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The effects of COVID-19 on the Spaniards' reading habit

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The effects of COVID-19 on the Spaniards' reading habit

Abstract

The general objective of this work is to analyze the reading habit of Spaniards during and after COVID-19 confinement in the same period of the following year. The specific goals are: first, study the purpose of reading; second, know the type of book form read; third, assess the time spent reading during and after confinement and fourth, identify the motivating factors of reading during the COVID-19 isolation. This research used the online survey method through the Microsoft Forms tool and applied a simple random sampling to 1,251 Spanish citizens of legal age and residents in the country with social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter, together with WhatsApp) during May and June 2021. The main results obtained are: firstly, there is a direct and positive relationship between academic training and the habit of reading; secondly, the reading habit among women is higher than among men; thirdly, there is a direct and positive relationship between age and reading habit; fourthly, confinement has had a positive impact on reading habits; fifthly, it is evident that confinement has driven the online purchase of books; finally and sixthly, the paper book continues to have a leading position as a content medium, compared to other alternatives such as the electronic book or the audiobook.

Keywords: book; reading habit; COVID-19; Spain.

Introduction

The confinement of the Spanish population in their homes for the virulent spread of COVID-19- took place on a Saturday, March 14, 2020, at 00:00 hours. It was strict confinement that -except for justified reasons such as the acquisition of food, medicine, going to the job, or attending emergencies- was focused on stopping the high rates of mortality and hospital admissions that took the national sanitary system to the limit of its

capacity. A series of restrictions were added to the confinement that, among other economic activities, affected the book sector for the closure of bookstores, libraries, and cultural centers (BOE, 2020; Cordón and Muñoz, 2020). Finally, three months and a week later, Spain was opened to what was known politically and in the mass media as the 'new normal.

Paradoxically, during home confinement, a part of the citizenry discovered in reading books a liberating and therapeutic escape route to cope with isolation (Adeyemi, 2020). In fact, during the months of seclusion, the number of readers increased, reaching its historical maximum precisely during those months of confinement (FGEE, 2021).

The quarantines linked to the control of viral epidemics end up harming the physical and mental health of those citizenries who suffer them: appear on the scene cases of insomnia, depression, anxiety, restlessness, nervousness, stress, or hopelessness, among others (Brooks et al. al., 2020), and the COVID-19 pandemic has not been immune to such a pattern of impacts (Qiu et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the time of confinement may have fostered some positive experiences, including reading (Adeyemi, 2020; Sandín et al., 2020).

The psychological state of people during confinement may influence reading habits (Levine et al., 2020). Reading requires concentration, tranquility, and a certain degree of peace of mind, but the existence of stress, nervousness, or anxiety associated with seclusion could have negatively influenced reading habits (Vyas and Tandel, 2020). Self-awareness of this risk can lead the isolated individual to embrace reading to maintain their psychological balance, in the same way, that, for instance, a possible overweight associated with confinement leads to physical exercise routines.

Motivation to read is paramount in modeling both the reading habit and the development of reading comprehension (Morgan and Fuchs 2007; Schaffner et al. 2013; Schiefele et al. 2016). At the same time, the motivations behind individual reading habits are very varied: the improvement of knowledge, personal development, mental stimulation, entertainment and pleasure, mental health, or avoidance, among others (Merga, 2017).

The general objective of this work is to analyze the reading habit of Spaniards during and after COVID-19 confinement in the same period of the following year. The specific goals are: first, study the purpose of reading; second, know the type of book form read; third, assess the time spent reading during and after confinement and fourth, identify the motivating factors of reading during the COVID-19 isolation.

The study starts from a questionnaire with a wide variety of questions that try to evaluate reading behaviors during confinement and determine possible relationships between such behaviors and specific profiles of readers.

