Social Factors in Cultural Participation

Social Factors in Cultural Participation is a series of four factsheets based on the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) 2019. The series builds on *Widening the Lens: Social inequality and arts participation* (2023) through detailed analyses of key topics using statistical techniques.

Widening the Lens considered the complex and intersecting nature of the social factors that inform our understandings of 'class'. These factsheets sit within the context of this understanding, while conducting a focused analysis of specific relationships that can be observed with the survey data.

The series is produced through a partnership between Creative Australia, RMIT University and the University of Canberra's News and Media Research Centre.

Factsheet 3:

Reading for Pleasure

Headline findings

- Three in four (75%) Australians engaged in reading for pleasure in the year before completing the survey (ie, read a book, ebook, poetry, or graphic novel that was not for study or work).
- The strongest predictors of reading for pleasure were gender (being female), education (having a university degree or above), and social class (identifying as upper-middle or upper class).
- Women were more likely to read for pleasure compared to men, regardless of age, education, or self-identified social class. However, the size of the gender gap varied across different groups:
  - There was almost no gender gap in reading habits in the youngest age group (18–29 years).
  - The gender gap in reading habits was larger among those with no post-school qualification (19 percentage points), compared to those with a trade, vocational, or university qualification (9 percentage points).
  - The gender gap in reading habits was larger at both the high (upper middle/upper class) and low (lower/working class) ends of the self-identified social class spectrum (21–25 percentage points), compared to the middle-class groups (10–11 percentage points).
- Reading for pleasure was associated with more positive social attitudes and experiences:
  - Readers reported higher levels of social trust:
    - 62% of readers said they trusted others, compared to 57% of non-readers.
  - Readers were more concerned about social inequality in Australia:
    - 75% think income differences are too large, compared to 67% of non-readers
    - 62% think income distribution is unfair, compared to 51% non-readers
    - 39% feel very angry about income inequality, compared to 26% of non-readers.
  - Readers were more likely than non-readers to have experienced upward social mobility (46% compared to 39%).

Background

Reading for pleasure can be defined as any reading that is freely chosen (ie, not for study or work).[1] There are many reasons why people read for pleasure, including enjoyment, escapism, learning, and wellbeing. Common barriers to reading for pleasure include lack of time, access/cost, and lack of interest.[2]

Australian survey data shows there is a distinct 'reading class', that is, an elite group that is characterised by higher incomes and education levels, living in metropolitan areas.[3] It is also well established that women are more likely to read for pleasure than men.[4] However, recent changes in book culture may be increasing the diversity of people who read for pleasure.[5] These changes include increased accessibility (eg, ebooks) and genre diversity (eg, graphic novels, popular fiction), as well as greater educational focus on developing positive reading identities in childhood and adolescence, especially among boys and socially disadvantaged groups.[6]

Encouraging reading for pleasure is important because it is associated with multiple cognitive, emotional and social benefits.[7] Reading is linked to benefits at both individual and societal levels and has been recognised as a valuable tool for reducing social inequalities and building more inclusive societies.[8]

There are several mechanisms through which this can happen. First, reading exposes people to different cultures and worldviews that can broaden their perspectives and challenge their preconceptions and stereotypes.[9] Second, reading fosters empathy and understanding, which may promote a more inclusive mindset.[10] Third, reading for pleasure improves language, literacy and other cognitive skills (eg, critical thinking), and promotes lifelong learning, thus helping to reduce educational inequalities.[11] Finally, reading for pleasure has a positive impact on health and wellbeing, which is also linked to better social outcomes.[12]

In this factsheet, we examine how gender intersects with age, education, and self-identified class to influence reading for pleasure among Australians. We then explore links between reading for pleasure and social attitudes in Australia. Specifically, we examine how readers and non-readers differ in their levels of social trust, concern for social inequality, and social mobility.

Analysis 1: Factors influencing the gender gap in reading for pleasure – age, social class, and education

Analysis 1 contributes to a more nuanced understanding of gender differences in reading habits among Australians. Figures 1 to 3 show that women are consistently more likely than men to read for pleasure, regardless of age, social class, or education. However, these figures also show significant variations in the size of the gender gap across different social groups. To help explain these differences, we consider how cultural values, social expectations, and individual choices might intersect with socio-demographic factors to influence reading habits among Australians.

