Between the Lines and in the Margins

Investigating the Attitudes of Library Staff at Swedish University Libraries Towards Marginalia in Library Books

JOHANNA ELIASSON

© Johanna Eliasson
Partial or complete copying and distribution of the material in this thesis without permission is forbidden.
This thesis explores the attitudes of Swedish university library staff towards marginalia in library books. The study aimed to investigate their experiences and opinions on the topic and any existing routines and guidelines regarding marginalia. Additionally, the study aimed to compare its findings to previous literature, which had made negative assumptions about how librarians feel about marginalia. Despite these assumptions, there has been no research to support them. The study used a mixed-method approach and collected data through a questionnaire. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and qualitative content analysis.

Based on the results, it was found that library staff regularly come across marginalia in library books. While most staff members hold a negative view towards marginalia, there are varying opinions that differ from what previous literature suggests. Those with negative attitudes believe that marginalia ruins the book as an object and hinders future readers from reading autonomously. However, there are also positive attitudes towards marginalia, with some believing that it is a sign of the book being used and that the reader has benefited in some way. Overall, those with both negative and positive views understand marginalia as a byproduct of reading and studying and as a study technique. Current routines and guidelines do not provide much information about handling books with marginalia, with only a few mentioning it. Some library staff believe that explicit guidelines are necessary, while others consider marginalia an inevitable part of libraries and therefore do not require guidelines.

Keywords: Marginalia, marginal notes, annotations, reading practices, libraries, library staff, vandalism.
Usus libri, non lectio prudentes facit

1 The quote originates from Geoffrey Whitney’s *Choice of Emblemes* (1586) and translates to “using a book, not reading it, makes us wise” (Orgel, 2015).
# Table of Contents

1. **Introduction** .................................................................................... 2  
   1.1 Research Problem ......................................................................... 3  
   1.2 Purpose and Research Questions ................................................ 4  
   1.3 Background .................................................................................. 5  

2. **Literature Review** ........................................................................... 7  
   2.1 Famous Individuals and Notable Persons ....................................... 7  
   2.2 Marginalia as a Study Technique .................................................. 10  
   2.3 Marginalia in Libraries .................................................................. 12  
   2.4 Marginalia and Library Staff ....................................................... 14  

3. **Theoretical Framework** ................................................................. 16  
   3.1 Concepts of Marginalia ................................................................. 16  
   3.2 Why write in books? .................................................................... 18  
   3.3 Marginalia as vandalism ............................................................... 19  
   3.4 ‘Matter out of place’ ..................................................................... 20  

4. **Method** .......................................................................................... 23  
   4.1 Choice of Method .......................................................................... 23  
   4.2 Sampling and Population ............................................................. 24  
      4.2.1 Population size ...................................................................... 25  
   4.3 Survey Design ................................................................................ 26  
      4.3.1 Survey layout ....................................................................... 27  
   4.4 Data Analysis ................................................................................ 28  
      4.4.1 Descriptive statistics ............................................................. 28  
      4.4.2 Qualitative content analysis .................................................. 29  
   4.5 Credibility .................................................................................... 30  
   4.6 Ethical Considerations ................................................................... 31  

5. **Results** .......................................................................................... 33  
   5.1 Demographics ................................................................................ 33  
   5.2 Experience of Marginalia ............................................................. 34  
   5.3 Routines and Guidelines ............................................................... 35  
      5.3.1 Satisfaction with guidelines .................................................. 35  
      5.3.2 Prevention .......................................................................... 36  
      5.3.3 Can libraries do more? .......................................................... 37  
   5.4 Emotions and Reactions ............................................................... 38  
   5.5 Actions ......................................................................................... 41  
   5.6 Understanding .............................................................................. 42  

6. **Discussion and Analysis** ............................................................... 45  
   6.1 RQ1: Experiences and Opinions ................................................... 45  
      6.1.1 Marginalia as ‘matter out of place’ ........................................ 46
6.2 RQ2: Routines and Guidelines ................................................................. 48
6.3 RQ3: Assumptions ................................................................................. 49

7 Conclusions ................................................................................................. 50
  7.1 Limitations and Further research ......................................................... 51

Reference list ................................................................................................. 52

Appendix A – Email to the libraries ............................................................. 56
Appendix B – Survey ...................................................................................... 58
Appendix C – Part of coding for Q18 ............................................................ 67
1 Introduction

In modern times, marginalia, the practice of writing notes in the margins of books, generate strong emotions and has been described as an act of defacement, desecration, destruction, mutilation, and a violation against the book and future readers (Jackson, 2001; Wolfe & Neuwirth, 2001; Sherman, 2008; Lerer, 2012; Orgel, 2015).

However, this has not always been the case. Using the blank spaces in the margins, between text lines, in the head or the foot of the page, or anywhere on the empty pages of a book has been a common and accepted practice by readers and students for centuries. Historically, writing in books has been a natural part of the learning process; teachers taught and modeled annotation methods to aid memorization and encourage reading comprehension. Marking, copying out, writing observations, etc., were reading practices used to remember and assimilate text (Jackson, 2001; Orgel, 2015).

With the development of publicly accessible libraries, the need to prohibit readers from writing in books became apparent. With books no longer confined to the library and becoming communal on a large scale, libraries needed to ensure the books’ pristine conditions (Jackson, 2001). The wish to limit the readers’ wandering and dirty hands transformed the perspective of marginalia. Marginalia, previously valued evidence that reading involved strenuous production rather than idle consumption, was banned. Price (2012) writes, “in earlier eras, traces of the hands through which a book had passed formed an expected and even valued part of its meaning; over the course of the nineteenth century, that practice gradually retreated (…)” (p. 19).

Orgel (2015) suggests that the modern attitude towards marginalia and the desire for clean books, unmediated by use and prior possession, relates to the constructed idea that the book belongs to the author and not the reader. Furthermore, the modern inclination towards clean books might also, as explained by Sherman (2008), be nothing more than common sense; preserving books can ensure that more readers can access the text. The attitude of ‘do not mark books’ reflect not simply a sense of propriety but also an awareness that when books are made of decent materials and handled correctly, they are likely to outlive their owners and become available for future readers. The bias against writing in books also centers around ethics of possession and the etiquette of use and is attached to ideas of taboo and transgression. Marking library books breaks social norms. Sherman writes, “when books are communal property (…), writing in their margins is considered antisocial behavior, at best a breach of decorum and at worst a breach of law” (p. 156).

However, Sherman (2008) makes a compelling statement when he argues that the current obsession with the cleanliness of books poses difficult questions about the role of libraries in empowering the reader. Sherman means that turning marginalia from a tool to a transgression has deprived readers of the most powerful methods for conversing with authors and other readers. Expanding on the controversial nature of marginalia, Orgel (2015) asks, “at what point did marginalia, the legible incorporation of the work of reading into the text of the book, become a way of defacing it rather than of increasing its value?” (p. 25).
1.1 Research Problem

Today’s libraries prohibit marginalia, and many library rules clearly state that damaging books by writing, scribbling, or physically altering the material is forbidden. Sherman (2017) gives examples; in the Bodleian Library, all users must swear an oath not ‘to mark, deface, or injure’ books. Cambridge University Library has a sign on every desk stating: MARKING BOOKS IS FORBIDDEN. Similar rules can be found at libraries in Sweden; from the National Library: “Det är inte tillåtet att anteckna, göra understrykningar, använda gem, självhäftande lappar, tejpa eller på annat sätt skada materialet”. 2

Nevertheless, readers still write in library books and annotate; they still physically alter books when reading (see Figure 1 for an example of how one reader has annotated a library book). Acheson (2019) explains the persistence of marginalia: “where there are books there are marginalia” (p. 2). But how do libraries, specifically their staff, regard this ever-persistent practice? Lerer (2012) claims that the job of librarians has always been to keep books clean and unmarked. Librarians needed to defend and protect books from marginalia to ensure the greater good of the community. Jackson (2001) explains, “[library] policy rests on widely shared assumptions about the superiority of the general good to the wishes of individuals and the tactic conventions that govern common (as opposed to private) property” (p. 236).

In the research field of marginalia, library staff’s voices have been, and still are, silent. Broad assumptions concerning library staff’s presumed opinions about marginalia are made in the literature. For example, Lerer (2012) states that the margins of books tempt the reader but torment the librarian. Ian Jackson (2004) writes about librarians’ hostility towards marginalia and that unless the author or the book has historical significance, books with marginalia have been regarded by librarians as unimportant and discarded from library collections. Wagstaff (2012) declares that “one demographic that has consistently objected to the practice (...) is that of the librarian” (p. 5). Ramdarshan Bold and Wagstaff (2017) proclaim, “librarians tend to frown on the practice” (p. 17). Fajkovic and Björneborn (2014) write, “libraries condemn physical marginalia” (p. 903).

Numerous research articles and books in the field of marginalia describe marginalia as something that libraries and library staff view negatively. However, there is no scientific evidence for these assumptions, and very little is known about the relationship between library staff and marginalia. What are their thoughts, feelings, and opinions of what, in essence, is a centuries-old practice? Do they consider marginalia as the defacement of books, as vandalism, or do they view it as a natural or inevitable part of the reading process and the library?

---

2 “It is not permitted to take notes, underline, use paper clips, sticky notes, tape, or otherwise damage the material” [My translation]. Accessed here: https://www.kb.se/hitta-och-bestall/bestall-och-lana/laneavtal-pa-kb/laneavtal.html.

3 The term ‘library staff’ will be used in this study to describe all staff members employed at the libraries that work closely with the collection. Previous literature has used the term ‘librarians’, but I feel that library staff is a more inclusive term. However, when the term ‘librarians’ is used in the literature, I keep the term and use it synonymous with library staff.
1.2 Purpose and Research Questions

My study aims to investigate Swedish university library staff’s attitudes toward marginalia. Historically, readers have been encouraged and taught to mark books as a study technique, and marginalia has played a central role in education and theories of pedagogy. The practice of annotating texts has been encouraged by teachers and scholars to retain and memorize textual information. However, these days, marginalia are rarely taught to students as a reading practice (Sherman, 2002; Jackson, 2001). Nevertheless, the practice persists, and books with marginalia can still be found in libraries (see Jackson, 2001; Attenborough, 2011; Fajkovic, 2012; Mako, 2019; and more).

Therefore, my study will focus on marginalia in university libraries and how university library staff perceive and experience marginalia. I am interested in understanding if the negative words used to describe their feelings and attitudes are accurate.

To achieve this, the following research questions will guide the investigation:

1. What are the experiences and opinions of library staff towards marginalia in library books?
2. What kind of routines and guidelines exist at libraries, and how do library staff utilize them in their encounters with marginalia?
3. How do the results of my research relate to the assumptions of previous literature about library staff and marginalia?
1.3 Background

The poet S. T. Coleridge (1772–1834) imported and popularized the term marginalia in English in 1819 when he published parts of his marginal notes. However, Coleridge was not the first to create or publish works with written marginalia; writing in the margins of books and manuscripts has been widespread since the creation of script (Jackson, 2001).

During the manuscript era, terms like scholia, rubrics, and glosses were used to describe the practice of writing in the margins of a text. Scholia was a note that introduced information outside the work that a scholar judged relevant. Rubrics refer to the scribal practice of writing certain words in red. Glosses, derived from the Greek word glossa, denote the practice of including translations or explanations of foreign and obscure words (Jackson, 2001). Glosses provided aids when reading and appeared alongside the main authoritative text in the margins so that the reader could access both text and interpretation simultaneously. Text and glosses were an integrated unit, and scribes created the layout of the manuscript pages so that glosses aesthetically and textually supplemented the main text (Amtower, 2000).

Since the Carolingian period (ca. 751–987), scholars have inscribed translations, clarifications, or comments between the lines and in the margins of important theological texts (Amtower, 2000). The origins of marginalia are based in the circles of the learned and in education. Early manuscript glosses, followed by early printed glosses, provided commentary on important texts like the Bible and legal works. For centuries scholars compiled adversaria (commentaries or notes) and instructed students on how to mark texts and how to use these marks to assimilate and facilitate the understanding of the texts (Jackson, 2013). The practice of marginalia later evolved during the twelfth century, and teachers began to standardize marginalia and circulate them to students. This practice originated in French provincial schools and rapidly spread to other parts of Europe as a standard part of scholarship (Amtower, 2000).

Camille (1997) states that the practice of marginalia was a natural result of books being an expensive luxury that forced students to become scribes of their own texts, which fostered the idea of the book as an object of transformation; readers and students were encouraged by educators to engage and interplay with the text already written. By using the interlinear, the empty spaces between text lines, and the margins, readers could interrupt, interject, and replace; “the gloss was a site not only for supplementation; it was also one of contestation, allowing the reader to mark disagreement” (p. 254). Notes found in early manuscripts and books reflect a wish to clarify the text on behalf of the community of the learned; there existed “a desire to render each page into a memorable image, easily retainable and accessible to subsequent readers” (Saenger & Heinlen, 1991, p. 250).

The encouragement of and the instruction on how to mark books continued into the early modern period as a way for students to make books more beneficial for their current and future needs. Marginalia played an essential role in pedagogical theory and practice. Records of professors and students at universities in England and France testify to the use of marginalia for analyzing Latin sentences and storing useful phrases (Sherman, 2002).
However, not all marginalia during the early modern period consisted of notes that directly engaged with the text; instead, most of the notes had more to do with the reader's life than the life of the text. Sherman (2002) explains that the blank spaces of early modern books were used to record “penmanship exercises, prayers, recipes, popular poetry, drafts of letters, mathematical calculations, shopping lists, and other glimpses of the world in which they circulated” (p. 130).

During the 1700s, marginalia took on a new form and became more personal, critical, and designed to be shared socially. Readers were encouraged to engage with the text and to make critical observations. Instead of the impersonal, scholarly marginalia modeled by teachers, marginalia was used to express personal views and individual impressions. From 1820 onwards, marginalia and peoples’ attitude towards it evolved into what is common today (Jackson, 2001). The practice of marginalia diminished and developed into an increasingly privileged form of writerly behavior and an increasingly transgressive form of readerly behavior (Sherman, 2008).
2 Literature Review

Lied (2018) states that the study of marginalia can provide information about historical reading and writing practices. Marking books can hint at how people have engaged with cultural artifacts or books during various stages of their circulation. According to Dahlström (2011), research surrounding marginalia has primarily been concerned with examining acclaimed authors’ or individuals’ roles as readers, as well as marginalia in famous works or documents.

