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RESULTS OF THE 'READING IN THE TIME OF WAR' TARGET SURVEY OF TEENAGE BLOGGERS

CZYTANIE W CZASIE WOJNY WŚRÓD NASTOLETNIICH BLOGERÓW – KOMUNIKAT Z BADAŃ

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Abstract:

The goal of the 'Reading in the Time of War' survey of teenagers was the need to find out the opinions of young book bloggers about what reading is for them now, in the conditions of the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine: a way to normalize the world, an escape from a terrible reality, a means of gaining popularity, or something else. The survey was conducted from July 21 to August 10, 2022, by the method of purposive sampling using Google Forms. It covered 45 bloggers who live in Ukraine or were forced to evacuate abroad. The results showed that for those who like to read, books remain a way (often the only possible) of normalizing the world and getting salvation, an escape from the terrible reality under any force majeure circumstances. Genre literature is in constant demand among teenagers: fantasy/sci-fi, detective, and adventure. Realistic prose became more popular. In addition, teenagers use their own blogs to tell the truth about the war in Ukraine and popularize Ukrainian literature/culture around the world.

Keywords:

reading, war, teenage bloggers, a way to normalize the world, books for teenagers, teenage writers

Abstrakt:

Celem badania zrealizowanego wśród młodzieży pt. "Czytanie w czasie wojny" była potrzeba poznania opinii młodych blogerów książkowych na temat tego, czym jest dla nich czytanie teraz, w warunkach pełnej inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę. Czy jest to sposób adaptacji do sytuacji, ucieczka od strasznej rzeczywistości, sposób na zdobycie popularności, czy jeszcze może coś innego. Badanie zostało przeprowadzone w dniach 21 lipca – 10 sierpnia 2022 roku metodą sondażu online. Próba do badań była celowa. Ankieta została przygotowana na formularzu Google. Próba obejmowała 45 blogerów mieszkających w Ukrainie oraz tych, którzy wyjechali za granicę. Wyniki pokazały, że dla tych, którzy lubią czytać, książki pozostają sposobem (często jedynym możliwym) na adaptację do trudnej rzeczywistości oraz ucieczkę od wrogiej rzeczywistości. Z badań wynika, iż literatura jest stale poszukiwana przez nastolatki: *fantasy*, *science fiction*, detektywistyczna i przygodowa. Proza realistyczna stała się bardziej popularna. Ponadto nastolatki na swoich blogach opowiadają prawdę o wojnie w Ukrainie i popularyzują ukraińską literaturę/kulturę na całym świecie.

Słowa kluczowe:

czytanie, wojna, nastoletni blogerzy, adaptacja do rzeczywistości, książki dla nastolatków, nastoletni pisarze

Introduction

The largest study ‘Reading in the Context of Life Construction and Media Consumption’¹ in Ukraine was carried out by the Ukrainian Book Institute in 2020. The results represented the specificity of reading in two realities: before the coronavirus disease pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic. But with the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine on February 24, 2022, we have to talk about reading in the conditions of military reality². And adults, ‘almost adults’ (teenagers), and children had to adapt to this reality.

The opinion that reading helps to survive in the realities of war, people had to derive from their own experience and on the basis of research on reading in the face of World War II. For example, Małgorzata Wójcik-Dudek and Joanna Roszak analyzed the books that children read in the ghetto. The researchers concluded that the books helped maintain a state of normality, and provided healing and hope for survival (Wójcik-Dudek, 2015; Roszak, 2019). Krystyna Helska-Kwaśniewicz investigated the role of books in the life of art historian Karolina Lanckorońska, who survived two occupations of Lviv, the Soviet and the Nazi German one, emphasizing that reading books was a way to strengthen the spirit, an option to resist the horrors of war (Helska-Kwaśniewicz, 2017). Lucyna Sadzikowska analyzed the memoirs of former prisoners of Dachau – writer Gustaw Morcinek and priest Emil Szramek, as well as other prisoners and on this basis concluded that books in the concentration camp: 1) contributed

to the search for the meaning of life³; 2) gave joy, strengthened the spirit; 3) helped to escape from the nightmarish camp reality or better understand it; 4) gave a sense of freedom; 5) helped to understand themselves and others; 6) were loyal friends; 7) helped maintain mental health; 8) were the source of the search for God (Sadzikowska, 2015).

