

## **Sociological Explanation of the Relationship between Gender and Reading among Ahvaz Citizens**

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### **Abstract**

This study aimed to investigate the effect of gender on the amount and type of reading. This study was descriptive. The research population consisted of people over 15 years of age in Ahvaz city. A multistage random sampling technique was used, and the data were collected using a questionnaire. The independent t-test and contingency table were used to analyze the data. The results indicated that gender could affect reading, and women had more reading time than men. Also, there were differences in reading interests based on gender. Women were more likely than men to read popular books. Still, men were more elitist and were more likely to read non-fiction books than popular works. Men were more likely to read intellectual and cultural magazines, while women tended to read more popular ones. Besides, women and men had different reading interests in different sections of the newspapers. The deep familiarity of readers with discovering the level and type of reading and defining a developmental plan for reading can provide a valuable guide to policy-making for promoting reading by trusted institutions.

**Keywords:** Reading; Reading interests; Gender; Ahvaz citizens

### **Introduction**

Reading is a fundamental competence for adults, children, and adolescents and is assumed to be indispensable for active participation in various domains, including social life, education, and the labor market. Furthermore, reading is key to learning and achievements in other domains since knowledge is accessible through text and discourse (Thums, Artelt, & Wolter, 2021). Reading can be viewed as behavior or action. Behaviorists and psychologists have considered reading as a behavior; sociologists have regarded it as an action. Conventional theories or views of reading are divided into three paradigms: psychological, educational, and sociological. They can identify three general domains of theorizing, each of which produces the contradicting sub-theories sometimes. For example, theories explain the nature of learning to read by being influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic theory or Piaget's theory of cognitive development. In the psychological paradigm, theories that explain the role of reading in education are influenced by the theories from people like Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In the educational paradigm, theories that explain reading as a social relation or social interaction

between individuals and social classes are influenced by György Lukács and Lucien Goldmann's sociological theories and are placed in the sociological paradigm (Khandan, 2009).

Today, reading a text is one of the most significant aspects of the sociology of literature. Reading is a conversation between texture and hypertext. In the sociology of reading, the reader requires creativity in reading as much as the work of the writer and his/her artistic and literary creations can be considered a creative work. Reading is an active process between the text and a reader's mind; that is, there is a close relationship between the production and reception of the work. The sociology of reading is founded on the main idea that society also exists after the creation of literature. All literature implicitly or explicitly are encountered by audiences or readers. This field of study deals with issues such as the type of literary works presented in a certain period, the different forms of receiving and decoding literary texts by readers, and the length of time it takes to re-read and interpret each of the presented works. Thus, the sociology of reading involves trying to answer such questions as: Why do readers have different perceptions of a literary work? Why are different interpretations of a literary work presented in different periods? What kinds of relationships can there be between the text structure and the readers' perceptions? Is the reader's horizon of expectation involved in understanding and interpreting the text? To what extent do the factors such as gender, level of education, social background, socio-economic status, and class level of the reader influence the level and kind of reading?

Experimental research confirms that contrary to the explanations of the dominant psychological paradigm, which considers reading as a one-sided act depending on the subject, the act of reading is a context-dependent social action (Shaghaghi, 2012). Globalization and information and communication technologies (ICT) lead to changes in society and social and economic structures. Accordingly, reading is explained by psychological and educational factors and is also influenced by social, cultural, and economic factors. Reading is regarded as social action. Since the 1990s, the focus of research has shifted to view it as social action (Griswold, McDonnell & Wright., 2005). Sociological factors that influence reading have received attention from many researchers (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Ruddell, 2005; Sullivan, 2001; Griswold et al., 2005; Atkinson, 2016). In this regard, it asks who reads, why people read, and how relationships are created between reading and other activities of readers. In general, part of the sociology of reading examines the demographic characteristics of readers and considers reading as a form of social action.

