Reading Habits in the United Arab Emirates

A survey conducted among attendants of the Sharjah International Book Fair in November 2011

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Executive summary

This survey, “Reading Habits in the United Arab Emirates”, (UAE), is based on 503 interviews conducted in November 2011 among visitors of the International Sharjah Book Fair, which also commissioned the report.

The goal of this study is to characterize reading habits and related media consumption in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

In this perspective, interviewees have responded to an extensive set of questions, referring to their personal background as well as to a wide range of reading habits – including periodical print publications, books as well as online – and related cultural practices, preferences with regard to topics, as well as parameters highlighting circumstances and contexts of reading.

The resulting answers have been cross referenced by combining a number of different indicators, notably gender, age, but also reading education.

The findings in this report portray readers in the UAE as being highly appreciative for reading, and media savvy, as they embrace readily reading materials across various channels and formats, in printed periodical publications, on the Internet, and in books, often reading in at least two languages, Arabic and English, and differentiating along a wide array of personal preferences. At the same time, reading is more connected with the ambition to become (more) educated, and improve oneself, or gain in status, than as a pleasure and entertaining pastime.

The impact of the Internet on reading habits and the competition between media formats, channels and preferred topics becomes clearly visible as driving change, and to also increase a juxtaposition between a group of power readers and particularly strongly committed media users at the one hand, and another, slightly smaller group of users and readers who distance themselves sensibly from the media and content offerings and their appreciation.

To bridge this growing divide, it is recommended to more strongly embed reading and notably the reading of books, aside from their educational value, in the normal routines and pleasures of today’s life, and their status as reflected in the public, and to further develop choice and accessibility of diversified reading materials on the way to a modern knowledge economy in the UAE.
Goals, scope and approach of this survey

The goal of this survey is to characterize reading habits and related media consumption in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The study has been commissioned by the “Sharjah International Book Fair”, and executed jointly by Nasser Jarrous Enterprise, Lebanon, and Rüdiger Wischenbart Content and Consulting, Austria.

In this perspective, it was decided to interview attendants of the Sharjah International Book Fair in November 2011, in order to focus on a segment of the overall population that can be expected to have a positive connection with books and reading.

For the interviews, a questionnaire was used that had, previously, been developed for a much broader, groundbreaking survey, “What Arabs Read”, in 2007, conducted by NextPage foundation in nine Arab countries (see http://www.npage.org/article63.html).

For "What Arabs Read", a representative sample of the countries’ overall population had been polled, and some of its findings could be used for the current report on the UAE as a reference and benchmark, as we could assume that our choice to interview a much more homogeneous target group of book fair visitors - who can be expected to be “readers” in the first place - allows a more in-depth understanding and a more differentiated assessment of reading and media patterns.

The general setting

For the survey on reading habits in the UAE, 503 attendants of the Sharjah International Book Fair have been interviewed between November 20 and 24, 2011. The interviewers were instructed to primarily focus on citizens of the UAE (as opposed to visitors with different backgrounds).

By the fact that the fair is particularly addressing young readers, these account for a specifically large segment among the interviewees.

Altogether, 53.8 % of the interviewees were male, and 46.2 % female, with 31.2 % of the respondents under 15 years old (26.6 % of the male, 36.5 % of the female), and less than 5 % of the interviewees were 50 years or older (all male).
Chart 01: Distribution of respondents according to age and gender.

Overall, the targeted group is one of highly committed readers, which encompasses a wide array of media, not only books.

It can be noted that female readers are more committed to books than male, who instead show a higher appreciation for printed newspapers and magazines (which, as
will be seen, relates to readers being more interested in topics such as politics and sports), while Internet usage is high up in the favor of both.

43,2 % of the respondents have more than 100 books at home, as compared to only 13,7 % having 10 books or less.

