

Readers in Reading Groups

An Online Survey of Face-to-Face and Virtual Book Clubs

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Abstract: Using the findings of an online survey that yielded 252 responses from readers in Canada, the USA, Australia, the UK, Israel, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Japan, this article shows who readers are, what they read, and that reading is an integral part of people's lives. Equally as vibrant is the book club movement in which the readers meet either in a face-to-face (f2f) or a virtual environment, bringing with them to each reading and meeting their own specific, influential socio-cultural resources, which also influence what they get from their clubs and how they operate within those cultural sites. Through club discussions, whether online or in person, members interpret books, forming social bonds that allow them to fulfil their desires to learn about the world and themselves. The article also attempts to explain why book club members are mainly women and how the mass media might influence this. It concludes with an argument that both f2f and virtual book club research must be conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Introduction: meeting in the name of literature

Humans have been discussing literature in collective environments for more than 500 years. Familiar to scholars are the salons of eighteenth-century France and the literary societies of North American women in the nineteenth century; well-known to all are contemporary book clubs. Members of these groups meet in each other's homes, in libraries, in pubs, on the radio, on television, in offices, in prisons and on the internet. Despite evidence of a renaissance of this cultural practice, the academic community has essentially ignored book club existence. To date, only three studies of contemporary book clubs exist.¹ There are no studies of online reading groups, even though the book club sites, membership, book selection and other practices, and the social networks created by the clubs, define a significant cultural field. This paper seeks to fill that gap.

The pre-eminent scholars in the area of book clubs are Elizabeth Long and Jenny Hartley.² Hartley's primarily quantitative study of predominantly UK book clubs outlines their composition and processes. Through quantitative data, supported by comments provided on the surveys and analysis of clubs she visited, Hartley legitimises the intellect of book clubs to a non-academic audience. Her study provides sound

numbers to justify the following claims: first, book clubs are comprised of primarily women members; second, readers report the search for knowledge as a primary reason for joining and belonging to a club; and finally, although clubs operate differently from one another, the divergent dialogical and structural formats do not impede on the communities that are formed when people gather together to interpret books. Hartley's impressive study begins to identify the potential of virtual clubs; however, her discussion stops at the identification of their existence, and the postulation that the largest influence the internet has on book clubs is that it offers opportunities for face-to-face (f2f) clubs' research efforts.

Long's extensive ethnographic study of reading groups in Houston, Texas is an attempt to analyse women's collective interpretations of texts as a comment on their social lives, concluding that: 'They [book clubs] show in action how at least one sector of the reading public responds to the economic power of the modern book industry and to the cultural authority of the critical establishment.'³ In her 1992 essay, 'Textual Interpretation as Collective Action', Long expands her study to include mixed-gender book clubs, undercutting the notion of a solitary reader by successfully arguing an individual's participation in a book club is based on a shared need that informs the individual's sense of identity and contributes to the group's solidarity. Reading is thus transactional not only between reader and text but also between reader, text and group.

Long also argues that the book club is a site of social change. When books are discussed collectively, readers have the potential 'individually or as a group' to transform.⁴ Through narrative and characters, readers are able to identify themselves, who they are and who they want to be, and to begin that process of development. However, Long does not provide insights into the virtual book club.

Australian Lindsay Howie deals directly with the formation of the female self in book club environments.⁵ Her dissertation is a result of survey research and in-depth interviews of book club membership within the state-sponsored Victorian Council of Adult Education, and directly intersects with Long's work. There are three salient themes in Howie's work, which is situated within the literature of sociology, ritual theory of anthropology, philosophy, social geography, feminism and psychoanalysis. First, she argues that the ritual of the book club provides women with an escape and an opportunity to change within a safe environment, and to understand themselves in relation to the text and other club members. Second, her subjects referred to 'journeying', which, she argues, is an attestation 'to an interpretation of group reading as spatialized ontology, a forum for members to map their developing self-identities through movement in fictional and real

worlds'.⁶ Her third argument is that the intersubjective space of the group allows women to create different ways of being in their world. However, as with Long and Hartley, Howie does not explore the impact of the internet.

Virtual communities

Whereas book clubs are understudied phenomena, cyber community research is a vibrant, if nascent field. From an ethnography of a fan site with 50,000 youth members who formed a community that helped create a new category of American music,⁷ to a full-length triangulated study of a soap opera fan newsgroup that attempts to demonstrate how women create and use community practices,⁸ to personal essays by prominent sociologists who have strong traditions in empirical research,⁹ vigorous scholarly activity exploring how we humans create communities on the internet is underway.

In the introduction of his pivotal book for internet scholars, *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, Steve Jones writes:

There is no existing parallel social construct, and in many ways, the Internet creates wholly new social constructs. The medium and its use are creating communities that not only would not but could not have formed without the use of the Internet.¹⁰

Jones argues that the internet must be studied in the context of everyday life because it does not exist in a vacuum. He says 'Internet users are as much a part of physical space as they are of cyberspace,' and, as an afterthought, adds – in parentheses – '(more so, really, insofar as users' choices regarding place, identity, etc are far more limited in physical space.)'