1   Cremin T 2023, 'Reading for Pleasure: Recent research insights', School Libraries in View 47.
2   Australia Council 2023, *Widening The Lens: Social inequality and arts participation*.
3   Griswold W, McDonnell T, and Wright N 2008, 'The Reading Class', *Regionalism and the Reading Class*. Kelly M, Gayo M and Carter D 2018, 'Rare Books? The divided field of reading and book culture in contemporary Australia', *Continuum* 32:3. Lee J, Brook S, Curll S and Park S 2023, *Social Factors in Cultural Participation: Factsheet 1 – Parents' Occupational Class*, Creative Australia, University of Canberra, RMIT University.
4   Baron N 2021, *How We Read Now: Strategic choices for print, screen, and audio.* Throsby D, Zwar J and Morgan C 2017, *Australian Book Readers: Survey method and results.*
5   Creative Australia 2023, *Creating Value: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey.* Spjeldnæs K and Karlsen F 2022, 'How Digital Devices Transform Literary Reading: The impact of e-books, audiobooks and online life on reading habits', *New Media & Society 0:0.*
6   Flint S, Vicars M, Muscat A, Bennet M, Ewing R, Shaw K, et al 2024, *Literacy in Australia: Pedagogies for engagement.*
7   Clark C and Rumbold K 2006, *Reading for Pleasure: A Research Overview*, National Literacy Trust.
8   Fielding K and Trembath JL 2020, *A View from Middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity*, A New Approach and the Australian Academy of the Humanities. Leroux K and Bernadska A 2014, 'Impact of the Arts on Individual Contributions to US Civil Society', *Journal of Civil Society* 10:2. OECD 2021, *21st-Century Readers: Developing literacy skills in a digital world.*
9   Dodell-Feder D and Tamir D 2018, 'Fiction Reading Has a Small Positive Impact on Social Cognition: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 147:11.
10 Mumper ML and Gerrig RJ 2017, 'Leisure Reading and Social Cognition: A meta-analysis', *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 11:1.
11 Clark C and Teravainen-Goff A 2020, *Children and Young People's Reading in 2019: Findings from Our Annual Literacy Survey*, National Literacy Trust.
12 Australia Council 2023, *Creating Wellbeing: Attitudes and engagement with arts, culture and health*; Teravainen-Goff A and Clark C 2020, 'Literacy and Mental Wellbeing', *Debates in English Teaching*.

1.1. Gender and age

Figure 1 shows that while there is a significant gender gap in all age groups 30 years and above, there is almost no gender gap in reading habits among younger adults (18–29 years). These findings may reflect a generational change. For example, the introduction of ebooks may have had a larger impact on male reading rates, given men have more favourable attitudes toward digital technology in general.[13] Recent educational strategies aimed at helping young boys develop a reader identity might also be reducing the gender gap in reading for pleasure.[14] Alternatively, these findings may be age-related. For example, men may be more likely than women to lose interest or prioritise other leisure activities as they reach a certain age. Social factors, such as the prevalence of female-dominated book clubs, may also play a role.

