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# **Towards a new sociological model of fiction reading**

**Briony Birdi and Nigel Ford**

Dr. Briony Birdi (Corresponding author)  
Senior Lecturer in Librarianship  
Information School  
Regent Court, 211 Portobello  
Sheffield, S1 4DP  
+44 (0)114 222 2653  
[b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk)

Prof. Nigel Ford  
Professor of Information Science  
Information School  
Regent Court, 211 Portobello  
Sheffield, S1 4DP  
+44 (0)114 222 2662  
[n.ford@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:n.ford@sheffield.ac.uk)

## **Abstract**

Although much previous research has considered how we read, less attention has been paid to *why* we read, and the influence not only of individual or text-related factors on a reader's intention to read, but also of broader societal factors. This paper presents a novel, empirically-based model of fiction reading in a public library context, taking into account the characteristics differentiating the readers of individual fiction genres. It begins with a literature review of factors motivating a reading choice or habit, and of the effects of reading different fiction genres, before introducing three previous studies by the first author into readers' attitudes towards, and engagement with, fiction and selected fiction genres. The methodologies are then summarised both for the three previous studies and the present study. The authors present a combined analysis which integrates the findings of the previous studies in order to generate a new, evidence-based model for the reading of fiction genres. Incorporating both demographic and motivational aspects, this model illustrates how the broad themes of the fiction reader profile interrelate, giving them a new causal ordering. Finally, there is a discussion of the implications of this work for library and information science research and practitioner communities.

## **Towards a new sociological model of fiction reading**

Reading is an activity that is central to our development educationally, psychologically and socially. There is much existing research into *how* we read – the process of decoding and extracting meaning – especially in relation to informational and educational sources.

However, less research attention has been paid to *why* we read, with reference to groups of people differentiated by factors such as age, gender and the social communities in which they operate. Also, relative to explicitly educational and/or factual information sources, relatively little research has explored the reading of fiction, and our attitudes to different fiction genres. A recent exception is Thelwall's (2017) work on gender differences relating to genre reading.

It is important to understand fiction reading practices and attitudes. There is evidence, for example, that the reading of literary fiction may affect a person's Theory of Mind (ToM), which is the ability to understand the mental states of others – to appreciate that others hold beliefs and desires that may differ from one's own. For Nikolajeva (2013), 'the main attraction of fiction is the possibility of understanding other people in a way impossible in real life' (p.95), and Mar et al. (2006, p.708) suggest that fiction reading is a 'tool' with which to educate children and adults 'about understanding others'. Presenting five empirical experiments Kidd and Castano (2013) conclude that reading literary fiction results in better performance on tests of affective and cognitive ToM, compared to the reading of non-fiction, popular fiction, and no reading. Based on a review of the literature, Garro (2014) describes educational benefits associated with fiction reading such as 'memory retention, vocabulary, empathy, and world knowledge' (p.11).

Research in Library and Information Science and English Literature has given us an understanding of the reading process in general, of certain factors motivating book selection, and of the influence of the library environment on book choice. However, previous research tended to present 'fiction readers' in rather homogenizing terms, omitting to consider the influence of individual, text-related or even societal factors on an individual library user's fiction selection process.

The purpose of this paper is to present a new empirically-based model of fiction genre reading in a public library context, which takes into account the characteristics differentiating

the readers of individual fiction genres. This has been developed from doctoral research investigating the reading of, and engagement with, fiction genres by public library users, with a particular focus on materials written by Black British and Asian authors.

The paper is organised into three main sections. Firstly, a brief review of motivation to read, the reading of fiction genres, and of theoretical approaches and reader models. Secondly, a summary of new empirical work which has built on omissions in previous research. Thirdly, the introduction of a new model based on the empirical work reported, and a discussion of the implications of this work for library and information science research and practitioner communities.

## **Literature Review**

The research reported in this paper concerns why people read what they do – specifically, why different people read different fiction genres. The review of literature, therefore, focuses on previous research investigating people's *motivations* for reading both generally and more specifically in relation to fiction genres, and the *effects* of fiction reading (providing potential reasons for why they choose to read what they do). It also includes a brief review of previous theoretical approaches and reader models.

### **Motivation to Read**

A primary focus of this research was to investigate the factors which influence the reading of different fiction genres. In the field of reading research, historically the investigation of a reader's motivation to read has been strongly linked to the child's learning process, and to changing patterns in reading and learning throughout the school years. Guthrie and Wigfield's model of reading engagement (in Kamil et al., 2000) proposes that there are both intrinsic and external motivators for reading. The former relate to a child's 'curiosity, involvement and preference for challenge', and the latter refer to his or her desire to receive 'external recognition, rewards or incentives' (p.407).

Mathewson (1994) presents a model of 'attitude influence upon reading and learning to read', which implies that the reader looks to read a text which affirms 'cherished values, goals and self-concepts' (pp.1148-9), and will avoid text that does the opposite. Although this model

was specifically designed to understand pupil motivation, there are elements which could apply to the adult fiction reader, namely that the overall attitude to reading, and the intention to read or to continue reading a book could be directly affected by feelings aroused by the reading process, and ideas linked to reading selection.

In relation to the adult reader, Escarpit (1971, p.90) famously writes of motivation in terms of two perceived roles of the text: a 'medicinal' role (to help the reader to sleep or to occupy his/her preoccupied mind), and a 'relaxation' role (to help the reader to obtain certain distracting sensations, be they pleasurable, emotive or erotic).

Specifically in relation to the reading of fiction, Appleyard (1994, p. 163) later suggested three motives, namely 'to escape from the intractable problems of everyday life, to enlarge their [readers'] consciousness of the world, to discover images that have power and meaning for their lives'. More recently, according to D'Astous et al. (2006) the act of reading is associated with one or all of three more wide-ranging motivations: utilitarian (e.g. increasing one's knowledge), hedonic (enjoying oneself), and symbolic (e.g. feeling that one is an intellectual). The act of choosing a book can be 'highly involving', as books serve to 'define one's identity' (p. 135). They also describe three 'relatively important' attributes used by readers when choosing a book, namely the author (his or her reputation and readers' past experience of reading his or her books), the reputation of the publisher, and the book cover. Finally, they suggest that the genre chosen is likely to reflect different reading motivations, for example 'a novel for relaxation versus a technical book for learning' (p.135).

The nature of what effect a reader might want from reading a book in terms of the experience to match his or her mood was one of the key findings of Ross (2001), who offers a 'model for the process of choosing a book for pleasure' (p.16), which applies directly to public library users rather than to potential book consumers. Based on an analysis of readers' statements, the model describes five interlinked elements, namely:

1. 'Reading experience wanted: the 'what mood am I in?' test.
2. Alerting sources that the reader uses to find out about new books.
3. Elements of a book that readers take into account in order to match book choices to the reading experience desired.
4. Clues on the book itself used to determine the reading experience being offered.

5. Cost in time or money involved for the reader in getting intellectual or physical access to a particular book' (pp. 17-19).

Although there are similarities between this and previous models, this is the only example which addresses the role of a third party – here, the librarian – in supporting the reader in choosing a book to read.

