

## Article title page

### Websites for booklovers as meeting places

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#### ABSTRACT

*Purpose* – The study aims to report on a research project that analyzed social websites for booklovers. These sites represent a service that is promising for public libraries in their efforts to find new ways in promoting reading and literature. At the same time the growth of such sites is another example of how technological developments challenge librarianship. Many of these sites are established and run independently from the library field.

*Design/methodology/approach* – This paper reports from a research comparing two such websites – the Norwegian Bokelskere.no and the Hungarian Moly.hu. A questionnaire was published on the two websites in mid September 2010. It was accessible for approximately 20 days. A total of 777 users filled in and returned the questionnaire.

*Findings* – as the typical user of Moly/Bokelskere is a young, ethnic Hungarian or Norwegian, well educated, female from the bigger cities the complexity and pluralism of society is not reflected in the websites in the same way as it is in physical libraries. They are not heavy library users, and they have a relatively low trust concerning libraries in comparison with other sources of information. The sites are mainly used as information

sources and not as places where one can meet with others. Though the social dimension of reading appears, it is related mainly to the family or friends and not to strangers.

*Research limitations/implications* – It would be inaccurate to claim that the study gives a comprehensive overview on social sites for booklovers. The relatively high number of respondents from the two analyzed websites provides an extensive but not comprehensive sample. Self-recruitment of respondents might cause biases compared to a randomly drawn sample.

*Practical implications* - The study on which the paper is based is a part of the PLACE project<sup>1</sup>, which aims at exploring the role of public libraries as meeting places. The study generates knowledge on the potential and role of virtual meeting places which is relevant for public libraries in their efforts to adapt to a new reality.

*Social implications* - The study generates knowledge that can be of importance for developing libraries and library policies in relation to digital meeting places and it

*Originality/value* – There are few studies analyzing literary websites for booklovers and the study contributes in developing a new research field in library and information science.

*Keywords* – Social websites, virtual meeting places, promoting literature

*Paper type* – Research paper

## **KEYWORDS:**

Social websites, virtual meeting places, low intensive/high intensive meeting places social capital, public libraries

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Internet is about to become an important arena for the promotion of reading and for communication between readers. Social websites directed towards booklovers are popping up. On such websites readers can discuss with each other on books and authorships, review and recommend books, identify literature of interest, present their literary tastes to others and administer their own book shelf and reading. In some cases, such as the pioneering Danish project Litteratursiden.dk (<http://litteratursiden.dk>), the Hungarian Konyvtar.hu (<http://konyvtar.hu>) or the Finnish Kirjasampo.fi (<http://www.kirjasampo.fi>), Hypén &

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<sup>1</sup> PLACE – Public Libraries, Arenas for Citizenship – is a research project financed by the Research Council of Norway for the period August, 2007 – April 30, 2012. The project researches the library's potential as a meeting place in a digital and multicultural context and its capacities related to fostering communication, a critical minimum of community in norms and values and social capital across generational, social, cultural and ethnic belongings. The project has been anchored at Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences.

Impivaara, 2011) such sites are established and run by the library field. But many of these sites, maybe the majority, are established and run by enthusiasts from outside the library field. They are, then, another example of how digital developments challenge the library profession. Such virtual places for book lovers will undoubtedly increase in importance. If librarianship shall be able to cope with the challenges and remain relevant, knowledge on how such sites function and how they are used is needed. This piece of research aims at contributing to this by studying one Norwegian and one Hungarian site for booklovers: Bokelskere.no (<http://www.bokelskere.no>) and Moly.hu (<http://www.moly.hu>). Both these sites have established and are run independently from the library field. Both have functionalities that open up for:

- Reviewing and recommending books you have read,
- Reading the recommendations of others,
- Following book lovers and their reading activity,
- Finding friends,
- Taking part in discussions on literary issues,
- Presenting your reading and literary interests to others,
- Administering one's reading activity.

The research presented here is a part of the PLACE-project. PLACE is a project financed by the Norwegian Research Council studying the library's role as a meeting place and its potential in promoting community and building social capital. The PLACE project is particularly preoccupied with the library's potential for promoting cross cultural meetings.

## **2. PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The research presented in this paper aims at eliciting the following research questions:

1. Who are the participants at Bokelskere.no and Moly.hu? Traditional public libraries have a very complex composition of its users. Although those with high education tend to use libraries more than those with low education and women tend to use libraries more than men, all social strata are to be found in the traditional library. That is one of the traits that might give the library its potential as a cross cultural meeting

place. What about virtual literary rooms like Bokelskere.no and Moly.hu? Do they have the same complexity in the demographic composition of its users or do the users of such site tend to have a homogenous composition where people with the same social characteristics are exposed to each other?

2. What is the balance between these websites and other channels for acquiring books and receiving literary advices, e.g. libraries and librarians?
3. Are these websites arenas where one first and foremost communicates with people who shares and confirms ones (existing) literary interests and values , or do they also have a potential for exposing their users to new genres and unknown authors and books?
4. How are such literary sites used? What is, for example, the balance between social activities such as communicating with others, taking part in discussions and finding friends versus using the sites as a source of information?

