

Fewer readers, more screens: the paths of reading in Brazil according to Zoara Failla^I

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Abstract

The 6th edition of the *Portraits of Reading in Brazil* survey presents a concerning diagnosis of the population's reading habits: between 2019 and 2024, the percentage of readers dropped from 52% to 47%, and the average number of books read per year also decreased. To better understand this scenario, we spoke with Zoara Failla, a sociologist and coordinator of the study, who has been working at the Pró-Livro Institute (IPL) for nearly two decades. In her analysis, Zoara highlights the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, socioeconomic inequalities, and the role of new technologies in transforming Brazilians' relationship with books. Throughout the interview, she points out the main challenges for fostering readers in the country and advocates for urgent public policies directed at schools, libraries, and families, emphasizing the importance of printed reading in cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Keywords: Reading; pandemic; reader development; public policies.

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Menos leitores, mais telas: os caminhos da leitura no Brasil segundo Zoara Failla

Resumo

A 6ª edição da pesquisa *Retratos da Leitura no Brasil* traz um diagnóstico preocupante sobre os hábitos leitores da população: entre 2019 e 2024, o percentual de leitores caiu de 52% para 47% e a média de livros lidos por ano também diminuiu. Para compreender melhor esse cenário, conversamos com Zoara Failla, socióloga e coordenadora do estudo, que há quase duas décadas atua no Instituto Pró-Livro (IPL). Em sua análise, Zoara destaca os impactos da pandemia de COVID-19, as desigualdades socioeconômicas e o papel das novas tecnologias na transformação da relação dos brasileiros com os livros. Ao longo da entrevista, ela aponta os principais desafios para a formação de leitores no país e defende políticas públicas urgentes voltadas à escola, às bibliotecas e às famílias, ressaltando a importância da leitura impressa no desenvolvimento cognitivo, emocional e social.

Palavras-chave: Leitura; pandemia; formação de leitores; políticas públicas.



Menos lectores, más pantallas: los caminos de la lectura en Brasil según Zoara Failla

Resumen

La 6ª edición de la investigación Retratos de la *Lectura en Brasil* presenta un diagnóstico preocupante sobre los hábitos de lectura de la población: entre 2019 y 2024, el porcentaje de lectores cayó del 52% al 47%, y el promedio de libros leídos por año también disminuyó. Para comprender mejor este escenario, conversamos con Zoara Failla, socióloga y coordinadora del estudio, quien desde hace casi dos décadas trabaja en el Instituto Pró-Livro (IPL). En su análisis, Zoara destaca los impactos de la pandemia de COVID-19, las desigualdades socioeconómicas y el papel de las nuevas tecnologías en la transformación de la relación de los brasileños con los libros. A lo largo de la entrevista, señala los principales desafíos para la formación de lectores en el país y defiende políticas públicas urgentes dirigidas a la escuela, a las bibliotecas y a las familias, resaltando la importancia de la lectura impresa en el desarrollo cognitivo, emocional y social.

Palabras clave: Lectura; pandemia; formación de lectores; políticas públicas.



Introduction

The reading habits of Brazilians continue to undergo transformation, and the most recent numbers raise an alert. In this sense, the 6th edition, which is also the latest update of the Retratos da Leitura no Brasil [Portraits of Reading in Brazil] survey, conducted in 2024 by the Instituto Pró-Livro (IPL), aimed to understand reader behavior in its specificities. The data show a drop in the percentage of readers, which went from 52% in 2019 to 47% in 2024, in addition to a reduction in the average number of books read per year, from 4.95 to 3.96.

Among the factors that contributed to the respective drop, we cannot fail to mention the impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic had on our country. COVID-19 was a moment of health crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, affecting the population globally. The period of the health crisis spanned from March 2020 to May 2023. In Brazil, there was a need for social isolation; this resulted in the suspension of school classes, among other activities. Consequently, the socioeconomic, cultural, and technological factors that have been shaping Brazilians' relationship with books were impacted.

To understand the causes and implications of this trend, we spoke with ²Zoara Failla, sociologist, researcher, and study coordinator. With a trajectory dedicated to the promotion of reading, she analyzes the research results and points out the main challenges faced by the country: the absence of libraries in many schools, the deficient training of reading teachers, the growing weight of social networks, and the loss of space for reading in free time.