In addition to the fact that anyone can read, numerous studies have shown that socio-demographic factors can affect the level and type of reading. The more educated people tend to read more than the less educated people (Berelson, 1957). The results from Ganzeboom's study (1982) also demonstrated that cultural consumption, including reading, is more pronounced in societies with higher education levels than in those with lower education levels. Some studies have examined the effect of age on reading performance. Two-thirds of Americans report that they started reading by age seven (Griswold, McDonnell & Wright, 2005). Knulst and Kraaykamp (1998) showed that one of the possible causes of a decline in young people's reading interest is a variety of leisure activities.

Several studies have examined the relationship between gender, lifestyle, and cultural consumption, including reading. On the one hand, these studies have investigated the effect of gender on traditional lifestyles, and on the other hand, they have examined the difference between men's and women's lifestyles. Other studies have explored the mechanism that causes

such differences. McQuail (2006) pointed out that the segregation of media use based on gender has a long history, and some studies like perception analysis have been influenced by theories related to the women's rights movements, whereas the use of media has been affected by gender. Undoubtedly, men and women are not fundamentally different from each other, but separate areas of their lives are shaped by their ways of existence and can separate the sphere and scope of their thinking from each other. Now, if we study gender sameness or difference (Lloyd, 2002), we will see that gender plays an essential role in reproduction, and it is separated by relying on different values and norms (Cheney, 1999). For women, some aspects of life are different from the rest. Men and women are different in this regard, and women write and talk about different issues in a way that is different from men. They also have different tastes in their consumption choices (Katz-Gerro & Sullivan, 2002).

Gender is commonly used as an analytical method in reading studies (Logan & Johnston, 2010). Many studies have revealed gender differences in the level and type of reading (Bennett, Emmison & Frow, 1999; Knulst & Van Den Broek, 2003; Toivonen, 2004). Women and men differ in their choices of reading (Coles & Hall, 2002; Merisuo-Storm, 2006) and reading time (Coles & Hall, 2002). The results of Stokmans's study (1999) demonstrated that reading is influenced by both reading attitudes and socio-demographic variables such as age, sex, income, and level of education. Purhonen, Gronow, and Rahkonen (2009) also showed that gender clearly explains more than anything else, in particular, the factors of serious literature and romantic literature. Women in their study typically preferred serious literature, and men read more non-fiction texts than females did. In their study, Katz-Gerro and Sullivan (2010) showed a significant and strong relationship between cultural tastes and gender and found that gender plays an important role in the volume and type of cultural consumption and the quality of taste. Uusen and Mürsepp (2012) also showed differences between boys and girls in many aspects of reading habits and preferences. Atkinson (2016) showed that gender could influence people's literary tastes more than Bourdieu proposed in his theory of differentiation. Osareh, Shehni Yailagh, Navah and Koohi Rostami (2017) demonstrated that cultural and social capital, cultural lifestyle, gender, and education level directly positively affect the level of reading of Ahvaz citizens. Olave (2018) showed that women read more novels and fiction books than men do. Becker and McElvany (2018) also found that gender also influences reading attitudes and behavior in addition to socio-economic status. Thums, Artelt, and Wolter (2021) showed that Women were expected to read more often for the sake of entertainment (entertainment preference), whereas men were expected to read more often to gain information (information preference). They further assumed that individuals who read for entertainment would have higher reading competence in fictional literary texts than non-fictional informational texts, and vice versa in individuals who read to gain information. These studies revealed that there are differences between women and men, even with the same cultural capital, concerning the level and type of reading and its nature.

Reading is one of the few creative realms of life that represents an individual's identity, and in recent years, there has been an increasing interest in examining gender similarities and differences. The nature of gender and its effects on people's performance and interests have received attention from professionals, including biologists, physicians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and others. Library science also contributes to studying gender differences and their effects on the clients and library services. Research has focused on effect of gender on the level and type of reading, the use of the Internet, and library use. Furthermore,

it dealt with the perceptions about gender, and the ability to read. It is crucial to investigate whether or not gender has a significant effect on individuals' reading interests and habits and whether or not these habits and interests result from inherent biological differences or a product of culture (Summers, 2013). Theoretical explanations for the emergence of gender differences in reading have been offered. These center around biologically based or sociocultural explanations for gender differences or combinations of both (Reilly, Neumann & Andrews, 2019): (a) differential rates of maturation, (b) gender differences in lateralization of brain function, (c) gender differences in variability, (d) gender differences in externalizing behavior and language competence, and (e) gender-stereotyping of reading and language as feminine traits.