Within the PLACE project the concept of high intensive versus low intensive meetings and meeting places has been developed. (Audunson, 2005). High intensive meetings are meetings where one lives out one's primary interests and values, for example one's literary and cultural interests and values, together with others who share those values and interests. Low intensive meetings and meeting places describe meetings where one is exposed to other values and interests and have to reconcile oneself with those values and accept them as legitimate.

When users go to a traditional library to find material and perform activities related to their interests and values, they are also exposed to users who value other cultural expressions, belong to different ethnic or cultural groups, different age groups etc. That is a characteristic with public libraries which might give them a potential as low intensive meeting places. An important point of departure for the PLACE-project is that in a society that is becoming more and more complex and where one, due to modern technology, has the possibility of constructing one's own informational and cultural universe according to one's individual values and tastes, it is necessary with meeting places where we are exposed to and learn to accept this complexity and pluralism. Does the library play such a role? It is interesting to study digital meeting places like Bokelskere.no and Moly.hu in such a perspective.

Another basic concept in the PLACE project is social capital. In several other articles from the project, this concept has been presented in detail. (Vårheim, 2007; Vårheim, 2009; Aabø.

Audunson&Vårheim, 2010; Vårheim, 2011). Social capital can be shortly defined as the amount of generalized trust in society. Trust is supposed to decrease transaction costs and increase efficiency in society. There are also positive correlations between low crime rates and high social capital and a high score on health indicators and social capital. There are two kinds of social capital: bonding social capital, i.e. trust between members of tightly knit social groups, and bridging social capital, i.e. trust across such belongings. As society is becoming more and more diversified and complex, creating bridging social capital and trust across belongings, is a challenge.

Our findings related to the research questions listed above will be discussed and analyzed within the framework of these basic concepts.

### **3. LITERATURE REVIEW**

It is far from surprising that social researchers have focused on the Internet in general and social network sites in particular, considering that they represent technological developments generating profound social consequences. These developments might have far reaching consequences on political participation and communication, on power relations and distribution of power in society, on the level of equality/inequality, on social capital and community, to mention some areas. (DiMaggio et. al, 2001; Hargittai, 2002; Hargittai, 2003).

Social network sites (SNS) entered the scene in the late 1990s. (Boyd&Ellison, 2008).

According to Boyd&Ellison “to date, the bulk of SNS research has focused upon impression management and friendship performance, networks and networks structure, online/offline connections and privacy issues”. (Boyd&Ellison, op.cit, p. 219).

We do, however, also find, examples of research on SNS that is directly relevant for our research question, for example exposure to pluralism versus selective exposure to one’s own values interests and the relationship between activity on SNS and the generation of social capital.

Johnson et al. (2009) studied blog users in order to analyze the extent to which they practice selective exposure to blogs, i.e. blogs reflecting their own values and points of views. They

found that to be the case. Although blogs and SNS are not the same, both phenomena belong to the world of web 2.0. and findings related to bloggers might also be relevant for participants at SNS. An interesting question, then, is if SNS participants also practice selective exposure, for example if the participants at our literary web sites expose themselves to literary values, genres, authors and values that they already cherish. Hargittai (2008) studying the SNS behavior of first year students at a US university, found indications of the same when she found that students from different ethnic groups tended to select differently when choosing between web sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Friendster and Xanga. Students with an Asian background tend to gather on Xanga and Friendster, whereas students with Hispanic background tend to cluster on MySpace.

That which first and foremost characterizes social network sites is that users can be active in generating content. They can discuss with others, present themselves etc. But several studies have shown that only a minority of users are active participants. (Courtois et. al, 2009); they are free riders, harvesting grains of information sowed by other seeders. The phenomenon is called lurking. Courtois et. al. found that among a sample of adolescents, i.e. digital natives, a majority (62 per cent) seldom engage in seeding behavior, whereas a small minority of only 8 per cent can be described as high frequency seeders. Rafaeli et al. (2004) and Soroka & Rafaeli (2006) analyzed the phenomenon of passive lurking and de-lurking on the sample of 82 forums using the SCN (SocialCommunication Network) approach in the context of cultural and social capital. They found that community virtual social capital positively correlates with the levels of users' activity in the community, but as the number of postings increases, the correlation no longer exists. They also found that community virtual social capital positively correlate with the levels of de-lurking in the community. They do not, however, necessarily perceive lurking as a problematic kind of behavior: "Lurkers are important to virtual communities. Lurkers are the audience in forums, blogs and other computer mediated channels of communication...We need to understand lurking behavior not only to make people start participating or de-lurk, but also to be able to create virtual spaces that are pleasant and interesting to be in even for silent participants". (Soroka & Rafaeli, 2006).