Leemans and Stokmans (1992) present a sequential hierarchical model of consumer decision-making for book purchase, involving six sequential phases: problem recognition, information acquisition, information evaluation, choice, purchase, and post-purchase evaluation. They argue that the decision process begins with the recognition of a problem, which could simply be a desire to read or own a book, then involves an internal (memory-based) and external (book reviews, personal or professional recommendations) search for information, before reviewing that information, making an informed choice, buying the book and finally reflecting on one's purchase. However, they acknowledge that this six-stage process will inevitably be affected by the consumer's prior reading experiences and knowledge of fiction, which will vary from one individual to another.

### **The Effects of Reading Different Fiction Genres**

The research reviewed above suggests that the reader's expectations of what effect (for example, in relation to his or her mood) a text might have is a key determinant of the nature of the book(s) chosen for reading. It is feasible that different fiction genres may be associated with different types of effect.

Usherwood and Toyne (2002) reported in a study of the value and impact of reading imaginative literature that readers felt that reading improved their ability to relate to other people, even that it had increased their understanding of people from other backgrounds and cultures. Similarly, Fong, Mullin, and Mar (2013) noted that studies have found that exposure to fiction can positively affect interpersonal sensitivity. They investigated the relative effects of four genres - domestic fiction, romance, science-fiction/fantasy, and suspense/thriller. After controlling for personality, gender, age, English fluency, and exposure to nonfiction, the romance and suspense/thriller genres remained significant predictors of interpersonal sensitivity.

Koopman (2016) investigated the effects on two types of empathy (empathic understanding and pro-social behaviour) of three genres (expository, life narrative, literary narrative), personal factors (including trait empathy, personal experience, and exposure to literature), and affective responses (including sympathy/empathy with the character). She found that life narrative had an effect on prosocial behaviour for depression. Sympathy/empathy with the character, along with trait empathy and exposure to literature predicted empathic understanding.

As noted in the *Introduction*, Theory of Mind (ToM) is essentially our ability to infer and understand the thoughts and feelings of other people. Kidd and Castano (2017) note that ‘Research suggests that lifetime exposure to fiction predicts performance on ToM tests’, although they acknowledge that ‘little evidence speaks to the type of fiction most responsible for this effect’ (p.474).

### **Previous Theoretical Approaches and Reader Models**

In an examination of the role of the reader in the study of American fiction, Mailloux (1982) attempts to classify the mass of literary theory relating to reader response criticism into three reading models, psychological, intersubjective and social, summarised briefly in Table 1 below:

#### **Table 1 Summary of three fiction reading models (adapted from Mailloux, 1982)**

<b>Psychological model</b> <i>Based on subjective criticism</i>	<b>Intersubjective model</b> <i>Based on phenomenology</i>	<b>Social model</b> <i>Based on structuralism</i>
<p>No objective text independent of a reader (Bleich, 1975; Fish, 1980)</p> <p>Reading is a function of personality (Holland, 1975)</p> <p>Favours individual interpretation over collective (Holland, 1975)</p>	<p>An interaction takes place between the reader and the text – while the reader is manipulated by the text ('affective stylistics') (Fish, 1970)</p> <p>No 'message' to extract from a text, rather a meaning assembled by the reader (Iser, 1978)</p>	<p>'Reading communities', 'interpretive communities', rather than individual readers as subjects</p> <p>Communication takes place between the author and the reader via shared reading conventions (Culler, 1975)</p> <p>A structuralist perspective dictates that the reader and text are no longer independent (Fish, 1980)</p>

The *psychological model* is based on subjective criticism, which places meaning in readers, rather than in texts. Bleich (1975) rejects the notion of an objective text existing completely independent of the reader, suggesting that for the reader, 'the interpretation is the response to his reading experience' (p.754). Similarly, Fish (1980) proposes that the text does not exist before its interpretation by the reader, and Holland (1975) emphasises the individual over the group, that reading is a function of personality.

The *intersubjective model* builds on the idea of subjective criticism, proposing that on the one hand there is an interaction between the reader and the text, and on the other hand that the text in some way manipulates the reader. Fish (1970) claimed that a sentence within a text is not 'a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that *happens* to, and with the participation of, the reader'; he describes the reader as 'informed', having the ability to understand the text and to have the experience the author intended him to have. In this process of 'affective stylistics', the reader is forced to perform certain cognitive acts, is 'manipulated' by the text. Moving away from traditional writer and text-centred approaches to literature, Iser's (1978) phenomenological theory introduced the concept of the reader as co-author, regarding the text as a series of marks of little significance in their own right.

The *social model* differs from the psychological and intersubjective models in that its subjects are 'reading communities', not 'individual readers'. As Mailloux (1982, p.40)



explains, 'social accounts of reading employ models based on intersubjective categories and strategies shared by members of a group.' Culler's definition of 'structuralist poetics' (in Mailloux, 1982) describes a communication which takes place between the author and the reader (with agreement among readers), via 'a shared system of reading conventions...the author makes use of these conventions in his writing and his intended readers use them to understand his text' (p. 42). In 1980 Fish revised his 'affective stylistics' as described above, replacing them with a theory of interpretive strategies and thereby moving from a phenomenological to a structuralist position which, as Mailloux (1982) describes, presents 'the underlying systems that determine the production of textual meaning and in which the individual reader and the constraining text lose their independent status' (pp. 22-3). Exploring the term 'interpretive community' Tompkins (1980) similarly suggests that 'since all sign systems are social constructs that individuals assimilate more or less automatically...an individual's perceptions and judgements are a function of the assumptions shared by the group he belongs to.' (p.xxi)

Although the word 'social' is used to describe this third (and aspects of the second) model of reading, it is important to note that such models are social in the sense of a communication they describe between the author and the reader and of reading communities, but not in the wider sense of 'society'. Indeed, the creators of these models have been criticised for their general inattention to sociological detail, in other words that any external factors – economic, political, socio-cultural, etc. – were not perceived as having a direct effect on the process of reading and interpreting a text.

In considering an appropriate model for this research, we felt that wider, sociological factors should be taken into account. This moves beyond the more usual notion of the 'sociology of literature' which refers primarily to the role of literature to depict contemporary society (Hall, 1979), towards instead a consideration of the effects of that society on the literature, its authors and, eventually, its readers. This approach is in line with the view of critics such as Mailloux (1982), for whom reading does not take place 'in a social vacuum independent of economic and political forces' (p. 41). He refers to economic factors which determine the availability of books and the material circumstances in which they are read, to political structures which affect the motives for and effects of the act of reading, and also to larger social forces such as class, gender or age, each of which could affect audience interest and

literary taste. As he suggests, 'a complete sociological model of reading would have to take all these factors into account' (p. 41).