H. J. Jackson is a leading scholar in marginalia, whose book *Marginalia: Reader Writing in Books* (2001) is a great general introduction to the field and has been a staple piece since it was published. In the book, Jackson examines and discusses the practice of marginalia during the centuries. In a later book, *Romantic Readers: The Evidence of Marginalia* (2005), Jackson focuses explicitly on the social reading practices and marginalia of the Romantic Age by analyzing over two thousand books between 1790 and 1830.

2.1 Famous Individuals and Notable Persons

Historically, research surrounding marginalia has focused on marginalia written by famous authors, other notable persons or in older texts such as manuscripts with religious, cultural, or historical significance. As to why notes written by famous authors are valued, Jackson (2013) explains that people are inclined to believe that these notes reveal something about the authors’ mental lives and the source of the creative process. Books with marginalia made by authors are valued today and in the past because writers are believed to be good critics and, therefore, have more interesting things to say. The value of authors' marginalia is also based on the assumption that the notes will provide insight into their literary works. When society started to shun the practice of writing in books, an exemption was granted to authors. However, Jackson means there is nothing special about marginalia written by authors, and there is no inherent difference between the marginalia of writers and the marginalia of ‘ordinary’ people. The relationship between authors and marginalia has become valued because of the historical difference brought on by social and commercial forces.

In 1965, Wilson Walker Cowen submitted an eleven-volume Ph.D. dissertation on the marginalia of the author Herman Melville (1819–1891). In the dissertation, Cowen states that with the help of marginalia, a coherent and accurate impression can be established of Melville’s intellectual life, prejudices, and enthusiasms. The complex process and development of Melville’s creative imagination and his views of himself and his art can be discerned.

Cowen’s (1965) eleven-volume dissertation is a colossal scholarly work and is too extensive to account for accurately. Therefore, Cowen's research is only superficially mentioned here as an example of older research on marginalia. However, one interesting observation to highlight is what the existence (or not existence) of marginalia can say about an individual. Cowen explains that there are numerous erased markings and annotations throughout Melville’s books, and most of the erased markings are marginalia stating Melville’s personal feelings and reactions towards women:
The marginalia reveal that Melville spent a lifetime thinking about women in spite of the rather limited use he made of them in his fiction. The misogynous nature of the markings suggests that he was too much bothered by the subject to trust himself to write about it (Cowen, 1965, p. xix).

Interestingly, Cowen (1965) states that there is no evidence suggesting that Melville was the one that erased the notes. And therefore, it is not improbable to assume that the erasure was an adjustment made later by either Melville’s family, acquaintances, or others. The fact that Melville did not erase the more ‘problematic’ marginalia himself can either be because (1) Melville did not regard the marginalia as problematic (he was a man of his time), but later readers did and therefore censored the content, or (2) Melville did not intend for the marginalia to be seen by others and therefore did not feel the need to censor his more problematic opinions.

One notable author whose marginalia has garnered attention is Coleridge; Jackson (2012) describes Coleridge as “the best-known scribbler in books in the English-speaking world, having held the title unchallenged for 170 years or more” (p. 272). The reason why Coleridge's marginalia is as well-known as it is today and why it still garners attention is, according to Jackson, based on two reasons. First, his friends and family knew and encouraged his marginalia writing; and second, Coleridge’s testament explicitly provided for the publication of his marginalia. “Through the loyalty and dedication of his family and executors, hundreds of pages duly appeared in various collections of his 'literary remains’ between 1836 and 1853” (p. 273).

Jackson (2012) explains that most of Coleridge’s notes were deliberately produced for a specific occasion and a known audience. Nowadays, people assume that marginalia is the private records written by and for the book’s owner. However, this was not the case for Coleridge and his contemporaries. The relationship between the reader and the author was not a two-way communication but rather a three-way act of communication: the author, the reader, and the Other reader, the unknown future owner. Readers annotating books in the 1700s and 1800s did not imagine that they were alone with their books and that no one else would ever read them. Books were treasured and made to last; sooner or later, they would pass on to a new owner. There was no prospect of privacy; therefore, all marginalia written was a performance and display to an audience.

Although Coleridge’s and Melville’s lives barely overlapped, it is interesting to analyze the different views of their marginalia. According to Jackson (2012), Coleridge wrote marginalia with an audience in mind; the marginal comments were not private. On the other hand, according to Cowen (1965), Melville wrote annotations without intending future readers. This might indicate how society in the nineteenth century started to regard marginalia as more private and personal; the social character of marginalia changed. The view of marginalia as something private can also be exemplified by the annotation habits of the Swedish king Oskar II (1829–1907), whose lifespan more directly mirrors Melville’s.
In a Master’s thesis (Carlsson & Jakobsson, 2000), Oskar II’s library, filled with books with marginalia, is examined. In one book about religion and specifically a passage that discusses suicide, the king writes in the margins: “Jag tror detta är fullkomligt sannt. I mina unga år var jag två gånger frestad att begå denna svåra synd! (självmord). Lyckligvis kom jag till besinning och vann en varande insight” (p. 43). The authors of the Master’s thesis state that it is an incredible confession by the king and shows how personal the king felt he could be in the margins of his books. Moreover, it also suggests that the king did not write marginal notes with the thought that someone else might read them; the king had no intended audience or intention of letting future readers read his marks.

H.J. Jackson (2017) has also examined John Adams’ (1735–1826, President of the United States 1797–1801) marginalia. Jackson uses Adams’ marginalia to answer two questions: what contribution does marginalia make to the profile of Adams as a reader, and how do we read him? During his lifetime, Adams’ marginalia held value and admiration. Afterward, editors, biographers, and historians used Adams’ marginalia for evidence about the source of his ideas and the clarification of his opinions on political issues.

The reason for the value and importance of Adams’ marginalia, Jackson (2017) explains, is that writing notes in books was a kind of performance during Adam's time. Books were rare and costly, resulting in the books being handled respectfully. Adams’ and Coleridge’s lifetimes overlapped, and both were influenced by the contemporary view of marginalia as a social reading practice. Adams, Coleridge, and contemporaries knew the books would likely outlast them, and books were frequently shared between friends, family, and colleagues. Marginalia was seldom anonymous, and nobody expected marginalia to be private; therefore, the marginalia was rarely messy, as the writer knew that the marginalia would be shared sooner or later.

“For readers of his time, as for generations before them, the privilege of ownership entailed responsibility, and if books were to be altered, it should be by way of improvement” (Jackson, 2017, p. 127). So, what contribution can the marginalia make to the profile of Adams as a reader? The short answer, according to Jackson, is not as much as we think and not precisely what we might expect. Adams’ notes may be of limited value in telling us what, when, and how he read his books, but they help show how he used them at different points in his life. Writing marginalia gave him something he needed from writing: at first, discipline; later, a means of sharing ideas with his contemporaries; and towards the end of his life, a way to set the record straight for the future.

---

4 English translation: I think this is absolutely true. In my younger years, I was twice tempted to commit this grievous sin! (suicide). Fortunately, I came to my senses and gained a lasting insight.
2.2 Marginalia as a Study Technique

As society progressed and public libraries grew, marginalia became less of a valued tool for reading and more of a desecration of the book. However, students still mark and write in books, and the question of why and if the practice is beneficial has been the focus of many studies. In a study from 1987, Nist and Hogrebe investigated opposing theoretical viewpoints that had attempted to explain the effects of text underlining and annotation for textual information recall. Nist and Hogrebe explain that while underlining is a widely used study technique, little research has been performed. One possible explanation is that marking text is highly complex, convoluted, and difficult to explore.

Nist and Hogrebe (1987) discuss the von Restorff theory (the theory of isolation effect: the more something stands out, the more likely it is to be seen) and how the theory might explain the effectiveness, or the ineffectiveness, of underlining. According to the theory, increased recall occurs when an item is isolated against a homogeneous background. Nist and Hogrebe, therefore, suggest that, in the case of underlining, students will focus and better remember the text underlined because the underlining isolates and accentuates the underlined parts in the homogenous wall of text.

The study focused on how researcher-generated and student-generated text marking affected test performance, textual understanding, and recall. The results of Nist and Hogebre (1987) suggested that students directed their attention to the information emphasized when the text was underlined or annotated. Furthermore, the results indicated that researcher-generated text marking was just as effective as student-generated text marking at directing students' attention. However, annotation of text passages was not better than underlining for increasing test performance. Researcher-generated underlining was sufficient to direct students’ attention to important passages. However, the results did not explain how text-markings might improve understanding and recall.

The study of text marking has continued into recent years; for example, Bell and Limber's (2009) study on text marking and its correlation with reading skills and course performance. By surveying students' text-marking preferences and analyzing marks in textbooks, Bell and Limber argued that the advantages of marking text are only beneficial if the student is a high-skill reader; low-level readers could not determine relevant passages when marking text. Interestingly, Bell and Limber found that low-skill readers preferred used books with text-markings and used the previously marked material for studying. Bell and Limber, therefore, conclude that many used textbooks likely contain irrelevant markings, and low-skilled readers are disadvantaged when buying used textbooks because they cannot identify the most relevant materials in a text.

I fail to understand the reasoning Bell and Limber (2009) make: that most used textbooks contain irrelevant text-markings. The study does indicate that low-skill level readers prefer to only study materials marked by a previous reader and that if the previous reader was also low-skilled, the text marked might not be the most relevant. Nevertheless, these findings should not be used to make general assumptions about the quality of used textbooks just because low-skilled readers prefer buying them.
Bell and Limber (2009) claim that the findings of their study go against Nist and Hogreve's (1987) study, which found that underlining is not detrimental to students. Instead, Bell and Limber deduced that text marking is detrimental for lower-skilled readers. Bell and Limber conclude that the most obvious implication of the study centers on the importance of warning college students of the potential negative consequences of buying used textbooks that contain text markings, as these markings can affect the student’s studying. It is essential to “point out the pitfalls of previously marked texts,” according to Bell and Limber, and with their findings, “perhaps more students can be persuaded that heavily marked used texts are not a good value” (p. 66).

I agree that lower-skilled readers might have difficulty determining relevant information in text passages, which might affect their text marking. However, I cannot entirely agree with their belief that used textbooks are substandard and might negatively impact low-skill readers. This is an oversimplification of a complicated issue. With the study's design and results, it is impossible to make assumptions or conclude that using textbooks harms academic performance. However, I do agree with Bell and Limber’s (2009) assessment that all students would benefit from being taught effective marking techniques to improve study habits.

A researcher that addresses markings and annotations in used textbooks is Marshall (1997); the focus of the study was the form and function of annotations and their status within a community “of fellow textbook readers” (p. 131). Marshall calls the annotations done in textbooks ‘personal annotations,’ which means that it is a visible trace of human attention. Marshall was interested in students' markings as they were engaged in being ‘students.’ This was done by analyzing textbooks at a university bookstore. By focusing on textbooks, Marshall could examine books that started materially the same; therefore, examining identical copies of the same book was possible.

By analyzing over 150 used books, Marshall (1997) found that the form of annotations arises partly from the characteristics of the materials themselves, the imprints, and the tools used to write. For example, blank spaces in the margins allowed students to write more extensive notes, and students who used highlighters wrote fewer marginal notes than those who underlined passages with pens. The forms of annotation were also clearly shaped by expectations and textbook genre; clear patterns could be discerned in the types of markings and marking tools for various subjects.

One exciting aspect of Marshall’s (1997) study was that she listened to students as they selected textbooks and watched the buying patterns of the used books better to understand the status and value of textbook annotations. Marshall found that books with annotations were in demand but that these annotations had to be the ‘right’ kind. Annotations by previous owners had value, but only if the annotations were intelligible. Marshall concluded that used books with annotations “do not always make a book less attractive” (p. 137). Marshall’s study shows that used textbooks with annotations can be positively valued by students and are used as aids in studying. The study reveals that students find meaning and want to obtain used textbooks. Therefore, Bell and Limber’s (2009) conclusion that the best action for teachers is to warn students against using textbooks goes against students’ desires.
2.3 Marginalia in Libraries

Concern about the scholarly value of library marginalia as a research object has been expressed; the anonymity of marginalia in library books makes it challenging to study the phenomenon in a library setting (Dahlström, 2011). Most research surrounding marginalia and libraries focuses either on the form and appearance of the marginalia or on the people writing and marking books.

A study focusing on marginalia in an academic library setting is Attenborough (2011). By concentrating on library textbooks, Attenborough examined university students’ academic identities. Attenborough’s research aimed to chart how students negotiate an academic identity while pursuing academic tasks publicly observable as ‘academic tasks’ by other students. The focus of the study was centered around student interaction in the margins of library textbooks. Attenborough claims, “the margins of library textbooks act as spaces within which privately and individually accomplished research work can become publicly observable” (p. 100).

Attenborough (2011) bases his research on previous literature that discusses different kinds of student identity that come into conflict when students interact face-to-face during tutorials. Attenborough discusses the use of the concepts ‘doing education’ and ‘doing being a student’:

(…) the imperative of ‘doing education’ – as a keen, enthusiastic proto-academic seeking to attain a good final degree classification – often seems to be overridden by the imperative of ‘doing being a student’ – as an average and/or indifferent student who does not stand out whilst interacting with other students (p. 100).

Established results of previous research have indicated that when students interact with other students face-to-face, they tend to want to be perceived as average and/or indifferent student who does not stand out. The importance of not standing out overthrows the desire to be an enthusiastic student seeking a good grade. Attenborough (2011) states, “it is not that students do not work hard, simply that public displays of knowledge accrued as a result of that hard work have to be carefully managed and negotiated” (p. 117).

In the case of textbook margins as places where students’ identities of ‘doing education’ and ‘doing being a student,’ Attenborough (2011) found that there were instances of marginalia that appeared to reveal students who had been ‘doing education’ more than they had been ‘doing being students.’ Students used the margins of textbooks to develop pedagogic aids: summaries of important information, re-formulations of complex terminology, definitions of difficult words, and intertextual references to other texts and authors. Instances such as these, Attenborough claims, can easily be used to suggest that the face-less anonymity of library textbooks allows students to publicly ‘do education’ without having to worry about the need to ‘do being a student’ simultaneously.
The data also suggested that students tend to police their own and each other’s displays of ‘doing education’; specific displays of academic expertise were deemed acceptable, while others were deemed unacceptable and tagged with censorious or ironic comments. However, these instances of what Attenborough (2011) called ‘tagging’ were uncommon; most students tended to leave others’ marginalia alone.

Attenborough’s (2011) hypothesis was that marginalia found in library textbooks would allow for hard-working, keen, and enthusiastic academic identities to emerge more forcefully than within university tutorials. The reasoning behind this was based on the fact that textbooks allow students to be completely anonymous and free from supervision by lecturers and other students. However, the data indicated that the marginalia found in the margins of library textbooks, anonymous and unsupervised spaces, appear to be marked by similar conflicts to those observed in university tutorials. The unsupervised, anonymous spaces in textbook margins seem to be marked by the same system of norms that regulate the boundaries of tutorial behavior.

