

Determinants of book reading and library attendance in Colombia. A microeconomic approach

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Analysing determinants of book reading and library attendance provides an interesting case study, firstly because reading is perhaps one of the most basic forms of cultural participation (Fernández–Blanco and Prieto–Rodríguez 2009), and secondly because it is a cultural activity which has received scant attention from the standpoint of participation determinants (Amez 2010; Gray 2003).

The main goal of the current paper is to explore determinants in the decision to read books and to attend libraries in Colombia, based on data from the *2008 Cultural Consumption Survey (ECC2008)* drawn up by the National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE). Given the dichotomous nature of the variables of interest and the hierarchical structure of the ECC2008, multilevel logistic regressions are estimated so as to ascertain the impact of individual, family, and neighbourhood features on the two decisions. The neighbourhood constitutes the closest context to which an individual is exposed and may affect decisions through a range of mechanisms: the social interactions created therein, the geographical location, as well as access to services and opportunities.

In the field of cultural economics, available empirical literature on the topic remains scarce and has mainly focused on the use of time series to estimate elasticities of demand for books (Billintmayer 1992; Hjorth-Andersen 2000; Prieto-Rodríguez et al. 2005; Ringstand and Loyland 2006; Palma et al. 2009). In the case of Spain, participation studies, such as those by Escardíbul and Villarroya (2009), and Villarroya and Escardíbul (2010), have explored the purchase of books and periodicals. Other studies more closely linked to the analysis conducted here have analysed factors impacting both the decision to read as well as frequency of reading (Fernández–Blanco and Prieto–Rodríguez (2009). The literature is even scarcer for developing countries, prominent studies including those by Parra and Corzo (2008) exploring the impact of the National Reading and Libraries Plan on the number of books read in Colombia, or the study carried out by Muñoz (2012) into reader behaviour in Chile, aside from the descriptive studies into reading behaviour and reading habits published by CERLAC (2012) or by the Colombian Book Chamber (2006).

The main hypothesis to be tested is whether, despite addressing a developing country which evidences a low readership rate and a high rate of income inequality, the factors affecting the decision to read and to attend libraries do not vary substantially from those in other developed countries.

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The main findings reveal that, in addition to individual characteristics such as age, sex or marital status, a high level of educational attainment and a higher socioeconomic status have a positive and significant effect on the decision to read. As regards the decision to attend libraries, socioeconomic standing does not prove significant, whereas being married, separated, or widowed, having a lower level of educational attainment or stating that one is black reduces the likelihood of attending libraries. With regard to the effect of the neighbourhood, according to the VPC (Variance Partition Coefficient), 5.33% (6.58%) of the residual variation in the tendency to read at least one book (attend a library) can be attributed to unobserved neighbourhood characteristics.

This paper makes a two-fold contribution to the empirical literature addressing cultural participation: firstly, by providing an analysis of reading and library attendance decisions, an area thus far absent in any developing country, as is the case of Colombia, and secondly by using multilevel models to reflect the effect which individuals' living environment (neighbourhood) has on the reading and library attendance decision.

The findings to emerge from the models estimated shed light on the implementation of cultural policies aimed at boosting the population's reading rate and access to libraries. On the one hand, the findings bear out the importance of the need to further levels of education amongst the population, in particular vis-à-vis secondary and university studies, and on the other, evidence the importance of subjects' environment as an element to be included in programmes aimed at promoting the two cultural activities. In this sense, policies fostering access to cultural infrastructure such as libraries, together with educational programmes, encouraging the setting up of reading clubs in contexts other than schools (public transport stops, buses, markets, recreational areas, and so on), which foster interest and reading habits, might prove relevant.

Keywords: cultural participation, reading habits, library attendances, multilevel logistic models, Colombia.

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