Speaking of contemporary experiences, many representatives of the creative industries (including many children and teenage writers) have shared their thoughts through the media and social networks about how reading supports them now⁴. Some media sources have conducted their own polls on the benefits of reading during wartime and have received the following respons-

¹ «Reading in the Context of Life Construction and Media Consumption» (2020). Ukrainian Book Institute. Obtained from: <https://book-institute.org.ua/uk/activity/doslidzhennya/doslidzhennya-2020> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

² Do not forget, however, that Russia’s war against Ukraine has been going on for ninth year, since the temporary occupation of Crimea (since 2014).

³ Let’s recall that Viktor Frankl also called the search for the meaning of life, in the inevitable suffering in particular, an indispensable condition for maintaining one’s own spirit, i.e., survival. By the way, now the subgenre of non-fiction stealth-help books is gaining more and more popularity around the world. In such books, authors describe their own life experience, and readers use this experience to overcome difficulties in their own lives. And Frankl’s book «Man’s Search for Meaning» (1946) exactly is considered the first example of the mentioned subgenre. I will also note that it was this book that helped many Ukrainians (including me) return to reading after the shock of the first weeks/months of Russia’s full-scale war against Ukraine.

⁴ For example, refer to: Shymanska A. (2022). Reading during the war: what do Ukrainian writers read and do they read at all? Vydavnytstvo Staroho Leva. 28.04.2022. Obtained from: <https://starylev.com.ua/blogs/cytannya-pid-cas-viyny-shho-cytayut-i-cy-cytayut-vzagali-ukrayinski-pysmennyky> (downloaded on 11.12.2022); Shymanska A. (2022). Reading during the war: what do Ukrainian writers read and do they read at all? Part 2. Vydavnytstvo Staroho Leva. 09.05.2022. Obtained from: <https://starylev.com.ua/blogs/cytannya-pid-cas-viyny-shho-cytayut-i-cy-cytayut-vzagali-ukrayinski-pysmennyky-castyna-2> (downloaded on 11.12.2022); Tolokolnikova K. (2022). In which book to find solace during the war: advice of 6 Ukrainian writers. 24.03.2022. Suspilne. Kultura. Obtained from: <https://suspilne.media/220852-v-akij-knizci-znajti-rozradu-pid-cas-vijni-poradi-6-ukrayinskih-pismennikov/> (downloaded on 11.12.2022); Books we read during the war. 03.04.2022. Obtained from: <https://vogue.ua/ua/article/culture/knigi/knigi-yaki-mi-chitayemo-pid-chas-viyni.html> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

es: reading distracts; stimulates cognition; maintains mental health; adds strength and stamina; reminds that life goes on; reading ‘pumps up’ (*What Ukrainians...* 2022).

Teenagers themselves talk about the experience of living in war conditions, revealed through books. Of course, first of all, they do it through social networks. But there are already the first reflections on the Russian-Ukrainian war in the format of book publications authored by a teenager. For example, the whole world knows about the diary of Anne Frank, written during World War II. Much less known is the diary of 14-year-old Anna Kagan about World War I (Olech, 2015). But about Eva Skaletska’s diary – *You Don’t Know What War Is: The Diary of a Young Girl From Ukraine*, in which a 12-year-old girl from Kharkiv wrote down her own experiences under Russian shelling from February 24 to mid-March 2022, until she left for the west of Ukraine, and later to Ireland, the whole world will learn too. Because the book has already been published in English in the United Kingdom by the Bloomsbury publishing house, and the Ukrainian translation is being prepared by the Vivat publishing house⁵.

