

Recreational Book Reading among Secondary School Students in Bangladesh: Access, Trends, and Issues

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Abstract

Recreational reading has been linked to significant benefits for adolescents' cognitive, emotional, and academic development. However, very little is known from the existing research literature on how Bangladeshi adolescents perceive and experience their reading of recreational texts. This study explored the access to and trends of recreational reading among the secondary school students of Bangladesh. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected through a survey questionnaire from 691 students (56% female) across three secondary schools and two Dakhil Madrasahs (Islamic secondary schools). Findings revealed that adolescents have a generally positive perception of recreational reading, with 87% valuing it, but only 38% actively engaging in it. The fiction genre remains a strong trend in pleasure reading. Similar results were found in the quantitative analysis, with top preferences including comics and jokes (56.2%), sci-fi (33.7%), horror (41.7%), and short stories (54.8%). The recommendations include expanding infrastructural and service facilities in libraries, both at schools and other social institutions; integrating recreational reading of books into the education system; and launching a national campaign of reading and reading programs in urban and rural areas. The study further suggests governments intervene in policy, funding, and implementation of the library movement.

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Introduction

Recreational reading, also known as pleasure reading, leisure reading, free voluntary reading, or independent reading, is a self-selected, independent activity motivated by personal interest and enjoyment, serving various personal and social purposes occur both within and outside of school settings (International Reading Association, 2014). An increasing number of studies (Cress & Holm, 1998; Mar et al., 2009; Serafini & Moses, 2014) indicate that recreational reading benefits children and adolescents by broadening their horizons, increasing awareness, and fostering imagination, creativity, and critical thinking. Research by Serafini and Moses (2014) further shows that reading for pleasure

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creates opportunities for thoughtful discussions and stimulates curiosity and imagination. Recreational reading not only enhances students' intellectual capabilities but also supports their emotional well-being. Cress and Holm (1998) found that literature, particularly realistic picture books and stories can evoke feelings of empathy. In addition to promoting emotional and cognitive development, recreational reading has also been used to support academic achievement (Clark & Hawkins, 2011; Whitten et al., 2016). Teachers have reported that recreational reading materials can strengthen students' understanding of lessons and help them connect textbook topics to real-world phenomena (Rodgers et al., 2007).

Children's literature is generally conceptualized as literature written specifically for children and young readers (Junaid, 2017). It often includes ideas, relationships, and language considered simple, with the intention of imparting moral lessons. Livingston and Brown (2017) highlight that children's literature encompasses stories, poetry, rhymes, folk tales, and drama designed with children as the primary audience. However, as readers grow older, their cognitive, emotional, and social needs evolve—leading to the emergence of adolescent literature as a distinct category. Adolescent literature, particularly in works of fiction, often explores how power relations in society shape individual lives (Trites, 2001). In contrast, children's literature typically focuses on the child's sense of self and personal empowerment (Trites, 1998). The reading preferences of adolescent readers vary widely and can be broadly categorized into fiction and non-fiction. Each of these categories can be further divided into multiple genres. Fiction includes genres such as mystery, thriller, horror, crime/detective, romance, poetry, and realistic teen fiction (Loan & Shah, 2017). Non-fiction genres include history, biography, autobiography, and self-help (Loan & Shah, 2017).

Research (Gao et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2015; Saha, 2022) consistently demonstrates that students' access to diverse literature is a crucial long-term factor in their academic achievement. Furthermore, a growing body of research (Hoyne & Egan, 2019; Pearson, 2015; Ring et al., 2016) have sought to examine how reading literature contributes to adolescents' overall development, including personal, and social growth. Studies (Clark & Hawkins, 2011; Whitten et al., 2016) show that recreational reading contributes to the multidimensional cognitive, emotional, and social development of adolescents. The following table presents a summary of the diverse impacts of recreational reading on adolescents, based on studies conducted between 1975 and 2025.

Table 1: Impact of Diverse Recreational Reading Materials on Adolescents

Reference	Findings
Lois (1975)	- Literature featuring fictional heroes helps adolescents further develop their empathy.
Trites (1998)	- Literature reveals how social forces shape individual lives, offering insights into societal structures, roles, and their own identities within a broader social context.
Cress & Holm (1998)	- Realistic picture books and stories inspire empathy.
Hefflin & Barksdale-Ladd (2001)	-Reading helps connecting cultural understanding

Baker (2003)	- Reading a variety of literature and informational texts enhances understanding and stimulates interest.
Mar et al., (2009)	-Exposure to fiction positively correlated with social skills, skills of empathy and social understanding
Serafini & Moses (2014)	- Children's Literature as a medium for reflective discussions - Children's Literature Fosters Imagination and Inquiry.
Livingston & Brown (2017)	-Children prefer reading wide range of literature
Lenhart et al., (2023)	- Cumulative reading of modern classic literature is positively associated with the development of prosocial behavior and improved social adjustment over time.
Tlou & Snyman (2020)	- Leisure reading enhances vocabulary and literacy, self-development, and provide entertainment and relaxation for young adult

These findings from global literature indicate that reading literature has many positive effects from developing socio-cultural understanding, social skills, and empathy to stimulate their curiosity and sense of imagination. Such insights can broaden adolescents' worldview and foster diverse abilities, positively impacting their educational development. Along with different types of reading materials, the family environment and parents' involvement in academic and recreational reading make children advanced readers (Morni & Sahari, 2013).

