National Reading Survey 2023 Findings Report

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in partnership with the National Library of South Africa,
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and the National Education Collaboration Trust

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The National Reading Survey is part of the larger National Reading Barometer project, which compiles the findings of this survey and secondary data to describe the national reading ecosystem. Full project documentation can be found at www.readingbarometersa.org. You can contact us at info@readingbarometersa.org

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Core National Reading Barometer team

The National Reading Survey was commissioned by the Nal'ibali Trust (led by its Director, Nqabakazi Gina), in partnership with and with significant funding from the National Library of South Africa (led by its CEO and National Librarian, Kepi Madumo).

Project design and implementation was led by the following core team:
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The project steering committee was selected via application to represent key stakeholder groups, including education, libraries, researchers, funders, literacy organisations, publishers/creatives, and community activists. It included Bafana Mtini (Khutsong Literacy Club/EarWorm Project), Catherine Langsford/Nadeema Musthan (Litasa), Dorothy Dyer (FunDza), Heleen Hofmeyr (RESEP, Uni. Stellenbosch), Janita Low (independent), Kentse Radebe (DGMT), Kulula Manona (DBE), Lauren Fok (Zenex Foundation), Lorraine Marneweck (NECT), Nazeem Hardy (LIASA), Nokuthula Musa (NLSA), Nqabakazi Gina (Nal'ibali), Ntsiki Ntusikazi (Wordworks), Smangele Mathebula (SAIDE), Stanford Ndlovu (Jakes Gerwel Fellowship) and Takalani Muloiwa-Klenam (Uni. Johannesburg).

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GLOSSARY:

Some commonly used words and phrases take on specific meanings in the context of this study. This glossary provides definitions for key words and phrases to aid report interpretation.

- **Adults**: People age 16 and older. While this is not the traditional definition of "adult," the survey targeted this population to be consistent with the 2016 National Reading Survey (NRS 2016).
- **African languages**: In this report, we use the term "African languages" to include nine South African national languages (excluding Afrikaans and English): isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. While this report recognises that Afrikaans is also a language that originated in Africa, it is analysed separately given its more advanced status in the publishing industry and as a language of learning in older grades and at universities.
- **Deep reading**: Deep reading involves activating linguistic, cognitive, and affective processes, including connecting background knowledge to new information, making analogies, drawing inferences, examining truth value, passing over into the perspectives of others (expanding empathy and knowledge), integrating everything into critical analysis, and moving beyond the author's meaning to develop one's own novel thoughts about the text. It stands in contrast to skimming, where a person reads (often quickly) but does not think or feel deeply about the text. It occurs more often (though not exclusively) when reading longer texts and printed materials. See the work of Freebody & Luke, Janks and Wolf among others (note references on page 123).
- **Frequently**: daily or several times a week. For adult reading, frequently includes reading daily and several times a week. For reading with children, more response options were given for 'how often': frequently includes reading daily, almost daily and 2-3 times a week.
- **Rarely**: less than monthly
- **Regularly**: weekly, several times a month or monthly
- **Reading**: engaging with written symbols and making meaning from them
- **Reading cultures**: sets of beliefs, social practices, and material cultures related to reading that are shaped by how people perceive environmental factors, such as social norms and reading material availability, and make choices in response to these
- **Reading for enjoyment**: reading for entertainment or relaxation
- **Reading for information**: reading to gather information and answer questions such as reading newspapers, for work, for studies, instruction manuals
- **Reading to communicate**: reading letters, SMSes, chat messages, social media posts, emails
- **Regression**: a statistical data analysis technique that identifies which variables explain changes in another variable (like whether someone reads with children). It tests the effect of each variable independently without the effects of other variables. For example, education level and income are often closely related, so if we want to know which one has more impact on reading practices, we use a regression analysis to find out each variable's independent effect on reading practices.
- **Variable**: a characteristic of the survey sample or population that can change, such as gender, age, reading practices or reader identity

How do South Africans read?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY : 1 - Introduction

This report presents the results of the South African National Reading Survey, conducted in 2023. The National Reading Survey is part of the larger National Reading Barometer project, which compiles survey findings and secondary data to describe the national reading ecosystem. **The full project documentation can be found at www.readingbarometersa.org.**

Objectives

- **Understand reading cultures:** describe the diverse reading cultures and practices of South African adults.
- **Understand reading motivation and attitudes:** understand why people read and don't read, including with children, and how they feel about reading.
- **Understand access:** map access and barriers to access to reading materials, by type and language, including digital materials and reading material for children.
- **Track change over time:** track changes over time since the National Reading Survey 2016 (conducted by the South African Book Development Council (SABDC)), and when the NRS will be run again in 2026 and 2030, to help reading sector stakeholders understand what is shifting and where more focus is needed.
- **Inform research, policy and practice:** Contribute to and inspire research that increases understanding of reading in South Africa; promote policy shifts that will create a more enabling context for reading; and inform design of campaigns and interventions to promote and strengthen reading.

Who can use this information

This report is written to inform:

- Government policymakers and implementers in the Departments of Basic Education; Higher Education and Training; and Sport, Arts & Culture; Public libraries at National, Provincial and Local municipalities and Metro levels.
- Civil society actors (donors, literacy NGOs and researchers) working on child and adult literacy, and any organisations interested in holistic education, social well-being, social cohesion and social development;
- The publishing and reading materials distribution industry;
- All South Africans personally interested in reading and their own reading choices and options.

Methodology

The National Reading Survey is a nationally representative survey of South African adults aged 16 and above. The data was collected in late 2022 and early 2023. The questionnaire and final dataset are open-source and can be accessed at www.readingbarometersa.org, together with detailed technical documentation of the survey and analysis methodology.

Topics Covered

The National Reading Survey describes the reading practices, preferences and contexts of adults, both in terms of reading for themselves and reading with children in their household. In addition to covering information about frequency, depth and types of reading, access to and preferences regarding reading materials, and attitudes/motivations related to reading, the survey has focus areas relating to library use, digital reading, reading with children and reading language preferences.

Limitations

The survey did not test respondents for reading ability. It relied on self-reported reading ability by asking the question 'if you received a letter would you…' and coding respondents who replied they would give it to someone else to read as 'non-readers'. Findings on reading by older children (age 11-15) is reported by adults and not the children themselves. In general, the survey relies on self-reporting about adult and child reading behaviour, which can introduce social desirability bias and does not allow for any assessment of reading 'comprehension' or skill, but this is consistent with the NRS (2016) survey approach. The study excludes any discussion of teaching and learning reading in schools, teacher training or the literacy curriculum. These are sufficiently covered by many other studies in South Africa.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 2 - Approach to Reading in South Africa

Defining reading for our time and context

Conventional studies of reading practices, including previous iterations of the National Reading Survey (2006, 2016) privilege a definition of reading that focuses in printed books. The 2023 National Reading Study defines reading for the modern digital world and our African context. This context includes multilingualism, high levels of resource inequality, and widespread cultures of reading (like religious reading) that do not fit neatly into concepts about fiction/non-fiction.

Taking a pluralistic view of reading cultures

South African public and government references to 'reading culture' tend to describe it as monolithic (there is only one 'reading culture') and use deficit framing (we don't have a 'reading culture'). This study recognises that there are some people who read very little and some who read a lot, but there is not only one 'right' way to read: people read for different reasons and in different ways.

Understanding reading as multidimensional

When measuring or describing reading, this study considers multiple dimensions:

1. **Reading Purpose**: reading for enjoyment, information or communication. Reading for enjoyment and information are 'deeper' than reading to communicate, but they are all reading.
2. **Reading Habits**: how regularly you read
3. **Reading Volume**: how much time you spend reading
4. **Reading Depth**: length and complexity of texts you read
5. **Reading Motivation and Identity**: the extent to which you value reading and identify as 'a reader'
6. **Reading Materials Access**: number, types and diversity of reading materials you engage with and ability to access preferred materials (including through libraries and digital means and in preferred languages)

Recognising the rise of digital reading

Rather than assuming that digital reading, social media and communicative reading are competing with or reducing 'real reading', the study recognises that reading (and writing) were originally invented to enable communication and that digital formats are increasingly available for many different forms of reading (from short to long text, news to books). The survey was designed to enable open exploration of 'reading to communicate' (most of which is now digital) as well as various forms of online and downloaded digital reading.

Broadening types of reading material

In addition to including new forms of written text related to digital communication and online publishing (blogs, social media posts and articles, websites, etc.), this study's analyses of reading practices include commonly-read printed materials such as religious texts and newspapers.

Considering multilingual reading

The 2023 NRS documents multilingual reading practices by understanding that people may read in multiple languages (not choosing one over others), read in different languages for different purposes (i.e. to communicate, to get information or for pleasure, to read with children), and have differential access to reading materials by language.

Balancing Appreciative Enquiry and Policy Focus

Debates on reading in South Africa often start from a 'deficit' position, focusing on how children and adults are *not* reading enough, well enough, or in the right ways. There is no doubt that there is a crisis in children's literacy, with research results showing few children 'on track' for early literacy before starting school and even fewer able to read for meaning at Grade 4. Understanding how to effect change, however, includes appreciating the ways in which South Africans *do* read, and building policy and practice shifts from there, especially where adult reading intersects with childhood literacy development.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 3 - Key Findings

How do South Africans read?

- When defined broadly, South Africans read a lot, but not enough are frequently reading long texts
- More adults are reading with children, and most adults believe it is important, but they do not have enough children's books.
- Digital reading has grown significantly, although access remains unequal, and many readers still prefer paper.
- South Africans are multilingual readers. People want to read in African languages, especially less active readers, but not enough texts are available.
- Libraries remain important places for reading material access, but are still not accessible to all, and many users don't borrow books.
- Positive attitudes and beliefs about reading have improved dramatically since 2016. This is an important first step in changing reading behaviour but is not yet reflecting in large shifts in reading practices.

Reading materials access is improving, but most households still have few books

- 87% of South African adults live in homes with some printed reading materials (13% reported not having any printed materials at home).
- By far the most common form of reading material is religious books and pamphlets (in 58% of homes), followed by newspapers (42%), dictionaries (39%), magazines (38%) and textbooks (38%).
- 63% of households do not have a single fiction or nonfiction book. This is similar to the 2016 finding that 58% of homes had no books.

Most South Africans read, but only a third read long texts often

- 83% of South African adults read in some way. 10% cannot read and 7% choose not to read even though they are able to.
- 78% of adults read for enjoyment. This proportion has remained largely stable since 2006. In 2023, almost half (48%) of adults read frequently (daily or several times a week) for enjoyment and 22% spend an average of 1.5 hours per day or more reading for enjoyment.
- 32% of adults frequently read books (defined in this report as more than once a week).
- Reading practice is not determined by gender or race. All other factors being constant, demographics do not predict whether someone is likely to read in general, or whether they read long texts.
- Reading to communicate is the most frequent form of reading. 67% of adults read to communicate daily or several times a week.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 3 - Key Findings

Reading with children is increasing, but very few homes have >10 picture books, and most parents use print materials

- More adults are reading with children, and most adults believe it is important - but they do not have enough children's books
- In 2023, 52% of adults who live with children read with them (up from 35% in 2016). About three-quarters of these (73%) do so at least two or three times a week.
- It's not just wealthier, urban people who read with kids: it happens across class, race and urban-rural divides.
- Owning any number of books (not only children's books) makes people more likely to read to children, and the effect is cumulative - people with more books are most likely to read.
- More people recognise the benefits of reading with children: 93% of adults who live with children (including some who do not read themselves) agree that reading improves school performance. In 2016, agreement with the same statements was low.
- However, action lags behind awareness – and many homes still lack access to reading materials. 65% of homes with children under age 10 do not have a single picture book, and only 10% have more than 10 picture books. Only 31% of adults said their oldest child owned a book by age 5.
- The biggest barrier to reading with children is lack of time, for adults who read with children (82% would read more if they had more time) and who don't (47% don't read because they lack time).
- More than three-quarters of adults who read with children would also read more if they felt more confident as readers; and if they had more interesting, free, relatable reading material in preferred languages.

Digital reading is growing, but still limited for reading with children

- 55% of adults read online materials, up from 7% in 2016. (This excludes social media.) Online news, magazines and religious materials are most popular. A quarter of adults have read an ebook, and 20% own at least one (up from 11% in 2016).
- Digital reading predominantly happens on small screens. 84% of internet users use a smartphone; just 7% use computers and 1% use tablets.
- Despite popular perceptions that social media use detracts from "real reading," this study found that they tend to occur together. People who spend 11-20 hours a week on social media are also more than twice as likely to read long texts regularly.
- Access challenges remain. 27% of adults do not have internet access, and another 16% say their access is not reliable. People without internet access are more likely to be over age 50, rural, less educated (incomplete secondary or less), and have lower household incomes.
- And despite digital reading's growth, print remains popular. Almost half of book readers still prefer print (48%), while 1 in 5 prefer digital books (the rest enjoy both formats). People who read less frequently overwhelmingly prefer print materials, though young people are more likely to read digitally. And caregivers still want print: only 5% of adults who live with children read digital materials with them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: 3 - Key Findings

South Africans are multilingual readers, but not enough texts are available

- South Africans are multilingual readers. 68% of South Africans are capable of reading in multiple languages. 63% can read in at least one African language.
- Most African language speakers enjoy reading in both African languages and English.
- Overall, 76% of African language speakers who read for enjoyment want to read in African languages. More active readers tend to prefer both African languages and English, while less active readers are less likely to prefer English. This suggests that African-language materials may support less prolific readers to read more.
- Access to African language materials, for adults and children, still lags behind English and Afrikaans, and is unequal across languages. Of people who have any books at home, 97% of people who mainly speak English have at least one book in English, and 78% of Afrikaans speakers have a book in Afrikaans. This drops to 68% for isiXhosa and isiZulu speakers, 64% for Sepedi, 56% for Setswana, 52% for Sesotho and 51% for Setswana speakers. (Sample sizes for isiNdebele, Tshivenda and Xitsonga were too small to draw reliable conclusions, but these numbers were significantly lower.) The same trend is echoed in children's books, with similar percentages.

Libraries remain important places for reading, but most users don't borrow books

- 58% of adults have access to a community library, but this is highly unequal by province, ranging from 86% in the Western Cape to 20% in the Eastern Cape. Those who need libraries most – people with less income, less education and in rural areas – have the least access.
- Despite Covid-era closures, libraries seem to have "bounced back": 28% of South African adults have visited a community library in the last year (27% in 2016), and 19% use a library once a month or more. Students and residents of small towns are most likely to use libraries regularly.
- 17% of adults use community libraries to read, but only 8% borrow books (7% in 2016). People who use libraries for reading (rather than just meetings or internet access) are more likely to live in small towns, own books (especially those who own fewer than 20 books), have a monthly household income below R12 800, like to talk about reading with friends and family, and self-identify as an occasional, regular or passionate reader.
- Among book readers, the percentage of people who usually get books from libraries has declined sharply in recent decades: from 48% in 2006 to 24% in 2016 to 17% in 2023. However, libraries are the top preferred location for people to pick up free reading materials to keep and own (43% of adults).
- Three in four community library users are happy with the library as it is, and 9% are concerned about external factors (such as the distance from home or the cost of transport). For those who do not use libraries, disinterest in reading and transport costs are the main barriers.

Reading Personas

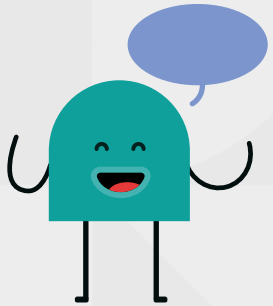
What are Reading Personas?

These Personas represent the different reading cultures identified among South African adults. Each Persona combines different reading practices (what, how much and how often you read) with different values and identities around reading. Reading cultures are the result of how individuals interpret and make choices in response to environmental factors such as social norms and reading material availability in their communities. Because of their different existing reading practices, each Persona has different reading needs and motivations.

Why are Reading Personas useful?

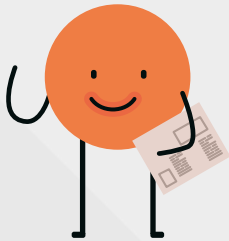
Personas can be used to inform policy and practice by government and civil society literacy organisations. For example, a Functional Reader' ("I read when I have to"), who reads rarely to get necessary information, will require different forms of engagement than an 'Occasional Reader' ("I read but it's not a big part of my life"), who may already be reading for multiple hours daily, but mostly short or medium-length content.

Personas can also be used to engage the general public in conversations about reading, motivating more people to identify as 'readers' of various kinds without a sense of judgement, and to try out different forms of reading for themselves and with their children.



Non-Readers

Occasional Readers



Functional Readers

Regular Readers

Committed Readers

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SECTION 1

Framing & Method

Background

The National Reading Survey (2023) builds on a series of surveys commissioned by the South African Book Development Council (SABDC) in 2006 and 2016, referenced in this report as NRS (2006) and NRS (2016)

After 20 years of significant contributions to the literacy landscape, the SABDC closed its doors in 2021. Unfortunately, this meant literacy NGOs, publishers and government departments no longer had a feedback mechanism to understand the landscape, notice the gaps in reach, or monitor changes in reading culture.

The 2023 survey is comparable with the 2016 survey in that it:

- Is nationally representative of adults aged 16, with 4000+ respondents
- Includes many of the same questions, either with exactly the same formulation or small variations. This report includes trends over time for many of the variables that can be compared. The technical report includes a full list of longitudinal variables.

The 2023 survey differs from the previous survey in the following ways:

- It describes South African reading cultures and practices more broadly than the 2016 NRS 2016, which focused primarily on reading books for pleasure/enjoyment.
- It is framed in terms of social benefit rather than being framed in terms of 'market segmentation' of (potential) book buyers, and 'competition for limited leisure time'. The 2023 survey did not collect information on other leisure activities (incidence or time spent on them).
- It combined telephonic and face-to-face data collection rather than being completely face to face (2016), although the 2023 participants were recruited face-to-face to ensure randomness and representativity.
- It did not test respondents' reading ability, as sufficient information about basic adult literacy is already available in South Africa, although it did use a self-reported reading ability question.
- It has a stronger focus on reading with children.
- It asked a wider range of questions about digital reading.
- It has a stronger focus on understanding multilingual reading practices and preferences.

National Reading Survey Objectives

Understand Reading Cultures

To fully describe the diverse reading cultures and practices of South African adults, with a focus on reading with children, digital reading, multilingual reading and library use.

Understand Access

To gain a full understanding of access to reading materials by type and language, including digital materials and reading material for children, and unpack barriers to access.

Understand Motivation and Attitudes

To gain an understanding of the reasons people read or don't read – for themselves, and, where relevant, with children in their household - and how they feel about reading.

Track Change over Time

To track changes in variables since the NRS (2016) and when the NRS is run again in 2026 and 2030, to help reading sector stakeholders understand what is improving and where more focus is needed.

Sector Feedback

To provide updated information on reading cultures and the reading ecosystem to communities, literacy organisations, funders, government departments mandated to enable reading, and political leadership.

Inform Research, Policy and Practice

To inform and inspire research that will increase our understanding of reading cultures in South Africa, policy shifts that create a more enabling context for reading, and interventions to promote and strengthen reading.

2023 NRS in Context

The 2023 NRS is part of a longitudinal series of studies about adult reading in South Africa. The first two iterations of the series in 2006 and 2016 were conducted under the auspices of the South African Book Development Council (SABDC), which was the representative body of the South African book sector until it closed. This left the literacy sector in South Africa without a source of important information about trends in reading over time. Nal'ibali therefore approached the National Library of South Africa and a number of donors to collaboratively revitalise and redesign the survey.

The 2023 NRS was designed to enable continuity with the NRS (2016) by retaining a nationally representative sample of around 4000 adults ages 16+ and including many of the same themes and question areas. Full continuity was constrained because the NRB team did not have access to the original 2016 questionnaire, so 2023 questions had to be reconstructed based on how 2016 results were framed in the public report.

While the trendline was maintained where possible (as reported on throughout this report), the NRS 2023 also represents a significant redesign of the questionnaire, including defining 'reading' in broader ways, paying more attention to reading with children, digital reading and reading in multiple languages, and focusing more on the reader's full social experience of reading rather than their behaviour as a consumer of books. In this sense, the NRS 2023 is a 'relaunch' of the series. The current design will be repeated in 2026 and 2030 as a contribution to South Africa's overall efforts to improve child literacy and adult reading by 2030.

What Big Questions are we Answering?

Adult Reading Behaviour: Reading Cultures

- How can we best define South African reading cultures for our context and this moment?
- To what degree are reading cultures defined by personal choice vs. determined by demographic or external socio-economic factors (affordability of materials, accessibility of materials where you live, etc.)?

Motivation

- How aware is the public of the benefits of reading?
- Who motivates/ influences adults and children to read?
- What barriers dis-incentivise reading?

Access

- What materials do people currently read? (formats, lengths)
- How do people currently access materials, and how do they want to access materials?

Reading with Children

- How many caregivers are reading with children?
- What are the determinants of whether adults read with children in their households?
- How many older children (aged 10 and above) are reading for themselves at home?
- How does reading with children relate to adults' own reading practices?

Digital Reading

- What proportion of readers use and prefer digital devices and materials for reading?
- What are the barriers to digital reading access?

Libraries

- Who uses libraries and how are libraries used?
- What are the barriers to public library use?

Languages

- In what languages do South Africans read, and in what languages would they prefer to read?
- How important is (lack of) access to reading materials in African languages as a barrier to reading (for adults and children)?

The Importance of Reading

Reading gives us power – to learn new things, tell our stories, and shape our futures. It helps build a stronger, more equal economy and a connected society.

There is growing body of evidence on the importance of reading as a pathway to personal development as well as social, economic and civic engagement.

- Reading (and being read to) builds language skills, and the degree to which children acquire language skills is a strong predictor of future academic success, educational attainment, employment and income (Krashen 2004).
- Reading is a powerful tool to address poverty and inequality: when children read for pleasure, it boosts achievement and life outcomes independent of parents' education, occupation or income (Evans et al. 2010; Kirsch et al. 2002; Sullivan & Brown 2013).
- Reading ability and comprehension promote social cohesion and innovation by building empathy, critical thinking and imagination (Nussbaum 2010).

Reading enhances:

1. Educational outcomes
2. Economic opportunities
3. Critical thinking abilities
4. Empathy and the ability to engage with diverse people and tolerant societies
5. Civic engagement and public participation in democratic processes
6. Celebration and preservation of creativity, art and cultural heritage
7. Child-adult relationships

How do we define 'Reading' and what are 'Reading Cultures'?

At its most basic level, 'reading' means **engaging with written symbols and making meaning from them.** The conventional approach to discussing South Africa's 'reading culture' explicitly or implicitly defines a 'reader' as someone who regularly reads books in print and has printed books in their home. There is extensive global and South African evidence about the importance of 'deep reading' (books and especially fiction) for adults, and the effects of books in the home on children's school performance and long-term socio-economic success, and so these forms of reading are important. However, these are not the only forms of reading practiced in South Africa.

The NRS **defines reading more broadly in ways that are adapted to our 21st-century African context**.

This means taking into account multilingual reading, digital reading (especially by youth), reading for (digital) communication, and reading of a wide variety of materials (e.g. newspapers, religious books, online materials), including materials that are free or shared/borrowed or otherwise accessible with few economic resources. The NRB project therefore defines multiple reading cultureS rather than a single 'idealised' book-reading culture.

The diverse reading cultures are not defined normatively (how we think South Africans should be reading) but are based on statistical analysis of the reading practices of our 4250 respondents (how South Africans are actually reading). How this is done is described in more detail in the 'Personas' section of this report and in the accompanying technical report on the website.

People from across South Africa's diverse (and unequal) society are present in each of the 'reading cultures' that emerged from the data (see page 32).

How can we strengthen Reading Cultures in South Africa?

The project's **Theory of Change** shows the virtuous cycle created when reading cultures are strengthened by improving reading ability, materials access and motivation.

Flourishing reading cultures in turn create demand for more relevant and accessible reading materials and an enabling reading environment.

In terms of adult reading, **the main levers for strengthening national reading cultures are improving Access and Motivation.**

Figure 1

How can we strengthen Reading Cultures in South Africa?

As shown by the circles in the diagramme on the right, **reading cultures are influenced by individual constraints such as education and income (demographics) but they also about choices individuals make**.

These choices, however, exist within a **reading environment or ecosystem**, which can be enabling or constraining.

There are **two distinct levels at which change can happen: individual and institutional.** Furthermore, individuals and institutions can change. The boxes in the diagramme speak to the kinds of changes individuals (left) and institutions (right) can target to strengthen reading cultures.

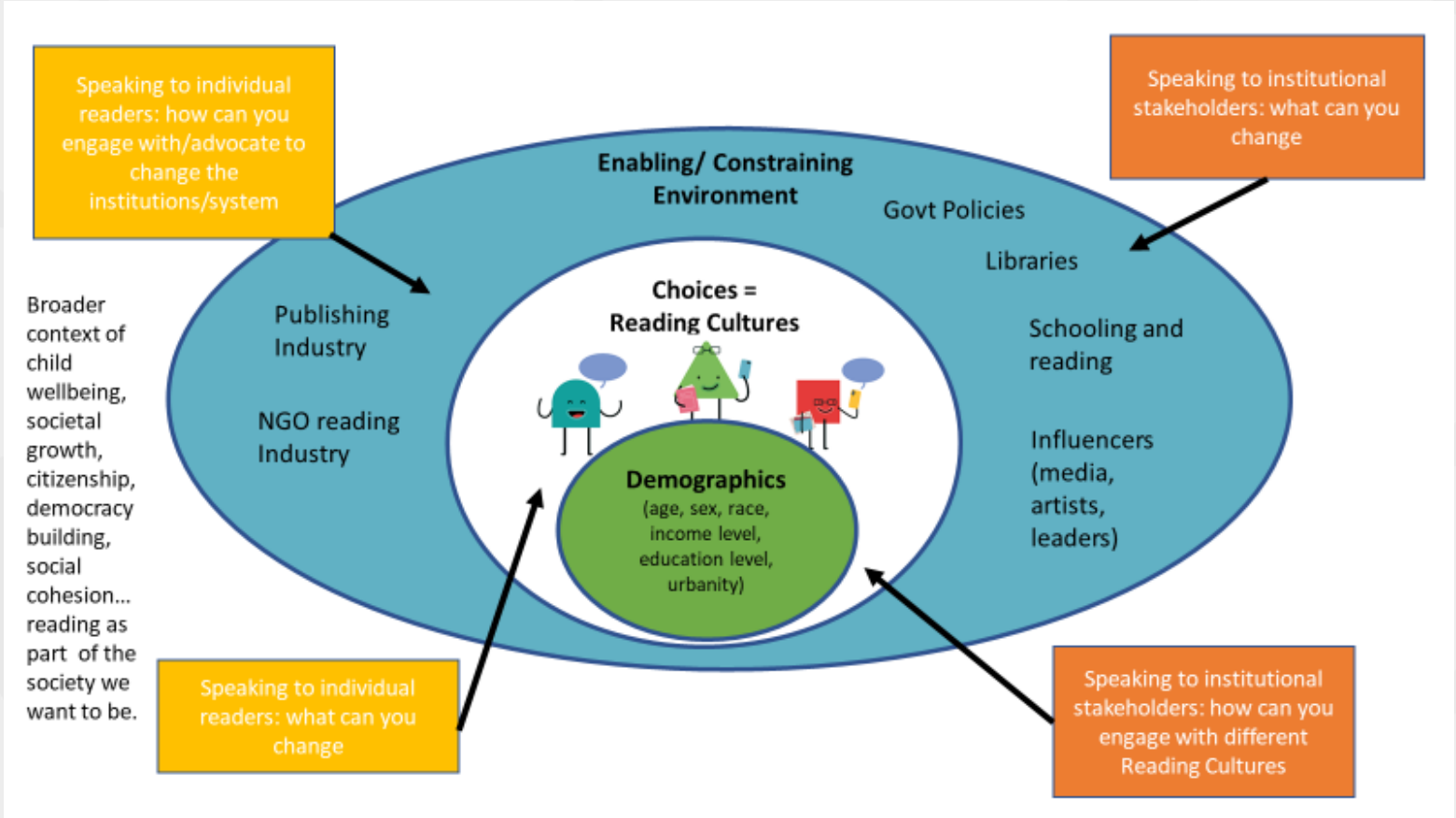


Figure 2

Survey Methodology

Questionnaire Design

The NRS 2023 questionnaire was developed by combining measures reported on in the NRS 2016 report (the original questionnaire was not made public and could not be accessed from SABDC) with new questions derived from the project's conceptualisation of reading, its Theory of Change and consultations with Steering Committee members

Sampling Method

The nationally representative sample was generated through a spatial sampling frame that categorises neighbourhoods by socio-economic and infrastructure levels and selects areas representative of the socio-economic distribution of each Province. Households and individuals are then randomly selected within each sampled neighbourhood.

Data Collection Method

Data collection tools and processes were piloted and data collection was carried out from November 2022 - March 2023. Respondents were selected face-to-face as per the sampling process described above, and gave consent to participate face-to-face. The full questionnaire was then administered using Kobo toolbox (digital data collection tool) through a combination of face-to-face and telephonic interviews, in the participant's chosen language.

Data Analysis Processes

Descriptive data was analysed in Excel and Stata. Correlations and regressions were completed in Stata. Cluster analysis was completed in R. The data set was weighted by age, race and province using parameters from General Household Survey 2021.

Ethics Clearance

The survey received ethics clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), protocol number H22/11/63 in November 2022.

Open Source Data and Technical Report

The NRS 2023 questionnaire and dataset are open source and are available for download on through DataFirst along with a technical report outlining further details regarding data collection, data cleaning and analysis.

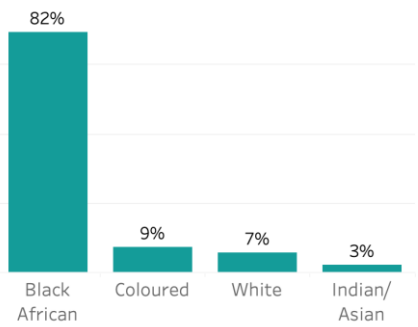
Survey Sample

This findings in this report are based on a nationally representative survey of 4251 adults aged 16+ in South Africa. Participants were recruited through face-to-face stratified sampling. The survey findings were weighted by race, province and age group.

The results can therefore be reliably extrapolated to all adults in the country and used to describe national reading patterns as a whole.

