

## Literacy without Literature in the Digital Era

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**Abstract:** *The technological progress has transformed the world in such a way that it would be impossible to be recognized by the people living only a hundred years ago. Instant communication reduced physical distances to nothing. All our thoughts travel at the speed of light to reach the most remote corners of the planet. We do not have time to write full sentences or even full words anymore. We use emoticons and shortcuts, whereas punctuation has become optional. Does this affect the level of literacy in the younger generations? Have people been losing their ability to spell words because of the abuse of shortcuts such as: "lol" and "cf" (Romanian for "cefaci")? In a world where we can express our opinion on absolutely anything, do we pay attention to what the others think or say? Do we still read real literature, or is literature old-fashioned since all the wisdom we need is now available on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, among others? Are we still able to vibrate with aesthetic pleasure reading a poem, or have we entered in the most pragmatic era of our existence as the only beings on Earth (still) able to create art? This research represents a version of the current reality.*

### Introduction

The idea that the Internet is a game changer has been around since almost immediately after it spread all over the world, and irrefutable pieces of evidence have been brought to our attention by specialists in various fields. Having a mobile phone or a tablet with which to connect to the Internet and to access a seemingly unlimited data base of everything there is on this planet and beyond has changed some of our habits. The mere fact that we can store phone numbers in the memory of our mobile phones caused the disappearance of an activity once extensively done by humans: memorizing. Has this diminished the capacity of our brain to store data? Are we less capable of retaining pieces of information for a longer period of time than we used to be? Is the fact that an increasing number of children do not read fairy tales before falling asleep going to affect their intellectual abilities of understanding literature later in life?

"In Great Britain, a recent survey of pre-schoolers shows that a rising number of toddlers are now put to bed with a tablet instead of a bedtime story. In the USA, a telephone survey of 1,009 parents of children aged 2–24 months (Zimmerman et al., 2007) documents that by 3 months of age, about 40% of children regularly watched television, DVDs or videos, while by 24 months the proportion rose to 90%. Moreover, with the advance and exponential use of social media, children see their parents constantly interacting with mobile devices, instead of with people around them." (Vulchanova et al, 2017: 1)

It goes without saying that the habits we develop in the early age will dictate the guiding lines of our lives as adults. The environment in which a child is raised will leave its prints on the personality of the young adult. The fact that children imitate the adults is an undeniable truth. Therefore, in a world in which more and more parents spend hours in front of a computer screen or with a mobile phone in their hands, exchanging short messages with friends and having less time to read from a book, more and more children will do the same, passing this behaviour onto their children when the time comes. Seeing things from this perspective, the prediction for the literary future of this planet seems very dark.

Literature, one of the greatest means of educating and entertaining hundreds of generations throughout the centuries, has been under constant attack from the beginning of the audio and video entertainment, namely the radio, the cinematography, the television and, most recently, the internet with its social media platforms, the latter looking more and more like the fatal blow in a violent video game. Surveys show that, while literacy does not seem to be profusely influenced, reading literature is one of the human activities which proves to be less popular than before. This fact arguably leads to another phenomenon: functional illiteracy. It is not certain whether this type of illiteracy, which basically describes people who can read and write, but who do not have the capacity of understanding and using what they read, represents the failure of the educational system in many countries or the effect of the constantly decreasing number of hours per week spent reading a book. It can be anyone's educated guess that it is a combination of the two.

The survey in which 100 Romanian students took part – and whose results will be shown later in this article – was designed specifically to shed a light on the behaviour of the 2022 adults concerning the time spent on various social media platforms and how this influenced the time devoted to reading literature. The survey also aims at establishing whether *text speak* – the activity of sending short written messages over the Internet, using mobile phones – has already caused changes in the way people write. The research had as a starting point a controversy related to how *text speak* may or may not have diminished the capacity of the young to use correct grammar and spelling, but revealed other important truths in the process.

