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*Reading Habits of High School Students from Transylvania Studying in Hungarian, and
Their Interactions with the School Canon*

ABSTRACT

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My investigation of the reading habits of secondary school students was motivated by a lack of available information. At the beginning of my doctoral studies, I undertook to determine the characteristics of reading materials that are popular among secondary school students; specifically, I sought to answer the question of what criteria teachers should use when recommending readings or selecting compulsory or recommended school texts for their students. I was interested in how—and indeed whether—the genre, length, linguistic complexity, structural composition, or thematic content of a work influences the reading choices of this age group.

However, this task proved infeasible without precise knowledge of the most popular readings. Therefore, I considered it necessary to conduct a comprehensive sociological study of reading among Hungarian native-speaking high school students studying in Hungarian-language classes in Transylvania, and subsequently to interpret the data in light of the school canon. In the first phase of the research, following a narrowing of focus, the following questions came to the forefront (organized thematically):

- What do secondary school students in Transylvania studying in Hungarian-language classes read? What do they enjoy reading?
- How does the set of popular readings differ from the corpus of compulsory and/or expected readings?
- To what extent does the school curriculum influence the reading habits of secondary school students? Is it possible that debates in educational policy and canon theory ultimately miss their target—that is, fail to accurately recognize and consciously address the needs, characteristics, and areas of interest of the very group they concern?
- What relationship can be observed between reading habits and internet use (including social media use)?
- What relationship can be observed between students' other leisure activities, their evaluation of these activities, the time spent on them, and their reading habits?

In order to formulate the hypotheses of the research along these lines, it was naturally necessary to review both previous studies on reading habits and the social and institutional factors influencing the reading choices of the target group.

The dissertation produced as a result of this work:

- reviews the relevant literature on the sociology of reading and presents hypotheses formulated on the basis of this literature (Chapter II.1);
- reviews the relevant insights of canon theory and presents hypotheses formulated on the basis of this theoretical overview (Chapter II.2);
- presents the questionnaire designed to answer the research questions and to test the hypotheses (Chapter III);
- analyses the data obtained through the questionnaire (Chapter IV);
- tests the hypotheses in light of the analysed data (Chapter V);
- attempts to provide comprehensive and forward-looking answers to the research questions (Chapter VI).

After reviewing the relevant literature and research history in the sociology of reading, the dissertation formulates the following hypotheses:

H1.1: I assume that internet use (*excluding* social media use) will enjoy moderate popularity among the examined population.

H1.2: I assume that social media use will enjoy high popularity among the examined population.

H1.3: I assume that internet and social media use will negatively influence reading performance/frequency.

H2.1: I assume that the examined population will exhibit higher reading performance and frequency than the adult population.

H2.2: I assume that the examined population will demonstrate weaker reading performance than previously measured data for similar age groups.

H2.3: I assume that the examined population will show better reading performance than secondary school students in Hungary.

H3.1: I assume that significant differences—greater than those observed among adults—will be observable between the reading habits of boys and girls.

H3.2: I assume that significant differences—similar to those observed among adults—will be observable between students with rural and urban permanent residence.

H3.3: I assume that significant differences will be observable between students attending different educational tracks.

H3.4: I assume that reading in multiple languages will show a positive correlation with reading performance and frequency.

H4.1: I assume that foreign authors will occupy an important place in the reading structure of the examined population.

H4.2: I assume that contemporary authors will occupy an important place in the reading structure.

H4.3: I assume that popular fiction authors—writers of light, entertaining literature—will occupy an important place.

H4.4: I assume that informational (non-fiction) literature will occupy an important place.

H4.5: I assume that “fashionable” authors will appear—i.e., authors who quickly gain popularity but whose popularity fades rapidly. (This hypothesis cannot be verified with a single dataset, but it allows for examination of whether such authors can be identified in earlier datasets.)

H4.6: I assume that the list of favourite authors will be more conservative than the list of currently read authors.

H4.7: I assume that the list of authors of the most memorable readings will be more conservative than both the currently read and favourite authors.

H4.8.1: I assume that the examined population will exhibit a more conservative reading structure compared to that of Hungary.

H4.8.2: I assume that the reading structure will display regional characteristics (e.g., relatively high popularity of Transylvanian authors).

