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A great reader takes pleasure in little else

Exploring leisure activities of readers and non-readers in Sweden

Abstract

In this article we explore people's engagement in various leisure activities and to what extent they are also book readers or non-book readers. The study is based on a Swedish national survey from the Gothenburg University SOM-institute, pertaining to media use and habits (n 12 878). We have focused particularly on respondents' leisure activities and cross tabulated the answers with their stated book reading habits. These statistics are examined through a Bourdieuan lens with attention to habitus and capital with consideration of how these matters create varying opportunities to engage in different types of activities. The study is also positioned within the Library and Information Science perspective of critical studies of reading. The findings show that people who engage in arts, culture and media consumption are avid readers to a higher extent compared to the national average. Meanwhile, the largest group of non-readers is found amongst individuals who frequent restaurants, pubs and bars in the evening. The known gender imbalance in reading is also reflected in leisure activities, with reading being more common among those who participate in traditionally female-dominated hobbies like horse riding, whereas it is less prevalent among those engaged in male-oriented pastimes such as tinkering with cars and motorbikes. Generally, people who take part in any of the studied leisure activities are also book readers. This highlights that readers have many interests and are a diverse group of people. It is therefore rarely correct nor helpful to make narrow assumptions about who readers, and indeed non-readers, are.

Keywords: book reading, habitus, culture, leisure activities, social life, domestic practices, critical studies of reading

Introduction

One evening as Elisabeth Bennet stays at Netherfield Hall in Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*, she chooses to read a book instead of joining a card game. This behaviour surprises some of the other members of the party:

Mr Hurst looked at her with astonishment. 'Do you prefer reading to cards?' said he; 'that is rather singular'
 'Miss Eliza Bennet' said Miss Bingley, 'despises cards. She is a great reader and has no pleasure in anything else'.
 'I deserve neither such praise nor such censure,' cried Elisabeth; 'I am not a great reader, and I have pleasure in many things.' (Austen, 1813, p. 83)

Miss Bingley, who sees Elisabeth as her rival in the pursuit of the esteemed Mr Darcy's affection, uses this observation to present Elisabeth as uninteresting, in contrast to the sociable people playing cards like herself. This interaction in a novel more than 200 years old highlights that readers have long been seen in a certain light, perhaps as dull, virtuous or righteous. Rarely as exciting or adventurous. Indeed, to be bookish is often seen as serious, brainy and scholastic, enjoying books over other things (Ross et al., 2018). But is this really the case?

The way reading and readers are perceived can have real consequences. For instance, this can be seen in how assumptions about reading are ingrained in how Swedish cultural policy is expressed and enacted (Lindsköld et al., 2020). Reading, particularly fiction reading, is perceived as widely beneficial and thought to foster empathy, cultural sophistication, to strengthen citizens' ability to participate in a democratic society and contribute to economic growth (Lindsköld et al., 2020; Lundh, 2022). With all this promise placed upon the act of reading, being a reader is seen as being an ideal citizen, while non-readers are seen as problematic (Kann-Rasmussen & Balling, 2015). Cultural narratives also mean that books and reading hold values and norms which can feel alienating or make people less inclined to want to read. For example, reading can be perceived as a feminized activity or be associated with individuals who excel academically and possess a high degree of cultural and economic capital. For those who exist outside of these norms, reading may appear disconnected to them and their lives. Restrictive views of how reading should be carried out can also create feelings of exclusion. In a Swedish interview study, men who identified as non-readers expressed how being labelled poor readers in school and being unable to find interest in the reading material introduced to them made them think that they were not "the reading type" (Scholes & Asplund, 2021).

This analysis is situated within critical studies of reading, an emerging research area in Library and Information Science (Lundh et al., 2022). Within this perspective it is understood that reading does not occur in isolation; rather, it is shaped, interpreted, and enacted within a constellation of social, material, institutional, historical, and political contexts and practices. Studying reading from a critical perspective involves studying it both as a situated practice and critically examining the underlying structures for how reading is understood and carried out (Lundh et al., 2022). In outlining this research area, Lundh, Hedemark and Lindsköld identified seven features of critical studies of reading. This article primarily relates to four of these features. Firstly, "*taking sides with the reader*" which entails exploring how readers are described and the consequences of this. Furthermore, this feature involves critically examining the access to reading material in formats that suit each individual and looking at situations where people are excluded from reading. Secondly, "*understanding reading empirically*", which includes studying reading as it takes place within various circumstances and settings, rather than just working with already established notions of what reading is. This article contributes with new knowledge on the contexts wherein reading occurs in people's lives, as part of a variety of leisure activities and hobbies. Thirdly, "*employing a non-evaluative approach to reading activities and reading*

practices”, which includes moving beyond normative assumptions of reading and just the study of printed books. In this article all types of book reading are explored, and the reading of e-books and audiobooks is also considered as part of reading practices. Fourthly, “*drawing on methodological pluralism*” which means that critical studies of reading aren’t just conducted with one specific research method, instead, different types of methodologies and methods are useful to study reading practices in different ways (Lundh et al., 2022). In this article, existing statistics will be explored from a new angle as we cross-tabulate results which have never been previously compared to gain new insights, and the quantitative material is also reflected upon with a qualitative Bordieuan lens.

This study is set in Sweden, which is one of the European countries with the largest amount of book readers. EU statistics on leisure readers place Swedes fourth, only falling behind Luxembourg, Denmark and Estonia. Norway is also a prolific reading country, at similar levels as their Scandinavian neighbours (Eurostat, 2024). The most influential factor in making someone a reader is higher education. Men and people with lower incomes are less likely to be leisure readers (Ross et al., 2018). At EU level, young people ages 16-29 and women are the groups that read books the most (Eurostat, 2024). Coming from a reading family is also a significant influence in making someone a reader, although reading habits often vary over a lifetime as people enter and exit different life stages (Ross et al., 2018). For elderly people, reading books is associated with maintaining interests and hobbies (Lindberg & Hedemark, 2019). By being offered public library services where librarians deliver books to users’ homes, elderly people continue to foster social connections and a sense of belonging in the world (Lindberg & Hedemark, 2019; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018). Books and reading also helps readers make sense of time and their lives (Rothbauer & Serantes, 2022). Of course, some people read other types of texts regularly, like newspapers, magazines or other longer texts online, and should still be counted as readers (Ross et al., 2018). However, in this study we only consider statistics relating to books, where the different formats printed books, e-books and audiobooks, are included. The survey does not inquire about types of genres or if respondents read fiction or non-fiction, only if they read books in those formats. Reading, like any other leisure activity, is here understood as part of everyday life. This means that the act of reading, or not reading, is negotiated within and affected by everyday temporal complexities (Rothbauer & Serantes, 2022). Ross (1999) has identified that avid readers organise their time and lives to create space for reading, regardless of other responsibilities and activities. Meanwhile, non-readers perceive a lack of time as something that hinders them from reading.

