How the Best Readers in the World Read

R kobo

April 2016

Setting the stage

We find ourselves not so much at the gates of a revolution that began in 2008, but just inside the door. The cataclysmic predictions have dissipated, the massive changes and reinventions of the publishing and bookselling industry have settled in and now, in 2016, we find ourselves in a steady state.

Gone are the days that saw digital jump hundreds of percentage points a year. Now, eBooks have settled in at 20-30% of overall book sales, more depending on the category – mystery or romance or erotica for example – less in children's books or other highly visual categories.

One of the great virtues of being in this steady state, or in a business that has a critical mass of adoption around the world, is the opportunity for reflection.

The great leap forward that digital affords is a precise understanding of how readers read. While historically we could measure a book by its literary merit as adduced by critics or awards juries, its sales performance and, perhaps, customer ratings to understand its popular appeal, we now have the opportunity to glean insights from a third dimension: how the audience read the book or if they read it at all. Which books were read in a feverish hurry, which lost momentum and which were abandoned?

Aggregated reading data has given us tremendous insight into who the best readers are and what they seem to want.

As a digital retailer, we think about readers a lot. And, we have a lot of them – almost 28 million. We run stores in 18 countries, sell books in 97 languages, and are the second largest manufacturer of eReading devices in the world. Plus, we are the only global player focused exclusively on the reader. All this means we spend a huge amount of time as booksellers trying to determine what the reader wants.

We know that there is no one reader. So, in our goal to be the world's best bookseller, we try to understand them as best we can, given all the tools we have at our disposal. We segment and study readers across a number of data points to glean who they are, how old they are, how they decide to buy and what motivates them, whether it be a new book by a favourite author, a vacation, a multi-buy offer, an event, a review, the time of year. We spend a lot of time thinking about who they are, what they're reading and why they're reading it.

And we want to share this knowledge.

For the purposes of this whitepaper, we examined one global segment – the world's best readers. Our definition of "best" reader or "good" reader will be used throughout this whitepaper and is based on time spent reading as well as books purchased or borrowed. We found surprising similarities in behaviour around the world, and a few anomalies. Our data below is based on the world's most active readers.

Why did we choose to look at only the best readers? They read the most – almost every day in fact – and they purchase the most. These are the people who drive our business – both publishing and retail – and learning more about them and why they do what they do may help us not only super-serve them, but provide important insights into how to entice more casual readers into the vivid and wonderful world that emerges when you read more.
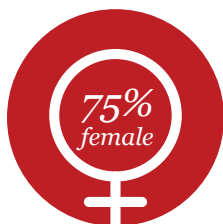
A note on our findings

This whitepaper is derived from a number of sources:

- Global reading and purchasing aggregate statistics based on customer use of devices, apps, and web store analytics
- Global surveys of readers conducted by UK-based Verve, the specialist in community panels for research
  - Surveys included Kobo and competitor customers; the margin of error is <1% with a confidence level of 95%
- Direct interviews with booklovers

Who is the passionate reader?

For the purposes of this whitepaper, here is an outline illustrating what our "good" readers look like:

75% female — This customer loves a deal and loves a great story – especially romance and general fiction
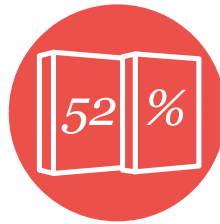
5 — average number of eBooks she buys a month

2 — number of PRINT books she reads a month

16 — number of PRINT books she buys a year

99% — of our top 10% read multiple books by the same author

52% — of her library is devoted to series (vs. 42% average)

The uptake of eBooks is being driven by 50-, 60-, and 70-year-olds.

We might be in the midst of the first and only technological revolution being driven by people age 45 and older rather than 35 and younger. We shouldn't be that surprised – these are the same people who make the print book business hum, and as the most dedicated readers, they're also the ones most likely to see the benefits of reading digitally.

It's very much a woman's world, with 75% of the most avid readers being women.

Uptake in digital reading is driven by middle-aged people – approximately 77% of the most active readers are age 45 and older, with the largest single group (30%) being age 55 to 64.

However, when breaking down the numbers by age, things shift slightly. While women make up the largest group of digital readers, men age 65-plus seem to have acquired the habit. So, while men make up just 13% of the digital reading population among readers age 18 to 34, at age 65+, men represent 34% of the best readers.