Relatively much research has been undertaken on the use of social websites such as Facebook and MySpace, for example research analyzing the demographic characteristics of users, what kind of social contacts the sites are used for – e.g. bonding with existing friends , developing new friendships or bridging with people who are not friends. Keenan and Shiri (2009)

examined four social websites (Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter) seeking answer to the following questions: How do these websites encourage sociability? What features and design practices enable users to socialize with others? The evaluation of the sites was based on user experience and literature. The different social websites use different approaches to encourage sociability. Facebook encourages sociability by representing your existing real world social connections in a virtual space. MySpace promotes publicity and representing both real world and virtual networks in a web environment, while LinkedIn and Twitter focus on more specific aspects of community and technology.

It seems, however, that research specifically focusing upon sites dedicated to discussing and sharing reading experiences is limited. Nielsen (2005, 2006) has studied the Danish site Litteratusiden.dk, which is a joint undertaking organized by the public library field in Denmark. Litteratusiden.dk has some similarities with the sites studied in this paper, but, apart from being run by librarians, it can be described as more centralized and more strongly edited. Balling & Kann Christensen (2009) call it 2.0. centralism. Nielsen published a questionnaire on Litteratusiden.dk in order to study the characteristics of the users. He found that the users are younger and better educated than the Danish population and Danish library users in general. A clear majority – 58 per cent – were 39 years or younger. 28 per cent of the users had a professional interest in literature related to work or studies and 31 per cent combined a professional and leisure time interest in literature. Most of the respondents used the site as a source of information – they were lurkers – few communicated with librarians or members of panels of experts. The literary taste of the respondents was relatively advanced. The kind of authors preferred by most people was high quality contemporary authors and classic authors. Love stories, phantasy, science fiction and crime & action were preferred by fewer.

There are also some examples of researchers studying virtual reading groups. Sedo (2003) compares online reading groups with face to face groups. The reasons for taking part in reading groups seem to basically identical between face to face and virtual groups, but those joining virtual groups value the flexibility of not being bound to time and physical boundairies. Toftgård (2011) in a recent master dissertation conclude that discourses in virtual book clubs are somewhat different from discussions in face to face groups, for example that participants in virtual reading groups discuss while reading a book, not only after having concluded it. Sites such as Booklovers.no and Moly.hu might provide platforms for organizing online reading groups, a fact which Toftgård points at, but they are not such groups. Participants in reading groups are by definition social readers. In the study presented

here, one of the main research issues is the balance between being socially active on the sites versus passive lurking. At the present stage of our research, the passive lurkers are as interesting as those using the sites to socialize with other readers. At later stages in our research it will be of interest to focus on the social activities on the two web sites and the discourses taking place. Then the findings of researchers such as Sedo and Toftgård will be highly relevant.

#### **4. METHODOLOGY**

##### **4.1. Questionnaire and survey design**

A questionnaire was developed using the survey instrument Questback. The questionnaire was constructed to measure the following categories of variables:

1. Demographic variables. (Gender, educational level, age and ethnic and cultural background).
2. Which functionalities are used?
3. What is the purpose of using the site? Finding books to read,, finding friends, engage in discussions, following booklovers, organizing own reading activity, show one's literary taste to others, to mention some).  
at which functionalities the respondents use and the purpose of use.
4. Which factors are regarded important in making literary websites attractive (design, content, the possibility of meeting people, that it is funny using is to mention some).
5. Which channels do the respondents use in order to acquire books? The library, traditional bookstores, web based bookstores, borrowing from family and friends, own collection of books, downloading from the net).
6. From where do they get advice and recommendations about books to read.  
(Librarians, booksellers, internet bookstores like Amazon, teachers, family and friends, sites for booklovers like Bokelskere.no and Moly.hu, other internet sources.
7. Which literary genres do they read?
8. What is their motivation for reading.

In addition the respondents were asked to list three books they have read during the last year which they found particularly good. In this article we will focus upon the variable categories 1 to 3 and 5 to 6 above. These are seen as operationalizations of the research questions : The demographic composition will be analysed in order to elicit research question 1 – who are the



participants and are the participants exposed to the same complexity as users in traditional libraries? Being exposed to people different from oneself is seen as a presupposition for the sites' potential related to generating bridging social capital. The functionalities used, first and foremost the use of social versus informational functionalities, and the purpose of using the sites, will be used to analyse the balance between social activities versus using the sites for informational purposes, i.e. lurking. Communicating with others, making friends and taking part in discussions are seen as indicating a potential for generating social capital. The categories 5 and 6 elicit the balance between the sites and public libraries/librarians as sources for acquiring books and receiving literary advices

Reading preferences and motivations for reading will be analyzed in a later paper.

On the sites an invitation to participate with a link to the questionnaire was published on the opening page. The survey was open for 22 days and resulted in 777 responses. 56 per cent of the responses came from the Hungarian site and 44 per cent from the Norwegian site.

Web surveys like this one are based on self-recruitment. We have not drawn a statistical representative sample from a population. Therefore one cannot generalize from our sample to the whole population of users. Hargittai et al. (2010), researching the use of social websites such as Facebook and MySpace distributed their questionnaire physically in order to avoid biases due to the fact that intense and frequent users would be overrepresented is the questionnaire was published on the websites in question.

