

Cultural capital during pandemic emergency: Preliminary data on how pandemic changed adults' attitude towards reading for pleasure

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Abstract

In the current research, we report preliminary findings from an online reading questionnaire. This was created to study attitudes towards reading during the March-August period of the 2020 pandemic emergency in Italy. Findings showed an interesting trend: we observed an increase of reading for pleasure, but not for study/work purposes.

Keywords

Cultural capital, book reading, Covid pandemic, reading for pleasure

1. Introduction

The global pandemic emergency generated unplanned changes in everyday life, and a rapid move online for many activities, including learning. According to Li and Lalani [1] of the World Economic Forum, some scientists believe these sudden changes will result in a "...poor user experience that is uncondusive to sustained growth". However, others believe "...a new hybrid model of education will emerge, with significant benefits" [1]. In either case, we should recognize the multiple, wide-ranging changes in our habits and lifestyle that are likely to reverberate in the social and cultural backgrounds in which we are immersed.

Socioeconomic and cultural status (SES) is commonly indexed by parental education, occupational status, and income; in particular, low SES appears to affect the level of learning [2]. However, here the cultural dimension is neglected, and SES measures are not impacted by any cultural dimension.

The concept of "cultural capital" was introduced to explain individual differences in scholastic learning associated with sociocultural background. According to Bourdieu [3, 4], it is important to analyze three types of cultural capital (embodied, objectified, and institutionalized) individually. *Embodied* cultural capital speaks of personal values as well as social knowledge. *Objectified* cultural capital refers to cultural objects such as art works, but also books and equipment. Formal education contributes to generate *institutionalized* cultural capital.

Recently, Balboni and colleagues [5] developed a validated scale to measure all three dimensions of cultural capital following Bourdieu's analysis [3, 4]. The Scale of Cultural Capital demonstrated clear predictiveness of personality traits in a sample of teenagers [6].

Here, we aimed to investigate academic changes due to pandemic response (e.g., distance learning and 'smart' work), on embodied and objectified cultural capital, and its relation to learning, internet use and perceived worry. More specifically, we were interested in reading behavior in respect of *reading for pleasure* purposes (i.e., vs. reading for study/work purposes) during the first 6 months of pandemic emergency in Italy (March-August 2020).

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More generally, we were interested at investigating reading behaviors to understand if the time our participants spent at homes necessarily, due to lockdown restrictions, fostered their reading behaviors and in which directions, e.g., for pleasure or work/study objectives? Indeed, during the lockdown people had more time to spend at home and usually less possibilities to choose how to employ that time. However, we have to notice that at home there are many possible media activities (e.g., tv, games). We were specifically interested in how people manage their time and indeed whether their reading behavior underwent some changes or not.

Reading for pleasure is a voluntary activity, to some extent, marked by reader choice. This involves a text of interest to the reader, usually narrative, and often, but not always, fiction. It usually denotes an individual, silent activity and often indicates that reading will not be followed by the activities/tasks common to reading in many educational/work settings [7].

Reading for pleasure is not, therefore, primarily defined by the type of text, but rather by the *original purpose* of the reading. Reading for pleasure is neither defined by the type of support, such as printed books or e-books, although it has been consistently shown that people prefer printed books (vs e-books) [e.g., see 8 for a survey]. Further, it is not done for work, study or life administration purposes, but rather reading for its own sake; reading because it simply pleases you. Crucially, this is a term used within the contexts of educational research, policy and pedagogy, to describe reading which is frequently imagined to happen ‘naturally’ outside of these settings, for ‘leisure’ purposes.

2. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Eighty-one participants completed the online reading questionnaire. Females constituted 74% of the sample, with males the remaining 26%. Ages ranged from 19 to 67 years (mean age: 34 years, SD: 15 years). Of note, the most represented age groups were 20 years-old (16%) and 30 years-old (11%). Five participants were pursuing doctoral studies, 37 a Masters degree, with 38 possessing a High School diploma, and one a Middle School diploma. The sample was very heterogeneous in terms of age *and* educational level, although the majority reported a medium-to-high education level. Participants were high Internet users; 44.4% used the Internet *every day* to keep up with the news, and 45.7% used the Internet *more times a week*, as represented in **Figure 1**.