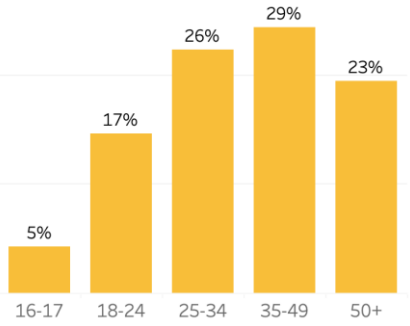
Population Group

Figure 3



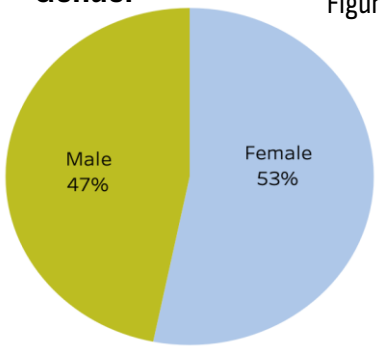
Age

Figure 4



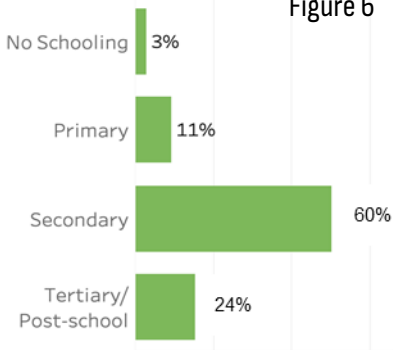
Gender*

Figure 5



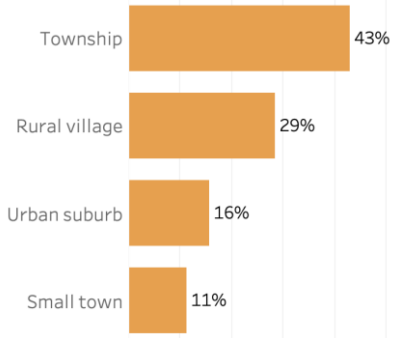
Education**

Figure 6



Area Type

Figure 7



* Non-binary (n=4, 0%)

**Each education level includes complete and incomplete qualifications. Tertiary includes TVET

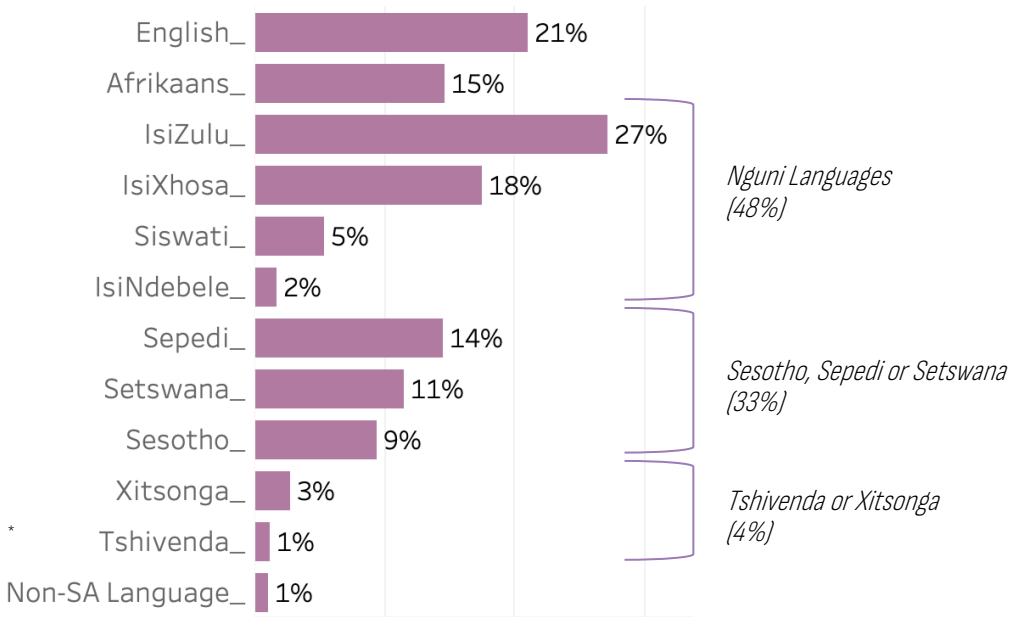
Province

Figure 8

Survey Sample

Language/s spoken at home*

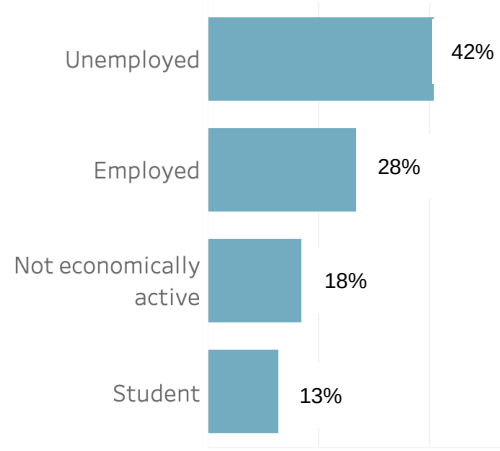
Figure 9



** Respondents could mention more than one home language. Totals add up to more than 100%*

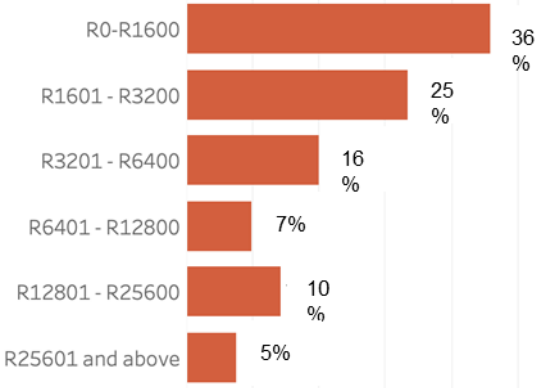
Employment

Figure 10



Household Income*

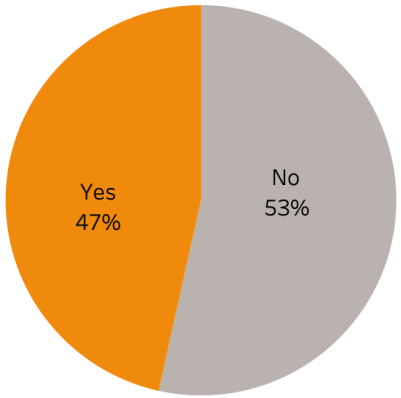
Figure 12



*Responses for refused to answer (20%) and don't know (14%) imputed from other socio-economic indicators

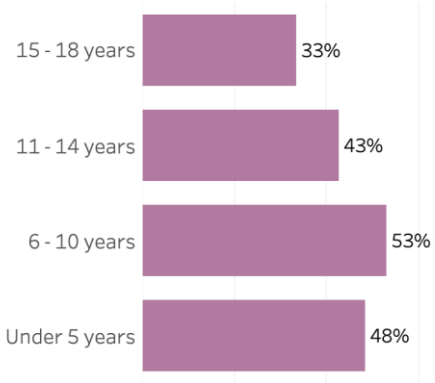
Living with children

Figure 11



Ages of Children in Household

Figure 13



Figures 9-12: n=4251
Figure 13: n=1980

Data Analysis Approach

Figure 14

Descriptive

Complete survey (196 questions, 800 variables, 4251 respondents)

Questions about **Adult Reading Practices:** 4251 respondents (100%) Some questions only asked of those who have the ability to read (3783, 89%)

Questions about **Reading with Children (RwC):** 1980 respondents who live with children (47%)

Questions about **Digital Reading:** 3101 respondents who have access to the internet (73%)

Questions about **Libraries:** 2804 respondents who have ever visited a library (66%)

Questions about language use and preferences are included in the modules on reading practices and reading with children.

Some questions about digital reading and library use are also included in the Adult and Reading with children survey sections

Indices

Adult Indices

1. Reading Types
2. Reading Habits
3. Reading Volume
4. Reading Depth
5. Reading Motivation and Identity
6. Reading Materials Access

Personas

5 Adult Reader Personas

The National Reading Survey has 196 questions resulting in a dataset with over 800 distinct variables. This includes variables about adult reading practices (300 variables covering behaviour, languages, materials access and motivation), reading with children (280 variables covering the same elements as for adults), digital reading (40), libraries (80) and demographic variables.

Questions were only asked of relevant subsamples of respondents: reading with children questions were asked of the 47% of respondents who are living with children, digital reading questions were asked of the 73% who access the internet, and questions about libraries were asked of the 66% who had ever visited a library. A descriptive analysis of these variables is presented in this report, along with the results of select regressions to understand determinants of adult reading and reading with children.

To profile South African reading cultures, six indices were constructed out of select variables relating to adult reading, each describing a different dimension of reading practice. These indices were then used in a clustering analysis to generate five Reader Personas. These are described in detail later in this report. More details on the analysis techniques used to generate the Personas can be found in the accompanying technical report on the NRB website.

SECTION 2.1

Reading Cultures: Reader Personas

Describing diverse reading cultures: Reader Personas

To describe and measure diverse adult reading cultures, the project looked at six dimensions of reading.

It recognised that not all reading offers the same benefits to the reader and to society. To build indices for each dimension, we weighted some variables more heavily than others. The indices are described below:

1. **Reading Practices: Purpose** - reading for enjoyment is weighted more highly than reading for information and reading to communicate
2. **Reading Practices: Habits** - habitual reading (daily or several times a week) is weighted more heavily than less frequent reading
3. **Reading Practices: Volume** - this index combines the total time spent per week across all types of reading
4. **Reading Practices: Depth** - reading long text is weighted more heavily than medium and short text lengths
5. **Reading Motivation and Identity** - the index combines questions about the value of reading, being motivated to read and self-identifying as a reader
6. **Reading Materials Access** - the index combines the number, types and diversity of reading materials (print and digital), access to the internet and library use. The presence of printed reading materials in the home, and especially books, was weighted more heavily than other material types.

When we statistically clustered the patterns of reading in these six dimensions, we found five distinct reading cultures, which we have represented through Reader Personas. In this report section we:

- Present the Reader Personas;
- Describe the reading practices, motivations and access patterns underlying the Personas;
- Describe how Personas can be used to inform policy and practice by addressing the reading needs and motivations of different target audiences.

Committed Readers

"I love reading and it's part of my everyday life"

Committed Readers are the group that reads the most.

They spend most of their days reading for information and to communicate as part of studying, working or looking for work. They also choose to read for enjoyment almost daily.

They enjoy a diverse range of content, are likely to own more than 10 books (including both e-books and physical books), and regularly access books through libraries. They all have access to the internet and smartphones. They read equally on paper and digitally.

They identify strongly as regular or passionate readers.

Figure 15

17% of adults are Committed Readers.

Growth edge: Share your favourite reads with others; influence people in your social circles to read

Regular Readers

"I read to stay connected and know what's happening."

Regular Readers are the group that reads the second most. They read very frequently to communicate, for information and for enjoyment.

They are likely to own more than 10 books, generally have access to the internet and smartphones, and are digitally active - including spending a lot of time on social media - but they rarely read e-books. They often read on mobile devices, both for enjoyment and for information, but about half prefer reading on paper. They enjoy reading a variety of materials and also visit libraries regularly.

They read long texts, but less frequently than committed readers.

They identify strongly as regular or passionate readers.

Figure 16

26% of adults are Regular Readers.

Growth edge: Share your favourite reads with others and try longer texts

Occasional Readers

"I read but it's not a big part of my life"

Occasional Readers read a little bit of everything but not too much of anything. They frequently read for communication but also read regularly for both information and enjoyment.

Most own a few books, but usually less than 10. A few read long texts regularly, but most do so rarely.

Most have internet access and are comfortable with digital reading, but still prefer to read content in print format. They enjoy reading fiction, non-fiction, news and magazines but rarely visit the library.

They mostly identify as occasional readers.

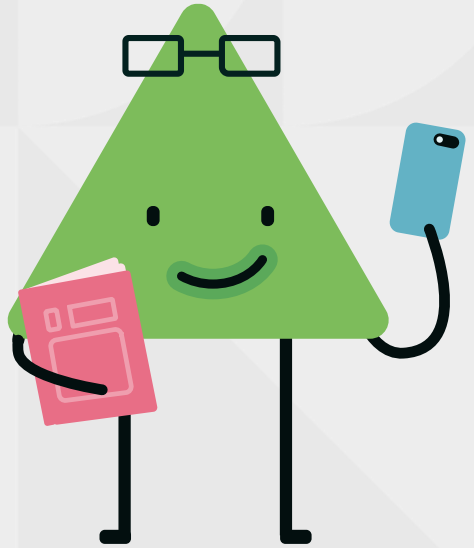


Figure 17

23% of adults are Occasional Readers.

Growth edge: Find a topic or an author that interests you and make reading more of a habit.

Functional Readers

"I read when I have to."

Functional Readers are people who can read, but really only read when they have to. They do read short messages for communication and might have internet access but rarely spend much time on social media.

They own very few physical books (apart from religious books) or e-books, even when they have internet access.

They rarely use their mobile devices to read for pleasure, but sometimes use them for getting information they need. They prefer to read on paper.

They identify as aspiring or occasional readers.

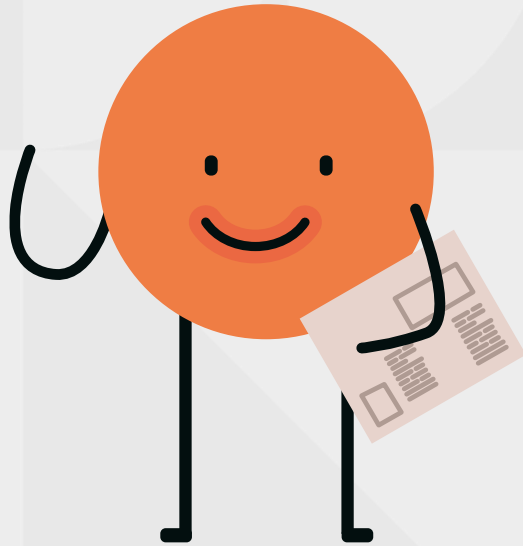


Figure 18

17% of adults are Functional Readers.

Growth edge: Believe that you are a reader and value the reading you are already doing; find a topic or an author that interests you

Non-Readers

"Reading is valuable, but it's not for me."

Non-readers might be able to read a little, but they rarely do. If something has to be read they will usually get someone else to read it to them.

They have very little printed reading material at home, but some may have religious books. They rarely use the internet; they have access to cellphones, but these are unlikely to be internet-enabled.

They are typically older (retirement age); not economically active or unemployed; and have had less opportunity for education.

They do not identify as readers. Still, they see the value in reading and are positive about children learning to read.

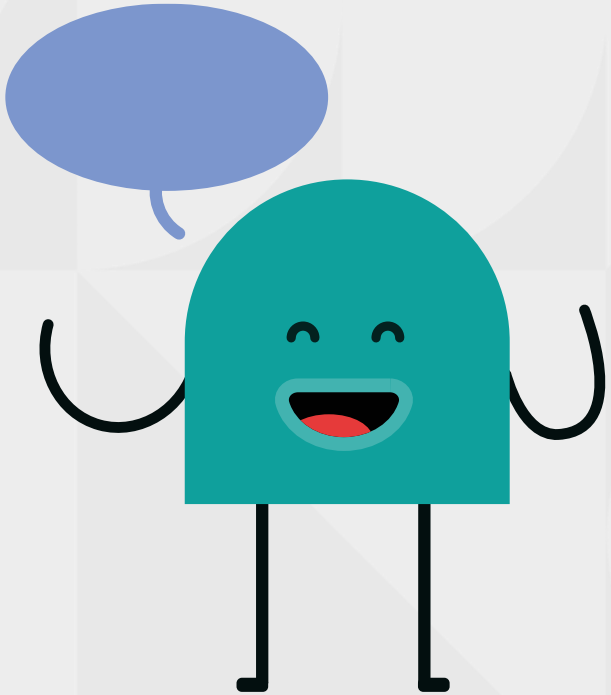


Figure 19

18% of adults are Non-Readers.

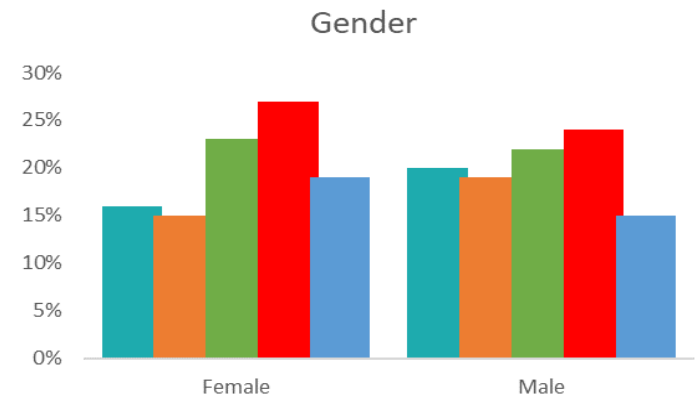
Growth edge: Find opportunities to tell and listen to stories; motivate young people to read

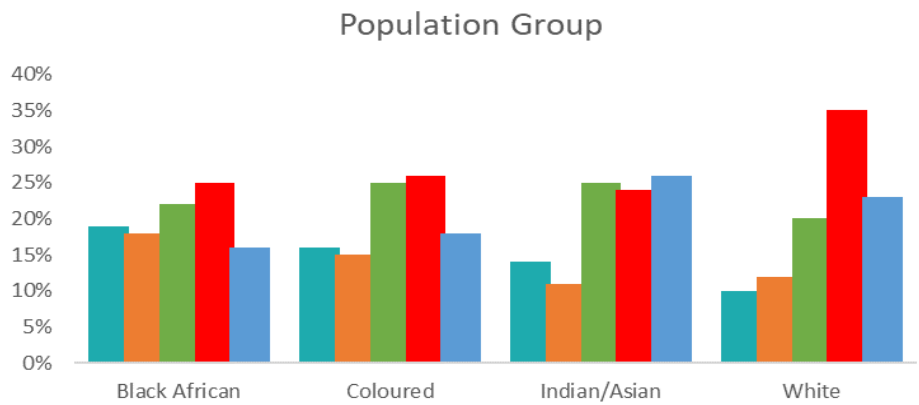
Reader Personas and Demographics

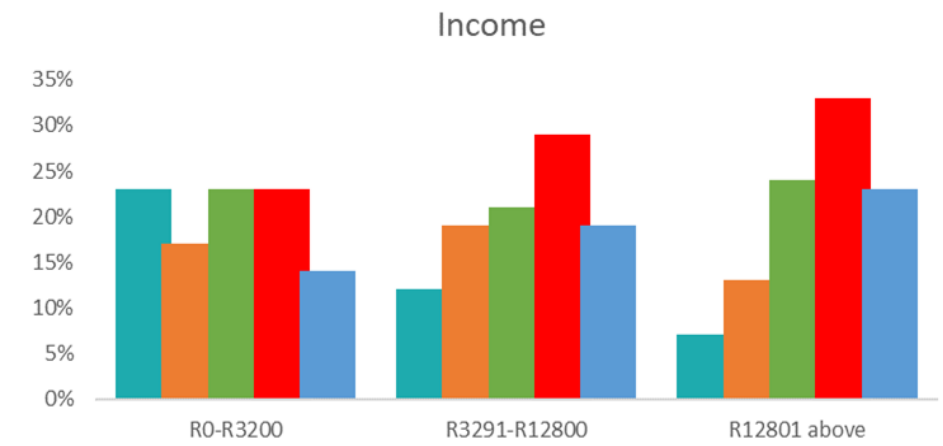
The distribution of Reader Personas by gender, population group, income level and area of residence show that demographics and socio-economic standing have an impact on reading choices, but also that all types of readers are present in all groups (even if not to the same extent).

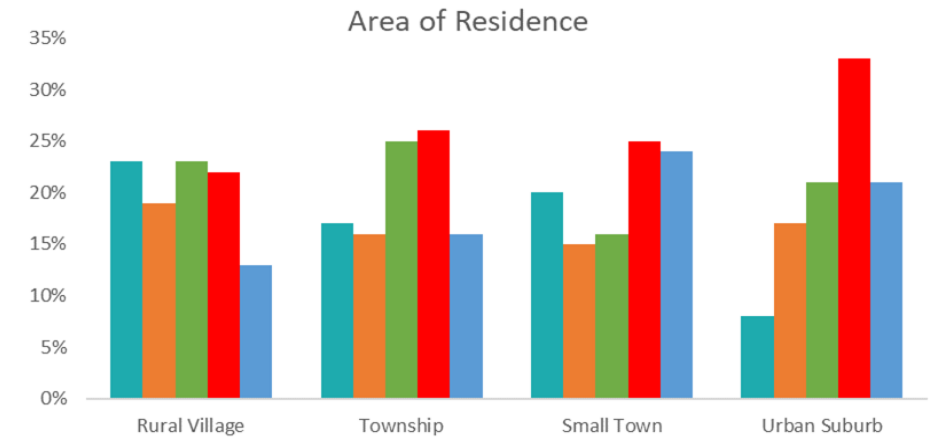
Figure 20

N=4251









Non-Reader
Functional Reader
Occasional Reader
Regular Reader
Committed Reader

SECTION 2.2

Reading Cultures: Adult Reading Practices

How many South Africans read?

83% of adults **read** for any purpose and any length of time. This means that 17% never read.

78% of adults **read for enjoyment**. This compares to 71% of the population who read for leisure in the 2016 survey.

75% of adults live in **homes with at least one book** (including religious books, textbooks, dictionaries as well as fiction/nonfiction)

32% of adults **frequently read books**

22% of adults **read for >1.5 hours per day** (11 hours per week) for enjoyment and the same again for information.

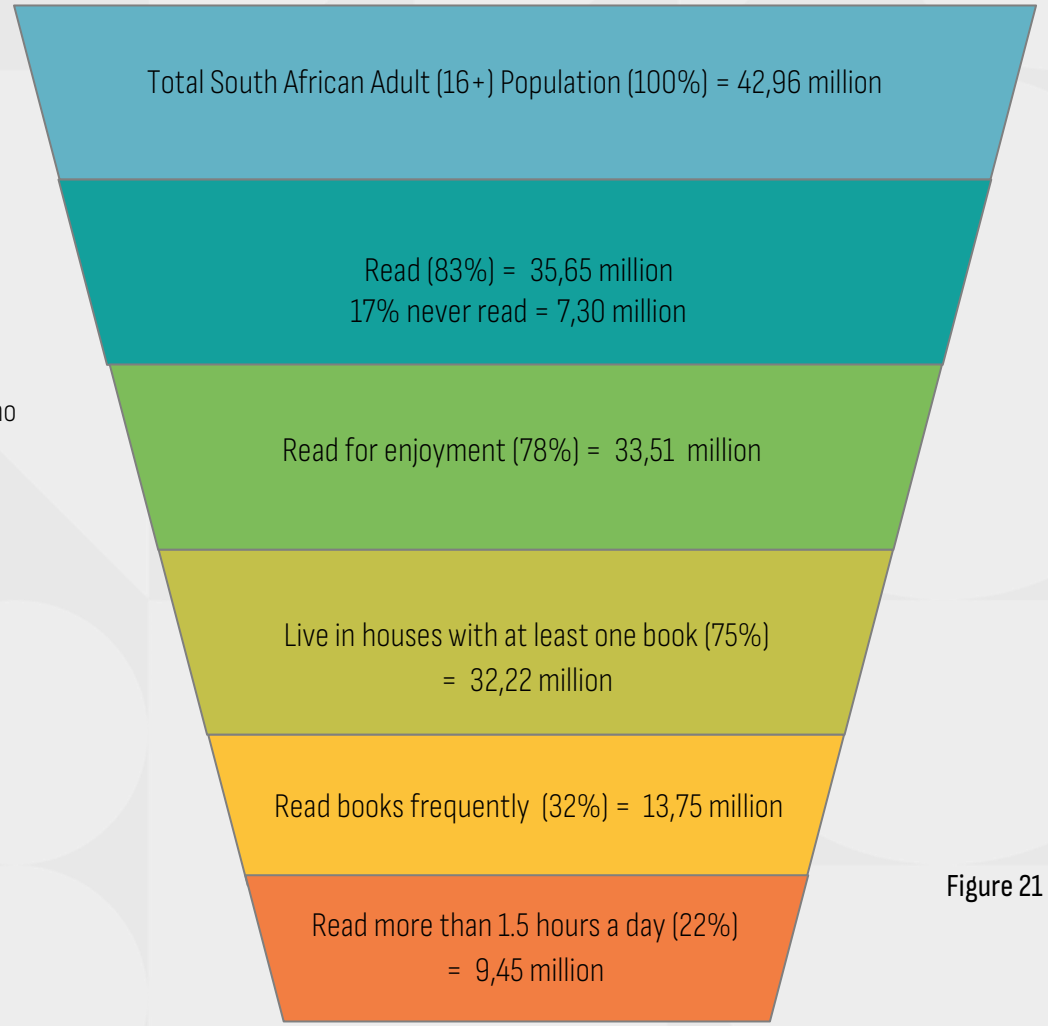


Figure 21

Adult Reading Ability

The NRS surveys are not designed to test reading ability or to provide a 'literacy rate' for the adult population.

Surveys such as the South African census define adult literacy based on a respondent's ability to read and answer a written question provided to them on a card. Since the NRS (2023) was conducted telephonically, this was not possible. Reading ability was therefore measured based on a self-reported question.

Respondents were asked "Imagine that a letter arrives for you from a friend or relative. Which of the following would you do with this letter?" The response options were:

- I would read it myself
- I would read it myself but it would be difficult
- I would ask someone to read it to me

Respondents who answered that they would ask someone else to read the letter were assumed to not have the ability to read.

10% of the total adult population say that they cannot read (would ask someone else to read a letter for them) (Figure 22).

This 10% self-reported result matches the Department of Higher Education's 2020 reported adult (15+) functional illiteracy rate of 10%, which is based on the proportion of adults who have not completed Grade 7 (DHET 2023). The official South African adult illiteracy rate is 5% (World Bank 2019).

Figure 22 **90% of adult South African Adults can Read**

N=4251

What explains if Adults Ever Read?

In addition to people who **cannot** read, the survey also measured who **do not** read. This was measured by asking respondents how many hours per week they spend on reading for enjoyment, information or communication. Those who reported spending 0 hours on any type of reading were counted as never reading.

In total, **17% of South African adults never read.**

Just over half of these cannot read while the other half can read (would read a letter themselves, with or without difficulty) but choose not to read.

Adults who never read are more likely to*:

- Have no schooling or only primary schooling
- Be older (50+)
- Live in a rural village, small town or township, when compared with those who live in urban suburbs
- Have less than R3200 or between R6400-R12800 monthly household income. Those with R3200-R6400 and above R12800 monthly household income are more likely to read. This finding requires further research but may suggest that middle income households (R6400-R12800) combine various factors that mitigate against reading (such as working long hours in roles that do not require reading with little disposable income for reading materials).
- Not live with children
- Have a reading disorder (such as dyslexia)
- Were never taught to read
- Self-identify as non-readers or aspiring readers.

These findings do not mean that all people in these groups do not read. For example, 78% of those who live in rural villages and 66% of those who identify as non-readers do read occasionally. They are just significantly less likely to do so than the average.

When all other factors are held constant, the following characteristics have no significant effect on whether someone reads (as contrasted with not reading) *:

- Gender
- Race
- Age differences under 50
- Having difficulties with sight (22% have difficulties with sight)

* These factors are confirmed through regression analysis as significant predictors (at 95% confidence level) of reading versus not reading. This means each characteristic is a significant predictor of whether someone reads even when all other characteristics are held constant. Regression analysis is explained in the glossary of this report

Action Point: how to encourage non-reading adults to read? While most factors associated with not reading are difficult to change (age, education level), reading identity can be encouraged by shifting the focus from reading books to a recognition of other common forms of reading (like reading text messages, the news or a religious text)

Reading Purpose

Studies of adult reading culture mainly focus on reading for pleasure or enjoyment. Studies of reading ability may include an assessment of functional reading (for information) if related to specific tasks (academic studies, professional skills, etc.) but it is rarely considered part of reading culture. Very few studies consider reading to communicate, even though our modern, digital world means that the volume and ubiquity of written (and therefore read) communication (WhatsApp, emails, etc.) has grown exponentially and is present in most South Africans' lives on a daily basis. The NRS 2023 considers all of these forms of reading as part of our reading culture.

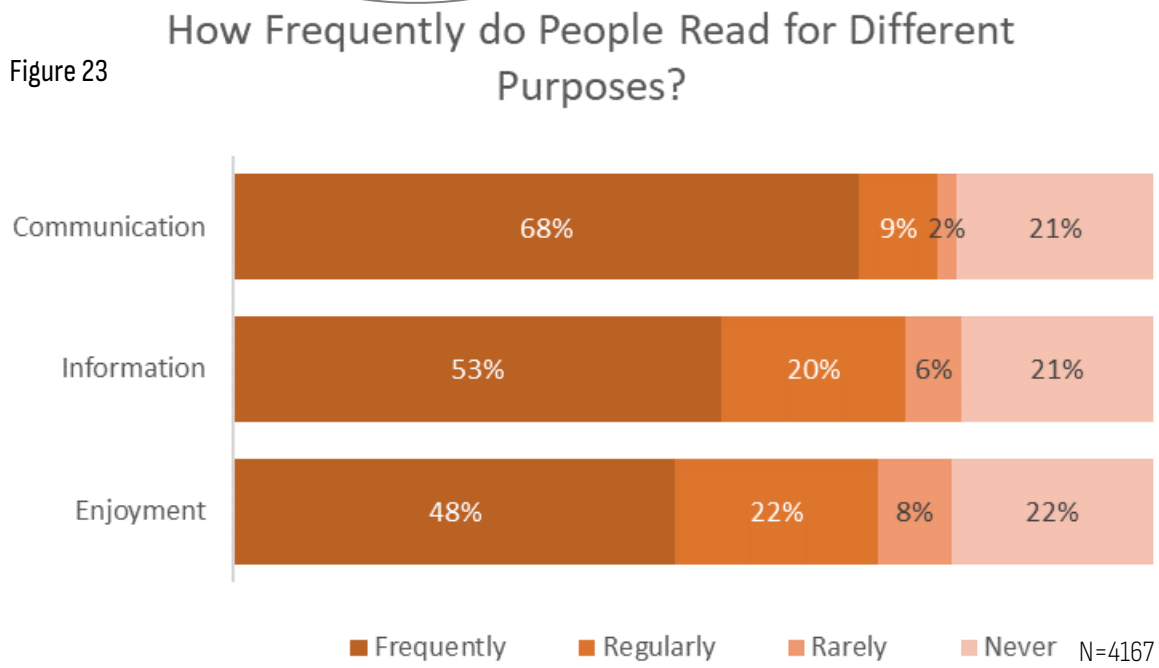
For what purposes do South Africans read?

One of the innovations of the National Reading Survey is to distinguish between three different reasons for, or functions of, reading:

- Reading for **Enjoyment** (reading for entertainment or relaxation, not work or study)
- Reading for **Information** (reading to get information or instructions or learn something for work, study or because you choose to)
- Reading to **Communicate** (reading and writing to communicate with others)

Overall, 78% of adults read for enjoyment, 79% read for information and 79% read to communicate (Figure 23).

Figure 23



Frequently = daily or weekly
Regularly = monthly
Rarely = a few times a year

Reading Purpose

The NRS (2023) shows that different types of reading tend to occur together and reinforce each other. **If someone reads a lot, they read across enjoyment, information and communication. If someone reads very little, they read in none of these ways.**

This counters the perception that reading to communicate (i.e. spending time reading and communicating on social media, texts and email, etc.) reduces reading for enjoyment. No evidence for this could be found in the NRS data.

R (correlation coefficient) represents how closely two things co-vary (happen together). Reading for information and for enjoyment are mostly closely associated with each other (r=0.61) but the other forms of reading are also highly correlated. All correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$

Figure 24

Relationships between different reading types

r = 0.4, 95% CI [0.37 - 0.44]	Read to Communicate			
Read for Enjoyment	Frequently	Regularly	Rarely	Never
Frequently	63%	22%	14%	27%
Regularly	22%	54%	17%	15%
Rarely	7%	10%	59%	4%
Never	8%	14%	10%	54%

r = 0.46, 95% CI [0.42-0.49]	Read to Communicate			
Read for Information	Frequently	Regularly	Rarely	Never
Frequently	70%	23%	11%	29%
Regularly	19%	54%	15%	14%
Rarely	4%	12%	69%	5%
Never	6%	12%	4%	53%

r = 0.61, 95% CI [0.58 - 0.64]	Read for Enjoyment			
Read for Information	Frequently	Regularly	Rarely	Never
Frequently	84%	39%	25%	21%
Regularly	10%	52%	28%	11%
Rarely	2%	4%	41%	7%
Never	4%	5%	6%	61%
	100%	100%	100%	100%

Action Point:
How to retain teen interest in reading for enjoyment as they get older?