While a vast majority has started reading at school (between 60,4 % under 15 and 83,9 p% of age 25 to 34), almost one third of those under 15 had a mother, and 18,1 % a father who read aloud to them (plus another 18,2 % the mother, and 14,8 % a father for those aged 15 to 19). Here those under 20 have obviously had a strikingly different early reading experience than anyone above that age, as for those, less than 10 percent had someone reading aloud to them at an early age.

While 25 of those under 15 learned reading at the mosque, this was the case for half of those over 40, and of this group, only one respondent had a mother (and a father) reading to him aloud.

**Detailed findings and analysis**

The readers polled for this survey are, by their vast majority, bilingual readers, prepared to appreciate text both in Arabic and in English, with male respondents to an even larger degree (92,1 %) reading also English than female (75%), and the younger more comfortable in both languages, Arabic and English (88,4 % for those under 15, 80 % for those 15 to 19), than those between 20 and 35 years (73,7 % and 76 % respectively).

Roughly half of those readers under 35 read a book once or twice a week, with male and female roughly on par, and circa two third reading more than 11 minutes per day, but less than 60 minutes. Of those between 35 and 39 years, almost half said to read between 31 and 60 minutes per day.

**Preferred topics and interests in different media and platforms**

Different sets of questions were addressing different reading platforms, to compare differences between the usages of 3 types of channels, or platforms, that are reading printed newspapers and magazines, using the Internet / reading online, and (printed) books.

As reading printed newspapers, magazines or books differs significantly from the usage of the Internet, which consists of a combination of actively researching and following topics, and reading the found material, we chose to query at different moments throughout the interviews a set of preferred topics and interests, with regard to (a) “reading printed newspapers and magazines”, (b) “using the Internet”, (c) “reading online”, and (d) “reading printed books”. This approach allows to analyze clusters of topics and interests, as well as those same clusters, related to the different media platforms, and relate each to gender and age groups.

The questions regarding the media platforms and their respective usages read verbatim:
・ Q6 For what do you use the Internet?
・ Q9 Which topics interest you most when you read online?
・ Q70 Which topics do you read most? (Check all that apply) – Here the context referred only to books.

As noted already, the respondents were in their vast majority, and across the various age groups, committed readers and Internet users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you</th>
<th>Less than 15</th>
<th>15-19</th>
<th>20-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-39</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>read printed newspapers or magazines?</td>
<td>81,9</td>
<td>87,0</td>
<td>90,8</td>
<td>93,5</td>
<td>93,9</td>
<td>87,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>use the Internet?</td>
<td>97,3</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>97,8</td>
<td>97,0</td>
<td>98,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read online?</td>
<td>73,3</td>
<td>85,6</td>
<td>82,7</td>
<td>87,9</td>
<td>90,3</td>
<td>81,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read books?</td>
<td>98,7</td>
<td>92,1</td>
<td>90,8</td>
<td>98,9</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>96,1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 01: Reading across age groups

Expectedly, preferred topics and reading interests showed clear differences according to gender and age. While for instance news, politics, economics and current affairs were more prevalent as a preferred topic among male respondents, so were fashion, beauty, or health predominantly female.

Chart 03: General news and current events as a preferred topic, across gender.
Chart 04: Fashion, beauty, and health as a preferred topic, across gender.

Interesting, educational reading does not show a clear, strong preference among one gender or the other.

Chart 05: Various educational materials as a preferred topic, across gender.

Reading (notably contemporary) fiction or literary magazines finds a larger female audience, as would also be expected by a European group of interviewees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you read</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Literature (newspapers)</td>
<td>22,5</td>
<td>30,9</td>
<td>26,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary novels (preferred topics, books)</td>
<td>36,4</td>
<td>58,5</td>
<td>46,8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 02: (Contemporary) Literature as a preferred topic and or interest.
Religion, meanwhile, does not show any clear pattern with regard to gender in a readership under 40 years.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you read</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>All (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion (newspapers)</td>
<td>31,7</td>
<td>32,5</td>
<td>32,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion (Internet)</td>
<td>27,1</td>
<td>29,0</td>
<td>28,0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious books (Preferred topics, books)</td>
<td>41,3</td>
<td>30,9</td>
<td>36,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion (read online)</td>
<td>29,2</td>
<td>27,8</td>
<td>28,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 03: Religion as a preferred topic and or interest.