## Literature Review

Human beings are not the only species capable of using tools in their daily activities. Instead, they have proven to be the only ones having the ability of inventing new technologies. This fact leads, inevitably, to abandoning old technologies if the new ones can replace them with the purpose of making our lives more comfortable. Electricity offered the perfect grounds for inventing things and devices which would have most certainly been considered the work of a magician before their discovery. Loudspeakers, amplifiers, electronic keyboards, special sound effects, electric guitars with their distinct rock/heavy metal distortion of the sound diverted the attention of music lovers from symphonic concerts to rock and electronic music festivals. Have these new musical technologies caused the disappearance of the symphonic music with its large orchestras and sold-out concerts? No, but they have “snatched” away a large number of potential classic music lovers. Articles in newspapers or on television channels websites such as *The Guardian* and the *ABC News* point to the same reality. In *Why no symphony orchestra in the world makes money*, for example, written by Alex McClintock and published on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2017, it is revealed that “fewer, older people go to the symphony” (source: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-04/why-no-symphony-orchestra-in-the-world-makes-money/8413746>, visited on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022) while a report published by *The Guardian* in 2007 states that “the typical attender of classical concerts is 50-plus, well educated” (source: [https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/oct/05/classical\\_music\\_and\\_operal#:~:text=At%20the%20last%20count%2C%208.3,had%20attended%20a%20classical%20concert](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/oct/05/classical_music_and_operal#:~:text=At%20the%20last%20count%2C%208.3,had%20attended%20a%20classical%20concert), visited on November 30<sup>th</sup>, 2022). Looking back at the evolution of the technology involved in bringing the act of culture to the public, the same trend can be easily noticed: the apparition of cinematography was said to be the end of the movie theatre, the apparition of television was said to be the end of the cinema halls, the apparition of online newspapers was thought to possibly cause the extinction of the printed press and so on. None of them caused the extinction of any of the others, but each of them had an impact on the number of the people going to the theatre, to the movie halls and buying newspapers. It also caused other changes:

“Some results from this early research indicate that there are certain behavioural consequences. For instance, TV-viewing appears to lead to less reading, yet subject to individual variation (Himmelweit et al., 1960). Furthermore, TV-viewing leads to less listening to the radio, and, in particular, with more adverse effect for “brighter” children (greater loss). (...) Other research suggests that TV viewing overall has a negative effect on the development of children’s attention and cognition and the American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended that children below 2 years of age not watch any television (Anderson and Pempek, 2005)” (Vulchanova et al, 2017: 3).

Watching television or listening to the radio does not imply knowing how to read or write and it does not imply using our imagination which would otherwise lead to improving the speed with which we think. All the viewer or the listener needs to understand, now, are images or spoken words. Watching a movie based on a book means accepting the view of the director on the original text and this prevents us from exercising our capacity of understanding written words, of interpreting them in our own way and of creating the scenes in the source text by using that part of our brain responsible with the act of creation. Metaphorically speaking, movie viewers are fed off-the-shelf interpretations of a text, which make their minds take the shape of somebody else’s artistic view instead of creating their own views with the power of their minds while reading written words on a page with no moving pictures.

Reading a book is a complex activity from which people of all ages, but especially young people, learn how to decode combinations of words meant to create aesthetic pleasure. In addition to that, reading a book is a fill-in-the-blanks type of activity, in which the blanks are filled with movie-like images. In the

end, if a thousand readers read the same book and their mental representations were transformed in moving pictures, we would have a thousand different movies on the same subject, with the same characters and the same story, but with different interpretations.

Numerous studies show that the vocabulary of the people who do not read literature is less comprehensive than that of the people who read regularly. This is not a surprise, and the explanation is simple: while a movie consumer receives only the dialogues, in which orality is abundant, a literature reader benefits from a collection of passages, which are formally and semantically more complex and, which have, more often than not, a poetic form. The written text gives the author the liberty of choosing words which a character will not normally use – or otherwise the character would not be a credible one. The fact that reading fiction leads, eventually, to having a significantly more developed vocabulary is beyond a shadow of a doubt, the connection between regular communication and fiction reading being a part of the classical theory of human speech development (Hoover and Gough, 1990 and Vellutino et al, 2007 in Oliink et al, 2022: 48).

Arguably, mobile phones, with their plethora of incoming and outgoing written messages, have the most visible impact on the way in which young people use their vocabulary to communicate. We live in an era where we can express our thoughts and verbally react in an instant by using various media platforms. If a person from Perth, Australia, for example, uploads a video of a puppy wrestling a slipper, he/she may receive thousands of written reactions from all over the world, many of them consisting of chunks of words or acronyms: *OMG, so cute. LOL, dat gr8!* These examples imitate the way in which young people write short messages. As a matter of fact, there are many sites named “OMG, so cute!” (see <https://giphy.com/explore/omg-so-cute>), in which the word *gif* is also an acronym standing for *graphics interchange format*. As for *LOL* and *dat gr8*, they are largely used in short text messages sent from mobile phones and other devices connected to the Internet. The changes to be observed in the examples above are at different levels: using acronyms for usual expressions, not using the verb *to be* – *so cute* instead of *it is so cute* and *that great* instead of *that is great* – and even shortening words by means of “innovative” spelling – *dat* instead of *that* and *gr8* instead of *great*. Everything in the name of speed, one may say. The generations whose teenagerhood did not gravitate around mobile phones used to sit down in front of an empty piece of paper and write letters, which were viewed as small pieces of literature, therefore the vocabulary was chosen more carefully, and great attention was paid to grammar and punctuation. The spread of mobile phones able to send written messages from one corner of the Earth to the other almost instantaneously created such a change that the older generations find it difficult, if not impossible, to understand. Although these changes seem to mutilate the language traditionally used to create remarkable literary masterpieces from classic poets such as Shakespeare, Byron, Elan Poe, Ezra Pound – to name just a few – they have a very simple explanation. It is normal to use shortened words and acronyms while using a device, namely the phone, which was originally created for oral communication. Orality was transferred in writing, but since the mouth is still faster than the hands, the latter are trying to keep the pace with the mouth by creating a set of shortcuts, so that the speed of texting – therefore the speed of communication – can resemble the speed of real talk. This way of speaking – with the hands – received different names by various researchers, but the most popular one is *text speaking*, a term which will be used in the present article, as well. As regards the colloquial nature of *text speaking*, it may be due to the fact that the characteristics of oral communication had to be transferred in written communication, the texts being much smaller than the traditional ones.

