

Adult Reading Habits and Preferences in Relation to Gender Differences

This article examines existing studies and theories about gender differences in the reading preferences of children, adolescents, and adults. A recent study of the reading preferences of a sample of adult men and women is then presented.

Interest in research that examines gender differences or similarities has remained constant over the years. Research into the nature of gender and its influences on people's actions and interests is a subject that has occupied, and continues to occupy, a range of professionals: biologists, doctors, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists, among several others.

The field of library science also has a stake in gender differences and its implications for library patrons and services. Research has examined if and how gender affects choices in reading materials, Internet usage, library usage, perceptions about what is considered appropriate reading for each gender, and reading abilities. Of particular interest is whether or not gender has a significant effect on the personal reading interests and habits of individuals and whether or not these habits and interests are a result of inherent biological differences or a product of culture.

Despite demonstrated interest in how gender affects reading, most

researchers have focused on the subject in its relation to children and adolescents. Research pertaining to gender and adults in the realm of reading is sparse and typically confined to questions about why women read more than men and especially why women are more inclined to read fiction than men. Although children and adolescents are repeatedly queried about their reading preferences, which are then viewed in light of gender, adult reading preferences in relation to gender have been largely ignored. Appleyard, a former professor of English Literature at Boston College, summarizes, "If psychological studies of infant and adolescent development could easily overflow a boxcar, those on adults would fit handily into a small trunk. Research specifically relevant to adult reading is even scarcer."¹ Although Appleyard's statement is now over twenty years old, it is still relevant today.

Studies involving gender span a wide variety of professions and are not excluded from immense controversies surrounding gender. Some argue that gender differences stem from inherent biological factors, while others cite societal and cultural factors and argue against gender as an artificial construction. Gender studies are also challenged because they typically consider only

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two genders. Brannon, a professor of psychology at McNeese State University, mentions, "the sexual world may not actually be polarized into only two categories."²

Many assumptions are based on research on gender and reading in childhood and adolescence, including the gap in reading achievement and how children are socialized in accordance with traditional notions of gender identities.³ These assumptions all have implications for how men and women are perceived to have different reading habits and preferences.

To effectively examine research about the gendered differences between adult readers, it is necessary to investigate research about the gendered differences between child and adolescent readers as well. Understanding gender differences in young readers is important because it helps to clarify the role of gender differences in adult readers.

Reading ability is often a major factor considered when examining gender differences in relation to children and adolescents. National and international assessments of reading achievement consistently reveal gender differences in their results.⁴ Results reveal that "girls consistently outperform boys on tests of reading comprehension, although the reason for this is not clear."⁵ A study conducted by Ming Chui and McBride-Chang examined fifteen year olds in forty-three countries and discovered that girls outperformed boys in all forty-three countries, "regardless of the type of reading instruction."⁶

Another factor that may contribute to reading ability is attitude toward reading. Logan and Johnston, a lecturer and a professor of psychology at the University of Hull, respectively, conducted research with elementary school children and believe that because boys have a harder time being "good" pupils who sit still and listen well, teachers consequently are more likely to treat boys negatively, helping boys "to develop negative attitudes toward school."⁷ A negative attitude toward school may extend to a negative attitude toward school-related activities, such as reading. Logan and Johnston also believe that boys' underachievement in reading is a result of a school curriculum that is "biased towards girls' reading interests" or a product of the predominance of female teachers versus male teachers, which contributes to boys' perception of reading as being a feminine pursuit.⁸

In contrast to the outpouring of studies that draw conclusions about the reasons for boys' underperformance as readers, Smith, a lecturer in education at the University of Birmingham, set out to examine factors that contributed to the success of six boy readers. Smith found that the subject areas that dominated the six boys' reading interests were space, football, dinosaurs, and animals/minibeasts. All six boys read books about space, while the rest of the topics were all read by five boys.⁹ Because the six boys had reading interests that reflected typical "boy interest areas," Smith believes that their expertise in their nonfiction subjects of choice, coupled with the resulting respect from their peers, leads the boys to have a positive correlation between reading and masculinity. Smith concludes, "thus, for this group of boys, unlike many other boys, masculinity and reading are compatible."¹⁰

