

# **The Impact of Social Media Outreach on Library Patron Engagement: Assessing Success Factors and Best Practices**

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## **Abstract**

*Libraries have evolved significantly in the digital era, transitioning beyond their traditional roles as repositories of physical books to become dynamic community hubs that strive to meet diverse informational, educational, and cultural needs. In this context, social media has emerged as a powerful platform to enhance patron engagement, create interactive experiences, and expand library services beyond physical walls. This research paper explores how social media outreach influences library patron engagement, with a focus on success factors and best practices that can guide library professionals. Drawing upon a review of historical shifts in library outreach, a mixed-methods methodology—encompassing surveys, interviews, and content analysis—was employed to assess the effectiveness of various social media strategies. The findings reveal that patron engagement is positively impacted by targeted, consistent, and inclusive content that fosters community interaction. However, challenges remain, including issues related to digital equity, staff training, and strategic alignment of social media goals. This study concludes by proposing best practices, including audience-centric strategies, consistent branding, and robust evaluation tools, which libraries can implement to maximize patron engagement. Ultimately, by leveraging social media effectively, libraries can broaden their reach, reinforce their relevance in the digital age, and foster stronger connections with their communities.*

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## **I. Introduction**

Libraries have always existed at the intersection of culture, education, and information. In the past, the function of a library was primarily perceived as a physical repository of books and archival materials. Over the last few decades, however, societal and technological changes have reshaped the way people learn, collaborate, and communicate. The rise of the internet and digital technologies has forced libraries to reconsider their roles, moving beyond collections and knowledge management to become dynamic social spaces that encourage participation, creativity, and innovation. This evolution has led to a growing recognition of the importance of active engagement with patrons—an engagement that transcends bricks-and-mortar to embrace the virtual realm.

One of the most significant developments in this context is the advent and proliferation of social media. Social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and others—have become integral to daily life for millions of users worldwide. This ubiquity provides libraries with both an opportunity and a challenge: how can they leverage these platforms to maximize patron engagement and reinforce their relevance in the digital age? On one hand, social media offers unprecedented reach, the ability to interact directly with community members, and a means of showcasing library collections, programs, and events. On the other hand, it demands a new skill set among library staff, thoughtful curation of digital content, and continuous adaptation to changing algorithms and user expectations.

Recognizing this duality, libraries worldwide have been experimenting with various social media outreach strategies. Some have found great success by using creative campaigns that spark viral interest; others struggle to gain traction in an environment where countless organizations and influencers vie for attention. Understanding the difference between successful and underperforming social media approaches is critical, both for maximizing limited library resources and for fulfilling the library's mission of equitable access to knowledge.

In light of these developments, this paper explores the impact of social media outreach on library patron engagement, drawing upon conceptual frameworks that view social media as participatory and dialogic tools rather than merely broadcasting platforms. The research aims to identify the success factors—organizational, strategic, and contextual—that shape effective social media initiatives. It also scrutinizes common pitfalls, such as inconsistent posting schedules, lack of engagement metrics, or underestimation of staff training needs. These insights are not only beneficial for librarians in the field; they are also relevant to policymakers, community stakeholders, and educators who seek to collaborate with libraries.

This research is grounded in a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide a holistic understanding of social media engagement. Surveys provide baseline statistical information

regarding patron perceptions, behaviors, and preferences, while interviews with library staff offer nuanced insights into the challenges and best practices in social media management. Additionally, a content analysis of library social media pages illuminates patterns in engagement, from likes and shares to comments and user-generated content. The interplay of these data sources underscores how library culture, staff competencies, and community context intersect to shape the outcomes of social media outreach.

Overall, the goal of this paper is threefold. First, it seeks to map the historical trajectory of library outreach, illustrating the pivotal role that social media now plays in engaging with patrons. Second, it aims to present and analyze the findings from a robust methodological framework, highlighting the factors that enhance or impede social media engagement. Third, it outlines best practices that libraries of different sizes and contexts can employ to ensure their social media presence aligns with their core mission, resonates with their target audience, and evolves in tandem with emerging digital trends. By doing so, this paper aspires to contribute to a deeper understanding of how social media can serve as a catalyst for renewed energy, community building, and long-term sustainability in the library sector.