H4.9: I assume that certain authors popular among the examined population will coincide with those found popular in recent adult-sample studies (e.g., Danielle Steel, Lőrincz L. László, Rejtő Jenő, Stephen King, J. K. Rowling, Dan Brown, J. R. R. Tolkien, George R. R. Martin, Müller Péter, Agatha Christie, Robert Merle, Fejős Éva, Nora Roberts, Robin Cook).

H4.10: I assume that authors publishing multi-volume works and/or series will appear prominently.

H4.11: I assume that works and authors of popular literature aimed at adults will also appear.

Following the review of canon theory and the identification of aspects of the school canon relevant to the target group, the dissertation formulates the following hypotheses:

H5.1: The readership of recommended authors/works included in the curriculum will not be higher than that of works not included in the curriculum.

H5.2: The readership of curriculum-based recommended works will be lower than comparable data from recent Hungarian secondary school studies.

H5.3: Authors/works included in textbooks but not in the curriculum will show low popularity/readership.

H5.4: Few authors belonging to the Hungarian school literary canon will be found among the works read by the examined group.

H5.5: Many authors belonging to the Romanian literary canon will be found among the works read by the examined group.

After formulating the hypotheses, the dissertation defines the methodology used to test them, based on a questionnaire survey. The structure of the questionnaire partially follows earlier studies to ensure diachronic comparability, while also including new elements.

The first ten questions record demographic variables: gender; age; grade; parents' educational level; type of residence; location of the school; mother tongue; specialization; educational track.

Before addressing reading habits, I included a question on extracurricular activities (Question 11), assuming this factor may influence reading activity. Respondents were asked how much time they spend on such activities (private lessons, sports, arts, etc.).

The subsequent section records reading and cultural consumption habits. A Likert-scale question, that followed the methodological practice of the National Széchényi Library (OSZK) and the Hungarian Academy of Science (MTA) (Question 12) assessed the attractiveness of 31 leisure activities. Question 13 became a question mapping the “reader’s daily menu,” adopted from the methodology of Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library (FSZEK): in Tóth Máté’s formulation, this question “sought to answer what types of content the respondents consumed. From this, it can be inferred in what forms those who do not consider themselves book readers encountered written content.”

Questions 14 and 15 of the questionnaire inquired into reading performance (“Apart from your other activities – excluding textbooks – do you read books?”), and reading frequency (“How often do you usually read books?”), respectively. Of the two questions—practically interpretable as control questions for one another—the former is rooted in the methodology of OSZK, while the latter in that of the Tárki research institute. In Question 16, I also considered it justified to ask about the reasons of non-readers; this consideration was likewise prompted by the practice of Tárki. Regarding the currently or most recently read material, I inquired through Question 17 (based on OSZK methodology), regarding preferred genres through Question 18, and regarding the language of reading through Question 19.

This was followed by a group of questions through which I was able to collect from respondents the names of specific authors and the titles of specific readings: Question 20 asked about the favourite author, Question 21 about the favourite Hungarian author, Question 22 about

the most memorable reading experience, while Question 23 asked about the book recommended to a best friend.

The idea for Question 24 was borrowed from the researchers of Kaposvár University, after which I modified the form of the question. In my case, the question was formulated as follows: “Have you read (partly or in full) the following works?” The list of works consisted of 30 items. The final three questions of the questionnaire aimed to obtain data on the respondents’ attitudes toward reading; these were likewise modeled on the practice of Kaposvár University.

The description of the questionnaire is followed by the precise definition of the target group and the sample. The sample included students studying in Hungarian-language secondary school classes (ISCED level 3). In determining the target group and selecting the sample, I relied on the data of the National Institute of Statistics. Surveying every member of the entire target group, numbering several thousand, was naturally not feasible, thus it was necessary to resort to some specific sampling procedure. For the present research, the most appropriate seemed to be a modified version of the multi-stage probability sampling also used by the staff of Tárki for constructing secondary school samples. Although this sampling procedure is, in the traditional case, considered random sampling, provided that I had first selected randomly some schools from among all those in Transylvania offering Hungarian-language secondary school classes, and then within these schools had the questionnaire filled out by all members of some randomly selected classes.

