is a growing awareness that cultural facilities are not an end in themselves, but a means: tools for relationships and well-being.

For a long time, the promotion of reading was conceived as an autonomous objective, a quantitative goal to be achieved. Today, however, thanks to numerous transformative experiences (8), it is clear that reading is an enabling tool, capable of activating social, educational and health-building processes. The second paradigm shift concerns health itself, no longer understood solely in pathogenic terms, centred on prevention and treatment of disease, but from a salutogenic perspective, which focuses on the resources, connections and conditions that enable individuals and communities to thrive. In other words, the construction of health. In this new horizon, reading, libraries and cul-

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ture are no longer accessory elements, but social determinants of health, factors that affect quality of life.

From this perspective, health building is not only the responsibility of the health system, but of all sectors, including culture.

This view is also confirmed at European level. The first OMC (Open Method of Coordination) report on Culture and Health, *Time to Act* (9), the result of collaboration between the Ministries of Culture and Health of the Member States of the European Union, explicitly recognises the role of cultural practices in promoting well-being. Culture and health are intertwined and find common ground in libraries, which are capable of translating these principles into concrete, local practices.

However, any reflection on culture and health must take into account the new environment in which our lives unfold: a profoundly changed environment, where digital technology has become not only a tool but also a living space. Digital technologies are now existential environments that are reshaping the ways in which we relate, learn, construct our identity and perceive ourselves and others.

In Italy, data from the 20th CENSIS Report on Communication 2024 entitled *I media e la libertà* (The media and freedom) confirm this trend: in 2024, 89.3% of Italians use smartphones (+1.2% compared to 2023), while social networks show a significant leap forward, reaching 86.1% of the population (+4%); among young people aged between 14 and 29, there is a consolidation in the use of image-oriented online platforms: 78.1% say they use Instagram; 77.6% YouTube; 64.2% TikTok. The presence of young people on messaging platforms is particularly significant, with almost total representation on WhatsApp at 87.4%, but also significant on Telegram at 42.9% (10, 11).

This ecosystem offers extraordinary opportunities for access to knowledge, expression and exchange, but it is essential to recognise that this environment is not neutral and to question the effects it has on identity formation and psychological well-being.

Young people, engaged in the complex process of identity construction, are exposed to violent or sexually explicit content, extreme ideologies, cyberbullying, amplified social comparison dynamics and phenomena of emulation linked to eating disorders or self-harming behaviour.

Rather than demonising or banning social media, it

seems necessary to intervene in the quality of the digital experience, working on content, exposure times, disconnection rituals, the development of self-regulation and critical thinking skills, and the strengthening of educational contexts.

In this context, libraries are strategic players within the educational community. As public, free and inclusive places, they guarantee equal access without discrimination based on age, ethnicity, gender, religion, nationality, language or social status (12), and can take on a new educational and cultural responsibility. They qualify as authentic “third places” (13), informal social spaces that complement the home and school, fostering meaningful relationships, shared creativity and social cohesion.

In this scenario of hyper-connectivity and vulnerability, libraries can represent a counterbalancing space: physical and symbolic places where slowness, concentration, relationships and trust can be rediscovered. Today, libraries can play a crucial role in building individual and collective well-being, especially if we look at them through the lens of social prescription.

Social prescription is a tool with significant transformative potential: it allows us to address certain forms of discomfort and pathology – not all, of course – by leveraging not only medical interventions but also the cultural and social resources available in the community. From this perspective, several research questions arise: How does reading a book, participating in a reading group, or visiting a library contribute to the psychological, social, and emotional well-being of individuals? What effects do these activities have on collective well-being, community cohesion, and social inclusion? How can libraries act as spaces of alliance between culture and care, and under what conditions can their role as “link workers” be most effective in supporting vulnerable populations, such as those living with chronic conditions, social isolation, mental health vulnerabilities, or socio-economic disadvantage? To explore these questions, several types of studies could be proposed: Qualitative studies, such as interviews and focus groups with users and staff, or participant observation in reading groups and library activities. Quantitative studies, such as surveys measuring perceived well-being before and after participation in library programs. Mixed-method studies, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture both measurable changes in well-being and the personal experiences and narratives

of participants. Through such research, libraries could be investigated as genuine sites where culture and care intersect, with significant potential to promote both individual and collective well-being.