The annual survey study on book reading in Sweden this analysis builds on shows that 81 percent of Swedes aged 16-90 read at least one book in 2024, and 53 percent read books every month or more often (Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). Demographically, we can see that readers are more likely to live in cities than in the countryside, and avid readers are more common among the well-educated with at least a 3-year university degree (Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). Reading is also more common among women than men, 88 percent of Swedish women read books in some format at least once during 2024, while 74 percent of men did the same. Printed books are by far the most popular book format with 75 percent having read them in the past year, with audiobooks (41%) and e-books (24%) growing in popularity. The smallest gender gap can be seen in e-book reading habits. The typical person who does not read books, in this study called a *non-book reader*, in Sweden is a man above 50 years of age of low or medium education and who lives in the countryside or in a small town (Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). Furthermore, studies on daily media habits show that 51 percent of Swedes ages nine to 85 read books in some format every day, that is either as print books, e-books or audiobooks (Ohlsson, 2025). Nearly 30 percent of the population spend more than 30 minutes per day reading printed books. The most common genre among book readers is fiction, which 37 percent read each day. This is followed by course literature

for educational purposes, while non-fiction and children's books are each read by around 10 percent of the population (Ohlsson, 2025).

These studies paint part of the picture of who book-readers are and how many among the Swedish population engage in book-reading in various formats. In this article we will put reading into an everyday context by exploring what leisure activities that book readers as well as non-book readers engage in. This will be conducted with the help of survey data from the Swedish SOM-institute, collected in 2024. By understanding the type of leisure activities which are popular with readers, we may learn more about readers and move beyond preconceived notions of what separates readers and non-readers.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What is the distribution of non-readers, occasional readers and avid readers among people who engage in other leisure activities?

RQ2: Which activities are more common among readers versus non-readers?

The authors will employ a Bourdieuan lens to study the material. Bourdieu's field theory encompasses various concepts, which are useful when studying cultural consumption and social activities. One of the key concepts is habitus, which refers to individuals' learnt or socialized norms that shape their behaviour in different situations (Bourdieu, 2010, 1996, 1993). Habitus functions as a system of dispositions influenced by different forms of capital, such as social, cultural and economic capital. For those who frequently take part in cultural activities, habitus not only strengthens familiarity with cultural expressions but also enhances their cultural capital. Cultural experiences, as well as other life experiences, help the individual understand how to view the world (Bourdieu, 1996, 1993). Cultural capital embodies a cultivated use of language and familiarity with fine culture and a sense of good taste. According to Bourdieu (1996, 1993), cultural capital is therefore considered to consist of knowledge, experiences, ways of speaking, thinking and perceiving things. Another essential concept is social capital, which refers to the network of social connections an individual has. This includes ties to influential people in society, such as relatives in prominent positions, as well as personal connections formed during school years, sports activities, and other social interactions. In essence, the level of social capital depends on the relationships and networks an individual maintains with others (Bourdieu, 1996).

Economic capital encompasses the material assets and fortune an individual or group have access to, and it can be used to strengthen other forms of capital. Economic capital affects a person's position in the social stratification, that is in classes with different power, status and resources, which can lead to social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1996, 1993). Bourdieu's field theory lends itself to analysing people's engagement in reading and other leisure activities through the lens of habitus and cultural, social and economic capital. The possession or lack of said capitals may facilitate or hinder the engagement in different leisure activities. A person's habitus may be instrumental in deciding what leisure activities they are likely to engage with, such as going to the theatre or the pub, sitting quietly reading at home or playing football with friends.

Method and material

This study builds on material collected through the annual Swedish national SOM-survey (Society, Opinion and Media). Since 1986 the survey explores Swedish citizens' attitudes to contemporary issues, their news and media habits, and trust in various institutions and organisations (SOM-institute, 2025). The study is run by the SOM-institute at the University of Gothenburg, in collaboration with other researchers, universities and governmental agencies. The authors of this article are among these collaborators, and we have collectively studied reading habits, library use and trust in libraries through the SOM-survey for several years.

The SOM-survey is sent out each year to 26 250 randomly selected adult habitants of Sweden who are from ages 16 to 90 or above (Andersson et al., 2025). Tax registers are used to ensure that the sample represents the wider Swedish population. Due to the vast number of questions in the study, the survey is divided into seven different questionnaires, each edition is sent to 3 750 individuals. Some questions appear in several questionnaires while others only appear in one. The response rate for each questionnaire is roughly 50 percent. It is harder to get responses from men and from young adults, while women and older adults are more prone to reply. There is no geographical difference in response rates.

In total, the 2024 survey had 12 878 respondents. Most respondents (84, 5%) were born in Sweden, with 2,4 percent born in another Nordic country, 5,4 percent born in another European country and 7,7 percent born outside of Europe. In the 2024 study, 52 percent of the respondents were women and 48 percent men (Andersson et al., 2025). Respondents have the choice between answering the paper survey or using a code to respond to an online version, 28 percent of respondents used the online version in 2024.

This article builds on data collected between September and December 2024. The following survey question is used: “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?”¹. In the different questionnaires this question was followed by 20-36 different types of leisure activities and interests. To gain an overview of a variety of different leisure activities and their relationship to reading, we selected the following 28 activities for this study:

1. Visit library
2. Visit cinema
3. Attend dance performance
4. Visit art exhibition
5. Visit museum
6. Attend theatre
7. Listen to audiobook/talking book
8. Read e-book
9. Listen to music
10. Watch films
11. Watch tv-series
12. Play video games/phone games
13. Sing in a choir/play musical instrument
14. Act in theatre or live-action role-playing (larping)
15. Drawing/painting
16. Take photographs/film
17. Cycling
18. Exercise/work out
19. Horse riding
20. Outdoor/nature activity
21. Attend sporting events
22. Baking/preserving/making jam
23. Tinker with car/motorbike/moped
24. Gardening (in garden or on balcony)
25. Visit restaurant/bar/pub in the evening

¹ The original question in Swedish is: “Hur ofta har du under de senaste 12 månaderna gjort följande?”.