**Reading habits according to topics, age groups and channels**

However, patterns for various reading habits and preferences by topic and channel become ever more relevant, when broken down according to age groups as well (and for this study, we particularly look into age groups between “less than 15” to 39 years, as these are best represented in our interviews).

News, politics and current events are obviously a group of topics that gains in relevance as reading audiences get older (in our sample from 19 % for those under 15 to 64,3 % for the group of 35 to 39). But when channels and forms of usage are correlated with age and channels (e.g. print vs. online), we can observe how professionally authored ‘journalistic’ media (that is newspaper, and magazines) are highly popular in their printed form, with a grown up readership (over 20), yet their reach is suffering significantly when those formats of newspapers and magazines are read online. Meanwhile it appears that the same readership greatly and actively is looking for “news and general information” by actively searching the Internet and reading those divers sources online.
Chart 06: Reading about news, politics and economics in printed and online formats, by age groups.

Most interestingly, a similar transition from print to online cannot be seen in similar clarity for other topics, like fashion, beauty or sports, as for these topics, the authority of a professionally crafted offer of information may be considered to be more relevant than retrieving information on these topics by individual research from a wider variety of sources.

Chart 07: Reading about sports in printed and online formats, by age groups.
Patterns are slightly more complex when it comes to reading about religion.

First of all, the specifically high presence of books across all age groups certainly reflects the importance attributed to reading the Quran. Second, across all data, the prominence of religion in reading preferences clearly correlates with age, and here the group between 20 and 35 is more focused on religious reading than all other age groups. And third, the Internet is appreciated by all age groups to back up their reading of religious books.
When it comes to learning however, online is more and more taking over from printed books, with the obvious exception of textbooks for students until the age of 20 to 24, and, interestingly, encyclopedias and dictionaries having a remarkable standing as readers grow older. But research and reading online is becoming the gold standard for learning.
The context of reading: Finding information about books,

When it comes to finding information about interesting books, friends and family account for over two thirds of the input, with only relatively modest variations according to the readers’ age (on average 68,8 %, and variations between 62,5 % for those over 35, and 71,7 % for those between 25 and 34).

The next most popular sources of information are readers looking around for themselves, in bookshops (on average at 37,2 %), teachers (at 29,6 %), school (at 25,9 %), the TV program (at 24,7 %), and a library (at 22,6 %).

Advertising in newspapers or reviews of books plays a minor role as a source of information about books.

More than half of the respondents (55,7 %) said to have bought between 2 and 6 books in the past 12 months, with 10 % purchasing more than 25.

When readers came to read more books than earlier in their lives, finding interesting books was the single most prominent reason for this (61,3 %), followed by being “bored by TV” (30,8 %) and having more time than previously (25,9 %), while only lesser impact had factors like finding interesting translations of foreign books (10,8 %), improvements of foreign language skills (9,5 %), religious considerations (10,8 %) or having more money available (7,5 %).

Reading motivation

In one subset of questions, respondents have been queried about a variety of factors that may encourage or discourage reading, in order to better understand motivations as well as hurdles for reading, and also to understand the cultural status of reading as an occupation.

In a first series of questions respondents in a broad majority said that they did not read for pleasure (between 60 and 73 %, according to age groups), yet only the group of under 15 considered reading in a majority of 67,9 % as “hard work because you need to concentrate”, while this value dropped rapidly among older groups to between 44 and 31 percent.