In a research study from 2019, Mako examined the marginalia of ‘ordinary’ library users. Mako explains that the value of marginalia generated by noteworthy people is easy to understand; such notes give us insight into their thoughts, values, and priorities. But, Mako asks, “is there value in studying the marginalia of anonymous (...) patrons, and what might we deduce from their marginalia?” (p. 19). Mako found approximately 3000 instances of marginalia by closely examining ten fiction books. Almost every page in the ten books was filled with marginalia, and many pages contained multiple examples of marginalia. With a few expectations, there were signs of only one marginalia writer. This surprised Mako, as he had assumed, based on the popularity and controversies of the books chosen, that there would be more than one writer, if not several. This corresponds to Attenborough’s (2011) findings; that other writers left most books with marginalia unmarked.

In conclusion, Mako (2019) states that marginalia should not be ignored or allowed to be discarded; instead, marginalia should be valued and preserved, and support for writers of marginalia should be developed. The marginalia found in the ten books suggest that readers benefit from workshops on vocabulary, understanding cultural nuances and vernacular, literary criticism, and effective use of note-taking. This, Mako states, are subject matters that libraries can provide and something that libraries should provide and be the forerunners of. It is important to note that Mako performed an exploratory study and specifically chose books containing copious amounts of marginalia. Therefore, Mako’s findings should not be regarded as representative. Nevertheless, it is an exciting study that explores marginalia in library books.

In a Master’s thesis from 2012 (later developed into a published article: see Fajkovic & Björneborn, 2014), Fajkovic examined the communicative aspects of marginalia in library books. The goal of Fajkovic’s study was to analyze the characteristics of marginalia seen as an act of communication between library users. This was achieved by answering three questions: what is the socio-physical realm within which marginalia exists, what conditions make marginalia possible as a communicative act between readers, and what characterizes marginalia explicitly as a communicative genre?
As marginalia was, and still is, a relatively unknown phenomenon in libraries, Fajkovic (2012) first decided to perform an exploratory study to examine the physical presence of marginalia in Danish public and academic libraries. Fajkovic found that books at public libraries had the highest percentage of marginalia. He explains that the books at the public libraries were older than those available on the open shelves at the academic libraries. In contrast to Mako (2019), Fajkovic found that the books belonging to the fiction genre were almost always blank and pristine. Instead, it was non-fiction books that contained the most marginalia. The difference between the frequency of marginalia in the two studies is mainly because Mako explicitly sought and chose books from the fiction section containing marginalia. However, it is interesting that Fajkovic found no traces of any marginalia of consequence in his randomized sampling of fiction books.

In the case of marginalia as an act of communication, Fajkovic (2012) states that the communicative functions performed by marginalia re-force, challenge, and digress from the text. Fajkovic states that marginalia is not a two-way communication but a communication handed over from one reader to another. Marginalia is an extra layer attached to the primary text, interfering with the readers’ attempt to comprehend the text. In the relationship between reader and text, the primary message is the text itself, and the primary communication happens between the reader and the text. Marginalia, then, forces its way into the primary communication and interferes with the reader’s interpretation of the text. In conclusion, as a communicative aspect, marginalia depends on the primary text, adds a layer of meaning, and is a different subject attached to the primary communication between the reader and the text.

2.4 Marginalia and Library Staff

As previously stated, assumptions have been made, but no factual knowledge exists on the relationship between library staff and marginalia. Even with extensive research, I have found no studies focusing on library staff and marginalia—and none of the literature that I reference in section 1.1 base their assumptions on existing data. Instead, the researchers express their assumed opinions of the relationship between libraries, library staff, and marginalia without evidence backing up the claims.

Lerer (2012) states that the rise of the library is inseparable from the suppression of marginalia. He continues and states that it has always been the job of librarians to keep books clean as books in public libraries (as opposed to rare book archives) are not unique artifacts but representatives of the same edition; one copy should be as good as another. Therefore, the margins of books tempt readers but “torments the librarian” (p. 146). Once again, the library staff’s presumed opinions are stated, and no objective evidence is presented. Lerer does discuss how libraries have historically enforced policies to keep books clean. However, I believe there is a difference between stating something supported by facts (that libraries have had and still have policies specifying how to handle books) and assuming supposed feelings of the practice (that marginalia torment the library profession as a whole).
In an article on the approaches to the history of reading in eighteenth-century Britain, Ian Jackson (2004) makes a passing remark about how librarians’ hostility to marginalia has meant that books with marginalia have been less likely to be included in library collections. Therefore, tracking down books with marginalia in library catalogs “is inevitably a haphazard exercise” (p. 1047). According to Jackson, if the annotations are of unknown origins, books with marginalia are discarded by librarians; only marginalia by celebrated annotators are preserved in libraries. However, I am not prone to believe this statement. Without data, I do not believe it is possible to make a general assumption that library staff are ‘hostile’ towards the practice of marginalia. Nor do I think that it is possible to state that this hostility affects the acquisition of books with marginalia and that only the prestige of the annotator is the reason for preservation.

Instead, I am more inclined to believe that the value libraries and library staff place on marginalia is more aligned with H. J. Jackson’s (2001) explanation: that the older the book, the more value the marginalia has. Jackson states that the age of books, and not only the writer's prestige, affects the book's value. To exemplify this point, Jackson references the British Library’s acquisition of a second copy of Galileo’s *Istoria e dimostrazioni intorno alle macchie solari* (1613). The acquisition was proudly announced, and it was due to the book’s annotations that the book was acquired, annotations written by an unknown reader. According to Jackson, it was the fact that the marginal notes displayed a contemporary response to the text that the book was valued highly by the library and its staff. The British Library’s acquisition and the character of the marginalia exhibit a view that goes against Ian Jackson’s (2004) conclusion.

A similar point of view to Jackson (2004) regarding librarians' hostility toward marginalia is presented by Wagstaff (2012) in an article on the evolution of marginalia. Wagstaff declares that the “one demographic that has consistently objected to the practice of (modern) readers annotating books is that of the librarian” (p. 5). She states that the practice of writing in library books differs from writing in books that the reader owns. I agree that there is a difference between marking library books and personal books. However, from my perspective, the above quote conveys an opinion that all annotations, even those made in personal books, are viewed as negative by library staff, which I believe is impossible to declare without data backing it up.

In a later article, Ramdarshan Bold and Wagstaff (2017) declare that “librarians tend to frown on the practice” of annotating. As a source, Ramdarshan and Bold quote a library director that recommends fining library users for annotating eBooks. No further information is provided for this statement. There is a clear difference between making a general assumption about a profession and exemplifying that assumption by referencing one library director’s views on eBook annotations.

Fajkovic and Björneborn (2014) state that while libraries condemn physical marginalia, digital counterparts are greatly encouraged. This goes against Ramdarshan Bold and Wagstaff’s (2017) findings. These contradictory views demonstrate the polarizing opinions about marginalia and library staff that exists; what some encourage, others discourage.
3 Theoretical Framework

The following chapter will account for the theoretical framework used to achieve the aim of the study. The first section discusses marginalia as a concept and accounts for different researchers’ perspectives and definitions. The objective of this section is to enable the discussion and argumentation for how library staff views the concept of marginalia and where in the research field their interpretation of the phenomenon falls. Following is a section discussing the ‘why’ of writing in books—why do readers write in books?

At the beginning of the third section, there is a brief explanation of how marginalia has been seen as vandalism throughout history. The section also discusses theories of vandalism and how they can be applied to the perception of marginalia as vandalism. Finally, Mary Douglas' theory of dirt as 'matter out of place' is discussed. This theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing and discussing how library staff reacts to marginalia. It explains why people have certain reactions towards marginalia and emphasizes the importance of the group's collective classification schemes in determining whether something is clean or dirty.

3.1 Concepts of Marginalia

There is disagreement in the academic community about the definition of marginalia. Sherman (2008) defines marginalia as a body of writing that accompanies and engages with a text. Jackson (2001) describes marginalia as ‘notes in books’ and narrows it down to original discursive notes that express a reaction to the text or an opinion about it. She distinguishes these notes from other marks such as asterisks, exclamation or question marks, word-by-word translation, or other non-verbal, non-opinioned, non-autonomous signs a reader leaves. As the amount of marginalia in books is unmanageable, Jackson has chosen to ignore what she calls the ‘minimal and equivocal witness’ of reader attention.

Fajkovic and Björneborn (2014) have classified marginalia into three categories: embedded, evaluative, and extra-textual. Embedded marginalia are annotations that interact closely with the text, e.g., underlining, vertical lines, and translations. Evaluative marginalia takes a stance on the text; the annotations challenge the text and give an opinion, e.g., comments, question marks, or other signs of the annotator's attitudes. Lastly, extratextual marginalia projects its attention outside the text; the annotations expand the text and digress from it with references to other authors or works.

Another term used for the marks left by readers is annotations. Steiner (1996) states that annotations also occur in the margin but differ from marginalia. Steiner states that in comparison with marginalia, annotations tend to have a more formal, collaborative character. Instead of existing in the margins or the interlinear between text, annotations are, when possible, written at the bottom of the page and point out specific words or passages in the text and cite parallels or subsequent authorities. Steiner concludes, “the writer of marginalia is, incipiently, the rival of his text; the annotator is its servant” (p. 6).
Bourne (2017) discusses the terms marginalia and annotations; and what these concepts define. According to Bourne, marginalia, in its strictest sense, refers to marks written in the margin of the page. However, using marginalia as an umbrella term for all reader marks risks excluding marks not explicitly written in the margins. On the other hand, annotation implies a degree of engagement with the text. It excludes marks such as pen trails, doodles, ownership inscriptions, arithmetic problems, and other notes not centered around the text.

Lied (2018) defines annotations as “a discrete unit of handwritten text, which layout-wise is not part of the nuclear text on the writing area of the manuscript text” (p. 2). The author divides annotations into verbal and non-verbal. Verbal annotations are notes that surround and add to the primary text layer, whereas non-verbal annotations are doodles, drawings, and symbolic representations. In contrast, Sherman (2008) states, “many notes that readers wrote in their books—doodles, pen practices, ownership formulae, and a wide variety of quotidian marks that were entered in books simply because they offered a convenient space for writing—do not qualify as ‘annotations’” (p. 23). Instead, Sherman defines these marks as ‘graffiti.’

Adler and Van Doren (1972), avid advocates for annotating books, have created seven categories to define different types of annotations. These categories are strict and do not include all kinds of physical traces readers leave. Nevertheless, it is an interesting list of ‘acceptable’ annotation practices:

1. Underlining
2. Vertical lines at the margin—to emphasize a statement or point to a passage too long to be underlined.
3. Star, asterisk, or other doodads at the margin—these symbols Adler and Van Doren state should be used sparingly to emphasize the most important statements or passages.
4. Number in the margin—to indicate a sequence of points made by the author in developing arguments.
5. Numbers of other pages in the margin—to indicate where else in the book the author makes the same points.
6. Circling of keywords or phrases
7. Writing in the margin or at the top of the bottom of the page—used to record questions, reduce a complicated discussion, and record the sequence of significant points.

Compared to the researchers mentioned above, I have a more extensive view of marginalia. The marginalia I intend to use for my research is any written note, mark, sign, or symbol left behind by the reader with a pencil, pen, or highlighter. I am interested in all physical and written evidence left in library books. This can be notes, annotations, underlining, question and exclamation marks, asterisks, highlighting, notes with either a single word or complete sentence, translations of words or whole sentences, scribbles, hand-drawn pictures, or illustrations, that are not originally part of the printed work. These traces do not need to be intentional; unintentional traces, such as accidental pen traces, unaware doodles, etc., are also considered marginalia within the scope of this study. However, this study does not include other kinds of physical evidence left behind by readers; sticky tabs, post-it notes, bookmarks, drink or food stains, or any traces not left by pencils, pens, highlighters, markers, colored pens, or pencils.
3.2 Why write in books?

What advantage did the student reader find in marking up her own copy of a book she was reading, rather than taking notes on separate pages, or writing her notes in pencil so that they could be erased when the book was resold or passed on? (Jackson, 2001, p. 4)

Colclough (2011) states that those who read with a pen chose to engage with the text on a particular level. While reading with a pen in hand is not a common everyday practice, it is a distinct mode of reading used by readers when necessary. Interacting with the text by physically marking it is to read with intention. Richards (2019) explains that annotations are an obvious sign of use, indicating that an actual person at one point picked up a particular book, opened it, and perhaps read it or not, but at least left their marks. Marginalia records the reader’s presence in the book; marginalia is a record that the reader has been there, sometimes not to interact with the text but merely to try out a pen.

In an essay, George Steiner (1996) states that marginalia is the active trace accompanying the reading process of the dialogue between the reader and the book. It can be complimentary, ironic, negative, or argumentative in its form. According to Lied (2018), the marks readers leave can be critical and learned, commentaries, notes on textual variants, erasures, censoring remarks and rewriting, intertextual references, and excerpts from other writings. These marks can be categorized as *dignum memoria*, notes designed to guide reading and interpretation, remnants of memorization practices, attempts to facilitate the use and retrieval of texts, or notes that personalize the text.

In an influential article from 1940, Mortimer J. Alder addresses the ‘how’ of marking books. Adler argues that readers are not likely to understand the text efficiently without marking the text. But why is annotating a book indispensable to reading? Annotating keeps the reader awake, “if reading is to accomplish anything more than passing time, it must be active” (p. 12). However, Adler does differentiate between book genres; some books can be read with pleasure and relaxation, “but a great book, rich in ideas and beauty, a book that raises and tries to answer great fundamental questions, demands the most active reading of which you are capable” (p. 12). Readers write in the margins of books because of the proximity to the text; annotating is more continuous with reading as it requires fewer shifts in concentration. If the reader takes notes in a separate notebook, the reader’s attention is divided between the two (Fajkovic & Björneborn, 2014; O’Hara et al., 1998).

Orgel (2015) means there are more ways to use a book besides reading them, and marks in books are often not about reading but possession. According to Adler (1940), for readers to fully own a book, they must make it a part of themselves. Moreover, this can only be done by writing and marking the book. To own a book, every book must be “dogeared and dilapidated, shaken and loosened by continual use, marked and scribbled in from front and back” (p. 11).

---

3 Online versions of the article have been incorrectly dated July 6, 1941. The correct date is July 6, 1940.
However, later readers may resent this mark of ‘ownership,’ which can, ultimately, influence readers’ negative attitudes towards marginalia. Tankard and Spedding (2021) claim that when a reader annotates a book, the annotator makes an implicit moral or legal claim about the book. With marginalia, subsequent book readers cannot have the original artifact without the annotator’s meaning. The annotator has taken on a gatekeeping role and appropriated the book’s intellectual content for subsequent readers.

