

# Book demand in public Library

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**Abstract** This paper aims at evaluating the demand for fictional books in Parisian public libraries and its determinants. It is based on a comprehensive database of borrowing books provided by the Central office of Parisian libraries. Our results indicate that 20% of the most borrowed titles accounts for 67% of the total amount of borrowings. This result points out a relatively less concentrated distribution of book demand in public library, as compared to the traditional bookshops, which are usually characterized by a 80/20 distribution. Another result is the role of the different prescription channels. We estimate that, even if traditional prescription of experts accounts positively, the borrowing of a title is highly correlated by the librarians' prescription. Altogether, these results suggest that the public libraries play a key role on book demand with the respect for cultural diversity.

**Keywords** Book – Library – Long tail – Prescription

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## 1. Introduction

Traditionally, the book market is characterized by a sales concentration on a few star titles. This phenomenon refers to the Pareto principle, or 80/20 rules, indicating that 20% of titles should account for more than 80% of the sales (Benghozi and Benhamou, 2010).<sup>1</sup> With the rise of the Internet, Anderson (2006) conjectures that the Pareto principle should be replaced by the “long tail effect”. According to this theory, the book demand should partially switch from the star titles toward the niche titles, i.e. from the head of the sales distribution toward the tail. Some empirical studies have shown that, even if the superstar effect is not totally eroded, individuals tend to choose more niche books on online markets (Brynjolfsson et al., 2003, 2012; Peltier and Moreau, 2012).

Whereas the book demand has been analysed in offline and online stores, economic literature does not cover this question in public library. However, the “consumption” of book through this channel seems to play a key role in the dynamics of a book market.<sup>2</sup> To fill this gap, this paper aims at examining how book demand responds in public library.<sup>3</sup> To address this issue, we explore two related questions: (1) how is the demand in a public library distributed? And (2) how is this demand established? We base our analysis on book borrowings in the public libraries of Paris (France). This institution is the higher network of public library in France (out of academic library), which accounts for 304,800 users and 13 million of borrowings in 2011. This network displays specific characteristics on supply (i.e., high offer level and free access) and demand (i.e., distinct prescription channel).

On the supply side, the volume and the variety of books offered is high as the Parisian public libraries offers 2.7 million copies.<sup>4</sup> As a comparison, Brynjolfsson et al. (2006) noticed that conventional bricks-and-mortar stores display a catalog of 40,000 to 100,000 books, whereas online retailers, such amazon.com or barnesandnoble.com, offer 2.3 million printed books. In that sense, the catalog of Parisian public libraries is similar to those of online retailers. Another characteristic is the free access in Parisian public libraries; that confers that books are offered at a direct price of zero. According to Ecalle (1988), book purchase is influenced by the price as the demand of each book decreases with the price of this book. In this paper, we aim at understanding how the choice of titles in a library responds to these specific supply-side characteristics. Is there a long tail effect like on the Internet where the volume and the variety offered are high? On the contrary, is demand concentrated on few star titles as stipulated in the Pareto principle?

On the demand side, public libraries offer users a specific prescription channel: advice from librarians. As reading a book is typically a good experience (Nelson, 1970), individuals have

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<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is also known as the *superstardom* (Rosen, 1981) or *winner-take-all* (Frank and Cook, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> According to the French Office of book and lecture, 450.6 millions of books have been purchased in 2011 in France and 207.5 millions have been borrowed (out of academic library).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, “library” refers to establishments that are accessible by the general public that can access the collection and borrow any document. This definition excludes academic libraries.

<sup>4</sup> At each visit, a user can borrow until 20 documents. Moreover, if a title is not available when a user comes in a library, she can book and borrow it during her next visit.

to collect information about their quality to reduce the risk inherent in their consumption. They base their choice on characteristics observable before consumption (MacDonald, 1988) or follow advices from experts (Ashworth et al., 2010; Ginsburgh, 2003; Ginsburgh and Weyers, 2013; Sorensen and Rasmussen, 2004). For instance, Ashworth et al. (2010) shows that winning a literary prize generally has a positive effect on sales. Individuals also used bestselling lists as quality signals (Sorensen, 2007), as well as word-of-mouth (Benhamou et al., 2012; Chevalier and Mayzlin, 2006). As these studies have shown that these different prescription channels influence sales; we explore how they impact choices in library. Moreover, we aim at testing how prescription from librarians influences title borrowing.