Reading Purpose: Enjoyment

When asked 'how often do you read for enjoyment':

- **78% of South African adults read for enjoyment and almost half (48%) read frequently for enjoyment**, defined as several times a week. 19% read for enjoyment daily.
- This means that 22% of adults never read for enjoyment. This includes 10% who cannot read and 14% who do not read for enjoyment, even though they are able to.
- **Trends in reading for enjoyment have remained largely stable since 2006 with more than 70% of adults reading for enjoyment at times**. Changes in daily, weekly and monthly reading patterns may be due to changes in how the questions have been asked, more than change in actual reading practices.

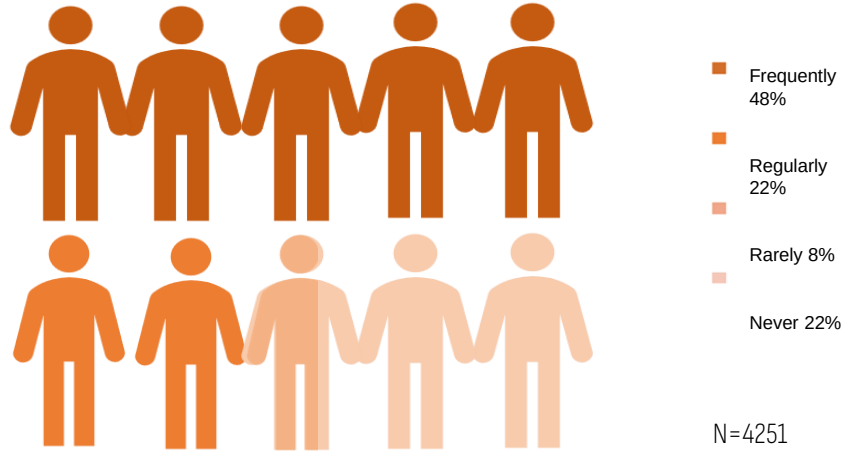
Who reads for enjoyment?

- Teens (ages 16-17) are most likely to read for enjoyment (62% read frequently, compared with 52% of 18-35 year olds and 45% over the age of 35).
- Those with no schooling or only primary schooling are least likely to read for enjoyment (3% and 19% respectively), partly because they are least likely to read at all. However, once adults start secondary school, even if they did not complete, they read frequently for enjoyment (51% and above).

Those who read for enjoyment spend an average of 5 hours per week doing so.*

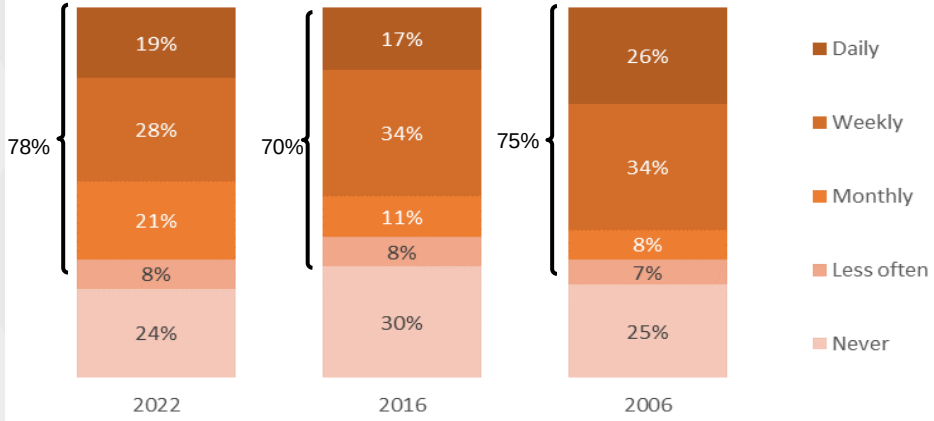
* Averages are calculated as the mode rather than the mean due to skewed response distributions. The mode is reported for unweighted data as mode analysis is not available for weighted data.

Figure 25 **South Africans who Read for Enjoyment**



N=4251

Figure 26 Trends in Reading for Enjoyment



Reading Purpose: Information

When asked 'how often do you read for information':

- **79% of South Africans read for information. More than half (53%) frequently read for information**. 23% read for information daily.
- 23% never read for information. This is mostly the same people who never read for enjoyment.

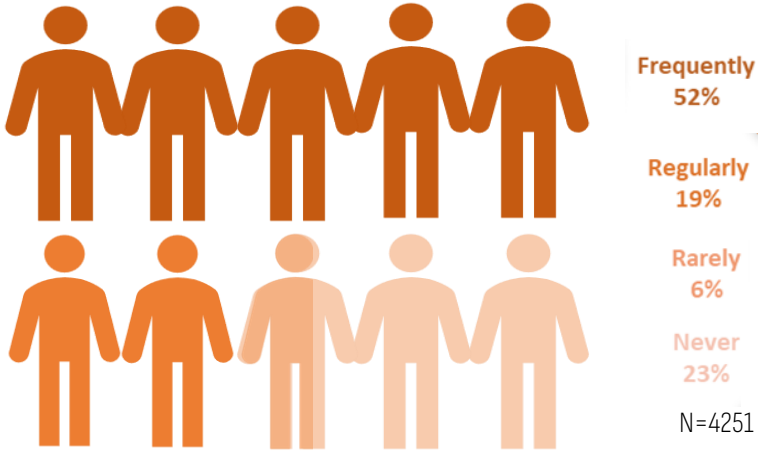
Who reads for information?

Teens (16-17) and young people (18-24) are most likely to read for information (71% and 64% respectively read frequently). This is likely influenced by the fact that many young people are involved in schooling and studies. There is no significant difference by gender.

Students and employed people are more likely to read frequently for information (77% and 62% respectively), but **50% of unemployed people still read frequently for information.**

Those who read for information spend an average of 5 hours per week doing so.*

Figure 27 **South Africans who Read for Information**



* Averages are calculated as the mode rather than the mean due to skewed response distributions. The mode is reported for unweighted data as mode analysis is not available for weighted data.

Action Point:
How to use 'reading to communicate' as a pathway to other forms of reading?

Reading Purpose: Communication

When asked 'how often do you read to communicate':

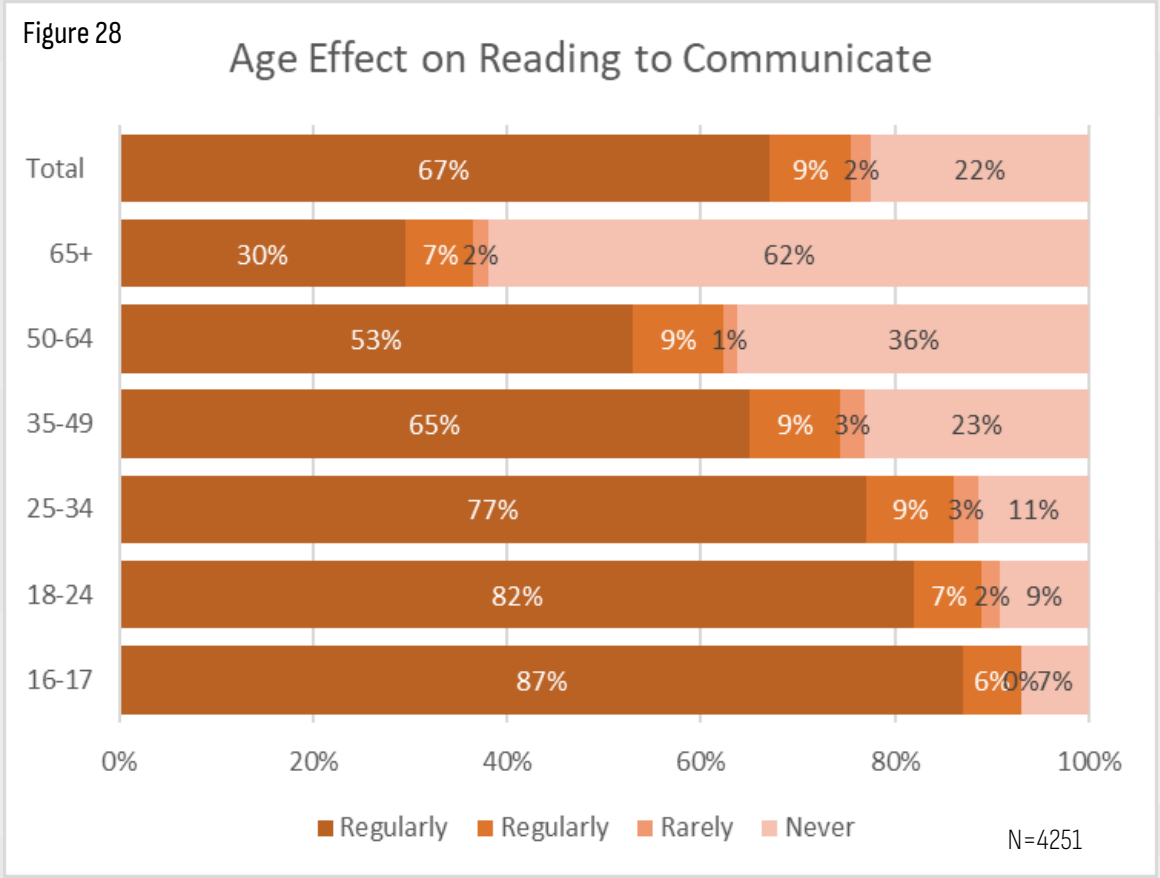
Reading to communicate is the most frequent form of reading in South Africa. 79% of adults read to communicate, and 67% do so frequently. Reading (and writing) is an essential means of communication and social interaction for many South Africans.

Who reads to communicate?

While young people read most frequently across all reading purposes, the age effect is strongest for reading to communicate. As Figure 28 shows, more than three-quarters of those 34 years and younger read to communicate frequently. This drops off for older groups.

People tend to spend higher amounts of time reading to communicate than reading for enjoyment or information.. Those who read to communicate spend an average of 7 hours per week (1 hour per day) doing so. *

Figure 28



* Averages are calculated as the mode rather than the mean due to skewed response distributions. The mode is reported for unweighted data as mode analysis is not available for weighted data.

Reading Volume

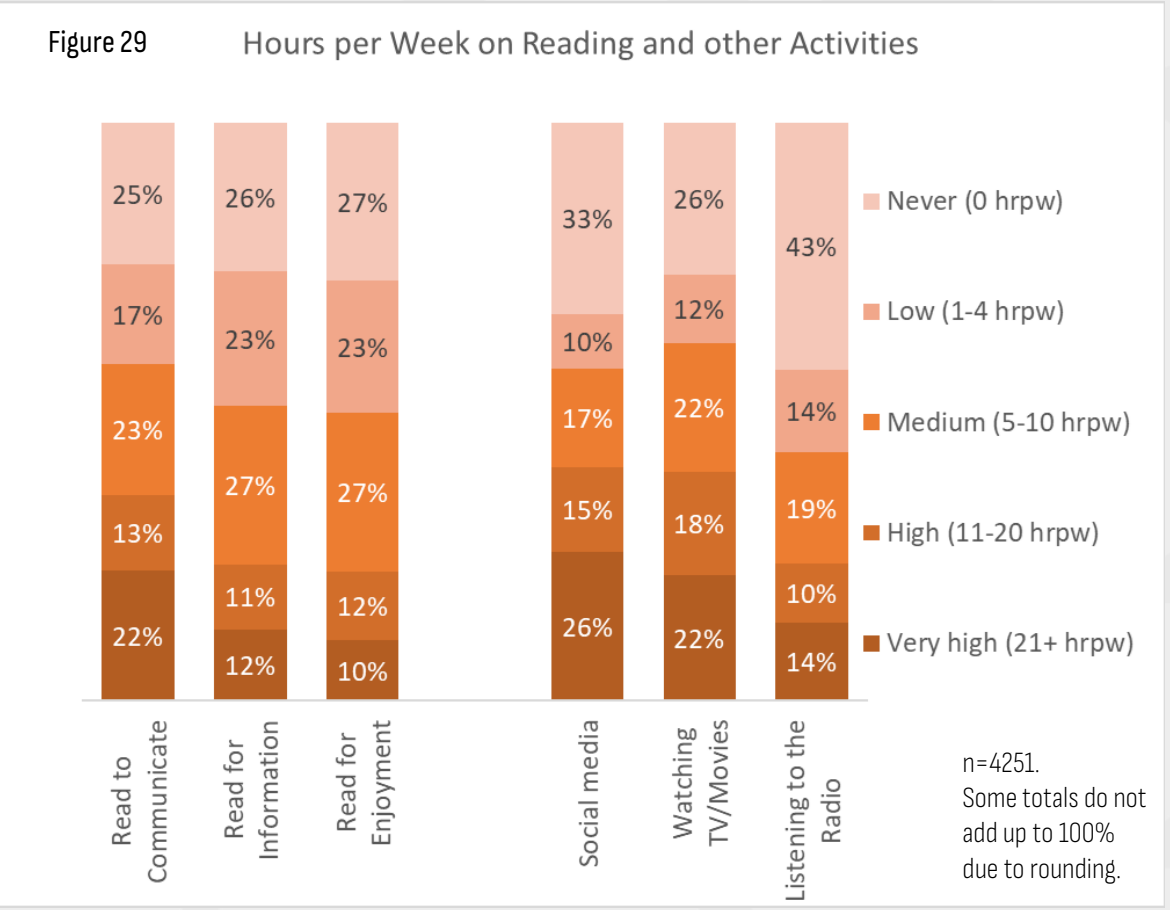
How many hours per week do South Africans spend reading, and how does this compare to other activities?

As reported on previous pages, readers spend an average of 5 hours per week reading for enjoyment, 5 hours reading for information and 7 hours reading to communicate.* When considering the distribution (Figure 29), **about a quarter of adults do not read at all, while just over a fifth (22%) read more than 11 hours per week** (1,5 hours per day - in the graph as high or very high reading volumes) for both enjoyment and information.

In comparison, South Africans spend an average of 10 hours per week watching TV and the same amount of time on social media. While the survey asked about time spent on social media as distinct from time spend on reading to communicate, they are highly correlated and may be measuring much of the same time.

In 2016, the average time spent reading 'for leisure' was 4 hours per week and the average time spent on social media was 6.3 hours per week

Figure 29 Hours per Week on Reading and other Activities



* Averages are calculated as the mode rather than the mean due to skewed response distributions. The mode is reported for unweighted data as mode analysis is not available for weighted data.

Reading Habit

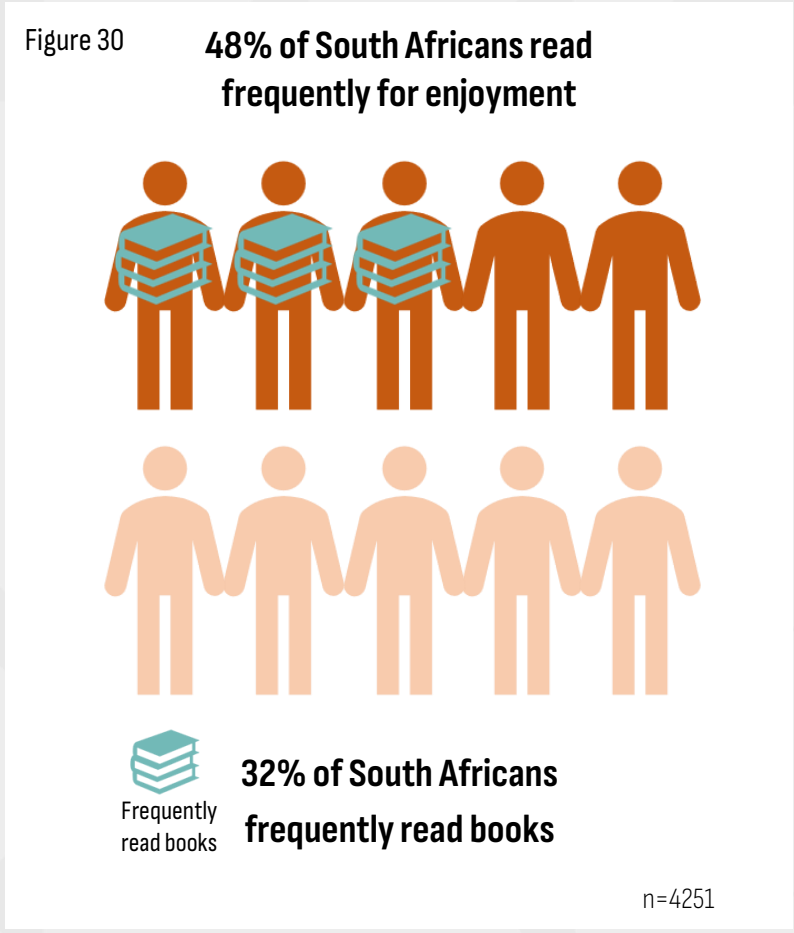
Action Point:
To be a reader, the most important thing is to make reading a habit. This means reading frequently (daily or several times a week). The habit of reading is more important than how long or what you read.

How regularly do South Africans read? And what do they read regularly?

In terms of frequency, **reading to communicate is the most frequent form of reading.** 67% of South Africans read to communicate at least several times a week.

Almost half of adults (48%) also read frequently for enjoyment and **32% frequently read books** (including print fiction, print nonfiction and ebooks).

Figure 30



Reading Depth

Why is 'deep' reading important?

Deep reading involves activating linguistic, cognitive, and affective processes, including connecting background knowledge to new information, making analogies, drawing inferences, examining truth value, passing over into the perspectives of others (expanding empathy and knowledge), integrating everything into critical analysis, and moving beyond the author's meaning to develop one's own novel thoughts about the text. It stands in contrast to skimming, where a person reads (often quickly) but does not think or feel deeply about the text. It occurs more often (though not exclusively) when reading longer texts and printed materials. See the work of Wolf (2008), among others.

More information about reading books is covered in Chapter 3: Reading Materials Access

How 'deeply' do South Africans read?

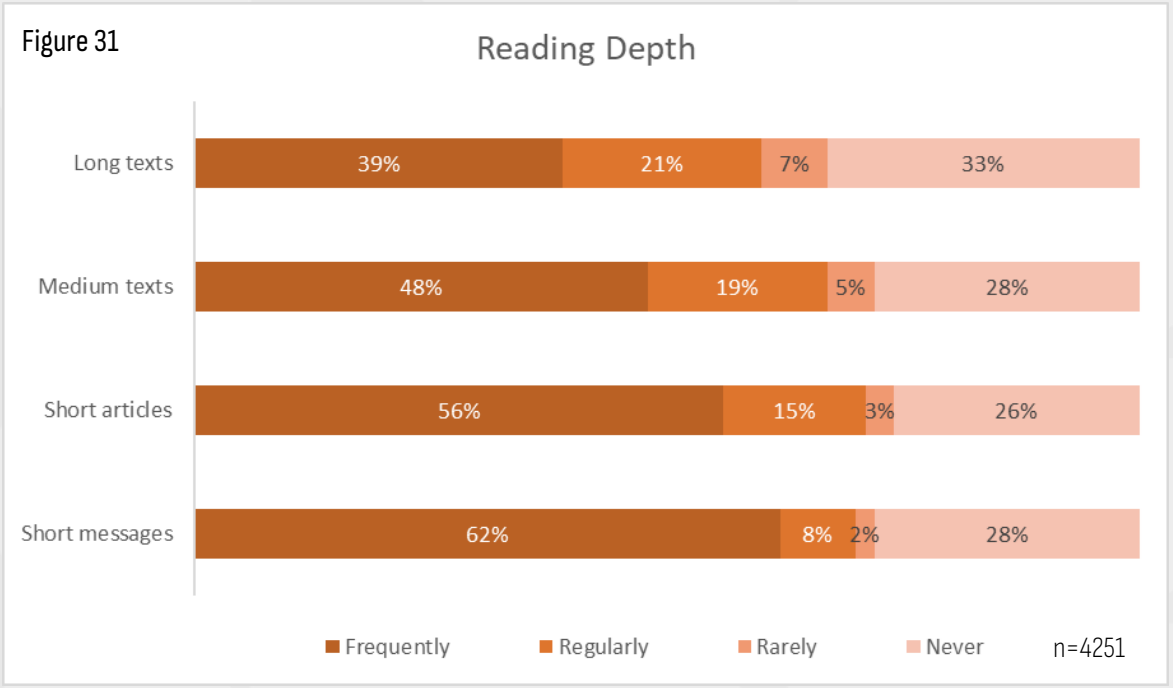
The NRS proxies the depth of reading by asking how often respondents read texts of different lengths. The question asked:

Now please think about all the different kinds of things you read: for fun, work or communication; in print, online or on mobile apps. How often do you read...

- Short messages: a few words or sentences like a Twitter post, WhatsApp chat, cookbook recipe or prayer
- Short articles: a few paragraphs, like a short newspaper article, bible passage or long email
- Medium text: a few pages, like a short story or a long newspaper article or blog post, or a section in a religious text, or a textbook chapter
- Long text: many pages like a novel or non-fiction book or a religious book

South African adults mostly read short texts (like messages), or medium-length texts (like newspaper articles). **39% read long texts frequently and 33% never read long texts.**

Figure 31



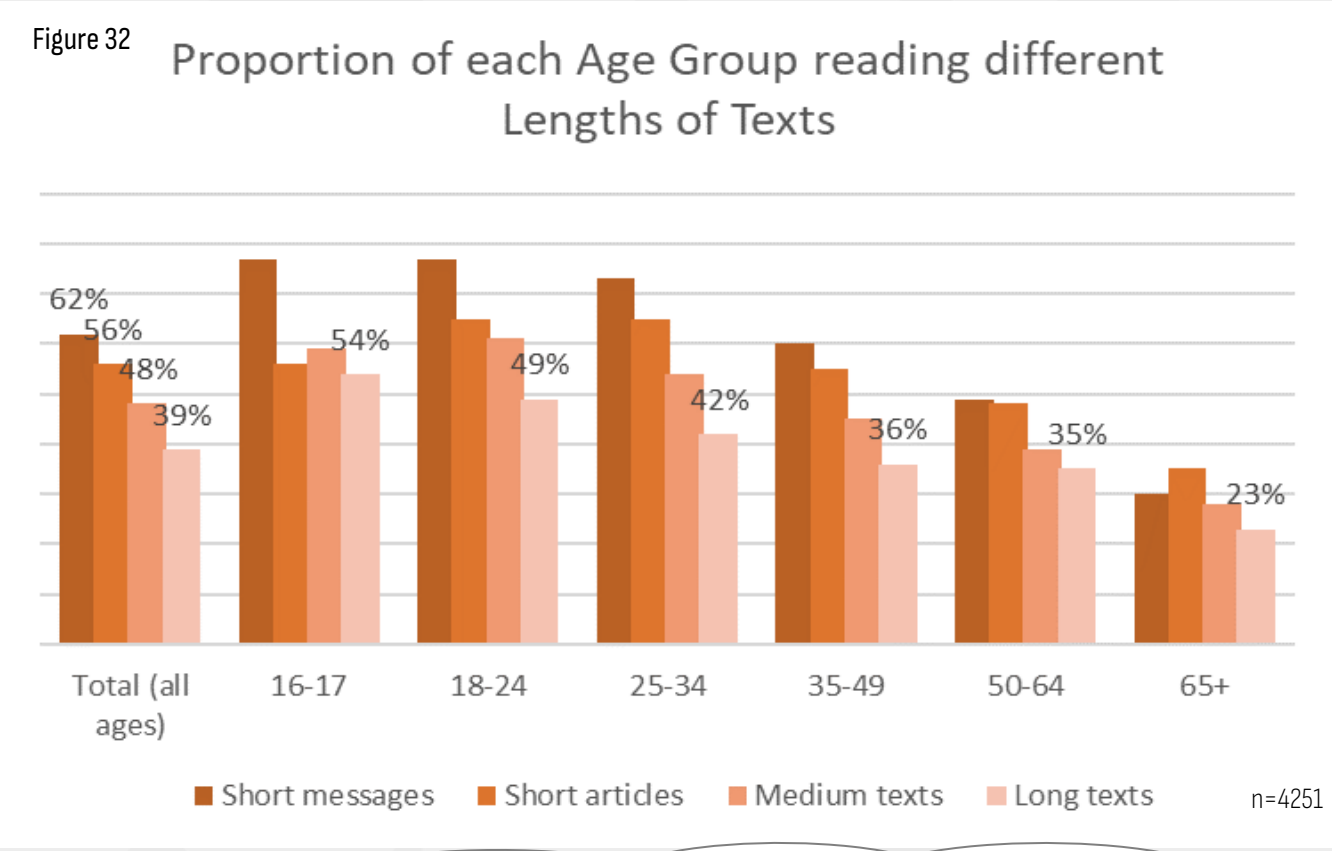
Reading Depth: Generations

There is a common perception that younger people are less likely to read 'deeply', given the rise of digital communications and the use of digital devices for reading.

The NRS (2023) results show that rather than reading more short texts and fewer long texts, **youth (under 24) are reading all lengths of texts more frequently than older readers**. Young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are more likely than average to read long texts.

As discussed on the next page, age is not a significant factor in explaining long text reading, when all other factors are held constant.

Figure 32



How to read this graph:
Any age group with a bar that is longer than the average for Total (on the left) reads more frequently than this overall average. Any bar that is shorter, reads less frequently. For example, 16-34 year olds read short messages more frequently than average (dark red bars are longer than 62%). They also read long texts more frequently than average (light orange bar is longer than 39%)

What explains who reads Long Texts?

What explains the differences between the 60% of adults who regularly or frequently read long texts and the 40% who never or rarely read long texts?

Adults who regularly or frequently read long texts are more likely to*:

- Have at least some secondary education.
- Have more than 11 books at home. Book ownership at this level doubles the odds of reading long texts.
- Have a household monthly income of above R12800.
- Identify as a reader. When compared to non-readers, self-identified occasional readers are three times as likely to read long texts, and self-identified passionate readers are five times as likely to read long texts.
- Spend 11 hours or more per week reading for enjoyment.
- Spend 11 hours or more per week on social media. This is an important and counterintuitive finding. **High levels of social media use (11-20 hours per week) more than double the odds of reading long texts**, suggesting that rather than being trade-offs, these forms of reading may be mutually reinforcing.

These findings do not mean that people in other groups do not read long texts. For example, 28% of those who identify as non-readers read long texts regularly or frequently. They are just significantly less likely to do so than the average.

When all other factors are held constant, the following adult characteristics have no significant effect on whether someone reads long texts *:

- Gender
- Age
- Race
- Living with children
- Where you live (suburb, township, small town, rural)
- Employment status
- Differences in household income levels below R12800 per month
- Library use

These findings counter perceptions that reading long texts is a 'culture' reserved for urban people with higher incomes and that young people do not read long texts.

* These factors are confirmed through regression analysis at $p<0.05$ as significant predictors of reading long texts regularly or frequently

Action Point: how to encourage more people to read long texts?
Build adults' confidence in their reading identities. Use social media to intentionally link readers to long texts through online reading clubs, influencers and BookTok. Reconsider the narrative that social media users are not 'real' readers. Counter perceptions that long text reading is an activity associated with only some groups in society by emphasising that people across South African society read long texts.

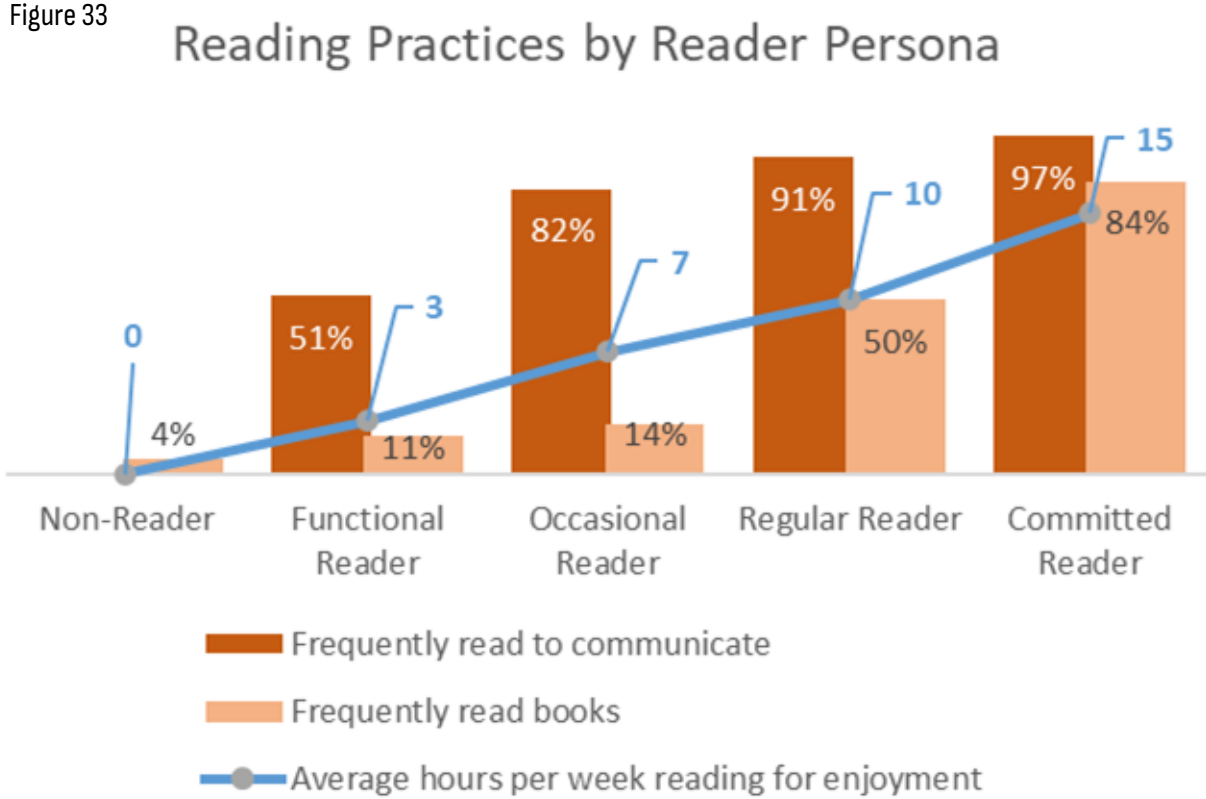
Personas and Reading Practices

Non-readers rarely read at all, but a small number do read to communicate. While **Functional Readers** rarely read for enjoyment, half do frequently read to communicate.

This rises to almost universal communication by **Occasional**, **Regular** and **Committed Readers**, but the difference between these Personas is most clear when looking at the rising levels of frequent reading of books (print fiction, print non-fiction and ebooks) as well as the rising average hours per week spent reading for enjoyment.

In comparison to the overall average of 7 hours per week of reading for enjoyment, Regular Readers generally spend 10 hours and Committed Readers 15 hours.

Figure 33



SECTION 3

Reading Cultures: Adult Reading Motivation & Identity

Why is Reading Motivation & Identity Important?

Motivation (considering something to be good and important) and identification (considering something to be 'relevant to me') is a crucial early step in adopting new practices and behaviours.

Organisations working to increase reading in the country have focused many campaigns on motivating children to read and motivating adults to read with children. There has been less attention paid to intentionally motivating adults to read more for themselves.

One of the survey's goals is to measure the systems impact of behaviour change communication interventions aimed to increasing public awareness about the benefits of reading (with children and for adults).

