Understanding Australian readers:
Behavioural insights into recreational reading

Executive summary

To encourage more people to read for recreation, it's essential to understand the behaviours and the challenges faced by different types of readers and non-readers, especially those who read infrequently.

By identifying what makes reading easier, we can develop strategies that encourage more people to pick up a book. At the same time, understanding the barriers helps us to find ways to overcome them.

With this approach in mind, this research has been designed to:

1. **Identify the key decisions and behaviours that influence how and when people read.**
2. **Map the reading journey and uncover the drivers and barriers at each stage.**
3. **Examine the specific drivers and barriers faced by different groups, with a particular focus on those who read less often.**

This research project applies a behavioural science approach to understanding reading as a series of behaviours, and in particular, the drivers and barriers to engaging with recreational reading. This involves breaking reading down into a sequence of six specific behaviours in a reading journey:

1. **Finding books that you might want to read**
2. **Choosing the next book that you want to read**
3. **Getting books**
4. **Starting to read**
5. **Continuing to read**
6. **Reflecting and sharing**

We focus on reading books in print form, reading ebooks on digital devices, and listening to audiobooks. We are specifically interested in recreational reading across a wide range of genres and formats – from novels and short stories to autobiographies and graphic novels. Our definition does not include reading newspapers and magazines.

A population-based survey was developed to examine attitudes and behaviours around reading, and a broadly representative sample of 1622 respondents was obtained. An audience segmentation of the data was performed based on aspects of reading frequency.

Audience segments

Six segments were identified: four of Readers and two of Non-Readers. A deep dive into the segments looked at the drivers of capability, opportunity, motivation and social norms. The full report provides a detailed profile of each segment, highlighting the key drivers and barriers for each group.

Avid Readers (22.4%)

The daily devotee

Habits: Read daily and frequently start new books

Intentions: No gap between how much they read and how much they intend to read

Demographics: Mostly women, older or retired, living alone or with a partner

Barriers: None! They have the motivation, time, and ability to read

Engaged Readers (30.6%)

The regular but busy reader

Habits: Read regularly (daily or a few times a week), but want to read more

Challenges: Struggle with motivation, distracted by other activities

Demographics: Young to middle-aged, highly educated

Barriers: Competing priorities and lack of time for reading

Ambivalent Readers (14.8%)

The uncertain explorer

Habits: Inconsistent reading; unsure if they truly enjoy reading or want to prioritise it

Challenges: Lack of interest, uncertainty about enjoyment, and motivation

Demographics: Slightly younger, with more men in this group

Barriers: Indifference to reading, uncertainty about their capability and interest

Aspirational Readers (14.7%)

The eager yet struggling seeker

Habits: Read infrequently (monthly or a few times a year), but eager to read more

Challenges: Lack of time, distractions, and difficulty staying motivated

Demographics: Younger to middle-aged, higher earners, mostly full-time employees

Barriers: Struggle with competing activities, time constraints, and motivation

Lapsed Readers (7.1%)

The forgotten book lover

Habits: Used to read more but have lapsed into not reading; remember positive reading experiences

Challenges: Read less than they want to, experience difficulty with focus and reading skills

Demographics: Fairly balanced age and gender distribution, mixed household types

Barriers: Lack of time, trouble finding books that interest them, and difficulty concentrating

Uninterested Non-Readers (10.4%)

The complete disconnect

Habits: Don't read for recreation and lack interest in reading

Challenges: Indifferent to reading, find reading difficult and prefer other entertainment forms

Demographics: Younger to middle-aged, mostly male, many working full-time

Barriers: Low motivation, concentration difficulties, lack of time, and lack of interest in books
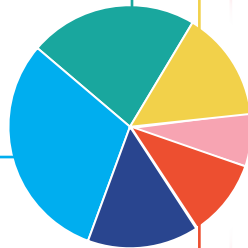
Reading journey

The reading journey outlines the stages and behaviours that make up the process of reading. The segments defined as Readers have been mapped against this reading journey, identifying specific drivers and barriers faced by each group at each stage.