Despite a growing interest in investigating the effect of gender on reading, most studies have been conducted on children or adolescents, and few studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between gender and reading among adults. These studies are usually limited to why women read more books than men do, especially why they read far more fiction than men do. Although children and adolescents are repeatedly queried about their reading preferences which are then viewed in the light of gender, adult reading preferences have been ignored mainly concerning gender. In most studies conducted on adults, the effect of gender on reading is usually a secondary factor that is briefly considered alongside the main focus of the research. Therefore, in this study, gender was considered the key variable to determine the difference between men and women living in Ahvaz concerning the level and type of reading interests?

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this study included: (1) to evaluate the relationship between gender and amount of reading, and (2) to identify the difference between gender groups living in Ahvaz concerning the kind of reading, books of interest, magazines, and newspaper sections.

### **Research Hypothesis**

There is a significant difference between gender and the amount of reading.

Research Questions:

Is there a difference between gender groups in terms of reading the books?

Is there a difference between gender groups in terms of reading magazines?

Is there a difference between gender groups concerning reading different sections of the newspapers?

### **Materials and Methods**

This study was descriptive. The study population consisted of people over 15 years of age selected from all regions of Ahvaz in 2019. According to the statistical yearbook of Ahvaz city, the total population of districts of Ahvaz municipality is 1,108,780 people; 892,776 individuals are in the age groups above 15 years old (Statistical Yearbook of Ahvaz, 2018). Cochran's formula was used for calculating the sample size. The required sample size was 496 people. More than 505 questionnaires were distributed, and 505 were returned and analyzed. A multistage random method was used as the sampling technique. The city of Ahvaz consists of eight urban areas. The sample size was determined based on the population percentage of each region. After determining the number of samples in each of the seven areas, several

neighborhoods were randomly selected. After referring to each of these neighborhoods, the questionnaires were distributed. The completed amounting to a maximum of 20 questionnaires in each neighborhood.

Regarding the reading interests, the respondents were asked to name three books they had the last read. After collecting the data, the respondents indicated they were reading more than 800 books. The samples were classified into different groups based on reading interests to classify reading interests and evaluate the relationship between gender and reading interests. Therefore, to classify the reading interests, besides acquiring views of the subject experts (it will be explained later) and based on the conducted studies, the classifications in the studies done by Rees, Vermunt, and Verboord (1999), Bukodi (2007) and Torch (2007) were used after making some changes. To precisely group the books and journals read by the study population, the views of specialists in the field of literature and bibliography were used. For this purpose, 15 experts from the General Directorate of the Institute of Public Libraries of the country and 10 writers and Ph.D. students of Literature at Shahid Chamran University were employed to judge the grouping of books and journals in these three groups. Ultimately, the final grouping was completed after summarizing the comments.

Regarding newspapers, since they mainly focus on different issues, it is challenging to determine the level of every newspaper. Thus, to determine reading interests, the following classifications were used:

1. Elitist Works: They include classic and new novels, drama, poetry, biography, and short stories.
2. Non-Fiction Works: They include books on literature, history, religion, philosophy, geography, and practical and technical books.
3. Popular works: They include criminal stories, romance stories, adventure stories, works of home decor (cooking, sewing, etc.), and hobby-related works.

For journals, based on the licenses issued by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for the publication of various journals as well as expert viewpoints, the following groupings are used:

- 1- Intellectual and cultural journals: journals that essentially address intellectual and cultural issues.
- 2- Scientific and technical journals: journals that address scientific and technical issues such as computer science, information technology, economics, etc.
- 3- Popular journals: journals that mainly deal with entertainment, solving issues, and family folk tales.