Figure 1: Reading for pleasure by Gender and Age (%)
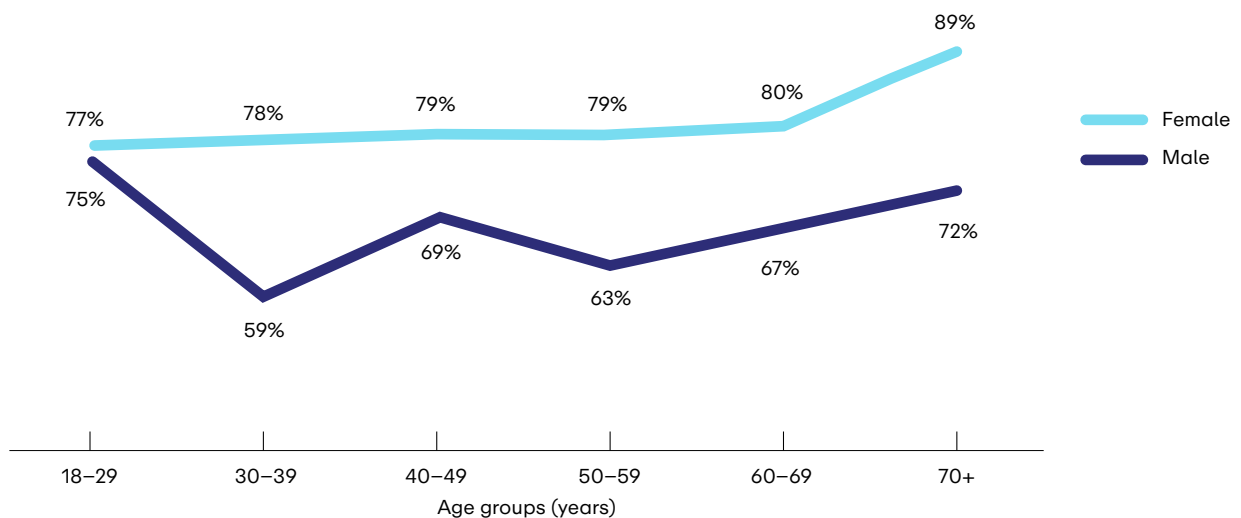
1.2. Gender and self-identified class

The data from this survey also reveals an interesting interplay between gender and self-identified class in shaping reading habits among Australians. Respondents were asked which social class they belong to, ie lower class, working class, lower middle class, middle class, upper middle class, or upper class. Few people identified as lower class or upper class, so these categories were combined with working class and upper middle class, respectively.

Figure 2 shows that the gender gap is more pronounced at the low and high ends of the self-identified class spectrum.

The lower/working class group had the lowest overall rates of reading for pleasure, with 72% of women and only 50% of men reading for pleasure. Potential contributing factors include lower literacy levels and more limited access to reading materials and resources. Traditional class and gender norms that prioritise income-generation or other leisure activities over reading may further discourage working class men from reading for pleasure and help explain the gender gap here.
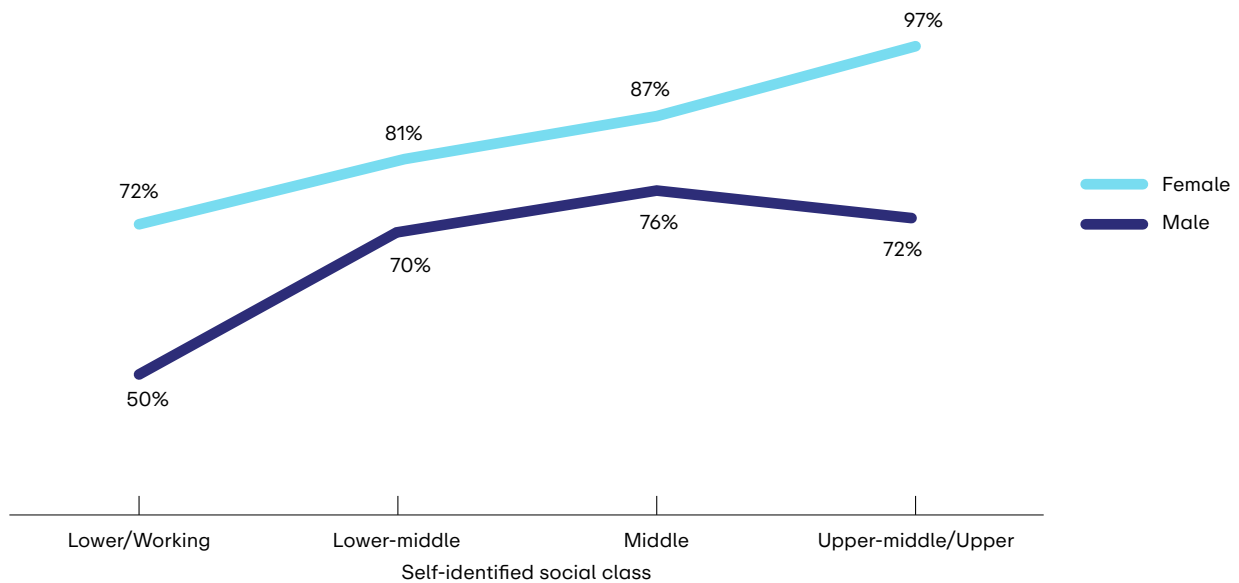
In the upper middle/upper class group, almost all women read for pleasure (97%), compared to 72% of men. Historically, social norms in middle and upper classes actively encouraged reading for pleasure for women, while men were more encouraged to pursue sports or outdoor activities. Greater discretionary resources (time, money) in higher class groups could amplify these socialisation processes and help explain the wider gender gap found here.[15] Men who identify as upper middle/upper class may be more drawn towards more public modes of arts participation, such as attending cultural events, with these activities allowing them to express their higher social status and network with peers.[16]

