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Exploring reader response to minority ethnic fiction

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Introduction

Research conducted by the previous UK government suggests that society today is increasingly affected by segregation and minimal contact between communities in the UK (BBC, 2006a). A recent study of the 'decline of Britishness' found that white focus group participants referred to a 'perceived separation' between British Muslims and the white British population, and again to 'parallel worlds' they inhabited (ETHNOS, 2006:10). Operating within this complex environment, the UK public library service has been selected as the context for this paper, both because of its intended function to provide services and reading materials to all members of society (CILIP, 2004), and its perceived role in ameliorating relations between communities (MLA, 2005). It presents findings from an ongoing investigation of the reading of, and engagement with, Black British and Asian fiction in English in UK public libraries.

Research context: minority ethnic fiction

Historically, fiction in the English language was almost exclusively Western in focus, a body of work that was central to the cultural dominance of the British Empire. However, the form of this dominance is changing and, as it is no longer possible to deny the achievements and impact of post-colonial authors, in particular from South Asia and Africa, there has been a move to incorporate their work within the Western body of literature. This idea of 'incorporation' was taken further by Salman Rushdie in an essay written in 1983 (in Rushdie, 1992), in which he writes of the 'ghetto' into which he and other authors felt themselves to have been placed, writing in the English language, but 'occupying…a position on the periphery' (61) of the body of English literature.

The importance of minority ethnic fiction is crystalised by Mercer in 1994 in a critique of Black cultural studies, in which she writes: 'The postcolonial diaspora is not simply immigration into Britain from other places, as for example immigration into the United States…but is instead a constant reminder that "we are here because you were there"'(7).

Research context: the public library service

In 1996 Tyerman found that the provision of a multilingual library service was considered to be essential by some ethnic minority groups, and certainly Tso's more recent (2007) study of

library services to Chinese communities found that non-Chinese speaking library staff 'usually leave the task of understanding Chinese users' library service needs such as exploring popular fiction choice to [the] Chinese librarians' (28). However, in a study of Danish libraries Berger (2002) concludes that it is mainly older members of minority ethnic communities who request materials in their mother tongue, and that younger users generally prefer to read in English.

Pettingill and Morgan (1996) tested the ethnic composition of a library's stock by comparing the library's holdings against titles listed as 'multicultural texts' in bibliographies. Whilst such a method is fairly limited in its approach, it nonetheless raises questions as to the nature and composition of minority ethnic stock collections, and whether or not they should match the profile of the local community.

Moving away from the specifically linguistic provision of multicultural resources, we can also consider the provision of such materials in the English language, and their capacity to reach a wider readership. Research into the capacity of fiction reading to increase intercultural awareness and understanding has tended to focus on the interaction between children and young people, with a frequent finding that fiction reading is a 'tool' with which to educate children and adults 'about understanding others' (Mar et al, 2006). A 2002 study by Usherwood and Toyne into the value and impact of reading imaginative literature reported 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.

The fair portrayal of cultures in imaginative literature

If the act of reading imaginative literature about cultures other than one's own has the potential to increase intercultural understanding, it follows that their portrayal within this literature should be accurate, and fair. An inaccurate or unfair representation could arguably have a negative effect on readers' views of other ethnic groups.

Taking fiction portraying the British Asian community as an example, critics frequently refer to the 'culture clash' between British Asian and white communities. Tan (2007) discusses a number of British Asian works, focusing on this very theme of cultural dislocation and identity. She describes Monica Ali's novel 'Brick Lane' (2003) as 'grimly accurate' (Tan,

2007:228), the characters describing themselves as caught between cultures, whilst Ali herself describes it as the 'two-camp split' (ibid.).

However, this perceived clash of cultures does not need to be viewed in negative terms: Tan also discusses Jhumpa Lahiri's novels 'The Namesake' (2003) and 'The Interpreter of Maladies' (1999) which describe it as 'decisively liberating and productive' for the author, who adopts a 'tone of gentle humour, even affection, for her characters' (ibid.:231), who are both three dimensional and not at all stereotypical.