Finding books

Browsing books and finding potential reading options

- Avid and Engaged Readers have little trouble finding books they want to read.
- In contrast, Aspirational and Ambivalent Readers face more difficulty in finding books and are less likely to consider this a worthwhile activity in its own right.

Choosing books

Making a choice on what book to read

- Genre is a common consideration across all segments, but Avid and Aspirational Readers place the most emphasis on it. Avid Readers also place a lot of weight on the author.
- Engaged Readers show a balanced approach, evaluating multiple factors including price, genre, and author.
- Ambivalent Readers are more focused on practical aspects such as book length and affordability, while also considering genre and author.

Getting books

Actually acquiring the book from a bookstore, library, online store or other source

- Acquisition methods reveal distinct preferences between the segments.
- While Avid Readers purchase books, they are more frequent borrowers particularly from local libraries.
- Aspirational Readers favour purchasing from physical bookstores and department stores, while Ambivalent Readers display less consistent preferences in how they get books.
- Physical locations, including libraries and bookstores, remain common avenues for most segments, rather than online locations.

Starting to read

Beginning the book – whether that's opening the cover, or hitting play on an audiobook

- Each segment has unique preferences and challenges when it comes to starting a new book, suggesting different motivations and approaches to beginning a book.
- Avid Readers are most likely to report that knowing exactly which book they want to read makes it easier to start reading.
- Engaged Readers find it easier to start reading if they have a dedicated time.
- Ambivalent and Aspirational Readers have less routine and structure around beginning to read and are largely driven by their personal interest and being in the right mood, but distractions easily derail their reading.

Continuing to read

Repeatedly engaging with the act of reading or listening to a book

- Avid Readers are committed to finishing books, even if disengaged, with half choosing to stop only when fully disinterested.
- Engaged Readers share this persistence, with 33.7% determined to complete what they start.
- Aspirational Readers are more likely to abandon books if they lose interest and Ambivalent Readers have the lowest completion rates, showing minimal sense of accomplishment upon finishing.

Key takeaways and opportunities

Understanding behaviours helps drive change

Behavioural science offers the Australian book sector useful insights into how and why people read – and what messaging is likely to be persuasive and effective to get people reading more books, more often. Understanding the barriers that people experience to recreational reading means we can design solutions to specifically overcome them.

Different readers, different approaches
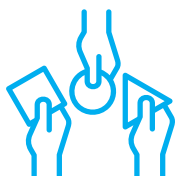
Unsurprisingly, people read (or choose not to read) for different and complex reasons. Each Reader and Non-Reader segment identified by this report has distinct attitudes and behaviours around reading. Targeted approaches that address the specific barriers of each group are needed to encourage engagement with recreational reading. In other words, there's no 'one size fits all' model to shifting reader behaviours, but there are similar barriers and opportunities that we can address.

The industry is getting it right for Avid Readers

The most active readers feel comfortable with reading, find it easy to choose a book they'll love, and enjoy the browsing experience. Efforts to support their love of reading are working – they know where and how to find books, they take pleasure in the experience of reading, and they recommend books to others.

Many Australians want to read more

Many people wish they read more – 54.9% of Readers and 49.8% of Non-Readers indicate they read less than they intend to. This signals an opportunity to explore ways to help people integrate reading into their lives more often and overcome the barriers that stand in their way.

Focus on infrequent readers to have the greatest impact

To increase reading rates on a national scale, the biggest opportunity for impact lies with Aspirational Readers, who currently read less frequently but express a desire to read more. Targeting this group should be a primary focus of intervention efforts. Following Aspirational Readers, attention should be directed towards Ambivalent Readers, Lapsed Readers, and Engaged Readers. We need to shift our focus from speaking to Avid Readers (the converted!) and direct our efforts to occasional readers who have the potential and desire to read more.