Theoretical Framework of Reading for Pleasure

The Open University, UK, has developed a practice framework for pleasure reading that integrates findings from global research literature with empirical evidence derived from literacy programs in London. This framework underscores the dynamic interplay among individual autonomy, social interaction, and responsive adult support in cultivating sustained literacy engagement (Cremin et al., 2023). The framework outlines five interconnected core components: (1) access to diverse texts, (2) dedicated time, (3) an individually oriented approach, (4) a socially oriented approach, and (5) a responsive adult environment. Access to diverse texts entails providing young readers with culturally relevant materials that reflect their identities and interests, while dedicated time ensures informal, unstructured opportunities for immersive reading. Individually oriented approaches emphasize learner agency, self-efficacy, and personalized feedback to cultivate positive reader-writer identities. Socially oriented approaches foster literacy communities through peer discussions, collaborative projects, and shared reading experiences. Finally, responsive adult involvement entails scaffolding literacy practices, adapting to learners' evolving needs, and nurturing supportive relationships. Grounded in evidence from international research (e.g. Cremin et al., 2014) and adapted for diverse contexts, this holistic framework positions literacy development as both an individual pursuit and a socially embedded practice

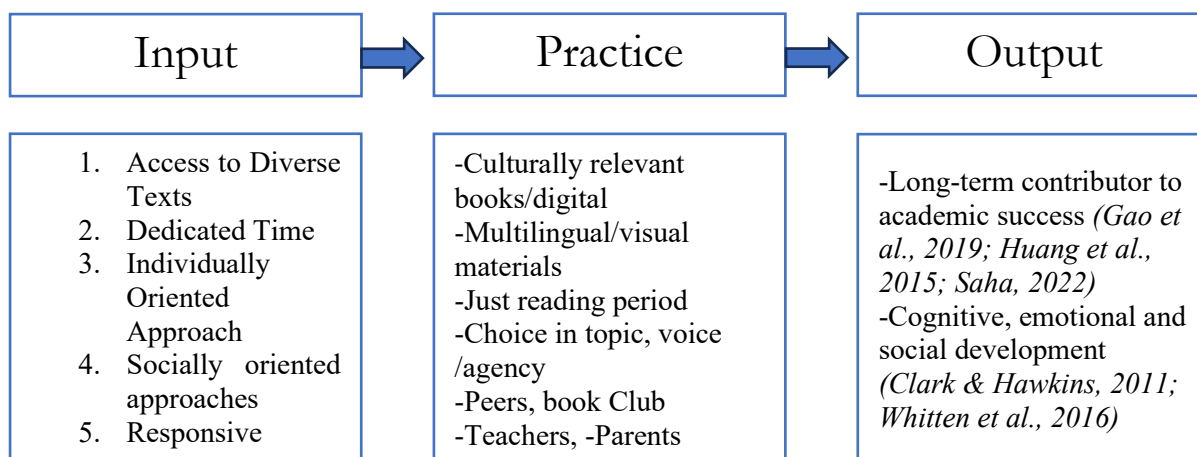


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework for pleasure reading adopted from Cremin et al. (2023)

The framework challenges traditional, assessment-driven literacy instruction by advocating for environments where pleasure and agency are paramount. It aligns with sociocultural theories (Vygotsky, 1978) by positioning literacy as a socially mediated practice, while incorporating findings from the *Literacy Special Initiative* (2020–2023) that highlight the transformative power of adult role modeling and text-rich spaces.

Recreational book reading among secondary school students in Bangladesh is shaped by a complex interplay of accessibility, sociocultural influences, motivational drivers, and systemic barriers. Further, despite global evidence highlighting the benefits of reading diverse types of literature, little is known about the advantages of reading supplementary materials alongside school textbooks in the context of Bangladesh. Studies in the context of Bangladesh have found that a focus on academic reading often leads to consequences such as rote memorization and inadequate reading skills, which hinder the achievement of quality education (MoE, 2010; Salahuddin et al., 2020). A study on primary students in Bangladesh found that parents prioritized textbook reading over recreational reading (Saha, 2022). The study also highlighted a preference for a 'listening society' rooted in oral storytelling over a reading-oriented culture (Mngoma, 1997; cited in Saha, 2022). Another study revealed that teachers tend to encourage students to read textbooks rather than engage in additional reading materials for recreational purposes (Salahuddin et al., 2020). Furthermore, the practice of buying storybooks was limited, and many students lacked access to additional reading materials both at home and at school (Saha, 2022; Salahuddin et al., 2020). Drawing on global theories and local empirical studies, this research seeks to understand to what extent Bangladeshi adolescents is reading out-of-school literature and, if they do so, what types and trends of reading habits they have and how accessible that literature is to them.

Methodology

The study employed a quantitative method. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to collect quantitative data. With regards to sampling, a non-probability technique was used. A total of 691 students (girls, 56%) age ranges from 12-15 years, participated from 5 secondary level educational institutes. Out of 5 schools 2 Dakhil Madrasahs (Islamic religious secondary schools) and 3 mainstream secondary schools. The students were from

Grade VII and Grade IX. Informed consent was properly obtained from all student participants involved in the study. As they are minors, additional consent was also secured from the school authority representing the participating students.