---

13   Schwabe A, Kosch L, Boomgaarden H and Stocker G 2023, 'Book Readers in the Digital Age: Reading practices and media technologies', *Mobile Media & Communication* 11:3.
14   Flint S, Vicars M, Muscat A, Bennet, M, Ewing R, Shaw K et al 2024, *Literacy in Australia: Pedagogies for engagement*.
15   Christin A 2012, 'Gender and highbrow cultural participation in the United States,' *Poetics* 40:5.
16   Reeves A 2014, 'Neither Class Nor Status: Arts participation and the social strata,' *Sociology* 49:4.

Figure 2: Reading for pleasure by Gender and Social Class (%)

97%

87%

81%

72%

Female

76%

70%

Male

72%

50%

Lower/Working   Lower-middle   Middle   Upper-middle/Upper

Self-identified social class

1.3. Gender and education

Figure 3 shows that the gender gap in reading is wider among Australians who have not completed a post-school qualification. These results suggest that while higher education increases the likelihood of reading for pleasure for both genders, it has a stronger impact on men. Compared to women who are more likely to develop a positive reading identity in childhood,[17] higher education may be a pivotal point for men[18] – potentially a time where they are exposed to more diverse reading materials and the cultural value of reading for pleasure increases.

Figure 3: Reading for pleasure by Gender and Education (%)

92%

80%

75%

Female

83%

71%

Male

56%

None   Trade/Vocational   University

Post-school qualification
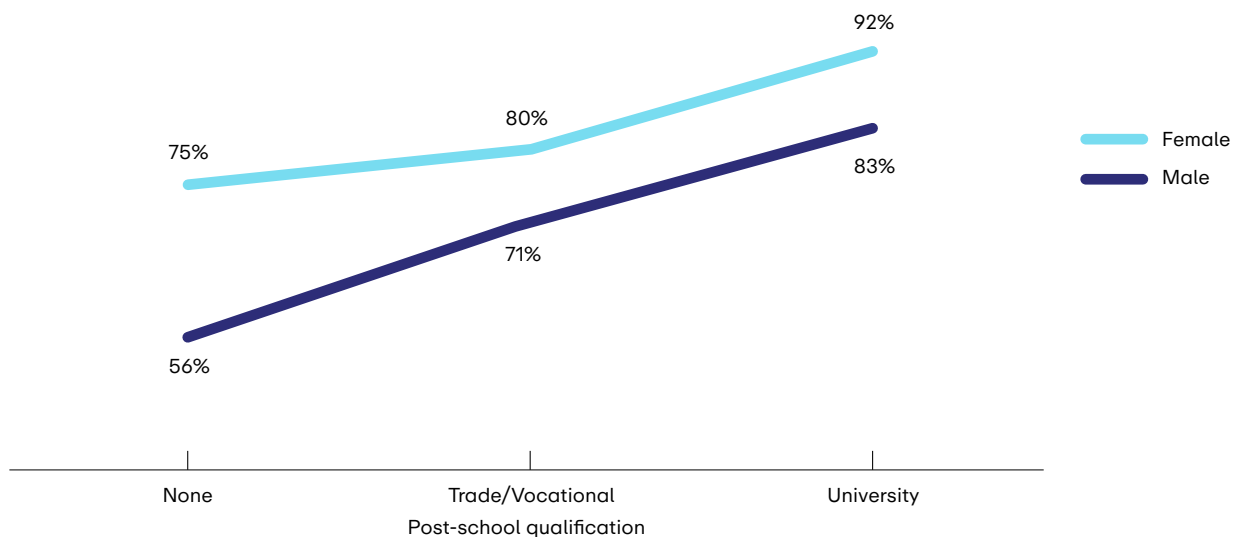
17 McGeown S, Goodwin H, Henderson N and Wright P 2012, 'Gender Differences in Reading Motivation: Does sex or gender identity provide a better account?', *Journal of Research in Reading 35:3*.
18 Reeves A 2015, 'Music's a Family Thing': Cultural socialisation and parental transference,' *Cultural Sociology 9:4*.