New communities *are* forming as a result of the internet; one need only examine Usenet directories to realise the sheer number of potential communities available. However, if one also considers Pierre Bourdieu's idea that the judgements people make – in this case, readers – are a result of their class positions and remain constant across different fields, for example, from family to book club,¹¹ and if one goes a step further, to include Paul DiMaggio's arguments that mass media and cultural commodification influence class and taste,¹² one can begin to profoundly understand book club communities on and off the internet. One can better determine if 'wholly new social constructs' are created, and if indeed f2f book club members are 'limited' in the way Jones generalises.

Interpretive communities

Brian Stock identifies 'interpretive communities' as groups of readers within specific social locations who use a complex process of interpretation.¹³ Whether in classrooms, in familial situations, or in book

clubs, interpretation processes differ from one another, they even differ from person to person. It is also possible that those processes are influenced by each individual's meaning system.¹⁴ Studies of nineteenth-century literary societies and contemporary book clubs demonstrate how the socio-cultural resources readers bring to each meeting and to each reading act as 'binding' mechanisms that help to inform individual and group identities, and eventually to form group solidarity.¹⁵ Whether the readers – who for the past 150 years have usually been women, both in North America and in Europe – need to connect with others, or have a desire to learn, or want to escape from the monotony of work or home, their needs can usually be met in these groups where literature acts as a conduit for conversation. Once the sharing and caring process begins, communities are created. The communities and the bonds created within them affect how interpretations proceed.

The internet will ultimately influence how communities form, converse and disband (or at least it will in capitalist societies) because the social settings of human interaction and behaviour are transforming.¹⁶ This paper will provide ideas about how the internet as an evolving communication technology influences readers who interpret books through group dialogue. The findings will begin to illuminate what roles age, education, ethnicity, gender and occupation play in reading choices and in the practices of both book clubs that meet online and those that meet in a face-to-face environment. As such, the paper will also explore how the internet influences book clubs.

Virtual book club readers are compared with f2f book club members and non-book club readers. Using the findings of an online survey of all three categories of readers, the satisfaction of the two types of reading group members is assessed, as are the cultural processes and significance of the groups. The paper also evaluates whether this research methodology enables adequate investigation of the degrees of 'credulity, involvement, and critical distance that readers bring to ... texts' (as in books), necessary in reading reception analysis and to other forms of 'texts' (as in the networks of codes influenced by socio-cultural experiences – or rather, the book club sites themselves).¹⁷ In answering these questions, the paper then projects how reading processes evolve through the internet.

The study and its findings

A primarily quantitative 34-question survey was posted on the web, with questions ranging from the role reading plays in readers' lives, through where they get their books and how much they spend on them, to their participation in online or off-line reading groups. Using a 'snowball technique' of sampling methodology, the survey was promoted as a general reading habits survey to 24 people on this author's personal and professional email lists, and recipients were encouraged to send it to theirs. Permission was also granted to post

to message boards or email lists of 20 reading groups, searching for diversity in group ideology, genre preference or ethnicity. This can sometimes be determined by the group's name; consider, for example, 'Women who Read too Much', 'The Post-Proustian Reading Group' or 'The Sistah Circle'. Finding fora to include in the sample was not difficult. A simple search of 'book clubs' on the search engine google.com yielded 1,120,000 hits. And community access fora on large for-profit sites such as the iVillage.com or on yahoo.com produced a deluge of choices for the researcher.¹⁸ Permission was received to post on 13 fora, including four listed on yahoo.com, the *New York Times* reading group's general bulletin board, Radio 4 Book Club in the UK, *Chatelaine's* book group forum, and several independent groups whose addresses were located through the google.com search engine.¹⁹

The survey was posted for a period of two weeks in late June and early July of 2001, and yielded 252 responses (including one duplicate). The statistical software program SPSS was used to analyse the responses, paying particular attention to the qualitative answers. One concern had been that the response rate for online surveys is dismal. In fact, Diane Witmer et al state that response rates for online surveys may be 10 per cent or lower.²⁰ The response rate in this instance is good, and is attributed to several reasons. First, and this is generalising without any statistical data, but is the result of several years of investigating reading group members, readers apparently like to talk about their clubs and generally can be quite passionate about their reading practices. Second, the questionnaire was formatted simply. Buttons were used for the choice options and unlimited space was provided for the open-ended questions. Fortunately, there were no technology malfunctions. And finally, a US\$50 gift certificate draw for a virtual bookstore to anyone who wanted to enter his or her email address was offered (the winner resides in Australia).

One acknowledged difficulty with the research, in addition to other challenges to be briefly discussed later, is that the number of people who originally received the survey is not known, so a response rate is not available, nor are statistically reliable results, according to traditional quantitative research theories. However, there are statistically significant findings from the sample. These findings provide insight into reading practices and book club practices, and begin to illuminate what these mean to the people who participate in them. When census data or readership surveys were available, findings were tested against those studies. The open-ended questions provided an opportunity for respondents to explain the meanings they attach to reading, and to their book clubs, in their own words. Occasionally, available list exchanges were observed, so that it was possible to seek clarification for a theme as it emerged in data analysis.

Book club members Of the 251 valid respondents, more than half (64 per cent) are or have been members of a book club with nearly equal representation from both f2f (36.3 per cent) and virtual groups (36 per cent). The remaining 28 per cent are members of both types of groups.

