

The Commuter Rail Reading Trends in Sri Lanka: a Case Study of the Rabukkana - Panadura Office Train

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Public transportation plays a vital role in daily routines, including the reading habits of commuters. This study views reading as the interpretation of symbols to comprehend meaning, which encompasses the act of reading books, watching films and more. It investigates the reading trends of passengers travelling on the *Rabukkana-Panadura* semi-express office train (No. 1531-8729), which departs from *Rabukkana* at 5:59 a.m. and arrives at *Panadura* at 9:02 a.m. The main objective was to understand how commuters use a space in public transportation for reading. Specific objectives were to identify the types of reading sources frequently used by passengers and identify factors influencing reading habits of commutes. Surveys and on-site observations were used to collect data from regular commuters. The survey forms were randomly distributed among 100 commuters from each of the 10 compartments. A total of 1,000 questionnaires were distributed and 852 valid responses were received. Microsoft Excel 2020 was used for the data analysis. A majority (608) were over the age of 30. Despite there being fewer second-class compartments, more respondents (531) travelled in second class compared to other classes. Most commuters engaged in chatting (69%) with familiar friends while travelling. 27% of the sample engaged in both reading and chatting. Digital reading was more popular (83%), while physical reading accounted for 17% of the sample. Executive-grade employees and smartphone users were more likely to read during travel. Facebook was the dominant platform for digital reading (52%), with many users accessing teledramas (30%). The study revealed that the primary obstacle for reading was distraction from mobile entertainment (87%) and limited mobile data availability within the train. Despite the rise in digital content, print media remains relevant, especially among passengers over age 30. The data suggested a strong correlation between smart-phone usage, education level and reading habits. The study highlights other challenges such as overcrowding and noise against reading habits. It is recommended to provide onboard Wi-Fi, which can further support digital reading by improving mobile internet and to set up mobile libraries or mini book kiosks at railway stations for those who prefer print media.

Keywords: *Commuter rail; Digital reading; Literacy; Public transportation; Reading habits*