Literature review

Reading is one of the fundamental skills and competencies in people's lives, something evidenced in at least two dimensions: a) literacy aimed at understanding and acquiring knowledge, which begins from the early stages of learning in school education and that extends to all levels of training (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2003; Andreassen and Bråten, 2010; Suggate et al., 2018; Sikora et al., 2019), and b) entertainment and cultural enrichment (Stigler and Becker, 1977; Becker and Murphy, 1988; Hoover and Gough, 1990; Becker, 1996).

The consolidation of the reading habit starts from literacy, that is, in the first years of school training (Scales and Rhee, 2001; Leppänen, Aunola and Nurmi, 2005; Verboord,

2005). It is common to associate and even define the lack of motivation to read with the lack of reading habit (Scott, 1996; Ivey and Broadus, 2001; McQuillan and Au, 2001). The reading habit can be enhanced by a Genuine intrinsic motivation, cultivated throughout the formative years, thanks to the teaching strategies of teachers to introduce their students to literacy and comprehensive reading, which would evidence in their academic and social success (Gallik, 1999; Guthrie and Davis, 2003; Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson, 2006; Guthrie and Klauda, 2012; Nielen et al., 2016; Kyröläinen and Kuperman, 2021). The first assumption of this research obtained from the analytical framework above is the following:

Assumption 1. The higher the academic training, the greater the reading habit.

However, there are extrinsic factors that can undermine the habit of reading over the years: academic or professional impositions that lead to an extensive and intensive reading of documentation and technical work; for example, can lead to a saturation in the individual that leads to not to consider reading as a pleasant and enriching act in comparison with other recreational activities (Nielen et al., 2016; Soemer and Schiefele, 2019). From this analysis, it is possible to make the second assumption:

Assumption 2. The more frequent and intense the reading for academic or professional reasons, the lower the reading habit.

In general terms, women read more than men (Coles and Hall, 2002; Logan and Johnston, 2009; Brozko et al., 2014). Women also show greater intrinsic motivation to read than men (Schaffner et al., 2013; McGeown, 2015). The third assumption stated from these considerations is the following:

Assumption 3. There are significant differences in reading habits based on gender.

Adults show a more frequent and intensive reading habit than younger (Roe and Taube, 2012). Despite this, each new generation does not read as much as the replaced (Lauf, 2001; Knulst and van den Broek 2003). Based on these assessments, this research states the following fourth assumption:

Assumption 4. The older the individual, the greater the reading habit.

Many read for the pleasure of escaping from oneself or the immediate environment. Therefore, there is a positive relationship between reading and mental health purposes (Merga, 2017). Recreational reading is associated with reductions in psychological distress and better mental health (Levine et al., 2020). Reading helps people: a) disconnect from confinement and combat boredom, b) activate memory, c) promote critical thinking skills, d) prevent stress, and e) combat insomnia (Guardiola and Baños, 2021). What is more, reading has been shown to protect people against cognitive decline and dementia (Lopes et al., 2011; Vemuri and Mormino, 2013) and is associated with longer life expectancy (Bravishi et al., 2016). It is important to note that, during confinement and to end boredom and escape from it, the number of books read increased (Adeyemi, 2020), increasing the daily hours dedicated to reading (Parikh, Vyas, and Parikh, 2020; ERI-Lectura, 2020). The fifth assumption derived from the analytical framework above is the following:

Assumption 5. The reading habit intensifies and becomes more frequent with stressful situations such as pandemic confinement.

Despite the current dominance of physical bookstores and paper books, online book sales are increasing (Gao et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). In 2020, the entire world faced the COVID-19 pandemic, with inevitable profound changes in all aspects of life, from the social to the economic sphere (Ting et al., 2020; Piccarozzi, Silvestri, and Morganti,

2021). The difficulties have arisen, and the policies adopted have harmed many sectors (Ozili and Arun, 2020). During the lockdown, bookstores temporarily and forcibly closed as consumers could not travel to these physical stores, so the demand for online book purchases would increase rapidly in the short term (Nguyen et al., 2020; Shafi, Liu and Ren, 2020). From these previous considerations, it is possible to formulate the sixth assumption:

Assumption 6. The pandemic has positively boosted the online purchase of books.