Besides asking the participants to name the newspapers they were reading, they were asked which sections they were mainly reading. It is worth noting that the selection of these sections was based on common sections in national and local newspapers. On this basis, one can find out what part of the newspaper is read by each individual. Based on the results, the following groupings were used for newspapers:

1. The intellectual and cultural sections: include political, social, cultural, and artistic sections.
2. Scientific and technical sections: scientific and educational sections, economics, technology, and health.
3. Popular sections: includes sections of events, needs, sports, comics, and entertainment.

## Data Analysis

Hypothesis: Is there a difference between gender groups in terms of reading books?

An Independent group t-test was used to test the research hypothesis. As shown in Table 1, the t value was -2.59, indicating a significance level of 0.05. In other words, there was a significant difference between women and men concerning the reading level. Given that the average reading level of women was higher than that of men, it showed that women read more books than men did.

Table 1

*The T-Test Results of Comparing the amount of reading based on Gender*

Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Degree of Freedom	t -Value	Significance Level
Man	2.60	2.83	503	-2.59	0.010
Woman	3.14	2.41			

First research question: Is there a difference between gender groups regarding the level and type of reading?

As shown in Table 2, 51.4% of the men read elite works, 29.1% read non-fiction works, and only 19.6% read popular works. While women's reading interests were much different: only 15.5% read the elite works, more than half (54.9%) read public works, and 29.6% read non-fiction works. The Chi-Square value was 8.65 ( $p < 0.05$ ) with a degree of freedom of 2. The results of this test showed that women and men had different reading interests. These results showed that men tended to read more elitist works, and women preferred to read popular works. The tendency towards non-fiction works in both groups was approximately equal. As shown in the table above, the gender contingency coefficient with the reading habit was 0.33 ( $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, the gender level of 0.33 is related to the reading habit.

Table 2

*Chi-Square Analysis Test of Gender and Favorite Books*

Kind of Studied Book	Elitist Works		Non-Fiction Works		Popular Works	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Men	76	51.4	43	29.1	29	19.6
Women	22	15.5	42	29.6	78	54.9
Sig = 0.011	Chi-Square = 8.65					
	DF = 2					
Contingency Coefficient = 0.33						
N = 505						

Second research question: Is there a difference between gender groups in terms of reading the magazines?

As shown in Table 3, 26% of men read intellectual and cultural magazines, 27.3% read scientific and technical publications, and 46.7% read popular publications. However, the favorite magazines for women were different; 2.5% read intellectual and cultural works, 3.9% read scientific and technical works, and most women read popular publications. The chi-square value was 7.95 with a degree of freedom of 2 at the level ( $p < 0.05$ ). The results of this test

showed that women and men had different reading interests. These findings indicate that men tended to read intellectual and cultural publications, and women were more likely to read popular publications. The contingency coefficient of gender with the published articles was 0.30 ( $p < 0.019$ ). In other words, the gender ratio of 0.03 was related to the type of reading/interested publications.

Table 3

*Chi-Square test of gender and the magazines read*

Kind of reading/publications of interest	Elitist Works		Non-Fiction Works		Popular Works	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Men	20	26	21	20	21	26
Women	2	2.5	3	2	3	2.5
Sig= 0.019	Chi-Square= 7.95 DF= 2					
	Contingency Coefficient= 0.30 N= 505					

Third research question: Is there a difference between gender groups concerning reading different sections of the newspapers?

As shown in contingency Table 4, 20.7% of men read the intellectual and cultural sections, 16.8% read the scientific and technical sections, and 59.2% read the public section of the newspaper. However, 3.8% of women read the intellectual and cultural sections, 10.1% read the scientific and technical sections, and 81.7% read the popular section. The Chi-square value was 10.53 with a degree of freedom of 2 ( $p < 0.05$ ). The result showed that women and men had different reading interests in reading different sections of the newspapers. These findings demonstrated that women read more popular works than men did. The gender contingency coefficient with the study interest of the newspaper was 0.31 ( $p < 0.05$ ). In other words, the gender contingency of 0.31 was related to the kind of reading interest in the newspapers.