This situation raised a question among the specialists: is *text speaking* influencing education to such a degree that the young generations will have a poor command of their (English) language in the future?

“Text-speak tramples upon Standard English rules and presents a challenge to academicians and parents. Educators are concerned that abbreviated content rampant with misspelled words and grammatically incorrect sentences are creeping into students’ assignments, which blurs the distinction between formal and informal writing (Strain-Moritz, 2016). Results from a study showed that there is an inverse relationship between texting and professionally written communication and reading accuracy in a sample of college students (Drouin, 2011). In this day and age, grammar and language are both collapsing (Sonn, 2006); users are increasingly turning away from reading and writing in Standard English. Basically, conventional writing, that once required the proper use of Standard grammatical rules, has apparently fallen into an abyss.” (Al-Sharqiland Abbasi, 2020: 2).

We do not agree with this rather apocalyptic view. While accepting that *text speaking* crosses the borders of academic assignments and casual conversations between friends, it is rather the other way round. *Text speaking* seems to be responsible for the poor grammar, the poor punctuation and the limited vocabulary of the young generations, but the real problem is probably the students' spending less and less time reading literature. The results of the study mentioned by Al-Shakil and Abbasi show that 64% of the college students admitted having mixed informal writing with academic writing in their assignments. More than that, 50% reported incorrect grammar and punctuation, while 38% used text shortcuts. Is this a sign that *textspeak* interferes with academic writing? In our opinion, it has little to do with that. Using shortcuts, missing punctuation and misspelling words come from a lack of elegance in writing. This elegance comes, in its turn, from reading thousands of pages of classic and modern literature, since reading also means observing and, eventually, learning the grammar and the punctuation of a well-formed and correctly written text. After all, the best training for a writer is to read a lot before starting to write.

### **Is text speaking to blame?**

Not all researchers consider that *textspeak* is the sole responsible for the degradation of grammar, punctuation and spelling. Text speaking can be considered another way of coding messages, based on the knowledge shared by people who can write in keeping with the constraints of academic writing. The textbooks and all the literature students use at school make a long-lasting impression on them. The information they acquire passes from the short-term to the long-term memory (LTM), and studies have shown that the information stored in the LTM is characterized by resilience in the sense that it is not easily affected by the passing of time. Bahrack (1984) reveals the fact that people who manage to master a foreign language in school, and do not use it constantly after graduation, can retain a large amount of that language for over 50 years (Bahrack, 1984 in Drouin and Davis, 2009: 50)

Also, Drouin and Davis (2009) designed a survey which involved 80 students, 24 males and 56 females, to determine whether *text speaking* is destroying literacy. Before the survey, the participants were put in separate rooms and asked to complete various tasks such as writing an email, reading out loud, spelling etc. The results showed that "there was little difference between texters and nontexters on any standardized literacy measures" (Drouin and Davis, 2009: 60). The same study demonstrated that "a higher frequency of *text speak* usage is not related to college students' abilities to produce appropriate S(standard) E(English) spellings for words that are commonly used in texting." (Drouin and Davis, 2009: 61). The observation which can be made, based on the research whose results are mentioned above, is that people who know the correct spelling of words and the correct grammar may use shortcuts and text speaking without forgetting how to academically write a text. People who are not able to write correctly make the same mistakes before starting to text speak. A parallel can be drawn between text speakers who are not able to write correctly and emigrants who cannot use their mother tongue correctly after only a few years spent in another country where people speak a different language: neither of them were too good at communicating correctly before leaving their native countries.

