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Booktrust Reading Habits Survey: Executive Summary

Introduction

Booktrust is the UK's largest reading charity. Booktrust believes that no-one should miss out on the life changing benefits that reading can bring. Initiatives such as the national flagship programme 'Bookstart' give free books to families at key stages in their children's lives.

This report presents the results of an England-wide survey of the reading habits of 1500 adults. It examines the relationship between reading habits, attitudes to reading and demographic factors. The findings highlight the need to pursue initiatives to encourage reading (a) from an early age and (b) in disadvantaged areas.

Headline statistics

Significant minorities of adults in England have negative attitudes towards reading:

- Nearly a fifth (18%) never read physical books, and 71% never read e-books.
- A fifth (20%) never buy physical books at all (in a shop or online).
- 36% often start a book but get bored and 35% cannot find the time to read.
- 56% think that the internet and computers will replace books in the next 20 years, the proportion with this view rises to 64% of 18 to 30 year olds.
- 27% prefer the internet and social media to reading books, rising to 56% among 18-30 year olds.
- 45% prefer television and DVDs to reading.

However, substantial sections of the population have more positive attitudes to reading:

- 76% say that reading improves their life, and the same number says it helps to make them feel good.
- 28% of adults read physical books every day, with a further 22% reading them at least weekly.
- 76% prefer to read physical books, only 10% prefer e-books.
- Nearly half (49%) enjoy reading books very much. A further 23% enjoy reading books quite a lot.

Reading, wellbeing and deprivation

People who read books regularly are on average more satisfied with life, happier, and more likely to feel that the things they do in life are worthwhile.

More frequent book readers tend to live in areas of lower deprivation with fewer children living in poverty, while respondents who never read books tend to live in areas of higher deprivation and more children living in poverty.

Reading and socio-economic group

On average, the higher the socio-economic group¹ that someone is in, the more often they read:

- 27% of DEs never read books themselves, compared with 13% of ABs.
- 62% of ABs read daily or weekly, compared with 42% of DEs.

Although most of those who read books say this improves their life and/or makes them feel good, this is more pronounced for higher social-economic groups:

- 83% of ABs feel that reading improves their life, compared to 72% of DEs.
- 85% of ABs say reading helps to make them feel good, compared to 69% of DEs.

In terms of attitudes to digital technology, the lower their social-economic group, the more likely people are to think that the internet and computers will replace books and to prefer TV, DVDs, the internet and social media to reading books.

While the research indicates that those who read more books have a higher socio-economic status than those who do not read, further research would be necessary to identify causality.

Reading history

There is a significant link between reading history, reading habits and reading attitudes. Respondents whose parents encouraged them to read whilst growing up read more as adults. Similarly, those who enjoyed reading at school read significantly more books now than those who did not.

In addition, 89% of respondents whose parents read to them as children read regularly to their own children, compared to 72% of respondents whose parents didn't read to them.

Reading, demographics and the digital age

Across all age groups, women are more frequent readers than men and tend to be more positive about books. Men are more likely to admit they find reading boring and can struggle to find things to read that are interesting to them.

¹ ABs have the highest socio-economic status, followed by C1C2s and then DEs

The groups of respondents who read least frequently are more likely to be male, aged under 30, have lower levels of qualifications and have lower levels of happiness and satisfaction with their lives.

Amongst both women and men, the over 60s read most and the 18 to 30s read least. This difference is most prominent for females: only 18% of women under 30 read every day, compared with nearly half (48%) of women over 60.

Available time is a factor; retired over 60s are likely to have more spare time to read. Other age groups (particularly 30 to 59 year olds) would like to read more but are often too busy.

Technology is another factor; under 30s (especially men) are much more likely to prefer technology to reading books, often agreeing that the internet and computers will replace books in 20 years. They prefer TV, DVDs, the internet and social media to books.

The difference in views is perhaps best summarized in comments from respondents themselves. When asked why they didn't enjoy reading, one respondent said:

“The fact that it is 2013 not 1813. We have electricity now so we can buy DVDs and watch television rather than read books. Books are for an older generation, younger people on the whole do not read books.” [Male, 30-44 years]

When asked why they did enjoy reading, one respondent said:

“I enjoyed [reading] and started at school and never stopped. A better alternative to TV as you can learn more about the characters and subjects.” [Male, 60+]

Conclusion

Overall, the research highlights four justifications for initiatives to encourage reading for pleasure from an early age, particularly among disadvantaged groups:

- People who read books are significantly more likely to be happy and content with their life.
- Most people who read books feel this improves their life. It also makes them feel good.
- People who were read to and encouraged to read as children are significantly more likely to read as adults, both to themselves and to their own children.
- Those who never read books live in areas of greater deprivation and with more children in poverty.