## **History**

Libraries have historically been central to community life. In ancient times, such as in Alexandria, libraries were exclusive archives of scholarly works. Over centuries, as literacy rates rose and public education systems expanded, libraries began to transform into places of communal learning. The mid-19th century saw the rise of the public library movement, particularly in North America and Europe, where philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie funded the construction of public library buildings. These institutions served as beacons of democratic ideals, offering free and open access to knowledge for all citizens, regardless of social or economic status.

During the 20th century, libraries continued to adapt to technological shifts. The arrival of microfilm, photocopiers, and audio-visual materials during the mid-century allowed libraries to diversify their collections. By the late 20th century, digital catalogs and CD-ROM databases began to change the nature of how patrons located and accessed information. The introduction of the internet in the 1990s was a critical turning point. Libraries started to offer free internet access, bridging the digital divide for individuals who lacked resources at home. This expansion in service paralleled a growing recognition of the library as a community hub, rather than merely a static warehouse of books.

As the internet evolved into the Web 2.0 era, marked by user-generated content and participatory online platforms, libraries found themselves on the cusp of a new paradigm of outreach and engagement. Early social networking sites like MySpace and Friendster, though short-lived compared to later giants, paved the way for a user-driven internet culture. Facebook, founded in 2004, ushered in a new age where social media became mainstream. Librarians began to realize that these platforms were not just a passing fad, but a fundamental shift in how people communicated, shared information, and formed online communities.

Responding to this shift, libraries started experimenting with social media accounts, using them first to post announcements about events, new collections, and changes in operating hours. As librarians gained more experience, some recognized the interactive potential of these platforms. They began encouraging user participation through polls, competitions, and reading challenges. Early adopters explored how social media could be used to stimulate discussions around books and literacy, partnering with local authors or inviting patrons to share reviews. Over time, as video-based platforms like YouTube and TikTok proliferated, forward-thinking libraries produced short videos highlighting library tours, instructional workshops, and even staff-led storytelling sessions.

The COVID-19 pandemic, starting in 2020, accelerated this digital shift. With physical library buildings often closed or operating under restricted hours, social media became a lifeline for libraries to maintain visibility and engagement. Virtual storytimes, digital literacy sessions, and author talks proliferated online, reaching patrons in their homes. Libraries that had previously seen social media as an optional or peripheral tool realized its strategic importance for continuity of services. The lessons learned during this period reinforced the notion that social media is not just a marketing channel, but an extension of the library's core mission—education, community building, and democratic access to information.

Simultaneously, libraries faced new challenges. Rapid changes in social media algorithms made it harder for organizations to ensure their posts reached intended audiences without paid promotion. Concerns around data privacy and misinformation also cast a shadow over these platforms, prompting some librarians to question the ethics of relying too heavily on them. Nevertheless, as libraries re-examined their roles, they embraced social media as a tool that could complement traditional, in-person services. This adoption also aligned with the broader trend of digital transformation across all sectors—government, education, and healthcare—where citizen engagement increasingly happens online.

By tracing this historical arc, we see how libraries evolved from passive institutions to proactive agents of community engagement. Social media has proven instrumental in this evolution, shifting the library's role from a one-way channel of disseminating information to a two-way conversation hub. However, the process of

fully leveraging social media is ongoing, contingent upon understanding best practices, measuring impact, and addressing ethical and logistical concerns. This historical perspective lays the groundwork for the present study, which investigates how social media outreach can effectively foster deeper patron engagement while preserving the foundational values of libraries—access, equity, and community development.