The key findings on Motivation and Identity are that:

- Adult **self-identification as a Reader** is a strong predictor of reading behaviour, including reading at all (p. 37), reading long texts (p. 47), reading with children (p. 69) and using libraries (p. 97)
- However, **self-identification lags behind actual reading practice**. 36% of adults self-identify as passionate or regular readers, but 48% of adults read frequently for enjoyment. Expanding public debates about reading to include reading for information and to communicate may enable more people to self-identify as 'readers', which may in turn increase motivation to read different types of material (if there is an otherwise enabling environment in terms of materials access).
- **Levels of adult motivation about reading have increased**. In 2023, more than half of all respondents agreed with positive statements about reading, while less than 10% agreed with the same statements in 2016.

The survey asked about reading motivation and identity in the following ways:

Self-categorisation: How would you describe yourself? (passionate reader, regular reader, aspiring reader, occasional reader, non-reader). This question asked respondents how they feel / how they identify, independent of any other responses. This is distinct from the Personas, which were constructed by the research team after the survey, based on the analysis of multiple survey questions.

Reasons for reading: Agree/Disagree with:

- Reading is a way to explore new people and places;
- I read as a way to improve my economic situation;
- I read only to get information that I need;

Feelings about reading: Agree/Disagree with:

- Reading is one of my favourite hobbies;
- Reading helps me relax;
- Reading is stressful for me;
- For me, reading is a waste of time

Social environment relating to reading: Agree/Disagree with:

- I like talking about books with other people;
- If people in my family/ my friends saw me reading a book, they would make fun of me;
- People in my life talk about the importance of reading and storytelling;
- When I was small, someone in my family read to me almost every day (discussed in Chapter 5: Reading with Children)

How to read this graph:
The dotted line is the overall average of adults who consider themselves active (regular or passionate) readers. Any group with a very dark or dark bar that is longer than this line has higher levels of active reader identity than this overall average. Any bar that is shorter, has lower active reader identity.

Self-identification as a 'Reader'

In the survey, respondents were asked: "How would you describe yourself as a reader? Which of these categories do you identify with most? Non-reader, aspiring reader, occasional reader, regular reader or passionate reader?" 35% of South African adults self-identify as either passionate or regular readers. 22% self-identify as non-readers or can be categorised as non-readers based on not having the ability to read. Just under half the adult population therefore self-identify either as people who could read more (occasional readers) or would like to read more (aspiring readers).

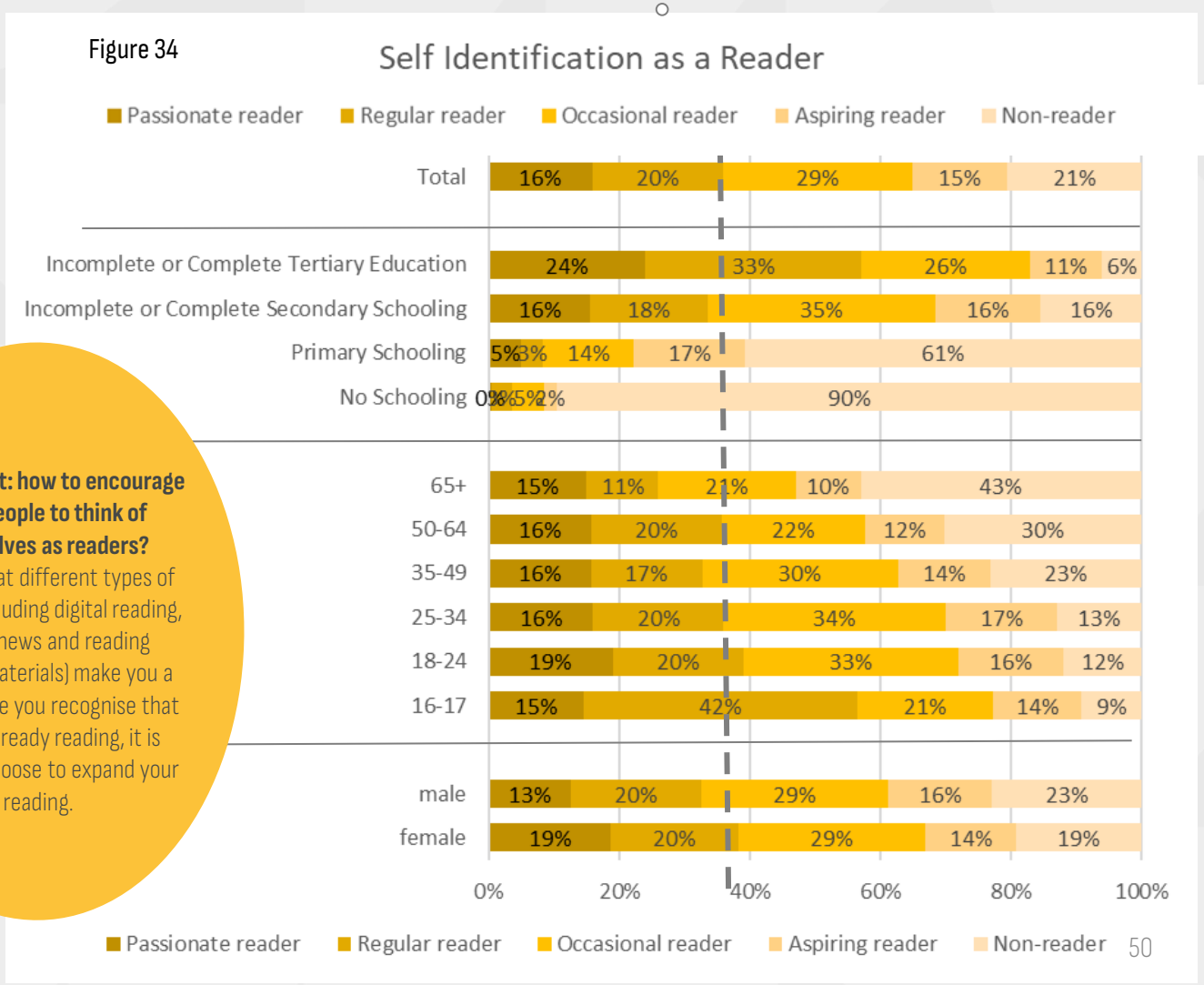
This suggests that some adults may be open to reading more, and efforts to increase adult reading may want to target these segments of the population.

Gender has an effect on self-identification, with women more likely than men to identify as passionate or regular readers. Teens (16-17) identify most strongly as readers, although this is mostly in the category 'regular reader', which may reflect the reading they do as learners rather than a voluntary identity that they retain after leaving school. Age otherwise shows no clear pattern. The strongest effect on self-identification as a reader is level of education. The higher the education level, the more likely someone is to identify as a regular or passionate reader.

Many people read a lot but do not identify as 'readers'. Of the respondents who report reading for enjoyment more than 21 hours per week, 60% identify as passionate or regular readers and 40% think of themselves as occasional, aspiring or non-readers. Some of this may be due to mis-estimation of reading time, but it is clear that reading identity is to some extent distinct from actual reading practices.

Action Point: how to encourage more people to think of themselves as readers?
Validate that different types of reading (including digital reading, reading news and reading religious materials) make you a reader. Once you recognise that you are already reading, it is easier to choose to expand your reading.

Figure 34



Motivation: Reasons, Feelings and Social Environment

Positive attitudes and beliefs about reading have increased dramatically since 2016. The 2017 NRS survey included 33 positive statements about reading and only 9 of these were agreed to by more than 10% of respondents (NRS 2016, pg 33). In the 2023 NRS, 7 out of 9 statements about the value of reading found more than 60% agreement.

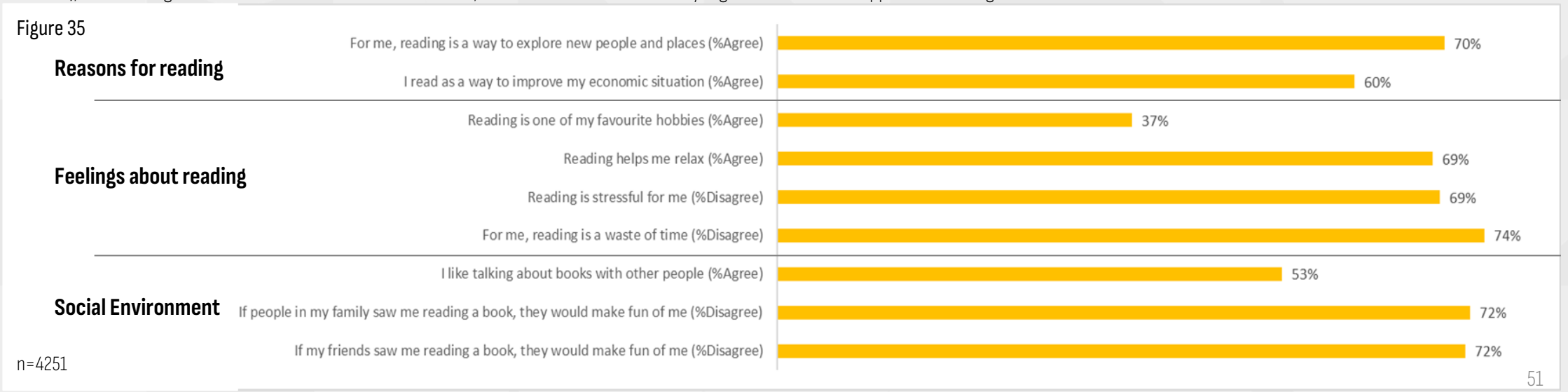
For those statements that are the same across both years, we can see the extent of the change:

- Reading helps me relax: from 47% of adults agreed (2016) to 69% of adults agreed (2023)
- Reading is one of my favourite hobbies: 16% of adults agreed (2016) to 37% of adults agreed (2023)

For negatively formulated statements, the graph below reports on the % who disagree, so showing an overall positive attitude towards reading

These statements show that South Africans see reading as a way to expand their minds, and not only as a functional activity (to improve their economic situation); that reading is a valued form of leisure and relaxation; and that there are reasonably high levels of social support for reading.

Figure 35



Motivation: Influencers

The most important influencers about the value of reading are friends and family, following by personal contacts on social media and schools. This is the same pattern when looking only at youth (aged 16-34), who are also likely to be exposed to reading messaging by social media influencers (25% of youth).

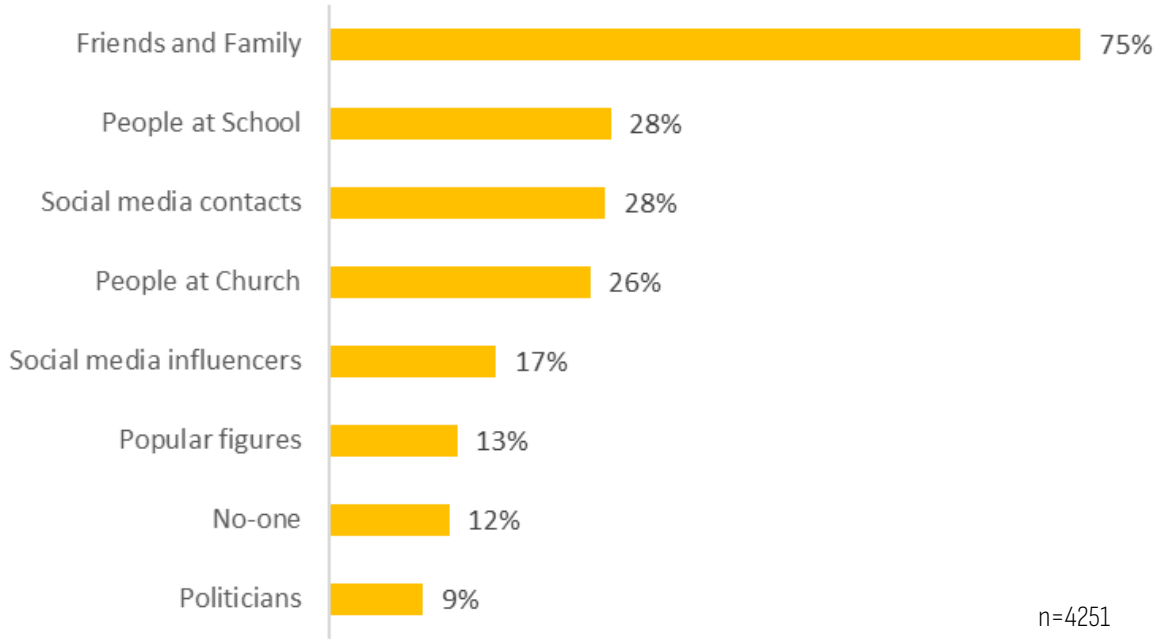
Religious materials are the most commonly read type of material in South Africa (see Chapter 4 on Reading Materials), and churches play an important role in encouraging reading.

Popular figures in sports or the arts are less active champions of reading, in spite of Libraries being part of the mandate of the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture.

A positive finding is that **88% of respondents have someone in their lives who talks about the importance of reading and storytelling** (12% have no-one).

Action Point:
Engage religious leaders and popular figures in sports and arts to talk about the importance of reading. Use the existing influence of friends and family to spread reading practice through social networks.

Figure 36 Which of the following people in your life ever talk about the importance of reading and storytelling?



SECTION 4

Reading Cultures: Access to and Use of materials

Materials access as a change lever of reading cultures

Together with motivation, access to reading materials is the main lever for changing reading practices and reading cultures.

Reading materials access is closely tied to a country's enabling (or constraining) reading ecosystem, since it requires complex processes for resourcing, producing and distributing materials. While a shift in reading motivation can occur in an individual through one book or article or one conversation, materials production often requires multiple institutions, significant financial investment and many months or years. Unless managed very intentionally, these processes tend to mirror socio-economic inequalities in the country that advantage some readers over others through the content, languages, formats, pricing and distribution channels chosen.

The 2006 and 2016 SABDC surveys focussed mainly on the traditional publishing industry (which includes not only book publishers but also magazine and news publishers). The NRS in 2023 expands our understanding of where reading materials 'come from' today. This includes conventional commercially-published materials, and materials published by government and non-governmental organisations and distributed for free. It also includes 'free' (data cost determined) online materials, and content that readers themselves generate by writing (and therefore reading) various forms of digital communication.

While it is important to recognise the full spectrum of reading materials, not all material types are equal. There is extensive research (Evans et al 2010; Sikora et al 2019; de Bondt et al 2020) that the presence of printed reading materials, particularly books, in the home is correlated with a range of positive outcomes for children, including improved schooling performance and years of education completed. This chapter therefore looks at the range of reading materials and various access challenges, as well as looking at access to books in particular.

We consider the following dimensions of Access to Reading Materials in the Home:

- What types of print reading materials are in the home (owned and borrowed) and how regularly are they used?
- To what extent do South Africans own books, including 'literature' (fiction and non-fiction books) and other books (religious, reference, textbooks, cookbooks, etc.)?
- What are South Africans' current and preferred channels for sourcing reading materials?
- What barriers to sourcing print reading materials (distance, cost…) do South Africans face?

The following topics are related to materials access but are covered in separate sections of the report:

- Digital reading: Access to and use of digital reading materials
- Libraries: Access to libraries
- Languages: Availability of reading materials in preferred languages
- Schools as sources of reading materials: covered under reading and children

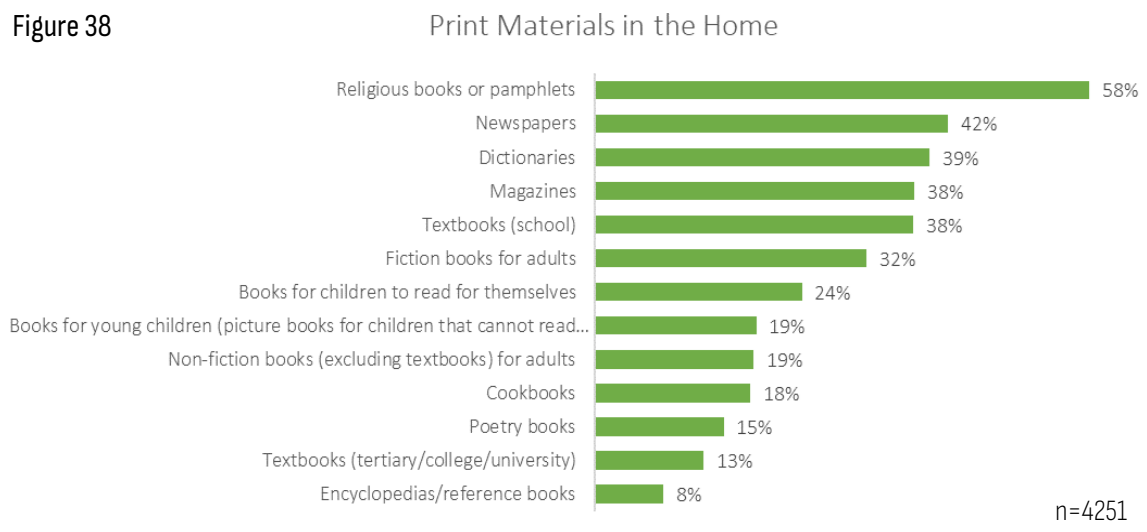
Print Reading Materials in the Home

Figure 37 **87% of South Africans have some printed reading materials**

37% have fiction and/or nonfiction books
30% have children's books

n=4251

Figure 38



87% of South African adults live in homes with some printed reading materials (13% reported not having any printed materials at home) (Figure 37).

By far the most common form of reading material is religious books, followed by newspapers, dictionaries and magazines (Figure 38).

Conventional discussions of reading generally privilege fiction and nonfiction books for adults. 37% of South Africans have at least one of these types of book in their home.

30% have at least one form of children's book. This includes picture books and 'readers' (books young children can start reading for themselves) but not textbooks.

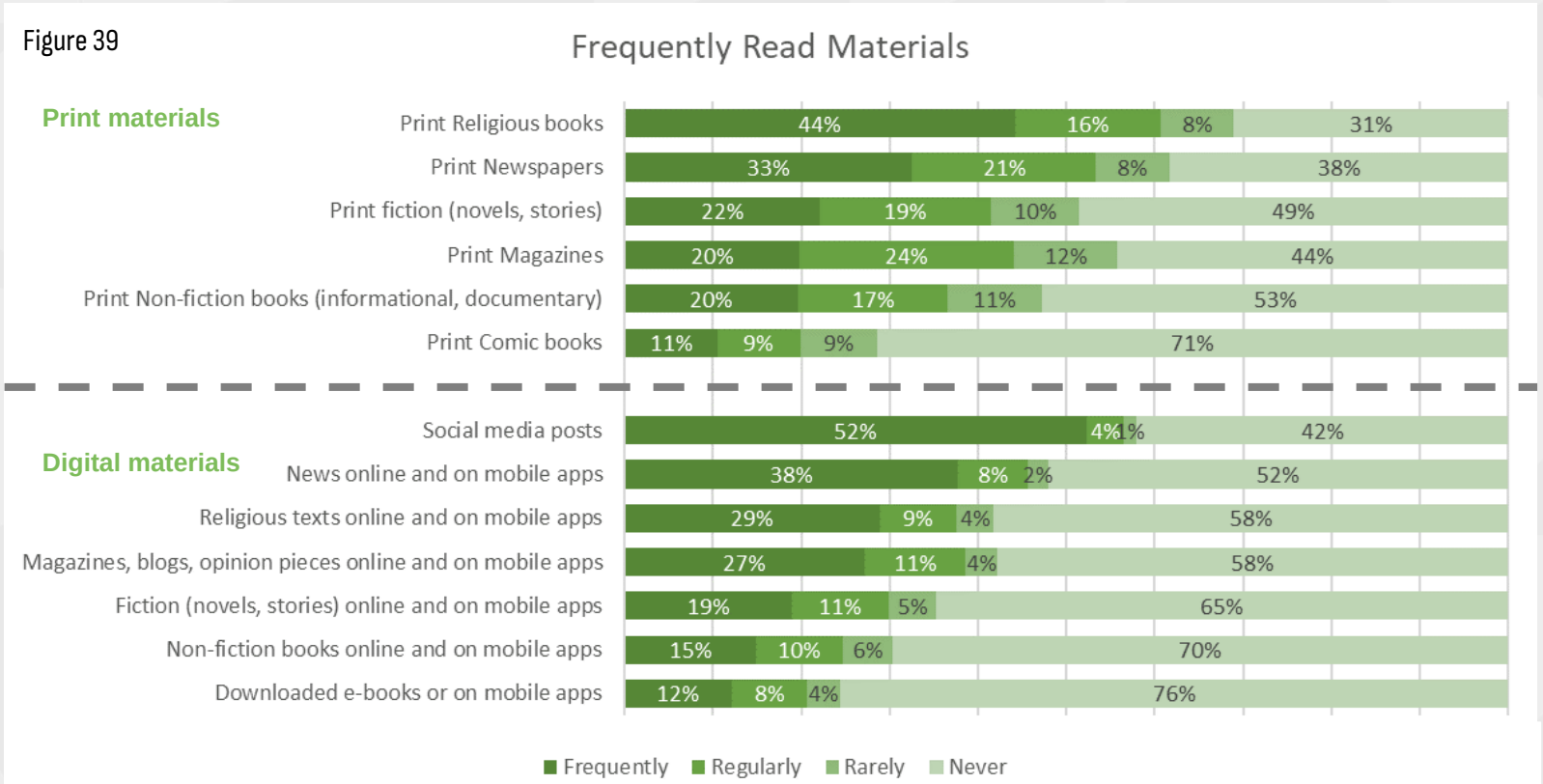
What Materials are Read Frequently?

The most commonly read print materials are religious books and newspapers. Of those who have digital access (73% of adults), the most commonly read materials are social media and online news sources, followed by religious texts.

The NRS also found that 51% of adults read print fiction books and 47% read print non-fiction books (Figure 39). Digital book reading is increasing (35% read online fiction, 30% read online non-fiction and 24% read downloaded ebooks) but is still less common than print book reading. Digital book reading tends to augment rather than replace print book reading: frequent and regular ebook readers are also regular or frequent print book readers.

These book reading statistics are not directly comparable to the 2016 survey findings (34% read books, page 45), since in 2016 only adults who read for leisure were asked this question while the 2023 results are out of all adults. Nonetheless, the 2023 results certainly suggest that **about half of South Africans read books as conventionally defined (fiction and nonfiction).**

Figure 39



n= 4251

For print materials, 'never' includes the 10% who cannot read. For digital materials, 'never' also includes the 27% who never access the internet)

Books in Homes

While the 2023 NRS takes a broad view of reading, reading long texts (like books) and having books in the home remain important. As noted on page 16, there is extensive global evidence about the effects of books in the home on children's school performance and long-term socio-economic success (Evans et al 2010, Sikora et al 2019, de Bondt et al 2020). Each additional book results in better outcomes, and the effect is largest in households with the fewest books (Evans et al 2010).

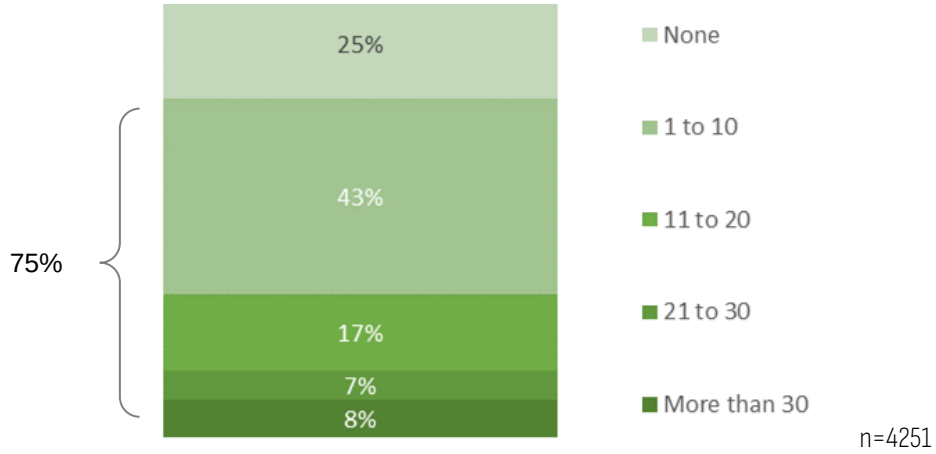
In terms of the number of books in homes (owned or borrowed), **75% of adults have at least 1 book at home** (25% do not). This finding is not comparable with the 2016 NRS (p.81) (42% with any books and 58% with none), which excluded books for school, work and religious books, since these were included in 2023.

The findings about larger book numbers are more comparable, since the presence of one or two religious books will not change these. The percentage of households with 11-20 books increased to 17% in 2023 from 4% in 2016, and the percentage of households with more than 20 books increased from 3% to 15% in 2023.

In spite of this positive trend, **nearly two-thirds (63%) of adults do not have a single fiction or nonfiction book at home.** There are still opportunities for further increasing access to books in the home.

Figure 40

Number of Owned and Borrowed Books at Home



When we focus only on fiction and nonfiction print books for adults, just 37% of South Africans have at least one of these in their home.

Religious Reading

Religious reading is a dominant form of reading in South Africa.

The NRS (2023) found that the most common form of book reading is religious books: 44% of adult South Africans read religious books in print daily or several times a week and 60% read them several times a month. Religious materials are also the third most common online reading content, after social media posts and online news.

This is consistent with NRS (2016) findings, which found that religious books/scriptures were the most common genre of printed books being read. However, when reporting on overall book ownership, the 2016 NRS excluded religious books. In 2023, we have included religious books in the overall count of books in the home.

273 households in our sample (6% of total households and 9% of those with any books in the home) reported only having religious books in the home.

Religious materials are also important for adults reading with children. 28% of adults who live with young children read religious materials with them.

Action Point:

Reading for religious reasons is an important form of reading. In addition to being widespread, with materials that are already accessible in many languages, it can be a 'deep' form of reading. It should be recognised and valued in its own right, as well as being viewed as a pathway into other forms of reading.

Material Sources: Actual and Preferred

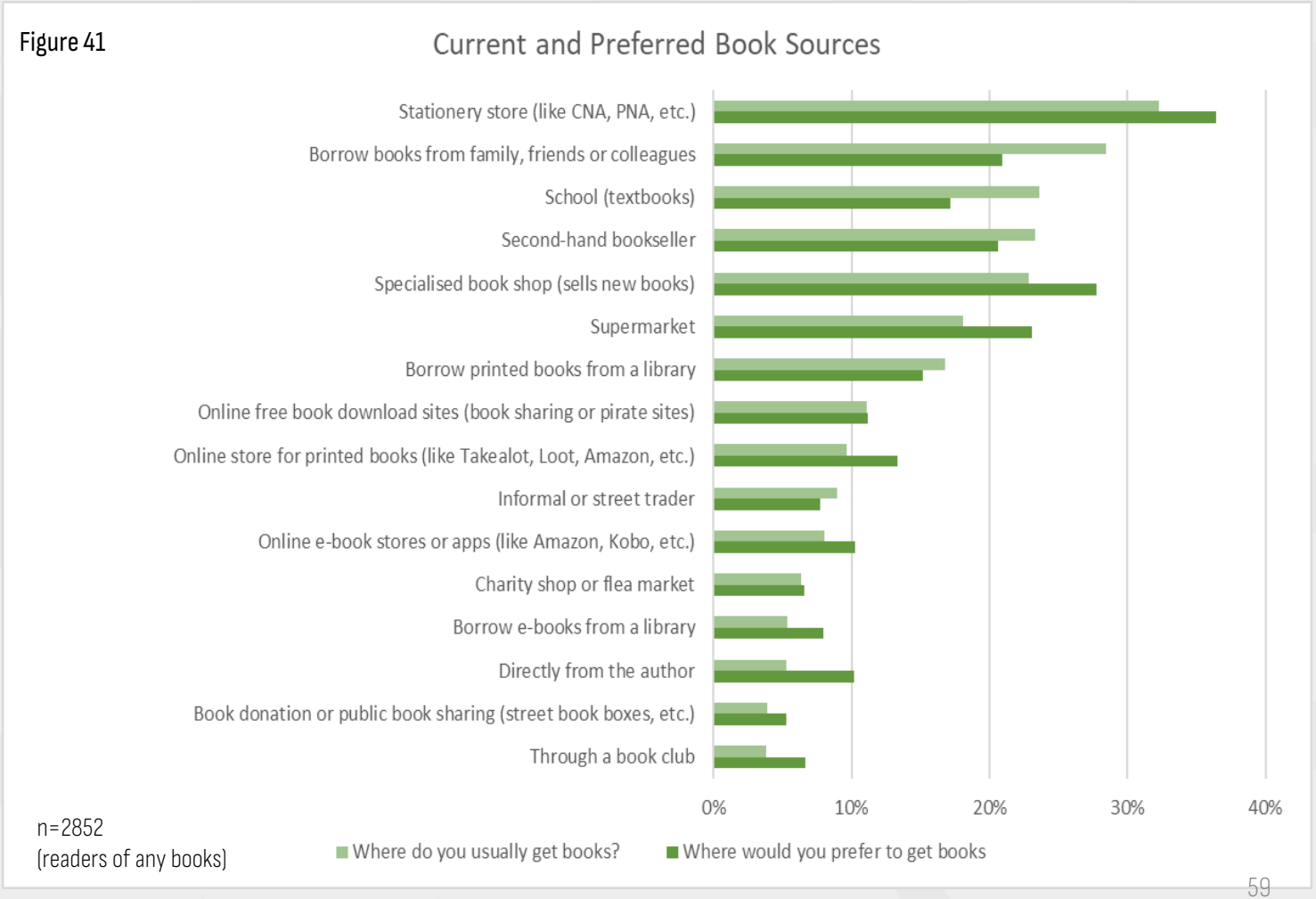
Current and preferred book sources are similar, with some additional (perhaps aspirational) preference for specialised book shops. Stationary shops (and to a lesser extent supermarkets) play an important role in book distribution.

The NRS 2023 also shows that books are shared among family, friends and colleagues.

Schools are also important sources of reading material (as discussed in the section on reading with children).

Action Point:
Recognise the important role stationary shops, supermarkets and schools play in materials distribution and include them in strategies to increase book ownership. Work with and support existing social networks of book sharing.