Technology has not always been seen as a positive thing. "In the fifteenth century, the arrival of printing was widely perceived by the Church as an invention of Satan, the hierarchy fearing that the dissemination of uncensored ideas would lead to a breakdown of social order" (Crystal, 2001: 2). Four hundred years later, the same concerns, different technology: "The telegraph would destroy the family and promote crime. The telephone would undermine society. Broadcasting would be the voice of propaganda. In each case, the anxiety generated specifically linguistic controversy" (Crystal, 2001: 2). Now, it is the turn of computer technology, mobile phones and the Internet to be feared as potential destroyers of writing, the element which allowed passing ideas and experience to the next generations. In fact, the real danger is represented by the fact that, while the new communication technology helps spreading ideas faster than ever before, the video support and all the visual entertaining have been diverting our attention from reading literature, as a means of entertaining, to simply watching images which may speak a thousand words, but not aesthetically loaded. It is the opposite of what happens when people read a thousand words carefully chosen by a writer and create their own images in their brains. Studies and surveys indicate that the number of people who read books has been dropping, as well as the hours spent reading. In a world where there are more college students than ever before, this situation seems to be

counterintuitive. Yet, various polls and surveys clearly show a decrease in the number of people who read. For exemplification, we took into consideration two surveys:

1. According to INS (the Romanian National Institute of Statistics), the number of readers dropped from 6.1 million in 1999 to 2.5 million in 2020 ([https://www.realitatea.net/stiri/actual/sau-inchis-jumatate-din-bibliotecile-din-romania-un-milion-de-cititori-mai-putini-in-ultimii-doi-ani\\_631f0b6ed1ed792752\\_6d3\\_ee2](https://www.realitatea.net/stiri/actual/sau-inchis-jumatate-din-bibliotecile-din-romania-un-milion-de-cititori-mai-putini-in-ultimii-doi-ani_631f0b6ed1ed792752_6d3_ee2)).

2. A national survey made in the United States of America the same year showed that almost half of the respondents had not read any books for over a year – 48.5% to be more precise (source: <https://testprepinsight.com/resources/us-book-reading-statistics/>).

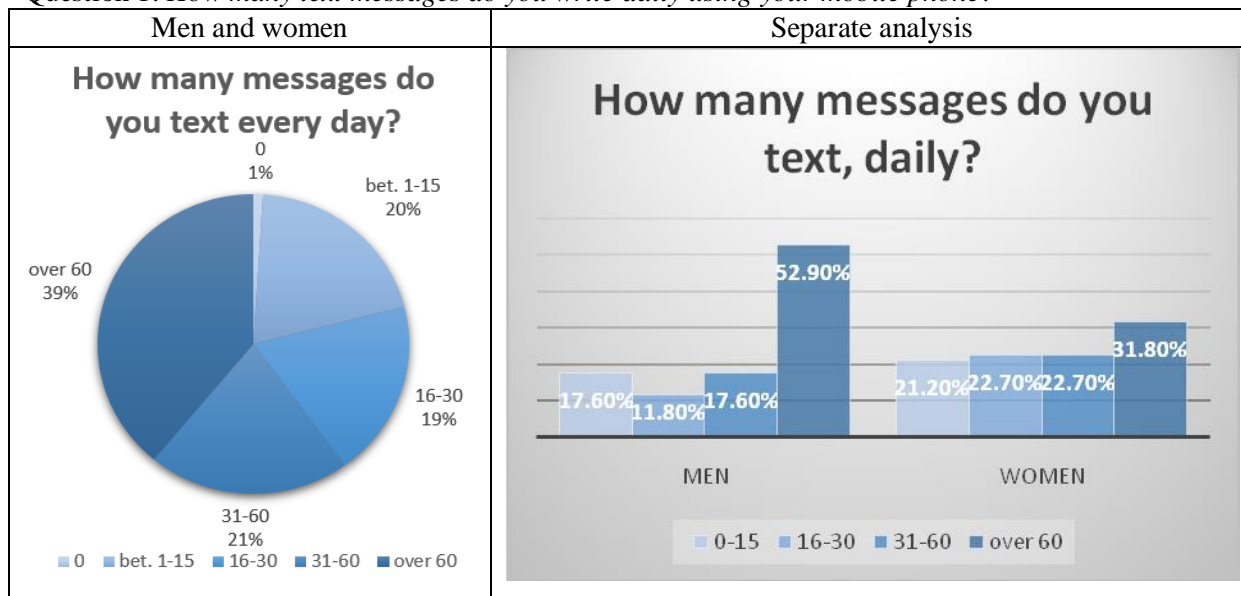
How did we get here? What causes the drop in the number of literature readers? Is it because people prefer to go to the movies instead of reading? This may hardly be the answer. As a matter of fact, the number of moviegoers decreased dramatically since cable television, especially with HBO, Cinemax, Netflix etc. The era of large movie theatres, with hundreds of spectators, is long gone. What else, then? Could it be the fact that fewer and fewer people know how to read and write? This cannot be the answer, either. Illiteracy has almost been eradicated in the civilized world. On the other hand, functional illiteracy has been increasing. But what causes functional illiteracy? Is the inability of people to understand elaborated texts such as novels, short stories and poems fuelled by the fact that the texts people read today are the ones sent by their friends on phones? How much time do people spend on social platforms? Have their writing habits changed along with the evolution of electronic devices where typing has replaced handwriting? Is the ever-increasing need for speed in communication diminishing the people's capacity of understanding long and elaborated sentences? To have a glimpse in what is really happening, a specific survey was created whose questions and results will be presented below.

