

A photograph of two women in conversation on a subway train. The woman on the left is wearing glasses and a blue top, while the woman on the right is wearing a grey tank top and holding a smartphone. The background shows other passengers and the interior of the train.

Ask me what I'm reading

Knud Wassermann

„Subway Book Review“ Sets Digital Monuments for Books

The Instagram account „Subway Book Review“ shows once again how print – in this case printed books – and social media benefit from each other. What started in New York in 2013 has now conquered 20 major cities around the globe, and sheds light on what people read on the subway, focusing on the readers and their very personal story with the book.

While researching the use of media in connection with e-books, I first came across the phenomenon that printed books are seen as identity-building among young people. With a printed book under the arm of their environment, they want to convey what they are currently working on and thus also enter into conversation with others – because in the e-book, the book title disappears into digital nirvana.

The other day I came across the Instagram account [„Subway Book Review“](#), where people who take the subway and read a book get a chance to speak. Even in the smartphone age, you meet people on the subway who are completely absorbed in their book – although this cannot be limited to one generation. Uli Beutter Cohen, who comes from Germany and now lives in New York, launched the Instagram account and tries to capture the feelings of the readers.

Touchpoint Book

It was probably the open and curious look with which she discovered New York that enabled

her to recognize this phenomenon. She was fascinated by the fact that people reveal their emotions when they read in public – and it was precisely these moments that she wanted to capture and portray the readers. „A book that you read in public says a lot about your own identity. Talking about a book is an ideal starting point for getting to know someone.“ This is why Uli Beutter Cohen tirelessly roams the platforms and cars of the New York subway – her preferred line is the „Q“.

In 2013 she posted her first interviews on Instagram, and six years later „Subway Book Review“ has 132,000 fans on Instagram alone – including stars such as actress Emma Roberts, author Phoebe Robinson and writer Elizabeth Gilbert.

Touching personal stories

„Subway Book Review“ is of course about books – but the relatively long texts are mainly about the readers and what the book means to them. Eight out of ten people whom Uli Beutter Cohen addresses are enthusiastic about the idea. What emerges from these conversations are sensitive portraits of readers holding their books in front of the camera – accompanied by reviews, book recommendations and touching personal stories. They are thus a snapshot that shows what the interviewee is dealing with – and that is exactly what Uli Beutter Cohen wants to give people the space they need in her account.

The book author Glynnis MacNicol emphasizes to the magazine „Esquire“: „Every New Yorker wrenched his neck on the subway to find out what someone is reading right now. Uli Beutter Cohen tapped into this intellectual voyeurism and used it to create this committed platform. I was thrilled when I discovered my book one day. But what really surprised me was how the mention of my book boosted sales. In the publishing scene, digital word-of-mouth is now very much appreciated, and it has been recognized that „Subway Book Review“ reaches younger readers in particular.

„Subway Book Review“ goes global

With increasing popularity, „Subway Book Review“ became a global affair and expanded its sphere of activity to Berlin, Milan, Sydney, London, Moscow, Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro. Despite its success, the account is absolutely free of advertising. Uli Beutter Cohen remained true to himself and never got carried away selling the data or plastering the digital space with banners. „We want honest and authentic reporting,“ assures Beutter Cohen and nothing will change in the future.

In this sense, she also took one of the book’s central strengths as a model. Reading a printed book is one of the few moments in modern times when you don’t leave a digital trail. In addition, the book’s lack of multitasking capability forces the reader to pay full attention.

Yours

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