### **The Development of a New Model of Fiction Genre Reading**

In recent years the first author's empirical research has begun to address these sociological omissions, undertaking a number of related studies of readers' attitudes towards, and engagement with, fiction and selected fiction genres. The first of these (Birdi & Syed, 2011) presented selected findings of a large-scale quantitative survey of reading habits and attitudes of public library users in the East Midlands region of England, conducted in order to investigate the demographic profiles and reading habits of the readers of 12 different fiction genres, and of non-fiction. As part of an investigation of public library users' attitudes towards minority writing, the focus of this study was on attitudes towards British minority ethnic fiction, namely Black British fiction and Asian fiction in English. Drawing from social identity theory and reader response theory, the study investigated the factors motivating a decision to read - or to avoid reading - minority fiction genres. A second paper by Birdi (2011) presented the findings of a qualitative study which applied personal construct theory and the repertory grid method (see Methodology) in order to generate (with a smaller, purposive sample of Masters students in Librarianship) a series of perceived characteristics of fiction readers and their associated genres, and again expanded upon these characteristics in relation to the readers of Black British fiction and Asian fiction in English. A third paper (Birdi, 2014) presented a quantitative study of provided construct ratings which built on the previous repertory grid interview study of the idiosyncrasies of individual participant response: a new, quantitative testing was devised of similarities and differences of constructs across a larger sample population including Masters and doctoral students in librarianship and members of the editorial board for the former *Public Library Journal*. Whereas previous research had tended not to consider the readers of individual fiction genres, this study enabled a detailed examination of perceptions of the reader profiles of different fiction genres, and of the extent to which these may overlap.

The present paper builds directly on these three studies. Each has contributed to a deeper understanding of the characteristics and motivations of the reader of different fiction genres. However, this paper presents a combined analysis which integrates the findings from the individual studies in order to generate a model of fiction genre reading incorporating both

demographic and motivational aspects. Consistencies and differences in findings are identified and discussed. None of the past three papers in isolation was able to provide the rich picture required for this new, integrative model of fiction reading.

## **Methodology**

Methodology is discussed here in relation to (a) the methodologies employed in each of the 3 individual studies - the combined analysis of which is the basis of the model presented here - then (b) the methodology used to conduct the combined analysis and to generate the new model of fiction genre reading.

### **Methodology for the Individual Studies**

**Study 1: The public library user reading survey.** This survey sought to identify the demographic profiles of readers of different fiction genres. Selected findings have been reported in a previous paper (Birdi and Syed, 2011), which presented the survey data as part of a wider investigation of the impact of a fiction promotion activity on the users of 16 libraries within nine local authorities in the East Midlands. The present paper also includes data from users of an additional 5 libraries which did not participate in the fiction promotion activity.

**Sampling.** A large-scale, quantitative sample was necessary in order to collect representative profiling data. The sample was selected using a stratified sampling approach to a total of 1,150 readers in 21 libraries as described above. 1,150 readers were asked to participate, and 1,047 valid responses were received. Inevitably, only those people who wished to do so completed the survey. However, the danger of a lack of representativeness associated with such a self-selecting sample is arguably mitigated by a relatively high response rate (91%). A possible reason for this high figure is discussed in the next section.

**Data collection.** A questionnaire was designed consisting of 5 simple questions:

1. During your visit to the library TODAY, what type(s) of books were you looking for?
2. Where did you look for these books?
3. What type of books would you USUALLY borrow from the library?

4. (In the following list), are there any types of book that you would NOT consider reading?
5. What factors usually influence you in your choice of library books?

Each question was followed by a list of options, and respondents were asked to tick as many as applied. A list of genres was provided in relation to questions 1, 3 and 4.

The questionnaires were distributed by library staff in the participating libraries. Since it was very short, respondents were asked to complete them whilst in the library. A stratified sampling method was employed for the distribution of the survey, giving the researcher more control over the selection of the sample, so that it includes particular factors, and is thereby a more proportionate sample from which generalisation should be easier (Denscombe, 2003). To illustrate the stratification approach, each of the 21 libraries was selected according to the nature of the community in which the library was based (whether rural/urban/suburban), the predominant ethnicity of the community according to census data (whether predominantly white/black/Asian/mixed), and the predominant class of the community (whether middle class/working class/mixed), again according to census data. It is likely that this way of administering the questionnaire have led to the high response rate (91%).

***Data analysis.*** As the quantitative data collected for the public library user survey were binary and non-parametrically distributed, we decided that the chi-square test was the most appropriate to determine statistically meaningful differences in the distribution of variables. Chi-square tests for independence enabled us to establish a degree of confidence in the relationship between two categorical (nominal) variables in the sample population, for example male and female respondents. For analyses with more than two categories, such as for LGBT fiction reading choices and age, a Pearson chi-square test was used. Where the variables had only two categories the correction value Yates' Correction for Continuity was also used, to compensate for any overestimation of the Pearson chi-square value.

### **Studies 2 and 3: using the repertory grid method to elicit and rate reader constructs.**

The two repertory grid studies sought to identify the motivational characteristics of different fiction genre readers, and comprised the following:

- (a) Inductively identifying the motivational characteristics of different genre readers as perceived by a first sample (Study 2, detailed below).
- (b) Testing the validity and reliability of the identified motivational characteristics using a second sample (Study 3, detailed below).
- (c) Looking for correlations between these motivational characteristics and the reading of different fiction genres (Study 3).

**Sampling.** The sampling strategy required for the first repertory grid study differed from that required for the survey study. Rather than needing a large representative stratified sample of public library readers, we opted for a small purposive sample which would provide the richest data for a qualitative inductive analysis. We aimed to include people for whom there was an anticipated relevance of the elements (fiction genres) and concepts (fiction reading) which formed the focus of the study. The repertory grid interview is a time-consuming and demanding process for both participant and researcher, and the sample sizes will necessarily be quite small. In view of the intensive nature of the data collection, we needed respondents who would be prepared to devote considerable time and effort to the research (the mean duration of the interviews was 52:06 minutes). This meant that to an extent the sample was opportunistic. However, although opportunistic, the sample did possess characteristics which made it in our view suitable for the study (detailed below).

If they were to provide rich data, members of the sample should be interested, knowledgeable, analytic and reflective in relation to the subject matter. The selected respondents were Masters students studying librarianship, on a programme which emphasises reflection in its curriculum and assessment methods (Sen and Ford, 2009). They had also all worked in a public library prior to joining the Masters programme. As the previous study (Birdi and Syed, 2011) had investigated public library users' perceptions of different genres, this second study sought to investigate the perceptions of librarianship postgraduate students, both in terms of their experience as library and/or bookselling staff (each of them had previously worked in an academic, special and/or public library, or in a bookshop, for at least one year) and their own perceptions as readers. Their appropriateness as participants related to the anticipated relevance to them of the elements (fiction genres) and the concept of fiction reading, within the overall context of librarianship. As well as being students the members of this sample were also members of the general reading public, and specifically readers of fiction.

For the first repertory grid study, 42 students on an MA Librarianship programme were invited to participate in an interview, and 15 agreed to do so, giving an overall response rate of 35.7%.

For the second repertory grid study, a purposive sampling method was again used. This sample had 3 components:

- (a) To test the reliability of the emergent constructs over time, the original 15 students who took part in the first stage also formed one component in the sample for the second.
- (b) To test the validity of the constructs, a new set of respondents was purposively selected to be similar to the first set. This sample consisted of further Masters students from the following academic year (n=9), doctoral students registered at that point in the Information School (n=3), and members of the editorial board for the Public Library Journal (n=4). Although again opportunistic, the sample did fulfil the required criteria for this part of the study in that they all possessed relevant subject knowledge and interest, and reflective skills, and had all previously worked or volunteered in a public library.
- (c) To further test the validity of the constructs more generally to people who had never worked in a public library a group of academic and research staff within the Social Sciences faculty (n=5) was also included within the sample population.

