

# **A Books Reading Pattern Based on Economic and Psycho-Sociological Factors**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the relative influence of socio-economic variables versus attitudes as regards consumer behavior towards books reading as a leisure activity. Previous studies on leisure consider the amount of discretionary time available for the individual as a decisive factor. This study is based on a field research conducted with a French population sample. We isolate four fundamental dimensions of the reading activity which appear to act as necessary intermediate variables to predict consumer behavior towards this leisure activity. A threshold of involvement is identified, below which individuals appear to feel unconcerned by reading, should they have some discretionary time available or not.

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READING, AS A LEISURE ACTIVITY received little research attention in research. For many years, studies of consumer behavior have insisted on regarding the time disposed of by consumers as a constraint upon their free activities. Whether from a purely economic point of view (Becker 1965) or a sociological one (Dupuy 1975; Linder 1970), time appears to act as a fundamental element in a consumer's action; the individual disposes of a certain amount of time that can be attributed to a certain number of activities. The leisure time one disposes of depends, for example, on overall non-working time (discretionary time) but also on the discretionary time after deduction of obligatory household activity time (free time). Lastly, the attribution of units of time to units of activity also depends on specific social and psychological factors such as personal life framework and goals (Bergadaà, 1990).

Given that reading is at the same time an obligatory activity (when studying) and a leisure occupation, the question to be considered in this study is what in fact are the most predictive variables in an individual's behavior with regard to this activity. Individual behavior with regard to books has already been examined (Janssen, Leemans

1988) but no specific research appears to have been carried out on the activity of reading. Now, going beyond specific behavior towards the "book" object, a study of the activity raises many questions (Bergadaà and Nyeck, 1995). What relationship does it bear towards an individual's available time, discretionary leisure time and personal attitude towards reading?

The traditional economic approach opposes two notions, obligatory time and discretionary time. In this perspective, time is a commodity limited in quantity (24 hours per day) and not stockable. Discretionary time is the time remaining free after the obligatory time for work has been taken up. This discretionary time breaks down into a large number of activities, such as the necessary household activities (meal preparation, shopping, etc.) or leisure activities. According to this approach, the time that an individual devotes to a particular leisure activity is directly related to the overall discretionary time one disposes of. But an imbalance exists between individuals; one part of the population works and feels a lack of free time, while another part is unemployed and has too much free time at its disposal (Sue, 1982). In order to take into account different perceptions of an activity such as reading, it is necessary to make the distinction between "leisure time" (as opposed to "work time") and "free time" (as opposed to "obligatory time"). The objectively free time of the jobless individual does not appear to him, nor is it experienced, as time he disposes of for relaxation or personal improvement. Thus, considering that reading is a leisure activity, the economic approach suggests that the amount of time spent reading is directly and positively related to the amount of discretionary time available.

In his theory of human capital, Becker (1965) raised doubts about this mechanistic short term view of discretionary time. In his theory, time is a resource and individuals produce their own satisfaction. Thus, time and values are the elements of the process and individuals seek the greatest satisfaction by producing the final values they wish, such as health, culture, etc. These final values are themselves made up of time-vectors and activity-vectors, since a quantity of values and time enter into their composition.

For example, "culture" can be made up of a large number of interchangeable "sub-activities", such as reading, cinema, television, etc., according to the psychological make-up of the person. Thus, this approach introduces some subjectivity, to the extent that individual allocation to different activities is considered subjective and influenced by antecedent factors such as marital status (Ferber and Birnbaum, 1977), or age and work situation (Arndt and Gronmo, 1977), but still considers that the link between the allocation of time to a given activity and discretionary time is objective. Two other interesting antecedents are the propensity to make plans and beliefs in destiny (Bergadaà, 1988). Individuals who consider themselves master of their destiny and make projects adopt an active attitude towards the objects in their environment, which they endow with a value of personal enhancement. Individuals who, on the contrary, make no projects and think that the individual is subject to the shifts of fortune are more aware of the recreational value of the objects that surround them.. Thus, Becker's approach suggests that the positive relationship between the amount of time spent reading and the amount of discretionary time available is moderated by antecedent factors such as marital status and age or the propensity to make plans and beliefs in destiny.