#### **4.2. The comparative rationale and selection of sites to compare**

Digitization is a driver behind the growth of the globalized, networked society. (Castells, 2010). The growth of social networks is an integral part of this. It is of interest to see if such networks set themselves through and are taken into use in the same way in different cultural contexts, or if there are national and cultural differences. Hungary and Norway are sufficiently different in culture and traditions to make such a comparison interesting. In addition there is an 20 years long history of cooperation between the Norwegian coauthor of this paper and the Hungarian public library research community.

## **5. FINDINGS**

### *5.1. The demographic characteristics of the participants*

Our first question is related to the social background of the users of the two websites. Who meets there? Are the users exposed to the complexity of society or do the first and foremost meet people who are similar to themselves?

Most of the users are women (81%) both among Hungarian and Norwegian respondents. The female majority is, however, a little bit higher among the Hungarians compared to the Norwegian sample. There are also marked differences between the two samples regarding age and educational background. The average age among all respondents was 28.9 years, with the Hungarian average a little below this (27.4) and the Norwegian a bit higher (31.4). The age distribution is large. The youngest respondent is 11 years old and the oldest 71. In spite of this wide distribution, using web sites such as Bokelskere.no and Moly.hu seems to be a youth phenomenon.

When gender is kept constant, age differences increases. Hungarian men are the youngest (mean value 27 years) and the Norwegian male respondents are the oldest (mean value 34 years). Our youngest respondent (11) is a girl from Hungary, while the oldest (71) is a woman from Norway.

The average level of education is lower among Hungarian respondents compared to Norwegian. That is probably a direct result of their lower average age: Fewer have reached the age where they have completed a university or college education compared to the Norwegian sample. The percentage of respondents having a college or university degree is 58,6 among the Hungarians and 69,7 among the Norwegians. The proportion of respondents reporting secondary school as their highest education (so far) is much higher among the Hungarians compared to the Norwegians. (33.3 vs. 20.6) and those with primary education is little bit lower (8.2 vs. 9.7) among the Moly users.

In spite of these differences it is clear that the users of these sites are well-educated young people.

Norway has over the last decades developed into a multicultural society. In Norway's capital, Oslo, every fourth inhabitant is either born in a non-Western country or has parents who both

were born in a non-Western country. But among our respondents this multiculturalism is not reflected at all. Only 3% of the Norwegian respondents report that they speak in another language than Norwegian at home, and in all cases this is another Western language. Among the Hungarians even fewer, just 0.5%, speaks another European language at home.. The sites stand forth as ethnically homogenous meeting places.

Regarding the places of residence we defined seven categories according to size and centrality, and coded the mentioned settlements after data collection. The following categories have been created: 1. capital and its area; 2. city with more than 100.000 inhabitants; 3. city with between 50-100.000 inhabitants; 4. city below 50.000 inhabitants; 5. rural communities; 6. outside Norway/Hungary; 7. not responding.

One striking difference between Norway and Hungary is the geographic distribution of the respondents. In Hungary 40 per cent live in the Budapest area and 17 per cent in other cities with more than 100.000 inhabitants. Only 9 per cent live in rural communities. In Norway 28 per cent live in the capital area of Oslo and almost the same proportion (26) per cent live in rural communities. This finding is related to the fact that access to and use of internet still is much more of an urban phenomenon in Hungary compared to the situation in Norway.

The sites can be used without registering, and the questionnaire was presented prior to the login page, it was available also for non-registered users. Only very few respondents , however, (3.3%) were non- registered

Those who filled in the questionnaire are also very frequent users. More than half (54.3%) report visiting the sites daily and another third (35.6%) report weekly visits. The Hungarian users seem more enthusiastic: 69.7% visits Moly almost every day, while more than 50% of the Norwegian respondents said that they are visiting Bokelskere weekly. There are no significant differences between males and females regarding this issue.

Summarizing the demographic features of our respondents the typical user of Moly/Bokelskere is a young, ethnic Hungarian or Norwegian. She is a well-educated woman from the capital, its agglomeration area or from another bigger city, very enthusiastic concerning the site and hanging there very often

## 5.2. *Reasons for using the sites*

We also aimed at exploring how the users use these sites, and for what purpose.. We also wanted to know if these sites are functioning as virtual meeting places where people with different background can exchange their ideas about books and reading.

The respondents were asked to evaluate their reasons for using the sites and their evaluation of the sites' different functionalities on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 means not important and 5 very important. We classify reasons and functionalities like "finding books" or "getting information on books and reading" as information functions. It can be argued that these usages, although there are important elements of socializing related to them, place the user first and foremost in the position of an information recipient. The other group of functionalities and reasons for use can be regarded as social activities, for example finding friends and engaging in discussions.

Functionalities and reasons for using the sites related to finding information, i.e. harvesting, are much more popular than those related to being socially active and communicating with others. In this respect both countries' booklovers think and behave the same way. Features like finding and following the activities of other booklovers and exchanging ideas with them are all less important than the functionalities related to finding and receiving information.