Thus the total number of participants who rated the constructs in the second repertory grid study was 36. We do not claim that the population used in the repertory grid studies represents the full range of fiction readers. However, we believe that these studies provide an analysis of relatively deeper processes and associations than was possible using a larger more representative sample as used in the first study. To that extent, the repertory grid studies represent an exploratory investigation designed to illuminate in much greater depth associations between personal psychological and social characteristics and fiction genre reading in terms of (a) proof of concept of the methodology and (b) a tentative model that can be further tested using larger more representative samples in future research.

***Data collection.*** The repertory grid is the most well-known aspect of Kelly's (1955) personal construct theory. The repertory grid interview is based on three interlinked stages, conducted in the order as stated:

- (a) Defining of a set of elements.
- (b) Eliciting a set of constructs to differentiate between those elements.
- (c) Relating of the elements to the constructs.

For our repertory grid studies we used ‘provided elements’, drawing from the identical set of eleven elements for each interview, enabling easier comparison across the findings (Fransella et al., 2004). These elements comprised ‘the reader of’ ten different fiction genres, and ‘myself as reader’ as the final element, used for rating purposes only and not within the triads. The repertory grids were then constructed by presenting to each respondent an identical set of ten triads (groups of three provided elements) and for each triad asking them to describe either a perceived difference between, or the perceived opposite of, different combinations of the elements (stage 2). The ‘triadic difference’ relates directly to Kelly’s (1955) original ‘minimum context’ form of construct elicitation – whereby the respondent is presented with sets of three elements and is asked to specify a way in which two of the elements are alike (the emergent construct) and thereby different from the third (the polar construct) – and we therefore felt that this would be a reliable and authoritative method to adopt. During the elicitation process, the implicit and polar constructs were recorded in the grid by the interviewer (Birdi), and when all triads had been presented and all constructs noted down, the grid was passed to the participant so that each construct could be rated (stage 3).

For the two repertory grid studies we used an ordinal scale of 1-7 for the ranking of the constructs. It is important to note that the numbers selected by the participants have no meaning in themselves, but provide a means by which to position elements in relation to each of the constructs, thereby resulting, as Banister et al. (1994) suggest, in a ‘slightly richer picture’ (p.77).

In order to increase the overall validity of the data collected and to enable more helpful statistical analyses, the second repertory grid study combined the data collected for the first (n=15) with data from an additional 21 participants (see ‘Sampling’, above). The 21 new participants were given a repertory grid containing 16 provided constructs, with no opportunity to elicit further constructs. Constructs were deliberately selected from each of the five high-order themes identified by thematic analysis in the previous interview study, in

order to build on a large proportion of the original dataset, and to increase the likelihood of generalisability across the sample population.

For a more detailed description of the repertory grid interview and construct ratings test developed for these two related studies, the reader is referred to Birdi (2011).

***Data analysis.*** The data collected during the repertory grid interview consisted of the constructs elicited, their groupings and subsequent ratings. In order to manage and interpret this large volume of data, thematic analysis was used to group constructs initially by codes relating to similarity of meaning, and then to count the frequency of different code occurrences as a means of identifying key areas for analysis. This resulted in an initial set of themes (or factors) characterising the reader of different fiction genres, with their frequencies. Further thematic analysis identified broad themes (high-order codes), within which more narrow and focused subordinate themes (lower-order codes) were also identified.

The construct ratings from the second repertory grid study were analysed using a number of statistical tests, including Wilcoxon signed ranks tests, to determine whether or not the mean ratings for a particular genre varied significantly from the midpoint of 4 on the Likert scale 1-7. This test is a more effective means of investigating this issue than a simple observation of mean ratings, and enabled the specific analysis of the readers of each of the fiction genres.

To identify relationships between the repertory grid constructs and different genre readers, correlations were undertaken between the relevant variables (for example, between demographic characteristics and fiction genre preferences).

### **Research Limitations**

Inevitably, during the course of the research process certain limitations were noted of aspects of the methodology and individual methods, and a brief exploration of these is included below.

For ease of completion, respondents to the reading habits survey were simply asked to tick all responses that applied to them, for each of the five questions. With no form of 'ranking' or



prioritisation, it is impossible to know which of the variables would be the most, or least popular choice for the individual respondent. Overall, this binary ranking system was felt to be quite limited, so for the quantitative element of the repertory grid study it was decided to use a Likert scale of 1-7.

The main limitation of the first repertory grid study was the difficulty of comparing participant ratings given that so many different constructs were elicited (128 before grouping), that there was a relatively small number of repeated constructs, and that the sample size (n=15) was too small for meaningful statistical analysis. To address this, the second repertory grid study involved the rating of a series of identical (provided) constructs by a larger number of participants, in order to test the extent to which the constructs differentiate between individual readers and genres.

For the second repertory grid study the construct ratings of the previous 15 participants were combined with those of 21 new participants from a deliberately similar population, and analysed as one group. The potential difficulty of using provided constructs (rather than elicited constructs, as in the previous study) and its effect on the research outcome is acknowledged, although given the similarity of the two populations (a deliberate strategy to maintain a relative homogeneity in terms of professional knowledge and experience) and the consequent relevance of the constructs to all participants, we regarded this as an appropriate technique to use.

### **Methodology for the Combined Analysis and Model Development**

Hammersley (2002) refers to three approaches to mixed methods research, which can be summarised as follows:

- (a) Triangulation – whereby quantitative research is employed to corroborate qualitative findings (or vice versa).
- (b) Facilitation – whereby one research approach is used in order to aid research using another approach.
- (c) Complementarity – whereby the two research strategies are employed in order to ‘dovetail’ different aspects of the investigation.

The research approach underlying the individual studies was designed to enable *facilitation* and *complementarity* in that the qualitative and quantitative methods used were seen as complementary to one another. As has been described above, one built sequentially upon the other.

This sequential, integrated approach to designing the individual studies also enabled the *triangulation* used in the combined analysis reported here whereby their findings could be compared and contrasted. Firstly, it offered the opportunity to consider the issues in question from different perspectives, and ‘to understand the topic in a more rounded and complete fashion than would be the case had the data been drawn from just one method’ (Denscombe 2003, p.132). Secondly, the research data could be questioned and corroborated by comparing one dataset to another (Rudestam and Newton, 2001; Gorman and Clayton, 2005). This allowed the researchers to identify consistencies and differences across the studies in order to develop a more holistic understanding of the phenomena under investigation – and ultimately to build the model of fiction genre reading presented below.

### **Research Findings**

Table 3 triangulates the data from the quantitative survey and the repertory grid study to summarise the main characteristics of the perceived reader profile for each of ten fiction genres. Data for the six characteristics describing the ‘perceived demographic profile of the reader’ are taken from both the survey data and repertory grid data, whereas the remaining groupings ‘perceived reader behaviour’, ‘perceived nature of plot’, ‘subject genres’ and ‘preferred genres’ are taken from the repertory grid grouped constructs ratings data only. In view of the number of significance tests being conducted for the combined analysis, we applied measures to lessen the chances of Type I errors occurring. We therefore adopted the relatively conservative significance level of  $p < .01$  as opposed to  $p < .05$ . We did not further increase the stringency of the significance level because arguably this may have increased the likelihood of Type II errors. Where relatively small sample sizes are used (as was the case with the repertory grid study) the power of the study is weaker, and hence a more generous level of significance is recommended (Pallant, 2016). If 5% of associations were significant by chance, we would expect to see 10-11 randomly significant associations. However, the fact that 103 of the 210 associations (49%) were significant at the more stringent  $p < .01$  level indicates that they are not due to chance (Banerjee et al., 2009).