Findings

Reading perceived as highly valued activity

A high number of participants (87%) found reading valuable. The number of male readers was apparently ahead of the number of female students. Around 52.15% of male students responded positively to pleasure reading. On the other hand, 47.84% of female students read books for pleasure.

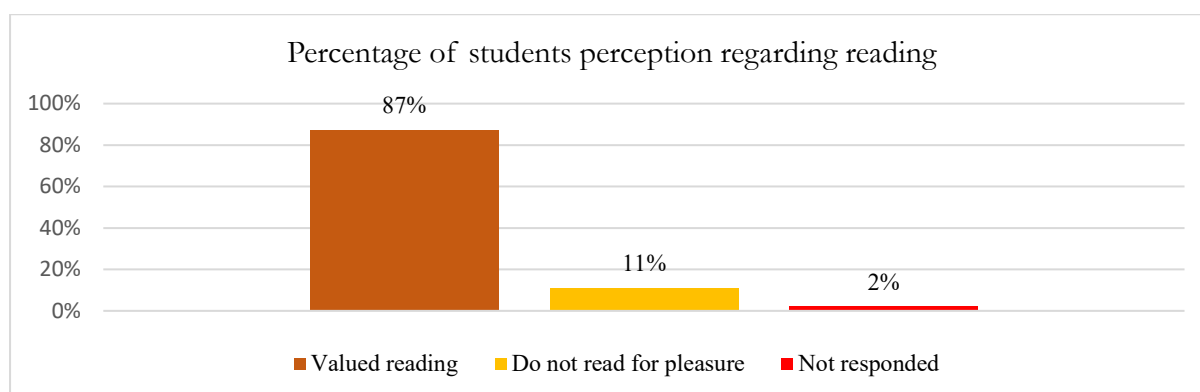


Figure 2: Percentage of students who valued reading

Higher-grade students have higher reading habit of pleasure than lower grade

Considering the total number of students, grade IX students read more for enjoyment than grade VII students. According to the data, 323 students in grade IX (89.23%) had the habit of pleasure reading. On the other hand, 281 (85.41%) individuals in grade VII participated in leisure reading.

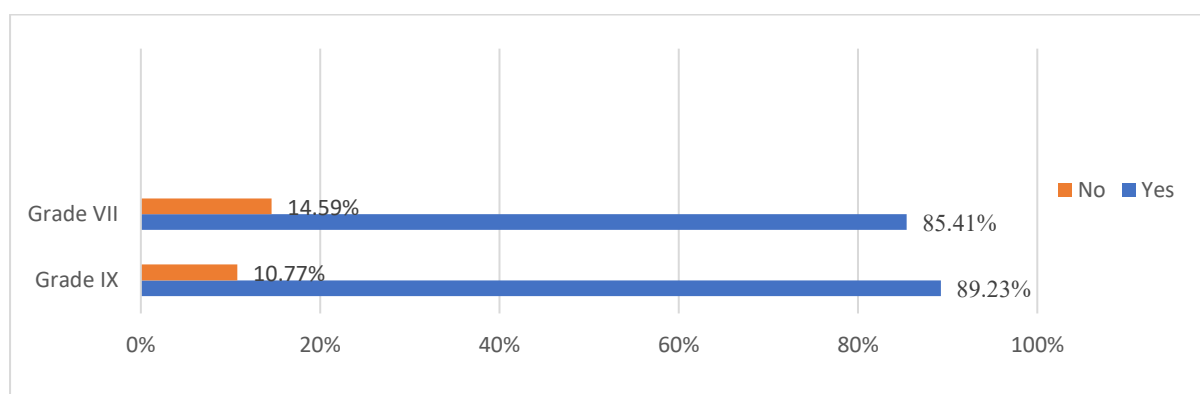


Figure 3: Percentage of students reading for pleasure according to grade

Fiction appears as most preferred storybooks

The study looked at the genres that students read the most. The study revealed story reading as the favorite sort for over half (55%) of the respondents. On the other hand, essay-type readings came in as the least preferred books, with only 5.8% of responses. After

stories, 41.70% and 37% of attendees loved to read horror and jokes, respectively. One-fifth (25.8%) of students liked adventure literature. Aside from these, 19.4% of students selected comics as their favorite genre.

