

## Book Format Preferences of Children and Teenagers

Georgi Alexandrov

**Abstract:** This article examines the reading practices among the youngest readers in the age groups of children and teenagers. The main purpose of the study is to identify their preferences concerning printed and electronic books. The extensive use of electronic devices by these two age groups could lead to the hypothesis of a steady transition from paper to screen in their reading attitudes. The present research aims to verify whether this hypothesis is objectively valid for the youngest readers within the children's age group (up to 12 years) and the juvenile age group (from 13 to 18 years old). The territorial coverage includes the United States and key European book markets during the second decade of our century. The main findings are surprising. Children's and juvenile literature is one of the weakest categories of the e-book market. The analysis of the reading attitudes surveys and the market data presented here rejects the hypothesis that a transition from paper to screen is taking place in book consumption by children and teenagers. Their reading practices reflect a tendency of integrated use of both print and electronic book formats. This article formulates the conclusion that print and electronic formats complement each other and thus enlarge and enrich the book reading practices of these two age groups.

**Keywords:** book publishing, reading practices, book market, print books, e-books

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The extensive use of electronic devices by children and teenagers creates the general impression that there is a very radical change in the reading practices of these two age groups. From a scientific perspective, a clear distinction between the different types of content consumed electronically is required. The time youngest readers spend reading on screen is related to various materials such as messages, blogs, forums, websites, tweets, song lyrics, e-papers, and e-magazines. E-books are just one of many media formats. Therefore, the changing reading habits of children and teenagers raise the question of how specifically the reading of books is affected by the digitization of reading in general.

This study focuses on the reading practices of children and teenagers as regards their preferences for print books and e-books as media formats of various types of content and genres. In the present examination of reading practices, audiobooks remain beyond the study area. The research target group is the young population up to 18 years old, which is often called the second generation of the “digital natives.”<sup>1</sup>

The time frame is the period between 2012 and 2019, although some facts and studies from earlier years are also included because the digitization of book reading is a process with a longer history. The territorial coverage includes the biggest English-speaking markets – the United States and the United Kingdom, and the largest European book market, which is in Germany. In order to support the comparative analysis or to illustrate some of the findings, the article refers to empirical data from a few other European markets as well: Spain, France, Sweden, Italy, and the Netherlands. The Bulgarian book market is not presented in terms of sales data because official sources are not available, but local studies on reading attitudes are cited in accordance with similar studies from other countries.

The main purpose of the study is to identify the preferences between print book and e-book formats among children and teenagers. It aims to verify the hypothesis that the shift from paper to screen in the reading attitudes of these age groups is also valid as regards book consumption.

In order to achieve this purpose the following tasks were completed:

- Outlining the market context and the reading attitudes from the perspective of book format preferences.
- Investigating the specific reading attitudes of children and teenagers with focus on the preference for print books or e-books.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Helsper and Rebecca Enyon. [“Digital Natives: Where Is the Evidence?”](#) June 2010. *British Educational Research Journal* 36, no. 3 (June 2010): 504.

- Analyzing the sales data of print books and e-books on the children's and teenage book markets.
- Identifying the mutual dependence between reading attitudes and book format market performances.

The goal was to study the implications of the preferences for print and electronic formats on book consumption, rather than to examine the psychological reasons for these preferences. The reading attitudes of children and teenagers were studied as key factors for the market performance of print books and e-books. Therefore, the empirical data presented here has been gathered mainly from surveys on reading attitudes and official reports on book sales. The study applies the method of comparative analysis across markets and age segments.

### **The Book Market Context**

The launch of Stephen King's novel *Riding the Bullet* in electronic format online in the year 2000 marked the start of the market success of e-books. Although this experiment has shown the potential of the electronic book format, the real commercial expansion of e-books was triggered by Amazon's reading device, Kindle, launched in 2007. The penetration of e-books in the largest book markets in the following few years was measured by a growth rate in two- and three-digit figures. In 2012, for example, the revenue of e-book sales grew by 45% in the United States, 134% in the United Kingdom, and 191% in Germany. The new book format provoked enthusiasm among publishers and book retailers, especially when online trade, dominated by Amazon, proved to be its appropriate sales channel. The authors noticed the possibility for faster access to their customers. The "early adopters"<sup>2</sup> among the readers got excited by the technological features of the new format. At the same time, the e-book market expansion caused concerns about the future of print books, which were losing sales in the beginning of the second decade of the century in the United States and other key markets. "E-books versus print books" became a catchphrase illustrating the perceived antagonism between the new electronic format and the traditional paper one. The Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2014–2018 report of PricewaterhouseCoopers formulated the prognosis that e-book sales would permanently grow, while the sales of print books would

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<sup>2</sup> The notion has been introduced by Everett Rogers in his work "Diffusion of Innovations" regarding the people eager to adopt new technologies.