Examples of the results of the survey and repertory grid studies are described below, before the findings of the combined analysis are presented.

### **The public library user reading survey**

Significant relationships were found between the six demographic characteristics (gender, age, class, membership of a minority community, community ethnicity, and community type) and the readers of certain fiction genres. For example, the readers of Asian fiction in English were significantly likely to be younger (chi-square = 18.43,  $p < .01$ ), whereas for Black British fiction there was no significant difference in age (chi-square = 10.89,  $p = .09$ , ns). For gender, there were no significant differences for the readers of Literary fiction or Crime fiction, but women were significantly more likely to read Chick Lit (chi-square = 34.75,  $p < .001$ ) and men were significantly more likely to read Science fiction/fantasy (chi-square = 20.57,  $p < .001$ ). The complete pattern of relationships is illustrated in Table 3.

### **The First Repertory Grid Study: Details of the Emergent Constructs**

From the fifteen repertory grids that were administered a total of 128 constructs were provided of a possible total of 150, with a mean number of 8.5 constructs per interviewee. Following Cassell and Walsh's (2004) recommendation, the initial set of themes (or factors) were dual-categorised where constructs contained multiple aspects, such as 'Would tend to be a middle-aged woman', which could be grouped under either 'age' or 'gender'. The final list of themes therefore increased from 128 to 142.

To understand the range of constructs elicited and what they could reveal about the perceived characteristics of the readers of different fiction genres, further thematic analysis identified five broad themes (high-order codes), within which more narrow and focused subordinate themes (lower-order codes) were also identified. The first of these themes relates to the demographic profile of the reader; the second to the approach they might take to the act of reading; the third to the experience they might be looking for (or the emotions they might hope to derive) from reading; the fourth to specific subjects they might be interested in reading about; and the fifth to genres they might be interested in choosing. The themes were

then grouped into three categories, namely Major, Minor and Idiosyncratic themes, indicating the frequency with which constructs were elicited within each theme. ‘Major’ themes were elicited by the majority ( $n \geq 8$ ) of participants, ‘minor’ themes by 4-7 participants, and ‘idiosyncratic’ by 1-3 participants. Table 2 gives an illustrative example of the perceived characteristics of the fiction reader, with the fourth high-order theme ‘Preferred nature of plot’ and eight related lower-order themes.

**Table 2 Perceived characteristics of the fiction reader: illustration of high-order and lower-order codes (themes) identified by thematic analysis for ‘Preferred nature of plot’, with frequencies and thematic groupings**

Themes	Frequency (participants)*	Thematic grouping
<b>PREFERRED NATURE OF PLOT</b>		
1. Looking for an easy (non-challenging) read	9	Major
2. Interest in escapism (not reality)	9	Major
3. Looking for a light read (for pleasure)	6	Minor
4. Looking to identify with the plot/characters	4	Minor
5. Looking for a happy ending	2	Idiosyncratic
6. Looking for a predictable plot	3	Idiosyncratic
7. Looking for thrills/entertainment	2	Idiosyncratic
8. Looking for a humorous plot	1	Idiosyncratic
* ‘Frequency (participants)’ refers to the number of participants eliciting constructs relating to each theme at least once.		

### **The Second Repertory Grid Study: Results of the Tests for Differences in Construct Ratings Within Fiction Genres**

To evaluate where on average the readers of ten different fiction genres were rated by participants on a construct continuum, a series of Wilcoxon signed ranks tests was conducted.

To give examples of these findings, the readers of Lad Lit fiction were felt to be the least ‘avid’ readers (mean = 2.75,  $p < .001$ ), and the readers of Romance fiction were regarded as the most ‘avid’ (mean = 5.29,  $p < .001$ ). There was no clear opinion regarding the readers of the three minority fiction genres, who were considered equally likely to be ‘avid’ as not (Asian fiction mean = 4.13, ns; Black British fiction mean = 4.25, ns; LGBT fiction, 3.75, ns).

Readers of the three minority fiction genres were considered highly likely *not* to be looking for a mainstream read, each at  $p < .001$  (Asian fiction mean = 2.78, Black British fiction mean = 2.52, LGBT fiction mean = 2.48), with the reverse being the case for readers of Romance fiction (mean = 5.91,  $p < .001$ ), Crime fiction (mean = 5.70,  $p < .001$ ), Chick Lit (mean = 5.87,  $p < .001$ ) and, to a lesser extent, Lad Lit (mean = 5.04,  $p < .01$ ).

### **The Integrative Analysis**

Table 3 presents a new, integrative review of the consistencies and differences in demographic and motivational characteristics of the readers of ten different fiction genres, across the aforementioned studies (Birdi & Syed, 2011; Birdi, 2011; Birdi, 2014). Whereas the literature review revealed a lack of clarity as to the identity of the readers of individual fiction genres, emerging from the empirical research is a clearer profile of the more traditional genres (Science Fiction and Fantasy fiction, Romance, Crime, Literary and War/Spy fiction), and even of the more recently established genres Lad Lit and Chick Lit. Still less data had previously been available regarding the characteristics of the readers of minority ethnic fiction, but research conducted in the previous studies has also facilitated an investigation of their profile. Table 3 triangulates the quantitative data to summarise the main characteristics of the perceived reader profile for each of ten fiction genres. In doing so, it is now possible to compare the extent to which the readers of one genre may differ from those of another. Given the large number of correlations presented a significance level of  $p > .01$  was adopted to reduce the possibility of Type I errors, as explained in the Methodology section.

