

Declining Literacy Despite Increasing Book Sales

While book sales have increased substantially over the past few years (Milliot, 2022), both the percentage of US adults who have read any book in the last 12 months and the average number of books read by US adults have declined over the past 30 years, and steeply in the last five years (see figure, NEA SPPA). In addition, literacy rates have concurrently declined among middle- and high-school age students and adults (U.S. Department of Education). Literacy is essential for educational attainment, understanding and communicating ideas, and solving real-world problems, and declines in literacy rates are alarming. Reading promotes literacy at all ages; primary and secondary education curricula typically require several books per grade level, and students develop reading, writing, and analytical skills via literary analysis guided by teachers. In adulthood, reading is both a vehicle for maintaining or increasing literacy and engaging with current cultural trends; human capital is gained through engaging with the books themselves, popular ideas communicated in longform, in-depth writing, and authors of interest.

Books also confer cultural capital, signaling that the reader is “a reader” and has a certain taste and may have certain opinions about topics related to the book’s topic, as well as social capital in that connections can be formed around shared interest in a book or genre (formally, e.g., via book clubs). Crucially, the cultural and social capital gleaned from books does not require the signaler to have read those books.

Books have been decoupled from reading via the very social media-driven promotions meant to boost reading; books are often marketed for their readability and adherence to familiar storylines and tropes rather than for their novelty and literary value, driving consumers to prioritize buying relatively un-challenging, formulaic books that they perceive everyone else to be reading and to learn about what they should buy next by engaging with social media, which directly competes with reading time as a proportion of leisure. Habituating this mode of book consumption makes it more difficult to engage with more difficult works in the future, dampening potential literacy. Demand for these books drives writers towards writing based on familiar, marketable formulas and cultivating online presences where they promote their work, even summarizing the main plot points for their online audience.

The goal of this project is to formulate a model that can replicate the sales and consumption patterns of a good for which these two are aligned at first and then diverge as the value of owning the good diverges from the value of consuming the good through social processes meant to boost sales and consumption in tandem (promotion and signaling) and internal reinforcing dynamic (reduced capability of engaging) processes.

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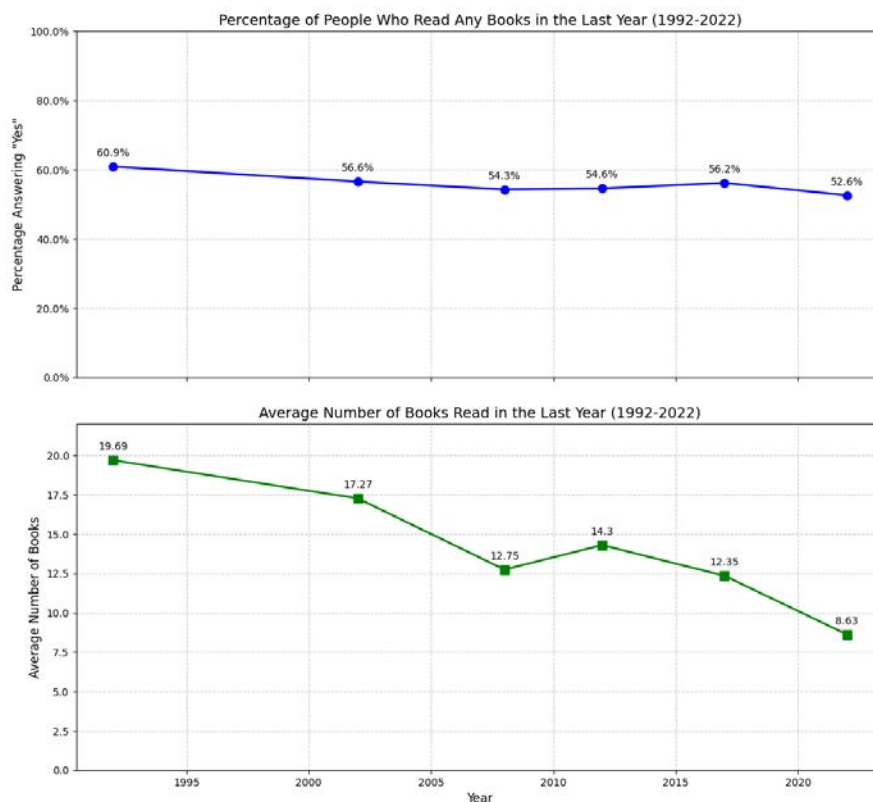
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Figure. Concurrent declines in adults reading any books and average number of books read per year (1992-2022)



Source: National Endowment for the Arts. Survey of Public Participation in the Arts 1992-2022 [United States].

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