

Reading Habit of Students in Social Sciences and Arts: A Case Study of Rajshahi University

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ABSTRACT: Reading is considered essential for the overall development of a human being. However, with the advent of modern digital technologies, especially the growing popularity of social networking on the web, mobile phones, televisions, and other means of entertainment, the reading habit of the general public, especially the younger generation, is undergoing a decline. This paper tries to assess the reading habit of the students of a leading public university in Bangladesh and identify the trends in their reading habit. Reading and other activities of the respondents have been analyzed to find out how reading habit is affected by various other elements. Based on the findings of a questionnaire-based survey, the paper also attempts to put forward recommendations for improving the reading habit of young students in particular and the larger cross-sections of people in general.

I. Introduction

Reading is an art which provides a human being with the foundation upon which to erect his or her understanding of life as well as the elements with which to build his or her worldview.

Clark and Rumbold (2006) observed that, in addition to personal and mental developments, reading is critical for ensuring one's access to social, economic and civic life. Against the backdrop of rapidly changing nature of life as well as the society, reading is considered to be crucial for people from all cross-sections of life for successfully coping with the complexities and challenges of the 21st century. In recent times, the emergence of digital technologies and various modes of social interaction, reading is facing a number of hurdles. Reading among young people is said to be on the decline because of their interest in social networking, gaming, music, and so on. This article aims to assess the reading habit of the students of a large university in Bangladesh and put forward recommendations for the improvement of the reading habits among the younger generation based on the findings of the survey.

Reading and reading habit are two aspects that have received increasing attention in recent years. In the evolving knowledge society, reading is considered crucial for gaining the necessary information and insights, which prepare a person to face the diverse challenges of modern times.

Holte (1998) maintained that reading adds quality to life and provides access to culture and cultural heritage. He believed that reading empowers and emancipates citizens and brings people together.

Okeke (2000) viewed the art of reading as a priceless instrument for everyone. He opined that reading is one of the most important activities in life, through which we enter into the life and experiences of others and extend our knowledge, scope of experience, and enjoyment.

Reading is particularly important in education as well as for unhindered intellectual growth of a person. Tella and Akande (2007) asserted that the ability to read is at the heart of self-education and lifelong learning and that it is an art capable of transforming life and society.

Shabi and Udofia (2009) noted that active learning from books is better than passive learning such as watching televisions and playing games.

The issue of reading, especially book reading, has received much attention from different quarters in recent times because of the downward trend it is experiencing, especially among the younger generation. The reasons of the decline in the reading habits of the general public, especially students and young people, are being widely debated and discussed by academicians, intellectuals, writers, librarians, and reading enthusiasts.

Lesesne (1991) observed that elder people can inspire younger people for reading by increasing their own reading habit and by demonstrating the art of reading to the younger generation. The role of teachers and guardians is particularly important in this regard. Only telling young people to read is not sufficient. Therefore, teachers and guardians should be readers themselves. In many educational institutions, especially in the developing nations, the demonstrative effects of reading cannot be achieved because of the weakness in collections and resources in libraries.

Sangkaeo (1999) found that reading habit among students is hindered by many factors. He emphasized on the role of local institutes and organizations in the promotion of reading habits among students.

II. Objectives of the Study

This is an exploratory study to investigate the reading habit of the students of Master of Social Science (MSSc) and Master of Arts (MA) in the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh with the following objectives:

- To identify reading interest and habits of students of MSSc (Master of Social Science) and MA (Master of Arts) in the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Rajshahi.
- To trace the major trends in the reading habits of those students.

- To assess the influence of the Internet, radio, television, and other mass media on the reading habits of those students.
- To put forward recommendations for the improvement of the reading habit of those students in particular and other people in general.

III. Research Methodology

Rajshahi University is the second largest public university of Bangladesh and has eight faculties. The Master's students in the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Faculty of Arts are selected as the population of the study. The Faculty of Arts, one of the oldest faculties in the University, was established in 1953. It consists of 10 departments. The total number of students in the Faculty of Arts is about 5,000. The Faculty of Social Science, founded in 1985, consists of nine departments. There are about 3,325 students in the Faculty of Arts. From the two faculties, 8 departments were selected for this study, namely, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Mass Communication & Journalism, Philosophy, History, Bengali, and English. A structured questionnaire has been designed to collect data from the students. The total number of Master's level students in these eight departments is 570. 272 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the students, and 260 filled-in copies were returned.

