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**THE REALITY OF LIVING IN A PANDEMIC WORLD.  
ANALYZING READING PREFERENCES AND LANGUAGE USAGE**

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**Introduction**

The global pandemic that began in 2019 has forced many people to introduce major changes into their lifestyles. As a society, we have had to learn how to cope with working, and essentially living from home, and with many restrictions being instigated in our everyday lives. The global outbreak has forced many into a new and unfamiliar territory, i.e., being forced to stay at home and limit real-life interactions to a minimum. But these were not the only things that have changed throughout this time. New trends can be also observed in reading habits and language usage.

With several lockdowns being enforced, people needed to come to terms with their perception of reality being shaken. This situation caused a deterioration of mental health for many. The results of a poll conducted in April 2020 by Angus Reid Institute showed that while 40% of Canadians reported that their mental health has worsened in general, another 10% reported that their mental health has worsened “a lot” (Angus Reid Institute 2020). Moreover, numerous studies have been conducted to determine the effects of quarantine; one research has shown that some of the negative consequences of quarantine include acute stress disorder, insomnia, exhaustion, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, poor concentration, and detachment from others (Brooks et al. 2020). In order to cope with these symptoms, online

support groups have been created to establish a sense of being connected to others. Furthermore, many people have turned to various forms of art, such as reading books — a survey conducted in 2020 found that 34.5% of children and young people were reading more during lockdown (Clark and Picton 2020). The pandemic has brought many changes, including how the number of readers has risen during lockdown, and the various types of books that were reached for the most often. But reading habits are not the only change necessitated by this new reality. Due to the dynamic nature of language, there has been a need to coin new terms, such as *COVID-19* or to establish terms like *lockdown* and *flatten the curve* as everyday phrases.

### **Changes in Reading Habits**

The pandemic has brought about many different changes, one of them being the necessity of staying at home. Because of this, people had more free time and were able to discover new films, learn useful skills, and find new books to read. As stated by the U.K. Reading Agency, in 2020 “31% of Brits [we]re reading more since the COVID-19 lockdown began, including a ‘particular spike’ among readers aged 18 to 24” (Flood 2020). A similar survey was conducted in the same year in order to elicit information about the reading habits of its participants. The survey consisted of 105 participants: 86 students and 19 faculty members from law and computer science departments of Law and Technology College, respectively. The results have shown that before the lockdown, 21% of faculty members spent 3–5 hours a day reading books, whereas after quarantine the percentage has increased to 38%, so almost double the amount. When analyzing the responses from students, it can be seen that prior to lockdown about 8% of students were reading books for 3–5 hours, but after this period the number has increased to 15%. Another part of the survey has shown that 70% of students and 53% of faculty are reading more content during lockdown days (Parikh, Parikh & Vyas 2020). The content (apart from books) includes newspapers, magazines, and research papers. One of the

main categories for popular reads were critically acclaimed literary classics. Some of these titles include *The Great Gatsby* written by Francis Scott Fitzgerald and *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez (“Coronavirus: Book sales surge as readers seek escapism and education” 2020). Stephen King stated that he had been brushing up his knowledge on classical literary tales by “finally getting round to reading *Ulysses*” (King 2020). Coloring books and uplifting stories were the main choices for children. As far as adult readers are concerned, the main preferences were survival and medical history books (Pesce 2020). High on the list were also books about gardening and cooking. One explanation for this trend is that many people had more time to devote to their passions or to start a new hobby. In the report presented by The NPD BookScan, books are described as “an important resource” during times of crisis (Pesce 2020). The most prominent reason for this is that they offer information and entertainment without people having to spend countless hours gazing at a computer screen or any type of monitor. Furthermore, in the case of uplifting stories, the reader has a chance to escape to another world and try to forget about their troubles for at least a short period of time. This type of escape from reality can prove to be very beneficial for numerous reasons, the main one being that the reader can focus their attention on something else than the current events. Being constantly bombarded with statistics, upsetting news, general panic, and feelings of anxiety can lead to increased stress levels and feelings of distress (Lavanco, Smirni & Smirni 2020). By partaking in an activity that lets the reader engage their interest and thoughts, they can try to leave these negative feelings and relax. Another positive aspect is the educational value. During times of lockdown, many had the opportunity and the time to expand their knowledge and expertise in various fields of research or to study something entirely new. As mentioned earlier, books concerning the topic of medical history (including also information about the 1918 flu pandemic) were discovered to be one of the leading topics. Another popular choice were cooking and gardening books. Cooking books were a popular choice due to the