### **Table 3 Summary of the reader profiles for each of ten fiction genres**

	Reader of Asian fiction in English	Reader of Black British fiction	Reader of LGBT fiction	Reader of Sci-Fi/Fantasy fiction	Reader of Romance fiction	Reader of Lad Lit fiction	Reader of Crime fiction	Reader of Chick Lit fiction	Reader of Literary fiction	Reader of War/ Spy fiction
<b>Perceived demographic profile of the reader</b>										
Gender	Either	Either	Either	<b>Male**</b>	<b>Female**</b>	<b>Male**</b>	Either	<b>Female**</b>	Either	<b>Male**</b>
Age	<b>Younger*</b>	Either	<b>Younger*</b>	<b>Younger**</b>	<b>Older*</b>	<b>Younger**</b>	<b>Older*</b>	<b>Younger**</b>	<b>Older*</b>	<b>Older**</b>
Minority Class ❖	<b>Minority**</b>	<b>Minority**</b>	<b>Minority**</b>	Majority	<b>Majority**</b>	<b>Majority*</b>	<b>Majority**</b>	<b>Majority**</b>	<b>Majority*</b>	<b>Majority*</b>
	<b>Working class**</b>	<b>Working class*</b>	Any	Any	Any	Any	Any	Any	<b>Mixed*</b>	Any
Community ethnicity ❖❖	<b>Diverse ethnic community**</b>	<b>Diverse ethnic community†</b>	Any ethnic community	Any ethnic community	Any ethnic community	Any ethnic community	Any ethnic community	Any ethnic community	Any ethnic community	Any ethnic community
Community type ❖❖❖	<b>Urban*</b>	<b>Any community type†</b>	Any community type	Any community type	Any community type	Any community type	Any community type	Any community type	Any community type	Any community type
<b>Perceived reader behaviour</b>										
Avid reader	Either	Either	Either	<b>Avid*</b>	<b>Avid**</b>	<b>Not avid**</b>	<b>Avid*</b>	Either	<b>Avid*</b>	Either
Looking for mainstream read	<b>Not mainstream**</b>	<b>Not mainstream**</b>	<b>Not mainstream**</b>	Either	<b>Mainstream**</b>	<b>Mainstream*</b>	<b>Mainstream**</b>	<b>Mainstream**</b>	Either	Either
<b>Perceived nature of plot</b>										
Looking for an easy read	Either	<b>Challenging*</b>	Either	Either	<b>Easy**</b>	<b>Easy**</b>	Either	<b>Easy**</b>	<b>Challenging**</b>	Either
Looking for a light read	Either	<b>Serious**</b>	Either	Either	Either	Either	Either	Either	Either	Either
Interest in escapism	<b>No escapism*</b>	<b>No escapism*</b>	Either	<b>Escapism**</b>	<b>Escapism**</b>	Either	Either	<b>Escapism*</b>	Either	<b>Escapism*</b>
Looking to identify with plot / characters	Either	<b>I identify*</b>	<b>I identify**</b>	<b>Not identify*</b>	Either	<b>I identify*</b>	<b>Not identify*</b>	<b>I identify**</b>	Either	Either
Looking for predict-ability	<b>Unpredictable*</b>	<b>Unpredictable*</b>	Either	Either	<b>Predictability**</b>	<b>Predictability*</b>	Either	<b>Predictability**</b>	<b>Unpredictable**</b>	<b>Unpredictable*</b>
Looking for a happy ending	Either	<b>Not happy*</b>	Either	Either	<b>Happy**</b>	Either	Either	<b>Happy**</b>	<b>Not happy**</b>	Either
<b>Subject interests</b>										
Interest in ethnicity	<b>Ethnicity**</b>	<b>Ethnicity**</b>	Either	<b>Not ethnicity*</b>	<b>Not ethnicity*</b>	<b>Not ethnicity*</b>	<b>Not ethnicity*</b>	<b>Not ethnicity*</b>	Either	<b>Not ethnicity*</b>
Interest in other people	<b>Interest in people*</b>	<b>Interest in people*</b>	<b>Interest in people**</b>	<b>No interest in people**</b>	<b>Interest in people**</b>	Either	Either	<b>Interest in people**</b>	Either	<b>No interest in people*</b>
Interest in societal issues	<b>Societal**</b>	<b>Societal**</b>	<b>Societal**</b>	<b>Not societal*</b>	<b>Not societal*</b>	<b>Not societal*</b>	Either	Either	<b>Societal*</b>	Either
<b>Preferred genres</b>										
Interest in multiple genres	Either	Either	Either	<b>Single**</b>	<b>Single*</b>	Either	Either	Either	<b>Multiple*</b>	Either
Interest in romantic novels	Either	Either	<b>Romantic*</b>	<b>Not romantic**</b>	<b>Romantic**</b>	Either	<b>Not romantic*</b>	<b>Romantic**</b>	Either	<b>Not romantic**</b>

\* p<.01

† p=.01

\*\* p<.001

❖ 'working class' - is perceived to be from a predominantly working class community; 'mixed class' – is perceived to be from a community comprising members of different socio-economic groups

❖❖ 'diverse ethnic community' – is perceived to be from an ethnically diverse community; 'any ethnic community' – could be from a predominantly white or an ethnically diverse community

❖❖❖ 'urban' – is perceived to be from an urban community; 'any community type' – could be from an urban/rural/suburban community

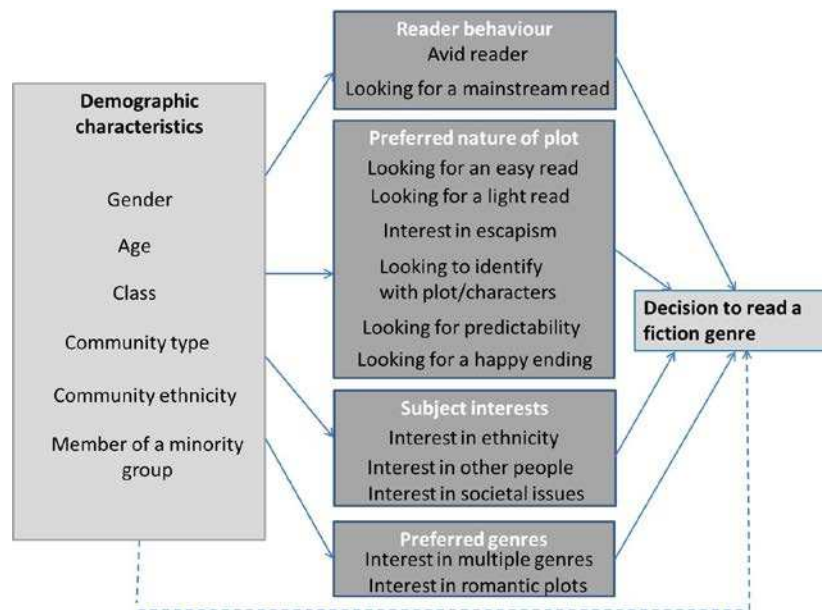
Table 3 appears to illustrate the inaccuracy of the implication of much previous research into the reading process that 'fiction readers' are a homogenous group: looking at the ten complete profiles, each one is perceived to be different from all the others, to varying degrees. However, it is interesting that when the five broad themes are considered individually, a number of patterns seem to emerge from which certain observations can be made. For example, looking at the perceived demographic profile of the reader, the last four of the six characteristics indicate that the readers of five fiction genres would tend to be regarded as belonging to a 'majority group', and would not tend to be associated with any particular socio-economic class, ethnic community or community type (rural, urban, suburban). Readers of four of the six 'traditional' fiction genres (Science fiction/fantasy, Romance, Crime and Literary fiction) are perceived as 'avid' readers, and a slightly different group (readers of Romance, Lad Lit, Crime and Chick Lit fiction) are regarded as looking for a 'mainstream' read. Many readers of 'traditional' fiction genres can also be grouped according to their desire to find each of 'easy', 'escapist' and 'predictable' reads. The association of such characteristics with the genre fiction reader is a generally unsurprising finding. It is interesting, however, that the more 'traditional' fiction genre readers were not regarded as particularly likely to have an interest in ethnicity as subject matter: this interest has not been frequently reported in previous research, although authors such as Toyne and Usherwood (2001) have reported this to be the case with their own studies of reading interests.