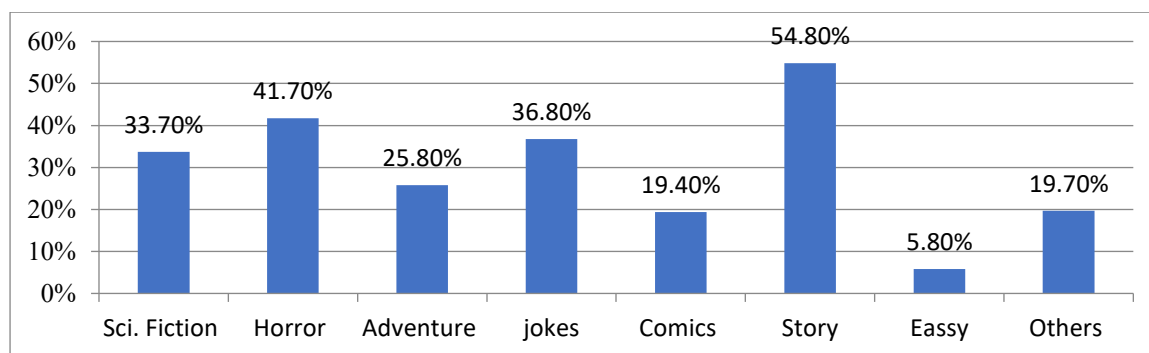


Figure 4: Percentage of students' preferred types of books

Lower-grade students read higher number of books than upper -grade students

The study found a range between 0 and 16 regarding the number of books students read monthly. The mean score of 3.06 shows that students read around three books in a month. Though the standard deviation was 2.72, the mean quantity of book reading differed roughly 2 (two) from the mean value. Male participants read more books in a month than female readers. However, on average, male students read almost three books, whereas approximately two books are read by female students every month. Students in grade VII often read more books per month than students in grade IX. However, the difference was not statistically significant. Students in grade IX read almost three (2.8) books a month on average, compared to 3.3 books for students in grade VII. Furthermore, data indicated that secondary school students read more books (3.38) than madrasa students (2.54).

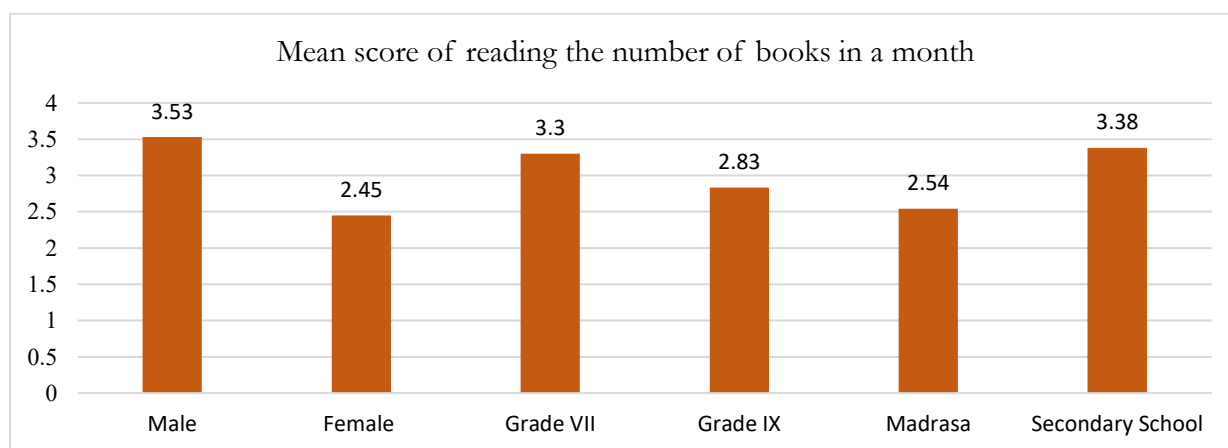


Figure 5: Mean score of reading the number of books in a month by different categories of students

Purchasing is the main source of recreational books

The data revealed that students collected books from three specific sources. Among them, the highest 66.86% of readers bought books for them. On the other hand, only 14.18% of students collect books by borrowing from others, and 11.73% of students have access to

books as gifts. However, only 4.63% of students collect books from other sources than those mentioned.

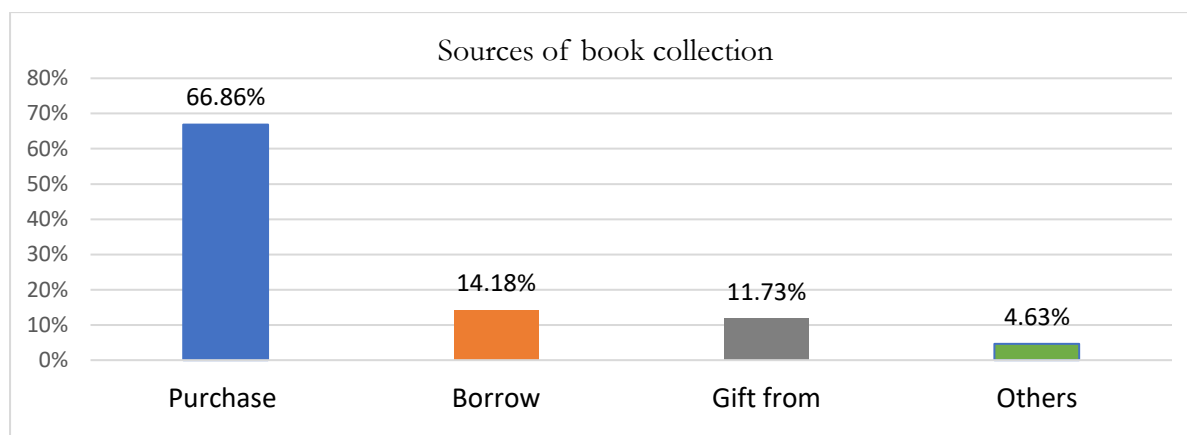


Figure 6: Sources of book collections for recreational reading

Mostly new books were collected by students. The chart above depicts that 88% collected new books while only 10.1% read old books. Approximately 2% had no answer regarding this.

Reading environment in families

The study looked at how recreational readings were being supported at home and school. Data found that almost three-quarters (72.4%) of the total participants mentioned their family members had the habit of book reading. On the contrary, almost 27% had no practice of book reading in their family. Besides, 0.7% refrained from responding. In addition, around 65% owned bookshelves. On the other hand, 35% of students did not have bookshelves of their own at home.