Regarding the development of the interview, it was conducted on August 19, 2025, via email, which was a choice of the interviewee. We sent the 14 questions to her and the answers were returned by email; therefore, we emphasize that there was no interaction between the involved parties. In this sense, there are authors and concepts cited by the professor that were not possible to clarify in the presentation of the textual production of the interview.



Throughout the interview, Failla also highlights the fundamental role of the family and the school in forming a taste for reading, discusses the effects of digitalization, and alerts to the urgency of public policies capable of reducing regional and social inequalities, ensuring that the book—whether printed or digital—continues to play its essential role in the cultural, cognitive, and civic formation of Brazilians.

Interview

Interviewers: The 6th edition of the survey reveals a drop in the percentage of readers (covering different audiences: children, youth, and adults) in Brazil, from 52% in 2019 to 47% in 2024, as well as a decrease in the average number of books read per year by all respondents (from 4.95 in 2019 to 3.96 in 2024). How do you interpret these results? In what way may the COVID-19 pandemic, with its restrictions and changes in lifestyle habits, have influenced this drop, and what other factors (socioeconomic, cultural, technological) do you consider relevant to this trend?

Zoara Failla: We identified the impact of the pandemic, in particular, in the drop of the percentage of readers (from 71% in 2019 to 62% in 2024) in the 5-to-10-year age group. Most children faced difficulty accessing online classes and many relied on their parents' cell phones, which certainly impacted learning and reading development, especially in this age group, when in-person reading practices are essential. The research also reveals to us that more than 50% of students in the Early Years (1st to 5th grade) and Final Years (6th to 9th grade) of Elementary School depend on the school library for access to books recommended by teachers. Isolation also impacted this access to books during the pandemic.

But there are other factors that add to the difficulties of access to books and the drop in reading practices in classrooms and libraries, partly motivated by the pandemic. We know, according to the MEC [Ministry of Education]



Census, that more than 50% of public schools do not have a school library and around 1,500 public libraries were closed in the last ten years.

The research also brings us other revelations about what may explain the drop in the percentage of readers: as pointed out in subsequent questions, more than 90% of the population over 14 years old uses their free time on the internet and on social networks. 43% of children are on video games. Only 20% use this leisure time for reading books (printed or digital).

Interviewers: The survey indicates an increase in internet access (88% of the population) and in the use of messaging applications and social networks compared to 2019. Furthermore, the use of cell phones/smartphones for digital reading skyrocketed from 73% in 2019 to 97% in 2024 among those who have read digital books. In what way may the pandemic have accelerated or consolidated the digitalization of reading and the use of mobile devices? What are the implications of these changes for the future of the printed book and for the reading experience in Brazil?

Zoara Failla: Certainly, the pandemic contributed to the increase in the percentage of those who use cell phones/smartphones for digital reading and for other consumption and cultural habits of the population. However, we cannot credit these changes solely to the pandemic. I am not a specialist in this area, but we know that digital technology and the use of mobile devices to access platforms and social networks have impacted: the economy, with purchases via digital platforms (here we verify the impact on the closure of several physical bookstores); access to cultural goods (videos/streaming and reading); and the power of digital influencers. These transformations are already impacting book consumption—whether digital or printed. The drop, according to surveys on retail sales, in agreement with the Brazilian Book Chamber (CBL) and the National Union of Book Publishers (SNEL), impacts printed and physical books, which reveals that the problem does not lie in the format—paper or digital—but rather in the decline in interest in books (47% declare not having read due to lack of time or disinterest and 17% confess to not liking to read) and in the percentage



of those who indicate difficulties in reading: 36% do not understand what they read—28% are the ³functional illiterates—Functional Illiteracy Indicator (INAF).

I understand that the disinterest in reading books, in addition to screen addiction, which is certainly the main challenge in countries like Brazil that do not have a reading culture, can be explained by factors that combine: the deficient formation of readers by the school, the teacher's reader profile, the difficulties in access to books, and the difficulties in valuing and awakening interest in reading. Here, the family plays a fundamental role in this awakening of taste in childhood, but we know that there are few reading families who perceive this importance.