Figure 41



n=2852
(readers of any books)

Free Printed Materials Distribution

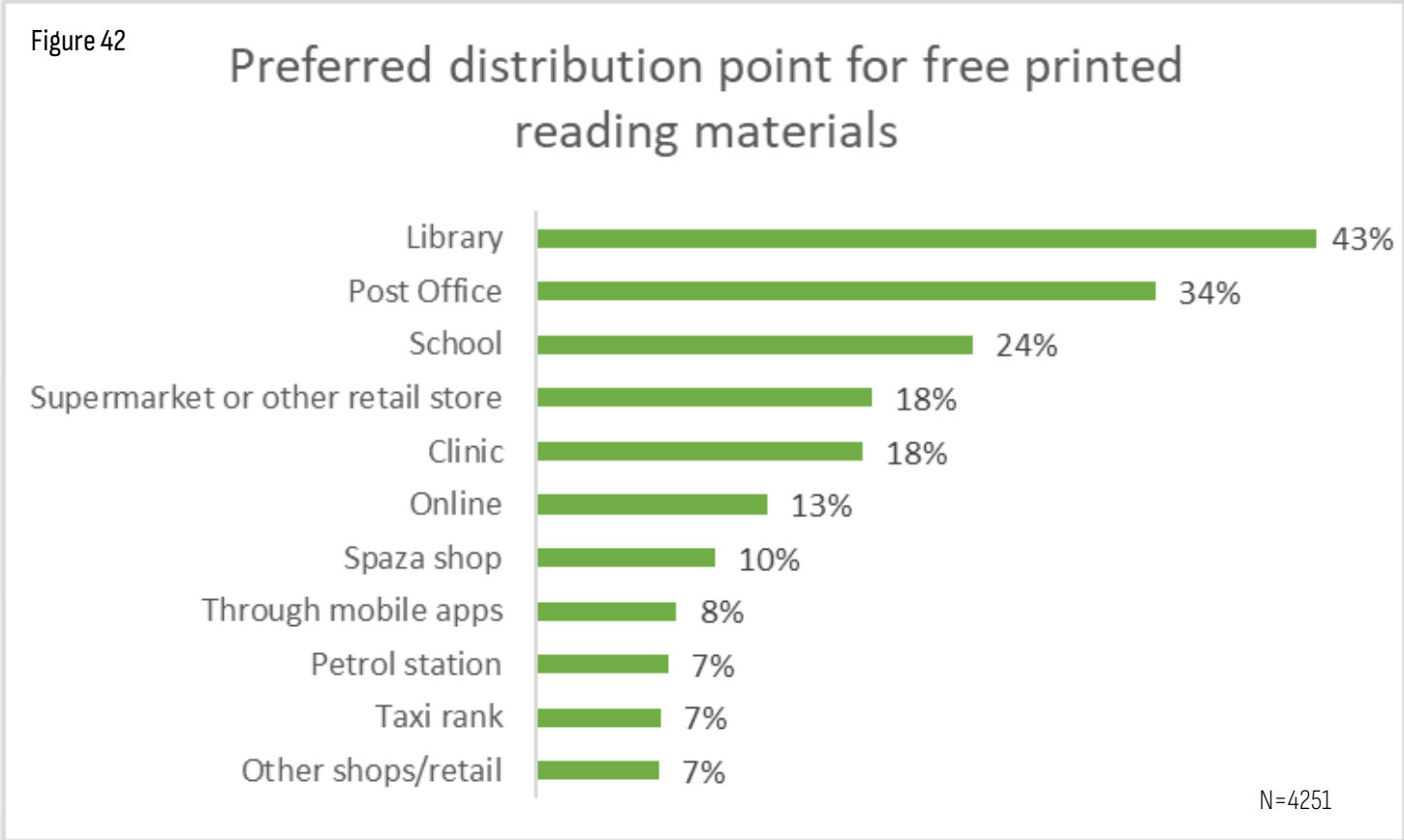
If there was free printed reading material being given away, where would you prefer to collect it from?

The **preferred distribution points seem to be formal institutions, such as libraries, post offices and schools,** rather than less formal outlets like spaza shops, petrol stations and taxi ranks.

13% are not interested in free printed reading materials.

Overall, South Africans are more interested in free printed reading materials than in free online materials.

Figure 42

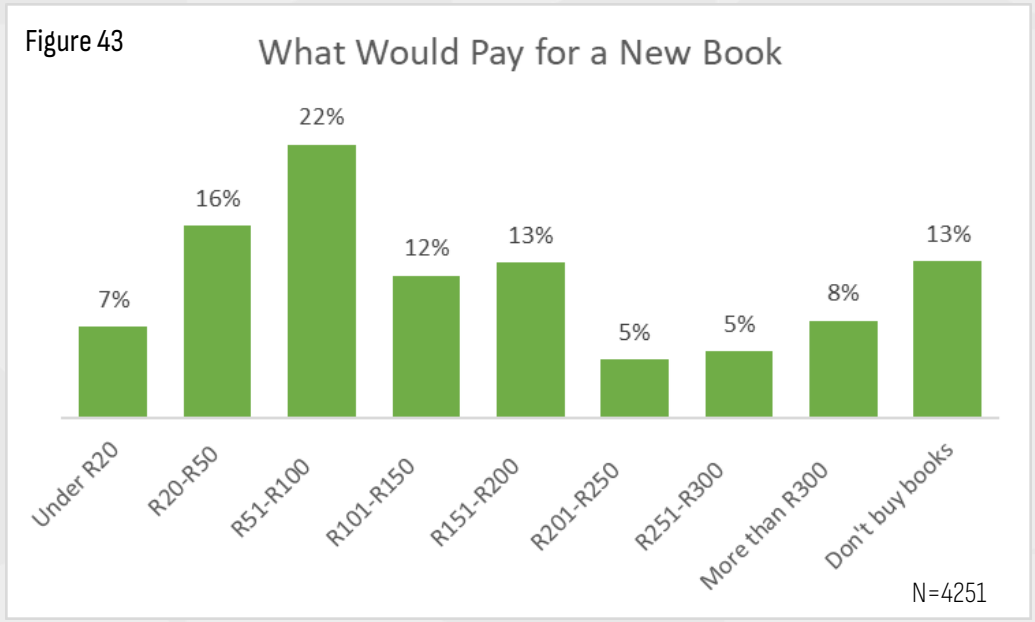


Book Buying and Pricing Expectations

When asked whether they buy new or second-hand, **63% of South Africans say they never buy books**. 21% buy both new and second-hand books, 10% buy only second-hand books and 7% buy only new books. In total, therefore, **28% of adults buy new books**.

When asked what they would pay for a new book (including asking those who say they don't buy books), **the average price South Africans are willing to pay for a new book is R145** (see the distribution of pricing expectations in Figure 43). The average price depends on household income levels. Low-income adults (under R3200 per month) would pay R138, middle income (R3201-R12800) would pay R164 and higher income (R12800 and above) would pay R237 for a new book.

Figure 43

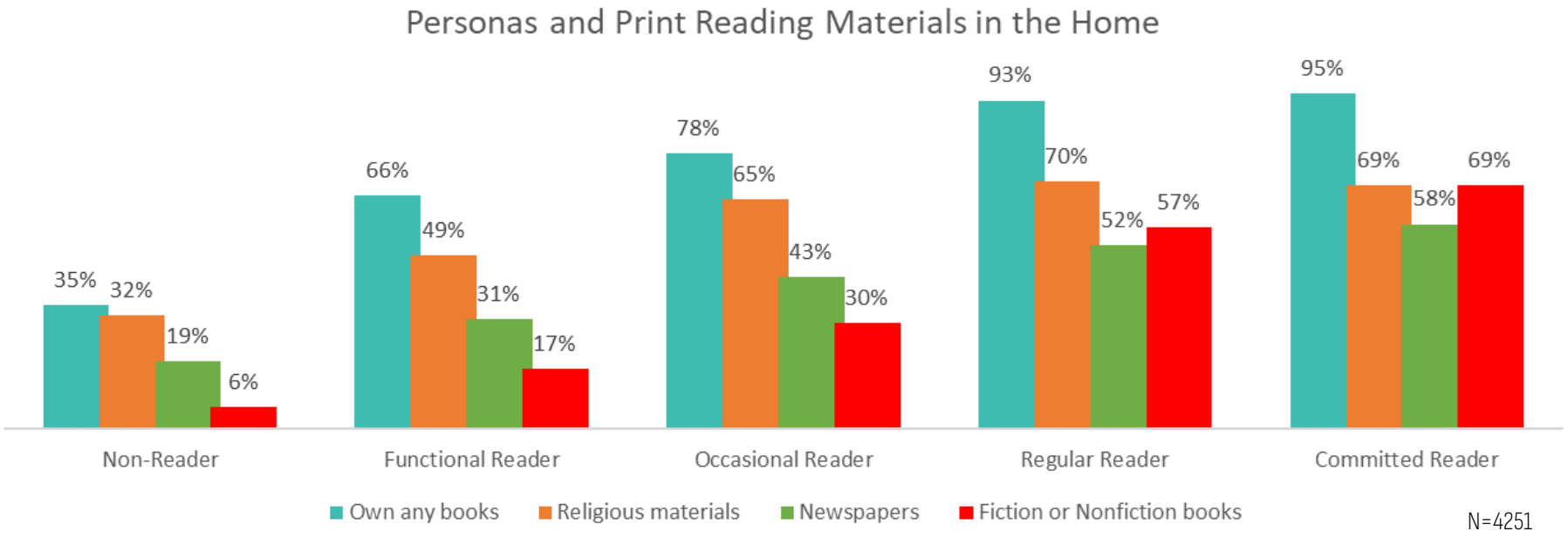


Recommendation: Increasing Materials Access among Different Reader Personas

Even though **Non-Readers** do not read fiction books, they often have some printed reading material in the home, particularly religious print materials and newspapers. They, and **Functional** readers, may be motivated to read more if the books they already have and the reading they already engage in (i.e. religious books, newspapers, etc) are celebrated and recognised as 'reading'.

Occasional, Regular and **Committed** readers are equally likely to have religious books in the home but have increasing numbers of other books; for Regular and Committed readers this especially includes fiction. Regular and Committed readers also read digital and online materials (see later section on digital reading). They can be motivated by having better and easier access to books and can be encouraged to share the books they already have with their networks.

Figure 44



SECTION 5

Reading and Children

5 Reading and children: Key Findings

More adults are reading with children, and most adults believe it is important – but they do not have enough books.

Reading with children has increased, but still only half of caregivers read with young children

52% of adults who live with children read with them. This has increased from 35% in 2016.

Just Start (frequent reading follows)

If caregivers read with children at all, they are likely to read with them frequently. 73% of those who read with young children, read with them at least 2-3 times per week.

Readers are most likely to read with children

It is not just wealthier, urban people who read with kids: it happens across class, race and urban-rural divides. People who live in small towns are statistically more likely to read with children than those in suburbs (all other factors being constant). The most important predictors of reading with children are having books in the home, whether the adult identifies as a passionate reader, and whether they read frequently for themselves.

Awareness and Motivation are high

More people recognise the benefits of reading with children: over 90% of adults who live with children agree that reading improves school performance and helps build and preserve culture and identity. In 2016, agreement with the same statements was low. Even people who don't read for themselves now value reading with children.

Reading materials access remains limited

65% of homes with young children (under 10) do not have a single children's book, and only 10% of homes with young children have more than 10 picture books. Only 31% of adults who live with children said their oldest child received their first book before the age of 5. Only 5% of parents read digital stories with their children; the majority still rely on print.

Time is the main barrier

Lack of time is the greatest reported barrier to reading with children, both among adults who read with children (82% would read more if they had more time) and those who do not (47% don't read because they lack time). More than three-quarters of adults who read with children would also read more if they felt more confident as readers; and if they had more interesting, free, relatable reading material in preferred languages.

Introduction

Many studies and interventions relating to childhood literacy (learning to read) attempt to understand and encourage caregiver involvement in children's reading. Children who are read to at home by adults develop stronger language and literacy skills (Law et al 2018).

The survey asked adults questions about all children living in the same household as the interviewed adult, whether or not the adult is the parent or guardian. The survey does not include information on adults reading with children (their own or others) that they do not live with.

The survey covers three age groups of children:

- **Young children** (0-10): adults living with young children were asked about reading to and with young children who cannot yet speak/read or who are learning to read. 1592 adults had at least one young child in the household.
- **Older children** (11-18): adults living with older children were asked about the ways in which these children read by themselves. 1273 adults had at least one older child in the household.
- **Teenagers** (16-17): teenagers 16 and above were interviewed as part of the 'adult' sample and therefore provided information about their own reading practices. 183 teens aged 16 and 17 were included in the sample. Teen results are included in the discussion of adult reading practices in other chapters of this report.

This chapter also includes findings regarding levels of awareness about and participation in **reading initiatives**. Since most of these initiatives are targeted at children/youth or caregivers of children, these questions were only asked of respondents who live with children.

Action Point: Increase awareness about the importance of reading with children from a very young age.

Reading with Children has increased

52% of South Africans with children in their households have ever read with them. In 2016, 35% of adults with children said they read with their children.

Three quarters of South Africans who live with children encourage children to read, compared to 13% in 2016. 68% encourage children to look at books.

While the survey cannot explain causality, these increases may be due to the growth and proliferation of reading initiatives that seek to increase parental awareness of reading with children and improve accessibility of reading materials. It may also be an effect of the Covid-19 years when parents were asked to play a more active role in children's schooling.

However, although book sharing with very young children is beneficial (Dowdall et al 2020, Murray et al 2016, Law et al 2018), fewer adults read to small children: **only 35% of South Africans read stories to children in their homes before the children can talk and only 37% read to children before the child can read themselves.** In 2016, respondents were not asked about actual reading practices with small children but only 5% agreed that reading with children before they could talk helps them learn (NRS 2016, page 35).

Parents of young children lack appropriate material: only 31% of adults who live with children said their oldest child owned even one book by the age of five.

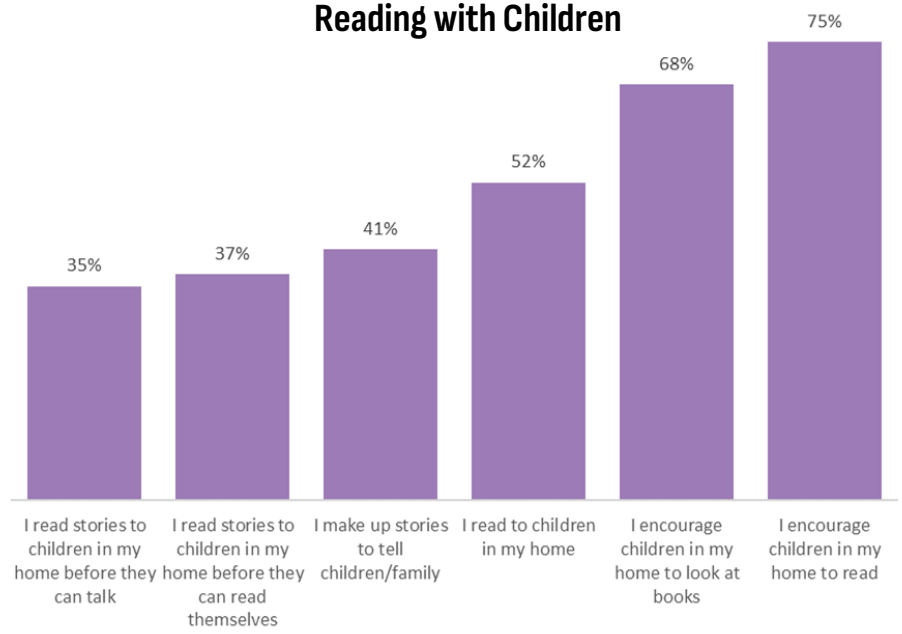
Figure 45

52% of South Africans with children Have ever read with them

n=2071 people living with children

Figure 46

Agreement with Statements about Reading with Children



Frequent Reading with Children

Action Point: Campaigns to promote reading with children should emphasize that It just takes a few minutes. Reading with a child daily for 5-10 minutes is the target. Reading regularly is more important than reading for long periods of time.

The NRS distinguishes between young children (under 10) and older children (10-16).

Young Children

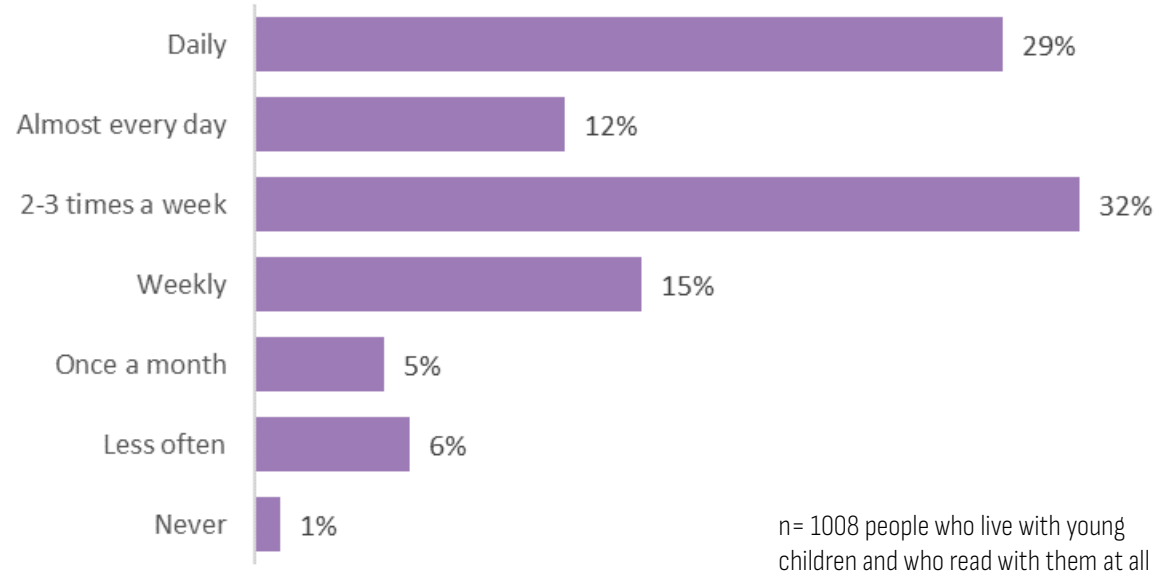
- **Out of adults who read with young children, three quarters (73%) do so frequently** (at least 2 or 3 times a week).

Older Children

- **54% of adults who live with older children** (N=1273) **read with them.** This may include caregivers supporting children with homework (since commonly used reading materials include school textbooks and readers- see page 70), as well as reading together for enjoyment. While older children should be able to read for themselves, reading together with adults continues to build language and social skills that are important for schooling and life.

- 72% of adults say that the older children they live with read daily at home on their own. Only 12% say their older children never read at home. This may include reading related to school as well as reading for other reasons.

Figure 47



What Explains Whether Adults Read with Children?

What explains the difference between the 52% of adults who read with the children they live with and the 48% who do not? Understanding these differences can help focus advocacy and interventions on relevant change factors.

Adults who read frequently with young children are more likely to*:

- **Live in rural villages**. When we compare people who are similar in terms of age, income and education level, people in these areas are more likely to read with children than people in suburbs and townships.
- **Have children's books at home**. Having any picture books or 'readers' (learn to read books) at home increases the odds of reading with children. Those with 11-20 children's books are almost twice as likely to read with children than those with 1-10 books.
- **Have any books at home**. Having more than 10 books of any kind in the home, including books for adults, increases the odds of reading with children.
- **Identify as a reader**. Self-identification as a passionate reader more than doubles the odds of reading with children compared to identifying as an occasional reader. Those who identify as non-readers are only half as likely to read with children than a self-identified occasional reader.

These findings do not mean that people in other groups do not read with children. For example, 19% of adults who live with children and identify as non-readers read with children. They are just significantly less likely to do so than the average.

When all other factors are held constant, the following adult characteristics have no significant effect on whether someone reads with children *:

- Gender
- Age (18+)
- Education level up to completed secondary school **
- Number of children in the household
- Whether the adult grew up being read to as a child
- Household income level below R25600 per month***

These findings are important in dispelling perceptions that reading with children is a 'culture' reserved for urban families with higher incomes and education levels and intergenerational reading patterns. In fact, **in terms of demographics and socio-economic groups, everyone in South Africa reads with children.**

Action Point: how to encourage adults to read with children? Increase the number of books in homes and build adult confidence in their own reading identities

* These factors are confirmed through regression analysis at $p<0.05$ as significant predictors of reading with children.
** The regression results show that adults with tertiary education are less likely to read with children, but this may be because of a relatively small sample size.
*** Adults with household income above R25600 may be more likely to read with children, but the sample size in our survey is too small to find a significant effect.

Awareness and Motivation

Awareness of the benefits of reading with children has increased greatly. High levels of awareness and motivation can be channeled into changing adult behaviour and increasing the demand from caregivers for more materials and support for reading at home.

Overall, 94% of South Africans with children in their homes are positive about the benefits of reading with children. This is a big change from 2016, when agreement with positive statements was under 10%.

Action Point: Move from general awareness raising about the importance of reading with children to more specific messages about reading frequently, reading with children before they can talk, and reading in African languages. Focus interventions on improving reading material access for anyone who wishes to read with their children.

An average of 93% of adults who live with children see reading with children as improving school performance and learning outcomes by agreeing with the following statements:

- Children do better in school if the children read at home every day
- Children do better in school when adults (parents/ grandparents/ caregivers) read to them
- Telling stories to children before they can talk helps them learn
- Reading to children before they can talk helps them learn
- Children do better in school if the children read for enjoyment

An average of 95% of adults who live with children see reading with children as beneficial for building and preserving culture and identity:

- Listening to stories is an important way for children to learn about their culture and identity
- Reading is an important way for children to learn about their culture and identity
- It is important that children can read and write in their parent's language
- It is important that children can read and write in English*
- Reading together is a good way for adults (parents/grandparents/caregivers) and children to bond and build positive relationships with each other

n=2071 people who live with children

* See discussion on languages on page 71

Reading Materials Access

Action Point: Increase the flow of books from schools into the home that children can 'borrow to read for fun' and that they can keep and own.

Reading materials access remains a major barrier to reading with children at home.

Considering adults living with young children (under 10), **65% have no picture books**. Only 10% have more than 10 picture books.

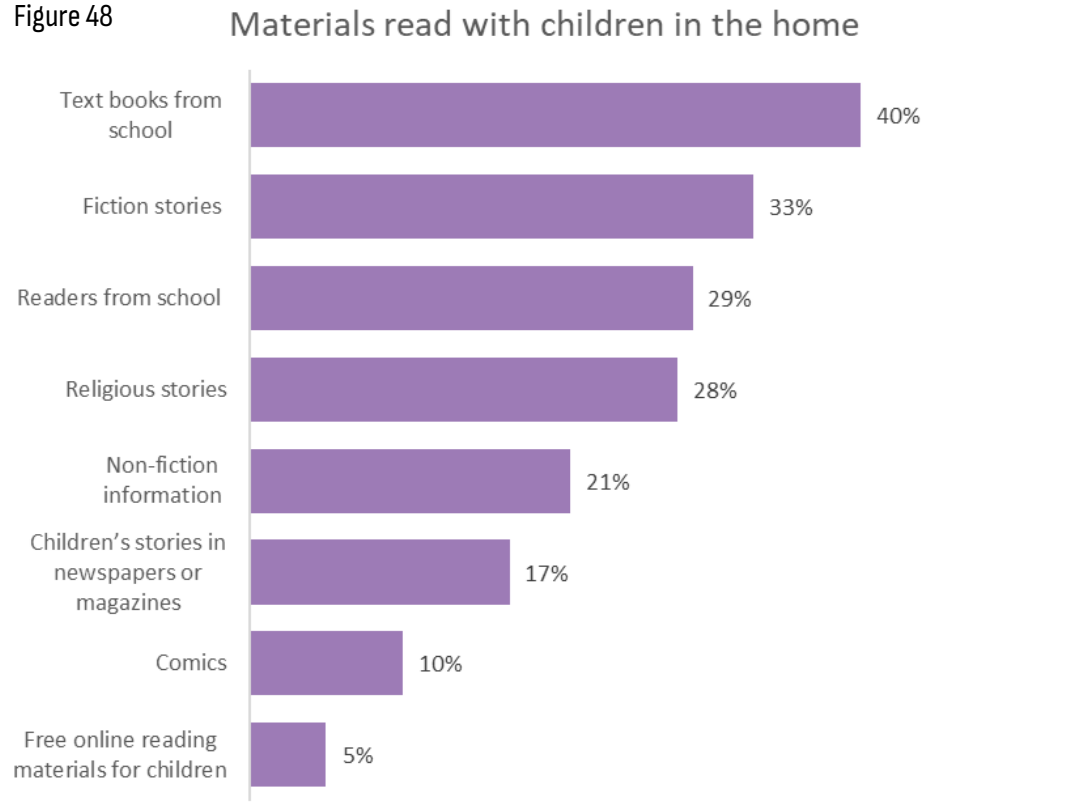
Of adults with older children (11-15), 57% have no age-appropriate books. Only 10% have more than 10 books for older children.

For those who do read with children**, schools are the most important source of reading materials in the home.** Half of South African households with children use school-sourced materials (either textbooks and readers or both) when reading with their children. **13% of households rely solely on materials from school to read with children**.

73% of adults say children bring textbooks and readers home from school daily or several times a week, but only **35% say children frequently bring home books from school that they 'borrowed to read for fun'**.

While the NRS (2016) asked about reading materials used with children, the categories used were not comparable with the 2023 NRS and so we do not report on trends in material use.

Figure 48



n=2071 people who live with children
n=1592 people who live with young children
n=1273 people who live with older children

Languages

Interest in reading with children in African languages is high.

Of adults with young children who can read and write an African language and who read with their children, 74% **currently** read with their young children in an African language and 72% would **prefer** to read with their children in an African language. 73% have **reading materials** in multiple languages.

When asked about the languages their older children read in, parents report that 75% of older children in African language-speaking households currently read in an African language.

Reading in African languages is not mutually exclusive with reading in English.

When asked whether 'it is important' for children to be able to read and write 'in their parents' language' or 'in English', 95% South Africans with children in their homes (irrespective of home language) agreed with both. When answering questions about actual reading practices, 80% of African-language-speaking adults with young children read with their children in both English and at least one African language.

Figure 49

74% of African language-speakers who read with young children do so in at least one African language

n=723 people who live with children who can read and write an African language who read with children
n=1478 people who live with children who can read and write an African language.

Adults do not perceive accessibility of reading materials in appropriate languages as a primary barrier to reading with children. Only 5% of adults who do not read with children said it was because they did not have materials in the right languages (most said it was a lack of time). On the other hand, 79% of adults also report that they would read more with children if they could access more materials in their preferred languages. This suggests that adults who are strongly motivated to read with children will do so, irrespective of materials access, but that increasing accessibility to reading materials in the right languages may increase the quality and amount of reading.

Reading Practices by Older Children (11-18)

South Africa has a policy objective that all children should be able to read fluently and for meaning by age 10. The NRS 2023 includes questions about younger children (under 10) and questions about older children (10 and above) because the older group should be able to read for themselves.

In practice, however, we know that many children are still learning to read or do not read fluently by age 10 (DBE 2023). There is therefore still an important role for caregivers in supporting their older children with reading. Even for children who can read for themselves, reading together with adults in the family can be an important social activity, building emotional connection and deeper reading comprehension skills.

There are additional challenges in terms of measuring older children's practices of reading at home. Caregivers may have less knowledge about their activities, and may assume they are reading when they are not (or that they are not reading when they are). Older children are also more likely to have their own digital devices, where children may be reading or doing a variety of other things. The information about the reading practices of older children presented in this section is based on adults' perceptions of their children's reading practices, rather than what children have shared themselves.

Age-appropriate reading materials in a diversity of languages may also be less accessible, since vastly more attention has been given to producing African-language picture books and readers for young children than books for progressively older children to read for themselves.

Do you read to or with the older children?

54% of adults living with older children (age 11-15) sometimes read to or with these children.

How often does the older child read for themselves at home?

According to caregivers, **72% of older children read daily for themselves.** This is probably a reflection of reading as part of school work.

The findings reported here related to 1273 adult respondents who live with older children (11-18). It does not include interviews with 16-17 year olds directly. This information is included in the sections on adult reading practices.

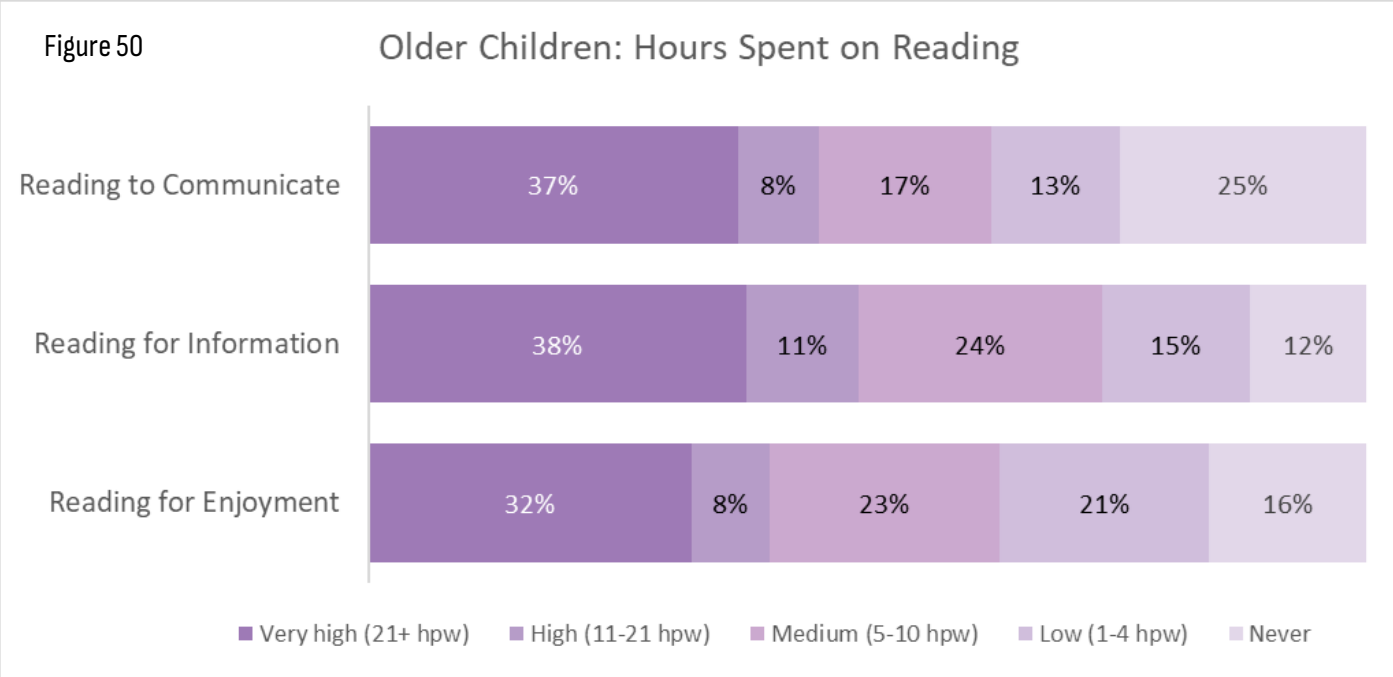
Reading Volume by Older Children (11-15)

Adults report that **children who are old enough to read for themselves are spending significant amounts of time reading.**

Time spent on reading for information is to be expected as part of school work. In addition, adults reported that 84% of older children spent at least some time each week reading for enjoyment and **40% of older children are spending 11 hours per week or more reading for enjoyment** (high + very high hours per week) (Figure 50).

Further research into teen reading practices that includes teens' own responses and incorporates qualitative research would be useful.

