

Are the arts elitist? New report shows that cultural experiences are more important than demographic factors

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Factors in Canadians' Cultural Activities, the 21st report in the *Statistical Insights on the Arts* series from Hill Strategies Research, provides insights into demographic and other factors involved in four cultural activities:

- Reading a book;
- Attending live performances;
- Visiting art galleries; and
- Movie theatre attendance.

This summary highlights the overall conclusions of the report. The full report contains greater detail and more statistics concerning the factors involved in each of the four cultural activities.

The report is innovative in many respects. In addition to demographic factors, the report provides substantial information about cultural crossovers. The report also provides an analysis of the cultural activities of minority-language Canadians and Canadians with activity limitations.

The report summarizes data on Canadians 15 years of age or older who participated in these cultural activities during the 12 months prior to the survey. The data is drawn from Statistics Canada's General Social Survey of 2005, an in-depth telephone survey of about 10,000 Canadians 15 years of age or older.

Cultural experiences more important than demographic factors in cultural activities

A key finding of the report is that demographic indicators are not the **only** factors that should be considered when examining cultural activities. A person's cultural experiences and interests are extremely important. More specifically, many different categories of cultural attendance and reading are strongly related to each other. For each of the four cultural activities, eight of the top 10 predictors are other cultural activities, not demographic factors. For example:

- Compared to the Canadian average of 67%, the book reading rate is particularly high among Canadians who visit an art gallery (85%), visit another type of museum (82%) or attend a performing arts event (between 77% and 80% for various types of performances).
- Compared to the Canadian average of 41%, the performing arts attendance rate is particularly high among Canadians who visit an art gallery (68%), visit another type of museum (65%) or visit an historic site (59%).
- Compared to the Canadian average of 27%, the art gallery attendance rate is particularly high among Canadians who visit another type of museum (60%), attend a cultural festival (51%) or visit an historic site (49%).
- Compared to the Canadian average of 61%, the movie theatre attendance rate is particularly high among Canadians who attend a cultural festival (79%), listen to downloaded music (79%), attend a performing arts event (between 77% and 79% for various types of performances) or visit an art gallery (78%).

Demographic factors in cultural activities

Although somewhat less important than cultural factors, demographic factors are still important in predicting cultural attendance and reading. Overall, a person's education is the most important demographic factor. In fact, education is an important indicator for all four cultural activities examined in this report (book reading, performing arts attendance, art gallery attendance and movie attendance).

Income, urban residence and not being limited by physical or other disabilities are important factors in three of the four cultural activities (performing arts attendance, art gallery attendance and movie attendance).

For the four cultural activities:

- Book reading appears to be an activity that is enjoyed fairly equally by many groups of Canadians. Compared with the other cultural activities examined in this report, book reading is very egalitarian with regards to income. The only demographic factors that have a substantial impact on book reading rates are education and sex.
- Demographic factors that appear to have a substantial impact on performing arts attendance are education, income, residing in an urban area, and activity limitations.
- Demographic factors that appear to have a substantial impact on art gallery attendance are education, income, residing in an urban area, and activity limitations.
- Many demographic factors appear to have a substantial impact on movie theatre attendance, including age, education, income, residing in an urban area, country of birth, language and activity limitations.

An “arts bug”

If many categories of cultural attendance and reading are strongly related to each other, what might this mean for the cultural community? Overall, the statistics imply that cultural experiences and cultural exposure are more important factors in cultural activities than most demographic factors. In other words, there is an arts-interested public that transcends demographic analysis. Those who get the arts go to a range of things. Those who don't “get it” don't go.

This arts interest could be considered an “arts bug”. For the cultural community, the presence of an arts bug can be seen as both bad news and good news. The rising levels of education in society and the aging of the public will likely have less of a (positive) impact on cultural participation than one might think. More important factors might be the quality and quantity of an individual's cultural exposure and arts education experiences.

On the positive side, the statistics imply that the arts can attract people from various demographic groups. In other words, the arts are not elitist in the conventional sense of the term.

A key question for the cultural community is how to spread this beneficial bug to more people. Past studies have shown that a person's childhood arts education is an important factor in adult arts participation.

Marketing implications

The statistics have obvious marketing implications for cultural organizations. Specifically, cultural marketing should be directed at other cultural attendees. For example, performance information should be made available at art galleries, festivals, museums and historic sites. Art gallery exhibition brochures should be made available at festivals, in libraries or through reading series.

The statistics imply that efforts to draw new attendees to cultural activities could be rewarded through higher participation in a range of cultural activities. If organizations help “enlarge the pie” of the arts-interested public, many organizations can reap the rewards.

The statistics clearly point to the interrelatedness of the arts and cultural industries. This supports a call for stronger collaborations within the cultural community. These collaborations could include performances in art galleries, co-location projects, co-productions and even co-creations. Collaboration in advocacy efforts, possibly around arts education, could also be beneficial.

For more information

The full report, funded by the Canada Council for the Arts, the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Ontario Arts Council, is available free of charge on the Hill Strategies Research website (<http://www.hillstrategies.com>) and the websites of the funding organizations.