Moving beyond the theme of cultural dislocation, Afzal-Khan (1993) explores the rationale behind many of the trends in British Asian fiction. She focuses in particular on cultural imperialism, whereby the dominant culture defines the other – consciously or unconsciously – as inferior and in need of improvement and guidance from the former. She argues that many of the early novels in the genre – written by authors from outside the Asian community- do represent this view, even when they are trying to arouse empathy in their readers. For later novels written by people native to the community, she states that some 'self-hating' authors reinforce this view, whilst others provide a more liberating and sympathetic outlook. This interpretation raises an interesting question: if novels from this genre are felt to reinforce elements of cultural imperialism, how can they be trusted as a fair representation of the British Asian community?

This relationship between cultural imperialism and identity is generally explored by Taylor (1992), who argues that identity is shaped by positive recognition – whereby each identity is appreciated and respected - and that what he terms as misrecognition can cause people to:

> '…suffer real damage, real distortion, if the…society around them mirror[s] back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.' (Taylor, 1992: 25)

Having briefly considered the critics' views of the portrayal of minority ethnic communities in imaginative literature, a fuller picture can be obtained by consulting members of the communities themselves. In a survey conducted with members of the British Asian community (n=28), Syed (2008) found that respondents did not generally feel that they were fairly represented in fiction concerning their culture. Common complaints were that it focused on irrelevant and now clichéd issues such as unhappy arranged marriages, culture clashes and identity issues. Respondents felt that many of these issues no longer applied to them and were unhappy at how they were resolved in the novels:

'…it's slightly irritating that many of these works only tackle characters and situations where a British Asian has completely 'rebelled' against his/her culture and a caricature of a very Westernised British Asian is presented…'

'I don't think I [could] fully relate [to the stories]…a lot of it stems around themes such as marriage - forced marriage [in particular] - cropping up all too frequently for my liking.'

'…these books are dominated by themes of being 'torn between two cultures' when, in fact, that isn't the primary concern of all British Asians.' (idem:35).

Many respondents also felt that the portrayal of their culture and community was not a balanced one. They were not asking for an idealised representation, but wished that the more positive aspects were shown as well as the negative. Other, more mainstream issues were felt to be better representative of current thought within the community:

'[Some of the books] concentrate on the negative aspects of the culture without providing a balanced view.'

'[*Brick Lane* and *White Teeth*] don't have any positive representation of our community...especially with regards to [marital] relationships…[The married characters] just seem to be two people living together with no warmth or love…it's unrealistic to think that all Asian couples can't stand each other.'

'…I think Asian culture has evolved [away from] concerns such as forced marriages in present day UK. Topics of concern like gun culture, nationalism, racism…teenage pregnancy, disillusionment are a lot more prevalent now…' (idem:37,38,41).

Much of the criticism of minority ethnic fiction has been targeted at the high-profile, bestselling authors. However, there are in publication works by lesser-known authors from all communities, some of which will inevitably present a more 'balanced' portrayal of those communities: Monsoon Press, for example, aims to 'redress the under-representation of ethnic literature and promote diversity in publishing' (Monsoon Press, 2010). However, as titles published by the smaller, independent publishers they will not necessarily reach the national media reviews, or be selected by a library supplier for purchase by a local authority.

In a BBC interview regarding the portrayal of Muslims in fiction, Muslim convert Tim Winter suggested that '… publishers… are reluctant to commission…novels which portray Muslim cultures positively, since they felt, as one publisher put it, that readers would be 'confused,' and the book would not sell.' (BBC, 2006b). He was critical of the community protest to Monica Ali's 'Brick Lane', recommending that people should instead 'seek out and publicise books…which they feel will portray them accurately' (ibid.).