Chapman and colleagues, in the Department of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, also discuss the concern about boys' literary achievement, noting the commonly held belief that boys should be provided with nonfiction texts, particularly when they are beginning readers. They state "the argument has been that, although reading informational text is beneficial for all children, it is especially critical to boys' motivation to read."¹¹

Despite this belief, schools predominantly rely on narrative texts in elementary school classrooms because they are considered more appropriate for children than informational texts. It has been suggested that schools focusing on narrative texts, rather than informational texts, may promote literacy that appeals more to girls than to boys. The predominance of narrative texts in elementary school classrooms has been criticized, with arguments stating that children's lack of experience with informational texts leads to their difficulty with the genre, rather than developmental differences between boys and girls.¹²

Chapman and colleagues set out to determine their own conclusions about the recreational reading preferences of girls and boys as well as how girls and boys perceive the reading preferences of their peers based on gender. They analyzed the responses of forty children from four different schools after performing different tasks. The tasks included selecting books for themselves, a boy and a girl; suggesting books for someone else's boy and girl grandchildren; selecting as many books as desired from a set of four information books and four narrative books; and choosing between an information book and a narrative book on the same topic from four pairs of books.¹³

After analyzing their data, the researchers found that their results did not support the common notion that boys prefer informational texts and girls prefer narrative stories. The boys in their study typically preferred narrative stories for their own reading choices, selected fewer books overall, and chose fewer information books for their own reading than the girls. The girls chose similar numbers of information and narrative books when able to select however many books they liked and displayed a strong preference for narratives when confronted with a choice between an information or narrative book on the same topic.¹⁴

The children's choices and suggestions for other boys and girls reflected typical gender stereotypes. Both boys and girls chose considerably more information books for boys and narrative storybooks for girls.¹⁵ Of particular interest was the discrepancy between what the boys chose for themselves versus their perception of what boys in general prefer to read. The researchers noted, "It appears that boys' perceptions of what other boys like to read is [sic] based not on generalizations from their own reading preferences, but from a socially constructed understanding."¹⁶

In addition to children, the gendered reading preferences of adolescents have also been of interest to researchers. Schultheis, a former master's student in library science at Kent State University, conducted a survey to determine whether or not

conclusions drawn from previous studies continued to hold true—that males prefer to read about action (particularly sports), read more nonfiction texts than females, and prefer texts with male protagonists while females prefer texts about relationships (particularly romance novels), read more frequently in general, and have a diminishing preference for the gender of a text's protagonist as they get older.¹⁷

Schultheis received survey responses from 110 eleventh grade students—68 females and 42 males. The survey asked questions that would help determine genre preferences, preferences based on the gender of the protagonist, time spent reading, and identification with characters. Schultheis found that the students generally preferred fiction as well as a few biographies. Ten nonfiction titles were listed as favorites, nine of which were named by females, refuting the assumption that males prefer nonfiction. In the narrative titles, 64 percent of the protagonists in the books chosen by females were male, while 90 percent of the books chosen by males featured male protagonists.¹⁸

Appeal factors for books preferred by the students in the study also were noted. The characteristics that most frequently appealed to both males and females were realism, writing style, believable and interesting characters, suspense, humor, and an ability to relate to the story.¹⁹ Discrepancies in interests included the fact that 18 percent of the females found romantic elements as appealing while romantic elements were absent from the males' responses, and 15 percent of the males chose action as an appeal factor, while action was an appeal factor missing from the females' responses. It is typically assumed that females prefer characters they can identify with, but 43 percent of the males also reported the need to identify with characters compared to the same response from 35 percent of the females.²⁰

The most frequently cited category of preferred books in Schultheis's study was "realistic fiction that deals with contemporary problems of people," chosen by 57 percent of the females and 50 percent of the males. Genres of books most frequently cited by males as preferable were adventure (81 percent), humor (64 percent), and horror and science fiction (57 percent each). The most frequently chosen genres by females were romance (68 percent), realistic fiction dealing with relationships (65 percent), mystery (59 percent), realistic fiction dealing with problems (57 percent), and humor (51 percent).²¹