Research method

This research used the online survey method through the Microsoft Forms tool and applied a simple random sampling to Spanish citizens of legal age and residents in the country with social networks (Facebook, LinkedIn, or Twitter). According to the 2021 Digital Report, the estimate of Spaniards who use social networks is 37.4 million (Kemp, 2021), which establishes the population universe of the survey. The sample finally obtained from the said universe for this research is 1,251 Spanish citizens. The questionnaire launched through the said social networks -together with the WhatsApp application- during May and June 2021 get 1,251 responses from all the Autonomous Communities in the country.

Table 1. Technical data from the conducted survey

Universe	37.4 million Spaniards
Sampling method	Simple random sampling
Sample	1251 respondents
Sampling error	± 2.77%
Level of confidence	95%
Survey	Structured with closed questions
Timing	Between May and June 2021

Source: own elaboration.

As seen in table 1, this research used a structured survey with closed questions and the Excel program for the data analysis and its graphic representation.

Research design

The purpose of this research is to analyze the Spaniards' reading habits during and after COVID-19 confinement.

Although the design of this research tries to follow the roadmap applied in the Survey of Reading Habits in Spain, the limitation of resources available for its realization has forced the adaptation of procedural aspects such as the supports chosen to launch the survey - networks, social media, and messaging applications versus telephone survey - among others.

Respondents

Respondents are adult Spaniards living in any Autonomous Communities of the country and with a profile in some of the social networks mentioned above.

Research Tool

The research tool used is an online survey, designed through Microsoft Forms, consisting of 31 closed questions.

Tool validity and reliability

Two academic counterparts validated the questionnaire with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.8237. They received a previous version of the final questionnaire, which contained 40 questions. Finally, after validation and subsequent analysis, the survey was left with 31.

Sample

This research adopts the simple random sampling technique, which allows all the possible respondents with a presence in the social networks abovementioned to have the same possibilities of participating in the study. After launching the survey, a sample of 1251 responses is obtained, which constitutes the unit of analysis of this work.

Data collection and processing

Between May and June 2021, the respondents' surveys came to researchers intermittently, and reminders repeated through new shipments of the questionnaire. The data obtained were statistically treated by descriptive methods.

Table 2. Respondent profiles.

Variables		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Woman	728	58.2%
	Man	523	41.8%
	Total	1251	100%
Education	Middle school	113	9.0%
	High school / Professional education	293	23.5%
	University	845	67.5%
	Total	1251	100%
Age rank	From 14 to 24	6	0.5%
	From 25 to 34	213	17.1%
	From 35 to 44	265	21.1%
	From 45 to 54	266	21.3%
	From 55 to 64	319	25.5%
	65 or older	182	14.5%
	Total	1251	100%

Source: own elaboration.