This research is based on a comprehensive database of borrowing books provided by the Central office of Parisian library. The data focuses on adult fictional books, which include novels, poetry and theatre.<sup>5</sup> Book borrowing is examined among 37 libraries in Paris. The study was undertaken over a period of four months, from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 30<sup>th</sup> April of 2012.

To anticipate our results, we show that the top 1% of the items (“Bestborrowers titles”) generates 11% of the total borrowing and the most popular title is borrowed 257 times over the period. However, if we look at 20% of the most borrowed titles, they “only” account for 67% of the total amount of borrowing. This result points out a relatively less concentrated distribution of book demand in public library, as compared to the traditional bookshops, which are usually characterized by a 80/20 distribution. Another result is on the positive role of librarians as a prescription channel. Our data shows that a title is more borrowed when it benefits from a set of selves and a labelling in Library. The prescription from experts, by granting book prizes, also impacts the title borrowing, but seems to be less effective than the librarian’s prescription.

This paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the data. Section 3 presents our main findings. Section 4 discusses and concludes.

## **2. Empiric approach**

### **2.1. Methodological choices**

This paper focuses on books that were borrowed in the public libraries of the city of Paris from January 1<sup>st</sup> to April 30<sup>th</sup> 2012. We decided to choose this period of the year because the act of borrowing depends of a seasonality effect. Whereas in summer season (from May to August) we observe low rates of borrowing and frequentation of Parisian libraries, the remaining of the year provides high borrowing rates. Moreover, the period from September to December is a special period in France, characterized by the number of new titles (or ‘literary season’) and attribution of literary prizes. For these reasons, the fourth months of the year seem to be a relevant study period.

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<sup>5</sup> Due to their particular format, comics have been analysed separately.

This study focuses on books that were borrowed by adult users. Thus, 37 libraries among the 43 establishments that possess an adult book section in the Parisian library network<sup>6</sup>, plus the central reserve, compose our sample. This reserve includes the collections that are available in the library system allowing any reader to order and borrow any document even if it is not available from her usual library.

Following Dewey's decimal classification system, a classical model of library organization, we base our analysis on adult fictional books (i.e, books that are conveyed by many different channels of cultural prescription). Our database is thus made of novels (literature, detective fiction, science fiction), theatre, and poetry.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it excludes the borrowing of children's books and of adult non-fiction books (that represent almost 40% of the catalog of adult printed books proposed by Parisian libraries). In accordance with recent studies in the field of human and social sciences (Peltier and Moreau, 2012); Evans and Gaudet, 2012), we also distinct comics and other fiction books since comics have a specific format that allows the existence of diverse and singular models of consumption.

## 2.2. Data description

Table 1 offers a description of the data that was used. It shows that 41,916 fiction titles (not including comics) were borrowed between January and April 2012 in the Parisian libraries. In order to measure the respective role of the different channels of cultural prescription in the act of choosing one title, we introduced different variables. In the library, librarians can prescribe a book principally by attributing two distinct labels.

- i) *Novelty*: librarians give this qualification *ex ante* to a title that is supposed to generate an important demand; in opposition to other titles that are considered as being part of the library catalog. During the period we studied, 1,069 titles were considered as novelties. Novel titles benefit from a set of selves, and therefore a great visibility, as they are presented on specific tables.
- ii) *Crush*: librarians can award a title by assigning a tag of their favourite lectures. We counted 50 titles labelled as Crush by the librarians in our database.

According to the studies mentioned before (Ashworth et al., 2010; Ginsburg, 2003; Ginsburg and Weyers, 2013), prescription can also come from experts. The variables chosen here are:

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<sup>6</sup> Have been excluded the libraries that were closed during January and April 2012.

<sup>7</sup> This fiction books are sub-classified according to the historic period or the geographical region where the author was born. Thus, our sample was composed of 19 subcategories: ancient literatures, Russian and Soviet, Portuguese, Nordic, North American, Latin American, Japanese and Korean, Italian, Indian and Asian, Germanic, French, Spanish, Middle Eastern and from Maghreb, from the Balkans, Central European, Chinese, British, Australian and from the Pacific and from Sub-Saharan Africa.