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Returning to the issue of readership, it could be suggested that fiction which portrays specific minority ethnic communities is not particularly aimed at a conservative audience within that community, rather at a wider, more liberal audience. Indeed, a librarian interviewed for research conducted by Syed (2008) suggested that publishers could be lobbied to provide more conservative fiction and also felt that such a genre may mirror the white working class family sagas that were already widely available in public libraries. However, such ideas may be difficult to put into practise. Publishers are inevitably motivated by economic factors, and may feel that a conservative British Asian novel may have a limited audience and would not be cost-effective to produce.

The danger, therefore, is that well-intentioned readers from outside the community may believe they are learning something about another culture when, in reality, they are reading a highly dramatised version of the truth. Focusing only on the more well-known authors may also result in members of the communities being dissatisfied with the way in which they are portrayed in English language fiction. Other titles undoubtedly exist, but are they being sufficiently well promoted, and what are readers' attitudes towards the minority ethnic fiction 'genre' as a whole?

The aim of the research

The findings of the investigation provide some initial answers to these difficult questions. The overall aim was to conduct a general survey of the reading habits and attitudes of library users in the East Midlands region, with a particular focus on Black British and British Asian books. This was conducted as part of an evaluation of *black bytes,* a public library fiction promotion of fifty titles (in the first instance) written in the English language by Black British authors, in particular those of a Black British background, carefully selected not to represent any community in a negative light. As an intervention it aimed to increase, using reader development methods, the readership of Black British fiction by both minority and majority communities. The promotion was developed as part of the three-year EMRALD [East Midlands Reader and Library Development] initiative, funded by each of the nine East Midlands public library authorities and the Arts Council East Midlands, and managed by Opening the Book Limited, a UK-based reader development agency.

Although the titles within the promotion itself were uniquely Black British, the focus of the study was expanded to include British Asian authors writing in English, in order to broaden the investigation of attitudes towards British minority ethnic fiction. The target audiences of

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black bytes were described by Van Riel (2002), Director of Opening the Book Limited, as follows:

> 'people who think books by Black writers are not for them;
>
> people who think books by Black writers are all the same;
>
> people who don't know where to start with Black British writing;
>
> people who are not aware of the full range of Black British writing (this includes Black readers)'.

As all titles were originally written in the English language, a key objective of the project was to enable all English-speaking library users to borrow and enjoy the books, whatever their cultural background, thereby developing their own reading choices and habits. This is reflected in Van Riel's definition of reader development:

> 'Reader development means active intervention to increase people's confidence and enjoyment of reading, open up reading choices, offer opportunities for people to share their reading experience, raise the status of reading as a creative activity'. (Opening the Book, 2010)

The requested focus of the original evaluation was on the impact of the *black bytes* promotion on the reader. However, with the above definition in mind and in order to reduce the likelihood of conducting a biased study, the author decided that the evaluation should have a more general focus, investigating people's reading choices, and factors that may affect these choices. This decision is therefore reflected in the aim stated above.

Survey of reading habits

A brief, quantitative reading habit survey was devised, and distributed by library staff at issue points in a total of 16 libraries in the nine participating local authorities. Adopting Basic Skills Agency (2006) guidelines for the creation of written text for a wide range of readers, the survey was designed to be straightforward and rapid to complete, and accessible to as many library users as reasonably possible, whatever their age, gender, socio-economic or ethnic background. Respondents were asked to state their gender and which age group they belonged to, but not to state their ethnicity. As the questionnaire was so brief, respondents were asked not to take them home, but to complete them while in the library.

The survey was specifically designed to focus both on positive and negative reading choices, as it was felt that an exploration of attitudes towards particular genres should investigate not only respondents' preferences, but also their potential prejudices. As Van Riel states in her

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observation of the data, 'Black British fiction, Asian fiction and gay/lesbian fiction cover a huge range of kinds of reads and have no literary qualities or characteristics exclusively in common with each other. What's at work here is not just a reading preference' (Van Riel, 2003).