Analysis 2: Social benefits of reading for pleasure – Social trust, concerns about inequality, and social mobility

Analysis 2 shows how reading for pleasure relates to social trust, concern for social inequality, and social mobility among Australians. We discuss potential explanatory processes; however, it is important to note that these relationships are complex and influenced by many factors, and causality remains unclear.

2.1. Social trust and concern for social inequality

Social trust refers to the belief in the honesty, integrity, and reliability of others. Social trust facilitates connected, engaged, and tolerant communities and is considered by many to be the core of social capital.[19] Concern for social inequality reflects perceptions of fairness and respect for others and, as such, is an important driver of change toward greater inclusivity and equity.[20]

Overall, 60% of this study's respondents think that other people can always or usually be trusted. Figure 4 shows that people who read for pleasure are more likely to say that people can be trusted (62%, compared to 57% of non-readers). Figure 4 also shows that readers are more likely to express concern for social inequality in Australia. Specifically, readers are more likely to perceive income differences as too large (75%, compared to 67% of non-readers) and unfair (62%, compared to 51% of non-readers), and to feel very angry about wealth inequality (39%, compared to 26% of non-readers).

While data from this study cannot explain these associations, prior work has considered how reading might foster greater trust in others and concern for social inequalities. Immersion in narratives featuring diverse experiences and perspectives can challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudices – key barriers to developing trust across groups.[21] Reading can also improve critical thinking abilities, which can make people more open to trusting others.[22] Moreover, the empathy-building process intrinsic to reading can encourage people to think and act for the collective good.[23] Based on these findings, scholars have argued that reading is a tool for social justice and positive social change.[24]

Figure 4: Differences in social trust and concerns about social inequality between readers and non-readers (%)
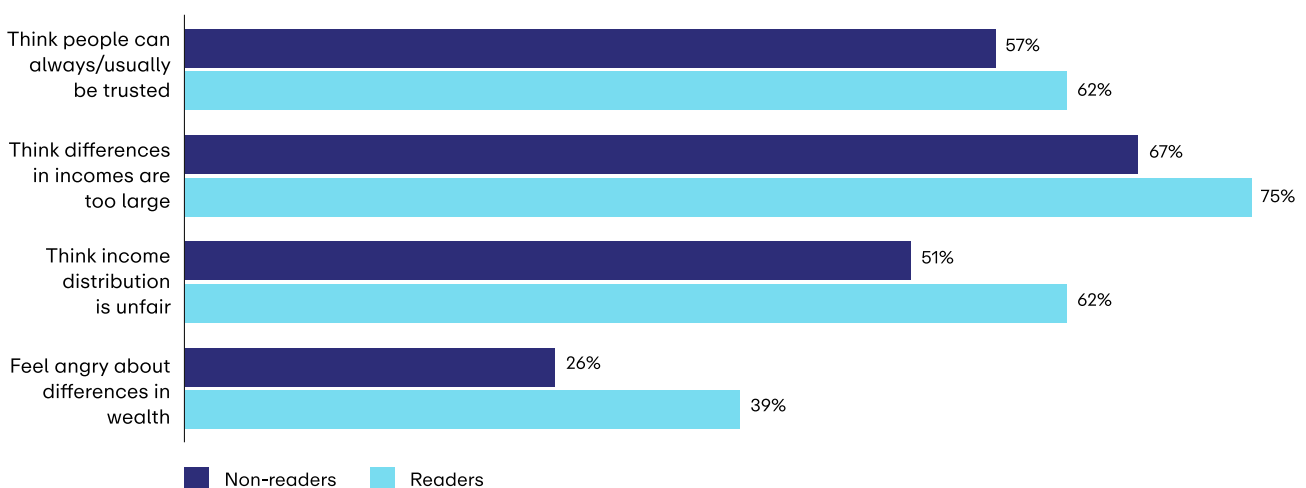
19   Stolle D 2002, 'Trusting Strangers – The concept of generalized trust in perspective', *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 31:4.
20   Roex K, Huijts T and Sieben I 2019, 'Attitudes Towards Income Inequality: 'Winners' versus 'losers' of the perceived meritocracy', *Acta sociologica* 62:1.
21   Vezzali L, Stathi S, Giovannini D, Capozza D and Trifiletti E 2015, 'The Greatest Magic of Harry Potter: Reducing prejudice', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 45:2.
22   Mumper ML and Gerrig RJ 2017, 'Leisure Reading and Social Cognition: A meta-analysis,' *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 11:1.
23   Roza S and Guimarães S 2022, 'The Relationship Between Reading and Empathy: An integrative literature review', *Psicologia: Teoria e Prática* 24:2.
24   Dewan P 2016, 'Economic Well-being and Social Justice Through Pleasure Reading', *New Library World* 117:9.