fact that many restaurants had to shut down because of declining sales and financial problems. Furthermore, citizens were encouraged to keep fit by going on daily walks in order to build up their immune systems. This also included introducing or maintaining a healthy and well-balanced diet. To achieve this, it is better to eat healthy produce and home-cooked meals rather than order take-out every evening. For example, researchers in France asked 2422 people to complete a questionnaire regarding their dietary changes. Many people spent more time cooking and over half of the focus group reported a positive change in their overall diet. The study also showed that 47.4% of the participants had started eating more fresh products, such as fruit and vegetables (Delamaire, Ducrot, Sarda, Serry 2022).

In this part I will discuss what type of books gained popularity during times of lockdown and trends in the literary world. As far as book sales are concerned, Amazon has revealed which books were the most frequently bought through their website in the United States of America (Sutton 2020) and the United Kingdom (Rainbow 2021). The data takes into consideration the period between the 23rd of March and the 11th of May 2020, when the lockdown was in full force. The top picks by American readers include the thriller genre, historical fiction, and drama. The book with the most sold copies is *Normal People* written by Sally Rooney. One of the reasons why this book was such a popular choice is the fact that it had been adapted into a BBC/RTÉ production released on April 26th 2020, and turned out to be a hit among viewers. The story follows two teenagers as they try to navigate their complicated relationship. Other positions on the list include the thriller *The Silent Patient* by Alex Michaelides, which tells the story of a woman named Alicia who has not uttered a single word ever since she shot her husband several years prior. Keeping in touch with the thriller genre being a prominent choice, *Blood Orange* written by Harriet Tyce tells the story of a lawyer named Alison who has been given a murder case to defend while discovering the truth behind her seemingly perfect life. The book *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by

Charlie Mackesy has taken the literary world by storm with its charming illustrations and inspiring words. To now compare these choices with the books that sold well on British Amazon (Rainbow 2021), the top ten bestselling books comprise titles such as *The Thursday Murder Club* by Richard Osman, which tells the story of four friends who solve cold murder cases. Similar to the previous list, the book *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* was also a frequently ordered position. Another popular choice was the book *The Midnight Library* written by Matt Haig, which discusses themes of philosophy, life and death, and the impact of the choices that one makes on their life and well-being. The two previous books both deal with the topic of mental health, which has been discussed more openly and can be found in various books that have been published before or during the time of lockdown. In the latter book, the main character must decide how she wants to continue to live out her life and how to overcome her past traumas. Other trends include discussing communal matters, such as social mobility and class. These themes are explored in the cases of Kiley Reid's debut novel *Such a Fun Age*, as well as the 2020 Booker Prize winner *Shuggie Bain* written by Douglas Stuart. Now looking at the same year but changing the location to Poland, as stated in the April report provided by Empik (Staszczyszyn 2020), one of the most prominent bookshops in Poland, criminal stories were the bestselling genre, with authors such as Remigiusz Mróz, Katarzyna Bonda, and Alex Michaelides having the largest number of copies sold. Another popular choice were fantasy books with Andrzej Sapkowski and his series of novels *The Witcher* taking the lead. But it seems that the pandemic itself has inspired readers to delve into the topic of viruses as Albert's Camus *The Plague* has experienced a 10 times higher number of copies bought online compared to the previous year. Following the trend, the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez was a hit among Internet buyers. One might wonder whether the isolation of recent months has prompted authors to publish books on mental health, coping with difficult situations, and/or self-help books. This type of book is written to