Most of the readers participating in the study live in Canada (115) and the USA (112). There were also a small number of respondents from the UK (7), Australia (5), Israel (2), Germany (2), Saudi Arabia (1), the Philippines (1) and Japan (1). All book club members, including those who participate in both types of groups, were asked to indicate which group they participate in most and to answer the questionnaire with that club in mind. Country representation did not change significantly but Canada and Germany are represented by more f2f groups than virtual clubs (5:1 and 1:0, respectively); the United States by more virtual than f2f (1.5:1), as is Australia (4:1), Israel (2:0) and Saudi Arabia (1:0).

Gender composition Eighty-five per cent of all survey respondents are women, 14 per cent men, and two respondents, or one per cent, chose not to indicate. This gender discrepancy becomes more prominent in the book club population, where 93 per cent of the members are women. Of the women members, 36 per cent participate in a f2f group, 34 per cent in a virtual one and 28 per cent belong to both types of groups. And of the book club members who are men, five belong to a f2f group, three to a virtual and one belongs to both (see Table 1). More than half of the women and men participate most often in a f2f group.

Table 1

Type of Group	Women %	Men %
Book club population	93	5
f2f members	36	5
virtual members	34	33
members of f2f and virtual	28	11

One might begin to explain this as a gendered activity by using feminist psychoanalysis theory, as Janice Radway did in her seminal cultural study of female readers of the romance genre.²¹ These theories suggest women form their identities through their relationship with their mothers, creating a process in which women form intimate, caring relationships with others.²² The relationships are solidified through discussion and sharing, which is pervasive in book club culture. It is possible, however, that book clubs are about more than women trying to recreate the intimacy they shared with their mothers through books and discussion. As Joanne Naiman writes, 'Any analysis of gender inequality and process of change must always take into account both objective and subjective variables'.²³ Because reading groups have (once again) become popular phenomena, it is necessary to examine the influence of

the mass media on their popularity, and on the gendered labels given to them. Furthermore, the educational system in which most literate adults formulate tastes, gendered or not, should also be considered.²⁴

Cultural theorists have demonstrated that social influences such as the structure of the educational system and the mass media support and perpetuate perceptions and formations of gendered cultural practices and class relations.²⁵ As early as birthing gifts, or even before with symbolic decorations of a nursery if a child's gender is known, families appropriate gender to children that supports society's ideology of what it is to be 'female' and what it is to be 'male'. Early in childhood, boys are taught not necessarily how to act as boys, but rather how definitely not to act as girls.²⁶ In a patriarchal and often homophobic society, it is acceptable for a woman to emulate men, but not vice versa.²⁷ This is especially so if women's activity is seen as radical, or unpopular in mainstream consciousness. As one male reader in Ellen Slezak's book club how-to book writes: '[While] men of earlier generations avoided book clubs because they were viewed as too *feminine*, men of the 90's do the same because contemporary reading groups are seen as too *feminist*.'²⁸ Because this study did not query male readers who are not in book clubs, it is not possible to establish whether men, generally, view book clubs as feminist vehicles. However, many book club women interviewed for another study said their husbands, partners and male friends questioned their involvement in book clubs.²⁹ In addition, it is arguable that the media, including those reporting on the Oprah phenomena, characterise book clubs as a female activity, and sometimes condescendingly portray them as spaces in which women get together to talk about 'women things'.³⁰ Or, as Canadian cultural essayist David Macfarlane wrote, men's cultural practices are not such that they could gather in each other's homes to discuss literature over coffee and treats once a month.³¹ No, says Macfarlane. 'Join a men's book club and before you know it you'll be exchanging recipes and getting involved in car pools. A cigar is seldom a cigar when a man talks about a modern novel in the company of other men ...' He then warns men: 'If you're standing at a urinal and the guy next to you so much as mentions the word "Bloomsbury", you should word your reply with considerable care.'

Whether satirically or not, book clubs are sometimes perceived as policy- and rule-bound, university-English-class deconstructionist havens. More often the academy's and mainstream society's general view is that book clubs are at the other extreme: women's spaces, and thus void of efficacy, class and politics.³² Usually, the more serious study of literature and ideas are associated with institutions of higher education, or in the renaissance of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, salons, whose members included mostly men.³³ This supports Bridget Fowler's argument that 'the profound seriousness of the arenas within which men

invest their energies enhance their dignity, while women's cultural energies are forcibly divided,' which is 'a necessary consequence of their culturally induced preoccupation with children and matters of life and death'.³⁴ This argument is especially helpful in understanding why book clubs are usually cultural locations for women more so than they are for men when considered in tandem with the theories of Dorothy Smith.³⁵ According to Smith, the processes of the capitalist production of the past 500 years has meant that women's voices – written and oral – have not been heard, and that only male voices are given credence. Women have not been given the space in which to create and exchange intellectual ideas and, on only a limited basis and usually with domestic ideology attached, do they have access to cultural products. Book clubs *do* offer women intellectual space, and like the girls of McRobbie's 1970s and 1980s subcultures, women have formed their own distinct cultures in their clubs.