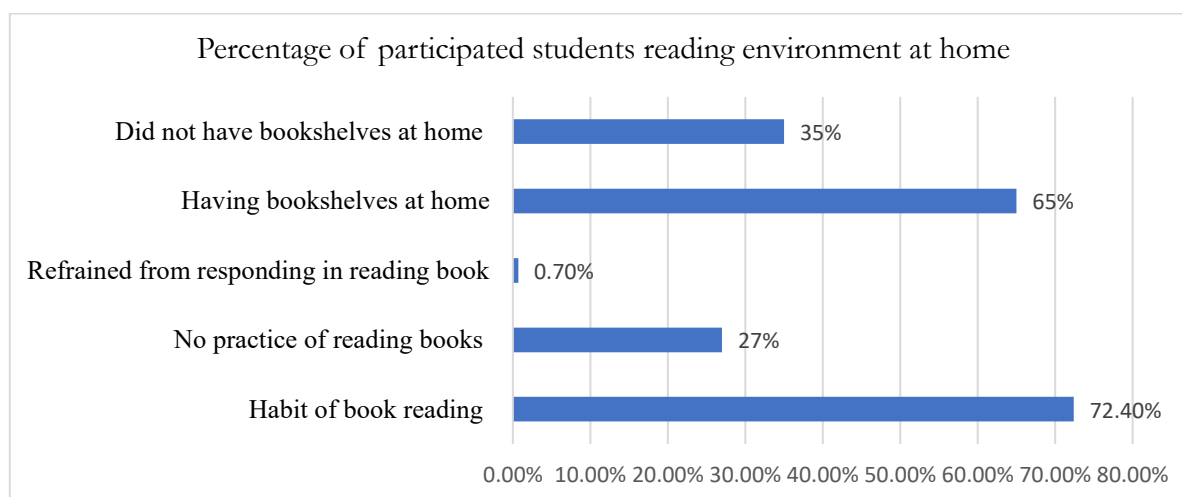


Figure 7: Percentage of participated students reading environment at home

School library and its limited use

The school library is one of the significant sources of recreational books for students. The study found that more than half (56.7%) of the students mentioned having a library in their school. The rest of the students (43.30%) stated that they did not have any libraries at their school. Interestingly, even though more than half of the schools have libraries, only 44.90% of participants mentioned that they could borrow books from the library.

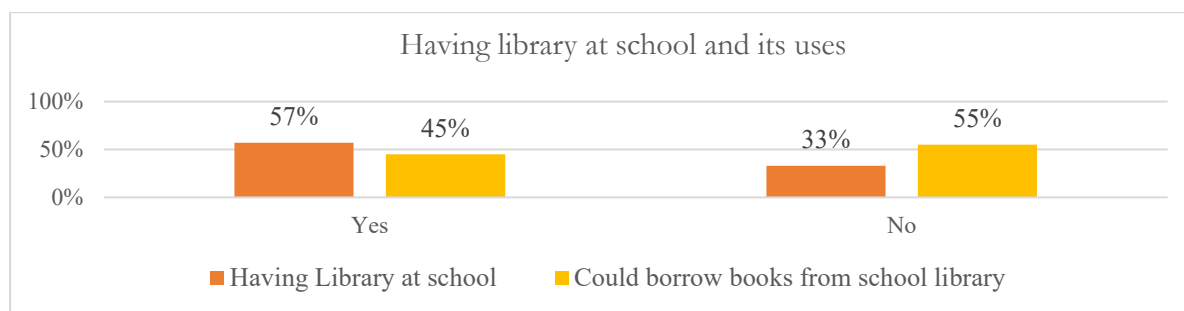


Figure 8: Having library at school and its uses

However, in practice, the scenario appeared even more disappointing. In response to the question of how many books they had borrowed the week before data collection, 84.10% of participants responded with no book at all. Students lacked the practice of borrowing books from libraries. The number of students who borrowed books was trivial. Among those who borrowed books, 7.4% of them collected at least one book weekly. An almost equal percentage of students (7%) took two books per week. Only 1.5% of students combined borrowed three or more books in a week.

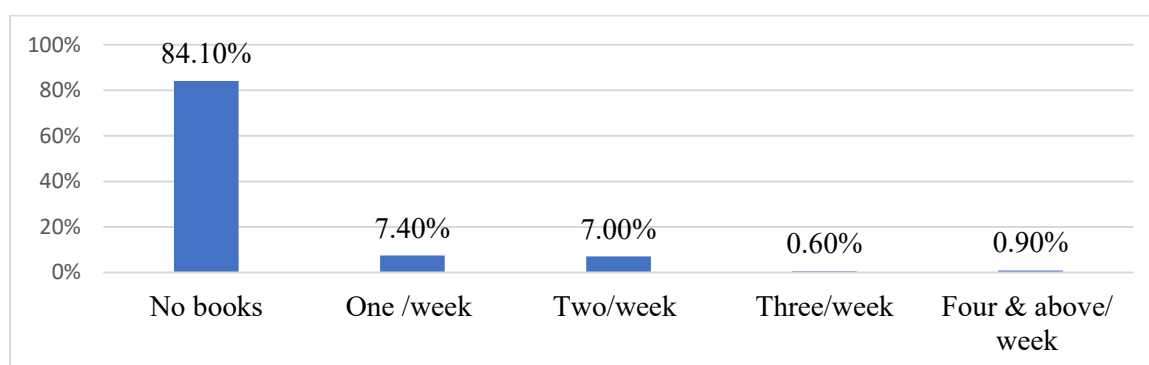


Figure 9: Frequency of borrowing books per week

Despite having libraries, almost all participating schools did not allocate time for library classes. Only 7% of students had library classes. However, a large portion of students (89%) did not get any library classes.