Table 4

*Multidimensional Chi-Square test of gender analysis and section of the newspapers*

The read sections of a newspaper gender	Intellectual Cultural Sections		Scientific Technical Sections		Popular Sections	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Men	40	20.7	33	16.8	106	59.2
Women	9	8.3	11	10.1	89	81.7
Sig= 0.005	Chi-Square= 10.53 DF= 2					
	Contingency Coefficient= 0.31 N= 505					

## Discussion

The results showed the effect of gender on the reading level; women generally read books more than men did. Also, there was a difference between males and females concerning reading interests. Our results showed that women read more popular books while men were more elitist and were more likely to read non-fiction books than popular works. Men were more likely to read intellectual and cultural magazines, while women tended to read more popular ones. Also, women and men had different reading interests in different sections of the newspapers. Studies have revealed the effect of gender on cultural consumption and, in particular, the results from a study showed the positive effect of gender. This ensures that the effect is the only source of potential differences in results. Katz-Gerro and Sullivan (2010) showed a significant and strong relationship between cultural tastes and gender and found that gender played an essential role in the volume and type of cultural consumption and taste quality. In this study, women read more books than men did, and they were more likely to read popular books. The results from this study are consistent with those of the study of Uusen and Määrsepp (2012), suggesting that males spend less time with reading (74 minutes on average reading a day), while females (114 minutes on average reading a day) read more frequently than males did. Summers (2013) showed that women read far more fiction books than men did. Atkinson (2016) showed that women tended to read romance novels, and men preferred to read sportsbooks. Olave (2018) found that women read more novels and fiction books than men did.

Contrary to the results of this study, Bihagen and Katz-Gerro (2000) explored the salience of gender in shaping culture consumption patterns independent of other socio-economic factors and found that women are indeed more active in the sphere of highbrow culture than men are. Lizardo (2006) showed women's higher involvement in highbrow culture than men in more market-oriented fields. Christin (2012) also showed that women read more literary works than men did. In general, some believe that the difference between men and women in cultural consumption is a complex issue to which there is no straightforward answer. They have shown that there is a gender difference in cultural consumption. For example, in their study, Bihagen and Katz-Gerro (2000) and Lizardo (2006) found that women tend to be more engaged in highbrow leisure activities, and men are active in popular cultural consumption. Conversely, Modelski (1986) believes that women are more likely to engage in popular cultural consumption, and men are more likely to engage in highbrow cultural consumption. Katz-Gerro and Sullivan (2002) found that these differences could be attributed to the logical differences in the women's activities. The results from this study which are consistent with several prior studies, demonstrated differences between women and men, even with the same cultural capital, concerning the level and type of reading and its nature. Several studies have shown that men and women differ in leisure activity and cultural consumption, which may be due to their cultural tastes. Cultural taste, a function of cultural capital, originated from the social background and is primarily influenced by gender and its different approach to the world. Cultural taste can be used to build the aesthetic judgments of individuals and ultimately influences their cultural choices. The relationship between gender and reading interests among the Iranian population can be examined from the perspective of social developments in recent decades because with these developments comes a profound change in terms of gender. Masculinity and femininity cannot be considered judging criteria because women reach new positions and have equal opportunities. Our results, influenced by these developments, demonstrated that women read more books than men did. On the other hand, men seem to be more enthusiastic about exciting entertainment, especially E-entertainment. Regarding the

reading interests, women tend to read more popular works, especially inspirational books, because women have a higher level of empathy than men do. Moreover, women have a strong tendency to read Iranian and foreign emotional books, and basically, the genres annotated with induced emotion result from the known and discoverable view of such works for them.

### Conclusion

Although there are gender differences between the study participants, it should be noted that gender is not the only factor affecting the reading habits and preferences of individuals. While gender may help explain some distinct differences in readers' choices, other factors should also be considered. As with other professions with a vested interest in the effects of gender on various outcomes, understanding some of the differences and similarities can be helpful for the library and information professions. These results can help librarians develop collections, marketing, and reader consulting services to suggest books and other sources of information to the reader. Although gender equality in life is fundamental, it does not seem like a bad idea when it comes to reading, especially for leisure purposes, reading preferences, and paying attention to the needs of men and women.

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