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Survey on the Sociology of Reading in the Partium Region

Abstract In our study, we present the results of our questionnaire-type survey which aims to examine reading habits and techniques of information acquisition in the tertiary-level institutions of the Partium region – a region bordering Hungary. Based on the methods of the traditional sociology of reading, we surveyed the reading, internet and library using habits of the students with quantitative methods. One of the major practices of questionnaire-type surveys is that examinations in the field of the sociology of reading have to follow the new type of reading that has come to life due to sociological and technical changes. Because of the spread of technical development, the internet, mobile phones and other digital devices (audio books, e-books), we need to carry out an examination in a much wider spectrum since traditional books and press products do not reflect the tendencies of reading habits in the age of information and communication technologies. Our study will present the tendencies that most characterize and define the relation between students and reading. Beside the differences of genders (the majority of women in reading), we will discuss in details the divergences between institutions and faculties. The lead of students who read in the Partium region will be demonstrated based on the number of books bought and the time spent reading. Based on the examination results, we also found the strengthening of informative and entertaining function of the internet. We compared the list of favorite readings and authors with national data and, as a conclusion, we have found that classics still stand time.

Keywords:

reading, sociology, higher education, reading habits, information resources

Examinations of reading – Reading research

Several studies dealing with school reading and text comprehension highlight the spread of functional illiteracy (Csoma & Lada, 1997; Steklács, 2005), the attitude changes of children and young adults. However, there are numerous other approaches to reading than comprehension. The research of reading habits linked to free-time activity and the studies mapping the methods of information acquisition also take us closer to the knowledge of reading attitude. Due to technical development, the electronic – so-called online – reading has become a serious rival of traditional, or in a different term, offline reading (Koltay, 2010). Although, according to public belief, the two reading methods are counterparts, they indeed complement each other. This point of view was certainly verifiable in the case of TV vs. books. Making the relation between the TV and reading more exact and clear, we can state that too much or too little TV watching are harmful to reading activity alike, since both extremes bring about reading habits below the average (Gereben, 1998). However, according to the research projects, internet usage does not turn

readers away from reading (Nagy, 2003) – moreover, it complements internet-based activity – as the features of the Web rather stimulate users to become writer-readers. The group of electronic readers, therefore, mostly covers that of book readers (Gyenes, 2005), although, considering the younger generation, the socialization of reading often takes place reversed, since the teenagers of our time had used computers before they learned how to read. Reversed socialization often takes place – i.e. youth teaching the older generation how to use the computer and the internet (Csepeli & Prazsák, 2010).

The change of reading habits in the 21st-century sets a serious challenge for researchers who are trying to interpret reading relying on the social changes that have appeared because of technical development. In our study, by leaning on an examination of university students, we are trying to highlight the tendencies that present the learning, information acquiring, communicational and cultural habits of “campus youth”.

On the research

Based on former regional research projects, the TERD¹ research (the role of tertiary training in regional change) broadened our knowledge of participants already taking part in the two-cycle training. Beside the examination of learning and work, the study of culture and the consumption of cultural activities also played an emphatic role as factors that impact individual lifestyle and future career and job activity.

We carried out our research in the tertiary-level institutions of the Partium region (the borderline region of Hungary, Romania and Ukraine).² The sampling took place in 2008 and 2010. The target population of the first examination phase (autumn, 2008) were the (last-year) BA and BSc students. The sample comprised of 1361 individuals. Our target for the second phase of the examination (spring, 2010) was the surveying of MA and MSc students³ studying in the region. The sample was approximately 68% of the target population and the final sample size was 602 persons. We ensured representative sampling per faculty by weighting.