The questionnaire consisted of five simple questions:

1. During your visit to the library TODAY, what type(s) of book 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?

Following each question there was a series of options, and respondents were asked to tick as many as were relevant to them. For Questions 1, 3 and 4 respondents were given as options the same list of 13 genres (excluding 'Other'), which were the result of a series of discussions between the researcher and the project group, and were agreed to represent a wide range of the stock available in a typical library in the East Midlands:

1. Science fiction/fantasy
2. Gay/lesbian fiction
3. Black British fiction
4. Family sagas
5. Non-fiction
6. Romance fiction
7. 'Lad Lit' e.g. Nick Hornby, Irvine Welsh, Mike Gayle
8. Crime fiction
9. 'Chick Lit' e.g. Lisa Jewell, Jane Green, Marian Keyes
10. Asian fiction in English
11. Audio books (books on tape/CD)
12. Literary fiction
13. War/spy/adventure.

Response rate and sample population

In total, 1,150 questionnaires were distributed by library staff at issue points in the nine participating library services. A total of 1,047 valid responses were received, giving an overall response rate of 91.0%. Of these respondents, 277 (26.4%) were male, 572 (54.6%) were female, and 198 (18.9%) chose not to state their gender. There was a fairly similar number of respondents in each of the age groups over 30 (slightly more in the 70+ group), and considerably fewer for the 16-19 and 20-20 groups.

Reading habit questionnaire: findings

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Respondents' reading choices 'today'

The purpose of Questions 1 and 3 ('During your visit to the library *today*, what type(s) of book were you looking for?' and **'**What type of books would you *usually* borrow from the library?') was to distinguish between the respondent's visit on that day only, and his or her typical visit to the library. The intention of asking both questions was to guide respondents to think differently about the books that they had in their hand on that day, and those that they might usually choose, thereby avoiding the atypical example that may skew the results in some way. The responses to both Questions 1 and 3 are briefly reported in this paper, but with more analysis conducted for the latter, as this should provide a more generalised indicator of borrowing patterns.

Figure 1 (below) shows the number of responses to Question 1 for each genre, listed in order of the frequency of response.

Figure 1. Table to show the frequency with which different types of books were chosen by respondents on the day they completed the survey.

Popularity ranking	Variable (genre)	Combined results (% of total 1,047)
1	Non-fiction	497 (47.5%)
2	Crime fiction	396 (37.8%)
3	Family sagas	274 (26.2%)
4	Literary fiction	215 (20.5%)
5	War/spy/adventure	216 (20.6%)
6	Romance fiction	215 (20.5%)
7	Science fiction/fantasy	169 (16.1%)
8	Audio books	80 (7.6%)
9	Chick Lit	70 (6.7%)
10	Black British fiction	32 (3.1%)
11	Lad Lit	32 (3.1%)
12	Asian fiction in English	22 (2.1%)
13	Gay/lesbian fiction	5 (0.5%)

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It could be anticipated that the books respondents were looking for 'today' might not be the same as those they would 'usually' look for (i.e. on a habitual basis). However, a Spearman's Rank Order Correlation showed that the genre choice 'today' was in fact strongly related to the genre choice 'usually', for all genres (r=.58 to .78, all p<.001). The inclusion of Question 1 in the survey arguably helps to support the validity of Question 3, as the analysis has demonstrated that asking people what they are looking for on a single visit to the library is very strongly correlated to what they are looking for on a typical visit.