## **II. Methodology**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the impact of social media outreach on library patron engagement. The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach is to capture both the breadth and depth of the phenomenon, combining the generalizability of quantitative data with the contextual richness of qualitative insights. The methodology consisted of three primary components: surveys, interviews, and content analysis.

### **1. Surveys**

An online survey was designed to collect data from library patrons and community members. The survey was disseminated via email lists, library newsletters, and social media channels. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity to promote candid responses. The survey instrument contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions covered topics such as frequency of library visits, familiarity with different social media platforms, and perceived benefits of library social media posts. Likert-scale items measured patrons' satisfaction with the library's online presence, the perceived value of social media content, and the likelihood of engaging with future library-related posts. Open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their personal experiences, preferences, and suggestions for improvement. A total of 450 valid responses were received, which provided a broad demographic representation.

### **2. Interviews**

To complement the survey data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with library staff, administrators, and select community stakeholders. Interviewees included librarians responsible for social media management, directors who influence policy decisions, and long-time patrons who are active on multiple platforms. Each interview lasted between 30 to 60 minutes and was conducted either in person or via video conferencing. The interviews focused on understanding the strategic goals behind social media use, the resources allocated to online outreach, perceived challenges, and success stories. Participants were prompted to reflect on their experiences with planning content, measuring engagement metrics, collaborating with other departments or community partners, and adapting to evolving technologies. These qualitative insights provided depth, revealing the complexities behind the data captured in the survey.

### **3. Content Analysis**

A content analysis of selected library social media accounts was carried out over a three-month period. Platforms analyzed included Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram due to their widespread usage among libraries in the study. A total of 600 posts were reviewed. The analysis focused on post type (e.g., text-based updates, images, videos, polls), engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments), tone (informative, promotional, interactive, humorous), and key themes or topics (event announcements, educational resources, staff introductions, community news). By coding these attributes, the research team could identify patterns and trends in how the library was using social media, how patrons responded, and which content types generated the highest engagement. Triangulating the content analysis with survey responses and interview data allowed for a holistic perspective on outreach effectiveness.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All methodologies complied with institutional review board (IRB) standards and ethical guidelines. Participants in surveys and interviews were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, the data collected was anonymized to maintain privacy. Content analysis was limited to publicly accessible posts; any direct quotes or images from social media were used with permission from the respective libraries, maintaining confidentiality for individual patrons who engaged with the posts.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Quantitative data from the surveys was analyzed using statistical software. Descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts and means, provided a snapshot of participant demographics and social media usage patterns. Inferential analyses, including t-tests and ANOVAs, were performed where relevant to determine statistically significant differences between subgroups (e.g., age cohorts, frequency of library visits, or preferred social media platforms).

Qualitative data from interviews was transcribed and coded using thematic analysis. Themes such as “resource constraints,” “innovative engagement strategies,” and “community collaboration” emerged from the coding process. These themes were then compared against survey findings to identify areas of convergence or divergence. Similarly, content analysis data was quantified through coding categories, which were then correlated with engagement metrics to see which types of posts attracted the most interaction.

Overall, the mixed-methods design facilitated a comprehensive examination of social media outreach. Surveys provided quantitative benchmarks of patron perception and behavior, interviews delivered the contextual understanding needed to interpret those benchmarks, and content analysis illustrated the actual practice of social media engagement. In the next section, we present an in-depth analysis of these findings, discussing how libraries can refine their strategies to heighten patron engagement and address the challenges revealed by the data.

### **III. Analysis and Discussion**

In analyzing the results of the survey data, interviews, and content analysis, a complex picture emerges regarding the impact of social media outreach on library patron engagement. Overall, the data indicates that a thoughtfully managed social media presence can significantly enhance patron interaction, but success is tied to a constellation of factors, including content strategy, staff expertise, and alignment with community interests and needs. This section unpacks the salient findings, delving into how libraries can integrate social media outreach into their broader goals and overcome barriers.