There are a variety of prevailing assumptions about the effects of gender on adult reading, several of which focus on the notion that women read more fiction than men do. Due to the almost complete absence of scholarly studies examining the implication of gender on adult reading, many of these assumptions result from observation and experience and are primarily anecdotal. One assumption held by Pinter, a writer and former editor at Warner Books, is that men do not read because publishing companies target their products and marketing efforts largely on women.²² While working as an editor, Pinter was frustrated by the poor reception of his proposal to publish a nonfiction book about a professional

wrestler and felt that the lack of interest was due to the belief that women would not find the book appealing.

Weiner, an author and a former NPR correspondent, examines explanations for gendered reading differences, citing findings by cognitive psychologists that assert that because women are more capable of empathy than men and display a wider range of emotions, they are more likely than men to be attracted to fiction.²³ Chaudhry, a news editor who has reviewed research related to gender and reading, believes that these kinds of arguments perpetuate gender stereotypes by portraying "women as sensitive, emotionally intelligent creatures [and] men as unreflective dolls."²⁴

Pinter argues against the "tired old maxim" that men don't read. He argues that "men read. Tons of them do. But they're not marketed to, not targeted, and often totally dismissed."²⁵ When author Jonathan Franzen was approached to have his book *The Corrections* be endorsed by Oprah's Book Club, he was initially hesitant, a reaction that resonates with Pinter's claims about publishing companies' marketing strategies. Franzen reported hearing male readers at his book signings profess that if they hadn't heard him speak, they'd have had no interest in his books because they figured that Oprah's Book Club books "are for women."²⁶

While there are a plethora of scholarly studies that examine the implications of gender on childhood reading preferences, there are very few studies that examine gender's continued impact on reading through adulthood. In the majority of studies regarding adults and reading, the issue of gender is typically a secondary factor that is only briefly considered alongside the main research focus. Tepper, an associate professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University, conducted the most in-depth analysis of the effect of gender on adult reading. To better understand the belief that women read more fiction than men, Tepper examined data relating to fiction reading from two nationwide surveys, the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts and the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey.²⁷

Data analysis revealed that 43 percent of women respondents were encouraged to read "often," as children, compared to 32.6 percent of men. Additionally, 35 percent of men reported no encouragement to read as a child compared to 31.9 percent of the women. It was also found that those who were encouraged to read as a child were 4.69 times more likely to be fiction readers as adults and that the gender gap diminishes "when parental encouragement is held constant."²⁸

Another notable observation from Tepper is that

the fiction reading gap virtually disappears among men and women who were both introduced to the arts at an early age and among those who participate in the predominantly "feminine" hobby of sewing, weaving and working with textiles. Thus men who cross traditional gender boundaries in terms of their leisure activities are much more likely to be readers of fiction than men who do not.²⁹

Tepper's conclusions drawn from data analysis reveal strong support of the role that childhood socialization and gender role stereotypes play in determining the reading habits and preferences of adults.

The notion that reading fiction is a feminine pursuit is so ingrained into American culture that it has become something of a joke. On NBC's hit television show *30 Rock*, notorious alpha-male character Jack Donaghy discusses how he negotiates life with his new, domineering wife and concludes, "If I give in, then I'm no longer the alpha in my house. Before you know it, she'll have me wearing jeans and reading fiction."³⁰ The word "fiction" is emphasized with what can only be described as sheer disgust. It is statements like these that raise questions about whether women truly outnumber men in their preference for fiction or whether society has steered men away from fiction by negatively portraying fiction reading as a feminine activity.

It is important to note that gender alone is not the sole predictor for how people choose reading materials. After conducting intensive interviews with 194 avid readers, Ross, a professor emerita in the faculty of Information & Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario, found five distinct motivations for readers' choices: a specific desired reading experience (an easy read versus a challenging read), "alerting sources" (the way in which readers receive recommendations from trusted interpersonal sources or various other outlets), appeal factors of the book itself, physical cues on the book (such as attraction to the cover or familiarity with the author), and the general convenience of obtaining a particular book.³¹ While gender may help explain some distinct differences in readers' choices, there are other factors that should also be considered.