continuously drop. Thus, e-books were foreseen to outsell print books in the United States in 2017, and in the United Kingdom in 2018.<sup>3</sup>

The reality turned out to be different. The US book market went in an opposite direction from the forecasts. Over six consecutive years print book unit sales grew permanently from 591 million in 2012 to 695 million in 2018. The e-book unit sales decreased from 242 million in 2013 to 162 million in 2017. On the trade market (fiction, non-fiction, children's, juvenile, and religious literature), print books increased by 4% in 2018, reaching 5 881 billion USD. The same rate, but in a negative direction, marked the drop of e-book sales down to 1,016 billion USD. In the period 2013–2018, the revenue shares in the trade market of these two book formats followed opposite trends: an increase from 72% to 75% for print books and a decrease from 21% to 13% for e-books. Confirming the same trend on the trade book market, print book revenue increased by 2.5%, while e-book revenue dropped by 4% in the first half of 2019 compared to the same period in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

In 2017, for the first time, self-published book titles registered with an ISBN in the United States exceeded one million. In 2018, their number grew by 40% and reached 1 678 million. The large majority of these titles were print books, which marked a peak of 1 547 million after a continuous year-on-year growth from 236 thousand in 2012.<sup>5</sup> For the same period the self-published e-book titles continuously decreased from 158 to 130 thousand. Thus, in 2018, compared to 2012, the print books share of all self-published titles with an ISBN increased from 60% to 92%, while the e-books share declined from 40% to 8%.<sup>6</sup> The statistical data clearly illustrates the increasing preference of American self-publishing authors for the print format.

The book market trends in the United Kingdom also developed in an unexpected direction. Physical books<sup>7</sup> have performed better on the British trade market. In terms of revenue, books in a physical format have grown by 16%, while digital books (e-books and audiobooks) have dropped by 5% in the period 2014–2018. Physical books have sustainably kept their dominant position on the British home book market (export and license deals

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<sup>3</sup> Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2014 - 2018. PricewaterhouseCoopers. 2014. <https://www.pwc.com/gx/en>

<sup>4</sup> "AAP StatShot: Trade Book Publisher Revenue Increased by 4.6% in 2018." *Association of American Publishers*. 12 February 2019.; AAP StatShot: "Publisher Revenue at \$6 Billion for First Six Months of 2019." *Association of American Publishers*. 28 August 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Bowker self-publishing report 2017. Bowker. 2018. <http://www.bowker.com>

<sup>6</sup> "Self-Publishing in the United States, 2013-2018. Print and Ebooks." Bowker 2019. <https://media2.proquest.com/documents/bowker-selfpublishing-report.2019.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> The UK market statistics divide book formats into physical (print books plus e-books and audiobooks on a physical cartridge) and digital (e-books and audiobooks downloads and streaming).

excluded). Their share of the total net revenue varied between 80% (2014 and 2015) and 83% (2017). In 2018, the net revenue ratio between physical books and digital books was 81/19.

The only sales indicator for e-books statistically detached from audiobooks is the online downloads revenue, which decreased by 9% in the five-year period: from 424 million GBP in 2014 to 390 million GBP in 2018.<sup>8</sup>

After the drop in the United States and the United Kingdom, e-book sales revenue decreased for the first time in Germany in 2017. The drop of 1.4% was expected after the growth rate drastically fell from the record 191% in 2012 to 2.6% in 2016. However, e-book sales revenue rose again and reached a 9.3% growth in 2018. The market share of e-books has remained almost the same over the last five years, with a slight increase from 4.3% in 2014 to 5% in 2018.<sup>9</sup> The Spanish e-book market also experienced a decline, although by an insignificant 0.1%, in 2018.<sup>10</sup>

E-book sales kept growing in the other key European markets, although with a small growth rate. Nevertheless, in 2018 the examined book markets remained dominated by print books, which kept high market revenue shares: 75% in the United States (trade market), 81% in the United Kingdom (physical books, trade home market), 89% in Germany, 92% in France, 95% in Spain, and 76% in Sweden. The e-books market position was much weaker: 13% in the United States (trade market), 5% in Germany and Spain, 2% in Sweden. The jointly generated market shares of the two digital formats, e-books and audiobooks, were 19% in the United Kingdom (trade home market) and 8% in France.

### **The Reading Attitudes Context**

In 2010, Ellie Hirschhorn, who at that moment held the position of Chief Digital Officer of the Simon & Schuster media group, predicted that half of the books sold in 2013 would be digital. Four years later, in 2014, she had to admit: “I thought everything was going to change so much more quickly and so much more radically.”<sup>11</sup> The top manager of another publishing giant shared publicly his even more discouraging experience with e-books. Arnaud Nourry, CEO of Hachette Livre, did not sound so optimistic in a 2018 interview:

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<sup>8</sup> *Yearbook 2018*. (London: The Publishers Association, 2019). <https://www.publishers.org.uk/news/releases/2019/pa-publishing-yearbook-2018>.