26. Host dinner at home
27. Socialise with friends
28. Read any book

The first 27 leisure activities were cross tabulated with the variable “read any book” to explore how the engagement in different leisure activities correlate with book reading. We have divided the respondents into three groups: those who state that they have not read a book during the past year, those who have read books occasionally (that is, sometime every 12 months, sometime every six months, sometime each quarter) and those who are avid readers (those who have read sometime every month, sometime every week or several times per week). This study can therefore explore how many people who have socialised with friends, have also read books, and equally, how many in this group that are non-book readers, for example. It is worth noting that different people can interpret “read any book” in varying ways, so some respondents may only count printed fiction books, while others will also include their reading of non-fiction, audiobooks, talking books or e-books.

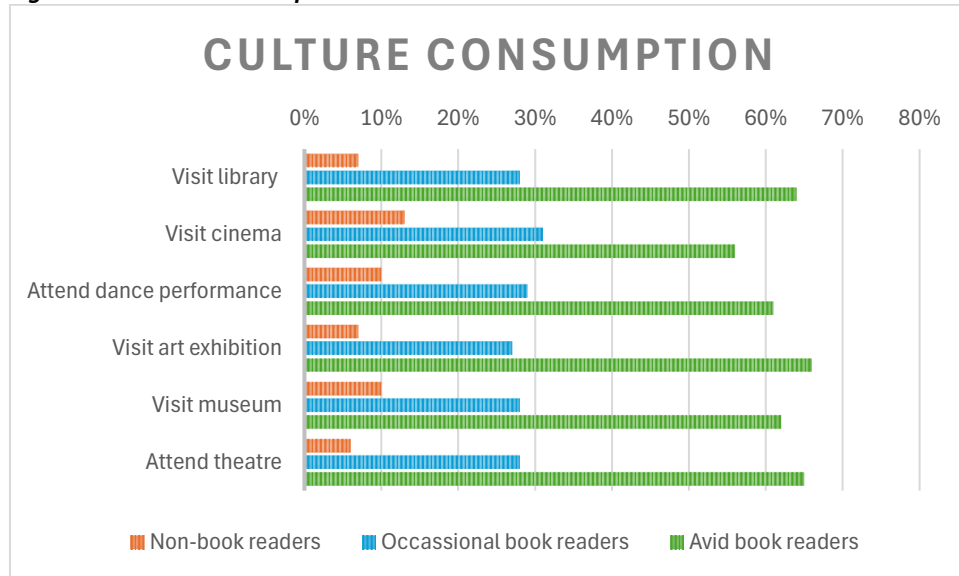
As some questions are included in several questionnaires they reach a larger number of respondents, while other questions only appear in one questionnaire. Furthermore, since some leisure activities are more common among the Swedish population the number of people who engage in them are larger than other activities. For instance, some activities have several thousands of respondents who have engaged in them (such as socialising with friends), and others (such as acting in theatre or larping) only a few hundred.

As noted in the introduction, 81 percent of Swedes read at least one book in 2024, and 53 percent read books every month or more often (Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). With these figures in mind, the average leisure activity could then be presumed to have approximately 19 percent of practitioners who have not read a book, 28 percent who are occasional readers, and 53 percent who are avid readers. The most striking activities are therefore going to be those which differentiate from these averages.

Results

To provide a clear overview of the 27 different activities, we organised these into six different categories. Therefore, this results chapter is structured as follows: first we will look at culture consumption, then media consumption, arts participation and production, sports and physical activity, domestic practices and, finally, social life. Each activity within these categories stands on its own. That is, the different activities within a figure are not cross tabulated with each other, only with the variable relating to book reading. At the end of the chapter we will also briefly explore some non-activity engagement with non-reading.

This study looks specifically at the correlation between leisure activities and book reading. So, although the focus only is on the reading of books, for the ease of writing and reading, we will in the text sometimes refer to the three groups as *non-readers*, *occasional readers* and *avid readers*, knowing full well that people who do not read books can still be readers of other formats of text. Using Bourdieu’s theory on habitus and capitals as a lens for analysing the statistics on leisure activities can reveal how peoples background and class direct their interests towards certain activities, no more evident than in people’s culture consumption.

Figure 1 – Culture consumption

Comment: The figure shows, in percent, how many people who have consumed culture in these forms in the past year and whether they are non-book readers, occasional book readers having read sometime in the past year, six months or quarter, or avid readers having read sometime per month, per week or several times per week. The survey question was “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?” and the response for each activity has then been cross tabulated with the variable “read any book”.