Nevertheless, reading is considered as “good”, but “old-fashioned”, a statement to which more than half subscribe strongly, and another 8 to 20 % modestly (in various age groups). Overall, the relative resistance against reading as a positive occupation goes down with growing age, while gender does not seem to have a major impact on the assessment. Surprisingly, those who read more frequently considered reading slightly more commonly as “hard work” and “old-fashioned” than those reading only once per month. Half of all interviewees disapprove strongly of the statement “I have always liked reading (48,7 % of male, and 54,1 % of female).
The younger respondents consider themselves as being generally stronger readers than “most other people (they) know” (43,9 % for those under 15, and 32,1 % for those between 15 and 19).

One relevant group of circa one third of respondents has no time for reading, as they prefer to party on weekends (up to 56,6 % for those under 15, and largely consistent between 29,6 to 36,7 for the elder groups), which contrasts to roughly another third who “strongly disagree” with such a notion. By gender, female agree more strongly than male (44,1 % against 39,4 %).

Reading during commutes shows a similar split between strong rejection (due to overcrowded transports) as well as, on the other side, strong approval by a similarly large group of over one third to even 40 and more percent for each option.

Books are, for most, not considered as a nice present for friends and family (between 62 and 40 %, according to growing age, an 47,5 % and 53,2 % for male and female), while the statement “Most people buy books only to show off” is “strongly approved by 34,9 % of males and 40,1 % of female (while frequency of reading does not seem to have a major impact on this assessment, while growing age brings approval down from 50,8 % for those under 15, to only 29 to 30 % approving strongly past the age of 20.

Only a minority of respondents (around 20 %) would tell friends and family about interesting books, with female more strongly being opposed to such a communication than male (62,4 % against 48,7 %). This is surprising, as friends and family are not only considered by far as the most important source of information about interesting books. Over 70 percent would also borrow a book to friends and family at least once, or a few times per year.

A significant number among those who read, do so because they are “not allowed to go out in the evening” (strong approval by almost two thirds in various strata).

For all those responses linked to the motivation of reading, it must be said that the respective strongest opinion for each question is consistently contrasted by another, opposed segment of respondents, of ca. one fourth to one third, while the middle ground of modest approval or rejection is finds support by only a minority of 10 or less %.

Two key findings of this survey

This clearly illustrates two key findings of this survey:

Reading, while being considered as important, has a difficult standing among most of the polled readers, and even among many of the stronger readers, as being more of a requirement, a challenge, and a duty, than a pleasure and a pastime that allows the reader to get immersed in something positive, that will be a topic providing status when shared with friends or family. Instead it is considered by many as an ambivalent exercise, risking a reader to be viewed as showing off, than as a positive trait of a personality.
At the same time, and even among the relatively homogeneous segment of interviewees, reading, and the motivation to read, is setting apart two relatively distinct, opposed profiles of respondents, those who nevertheless will allow reading to occupy a relevant, or even important place in their lives and personal profile, and others who will reject, or at least not foster it when defining their lives.

Assessing media consumption and the purpose of reading

Several aspects indicate the impact of access to the Internet on reading habits in a number of ways.

A strong group of 44 % of the strongest readers (those reading a book “every day”) of respondents strongly approve the statement “Reading a book, watching TV, listening to the radio or surfing the Internet is the same. It's all about information." This statement finds a similarly strong approval among the weaker readers (40,7 of those reading only once a week, and 38,5 % of those who read once a month). When it comes to age, this same statement finds by far the strongest approval among those under 15 (45,2 %, falling to 29 % and 36,8 % for those 20 to 24, and 25 to 34 respectively). And again, this approval is contrasted by roughly one half to disapprove modestly or strongly to the concept of media integration across channels and formats.

However, those reading a book every other day strongly disapprove (43,2 %) while those reading a book twice a week are split evenly between strong or modest approval or rejection.

Access to the Internet has roughly half of the respondents increase their reading habits, yet migrating online, and the other half not. Among the youngest of under 15, this distinction produces even a clear dichotomy, with 42 %increasing their reading online, and the almost same number of 41,2 % not following this path.