- iii) *Literary prize*: a judging panel of specialists can award a literary prize to a title. In our study, we consider ten literary prizes<sup>8</sup> given during the last five years, that is between 2006 and 2010.<sup>9</sup> In total, 42 titles have received one of these prizes during 2006-2010.
- iv) *Nominated*: this refers to titles that were nominated for one of the ten French literary prize mentioned before. This variable also allows us to consider that some books, chosen among others by specialists benefited from a favourable opinion in the media. Our database counts 319 titles that were nominated during 2006-2010.

Another sign of quality is to be part of the list of bestsellers (Sorensen, 2007). According to Stigler and Becker (1977), individuals may benefit from adopting a mimetic behavior by reading those bestsellers to reduce learning and researching costs. So we decided to introduce a variable that takes into account this way of prescription:

- v) *Best seller*: this variable shows if the title has been in the list of bestsellers during the last five years (2006-2010). Even though a title is considered as a best seller if it sells more than 20,000 copies, we decided to use a different meaning of this term: we consider titles that are reported as best sellers by *Livres Hebdo* magazine (regardless of how many copies were sold) in the category of “Fiction”.<sup>10</sup> In our database, 465 borrowed books appeared in *Livres Hebdo*’s best seller list during the 2006-2010 period.<sup>11</sup>

**Table 1** Description of data

Variables	Observation
Number of borrowed titles	41 916
<i>whose</i> Best sellers	465
<i>whose</i> Novelty	1 069
<i>whose</i> Crush	50
<i>whose</i> Literary prize	39
<i>whose</i> Nominated	319
<i>whose</i> Series	2 525
<i>whose</i> Compilation	2 348

<sup>8</sup> The ten French literary prizes that we chose are: the *Grand Prix Roman de l’Académie française*, the *Prix Goncourt*, the *Prix Femina*, the *Prix Médicis*, the *Prix Renaudot*, the *Prix Interallié*, the *Prix Goncourt des Lycéens*, the *Prix du Livre Inter*, the *Prix des Lectrices Elle*, and the *Prix des Libraires*.

<sup>9</sup> Because there’s an interval time between the year of publishing of a book and the moment of its arrival in the libraries, we only considered literary prize up to 2010.

<sup>10</sup> This list is published once a year in *Livres Hebdo*. *Livres Hebdo* is a French magazine targeting professionals of book industry: booksellers, librarians and publishers. (<http://www.livreshebdo.fr/>)

<sup>11</sup> Again, we only consider the bestsellers up to 2010 because of the interval time between the year of publishing and the book’s arrival in libraries.

At least, two variables have been introduced to take into consideration the process of reading accumulation:

- vi) *Series*: this variable indicates if a title has several volumes;
- vii) *Compilation*: this variable refers to books compiling several titles.

### **2.3. Expected effects**

To illustrate the effects that can be expected from this study, this sub-section presents different conjectures.

We will first study how the distribution of the demand for books responds to specific library's characteristics. According to the academic literature on the Long Tail effect, an increase in the volume and variety of books offered leads individuals to choose more often niche products. This is based on the fact that the larger the range of products offered, the higher is the probability that individuals would find a product that matches their preferences. Similarly, the absence of a direct price can be expected to lead individuals to consume more goods (within a time limit). Within this condition, individuals could borrow a book "to see" that is selecting a good for which the consumption utility is uncertain. Therefore, the demand for niche books should increase.

**Conjecture 1** *Since the number of titles offered in Parisian libraries is high and the access is free, the book demand should be low concentrated in public libraries.*

Secondly, to explain the distribution of book demand in public library, we will analyze how the different channels of prescription may influence the choice of a specific title. Previous literature has shown that prescription from experts had a positive impact on the sales of a title. In this sense, winning a literature prize or even being just nominated is enough to increase the sales of a title (Ashworth et al., 2010; Ginsburgh, 2003; Ginsburgh and Weyers, 2013). According to Sorensen (2007), being on the list of best sellers also positively influences the sales. Under the assumption that borrowers and buyers have access to the same information set, those types of recommendations can be expected to also have a positive impact on the titles borrowed.