The antecedent variables in the behavior of individuals with regard to reading are legion. Thus Linder (1970) notes that in our societies, individuals have less and less free discretionary time at their disposal. Dupuy (1975) considers that the competition of many objects (e.g. television, radio, cassette recorder, etc.) tends to limit the quantity of time allotted to each activity. For their part, Hendrix, Kinnear and Taylor (1979) emphasize that so-called "leisure" activities contain elements of obligation and discretion which depend on many intermediate variables, as for example the pleasure felt during the activity, other people's allocation of time, the accessibility of activities, the role played by the individual, etc.. Thus, the activity needs to be examined in the context of the individual relationship with one's surroundings. Lastly, it should be observed that the authors implicitly propose the hypothesis that the service rendered by

a resource increases in proportion to the quantity consumed. However, it is difficult to accept that the same resource gives the same "service" to all individuals. Consumers must also be able to derive a certain satisfaction from reading to become involved in the activity. Research of phenomenologist psychologists into reading have revealed the existence of pleasure in success in the operation of reading and that not all individuals, for various reasons, have necessarily acquired a sufficient proficiency in reading to achieve such a pleasure. Moreover, cognitive psychology suggests that a real disgust with reading can result from failure when learning (eg. Denhières, 1988). Learning to read is indeed long and difficult, and individuals go through a great number of stages, from simple deciphering of signs to the comprehension of a written text. The mastery of reading implies a great many intellectual reflexes, deciphering, but also committing to memory (Schank and Abelson, 1977). The question for our research is therefore: Is there a threshold of involvement below which reading is simply an effort for the individual and how does this threshold relate to the allocation of time to reading?

The book is an object with a social sign attached ("the prime and the most basic index of cultural level") as well as a symbolic one ("it only acquires its true meaning when it meets the individual trajectory of each reader"). According to some authors (Bassy, 1979), individuals appear to have attitudes with regard to reading based mainly on the following functions: social, personal, reflective and recreational. Identifying this attitude structure and whether it directly influences the time spent reading or acts as an intermediary between socio-economical variables and time spent reading will also be investigated in this project.

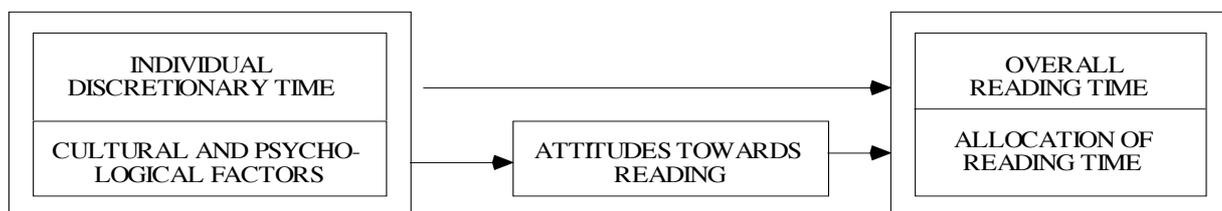
### **Method**

To provide answers to these questions, we developed an empirical survey based on a literature review and on in-depth interviews on the topic. Tests and analyses were made in order to reveal the main features of individual attitudes regarding reading and the way these intermediate variables affect consumers' time allocated to reading and

their organization of this activity. To summarize, the general design of the study will be as follows:

**FIGURE 1**

General Design Of Study



Data for this study were collected through 178 questionnaires on a convenience sample using the quota method based on the following criteria: age, sex, standard of education and profession. This approach ensured that all categories were represented and thus to alleviate the concern that members of lower social classes might decline to answer a questionnaire on a topic with which they might feel ill at ease.

Although discretionary time was a crucial construct in our study, we decided not to use instruments such as time-budgets to measure this construct or the time spent reading. This decision was based on two factors: first, time-budget instruments are very demanding on the respondents and quite cumbersome to handle and tend to generate very low response rates; second, and more importantly, these instruments have been shown to be also prone to bias in the individual recollection of the time spent on activities. Thus, even in these more “descriptive” instruments, the subjectivity of inter-individual measurement is important because for instance some people read far quicker than others or time seems longer if the activity is unpleasant, etc. As a consequence, we decided to measure time spent reading and the use of discretionary time through two indirect variables. On the basis of criteria defined by Didelot (1979), time devoted to reading was measured in three categories (small readers - less than one book a month; average readers - one or two books a month; big readers - more than two books a