### **The Model of Fiction Genre Reading**

The new model presented below takes each of the perceived omissions in previous research (as described above) into account. Figure 1 depicts the generic model which can, as illustrated further below, be instantiated with different specific examples. This illustrates how the five broad themes of the original fiction reader profile interrelate, giving them more of a causal ordering than had previously been possible, or than would have been possible with any one of the empirical studies conducted for this research. Developed after triangulating the findings of the three studies, the model facilitates the examination of the individual characteristics, enabling a deeper understanding of the relationships between them, thereby building on previous reading models which tended to consider each one separately.



**Figure 1 Model to show the demographic characteristics and mediating factors which could affect the decision to read a fiction genre**



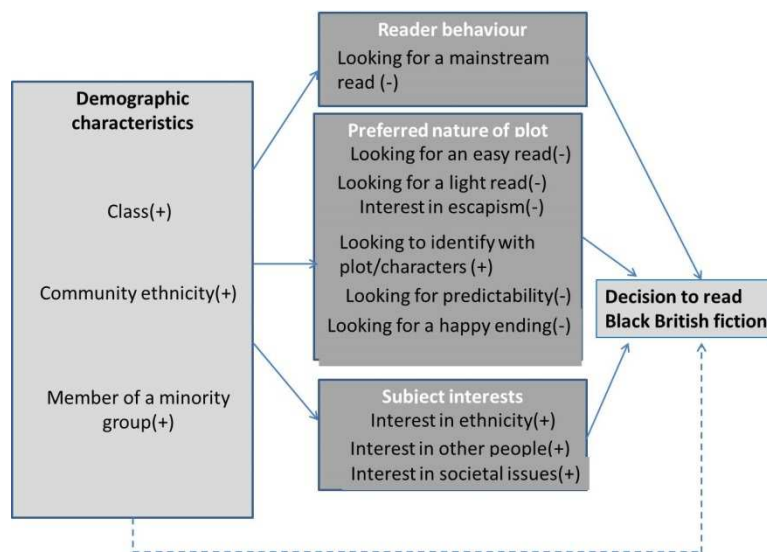
The ‘demographic characteristics’ box on the left-hand side contains those more stable characteristics which may influence the characteristics within the four attitudinal boxes in the centre, which themselves influence the decision to read certain fiction genres. The left-hand box may also in certain cases directly influence such a decision. Presenting the characteristics in this way also helps to explain why demographic or societal characteristics could directly affect reading choices. For example, those readers with less of an interest in romantic plots are more likely to be male, and those from working class communities are more or less likely to be interested in a particular fiction genre. The dotted arrow from ‘demographic characteristics’ to ‘decision to read a fiction genre’ indicates that the list of factors mediating this decision is not intended to be exhaustive. The decision may also be affected by other mediating factors which future research could address.

Figures 2 to 4 show how the model can be adapted to different fiction genres, taking as examples the reading of Black British fiction, Asian fiction in English, and Science fiction/Fantasy fiction. After each characteristic the ‘+’ or ‘-’ indicates whether the data indicated that the reader of this particular fiction genre is statistically likely (or not) to have that particular characteristic. For example, ‘member of a minority group (+)’ indicates that

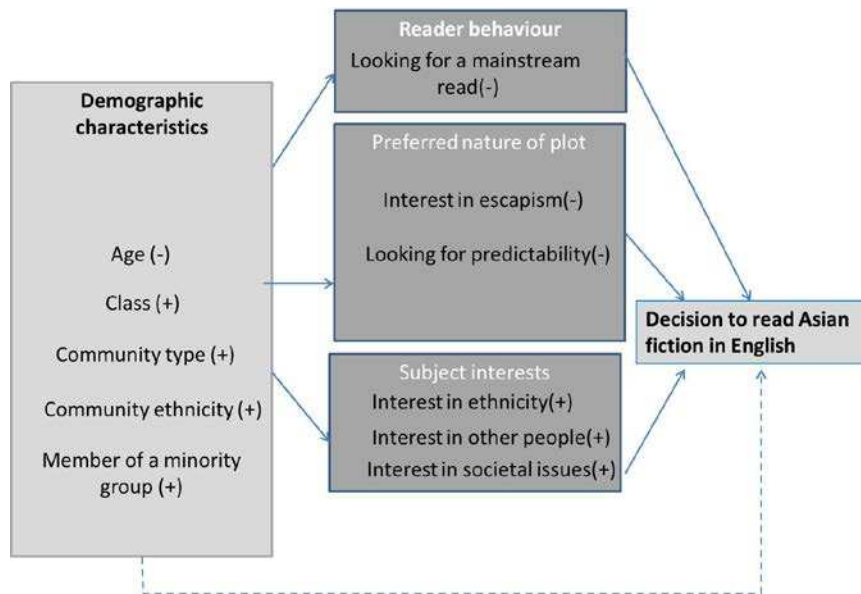
the reader is more likely to be a member of a minority group than not. For those demographic characteristics without an obvious positive or negative aspect, the following apply:

- **Gender:** statistically (+) more likely to be female; (-) more likely to be male.
- **Age:** statistically (+) more likely to be older; (-) more likely to be younger.
- **Class:** statistically (+) more likely to be from a working class community; (-) more likely to be from a community comprising members of different socio-economic groups.
- **Community type:** statistically (+) more likely to be from an urban community; (-) they could be from an urban/rural/suburban community.
- **Community ethnicity:** statistically (+) more likely to be from an ethnically diverse community; (-) could be from a predominantly white or an ethnically diverse community.

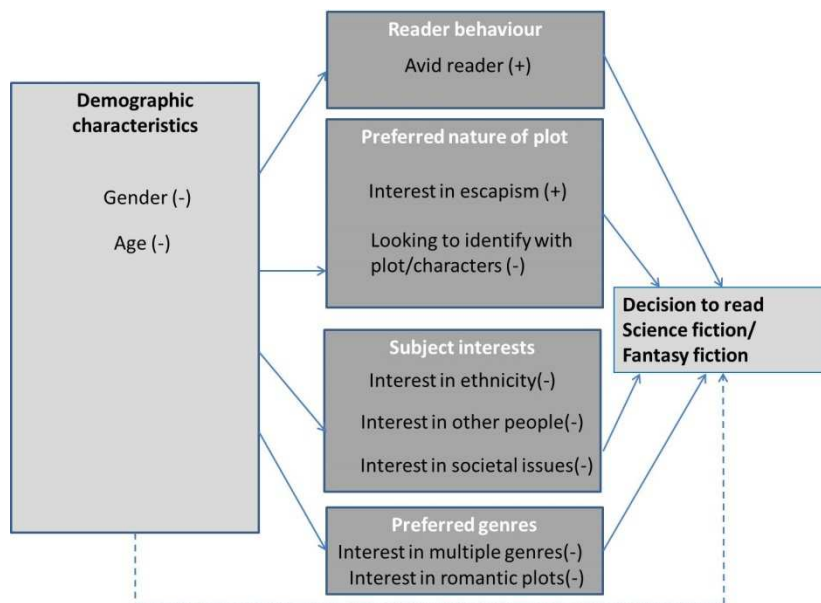
**Figure 2 Submodel to show the demographic characteristics and mediating factors which could affect the decision to read Black British fiction**



**Figure 3 Submodel to show the demographic characteristics and mediating factors which could affect the decision to read Asian fiction (in English)**



**Figure 4 Submodel to show the demographic characteristics and mediating factors which could affect the decision to read Science fiction/Fantasy fiction**



**Discussion: The Theoretical Contribution of the Model**

The contribution of the model can be summarised as fourfold:

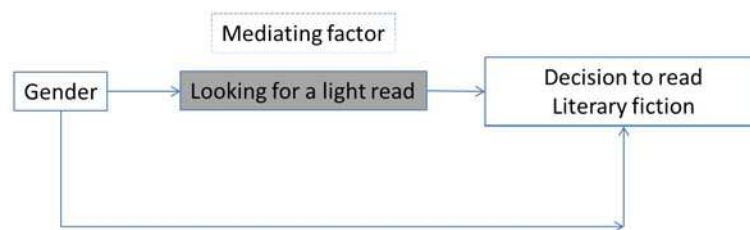
1. Identifying reader characteristics.
2. Illustrating the relationships between factors.