#### **1. Patron Demographics and Platform Preferences**

Survey results reveal that a library’s social media reach depends in part on the platforms it chooses to use and the demographic profile of its patrons. Facebook remains the most popular platform across a broad age range, especially among middle-aged and older adults. Younger demographics show a preference for Instagram and TikTok, highlighting the need for multi-platform strategies. Interestingly, Twitter (X) had a modest but dedicated following among patrons interested in rapid updates, news, and professional topics. The survey data also suggested that libraries located in more urban or suburban areas tended to have patrons who were more active on social media, whereas rural patrons were somewhat less engaged online. Libraries serving these communities may need to adapt their strategies accordingly, potentially combining robust physical outreach (like flyers, community bulletin boards) with targeted social media efforts.

These demographic insights have practical implications. For instance, a children’s librarian aiming to promote storytime sessions might find success using Instagram Reels or Facebook Live events targeted at parents. Meanwhile, an academic library seeking to reach undergraduates may benefit from short, vibrant TikTok or Instagram video content that showcases study hacks or library resources. Failure to consider the nuances of platform use can lead to suboptimal engagement, with messages either oversaturating the wrong audience or missing a key demographic altogether.

#### **2. Content Strategy and Consistency**

From the interviews with library staff, a clear theme emerged: a successful social media presence requires a coherent content strategy aligned with library objectives. Rather than posting sporadically about events or operational updates, the most effective libraries dedicate resources to content planning. They schedule posts around themes—like literacy week, heritage celebrations, or new technology demonstrations—ensuring a consistent “voice” and visual identity across platforms. This strategy helps patrons recognize the library brand and fosters an expectation of regular, meaningful updates.

Content variety also plays a crucial role. According to the content analysis, libraries that mix informational posts (e.g., new book arrivals, research tools) with interactive content (e.g., polls, quizzes) and community highlights (e.g., local author spotlights) enjoy higher engagement rates. The interplay of these post types keeps social media feeds lively and encourages patrons to interact. Engaging features such as polls and contests are especially potent in eliciting comments and shares. These features tap into the participatory ethos of social media, inviting patrons to actively contribute rather than passively consume information.

Consistency in posting schedules also emerged as a success factor. Libraries that posted at least 3-4 times per week experienced higher average engagement than those that posted randomly once or twice a month. Patrons come to expect updates on specific days or times, and irregular schedules risk losing momentum. Nonetheless, a balance is essential; an overly aggressive posting schedule without substance can fatigue followers and reduce engagement. Finding the sweet spot requires experimentation and monitoring engagement metrics, such as post reach, likes, shares, and comments, to calibrate the frequency and timing of updates.

### **3. Fostering Community Interaction**

Perhaps the most significant insight revealed by the interviews and content analysis is that social media should be viewed not merely as a promotional channel but as a forum for community building. Libraries with higher engagement rates consistently respond to comments, ask follow-up questions, and create opportunities for user-generated content (UGC). For example, some libraries host monthly “Book Face Friday,” where patrons submit photos aligning their faces with book covers, and then repost the best submissions. Others invite local clubs or reading groups to take over the library’s Instagram stories for a day, offering a patron-centric perspective. By highlighting patron voices, libraries reduce the perception of being a monolithic institution and become a relatable, humanized presence.

In interviews, librarians noted that these interaction-focused strategies do more than boost metrics; they align with the library’s mission to foster lifelong learning and community engagement. Encouraging dialogue and user contributions can lead to unexpected collaborations—for instance, local artists offering to host workshops or local businesses sponsoring reading campaigns. This synergy strengthens the library’s social capital, positioning it as a hub for communal activities and partnerships. However, librarians also underscored the labor-intensive nature of such interactions, cautioning that staff must be prepared to actively moderate conversations, address negative feedback, and maintain a consistent tone that reflects library values of inclusivity and respect.