Based on our student surveys, we carried out the examination of the reading habits (book, library and internet usage) of both the Bachelor's and the Master's students, which – besides being unique – is an excellent addition to the national data (Gereben 1998, Nagy 2003; Szabó & Bauer, 2009). The problematic point of the examination is that the analysis done on two levels (bachelor's and master's) cannot entirely be compared with each other, as some questions and question groups in connection with reading were altered after the analysis of the data taken in 2009 (Bachelor's students). A part of the questions in the survey taken among Master's students had to be broadened and specified according to the new reading habits. In the survey prepared for Master's students, we specified electronic reading habits and different areas of internet usage in details. All in all, the results of the research carried out among university-level students from the Partium region can be an addition to the reading-sociological data and the national tendencies of information acquisition and usage.

Three important questions: What? How much? How?

We find in the examination of Bachelor's students that 3.8% of the students admittedly do not read books, which is a staggering piece of data – despite the low rates – as concerning the myth about tertiary-level students, these young people will be part of the intellectual circles. Indeed, it is not the goal of this present study to discuss the issues and questions of intellectual life, culture and that of being cultured. Yet, in the light of the following data it is thought-provoking where students really acquire culture, information and knowledge: 11.6% of these students very rarely read anything that is on paper and 38.5% read only occasionally. The results, therefore, demonstrate that a bit fewer than half (46.2%) of those students whose primary task is learning, and being informed and cultured often read.

The revision of gender distribution may prove interesting in the light of the fact that more than one examination showed the lead of females in reading (Bartos, 2009; Fényes, 2010; Gereben, 1989). Our research found that girls generally have more books than boys in the case of 21–500 volumes. Yet, in the case of those very few students who have more than 500 volumes of books, boys are in the lead (Table 1).

Table 1 *How many volumes of books do you own?* (N=1289 TERD BA/BSc database)

	0-20 volumes	21-100 volumes	101-300 volumes	301-500 volumes	More than 500 volumes
Male	35.5%	44.9%	14.4%	2.1%	3.1%
Female	22.9%	52.5%	18.6%	3.7%	2.3%

(own chart)

The question referring to the frequency of book reading, in itself, does not give a relevant explanation to the dilemma of what characterizes the reading habits of young adults. Therefore, this question has to be specified further. What do the students really read if not books? The exact answer to this question was found during the examination of students in Master's training. By closely examining internet-based reading, we found (Table 2) that Master's students primarily read news, forums, tabloids and blogs on the screen, and beside entertaining literature we can see the appearance of poems. The advancement of female students in this area was clearly demonstrable at all examined entities, and it was most remarkable in the case of tabloids.

Table 2 *What do students read on the internet?* (N=602 TERD MA/MSc database)

	news	forum	tabloid	blogs	entertaining literature	poems
Female	16.2 %	12.6 %	9 %	6.3 %	6.5 %	2.2 %
Male	12.4 %	8.3 %	4.4 %	6.1 %	3.4 %	0.8 %

(own chart)

Turning back to the question of book reading, we found it important to examine how their relation to books is limited to studying and in what rate it appears similar to entertainment, culture and book reading done as a free-time activity. The answers of students reflect that they buy an average of seven books for their own use every year and that around half of these are textbooks for studying. The other half are not study material or reading connected to their studies but pieces of some other genre. Pusztai (2008) demonstrated that the students of denominational high schools are more open to books and therefore we tried to make the question more nuanced. We found a significant difference when looking at the maintainer of the schools. Whilst we can see almost similar rates (6.8 textbooks/year and 6.5 other books/year) in the case of senior students who graduated at high schools with self-governmental maintenance, there is remarkable difference for the advantage of other types of books at students studying at high schools with denominational maintenance. Students having graduated from denominational alma maters, bought 12.5 volumes of other types of books beside the 6.06 textbooks last year.