3. Having the flexibility to build in different types of factors.
4. Enabling the further exploration of interactions between these factors.

1. The model identifies a series of demographic and attitudinal characteristics of the readers of fiction as a whole, and of a series of individual fiction genres.

2. It clearly shows that some factors – demographic or attitudinal – can influence other factors and can, in turn, influence the reading of a particular fiction genre or genres. To illustrate this, we can look at an example of a proposed mediating relationship emerging from the data (Figure 5), which illuminate the possible role of ‘interest in multiple genres’ as a mediating explanatory factor in the relationship between gender and the reading of Literary fiction:

**Figure 5 Mediating relationship between gender and the decision to read Literary fiction**



We know from the empirical data that female readers are more likely to be interested in reading books from multiple genres than male readers; that readers of Literary fiction are more likely to be interested in reading multiple genres rather than a single genre; and that readers of Literary fiction are more likely to be female than male.

3. The empirical research reported here has focused on the individual characteristics of the reader, as illustrated in the previous model(s). However, drawing from the literature review and aspects of the first study it is also possible to expand the model beyond these original factors to add additional factors, such as ‘book factors’ and ‘external factors’. Regardless of the profile or attitudes of the fiction reader, this second version of the model indicates that there may be a series of additional factors which could influence his or her reading choices. Examples of these are given below.

## Book Factors

Previous research has explored different motivations potentially affecting a reader's choice of book. D'Astous et al. (2006), for example, proposed that the following three elements would affect the process:

- Author – the reader's previous experience of books by this author, or of knowledge of his or her profile/reputation as an author.
- Publisher – the reader's previous experience of titles from this publishing house, or of knowledge of its profile/reputation.
- Book cover - the visual impact of a book cover; this would be more likely to affect choice when part of a book display.

Similarly, Ross (2001) refers to the 'clues on the book itself used to determine the reading experience being offered' (p.18).

## External Factors

Factors shown in Table 4 were included in the questionnaire survey for the first study as potential factors influencing respondents in their choice of library books, and each was found to have some effect on the selection process (detailed in the table):

**Table 4. External factors influencing respondents in their choice of library books, in order of popularity**

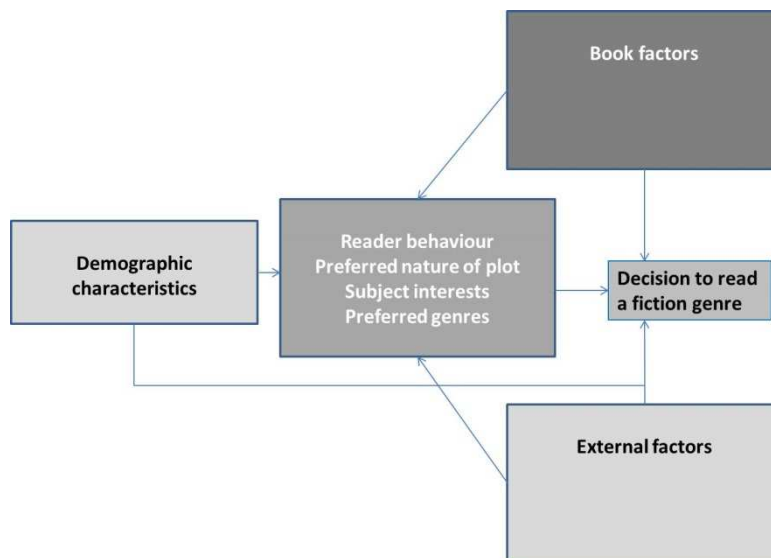
Popularity ranking	What factors usually influence you in your choice of library books?	Combined results (% of total)
1	Display in the library	682 (57.6%)
2	Friends' recommendation	483 (46.1%)
3	Newspaper/magazine/TV review	464 (44.4%)
4	I saw it in a bookshop	407 (38.9%)
5	I saw it/them on the returns trolley	403 (38.5%)
6	Library staff recommendation	215 (20.6%)
7	'Prizewinners' e.g. Orange prize, Man Booker prize	181 (17.3%)
8	Current events	172 (16.4%)
9	Internet	82 (7.8%)

Individual elements of the following list of factors were also included in previous reading models described above, in particular by D' Astous et al. (2006), Leemans and Stokmans (1992), Mailloux (1982) and Ross (2001):

- Economic factors – determining ‘the availability of books and the material circumstances in which they are read’ (Mailloux, 1982, p.41); such availability could depend on the whether an author writes the book, whether a publisher chooses to publish the book, whether a library supplier chooses to supply the book, and whether public libraries/bookshops choose to stock and promote the book.
- Marketing campaigns for specific titles or authors (local, national or international).
- Library or bookshop promotional displays – thematic, and/or of new books).
- Location of books within the library.
- Title seen on the library book returns trolley.
- Library staff /bookshop staff recommendations – spoken or written.
- Prizewinning titles.
- Media book review or coverage.
- Current events (influencing reading choices).
- Friends’ recommendations.

4. As indicated above, previous research and the empirical data from Study 1 provide some evidence of the potential interaction between the ‘External’ and ‘Book’ factors on the reading of fiction genres. The expanded model (Figure 6) facilitates the further exploration of interactions between these factors, showing where further research would be helpful to test these relationships more and to investigate the interactions, for example considering the extent to which individual factors interact with external factors.

**Figure 6 Expanded model of the reading of fiction genres, showing additional book factors and external factors**



### **Concluding Remarks**

Chia (2002) comments that whereas the researcher seeks primarily to ‘*understand and explain*’, the priority for the practitioner is to know the ‘*consequences and instrumental effects*’ of the research process (p.3). As the focus of this research has remained firmly grounded in practice, whether in the context of the public library or the wider book trade, it seems important to conclude this paper with a brief summary of its practical implications and application. The findings could be used to inform the development of the fiction section within the overall library or bookshop collection: whereas previous research has not tended to consider the readers of individual fiction genres, these findings have enabled a detailed examination of the reader profiles of ten fiction genres, and of the extent to which these overlap. More specifically, the statistical findings relating to fiction reader profiles and attitudes which have been summarised in this paper can be adapted for professional use in the following three ways: firstly, by helping library/booktrade staff to understand the characteristics and motivations of different fiction genre readers, in selecting and promoting such materials; secondly by providing a tool to support the promotion of specific fiction genres; and thirdly by providing a stimulus for readers themselves in selecting their fiction.

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