So reading is a powerful means of normalizing abnormal circumstances for anyone forced to live in war. However, adults have more opportunities to talk about their experiences, while teenagers, given the specifics of age and psychophysiological features of development, are more reserved. But

⁵ In total, the rights to the book have been purchased by representatives of 12 countries: Dutka Yu. (2022). War diary of 12-year-old Ukrainian girl to be released in 12 countries. Tyktor Media. 23.06.2022. Obtained from: <https://tyktor.media/novyny/shchodennyk-vijny-12-richnoi-ukrainky-vyjde-u-12-krainakh/> (downloaded on 11.12.2022), the audio version of the British edition will be voiced by actress Keira Knightley: Comerford R. (2022). Keira Knightley to narrate Ukrainian schoolgirl’s «extraordinary» diary for Bloomsbury. The Bookseller. 15.10.2022. Obtained from: <https://www.thebookseller.com/news/keira-knightley-to-narrate-ukrainian-schoolgirls-extraordinary-diary-for-bloomsbury> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

in order to help adolescents overcome the traumatic experience of war with the least losses, it is important to ‘draw’ them into a conversation. That is why there was a need for the ‘Reading in the Time of War’ survey.

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to find out the opinions of young book bloggers about what reading is for them now—a way to normalize the world, an escape from a terrible reality, a means of gaining popularity, or something else.

The survey was conducted from July 21 to August 10, 2022, by the method of purposive sampling using Google Forms. Information about the survey was distributed through social networks, in particular Instagram. The participants of the survey were teenage bloggers (45 persons), because they not only read themselves, setting the ‘fashion’ for reading, but also have a direct influence on the choice of books by their same-age peers.

That’s why the most powerful Ukrainian book festivals⁶, publishing houses⁷ and specialized book

⁶ Shalova D. Ukrainian bookstagram: read, photograph, inspire. Part 1. Book Forum. Obtained from: <https://bookforum.ua/p/ukrayinskyj-bukstagram-chytaj-fotografuj-nadyhaj> (downloaded on 11.12.2022); Shalova D. Ukrainian bookstagram: read, photograph, inspire. Part 2. Book Forum. Obtained from: <https://bookforum.ua/en/p/ukrayinskyj-bukstagram-chytaj-fotografuj-nadyhaj-chastyna-2> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

⁷ 10 excellent Ukrainian bookstagram. The first top five. (2017). Yakaboo. 24.04.2017. Obtained from: <https://blog.yakaboo.ua/10-chudovykh-ukrayinskykh-bookstagram-persha-pyatirka/> (downloaded on 11.12.2022); 10 excellent Ukrainian bookstagram. The second top five. (2017). Yakaboo. 03.05.2017. Obtained from: <https://blog.yakaboo.ua/10-chudovykh-ukrayinskykh-bookstagram-druha-pyatirka/> (downloaded on 11.12.2022); Yefremova A. Bookstagram: top 10 of Ukrainian bloggers. (2018). Vydavnytstvo Staroho Leva. Blog. 29.01.2018. Obtained from: <https://starylev.com.ua/blogs/knyzhkovyy-bookstagram-top-10-ukrayinskyh-blogeriv> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

media⁸ have been preparing information materials about the most successful and interesting book bloggers for many years, telling about their blogging principles, favorite books, work with subscribers, organization of literary marathons, secrets of perfect book photos and more.

Furthermore, the rapid spread of the BookTok hashtag in the TikTok social network is another example of how teenagers and young people set the 'fashion' for reading. Young users compose book selections, recommend their favorite books and read out the passages they like the most. Books that are massively discussed on TikTok, according to publishers, become bestsellers, so publishers call tiktokers 'saviors of literature'. The trend itself encourages publishers to develop campaigns for this social network as part of the promotion of certain publications⁹. Currently, TikTok Book Club¹⁰ was founded, and at this year's Frankfurt Book Fair this social network had a separate stage¹¹.

