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Reading habits during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic entailed a sudden change of all aspects of our everyday life. Many were confined to their homes in isolation, unable to attend cultural events due to infection prevention. Reading literature, however, remained as one cultural activities still available, even as libraries closed. How has this situation affected reading habits in Norway? How do people read and relate to literature in a time of crisis?

Literary reading has for many years been used as a tool to support mental health. Readers can use a literary narrative to express and mirror their own feelings, and they is invited to explore possible, fictional scenarios related to their own problems, by following the characters through the narrative. Literature can also provide the individual reader with a sense of community with the other readers, and the characters in the book. Comments in the social media and newspaper columns were quick to speculate about changes in people's reading situations due to the COVID-19 crisis. The effects seem to vary: some report being less able to concentrate, while others enjoy the opportunity to dive into long reads to pass time in quarantine, or shield off the brutalities of the world outside. Newspapers and magazines offered reading lists to match the COVID-19 situation, suggesting plague- or isolation-related fiction and non-fiction (e.g. The New York Times, March 12th 2020). But many questions remain: To what extent do such social displays of "coping through reading" reflect people's actual reading habits and experiences? Do people use literature to aid emotion regulation in the pandemic crisis? And how has the ongoing change in living conditions changed the experience of literary reading?

Building on two short-term surveys that provide "snapshots" of people's views on reading books and their reading habits, we now investigate the changes in reading during the pandemic further. By conducting qualitative interviews with readers, we want to get a closer look at people's experiences with literature during the pandemic and discover themes and issues within and beyond the earlier survey studies. .

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LCE - Literature, Cognition and Emotions

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