<sup>9</sup> *Buch und Buchhandel in Zahlen 2019*. (Frankfurt am Main: MVB GmbH, 2019), 25-26.

<sup>10</sup> *Comercio interior del libro en España 2018*. (Madrid: Federación del Gremios de Editores de España, 2019), 43-44. <https://www.federacioneditores.org/documentos.php>

<sup>11</sup> [“From Papyrus to Pixels.”](#) *Economist*. 11 October 2014. [online].

*I think the plateau, or rather slight decline in the US and UK is not going to reverse. It's the limit of the e-book format. [...] We've tried enhanced or enriched e-books – didn't work. We've tried apps, web sites with our content – we have one or two successes among a hundred failures.<sup>12</sup>*

These views illustrate the change in the way e-books are perceived among professionals, starting from very high expectations for the substitution of print books with the new electronic format, but leading to disappointment over the market potential of e-books. Unlike the professionals, print book consumers remained much more attached to traditional reading, according to surveys in several countries. They showed how sustainable reading habits could be.

The annual surveys of the Pew Research Center proved with data the turn of the curve of book consumption among the adult population of the United States. In the period 2011 – 2015, print book consumption dropped from 71% to 63%, but it increased to 65% in 2017 and to 67% in 2018. The consumption of e-books experienced the opposite trend. After a sharp increase from 17% in 2011 to 28% in 2014, it remained flat until 2016, but dropped to 26% in 2018. The consumption of both print books and e-books slightly declined in 2019, to 65% and 25% respectively, mainly because the consumption of audiobooks rose to 20%. The 2019 Pew Research Center survey revealed the sustainability of the reading habits of Americans who have radically preferred only one book format: 37% have read only print books (38% in 2016) and 7% have preferred only e-books and audiobooks (6% in 2016).<sup>13</sup>

Surveys on reading attitudes from the middle of the second decade reflect the revitalization performance of the print book market and the slowdown of e-books sales growth. A 2013 survey found that 62% of 16- to 24-year-old British people preferred the print book format.<sup>14</sup> In 2014, 80% of Spanish people indicated they prefer print books.<sup>15</sup>

The people who have never read an e-book are still much more than the early adopters who moved completely to the new electronic book format. Following recent surveys on key European book markets, those who read only print books are 36% in the United Kingdom (2017), 32% in Germany (2017), 39% in Spain (2018), 68% in Italy (2018), and 52% in the Netherlands (2018). Following the same surveys, the shares of people who read only e-books are considerably lower: 5% in the United Kingdom, 2% in Germany, 6% in Spain, 10% in

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<sup>12</sup> Porter Anderson. [“Are E-books a ‘Stupid Product?’ Hachette CEO Discusses the Format.”](#) *Publishing Perspectives*. 20 February 2018. [online].

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Perrin. [“One-in-five Americans now listen to audiobooks,”](#) *Pew Research Center*. 26 September 2019..

<sup>14</sup> [Liz Bury. “Young adult readers prefer printed to ebooks,”](#) *The Guardian*. [online]. 25 November 2013.

<sup>15</sup> [Barometro de diciembre 2014. No. 3047,](#) (December 2014): 10. Centro de Investigaciones Sociologicas. 2014),10.

Italy, and 3% in the Netherlands.<sup>16</sup> A nation-wide study on reading practices in Bulgaria found that 67% read predominantly on paper, while only 13% read predominantly on an electronic device. Only 5% of those who read electronically use the new technologies for downloading books or other long texts.<sup>17</sup>

A media study in Sweden revealed that the daily media reach of print books in 2018 was 32%, compared to only 3% for e-books.<sup>18</sup> A 2018 survey in the Netherlands showed that 85% had no or minimum reading experience with e-books: the majority, 69%, had never read an e-book, and another 16% had read one or two e-books per year.<sup>19</sup> For the whole period between 2012 and 2017, the number of British people who have ever read an e-book has grown very slightly, from 19% to 20%.<sup>20</sup> In France, the share of people who have already read an e-book is almost at the same level, growing from 20% in 2018 to 22% in 2019.<sup>21</sup> French readers who had bought at least one print book over the previous 12 months have considerably increased: 69% in 2014, 89% in 2017, and 91% in 2019.<sup>22</sup> In Germany, the share of people who intended to read e-books dropped from 35% in 2015 to 32% in 2018.<sup>23</sup>

The survey “Reading Dimensions and Perceptions in the Digital Age,” conducted in Bulgaria in 2018, found a strong preference for reading on paper (72%) in comparison to reading on electronic device (14%). As regards the specific preference for print and electronic book formats, 76% stated they read only or predominantly on paper. No one was reading exclusively e-books, while 24% stated they read books predominantly in electronic format.<sup>24</sup>