In addition, the practice of exchanging books was noticeable in this study. The number of students who exchanged books was more than double compared to those who did not. Approximately 66% of readers exchanged books with others, whereas around 29% had no such practice. Besides, 4.4% had no response.

Multiple sources to receive information regarding recreational books

The study found that students received information about books from a variety of sources. Data revealed that 32.4% of students were taught about books by their friends. Surprisingly, only 3.5% of students got information from their teachers, which was the least chosen source. Newspapers held the second-lowest position since around 4% collected information from newspapers. About one-fourth (25.8%) learned from the Internet and 7.4% from family members. Moreover, close to 11% of readers obtained information on books through other means. However, there were no responses from about 17% of the learners.

Preferable leisure activities

Along with recreational reading, students' favorite activities were also investigated in this study. Data found the top three favorite activities of participants and almost 45.3% of students mentioned regarding sports. Around 38% of students put reading on their top three activity lists. Interestingly, only 7.2% preferred to play video games, and 3.2% watched TV. Aside from these, 1.5% had other activities on their most-liked list. Nearly 5% were reluctant to answer.

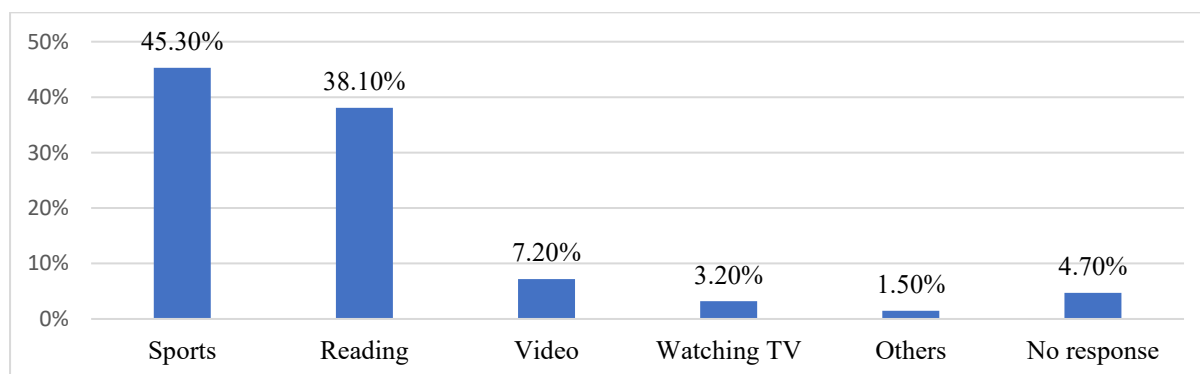


Figure 10: Top three favorite activities of students

Preferred language for reading recreation books

The data revealed information concerning the preferred language of readers. Four-fifths of the population reads books written in Bangla, while just about 12% reads books in English language. In addition, 4.2% of attendees preferred books in other languages. A trivial number of students (2.8) had no response regarding this question.

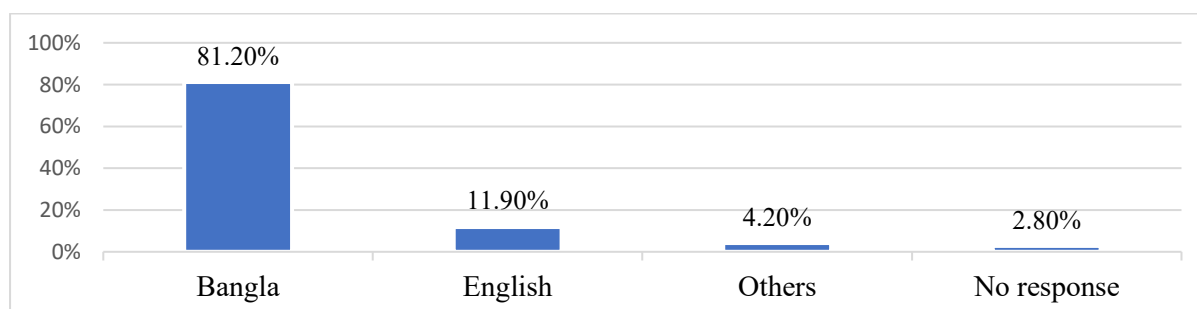


Figure 11: Preferred language for recreation books

Digital version was preferable for reading

Between two forms of books, including digital and physical, readers chose the digital version over the physical version. Quantities of virtual book readers were nearly doubled compared to physical book readers. Approximately 60% of students read digital books, while 33.5% preferred hard copy. Besides, 6.3% did not give their opinion.