Reading surveys show that boys read less than girls do.³⁶ Reasons for this vary from activity levels of the genders, to the suggestion that boys are less likely to read than girls because reading is perceived as a girl's activity. The latter most likely results from the social conditioning the children observe in the home and at school.³⁷ Most often the mother is the parent who teaches the child to read or reads to the child or children, and more often than not, elementary teachers are women. Determining the reasons for these phenomena is beyond the scope of this study, but it has direct relevance because these patterns re-emerge once boys become men. Readership surveys in both Australia and Canada have determined that women read more than men and women read more fiction than men.³⁸ Because book clubs tend to discuss fiction more so than not, at the most superficial level we might say that men do not belong to book clubs because they are not as interested in fiction as are women. I believe the situation is much more complex than that, however, and suggest along with Tony Bennett et al, Pierre Bourdieu, and Paul DiMaggio that education and its role in the formation and transference of cultural competence and cultural capital are especially important.³⁹

It's not only the young and old reading

More than half (55 per cent) of readers participating in this study are between 26 years of age and 40 (see Table 2). The largest group are 31-35 year olds (22 per cent), followed by 26-30 year olds (21 per cent) and 36-40 year olds (12 per cent). This might be a reflection of the personal and professional networks from which the sample was partially taken, or it might correspond with the age categories of internet users in general. However, it follows a 1999 Gallup Poll of USA readers, which found that 18-29 year olds read as much as 30-49 year olds.⁴⁰ It also correlates with Canadian statistics, which show that among the 36 per cent of Canadians who read at least a book a month, there is little difference in age categories of the readers.⁴¹ For

example, 37 per cent are 20-24 year olds, 36 per cent are 25-34 year olds, and 35 per cent are 35-44 year olds. Thirty-six per cent of the readers are 45-59 years old and 33 per cent are over the age of 60. These findings defy the stereotypes of readers being either very young or very old, and of book club members as comprising *only* middle-aged women, as is sometimes portrayed in the mass media.

Book club members in this study tend to be younger than Hartley's groups. Whereas the largest cluster of the f2f groups studied here range in ages from 26-35 (39 per cent), the groups in her study tended to be in the 40+ age range (66 per cent), 20 per cent were in their thirties, and only one per cent were under 30.⁴² In addition, the virtual environment seems to provide access to book clubs to younger club members, which is evident by the findings that 14 per cent of the f2f club members are 20-25 year olds.

Table 2: Participants ages in percentages, 2001 (n=251)

Type of Club	< 20	20-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	61-65	> 66
f2f n=82	0	2	17	22	13	7	13	10	6	7	1
Virtual n=70	1	14	19	17	10	10	11	7	4	3	2
All Readers	>1	9	21	22	12	6	9	7	4	4	2

* Missing eight respondents, or 3 per cent.

Book clubs as cultural sites

If we try to understand culture distribution directly or indirectly by the social structures in which people live, it is not surprising that nearly all readers in the study have at least some university-level education, and many have postgraduate degrees. The f2f members tend to have received more education than their contemporaries in the virtual groups. Ninety-nine per cent of the f2f members have university education, while only 90 percent of the virtual groups do. Of the 10 per cent who have not gone to university, two virtual members have not graduated from high school. This might indicate that the virtual book club members use these virtual sites as a way of permeating cultural boundaries that were heretofore inaccessible. In other words, in a society that values knowledge, a person's educational level is not as important in a virtual book club as it might be in a f2f club where the readers may have formed as an off-shoot of a adult education class, or where members talk more freely of their educational background, for example. It might also mean that virtual members see the virtual environment as unintimidating, and a safe space in which to increase their knowledge outside of formal institutional systems, which one college-educated

respondent claims was part of the reason book clubs are popular: '[There's] a need to continue studying in some form. ... It [the internet] is the perfect tool.' And, as another woman who has some postgraduate experience explains, '[The internet] brings together a more eclectic group of aficionados. The geographic, age, gender, experiential, race, age, and cultural boundaries are blurred to some extent. this [sic] fosters a more open and forthright exchange of ideas.' Or, as a woman who has only some university education wrote of her virtual club, 'it is anonymous – less need to be shy :)'.

The readers work mostly in communication (10 per cent f2f; 8 per cent virtual), education (12 per cent f2f; 6 per cent virtual) and other not necessarily related fields (9 per cent both f2f and virtual), and administration (6 per cent; 11 per cent virtual). Fifteen per cent of the f2f members consider themselves students, while 11 per cent of the virtual club readers do. These figures, when considered with the education levels of the readers, further Bennett et al's arguments that class and tastes have an influence on the cultural practices of readers.

Literary forms of cultural capital are most strongly associated with professionals and managers in a manner which reflects the degree to which both the acquisitions and maintenance of their class position is dependent on the certified intellectual competencies they have acquired through the education system.⁴³

The majority (86 per cent) of readers read for pleasure rather than for work (14 per cent). Motives vary, from a desire to increase knowledge (47 per cent), to escape (39 per cent) and to discover the world (34 per cent). These statistics do not change significantly when comparing book club readers to non-book club readers: the top three reasons for reading remain the same – increasing knowledge (44 per cent), discovering the world (39 per cent), and reading to escape (39 per cent). For a 25-year-old Spanish advertising executive from the USA, her book club provides the space in which to improve herself, both internally and in the eyes of others. She says that 'being part of a book club enhances self-esteem. It makes you look intellectual to others. ... If the book club is friendly, and no comment is a "dumb" comment, one does not need a high IQ or anything like that.'