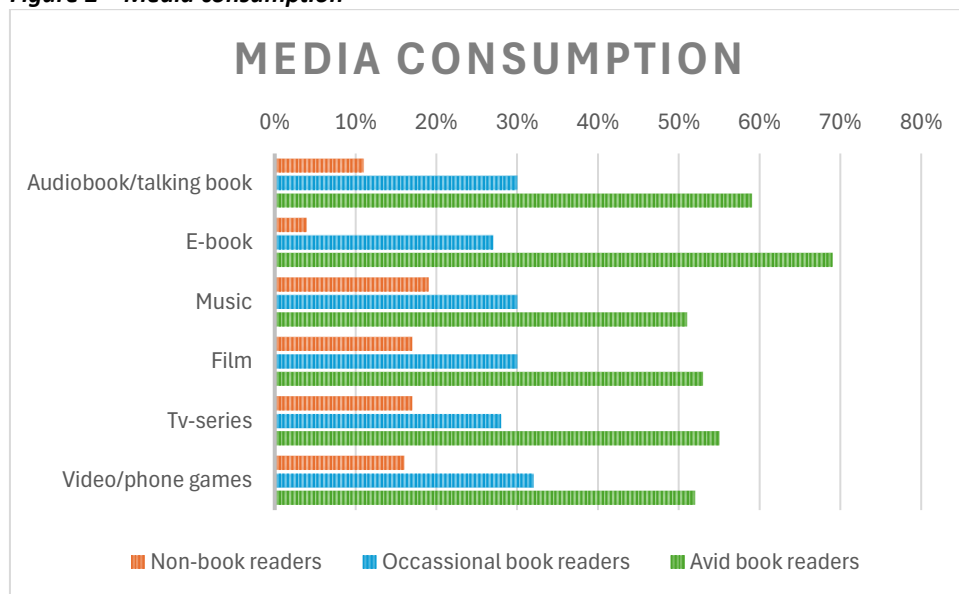
Source: The national SOM-study 2024

Figure 1 shows that the number of avid readers among culture consumers exceeds the national average, while the number of non-book readers is less than the national average (Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). The smallest number of non-readers is found in the group of theatregoers (6%), closely followed by those who visit libraries and art exhibitions, with seven percent respectively who state they haven’t read a book in the past year. Those seven percent who visit libraries stating that they are non-book readers, presumably do not borrow books but take part in other activities at libraries, such as using the wifi, borrowing computers, using study places or attending events (Wallin et al, 2025). But on the other hand, it is hardly surprising that those who frequent libraries also tend to read more extensively. In fact, this association highlights a distinct connection between being an active consumer of cultural experiences in general and having a strong reading habit. Previous studies show that library visitors actively engage with a variety of other cultural experiences, such as visiting museums, art exhibitions, theatre, and dance performances. There seems to be a particularly strong link between libraries and museums as persons who frequent one also visits the other (Wallin et al, 2025).

Furthermore, taking part of culture can be a learnt behaviour from an early age, influenced by a person’s background or habitus. For example, when parents expose their children to libraries, museums, and theatre performances, these experiences often become ingrained habits that continue into adulthood. For others it can be a habit learnt through university education or by new friendships forged as adults, thus strengthening their cultural capital. The childhood environment for reading is also relevant for being a reader as an adult (Ross et al., 2018) as learnt or socialized norms shape their behaviour and interest in reading and other cultural experiences (Bourdieu, 2010).

Among these culture consumers, cinemagoers stand out slightly, with the least number of avid readers and largest group of non-readers. Here, 56 percent state that they read books often, 31 percent read books occasionally and 13 percent do not read books at all, meaning that the number of readers among cinemagoers is still slightly higher than the national average.

Figure 2 – Media consumption



Comment: The figure shows, in percent, how many people who have consumed media in these forms in the past year and whether they are non-book readers, occasional book readers having read sometime in the past year, six months or quarter, or avid readers having read sometime per month, per week or several times per week. The survey question was “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?” and the response for each activity has then been cross tabulated with the variable “read any book”.

Source: The national SOM-study 2024

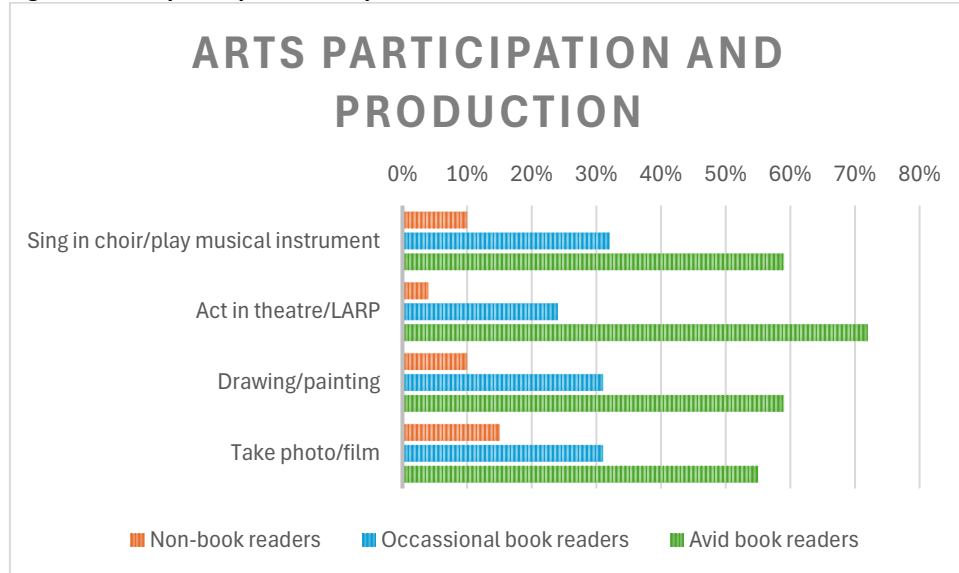
In figure 2 it is notable that most people who consume other media than printed books are also avid or occasional book readers. The decline in reading, particularly among young people, has often been attributed to the increasing competition from other entertainment sources, such as video games, film, television, and music. These mediums are frequently seen as contributing to the shift away from traditional reading habits (Wallin, 2019).

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that some of the e-book and audiobook/talking book users have classified themselves as non-book readers. Although the question this is cross tabulated with clearly states “how often during the past 12 months have you read any book?” some seem to instinctively associate this with printed books. While only four percent of e-book users, and 11 percent of audiobook and talking book users responded that they have not read any books, this distinction is still notable. The printed book carries deep cultural significance, and the concept of a “reader” is often tied to traditional formats. For the small group who exclusively reads e-books, this identity may not resonate with them, or they may even choose not to associate with it. Notably, a 2014 study by Tveit and Mangen found that young reluctant readers felt more interested in reading when presented with e-books instead of printed books. The very format of printed books and the connotations they carry can act as a deterrent to some who do not identify as readers. In relation to audiobooks and talking

books, ongoing debates about whether this counts as reading can influence respondents' perception of themselves as book readers. In recent library and information science research, audiobook and talking book use has been conceptualised as *reading by listening*, affirming it as one type of reading practice among many (Lundh, 2022; Tattersall Wallin, 2021). Additionally, neuroscience research also confirms that although the media modalities differ, audiobooks and printed books are almost identical in how they activate the same parts of the brain (Deniz et al., 2019). Meanwhile, in public debates listening to books is portrayed as something negative which has spurred on a “reading crisis” in Sweden (see for eg., Lundberg, 2024; Murguz, 2025). In a study on young adult’s audiobook reading practices, Tattersall Wallin (2022a) found that about half of interview respondents considered their audiobook use as reading and felt they remember audiobooks as well as printed books, while the other group explained that it felt like something different than reading for them. This illustrates how individual the experiences of reading are, and that people must be allowed to choose to read in ways that suit them.