To explain why readers write in library books, Fajkovic and Björneborn (2014) state that marginalia in library books are mainly the by-product of an active reading and studying process; marginalia is the physical evidence of the readers’ mental process of conquering and digesting the text. Marshall (1997) states that annotations are the personal and private markings of the reader at the time of writing. The act of borrowing a book creates an imitation of ownership, and this ownership enables the reader to leave marks as the book, at that specific time, belongs to the reader, although marking the book is forbidden.

### 3.3 Marginalia as vandalism

Even though marginalia was a broadly accepted practice before the eighteenth century, the view of marginalia as the destruction of books is not new. Richard de Bury (1287–1345), the Bishop of Durham and the treasurer and chancellor of Edward III, and a self-proclaimed bibliophile wrote in 1345:

> But the handling of books is specially to be forbidden to shameless youths, who as soon as they have learned to form the shapes of letters, straightway, if they have the opportunity, become unhappy commentators, and wherever they find an extra margin about the text, furnish it with monstrous alphabets, or if any other frivolity strikes their fancy, at once their pen begins to write it. There the Latinist and sophister and every unlearned writer tries the fitness of his pen, a practice that we have frequently seen injuring the usefulness and value of the most beautiful books (de Bury, 1889/1345, p. 239).

By writing in books, the ‘shameless youths’ were frivolously desecrating the book, a practice that injured not only the future use of the book but also the value of the book itself. de Bury saw no value in marginalia, or at least no value in the marginalia written by unworthy readers.

The view of marginalia as vandalism persists, and words like defacement, desecration, destruction, and mutilation continue to describe the practice. But why is marginalia such a controversial practice? According to Tankard and Spedding (2021), the act of annotation disregards the commercial value of books. It is “seen as a political activity and a powerful expression of resistance towards the commodification of literature and ideas” (p. 5). Authoritarian figures regard the act of annotating as subversive. With the growth of public libraries, institutional control of books and reading ingrained the feeling among the public that marginalia as a habit was irresponsible, transgressive, and criminal.
Tankard and Spedding (2021) state that the view of marginalia as vandalism is based on the fact that the practice of marginalia is perceived as “a practice verging on the criminal and sacrilegious” (p. 5). The authors use the term in flagrante delicto (the flaming offense) to describe the view of the act of writing in books: any mark made in books is seen as an assault, an act of “biblioclastic vandalism” (p. 3) regardless of how meaningful the annotation may be.

But what does the term ‘vandalism’ actually entail? What is vandalism, and can marginalia be defined as vandalism? According to Cohen (1973), “vandalism is neither a precise behavioral description nor a recognizable label, but a label attached to certain types of behavior under certain conditions” (p. 23). In contrast, Goldstein (1996) defines the act of vandalism as “an intentional act of destruction or defacement of property not one’s own” (p. 22). Vandalism is a broad and vague term used to describe different forms of property destruction. How society regards vandalism can differ by how tolerated, acceptable, or normalized the destruction is. Society can accommodate or absorb deliberate destruction without regarding the act as vandalism or processing the perpetrators as criminals if the damage is institutionalized.

According to Cohen (1973), libraries and librarians know that some readers annotate and mark library books. However, as generally, it is hard to do anything to combat it, vandalism is seen as inevitable and is ‘written off’. Vandalism on the condition of writing-off differs from conventional vandalism offenses as they are rarely formally reported and processed. Detection rates are low, and most damage is not considered worth bothering. According to Cohen’s conditions for vandalism, defacing library books is one of the safest and most anonymous offenses; unless the defacing is done right in front of a librarian, the perpetrator is rarely caught or punished.

Society’s ambiguity towards vandalism under the condition of writing-off is exemplified by the fact that, although there are legal prohibitions or rules against marking library books, the act is widely tolerated. However, there are certain limitations as to what society will tolerate. Acts of vandalism will be deemed unacceptable if the defacement involves some disapproved or hateful ideological message; (Cohen, 1973). So, for example, marginalia that interacts with the text to some extent can be deemed tolerable. However, if the marginalia includes an offensive message or symbol, hate speech, or other hostile threatening terminology, the marginalia will no longer be accepted or tolerated.

### 3.4 ‘Matter out of place’

Lord Chesterfield defined dirt as ‘matter out of place’, an idea that was expanded by Mary Douglas (Douglas, 1975). Dirt, as matter out of place, implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a violation of that order. Dirt is never a singular, isolated occurrence; there is always a system with dirt. Dirt is a byproduct of a systematic classification and order which eliminates undesirable elements: Dirt is a residual category excluded from the normal classification system (Douglas, 1966/1991).
In the book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966/1991), Douglas presents her concepts about the rule of purity and what is considered clean and unclean in cultures and societies. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas examined social and cultural systems and utilized dirt as a subject to support these systems. Douglas viewed dirt as ambiguous and anomalous, which generated distress by upsetting classification schemes and the world’s ordered relations (Campkin, 2013).

For us dirt is a kind of compendium category for all events which blur, smudge, contradict, or otherwise confuse accepted classifications. The underlying feeling is that a system of values that is habitually expressed in a given arrangement of things have been violated (Douglas, 1975, p. 51).

According to Douglas, the desire for cleanliness and the dread of dirt are universal patterns; she discovered this by examining ritual practices and taboos in various cultures and societies. Impure objects are seen as a threat to the established classification and are brought into order by being denounced, and objects classified as ambiguous, divergent, or out of place are labeled as dirt and condemned by society (Ditlevsen & Andersen, 2021).

Douglas considered dirt a crucial factor for understanding the systems and rules of classification that govern society. By comprehending what makes things dirty or unclean, Douglas delves into the moral order's innermost secrets and how society periodically renews and reaffirms its fundamental social relations and collective sentiments. Anything that doesn't fit into its proper category is considered unclean, deviant, or dirty (Wuthnow et al., 1984).

Douglas (1966/1991) argues that impurity occurs when anomalies appear in classificatory social and conceptual systems. A set of ordered relations and a transgression of that order determine what is considered pure and impure. Matter out of place is labeled impure due to a drive for mental and social order; that which is kept within the order is considered pure. Given that cultures thrive on order and that dirt is fundamentally disorder, eliminating dirt is not a negative movement but rather an endeavor to effectively organize the environment.

Wuthnow et al. (1984) states that when a group's collective identity or boundaries are threatened, the group will respond by ritually persecuting those who caused the threat. This is done to redraw the boundaries and reaffirm the group's identity. When individuals violate moral boundaries, people will take action to restore order and reaffirm the lines and categories, either by cleaning up the situation or by persecuting the offenders.

According to Douglas (1975), rules help maintain order and reduce conflict by categorizing different forms of pollution behavior. These rules are enforced through sanctions, which ensure that individuals comply with the cultural norms of their community. Pollution beliefs are deeply ingrained in cultural institutions and work by pressuring individuals to conform. The fear of punishment associated with pollution is a powerful tool for enforcing compliance. However, while deviants can be punished directly, this is not always possible.
The definition of dirt depends on the classification in use. Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021) note that “what counts as actual dirt is dependent on the cultural context: such definitions are dynamic and culturally constructed” (p. 182). What is clean in relation to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, according to Douglas (1966/1991).

Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021) explain that the dichotomy of purity and impurity is also a dichotomy of order and disorder, and impurity is understood as a detrimental inference from the natural order. A theoretical model of dichotomy, consisting of several conceptual pairs that serve as symbolic signifiers of order and disorder, can be used to explain Douglas’ idea of impurity (see Table 1, borrowed from Ditlevsen and Andersen).

**Table 1 – Douglas’ theoretical model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purity</th>
<th>Impurity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clean</td>
<td>Dirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>Danger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural</td>
<td>Transgression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Order</td>
<td>Disorder</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021) argue that objects are denounced as impure in different cultural settings. There are two distinctive ways for objects to become impure in the eyes of the observer. Firstly, an object can become impure if something is transferred to it which does not belong. Ditlevsen and Andersen define this as ‘imparted impurity’. Second, if an object is no longer intact, e.g., if something has been removed which should have been there. The authors refer to this as ‘incomplete impurity’ because the object’s border has been transgressed, and the object is now incomplete.
4 Method

This chapter outlines the methods used to collect the data required for the study. Empirical data was obtained through a survey. The choice of method, population and sampling selection, and survey format will be explained in detail in the following sections. Additionally, the data analysis method will be described, and the credibility of the study and its methods will be discussed. Finally, ethical considerations will be addressed.

As this study was carried out in Sweden and the survey was distributed to Swedish library staff, the survey used was written in Swedish. To make the survey as accessible as possible to readers, section 4.3 thoroughly explains the layout of the survey in English.

4.1 Choice of Method

Wildemuth (2009) explains that research tends to be oriented toward improving practice. In LIS, library and information science, research is motivated by the desire to improve information practices. For my research study, there is a desire to understand and clarify library staff’s attitudes towards marginalia. Vague assumptions have been made, but no data has been collected to support these claims. By examining and collecting information from the source, library staff themselves, the views and opinions of a profession that has been silenced in the research field will be heard.

I will use a mixed-method approach to gather the data necessary to answer my research questions. A mixed-method approach is the combination of different types of research methods within a single project. Combining different research methods will exploit the methods' strengths to compensate for weaknesses (Denscombe, 2017). I will use a survey, explicitly a questionnaire, to collect the empirical data. The questionnaire will consist of open-ended and close-ended questions, generating quantitative and qualitative data.

Wildemuth (2009) explains that with the help of surveys, respondents’ beliefs, opinions, attitudes, and behavior can be collected. According to Dillman et al. (2009), surveys aim to collect data that allows the researcher to obtain estimates of the behaviors and attitudes of all people in a population by sampling and collecting results from only a fraction of them. Denscombe (2010) states that surveys are useful when the researcher wants information about a particular group, especially what the group thinks about a specific phenomenon. Using surveys is also practical when gathering information about many people, and surveys are the best method for collecting mass data. Therefore, using a questionnaire as the data collection method will be the best method of achieving the aim of this thesis.
4.2 Sampling and Population

As previously stated, the point of interest for my research was university library staff's experience of marginalia in library books. It was my interest in marginalia created in an academic context that affected the choice to focus on university library staff. The history and practice of marginalia in educational institutions are fascinating, and, with the continuation of students writing in books, university library staff as a sample population present an intriguing research group. Therefore, from the start, university library staff as a sample population were extracted from the larger population of library staff.

The Swedish Higher Education Authority (Universitetskanslersämbetet [UKÄ], 2023) states that Sweden has approximately 50 higher education institutions. Of these 50 institutions, 40 have an academic library (Kungliga biblioteket [KB], 2022).

A criterion was established to further narrow the sample: The libraries must be connected to either a university or a university college (in Swedish universitet and högskola) per the UKÄ’s (2023) list of Swedish higher education institutions.

18 of the 50 higher education institutions are universities (universitet), and 12 are university colleges (högskolor) (UKÄ, 2023). In total, the final sample consisted of 30 different academic libraries.

Contact with the libraries was made on March 8, when 29 out of the 30 libraries were approached with an introduction email through either a contact form on the library’s website or a contact email. See Appendix A6 for the email. The link to the questionnaire was included in the first contact with the hope that the questionnaire would be spread to all library staff working closely with the collection.

At the time of writing, I was employed at the one remaining library; therefore, the email's contact and content differed from the other 29 libraries. I emailed two of my colleagues, explained my research, and provided a link to the questionnaire. They then forwarded my email to all library staff working with the library’s collection.

During the one month the survey was open, 151 individuals answered the questionnaire. Because the questionnaire generated a lot of responses in a short time, the choice was made not to approach the libraries with a follow-up request. The 151 responses were deemed a sufficient enough base for the empirical data to achieve the aim of this study.

---

6 The introduction letter in the email was written in Swedish. The original letter, as well as a translation of the letter, is provided in Appendix A.
4.2.1 Population size

As per the National Library of Sweden's (KB, 2022) official library statistics for 2021, at the 30 academic libraries contacted, 1795 individuals are employed. Among the employed individuals, 1594 are full-time equivalent (FTE).

To ensure the survey results are accurate, I have excluded the 116 FTE personnel categorized as "other personnel" by KB. I hypothesize that these 116 FTE do not work directly with the library's users or collection and therefore are irrelevant to this study. Because only staff working closely with the collection were requested to participate in the survey, I assume those employed as 'other personnel' were not provided with the survey link as requested.

Table 2 – Employment at the 30 academic libraries, 2021

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employed individuals</th>
<th>Total FTE</th>
<th>Total number of FTE categorized as “other personnel”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>1594</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To calculate what percentage of the 151 respondents make up the total population of library staff at the 30 academic libraries contacted, the following calculations were performed:

Subtracting the 116 FTE categorized as ‘other personnel’, the eligible FTE count is 1478, which accounts for 92.72% of the total FTE of the 30 libraries.

The total number of employees multiplied by the FTE of the (presumed) staff working with the collection equals:

\[ 1795 \times 0.9272 = 1664 \]

The total number of answered surveys multiplied by the (presumed) population gives us the following:

\[ 151 \div 1664 = 0.09 \]

Therefore, it can be inferred that 9% of the (presumed) population responded to the survey. However, as I did not have access to individual emails, I do not have an exact number of people to whom the survey was forwarded and therefore do not know how many of the total population had access to the survey.

Additionally, the statistics from the National Library of Sweden regarding 2021 may have changed since the time of writing, and the statistics for 2022 were yet to be released. Hence, I have made decisions and calculations based on inferences of what could be a plausible representation of the population.
4.3 Survey Design

At the University of Borås, SUNET Survey (https://sunet.artologik.net/) is used when creating and distributing questionnaires. Therefore, the choice of a web-administered questionnaire was compulsory. This worked in my favor as online surveys tend to have a faster response rate than postal questionnaires (Bryman, 2016). Furthermore, Denscombe (2010) states that web-based questionnaires are the fastest and cheapest way to administer surveys. The turnaround time between sending out the survey and receiving the completed survey is significantly reduced when using web-based questionnaires; the delivery of the questionnaires is instantaneous, and people get around to answering the questions sooner than in conventional surveys.

Bryman (2016) explains that an advantage of online surveys is that the questionnaires are completed with fewer unanswered questions, resulting in less missing data. Another advantage is that online questionnaires gather better responses to open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are questions the respondents are free to answer however they want. The advantages of open-ended questions are that respondents can answer in their own words, allow for unusual responses, and do not suggest a certain kind of answer. Close-ended questions are questions where the respondent is presented with a set of fixed answers from which the respondent can choose. I have chosen to utilize both open-ended and close-ended questions in my questionnaire.