Women particularly note that reading helps them fight loneliness and enables them to discover themselves, while expanding their worlds. As one reader notes:

Books were a means of escape to me when I was growing up, from my real world. My parents' home was not the place to be

if you were a child, so I escaped the anguish, hostility, and whatever by reading books, because they (books) offered me a better world. Being one who embraces wisdom and knowledge, books are a major source for gratifying my appetite. I live in the world of books. They're magical, they're my friends. They've helped me through some awfully rough times.

And, from another reader:

Reading has enabled me to visit places I would have never imagined possible. It has allowed me to discover qualities in myself which I may have never uncovered. Reading has also been a refuge for challenging times, and yet, it has strengthened and shaped me into an individual who is better able to deal with those challenges. Reading has been a constant when life has been inconsistent.

More than one third (34 per cent) of the participants have been readers since early childhood and some write of the importance books hold for them (as noted above) and why they consider this one of the reasons that they read today. The inter-generational practices of reading are not necessarily passed down from mother (or father) to children, but also from grandparents to grandchildren. One virtual book club member writes: 'My love of books is something I learned from my grandmother and will always carry with me.'

Most (68 per cent) of the readers in this study read for five to 10 hours a week, and they do so alone (68 per cent), in the evenings (67 per cent) and in bed (38 per cent) or in a favourite sofa or chair (31 per cent). Interestingly, virtual club members report being more voracious readers than their f2f counterparts. Indeed, f2f club members read little more than readers who are not in book clubs: 90 per cent of non-club member readers read more than five hours per week, which is slightly less (2 per cent) than those who participate in f2f clubs. However, 98 per cent of virtual club members read more than five hours. For one woman who is in both types of book clubs, reading has 'always been a primary focus'. She explains that she never goes anywhere without a book in case she's waiting in line and can take advantage of delving into her current read. She writes:

I listen to audiobooks in the car while driving to/from work. I either read or listen to audiobooks while walking the dog. I read while I watch television, and shy away from hobbies that require use of the hands since I can't read while doing them. I read three books a month for an on-line book discussion group, and another for the library's monthly evening group. I wish I didn't have to work so I could participate in their two daytime

groups. I often have two or three books going at once, and usually finish about ten in any given month.

This woman's reading habits are not reflective of most of the readers participating in the study. In a typical week, 69 per cent of the f2f club members report reading five to 10 hours, and 23 per cent read more than 10 hours. Forty-eight per cent of the virtual club members, on the other hand, read five to 10 hours and half (50 per cent) read more than 10 hours a week. These figures show that the readers in this study read more than the average Canadian who has 41 hours of free time and spends only three hours of it reading books, magazines or newspapers.⁴⁴

These basic findings, when taken in to account with some of the comments made by several of the respondents, begin to refute generalisations that books are no longer central to our lives and that the act of reading is no longer a priority. Reading is clearly important to the respondents in this study. One reader eloquently demonstrates this point:

I think that reading, though a solitary activity, keeps you in touch with the rest of the world, with humanity. All the crises and milestones of life – love, death, illness – have been written about, and when you read about these things happening to others, it is less devastating when it happens to you; you've already been there. John Irving writes about reading in *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and this is one of his points. The other point he makes is that it is amazing to read the thoughts of someone who has figured out a way to see the world, who has tried to come up with reasons and explanations for the vagaries of our existence.

Reading for some informs all aspects of their lives. In the words of another female respondent:

As far back as I can remember, I've been a voracious reader, fascinated by the fact that I could learn anything I wanted by simply [sic] picking up a book. ... I read everything I could get my hands on, and reading has had a profound influence on my life. ... Ideas, opinions, inspiration, empathy, understanding, political views, love of language, respect of diversity in cultures/viewpoints [sic] – all of these qualities in my life have derived from reading.

Gendered reading Readers were asked to choose which genre of books they read most often, and which they prefer. The genre categories included on the questionnaire – biography, other non-fiction, mystery, classical literature, contemporary fiction, romance, western, poetry, plays, science

fiction/fantasy/horror, cartoon, and humour – were based on a pre-test performed several years ago and reflect genres mentioned by readers themselves. The top five preferred genre categories suggest we can see gendered divergences in the categories of ‘other non-fiction’ and ‘science fiction’ with men noting this preference more often than women (see Table 3). The study shows both similarities and differences to other research findings on reading genre preferences according to gender.⁴⁵

Table 3: Gender genre preferences, 2001 (n=251)

Genre	Women	Men
Other Non-fiction	51.9	70.5
Biography	36.5	38.2
Mystery	43.7	36.0
Classical Literature	48.0	47
Contemporary Fiction	88.0	73.5
Science Fiction	24.0	44.1

Table 4 illustrates the relative similarities in genre preference between book club members and non-book club members. These similarities indicate the importance of book clubs to the book club members themselves. But what is so important or satisfying about a book club? And, are the virtual book club members as happy as their f2f counterparts? Does the virtual space allow the readers to negotiate a stance in the group sufficient so that they feel they can contribute to the interpretations of the book? Or is that even important to them?

Table 4: Genre preference differences between book club readers and non-book club readers in percentages, 2001 (n=251)

Genre	All Readers	Book Club Readers
Contemporary Fiction	88.0	85.6
Other Non-fiction	53.6	50.8
Classical Literature	47.8	49.3
Mystery	43.2	48.4
Biography	36.0	39.6

Why read for a book club?