IV. Data Analysis:

Purposes of Reading	Respondents	Percentage (%)
To pass the examination	15	5.77
To have fun	15	5.77
To be well informed	54	20.77
To develop life	114	43.85
To while away time	8	3.07
To get a job	54	20.77
Total	260	100

Table 1. Purposes of reading

Table 1 shows that students read books not only to prepare for exams or acquire knowledge but also for a number of other reasons. The largest number of respondents (114, 43.85%) indicated that they read to develop their life. This was followed by "To be well informed" (54, 20.77%) and "To get a job" (54, 20.77%).

Types of Books	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Fiction	78	30
Non-fiction	66	25.39
Textbooks	109	41.92
None of these	7	2.69
Total	260	100

Table 2. Type of books to read

Table 2 shows that students read textbooks the most (109, 41.92%). It could be that due to the pressure of their academic study, they do not have much time to read fictions and/or non-fictions. Still, a considerable number of students read books other than textbooks, such as fictions and non-fictions.

Deciding Factors	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Cover page	29	11.15
Author	122	46.93
Recommendation	39	15
Summary	70	26.92
Total	260	100

Table 3. Deciding factors for reading a book

Table 3 shows that 29 (11.15%) students find a book interesting only by looking at its cover page. However, almost half of the students (122, 46.93%) choose a book to read by looking at its author. Besides, 70 (26.92%) students are attracted to a book after reading its summary or abstract. 39 (15%) respondents indicated that they read a book after being recommended by others.

Length of Book Reading	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Less than an hour	21	8.07
2-4 hours	167	64.23
4-6 hours	39	15
6-8 hours	23	8.85
Above 8 hours	10	3.85
Total	260	100

Table 4. Length of book reading

Table 4 shows that the majority of the respondents (167, 64.23%) read a book for two to four hours while 39 (15%) read a book for four to six hours. A small percentage of students (23, 8.85%) read books for six to eight hours. Only 10 students (3.85%) read a book for more than eight hours.

Newspaper Reading Habit	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	198	76.15
No	0	0
Not regularly	62	23.85
Total	260	100

Table 5. Newspaper reading habit

Table 5 reflects the newspaper reading habit of the respondents. It shows that the majority of respondents (198, 76.15%) regularly read newspapers while 62 (23.85%) read newspapers irregularly. There was not a single respondent who indicated that he or she does not read newspaper at all. This is indeed a remarkable finding.

Length of Newspaper Reading	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Less than an hour	8	3.08
1 hour	132	50.77
2 hours	120	46.15
Total	260	100

Table 6. Length of newspaper reading

Table 6 shows that the majority of the students read newspapers for one hour (132, 50.77%) or two hours (120, 46.15) a day. Only a very small percentage of the students (8, 3.08%) read newspapers for less than one hour a day.

Internet Use	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	245	94.23
No	15	5.77
Total	260	100

Table 7. Internet use

Table 7 shows that students read anything on the web, be it newspapers, blogs, online articles or websites. 245 (94.23%) students responded in the affirmative. Only 15 (5.77%) students indicated that they do not read anything on the web. It is clear that the World Wide Web has become a major source of information and entertainment nowadays and that the habit of web browsing is most noticeable among the younger generation.

Places to Access Internet	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Access at Cyber Cafes	95	36.54
Access at Home	83	31.92
Access at Central Library	50	19.23
Access at Computer Lab	32	12.31
Total	260	100

Table 8. Places to access Internet

Table 8 shows that places where students use to access the Internet are quite diverse. Most of the students (95, 36.54%) access the Internet from cyber cafes, which is closely followed by “Home” (83, 31.92%). It is noticeable that a good number of students (50, 19.23%) also access the Internet from the University Library and 31 (12.31%) students from the University computer labs.