Denscombe (2010) describes open-ended questions as questions that leave it up to the respondent to decide the wording and the length of the answer. The advantages of open-ended questions are that the information gathered is more likely to reflect the complex views held by the respondents; the respondents are allowed space to express themselves in their own words. The disadvantages are that it requires more effort from the respondent, which can affect the respondents' willingness to complete the questionnaire.

Close-ended questions, on the other hand, only allow answers which fit into pre-established categories. The main advantage of close-ended questions is that the respondents' answers can easily be quantified and analyzed. Close-ended questions are easy to process and enhance the comparability of the answers in the post-processing of the questionnaire (Denscombe, 2010; Bryman, 2016).

Denscombe (2010) explains that the disadvantage of close-ended questions is that respondents cannot express exact thoughts, feelings, and views because of the fixed options, and these might not fully provide the answer the respondent seeks. Moreover, if the respondent cannot adequately express their views, it might affect their willingness to complete the questionnaire.
4.3.1 Survey layout

The survey consisted of 25 questions and was divided into six sections (see Appendix B for the survey). Most of the questions were close-ended, with 22 questions, whereas three were open-ended. However, five of the close-ended questions allowed the respondent to provide additional information based on their answers.

Ejlertsson (2019) states that it is essential when administrating a questionnaire that the information letter, or the information preceding the questionnaire, is simple and written in a language understood by the population. Specific terms can be used if the population commonly uses them. Therefore, the first page of the survey introduced the research project and explained the concept of marginalia. As the population and survey were distributed in Swedish to Swedish library staff, I wanted to define what I meant by the term and give an example of how marginalia can look in library books. Therefore, I chose to include a scan of a picture of marginalia in a library book (same as Figure 1 included at the beginning of this thesis). The practice of marginalia might be common at libraries, but that does not mean that library professionals commonly use the term.

Table 3 – Layout of the survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sections</th>
<th>Introduction to the survey and the research study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Example of marginalia in a library book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q1–Q3 Background</td>
<td>Q4–Q8 Presence of marginalia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q9–Q15 Routines, guidelines, and policies</td>
<td>Q16–Q19 Thoughts and feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q20–Q24 Opinions</td>
<td>Q25 Final question</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Because the survey was distributed to Swedish university library staff, the survey was written in Swedish. No translated version exists. However, the next page explains the questions in-depth in English.
The first three questions concerned the respondents’ job title (librarian, library assistant, or other), place of work (university library or university college library), and age range. Questions 4–8 focused on collecting data about the presence and frequency of marginalia and asked what the most common category of books with marginalia is, what type of marginalia is common, and how often they encounter marginalia.

Questions 9–15 focused on routines and guidelines. The aim was to gather data about how the respondents’ workplaces handle the practice of marginalia. Is there information distributed to employees or library users regarding marginalia? If so, is the information readily available and easily accessible? If not, does the respondent think the library should change what information or how it is distributed, and if so, what kind of changes would it be?

Questions 16–19 focused on the respondents’ thoughts and feelings about marginalia. Are the respondents' feelings about marginalia positive or negative, and with what kind of words would they describe those feelings? What kind of thoughts occurs when they encounter marginalia? And lastly, what does the respondent do when encountering marginalia in library books?

Questions 20–24 were ordinal questions stating assumptions that the respondent had to answer by ranking their agreement from a scale of one to five. The questions concerned whether the respondent understands why users write in or mark books, if marginalia by a celebrated individual or in older books differs from marginalia written by library users, and the last two questions concerned the respondents' opinions of preserving marginalia. At the end of the survey, question 25, the respondent could freely add anything regarding marginalia that they felt the survey had missed.

4.4 Data Analysis

The questionnaire consists of close-ended and open-ended questions, producing quantitative and qualitative data; therefore, the data analysis will consist of two different analysis methods. The quantitative data from the close-ended questions will be analyzed using descriptive statistics. The qualitative data produced by the open-ended question will be analyzed using qualitative content analysis.

4.4.1 Descriptive statistics

To analyze the quantitative data, I will use descriptive statistics, whose role is, according to Agresti and Finlay (2014), “to reduce the data to simpler and more understandable forms without distorting or losing much information” (p. 4). The majority of the questions in the survey are nominal variables, also known as categorical variables, which are categories that cannot be ranked; no true numerical value can be assigned to the variables (Wildemuth, 2009; Bryman, 2016). A few of the questions in the survey are ordinal and use Likert scales to generate data. Ordinal variables are variables for which the values (and categories) can be ranked ordered, but the distance between the categories is not equal across the range (Wildemuth, 2009; Bryman, 2016).
By using the digital system SUNET to create the survey, the system could be used to analyze the data from the responses. I did not have to go through each of the 151 responses and calculate the data by hand. Instead, SUNET produced and compiled a report of all questionnaire data. The report created by SUNET presented the quantitative results according to the standards of descriptive statistics. The qualitative results from the open-ended questions were presented in a format that was easy for me to utilize for the content analysis. With help from SUNET, much time-consuming work was condensed into a manageable form of data analysis.

### 4.4.2 Qualitative content analysis

Qualitative content analysis will be used to analyze the data from the open-ended questions. The method focuses on examining meaning, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a text, compared to quantitative content analysis, which focuses on counting word frequency or extracting objective content from texts. Qualitative content analysis examines texts to detect themes that can illustrate the range of the meanings of the phenomenon (Wildemuth, 2009).

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2005), qualitative content analysis is used for the subjective interpretation of text content through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. Hsieh and Shannon explain that “qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (p. 1278).

In qualitative content analysis, categories or themes are used as the primary unit for analysis instead of individual words or sentences, as in quantitative content analysis. This approach focuses on identifying and interpreting the expression of ideas rather than just counting words. Qualitative content analysis is especially useful for researchers who want to understand essential themes within a specific context and provide a detailed description of the social reality of those themes (Wildemuth, 2009).

Hsieh and Shannon (2005) explain that qualitative content analysis starts by repeatedly reading the data to understand the textual content. After that, the data is read word by word to derive codes by first highlighting words in the text that seem to capture key thoughts or concepts. During this, code labels emerge that reflect the key concepts. The codes are then sorted into categories or themes based on how the codes are related and linked, and the emerging categories or themes are then used to organize and group codes into meaningful clusters. After this has been completed, definitions for the categories, themes, and codes are developed, which are then used when reporting the analysis findings.

For my analysis, I created a coding frame (see Table 4) inspired by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). The coding frame was created during the first coding phase and later revised as themes and categories emerged.
Table 4 – Coding frame

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text Data</th>
<th>Key Concepts</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data from the answers. Highlighted and color coordinated.</td>
<td>A summary of the main points from the data.</td>
<td>Themes emerging from the data.</td>
<td>Interpretation and analysis of the themes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The first column, Text Data, consisted of the textual data from the respondents' answers, and each answer was separated into its own row. This data was color-coordinated according to the content of the text and the ideas expressed. The second column, Key Concepts, summarized the emerging ideas from the text into smaller, more accessible notes to condense the amount of data.

The third column, Themes, categorized the data into emerging themes. The emerging themes were analyzed multiple times to ensure the data were categorized into the most fitting themes. The last column, Analysis, was used to define, interpret, and analyze the themes. This column was mainly used the first time the theme was created to facilitate understanding and remind me of what the theme defined and encompassed. Appendix C gives an example of the coding frame in use.

There are limitations to using qualitative content analysis as the method for analysis, and there are a few things to be aware of. Firstly, qualitative content analysis tends to dislocate the text units and their meaning from the context in which they were made. Secondly, the analysis will be based on subjective interpretations.

Denscombe (2017) discusses the issue of objectivity in qualitative research and states that it is essential to acknowledge that qualitative analysis is heavily based on the researcher’s subjectivity and that the researcher's identity, values, and beliefs cannot entirely be eliminated from the analysis process. Therefore the researcher’s self should be acknowledged as affecting the production and analysis of qualitative data.

### 4.5 Credibility

A mixed-method approach requires different criteria to verify the credibility of the research. For quantitative data, two of the most prominent criteria for evaluating research are reliability and validity. Reliability is concerned with the question of whether the results of a study are repeatable. The study ensured this by including the questionnaire and detailed explanations of sampling, method, and data analysis. Validity refers to the quality of research conclusions (Bryman, 2016). This study aimed to investigate the phenomenon of marginalia in library books from the perspective of Swedish University library staff. Although the study's findings cannot be generalized to all library staff, they provide valuable insights into how a small portion of the population treats marginalia in library books. This can serve as a crucial starting point for future research.
Wildemuth (2009) explains that “qualitative research is fundamentally interpretive, and interpretation represents your personal and theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study” (p. 313). For a study to be replicable, the analytical procedures and processes must be monitored and reported as completely and truthfully as possible. Decisions and practices concerning the coding process and methods must be reported for qualitative content analysis to establish the study's credibility.

Using validity and reliability as criteria is inappropriate when evaluating qualitative research. Instead, researchers should focus on "trustworthiness," which includes credibility, dependability, confirmability, objectivity, and transparency. Credibility refers to the accuracy and appropriateness of the data, which can be demonstrated through good research practices. Dependability involves ensuring that the research reflects reputable procedures and reasonable decisions. Confirmability and objectivity refer to producing unbiased findings, although it is impossible to eliminate the researcher's influence in qualitative research. Ensuring transparency is the most critical factor in ensuring the credibility of the research (Wildemuth, 2009; Denscombe, 2010).

Being transparent about the coding process is crucial when conducting qualitative content analysis. In my research, I described the process thoroughly and included multiple quotes in the results chapter to illustrate the emerging themes and categories. However, the coding of open-ended questions is subjective and reflects my interpretation of the data; therefore, it is essential to note that complete objectivity is impossible. I have ensured that the analysis method is as detailed as possible and have provided a descriptive explanation of the content analysis and coding to ensure transparency.

To guarantee the credibility of my research, I carefully reviewed the coding multiple times to ensure consistency. Coding without the assistance of other coders requires consistency to be maintained throughout the process. Wildemuth (2009) states that it is inevitable for humans to make coding errors; therefore, consistency checks are essential for ensuring accuracy and minimizing mistakes. To maintain consistency, I cross-checked the interpretations with the original data, defined clear coding definitions and procedures, and reevaluated the coding multiple times.

### 4.6 Ethical Considerations

Being mindful of ethical concerns throughout the various phases of research is crucial. According to Bryman (2016), disregarding ethical issues is not an option as they directly impact the credibility of the research and the disciplines involved. Bryman states that there are different ethical principles pertinent to social research; two of these principles hold particular significance to my research: informed consent and the right to privacy. It is crucial to follow these principles to ensure that the research is conducted ethically and responsibly.

To conduct my research, I used questionnaires as a survey method. My top priority was ensuring the participants knew what they were consenting to. It is crucial to thoroughly explain the motives and objectives of the questionnaire (Bryman, 2016; Denscombe, 2017; Ejlertsson, 2019).
Therefore, I thoroughly described the research study, its purpose, and voluntary participation in the introduction email. The introductory section of the questionnaire also included details about the research aim, how the data gathered will be utilized, and the rationale behind it. Ejlertsson (2019) suggests that in the case of a questionnaire survey, the respondent's completion and submission of the survey can be considered as giving consent. Therefore, no further actions were taken to collect the respondents’ consent.

It is also essential from an ethical view to ensure that there is no invasion of privacy during the data collection. Participants have the right to privacy linked to issues, anonymity, and confidentiality (Bryman, 2016). Since 2018, the EU has had common legislation, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which regulates how personal data may be collected and handled. Personal data constitutes information linked to a living person, e.g., name, address, photos, and sound recordings.

According to Ejlertsson (2019), maintaining anonymity and ensuring that survey data remain unidentifiable is imperative when conducting research. Therefore, the survey only requested the respondent's age range and whether they work at a university library or university college library. No other personal information is collected through this survey.
5 Results

This chapter will provide a detailed summary of the survey results, consisting of the quantitative and qualitative data. The results will be presented in distinct subsections based on the questions and responses to enhance clarity. The chapter will initially follow the survey format, then categorize the answers thematically according to the themes that emerged during the content analysis.

5.1 Demographics

Regarding the respondent's job titles, 90.1% were employed as librarians, 6.6% as library assistants, and 3.3% chose ‘other’. The respondents that chose other specified their job titles as:

- System Librarian (*Systembibliotekarie*),
- Assistant Library Director (*Biträdande bibliotekschef*),
- Director (*Avdelningschef*),
- Assistant (*Assistent*),
- and Bookbinder (*Bokbindare*).

78.1% of the respondents worked at a university library, and the remaining 21.9% worked at a university college library.

Most respondents were 40-49, followed by 50-59 and 30-39 with similar percentages. 10% were in the age range of 60+, and only 3.3% of the respondents were in the age range of 20-29.

![Figure 2. Age range.](image-url)
5.2 Experience of Marginalia

96.7% of the respondents had, while working, noticed marginalia in the library’s books; 3.3% had never noticed marginalia in the library’s books.

Regarding which category the majority of books in which the respondents found marginalia: 84.5% belonged to the category ‘textbooks’, 8.5% ‘monographs’, 1.4% ‘reference literature’, and 5.6% belonged to ‘other.’

Q6 asked what type of marginalia the respondents had encountered. Nine options were available, and as the respondents could choose multiple options, the questions generated 621 answers. The answers that got the most were ‘underlining’ with 144 answers, followed by ‘single words’ with 122 answers, and ‘highlighting’ with 118 answers.

![Figure 3. Types of marginalia.](image)

8 out of the 17 respondents that chose the category ‘Other’, specified that one type of marginalia they encountered were post-it notes, which from my definition in this study, is not marginalia. However, it is interesting that several respondents viewed post-it notes as marginalia.

Regarding how frequently the respondents encountered marginalia, the majority (85.6%) encountered marginalia at least once a month. The most common answer to the question was ‘couple times a week’ with 31.5% of answers. 2.1% of the respondents never encounter marginalia while working.
5.3 Routines and Guidelines

Q9 asked if the library where the respondent worked had any internal guidelines for handling books with marginalia. 24% answered ‘yes’, 48% answered ‘no’, and 28% answered that they did not know.

To expand on Q9, respondents could add what kind of guidelines exist at their library and what those guidelines consist of. Most answers mentioned guidelines that center around what is done physically with books with marginalia. The main consensus seems to be that when a book has ‘too much’ marginalia, the book is weeded and replaced. No answer defined what ‘too much’ marginalia means or how such an amount is calculated.