The results for the whole material regarding *reasons* for use are presented in table 1 below.

*(Table 1 in here).*

, more important by Hungarians compared to Norwegians and by women compared to men.

, The two most important purposes are finding books and getting information about books, while the least important is finding friends. It seems that these sites are used largely as an information source, rather than a virtual meeting place. The findings are in accordance with the findings of Soroka and Rafaeli (2004) referred to above. The possibility of harvesting is regarded as far more important than the possibility of sowing.

In table 2 a logistic regression model is tested. In the model, age, gender, education, nationality and frequency of use are independent variables whereas reasons for using the sites are dependent variables. The coefficients in the table show the effect of each of the independent variables when controlled for all others on the reasons for using the websites. Standard errors are indicated in parentheses. Nagelkerke  $R^2$  is a measure of the predictive power of the model. It corresponds to proportion explained variance in linear regression. The closer to 1, the higher the explained variance and, thus, the higher the predictive power. We can see from the table how Nagelkerke  $R^2$  is affected for each new independent variable (block) introduced and the total predictive effect of the model when the fifth and last independent variable is entered into the model.

*Table 2 in here*

The table shows that in spite of similarities regarding the general picture, there are significant differences between the two nations' booklovers. Being Norwegian or Hungarian has significant effects on 4 out of 6 reasons for using the websites: Finding friends, finding books and finding information on books and reading. Hungarians are significantly more inclined than Norwegians to hold these reasons for use as important. These reasons for using the sites are related to their role as sources of information. The social reason of finding friends is, however, also significantly more important for the Hungarians than for the Norwegians.

Frequency of use has significant effect on five out of the six reasons for using the websites: It is significantly and positively correlated with the importance of finding friends, finding books; sharing information on books and reading, administering one's reading activity and exposing one's literary taste/sharing reading experiences. It is, thus, first and foremost the most active users who see the possibilities of involving themselves socially on the websites and contribute to the content as important – a finding that is not very surprising.

If finding and interacting with friends and sharing one's reading experiences are related to social capital, which is a reasonable statement, it is primarily the high frequent users who build social capital through their use and for whom use of the sites are high intensive meeting places.

Nationality and frequency of use are also the most important variables in the sense that they contribute most strongly to Nagelkerke  $R^2$ . Nationality (being Hungarian) leads to significant leaps in Nagelkerke  $R^2$  for the importance of finding friends (from .025 to .133), finding books (.106 to .173 and finding information on books and reading (.033 to .109). Frequency of use does the same for importance of finding friends (.from .133 to .204) and the importance of discussions (from.002 to .036), i.e. probably the two most social of the reasons for joining Moly or Bokelskere.

Table 3 in here

When performing a binary logit analysis, the odds ratios for each of the independent variables are calculated. We see from table table 3 that the odds ratio for frequency of use on finding friends is 4,842, meaning that the most frequent users are almost 5 times more likely to report that finding friends is an important reason for using the sites compared to the less frequent users. Frequency of use is also the strongest predictor of ranking reasons such as sharing information on books and reading, administering reading activity and exposing ones literary taste as important reasons for use. The frequent users are twice as likely to evaluate these reasons as important as the non-frequent users. Gender is the strongest predictor for ranking the importance of finding books and getting information on books and reading as important reasons for use.

### *5.3. Bokelskere and Moly compared to other channels for finding books and receiving literary guidance and advice*

From where do our respondents acquire books to read? What is the role of libraries as channels of acquiring books? And what about the role of librarians as literary guides and advisors compared to other possible sources for receiving guidance?

Surprisingly the most important sources of books are the most expensive ones: own book collections and purchasing in the book shop. The majority of the respondents do not use the library frequently. Regarding library use there is no significant difference between the two nations, a surprising find given the fact that official statistics show that the percentage of the population of library users in the population is considerably higher in Norway than in

Hungary. Among the female respondents, the library seems to be a much more important source for acquiring books than among their male counterparts. As our respondents probably are heavy internet users in general, it is also surprising that book downloads scores low on importance. Purchasing the physical volumes through the net, on the other hand, is almost as important as buying them in the bookshop. The results for the whole material are presented in table 4 below.

*Table 4 in here*

The primary source for getting advices, guidance and information about books is the respondents' private social network, family members and friends. It indicates that the social dimension of reading is strong, although this attitude is not manifested toward strangers from sites like Moly or Bokelskere. One of the results already mentioned indicates that a lot of content contributes to the attractiveness of web sites such as Moly.hu and Bokelskere.no. Therefore it is not a surprise that these sites also are regarded as very important sources for book recommendations. It was also expected that other internet sources might play an important role in this respect. These sources proved to be the most important in all categories of our respondents. More significant differences can be found regarding the less important sources: the pieces of advice given by booksellers, librarians and teachers. The Hungarians much more rely on the opinion of teachers, while Norwegians much more prefer getting such type of information from the mass media (radio, TV, newspapers) and from booksellers. The librarians' role has a very low importance in our sample.