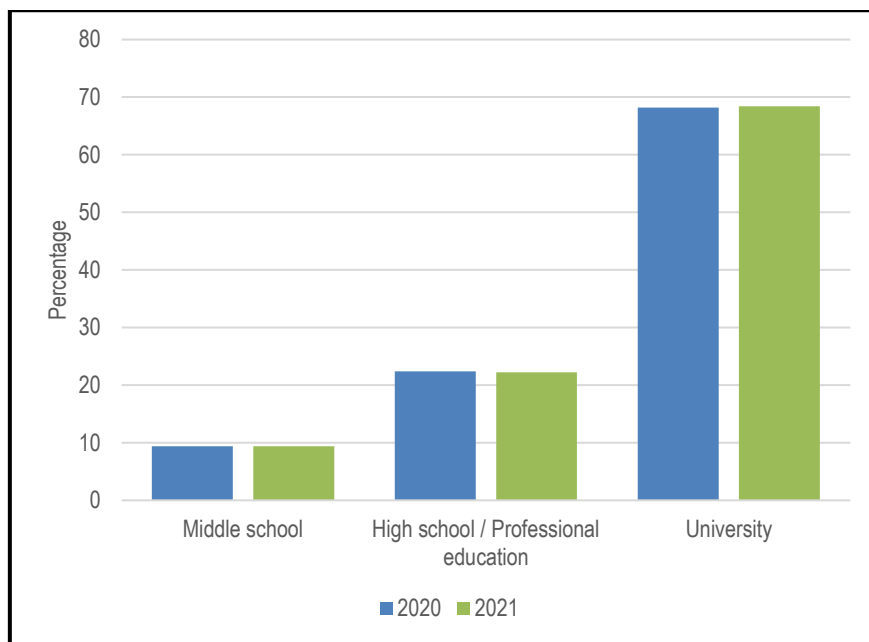
Results

Then, this section provides the results obtained from the assumptions raised once processed the sample data.

The higher the academic training, the greater the reading habit

The literature review carried out showed that reading was a core competence in individual development, evidenced by the necessary literacy as a precondition for acquiring culture (Stigler and Becker, 1977; Becker and Murphy, 1988; Hoover and Gough, 1990; Becker, 1996) and knowledge (Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2003; Andreassen and Bråten, 2010; Suggate et al., 2018; Sikora et al., 2019). The extrinsic stimulus of reading habit starts once individuals enter the educational system and learn to read (Scales and Rhee, 2001; Leppänen, Aunola and Nurmi, 2005; Verboord, 2005). However, depending on both on their psychosocial characteristics and those teachers who trained and guided them, intrinsic motivation for reading habit can develop beyond their academic and professional obligations (Gallik, 1999; Guthrie and Davis, 2003; and Jönsson, 2006; Guthrie and Klauda, 2012; Nielen et al., 2016; Kyröläinen and Kuperman, 2021). The reading habit adequately acquired throughout the educational process promotes motivation to read (see figure 1) and, therefore, the higher the level of academic training, the greater the reading habit (Scott, 1996; Ivey and Broaddus, 2001; McQuillan and Au 2001). In conclusion, the results obtained verify assumption 1.

Graphic 1. Reading habit according to academic training.



Source: own elaboration

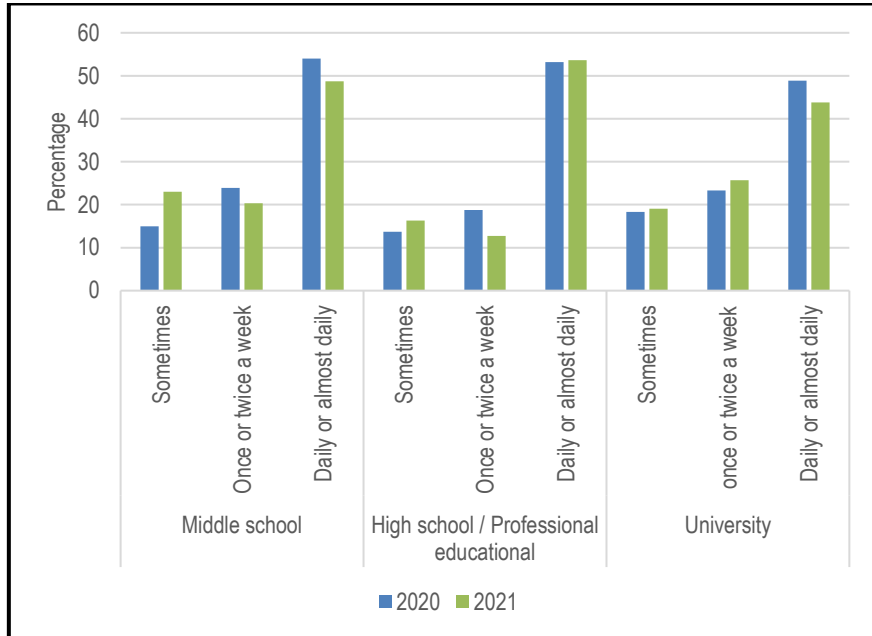
As seen in graphic 1, in addition to verifying the first assumption during and after COVID-19 confinement, the sample data obtained from the survey carried out did not show significant changes in reading habits according to academic training between the two periods analyzed.