The book-purchasing habit of students is also strongly affected by the factor telling which department they study at (Table 3). As the University of Debrecen has several faculties we considered that it is important to present the differences among them. We can read from the data that book purchase exceeds the 7 volume / year rate at students studying medicine, natural sciences, the Faculty of Pedagogy of the College of Nyíregyháza and those pursuing agricultural studies. With regards to buying non-compulsory reading, law and humanities students were in the lead beside the two Hungarian institutions from across the border. We consider the reading attitude of the students of the Partium Christian University and the Hungarian College in Kárpátalja to be what former research projects have already shown (Gereben, Lőrincz, Nagy, & Vidra Szabó, 1993). The book preference (Arts and humanities) of humanities and law students indicates positive rates.

Table 3 *How many textbooks/university materials and how many other books did students buy in 2009?* (N=602 TERD MA/MSc database)

Institution (percent of students in the database)	How many textbooks/university materials did you buy in 2009?	How many other books did you buy in 2009?
UD Technical Faculty (0,5)	6	3
UD Center for Agricultural Sciences (4,5)	7.2*	4.1
UD Informatics Faculty (4,2)	2.9	4.1
College of Nyíregyháza (4,2)	7.6*	4.2
UD Natural Sciences Faculty (9,8)	7.6*	4.8
UD Medical Faculty University level (2,5)	11.2*	5.2
DE Medical Faculty College level (2,8)	5.6	6.7
UD Arts and Humanities Faculty (25,8)	5.6	7.2*
Partium Christian University (7,3)	5.5	7.5*
UD Law Faculty (3,8)	5.7	9.6*
II. R.F. Hungarian College in Kárpátalja (12,8)	5.5	13.8*

(own chart)

Concerning the studying and cultural behavior of students, we can draw conclusions from their free-time activities and lifestyle. The time management of students can be considered special from the point of view that it is layered based on both age and socio-economical status (Bocsi, 2009). Ignoring the discussion of the detailed time management of the examined sample, we concentrated only on two modes of reading (1. reading linked to studying, 2. reading not linked to studying) in our study.

Having examined the daily amount of reading (hour/day) on the level of institutions (faculties), we concluded that there is a clear-cut difference between the cultural and economic capital of faculties concerning studying and free-time activities alike. The question is further colored by the multiple divergences that exist due to the differences of the separate departments within each faculty. The feature behind Humanities and Sciences also determines the students' relation to books – or more exactly – to reading. The question we asked the students cannot be answered easily when interpreted in a wider sense: How many hours do you spend reading (studying materials and other)? Although students continuously read (and write) during the daily 4–6 hours of internet use, their answers demonstrate that they understood this question as part of the “I grab a book or a laptop and spend time reading” category, and therefore, they only wrote the actual hours spent with reading exclusively in this category. In the other part of the question, there was a separate line for “internet usage” which clarified the interpretational differences coming from the lack of definiteness of the problem. Table 4 describes the students' entertainment and free-time activities/habits linked to studying and reading at each institutions or faculties. We marked the minimum 2 hours/day reading with an asterisk. Altogether, the students of six institutions (faculties) said that they spend two or more hours with reading that can be linked to studying. Medical students study the most (3.3 hours / day); they are followed by law students (2.7 hours), but the students of traditional university faculties (Natural Sciences: 2.3 hours, Arts and Humanities: 2.1 hours) are also in the lead. Beside in the four mentioned faculties, students read – study – minimum two hours in the two institutions across the border. Reading done for entertainment and free-time purposes appeared only in the case of three faculties. In addition to the students of the two Hungarian institutions (PCU: 2 hours, II.RFMF: 2.7 hours), the reading activity of the informatics students at the University of Debrecen can be referred to as remarkable. Special-honor medical students, however, spend only one hour with entertainment-type reading.