A 2019 study of reading attitudes confirmed the preference for the print format among Bulgarian book consumers. More than two thirds of the respondents (69%) indicated they read only (24%) or predominantly (45%) print books, while 9% read predominantly e-books. Not a

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<sup>16</sup> “Do you read more print books or e-books?” *Statista survey*. 2017. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/id739676>; “E-books in Germany.” *Statista*. 2019. [https://www.statista.com/study\\_28632id.e-books-in-germany-statista-dossier](https://www.statista.com/study_28632id.e-books-in-germany-statista-dossier); “Hábitos de Lectura y Compra de Libros en España”. *Federación de Gremios de Editores de España*. 2018. <https://www.federacioneditores.org/lectura-y-compra-de-libros-2018>; “Reading Habits in Italy.” *Statista* 2019. [www.statista.com/study\\_id44635\\_book-reading-habits-in-italy](https://www.statista.com/study_id44635_book-reading-habits-in-italy); “E-book Market in the Netherlands.” *Statista* 2019. <https://www.statista.com/e-book-market-in-the-netherlands>.

<sup>17</sup> [Chitateľski paktiki v Bulgaria. 2014]. Alfa Research. <https://www.abk.bg/page/practices2014>.

<sup>18</sup> *Mediebarometer*. (Göteborg: Nordicom Göteborgs universitet, 2019), 11.

<sup>19</sup> “E-book Market in the Netherlands,” *Statista* 2019. [www.statista.com/e-book-market-in-the-netherlands](https://www.statista.com/e-book-market-in-the-netherlands)

<sup>20</sup> *Online Copyright Infringement Tracker*. March 2017.

<sup>21</sup> 9<sup>o</sup> Baromètre sur les usages du livre numérique – 2019. *Syndicat national de l' édition*. 2019. <https://www.sne.fr/document/barometre-sur-les-usages-du-livre-numerique-sofiasnesgdl-2019/>

<sup>22</sup> Chiffres-clés du secteur de livre. *Ministère de la Culture et la Communication*. <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Livre-et-Lecture/Documentation/Publications/Chiffres-clés-du-secteur-du-livre>.

<sup>23</sup> “E-books in Germany.” *Statista*. 2019. <https://www.statista.com/e-books-in-germany-statista-dossier> Reading Attitudes in Choosing between Printed and Electronic Books

<sup>24</sup> Georgi Alexandrov and Lilia Raycheva. [Chitateľski naglasi pri izboru mejdu pechatni i elektroni knigi]. *Postmodernism problems*, 8, no. 2, 2018, 135 – 151.

single respondent read only e-books. Asked to make a forecast of their reading practices in a ten-year period, most of the respondents confirmed they would read only (8%) or predominantly (34%) print books. One tenth of the respondents expect to read only (1%) or predominantly (9%) e-books.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Children's and Juvenile Book Market**

The sales statistics from the US market reflect the low product suitability of e-books for children and juvenile literature. The revenue share of e-books from the total children's and juvenile market in the United States dropped from 8.6% in 2012 to 3.3% in 2016. Almost 90% of the units of the children's and juvenile books sold in 2016 were in print format.<sup>26</sup> The e-book share of the total number of units sold on the children's and juvenile market in 2015 was 11% in the fiction and only 2% in the non-fiction segment. In comparison, e-books had a share of 60% of the adult fiction market.<sup>27</sup> The decline of e-book sales on the US market in 2015 was incomparably higher for the children's and juvenile category (43.3%) compared to the 9.5% for the adult e-books.<sup>28</sup>

The big difference in format suitability for juvenile fiction was identified on the British market, too. A study from 2016 revealed that the electronic format took half of the adult fiction, but only 4% of the juvenile fiction market.<sup>29</sup> The sales revenue of children's and juvenile digital books (e-books and audiobooks) on the home market in the United Kingdom was permanently falling from the peak of 19 million GBP in 2014 to 10 million GBP in 2018. In comparison, physical children's and juvenile books generated 242 million GBP, representing 96% of the whole revenue of these product categories in 2018. In that year children's and juvenile books generated 15% of the revenue of physical books, but only 3% of digital books revenue on the British home market.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Georgi Alexandrov. [Intermediyni otnosheniya mejdu pechatnite i elektronnite knigi]. (Diss., Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski. 2020), 129-157.