There is no evidence that the frequency and intensity of reading for academic or professional reasons reduces the reading habit

The academic literature pointed to the fact that extensive and intensive reading - documentation, monographs, manuals, compendia or technical works, among others - imposed or required for academic or professional reasons, far from promoting the reading habit, can diminish it as a consequence of overexposure that leads the individual not to consider reading as a playful and pleasant act compared to other leisure alternatives (Nielen et al., 2016; Soemer and Schiefele, 2019). Based on the data obtained, and according to academic training, the frequency and intensity of reading do not show a

negative impact on reading habit (see graphs 2 and 3). In conclusion, the results obtained do not verify assumption 2.

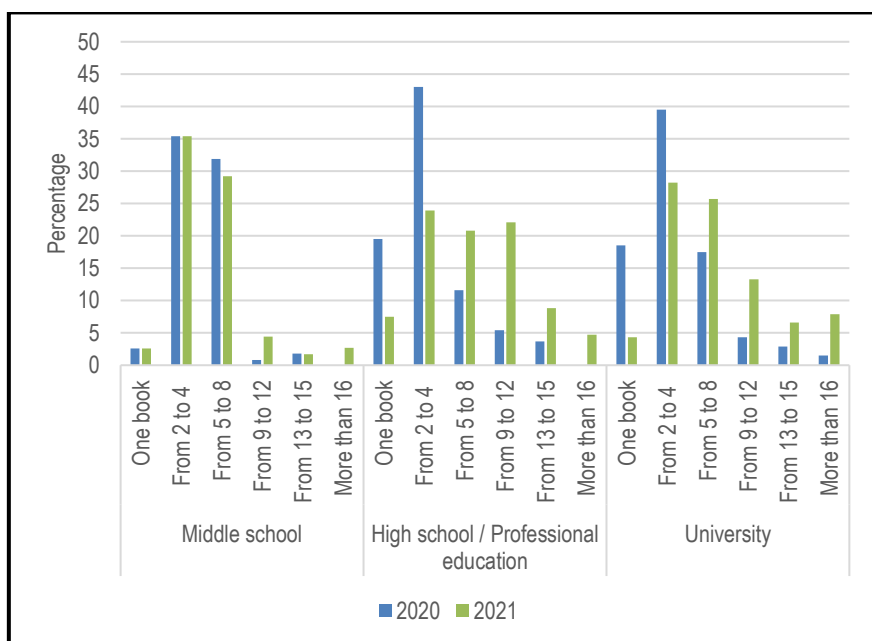
Graphic 2. Reading frequency according to academic training.



Source: own elaboration.

As seen in graphic 2, the data collected do not confirm a decrease in reading frequency according to academic training.

Graphic 3. Number of books read according to academic training.



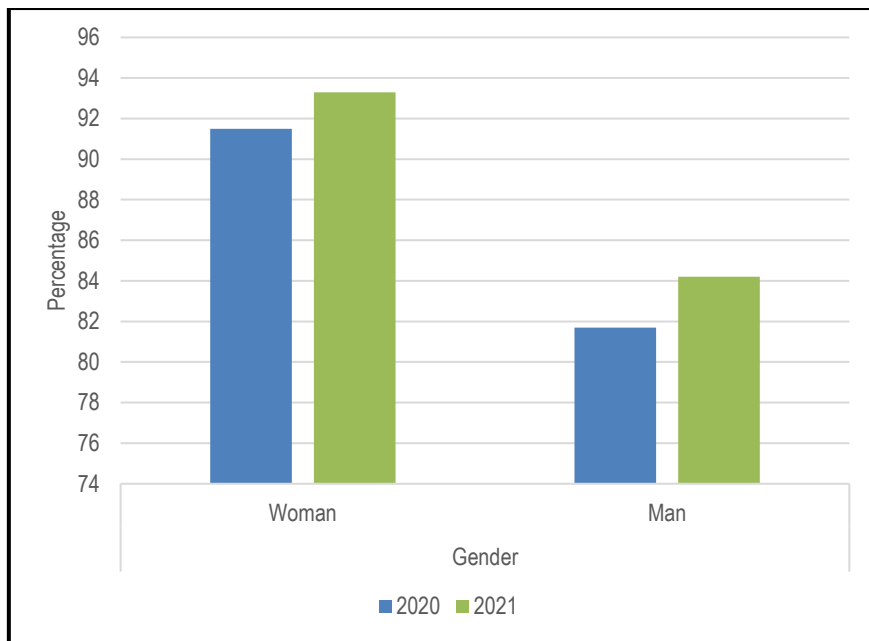
Source: own elaboration.