The notion that the “Internet is interesting, but satellite TV is more interesting” finds the strongest support among the strongest and the weakest readers (reading a book every day, or only once per month), as well as by the youngest (up to 19), while those reading a book twice a week are sharing this assessment only by one in four.

What we may see through these findings is the emergence of a group of particularly strong and savvy users of various kinds of media usage – with books and reading being integrated into a wider, and most likely also more educated, media competency, which is contrasted by another group of significantly weaker media users.

Within our population of interviewees, being chosen among visitors of a major book fair, the first group is expectedly larger (representing ca. 40 % of all those we could poll), and younger, while the latter group accounts for roughly one out of four respondents.
The context for books end reading

Information about interesting books comes, first of all, and most prominently (by over 60 %) from friends and family, which contrasts to the low number of respondents who actively share information about an interesting book (see above).

In comparison, professional contexts such as bookshops, libraries, or media play a relatively modest role in disseminating such information (around 20 % and less). So are schools, with the obvious exception of readers under 19.

The importance of finding relevant information on and access to interesting books is once again highlighted by the role of book fairs. Half of the respondents can be portrayed as regulars of such events, as they attend it every year, buying mostly between one and six books. By far the decisive reason for the visit is the selection of titles (two thirds of the respondents), while the offered discount is only relevant for students (9,2 % of under 15, 14 % of those 15 to 19).

The same assessment is expressed when asked “what would you make read more?”, as almost ninety percent of the respondents checked for an answer “More books on topics I am interested in”.

The retail price of books produced some contradictory results.

On the one hand, a clear majority of half or even two third of the respondents (according to the various strata of those polled) consider books as being too expensive, and in spending preferences, books clearly confront significant competition from other media and entertainment, like the cinema.

However, only students under the age of 19 consider discounts at book fairs as a relevant reason for visiting such events, and the same response came to questions about the acceptable retail price for a book, as even those under 15 found by 58,6 % that it does not matter (with an average of 84,2 % across all age groups).
Specific individual parameters and their impact on reading habits

Several parameters seem to have a lasting impact on reading preferences.

Those who have learned to read at a mosque (as compared to those who did so at school, or in the family or outside school) have a significantly higher interest in topics including news and general information (73.7 % against 58.4 % and 53.7 %), and reading newspapers and magazine (52.6 % against 32.2 % and 46.3 %), as well as slightly more so in research and education (57.9 % against 42.7 % and 56.1 %). Meanwhile their interest is lower in reading about health (5.3 % against 26.2 % and 43.9 %) or sports (26.3 % against 37.1 % and 24.4 %).

Also the higher the frequency of reading is for a person, the more likely the person is interested in news and general information, political scandals, religion or research and education, while those reading only once a week or less are more focused on topics like fashion and beauty.

Comparative notes on the UAE findings with the broader “What Arabs Read” survey

It has to be clearly understood that for “What Arabs Read”, representative samples for the overall population of nine Arab countries have been polled, while for this study on reading habits in the UAE, a much more homogenous group of “readers”, that is visitors of a major book fair (the Sharjah International Book Fair, in November 2011) has been polled. Nevertheless, selected aspects allow for relevant comparisons.

The presence of books among the book fair attendees from the UAE is significantly higher than in the Arab populations at large, where most households have between 15 and 60 books (against 50 % owning over 100 books among those polled in Sharjah.)

Home is the preferred place to read among readers in the UAE (for 80 to 90 %), followed by public places and cafés, and public libraries play a significant role as well, making Sharjah (or UAE) libraries the best frequented in the Arab world (where only 2 to 5 % claim to read in libraries).

Compared to other Arab readers, the role of school is slightly less important, while the role of the family for introducing the child to the realm of books is more important.
Almost 30% of respondents have encountered reading at home in Sharjah, as compared to 6 to 10% in other Arab countries studied.