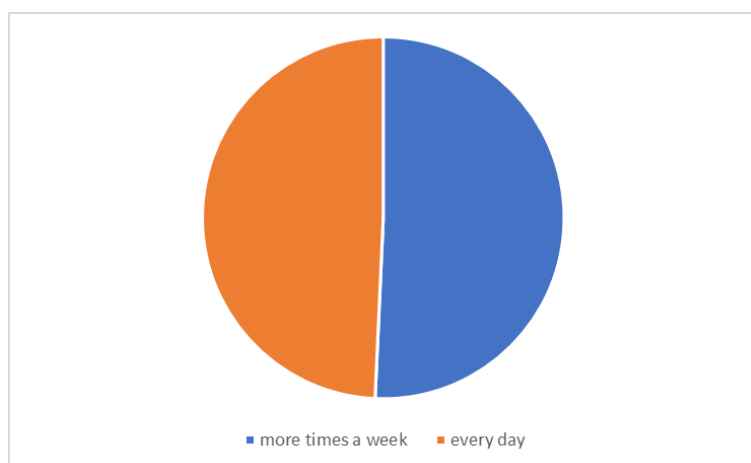


Figure 1. Sample Internet usage (proportion)

In addition, we assessed levels of general worry; most participants showed moderate-to-high worry during pandemic emergency in 2020. Specifically, in answer to “On average, in the March-August period of 2020 did you feel worried with no reason?” question, response percentages were as follows:

64.2% responded *sometimes*, and 29.6% responded *almost always* (see **Figure 2**). Of this *almost always* category, 23 were female and 1 was male; for the *sometimes* response, 34 were female and 19 male.

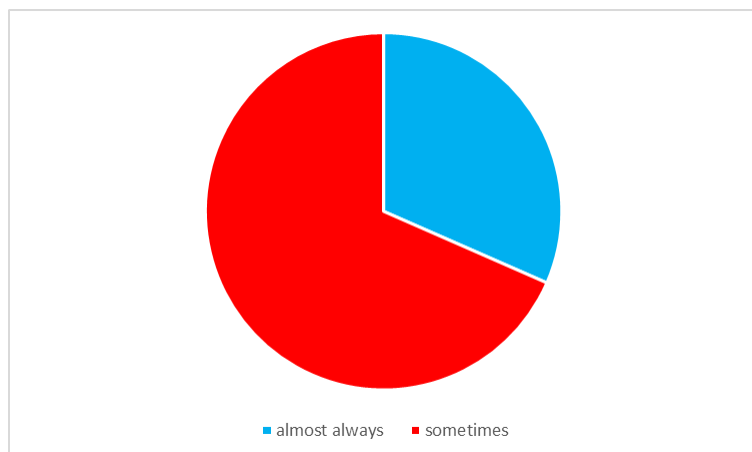


Figure 2. Sample levels of general worry

2.1.2. Materials

We developed an *ad-hoc* reading questionnaire to study the general role of cultural capital, but specifically focused on the 6-month period March-August of 2020. Several items were taken from the Scale of Cultural Capital devised by [5], with additional items specifically aimed to investigate culture-related activities during the pandemic (i.e., questions 3 and 4, see below). In addition, we administered 10 random items from the Vocabulary subtest of the Primary Mental Ability Scale [9] to obtain a profile of participants' verbal skills. This subtest had a multiple-choice structure and required to identify the word (out of four possible) with the same meaning as the target word. For instance, if 'fast' was presented, the participant should choose the word with identical meaning (from 'sour', 'smooth', 'strong' or 'quick'). We also included one item taken from Busnelli and colleagues' [10] Anxiety questionnaire to assess participants' level of general worry (see Participants section). The questionnaire was implemented via Google Moduli.

2.1.3. Results

Here, we report our key findings. Specifically, below we include response percentages for the four questions identifying culture-related activities during the pandemic. For general verbal skills, we found all participants scored very highly (> 90%) and therefore, had average-to-high vocabulary abilities.