Non-readers make up a notable portion of those who listen to music (19%), watch films and TV series (17%), and play video or mobile games (16%). Occasional readers are evenly spread across these groups, ranging between 28 and 32 percent, while avid readers show a consistent presence, varying between 51 and 55 percent. This is mostly in line with the national average reading habits.

Figure 3 –Arts participation and production



Comment: The figure shows, in percent, how many people who have participated in arts production in the past year and whether they are non-book readers, occasional book readers having read sometime in the past year, six months or quarter, or avid readers having read sometime per month, per week or several times per week. The survey question was “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?” and the response for each activity has then been cross tabulated with the variable “read any book”.

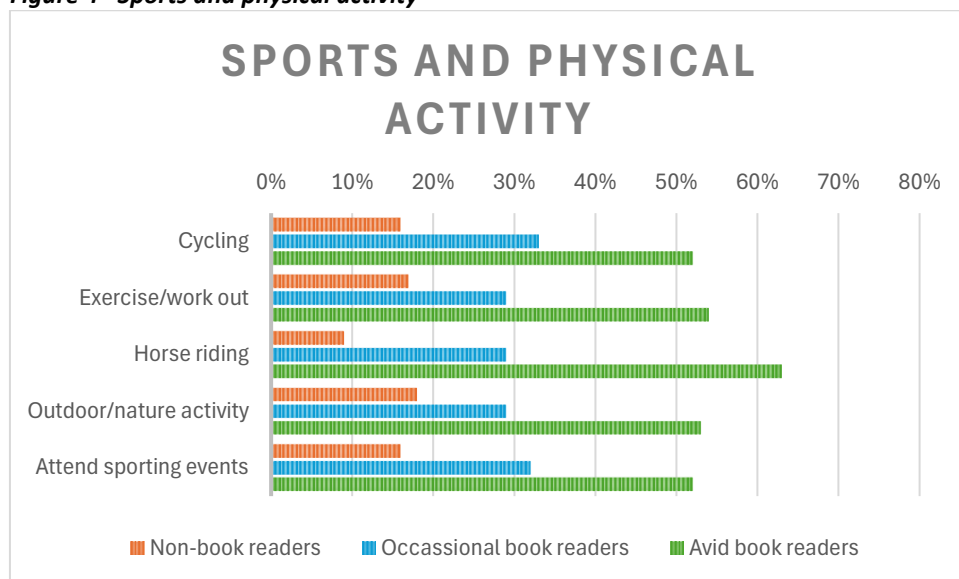
Source: The national SOM-study 2024

In figure 3 we can see that those who are engaged in larping or act in theatre as a leisure activity are generally also very interested in reading. In fact, 72 percent of them are avid readers, 24 percent

occasional readers and only four percent do not read books. This corresponds to figure 1 where we saw that those who attended theatre performances were also readers to a higher degree, compared to the national average. In general, we see that most people who are engaged in performing arts or art production as a hobby tend to be readers. Those who participate in choir singing, play musical instruments, or engage in drawing and painting (59%), as well as those who enjoy filming and photography (55%), tend to be avid readers. The occasional readers in these arts-related leisure activities range between 24 and 32 percent and the non-readers between four and 15 percent.

The difference between cultural consumption (figure 1) and arts participation and production (figure 3) is that in the first, people are attending exhibitions and performances, while in the second, they actively produce art themselves. Participation in arts production plays a role in enhancing individual well-being, social inclusion and socioeconomic status (Wang et al., 2020), potentially strengthening their social and cultural capital.

Figure 4 –Sports and physical activity



Comment: The figure shows, in percent, how many people who have engaged in physical activity or viewed sports in these forms in the past year and whether they are non-book readers, occasional book readers having read sometime in the past year, six months or quarter, or avid readers having read sometime per month, per week or several times per week. The survey question was “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?” and the response for each activity has then been cross tabulated with the variable “read any book”.

Source: The national SOM-study 2024

Figure 4 shows that people engaged in most of these sports and physical activities are more in line with the national average when it comes to their reading habits, compared to many of the culture and media-related leisure activities explored in previous figures.

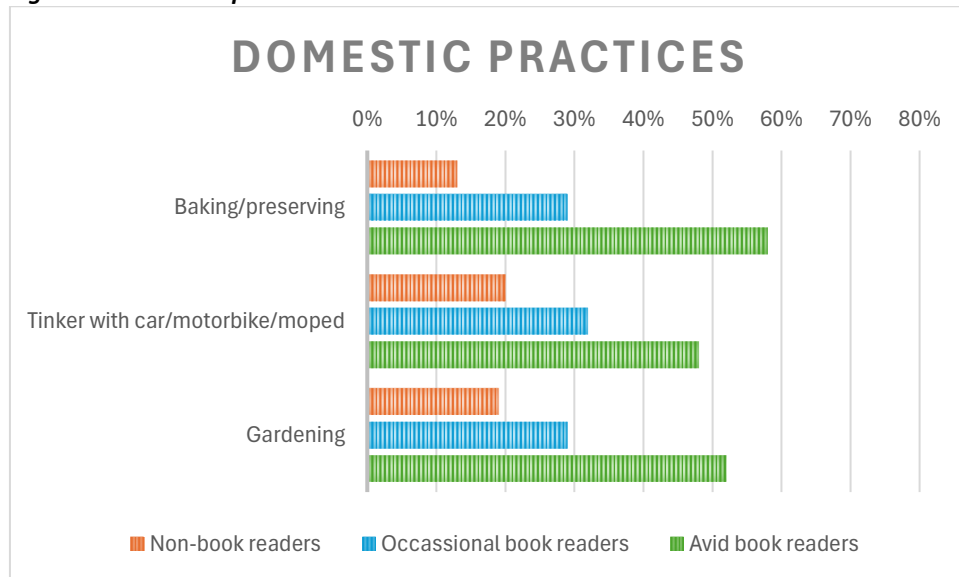
In sports, social capital refers to the resources and networks individuals develop through their interactions and relationships within sports settings and communities. Hobson et al. (2024) explored students taking part in sports and found that participating in sports can serve as both social and cultural capital, providing opportunities for networking and the development of valuable skills.