In an effort to address the near absence of studies relating to the implications of gender on adult reading preferences, a sample of adult men and women (29 men and 29 women) were interviewed about their reading preferences, habits, and reading related activities. This study attempted to determine whether or not there were discernible or distinct differences in the men and women's responses. It was hoped that examining the participants' responses would provide insight into the accuracy of claims about the differences between men's and women's reading habits, and whether or not gendered reading trends in young readers continued through adulthood.

Due to time restrictions for this study, and to increase the likelihood of procuring participants, the researcher previously knew a few of the subjects; however, these subjects were not selected based on prior knowledge of how they might respond to the interview questions. The initial subjects were then asked to have individuals known to them, but not to the researcher, contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. This process helped to diversify the subject sample. To additionally diversify the subject sample, a number of subjects were selected at random and requested to participate in an interview. Participants were between the ages of twenty-four and sixty-two years old. Interviews were conducted in person in locations convenient to each participant.

Interviews were audio recorded and the data were later transcribed and analyzed.

Additionally, specific book titles provided by participants in response to relevant questions were analyzed using the database *NoveList* to determine the gender of each title's protagonist and author. Book reviews were also used to help determine this information.

Participants were asked the following questions:

- What formats of print, if any, do you like to read?
- Do you have any favorite genres of books that you like to read?
- Do you generally prefer fiction or nonfiction titles?
- What nonfiction topics interest you?
- Do you like to read series books or do you prefer stand-alone books?
- What are a few of your favorite books?
- Do you have any favorite magazines?
- Who are a few of your favorite authors?
- Do you typically prefer books written by male authors or female authors?
- Do you typically read books that feature male protagonists or female protagonists?
- Were you encouraged to read when you were growing up?
- How do you choose books to read?
- Do you belong to a book club?
- Do you discuss books with your friends?
- Are you an active member of any book related social networking sites?
- Do you own an electronic reader?
- In what format do you prefer to read, print or digital?
- What kind of reading do you do online?
- Do you become interested in reading a particular book if it is adapted into a movie or a TV series?

Results indicated that there were indeed discernible, and some distinct, differences between the reading habits and preferences of this particular sample of adult men and women. Conversely, and expectedly, there were similarities as well.

Similarities in responses included: preferred formats of print reading materials, nonfiction topics of interest, preference for standalone books rather than series books, being encouraged to read when growing up (with a slightly higher number of women than men being encouraged to read), methods for choosing books to read (with women employing a higher variety of methods than men), preference for print reading materials rather than digital reading materials, and being mostly disinclined to become interested in reading books adapted into movies.

In addressing the question of men and women's preference for fiction or nonfiction, responses showed that men were almost equally divided between preferences for fiction and nonfiction titles. Women, however, displayed a strong preference for fiction, with more than double the number of women preferring fiction to nonfiction titles. Although the numbers of men and women preferring fiction were close, the

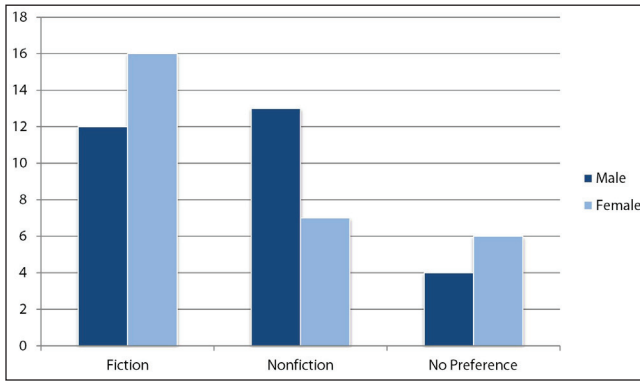


Figure 1. Number of Participants with Preferences for Fiction, Nonfiction, or No Preference