Figure 2. Table to show the non-parametric correlations (Spearman's Rank) between the variables choice of genre 'today' and choice 'usually'

	Variable (genre)	
1	Non-fiction	.58***
2	Crime fiction	.71***
3	Family sagas	.78***
4	Literary fiction	.60***
5	Romance fiction	.73***
6	War/spy/adventure	.64***
7	Science fiction/fantasy	.71***
8	Audio books	.62***
9	Chick Lit	.69***
10	Black British fiction	.62***
11	Lad Lit	.70***
12	Asian fiction in English	.66***
13	Gay/lesbian fiction	.59***
*** p<.001		

Preferred location for selecting books

Figure 3. Table to show where in the library respondents looked for their books

Popularity ranking	Variable (location)	Combined results (% of total 1,047)
1	On the shelf	777

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		(74.2%)
2	Displays of new books	510 (48.7%)
3	Returns trolley	464 (44.3%)
4	Other displays or promotions	175 (16.7%)
5	Library catalogue	164 (15.7%)

As **Figure 3** illustrates, the data collected regarding respondents' preferred location in the library for selecting books showed that almost three-quarters of the total sample of 1,047 respondents (74.2%) looked on the library shelves, in other words in the traditional A-Z sequence. At first glance this seems to be a discouraging finding in terms of promotion planning: if library users prefer to go directly to the shelves, why should library staff make the effort to devise specific promotional displays? However, given that respondents were asked to tick as many options as were relevant to them, in many cases the library shelves were just one of a number of locations they selected. Approximately half of respondents selected 'displays of new books' (48.7%), although far fewer selected 'Other displays or promotions' (16.7%), both findings of obvious relevance to the present investigation of attitudes towards minority ethnic fiction and its promotion.

Figure 4. Table to show where in the library Black British fiction and Asian fiction readers looked for their books

Variable (location)	Popularity ranking	Black British fiction readers (% of total 36)	Popularity ranking	Asian fiction readers (% of total 29)
On the shelf	1=	28 (77.8%)	1	21 (72.4%)
Displays of new books	1=	28 (77.8%)	2	14 (48.3%)
Returns trolley	2	15 (41.7%)	3	7 (24.1%)
Other displays or promotions	3	10 (27.8%)	5	5 (17.2%)
Library catalogue	4	6 (16.7%)	4	1 (3.4%)

36 respondents stated that they would 'usually' borrow Black British fiction, 29 respondents that they would 'usually' borrow Asian fiction in English. A cross-tabulation was conducted of these two groups and their preferred location for selecting books. Overall, the data would suggest that both Black British and Asian fiction readers look in a wide range of locations for

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their books. An explanation of this could simply be that fewer titles tend to be available in these categories than in the more 'popular' genres, such as crime fiction. It would therefore be reasonable to suggest that both minority fiction genres should be promoted using a wide range of display methods.

A Spearman's Rank Order Correlation was conducted, in order to calculate the strength of the relationship between each of the variables 'Black British fiction' and 'Asian fiction', and the five possible location variables. The resulting correlations can be used to inform us of the statistical significance of relationships within the sample populations described above, but also enable a comparison between these populations and the entire respondent population (those who answered the question 'Where did you look for these books?'), in order to investigate whether the patterns of popularity are the same across each category of respondent.

Given the large overall sample population for this survey (1,047 respondents), it is more helpful to look primarily for correlation at the 0.01 level than at the 0.05 level: the larger the sample size, the more likely we are to find a significant relationship between two variables.

Figure 5. Table to show the non-parametric correlations (Spearman's Rank) between the 'location' variable and Black British fiction/Asian fiction readers variables

Variable (location)	Black British fiction readers	Asian fiction readers
Displays of new books	.156**	.063
Returns trolley	.041	-.005
Library catalogue	.086*	.094*
Other displays or promotions	.128**	.036
On the shelf	.068	.053
* p< .01 \n ** p< .001		

How should these correlations be interpreted? Interestingly, they indicate that displays – either of new books or of general themed promotions – appear to influence the Black British fiction reader more than the Asian fiction reader when searching for their books within a public library, although both readers are likely to consult the library catalogue. This

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underlines that it should not automatically be assumed that the two readers will have similar patterns of reading behaviour, as they can in fact have very different characteristics.

Respondents' 'usual' reading choices

Figure 6 (below) shows the number of responses to Question 3 ('What type of books would you *usually* borrow from the library?') for each genre, listed in order of the frequency of response.