inform the reader how to cope with or solve a given problem. It means that essentially, this text is meant to give instructions on what to do. According to recent data, the topic of self-improvement interested readers so much that in 2021, 30% more self-help books were sold compared to 2020 (Milliot 2021). But the current situation has not only revolutionized the topics of books being written and bought; the very form of reading has changed as well. Statistics have shown that sales of e-books have skyrocketed since the beginning of April. One of the reasons why people value the comfort of e-books is the “ability to deliver patron requests in a few minutes compared to days” (Neujahr 2011). Libraries have not been so popular in recent times. Some libraries were shut down or needed to introduce *book quarantine*, which means that after returning a text to the library, it had to be kept in a separate room for fourteen days before being placed on the shelf. This practice was meant to make sure that the books could be ventilated before being lent to the next reader. A study conducted by Ithaka S + R concerning academic libraries has shown that “most libraries have experienced budget cuts in the current academic year and there is great uncertainty about longer-term financial recovery” (Guren, McIlroy & Sieck 2020). This could mean that some libraries could be forced to rely heavily on e-books or not be able to afford to order new books. Another reason for the expansion of e-book sales is the lack of financial support and new stock in libraries. Seeing that physical bookstores were forced to close because of lockdown, the demand for online book shopping has quickly risen. Because of this, there is “an urgent need for publishers and booksellers to develop and reinforce their presence online” (Do et al. 2020).

### **Changes in the Language Usage**

Language has also witnessed new changes since late 2019. The appearance of neologisms is an interesting matter to analyze “as it demonstrates the dynamism of language” (Akut 2020). New neologisms have been introduced and existing terms, such as *lockdown*, *pandemic*, and *quarantine* have become

more widely used in recent times. One of the most prominent examples is the name of the virus itself—SARS or COVID-19, derived from the very year the outbreak occurred. This means that the term is relatively new, having been popularized within a few weeks/months of its coining, and appears in many local and global news outlets. The term comes from coronavirus disease 2019 (Merriam-Webster 2020). What can also be observed is how the media have been using language to persuade the public into their desired way of thinking. If the viewer is bombarded with words such as *danger*, *lethal*, *dangerous*, or *hopeless*, they might begin to associate the outbreak with negative connotations. On the other hand, by using words such as *unity*, *overcoming difficulties*, and *hopeful*, the reader regains a sense of tranquility and, in some cases, might even begin to leave feelings of despair behind. These examples show how language is relevant to the world surrounding us and how quickly its users are able to adapt it to the existing circumstances. Since the term *COVID-19* was coined, it has become a permanent phrase in everyday conversations. Another example of a new term being coined is the lexical item *coronaświrus* invented by Polish speakers. The word *świrus* means headcase or nutjob, so the loose translation would be something along the lines of “a person going crazy because of corona/the pandemic.” Another example of a neologism would be the term *corona babies*, children that were born during the time of the pandemic.

A study conducted in 2020 by Muhammad Asif, Anila Iram, Maria Nisar and Deng Zhiyong analyzed articles, books, social media platforms, different websites as well as the Oxford English Corpus. This study and others published in 2020 reveal that the majority of newly coined or invented terms are nouns. The expansion of language is not only prompted by creating new terms but repurposing existing lexical items as well. This can be seen in the case of the term *bubble*, which has gained a new meaning since the beginning of the ongoing medical situation. In her discussion, Nayantara Sheoran Appleton provides a definition of this word as a “space (home, dorm, shared flats, etc.) to

which its inhabitants were constrained. Additionally, those in your *bubble* were the only people you were allowed to have any physical contact with” (Appleton 2020). She then continues to describe the instances in which one could hear this term being used. These examples include hearing parents use the phrase *bubble formation* to ensure that the required two-meter distance was kept between other people and even led to people signing their emails with the expression “stay safe in your bubble.”

The reasons for creating or blending new terms vary from technological advancements to the younger generation creating their own slang words. Another reason proposed by Veronika Katermina and Sophia Lipiridi is as follows: “trying to overcome the catastrophic consequences of the pandemic by categorizing them (new vocabulary), creating a system of colloquialisms and expressions that has a hierarchical structure” (Katermina & Lipiridi). Although quite a few new terms have been invented or coined, some words have simply become more popular in usage. This would be considered a different category, encompassing words or phrases that have already existed but have gained popularity in recent months. These examples include the term *lockdown*, which has experienced a boom in popularity since April. Other phrases include *social distancing* or *social distance*, which can be used as a noun or verb. The term itself means “a public health practice that aims to prevent sick people from coming in close contact with healthy people in order to reduce opportunities for disease transmission” (Pearce 2020). The methods include staying at home, limiting contact with other people, refraining from attending crowded places, keeping travel to a minimum as well as physically distancing oneself from others. On social media, some have been updating their profile pictures on Facebook with stickers “stay home.” Signs such as “keep your distance” have been placed in many shops. Relating to the topic of new forms being created, abbreviations have been included in the list as well, with the abbreviation WFH, which stands for “work from home,” making its way to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. Another example would be the abbreviation BCAC, which stands for