Length of Internet Use	Respondents	Percentage (%)
1 hour	124	47.69
2 hours	108	41.54
4 hours	21	8.08
Above 4 hours	7	2.69
Total	260	100

Table 9. Length of Internet use

Table 9 shows that, most of the respondents (124, 47.69%) spend one hour a day on the Internet while 108 (41.54%) spend two hours on the Internet. The number of respondents (21, 8.08%) who spend four or more hours on the Internet is not quite large. One of the most noticeable things among the younger generation these days is their excessive Internet use.

Purposes of Internet Use	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Research	75	28.85
Reading online journal	25	9.62
Download software	17	6.54
Discussion	0	0

E-mail	79	30.38
Download text	33	12.69
Others	31	11.92
Total	260	100

Table 10. Main reasons for Internet use

Table 10 shows that the highest number of students (79, 30.38%) use the Internet for sending and receiving email while the second highest number of students (75, 28.85%) use it for research. A good percentage of students (33, 12.69%) use the Internet for downloading important texts. And 25 students (9.62%) use the Internet to read online journals.

Reading Online Periodicals	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	222	85.38
No	38	14.62
Total	260	100

Table 11. Online magazine/periodical reading

Table 11 shows that a large majority of the respondents (222, 85.38%) read magazines or periodicals online. These days, many magazines and periodicals have gone online and there are some world-famous news and entertainment magazines which are available only online.

Library Visit	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	229	88.08
No	31	11.92
Total	260	100

Table 12. Library visit

Table 12 shows that a very high percentage of the respondents (229, 88.08%) visit the Rajshahi University Central Library regularly, which is indeed a very welcome sign. On the other hand, 31 (11.92%) of the respondents do not visit the Library, which is also noteworthy.

Purposes of Library Visit	Respondents	Percentage (%)
To read on specific subject of study	138	53.07
To borrow library materials	42	16.15
To copy reading materials	25	9.62
To read newspapers	25	9.62
To use Internet	22	8.46
Others	8	3.08
Total	260	100

Table 13. Purposes of library visit

Table 13 shows the reasons for which the students visit the Rajshahi University Library. When asked why they visit the university library, 138 (53.07%) students indicated that they go to the library for reading on specific subject of study. Many of them visit the library for other purposes, such as borrowing reading materials (42, 16.15%), photocopying library materials (25, 9.62%), reading newspapers (25, 9.62%), etc.

Library Visit Frequency	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Everyday	58	22.31
Once a week	49	18.85
Twice a week	42	16.15
Occasionally	111	42.69
Total	260	100

Table 14. Frequency of library visit

Table 14 does not offer an encouraging finding, because nearly half of the respondents (111, 42.69%) visit Rajshahi University Library only occasionally. On the other hand, the number of students (58, 22.31%) who visit the library everyday is also not very discouraging. 49 (18.85%) students visit the library at least once a week and 42 (16.15%) go to the library at least twice a week.

Favourite Pastime	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Playing on computer	15	5.77
Sleeping	8	3.07
Watching television	121	46.54
Reading books	70	26.92
Reading newspaper	23	8.85
Browse Internet/website	23	8.85
Total	260	100

Table 15. Favourite pastime of the respondents

Table 15 presents a list of activities the respondents do at their leisure times. Dominating on the list watching television (121, 46.54%), followed by book reading (70, 26.92%). Other pastime activities favored by the respondents include reading newspapers (23, 8.85%), web browsing (23, 8.85%), playing on computer (15, 5.77%), and sleeping (8, 3.07%). It is natural for young people to be engaged in various kinds of activities besides studying.

Types of information	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Academic information	129	49.62
Research information	39	15
Recreational information	54	20.76
Others	38	14.62
Total	260	100

Table 16. Types of information most needed by respondents

Table 16 shows that the highest number of the respondents (129, 49.62%) need academic information the most while research information is required by 39 (15%). In this Information Age, students, like other groups of people, are in need of various kinds of information for study and other purposes.