Figure 6. Table to show the frequency with which individual genres were 'usually' borrowed from the library

Popularity ranking	Variable (genre)	Combined results (% of total 1,047)
1	Non-fiction	550 (52.5%)
2	Crime fiction	452 (43.2%)
3	Family sagas	308 (29.4%)
4	Literary fiction	276 (26.4%)
5	Romance fiction	264 (25.2%)
6	War/spy/adventure	250 (23.9%)
7	Science fiction/fantasy	198 (18.9%)
8	Audio books	106 (10.1%)
9	Chick Lit	89 (8.5%)
10	Black British fiction	36 (3.4%)
11	Lad Lit	44 (3.2%)
12	Asian fiction in English	29 (2.8%)
13	Gay/lesbian fiction	10 (1.0%)

As illustrated in **Figure 6**, the most popular reading choice was non-fiction (52.5%). It is notable that more than half the respondents selected this option, as national data and professional opinion would appear to contradict this, indicating that more fiction is borrowed from public libraries than non-fiction (Van Riel, 2003; CIPFA, 2008). One possible explanation for the high response rate to the present study could be that respondents were including in their responses any non-fiction material they may read while in the library such as reference works, magazines and newspapers, even online texts. Commenting on the

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findings of the present study, Van Riel (2003) also suggests that although non-fiction tends to be the category towards which people express the least negative feeling, it is also 'an area where most people actually read less'. As she states, 'An absence of perceived problem with non-fiction does not translate into an increase of readership'.

The minority fiction genres included in the survey (Black British fiction, Asian fiction in English, gay/lesbian fiction) were three of the four least frequently cited genres. A statistical (Spearman's Rank Order Correlation) test was conducted, in order to calculate the strength of the relationship between Black British and Asian fiction variables for Question 3. If a person 'usually' reads the former category, would he or she be likely to 'usually' read the latter?

The correlation demonstrates that the two variables are strongly related, as correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed) (r=.398, p<.001). This could be of value to those working to raise interest in Black British and Asian fiction material, as it would appear that the two could reasonably be promoted together.

Genres that respondents would not consider reading

As **Figure 7** (below) illustrates, the genre 'gay/lesbian fiction' was respondents' least popular reading choice (63.6%, n=666). The second least popular genre was Asian fiction in English (44.7%, n=468), whereas interestingly Black British fiction was less unpopular, but would nonetheless not be considered by 32.3% (n=338) of the overall group of respondents.

Figure 7. Table to show the frequency with which individual genres would not be considered by reading survey participants

Unpopularity ranking	Variable (genre)	Combined results (% of total 1,047)
1	Gay/lesbian fiction	666 (63.6%)
2	Asian fiction in English	468 (44.7%)
3	Science fiction/fantasy	438 (41.8%)
4	Romance fiction	373 (35.6%)
5	Chick Lit	369 (35.3%)
6	Black British fiction	338 (32.3%)

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7	Lad Lit	316 (30.2%)
8	Audio books	284 (27.1%)
9	War/spy/adventure	234 (22.3%)
10	Family sagas	179 (17.1%)
11	Crime fiction	151 (14.4%)
12	Literary fiction	134 (12.8%)
13	Non-fiction	45 (4.3%)

It is interesting that there appeared to be less reluctance to read Black British than Asian fiction. Nonetheless, a Spearman's Rank Order Correlation test revealed that if a person stated that they would not read Asian fiction, it is also highly likely that he or she would not read Black British fiction (r=.607, p<.001). As minority genres such as these vary considerably in subject matter, we could infer that large numbers of respondents are choosing not to read these books not because of their content, but because of the cultures or lifestyles that they represent.