Making a note in the book’s catalog entry is common based on the answers, and not to accuse innocent users, one respondent writes:

Notera att det finns kladd i boken sedan tidigare så att nya låntagare inte misstänkiggörs.8

A few answers mention library rules that state that it is the user's responsibility to ensure the book's condition: when agreeing to the library’s terms, the user must ensure that the book is returned in the same condition. However, it is hard to determine who is to blame, so few libraries implement these rules.

There are instances when marginalia, instead of decreasing the book's value, increases the value, perhaps not monetary, but historically or culturally. Not all respondents work at libraries or with books where marginalia is viewed as adverse. Therefore, the guidelines to handle marginalia are not focused on erasing or weeding but on cataloging and preserving.

5.3.1 Satisfaction with guidelines

Q10 asked if the respondent was satisfied with the library’s guidelines regarding books with marginalia. 44% were happy with the guidelines, 10.6% were unhappy with them, and 45.4% were unsure about their feelings toward the guidelines. The respondents who were unhappy with the guidelines or chose the ‘do not know’ option could provide additional information about why they were unsatisfied. Uncertainty about how to handle books with marginalia is the main reason for respondents’ dissatisfaction, and multiple respondents write express wishes for more concrete guidelines.

By not acknowledging and having clear guidelines, books are, from respondents’ perspective, being mishandled. As one respondent writes:

Det är som om man inte tar på allvar att böckerna förstörs. Jag är inte säker på vad som skulle kunna göras, men nu är det som om man inte gör något.9

8 Note that there are scribbles in the book from before so that new borrowers are not made suspicious.

9 It is as if the destruction of the books is not taken seriously. I am unsure what could be done, but now it is like nothing is being done.
5.3.2 Prevention

Most respondents (72.2%) worked at libraries without routines in place to prevent users from writing, marking, or scribbling in the library’s books. Only 13.2% of the respondents worked at libraries with prevention routines, and 14.6% did not know if such routines existed. 82.8% of the respondents worked at libraries without signs, information sheets, posters, etc., in the library room, reminding users that marginalia is prohibited in library books.

The respondents had the opportunity to provide additional information about what kinds of routines are in place to prevent users from writing in library books. Some respondents referenced the terms and agreement agreed upon by users when obtaining a library card, specifically how users are liable to compensate for damaged books financially. However, only 28.5% of the respondents worked at libraries with explicit information in the library rules that it is forbidden to write, mark, scribble, etc., in library books.

All of the answers described using informational campaigns to prevent marginalia. Most respondents described how physical and digital reminders were used to prevent marginalia. The physical reminders mainly consisted of stickers on books, especially textbooks and new books. While it is essential to remind users, one respondent writes that the reminders should not be too overbearing and instead come across as friendly:

Vi sätter små vänliga runta klistermärken på alla nya böcker där det står att man ska vara rädd om boken och att den ska användas av fler osv. En snäll uppmaning.10

Other physical reminders consisted of bookmarks, information fliers, signs, or other physical objects reminding users not to mark books.

The digital reminders consisted of short information videos displayed on screens or information promoted on social media and the library’s website. By using different types of reminders, sometimes both physical and digital, together, the libraries are trying to prevent marginalia in an effort to preserve books. Ensuring the preservation of the book as a physical object ensures the object's potential future use by others.

---

10 We put small friendly round stickers on all new books that say that you should take care of the book and that the book will be used by more people, etc. A friendly reminder.
5.3.3 Can libraries do more?

Q13 asked whether the respondent believed the library should or could do more to prevent marginalia. Only 22.4% stated that they thought their library could do more to prevent marginalia, whereas the remaining 77.6% stated that their library could not do anything more to prevent marginalia.

Respondents who responded affirmatively to the inquiry regarding the library's potential to increase its efforts could provide additional details. However, even amongst those that felt that more could be done, there remained doubt regarding the efficacy of such measures in preventing all marginalia.

One measure to prevent people from writing in library books is to impose financial penalties. However, the respondents did not find this to be a practical solution. Inspecting every book before and after check-out would be too expensive and time-consuming. Additionally, it is difficult to prove which user wrote in the book; if the books are not consistently checked before and after it is borrowed, it is impossible to know who wrote in it. Furthermore, someone could have marked the book while reading it in the library, and therefore, it would be impossible to catch the perpetrator unless the marking was done in front of a staff member. To summarize, it is difficult and impractical to enforce fines on users.

The impossibility of preventing all marginalia is apparent in the respondents’ answers. However, ideas to minimize marginalia were proposed, which centered around the importance of drawing attention to the practice's negative impact and re-directing users’ need to write in books to other objects. Sticky tabs, post-it notes, and notebooks were proposed as study aids for notetaking that could be promoted:

(...), man skulle absolut kunna göra någon riktad kampanj mot det en kortare tid för att uppmärksamma problemet. Fota och dela roliga/konstiga kommentarer i böcker och uppmuntra till att istället samla dessa någon annanstans, ex. ”klotttra på den här whiteboarden istället för våra dyra, fina böcker”.

One respondent's workplace had discussed using a lighthearted approach to addressing marginalia by introducing a fun activity and providing rewards as incentives. The respondent writes:

Vi har pratat om sudda sudda dagar. Där vi samlar klottrade böcker och uppmuntra studenter får sudda medan vi bjuder på fika eller biobiljetter.

---

11 (...) you could certainly do some targeted campaign against it for a shorter period of time to draw attention to the problem. Take photos and share funny/strange comments in books and encourage to instead collect these elsewhere, e.g., “scribble on this whiteboard instead of our expensive, nice books”.

12 We’ve talked about erase-erase days. Where we collect scribbled books, and students can erase while we offer “fika” or movie tickets.
5.4 Emotions and Reactions

When asked to describe their feelings toward marginalia: 68.7% of the respondents described their feelings as negative and 9.3% as positive. 22% chose the option of ‘do not know’.

The respondents were asked to choose words that described their emotions when encountering marginalia in library books. The option to choose multiple answers was possible; in total, 333 answers were given. The most common response was "irritated," with 96 answers, followed by "disappointed" with 46 and "frustrated" with 45. The least common responses were "excited" with 9 and "happy" with 8. However, "interested" was the most common positive emotion, with 41 answers.

![Figure 4: Emotions](image)

When asked to share their thoughts and feelings about marginalia, respondents could provide additional information and describe their emotions in their own words. Two main groups emerged from the answers. The first group expressed interest in marginalia, seeing it as evidence of readers engaging with texts. They were curious about the marginalia left behind in library books and were eager to decipher its meaning.

Predominately, the positive reactions centered around the thought of marginalia as ‘evidence of use’. From the respondents' perspective, marginalia is a sign of readers using, interacting, and, most importantly, reading the book. Because of the traces left behind by readers, the respondents are presented with evidence that the book and the text as an object have been used. It is a display of reader reflections and reactions and an exhibit of how the reader has used the materials for their studies.

The positive reactions towards marginalia as evidence of use are interwoven with the idea of marginalia as a study technique. There is an understanding and acceptance of marginalia when the markings are viewed as evidence of studying.
Classifying marginalia as a study technique creates value in practice, and the usefulness of marginalia is a factor behind the positive reactions. Furthermore, some respondents stated that marginalia by past readers could be helpful to future readers; respondents deem this interaction between past and future readers positive.

However, for the marginalia to be exciting and generate positive feelings, it must have substance. Comments or writing in the margins elicited the most positive feelings, especially if they were in a valuable book or written by a person of significance. Marginalia consisting of ‘useless’ scribbles was not valued and therefore viewed as negative, whereas marginalia consisting of personal comments, reflections, etc., was deemed valuable and therefore viewed as positive. The extent of marginalia also influences the respondents' reactions; the amount of marginalia should not be ‘too much’. Underlining, single words, or comments are acceptable in small quantities.

The importance of either who is behind the marginalia or the form and value of the book itself also affects the respondents' reactions. According to the results, 60.2% of respondents think that notes written by famous people or discovered in historically significant books carry more importance than those written by regular library users. Marginalia created by researchers is deemed acceptable because the marginal comments can have value for academic purposes. One respondent writes that a magical limit exists: marginalia becomes rewarding instead of a disturbance when the material is older than 50–80.

The writing implement with which the marginalia has been written also significantly influences the respondent's emotions and reactions. There is a greater acceptance of individuals using pencils as marginalia implements; the traces of pencils can be erased, allowing the book to return to its original, unmarked state. With time and resources, the book can be restored for the next reader, free from interference by the previous reader.

However, not all marginalia can be removed, which generates irritation among the respondents. Pens and highlighters generate strong negative feelings as it hinders the restoration of the book. Even if the respondent has positive feelings towards marginalia, the impossibility of returning a book to its unmarked condition significantly affects how library staff views the practice.

---

13 (...) the fact is that sometimes it can be interesting to read comments (if it is a book that interests you personally) and if you know that it is, for example, a researcher who made them.

14 In new books and textbooks, marginalia is annoying because it risks ruining the reading for the next borrower. When it comes to marginalia, e.g., from the 17th century in a book from the same century, the marginalia is exciting and historically interesting.
One type of ‘marginalia implement’ that generates much controversy is post-it notes. Post-it notes generated either positive or negative emotions and reactions. Some deemed post-it notes as more acceptable as it is possible to remove them; therefore, it is an implement that is not as intrusive or permanent as others. However, some see no difference between post-it notes and other marginalia implements as it causes the same amount of harm. One respondent presents an interesting reflection:

The group who had a negative view of marginalia considered it a form of vandalism that harms both the book and the experience of future readers. According to their responses, those who use marginalia while reading or studying negatively impact future users’ reading and studying experience. The respondents believe marginalia is distracting, intrusive, and detrimental to others' reading comprehension. When reading a library book with notes in the margins, the reader is presented with someone else's opinions, which can interfere with their interpretation and hinder their ability to form their own opinions.

The respondents’ idea that marginalia negatively impacts others is based on the view of marginalia as an ‘individualistic behavior’. By writing in library books, the writer is only thinking about themselves. Marginalia is the trace of an egotistical reader that has no thought about anyone other than themselves. According to respondents, marginalia holds no value except to the writer, and the writer is careless about the consequences of their actions and only focuses on their reading and learning with no notion of anyone else.

The question of ‘ownership’ also influences the respondents' negative reactions. The respondents do not appreciate the possessiveness displayed by marginalia writers. When writing or marking library books, the users assume liberties and rights to books that do not belong to them. Multiple respondents state that if you want to write in books, buy your own!

The negative reactions in the answers revolve around marginalia as a sign of disregard toward the library and library property and negatively impacting resources. Marginalia damages books, and to ensure that all library users have access to clean books, vandalized books need to be discarded and new ones acquired. This is costly, not only for the library but also for society and the climate.

But almost even more annoying is when borrowers do not remove their little bookmarks/postit notes that stick out of closed books and are used as bookmarks for particular paragraphs. I experience that much more clearly as annoying as a librarian, as it is NOTICEABLE much more than marginalia when it is visible without opening the book.
5.5 Actions

Q19 asked what the respondents do when encountering books with marginalia. Six categories were provided, and the respondents could choose multiple categories. The question generated 229 answers.

![Figure 5. Actions.](image)

Personal opinion and judgment influence how respondents deal with marginalia. Primarily, the respondents' actions are based on the extent of marginalia. If there is ‘too much’, the book is weeded based on the individual’s subjective opinion and experience. If there is not too much marginalia, the book is returned to the shelf and kept in circulation.

Removing marginalia only seems to be a viable option if it is strictly necessary or if the number of books with marginalia is manageable. One respondent discusses, based on their experience, how different libraries deal with marginalia:

När jag arbetade på folkbibliotek brukade jag sudda i t.ex. språkläroböcker där det skrivits. På universitetsbibliotek är det så omfattande att det inte skulle finnas tid att gå igenom & åtgärda alla böcker det gäller.16

---

16 When I worked at a public library, I used to erase language textbooks where it had been written. In university libraries, it is so extensive that there would be no time to go through & fix all the books that apply.
5.6 Understanding

Statement (Q20): I understand why users write, mark, scribble, etc., in library books.

The respondents who state that they understand why readers use marginalia believe that it serves as a study technique. However, this does not mean that they approve of the practice. Instead, as one respondent summarizes: “[It is an] egoistic study technique.”

Library users utilize marginalia in all forms to facilitate the reading, learning, and study of books and texts. Marginalia in library books is evidence of a learning process, and the respondents, in their roles as library staff at university libraries, express an understanding of marginalia as a byproduct of learning.

However, most respondents dislike the practice; from their perspective, it is proof of an egotistical individual and reader. By writing, marking, scribbling, etc., in library books, the reader is taking liberties that are not acceptable. Marginalia indicates that the writer strongly disregards the library as an institution and ignores future readers' autonomy.

Jag har stor förståelse, MEN det är inte ok att de gör det! Men boken är deras studiematerial, de skriver och antecknar för att fånga tankar, förstärka något, fundera. Man läser och tänker med penna i hand. De borde bara ha bättre studieteknik för att inte skriva i boken.17

---

17 I have great sympathy, BUT it is not ok that they do it! But the book is their study material; they write and take notes to capture thoughts, reinforce something, and contemplate. You read and think with a pen in hand. They should have [a] better study technique to avoid writing in the book.
Some respondents contemplated how conscious the decision behind marginalia is. While, from the respondents' perspective, marginalia is a sign of a disregard towards the library, its books, and future readers, the reason behind it might not be a conscious decision. Instead, marginalia might be an action in the spur of the moment, and the marginalia writer might forget that they do not own the book they are reading. Therefore, the marginalia of some might be an unintentional consequence of a too-immersive reading experience. However, this is a sentiment shared by a few.

Instead, the writer is aware of what they are doing and that it is wrong, but as one respondent writes: “the end justifies the means.” There is too much to gain from marginalia. For example, it facilitates learning and can positively affect retention and memorization, which can contribute to the student understanding a complex subject, acing the exam, and ultimately getting a good grade. The possibility of academic success is a greater incentive than the possible threat of getting caught. For, in reality, how plausible is it to get caught? Marginalia is, for the most part, an anonymous offense. Therefore, the marginalia writer, although aware that they are making a transgression, disregards both written and unwritten rules to further their success without reflecting on the consequences.

Alternatively, the use of marginalia and the reason why some feel it is okay to write in library books is, as one respondent writes, because readers regard library loans as temporary ownership and therefore assume they have the right to treat the book however they want. When writing marginalia, the writer does not consider that the book does not belong to them and will eventually have to be returned. Instead, while writing, the book belongs to the reader; therefore, they can do whatever they want.

Other respondents contemplate that a lack of money might drive readers to write in books. As the population examined works at university libraries, most users are students and might not have the same financial stability as others. Textbooks might be too expensive for them to justify the purchase, and in some cases, a textbook might only be used for one class. Consequently, instead of buying their own books, which the students can mark however they want without repercussions, they borrow the books from the library and disregard the library's rules.