In public libraries, borrowers can benefit from another channel of recommendation: the ones given by the librarians. Indeed, the latter can enlighten borrowers on the intrinsic quality of a title. We could expect that borrowers also use information offered by librarians.

**Conjecture 2** *The number of borrowing of a title should be positively correlated with the recommendations given by both experts and librarians, as well as the fact that the title is bestsellers.*

### 3. Demand for fictional books in public Parisian libraries

This paper presents the distribution of titles that Parisian libraries have borrowed between January to April 2012 (3.1) and offers an estimation of the determinants of this demand through an econometric model (3.2).

#### 3.1. Book borrowings distribution

Table 2 displays data on titles borrowed between January and April 2012 in public Parisian libraries. In total, 41,916 titles have been borrowed over the period between 1 and 256 times, which account for 363,709 borrowings. On average, titles are borrowed 8.6 times whereas the median number of borrowings is 4 times per title. The difference between average and median values shows a polarization of the distribution. This means that there is a small number of titles that are borrowed frequently over the period and many titles that are only borrowed one or two times.

**Table 2** Description of fictional book borrowing

Categories	Titles		Borrowings						
	Obs.	%	Obs.	%	Median	Average	Standard deviation	Min	Max
Low	20,770	49.56	34,434	9.47	1	1.65	0.76	1	3
Medium	16,841	40.17	152,646	41.96	8	9.06	4.73	4	21
High	4,305	10.27	176,629	48.57	33	41.03	23.57	22	256
<b>Total</b>	41,916	-	363,709	-	4	8.67	14.08	1	256

More precisely, we have disentangled three groups of titles according to their frequency of borrowings.<sup>12</sup> On one hand, Table 2 shows a relatively high concentration of the distribution on a small number of titles: if the most popular titles (or *High borrowing category*) only represent 10% of the books borrowed (4,305), they take part in 48% of the total amount of borrowings (176,629). On the other hand, at the tail of the distribution, we notice that 50% of the number of titles (or *Low borrowing category*) accounts for about 10% of the total amount of borrowings. Graph 1, which represents the distribution of borrowing per title, illustrates these results by showing a relatively high concentration of borrowings on a small number of titles, but also a distribution relatively long at the tail.

<sup>12</sup> Focal values of borrowing have been chosen: median number of borrowing (4) is for example the limit between the medium borrowing category and the low one.

**Graph 1** Distribution of borrowing per title<sup>13</sup>

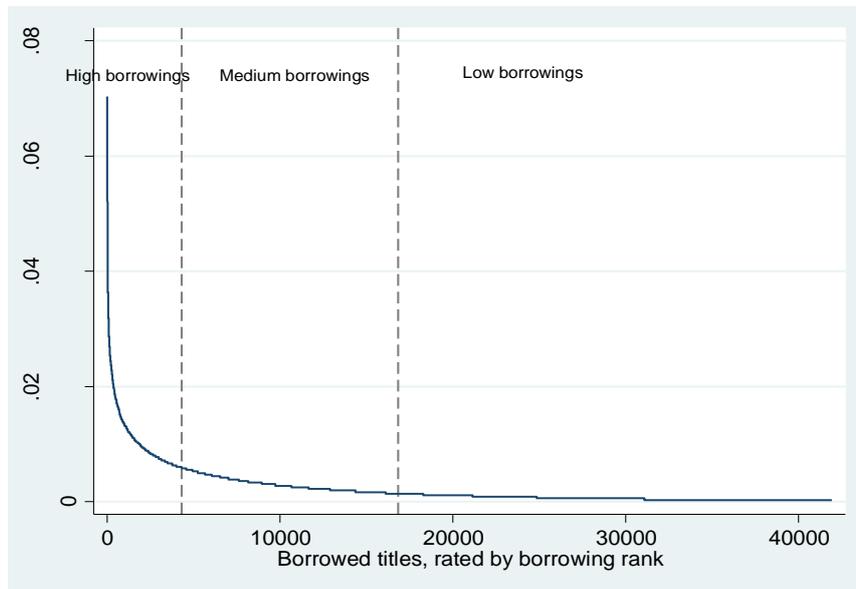


Table 3 indicates more precisely the distribution of titles according to the borrowings they aggregate. Traditionally, the book consumption is characterized by a superstar effect (Rosen, 1981) or Pareto principle, known as well as the “80/20 rule”.<sup>14</sup> In the case of libraries, Table 3 indicates that the top 1% of the items (“Bestborrowers titles”) generates 11% of the total amount of borrowings. It also shows that 20% of the titles accounted for about 67% of the total number of borrowings. This result points out that the demand in public library is less concentrated, as compared to demand in traditional bookshops.