<sup>26</sup> "Print books account for 70.6% of all units sold; eBook revenues decline," *Association of American Publishers*. 1 August 2017. <https://newsroom.publishers.org/book-publishing-annual-statshot-survey-reveals-religious-crossover-and-inspirational-books-supported-trade-book-growth-in-2016>

<sup>27</sup> "Year in Books Review 2015," *Nielsen US*. 2016. <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2016/2015-us-book-industry-year-end-review.html>

<sup>28</sup> "AAP StatShot: Publisher Trade Sales Up Slightly at Year End 2015," *Association of American Publishers*. 26 April 2016. <http://newsroom.publishers.org/aapstatshot-trade-sales-up-slightly-at-year-end-2015>.

<sup>29</sup> Sian Cain. "E-book Sales Continue to Fall as Younger Generations Drive Appetite for Print," *The Guardian*. [online] 14 March 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/14/ebook-sales-continue-to-fall-nielsen-survey-uk-book-sales>

<sup>30</sup> *Yearbook 2018*, 5-14.

Within the five-year period of 2013–2017, children’s and juvenile literature in Germany reached its peak in 2016 with an 8% revenue share because of a *Harry Potter* title launch. In 2017, this product category had only 5% of the total e-book market.<sup>31</sup>

In Spain, children’s and juvenile e-book titles were 936 in number and represented only 4% of the total number of e-book titles in 2016. In terms of value, the children’s and juvenile e-books share of the total e-book market was 5% in 2017. This market segment in Spain was continuously dominated by print books, with a stable revenue share of 95% for the period 2015–2017. For these three years, the e-book share remained at the level of 2% only. In terms of product categories, the Spanish e-book market value in 2018 was allocated as follows: fiction – 71.5%, non-fiction – 23.2%, and children’s and juvenile – 5.3%.<sup>32</sup>

In Sweden, the strongly predominant book format is also the print one. In 2018, it generated 84% of the share of children’s and juvenile book sales revenue in 2018, while e-books sales represented only 2% – much lower than the 14% share of audio books.<sup>33</sup>

### **The Reading Attitudes of Children and Teenagers**

Regardless of the slowdown of e-book sales in the United States and some European countries, the second decade of the new century has brought considerable changes in reading practices. The massive penetration of new technologies for electronic reading have affected children and teenagers too. At first sight, the change in reading practices seems very significant and obvious among these younger people, especially because they use smartphones and tablets for electronic reading along with dedicated reading devices.

However, the reading of books in electronic format should be studied in connection with print book consumption. It is necessary to examine children’s and teenagers’ preferences closely regarding print and e-books, which are reflected by the market performance of these

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<sup>31</sup> “Buchkäufer: Entwicklung und Chancen – Der Buchmarkt in Deutschland 2017,” Borsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels. [http://www.boersenverein.de/sixcms/media.php/1117/Wirtschaftspressekonferenz\\_2018.pdf](http://www.boersenverein.de/sixcms/media.php/1117/Wirtschaftspressekonferenz_2018.pdf)

<sup>32</sup> *El sector del libro en España*. (Madrid: Ministerio de educación, cultura y deporte, 2018), 74-85. <http://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/cultura/areas/libro/mc/observatoriolect/estudios-e-informes/elaborados-por-el-observatoriolect.html>; *Comercio Interior del Libro en España 2017*. (Madrid: Federación del Gremios de Editores de España, 2018), 43-45. [http://federacioneditores.org/img/documentos/comercio\\_interior\\_2017.pdf](http://federacioneditores.org/img/documentos/comercio_interior_2017.pdf); *Informe Anual del Libro Digital 2018*. (Madrid: Librandia. 2019), 11-19. <https://librandia.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05>.

<sup>33</sup> *Publishing Statistics 2018*. (Stocholm: Svenska förläggare AB, 2019), 13-19. [https://www.forlaggare.se/sites/default/files/publishing\\_statistics\\_2018\\_web.pdf](https://www.forlaggare.se/sites/default/files/publishing_statistics_2018_web.pdf)

two formats. The market data is a very objective indicator of the product suitability of the print and the electronic format for children's and juvenile literature.

The international surveys of the Scholastic publishing group conducted on the English-speaking markets contain valuable information about the reading attitudes of children ages 6–17, the level of their reading engagement and the influence of their parents. The Scholastic surveys in the United States established an increasing share of children who preferred print books even when they had the possibility of reading them electronically: 60% in 2012, 65% in 2014 and 2016, and 69% in 2018. Among the children ages 6–17 who had read an e-book, 45% would still prefer the print format and 16% would prefer e-books.<sup>34</sup>

The 2015 survey in the United Kingdom revealed that 68% of children ages 6–17 always preferred print books even if e-books were available. Half of those who had already read an e-book stated that they still preferred print books, versus 22% who preferred the electronic format. Among the children who had not read an e-book, only 35% showed interest in doing so.<sup>35</sup>

The latest literacy survey by the National Literacy Trust in the United Kingdom held in the period of January to March 2019 showed that print remains the predominant reading format for children aged 9–18.<sup>36</sup> It involved 56 905 participants in this age group and is thus highly representative. The survey investigated the way children read different types of literature at least once per month. More than half of the children (55%) read fiction in print, and only 20% do so on screen. Non-fiction is also predominantly read in print by 45% of the children, versus 15% who read it on screen. Compared to the previous research in 2017/2018, there was a small rise in the number of children who read fiction, non-fiction, and comics on digital devices, but the increase was less than one percent for all three types of content. The number of children who read fiction in print format has increased by 3.2%. The research found that the children who are more engaged with reading (good readers, enjoy reading, read every day) read both on paper and on screen, while those who are less engaged with reading prefer doing it on screen.