The regression model with age, gender, education, nationality and frequency of use as independent variables was tested with using the library as source to acquire books and the librarian as a source for guidance and advice as dependent variables.. The predictive effect of the model on these two research questions relating to the role of libraries was very small. None of the coefficients were significant and Nagelkerke  $R^2$  for the whole model was as low as 0.05 for using the library to acquire books and 0.03 for using librarians as a source for literary guidance and advice, i.e. a very marginal predictive effect indeed.

5.4. The web sites as meeting places: exposure to new literary tastes and participation in discussions

Being exposed to literature and tastes different from those which one knows and is well acquainted with, might be seen as an indicator of the sites' potential of creating bridges between people with different literary preferences. Thus it can be seen as an indicator of the sites' potential of creating bridging social capital. Discussions are by definition an activity where people exchange opinions differ somewhat viewpoints and argumentation. The extent to which the users of the website engage in discussions and exchange of arguments, then, can also be seen as an indicator of their potential of building bridging social capital. Simultaneously, the users' relationship to discussions can take two forms: They can be non-active observers or they can be active participants. Observing can be seen as an indicator of using the sites as a low intensive meeting place, whereas an active participation indicates that the sites are used for high intensive meetings.

We expected that the websites to be places where people's literary tastes, interests and values are confirmed primarily interaction with like-minded readers.. Our hypothesis is not supported. The majority have come across authors and genres that were unknown to them at the outset. We see that as much as 42 per cent report having experienced that frequently; only 12 per cent cannot remember having come across new and unknown literature.

*Table 6 and 7 in here*

There are, however, some striking differences between Norway and Hungary in this respect.

We see that the proportion who report having discovered new literature frequently is significantly higher in Hungary compared to Norway (58 versus 21 per cent) and the proportion who cannot remember having discovered anything new is considerably higher in Norway (21 versus 2 per cent). How can this striking difference be interpreted? Are Hungarian readers more open minded than their Norwegian counterparts?

The likelihood of frequently discovering new and unknown literature via the websites was tested against the model with age, gender, education, nationality and frequency of use as independent variables. The results are presented in table 8.

*Table 8 in here*

We see that there are highly significant correlations between being exposed to new and unknown literature between gender (being female), education (below university level), nationality (being Hungarian) and frequency of use (being a frequent user). The strongest predictor is frequency of use followed by gender. The chances of discovering new literature is almost 2.7 times as high for high frequency users compared to those using the web sites less and twice as high for women compared to men. The model as a whole explains 25 per cent of the variance in the dependent variable.

Another interesting aspect of use is the exchange of ideas in discussions. We asked the respondents if they had ever taken active part in discussions. 45% of the whole sample



answered yes, but there are significant differences according to gender and nationality. Norwegians and men are more active in this respect. The biggest difference is between the two nations. The rationale behind this can be Norway's longer democratic traditions. Another possible explanation could be the higher average age of the Norwegian respondents. Perhaps people with a mature mindset are more inclined to take part in discussions. The percentage of those who ignore discussions is approximately the same in all categories (a bit higher among the Hungarians). It means that the same number of people is interested in discussions, but the proportion of active participants is different.

Summarizing these results it seems that the users of these social sites are much more seeking for information than for friendship or social activities. The findings are in accordance with the findings of Soroka & Rafaeli referred to above.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

We will now return to our research questions and discuss the findings in relation to the basic concepts and theoretical approaches presented in paragraph 2 and 3.

The role of physical libraries as meeting places where one is exposed to the complexity and pluralism of today's society has been in the forefront of professional debates over the last years. Judged from the demographic composition of the respondents, the websites for booklovers differ markedly from physical libraries in this respect. The users seem to represent a narrow segment of society. They are young, highly educated, first and foremost women and belong to the cultural and ethnic majority. Pluralism is not the only possibility in the multicultural society. Societal and technological developments also open up for *avoiding* complexity and pluralism: One can choose cafes, neighborhoods, web sites, radio channels etc. where one only meets people similar to oneself. (Audunson, 2005). Judging from the demographic composition of the respondents, Bokelskere.no and Moly.hu seem to be meeting places for avoiding complexity. One has, of course, to take into consideration that the sample is biased due to self-recruitment. The large proportion of daily visitors is an indication of bias. There is, however, no reason to believe that a less biased sample would change for example the ethnic composition in any substantial way, given the fact that the ethnic minorities are not represented at all in the sample we did get.

The picture of the sites as arenas where people mainly are exposed to their own literary preferences, genres and values should, however, be modified. A clear majority report having been exposed to other literary tastes and interests than their own. This is especially the case among the Hungarian respondents. The strongest predictor, however, is frequency of use followed by being female. Although one meets people demographically similar to oneself on the sites, the majority seems to be exposed to *literary* pluralism on the sites.

In general, gender, nationality and frequency of use seem to be important variables when explaining variation in usage, with frequency being the most important. Age and education are less important, with the exception of participating in discussions, where there is a significant correlation between being older and engaging in discussions. Taking part in discussions probably presupposes a degree of self-confidence which comes with age.