### Literacy without literature?

The main goal of the survey was to reveal the extent to which the use of computer technology and the easy access to the Internet influence humans' written communication, their willingness and interest to read literary texts and their capacity of completing a small literary text, to be more specific, a two-line stanza.

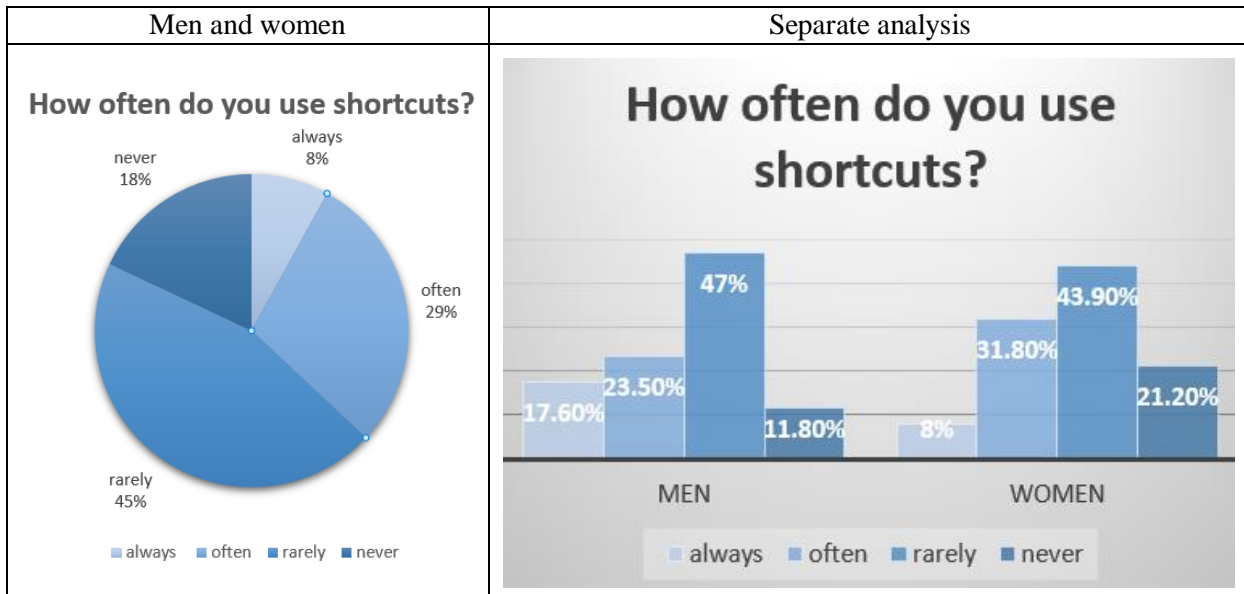
The survey was taken by 100 students from a series of non-philological faculties such as Medicine, Pharmacy and Engineering, aged between 18 and 50 as follows: 50% between 18 and 24, 6% between 25 and 30, 3% between 31 and 35, 7% between 36 and 40 and 20% over 40 years old. The majority, i.e. 66 of them, were women.