However, inequalities continue to affect both access to and participation in sports and physical activities (Hobson et al., 2024). Some sport activities are primarily available to people with a high social and cultural capital from the middle classes rather than the working classes, one such example is horse riding, which is unavailable to most due to high cost and limited access.

Moreover, there seems to be an interesting connection between horse riding and reading, potentially linked to the demographics of recreational riders. Hobby-level equestrians are predominantly women and girls, as shown in the statistics of the Swedish Equestrian Federation, of the approximately 140,000 members, 93% are girls and women (Svenska Ridsportförbundet, 2025). This highlights its deep connection to female participation and interest. Women are also a group well-known for their strong engagement with reading. According to Tattersall Wallin and Gunnarsson Lorentzen (2025), 52 percent of women read printed books every month or more often in the past year, while 27 percent listened to audiobooks, and 11 percent read e-book every month or week. Here we can see that 63 percent of those engaged in horse riding also are avid readers.

Individuals who engage in activities such as cycling, exercising, working out, or outdoor and nature-related pursuits generally align with the national reading averages: 19 percent are non-book readers, 28 percent read occasionally, and 53 percent are avid readers. While there are slight variations of a few percentage points in some cases, these differences are not substantial enough to be deemed statistically significant.

Figure 5 – Domestic practices



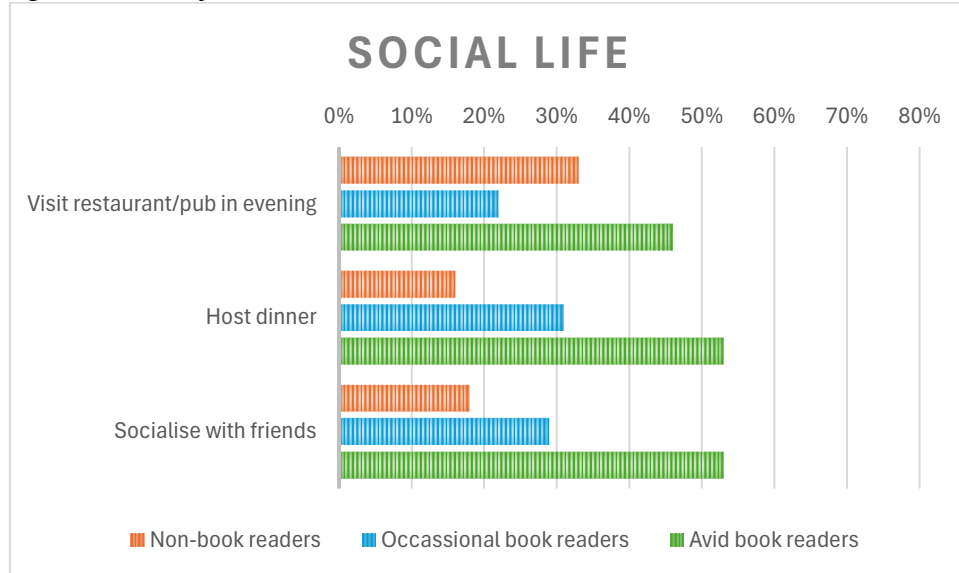
Comment: The figure shows, in percent, how many people who have engaged in these domestic practices in the past year and whether they are non-book readers, occasional book readers having read sometime in the past year, six months or quarter, or avid readers having read sometime per month, per week or several times per week. The survey question was “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?” and the response for each activity has then been cross tabulated with the variable “read any book”.

Source: The national SOM-study 2024

Within the domestic practices group, non-readers are more prevalent among those who enjoy tinkering with cars or bikes (20%) and gardening (19%) compared to those who bake, make jams and preserves (13%). Those engaged in baking and preserving are more dedicated readers, with 58 percent reporting that they are avid readers and 29 percent occasional readers. If we presume that more women will have this hobby and engage in these practices in a home environment, it is also in line with the aforementioned statistics which show that women are readers to a higher extent than men. At the same time, there are 48 percent avid readers in the group who enjoys tinkering with cars or motorbikes, which is ten percent fewer avid readers than amongst the bakers. Based on traditional gender roles, we might presume that there are more men in the group who tinkers with cars and other vehicles, even though there of course are women who are interested in motor vehicles too. Previous studies show that fewer men in Sweden read books in all formats (Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025).

The social, cultural and economic capital of engaging in these activities vary, depending on how and why they are performed. For example, gardening can involve everything from food production out of necessity, to the creation of aesthetic green spaces as a lifestyle choice. In general, activities that take place in a domestic setting are part of an individual's daily social life and may or may not involve people beyond their immediate family and friendship circle. Figure 6 provides a closer examination of social interactions both within and outside the home.

Figure 6 –Social life



Comment: The figure shows, in percent, how many people who have engaged in social activities in these forms in the past year and whether they are non-book readers, occasional book readers having read sometime in the past year, six months or quarter, or avid readers having read sometime per month, per week or several times per week. The survey question was “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?” and the response for each activity has then been cross tabulated with the variable “read any book”.

Source: The national SOM-study 2024

People's social experiences can take place in the home, by hosting a dinner, or in a more public setting, by visiting a restaurant, bar or pub. Socialising with friends can take part in any setting. Individual's social capital and potentially also their cultural capital increases if they have a lifestyle that includes a rich social life by forging new friendship ties or maintaining current contacts. Their social life may also influence their reading habits, as can be seen in figure 6.

