CultureCase

Differences in the highbrow and lowbrow tastes of library users

This research was conducted by **Mikhail Sokolov** and **Nadezhda Sokolova** at **European University at Saint Petersburg, Russia**

Summary

This paper examined data from public libraries in St Petersburg, Russia, to identify whether or not an ‘omnivorous’ reading habit is only associated with people in elite or privileged status groups. The researchers took data from the city's public library network to show that highbrow categories of books are preferred by highly educated readers of all ages and genders, whereas lowbrow categories of books tend to have more segregated groups of readers, either by age or gender. Additionally, they saw that 'the strongest cultural boundaries exist between different less privileged groups rather than between privileged and non-privileged ones'.

The study is based on books and their usage rather than the preferences of individuals

The library system held data on ‘the gender, year of birth, education completed, general employment status (using the categories pre-school, school pupil, student at vocational school, university student, manual worker, non-manual worker, unemployed, retired) and occupation of a reader’. This study just looked at books borrowed by readers aged over 20, to avoid having the findings skewed by educational demands.

The study found that borrowing patterns revealed seven general categories of fiction

Categories were assigned a level of ‘legitimacy’ according to whether the authors in them were in the school curriculum or had won a major domestic

literary prize or the Nobel Prize. These measures became an indicator of ‘highbrow-ness’ or ‘lowbrow-ness’. There were three broadly ‘highbrow’ categories (‘Literature for children - Russian classics’, ‘Contemporary Russian prose’, and ‘International classics’) and four ‘lowbrow’ categories (‘Russian fantasy/science fiction’, ‘Translated detectives’, 'Translated romance/ detectives’ and ‘Russian romance/detectives’).

The data might be imperfect for understanding wider reading patterns

Firstly, book borrowing is not the same thing as book reading, and secondly, the stock held by public libraries is not a reflection of all possible available literature. However, the researchers are confident that their data 'offers a relatively undistorted picture of general fiction readership in Russia as far as attributes of readers are concerned’.

Keywords

Russia **fiction** **reading** **box office** **libraries**

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