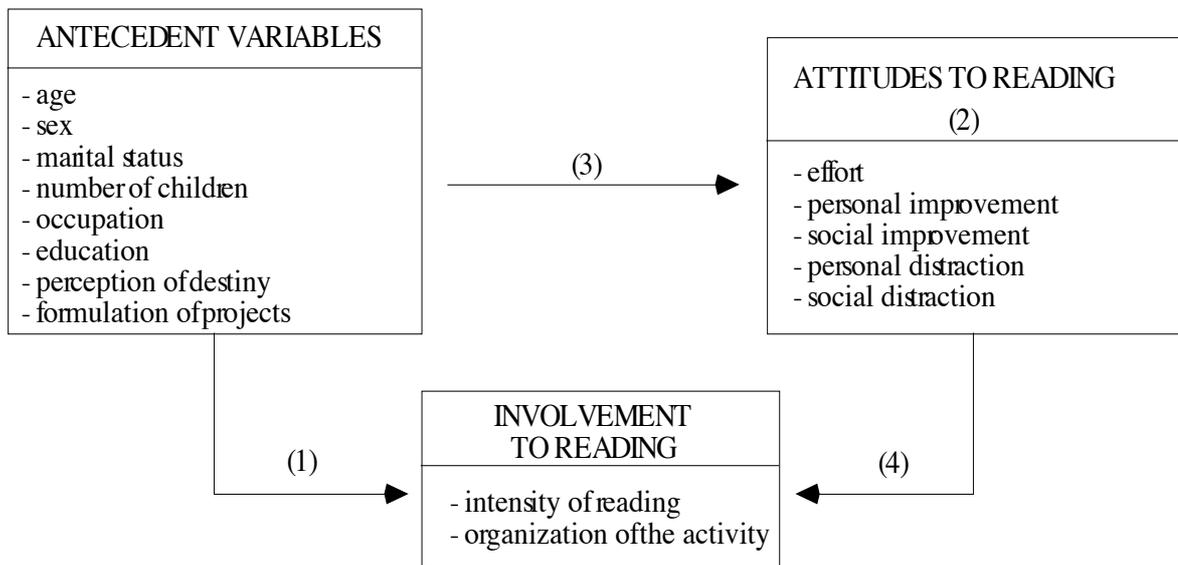
month). The organization of reading time by the individual tapped the extent to which individuals take discretionary time for reading or only read when their discretionary time is not taken up by other activities and they have free time imposed by their environment. Two categories tapped this notion: those who take every opportunity to read and those reading solely during holidays, week-ends, or in public transports.

To tap the notion of threshold of involvement, we combined these two variables and defined "non-involved" individuals as those who read little (less than one book per month) and who do not read when they do not have to.

We also measured a number of socio-economical variables such as age (4 categories: 15-25, 26-35, 36-50 and over 50), marital status (living as a couple or not), number of children (3 categories: no children, 1 or 2 children, more than 2 children), occupation (with or without a job outside the home), and education (4 categories: elementary brevet (after 3 years of secondary education) or below, Bacculaureate (after 5 years of secondary education), second year-end post-Bacculaureate, fourth year-end post-Bacculaureate and more). We also measured the propensity to make plans (3 categories: respondents say they make plans, give no indication, or state they make no plans) and the belief in destiny (3 categories: no belief in destiny, indifference, or belief that destiny plays an important role).

Finally, we developed a scale measuring the attitude structure of consumers towards the activity of reading. A preliminary content analysis of in-depth interviews of a small group of individuals made it possible to induce the existence of a first factor, being the effort felt while reading, together with two attitude axes: relaxation-education and social-personal. On the basis of this content analysis, the following multidimensional scale was then assembled with 5-point Likert items. This scale was first pretested quantitatively on a small sample before being refined and used in the main study.

In summary, the following model was tested in this empirical study (the numbers represent the order of the analyses carried out):

**FIGURE 2****Complete Design Of Study****Results**

The study results are presented in the order of numeration in the preceding design.

*Antecedent Variables and Involvement to Reading*

We first tested the relationship between the socio-demographic variables and reading intensity, organization of the activity, and involvement (in the form of a component of the two foregoing variables; before bringing together these two variables, a Chi-2 test was performed which showed a perfect correlation ( $\text{Chi-2} = 36.45$ ; sig. = 0.0000) between them).