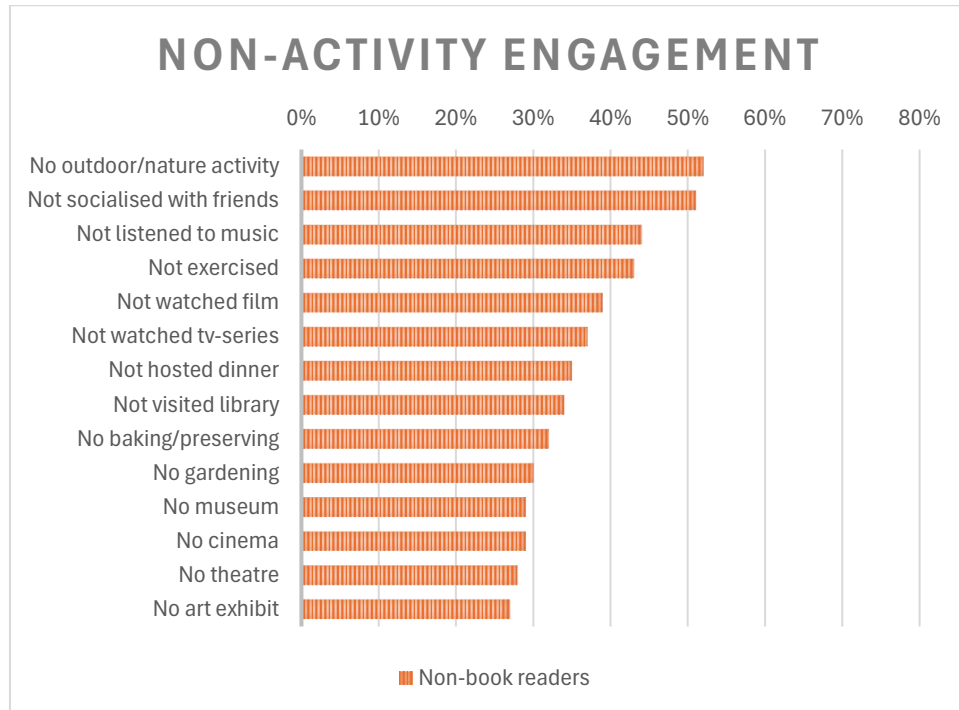
The highest proportion of non-readers is found among those who frequently visit restaurants, pubs, or bars in the evening, with 33 percent having not read a book in the past year. This is also the only activity in this study where the group of non-readers exceeds the occasional readers. Interestingly, individuals who socialize with friends in other ways or host dinners at home do not show the same tendency toward lower reading engagement, as the number of readers and non-readers within those activities is in line with the national average.

The difference between the reading habits of those who go to restaurants, bars and pubs in evenings, and all other categories is quite striking. It is hard to make any general assumptions about who these people may be in terms of age, gender or what type of area they live in. It is also quite a broad type of activity and there might be different people who go to restaurants compared to those who like to go to bars for a night out. One aspect we can contemplate is time and temporality in relation to leisure activities and book reading. When exploring audiobook use, Tattersall Wallin and Nolin (2020) found that the most common times for audiobooks were during typical commuting hours and in the evening at around 10-11 pm, what we might assume to be around bedtime. Reading in the evening before going to sleep is common with all book-formats, but reading also occurs in different times and places throughout the day, with some formats and genres more relevant for different situations (Rothbauer & Serantes, 2022). Audiobooks, compared to printed books, tend to be used more on the go (Tattersall Wallin, 2022a). We may therefore consider that there could be a clash between time to read and frequenting restaurants, pubs or bars in the evening. Or it may simply be that more people who are disinterested in books instead are interested in going out for a meal or a drink.

Absence of both reading and activity engagement

The main purpose of this article was to explore people who engage in various activities and cross-reference this with their reading habits. However, we do of course also have access to the statistics for those who stated that they have not done a particular activity, and we did initially also cross tabulate this with the variable "read any book". For the most part, these findings do not differ from the national average when it comes to reading habits. However, there were some activities where the percentage of people who said that they had neither participated in that specific activity nor read a book in the past year far exceeded the national average of 19 percent non-readers. We will therefore present 14 activities here which differed the most from expectations.

Figure 7 – Non-activity engagement and non-readers



Comment: The figure shows, in percent, how many people who have not engaged in the activity and who also have stated that they have not read any books in the past year. The survey question was “How often during the previous 12 months have you done the following?” and the response for each individual activity has then been cross tabulated with the variable “read any book”. All responses here relate to the variable “never” on the scale of how often they had done the following.

Source: The national SOM-study 2024

The activity which had the largest group of non-practitioners, who also were non-readers, is outdoor or nature-related activities (52%). However, what we found perhaps the most striking is that 51 percent of those who have not socialised with friends, have also not read any books in the past 12 months. There could be a variety of reasons why this may be, perhaps some have work and caring responsibilities which leave room for little else, including reading and socialising. Another reason could be people who do not have a social circle, perhaps are alienated from the local community due to illness, language, or social barriers, who also may not have the ability, inclination or option to read books as a leisure activity. Whilst it is an entirely valid choice to decide to not read books and not spend time with friends, the concern is if it is due to involuntary loneliness. Equally, if there are people who would like to read books but cannot do so due to material circumstances. While reading typically is a solitary activity, there is a strong link between a reader’s social circle and their reading habits, from friends and family members giving each other book recommendations to simply being a reading role model (Ross et al., 2018; Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). Additionally, books can be used as a sort of social substitute. In a study on audiobook reading practices Tattersall Wallin (2022b) found that young people listen to audiobooks in situations where they feel lonely or are unable to socialise with their friends. This creates the expectation that people experiencing involuntary loneliness might reach for books more often. However, we should highlight here that since most respondents of the SOM-survey stated that they had socialised with friends in the past 12 months, the group who have not done so is small, with only 207 respondents. Therefore, we cannot say that these findings are significant statistically, but it is of interest that more than half of them also state

that they have not read any books. Related to this finding is that 35 percent who had not hosted people for dinner at home also had not read any books.

Another interesting finding is that it is also common among those who do not listen to music, watch films or tv-series to not read books. The largest group of non-users here is the 44 percent who neither listen to music nor read books. Whilst this is a considerable group statistically, numerically only 122 people stated that they had not listened to music, with 44 percent then being 54 people. This makes it one of the smallest respondent groups by far. Just like socialising with friends, listening to music is something that most Swedes do in their day to day lives. Reasons for not listening to music, besides a lack of interest or time, could be disabilities such as hearing impairments which make this hard or even impossible. Or, possibly, there could be financial reasons hindering music listening. Library and information science research from Sweden and Canada shows that for elderly people experiencing loss of hearing or vision, media like television or radio can become inaccessible, but when libraries provide access to talking books or other accessible formats, books and reading continue to be an important leisure activity (Lindberg & Hedemark, 2019; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018).

In figure 1 we could see a strong correlation between being an avid reader and partaking in culture through visits to libraries, museums, theatres, art-exhibitions and the cinema. Figure 7 shows that there is also a strong relationship between never doing those activities and not reading books. Additionally, the actual number of respondents who reported never visiting these cultural institutions is significantly higher than those who do not socialize or consume media, reinforcing the statistical reliability of these findings and the correlation between these activities. The respondents' habitus and capitals influence what leisure activities they engage in or choose not to engage in.