R kobo

As much as they have welcomed digital reading into their lives, these are people who remain enthusiastic print buyers. Our top customers, the "good" readers of the world, are buying an average of 60 ebooks a year as well as 16 print books a year. Further demonstrating an affection for the printed word, 10% of our top customers buy a print newspaper or magazine every day.

Of our top customers, 16% tell us they buy an eBook "almost every day."

Asked how they read, as opposed to buy, 40% of our top customers say they read five or more eBooks a month, and 8% say those eBooks are borrowed from the library.

What does a day in the life of a passionate reader look like?

By definition, a passionate reader reads a lot and probably whenever they can. In fact, 40% of our best reader group say they read at least 20 hours a week, or about three hours daily.

When we look at the reading habits of the average reader, 40% read just ten minutes at a time. Reading isn't a frequent choice for them – those outside our good reader contingent choose reading over other forms of entertainment just 20% of the time, or perhaps once a week.

Meanwhile, our best readers choose reading over other entertainment 70% of the time. They read frequently during the day – 60% read two to five times a day, often for half an hour or more at a time – or three times as long as the average.

Reading is something they fit into all parts of their day, at every opportunity. While 85% read at night before bed, there is a lot of evidence suggesting a reader would prefer to take a book to lunch than anything else – 50% of our group read over the lunch break, 32% on the commute to and from work or on public transit, and 40% like to relax by reading in a café or coffee shop. Long journeys are
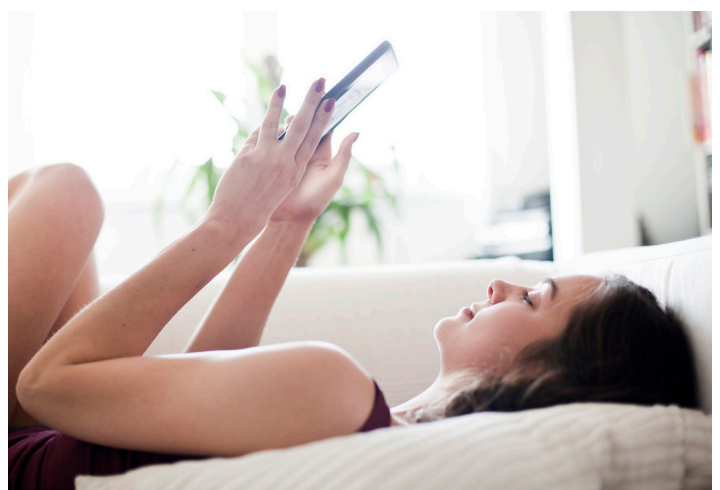
perfect for reading breaks – 73% like to read books while on a long flight or train journey and about the same like to read on vacation.

"I pretty much read whenever I can," says Andrea A., 39, a Kobo customer for more than five years. That means sneaking in some reading while her ten-year-old is doing homework and even while cooking. "I read about 25 hours a week I'd say. My whole family reads and always has." She says books are her escape, a chance to get away from the real world and they're her main form of entertainment.

Reading is just one way for her to fit books into her days. Andrea is a heavy audiobooks user as well, listening to three or four books a week. Sometimes she moves between audio and digital books: "I can't listen to an audiobook when my family is home so I switch to the eBook version to read."

For Kobo customer Bernadette M., 39, reading is a pleasure and an escape. "I don't watch a lot of TV; my free time is mostly spent reading." Like Andrea, she's an audiobooks fan and listens to books while driving. "I sometimes buy the same eBook so I can read it, too."

Passionate readers are like the rest of us – they buy more than they read. But, compared to the average reader, they know what they like. In looking at their libraries, we see that they open about 77% of their books, and complete 60% of what they've purchased. Average readers, on the other hand, open just 60% of what they buy, leaving 40% on the shelf, and complete just 40% of the books in their libraries. So, on average, a reader buys almost twice what they read.

What do our best readers read?

Romance is by far our bestselling category, accounting for more than twice the number of units as the next bestselling category. There are probably good reasons for that – it is the preeminent category within our Kobo Writing Life independent publishing service and, generally speaking, is less expensive than many other categories, has historically had an avid readership, and digital can offer a wider catalogue than a bricks and mortar store.