Having been given a multiple choice of book formats, the children expressed a clear preference for print compared to interactive e-books and simple e-books. The preference rate

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<sup>34</sup> “Kids and Family Reading Report,” 6<sup>th</sup> edition. *Scholastic US*. 2016. What Parents and Kids Want in Children's Books. 2017. <http://www.scholastic.com/readingreport/what-parents-and-kids-want.html>. Kids and Family Reading Report. 7<sup>th</sup> edition. *Scholastic US*. 2018. [https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/Downloads/KFRRReport\\_Finding\\_Their\\_Story.pdf](https://www.scholastic.com/content/dam/KFRR/Downloads/KFRRReport_Finding_Their_Story.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> “Kids and Family Reading Report 2015,” *Scholastic*. 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Christina Clark and Irene Picton. *Children, Young People and Digital Reading*. (London: National Literacy Trust, 2019), 2-4.

between these three formats was, respectively, 76%, 30%, and 15% regarding reading for pleasure. Regarding educational reading, print got 69%, followed by 30% for interactive e-books, and 15% for non-interactive e-books.

The children also indicated an attachment to print books in relation to two major product categories – fiction and non-fiction:

- Fiction: on paper only – 69%; on screen only – 18%; both formats – 13%;
- Non-fiction: on paper only – 72%; on screen only – 17%; both formants – 11%.

The preference for the print format was observed in the reading of poems and comics, too, with 64% and 62% of the readers of these genres, respectively. The survey found that the children who read these materials on screen increases with age. For example, in the 9–11 segment, fiction is read exclusively on screen by 17%, but this percentage goes up to 25% for children ages 16–18. Nevertheless, even in the highest age segment of 16–18, the number of those who read only on paper remains much more than of those who read on screen only: 55% versus 25% for fiction, and 58% versus 23% for non-fiction. The major finding of this highly representative study is formulated as follows: “Print remains the dominant reading format across all age groups, with most children reading a variety of materials on paper. Furthermore, older pupils (those aged 14 to 18) were found to be more likely to read on screen than younger age groups.”<sup>37</sup>

A similar preference for print was established by surveys of young readers’ attitudes in the European markets as well. Following survey data from 2018 in Spain, the large majority of children read electronically – 61% (ages 10–14) and 99% (ages 15–18). However, only about a third of them read e-books: 38% (ages 10–14) and 33% (ages 15–18). The share of those who consume other content on the internet is much larger: websites, blogs, and forums: 68% (ages 10–14) and 84% (ages 15–18); social networks: 39% (ages 10–14) and 74% (ages 14–18).<sup>38</sup> The usage of electronic devices is very high for Spanish teenagers: 59% (ages 10–14) and 98% (ages 15–18). But when it comes to the reading of e-books, the usage rate is much lower: 13% for the age group 10–14 and 34% in the segment 15–18.<sup>39</sup>

A study of the Iconkids & Youth Institute in Germany, conducted annually in 2017, 2018, and 2019, has compared the preferences for print and e-book formats among children ages 6–19.<sup>40</sup> Those who read only print books dropped from 50% in 2017 to 42% in 2018, but went up to 55% in 2019. The share of those who read only e-books remained at much lower

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 16

<sup>38</sup> “Hábitos de Lectura y Compra de Libros en España 2018”

<sup>39</sup> “El sector del libro en España,” 145.

<sup>40</sup> [“How Do You Read Books? 2017-2019.” Statista. 2019.](#)

levels over these three years: 3%, 5%, and 3%, respectively. The percentages of children who read both formats increased from 18% in 2017 to 20% in 2018, but dropped to 16% in 2019. The share of children who chose the answer “I don’t read books” changed as follows over the years: 30%, 34%, and 26%. The comparative analysis of the study’s data confirms the sustainability of the preference for print format in the age segment 6–19.