In 2003 Twomey conducted an investigation of the attitudes of reading group members towards fiction reading, and asked the question of focus group participants 'Is there any fiction you would never choose to read?' Unlike the present study, participants were not offered a choice of genres from which to select, so responses made related not only to specific genres but also to general characteristics of plot ('no sexual content, nothing explicit') and style ('really thin, bad characterising') (18-19). Interestingly, participants who listed a particular genre predominantly cited either 'romance fiction' or 'chick lit', referring to the books' 'irritating' or formulaic characteristics. Twomey's sample population (six focus groups were conducted, with between three and twelve members each) was considerably smaller than that of the present study (n=1,047) and is by no means representative of the population from which the sample was selected. However, it is of interest that a related study revealed no antipathy whatsoever towards minority ethnic fiction (Black British fiction, Asian fiction, gay/lesbian fiction). One possible interpretation of this would be that focus group members may be subject to the effects of group participation, for example that they may be more likely to express 'culturally expected views' than they would in a more 'individual' form of data collection such as the questionnaire survey for the present study (Bryman, 2004:360; Morgan, 2002).

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Factors affecting choice of library books

The final question in the reading habits survey explored those factors influencing

participants' choice of reading material. **Figure 8**(below) presents the findings.

Figure 8. Table to show the factors influencing respondents in their choice of library books, in order of popularity

Popularity ranking	Variable (factor)	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, Booker prize	181 (17.3%)
8	Current events	172 (16.4%)
9	Internet	82 (7.8%)

The data strongly suggest that the effectiveness of stock promotion is enhanced if the

potential influence of display is not overlooked. More than half of respondents (57.6%) said

that their choice of reading materials was affected by the 'display in the library'. In other

words, the presentation of books in the library building itself can influence a reading choice

more than any other internal or external factor.

A Spearman's Rank Order Correlation was conducted, in order to calculate the strength of the

relationship between each of the variables 'Black British fiction' and 'Asian fiction', and the

nine possible 'choice' factors influencing readers in their choice of library books. As in

previous tests, the large sample population means that it is helpful to look for correlation at

the 0.01 level than at the 0.05 level.

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Figure 9. Table to show the non-parametric correlations (Spearman's Rank) between the 'choice' variable and Black British fiction/Asian fiction readers variables

Variable (choice)	Black British fiction readers	Asian fiction readers
Display in the library	.398**	-.006
I saw it/them on the returns trolley	.062	-.046
Internet	.122**	.078
Newspaper/magazine/ TV review	.046	.038
I saw it in a bookshop	.069	-.009
Library staff recommendation	.084*	.042
Friends' recommendation	.059.	.035
Current events	.092*	.078
'Prizewinners' e.g. Orange prize, Booker prize	.099*	.63
* p< .01 ** p< .001		

Figure 9 illustrates that Asian fiction readers do not appear to differ significantly from non-Asian fiction readers in terms of the factors influencing their choice of library books. As in previous analyses, the reading behaviour and choices of the Black British fiction and Asian fiction readers appear to be quite different from one another. Interestingly, the former again seem to be more influenced than the latter by displays in the library (see also **Figure 2**). It is also notable that the readers of Black British fiction are significantly more likely than Asian fiction readers to look for prizewinning titles when searching for their books. Could an interpretation of this be that fewer prizewinning titles are perceived to have been written by (British) Asian writers than Black British writers? This would be relatively surprising, as although both Black British and Asian writers have featured in (for example) Booker and Orange prizewinning long and shortlists, representation from either 'group' is not yet commonplace. In 2007 the bookseller Waterstone's devised a list of 25 'future greats' (Brown, 2007), relatively new authors who it felt to be the 'next generation of superstars (Hoyle, 2007). Of this list of 25, just 1 was black (British Nigerian author Helen Oyemi) and 1 was British Asian (Gautam Malkani), in total less than a representative percentage of the overall non-white population. As reported in the Independent newspaper in 2007, it would appear that 'Britain's book business remains determinedly Caucasian'.