Interviewers: The 2024 data reveal that 68% of readers who use digital books perceive that they interrupt their reading more often to check messages on their cell phone or computer, while 58% are able to read for a longer time in paper books. How can this perception of interruption and difficulty of concentration in the digital medium affect reading quality and the development of readers' attention capacity, especially the younger ones? Does IPL have any view on how to mitigate these challenges?

Zoara Failla: These questions were included in the sixth edition of the survey given the great interest and controversies regarding the assessment of reading on screens versus reading printed books. We sought to identify the perception of these readers regarding: concentration, comprehension, imagination (concerning characters and described scenes), learning, new vocabulary, and time dedicated to reading—items that define the capacity for 'deep' reading. It is interesting to observe that among those with a higher education degree, we find the highest percentage (65%) of those who can read for a longer time or attain greater concentration with paper books. These results, in addition to numerous studies by neuroscientists and the evaluation of educational systems in countries such as Sweden, support our defense of reading printed books in schools, especially for children and youth. Unfortunately, we have seen in some Brazilian states the replacement of books with content



developed for digital platforms, generally ‘molded’ with ready-made questions and answers, eliminating the need for a more complex and contextual analysis of texts and prioritizing memorization, usually focused on university entrance examinations (vestibulares) or the ENEM [National High School Examination].

Neuroscientists, such as ⁴Maryanne Wolf, Michel Desmurget, and others, have evaluated the impact of screens on the cognitive, linguistic, and emotional development of young people and pointed to the printed book as an antidote to what they call ⁵‘rotten brain’.

How to mitigate it? It is difficult to identify how to face this ‘virus’ that is sustained by major powers interested in using screens and social networks for the manipulation of wills, consumption, representations, identities, and politics. Perhaps the book and critical reading are the primary ‘weapons.’ We depend on public policies and the union of forces from all of society, including the media, to seek ways to reverse this “contagion.”

Interviewers: Lack of time (47%) and preference for other activities (9%) are the main reasons cited by readers for not having read more in 2024. Among non-readers, lack of time (33%) and disliking reading (32%) are the main barriers. Did the pandemic alter the dynamics of these barriers? Do you perceive an intensification of the competition between reading and other forms of digital leisure, such as watching videos/movies or using social networks, which increased in the population’s free time?

Zoara Failla: Answered above: Simply adding that during the pandemic there was an increase in book sales for adult readers, particularly in the religious and self-help genres.

Interviewers: The 2024 survey separated technical/scientific/professional books from other types when measuring the average number of books read. A drop was noted in reading books by one’s own choice (from 47% to 43%). What are the main motivations for reading books in the current scenario (enjoyment, distraction, cultural updating/general knowledge, personal growth, religious reasons)? How have the priorities and needs of readers evolved, and



what might this drop in reading by one's own choice indicate about the role of reading in the lives of Brazilians today?

Zoara Failla: The drop in reading by one's own choice was from 47% to 43%, and the motivation for reading out of enjoyment went from 44% to 45%. This difference is within the margin of error. We can say that there was no significant variation among readers who read out of enjoyment and a four-percentage-point variation among those who read by their own choice. However, among all respondents, there is an expansion in those who state they do not like to read, from 22% to 29%, and a decline in those who state they like it very much, from 31% to 26%.

Enjoyment remains the primary motivation for reading, which reinforces the importance of awakening the pleasure of reading during childhood. Indeed, it is in the 5 to 10 age bracket where we find the highest percentage of those who state they like to read (86% say they like it very much or like to read). Children are fascinated by children's books when we offer them one. The challenge is discovering why we lose these readers along the way and why the percentage of those who state they like to read drops starting at age 14. This occurs likely because parents and teachers are not fueling this taste by offering books that can enchant or awaken the interest of these children. As the survey reveals, 43% are on video games, showing that parents replace books with cell phones.

Meanwhile, the motivation of adults is quite fragmented. However, we identified an important increase in interest in religious books starting in 2015, despite the drop in 2024. The Bible continues to be the most cited book, and experienced a slight increase in 2024, reflecting the growth of Evangelicals and Pentecostals. Indeed, there is a rise in the percentage of respondents who indicate religious leaders as the main influencer in their choice of book read. Apart from the Bible, we only did not identify a drop in the reading of short stories, biographies, and self-help.