With regard to our central research questions – the sites' role as high intensive versus low intensive meeting places and their potential in building social capital, our findings are ambiguous. . For those who do not belong to the most high frequent users, the sites seem to represent an arena for low intensive meetings: They are first and foremost *observing* evaluations published by others in order to find books to read, they are *observing* discussions from a certain distance, they do not regard it as important to find and communicate with friends. The most high frequent users, on the contrary, tend to regard finding friends as much more important. Being with friends, virtually or physically, can be regarded as a kind of high intensive meeting. The tendency, then, is that the sites are low intensive arenas for the not so frequent users and high intensive arenas for the most frequent users. The physical public library is, according to Audunson, Aabø and Essmat (2011) an arena opening up for legitimate peripheral participation. Newcomers can start by observing and then gradually involve themselves more and more in the activities taking place. Through legitimate peripheral participation newcomers can be integrated. The difference between the most frequent and the less frequent users of Bokelskere.no and Moly.hu might indicate that the sites open up for the same kind of legitimate peripheral participation.

Finding friends can also be regarded as an activity that enhances the bonding social capital of those engaging in such activities – given that the search is successful. For the high frequent users, for many of whom the social dimensions of using the sites are important,, the sites have

a potential for generating social capital. Engaging in discussion combined with being exposed to new and unknown literary genres, tastes and authors, indicate that the sites also have a potential for creating bridging social capital.

In the introduction to this article we stated that websites for booklovers represent a challenge to public libraries. That seems to be confirmed. The users of the sites are not very heavy library users and they do not regard librarians as very important guides and advisors when it comes to finding books. Viewed from the perspective of the libraries and librarians, however, it is positive that librarians are regarded as more important advisors than reviews and recommendations from internet bookshops such as Amazon and also as more important advisors than booksellers in physical bookshops. And although the proportion regarding libraries as important sources for acquiring books is a little lower than the same proportion for traditional and web based bookshops, it seems fair to conclude that the library still is regarded as a relevant institution.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

The typical user of Moly/Bokelskere is a young, ethnic Hungarian or Norwegian, well educated, female from the capital, its immediate urban surrounding or from another bigger city, very enthusiastic concerning the site and hanging there very often. The websites do not reflect society's complexity and pluralism of society in the same way as physical libraries. The users of these sites are not frequent library users, and they have a relatively low trust in libraries compared to other information sources. The library's importance as a provider of books and the librarian's importance as a literary advisor are approximately similar to bookshops, booksellers and web based bookshops such as Amazon.

The sites are mainly used as information sources and not as meeting places. But the sites also function as both high and low intensive meeting places and there are indications that they have a potential for generating bonding as well as bridging social capital. In future research the authors of this article will further explore if and how this potentials can be developed and utilized by libraries.

*Table 1 – For what purpose do you use Bokelskere.no (Norway) and Moly.hu (Hungary)*

**1 Not                      2                      3                      4                      5 Very                      N**

	<b>important</b>			<b>important</b>		
Finding friends	42,1 %	25,2 %	19,0 %	9,5 %	4,2 %	769
Finding books I will want to read	0,6 %	2,3 %	6,6 %	20,4 %	70,0 %	771
Sharing information about books	2,8 %	7,4 %	20,9 %	35,3 %	33,6 %	774
Getting information on books and reading	0,4 %	1,4 %	8,3 %	28,4 %	61,4 %	767
Administering my own reading activity	3,4 %	6,9 %	12,6 %	20,9 %	56,2 %	767
Showing my own reading style, my book shelf	11,2 %	10,8 %	23,6 %	28,4 %	26,0 %	768

*Table 2 - Logistic regression of reasons for using booklovers.no or Moly.hu.*

	Find friends	Find books	Taking part in discussions	Getting Information on books/reading	Administer Own Reading	Expose own literary taste
Constant	-1.752 <sup>b</sup> (.519)	3.114 <sup>b</sup> (.503)	.266(.322)	1.819 <sup>b</sup> (.050)	2.660 <sup>b</sup> (.372)	1.602 <sup>b</sup> (.328)
Age	-.023(.014)	-.030 <sup>b</sup> (.011)	.003(.008)	.021(.013)	-.055 <sup>b</sup> (.009)	-.060 <sup>b</sup> (.009)
Gender (1=female)	-.314(.286)	.935 <sup>b</sup> (.281)	-.061(.204)	.774 <sup>b</sup> (.270)	-.041(.231)	-.193 (.199)
Education	.150(.247)	.561 <sup>a</sup> (.274)	.170(.579)	-.543 <sup>a</sup> (.268)	-.302(.187)	-.219(.164)
Nationality (1=Norwegian)	-1.412 <sup>b</sup> (.321)	-1.155 <sup>b</sup> (.310)	.132(.174)	-1.226 <sup>b</sup> (.281)	.147(.201)	.478 <sup>a</sup> (.174)
Frequency of use	1.577 <sup>b</sup> (.316)	.843 <sup>a</sup> (.295)	.724 <sup>b</sup> (.171)	.273(.264)	.703 <sup>b</sup> (.195)	.717 <sup>b</sup> (.168)
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl.1	.021	.061	.000	.000	.104	.108
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 2	.022	.096	.000	.026	.104	.114
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl.3	.025	.106	.001	.033	.110	.117
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl.4	.133	.173	.002	.109	.111	.139
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl.5	.204	.196	.036	.112	.135	.147