Table 4 *How many hours do you spend reading? Breaking by institutions and faculties* (N=602 TERD MA/MSc database)

Institution	Reading /linked to studying/ (hour/day)	Reading for fun as free-time activity (hour/day)
UD Music Faculty	1	1
UD Technical Faculty	1.3	0.6
UD Informatics Faculty	1.8	2.1*
College of Nyíregyháza	1.9	1.5
UD Center for Agricultural Sciences	1.9	1.4
Partium Christian University	2*	2*
UD Arts and Humanities Faculty	2.1*	1.7
UD Natural Sciences Faculty	2.3*	1.7
II. R.F. Hungarian College in Kárpátalja	2.6*	2.7*
UD Law Faculty	2.7*	1.5
UD Medical Faculty	3.3*	1

(own chart)

With regards to the time the two genders spend on reading, we found females in the lead just as earlier. We saw a more significant difference in the case of reading for studying purposes. While female students spend 2.2 hours with books and reading that are necessary for their studies, male students only spend 1.8 hours. Concerning reading that can be linked to entertainment and free time, there is no considerable difference between them (females: 1.8 hours/day, males: 1.6 hours/day).

Preferred reading, popular genres

Along with preferences in consumption, the preferences and taste of reading also speaks of a given age, society and its values. In the first half of the 20th century and then in the 1960s, the most popular readings of the nation were listed to highlight how the book needs of a given age have changed over time. Naturally, when looking through top lists, we have to pay attention to the continuously widening range of readings. We can add further research data to the surveys of libraries (1977, 1997, 2003). Although the three examinations mentioned were carried out among 5–8 graders in primary schools, we find it useful to present these results, as the students accepted to tertiary-level education in 2009 and 2010 are more or less the same as the learners in the 2003 sample (Table 5).

Table 5 The list of most read authors

1934 ⁴	1964 ⁵	1977 ⁶	1997 ⁷	2003 ⁸	2009 ⁹
Gulácsy I.	Móricz Zs.	May	Móricz Zs.	Rowling	Szabó M.
Herczeg F.	Fejes E.	Gárdonyi G.	Gárdonyi G.	Sachar	Wass. A.
Kemény Zs.	Mikszáth K.	Fekete I.	Molnár F.	Wilson	Jókai M.*
Jókai M.*	Berkési A.	Petőfi S.	Jókai M.*	Fekete I.	Coelho
Kuncz A.	Jókai M.*	Cooper	Fekete I.	Cabot	Rowling
Zilahy L.	Passuth L.	Molnár F.	Mikszáth K.	Defoe	Agatha C.
Gárdonyi G.	Tatay S.	Jókai M.*	Knight	Shan	J. Austen
-	Vámai Zs.	Benedek E.	Tamási A.	Brezina	Rejtő J.
-	-	Verne	Petőfi S.	Kastner	Márai S.
-	-	-	Móra F.	Milne	Daniel S.

(own chart based on the researches of Gondos 1975, Nagy 2009 and TERD 2010)

Since the samples are not compatible with each other (there are differences in age and regional distribution as well), we cannot make a comparison, however, general tendencies are traceable in the data. Considering the names of preferred authors, we can see that there still are popular classic to lean on (e.g. Jókai, Mikszáth, Gárdonyi, Móricz), and beside these, we can find the actual bestsellers, as well, in changeable rates. The firmest place in the life of Hungarian readers (over a hundred years) is taken by Jókai Mór, whose name can be found between 1-7 on all lists except for that of 2003.

Concerning genres and preferred themes and based on the data of BA/BSc student questionnaires we can find that the mostly read books are classical literature (29%), romantic, historical and adventure novels (14–29%), crime stories (17%) and fantasy (14%). Students love reading sci-fi, books of psychological themes, youth novels (12% on average) and poems (11%) as well. Natural scientific readings, horror and thriller stories and esoteric books are favorites of 8% of the readers. Beside sport (7%) and drama (6%), students marked religious books and fairy tales (4–4%) as favored readings as well.