Figure 50



A quarter of children supposedly spend no time on reading to communicate, perhaps suggesting that they do not (yet) have access to their own digital devices.

n=1247 people who live with older children

Barriers to Reading with Children

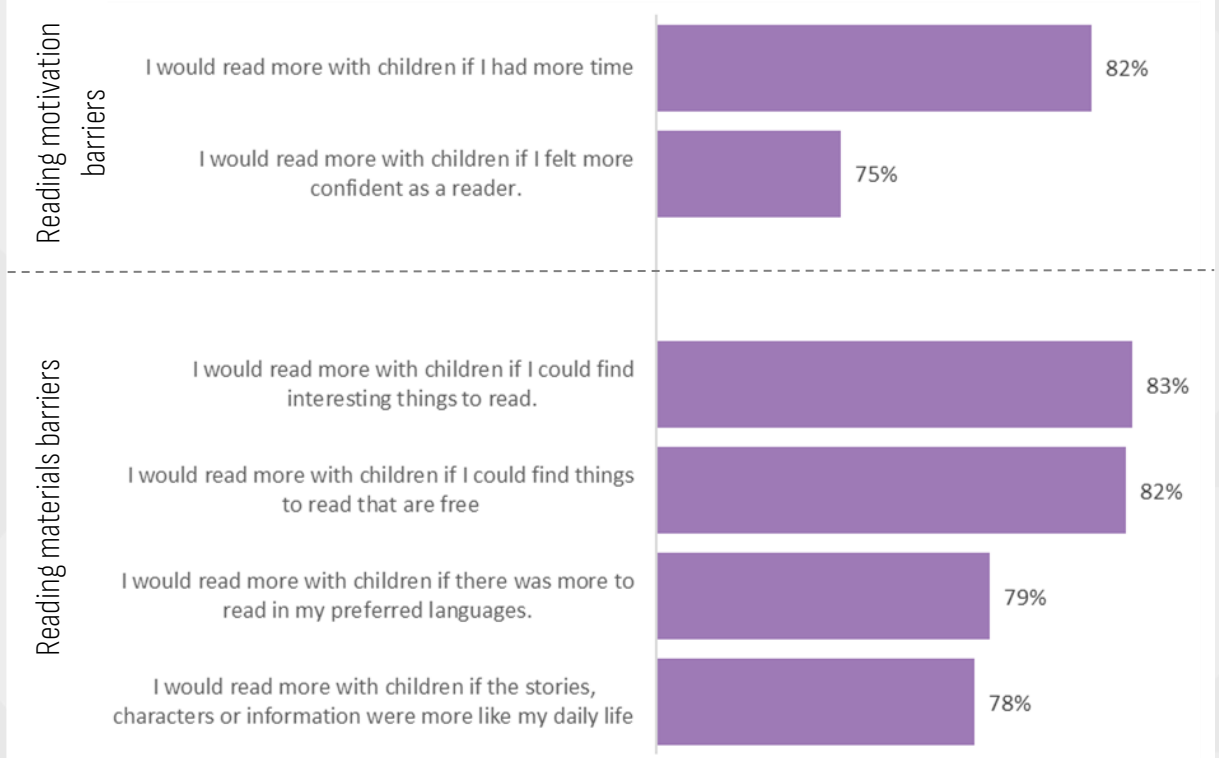
Lack of time is the greatest reported barrier for reading with children. Among all adults living with children, 82% agreed they would read more with children if they had more time. Among those adults who do not read with children, the most prominent reason given was **lack of time** (47%).

More than three quarters of South Africans with children in their household say they would read more if they had more access to materials that are free, based on interesting topics, based on stories or information that is relatable to them, or available in their preferred language.

Action Point: Not having time is one of the top barriers to reading with children. Raise awareness among parents that even small amounts of time spent reading are sufficient (i.e. 5-10 minutes a day), and that one does not need to be highly educated or read much themselves in order to be able to read with children.

Figure 51

Barriers to Reading with Children

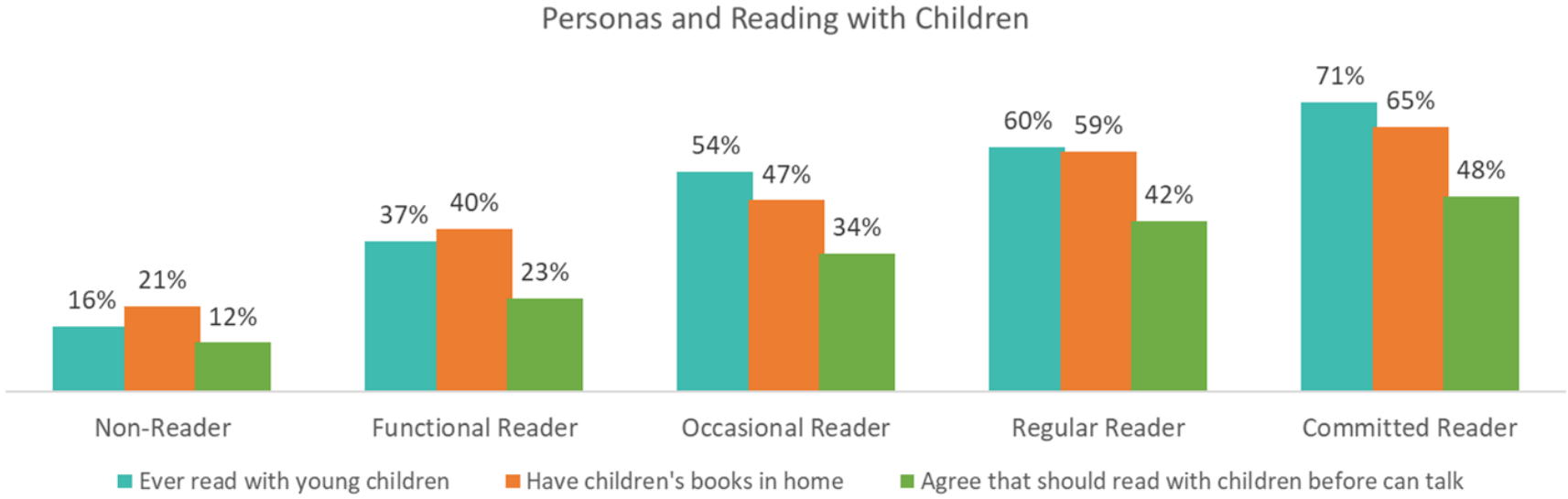


n=2067 people who live with children

Recommendation: Increasing Reading with Children among Different Reader Personas

- **Non-Readers** who live with young children rarely read with children, although 21% report having some children's books at home. Interventions could encourage Non-Readers to tell stories to children, distribute wordless picture books for small children (which can be "read" by anyone regardless of reading ability), and build their confidence to read children's books.
- **Functional** and **Occasional** Readers increasingly read with children. Advocacy can focus on giving it a try (for those not yet reading); reading regularly (5-10 minutes a day); and where to find more reading materials.
- **Regular** and **Committed** Readers already predominantly read with children. Those who do not can be engaged around their existing reading identity, and those who do read with children can be encouraged to influence others in their family and community to read regularly with their children.

Figure 52

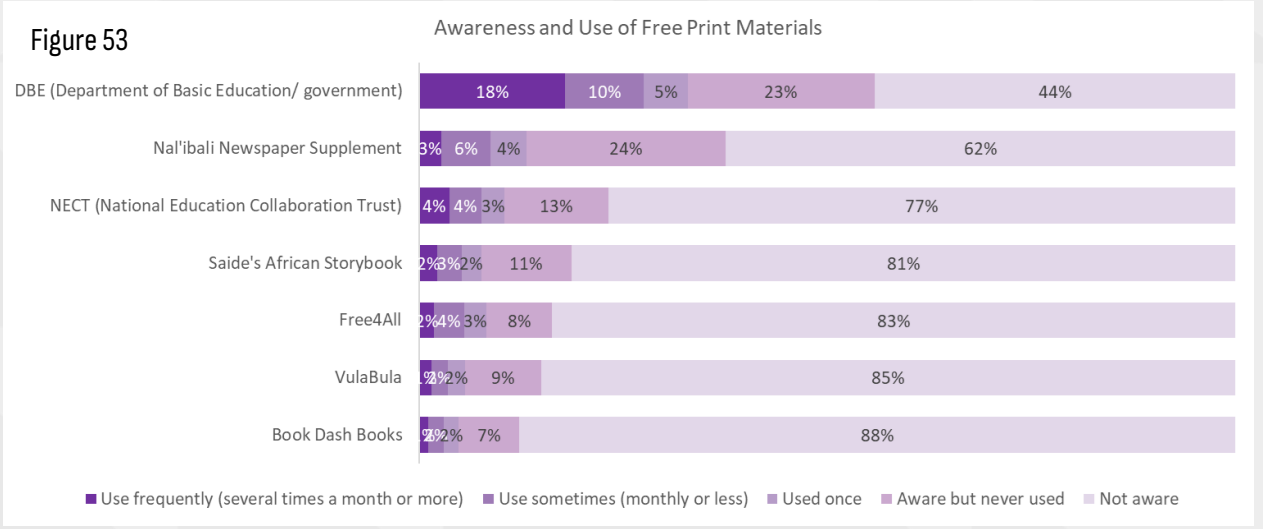


Reading Initiatives: Awareness and Participation

Reading initiatives and free reading materials are reaching a lot of people – and more than in the past. The NRS (2023) asked about three different types of reading initiatives: The highest level of awareness is for free print materials (Figure 53).

- **Free print materials:** **70% of adults with children have heard of at least one free print initiative and 42% have used free print materials from at least one source**. Materials produced by the Department of Basic Education are best known (56% aware), followed by the Nal'ibali newspaper supplement (38% aware). Of initiatives included in the survey, only DBE and Nal'ibali resources have ever been used by more than 10% of adults.
- **Free online materials:** **21% of adults with children are aware of free online books or stories or mobile story apps**. The most well known online initiative is Nal'ibali, which is also the most used (13% of adults with children are aware and 4% have used it at least once), followed by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) (7% aware and 3% used at least once).
- **Public reading initiatives:** **48% of adults with children have heard of at least one public reading initiative.** The most recognised are Nal'ibali (34%), World Book Day (22%) and National Book Week (19%).

Figure 53



n=2071 people who live with children

Though not directly comparable, the NRS (2016) survey found a maximum of 7% awareness for any reading initiative. In both years, reported participation in any reading initiative was around 1-3% for all initiatives. Many adults and children may not know the name of the organisation or project producing the materials they use, so the findings about awareness levels per initiative may not reflect the full level of awareness and use per project.

2016 and 2023 findings on awareness of initiatives are not strictly comparable, since the NRS (2016) survey asked all adults, while the 2023 NRS only asked adults living with children. Further, in 2016 awareness was tested by showing logos of the initiatives while the 2023 telephonic survey was limited to initiative names which may not have been as recognisable.

5 Reading and children: Recommendations

Schools as channels for reading materials

Schools are important channels to increase access to children's reading materials. DBE should ensure every classroom has a library; ensure children borrow books from schools; and work towards every child owning an anthology of graded readers and an anthology of storybooks alongside textbooks and workbooks.

Increase books in homes

Books in homes are an important catalyst for adult-child reading. Large-scale campaigns are needed to get a few books into every home, and homes with a few books need easier, more affordable ways to build their libraries.

Distribute more free printed materials

The vast majority of parents use print reading materials with kids under age 10. Increase accessibility of free and low-cost print reading materials in African languages at people's preferred pickup points - libraries, post offices, schools, supermarkets/retail stores and clinics.

Continue promoting reading with children, and introduce more nuanced messaging

While positive attitudes towards reading with children have grown, nearly half of adults who live with children don't read with them.

- Focus on building caregivers' confidence. Emphasise that 'any amount is fine', and that it's okay to 'give it a go' without worrying about doing it 'right'.
- Focus on starting early, before children can talk or read themselves.
- Raise more awareness about where to access free and low-cost reading materials, including libraries, schools, stationery shops, supermarkets and secondhand booksellers. Although they appeal to a smaller group, many digital platforms also offer free children's stories, including Nal'ibali, the African Storybook Project and Book Dash.

Areas for further research

Since the survey only recorded caregiver perceptions about their older children's reading practices, and could not engage children directly or measure levels of reading fluency and comprehension, further research is necessary to understand the apparent disconnect between school-based assessments of low reading skills in Grade 4 and NRS-reported high levels of at-home reading for enjoyment among children aged 11 and above.

SECTION 6

Digital reading

6 Digital reading

Digital reading has grown significantly, although access remains unequal, and many readers still prefer paper.

Digital reading has grown

55% of adults read online materials (excluding social media), up from 7% in 2016. Online news, magazines and religious materials are most popular. A quarter of adults have read an ebook, and 20% own at least one (up from 11% in 2016).

Digital reading predominantly happens on small screens

84% of internet users use a smartphone; just 7% use computers and 1% use tablets.

Social media use and other forms of reading tend to occur together

Despite popular perceptions that social media use detracts from "real reading," the NRS found that they tend to occur together. People who spend 11-20 hours a week on social media are also more than twice as likely to read long texts regularly.

Digital access challenges remain

27% of adults do not have internet access - and people who do not have access are more likely to be older (over 50), rural, less educated (incomplete secondary or less), and have lower household incomes. About three quarters of people with access say their internet connection is reliable.

Digital reading with children remains rare

Caregivers still prefer print: only 5% of adults who live with children read digital materials with them. Even adults who read digitally for themselves tend to read in print with children. 77% of adults who live with children believe that it is important for children to read in print and not on cell phones or digital devices.

Print remains popular

Almost half of book readers still prefer print (48%), while 1 in 5 prefer digital books (the rest enjoy both formats). People who read less frequently overwhelmingly prefer print materials, though young people are more likely to read digitally.

What is the digital shift in reading and why is it important?

The digital revolution is transforming not only how we communicate (faster, at much larger volumes, to a large extent through text rather than voice), but how we read more broadly.

Digital and online materials can be produced faster, versioned (e.g. into different languages), and distributed more cheaply than print materials. Materials can also be shared (rather than read by one person at a time), interacted with (through annotations, comments, reviews, interactive discussions, embedded dictionaries, etc.), archived and searched more easily. Furthermore, much of what we read today in digital formats is written by other 'normal people' like ourselves (social media posts, messages, blogs, etc.) rather than professional authors mediated by a commercial publishing industry. All of these factors 'democratise' reading and open up access.

On the other hand, there are concerns about the quality of digital reading - both in terms of the quality of the content being read and the quality of the reading experience itself, i.e. the depth with which the reader engages with what they are reading. Various studies have shown that digital reading by students is not as good for learning as reading the same content on paper (Lang 2021).

Since Covid-19, debates about the spread of digital materials for teaching and learning in the schooling system have also accelerated. The NRS cannot comment on school-based reading pedagogy or materials, but similar questions are often posed about the wider reading ecosystem. When the project consulted stakeholders about key questions they wanted answered, concerns about digital reading, reading on smart phones and possible trade-offs between social media use and book reading were prominent. So was curiosity about how digital reading is reshaping reading culture generally, and what opportunities it might provide.

In response to these questions, the NRS included questions about social media use, digital device use for reading, and adult perceptions about digital reading by their children.

One of the NRS' innovations is to include 'reading for communication' as a 'reading purpose' and therefore to include the reading of (mostly) digital messages as a form of reading. As reported in Chapter 2, when analysed in relation to other forms of reading, such as reading for information and reading for enjoyment, reading to communicate appears to augment rather than replaces these forms of reading.

The NRS (2023) finding that 73% of adults have access to the internet matches the official statistics for internet access, as reported by other sources: Social Media Users South Africa 2023: Trends and Stats (csa.co.za)

Digital access

Digital reading practices depend on the ability to access the internet, the reliability of this access, the locations where the internet can be accessed (since reading in public and reading at home are different processes) and the size of the device used for reading.

73% of adults have access to the internet. Among those under 35, this rises to over 85%. This means that over a quarter of South Africans are not able to make use of any digital opportunities for reading. Of those who access the internet, 76% have reliable access (available 'always' or 'on most days') and 24% (16% of all adults) have less reliable access.

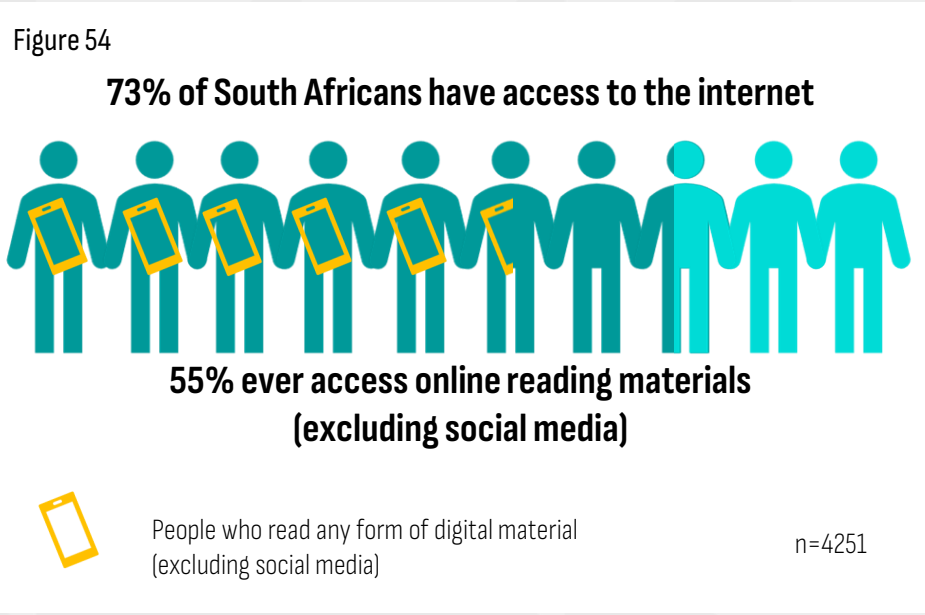
94% of internet users access it at home most or some of the time. 67% also use free wifi hotspots in commercial areas (like restaurants and malls) and 54% also use community facilities like libraries.

Digital reading has grown enormously since 2016, with 55% of adults reading online materials (excluding social media) **compared to 7% in 2016**.

Online news (48%), magazines and blogs (42%) and religious materials (42%) are most popular. A quarter of adults have read an ebook, and 20% own at least one (up from 11% in 2016).

Digital reading predominantly takes place on a small screen. Of those who access the internet, 84% do so through a smartphone that can access the internet and download apps. Only 7% use some form of computer and 1% use a tablet.

Figure 54



Action Point: Digital reading is now very widespread, especially among young people (under 35), and offers many opportunities for free reading material distribution. It should not be seen as a competitor to print reading, but it is also not a replacement for making print reading materials accessible. Reading initiatives should be explicit about how digital and print reading interact with and lead into each other to enable appropriate materials access for all.

Book Format Preference

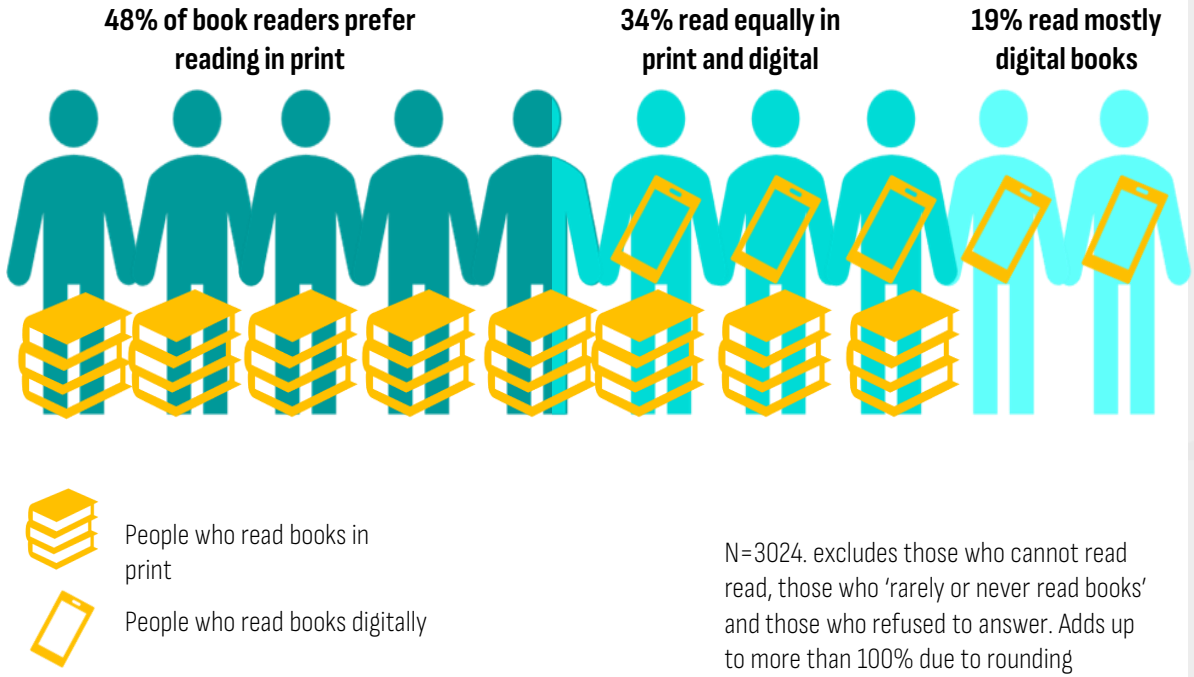
Among those who read books, **almost half still prefer print formats** and a third read both print and digital. **Only 19% of adults book readers read more often in digital formats.**

Considering those who only read in print and those who combine both formats, 82% read books in print at least some of the time. 53% read books digitally at least some of the time.

When adults read with young children, this is almost entirely in print. **Only 5% reported reading online materials with their children**.

Figure 55

Book Format Preferences



N=3024. excludes those who cannot read read, those who 'rarely or never read books' and those who refused to answer. Adds up to more than 100% due to rounding

The survey question defined social media as: WhatsApp, Facebook, Youtube, TikTok, Instagram, etc.

Social media use and Reading

There are debates about whether social media use 'competes' with 'real reading', i.e. reading of (print or digital) books.

The 2023 NRS has included 'reading to communicate' as a form of reading. This begs the question of how much time spent on social media is spent engaging with text (i.e. reading) and how much is spent engaging with non-textual material like imagines, videos and music.

56% of adults have active social media accounts (this is 85% of those with internet access).

50% of adults read messages daily or several times a week (88% of those who use social media)

46 % of adults write posts daily or several times a week (81% of those who use social media). 45% (80% of social media users) also watch videos and images, but this is in addition to reading and writing.

Social media is also an important source of influence and information about the importance of reading. **28% of adults list social media contacts among the people who influence them to read.** BookTok on TikTok is an example of a social media platform through which young people in particular engage about reading books.

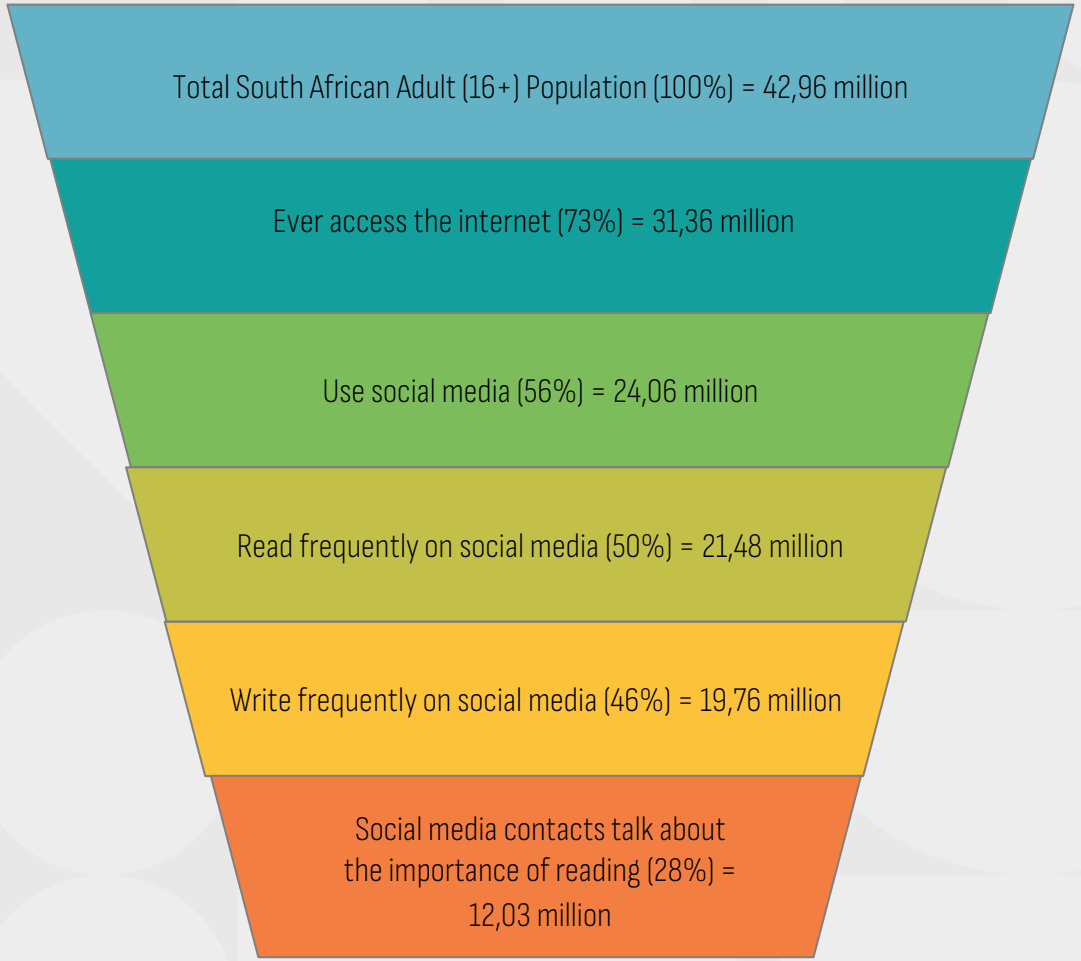


Figure 56

Digital Reading with and by Children

The digital trend in reading also affects reading with children and reading by children. There are many debates and research studies on whether reading on digital devices has different effects on children than reading in print (in terms of reading fluency, comprehension, types and depth of reading content and even brain development). The NRS' contribution to debates on digital reading and children is to consider adults' views on the desirability of digital reading by children, and adults' reports on older children's reading practices.

77% of adults who live with children believe that it is important for children to read in print and not on cell phones or digital devices.

Only 5% of adults with children report using digital materials (free online materials). That is 8% of the adults who read with their children.

Action Point: Recognise that any form of reading, including reading to communicate (digitally) can co-exist with and reinforce other forms of reading, such as reading longer texts in print. Encourage the linkages between reading types rather than discouraging digital forms of reading.

The survey also asked how often older children read on digital devices. Around 30% 'always' or 'often' read for enjoyment or information on devices, with a larger percentage (38% for enjoyment and 35% for information) never reading on devices.

When looking at the relationship between parents' perceptions of children's time spent reading to communicate and reading for enjoyment, most older children appear to do both at high volumes or both at low volumes. This suggests that they are not trade-offs and may be mutually reinforcing. This is the same pattern observed with adults (page 39).

Figure 57 Relationships between Time Spent Reading to Communicate and Reading for Enjoyment by Older Children

Reading for Enjoyment	Reading to Communicate: Very high	High	Medium	Low	Never
Very high	71%	16%	8%	5%	10%
High	4%	32%	13%	2%	5%
Medium	12%	36%	50%	17%	21%
Low	9%	8%	22%	68%	19%
Never	5%	8%	8%	8%	45%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

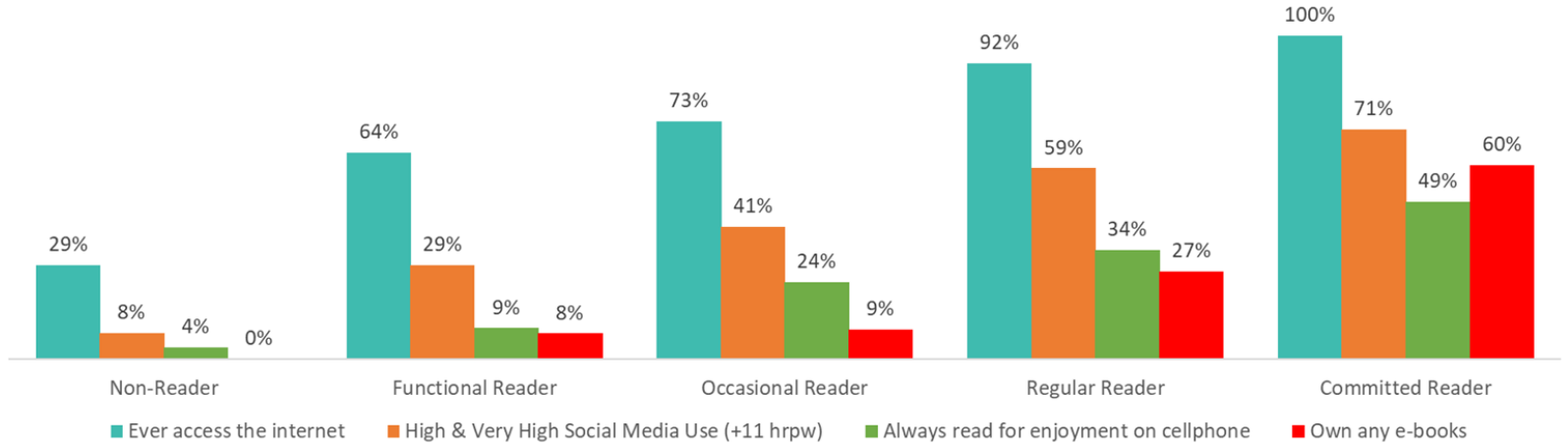
n=1209 people who live with older children (10+), excluding those refused to answer/ did not know

Recommendation: Engaging Different Reader Personas Digitally

The Reader Personas engage with digital reading materials in different ways. Initiatives that use online and digital materials should know that:

- **Non-Readers** cannot be engaged digitally. They must be reached in person/verbally and then slowly drawn into interacting with print materials before any digital materials can be attempted.
- The same applies for **Functional** Readers, except for some younger ones who may be reached via social media.
- Some **Occasional** Readers are digitally literate, but the majority prefer reading print materials.
- About a third of **Regular** Readers and half of **Committed** readers prefer reading on digital devices over print and will get excited by new online reading opportunities. They are also likely to enjoy online reading communities and networking with other readers.

Figure 58



6 Digital Reading: Recommendations

Digital reading is on the rise

Reducing barriers to internet access is likely to enable more reading

Rolling out public wifi, reducing the cost of data, and zero-rating websites with educational and reading materials are initiatives that can support reading.

Use social media, like Facebook and TikTok, to draw people into other types of reading

The majority of South Africans read to communicate frequently, via social media and WhatsApp. Use these existing communication channels to make reading attractive and share information about where to access other reading materials.

Many avid social media users also read regularly for enjoyment

Many avid social media users also read regularly for enjoyment. Shift the narrative about people not reading due to social media and digital devices, and recognise that reading to communicate (digitally) can co-exist with and reinforce other forms of reading, such as reading longer texts in print.

While digital is on the rise, many readers still prefer print

Print materials remain important, particularly for less frequent readers, older readers and children. Reading campaigns should be explicit about what they hope to achieve with print vs. digital resources, and use appropriate resources for the age groups and audiences they hope to reach.

Areas for further research

Further exploration of teen reading practices, including the relationship between digital communication/social media and long-text/deep reading, and the relationship between poor reading skills in Grade 4 and high perceived amounts of reading among older children, would be valuable, since the NRS only covers adult reporting about teen reading and does not engage with teens directly.

SECTION 7

Libraries

7 Libraries: Key Findings

Libraries remain important places for reading material access, but are still not accessible to all, and many users don't borrow books.

Library access is widespread but unevenly distributed

58% of adults have access to a community library (meaning there is a library nearby and they know about it), but this is highly unequal by province. The Western Cape has the highest rate of access (86%) while the Eastern Cape has the lowest (20%). Those who need libraries most (people with less income, less education and in more rural areas of residence) have the least access.

Libraries have 'bounced back' post COVID-19

Despite Covid-era closures, libraries seem to have "bounced back": 28% of South African adults have visited a library in the last year (27% in 2016), and 19% use a library once a month or more.

Youth use libraries

Students and residents of small towns are most likely to use libraries regularly. This includes learners who use libraries for studying and doing homework and young people studying, using the internet and accessing reading materials..