Question 1: *How many text messages do you write daily using your mobile phone?*



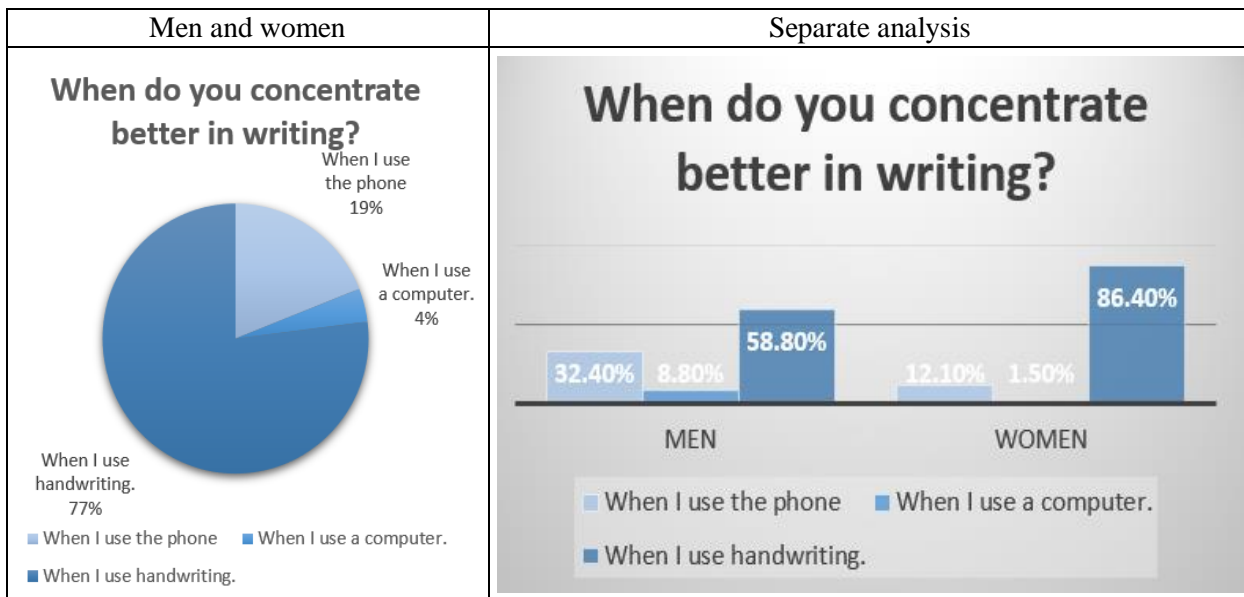
Question 2: *How often do you use shortcuts and acronyms when you text?*





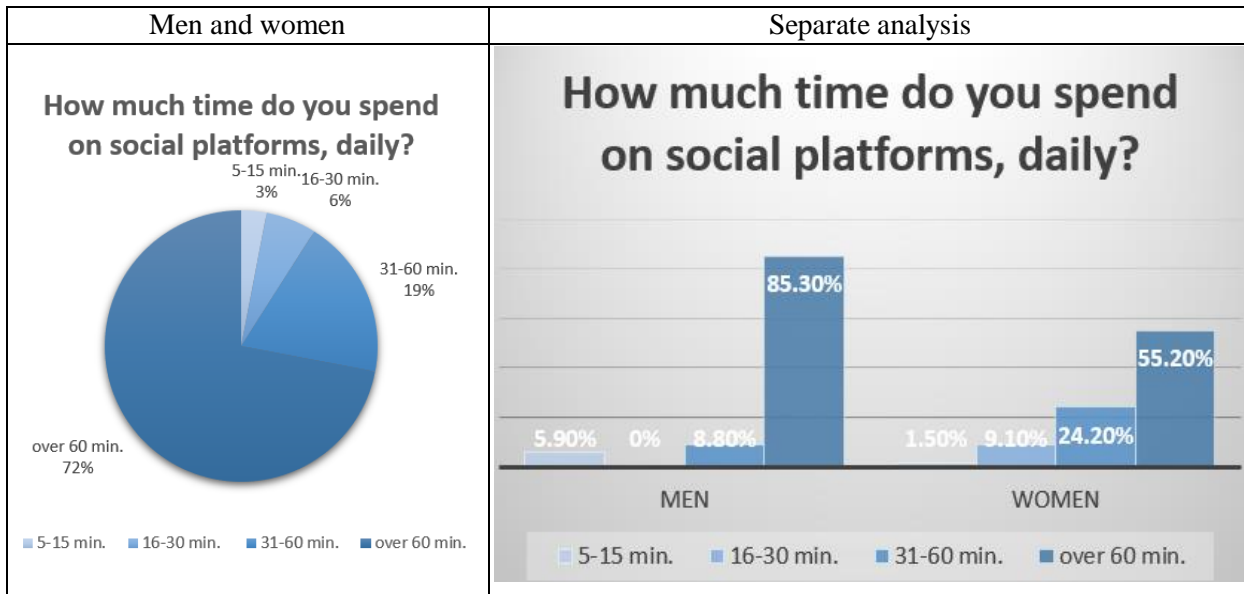
Surprisingly, in spite of the fact that the majority of the participants declared that they send more than 60 messages a day (some of them in the range of 500), more than half rarely or never use shortcuts. The fact that men use shortcuts more often than women may have something to do with the fact that women read literature more than men do, as it can be seen in Question 6. This does not mean that women are more artistically inclined than men, but that men pay less attention to aesthetic aspects.