Finding books is an early barrier for some

Spending time discovering books and browsing is not a priority for Aspirational and Ambivalent Readers. You can't read books if you haven't found something to read, so changing attitudes towards browsing or making it easier for these segments to find books could reduce a significant barrier to recreational reading for these people. This may involve reframing this behaviour as an investment, or positioning it as a worthwhile activity in its own right.

Key takeaways and opportunities
(continued)

Regular reading habits help

This research shows that people who have established a regular reading time are far more likely to read consistently. Encouraging people to carve out regular time for books and reading in their daily lives may be an effective strategy to engage more infrequent readers on a regular basis.

Sell the joys and comfort of reading

Comfort was one of the top emotions associated with reading, by most segments. At a time when other forms of entertainment are competing for people's attention, the industry needs to send a strong public message reminding people of the comfort, relaxation, and pleasure that can come from a good book. This is especially pertinent for those Ambivalent Readers who are not opposed to reading per se, but need more convincing to get them over the line.

Make books more visible

Increasing the visibility of books in daily life can have a positive impact on reading participation. Having books in the home, schools, workplaces, and other public spaces leverages 'availability bias' to make reading easier to engage with and a 'top of mind' activity. Creating comfortable, dedicated reading spaces may also encourage increased participation in reading, by making it more appealing and accessible.

Encourage a range of formats

While the majority of those surveyed still preferred print books, exploring and encouraging alternatives to print formats could reduce barriers to reading in different contexts and times and could also increase accessibility. For example, encouraging people to listen to audiobooks while commuting or completing household tasks extends the amount of time someone can dedicate to reading, or it can be a means of engaging with books for those who have reading or comprehension difficulties, or impairments that may impede reading.

Take the pressure off

Industry messaging should highlight that reading habits change over time and that it's normal to go through phases of reading more or less frequently. Exploring new genres or formats, or suggesting new 'reader identities' that fit someone's current lifestyle may help to maintain reading engagement. There is also an opportunity to explore messages for different segments on how to 'get back into reading' after a decrease in frequency.
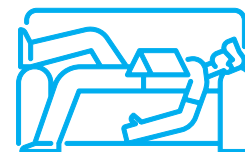
There are many ways to be 'a reader'

While people may reduce their own leisure reading during busy life stages, such as caring for young children, they may increase the time spent reading to others, even if they do not define this as time spent reading. Showcasing examples of the different ways people can enjoy books, such as shared reading experiences or reading aloud opportunities, may help broaden the definition of what it is to be a reader, encouraging more people to engage.

Key takeaways and opportunities
(continued)

Show how others are doing it

Modelling is an effective behavioural intervention to encourage reading participation. Sharing success stories of relatable people who have rediscovered reading or fit it into their busy schedules may help in showing others that it's enjoyable and achievable.

Early reading experiences matter

Non-Reader segments report that early experiences with reading have a strong impact on subsequent reading behaviour. Those who couldn't recall any positive reading experiences in the past were far more likely to not currently be engaged with reading, as well as also report a lack of interest in reading in the future. Early educators, parents, teachers and school librarians have a significant role to play in shaping future reader behaviours.

Social norms have a powerful influence

The more that the people around us value reading, the more likely we are to be a frequent reader, and feel positively about reading. When those around us visibly engage in reading or talk about its importance, it reinforces the social norm that reading is valuable and accepted. These messages are particularly impactful when received from people that we respect.

Conclusion

There are a number of groups and interventions which offer significant opportunities for increasing reading in Australia.

Aspirational Readers in particular, alongside Ambivalent, Lapsed, and Engaged Readers, all have the potential for growth, while tackling universal challenges like motivation and reading format preferences will likely yield increases in reading behaviour.

As reading is not a single behaviour, we need to consider barriers across the sequence of behaviours, and understand that these are not the same for different types of readers. This report demonstrates that there are significant variations in how people engage across the reading journey, and experience very different drivers and barriers to those reading behaviours.

Targeted approaches are needed to address these barriers, from all areas of the books, publishing and education sectors, to enable different types of readers to engage more frequently with reading.