General fiction is our second biggest category followed by mystery.

There is merit to the term "page turner" to describe certain books, or at least certain genres.

Readers on average are most passionate about Romance – not only is it among our bestselling categories, those who take part are reading for over an hour a day. Our best readers read Romance for almost 90 minutes in total daily and are finding times to sneak in a quick read more than six times during the course of their day.

Mystery is also a compelling category, again attracting attention for approximately an hour a day among all people reading – both the good reader and the average booklover.

Our best readers are, on average, reading more non-fiction (excluding biography and memoir) than the average reader. As a category, the group of good readers spent 15 times more of their reading life on non-fiction than the group of average readers.

Once engaged, our best readers simply don't want to put their non-fiction books down. If they're reading it, they are engrossed for more than two hours per day (actually putting in slightly more time with their books than Romance readers do theirs); the average single sitting, or reading session, is almost one hour. The average reader generally reads non-fiction for just a half hour a day in ten minute spurts.

eReading Locations / Contexts

On public transport	32%
In coffee shops/cafés	39%
During lunch breaks	50%
By the pool	29%
On holiday	74%
On flights/long journeys	73%
In the bath	22%
At home	93%
In bed	85%

How excited are you to dive into that next book?

On average, readers take about a week to open a freshly purchased book. But, 15% start reading within ten minutes of purchase and 37% dawdle all of a day before diving in.

Meanwhile, the ability to test drive a book is the critical deciding point for a lot of readers – 10% of purchases happened after a book was previewed.

kobo

How do they discover their next books?

Who or what do booklovers trust when it comes to finding their next read? We took a look at that thorny question from a few different angles.

We surveyed customers to understand where they learned about the books they've purchased or read, other than from us. Surveys indicate few surprises on book discovery sources. Booklovers say they use an average of three sources to learn about something new, and as it has always been, a recommendation from a fellow booklover is by far the most persuasive for readers (58% say this is how they find new books to read), followed by browsing in a physical bookstore (49% use the browsing method; in fact, 30% of our best readers go to a bookstore expressly to find things to buy online) and then reviews in newspapers or magazines (34% and again, a rather traditional source of information).

Book discovery sources used by age group	*Discovery sources differ by age – online sources like Goodreads and social networks are more important to younger customers, whilst traditional sources like critics' reviews hold more sway amongst older age groups*					
Sources with biggest differences by age	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
Personal recommendations from friends	68%	66%	60%	57%	55%	49%
Browsing in a physical bookstore	67%	58%	52%	50%	48%	41%
Online book lists	46%	41%	35%	26%	20%	14%
Posts on social network sites	33%	31%	25%	17%	12%	8%
Browsing / Recommendations from other online eBook sellers	26%	28%	29%	25%	22%	18%
Customer reviews on other online eBook sellers	25%	27%	27%	22%	18%	14%
Critic reviews	22%	26%	29%	33%	38%	40%

The fact that booklovers find their next book from a source outside the bookstore makes sense when you consider that 41% of book purchases are made from typing the title or author name into the search box – meaning the book was known before the purchase decision was made. If we include purchases made from a Google search that led directly to an item page, search represents more than 50% of purchases.

While less important than critics' reviews, online customer reviews are also persuasive to readers when discerning the merits of a book – being a source for about 27% of those ages 25 to 44 and 22% of those 45 to 54. Authenticity is imperative. Readers seem to have an instinct for what is a "real" review and tend to punish those authors or publishers who are trying to woo them by submitting false praise for their books. "I get really frustrated when you've clearly got fake reviews," said one customer.

Social media is also an important source of inspiration for what to read next – again, amounting to recommendations from "friends," though they may be virtual – but its power is mainly felt among younger readers. Social network sites like Facebook are a source of next-book intel for about 30% of readers up to age 45; then influence drops sharply, and is used by only 12% of those readers ages 55 to 64.

Interviews with top readers show that they tend to stick with what they know and love. Andrea A. says she, "reads everything written by my favourite authors" across all kinds of tt from general to historical to romance, sci-fi and fantasy. Many of our top customers check their favourite authors'

websites for updates; in fact, 66% of our best customers say they find their next read through author or publisher updates.