“Before CoronaVirus and After CoronaVirus.” BC would refer to the time period before the 31st of December 2019, when the first cases of the virus were recorded in Wuhan, China.

The creation of new lexical items does not only refer to the pandemic itself, but to various other topics as well. For example, the term *maskne* has been introduced to describe the skin condition caused by wearing a mask for extended periods of time. The term appeared after blending the words *mask* and *acne* together. This is an example of a portmanteau word, a word that is formed by combining or blending two lexical items in order to construct a new one. Another example would be the word *quarantini*, which is a blend of *quarantine* and *martini*. The lexical item refers to a drink prepared at home during lockdown. *The New York Post* was one of the first to use this term, with the article explaining what exactly the term means, as well as gave instructions on how to prepare one at home (Kussin 2020).

New terms have been introduced to the educational system as well. Schools were faced with the arduous task of managing lessons online. The phrase *zoom university* has been extremely popular and has become a fixed term in many students' personal vocabulary usage. Also connected with the platform Zoom used for hosting video conferences and classes is the term *zooming*, which refers to the activity of using the platform.

Although the examples previously mentioned mainly concern the English and Polish languages, examples of this trend can be found in other languages as well. Bryła and Bryła-Cruz (2021) examined new lexical items coined during the pandemic in English and Spanish. Furthermore, they analyzed the use of metaphor in discussing COVID-19 across a range of European languages, such as Norwegian. A model for the interrelation of emotion and time in the field of argumentation has been applied to a textual analysis of a COVID speech, which has been discussed by Prins Marcus Valiant Lantz (2021). This was used in order to show how argumentation affects action.

## Questionnaire

For the purposes of comparative analysis I created my own questionnaire so as to elicit similar information and compare the responses with the previously mentioned studies. The overall number of participants in my study was 20. The survey was mainly addressed to university students, i.e. the age group was mostly from 19 to 26, similarly to the participants in the 2020 study conducted by Parikh, Parikh and Vyas. This age group made up 85% of the respondents. The questionnaire was composed of multiple choice, short and long open-ended questions. I designed the questions myself and asked the participants to describe their reading preferences, and the language usage caused by the 2019 pandemic.

The survey opened with questions related to reading preferences. I found that most people had either read more than ten books since the beginning of the pandemic or between five and ten. 20% of respondents stated that they had read fewer than five books during this time. The main reason for reading books was for pleasure as confirmed by 75% of participants. The second reason was for academic purposes. When it comes to reading frequency, three participants, i.e. 15%, answered that they spend between three and five hours per week on this activity. Thirteen out of twenty respondents stated that they spend less than three hours per week reading. The majority of the participants of this study said that they had read more books since the beginning of the pandemic. This conclusion is similar to the one drawn in the report published by the U.K. Reading Agency, stating that over 30% of Brits “are reading more since the COVID-19 lockdown began” (Flood 2020).

The most popular books read during times of lockdown include *The Great Gatsby* written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Normal People* by Sally Rooney, and *The Plague* by Albert Camus. In Poland, as stated in the April report provided by Empik (Staszczyszyn 2020), *The Witcher* series written by Andrzej Sapkowski was the most popular choice. Out of these options, *The Witcher* proved to be the book reached for most commonly, as seven respondents checked that they had

read this position, four had read *The Great Gatsby*, and one participant had read *Normal People*.