Question 1: On average, how many books do you read a year for pleasure?

In **Figure 3**, we present response percentages to Question 1. As shown, most participants read 1-3 books for pleasure (35.8%), 24% read 8-12 books, and 14.4% read 4-7 books. Only 12.3% read more than 13 books a year. In addition, 12% of participants did not typically read books for pleasure.

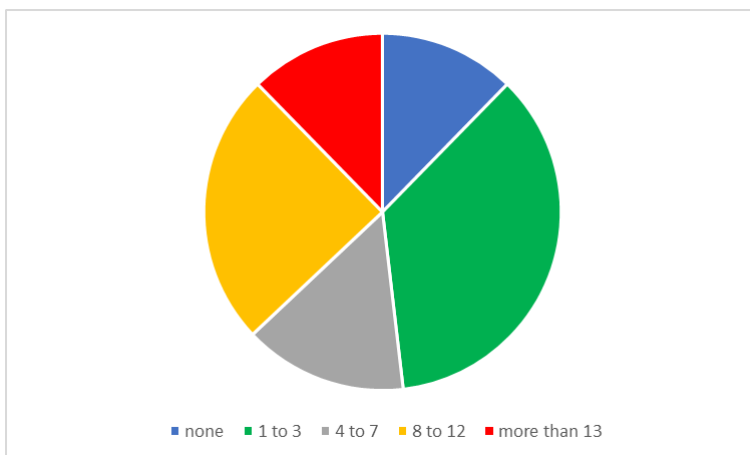


Figure 3. Percentage of books read for pleasure in a year

Question 2: On average, how many books do you read in a year for study/work?

From **Figure 4**, most participants read 1-3 books for study/work (25.9%), 24.7% read 4-7 books, with 21% reading 8-12 books annually. For this question, 16% read more than 13 books a year, but 12.3% did not read books for study/work during their year.

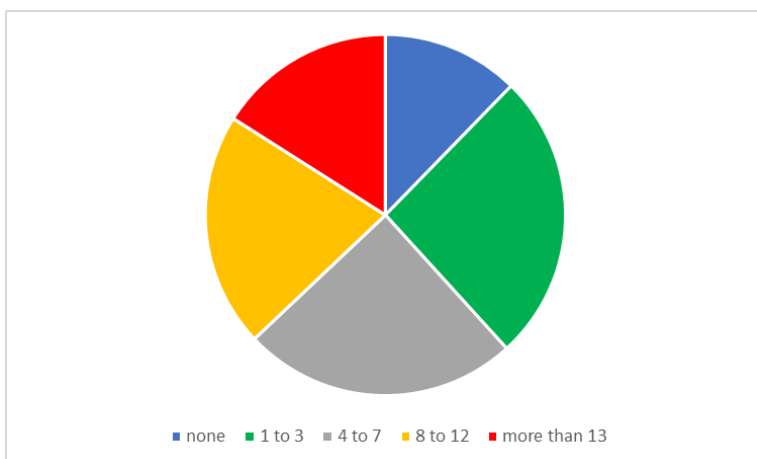


Figure 4. Percentage of books read for work in a year

Question 3: On average, in the March-August period of 2020, how many books have you read for pleasure?

From **Figure 5**, most participants (39.5%) read 1-3 books, with 18.5% reading 4-7 books and 9.9% 8-12 books. A further 8.6% have read more than 13 book, although 23.5% of the participants have read no books for pleasure during this period.