2.2. Reading for pleasure and social mobility

Social mobility refers to the ability of individuals to move within or between social strata in a society. Social mobility is crucial for fostering a fair, prosperous, and cohesive society.[25]

Survey respondents were categorised as having an upward, stable, or downward social trajectory based on where they put themselves on the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status[26] now, compared to when they were growing up. Overall, 44% of respondents reported an upward trajectory. Readers were more likely to report an upward trajectory (46%) than non-readers (39%).

Figure 5 shows that the increased likelihood of experiencing an upward social trajectory among readers was only found among those with lower subjective social status. This suggests reading for pleasure may be especially beneficial among relatively disadvantaged groups.

Previous research suggests several pathways through which reading for pleasure may facilitate upward social mobility. One mechanism could be through cognitive gains – the improved literacy, reasoning skills, and knowledge acquired though reading may boost academic performance and job prospects over time. Additionally, broader perspectives and improved social skills gained through reading might increase an individual's awareness of alternate life trajectories and lead to new opportunities for advancement.

However, the relationship between reading for pleasure and social mobility may also flow in the reverse direction. As individuals experience upward mobility, they may adapt their leisure behaviours to align with the social norms of their new socioeconomic status. More research is needed to determine whether reading for pleasure is a driver or outcome of social mobility processes, or both.

Figure 5: Proportion of readers vs. non-readers with upward social trajectory
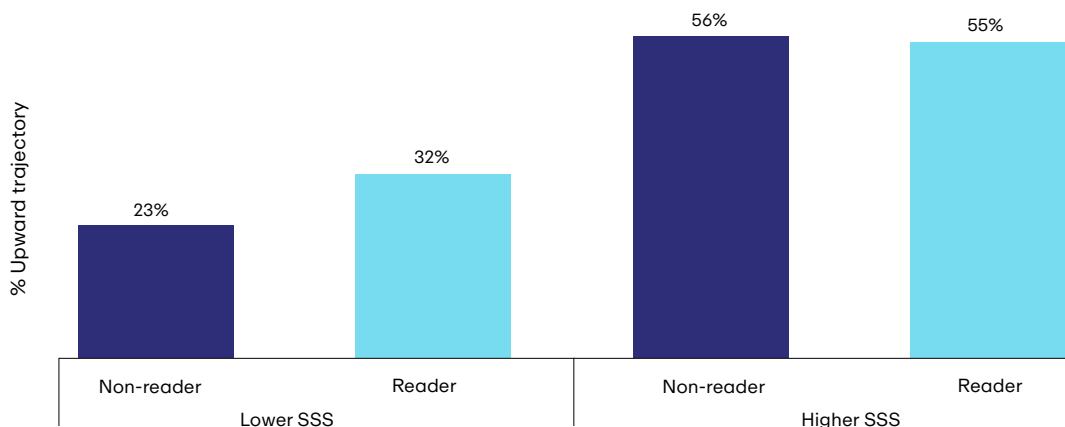
Note. Lower SSS = lower subjective social status. Higher SSS = higher subjective social status.