We know, from book sales surveys conducted by the Brazilian Book Chamber (CBL) and the National Union of Book Publishers (SNEL), as well



as from responses by literary book consumers, that digital influencers have mobilized interest in certain authors and fiction subgenres such as ‘romantasy.’ This influence is also evident at Biennials and book fairs. However, the Survey reveals habits of the Brazilian population as a whole, rather than the interests of specific segments, particularly upper-class youth with higher education levels.

Recommendations by schools or teachers continue to be among the primary influences driving interest in literature (46%), especially among the youngest demographic. However, the reading of books assigned by schools dropped from 26% to 13% between 2019 and 2024.

Interviewers: What strategies can be developed to strengthen the influence of teachers and schools in promoting reading more effectively?

Zoara Failla: The Survey also identified the reader profile of teachers. Their preferences are very similar to those of Brazilians in general. The most cited books are Bibles, religious texts, and self-help. With such a reading repertoire, it becomes difficult to identify books that might interest young people and to develop engaging activities without being a reader of these books themselves. However, we know that other factors impact reading practices in schools: teachers’ working conditions, which force them to work double shifts without time for reading and without conditions to access books; the training of teachers and librarians, given that teacher training curricula lack courses to cultivate teachers as readers or reading mediators; and the absence of school libraries. Public policies that guarantee the training of teachers, school librarians, and ongoing professional development are both fundamental and urgent. Schools must implement programs that engage families in reading-focused projects.

Interviewers: The perception regarding parents’ reading habits shows that 24% of readers report that their mothers always read, compared to 14% of non-readers. Furthermore, 55% of children aged 5 to 13 state that their parents or relatives used to read to them. What is the importance of family reading and parental role-modeling in shaping the taste for reading, especially considering that the mother’s influence remains high (from 71% in 2019 to 67% in 2024)?



Zoara Failla: The family plays a fundamental role in awakening the taste for reading in a playful, affective, and enjoyable manner. These experiences remain in the child's affective memory and foster an approach to books and literature that is not viewed as an obligation.

However, we know that there are few reading families with the necessary conditions to access books. The school must be prepared to assume this awakening in daycare centers and preschools, offering playful spaces and teachers who act as reading mediators.

Interviewers: Overall attendance at libraries decreased from 25% to 12% between 2019 and 2024. Among non-visitors, 85% state that nothing would make them visit libraries more frequently, and the main reasons that would encourage them to attend are closer proximity, more new books/titles, and interesting titles. What are the greatest challenges for Brazilian libraries in adapting to new reading realities and remaining relevant spaces in a post-pandemic and increasingly digital scenario?

Zoara Failla: The perception of libraries as places strictly intended for students and studying alienates the general population from these spaces, as does the library model that prioritizes collection preservation. It is vital to redefine the meaning of these spaces and the training and role of librarians so that libraries become mobilizing and welcoming environments that offer activities enabling the sharing of reading experiences and community engagement—spaces that foster gatherings, storytelling, discoveries of local authors, among other initiatives. Community libraries have succeeded in attracting local populations, and there are significant accounts of lives transformed through reading experiences and connections forged within these spaces.

Interviewers: The 'Retratos da Leitura no Brasil' survey serves as a crucial foundation for the promotion of reading and the dissemination of books in the country. Based on the data from this 6th edition, what would be the most urgent priorities for new public reading policies or for adjusting existing initiatives,



aimed at reversing negative trends and strengthening the book and reading ecosystem in Brazil?

Zoara Failla: Priorities for public policies: ensuring the training of teachers and librarians as readers and reading mediators; achieving universal school library coverage; revising the model of public libraries; promoting campaigns on the importance of families in awakening the taste for reading and on the significance of book reading in cognitive and emotional development, interpersonal relationships, and political formation. Ensuring functional literacy and promoting ⁶literary literacy for worldview development, expanding cultural repertoire, humanization, and empathy.

Interviewers: The 2024 'Retratos da Leitura no Brasil' survey shows that socioeconomic classes A and B continue to exhibit the highest percentages of readers (62% and 60%, respectively), although all classes experienced a drop compared to 2019. Furthermore, the average number of books read per year is consistently higher among those with higher education and income levels. How does the IPL interpret this persistence of socioeconomic disparity in reading? Did the pandemic accentuate this gap or merely reveal the resilience of pre-existing patterns?