- Intensity of reading: the intensity of reading was measured on an ordinal scale and a Kruskal-Wallis test was then used to test the relationship of this variable to the antecedent variables. No direct significant relationship emerged.

- Organization of the activity: the organization of the activity was measured on a nominal scale and the Chi-2 test was used. No significant relationship was found here.

- Involvement in the activity: as this measurement consisted of a 2 point scale, Chi-2 tests were done. We found a significant relationship of educational level with this measurement of involvement (Chi-2 = 16.26; sig. = 0.001). More than 40 % of non-involved persons had a brevet level or under.

Thus it appears that to be able to enjoy reading, learning the activity is the essentially discriminating factor, and not the variables affecting the amount of the time available to the individual or the constraints of organization. This is thus in accordance with Denhières' results (1988), where the activity is considered in the light of the learning process of the individual. We also note that this result can only be demonstrated by creating a measurement of involvement, and not by a simple economic-type measurement concerned with the quantity of books read or the leisure time devoted to the activity. However this measurement of involvement is in itself far too simple for a comprehension of the phenomenon, and the following analyses will deal with the different facets covered by this involvement, that is, the individual's varying attitudes to reading.

### *Attitudes to Reading*

A principal component analysis was performed on the attitude scale developed earlier. The results were as follow:

**TABLE 1**  
**Factors Loadings**

Variable	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
V9	0.59				
V13	0.77				
V15	0.76				
V4	-0.36	0.60			
V1		0.79			
V3		0.71	0.33		
V2			0.73		
V8			0.60		
V12			0.77		
V6				0.79	
V7				0.57	
V11				0.74	
V5					0.72
V10					0.51
V14					0.84
Eigenvalue	2.9	2.3	1.7	1.3	1.0
Cronbach's alpha	0.61	0.66	0.57	0.62	0.58
Cumulative% of explained Variance	19.4%	34.6%	45.7%	54.1%	60.5%

Note. Varimax Rotation was used. Loadings inferior to .30 omitted

This analysis thus showed that the attitude structure of consumers towards reading broke down into the following five dimensions: effort, personal improvement, social improvement, personal distraction, and social distraction. Although the overall variation accounted for was fairly low if one considers the number of factors, the latter were clearly differentiated from each other (only two items are linked to more than one factor), and the reliabilities were acceptable. As a consequence, these factors were re-processed in the form of a linear combination of their participant variables, in order to

produce five independent measures of attitudes to reading (measured on ordinal scales of five points).

### *Antecedent variables*

Bivariate tests were carried out to relate the five variables of attitudes to reading to the antecedent socio-demographic variables. These tests produced the following results:

For the Effort dimension education had a significant connection with this dimension; effort increased in inverse proportion with the level of education. However, people with only a brevet or sub-brevet level were the ones who demanded more easy reading than those in other groups (Duncan test: F. ratio = 2.59;  $p = 0.05$ ). Also, the individuals who stated that they believed in destiny and refused to make projects, looked for books requiring little effort (Pearson corr  $p = 0.002$  and  $0.007$  respectively).

For the Personal improvement dimension: A significant positive relationship was found between wishing to make projects and this dimension (Pearson corr.  $p = 0.003$ ).

For the Social improvement dimension: Women were more sensitive to this dimension than men (t-value = -2.85, D.F = 172.43,  $p = 0.005$ ); the 55-plus age group was significantly more sensitive than the others to this dimension (Duncan test: F. ratio = 2.87;  $p = 0.04$ ); and people living alone were more sensitive than couples (F. ratio = 7.99;  $p = 0.005$ ).

For the Personal distraction dimension: wishing to make projects was negatively related to this dimension (Pearson corr.  $p = 0.045$ ).

For the Social distraction dimension: The baccalaureate level group was more favorable to this dimension than those of other educational levels (Duncan test: ratio = 3.02;  $p = 0.03$ ).

We observe that individuals only wanting to read "easy" or "entertaining" books were strongly marked by their low educational level, their belief in destiny and their

refusal to make projects. It would seem that it is only beyond this stage of "reaction" to reading that consumers are able to consider the other facets of reading. For example, those wishing to make projects looked for self-improvement through reading, and not for distraction.