Libraries are used for reading

17% of adults use libraries to read, but only 8% actually borrow books (7% in 2016). People who use libraries *for reading* (rather than meetings or wifi access only) are more likely to live in small towns, own books (especially those who own fewer than 20 books), have a monthly household income below R12 800, like to talk about reading with friends and family, and self-identify as an occasional, regular or passionate reader.

Library users are overwhelmingly satisfied with the libraries they use.

Three in four library users are happy with the library as it is, and 9% are concerned about external factors (such as the distance from home or the cost of transport). For those who do not use libraries, transport costs are the main barrier.

Libraries are preferred channel for distribution of free reading materials

Among book readers, the percentage of people who usually get books from libraries has declined sharply in recent decades: from 48% in 2006 to 24% in 2016 to 17% in 2023. However, libraries are the top preferred location for people to pick up free reading materials to keep and own (43% of adults).

What roles do libraries play in South Africa's reading cultures?

Public libraries are crucial institutions for the support of reading cultures across the world. This is especially true for countries like South Africa, where high levels of inequality and poverty make owning books and other reading materials unaffordable for the majority of the population.

In addition to providing access to reading materials, libraries also offer information and events dedicated to books and reading; create safe, well-lighted and quiet spaces for reading (which may not be otherwise available for many people); and illustrate in various other ways that reading is important enough for the state to invest public resources.

In the digital age, libraries around the world are transforming their operations and offerings by adding digital materials and internet access services, a trend that is also growing in South Africa. All South African public libraries have computers and 92% have internet connectivity and are providing internet access to the public (NLSA). Ebook circulation is increasing. For example, in the Western Cape ebook lending increased nearly ninefold between August 2021 and April 2023 (Western Cape Government 2023).

Questions about library use were retained from the NRS (2016). The NRS provides an important source of information about library use because it is a representative sample of the adult population rather than a survey targeting library users. This allows for findings about barriers to library use as well as the experiences of library users. However, the NRS does not provide a complete picture of library users since according to NLSA the largest group of library users are school-age learners, who were not included in the NRS sample due to age (the NRS only includes adults aged 16+).

The survey findings should be considered in the context of a constrained resource environment for libraries nationally, with reduced overall budget allocations to the sector over several years.

Questions concerning libraries addressed by the NRS include:

- How many and which people use libraries? How regularly do they use libraries?
- What are the barriers to public library use?
- For what purposes are libraries used? What percent of users use them as a source of reading materials versus other functions?

Access to a library is a combination of whether there is a library present and whether the person is aware of it being present. The survey asked: "by access I mean that there is a library nearby that you know about, even if you don't use it"

People access different types of libraries. However, the rest of this report focuses exclusively on community libraries as more detailed questions were not asked about how people use libraries at education institutions or work

Access

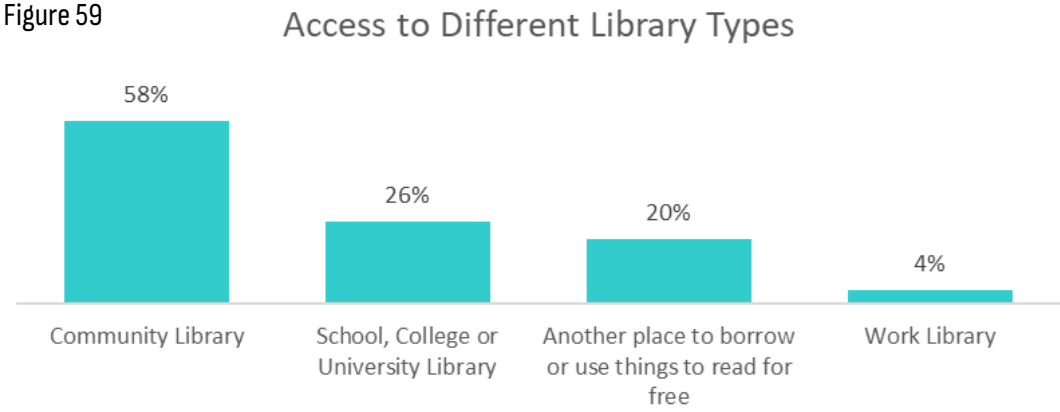
58% of adults have access to a community library in 2023. While some people access other types of libraries (Figure 59), these are not explored further in the NRS (2023).

Access to a community library is highly uneven by province (Figure 60). The Western Cape has the highest levels of access and the Eastern Cape the lowest. This is partly due to different per-capita library service levels per province, as shown by the orange line: in the Northern Cape there is one library per 5600 people, while in Limpopo one library serves an average of 56000. Per capita library numbers also do not tell the full story, since provinces have different settlement patterns which affect the ease of providing library services. Provinces with concentrated small towns like the Free State and Northern Cape are easier to serve than provinces with dispersed populations like Limpopo and the Eastern Cape.

Despite Covid-era closures, libraries seem to have "bounced back": 28% of South African adults have visited a community library in the last year (27% in 2016), and 19% use a library once a month or more.

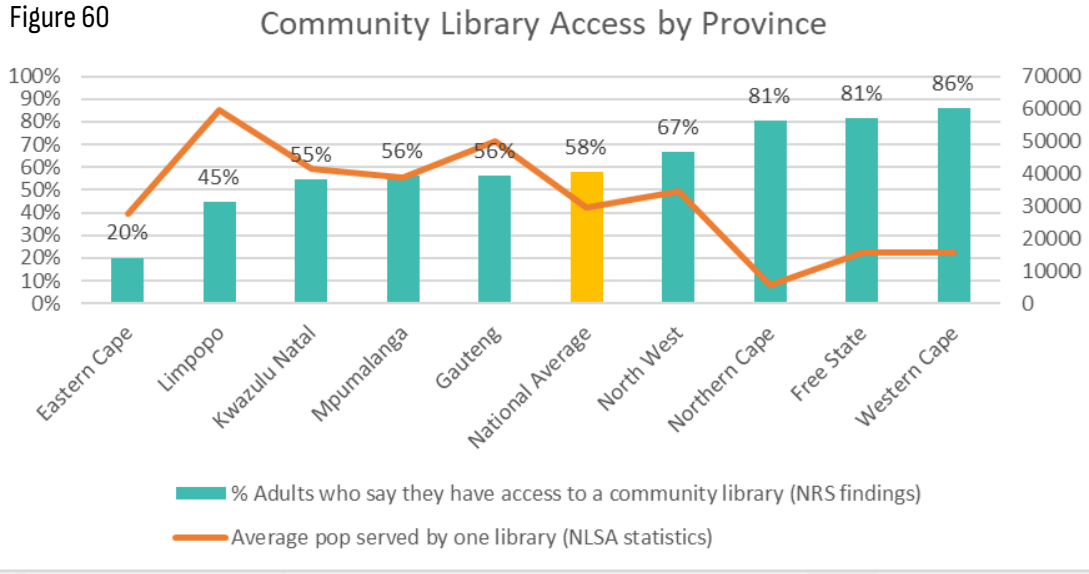
What impact did Covid 19 have on reading habits and library usage? This study cannot answer this question, but we cannot assume a continuous trend from 2016 to 2023. Library use likely declined and then increased again to pre-Covid levels.

Figure 59



n=4251

Figure 60



n=4240 (excluding refused to answer)

Access for whom?

The distribution of accessibility (presence and awareness) **of community libraries is regressive**. Those who are most in need of free reading materials have the least access: by education level, area of residence, employment status and income level.

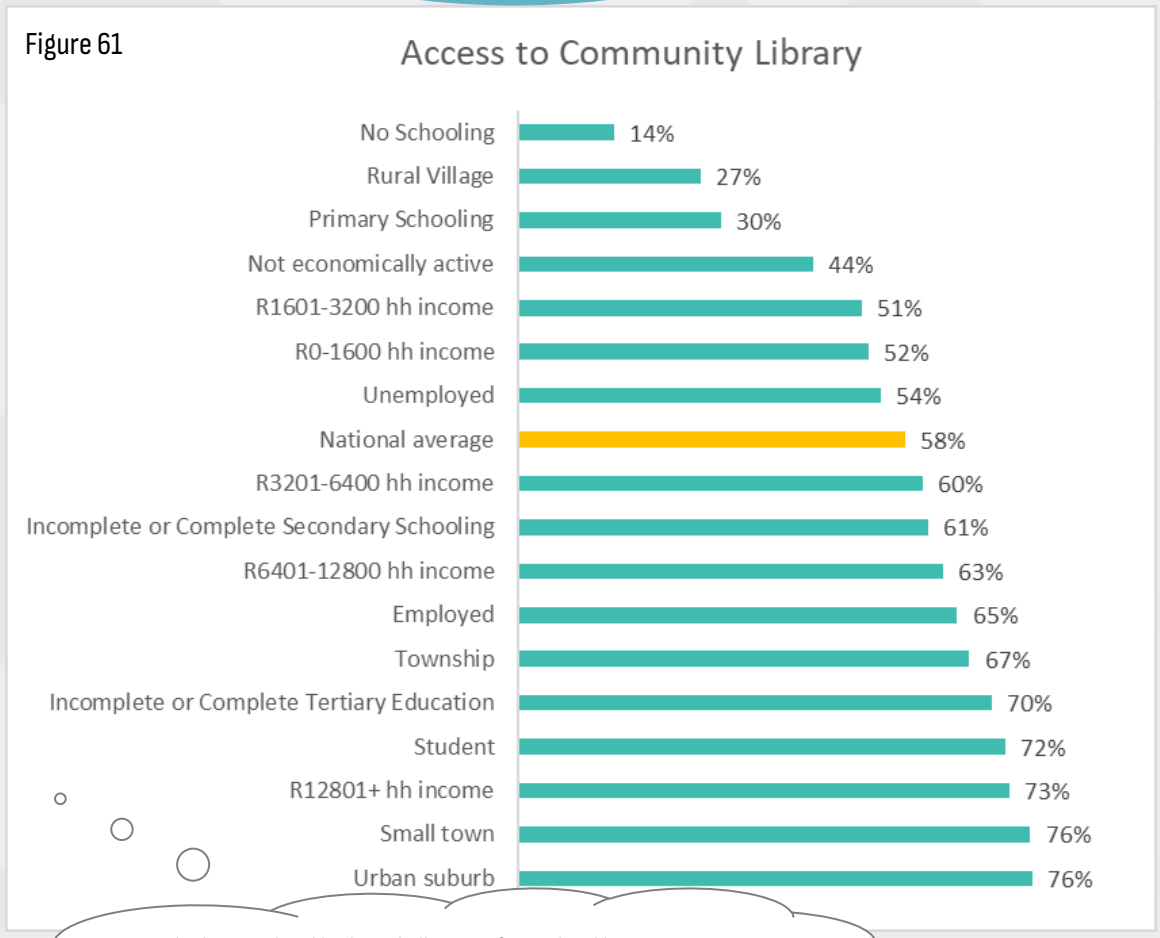
On the positive side, **young people and adults with children are more aware of the presence of a community library nearby**.

- 76% of 16-17 year olds and 62% of 18-24 year olds say they have access to a community library (compared to the national average of 58%)
- 62% of adults who live with children say they have access to a community library while 54% without children have access.

There is no significant difference in access by gender.

Action Point: Awareness campaigns about the presence of libraries, what they offer, and that everyone can access them for free, should be targeted at poorer households with low education levels.

Figure 61



The logistical and budget challenges of providing library services in rural communities are structural and so many of these access barriers are difficult to overcome.

n=4152 (excluding refused to answer)

Use and Frequency

66% of adults have ever visited a Library.

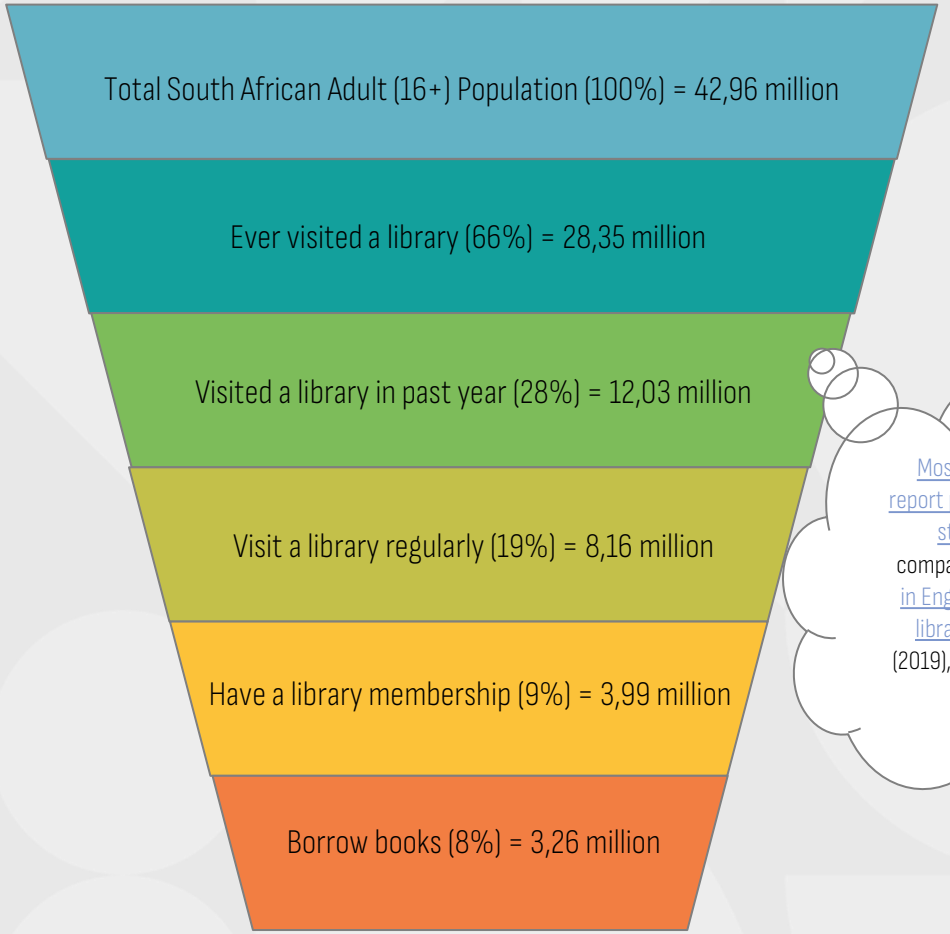
28% of adults visited a community library in the past year. This compares to 27% of the population who visited a library in the NRS (2016).

19% of adults visit a community library regularly or frequently (several times a month or more).

9% of adults have a library membership.

8% of adults borrow books from the library.

Figure 62

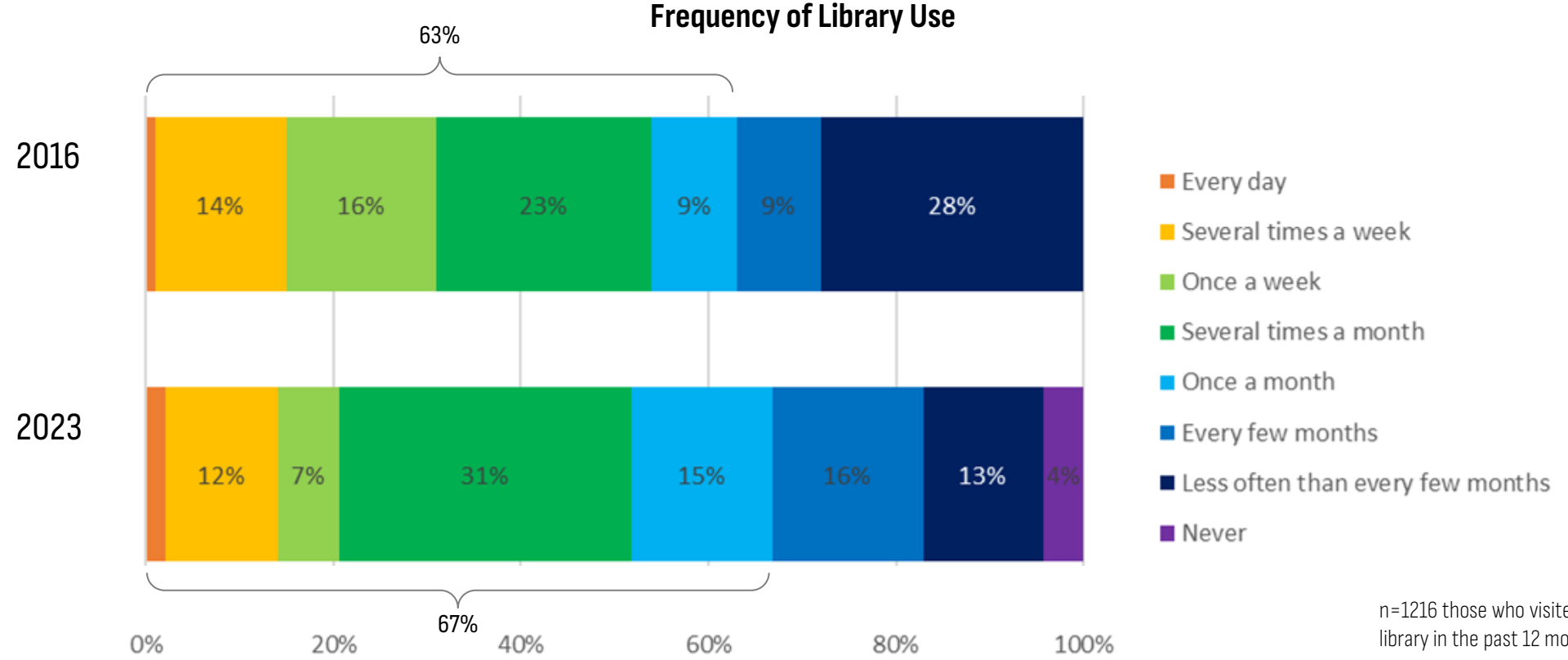


Most countries do not report publicly on library use statistics, but for comparison, 34% of adults in England visited a public library in the past year (2019), 34% in Australia and 33% in Kenya.

Use and Frequency

Frequency of community library use has remained largely stable since 2016. 67% of those who use the library in 2023 use it several times a month or more, compared to 63% in 2016.

Figure 63



n=1216 those who visited a library in the past 12 months

Use and Frequency

Figure 64 shows the prevalence of regular community library use among those who visited a community library in the past year. This does not consider interactions between variables (i.e. interactions between education level and employment status). The national average is 67%, shown by an orange line. Groups above the line are more likely to be regular library users and groups below the line are less likely to be regular library users.

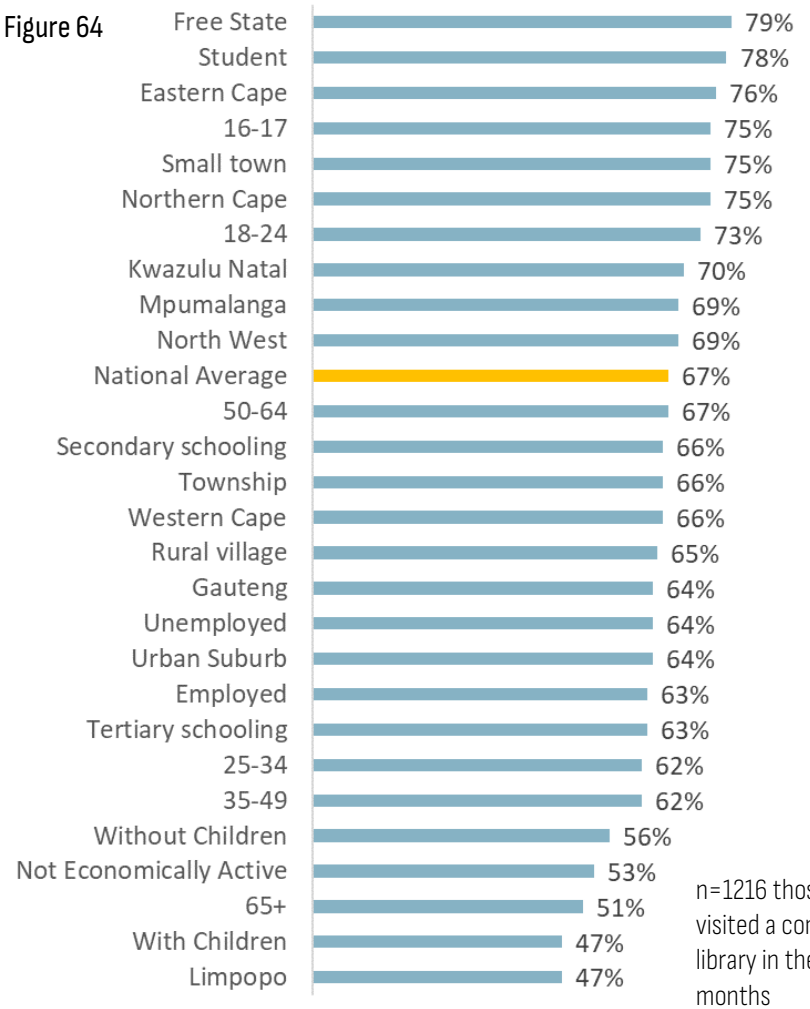
Students, people with secondary education and young people, as well as residents of small towns, are the most likely to be regular library users.

Groups who are less likely to use libraries regularly include both people who are disadvantaged (unemployed living in rural villages) and people who are advantaged (employed with tertiary education living in suburbs). The former are likely to struggle to access libraries due to transport costs (see page 97 on barriers) while the latter are less likely to need library access since they can afford to have reading materials in their homes.

Regarding education levels, the sample of regular library users with no or only primary schooling is too low to look at the frequency of library use.

It is notable that the provincial distribution of regular library users is different from the distribution of library access overall. The Free State and Northern Cape perform well in both accessibility and frequency of use, while KZN and Mpumalanga have regular users despite below-average accessibility.

Figure 64



What People Do in Libraries

79% of adult library users use libraries for some form of reading (doing at least one of the following activities: reading books (62%) or newspapers (9%) in the library, reading with children (8%) or attending books clubs (2%) at the library, or borrowing books for reading at home (34%)). This is 17% of the total adult population. **Internet access (29%), studying (28%) and job applications (15%) are also important uses.**

34% of those who visited a community library in the past year, borrow books from the library. This is 8% of the total population.

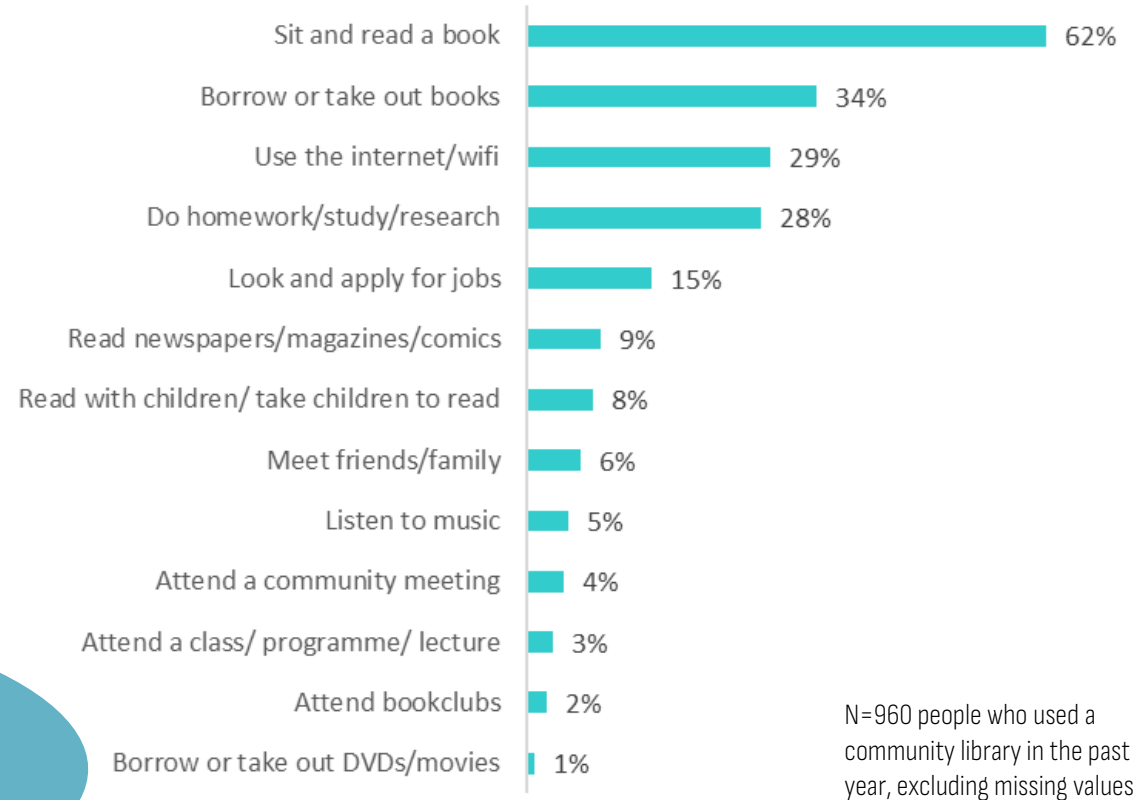
80% of those who borrow books from the library do so regularly (at least once a month). This is an increased trend from 2016 (59%).

43% of people who visited a library in the past year have a library membership. This is a stable trend from 2016 (41% of library users with membership).

60% of frequent users and 47% of regular users have a membership, but even 28% of infrequent users (less than once a month) have a membership.

Action Point:
When considering library-based reading interventions, use targeted strategies for different types of library users: people who use the **space** (read and study in the library, etc.), and people who use the **services** (borrow books from the library, including in some cases digital access to e-books without needing to go to the library physically).

Figure 65



What explains if Adults Use Libraries for Reading?

Considering people who have ever visited a library (N=2753), what explains the difference between those who use libraries regularly for reading and borrowing books and those who do not (who either do not visit the library regularly or only use libraries for non-reading activities like community meetings)?

Adults who use libraries regularly for reading are more likely to*:

- **Live in small towns.** Small town residents are 3 times more likely to use libraries for reading than rural residents. Suburban residents are least likely to use libraries for reading.
- **Own books.** Having any number of books in the home is associated with more library use than not owning any books, but the effect is smaller for those who own more than 20 books.
- **Have a monthly household income below R12800**. This is possibly because households with higher incomes prefer to buy books than use the library.
- **Want their friends and families to talk about reading.** Social support for reading is important for library readers. People whose friends and family talk about reading are 2,5 times more likely to read in libraries.
- **Self-identify as occasional, regular or passionate readers**. People who consider themselves to be non-readers or aspiring readers are less likely to use libraries for reading.

These findings do not mean that people outside of these groups do not read in libraries at all. They are just significantly less likely to do so than the average.

When all other factors are held constant, the following characteristics have no significant effect on whether someone uses the library for reading:

- Gender
- Race
- Age
- Education level
- Income differences under R12800 per month household income
- Whether the adult lives with children

* These factors are confirmed through regression analysis at $p<0.05$ as significant predictors of using libraries for reading versus not visiting libraries or using libraries only for non-reading activities (such as accessing wifi).

Action Point:
How to encourage adults to use libraries for reading?
Libraries are important sources of reading material for people who have some books but do not have the means to purchase many books for themselves. Libraries can focus resources on small towns and encourage social activities around reading, such as adult book clubs and author talks to build conversations about reading in communities

Barriers & Satisfaction

Current library users are overwhelmingly satisfied with the libraries they use. Three in four library users are happy with the library as it is, and 9% are concerned about external factors (such as the distance from home or the cost of transport).

For the 65% of adult South Africans who have not visited a library in the past year, **the main barriers to library use are disinterest in reading and the costs/distance of transport**.

Figure 66

Satisfaction Levels of Library Users & Reasons for Not Using Libraries

	What concerns do you have about the community library (current users) (N=961)	What reasons do you have for not visiting the library in the past year? (N=2793)
I'm not interested		41%
No concerns. I am happy with the library the way it is now	75%	
It is too far away or transport is too expensive	9%	33%
It doesn't have new reading material or recent publications	9%	2%
It is not open at the times when I want to go	6%	7%
It doesn't have things to read that I like	3%	3%
The people who work there are not helpful	2%	1%
Applying for membership is too complicated	2%	1%
It doesn't have thing to read in the languages I want to read	2%	1%
It doesn't feel safe or welcoming for people like me	1%	1%
It is closed	1%	3%

Accessing Reading Materials for home use

"Where do you usually get books?"

The importance of libraries as a source of books has declined sharply in recent decades (48% in 2006, 24% in 2016 and 17% in 2023).

"If there was free printed reading material being given away, where would you prefer to collect it from?"

However, **libraries are the top preferred location (43%) for people to pick up free reading materials to keep and own**.

Action Point:
There are opportunities for libraries to act as distribution channels for free take-home reading materials, working together with organisations that produce such reading materials.

While currently most free reading materials are produced for children, there is also an opportunity for adult reading materials to be produced and distributed for free through libraries, given this study's findings on the importance of adult reading. These should take into account adults' preferred languages, formats and content.

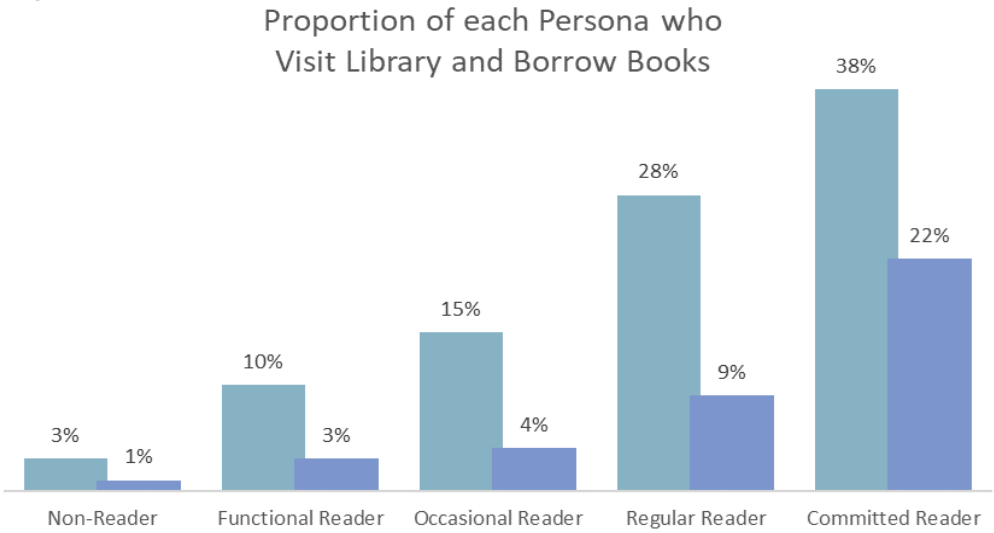
Recommendation: Engaging Different Reader Personas as Library Users

Personas strongly predict the probability of being a library user in the past year, as well as whether someone will borrow books from the library. They are therefore a useful way for Librarians and reading advocates to think about targeting their activities.

As examples, libraries and librarians can engage with different Reader Personas in the following ways:

- Guide **Committed** and **Regular** readers to the newest publications and online services and ask them for recommendations of materials they would like to see the library procure.
- Have a conversation with **Occasional** readers to find out what interests them and recommend books and other reading materials. Connect them with other library users with similar interests to encourage social support for an increased reading habit.
- Make **Functional** readers and **Non-readers** feel especially welcome. Reassure them that they belong at the library and are readers already, with many opportunities to slowly explore different kinds of reading. Assist them to orient themselves and find print reading materials that interest them.

Figure 67



7 Libraries: Recommendations

Retain Youth

Young people, especially older learners and students, are the most avid library users. Develop strategies to retain young library users as they grow older.