Still regarding the reader profile by social class, the 2024 study indicates that Class B has a percentage of 36% of audiobook listeners, compared to 31% in 2019. Is this a digital inclusion trend or a new form of content consumption that, by requiring devices and internet access, might reinforce divisions between classes? What kinds of initiatives would be necessary to expand access to and the use of audiobooks for less privileged social classes?

Zoara Failla: In all editions of Retratos, we have identified a higher percentage of readers within social classes A and B and among the population with higher levels of education. These data confirm that quality education and the right to reading, literary literacy, and book access are not being guaranteed to the most vulnerable populations.



We have few elements to answer the second question consistently, but I endorse your question/analysis, slightly altering the scope of exclusion: ‘is this a trend toward digital inclusion or a new form of content consumption that might reinforce divisions between classes?’ I believe that, by requiring devices and internet access, it must favor those who have the means for such acquisitions, thereby broadening exclusion rather than digital inclusion, unless addressed by public policies to enable access to these equipments in libraries and schools.

Interviewers: All regions of Brazil registered a decline in the percentage of readers between 2019 and 2024, with the Northeast showing the lowest percentage (43%) and the lowest average number of books read per year (2.88). In contrast, the South (53% readers, 4.96 books/year) and the Southeast (46% readers, 4.45 books/year) proved to be more resilient. What regional factors (such as library infrastructure, internet access, educational indicators, local cultural policies) do you consider determinant for these differences?

Zoara Failla: I believe that the evaluation results of Brazilian education (SAEB and IDEB) can better explain these differences. We have more school libraries in the South and Southeast, for example, but there are other data regarding school management, teacher training, and educational programs.

Interviewers: The intersection between social class and region is crucial. For instance, an individual belonging to class D/E in the Northeast faces different challenges than someone in the same class in the Southeast. Did the survey make it possible to identify how socioeconomic and geographical conditions interconnect to create even more complex reader profiles?

Zoara Failla: The survey does not perform this analysis by region. The sample size does not allow for evaluation by socioeconomic segments broken down by region. We only have the reader profile according to income and social class.

Interviewers: Are there data demonstrating whether the drop in reading was more pronounced in less developed regions or among more vulnerable social classes?



Zoara Failla: We have data by class and income. We did not cross-reference them by regions.

Interviewers: Considering the evident disparities both by social class and by region, as well as the post-pandemic context, what would be the most pressing recommendations from the Instituto Pró-Livro for the implementation of public policies that act in a more targeted manner, aiming to reduce inequalities in access to and the habit of reading throughout the national territory?

Zoara Failla: I answered above regarding the priorities that public policies must guarantee for the entire population. Certainly, the most vulnerable social classes, who rely on public education, depend on the success of these policies. However, rural and multi-grade schools located in settlements or communities with more vulnerable populations should benefit from special programs to ensure access to books by means of mobile libraries, as well as full-day instruction incorporating cultural activities, reading practices, and bibliotherapy. Moreover, teachers should receive specialized training to welcome and address diverse social and emotional needs.

From the interview, we perceive that a persistent need remains for fostering readers who develop a critical consciousness of societal reality. Furthermore, we affirm that, while it is impossible to live without technological artifacts in contemporary times, their utilization must occur in a conscious manner.

Notes

- 1 Statement on the Use of Artificial Intelligence – Gemini, an artificial intelligence tool developed by Google, was used to assist in translating this article into English. The translated version was fully reviewed and adjusted by the editorial team to ensure fidelity to the original text, terminological accuracy, and compliance with the journal's editorial standards. The tool was not used to generate the article's arguments, analyses, or academic content.
- 2 The interviewee does not have an active curriculum on the Lattes platform.
- 3 The term functional illiterate refers to subjects who know how to read and write minimally, but do not possess fluency and comprehension.
- 4 Maryanne Wolf is a neuroscientist, researcher, professor, and advocate for children and literacy around the world. Michel Desmurget is a French researcher and writer specializing in cognitive neuroscience.



- 5 The concept of 'rotten brain' comes from the English term (brainrot), which signifies the mental and intellectual deterioration caused by the excessive and unrestrained consumption of superficial and fast-paced digital content.
- 6 Literary literacy is the process through which the subject appropriates language in its meanings and signifiers, transcending the mere process of decoding.



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