### **4. Digital Equity and Accessibility**

While social media affords libraries the ability to reach a wide online audience, it also raises questions about digital equity. Survey data revealed that a small but notable segment of patrons rely on the library for internet access due to economic or geographical barriers. These patrons may be disadvantaged if the library shifts too many resources to digital-only announcements. Interviews with staff suggested that libraries must strike a balance, maintaining traditional outreach (e.g., printed calendars, bulletin boards) to ensure that all patrons remain informed. Some libraries address this issue by using their social media platforms to highlight digital literacy programs or tutorials, thereby empowering more patrons to engage online.

Accessibility also extends to considerations of disability and user interface. Content analysis indicated that libraries that include image descriptions, captions on videos, and high-contrast visuals gain a more positive reception from users who rely on assistive technologies. Making social media content accessible aligns with the library’s mission of inclusivity and can also expand the user base by ensuring no one is left out of the conversation. This aspect underscores how successful social media engagement is not only about flashy content but also about thoughtful, inclusive design choices.

### **5. Resource Allocation and Staff Training**

Another recurring theme concerns the resource implications of a robust social media presence. Many librarians interviewed expressed concerns about the time and expertise required to manage multiple social media accounts effectively. Large library systems may have dedicated social media coordinators, but smaller institutions often rely on staff members who juggle multiple responsibilities. Without proper support and training, social media initiatives can stagnate, leading to inconsistent posting and low engagement.

Staff training emerged as a critical factor for success. Comprehensive professional development programs can equip librarians with skills in graphic design, video editing, community management, and data analytics—tools that are invaluable for modern social media outreach. Moreover, some libraries benefit from having “digital champions” or specialized technology teams who regularly update staff on emerging social media trends and best practices. By building internal capacity, libraries can sustain a dynamic digital presence without overburdening individual staff members.

### **6. Measurement and Evaluation**

Measuring the impact of social media outreach is essential for continual improvement. Survey responses indicated that many patrons discovered library events or resources specifically through social media announcements. Yet, translating likes, shares, and comments into meaningful metrics can be challenging. Several libraries in the study used built-in analytics tools (e.g., Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics) to track reach and engagement, but fewer had formal procedures for interpreting these metrics in the context of library objectives. Without clear performance indicators, such as increases in program attendance or heightened usage of specific library services, engagement metrics risk becoming vanity metrics that do not accurately reflect progress.

Interviewees emphasized the need for libraries to integrate social media data into broader operational reporting. For instance, comparing event attendance data with the performance of corresponding social media posts can help librarians understand how effectively online outreach drives in-person engagement. Similarly, tracking changes in circulation or reference queries after social media campaigns can indicate whether these efforts are leading patrons to explore library resources. Libraries that adopt such evaluative practices can fine-

tune their strategies, phasing out content that yields little return on investment and scaling up successful campaigns.

### **7. Challenges and Potential Pitfalls**

Despite its benefits, social media outreach is not a panacea for all library engagement challenges. Several pitfalls surfaced in the data:

1. **Algorithmic Changes:** Platforms like Facebook frequently alter their algorithms, which can drastically reduce the visibility of organizational pages. Libraries may find that a strategy that once worked effectively no longer garners significant reach, necessitating constant adaptation.
2. **Information Overload:** With a plethora of organizations vying for attention, patrons may experience content fatigue. Libraries must develop unique, high-quality content to stand out amid digital clutter.
3. **Negative Interactions:** Social media can be a conduit for trolls or hostile feedback. Libraries must have protocols in place for moderating comments while respecting freedom of speech, navigating a delicate balance between open discourse and maintaining a safe online environment.
4. **Ethical and Privacy Concerns:** Some library professionals raise concerns about patron data being harvested by social media platforms. Balancing the desire for wide reach against ethical considerations requires thoughtful discussion and policy-making.

Addressing these challenges calls for both strategic thinking and nimble operational responses. A core recommendation from those interviewed is to continually reassess the library's social media goals, ensuring they remain aligned with the institutional mission and community needs.