Most of the readers (80 per cent of f2f; 96 per cent of virtual) have been members their clubs for less than five years (see Table 5), following the rising popularity in book clubs since the beginning of Oprah’s book club (and the resulting mass media attention), and also reflecting the increase in internet use in both the home and the workplace.

Contrary to this determinism, it is important to note that several f2f book club members have been members of their club for longer than the internet has been part of our daily lives. It is also interesting to note that some of the virtual groups have been meeting for five to 10 years.

Table 5: Number of years in book club percentage of respondents, 2001 (n=157)

Type of Book Club	Years in the Club					
	<1	1-2	3-5	5-10	10-15	>15
F2F n=83	19	36	24	10	7	4
Virtual n=74	36	34	26	4	0	0

To understand book club members' satisfaction levels and their uses of these groups, it is helpful to refer to the motivation for joining the club in the first place: what were their expectations, and are they being met? Not surprisingly, based on the reasons people read, readers in both types of book clubs say they joined because they wanted intellectual stimulation (67 per cent of the f2f members; 62 per cent of the virtual members) (see Table 6). This motivation is tied for most mentions with joining to have fun. The close rankings of seeking intellectual stimulation and joining to read books they wouldn't normally read indicate the readers feel the need to learn and to be well-informed, and they want to meet in an enjoyable, safe environment. This impetus comes from a variety of societal sources, but as acknowledged earlier, the media's influence cannot be ignored. In the words of an articulate 23-year-old Canadian member of a virtual club, gaining new knowledge is extremely important to the book club members. And, through the internet, readers are able to fulfil some of these needs:

I think that with the act of reading becoming more a part of pop culture (rather than something we did in closets a hundred years ago), book clubs are designed to cater to the common, yet critical reader. In the age of Oprah's Book Club, reading has become an interactive activity. It's not enough to be reading these days. Talking about a book is almost mandatory. In my opinion, reading is pointless without the intention to talk about what you've taken in. The internet offers every class the avenue to discuss books. Some people, particularly middle-class housewives, may not have the time or resources to join f2f book clubs. And what with Oprah encouraging literacy from the comfort of her soundstage, the internet is the ideal companion. Also, the internet allows readers to move beyond locality and (perhaps) a particular mindset. Issues in books are discussed from different point of views, rather than subjected to homogeneous interpretations.

Table 6: Top five reasons for joining a club in percentages, 2001 (n=157)

	F2f Club n=83	Virtual Club n=74
Wanted intellectual stimulation	67	62
Joined for fun	67	62
To read books wouldn't normally read	64	59
To connect w/others like self	57	69
Needs to talk about books reading	48	55

Several important distinctions arise between f2f and virtual clubs, particularly in terms of why people join. These distinctions also correlate to members' dissatisfaction levels, as discussed below.

First, virtual members (23 per cent) like the flexibility in scheduling that the virtual clubs offer, whereas only six per cent of f2f readers consider flexible scheduling a priority. Flexible scheduling is a perceived benefit of the virtual book club across all respondents. To illustrate, when all readers were asked what role they think the internet plays in book clubs, the most frequent responses included overcoming geographical barriers (35 per cent), access to like people (25 per cent), and time flexibility (21 per cent).

Forty-one per cent of the virtual club members joined because of the books the groups were reading, while this was mentioned by only 22 per cent of the f2f club members. Only four per cent of virtual club members joined as a result of an invitation from a friend or family member, whereas for f2f members, it is considerably higher at 29 per cent. This is no doubt explained by the fact that f2f clubs depend more on interpersonal affiliations, and also because they usually have little more than informal lists of the titles they read. On the other hand, the internet provides virtual members both broad access to information and to selective communities. As the websites described earlier illustrate, virtual club readers have many options if they have a particular genre interest, and, importantly, the clubs are almost always open to new members. This would be especially important to people who are in areas where there are no f2f clubs, and also to people who shy away from them, or to people who have very specific interests. As one respondent said:

The internet is a blessing to me. I live in N.C. [North Carolina] I don't have family who share my love for books, nor does any of my friends. I wouldn't have a anyone [sic] to discuss books with if it wan't [sic] for the internet. I have not been able to find an African American bookclub in my city.

**Local friends,
global intimacy**

I love the idea of online bookclubs although I have not joined one. I think I'll look into it because it really makes so many connects possible. I read one author – I think it was Jennifer James – who called it 'global intimacy' – love that concept! (f2f book club member)

While almost all (92 per cent) f2f club members see each other or communicate with each other at other times than their scheduled meetings, less than half (46 per cent) of the virtual members report communicating off the list. Interestingly, 18 per cent of the virtual members have met face-to-face with other book club members. Most (77 per cent) f2f members consider the other members very close or close friends, while the virtual members (66 per cent) consider the other members only acquaintances. But not in all cases; a significant number (18 per cent) of the virtual club members regard the other members as close friends. One virtual reader, who is a member of a f2f club and two virtual clubs, demonstrates that the idea of online friendship is surprising to some of the readers themselves, and this bonding over books online is important to them:

I like our discussions on the iVillage Mystery/Suspense Board because we all have a good sense of humor and enjoy our books, but we don't get too terribly serious about the discussion. ... It is a fun group. And none of us really know each other at all. And yet I feel all these women are my friends. I know. Strange. But I love it.

