

Researching Readers Online

Online Survey: A Brief Summary of Results

Background/Context

After a brief design phase and pilot, our survey went live on 26/3/2012, using Bristol Online Surveys (BOS). The survey was targeted specifically at users of online forums and book groups. The sites were selected on the basis that they were mainly hosting book-related discussions with an emphasis on literary fiction. In each case, permission was sought via email/private messaging from forum moderators and administrators before the link to the survey was posted. A small number of forums and discussion groups declined our request. The researchers monitored comments placed on the forums in response to the survey, and responded where appropriate to questions or criticisms about the survey design, purpose etc.

We would like to thank all those who participated in the survey, especially forum moderators, many of whom were very supportive. A more detailed discussion of the results will be published at the end of the project. If you wish to refer to these findings in any research of your own, please make sure you obtain permission to do so in advance, and reference our project appropriately.

Preliminary Findings

There were 248 responses in total the majority of which were from North America (106) followed by the United Kingdom (40), Europe and Scandinavia (28), Canada (16) and Australia (9), with a small number of respondents from a variety of countries around the world such as Argentina (2), the Philippines (1) and New Zealand (1). Most described their ethnicity as white or Caucasian, 76% were female, 24% male with ages ranging from 16 to 82 and averaging at 43. In terms of occupations the largest group were students followed by retired people and a number of people connected with books and writing; but overall there was a broad spectrum of sectors represented including lawyers (4), doctors (2), scientists (2), call centre workers (2), an accountant and a director of engineering.

80% read several times a day, nearly all read fiction (240) and most read non-fiction (197) with the most popular subjects being history (165), historical fiction (163), biography (144) and science fiction (130). Reading material was mainly obtained from bookstores (211), online (202) or from friends and family (125), but a significant number of respondents also used libraries (159).

Most people read at home (241) and a significant number in public places (151). The majority of respondents (54%) had not joined an offline reading group and most (60%) found that it wasn't easy to find local groups to join to discuss favourite books and authors with. Reading groups were viewed as welcoming by 33% but only sometimes welcoming by 59% of the respondents. 46% said they were members of non-book related online

forums. These varied from music, sport, gaming and television discussion sites to gardening, food, religion, ancestry and work related sites.

Most respondents (77%) have been members of online forums for more than a year and 50% are members of between two and five groups. A majority joined to share ideas, followed by those who sought to learn more about the book and/or author. 40% of respondents said that they had joined to meet other people. 81% of respondents said the site\ s gave them new insights into the books they read.

A third of respondents visited the site more than once a day with only 2% visiting once a month. Comments were posted occasionally by 56%, frequently by 30% and never by 14%. Topics were initiated occasionally 60% of the time, frequently 8% and never by 33% of the respondents. 84% would describe themselves as fans of particular genres or authors and 24% had written stories or fanfiction themselves.

Over half of respondents said they found it easy to find people online with whom to discuss favourite books or authors. Over half found the online groups welcoming but 45% said this was only sometimes the case.

The reason given predominantly for being more able to discuss subjects online was writing rather than speaking (146), informality (106), anonymity (91) and having your say uninterrupted (89). Other reasons given were that friends did not share an interest in literature or did not have the same taste in literature. Others mentioned the convenience of access for people busy with work or those who lived away from friends in addition to the ability to read a variety of opinions.

The most commonly owned digital device was the laptop (73%), followed by the desktop computer (57%), the smartphone (40%), the ereader (39%) and the tablet (21%). The preferred format for reading was the printed book (77%), followed by the ebook (21%), and the audiobook (2%) with no respondents choosing the webpage.

The Next Steps

The survey has provided some interesting insights into who is using online book forums and reading groups, and also why they are choosing this means of sharing their experiences. It also provided some valuable data on reading habits, and what kind of electronic devices (if any) readers are using. As well as the online survey, we held two focus groups in April and May canvassing opinions from students, librarians, offline book club members, teachers and writers. We also invited several leading academics to take part in a workshop to discuss our findings and possible future directions for the research. So as the project comes to a close this summer, we will be preparing a report bringing together these different strands of the research and providing recommendations for future research in this area.