The preference for print books in daily media consumption was identified by a GfK study among young Germans ages 12–19 in 2018. Print books are consumed on a daily basis by 19% and several times a week by 20% of teenagers. The consumption rate concerning e-books is much lower. Only 3% of teenagers read e-books daily, and 4% do so several times a week.<sup>41</sup>

Following the media monitoring in Sweden in 2018, the daily book consumption of readers ages 9–14 varies strongly according to the book format. More than half (54%) of the children of this age read print books, while only 2% read e-books.<sup>42</sup>

### **The Parents’ Role in Children’s Reading Preferences**

Most of the surveys cited on the reading attitudes of children and teenagers contain proofs of the parents’ role in the media choice between print and electronic book format.

A popular video on YouTube showed how a two-year old girl tries to “activate” a paper magazine thinking it is an iPad screen.<sup>43</sup> The situation shows the extent of attachment to e-devices in a very early age. This is one the major concerns of the parents of kids aged up to eight years, as found by a UK study of parents’ perceptions of children’s digital reading. Almost half of the parents (45%) did not want their child to spend much time reading on screen. One third of the parents were afraid that the use of digital books might lead to loss of interest in print books. The parents preferred print books as the right format for their children for both pleasure reading (76%) and educational reading (69%).<sup>44</sup> The study, conducted internationally by the Scholastic publishing group, found how strong the parents’ wish was that their children (ages 6–17) read print books: 48% in the United States and 53% in the United Kingdom. About 40% of parents would not mind their children reading both formats,

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<sup>41</sup> Media and Communication Research, GfK. 2018. *Statista*.

<sup>42</sup> *Mediebarometer*, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ferris Jabr. [“The Reading Brain in the Digital Age: The Science of Paper versus Screens.”](#) *Scientific American*. April 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Natalia Kucirkova and Karen Littleton. [The digital reading habits of children: A National survey of parents’ perceptions of and practices in relation to children’s reading for pleasure with print and digital books.](#) (London: Book Trust, 2016), 22-29.

but very few would rather have them read e-books: 3% in the United States and 7% in the United Kingdom.<sup>45</sup>

The cited survey on reading practices in Bulgaria from 2014 revealed proactive attitudes of parents towards the reading practices of their children. The majority of parents urge their children to read, and even those who do it increased from 71% in 2009 to 84% in 2014. The percentage of parents who read aloud with their children increased from 69% to 80% for the same period. As regards the juvenile age, 40% of the respondents indicated it as the right time for intensive reading, compared to 32% in 2009.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Suitability of Book Format to Content**

The empirical market data from the examined markets is a good base for the identification of the weak and strong segments for each of the two book formats. While academic literature and fiction proved highly suitable to the electronic book format, children's and juvenile literature generated a negligible share of the e-book market.

The subjective consumer's choice between print and electronic formats depends on the objective suitability to the content of the respective book. The format's suitability depends on the specific function of the product and the specific needs of readers. The features of the electronic book format prove to be very suitable for the academic and professional type of content. Fiction is also a strong category on the e-book market. For instance, in 2018 the academic books got 43% of the British e-book home market value, followed by fiction with 38%, while children's literature had just 3%.<sup>47</sup> One of the reasons for the high suitability of the digital format to the academic content is the possibility for fast access to specific parts of the targeted texts. This feature of the electronic content consumption got popular as the "use rather than read" effect, which is typical for scholarly reading.<sup>48</sup> As regards educational content, a frequently cited study on text comprehension among tenth grade students conducted in Norway found that reading in print scored significantly better than on screen.<sup>49</sup>

The suitability of the electronic format remains questionable concerning book content for the youngest readers. Some authors acknowledge the technological possibilities of book

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<sup>45</sup> "Kids and Family Reading Report 2015"

<sup>46</sup> [Chitatelski praktiki v Bulgaria 2014]

<sup>47</sup> *Yearbook 2018*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Jeff Staiger. ["How E-books Are Used: A Literature Review of the E-book Studies Conducted from 2006 to 2011,"](#) *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Summer 2012), 356.

<sup>49</sup> Anne Mangen, Bente R. Walgermo and Kolbjørn Brønnick. ["Reading Linear Texts on Paper versus Computer Screen: Effects on Reading Comprehension,"](#) *International Journal of Educational Research*. 58, (2013): 61-68.

digitization, but still underline the need for format suitability to the respective content. For example, a study on digital picture books emphasizes the basic expectations these products must meet, such as an appropriate voice, relevant sound effects, and well-designed illustrations to fit the size and the shape of the electronic device. The relevant question is not how, but – more importantly – whether a picture book should be produced in digital format as well.<sup>50</sup>

### **Book Format as a Factor in Young Readers' Choices**

Often the comparison between the print book and the electronic book remains at the subjective level, with long lists of “pros” and “cons” about these two formats. The researcher Naomi Baron has rightly warned: “We need to study the issue with open minds, not make presuppositions about advantages and disadvantages.”<sup>51</sup>

The analysis should better focus on the media functions of print books and e-books and the way they satisfy the readers' needs. This approach would reveal much better the reasons for readers' choices between the book formats.