Make book borrowing easier

Only about a third of past-year library users (34%) borrow books. Make it easier and more enticing for library users to borrow books - for example, by streamlining sign-up requirements, running campaigns and removing late fines. Furthermore, explore why some people with library memberships only use the library rarely.

Collaborate on free reading materials distribution

Libraries are adults' top preferred location to pick up free reading materials. Libraries should collaborate with campaigns that give away free reading materials on a large scale, such as the Nal'ibali campaign, Book Dash and others, to run campaigns and provide routine distribution.

Conduct more research on libraries, digital access and digital reading

As digital access becomes ever more important for economic, educational and leisure opportunities, and as libraries around the world adapt their processes to enable access to digital reading and information materials (including audio-visual materials), NLSA should conduct research into how South Africans currently use libraries for digital access and how libraries can adapt their services to meet needs and demand.

Adopt more efficient procurement systems for libraries

Libraries should be released from generic government procurement systems that require tendering and multiple quotes and be able to procure new reading materials that meet users' needs and interests, with flexibility and in fast time frames.

SECTION 8

Multilingual Reading Cultures

South Africans are multilingual readers. People want to read in African languages, but not enough texts are available.

South Africans are multilingual readers

68% of South Africans are capable of reading in multiple languages. 63% can read in at least one African language.

Demand for reading in African languages is high

The 80% of African language speakers who want to read to communicate in their African languages are already doing so. 76% of African language speakers who read for enjoyment want to read in African languages. Similarly, 71% want to read for information in African languages.

Less active readers are less keen to read in English

More active readers tend to prefer both African languages and English, while less active readers are less likely to include English in their preferences. This suggests that African-language materials may support less prolific readers to read more.

South Africans read to their children in English and in African languages

Of those adults who read with their young children, 84% read in English but 59% also read in at least one African language. (Language patterns for reading with children are discussed in Section 4.)

Books in African languages are not sufficiently available

Access to African language materials, for adults and children, still lags far behind English and behind Afrikaans, although in the major languages such as isiZulu, speakers who are also readers do generally have at least a few books.

Afrikaans is an African language but given South Africa's political history there is a disproportionately strong publishing culture in Afrikaans compared with other African languages. Our analysis in this Chapter therefore focuses on underrepresented African languages, including isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda and Xitsonga. Although other languages are also spoken, we focus on official national languages

Why are Languages Important?

Much of the global literature on reading culture comes from countries with one dominant language. But South Africa is a multilingual society, where many different languages are in use and most households use multiple languages.

Multilingualism is an important topic in debates around teaching children to read fluently and with comprehension in the school system. Research has shown unequivocally that children who to learn to read in a language they speak and understand ultimately do better in both home languages and additional languages (World Bank 2021). There is much research and discussion about availability and quality of reading materials in African languages, the right age for shifting from an African Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) to English, and use of translanguaging in the classroom to increase comprehension. In addition, reading materials in African languages affirm children's experiences and help them recognise themselves in stories.

Efforts to increase access to African language reading materials in recent years have focused primarily on younger children. Commercial publishing remains largely in English (with a sizable Afrikaans market), driven by the dominance of English (and to a lesser extent Afrikaans) in the economy, and of English as a global language. This not only means that accessing African language reading materials is harder, but also that some readers might find reading in English easier (because they were educated or mostly work in English) or aspirational (because they view reading in English as associated with higher economic and social status).

The NRS (2023) multilingual approach understands that South Africans do not so much choose between languages but choose to read in multiple languages.

Questions concerning language addressed by the NRS include:

Adult reading:

- What percent of adults in South Africa are multilingual readers?
- To what extent are adults currently reading in African languages? Which languages are they reading in?
- To what extent do adults want to read in African languages? What is the discrepancy between actual and preferred languages?
- Do South Africans use different languages to read for different purposes (enjoyment, information, communication)?
- What percent of adults have books in African languages in their homes?
- To what extent is language availability experienced as a barrier to reading? To using libraries?

The following questions have already been addressed in the previous report section on reading with children:

- What percent of African home-language caregivers read with their children in African languages? (74%)
- To what extent do African home-language caregivers agree that reading with children in their African language is important? (95%) Note that this is not 'instead of' the importance of reading in English, but in addition to for most respondents.
- To what extent is materials accessibility in the right language considered a barrier to reading with children? 5% of adults who do not read with children say it is because of a lack of materials in the right language, but 79% of those who do read already say they would read more if they had more materials in the right languages.

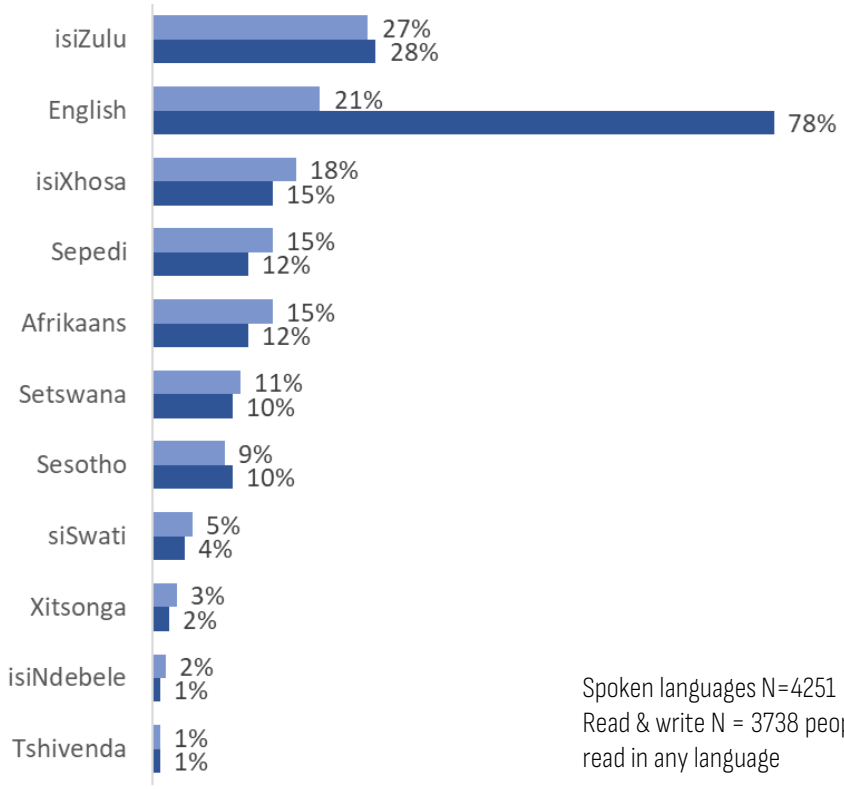
South Africans are multilingual readers, but English remains dominant

Considering adults across all language groups, including those who don't ever read, **68% of South Africans read in multiple languages. 63% read in at least one African language**.

When only considering those who are able to read, 77% read in multiple languages and 72% read in at least one African language.

Even though only 21% report English as one of the main languages they commonly speak at home, **English is the most commonly read language** in South Africa. 78% of the population is able to read in English (Figure 68)

Figure 68 Languages Spoken at Home vs Read and Write



Language and race are not synonymous. 13% of Black African respondents did not list an African language as one of the languages they commonly speak at home. 6% of White, 9% of Coloured and 9% of Indian/Asian respondents did list an African language as a main home language.

Language Preference

The demand for reading in African languages is high.

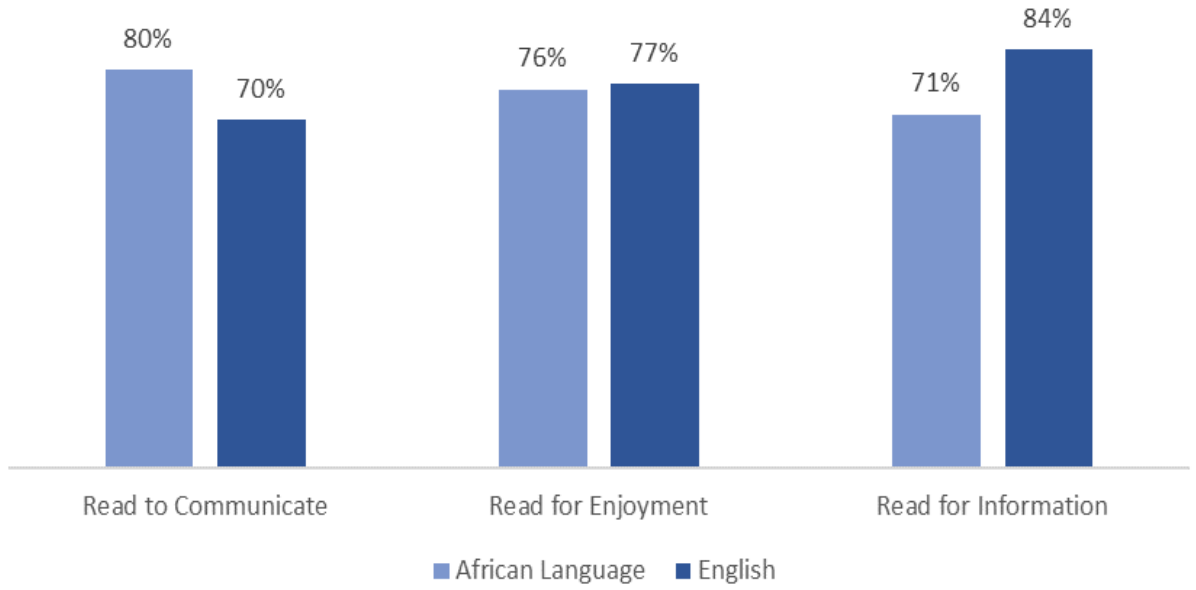
80% of African language speakers want to (read to) communicate in their African languages. 76% of African language speakers who read for enjoyment want to read in African languages. Similarly, 71% want to read for information in African languages (Figure 69).

This shows that there is a demand for print publications and online materials in African languages.

Language preference is not an either-or but is diverse. 70% of African language speakers also choose to read to communicate in English, 77% also choose to read for enjoyment in English and 84% see English as an important language when reading for information (Figure 69).

The NRS (2016) results on preferred languages are not comparable with the 2023 results because only one language was recorded as preferred in 2016, forcing a choice instead of recognising the multilingual nature of South African reading.

Figure 69 Preferred Reading Languages of African Language Speakers



N=1948 people who read in at least one African language and read for communication, enjoyment or information

The survey asked which languages South Africans would prefer to read in if they had access to materials. They could select multiple languages.

Books in African Languages

Considering readers of all languages with any books in their homes, 91% have books written in English, even though only 21% mainly speak English at home.

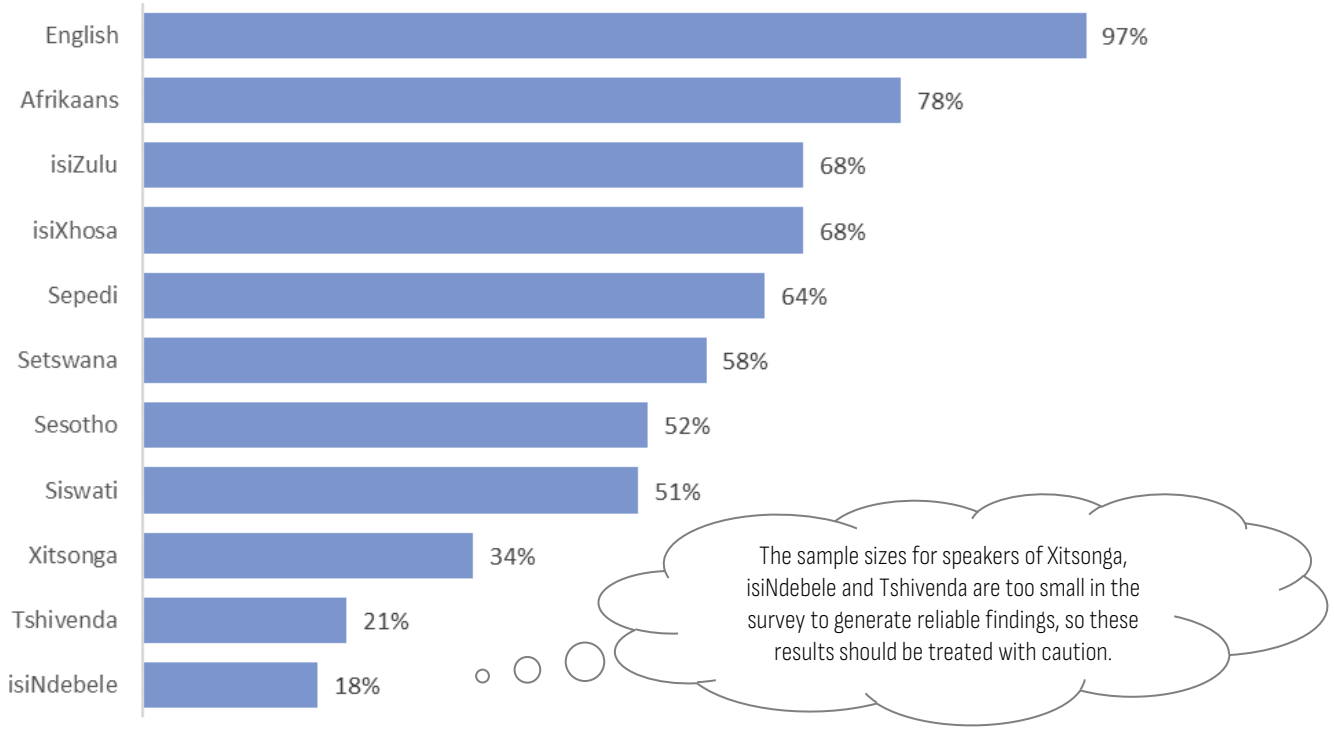
People who speak English and Afrikaans at home are still most likely to have books in those languages (97% and 78%) (Figure 70)

For people who speak most of the other main languages, more than 50% have at least some books in their home language. Significantly fewer Xitsonga, isiNdebele and Tshivenda speakers have books in their language than other language speakers, although NRS (2023) sample sizes for speakers of these languages are too small in the survey to generate reliable findings. The patterns for languages of children's books in the home are very similar to those of 'all books' (as in Figure 70).

This suggests that book availability in a range of African languages is improving but there remains a significant gap between supply and demand, particularly in the most marginalised languages.

If book availability in African languages is improving, it is also notable that **reading material language is not reported to be a barrier to library use**. Only 0,5% of people who do not use libraries say this is because the libraries do not have materials in the languages they want to read.

Figure 70 % of Main Home Language speakers with books in that language



N=2850 adults with any books

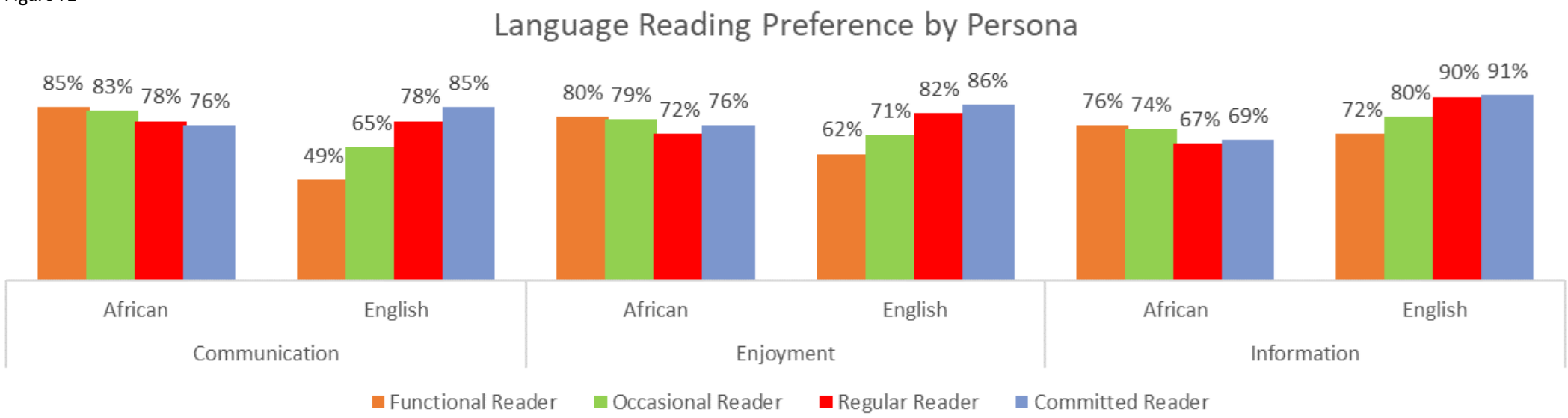
Personas and Languages

While African language readers are equally spread across all Personas, Personas affect language preferences for reading.

Across all Personas, the majority of African language speakers name an African language among their preferred languages. However, less confident readers (Functional and Occasional Readers) are less likely to name English as a preferred language, while Regular and Committed readers are equally or more comfortable reading in English.

This suggests that availability of reading materials in African languages may support less prolific readers to read more.

Figure 71



N=1987 African language readers who read for enjoyment, information and communication

Languages: Recommendations

Demand to read in African languages is high and exceeds supply, for both adult and child reading materials. Increase supply of and access to African-language reading materials by:

Increasing accessibility of free and low-cost print reading materials in African languages at people's preferred pickup points

These are libraries, post offices, schools, supermarkets/retail stores, and clinics.

Providing more support to authors who write in African languages, including those who self-publish and sell their books directly to the public

Publishing in African languages remains severely underfunded and is not a viable commercial undertaking at scale, so subsidies and various forms of support are warranted.

Expanding free African language reading material initiatives beyond young children to teens and adults

Fund organisations with experience producing and distributing free reading materials for children and young people to also produce short and medium-length materials in African languages and with local content targeted at adolescents and adults.

SECTION 9

Conclusions & Action Points

What Big Questions are we Answering

Adult Reading Behaviour & Reading Cultures

How can we best define South African reading cultures for our context and this moment?	Definitions of reading cultures should include all forms of reading, including reading for different purposes (including to communicate), digital reading and multilingual reading, and recognise that there are multiple reading cultures, while still recognising the importance of 'deep' and long text reading over short form reading. See page 18
Are reading cultures mostly about personal choice or are they largely determined by external socio-economic factors (affordability of materials, accessibility of materials where you live, etc.)?	The NRS 2023 results suggests that reading motivation & identity is more important in predicting reading practices than demographic or socio-economic characteristics, although income levels do impact on access to reading materials, which in turn impact on practices like reading with children.

Motivation

What level of public awareness is there of the benefits of reading	Public awareness of the benefits and value of reading have greatly increased since 2016. 60% of adults agree with positive statements about reading (helps me relax, helps me improve my economic situation, is a way to explore new people and places, etc). More than 90% of adults who live with children agree that reading improves school performance and is important for building and preserving culture and identity.
Who motivates/ influences adults and children to read?	Friends and family are the most important motivators, along with school-based influences and social media contacts.
What barriers dis-incentivise reading?	The main barriers to reading are lack of access to reading materials and lack of interest/ motivation or confidence as a reader. Barriers such as reading disorders and low levels of education (no schooling or only primary schooling) are also significant factors in whether someone reads at all.

What Big Questions are we Answering

Access

What materials do people currently read and what do they want to read? Formats, lengths	The most commonly read materials are religious texts in print (79% of adults read these) and print newspapers (62%). Social media posts are also read by many adults (58%). About half of South African adults read fiction or non-fiction books. Print remains the dominant format but digital reading, including ebook reading, is increasing. See page 56 on frequently read materials and page 82 on format preferences
How do people currently access materials and how do they want to access materials?	South Africans mostly access books from stationary stores and by borrowing from friends and family. Schools are also important sources of reading materials, followed by book shops (second-hand and specialised/new books). Stationary shops and specialised books shops are also the preferred sources for books (see page 59). In terms of free reading materials, preferred distribution sites are libraries, post offices and schools. See page 60. Awareness of online reading initiatives is increasing, but usage is still not very high, with only 5% of caregivers reading online materials with their children. See page 70

Reading with Children

How many caregivers are reading with children?	52% of caregivers have ever read with children. See page 66
What are the determinants of whether adults read with children in their households?	The main determinants of reading with children (when holding other characteristics constant) are: living in a rural village, having children's and adult books at home and whether the adult identifies as a reader. Adult age, gender, education level up to completed secondary school and monthly household income below gradations below R25600 do not predict reading with children. See page 68
How many older children (aged 10 and above) are reading for themselves at home?	According to caregivers, 72% of older children read daily for themselves. This is probably a reflection of reading as part of school work. Caregivers also report that 40% of older children are spending 11 hours per week or more reading for enjoyment. See pages 72-73.
How does reading with children relate to adults' own reading practices?	Adult reading identity, and the number of books in the home, are the strongest predictors of reading with children. See page 68

What Big Questions are we Answering

Digital Reading

What proportion of readers use and prefer digital devices and materials for reading?	Digital reading has grown enormously since 2016, with 55% of adults reading online materials (excluding social media) compared to 7% in 2016. Among those who read books, almost half still prefer print formats and a third read both print and digital. Only 19% of adult book readers read more often in digital formats. Page 81
What are the barriers to digital reading access?	Internet access is the biggest barrier, with 27% of adults having no access and another 16% having unreliable access. Most caregivers prefer reading with children in print, which impacts on low usage of digital reading materials for children. See Page 70 and 81

Libraries

Who uses libraries and how are libraries used?	28% of adults visited a community library in the past year. Students, people with secondary education and young people, as well as residents of small towns, are the most likely to be regular library users (based on regression findings). 79% of adult library users use libraries for some form of reading. Internet access (29%), studying (28%) and job applications (15%) are also important uses. See pages 92-95
What are the barriers to public library use?	Apart from a lack of interest in reading, the main barrier (for those with an interest in using library services) is distance to the nearest public library and costs of transport to reach the nearest library. See page 97

Languages

In what languages do South Africans read and in what languages would they prefer to read?	76% of African language speakers who read for enjoyment want to read in African languages and 71% want to read for information in African languages. See page 105. Of adults with young children who can read and write an African language and who read with their children, 74% currently read with their young children in an African language, 72% would prefer to read with their children in an African language, and 73% have reading materials in an African language. 80% of African-language-speaking adults with young children read with their children in both English and at least one African language. See page 71.
How important is (lack of) access to reading materials in African languages as a barrier to reading (adults and children)	More active readers tend to prefer both African languages and English, while less active readers are less likely to prefer English. This suggests that African-language materials may support less prolific readers to read more. While few adults who do *not* read with children say that lack of access to reading materials in the right language is a key reason for *not* reading with their children, those who *do* read with children say they would read more if they had better access to materials in preferred languages.

Action Points: Reading Culture & Practice

		Who?
1	Interventions focused on reading identity implemented among non-readers should shift the focus from reading books to a **recognition of multiple forms of reading** (like reading text messages, the news or a religious text)	Civil society, publishing and reading materials distribution industry, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture
2	To keep teens interested in reading, reading for enjoyment campaigns should be developed that **target teenagers**	National and provincial departments of education, NLSA, Civil society, NECT
3	**'Reading to communicate'** is the most frequent form of reading in South Africa. Therefore, this form of reading should be **leveraged as a pathway** to promote and encourage other forms of reading	Publishing and reading materials distribution industry, Civil society
4	**Building reading habits** means encouraging people to read frequently (daily or several times a week) even if short pieces or for short amounts of time. The habit of reading is more important than for how long or what you read	Publishing and reading materials distribution industry, Civil society
5	South Africans should be encouraged to **read longer texts** by • Building **adults' confidence** in their reading identities • **Using social media** to intentionally link readers to long texts through online reading clubs, influencers and BookTok • **Reconsidering the narrative** that social media users are not 'real' readers • **Countering perceptions** that long text reading is an activity associated with only some groups in society	Publishing and reading materials distribution industry, Civil society

Action Points: Reading Motivation

		Who?
1	**Encourage more people to think of themselves as readers.** • **Validate** different types of reading (including digital reading, reading news and reading religious materials). • Once someone **recognises** that they are already reading, it is easier for them to choose to expand their reading	Publishing and reading materials distribution industry, Civil society, NLSA
2	**Engage public figures** (religious leaders and popular figures in sports and arts) to talk about the importance of reading. **Use existing influence** of friends and family to spread reading practice through social networks	Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, Publishing and reading materials distribution industry, Civil society, NLSA

Action Points: Access to Materials

		Who?
1	**Reading for religious reasons** is an important form of reading. • The materials are often widespread and accessible in many languages • Religious reading is often "deep reading" • Religious reading should be recognised and valued in its own right, as well as being seen as a potential pathway into other forms of reading	Religious institutions, civil society, reading campaigns
2	**Stationary shops, supermarkets and schools** play an important role in materials distribution. They should also be included in strategies to increase book ownership. Existing networks of book sharing should be strengthened and supported	Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, Publishing and reading materials distribution industry, Civil society, NLSA
3	**All types of reading should be celebrated and recognised as ' reading'**. Non-readers and Functional readers may be motivated to read more if the books they already have and the reading they already engage in (i.e. religious books, newspapers, etc) are celebrated and recognised as 'reading'	Religious institutions, civil society, reading campaigns, NLSA
4	Campaigns to **motivate occasional, regular and committed** readers through • Having better and easier access to books • Sharing the books they have with their networks	Religious institutions, civil society, reading campaigns, NLSA

Action Points: Reading and Children

		Who?
1	Implementation of **targeted reading campaigns** focusing on • The importance of reading with children from a very **young age**, before they can talk • Raising awareness among parents that even **small amounts of time** spent reading are sufficient (i.e. 5-10 minutes a day) • Building **caregivers' confidence**, emphasizing that you don't need to be highly educated, and that it's okay to 'give it a go' without worrying about doing it 'right' • Reading with children in **African languages** • Improving **reading material access**; increase accessibility of free and low-cost print reading materials in African languages at people's preferred pickup points - libraries, post offices, schools, supermarkets/retail stores and clinics	DBE, NLSA, Civil society, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, NECT, Nal'ibali, Publishing and reading materials distribution industry
2	Encourage **adults to read with children** by • Increasing the number of **books in homes**. Large-scale campaigns are needed to get a few books into every home, and homes with a few books need easier, more affordable ways to build their libraries • Raising awareness about where to **access free and low-cost reading materials** • Build adult confidence in their **own reading identities**	DBE, NLSA, Civil society, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, NECT, Nal'ibali, Publishing and reading materials distribution industry

Action Points: Reading and Children (cont.)

		Who?
3	Increase the **flow of books from schools into the home** by • Ensuring **every classroom has a book corner or classroom library** • Ensuring children **borrow books from schools** • Working towards every child **owning an anthology** of graded readers and an anthology of storybooks alongside textbooks and workbooks	DBE, NLSA, Civil society
4	Interventions could encourage **Non-Readers** to • **Tell stories** to children • Distribute **wordless picture books** for small children (which can be "read" by anyone regardless of reading ability), and • Build their **confidence** to read children's books	Civil society
5	**Further research** is necessary to understand the disconnect between school-based assessments of low reading skills in Grade 4 and NRS-reported high levels of at-home reading for enjoyment among children aged 11 and above	NECT, Nal'ibali, National and Provincial DoE

Action Points: Digital Reading

		Who?
1	Capitalise on the opportunities that digital reading offers for **free reading material distribution**. It is however not a replacement for making print reading materials accessible	DBE, NLSA, Civil society, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, NECT, Nal'ibali, Publishing and reading materials distribution industry
2	**Support digital reading** by • Recognising that all forms of reading can **co-exist** • Encouraging the **linkages** between reading types • Rolling out **public wifi**, reducing the **cost of data**, and **zero-rating websites** with educational and reading materials • **Shifting the narrative** about people not reading due to social media and digital devices and recognising that reading to communicate (digitally) can co-exist with and reinforce other forms of reading, such as reading longer texts in print	NLSA, Civil society, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, NECT, Nal'ibali
3	The majority of South Africans read to communicate via social media and WhatsApp. Use these existing communication channels to make reading attractive and share information about where to access other reading materials	NLSA, Civil society, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, NECT, Nal'ibali

Action Points: Digital Reading (cont.)

		Who?
4	**Print materials remain important**, particularly for less frequent readers, older readers and children. Reading campaigns should be explicit about what they hope to achieve with print vs. digital resources and use appropriate resources for the age groups and audiences they hope to reach	NLSA, Civil society, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, NECT, civil society
5	Further exploration of **teen reading practices**, including the relationship between digital communication/social media and long-text/deep reading, and the relationship between poor reading skills in Grade 4 and high perceived amounts of reading among older children, would be valuable, since the NRS only covers adult reporting about teen reading and does not engage with teens directly	Civil society, NECT

Action Points: Libraries

		Who?
1	**Create and implement awareness campaigns** about the presence of libraries, what they offer, and that everyone can access them for free. These campaigns should be **targeted at poorer households** with low education levels	NLSA, DBE
2	Interventions should be targeted and use different strategies for different types of library users: people who use the **space** (read and study in the library, etc.), and people who use the **services** (borrow books from the library, including in some cases digital access to e-books without needing to go to the library physically)	NLSA, Public libraries at National, Provincial and Local municipalities
3	Adults should be **encouraged to use libraries** for reading • Libraries are important sources of reading material for people who have some books but do not have the means to purchase many books for themselves • Libraries can focus resources on small towns and encourage social activities around reading, such as adult book clubs and author talks to build conversations about reading in communities	NLSA
4	Libraries can act as **distribution channels for free take-home reading materials**, working together with organisations that produce such reading materials • Most free reading materials are produced for children, however, there is also an opportunity for adult reading materials to be produced and distributed for free through libraries, given this study's findings on the importance of adult reading. These should take into account adults' preferred languages, formats and content	NLSA, Nal'ibali, Adult reading campaigns, Department of Sports, Arts and Culture

Areas for Further Analysis of NRS Data

1. **Relationship between Economic Status and Materials Access:** Deepen analysis of reading materials access (materials in home, books in home, book sources, etc.) and household income and employment patterns. Statistically explore the extent to which the impact of income on reading practices is mediated via materials access

2. **Libraries:** Combine NRS respondent geolocation data with Libraries geolocation data to investigate the relationship between respondent distance from a community library and their level of awareness of/reported access to a library. Consider recommendations for library placement based on this analysis

3. **Teen Reading:** Compare teen self-reported reading practices (16-18 year old survey respondents) to caregiver reports about teen reading practices (15-18 year old children living in homes of respondents)

Areas for Further Research

1. **Predictors of Reading Practices: Demographics and Socio-Economics:** Investigate the relationship between demographics, socio-economic status and reading practices in more detail. Preliminary analysis found that these relationships were not as strong as anticipated, and that household income does not have a linear relationship with reading practices. Factors like reader identity and access to books were more strongly predictive of reading behaviours than demographics or socio-economic factors, but this needs to be explored in more detail

2. **Digital Reading:** Investigate the interaction between social media use and reading long texts in more detail

3. **Pathways to Teen Literacy:** Research teen reading practices to understand the degree to which parents' perceptions of these are accurate and the role of digital reading in enabling or constraining comprehension. Interrogate the relationship between poor literacy skills in Grade 4 yet high levels of reported reading activity by older teens

4. **Books in Homes:** Explore whether owning just a few books is a catalyst that further increases book ownership and reading practices over time

5. **Languages:** Gauge demand for African language materials among specific audiences and for different types of reading material

6. **Differently abled populations:** Understand the reading practices, preferences and needs of members of the blind and deaf communities (Including audiobooks) and explore how to better support them

7. **Religious reading**: Understand religious reading practices in terms of frequency, text length, depth of engagement, language use and preferences, and linkages to other forms of reading. Explore the roles of faith communities in promoting and enabling reading, including building reading identities and increasing reading materials access

NATIONAL READING BAROMETER
SOUTH AFRICA

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