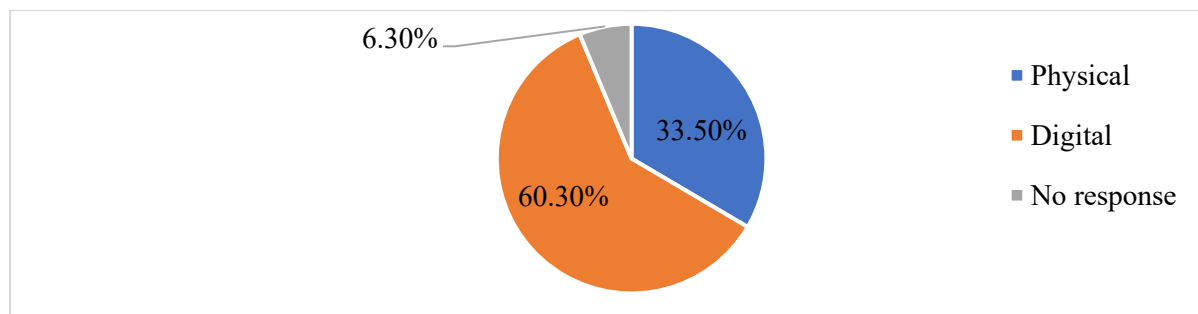


Figure 12: Digital forms preferred by students to read books

Stimulating areas of selecting books

According to the data, around 37.6% of students considered topic or subject as a criterion while choosing books to read. About 11.3% of learners pondered the name or title of the books. Apart from these, 7.5% considered cover, and 2.7% chose new books. Interestingly, only 6.4% considered prices for selecting books, even though participants were students. On the other hand, almost 35% of students had no response.

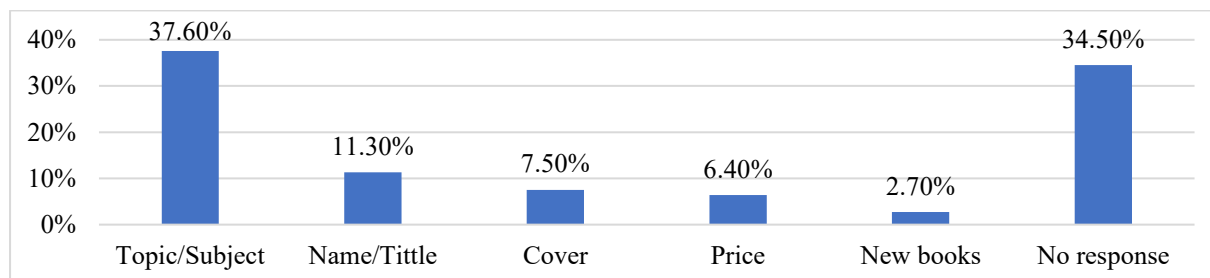


Figure 13: Considerations of choosing book

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the perception, access, and trends of recreational book reading among the adolescents of Bangladesh.

Positive Perceptions about recreational reading

This study found that the general perception of adolescents' recreational book reading was positive. A very high percentage (87%) of students, both male and female, showed that they preferred reading for pleasure compared to not reading. In addition, reading is the second (38%) most favored activity among students after sports (45%). These findings suggest that adolescents have a positive perception of reading and prefer to engage in reading alongside playing. Studies (Lee & Yeo, 2014; Mullen, 1998; Soiferman, n.d.) also revealed that a positive attitude towards reading ensures students' passion for reading,

desire to read, and enjoyment of reading. In addition to that, adults have a role to play in boosting positive attitudes and creating a positive environment for reading from a very early age. The present study found that a good number of students (72%) pointed out that their parents had a practice of reading books in their families, and this practice also stimulated students to read with passion (Heaton, 2016; Morrow, 1983).

Limited access to recreational books

Although participants shared that they valued reading, the unfortunate reality is that many of them have limited scope to read books or have access to books at home or school. In addition, physical facilities at home have a positive impact on students' motivation to read as well as cognitive development, as reflected in the study that 65% of the students have bookshelves at home (Bano et al., 2018; Bronfenbrenner & Evan, 2000; Evans et al., 2001; Schmeer & Yoon, 2016). However, the study missed one of the core elements of reading, which is the availability of books at home that stimulate students to read (Morni & Sahari, 2013; Mullis et al., 2017; Park, 2008; Yang et al., 2018). Nonetheless, the reading environment at home and the practices observed there had a significant influence on reading habits among children (Abu-Rabia & Yaari, 2012; Bracken & Fischel, 2008; Weigel et al., 2006).

It was notable that a good number of schools (43%) had no libraries. However, the government had instructions to have a library in every school and have the scope to use that library properly with plenty of reading materials at school (MoE, 2010). Even the schools (57%) who have libraries, around 45% of students could not borrow books from the school library. Despite the National Education Policy 2010 advocating for school libraries and ample reading materials (MoE, 2010), this study unveiled a considerable number of schools lacking libraries, with those equipped often lacking a borrowing culture. Even in 2017, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education (DSHE) issued an order to implement library classes in secondary schools, though this was not properly enforced yet (Dhaka Tribune, 2018; online). This study also found the same findings.

Studies (Bosman et al., 2008; Elliott, 2007) found that the library plays a significant role in promoting and encouraging recreational reading through the collections of books and also collaborations with others in the library. Additionally, both the school or academic library and the public library work together to foster pleasure reading. This study's findings reflect that collecting books from the library is not an established practice followed at schools, which was also reflected in other studies (Rahman, 2016; Tasneem, 2017) that the unavailability of sufficient materials and good service hamper the use of the library where it exists.