Up to 60% of readers in other Arabic countries have interrupted reading at a certain moment in their lives, notably when leaving school and starting to work. By contrast, a significant share of the interviewees in Sharjah said to have even increased their reading when between 15 and 25 years old. One factor may be the higher availability in the UAE of “more interesting books” (60%) and “more translations into Arabic” (10%).

With regard to preferred topics when reading books, religious books and the Holy Quran are the most popular, and being twice as popular in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as compared to Tunisia or Morocco, with readers from the UAE being close to those in Tunisia and Morocco.

A marked difference is the pronounced presence of “contemporary novels”, occupying the second rank in popularity, chosen as a favorite by 66% of UAE readers, while the highest respective value in other Arab countries is 33% in Lebanon. Similarly, UAE readers’ preference for historical books, contemporary poetry, theatre plays and even cartoons is without a precedent elsewhere in Arab countries studied so far, resulting in profiles that – aside from the presence of religious readings, largely corresponds to a segmentation as known from West European markets.

When comparing preferred topics when reading books, newspapers and magazines, and online, one remarkable pattern can be identified.

While preferences in the topics for reading periodicals and Internet content largely overlap, this does not seem to influence preference when choosing books. A general interest in political news and current affairs, for instance, does not necessarily lead to reading of such books, and neither does a specific interest in health result in an increased consumption of “how-to” books.

While limitations in the available choice may be part of the explanation of these patterns, the symbolic status of the book (as compared to magazines, or the Internet) an object and format meant to educate and enlighten the reader, before anything else, and not be a medium for entertainment, may be responsible for this split appreciation. However given the dynamic development in choice and appreciation of content on the Internet, as has been highlighted earlier in the report, can drive change in reading habits and preferred topics eventually rapidly as well as forcefully, thereby both offering opportunities and challenges for the public efforts and aims in reading education in the UAE.
Conclusions and recommendations

Reading habits and preferences as analyzed for this survey result in a number of findings.

First of all, the readers interviewed as the visited a major book fair, present themselves as being highly appreciative for reading, and media savvy, as they embrace readily reading materials across various channels and formats, in printed periodical publications, on the Internet, and in books, often reading in at least two languages, Arabic and English, and differentiating along a wide array of personal preferences.

At the same time, reading is more connected with the ambition to become (more) educated, and improve oneself, or gain in status, than as a pleasure and entertaining pastime.

With the Internet, cultural habits, and reading just as well, undergo significant and rapid change, as books are seen more and more often to be merging (and compete) with other media and the growingly available digital content. As reading, and more specifically, the reading of books, is seen more as a requirement than an emotionally well embedded cultural routine, it risks to being challenged by other cultural offerings in a heightened competition, ultimately loosing ground.

Already a division can be identified, clearly juxtaposing on the one hand a group of highly engaged power readers who, at the same time, are savvy users for all other kinds of media and content, while on the other hand, another group is taking shape, only slightly smaller even among the visitors of a book fair, who distance themselves sensibly from these offerings and their appreciation.

To bridge such an emerging split, two complementary strategies must be particularly recommended: On the one hand, it seems advisable to promote books and reading not exclusively through their educational and personality building values, but also, in addition, by highlighting their attractiveness and status in the wider contexts of other media as well as that of modernity.

Making books and reading – and, and as a result, knowledge – an integral part of today’s life, of media programs as much as of daily routines, as the salt in the many communications and in the entertainment of a people, can be a most effective strategy for anchoring them in the wider perspectives of a developing knowledge society.

This requires, on the other hand, to energetically developing choice in reading materials, from the symbolically highly valued to the widest other ranges, covering all the diverse strands and ambitions of readers, and to increase their availability and the ease of access.

The status quo, as reflected in many of the findings in this report however, portray the UAE as being in a remarkable position to engage in such a goal.
Annex

In the annex, the complete set of questions is documented.

The questionnaires has been licensed and adapted from that used in the survey “What Arabs Read”, as used by NextPage in 2007 in nine Arab countries. (For the full report of “What Arabs Read”, see http://www.npage.org/article63.html ).