Both print books and e-books fulfill their media functions when consumed by the readers. These two book formats fulfill two types of media functions: the common ones, defined by their media identity, and specific ones, determined by their different material nature – physical for print books and digital for e-books. The specific functions of print books and e-books satisfy particular readers' needs. Examples of print book-specific functions could be the feeling of ownership, integrity, gift value, tactile sensibility, visibility, art value, and durability. The specific e-book functions usually are identified as immediate delivery, distant access, interactivity, audio and visual effects, mobility, selective reading, easy storage, resizing possibilities, and connectivity.

Children's and teenagers' reading attitudes are also driven by their subjective perception of the specific functions of print and electronic book formats. Making a medium choice between the two formats, young readers select the one which would better satisfy their particular needs in a given situational context. The Scholastic media group international studies cited established that the majority of young readers have expressed readiness to keep reading print books even after having read e-books. The British National Literacy Trust

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<sup>50</sup> Junko Yokota and William Teale. “Picture Book and the Digital World,” *The Reading Teacher* 67, no.8, (May 2014): 583. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1262>

<sup>51</sup> Naomi Baron. “[Reading in a Digital Age.](#)” *Phi Delta Kappan* 99, no. 2, (September 2017):15-10.

surveys revealed the enrichment of young readers' practices by using both book formats: "While most of the reading done by children and young people in 2019 is still paper-based, reading both on paper and on screen is associated with higher reading attainment and reading engagement."<sup>52</sup> The outcomes of these studies reflect a complementary rather than antagonistic intermedia relation between print books and e-books in children's perceptions of their specific functions.

Although not specifically focused on children's reading preferences, the researchers Yin Zhang and Sonali Kudva formulate their conclusion regarding the co-existence of print and digital book formats based on the allocation of their functions. As they argue in their analysis of a large survey on the US book market:

*Both print books and ebooks have unique attributes and serve distinct functions in meeting people's reading needs, which may vary by individual demographic, contextual, and situational factors. As they stand, ebooks and print books complement each other, providing the same content in two different media.*<sup>53</sup>

Compared to the experience with print books, e-book reading creates various challenges that negatively affect the appeal to the digital book format of the youngest readers. The data from the reading attitudes surveys and the researchers' observations are a good basis on which to formulate some challenges for the electronic reading of books. As regards children, low content suitability, easy distraction, parental control, and lack of common parent-child reading experience seem to be the typical obstacles for a larger e-book consumption within the age group up to eleven. Concerning teenagers, the main e-book challenges appear to be the lack of feeling of ownership, the distraction effect of multitasking, and the parents' influence in favor of traditional print reading.

However, the specific functions of print books and e-books allow the consumption of the two formats to be adjusted to particular situations, content, or readers' needs. Children and teenagers very often have to combine educational and leisure reading and thus make their book format choice according to their specific needs. The expert Lotta Larson elaborated on the integrated use of both book formats: "Children often blur the lines between print and e-book reading. To them it is not an either/or but, rather, two equally appreciated events that can be enjoyed separately or in tandem."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Christina Clark and Irene Picton. "Children, young people and digital reading", 4.

<sup>53</sup> Yin Zhang and Sonali Kudva. "E-Books vs Print Books: Readers' Choice and Preferences across Contexts," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 65, no. 8, (August 2014): 1705.

<sup>54</sup> Lotta Larson. "Preservice Teachers Explore E-book Reading," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 56, no. 4 (2013): 289.

## Conclusion

The age group of youths up to 18 years old develops a great variety of reading practices. Any generalization risks being superficial because, in reality, this age group is fragmented into sub-segments with specific reading needs and attitudes. The preferences for print or electronic book formats chart an important area for research, because they are manifested in any age of the children and teenagers.

The many surveys and research presented here suggest five key findings concerning the book format preferences of children and teenagers.

- The print book is the preferred format for young readers up to 18 years of age.
- There is a tendency to apply integrated reading practices involving reading both print and digital book formats.
- E-books take an insignificant share of the time spent by children and teenagers in electronic reading of all types of electronic content.
- Children's and teenagers' reading attitudes reflect a complementary rather than antagonistic intermedia relation between print books and e-books.
- Children's and teenagers' literature is one of the weakest product categories on the e-book market.

These findings negate the hypothesis that a transition from paper to screen is taking place in the book reading practices among children and teenagers. The intense electronic reading of all various types of content should not be interpreted as an intense reading of books in digital format. The digital versions of books for children and teenagers coexist and interact with the print books in the changing media environment. The two formats are in permanent mutual dependence, and there is no evidence supporting speculation about the displacement of the print format by the electronic one.

All of these findings lead to the conclusion that the print and electronic formats complement each other, and their combined usage enlarges and enriches the book reading practices of children and teenagers.

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