Book reading is affected by several factors. Beside the model seen in childhood (the reading habits of parents), i.e. the cultural capital, school socialization may greatly influence a child to become a reader. Beside the stimulating example of the teacher, we cannot ignore the determinant role of the peer group. Naturally, beside social effects, the market also tries to generate book

consumption, and therefore, commercials and advertisements can also draw our attention to a newly published volume. In our research, we intended to find who or what influence(s) the students when choosing their readings. Based on our results we can state that the choice of students is basically determined by their own reading habits. Primarily, we can find that it is the dominance of knowing the theme and the author that determines the choice for buying a book. This is followed by the choice for books recommended by friends and teachers / educators. In the case of male students, family members have a weaker influence than in the case of female students, but both genders follow the advice of their peers. The effect of commercials and advertisements when choosing books, however, drops compared to the other options. Only 6–9% of the students follow (and make decisions based on) book reviews and recommendations that appear in the various media (Table 6).

Table 6 *How do you choose a book?* (N= 602 TERD MA/MSc database)

	Theme	Author	Friend	Teacher	Family member's recommendation	Fellow student's recommendation	based on advertisement
Females	95.1	58.1	51.3	43.8	29	28.1	8.9
males	89.2	41.9	30.4	35.8	19.6	25	6.1

(own chart)

Changed reading habits

The change of the function of reading is appropriately reflected by the tendencies that can be concluded from the data of traditional paper-based reading vs. electronic reading (Table 7). Students rather read books and longer pieces of writing in the traditional manner. 97.9% of the students read books in some kind of frequency, whilst 20% of the students have never tried reading electronic books. In the case of daily newspapers, traditional papers are a bit in the lead compared to the electronic versions, but this rate is not as significant as in the case of books.

It is an interesting and important tendency that more than 10% of young university and college students never read any daily papers, and 15% of them avoid even weeklies and periodicals. The space of press products (which would help receiving information) is presumably substituted by the informative function of news portals and community sites. Concerning the foreign language knowledge of students, the tendency shows that 60% of them usually read writings in a foreign language, while 40% of them only read in Hungarian. Audio books – as a technical opportunity to gain reading experience – are 5% more popular with male students. 30.4% of male students and 26.6% of female students listen to audio books with some sort of frequency.

Table 7 *Reading habits concerning traditional and electronic press organs – grouped according to gender.* (N=602 TERD MA/MSc database)

	Male (%)		Female (%)	
	Do not read	Read	Do not read	Read
Book (paper)	4.7	95.3	1.2	98.8
Book (electronic)	13.2	86.8	23.6	76.4
Daily (paper)	11.8	88.2	10.8	89.2
Daily (electronic)	10.9	89.1	19.3	80.7
Weekly/periodical (paper)	14.6	85.4	15.2	84.8
Weekly/periodical (electronic)	23.6	76.4	29.4	70.6
Book written in a foreign l.	49	51	38.4	61.6
Audio Book	69.6	30.4	73.4	26.6

(own chart)

The difference between the two genders was shown in the library-using habits of students, as well (Table 8). Borrowing books from the library is almost 10% more frequent with female students – almost 100% go to the library to borrow books. It is also the female students who use the help of librarians in a greater rate. Concerning internet usage and studying in the library, the difference is smaller but female students are still in the lead. Male students use other services of libraries to a greater extent: participating at events and borrowing visual documents / audio materials.

Table 8 *Using library services – according to gender* (N=602 TERD MA/MSc database)

Activity	Male (%)	Female (%)
Borrowing books	88.7	97.7
Asking for information, finding information	69.1	77.6
Internet usage	66.9	72.8
Studying	56.4	63
Visiting events	22.1	18.9
Borrowing visual documents	13.4	9
Borrowing audio materials	12.2	5.4

(own chart)

Provided we consider reading as a tool, we can name information-acquiring (linked to studying or spontaneous interest) and entertaining (fun-loving, relaxing, free-time spending) functions. We asked the students how much they consider books to be informative or entertaining. This question has exciting answers in itself, but we can receive a more nuanced picture of the information-acquiring and entertainment attitudes of the youth if we examine the other choices, as well. Therefore, beside books, we listed the following options in the questionnaire: TV, radio, daily, periodical/magazine, internet, local club/organization/religious community. The results demonstrate that though TV, radio, dailies and periodicals are present in the most important information-acquiring pattern of the everyday lives of students, these only appear in 4–17% rate as opposed to the dominance of the internet (68.5%) and

books (36.5%). Participating in community life – as information source – is also low (7.2%) in the “very important” category (Table 9).