However, not all respondents believe that a lack of money drives some to write in library books; instead, it is a form of laziness and an unwillingness to pay for the material. One respondent writes:

Jag kan förstå varför man vill stryka under texten, men inte varför man tycker sig ha rätt till att göra det direkt i källan och inte på en kopia. Tror inte det har att göra med att personen inte har möjligheten att ta kopior av ekonomiska skäl, det har de flesta, utan det handlar mer om att de inte vill behöva lägga ut någonting för egen räkning.18

---

18 I can understand why you would want to underline the text, but why do you think you have the right to do it directly in the source and not on a copy. I don’t think it has to do with the person not being able to make copies for financial reasons, most people do, but it is more about them not wanting to use their own money.
Respondents also express that they believe that marginalia is a sign that the writer disregards the core values and norms of (in this case, Swedish) society. By writing in library books, the individual ignores that the library’s resources are negatively affected. Buying new copies is inevitable when writing or marking library books, but no libraries have unlimited budgets. By not respecting the library’s sources, the marginalia writer is hurting the overall library population (and, in part, the whole population of the society). One respondent declares that writing or marking library books is evidence of a “bad upbringing”, and readers who write in library books have never been taught to be careful of and cherish library books.

Nevertheless, there will always exist those who see merit in that which others scorn. One respondent enthusiastically explains their positive understanding of marginalia:

“För att de ANVÄNDER böckerna. Det är en hjälp för att lära sig i väldigt många fall! Det betyder att de har tagit till sig boken och jobbat med den, vilket i sin tur betyder att världen går framåt och rullar med ny kunskap. (...) Det händer också att användare skriver som [sic] korta recensioner eller hälsningar i böckerna till läsaren som kommer efter, och det är ju något av det finaste av allt! Att dela läsupplevelsen på det sättet är ju fantastiskt!19”

19 Because they USE the books. It is an aid to learning in many cases. This means that they have taken the book to heart and worked with it, which in turn means that the world is moving forward and rolls with new knowledge. It also happens that users write small reviews or greetings in the books to the reader who comes after, and that is one of the nicest things of all! Sharing the reading experience in that way is fantastic!
6 Discussion and Analysis

This chapter will discuss and analyze the study's findings, drawing on the previous research and theoretical framework. The chapter's structure will follow the research questions, making it easily navigable.

RQ1: What are the experiences and opinions of library staff towards marginalia in library books?

RQ2: What kind of routines and guidelines exist at libraries, and how do library staff utilize them in their encounters with marginalia?

RQ3: How do the results of my research relate to the assumptions of previous literature about library staff and marginalia?

6.1 RQ1: Experiences and Opinions

Marginalia is a common phenomenon that library staff regularly encounter in library books. From the perspective of library staff, marginalia is all that is added to the page by readers: verbal or non-verbal additions made by marginalia implementations such as pens, pencils, highlighters, etc., or objects added to the page, such as post-it notes.

In contrast to the library staff's broad understanding of marginalia, researchers are more restrictive. Sherman (2008) defines marginalia as a body of writing; Jackson (2001) as original discursive notes expressing a reaction or opinion of a text. Bourne (2017) states that marginalia, in its strictest sense, refers to the marks written in the margins of the page. In its broader sense, marginalia is all written marks on any part of the text.

For researchers, in some cases, there is an advantage to restricting the definition of marginalia to encompass as narrow an understanding as possible; it facilitates their research. There is no value in that which carries no relevance for the researcher. Furthermore, if all marks left by readers were categorized as marginalia, it would create a Sisyphean task for the researcher to sort through the material. Therefore, occasionally, a narrow definition is necessary.

In comparison, there is no need for library staff to differentiate between different types of marks used by readers. There is no need to categorize the marginalia according to Adler and Van Doren's (1972) list. It is more beneficial for libraries to broaden the definition and understanding of marginalia. There is no point in differentiating and categorizing different types of marginalia if the general practice is deemed a vandalistic behavior that needs to be removed and prevented.

To answer the study’s overarching question: yes, library staff's opinions towards marginalia are, for the most part, negative. However, surprisingly, there are positive opinions of marginalia and the help it is perceived to bring to readers and students.
Library staff holds positive opinions toward marginalia if it is deemed a by-product of an academic process and evidence of an active reading process. The idea that marginalia is a consequence of an active reading process aligns with the beliefs of Colclough (2011) that those who read with a pen choose to engage with the text actively.

According to Steiner (1996), marginalia is the active trace of a reading process, and for library staff, this evidence of productivity influences positive opinion. Despite the damage marginalia cause to the book, the benefits to the reader are deemed more important; the user’s needs are prioritized over keeping the book clean. For some library staff, “dirt” in books is a sign of use, and it is evidence that someone has found value in the book and its content. To summarize the idea of one respondent: marginalia is a sign that new knowledge has been acquired and that the world is moving forward. However, most library staff consider marginalia vandalism and have a negative opinion of the practice.

### 6.1.1 Marginalia as ‘matter out of place’

Cohen (1973) describes vandalism as “neither a precise behavioral description nor a recognizable label, but a label attached to certain types of behavior under certain conditions” (p. 23). Cohen's explanation of vandalism, a label attached to behavior under certain conditions, is coherent with Douglas’ idea of ‘dirt as matter out of place’ as a concept or phenomenon dictated by the classification in use. What is vandalism and what is dirty depends on the context in which the vandalistic behavior, the dirt, appears. For some library staff, marginalia in library books is an act of vandalism; it is dirt.

Library staff that expresses negative emotions about marginalia base, in large, their opinions on the perception that marginalia ‘does not belong in library books’. Marginalia is, so to speak, ‘matter out of place’ and can, according to Douglas’ (1966/1991) theoretical framework, be classified as dirt. What dirt is, depends on the classification in use, and marginalia goes against the classification of what a modern library is and how library books should be handled. While marginalia has been a phenomenon encouraged and taught through the ages, the need to discourage marks in books became apparent with the introduction of public libraries. As Jackson (2001) explains, with libraries becoming communal on a large scale, the need to ensure the pristine condition of books became pressing.

The modern view of public libraries in the Western world was introduced during the nineteenth century; since then, the form and purpose of libraries have primarily been unchanged. Therefore, the classification used to define libraries, the rules and norms that dictate what is allowed and not, and their societal purpose has been unchanged. According to Douglas (1966/1991), classification aims to eliminate undesirable elements, and dirty objects are seen as a threat to the established classification and are brought into order by being denounced. Marginalia, as undesirable addition to library books, is classified as dirt by library staff because it goes against the order of libraries. Marginalia disturbs the purity of libraries and books; therefore, the practice is dirty, impure, and polluted.
Based on Douglas’ theories, Ditlevsen and Andersen (2021) argue that there are two distinct ways for objects to become impure and dirty in the eyes of the observer, either through imparted impurity or incomplete impurity. Imparted impurity describes an object that has become impure because something has been transferred to it which does not belong. This can explain why marginalia is considered impure by library staff; marginalia, something that does not belong, has been ‘transferred’ to the book.

However, I do not feel that the term imparted impurity fully encapsulates why marginalia is considered impure in the eyes of library staff. Instead, I propose a term inspired by Ditlevsen and Andersen: transformative impurity. While, yes, marginalia is something transferred that does not belong in the book, this does not fully explain the negative reactions. The negative reactions expressed by library staff are based on how the book and future readers have been violated. The book is forever changed, and succeeding readers will never have the opportunity to encounter the book’s original form. It is this transformation that library staff most dislike about the phenomenon of marginalia.

Library staff’s feelings of resentment of the transformative effect of marginalia can be explained by Tankard and Spedding’s (2021) argument that when a reader writes in a book, an implicit moral and legal claim has been made about the book. By writing or marking a library book, the reader appropriates the book’s intellectual content for future readers. The marginalia has changed the book, and future readers will never have access to the original, clean book.

Fajkovic (2012) argues that marginalia is a communication between one reader to another; marginalia is an extra layer attached to the primary text, interfering with the readers’ attempt to comprehend the text. Marginalia forces itself into the primary communication between the text and the reader, interfering with the readers’ independent interpretation of the text. Fajkovic’s idea of marginalia as communication between readers is similar to Jackson’s (2012) statement of how, historically, marginalia has been seen as a three-way communication between the author, the reader, and the unknown future reader. This transformative consequence of marginalia interfering with the communication between the author and the reader is the cause behind library staff's negative reactions toward marginalia.

The moment a reader chooses to leave marks, the book, an object clean from all signs but the intended text of the author, is altered to something impure. The book is transformed into a new, impure object when put back into circulation. The book has not only been imparted with impurity but also transformed and is no longer the neutral, pure object the library wishes to provide readers. Even if it is possible to remove the marginalia, the book has still been transformed into something ‘other’ than its pristine, clean form. In conclusion, as a viable option to describe library staffs’, and others’, opinions toward marginalia, I suggest the introduction of the concept of transformative impurity: an object can become impure if something is transferred to it which does not belong and which transforms the object’s future use.
6.2 RQ2: Routines and Guidelines

Through my research, I have found a lack of established routines and guidelines for handling marginalia, and this lack of clear direction affects library staff. Few respondents reported working in libraries with specific policies addressing ‘marginalia’. The term marginalia is not commonly known outside of academic circles; therefore, the lack of mentions of the term is not surprising. However, I was surprised that there are hardly any mentions of users' writing, marking, scribbling, etc., in library books and how this phenomenon should be handled. In the few instances when guidelines do discuss the phenomenon, they mainly discuss what should be done with the affected book or the marginalia writer.

The lack of precise routines and guidelines in libraries creates uncertainty. According to Douglas (1966/1991), pollution behaviors that transgress established boundaries must be categorized to maintain order and reduce conflict. Therefore, pollution behaviors such as writing in library books must be sanctioned to handle the disorder caused by marginalia. However, enforcing conformity and preventing disorder is impossible without clear routines and guidelines. The respondents' displeasure and uncertainty directly result from the inability to sanction offenders and create order in the face of disorder.

According to Wuthnow et al. (1984), when a group's collective identity is threatened, it ritually persecutes the individuals that cause the threat. The library staff's uncertainty and desire for clarity regarding the handling of marginalia and the offender indicate that the library's collective identity and staff are threatened due to the lack of routines and guidelines. Marginalia in library books is evidence of an individual not conforming to the group identity and actively disregarding the established rules and norms that dictate the relationship between the library and its users. The moral boundary of the library is under threat. To fix this, according to Douglas (1966/1991), people need to take action to restore order and reaffirm the classification by either cleaning up the situation or persecuting the offender. Library staff cannot restore order and reaffirm the library's classification and identity without explicit routines and guidelines.

As to why there is a lack of routines and guidelines, Cohen's (1973) explanation of how some vandalism is 'written off' because the behavior and property destruction is inevitable and hard to combat can be used. The elusive nature of marginalia and its practitioners makes it hard to punish offenders, so the vandalism is written off. To a degree, marginalia is accommodated and accepted by libraries; it is seen as an inevitable consequence of providing books to a large group of people. The elusiveness of the act, the difficulty of catching offenders, and ‘writing off’ the vandalistic behavior as inevitable and tolerable result in the difficulty of establishing practical routines and guidelines.

It is important to note that not all libraries or staff believe marginalia should be strictly prohibited. Some libraries view marginalia as valuable and even incorporate it into their collections; therefore, they focus not on preventing the phenomenon but on documenting and preserving instances of marginalia. However, this process is usually reserved for books of significant age, cultural and historical importance or marginalia written by notable individuals; and not for marginalia by ‘ordinary’ readers.
6.3 RQ3: Assumptions

My study found that most respondents (68.7%) had negative feelings about marginalia, while only 9.3% had positive feelings. A considerable portion (22%) were unsure about their feelings.

The survey revealed a divide in opinion, with some expressing a strong dislike for how marginalia damages books and reading experiences for future readers. Those with negative opinions saw marginalia as a sign of disrespect towards the library and its books, and the people who engaged in the practice were labeled as egoistic and poorly raised. The respondents expressed hopelessness and frustration, wondering why library users engage in this behavior.

These feelings align very clearly with the assumptions made in previous literature. But can you say that library staff is hostile toward marginalia (Jackson, 2004), that it torments them (Lerer, 2012), that they frown upon (Ramdarshan Bold & Wagstaff, 2017) and condemn the practice (Fajkovic & Björneborn, 2014)? For some library staff, these assumptions correctly describe their feelings and attitudes toward marginalia. However, it is impossible to proclaim that all library staff possess such negative notions.

Instead, my findings have discovered that some library staff accepts marginalia and delight in stumbling upon it in library books. For those that work with older collections and whose job is to catalog and preserve the marginalia they encounter, marginalia is an accepted and exciting phenomenon because of its historical and cultural significance. However, some find delight in the marginalia of ‘ordinary’ readers.

Library staff, whose attitudes are positive toward the marginalia of modern readers, express joy at the apparent use of the book that marginalia exhibits. From their perspective, it is a study technique that facilitates the understanding of the text. This idea is supported by Adler (1940), which states that readers are more likely to understand the content of a text if they utilize annotation habits during the reading process. Furthermore, marginalia used as a study aid can have value for other readers, which from the perspective of the library staff, is a positive interaction between reader and book and reader to reader.

In summary, while previous literature has captured the negative assumptions held by some library staff towards marginalia, my research has demonstrated that the attitudes of library staff are diverse and nuanced. It is crucial to recognize that while some library staff may harbor negative feelings toward marginalia, others appreciate its significance and view it as a positive phenomenon. The findings of this study provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between library staff and marginalia, highlighting the complexity of the subject area.
7 Conclusions

The results of my study have revealed that marginalia is common, especially in an academic setting. Library staff encounter marginalia regularly in library books; however, there is a lack of specific mentions of marginalia or even mentions that marking, writing, or scribbling in library books is forbidden in the routines and guidelines. For some, this creates uncertainty and frustration; they feel at a loss for how to handle the large amount of marginalia they encounter. Others feel that marginalia will always exist because it is an inevitable consequence of libraries; therefore, routines and guidelines are unnecessary.

While, at large, library staff's opinions toward marginalia are negative, the feelings and opinions it raises are more complex than previously assumed. For some, nothing is positive about the practice; marginalia is a despicable practice performed by egoistical readers. The negative-worded assumptions of previous literature perfectly describe their opinions of the practice; they are tormented, hostile, consistently object, and frown upon the practice. Previous literature is, to a degree, correct: (some) library staff do condemn and loathe the practice.