**Table 3** Distribution of titles according to aggregate borrowings

Titles		Borrowings	
%	Obs.	%	Obs.
1%	419	11,16%	40 597
20%	8 383	66,44%	241 651
50%	20 958	90,32%	328 529
<b>Total</b>	<b>41 916</b>		<b>363 709</b>

<sup>13</sup> In Graph 1, Y axis indicates the part of borrowings that a title aggregates (i.e.,  $= \frac{\text{number of times that a title has been borrowed}}{\text{Total amount of borrowings}} \times 100$ ). X axis represents the total amount of borrowed books, knowing that each title is ranked (from 1, the most popular title, to 41 916, the less borrowed title).

<sup>14</sup> Benghozi and Benhamou (2010) show that 16% of titles accounted for 83% of the total amount of book sales in 2005.

### 3.2. Determinants of book borrowing: the key role of prescription

To complete these statistical results, this paper offers an estimation of the determinants of book borrowings. More precisely, we study the influence of different channels of prescription in libraries since individuals tend to collect information in order to reduce the uncertainty about the quality of a book. Thus, we regress the number of time a title has been borrowed using the generalized least squares method. The independent variables include variables that indicate if the title has been subject of recommendations. Our intention is not to provide a comprehensive picture of all modes of prescription that influence fictional book demand but evaluating the sensibility of book demand in public library according to some relevant channels of prescription.

First, we introduce variables that indicate if a title has been recommended by librarians. Variable *Novelty* would equal 1 if librarians promote the titles by offering a specific bookshelf, 0 otherwise. Variable *Crush* indicates whether the librarian has granted the title with a distinctive marking, such as tags. Another channel of prescription could come from experts. Variables *Literary prize* and *Nomination* display the impact of the experts' prescriptions on the book demand in public libraries, by indicating respectively whether a title has won a prize or being nominated to a prize. The variable *Nominated* can also approximate the media coverage a title received. Finally, variable *Bestseller* has been introduced to design whether a title was part of the 100 best sellers list.<sup>15</sup> Table 4 displays the results.

Column 2 of Table 4 shows that the variables of prescription influence the number of title borrowing, but in different proportions. When a title has been awarded (nominated) by a literature prize, the number of borrowing increases by about 7 (3) units. The coefficient of the variable *Bestseller* is positively and significantly correlated with the number of borrowing, indicating that the fact a title has been a bestseller during the period 2006-2010 increases the number of borrowing by about 48 units.<sup>16</sup> Another result is the positive role of librarians' prescription on book demand. The attribution of a *Novelty* label increases significantly the number of borrowings of a title by more than 17 times. Should the title be considered as a *Crush*, it would be borrowed 14 times more than a title that wouldn't benefit from such a marking.

One could object that titles that have benefited from labels attributed by librarians can also be the object of recommendation from media. To test that, we introduce two cross variables (*Novelty*  $\times$  *Nominated* and *Crush*  $\times$  *Nominated*) to measure the cross effect of being recommended by librarians and benefited from media coverage. Column 3 of Table 4 shows that the coefficients of these variables are not significant, whereas coefficients of variables

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<sup>15</sup> The construction of the different explanatory variables and their expected effects are presented in sections 2.2 and 2.3.

<sup>16</sup> Column 1 of table 4 indicates that the correlation between the fact of being a bestseller and the number of time a title is borrowed is increasing each year: the latter is higher when the title is in the bestseller list of 2010 than in 2009, etc. Another result is that, even five years after publishing, a title is still demanded in Library. This result can be interpreted as a longer lifetime of a title in Library than in bookshops.