Sources of Information	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Library	116	44.62
Teachers	45	17.31
Friends	26	10
Internet	31	11.92

Others	42	16.15
Total	260	100

Table 17. Most important source of information

Table 17 shows that the library is considered by the highest number of the respondents (116, 44.62%) as the most important source of information. On the other hand, 45 (17.31%) respondents feel that teachers are the best source of information. Another 31 (11.92%) respondents view the Internet as the most important source of information. 26 (10%) indicate that friends are their favourite source of information. 42 (16.15%) respondents prefer other sources of information.

Obstacles to Reading	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Lack of interesting reading materials	159	61.15
Unavailability of books	47	18.08
Homework assigned by teachers	24	9.23
Unpaid tuition	0	0
Watching television	15	5.77
Playing sports/games	15	5.77
Total	260	100

Table 18. Obstacles to reading

Table 18 shows that the highest number of respondents (159, 61.15%) believe that lack of reading materials that arouse their interest is the single largest factor. Unavailability of books has been mentioned by 47 (18.08%) students while excessive homework assignment given by teachers has been indicated by 24 (9.23%) respondents. TV watching (15, 5.77%) and addiction to games (15, 5.77%) have also been cited as negative factors. The reading habit is on the decline, especially among the younger generation, for a variety of reasons.

V. Summary of Findings

The gradual decline in people's reading habit is a common phenomenon not only in the developing countries but also in the developed ones. This decline is most noticeable among young people because they are the people who are most affected by the emerging digital technologies, especially the Internet and TV-based entertainment.

The present survey also found this trend among the Master's students of the Faculty of Social Science and the Faculty of Arts at the University of Rajshahi. However, the whole scenario is not quite bleak and there are many encouraging signs which are evident from the survey. The major findings of the survey could be summarized as follows:

1. The students read books and other materials with a sense of purpose and with specific targets, not aimlessly or for fun. Most students feel that they need to read because reading gives them a way to develop their life and to keep abreast of the changing times. This is indeed quite encouraging.
2. Reading materials, especially books, should be constant companions to all people, especially students. However, in this respect, the finding of the survey is not very heartening, because only a small percentage of the students read books for six or more hours a day. The majority of the students read books only for two to four hours a day.

3. Most students surveyed have indicated that textbooks are the books of their choice, although a substantial number of students also like to read fictions and non-fictions. The choice between textbooks and non-textbooks is almost evenly split. It shows that the students prefer to read all kinds of books in almost equal amount.
4. Reading of newspapers requires less time. And newspapers give news and information on current affairs. That is why a large majority of the respondents read newspapers regularly. Most of them read newspapers for one to two hours every day.
5. The World Wide Web has grown in popularity and use in recent years. The respondents of this survey, like other young people, are regular users of the web. It is an encouraging sign that the majority of them browse the web for reading purposes.
6. Cyber cafés have become major places for people to use the Internet. Many young people prefer cyber cafés because they are affordable and comfortable. On the other hand, a substantial number of the respondents access the Internet from home. The pattern of their Internet usage is also noteworthy, because, contrary to the popular belief, the majority of the students surveyed indicated that they use the Internet only for one hour a day.
7. The reading habit and library use are closely interlinked. It is widely assumed that one of the main indicators of the decline in people's reading habit is the fact that the number of people visiting libraries is also decreasing worldwide. Although this is not supported by reliable statistics, it could be inferred that because of the prevalence of digital technologies and various means of entertainment, young people feel less enthusiastic about library visits. However, the survey findings show that a high percentage of Rajshahi University students visit the university library on a regular basis.
8. The reason for library visits among the respondents is not very diversified. The majority of them prefer to visit the library for specific study purposes, such as preparing notes or findings answers to questions. They also visit the library for borrowing books, photocopying, and reading newspapers. A discouraging trend among the students surveyed is that the majority of them visit the library only occasionally. On the other hand, the number of students who visit the library almost every day is also quite high.
9. Watching television is a favourite pastime for people of all ages. This survey also found that most respondents prefer TV watching to others pastimes. However, a significant number of them also like to read books at their leisure time, which is quite encouraging.
10. As the findings of the survey show, the library continues to be the place where students go to seek information they need. Although many students favour the Internet, teachers or friends to meet their information need, most students visit the university library for their required information. This is indeed an encouraging trend. If the library could be strengthened in terms of collections, manpower, and state-of-the-art technologies, more students will be attracted to it on a regular basis.