But to understand whether there is more that can be done to improve young people's relationship with libraries, let's look at the data from Istat (the Italian National Institute of Statistics) surveys, which show that this relationship has weakened in recent years. Among children and young people (aged 6-24), the percentage of library users is significantly higher than among adults, although it has fallen compared to the pre-pandemic period (2019). There is strong participation in the early years of school (almost 40% in 2019 among 6 to 14-years-old), but this tends to decline progressively with age. This indicates that the habit of visiting the library is strongly linked to the educational and school context, but struggles to consolidate itself as an autonomous and continuous practice over time (14).

While in libraries we are witnessing a growing fragility in the relationship between young people and reading, outside libraries the opportunities for contact with books and stories are multiplying. It is a paradox that raises profound questions: young people read much more than adults and for many of them it is also a deeply communal practice, but they often do so elsewhere, in informal, fluid contexts, outside the traditional book infrastructure. They seek shared reading experiences, becoming protagonists of silent book clubs, literary gatherings and rituals of reading aloud (8).

This is where the key concept of our reflection today comes from: cultural proximity. An idea that invites us to rethink the library as a generative place, capable of creating closeness – not only physical, but symbolic and relational – and of making culture accessible, habitable and shareable.

After the pandemic, there was a strong awareness that sociality and cultural enjoyment are inextricably linked. Cultural participation is not a solitary experience: the explosion of reading groups is a response to the need for community and a form of “natural social prescription”, capable of counteracting loneliness and isolation. Their growth in recent years is a powerful sign: it expresses the desire for community, for spaces where culture can be experienced together, as a shared and generative experience. It is also an implicit response to the digital world – not in opposition to it – as a recon-

quest of the space of presence, of authentic confrontation, of that giving exchange between people that is the very essence of a community. In this way, reading groups cure loneliness, strengthen bonds and are a very important tool for building well-being.

The Health Humanities approach perhaps represents a perfect synthesis of all this. It is an innovative frontier in the field of well-being, organically integrating art, culture, literature and medicine to promote health from a holistic and multidimensional perspective. Within this paradigm, libraries emerge as privileged places, capable of playing a highly significant role through the promotion of participatory cultural activities ranging from shared reading to creative writing, from expressive workshops to the visual arts (15).

These practices encourage emotional expression, stress regulation, a sense of belonging and the strengthening of psychosocial resilience. From this perspective, culture is not simply entertainment or personal enrichment, but qualifies as a preventive and transformative tool, capable of significantly affecting individual and collective well-being (16). By promoting the Health Humanities approach and developing structured partnerships with healthcare institutions, schools, educators and local associations, libraries can become genuine centres for promoting health culture, integrating participatory workshops on emotions, the body and well-being, guided readings on health-related topics, spaces for dialogue with health experts in non-medical contexts, peer education activities and co-design with youth groups.

Conclusions

In this systemic perspective, digital and health literacy are two complementary and synergistic dimensions of a new form of active citizenship, while libraries are definitively establishing themselves as places of early prevention, social inclusion and empowerment for the younger generations.

To make this transformative role effective, public policies need to be rethought to recognise libraries as public health actors and integrate them into cultural, educational and health welfare plans. At the same time, it is essential to invest in the training of librarians, developing educational, relational and digital skills to complement their traditional ones.

If we really want to take care of the future of our society, and in particular that of the younger generations,

it becomes strategic to invest in libraries as multifunctional infrastructures for health, culture and democracy. These are undoubtedly complex changes that require political vision, targeted investment and the ability to coordinate between different sectors and institutional levels. However, it is important to emphasise that these changes are not just future prospects, but processes already underway in many local areas, which are demonstrating the concrete feasibility of this innovative model.

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