The f2f book club members (34 per cent) accordingly find the social bonds that are formed in their groups the most satisfying aspect of membership. Somewhat unexpectedly, however, 19 per cent of the virtual club members also find this gratifying, although not to the same degree (second only to access to ideas about new books, which was the most satisfying aspect for 24 per cent of the virtual members). In the words of one virtual club member: 'Even though we don't know who each other is, we have something in common to discuss and by doing that you become friends very quickly. I don't think you need to have face to face contact with people to get to know them.' The interpersonal needs for these readers can be met through this special community on the internet. Virtual club members find that through discussion, points of view are confirmed, challenged and change, and they see this as an important benefit of belonging. Members of f2f groups, on the other hand, are more likely to value the sharing of personal experiences in book club book discussion.

**The eternal quest
for the next book**

When book club readers find out I am doing work on book clubs, inevitably the first question I am asked is what titles I would recommend or what titles I have heard about. I received this question so often that I have termed it 'The

Eternal Quest' for what to read next. Virtual club members are able to use their clubs to satisfy this quest; however, I was puzzled to find access to new titles did not register for the f2f club members of this study as something they value as a significant benefit of belonging. Rather, f2f groups value more the social bonds they form. The opportunity to read books they would not normally read, while also important to the f2f members, is an added bonus. There are many different aspects about a book club that the members find gratifying, but not any that are statistically significant, indicating the complexity of different meanings from person to person and from group to group. One woman who belongs to both a virtual club and a f2f club says that the camaraderie and repartee in her f2f group is what gratifies her and allows her to learn more about the books, but points out that there is a lack of time to delve deeply into the book in the face-to-face setting. And so she does this in her virtual group, where meetings can occur over a period of two to four weeks, rather than just two hours. The virtual meetings allow the reader to transcend physical, geographical and time boundaries, enriching her interpretations of the book. She can become as involved as frequently and as intently as she wants, and at her convenience. To people who love discussing books, a book club can bring hours of fun – two to three hours every month for f2f book clubs, and more than once per day for well over a third (37 per cent) of the virtual club members, or at least once a day for 28 per cent of them.

From biographies to mysteries, from erotica to poetry, from classical literature to cook books, book club book title choices run the gamut. In both the f2f and the virtual environments, the genre choices may vary from month to month (and sometimes week to week in some virtual groups) or they may remain consistent throughout the life of the club. Table 7 shows the genres book club members chose for their last three books.

Table 7: Genres book club members chose for their last three books

	F2F Groups	Virtual Groups
Biography	5	9
Mystery	1	11
Classical Fiction	8	9
Contemporary Fiction	54	53
Other Non-fiction	6	6
Romance	1	1
Western	0	10
Poetry	0	0
Science Fiction	3	7
Cartoon	0	0
Plays	1	0
Humour	2	2

Collective interpretation, divergent definitions

Discussion themes within book clubs vary, representing the diverse membership, the genres they read, and the structures and environments within which they operate. For example, 74 per cent of f2f members

say their clubs use personal experiences to interpret the books; 24 per cent say it happens occasionally; and two per cent say it never happens. Virtual clubs, on the other hand, have a more even split: 51 per cent say personal experiences frequently help interpret the books and 48 per cent say it happens occasionally. The questionnaire did not query a definition of 'personal experiences', however, as noted elsewhere, people's definitions of what constitutes personal experiences in book discussion vary.⁴⁶ One woman says that any use of the pronoun 'I' is too personal in any book club discussion, while another thinks that it is impossible to interpret the book without relating it somehow to her own experiences. One woman, a member of both types of groups, but writing about her virtual club, writes the following: 'Keep in mind this is an online group of women! I feel we are all very bright, and we express ourselves easily. So personal matters enter in, and that is okay.' A virtual member from Israel who writes that she most enjoys her club 'when someone describe how she feel concern something she read in the book, and I feel exactly like that, or if someone talk about her perspective and its so different from mine, or I can't describe exactly how I felt about it, and someone describe it so good. I like to read what other women think too.' [original spelling]

F2f book clubs report talking less about the structure of the book than do virtual clubs. For 18 per cent of the f2f groups, the book's structure is never talked about, and for another 18 per cent it is frequently talked about. For 65 per cent of the f2f groups, the structure is discussed occasionally. Virtual clubs talk about social, political and environmental issues less frequently than f2f groups do. Fifty-five per cent of the f2f groups say that book discussion frequently turns to social, political or environmental issues, while only 28 per cent of the virtual groups say so. This may help to illuminate why virtual clubs use publishers' reading group guides for discussion (50 per cent), more often than f2f clubs do (43 per cent). It is also possible that the privacy and time virtual group members have at their desks affords the opportunity to initiate more scholastic dialogue than a face-to-face meeting might offer. People might feel more comfortable 'speaking out' online, or, as one virtual member wrote, 'people may be more likely to share their true feelings and opinions'. Not only should the influence the online club has on identity be considered, but also what the channelling away from social, political and environmental issues might mean. For example, is this corrupting natural forms of resistance? An investigation of discussions that move to different locations might illuminate this issue.

Leaving the club It should be noted here that a small percentage (26 per cent) of the book club members report having left their clubs, and most report having left a f2f group (23 per cent), rather than a virtual one (3 per cent). When comparing the two types of groups, the reasons for leaving vary from the group disbanding, through scheduling conflicts, to

dissatisfaction with the depth of discussion. Again, however, no one particular reason is statistically significant enough to isolate. If one combines the two types of groups, readers' main reasons for leaving a club are: the member moved, she became too busy, or she was dissatisfied with the book choices.