### *Attitudes towards Reading and Involvement*

T-tests were performed to test the influence of the preceding dimensions on the involvement of individuals with regard to reading. These tests gave the following results. The "effort" dimension was negatively linked with involvement in reading (sig.=0.002). The "personal improvement", "social improvement" and "social distraction" dimensions were positively linked with intensity (respectively, sig. = 0.002, sig. = 0.007, and sig. = 0.010).

A discriminant analysis was performed with involvement as a dependent variable and reading attitudes as independent variables. The following table shows the standardized coefficients of the influence of the attitude variables on this involvement:

**TABLE 2**  
**Discriminating Variables**

Discriminating variables	Coefficients
- "Effort" dimension	- 0.528
- "Personal improvement" dimension	0.377
- "Social improvement" dimension	0.458
- "Personal distraction" dimension	0.313
- "Social distraction" dimension	0.044

Using these variables we arrive at a classification of consumers with regard to their involvement with reading, as the below table shows:

Present group	Number of individuals	Predicted group	
		Involved	Non-involved
Involved	55	37 (67.3 %)	18 (32.7 %)
Non-involved	84	28 (33.3 %)	56 (66.7 %)

(67.0 % of correct classifications)

The discriminant analysis increased the efficiency of a classification, otherwise random, by 34 %. Certainly this result is fairly low, but it must be remembered that in this question the attitudes of individuals to reading were more predictive than the antecedent socio-demographic variables in terms of the involvement or non-involvement of the individuals.

## Discussion

The first important result of this study is that no link could be established between the number of books read or the organization of reading and the variables which are assumed to be antecedent on account of their influence on discretionary time (work, number of children, living alone or in a couple). Thus, socio-demographic variables do not seem to influence the allocation of time to reading, contrary to some of Becker's ideas. Nonetheless, the involvement variable, which was created on the basis of the two preceding ones, appeared to be linked with educational level. We could therefore observe that the historical relationship established by the individual with the activity was more predictive of his/her involvement, or more exactly of his/her non-involvement, than the variables with economic connotations introduced beforehand.

In fact, only individuals who did not look for easy reading seemed able to perceive different facets of reading and to adopt a position in relation to the different attitudes of "personal improvement", "personal distraction", "social improvement" and "social distraction". Educational level, attitude towards destiny, and propensity to make

projects seemed predictive of capacity or incapacity to go beyond this threshold of involvement.

A final result relates to the fact that while the socio-demographic variables (except education) were not predictive of involvement with reading, they were far more predictive of individual attitudes towards this activity, and this network of attitudes was itself fairly predictive of involvement. Thus the knowledge of individual structure of attitudes towards reading appears to be a crucial intermediary for a better account of reading behavior.

In spite of these encouraging exploratory results, some of the limitations of this study indicate the desirability of continuing research into reading behavior. For instance, although a measurement of involvement was obtained, no direct measurement of the amount of time actually devoted to reading was taken. It would be desirable to investigate whether such a measurement could be envisaged. The rather small size of the sample ( $n = 178$ ) also made it impossible to differentiate between categories of consumers. For example, those reading during the weekends might not necessarily behave in the same way towards reading than those reading only during holidays or in public transportation. Finally, while different attitudes towards reading were uncovered, involvement with the "book" as an object could be measured more formally (for instance using the Laurent and Kapferer involvement scale (1985)).

Finally, the results of this study suggest the need for further investigating reader behavior. Further studies could for instance focus on the types of books read (novels, short stories, or informative reading for instance) or strive to understand the activity as complementing and/or replacing other leisure activities (cinema, theater, sport, etc.).

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**APPENDIX: THE MEASURES****Reading Attitudes Scale****1. Effort**

I do not like books which require a mental effort.  
I like books which are easy to read.  
I like books with an entertaining story.

**2. Personal improvement**

Good books ought to encourage me to ask questions.  
I often regret not having read enough.  
One should be able to draw a lesson from everything one reads.

**3. Social improvement**

I cannot understand how it is possible not to have read the great classics.  
One can only discuss books with people who also like reading.  
Today there are books which must be read.

**4. Personal distraction**

A book enables you to visualize for yourself.  
I really live the books I read.  
Good books transport me into another world.

**5. Social distraction**

I enjoy comparing my impressions on a book with those around me.  
You give someone a book because you want to share a pleasure with him.  
Reading is not something you can share.

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For ease of reading, the items are presented here in the order of the results of the factor analysis and not in the actual order in the questionnaire.

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