Another booklover, Christine D., 41, a married mom who reads about 15 hours a week, says while recommendations from friends and family are her primary source of ideas, she also values customer reviews or ratings. Additionally, like many of our top booklovers, she tracks her favourite authors' websites and signs up for their newsletters to keep her up to date on their upcoming books, and will occasionally search for books by theme, such as "vampires."

Christine is a try-it-before-you-buy-it reader, who always uses instant preview before a purchase (about 10% of our best readers buy from a preview) and checks out customer reviews before making purchase decisions. As an added caution, she prefers to borrow the first in a series from the library before committing to a purchase.

Then we asked readers a slightly different question – rather than how they usually make book purchase decisions, we asked them how they discovered the last book they purchased. Answers differed slightly and spoke to a sense of loyalty or comfort with familiarity that booklovers have. The best readers seem to stick to their favourite genres – 52% of purchases were made because, "it was a genre I like." The next trigger is a new book, or a freshly discovered book, by a favourite author, which accounted for 39% of their last purchases; the next in a series represented nearly as many purchases, at 37%. A personal recommendation accounted for just 10% of their most recent purchases.

Last Book Purchase Drivers

Driver	%
It was a genre I like (e.g. crime, romance, biography)	52%
It was by a favourite author of mine	39%
It was part of a series I'm reading	37%
It was about a subject I'm interested in	22%
I read good reviews/saw it on bestseller lists	15%
Someone recommended it to me	10%
I trialled/read the first chapter	8%
I saw it in a physical book store/library	6%

What you say versus what you do

As author Tom Vanderbilt writes in his book, You May Also Like, the "beauty of the internet is that regardless of what people say, you can see with increasing fidelity, their actual behaviour." This has been the engine that drives successes like Netflix, which has de-emphasized ratings as a means of determining what to recommend next to subscribers and instead closely tracks and aggregates actual watching behaviour. In other words, how you use whatever entertainment you're consuming – movies, music or books – is an important signal that will generate increasingly improved recommendations for what to enjoy next. Did you read a few pages of *Capital in the Twenty First Century*, or *The Goldfinch* for that matter, and then abandon it while ripping through *Gone Girl*, *The Rosie Project* and *The Love Song of Miss Queenie Hennessy* in one go? You're not alone, and that love-hate behaviour will trigger ever-better book recommendations taken from the pool purchasers similar to you read in the same way. "You cannot hide from your own taste," writes Vanderbilt, and that's good news for booklovers.

In fact, 24% of eBook purchases are made from related titles and recommendations generated by the algorithm measuring reading behaviour, and that number is rising.

There may be a good reason to explain the success of recommendations, and why they're expected to become an ever-larger part of digital book retail. After the first purchase, the eBookstore you see starts to evolve. It evolves not only according to what you search for and purchase, though that is important, but also by adapting to individual reading habits. The more you read digitally, the better the recommendations become. How? eBooks track bookmarks as pages turn and progress is communicated to servers so that reading can take place across platforms and devices. The immediate effect is convenience: booklovers can put down an eReader and pick up a smartphone, and be brought right back to the same place they left off. The side effect of this convenience is a wealth of data that can be used to recommend, personalize, and better understand the reader.

It creates the possibility of a store that organizes itself, that has a view into and responds to each customer's reading life, not just what they buy, or what they say they like, but what they actually read.

Since the beginning of 2016, we have seen a 60% increase in sales on titles generated through data-driven recommendations and related-reading suggestions, due to our algorithms constantly being tweaked for improvements.