The questionnaire method was used to collect primary information and reveal the views of respondents (Romakh, 2020) regarding the outlined problem. The questionnaire contained 16 questions: 3 closed, 8 open, and 5 questions with multiple answers. Methods of generalization and analysis of information were used to process the received information: systematization, grouping, qualitative (text analysis, classification),

and quantitative (digital data) methods of data interpretation. The presentation of the results is given as a detailed verbal description.

Research results

Based on identification questions, the following was established.

Table 1
Identification data

	Categories	%
Gender	Girls	95.7
	Boys	4.3
Age ¹²	10–13 y.o.	34.8
	14–17 y.o.	52.2
	more than 17 y.o.	13
Place of residence	village	21.7
	city with a population of up to 50 thous.	26.1
	city with a population of 51–100 thous.	8.7
	city with a population of 101–500 thous.	17.4
	city with a population of over 500 thous.	26.1
Residence after the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine	stayed at home	62.5
	became internally displaced persons	10.9
	went abroad	23.9

So, middle-teenage girls dominate among the respondents. Most of the respondents live in small towns and big cities, and they did not leave their homes when the full-scale war began.

⁸ Boiko O. 6 book bloggers you might have missed. (2022). Chytomo. 08.09.2022. Obtained from: <https://chytomo.com/6-bukbloheriv-iakykh-vy-mohly-propustyty/> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

⁹ «Book TikTok»: whether to expect a reading boom in Ukraine (2021). Ekskliuziv TSN. 03.11.2021. Obtained from: <https://tsn.ua/exclusive/knizhkoviy-tiktok-chi-chekati-chitackogo-bumu-v-ukrayini-1901707.html> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

¹⁰ A book club was created in the *TikTok* application, which is marked with the #BookTok hashtag. (2022). Chytomo. 27.07.2022. Obtained from: <https://chytomo.com/tiktok-stvoryly-knyzhkovyj-klub/> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

¹¹ TikTok Stage (2022). Obtained from: <https://www.buchmesse.de/themen-programm/publikumsprogramm/tiktok> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

¹² Based on current data, adolescence in the world is defined from 10 to 24 years pokiv: «Adolescence now lasts from 10 to 24». (2018). BBC News (10.01.2018). Obtained from: <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-42732442> (downloaded on 11.12.2022). In Ukraine, adolescence is not legally defined, the law has only the definition of «child» to denote a person from 0 to 18 years: On Protection of Childhood. Law of Ukraine. Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine. (08.06.2022). Obtained from: <https://zakon.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/2402-14#Text> (downloaded on 11.12.2022).

'You mean nothing to war. But the war means a lot to you.' (Kuleba, 2022), Dmytro Kuleba rightly emphasizes. You will have to believe in the reality of war, accept it, and adapt to it, learning to overcome your own fears. After all, fear not only paralyzes but also ensures our survival by mobilizing and hardening us¹³. At such times, people are desperately looking for ways to normalize the new reality. From numerous reports in the media and social networks, as well as from private conversations and personal experience, it was possible to conclude that in the first months/weeks, adults could not read anything but news at all. Therefore, it is logical that we were interested in the experiences of teenagers in this regard. So, the majority of respondents (34.8%) returned to reading in the first month of the war, 28.3% of them did not stop reading; 19.6% returned to reading after 2 months (+2.2% – after one and a half months), 8.7% – after 3 months, and 2.2% – after 4 months. One person (2.2%) started reading during the war, and another respondent said that periodically loses the desire for reading (2.2%). From this, it can be assumed that most of the respondents quickly (within a month) adapted/ tried to adapt to new realities. And those who did not leave reading obviously used it as a way to escape from reality.

The survey was aimed at teenagers who run book blogs because, as already mentioned, they have a direct influence on the choice of books by their same-age peers. And if they recommend a book as something that can support readers in difficult times (pandemic, war), then such a book has a much greater chance of being read than if only parents or teachers recommended it¹⁴. The

¹³ Refer to: Webb, B. (2021). *Mastering Fear: A Navy SEAL's Guide*. Kyiv: Yakaboo Publishing.