The survey findings offer important information and insight into the reading habit as well as choice of reading materials, Internet usage and other relevant issues. The younger generation, especially young students, are experiencing many changes in their choices, likings and disliking, because of the great changes happening in the socio-economic, cultural and technological landscapes. Their reading habit is quite naturally affected by these changes. Like other age groups, many young people in the West now prefer to read books on e-book readers, although such devices are not very common yet in Bangladesh. It is expected that with e-books becoming more common in Bangladesh in the coming days, students will find e-books a thing of choice and their reading habit may increase because of the increased popularity of e-books.

The Internet and the television seem to be the two most popular alternatives to reading books, especially among younger people. However, the Internet, as this survey has shown, could be a good place to read books, magazines, blogs, etc. Young people continue to be attracted to the Internet in larger numbers. It can be surmised that with different sources of information on the web, the Internet can play a supplementary role in increasing the reading habit of the students, rather than diminishing it. For this to happen, students need to be guided by their teachers and guardians to use the Internet and its services constructively, rather than spending long hours on the Internet playing games or other non-productive activities.

VI. Recommendations

Improving the reading habit of the students and turning them into lifelong learners is quite important for building a knowledge society. Reading is essential because it equips people with necessary knowledge and understanding, not only for building their own life but also for contributing positively in the socio-economic development of the nation. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made with a view to improving the reading habit of the younger generation in particular and people from all cross-sections of life in general.

The role of teachers and parents for improving the reading habit of students cannot be overemphasized. They can do this in many ways, but most importantly, by creating examples of themselves. The more they will read in front of young people, the more they will be able to instill the love for reading in the hearts of young people.

The performance appraisal system in educational institutions should be refurbished in such a way that encourages extensive reading. In this way, the students who read extensively will receive good grades rather than those who simply memorize.

Library visit and people's reading habit are closely interlinked. That is why libraries should be developed to attract young people. At present, most libraries have Internet facilities. If these facilities could be strengthened even more, the younger generation will find another reason for visiting libraries. Besides, library collections should be strengthened so that people will not get frustrated or disheartened by not finding their required materials there.

Academic institutions should regularly organize events like study circles, debate clubs, seminars, essay competitions, quiz competitions, etc. to inspire students to gather knowledge and make their marks in these events. In this way, reading habits of students will improve.

If the students do not find books to be attractive and interesting, they will not read books only to please their parents and teachers. Therefore, more and more books and reading materials should be produced to arouse students' interest in reading. It should also be kept in mind that good contents alone are not enough to ensure the readability. Their design and presentation are also of prime importance to retain the interest of readers.

As young people are more interested in the World Wide Web, blogging, social networking, etc., interesting and constructive reading materials should be made available online, too. In this way, print books and magazines and online books and magazines could complement each other to the satisfaction of readers.

Since people's reading habit is in the decline, partnership and collaboration between the public and private sectors, such as librarians, publishers, booksellers, teachers, social activists, cultural activists, intelligentsia, and the larger cross sections of people, should be promoted in earnest.

Regular and broad based reading campaigns should be undertaken at both government and non-government levels. "Reading week" or "reading month" could be planned during which reading among various groups of people could be encouraged by giving awards and recognition. Besides, massive awareness raising campaigns could be undertaken, which would create critical consciousness among local communities, thus encourage people to read.

VII. Conclusion

Reading is inseparably linked to learning. And learning leads to an overall mental, professional, and human development. Reading not only gives people new ideas, information, and insights, it also helps them to become more complete in every aspect. As Birkerts (2010) observed, "In a lifetime of reading, we store impressions ... according to private systems of distribution, keeping factual information on one plane, acquired psychological insight on another, ideas on a third, and so on." Therefore, reading is crucial for every human being because it benefits people not in one way but several ways. With the decline of the reading habit among young people, it is important to find new ways to instill love for reading in their hearts and improve their reading habit. This cannot be done overnight. It will take concerted efforts from all quarters and the creation of an atmosphere conducive to reading at home, educational institutions, libraries, and workplaces, to bring back the golden days of reading.

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