Anecdotally, many booklovers say these are reliable sources of ideas for a next book and they use it frequently. "I discover new books by looking up a book I really liked and looking through the 'Readers also Read' related titles," said Kobo customer Mary B., 60, who reads approximately 40 hours a week and buys at least six eBooks a month. It is unlikely that she is alone in this behaviour and the more purchases that come from this method, the more "educated" and reliable the algorithm becomes.
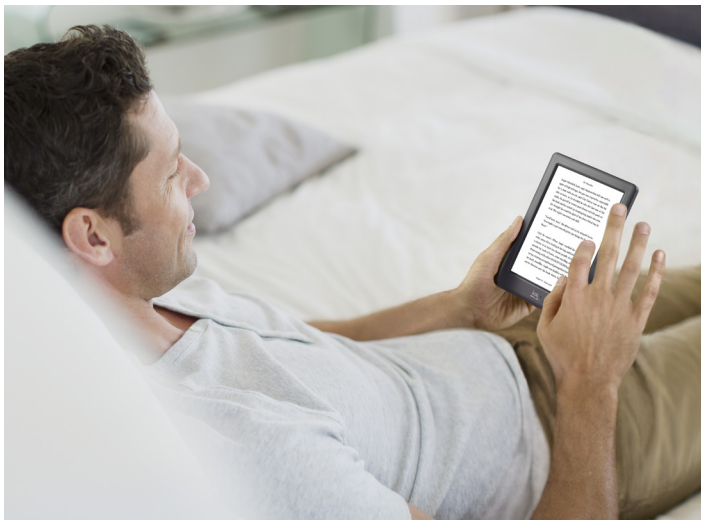
Meanwhile there are other, more pragmatic considerations before a book is bought

For heavy readers like Kobo customer Andrea A., who purchases about 20 eBooks a month, price plays a big role in buying decisions.

"When you read as much as I do, you have to price compare. I read so much it gets expensive. Sometimes it takes a bit of work but I can't always afford to buy everything I want," she told us. That said, if she's really interested in a book, "I'll just buy it. I figure I don't have a lot of other hobbies to spend money on."

Deals sites, coupons, and offers are all important triggers, and she frequently "bulk buys" books when she finds a good sale.

For all they read and as expensive a habit as it may be, booklovers seem to have a love-hate relationship with the public library – nearly 80% of the passionate readers group said they never borrow from the library, and just 15% said they borrow a book or two a month, in either print or digital format.

Daymon A., 65, says he never uses the library because he likes to re-read books. "I like to keep them. I read my books more than once – I'll read it and then four or five years later I'll read it again.

You see things you missed the first time." He also buys in bulk, perhaps five or six books at a time, and doesn't start looking for his next reads until he's almost through his current batch. Like Andrea, he likes eBooks because they're generally less expensive than their print versions.

Meanwhile, readers like Erin H., 23 and a self-professed "bookworm," says she's not interested in borrowing because even eBooks are "something I like to hold onto."

What the platform tells us

While many predicted the death of the eReader in the face of the popularity of tablets, eReaders are still in fact a thriving business among people who put reading at the centre of their lives. The reason may be as simple as the device itself – it's for reading and nothing else. No email, no social media, no video – it supports eBooks and reading and that's it.

Customers who use a device spend about 30% more than those who are app customers. Their book libraries are bigger and they tend to read faster because they are already a person who is predisposed toward doing more reading.

Overall, 80% of the best booklovers read on only one platform, and 80% of that is on an eReader. Meanwhile, among the wider population of "all readers," 90% are single platform users but only 60% of those have chosen an eReader as their platform of choice.