¹⁴ Another thing is that in order to build really fruitful cooperation with young bloggers, you have to make efforts. For example, as a writer who writes for teenagers, I occasionally host free «Beginning Bloggers and Writers: the Ins and Outs of Collaboration» webinars.

question about the time of blogging was open, so the answers were varied (such as 'two years', 'more than two years', etc.). It is better to present them not in percentages, but in the number of respondents. So, the largest number of respondents have been blogging for a year – 13 people; less than a year (from 3 months) – 8 people; from one to two years – 6 people; two years – 8 people; more than two years – 5 people, of them – one person each during 5 and 8 years. Moreover, 6 people post about books without a content plan for a long time. Regarding the number of blog subscribers, we have the following distribution: up to 100 people – 3 respondents; up to 500 people – 20 respondents; up to 1,000 people – 17; up to 2000 – 3; up to 3000 – 2; up to 10,000 – 1.

Two more open-ended questions are paired so that answers can be compared. They are key as well because the survey was conducted to get answers to them. 'What was reading for you before the start of the full-scale war?' and 'What is reading for you now, in the time of the full-scale war?'. Respondents could name several meanings of reading, giving detailed answers. Before the beginning of the full-scale war, the dominant definition of reading was 'hobby + pleasure, inspiration, something extraordinary' (18 responses); 'the whole world, escape from everyday reality' (9); 'exciting journey to other worlds' (6); 'discovering something new' and 'distraction from studying' (5 each); 'entertainment, comfortable recreation' (4 answers); and 'overcoming loneliness' (1 answer). During the full-scale war: 'escape from reality, a distraction from the war, salvation, medicine, sedative' (31 answers), 'hobby + pleasure' (7 answers); 'support of culture and economy' (3); 'life itself' and 'discovering the new' (2 each). As we can see, before the full-scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, the thinking about reading was dominated by the definition of reading as an interesting hobby, supported by immersion in travelling to new worlds. Since the beginning of the full-scale war, the answer 'escape from reality, a distraction from the war'

dominates by a significant gap, in other words, it is precisely an attempt to normalize abnormal circumstances, to save oneself, to heal, which confirms our assumption about the role of reading in wartime. Also, there are fewer definitions of what reading is, and there also appears an understanding of reading (and buying books) as support for Ukrainian culture and economy. Seems this is about the desire of teenagers to be useful in the circumstances in which we all found ourselves. And this is very important because reading high-quality publications (both elite and mass ones) encourages the development of critical thinking, and education of adequate humanistic values, including patriotism.

The next pair of questions concerned the genre selection of books that people read before the beginning of the full-scale war and during the full-scale war. Nine categories and the position 'other' were offered to choose from. In 'other' in both questions, love and historical novels were named. By category, the answers (several genres could be named) were distributed as follows (in descending order).

Table 2
Distribution of books read by teenagers by genre (in descending order of interest)

Before February 24, 2022		After February 24, 2022	
Genre	%	Genre	%
Science fiction, fantasy	89.1	Science fiction, fantasy	87
Detective	76.1	Detective	69,9
Adventure	60.9	Adventure	63
Realistic prose	37	Realistic prose	50
Thriller, horror	32.6	Thriller, horror	32.6
Strip cartoons (comics)	26.1	Strip cartoons (comics)	28
Biography	19.6	Biography	26.1
Non-fiction	19.6	Non-fiction	26.1
Poetry	10.9	Poetry	23.9

As it can be seen, the top 3 genres have not changed, but the percentage of respondents who choose one or another genre has changed. The

percentage of readers in general by genre and those who read poetry also increased. Seems, this is due to the fact that poetic and documentary responses to the circumstances dominate during the war. That is, a lot of war poetry and documentaries (recordings of eyewitness accounts) appear. A comprehensive (without hype) prose artistic understanding of reality is possible only after a deeper reflection on the catastrophic circumstances of the war.