From the perspective of the negative library staff, it is the change the book undergoes as an object when marginalia is added and how this has irrevocable effects on future readers that cause the negative emotions. I have, therefore, with inspiration from Ditlevsen and Andersen’s (2021) terms of imparted and incomplete impurity, coined the term transformative impurity to describe why library staff is negative towards the practice. Ditlevsen and Andersen base their terms on Mary Douglas’ theories of purity and impurity and how they can be used to understand and explain why people define particular objects as dirty while others are deemed clean.

With the term transformative impurity, I aim to describe and explain that it is the transformative character of marginalia that library staff rejects. Library staff does not only classify marginalia as impure because it has been imparted on the book. Instead, it is the change of the book, both as an object and its future potential use, that is why marginalia is deemed impure and consequently detested.

However, the negative opinions are not reflective of all library staff. Some are conflicted about the practice. They understand why readers do it; from their perspective, it is a study technique, but they cannot accept the practice. Others fully support the practice. For them, marginalia is a positive sign that the book has been used. Library staff that is positively inclined toward marginalia are focused on a user-centered library; they believe that, as a reading practice, marginalia carries value for the reader and it advances the reader as an individual. This is the library's core mission: to further knowledge. This does not align with the negative-worded assumptions of previous literature.

In conclusion, to answer the overarching thesis question, what are the attitudes of Swedish university library staff towards marginalia in library books: my research has shown that the relationship between library staff and marginalia is more complicated than previous literature states, just as marginalia is diverse, library staff’s attitudes are diverse.
7.1 Limitations and Further research

There are, of course, limitations in the execution of my research study regarding certain aspects like accessing the research literature, the literature review, the choice of method, and the sampling frame. Firstly, I can only access research in English or Swedish; therefore, my view and knowledge about marginalia are from a Westernized, English, and Swedish perspective.

Second, because of the broadness of the subject area, I have chosen to only focus on marginalia in an academic context and narrowed down my sampling frame to only include library staff at university libraries. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be used to state a general conclusion about all library staff’s perspectives on marginalia.

Only university library staff in Sweden have been used as a base for the sample. Therefore, it is impossible to generalize all library staff’s thoughts, feelings, and attitudes toward marginalia in library books. However, my aim was to better understand a phenomenon in a setting that lacks research; and hopefully, my research can become a stepping stone to an expansion into the field of library staff’s experience of marginalia.

Marginalia is a broad area of research, and there is still much to explore. Although my study focused on the critical question of library staff and marginalia, it could only examine a small portion of a vast and diverse population. Therefore, it should be viewed as a mere indication of a much larger discovery.

There is potential to expand on the findings of my study through further research. To gain a deeper understanding, conducting interviews with library staff would be fascinating. During my research, I discovered that while a questionnaire helped collect data from a large group of individuals, it did not allow me to explore the answers in greater depth. Therefore, it would be intriguing to delve further into participants’ responses.

An exciting avenue to explore would be to increase the sample size and examine library staff's attitudes beyond the borders of Sweden. It would also be fascinating to delve into the potential differences in attitudes and responses between university and public library staff and investigate the underlying reasons for disparities.

Exploring why readers write in books is also a fascinating topic of study. Fajkovic's (2012) Master's thesis has made significant progress in this area, but there is still much to uncover. Even library staff are intrigued by this topic, making it an exciting field for further investigation. Including library staff and users in a study would provide a deeper understanding. With ample opportunities to delve into libraries and marginalia, much remains to be discovered.
Reference list


Appendix A – Email to the libraries

Hej,

Jag heter Johanna Eliasson och skriver mitt examensarbete i biblioteks- och informationsvetenskap vid Högskolan i Borås. Jag kontaktar er angående en enkätundersökning som jag genomför för att samla in empirisk data till min uppsats.

Enkätundersökningen centrerar kring bibliotekarieperspektiv på marginalia i biblioteksböcker. Ordet marginalia kan definieras som “anteckningar skrivna i marginalen av böcker”. Jag använder marginalia som ett samlingsord för alla handskrivna, fysiska spår läsare lämnar efter sig i biblioteksböcker. Med det menar jag alla typer av klotter, kommentarer, understrykningar, anteckningar, markeringar på eller omkring i texten i biblioteksböcker utförda av läsare med hjälp av blyertspennor, bläckpennor, överstrykningspennor eller färgpennor.


Länk till enkät:

All data som samlas in är anonym och inga personuppgifter sparas. När uppsatsen är färdig och godkänn kommer den finnas öppen och tillgänglig i den vetenskapliga databasen DiVA Portal.

Om ni har några frågor om enkäten eller studien kan ni kontakta mig:

Johanna Eliasson
S192791@student.hb.se

eller min handledare:

Mats Dahlström
mats.dahlstrom@hb.se

Tack för er hjälp och tid.

Med vänliga hälsningar
Johanna Eliasson
Translation of email:

Hello,

My name is Johanna Eliasson, and I am writing my master's thesis in library and information science at the University of Borås. I am contacting you regarding a survey I am conducting to collect empirical data for my thesis.

The survey concerns librarians’ thoughts, opinions, and experiences of *marginalia* in library books. The word *marginalia* can be defined as “notes written in the margins of books.” I use *marginalia* as an umbrella term for all handwritten, physical traces readers leave behind in library books. By that, I mean all kinds of scribbles, comments, underlines, notes, and markings on or around the text of library books made by readers using pencils, ink pens, highlighters, or colored pencils.

I have discovered a lack of librarians’ perspectives on *marginalia* in the research area. I hope with my essay to be able to contribute to an increased understanding of the phenomenon. To achieve that, I need to collect empirical data and am therefore contacting you. I would appreciate your help distributing the survey to all librarians and library assistants at your library. The survey has 25 questions and takes 10–15 minutes to complete.

**Link to survey:**

All data collected is anonymous, and no personal data is saved. When the thesis is finished and approved, it will be open and available in the scientific database DiVA Portal.

If you have any questions about the survey or the study, you can contact me:

Johanna Eliasson  
S192791@student.hb.se

Or my supervisor:

Mats Dahlström  
mats.dahlstrom@hb.se

Thank you for your help and time.

With kind regards,  
Johanna Eliasson
Appendix B – Survey

Bibliotekariers upplevelse av marginalia i biblioteksböcker

Med den här enkäten är jag intresserad av bibliotekariers åsikter, tankar och upplevelser av *marginalia* i biblioteksböcker. Ordet marginalia kan definieras som “anteckningar skrivna i marginalen av böcker”.

För min studie är marginalia ett samlingsord för alla handskrivna, fysiska spår läsare lämnar efter sig. Med det menar jag: alla typer av klotter, kommentarer, understrykningar, anteckningar, markeringar på eller omkring texten i bibliotekets böcker utförda av läsare med hjälp av blyertspennor, bläckpennor, övertryckningspennor eller färgpennor.

Svaren till den här enkäten kommer användas som empiriskt underlag till min masteruppsats i biblioteks- och informationsvetenskap vid Högskolan i Borås.

För att svara på den här enkäten behöver du vara anställd som bibliotekarie eller biblioteksassistent på ett universitets- eller högskolebibliotek.

Enkäten består av 25 frågor och tar cirka 10–15 minuter att genomföra.

Din medverkan i undersökningen är anonym och inga personuppgifter kommer samlas in. Undersökningen är frivillig och du kan när som helst avbryta enkäten och inga uppgifter kommer sparas.

Har du några frågor eller funderingar kan du kontakta mig på s192791@student hb.se

Vänliga hälsningar
Johanna Eliasson

Tack för din medverkan!

Det är möjligt att hoppa över frågor om du inte vill eller kan svara på frågan.
Exempel på hur marginalia kan se ut i biblioteksböcker.

Del 1. Generell information

1. Är du anställd som
   - Bibliotekarie
   - Biblioteksassistent
   - Om annat, specificera

2. Hur gammal är du?
   - 20-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - 50-59
   - 60+
3. Är du anställd på ett
   ☐ Universitetsbibliotek
   ☐ Högskolebibliotek
   ☐ Använd, vänligen specificera

Del 2. Förekomst av marginalia

4. Har du i ditt arbete lagt märke till marginalia i bibliotekets böcker?
   ☐ Ja
   ☐ Nej
   ☐ Vet ej

5. Om du har lagt märke till marginalia, vilken kategori tillhör majoriteten av böckerna?
   ☐ Kurslitteratur
   ☐ Monografier
   ☐ Referenslitteratur
   ☐ Periodika
   ☐ Broschyrer
   ☐ Om annat, specificera
6. Vad för typ av marginalia har du lagt märke till i bibliotekets böcker? Det är möjligt att välja mer än ett svarsalternativ

- Understrykningar
- Enstaka ord
- Längre kommentarer
- Text markerad med överstrykningspena eller liknande
- Översättningar
- Klotter, t.ex. teckningar, pennstreck
- Referenser till andra författare, böcker
- Sammanfattningar av bokens innehåll
- Om annat, specificera

7. Uppskattningsvis när du arbetar i biblioteket, hur ofta stöter du på marginalia i bibliotekets böcker?

- Varje arbetstid
- Några gånger i veckan
- Varannan vecka
- En gång i månaden
- En gång i halvåret
- En gång per år
- Aldrig

8. Har du själv någonsin skrivit, markerat, klottrat etc. i biblioteksböcker?

- Ja
- Nej
- Vet ej/Vill ej svara

Om ja, varför?
Del 3. Rutiner och riktlinjer

9. Har biblioteket du arbetar på några interna riktlinjer för hur böcker med marginalia ska hanteras?
   - Ja
   - Nej
   - Vet ej
   Om ja, vad för?

10. Är du nöjd med bibliotekets riktlinjer gällande hanteringen av böcker med marginalia?
    - Ja
    - Nej
    - Vet ej
    Om nej, varför inte?

11. Har biblioteket du arbetar på rutin att ersätta böcker enbart på grund av omfattningen av marginalia i dem?
    - Ja
    - Nej
    - Vet ej
12. Har biblioteket du arbetar på några rutiner för att förhindra att användare skriver, markerar, klottrar, etc. i böcker?

- Ja
- Nej
- Vet ej

Om ja, vad för rutiner?

13. Anser du att biblioteket skulle kunna göra mer för att förhindra marginalia?

- Ja
- Nej

Om ja, vad skulle det då vara?

14. Har biblioteket du jobbar på information i lånerreglerna om att det är förbjudet att skriva, markera, klottra etc. i bibliotekets böcker?

- Ja
- Nej
- Vet ej
15. Har biblioteket du jobbar på skyltar, informationsblad, posters etc. i biblioteksrummet om att det är förbjudet att skriva, markera, klotta etc. i bibliotekets böcker?

- Ja
- Nej
- Vet ej

Del 4. Tankar och känslor

16. Skulle du beskriva dina känslor om marginalia som

- Positiva
- Negativa
- Vet ej


- Leden
- Irriterad
- Arg
- Besviken
- Frusterad
- Neutral
- Förvånad
- Intresserad
- Upprymd
- Glad
- Annat
18. Vad får du för tankar när du stötter på böcker med marginalia?


- Gör en notering i bokens katalogpost
- Försöker få bort markeringarna, t.ex. genom att sudda
- Försöker ta reda på vem det är som har markerat boken
- Tar bort boken från bibliotekskatalog och slänger den
- Jag gör ingenting
- Annat

Del 5. Ställningstagande

I den här frågan kommer du få ta ställning till ett påstående enligt en skala från 1 till 5, där 1 = Håller inte alls med, och 5 = Håller helt med.

20. Jag har förståelse till varför användare skriver, markerar, klottrar, etc. i biblioteksböcker 1

- Håller inte alls med
- 2
- 3 Varken eller
- 4
- 5 Håller helt med

21. Varför tror du användare skriver, markerar, klottrar etc. i biblioteksböcker?
I de här frågan kommer du få ta ställning till ett påstående enligt en skala från 1 till 5, där 1 = Håller inte alls med, och 5 = Håller helt med.

22. Jag anser att marginalia skriven av en känd person eller i äldre böcker med proveniens skiljer sig från marginalia skriven av biblioteksanvändare i biblioteksböcker.
   - 1 Håller inte alls med
   - 2
   - 3 Varken eller
   - 4
   - 5 Håller helt med

23. Jag tycker att biblioteket bör göra sig av med alla böcker som innehåller marginalia, oavsett bokens ålder
   - 1 Håller inte alls med
   - 2
   - 3 Varken eller
   - 4
   - 5 Håller helt med

24. Jag tycker att alla böcker med marginalia bör bevaras, oavsett bokens ålder
   - 1 Håller inte alls med
   - 2
   - 3 Varken eller
   - 4
   - 5 Håller helt med

Del 6. Avslut

25. Finns det något du vill tillägga om marginalia som den här ankäten inte har tagit upp?
Appendix C – Part of coding for Q18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text data</th>
<th>Main Points</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Jag undrar hur låntagaren har tänkt när hela boken är underskruten med bläckpenna eller understrykningspenna, om det överhuvudtaget finns en tanke på att någon ska läsa boken efter? Eller att det tvårtom ska vara en hjälp för nästa läsare? Jag tänker att det är helt ok att kladda i sina egna böcker, men förstår inte när man gör det i biblioteksböcker. Tycker det är väldigt egoistiskt när man tänker på att böckerna tillhör oss alla. | Tänker inte på att någon ska läsa boken efter  
- förstör för andra med understrykningar med bläckpenna/highlighter  
Frågande om det ska vara en hjälp för nästa?  
Ok med egna böcker - men inte med biblioteksböcker  
Egoistiskt - bibliotekets böcker tillhör alla | Negative impact on others  
Individualistic  
Ownership  
Disregard of the library | The role of the library is to provide books and materials to users; and all of the materials will be shared between everyone. The communal aspect of the library creates certain ideas of what is to be expected. To be able to provide books to as many users as possible, it is important from the library’s side to preserve the books. Therefore, marginalia as a habit cannot be encouraged. The books are library property which patrons then can borrow; in a sense the books belong to the patrons, in another sense the books belong to the library. |
| Tycker det är respektlöst mot andra studenter som ska läsa samma bok! Att man bara tänker på dig själv och sin egen inlärning! | Respektlöst  
Förstör för andra  
Egoistiskt  
Fokuserar bara på sin egen inlärning | Disrespectful  
Negative impact on others  
Individualistic | |
| Beror på hur sön- derklottrad boken är, om det är flera sidor därär markpennan har varit framme kan det bli en stor suck. | Skicket bestämmer  
Märkpenna = negativt  
- omfattningen påverkar  
En stor suck | Marginalia implement | The implement, the object used, to write marginalia decides how the marginalia is perceived. There is a larger understanding towards individuals using pencils as implements, as the traces of pencils can be erased. By using pencils, it is possible to reverse the traces of marginalia and therefore restore the book |