Reading statistics among app users, whether iOS or Android, support the notion that multi-use devices offer more distractions or a less immersive experience. Reading times are shorter for example, looking at all readers, people spend three times as much time reading on a dedicated device as they do reading on an app. Even the most passionate readers will read about 50% more on a device than an app. That said, 20% of our "good" reader pool read across multiple devices whereas just 11% of average readers do.
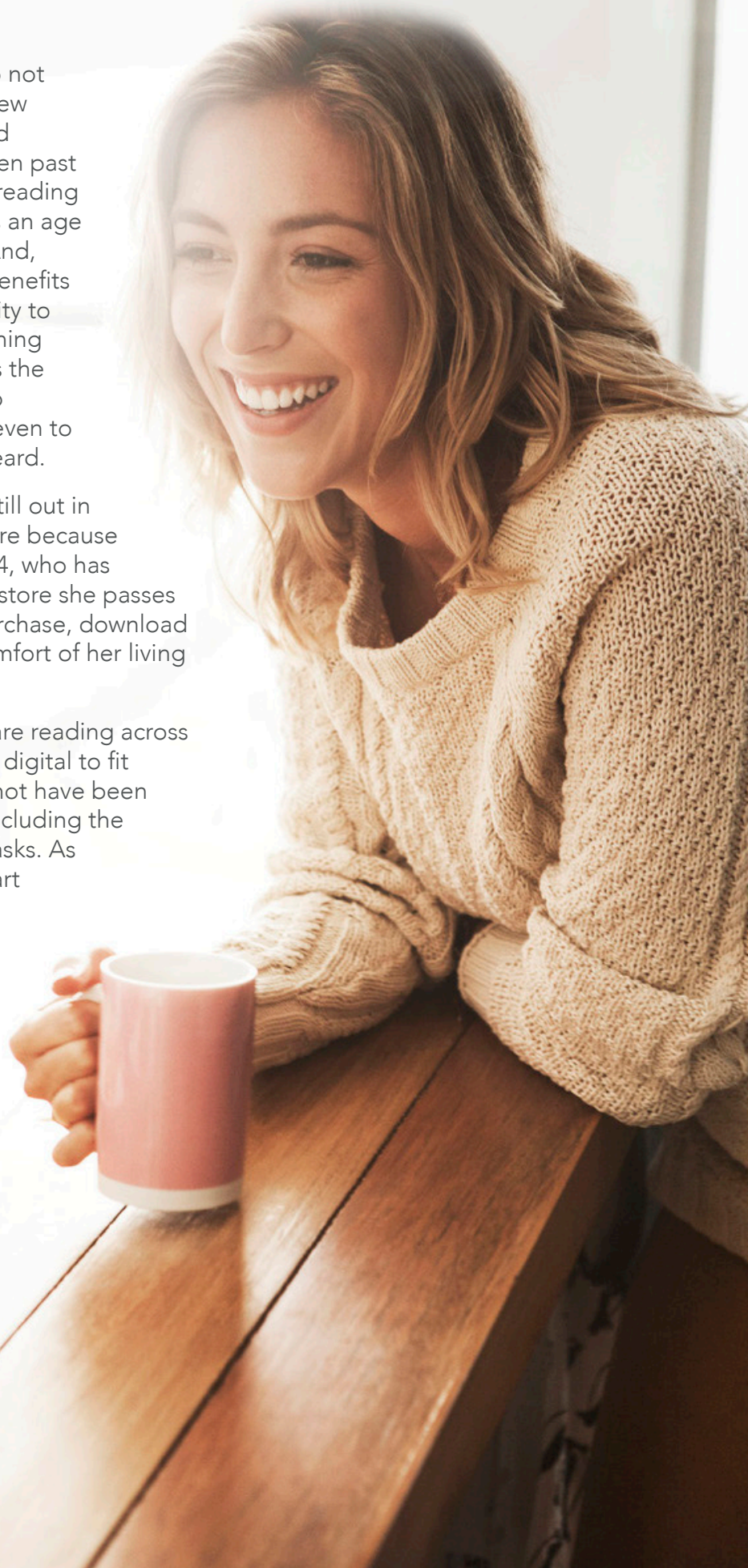
Conclusion

Digital reading is a revolution led by a group not generally associated with avid adoption of new technologies, led by those in middle age and adopted in good measure by men and women past retirement age. Why is the uptake of digital reading so high amongst this age group? First, this is an age group of passionate readers in any format. And, with the advancement of age, some of the benefits of digital become more meaningful: the ability to change font size to suit tired eyes or diminishing eyesight; the lightness of the eReader versus the heavy weight of a book; the instant access to books without having to venture outside or even to the mailbox are among the reasons we've heard.

"I'm able to read authors whose books are still out in hardcover, and I can't read hardcover anymore because of my hands," said Kobo customer Gail K., 74, who has arthritis. While she still pops into every bookstore she passes on the street, she also loves the ability to purchase, download and start reading her next book from the comfort of her living room sofa.

Regardless of age, the world's best readers are reading across both print and digital formats, and are using digital to fit reading into parts of their day where it may not have been convenient or comfortable to read before, including the morning commute or in the midst of other tasks. As well, for them, binge reading is as much a part of their lifestyle as binge-watching Netflix is for others – almost two hours a day on average, with Saturday and Sunday being reading's prime time.

Overall, this spells good news for publishers and bookstores alike: reading is alive and well, and digital reading is a pleasure that seems to set in at around age 20. Earlier than that, the appeal of paper and the seduction of technology for other purposes is stronger.

That's okay. The power of stories and ideas, and the convenience and portability of a digital library are pleasures that await in maturity. We'll be there when it happens.