CultureCase

Highbrow literature may be the cultural common ground among a community of strangers

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

Summary

This paper challenges the assumption that popular culture (rather than highbrow elite culture) is the ‘shared ground’ on which strangers like likely to meet and converse. The researchers analysed data from the St Petersburg public library system to construct a model in which people were grouped together or separated by their book borrowing habits in 2015. The research discovered that, when it came to finding culture that might bridge the diverse experiences and habits of strangers, ‘as far as the case of book reading in Russia is concerned, this role is played by legitimate authors and genres’. The authors with the greatest potential to link strangers were not necessarily the most widely read, but comprised a common canon: Pushkin, Tolstoy, Rubina, Ulitskaya, Akunin, Vil'mont, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Chekhov and Bunin.

The research took advantage of available data on books, authors and the book-borrowing public

The data on readers comprised: year of birth, education, employment status (e.g. student, unemployed, retired) and occupation. The researchers chose to use data on 21,931 authors whose works were (collectively) borrowed more than a million times by approximately 100,000 readers. The authors themselves were grouped into two clusters. One cluster comprised authors with ‘attributes of legitimacy’: they had most highly educated readership, their works were disproportionately represented in school curriculum, and had won most literary prizes.

There are two possible explanations for why highbrow books are the ones that link people together

One is that occasionally the general reader is in the habit of borrowing classic literature alongside more popular genres in an attempt to improve themselves or connect to the literary traditions of their country. Another is that highly educated elites are borrowing books that allow themselves to engage with any number of niche lowbrow or popular genres, possibly as a self-conscious way to signal their coolness. The researchers concede that their results only relate to book reading in Russia and may not apply in the case of other cultural forms or in other countries.

Keywords

Russia **reading** **literature** **books** **libraries**

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