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Discussion

Data collected for both studies have enabled us to draw initial conclusions about the readers
and the non-readers of Black British and Asian fiction in English. The study revealed that the
two variables are strongly related, in that if a person 'usually' reads from one genre, he or she
is significantly highly likely also to read from the other. However, of particular interest is the
clear finding that despite this apparent link it should not be assumed that the reader of each
genre will always have similar patterns of reading behaviour, or similar attitudes towards
fiction selection or reading. For example, those who usually read Black British fiction are
quite different from those who do not, in that they are significantly more likely to look for
their books from displays of new books or other displays and promotions, whereas those who
usually read Asian fiction in English appear to use these promotional tools no more than
those who do not.

Evidently, it would be wrong to assume that all Black British and Asian fiction is identical in
subject matter and style, or that the ethnicity referred to in its label should automatically
reflect its intended (or actual) audience. The use of any label or classification is problematic,
and terms such as 'Black British' or 'Asian' will inevitably carry with them certain cultural,
ethnic and racial characteristics and stereotypes. However, if those who would make a
deliberate choice to avoid one genre would behave in the same way towards the other, does
this suggest that these individuals are doing so because of the cultures or lifestyles that they
perceive 'minority ethnic fiction' to represent, and how different they feel them to be from
their own? Despite the apparent lack of intended readership for minority ethnic fiction, do
some white people perhaps feel that these genres are not relevant to them, being more
comfortable identifying themselves with other genres?

Just 8.7% (n=91) of questionnaire respondents had listed no category that they would not
consider reading, in other words that 91.3% of respondents would deliberately avoid at least
one genre when selecting reading material. These findings are also supported by Syed (2008).

Exploring this idea a little further, we can look to social identity theory, which considers the
behaviour of members of groups and how this relates to their self-conception as group
members. Hogg states that people feel a need to identify with a particular group in order to
reduce their own insecurities, or 'subjective uncertainty'. In doing so, a 'minimal group
effect' can take place, whereby members of one group will 'strive to favour themselves over
relevant out-groups' (Hogg, 2000; Hogg and Vaughan, 2005: 21, 407). The choice to read, or

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not to read, would therefore appear to be partly informed by previous habit, and partly by a desire not to leave one's comfort zone of a genre or genres with which one identifies, and which is somehow 'relevant' to his or her life.

However, the data for the study have also revealed an openness on the part of many respondents to read from a wide range of genres, and to try new material. Reader response theory, and the related concept of reader development, can help us to explain this second pattern of respondent behaviour; in reader response theory the reader plays a critical role, participating in a 'triangular relationship' with the text (Appleyard, 1994:6), even acting in some sense as co-author (Iser, 1978). The term 'reader-centred practice' (Train, 2003) has become frequently used in the application of reader response theory to library and information science, now commonly described as 'reader development'. In line with reader response theory, the concept of reader development has as its stated objectives to raise the status of reading as a creative act, to increase people's confidence in their reading, and to bring isolated readers together (Van Riel, 1992: 4).

Bearing in mind the above interpretations, social identity theory and reader response theory would appear to contradict each other: the first would suggest that readers will stay within their comfort zone and read genres that reflect characteristics of their (self-identified) group, whereas the second infers that readers will want to broaden their horizons, deliberately choosing to read something 'new'.

Essentially, whatever categorisation or labelling we choose to apply to any sample population, alternative patterns of behaviour within that population will inevitably emerge. Some readers will actively seek to follow others in their 'group' or 'community'; others will deliberately choose to behave differently.

In conclusion

With an understanding of the nature of the readers of 'minority genre fiction', and the nature of the material they choose to read, we are more likely to devise effective reading promotions – and sustainable reading practices – via which to celebrate cultural diversity. And although this study was based in a particular region of the UK, it is felt that this research would be transferable not only to other minority fiction genres, but to other ethnic cultures, and to public library readers in other countries. The findings have indicated that there is a promotional opportunity waiting to be taken by public library staff working with any minority ethnic community: in order to encourage people to find the elusive 'good read',

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themed displays can be used to remove fears and prejudices in an entirely unobtrusive way, to present wider reading choices to all library users.

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