*Novelty* and *Crush* are positive and significant, respectively equal to 18.06 and 14.57. This result indicates that librarians' labels influence the borrowing irrespective to media coverage.

**Table 4** Determinants of fictional book borrowing in Parisian libraries

VARIABLE	(1) Number of borrowing	(2) Number of borrowing	(3) Number of borrowing	(4) Number of borrowing
Novelty		17.88*** (0.403)	18.06*** (0.418)	17.41*** (0.422)
Crush		15.13*** (1.804)	14.57*** (1.860)	14.19*** (1.859)
Literary prize		7.027*** (2.158)	7.294*** (2.179)	7.418*** (2.177)
Nominated		3.302*** (0.757)	3.972*** (0.891)	3.455*** (0.892)
Novelty × Nominated			-2.525 (1.587)	-1.982 (1.588)
Crush × Nominated			9.151 (7.628)	9.474 (7.622)
Best seller		48.56*** (0.762)	48.52*** (0.650)	48.14*** (0.651)
Best seller 2010	77.23*** (1.406)			
Best seller 2009	51.15*** (1.363)			
Best seller 2008	44.90*** (1.341)			
Best seller 2007	31.95*** (1.347)			
Best seller 2006	31.09*** (1.301)			
Series				0.520* (0.270)
Compilation				-1.533*** (0.279)
Year of Publication				0.0560*** (0.00587)
Constant	8.160*** (0.0630)	7.688*** (0.0631)	7.685*** (0.0632)	-104.2*** (11.74)
Observations	41916	41916	41916	41825
R-squared	0.170	0.187	0.187	0.190

Notes: Standard-errors in parentheses; \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

Altogether these results show that Library users' choice is impacted by similar channels of prescription than buyers, i.e. experts' judgment and bestsellers list, as well as specific prescription due to librarians. Moreover, note that weigh of recommendation from librarians

is higher than one from experts. To check the robustness of these results, we introduce some variables that display observable characteristics of a title, which are *Series*, *Compilation* and *Year of publication*. Column 4 of Table displays the results. It shows that our previous results are robust to the introduction of such characteristics. Should title be series, the number of borrowing would slightly increase. However, when a book is a compilation of several titles, the coefficient is negative, which means that such a book would have fewer chances to be borrowed. Regarding the year of publication, the coefficient is positive and significant, indicating that the most recent the title is, the more it would be borrowed, even though its weight is quite low.

#### 4. Conclusion

The aim of the present paper was to analyze one accesses of reading that the economic literature had ignored so far: the borrowing act. The analysis is based on a database describing the fictional books borrowed by adult users in Parisian Libraries between January and April 2012. Several lessons emerged from our analysis.

From a general prospective, data reveals that 363,709 borrowings were undertaken in the Parisian libraries by 41,916 different titles. We report a difference between the average (8) and the median (4) that indicates a polarized distribution of book demand in libraries. On the one hand, a small number of titles generates a large part of total borrowings. On the other hand, many titles are borrowed only one time, that creates a distribution characterized by a long tail. In this sense, we show that the distribution of book demand in public libraries does not comply with the Pareto principle, which prevails traditionally on bookshops: 20 % of the titles accounts for 67% of borrowings in Parisian public Libraries.

Another result is on the positive role of prescription on the choice of a title in Library. Our data shows that the books borrowers follow the librarians' recommendation, as a title is more borrowed when it benefits from a set of selves and a marking in Library. Moreover they also use prescription from experts, as do books buyers, to fix their reading choices, but this prescription channel seems to be less effective than the librarian's prescription.

To conclude, the foregoing outcome reveals the key role the public libraries have. On the one hand, the extensive catalog of the Parisian libraries ensures the users the access to a large choice set of titles. This in turn allows all tastes to be matched. Moreover, the free access to books leads individuals to 'test' a title. These both conditions seem to favour the diversity of cultural consumption. On the other hand, librarians reduce the inherent uncertainty of cultural consumption by selecting and promoting some titles. According to the standard economic theory, such a mechanism allows users to be better informed and to borrow a title in respect with their preferences. This study reasserts the role of Library, as a place of cultural transmitter, promoting diversity.

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