The most popular genre turned out to be literary classics. The titles included in this category are: *Animal Farm* and *1984* written by George Orwell, *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien, *Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, *Tess of D'urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque, and books by Jane Austen such as *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*. Another eagerly reached for genre were self-help books. The selected titles were: *Hardcore Anxiety* written by Reid Chancellor, *Atomic Habits* by James Clear, *Eat That Frog!: 21 Great Ways to Stop Procrastinating and Get More Done in Less Time* by Brian Tracy, and Joyce Meyer's *Battlefield of the Mind*. The fantasy genre was mentioned several times with titles such as *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman, *Dune* by Frank Herbert, *Game of Thrones* by George R.R. Martin, and the *Shadow and Bone* trilogy by Leigh Bardugo taking the lead. Since one of the reasons for reading was to learn something new or gain a new skill, titles such as *Brief Answers to Big Questions* by Stephen Hawking, *How the Best Leaders Lead* by Brian Tracy, *100 Frequently Asked Questions about Jesus Christ* by C.Austin Tucker, *Economics* by Gregory Mankiw and Mark Taylor, *The Animator's Survival Guide* by Richard Williams, *George's Cosmic Treasure Hunt* by Lucy and Stephen Hawking, and *How to Eat: The Pleasures and Principles of Good Food* by Nigella Lawson were some of the examples provided by the respondents.

The majority of the participants, i.e. 65%, answered that they now used new words because of the pandemic. These words were mainly ones heard in the media or because other people started using them. Words or phrases such as *lockdown*, *social distancing*, and *pandemic* have become an integral element in many people's everyday vocabulary. Overheard words in the media included *koronasceptyk*, i.e. somebody who is skeptical of the pandemic, who does not entirely believe in it; another older word to describe such a person is *foliarz* —

this term means a conspiracy theorist. Other examples of frequently heard terms include *coronaświrus*, and *pocovidowe*, which means any changes that have occurred because of the corona illness. In English examples included *maskne*, *zoomer*, and *plandemic*, which is a blend of the words *plan* and *pandemic* and it signifies a planned pandemic, a reference to a conspiracy theory.

The participants of the questionnaire were also asked whether they had created their own lexical items because of the pandemic. Two categories can be distinguished in this part. The first category relates to names created in order to give various names to people and the type of behaviour they showcase during the pandemic: *covidowiec*, *antyszczep*, and *antymaseczkowiec*. The last two terms refer to people who are against vaccination or wearing masks. The second category was connected with health, and included words such as *asymptomatic disease*.

The participants were also asked to discuss whether they had introduced any lifestyle changes since the beginning of the pandemic. The answers were mostly connected with health issues, such as washing their hands more frequently, wearing a mask in public spaces, working out more, but also starting new hobbies such as knitting or playing the guitar. However, not everybody responded so positively to the changes that the pandemic had brought about. Some respondents stated that their mental health deteriorated or that they could not attend classes on-site, which in return made their studying less effective.

## **Conclusions**

As mentioned above, the events taking place since 2019 have had a significant impact on different aspects of everyday life. Starting with the introduction of new regulations, such as enforcing lockdowns and social distancing, new trends and tendencies in reading practices and language usage could be observed. Sales of e-books and self-help books have increased, as have the general

number of readers and the number of books read during the time of quarantine. As far as developments or changes in language are concerned, new terms have been invented and the usage of existing words, such as *quarantine*, *lockdown*, and *social distancing* has become more popular.

The results from the questionnaire that I conducted show that both reading preferences and the language usage has changed since the beginning of the pandemic. Although the sample group was quite small, it can be observed that people had read more books while staying at home and started to use new words. These findings are similar to the survey carried out by Kshama Parikh, Saurin Parikh, and Priyanka Vyas in 2020. It would be useful to gather a larger group of participants so as to conduct a more detailed analysis.

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### **Abstract**

The global pandemic that began 2019 has influenced our daily lives in many different ways. Due to periods of lockdown, new trends in reading habits have appeared. In this article the reading preferences of both American and British readers will be analyzed, as well as a study which was conducted among university students and colleagues.

As far as language changes are concerned, new terms have been coined regarding the pandemic since 2019. These terms have either been entirely created specifically during this time period, such as *coronaświrus*, or blended with already existing words. Another change in language is the increase use of already known lexical items which have gained popularity during this time. The article will discuss these matters at greater length, as well as provide relevant examples.