Similarly, as seen in graphic 3, it does not show clear evidence of a decrease in the number of books read as a function of academic training.

There are significant differences in reading habits based on gender.

The academic literature reviewed states that women read more than men (Coles and Hall, 2002; Logan and Johnston, 2009; Brozko et al., 2014), showing that women were intrinsically more motivated to read than men (Schaffner et al., 2013; McGeown, 2015). The conducted survey confirms this significant difference in reading habits (see graphic 4). In conclusion, the results obtained verify the third assumption: there are evident differences in reading habits based on gender.

Graphic 4. Reading habit according to gender.



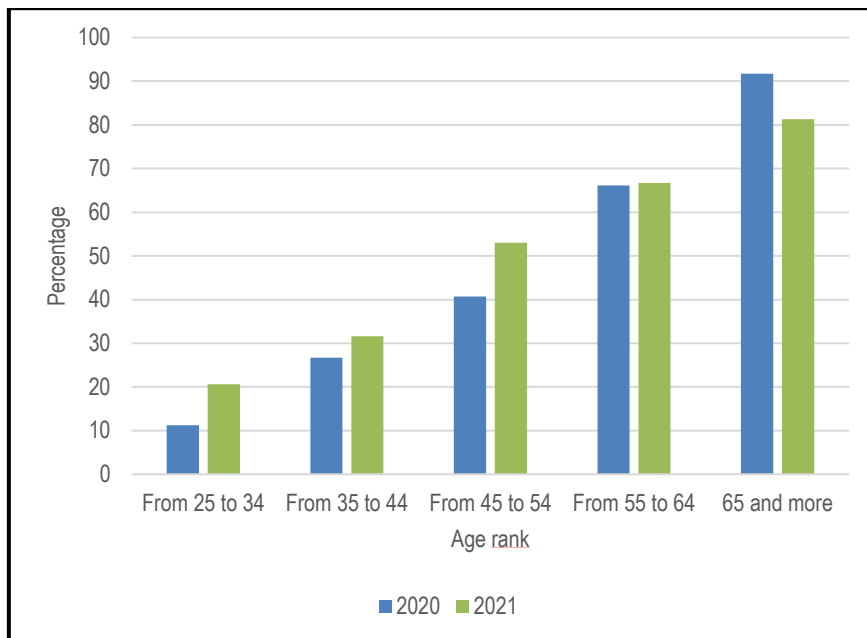
Source: own elaboration.

During COVID-19 confinement, the female reading habit exceeded that of males by almost ten percentage points (9.8%) and, after enclosure, this difference was barely shortened (9.1%).

The older the individual, the greater the reading habit

The academic literature reviewed indicated a direct and positive relationship between reading frequency and age (Roe and Taube, 2012). but the generations that replaced the preceding ones showed a diminishing in their reading habit (Lauf, 2001; Knulst and Van den Broek 2003). The data obtained from the surveyed sample confirm the positive relationship between age and reading habit (see graph 5). In conclusion, the results verify the fourth assumption: the older the individual, the greater the reading habit.

Graphic 5. Reading habit according to age rank.



Source: own elaboration.

Graphic 5 shows how, both during confinement and after its completion, there is an evident direct and positive relationship between age and reading habit. It also stands out, for all age ranges -except for the last one- a percentage increase in people with a reading habit.