<sup>b</sup>means significance on 99 per cent level, <sup>a</sup> means significance on 95 per cent level

*Table 3 The logit model's odds ratios for reasons using the website*

	Find friends	Find books	Taking part in discussions	Getting Information on books/reading	Administer Own Reading	Expose own literary taste
Age	.978	.971	1.003	1.021	.946	.941
Gender (1=female)	.731	2.548	.941	2.168	.960	.825
Education	1.162	.571	1.141	.581	.739	.804
Nationality (1=Norwegian)	.244	.315	1.142	.274	1.158	1.613
Frequency of use	4.842	2.322	2.063	1.314	2.020	2.047

*Table 4 – The relative importance of different sources for acquiring books to read?*

	<b>1 Not important</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 Very important</b>	<b>N</b>
Purchasing in a book shop	4,2 %	11,8 %	20,3 %	25,3 %	38,4 %	770
Purchasing on the net	12,7 %	13,4 %	17,7 %	20,1 %	36,2 %	763
Borrowing from a library	18,0 %	14,0 %	13,2 %	16,5 %	38,3 %	771
Downloading from the net	59,4 %	16,9 %	11,0 %	6,0 %	6,7 %	756
Borrowing, getting from family members or friends	16,2 %	24,1 %	27,3 %	21,3 %	11,1 %	765
Own book collection	3,2 %	6,2 %	19,4 %	28,4 %	42,7 %	770

*Table 5 – We can find books we would like to read in many ways. Which are the most important ones?*

	<b>1 Not important</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 Very important</b>	<b>N</b>
Advice of a librarian	26,2 %	20,3 %	23,8 %	18,9 %	10,8 %	772
Advice of a book seller	25,8 %	29,4 %	26,1 %	14,3 %	4,4 %	770
Reviews of internet bookshops like Amazon	19,1 %	26,0 %	30,0 %	17,3 %	7,5 %	769
Advice of friends and family	1,3 %	2,6 %	14,2 %	36,2 %	45,7 %	774
Newspapers, TV, radio	7,6 %	12,0 %	34,9 %	34,4 %	11,0 %	773
Advice of teachers	24,8 %	13,0 %	24,1 %	23,2 %	14,9 %	763
Websites like Bokelskere.no or Moly.hu	1,3 %	3,2 %	13,8 %	42,4 %	39,3 %	774
Other internet sources	4,4 %	8,5 %	27,5 %	39,3 %	20,3 %	768
Other	19,8 %	10,1 %	37,7 %	18,4 %	14,0 %	716

*Table 6. The proportion exposed to other literary tastes and interests than their own?*

<b>Navn</b>	<b>Prosent</b>
Yes, I frequently discover new and unknown literature	41,8 %
Yes, I discover new and unknown literature now and then	48,0 %
No, I cannot remember having discovered new and unknown literature	10,2 %
N	773

*Table 7. Proportion who frequently discover new and unknown literature: Norway and Hungary*

	Norway	Hungary
Yes, I frequently discover new and unknown literature	21	58
Yes, I discover new and unknown literature now and then	58	40
No, I cannot remember having discovered new and unknown literature	21	2
N	337	434

**Table 8. Logistic regression predicting the likelihood of frequently discover new and unknown literature via the websites**

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig	Oddsratio
Age	.009	.008	1.099	1	.295	1.009
Gender Female=1)	.702	.219	10.259	1	.001	2,017
Education	-.360	.176	4.185	1	.041	.698
Nationality (Norw.=1)	-1.386	.180	59.306	1	.000	.250
Frequency	.987	.172	33.021	1	.000	2.684
Constant	-1.019	.337	9.173	1	.002	.361
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 1 (Age)	.007					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 2 (Gender)	.031					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 3 (Edu)	.034					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 4 (Hun/Nor)	.20					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 5 (Freq)	.25					

Table 9. Logistic regression predicting the likelihood of participating in discussions onn the web sites



	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig	Oddsratio
Age	.034	.008	16.468	1	.000	1.034
Gender Female=1)	-.104	.201	.268	1	.604	.901
Education	.228	.168	1.844	1	.175	1.256 .250
Nationality (Norw.=1)	1.158	.184	39.589	1	.000	3.184
Frequency	1.443	.186	60.515	1	.000	4.235
Constant	2.502	.348	51.836	1	.000	.082
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 1 (Age)	.043					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 2 (Gender)	.044					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 3 (Edu)	.045					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 4 (Hun/Nor)	.049					
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup> bl. 5 (Freq)	.179					

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