Group dedication may be different for a virtual group than for a f2f club. A member of both types of groups writes that while she enjoys the camaraderie and repartee of her f2f group most, it is the depth of the discussion she gets from her virtual group that keeps her involved online. She also writes that she wishes there was more time to get into the book more in her f2f group, and that her virtual group doesn't give her enough control over which books are chosen to read. It is possible to choose not to participate in a month's discussion – or even several months' – in a virtual club, but so casual a commitment would not work in a successful f2f group. So while a woman might not participate in a virtual discussion for several months, she can still consider herself part of the virtual club. On the other hand, if she did the same for her f2f club, she might feel the pressure to quit the club, particularly if she finds the title choices not to her liking.

Issues of book choices, and book discussion, are both sources of enjoyment and reasons for dissatisfaction with clubs, virtual and f2f alike. Through negotiation, members will work to come up with a process to choose books that satisfy everyone, and will often try keep the dialogue as open as possible to accommodate all the members. According to Joanna Smith Rakoff, a one-time online, for-profit book club moderator, clubs often have a core group of members who are quite dedicated to the success of the group.⁴⁷ This is also true of f2f groups.⁴⁸ These individuals will spearhead discussions that seek to include each member's opinions and life situations that may influence both the title choices and the discussions.

Further observation of online groups may help us to better understand what those discussions look like and what they might mean. Offensive comments and the arguments that ensue are sources of bad feelings for some (17 per cent) virtual members. These, and off-topic conversation (23 per cent) along with the inability to communicate in a face-to-face environment (8 per cent) seem to be sources of frustration. However, leaving the group is not the outcome for every frustrated member. Through negotiation, the readers communicate a common ground and some wait out periods of discontent. The following exchange from a list illustrates my point:

Reader 1: Delighted to find others have happened on The English Passengers through book club posts. It's just another advantage of belonging to an online bookclub. Other people's

TBR [to be read] lists are a source of new books for me.
BTW [by the way], what does OT mean. Off Topic maybe?
Happy reading :-} MXXXX

Reader 2: Yep MXXX - it's Off Topic.

Cheers, SXXX (who's noticed there's been very little OT during this last book! Thanks to all for a great discussion – and for providing lots of meat for my next month's f2f group meeting).

This exchange not only demonstrates how the readers negotiate their space, but also suggests that the readers who belong to both types of groups might be using their virtual club to gather ideas for not only book club titles, but discussion as well.

Conclusions Book club members themselves believe the popularity of book clubs lies in the idea that people want to regain a sense of community, and that sharing ideas with one another through books is one way to do that. The clubs provide insight into the importance people, and in particular, women, place on literature and reading and the passion behind both individual and collective interpretation. Within book clubs, women are able to create spaces in which they feel they are able to discover new ideas. They transform the intensely private process of reading into an open, public forum.

The internet is another version of that forum for book readers. It is a convenient way to connect with other book lovers, without geographical or time barriers – which is the most important factor when considering the web's role on an individual's reading discussion preferences, according to most of the virtual club members (49 per cent). Both types of members (13 per cent) use it as a way to find new books to read, to learn about authors whose work they like or are reading. A small percentage (7 per cent) wants nothing to do with it.

The club's space is one that nurtures and embraces differences of opinion. Club members value their discussions as opportunities to learn new ideas (68 per cent). Book discussion provides an avenue for women to try on new ideas, to share experiences, to enter the world of the book together and come out at the end of the encounter enriched by the process. Not only are the learned benefits there, but an emotional bond is formed with the other women. The relationship with others in the community is one that is honoured by the women and is the source of most of the passion they feel. Book clubs act not only as locations in which women interpret their world through the literature, it is also one that provides space for organic dialogic democracy: the women work together to create systems that work for everyone; they provide a safe space for dissension; they encourage personal and collective growth.

The intimate, physical and continuous space afforded in a f2f group seems to better nurture opportunities for organic resistance. This could be a reflection of the genre-specific nature of the online groups examined for this study, or it could mean that the acquisition and negotiation of cultural competence looks different in virtual communities.

This study only begins to demonstrate how 'contextual considerations that seem to relate specifically to on-line situations have roots in off-line realities',⁴⁹ and what those realities are for readers. Further work needs to be done to capture the essence of those realities. The purely quantitative model of social science research 'argues that reality is constructed by "anonymous" travels of people within historically articulated social spaces, places and structures of practices'.⁵⁰ Remaining questions cannot be answered without augmented systematic research of a qualitative nature.

Further investigation is also necessary to determine whether the media – be it *Oprah*, or the variety of books published about book clubs and the collateral material accompanying or promoting other literature, or the many radio and television shows modelled on book clubs – recognised the popular and gendered phenomena, or spurred the movement. From the anecdotal comments made by some of the readers (9 per cent) mass media institutions have had some influence. But how much? And how? Those questions remain unanswered.

In addition, the data do not tell us if book club members recognise the inherent power hierarchies within both virtual and f2f book clubs. How do those power relations look? Are they different in the two environments? How important is it that they be identified, and what influence do they have on readers?

It is important the academy pay attention, for within these sites, readers are making choices, creating identities and practices, and negotiating places of being.

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