However, for several reasons this was not possible, primarily because I wished to carry out the recording of all responses personally. For this purpose, it was necessary to travel to each selected school, which limited the number of schools that could be visited. This number was also limited by the fact that not all schools responded positively to the request, although this rather counted as an exception. Thus, it can be stated that the selection of schools did not take place randomly. In selecting classes within the schools, I aimed to have as many students as possible complete the questionnaire. During sampling, I repeatedly reviewed the composition of the sample and attempted to select the next school to be visited as a function of the proportion of educational tracks within the sample. Thus, it can be said that it was not possible to implement the multi-stage probability sampling perfectly, since the realized sampling also shows the characteristics of quota sampling. In the present research, I divided the population into subgroups

according to the following criteria: the educational track of the class, gender, and type of residence.

The sampling was carried out in the form of individual work. I aimed, in pursuit of representativeness, to include as large a number of students as possible in the sample. The validity rate of the returned questionnaires was 98%, as the survey, alongside 1,945 respondents, resulted in 1,906 validly completed questionnaires. I made efforts to visit as many schools as possible in as many counties as possible, and also to ensure that, in the case of each county, data would be collected from classes of all three educational tracks. The sample included students from a total of 25 schools in 19 localities.¹

During sampling, it was not possible to establish quotas according to gender and type of residence; however, in both cases the proportions observed within the sample were very close to those observed in the population, therefore in this case the data were weighted in the SPSS software using the rake weighting method. (The analysis of the data obtained during the research was carried out with the help of version 27.0.1.0 of SPSS.) Thus, although the sample cannot be considered representative without criticism, it approximates representativeness to a large extent.

In the further part of the dissertation, I examined the truth value of the hypotheses previously established, as a result of which I was able to arrive at several expected and unexpected conclusions. At the beginning of my work, I was interested in which works and authors prove to be popular among secondary school students, as a function of their reading habits. Thus, I seek to answer how all those factors can be determined that play a role in the formation of certain taste types, reader attitudes, and reader needs.

As one such possible factor, I preliminarily identified internet use. It emerged about the examined group that their usage habits are very diverse: they use the internet both for maintaining contacts and for entertainment. It appears that internet use (and within this, social media use) forms such an integral part of their everyday lives that no correlation can be demonstrated between its extent and reading habits: continuous online presence is so general

¹ Târgu Mureș, Aiud, Carei, Cluj-Napoca, Târgu Secuiesc, Oradea, Sfântu Gheorghe, Arad, Odorheiu Secuiesc, Satu Mare, Brașov, Zalău, Săcueni, Turda, Gheorgheni, Bistrița, Tășnad, Timișoara, Șimleu Silvaniei.

among young people that the causes of differences in their reading habits must be sought elsewhere.

Another possible factor that arose was age, which, however, proved to be indeed decisive: in accordance with previous observations, it can be stated that the younger age group reads significantly more than the older, and that Transylvanian Hungarian secondary school students read somewhat more than their counterparts in Hungary, although a slow decline in reading performance can also be detected among them.

Contrary to my expectations, the division of reading habits along gender lines proved to be striking—the dissertation is able to demonstrate, in several aspects, that the differences observable between the reading habits of boys and girls are almost of a chasm-like nature. It appears that “boys’” readings enjoy very low popularity, and although there are undoubtedly books that repel boys, still (apart from the non-fiction category with a low number of mentions, and within it mainly life-management-themed books) we do not really find works that would reach the top of readership or favourite lists due to the large number of their male readers. Among the numerous insights of the dissertation, I believe this is certainly one of those whose further consideration belongs to the tasks of broadly understood educational policy. Such is also the finding that foreign authors, as well as authors of popular and entertaining literature, and non-fiction, occupy an important place in the reading structure of students.

In the dissertation, I was able to demonstrate that the development of the reading habits of Transylvanian Hungarian secondary school students studying in Hungarian-language classes fits into the trends that can be outlined on the basis of data provided by Hungarian sociology of reading, but also diverges from them. It can be seen that the willingness to read is decreasing, although the pace of this decrease is not drastic. Transylvanian Hungarian secondary school students, moreover, appear to read somewhat more than their counterparts in Hungary, and much more than the adult population in Romania or Hungary. A serious gap can be observed, however, between the genders, which, in light of earlier data, seems to be deepening. Similarly large differences can also be observed between types of classes, where the boundary runs between, on the one hand, students attending theoretical and talent-development lycée classes, and on the other, those studying in vocational education. The insight gained through the examination of the language of reading is also not negligible, according to which students studying in Hungarian

seem to be distancing themselves from Romanian literature (and, implicitly, we may assume, from the majority culture as well). In parallel, the role of the English language is increasing, and, in contrast to what was mentioned regarding Romanian, it may give reason for optimism that nearly one third of students (and 40% of readers) read literary fiction in English, that is, in a foreign language. This is generally a welcome development from the point of view of language acquisition, personality development, and the high-level use of language.