Question 3: *When do you concentrate better in writing?*



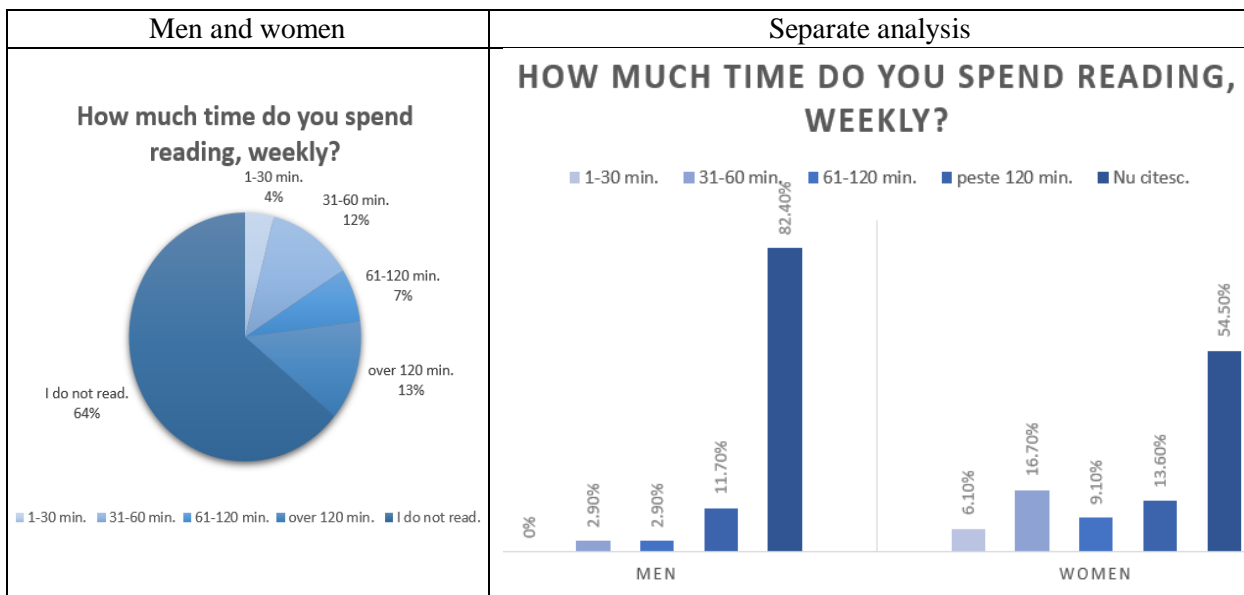
Paradoxically, in an era where written messages are in the form of electronic texts written with the help of virtual or physical keyboards, handwriting still occupies the most important place when it comes to concentrating. Further research may reveal why this is happening.

Question 4: *How much time do you spend on social platforms, daily?*



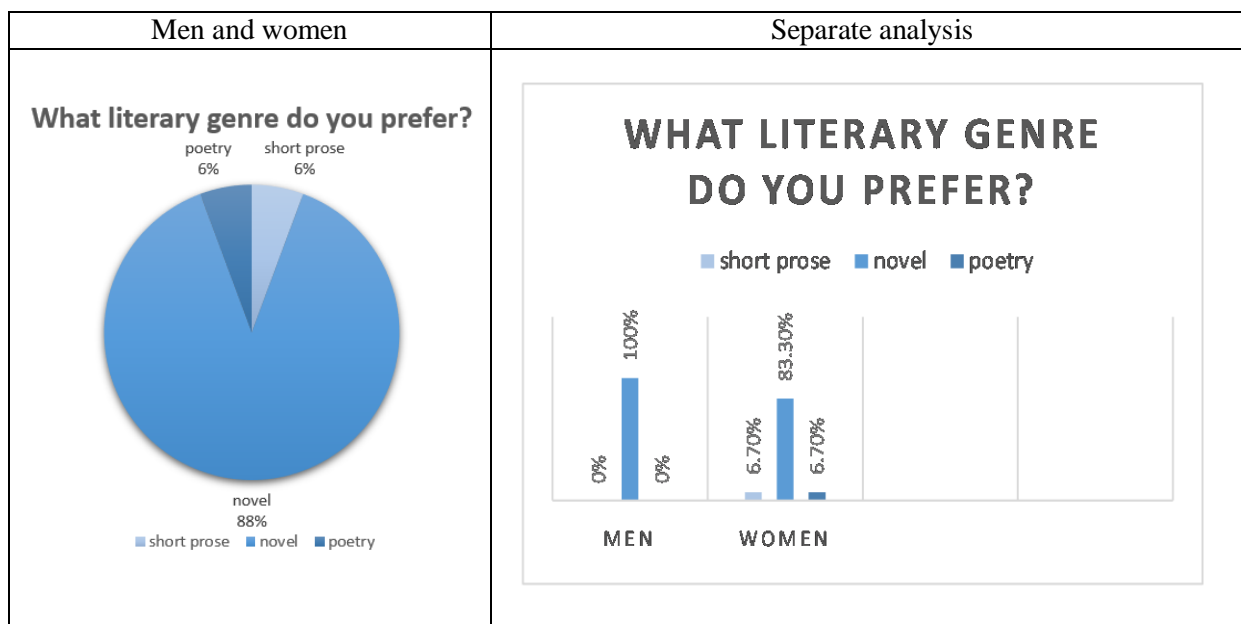
Spending time on social platforms is the new form of socializing, therefore the results are not surprising in the length of the stay, but in the gender: man spend significantly more time on such platforms daily. Without any other comment, it probably has something to do with how much free time Romanian men have as compared to Romanian women.