The reading habit intensifies and becomes more frequent with stressful situations such as pandemic confinement

The literature reviewed highlighted the therapeutic role of reading (Merga, 2019), reducing situations of stress or psychological distress and improving both mental health and life expectancy (Lopes et al., 2011; Vemuri and Mormino, 2013; Bravishi et al., 2016; Levine et al., 2020; Guardiola and Baños, 2021). Some studies indicate that, during the confinement period, reading became an evasion mechanism that made it possible to combat boredom (Adeyemi, 2020; Parikh, Vyas, & Parikh, 2020; ERI-Lectura, 2020). The data obtained from the Spanish sample (see table 3) underline the reading as an escape route from the pandemic situation has been more than evident. In conclusion, the results obtained verify the fourth assumption: the reading habit intensifies with stressful situations such as pandemic confinement.

Table 3. Reasons to read.

	During COVID-19 confinement		After COVID-19 confinement	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Knowledge improvement	75	6.0%	120	9.6%
Personal development	75	6.0%	90	7.2%
Stimulation and mental health	77	6.2%	82	6.5%
Entertainment and pleasure	370	29.6%	369	29.6%
Evasion from the COVID-19 pandemic	116	9.3%	16	1.3%
Habit	364	29.1%	381	30.4%
Studies	64	5.1%	102	8.2%
Work	23	1.8%	23	1.8%
Others	87	6.9%	68	5.4%

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3 shows that, among the motivations to read, is the related to the 'evasion from the COVID-19 pandemic, surpassing others such as work, studies, stimulation, mental health, and personal development. After the isolation, this reason loses its relative weight compared to all the others adduced by the respondents.

During confinement, the reasons to read were mainly: entertainment (29.6%), habit (29.1%), and evasion from the 'environment' of the pandemic (9.1%). These reflect that, during the months of confinement, the reading of books was an extraordinary traveling companion for many citizens, bringing them serenity, entertainment, and tranquility amid the anguish and bewilderment in the period of confinement. Reading helped weather the worst months of the pandemic. The data analyzed during and after the pandemic state that, first, the habit of reading grows, going from 29.1% to 30.4%, and second, the act of reading continues to monopolize people's preferences in their moments of leisure.

The increase of frequent readers was very significant. But, undoubtedly, one of the best data of this study is the historical maximum of reading frequency (45.9%) left by the confinement in Spain.

Table 4 shows that 36.9% of the respondents read between 3 and 5 hours a day during the confinement. One year later, 45.9% have a reading habit between 1 and 2 hours a day hence the reading habit persists after seclusion, although with a decrease in the hours dedicated to reading since people have partly recovered their lives and returned to their daily routines.

Table 4. Time spent reading.

	During COVID-19 confinement		After COVID-19 confinement	
	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Frequency	Percentage (%)
From 1 to 2 hours a day	337	27	574	45,9
From 3 to 5 hours a day	462	36,9	344	27,5
6 and more hours a day	330	26,4	209	16,7
No answer / Do not know	122	9,7	124	9,9
Total	1251	100	1251	100

Source: own elaboration.

The pandemic has positively boosted the online purchase of books

Regarding reading forms and devices, the conducted survey shows the following results: firstly, the paper book is the preferred medium and, therefore, dominant (69.6%); secondly, there is an emerging use of the audiobook (1.2%), and thirdly, the reading of e-books (29.2%) is done through reading devices, mainly eReaders (41.68%). It is interesting to highlight women are more committed than men to use this type of device compared to men (see table 5).

Table 5. Reading devices.

Device	Frequency	Percentage (%)
eReader	451	41,6
Women	302	27,9
Men	149	13,7
Smartphone	161	14,8
Women	113	10,4
Men	48	4,4
Personal Computer	192	17,7
Women	79	7,3
Men	113	10,4
Tablet	278	25,7
Women	168	15,5
Men	110	10,2
Total	1082	

Source: own elaboration.