Through the dissertation, it has been demonstrated that, in the case of the examined age group, the main competitor of reading is social media; however, in light of the data, it has also become conceivable (although not yet provable at present) that social media use can exert a significant influence on reading, not only compete with it. One of the results of the dissertation is that it has become more approachable to determine how social media influences the structure of reading. One of the main questions that arose is whether the trends of social media increase the number of readers, perhaps even their performance, or whether they merely change the taste of that layer of readers who would have read books anyway—to an extent determined by other factors. In the dissertation, I also undertake to describe one possible method of proving this question, by attempting to describe and illustrate, through network-theoretical methods, the relationships observable among favourite authors.

In the dissertation, I give voice to the observation that secondary school students read in an increasingly “adult-like” manner. The book market and publishing industry (dominated primarily by actors of the global West) have recognized this demand of theirs and seek to supply them with long-form prose targeted more or less above their own age group. It would require separate study(ies) to explore exactly what themes and what rhetoric popular Young Adult and New Adult books operate with, how they are able to address readers, and what they elicit from them. It would also be of interest to examine how young readers—who, while still young, are rapidly becoming autonomous both in taste and in time management—understand the literature they themselves consider popular, what reading strategies they employ, and how they integrate what they read into their own psychological and social lives. This question is also interesting because the dissertation has shown that large popular “peaks” exist, that is, the taste world of students (at least as far as the outlined snapshot is concerned) is not extremely fragmented, as the researcher might have assumed in an information world determined by post-truth.

The dissertation has also succeeded in demonstrating the existence of generational bridges (that is, all those readings that prove to be popular across several generations either within the same period or across defined periods), but at the same time it has also brought to light their low number. A certain part of these bridges comes into being through the strong influence of the school canon (such as *The Paul Street Boys*, *Ábel in the Wilderness*, or *Toldi* and *John the Valiant*), while others do so independently of it (for example, the Harry Potter series). The community-forming power of the national canon is still rather strong, although it appears to be declining, especially when viewed from the perspective of the Hungarian educational system. It seems that the school curriculum, as a constitutive element of the school canon, does exert some influence on students' reading habits, but this influence is somewhat weaker than that observed in Hungary.

I believe that the dissertation can also provide usable considerations for clarifying to what extent it is advisable, or at all possible, to make currently popular works part of the educational process. We have seen that the popularity of certain works, although it may be high at a given moment, lasts for such a short time that even the most basic processes of canonization cannot take place in their case. Such seems to be, in light of the presented data, the *Twilight* series (and all vampire novels), *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *Game of Thrones*, or the novels of Jacqueline Wilson and Louis Sachar. By contrast, we can speak of works that have been able to preserve their popularity for a long time without the canonizing effect of the school (in addition to *Harry Potter* and *St. Johanna High*, for example *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, or the novels of Stephen King and Agatha Christie), or even to revive it (we may think here of J. R. R. Tolkien or of authors who are, in some respects, quite surprising, such as George Orwell, F. M. Dostoevsky, Franz Kafka, or Albert Camus). The description of this latter phenomenon undoubtedly requires a research direction that the present dissertation could not undertake: alongside secondary discursive spaces (literary-critical media, scholarly discursive spaces), the investigation must in the future also be extended to primary discursive spaces. These include blogs, vlogs, and bottom-up, "grassroots" platforms, the most important layer of which is constituted by social media.

In summary, it can be stated that the reading habits of the examined group did not prove to be uniform at all. Among both currently read, as well as favourite or most memorable authors,

we find highly canonical and popular authors, classical and contemporary ones, Hungarian and foreign ones, youth writers and authors writing for adults, authors read by the parents' generation, as well as major newcomers and major returnees. I trust that the work carried out can refute a large part of the generalizations that often characterize the reading habits of the examined age group.