The study highlighted a notable absence of the culture of sharing or swapping books among individuals. It was found that adolescents primarily rely on new books, often provided by their parents, for their reading material. This dependence poses a significant obstacle to fostering a culture of recreational reading. Moreover, the socio-economic status of parents plays a crucial role in this dynamic, as it depends on their ability to procure an ample supply of books for their children (Begum, 2007; Henning, 2013; Melhuish et al., 2001). Access to libraries and other communal resources further compounds this issue. As

such, many parents face constraints in providing sufficient reading material for their children. To address this challenge, students must have unrestricted access to books without financial barriers. This can be facilitated through initiatives allowing students to borrow books free of charge from both community libraries and school libraries.

Adolescents preferred fiction as recreational reading

This study explored the reading preferences of adolescents in Bangladesh and found similar findings to some other previous studies. The quantitative analysis of the data found in this study revealed that the top favorites were comics and jokes (56.2%), sci-fi (33.7%), horror (41.7%), and short stories (54.8%). Another study (Alam & Rahman, 2021) found that students under 15 years old (secondary school students, which is similar to this study) choose science fiction, romance, drama, and horror as their favorite types of books. Fiction emerged as the preferred genre among adolescents in Bangladesh, showcasing its positive influence on creativity and imagination, especially in this demographic (Cress & Holm, 1998; Serafini & Moses, 2014; Mar et al., 2009). Additionally, research by Moje et al. (2008) emphasized how recreational reading strengthens interpersonal connections through shared enjoyment. The study further indicated that fiction supports fostering adolescents' creativity. In Bangladesh, despite students have a strong affinity for reading, particularly fiction, there are inadequate opportunities and resources for them to engage in leisure reading such as reading fictional reading materials. Rabbani (2006) also highlighted the dearth of leisure activities for adolescents in Bangladesh, particularly a scarcity of supplementary storybooks beyond textbooks for recreational reading. Nevertheless, schools, families, and communities possess the potential to instill a culture of leisure reading at every level of society. By providing access to diverse books and encouraging imaginative exploration, stakeholders can nurture adolescents' creativity and broaden their horizons.

However, the smaller number of participants falling under non-fiction categories could be the result of limited predefined options provided in the survey questionnaire. For example, instead of only one non-fiction option (i.e., an essay) in the questionnaire, a variety of popular sub-genres of non-fiction (e.g., biography, self-help, popular science, etc.) could have yielded a different result. The overall recreational reading practice among secondary school students appeared low, which the results of several factors. One of the reasons is that students are overburdened by the examination system, and parents encourage reading only for examination purposes (Saha, 2023). The study further marked that there is an inadequate systematic provision of recreational reading materials through school libraries, book reading programs, and community library services.

The study investigated students' preferred language for recreational reading. It showed that a small but considerable proportion of students select English as their preferred language for leisure reading. Although the number was small, this preference might explain the limited access to international publications, cost management, and the opportunity to read additional material for pleasure. Research (USAID, 2017) also revealed that age-appropriate and innovative interventions considering storybooks, sports-based program, psychosocial approaches, and ICT based curricula and materials needed to be introduced for adolescents for the effective development of their physical and mental health.

Recommendations

- As students have a positive attitude towards reading, a reading culture needs to be ensured in every social institution, like families, schools, and communities, so that all can have an interest in this skill with enthusiasm.
- The school library (infrastructure and services) facilities need to be strengthened. Local education officers need to make sure government instruction is being followed. It is also important to enrich the book collections of the school library with the scope of library class in the secondary educational institutions.
- This study recommends ensuring both fiction and non-fiction books are available in the surroundings of adolescents, although they prefer to read fiction books more.
- The culture of sharing or swapping books among individuals would promote recreational reading more effectively, and it might be a relief for parents to buy new books and a chance to share their (adolescent) feelings and experiences with their peers. Also, reduce their dependency on new books.
- Technological advancement has made various gadgets popular among adolescents. This is also reducing book reading time among adolescents. It is important to embrace technological advancement and associate it with reading by producing e-books and other digital mediums to make books more relevant to the changing times.
- There should be a common instruction all over the country to arrange school-based book fairs in every school. The Ministry of Education, in association with the public library, can initiate a school-based book fair every year. This fair can offer special discounts to students and the school library. On the one hand, this will enable students to avail books from their doorstep, and on the other hand, publishers can widen their market reach.
- The study recommends strengthening the public library network around the country. In addition to school-based libraries, the nationwide public library network could be made more user-friendly and welcoming for adolescents. Making books and library services available for students free of charge will increase the likelihood of increasing their reading habits.
- A national book-reading campaign would be necessary to emphasize the importance of reading books. It will not only inspire adolescents but also motivate other stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and administrators to offer necessary assistance to adolescents.

Conclusion

This study highlights the critical gap between Bangladeshi adolescents' positive perceptions of recreational reading and their actual engagement with it. While 87% of surveyed students valued recreational reading, only 38% actively participated in it, indicating systemic barriers such as limited access to books, inadequate library facilities, and a predominant focus on academic textbooks. The findings underscore the need for multi-level interventions, including strengthening school and public library infrastructure, integrating recreational reading into curricula, and leveraging digital platforms to align with adolescents' technological preferences. A coordinated national effort—involving government policy reforms, community-based book-sharing initiatives, and annual schoolbook fairs—could

bridge this gap, fostering a sustainable reading culture that supports cognitive, emotional, and academic growth.

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