In the answers to the following question: 'If you stopped reading, what book (indicate the author, title, publisher, and year of publication, if you can) helped you get back to your favorite activity and why this one?' the respondents noted the following: 1) some did not stop reading; 2) others read light, good, adventure stories or stories from well-known authors, both Ukrainian and foreign, that they will definitely like; 3) read Ukrainian classics (in particular, Ivan Bahrianyi and Mykhailo Kotsiubynskyi); 4) those books that people managed to find in Ukrainian abroad, during the forced evacuation; 5) e-books from the Yakaboo application¹⁵. As can be seen, they read either those books that will help to abstract from reality or those that they managed to find.

The next question is: with which book review did you return to active blogging if you took a break. Part of the respondents did not interrupt their work. As for the books that those who took a break came back with, they are the following: 'Buba' by Barbara Kosmowska, 'Undercover Model. Fashion Crime' by Karina Akselson, 'Lost in the Camp' by Nastia Muzychenko, 'Steve Jobs' by Masha Serdiuk, 'Today Definitely Not' by Maria Mash, 'Now Entering Addamsville' by Francesca Zappia, 'Hurricane Season' by Fernanda Melchor, 'The Girl on the Train' by Paula Hawkins, 'Guard in the Game' by Natalia Matolinets, 'Hikikomori Are Looking for Love' by Yuliia Cherniienko, etc. We also have foreign and Ukrainian authors here.

¹⁵ In the first days of the full-scale invasion, more than 50 publishers made their e-books available for free through this app.

In the next question, bloggers were asked to name their favorite Ukrainian authors who write for teenagers. In total, 52 authors were mentioned, but three of them write only for adults. Two respondents mentioned not Ukrainian, but foreign writers. The top 5¹⁶ was formed as follows (the positions were divided if the writers received the same number of mentions): 1) Natalia Matolinets; 2) Natalia Yasinovska and Anastasia Nikulina; 3) Natalia Dovhopol; 4) Maks Kidruk and Yuliia Cherniienko; 5) Olia Rusina and Olha Voitenko. Actually, books by the same authors were mostly recommended, answering the next question about what should be read during the war.

The final question was: 'If you were a writer (or maybe you already are), what would you write a book about right now?'. On the one hand, my professional interest is understandable here: I often involve my fans in discussing the topics of future books, because teenagers as a target audience are very demanding of texts. On the other hand, the answers will reveal topics that most concern teenagers during the war (respondents could name a few). So, the answers were distributed as follows: war in general, war and teenagers, refugees – 32.6%; science fiction or fantasy story – 19.6%; teenage problems – 15.2%; faith in the power of the human spirit, faith in the best – 8.7%; love in all forms and the value of life – 6.5% each; adaptation of mythological stories and Ukrainian Cossacks – 4.3% each. As it can be seen, teenagers have an urgent need to convert their own experience of living in war into texts. The only consolation here is that, despite all the horrors of war, the respondents emphasize that stories about war should also be stories about struggle and victory.

On the one hand, the writer's professional interest is understandable here: it is often necessary to involve book fans in discussing the topics of future books because teenagers as a target

¹⁶ If you take Olena Ryzhko out of brackets, because, in fact, the questionnaire was sent from this account, it is logical that this name was almost the first respondents mentioned.

audience are very demanding of texts. On the other hand, the answers will reveal the topics that most concern teenagers during the war (respondents could name a few of them).

Conclusions

Thus, the results of the 'Reading in the Time of War' survey of teenage bloggers proved that for those who like to read, under any force majeure circumstances, a book remains a way (often the only possible way) of normalizing the world and salvation, an escape from the terrible reality. Genre literature is in constant demand: fantasy/science fiction, detective, adventure. Realistic prose became more popular. It is also clear from the detailed answers that teenagers are looking for their own ways to be useful, in particular by telling the truth about the war in Ukraine and popularizing Ukrainian literature/culture around the world.

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