Despite the dominance of the traditional marketing channel for paper books, compared to other forms and marketing platforms, progressive development of online sales is evident (Gao et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020). The pandemic altered many economic and social aspects (Ting et al., 2020; Piccarozzi, Silvestri and Morganti, 2021), negatively impacting various sectors of activity (Ozili and Arun, 2020). However, although the confinement temporarily closed the bookstores, consumers, faced with the impossibility of physically approaching the bookstores, found in online purchases the alternative route to access

books, boosting in the short term the demand in these channels, both for paper book and e-book (Nguyen et al., 2020; Shafi, Liu and Ren, 2020). In conclusion, the results obtained verify assumption 6: the pandemic has positively boosted the online purchase of books.

The findings reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic had a positive and significant impact on the online buy of books. Online shopping has allowed us to continue acquiring books during confinement. 63.2% of those surveyed have purchased paper books during that period. Amazon has been the platform of choice for the online purchase of paper books (53.5%), with women (60.4%) having the most online book purchases compared to men (see table 6).

Table 6. Where have paper books been bought online?

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Women	446	60,4
Amazon	196	43,9
'Casa del libro' online	105	23,5
'El Corte Inglés' online	17	3,8
Fnac online	24	5,4
Online hypermarket	7	1,6
Online bookstore	97	21,7
Men	292	39,6
Amazon	199	68,1
'Casa del libro' online	31	10,6
'El Corte Inglés' online	9	3,1
Online bookstore	53	18,1
Total	738	

Source: own elaboration.

Regarding e-books, 36.9% of respondents affirmed have also acquired them during confinement. Amazon continues to be the preferred platform for their acquisition (19.7%), followed by Casa del Libro (10%). 13.3% of respondents have confessed to having downloaded e-books on pirated websites, and 17.6% have taken advantage of the availability of free e-books by some publishers to download them, especially during confinement.

Conclusions

From the exploratory study carried out in this work, some reached conclusions allow assessing the reading habits of Spaniards during confinement by COVID-19 and in the same period of the following year.

Firstly, there is a direct and positive relationship between academic training and the habit of reading. The reading routines acquired during the years of academic training consolidate the habit of reading.

Secondly, the reading habit among women is higher than among men. The psychosocial reasons underlying this fact are beyond the scope of this research, but it would be interesting to delve into the factors behind this result.

Thirdly, there is a direct and positive relationship between age and reading habit. Currently, there are alive and active generations that knew the arrival of personal computers beyond their adolescence for whom reading is a relevant part of their leisure time. Those generations, educated in a high concept of the value of books, not only as a source of knowledge but as enriching entertainment, are the ones that sustain this positive and direct relationship with the habit of reading.

Fourthly, confinement has had a positive impact on reading habits. Reading has been the faithful companion of many Spaniards during seclusion, valuing reading not only as an alternative for leisure but as a means of escape from the situation experienced. Reading helped weather the worst months of the pandemic. After confinement, the habit of reading increases for entertainment reasons: people read more and more frequently.

Fifthly, it is evident that confinement has driven the online purchase of books. The temporary closure of bookstores has not slowed down the consumption of books.

Sixthly, the paper book continues to have a leading position as a content medium, compared to other alternatives such as the electronic book or the audiobook. However, there is a growing trend for these other alternative supports.

The findings of this study have important practical implications for both bookstores and publishers.

First, bookstores and publishers should increase - and improve - their presence in online sales on the web. Booksellers and publishers should expand their product portfolios on their websites and offer consumers more sales promotions, given the positive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on e-sales platforms. In this regard, it is of paramount importance to improve the accessibility of the websites, the availability of orders, the different online payment methods, and the comment and search functions, among others.

Secondly, publishing companies, bookstores, and public institutions should be promoting the use of alternative supports to the paper that allows consumers to have immediate access to the content they want without depending on the logistic timing of sending copies in paper format.

Finally, and thirdly, The Spanish Government should develop a public strategy to support true digital literacy that normalizes the consumption of cultural content in alternative media among citizens.

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