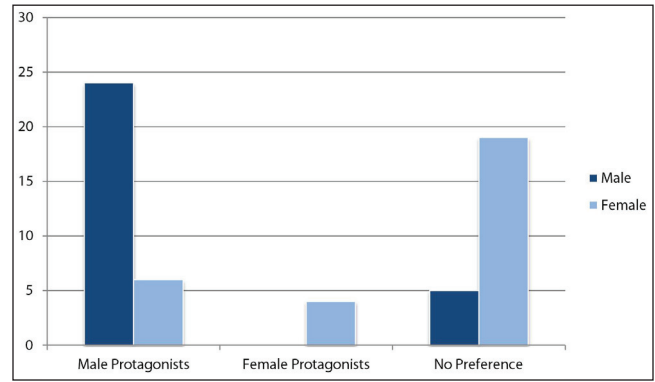


Figure 3. Number of Participants with Preferences for Male Protagonists, Female Protagonists, or No Preference

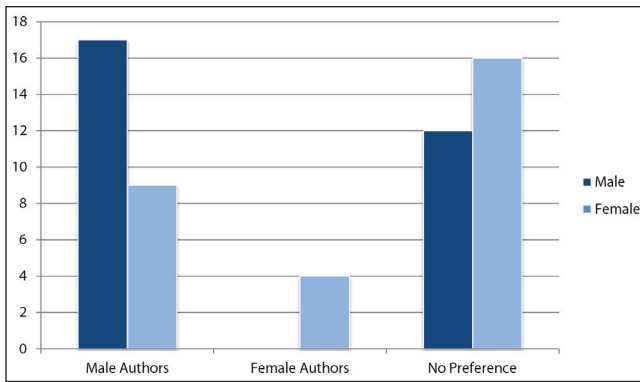


Figure 2. Number of Participants with Preferences for Male Authors, Female Authors, or No Preference

number of males preferring nonfiction titles is almost double the number of women preferring nonfiction titles. A similar number of men and women did not have a preference for either fiction or nonfiction titles (see figure 1).

Interestingly, the most significant gender differences in participants' responses involved matters of gender. When asked about preferred gender of an author, responses indicated that a slightly higher number of male participants preferred books written by male authors than those male participants who stated "no preference." No male participants indicated a preference for female authors. The majority of female participants indicated no preference for either male or female authors, while just over twice as many females indicated that they preferred male authors rather than female authors (see figure 2).

Despite this information, of the 60 authors chosen as favorites by male participants, 57 were male and 3 were female. Authors chosen as favorites by women were comprised of 44 male authors and 19 female authors. While both genders show a demonstrated preference for male authors, the female participants cited a much larger number of female authors as favorites.

Also significant is the gender of the authors of the books

listed as participants' favorite books: male authors accounted for 45 of the books (out of 68 books) described as favorites by women and 79 of the books (out of 88 books) described as favorites by men. Female authors accounted for 23 of women's favorite books and 9 of men's favorite books.

Similar to Schultheis's findings with adolescents, males indicated a strong preference for male protagonists. Of the 29 male participants, 24 indicated that they preferred books with male protagonists, while 5 indicated that they had no preference. No male participants indicated a preference for books featuring female protagonists. In contrast, the majority of female participants (19) indicated no preference for the gender of a book's protagonist, while 6 indicated a preference for male protagonists and 4 indicated a preference for female protagonists (see figure 3).

When the books listed as favorites by men and women were analyzed to determine the gender of each book's protagonist, it was found that in the men's favorite books, male protagonists were featured in 64 books and female protagonists were featured in 8 books. In the remaining books, 8 books featured both male and female protagonists and 8 books were not applicable to the question based on the nonfiction nature of the books. The women's favorite books were comprised of 32 male protagonists, 24 female protagonists, 6 books with both male and female protagonists, and 6 books that were not applicable to the question.

Also related to differences in the content of participants' reading materials were magazines and online reading activities. Despite these differences, there were still responses held in common by both genders. Magazines read by both genders were predominantly related to current events and culture, such as *The New Yorker*, *The Economist*, *The Atlantic*, *National Geographic*, and *Harpers*. Online reading activities cited most often by both genders included general interest websites such as blogs, book reviews, news articles, *Wikipedia*, and the RSS feed web-based aggregator, *Google Reader*.