Question 5: *How much time do you spend reading literature weekly?*



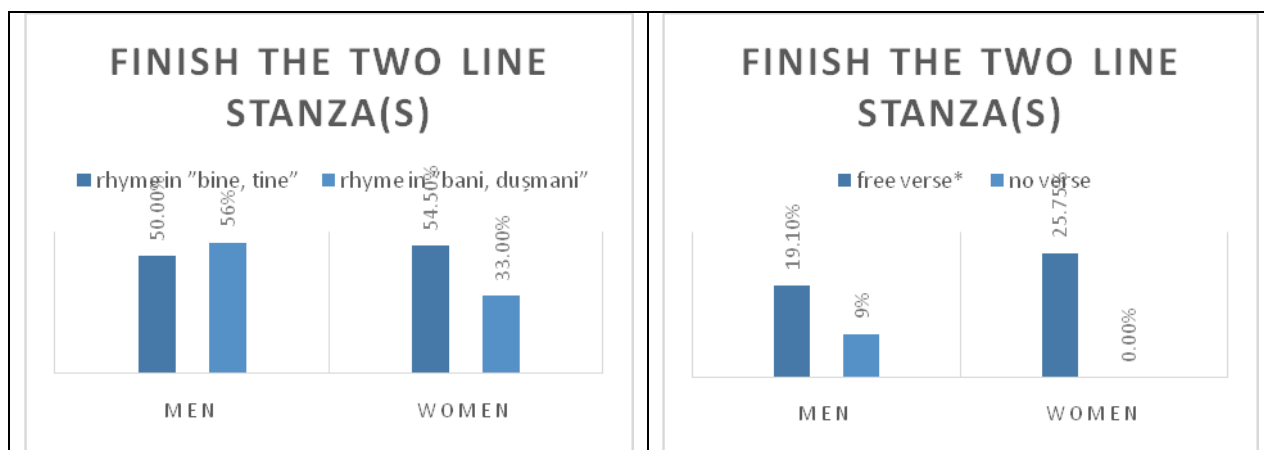
The results are not surprising. If you still have doubts that women read more than men, try to remember when you saw a man reading a book at the beach, and when you saw a woman in the same situation.

Question 6. *What literary genre do you prefer?*



Although sad and rather worrying, the fact that the men involved in this survey do not read poetry has a plausible explanation: poetry uses abstract images and metaphors which are less relevant to men who are practical. In addition to that, the most successful movies in the last decades have been the ones depicting men as heroes, superheroes and fighters, not sensible, reading poetry and painting.

Question 7: *Finish the two-line stanza(s).*



The students were given two two-line stanzas and asked to provide the second line in them:

1. *Atuncicândvorbesccu mine, / ...*
2. *Știmasta de mii de ani : / ...*

These stanzas are not from actual poems or songs. They were created with two purposes: on the one hand to see how many students read modern poetry and complete the stanzas using free verse, and on the other hand to have an idea of how contemporary Romanian dance music and *manele* influence the younger generation. To be more precise, a common place in the lyrics sung by many Romanian singers nowadays often use facile rhymes, combining words such as *bine, tine, mine* in pairs. Another common place can be found in *manele* (party music having strong Middle East influences, talking about life, love, wealth, enemies and friends and using a rather limited vocabulary), namely *bani* (money) and *dușmani* (enemies). Probably supported by the fact that at least 6% of the women taking part on this survey read poetry and apparently none of the male respondents reads this type of literary texts, women used free



verses almost 3 times more than men did. The results also revealed the fact that men are more influenced by *manele* than women, whereas women are more influenced by the contemporary dance music. Unexpectedly, though, 9 percent of the men did not even know how to finish the lyrics.

Considering the aspects presented in this paper, the following **conclusions** may be drawn:

- *text speaking* does not destroy grammar and spelling. These language related competences are not mastered by those who make such mistakes in communication.
- literacy is not in danger, but the elegancy in writing, coming from fewer and fewer people who read literature, is.
- cheap entertainment, such as watching pictures and short videos on social platforms, commenting and chit-chatting by using text speaking, has already replaced reading literature in a significant proportion, in some parts of the world.
- the factor with the most aggressive impact on literacy is not poor literacy skills, but not reading literature, especially fiction.
- a prediction easy to make: literature will not disappear, but the world of the future is a world with as many readers as we have symphonic concerts goes today.

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