Table 9 *How important to you are the following information resources?* (TERD MA/MSc database N=602)

How important to you are the following information resources?	Not important (%)	Rather not important (%)	Rather important (%)	Very important (%)
TV	17.8	25.4	44.2	12.7
Radio	18.8	29	40.4	11.7
Daily paper	20.2	24,1	43.9	11.9
Books	7.9	11.3	44.1	36.8
Periodicals / magazines	11.8	23.2	47.4	17.6
Internet	0.9	2.4	28.3	68.5
Local club, organization, religious community	40.9	28.1	23.8	7.2

(own chart)

We can find similar rates with regards to entertainment. The primary role of the internet (68.5%) in entertainment and free-time activities is straightforward concerning the examined student population. The vessel of traditional culture – the book – came second in the “very important” category with 36.5% which we can treat as a very good result since it exceeds the 12.7% TV entertainment to a great extent. Radio, daily papers and periodicals are the entertainment facilities of university and college student at an average of 11–17%. A fact for further studies may be the extremely low 7.2% rate of local clubs, organizations and religious communities in the “very important” category. We presume that community experiences appear in the answers of students marking the internet as entertainment method as “very important” – the experiences that the youth search for and find in the virtual domain in growing rates. The generation named “digital aboriginals” (Prensky, 2001) is characterized by online relationships. Their communications, interactions take place with the help of the internet. Relationships are gradually transported on the online surface which is not an exclusive mode but demonstrates a change of quality (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Live speech and meetings in person are not excluded entirely from the human communication process, but their function and role changes continuously due to the development of technology. *Internet incorporates a new potential for relationships beside serving us with communication facilities* (Csepeli & Prazsák, 2010, 12). Beside traditional information exchange, there are new entertaining functions that involve a group-

creating function beside creativity and entertainment. Games played on community portals also meet the entertainment needs of the youth. This may be the reason for the decline of the entertaining function of local clubs, organizations and religious communities.

Summary and prospects

In our study, we presented some data groups with the help of which we can get closer to knowing the reading, cultural, information-acquiring and entertainment habits of university and college students in the first decade of the 21st century. Obviously, the data make it possible to draw deeper conclusions as well. Therefore, our goal is a detailed analysis and evaluation by including further variables (the education of parents, religiousness, dwelling place etc.). Based on the data of reading habits, we can define further research directions. Due to the change of the function and content of reading, in the future we cannot exclusively use the reading-sociological examinations which were used for the survey of reading in the past decades. In our opinion, the examination of the reading attitude of young people can continue in newer dimensions and by developing further methods and points of view. A new theme for examination may be the mapping of community portal usage, blog writing and reading or the spread of e-books in the student population.

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¹ TERD research was an project donated by OTKA (number 69160). The leader of the project was Tamás Kozma. The research was fulfilled in the region of Partium (Hungary, Romania and the Ukraine).

² The sample comprises of students from the tertiary-level institutions of Hajdú-Bihar and Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg counties (University of Debrecen - UD, College of Nyíregyháza, Kölcsey Ferenc Teachers' Training College), and some institutions from across the Hungarian border (the

Partium Christian University in Oradea, the University of Oradea, the Faculty of Babes – Bolyai University in Szatmárnémeti and the II. Rákóczi Ferenc Hungarian College in Beregszász).

³ In the case of the II. Rákóczi Ferenc Hungarian College we questioned last-year students, however they are not part of the MA/MSc training of the Bologna system, but a similar, specialist training that takes place in Ukraine.