Aside from the responses the two genders held in common, responses revealed tendencies toward certain gender stereotypes, with there being a trend toward men reading

magazines and online reading materials related to informational topics, hobbies, and careers, while women tended toward magazines and online reading materials that involved topics such as parenting, crafting, family life, celebrity gossip, shopping, and cooking.

Social engagement with reading was another significant difference between the men and women participants' reading preferences and habits. Women generally, and often strongly, outnumbered men in areas such as membership in book clubs and on book related social networking sites and in discussing books with their peers. Along with the larger variety of methods that women employ to find books to read, it is clear that the women participants in this study were more socially engaged with reading and committed to reading in general. Additionally, although both men and women revealed a preference for print reading materials instead of digital reading materials, twice the number of women than men indicated that they owned electronic readers. Many female participants mentioned that they owned an electronic reader so that they could read at their convenience whenever they were able.

Additionally, there were some differences in the methods employed by men and women to find books to read. Both genders indicated such responses as browsing bookstores, choosing a particular author, and receiving recommendations from acquaintances; however, far more women in the study used print sources to find recommendations for books, while far more men used online media to find books. Along with using online books reviews more often than the women to procure book recommendations, men cited such online outlets as books recommendations from podcasts, respected public figures (such as John Stewart), and blogs. These forms of books recommendations through online media were minimally represented or absent in the women's responses.

As with other professions that have a vested interest in the influences of gender on various outcomes, understanding some of the differences as well as similarities between genders can be helpful for the library profession. It can assist libraries in their collection development efforts, marketing, and readers' advisory services to help get the right book into the hands of the right person. Determining what kinds of books appeal to both men and women, and for what reasons, can also help maximize purchasing efforts. In general, librarians can benefit from speaking to their communities directly and surveying patrons about what kinds of reading materials they find appealing.

Although there were definite discernible gender differences between the participants in this study, it is important to keep in mind that it is unlikely that gender is the only factor that determines people's reading habits and preferences. As mentioned by Ross, there are many other coexisting reasons and influencing factors that may lead a person to gravitate toward a particular type of reading material, including desired reading experience, convenience, or recommendations from trusted sources.³² Gender may certainly be a significant determinant of reading preferences; however, the existence of many similarities between the men's and women's reading

preferences in this study proves that gender may be more appropriately considered as a spectrum rather than definitive opposites. Consequently, rather than narrowly targeting our collection development efforts by assuming what men and women like to read, we need to make available a wide range of reading materials in libraries that may appeal to men or women specifically and to both men and women simultaneously. Additionally, just as there are differing reading interests between genders, so too are there differing interests within each gender, which may not fall on either side of the gender continuum as is often expected, but rather somewhere in between.

To effectively reach out to the communities that we serve, we need to adjust our practices to address the diverse needs of our communities, not only by diversifying the content on our shelves, but by adapting our programs to meet both specific audiences (male audiences and female audiences) and broader audiences (combined male and female audiences). In accomplishing this goal, it is also necessary to adjust marketing practices to make the public aware of offerings in the library that may interest them. This study noted that men often use online media outlets to procure book recommendations; therefore, is it important to examine how libraries are reaching out to their communities. In a time when there's clear concern about boys and men not reading enough, maintaining an updated website and using social media tools may be more important than ever.

An additional benefit of examining the reading preferences of adult men is the potential to gain knowledge about what kinds of reading materials compelled them to read as boys and continues to compel them to read. Such insights may help to illuminate how we can better encourage boys to read, procure reading materials of interest, and provide a more solid framework for addressing concern about boys' supposed indifference to reading.

Although there is much more research to be conducted on the subject, this study has helped to shed some light upon the differing reading habits of adult men and women. In relation to gender and reading, other researchers, such as Schultheis, have concluded that there's a need for more androgynous characters that appeal to everyone, regardless of the reader's gender.³³ After examining the data from this study, it is apparent that men and women do not necessarily have the same interests or indicate a need for androgynous characters as Schultheis suggests. While gender equality in life is crucial, when it comes to the realm of reading, particularly for leisure purposes, it might not be such a bad idea to embrace readers' preferences, however different, and give the men and women what they want.

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