25 Phillips L, Martin S and Belmi P 2020, 'Social Class Transitions: Three guiding questions for moving the study of class to a dynamic perspective', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 14:9.
26 The MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status is a widely used tool used to measure an individual's perceived social rank relative to others in their society.

Conclusions

These findings provide a 'snapshot' of how (1) gender intersects with age, social class, and education to influence the likelihood of reading for pleasure, and (2) reading for pleasure relates to positive social attitudes and upward social mobility among Australians. As book culture and the notions of gender and class continue to shift, these relationships and the factors driving them may also change. It will be important for future research to explore reading for pleasure over time, as well as different types of reading for pleasure (eg, fiction vs. non-fiction; digital vs. non-digital).

Overall, findings provide further evidence for the connections between reading for pleasure and positive social effects. In addition to the well-established individual benefits, promoting reading for pleasure may help build more trusting and inclusive communities. Interventions to promote pleasure reading appear to be most needed among men, people who identify as lower/working class, and people with lower levels of education.

The growing accessibility and diversity of reading material may offer valuable opportunities to overcome the common barriers to reading for pleasure, including time, cost, and lack of interest. Recent research provides useful insights for researchers, educators, and policymakers seeking to implement targeted strategies to promote reading for pleasure among different social groups, including leveraging digital modalities.[27]

---

27   Cremin T and Schole L 2024, 'Reading for Pleasure: Scrutinising the evidence base—benefits, tensions and recommendations', Language and Education 1:23. Webber C, Wilkinson K, Duncan L and McGeown S 2023, 'Adolescents' Perspectives on the Barriers to Reading for Pleasure', Literacy e12359. Wilhelm J 2016, 'Recognising the Power of Pleasure: What engaged adolescent readers get from their free-choice reading, and how teachers can leverage this for all,' *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 39:1.

Appendix

Key questions in the survey

Social trust: People can be trusted or can't be too careful in dealing with people? (4-point scale, binary recoded trust/mistrust).

Concerns about inequality: (1) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Differences in income in Australia are too large (5-point scale; binary recoded agree/disagree); (2) How do you feel when you think about differences in wealth between the rich and the poor in Australia? (11-point scale, binary recoded low/high anger); (3) How fair or unfair do you think the income distribution is in Australia? (4-point scale, binary recoded fair/unfair).

Social mobility: In our society there are groups which tend to be towards the top and groups which tend to be towards the bottom. Below is a scale which runs from top to bottom. Where would you put yourself now on this scale? And if you think about the family that you grew up in, where did they fit in then? (10-point scale).

Authors

Sonia Curll, University of Canberra

Scott Brook, RMIT University

Jee Young Lee, University of Canberra

Sora Park, University of Canberra

About the factsheets

The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA) is an annual national survey, which generates Australia's main source of data for the study of the social attitudes, beliefs, and opinions of Australians. In 2019, the topic for AuSSA was social inequality. The survey asked a range of questions designed to explore respondents' views on the overall fairness of society and their place within it. Creative Australia (then called the Australia Council for the Arts) added four questions to the 2019 AuSSA, aligned with those from the National Arts Participation Survey. Based on this dataset, Creative Australia published _Widening the Lens: Social inequality and arts participation_ report in July 2023. To explore further insights from the AuSSA on social inequality and cultural participation, researchers from the University of Canberra and RMIT are collaborating to produce a series of factsheets in 2023–24. This is the third of the series. For details on the methodology and other findings, please refer to the main report.

Cite as: Curll S, Brook S, Lee J and Park S 2024, _Social Factors in Cultural Participation: Factsheet 3 – Reading for Pleasure_. Creative Australia, University of Canberra, RMIT University.