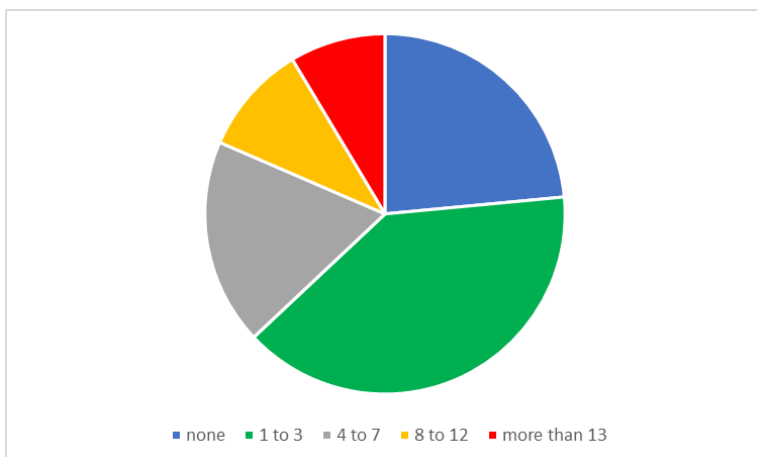


Figure 5. Percentage of books read for pleasure in March-August 2020

Question 4: On average, in the March-August period of 2020, how many books have you read for study/work?

In Figure 6 we show a consistent percentage of participants (30.9%) read 1-3 books, with the same percentage (30.9%) reading 4-7 books. Fewer participants (14.8%) read 8-12 books, although none read more than 13 books for study/work. About 21% of participants read no books for study/work during these months of 2020 .

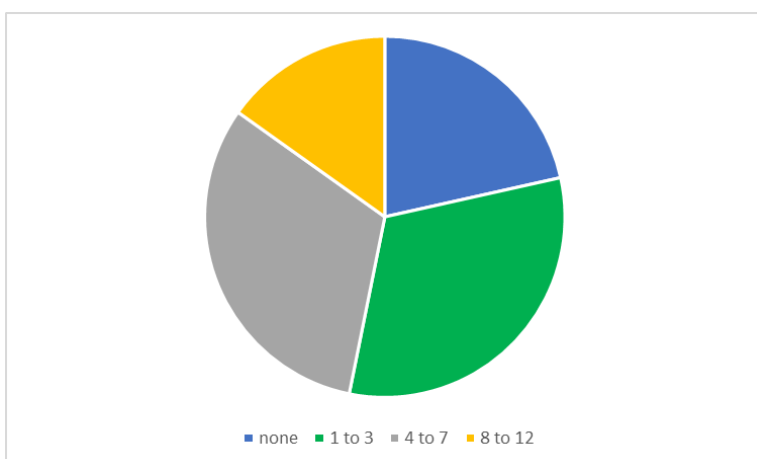


Figure 6. Percentage of books read for study/work March-August 2020

2.1.4 Discussion

From a qualitative perspective, we can observe that, on average, our participants showed a good balance between reading for study/work and for pleasure over a year (see Figure 3 vs. Figure 4). Notably, slightly more books were read for study/work purposes rather than for pleasure.

If we specifically consider the March-August period of 2020 pandemic (Figure 5 vs Figure 6), we see maintenance of that balance (i.e., between the two reading purposes); however, almost 20% of participants read more than 8 books for pleasure, whereas only 14.8% read an equivalent high number of books for study/work purposes.

Therefore, we observed an increase of reading for pleasure compared to reading for study/work purposes during the pandemic. Indeed, reading for work/study was potentially less intense, as

demonstrated by no participants reading more than 13 books (see Figure 6) and the percentage of participants reading 1 -3 books being lower in study/work reading than for pleasure.

These results seem to indicate that reading for pleasure increased during the March-August period of pandemic emergency in a sample showing high verbal skills and educational levels. The increase of this behavior may be cautiously interpreted as a potential individual cultural capital strategy to cope with worry/difficulties due to the exceptional conditions [1, 6, 7].

A few limitations of our study should be acknowledged. First, an overly broad age range did not allow us to distinguish results by age cohort; this would have been interesting in the light of the different research streams (e.g., pedagogical research, lifespan cognition, emergent readers) [7]. In addition, it would have been interesting to have a larger sample size, enabling comparison between participants with different education and/or SES characteristics; these features could undoubtedly influence reading behaviors. Another future direction goes towards examining reading digital texts for pleasure (for instance, text reading via online websites). Indeed, more investigation is needed to understand differential engagement with the most popular current text formats (e.g., comparing printed book vs e-book engagement, but see[8]).

In conclusion, we believe this study represents an exploratory investigation of reading behavior modification during pandemic conditions; this could be further investigated to study the potential specificity of such mediating/moderating role(s).

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