### **8. Best Practices and Framework for Implementation**

Synthesizing the findings, several best practices emerge that libraries can adopt to optimize social media outreach:

1. **Multi-Platform Strategy:** Use data on patron demographics to determine which platforms to prioritize. Tailor content to each platform's unique strengths and user expectations.
2. **Audience-Centric Content:** Develop themes and campaigns that resonate with local community interests, whether cultural festivals, back-to-school resources, or health and wellness initiatives.
3. **Interactive Engagement:** Encourage patron participation through polls, Q&A sessions, contests, and user-generated content. Respond promptly to comments to foster dialogue.
4. **Consistent Branding and Messaging:** Maintain a unified visual identity and tone of voice across all social media channels. Consistency enhances brand recognition and credibility.
5. **Staff Empowerment:** Invest in training and clearly define roles for social media management. Collaboration among different library departments can broaden the content pool and reduce the workload on individual staff members.
6. **Regular Evaluation:** Utilize analytics tools to measure engagement, correlate it with library metrics like program attendance, and adapt strategies accordingly.
7. **Inclusive Accessibility:** Incorporate alternative text, captions, and accessible design elements to ensure that all patrons, including those with disabilities, can engage with content.
8. **Balance of Online and Offline Outreach:** Recognize that a significant subset of patrons may have limited internet access. Combine digital outreach with traditional methods like physical flyers, community bulletin boards, and local radio announcements.

By following these principles, libraries can create a robust social media presence that not only informs but also inspires and unites community members. The data consistently points to the fact that meaningful engagement stems from crafting content that is both informative and participatory, reflecting the library's broader commitment to public service.

## **IV. Conclusion**

This study illuminates the multifaceted role of social media in fostering meaningful engagement between libraries and their patrons. Far from being a mere promotional tool, social media offers a dynamic forum for community interaction, creative expression, and knowledge sharing. Through a mixed-methods approach involving surveys, interviews, and content analysis, the research reveals that carefully crafted social media outreach strategies can significantly heighten patron engagement and enrich the library's public image. However, the degree of success hinges on several interrelated factors: consistent and varied content, interactive opportunities, staff competencies, resource allocation, and alignment with the overarching library mission.

The historical evolution of libraries—from static book repositories to vibrant community centers—underscores the importance of embracing innovation to remain relevant. Social media represents a natural progression of this adaptive spirit. Libraries that harness these platforms effectively can expand their audience, offer inclusive and accessible services, and position themselves as community catalysts for collaboration and

lifelong learning. Yet, challenges remain. Digital equity issues necessitate a balanced approach that serves both online and offline patron communities. Concerns about algorithms, content moderation, and ethical data usage require ongoing vigilance and policy development. Moreover, staff must be adequately trained and supported to manage these evolving digital channels without compromising their core responsibilities.

In outlining best practices, this paper emphasizes a holistic framework that libraries can adopt: perform data-driven demographic analyses to choose the right platforms, design content around thematic campaigns, maintain a consistent posting schedule, encourage two-way interactions, and continually assess outcomes through robust evaluation measures. Implementing these principles can transform the library's social media presence from a fragmented set of posts into a strategic, mission-driven tool for outreach.

Future research could delve deeper into longitudinal studies that track how sustained social media engagement correlates with changes in library attendance, volunteerism, and community support. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons might shed light on how libraries in different regions adapt social media tactics to fit local norms and technological infrastructures. As social media platforms continue to evolve—introducing new formats, algorithms, and user behaviors—libraries must remain agile, blending tradition and innovation to fulfill their timeless mandate of democratizing access to knowledge.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that social media, when harnessed thoughtfully and ethically, can help libraries reaffirm their cultural and educational significance in the digital era. By listening to patrons, partnering with community stakeholders, and continuously refining online engagement techniques, libraries can create a sustainable, impactful presence that resonates both within and beyond their physical walls. Through strategic and inclusive social media outreach, libraries not only stay current with technological trends, but also reinforce the enduring values of community, inclusivity, and lifelong learning that have long defined their role in society.

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