Concluding discussion

Is there any truth to the idea that readers are less sociable and take pleasure in little else, compared to non-readers? Not at all, as overall, readers participate in a diverse range of leisure activities. There is not a single activity explored here that isn't primarily made up of readers. This study examined individuals' participation in 27 different leisure activities and cross-referenced it to their book reading habits. To offer a structured overview we divided these activities into six main categories: culture consumption, media consumption, arts participation and production, sports and physical activity, domestic practices and social life. We have not looked at the relationship between the different activities, that is, whether the individual respondents do just one or many of them, or if there are any clear correlations between activities or categories. We have only compared the individual activity with book reading habits.

Our objective was to examine how non-readers, occasional readers, and avid readers are distributed among individuals who participate in the selected activities. Individuals with an interest in or engagement with theatre tend to be highly dedicated readers, surpassing even library visitors in reading frequency. This suggests a strong connection between participation in the performing arts and a deep appreciation for books, possibly due to the literary and narrative aspects of theatre. Books and reading can help people make sense of their lives and help foster a sense of belonging in the world (Lindberg & Hedemark, 2019; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018; Rothbauer & Serantes, 2022), and the same could arguably be said for theatre. Another aspect which fosters both a sense of belonging and an interest in reading can be a person's social circle. Reading research shows that friends and family are instrumental in making someone a reader and for sharing reading recommendations (Ross et al., 2018; Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). In all leisure activities presented in this article there are more avid and occasional readers than non-readers, but for one exception. In the category *social life*, people who go to restaurants, pubs and bars in the evening is made up of a larger proportion of non-readers than occasional readers, but even in this activity the avid readers are the largest group.

It is interesting that activities which are social at their core, attract more non-readers, but it could be that these activities diminish the perceived time a person has for reading (Ross, 1999; Rothbauer & Serantes, 2022).

For figure 7 we looked specifically at cases where people have stated that they do not engage in specific activities and do not read books. Whilst some of those cases are striking, it is worth remembering that if respondents in this study are not participating in one activity, it does not mean they aren't involved in others. They may also do other leisure activities; beyond those we examined. We have not been able to explore social media use here, which is something 84 percent of the Swedish population between ages nine to 85 do every day (Ohlsson, 2025). Looking specifically at ages 15-44, social media is even used by well over 90 percent every day. Scrolling on a smartphone is a type of activity that may compete with book reading, as they can be done in similar situations.

We also wanted to find out which activities are more common among readers versus non-readers and did find some interesting results. Two of the six categories, *culture consumption* and *arts participation and production*, have avid readers well above the Swedish average of 53 percent, with over 60–70 percent avid readers engaged in those activities. The remaining four categories also consist of just over 50 percent avid readers, falling slightly below the national average by a few percentage points. While they are close to the overall trend, their slight deviation suggests minor variations in reading habits across different activities. There are only two categories where the avid readers are less than 50 percent, in *domestic practices* and *social life*: tinkering with cars, motorbikes and mopeds (48%) and visiting a restaurant, bar and pub (46%). Among people who engage in those two activities we also find the largest number of non-readers in the study: visiting a restaurant, bar and pub (33%), well beyond the national average of non-readers (19%), and tinkering with cars, motorbikes and mopeds (20%).

Our findings show that no leisure activity is dominated by non-readers; in every case, readers outnumber those who do not engage in book reading. This aligns with national reading habits, as 81 percent of Swedes read at least one book in 2024, and 53 percent reported reading books monthly or more frequently. These figures underscore the prevalence of reading across various interests and activities.

A critical studies of reading perspective

Assumptions about reading and readers are clearly seen in public discourse and cultural policy, where readers of fiction are often idealized and non-readers portrayed as problematic (Kann-Rasmussen & Balling, 2015; Lindsköld et al., 2020; Lundh, 2022). These dominant narratives can have tangible effects, perhaps deterring people who do not see themselves reflected in such ideals and potentially discouraging them from engagement with reading (Scholes & Asplund, 2021). It is also interesting how people who never read are understood as one group of people and those who read another (Lindsköld et al., 2020). From a critical studies of reading perspective, it is important to both understand reading as a situated practice and see the underlying structures which impact how reading is understood and carried out (Lundh et al., 2022). This article doesn't study reading practices as such, but rather types of leisure activities that coexist with book-reading. This can be understood as part of the situatedness of reading in everyday life, part of temporal complexities (Rothbauer & Serantes, 2022). As we have discussed already, this study shows some clear correlations between certain types of activities and being an avid reader. For instance, a rich cultural lifestyle is closely tied to a strong inclination towards books. This isn't surprising, as both reading and cultural engagement are expressions of class, and contributors to cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1996). Nonetheless, we see that readers and non-readers exist, to different degrees, amongst those who do all these types of activities. This shows that the idea of readers as strictly one type of people and non-readers as distinctly another therefore does not hold.

As such, this article contributes to the critical studies of reading approach of moving beyond normative assumptions of readers and reading. We also contribute with new knowledge of the various circumstances and settings where reading takes place, by employing methodological pluralism (Lundh et al., 2022).

It is worth reflecting that many of the activities we have explored here are ones you have to actively choose to engage in, such as going to the theatre or cinema, doing a workout or gardening. They also require a certain economic, cultural and social capital, such as having the disposable income and social circle necessary to engage in them. Furthermore, physical or mental disabilities can hinder people from engaging in many of these activities, just like all these aspects can create a hindrance to book reading. Public library services where books are delivered to readers homes by librarians can bridge some of those obstacles for the elderly (Lindberg & Hedemark, 2019; Rothbauer & Dalmer, 2018) but may not solve reading hindrances for all people. Lindsköld et al., (2020) writes about the difference between viewing reading as a right or as an obligation from a cultural policy perspective. We can reflect on the fact that if reading is an obligation, something the ideal citizen should do, pressure is put on individuals to adhere to ideals and make correct choices according to the public discourse. If reading is instead seen as a right, the focus shifts to exploring what underlying structures might hinder or facilitate people from engaging in reading in a manner that is accessible to them. More emphasis may then also be placed on reading enjoyment. As reading is here explored as one of many types of leisure activities, enjoyment should be a key aspect. As we now know, readers really do take pleasure in many things.

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