

# May parental reading behavior explain the gender differences in subteens' reading attitude?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a research project which analyzed the impact of parental reading behavior on the gender differences in subteens' reading attitude. The applied theoretical approach is based on the tri-component view of reading attitude. A sample of 1633 (815 male and 786 female) students and their parents filled in a questionnaire on reading preferences and habits, and the students completed a reading attitude scale. Variance analyses (ANOVA) are used to determine the statistically significant differences. Independent variables of the measurement are materialized dimensions of reading, and parents' paper-based/online reading habits, purpose and frequency. As assumed, girls are generally more influenced by parental reading habits and exhibit more favorable reading attitude if either parent has positive reading behavior. Boys' reading attitude is far less influenced by behavioral patterns; nevertheless, the father's impact is significantly stronger than that of the mother. In the light of the results, this paper will also give some thought, briefly, to what can be done; thereby, indicating some directions of further research.

**Keywords:** subteens, reading attitude, gender, parental reading behavior

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The early 21<sup>st</sup> century faces a declining level of reading for enjoyment both within adult and adolescent populations [1]. On the basis of the results of international student assessments a great concern has emerged about the decreasing reading appetite [2]. In many countries, a great number of adolescents lack the ability of reading, dislike reading or do not read at all, which is even more worrying if we think of reading as a powerful tool for success not only in school but throughout the adult life of an individual. In Hungary, as in many other countries, the decline of reading, especially literary reading, is also one manifestation of the social stratification becoming more acute. As Erzsébet Bukodi has shown, "in Hungary book readers tend to be people with more cognitive resources (they are more educated) and more economic resources (they have higher incomes)" [20]. A representative Ipsos (the Hungarian subsidiary of the French-based global Ipsos institute) survey has established that close to two-thirds (63%)

of the Hungarian 18-25 year old population live their life practically without reading books; worst hit are the skilled workers, of whom 82% hardly read if at all [21].

In addition to overall decreasing reading willingness, boys seem to find even less pleasure in reading than girls. They not only like reading less but their reading achievement also falls behind that of the girls'. Since PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) was launched in 2000, there has been a consistently significant gender gap in reading performance within the 15-year-old population in all participating countries, and it is the widest among students whose general performance is the lowest. Many boys lack the basic reading skills [2]. This phenomenon draws attention to gender inequality in education, which is not only a moral issue but, again, an economic question.

The aim of this study is to investigate how parental reading behavior and reading patterns influence offsprings' reading attitude, and explain the differences in this regard between the two genders of the young. The research is based on tri-component models of reading attitude and, of those, it examines the affective components. The cognitive and conative components of the attitude are discussed in a separate paper.

Basic assumptions of the study are:

- materialized aspects of reading cannot explain the gender differences in students' reading attitude;
- the same-gender parent's reading behavior is the main influencer of the attitude.

## 2. RELATED WORK

Several theoretical models show connections between reading attitude and reading development [3]. Reading attitude plays a central role in becoming a competent reader [4], and positive attitudes toward reading are related to higher reading achievement and more frequent reading [5]. It is also documented in the literature that school performance relates to attitude rather than ability [6]. As far as reading is concerned, a positive attitude toward reading is one of the strongest correlates of reading achievement [7], and gender gap performances relate closely to gender differences in students' attitudes and behaviors towards reading [6]. Not mentioning the generational gap with the development of what we can call

the digital gap. The relevance of the generational/digital gap is emphasized by the circumstance that we are concerned with the digital-native Generation Z, whose parents are, characteristically, digital-immigrant Generation X readers. To involve the non-gender generational aspect in this discussion, however, is not the aim of the present work.

Girls possess a more favorable attitude towards both academic and recreational reading than boys [8], and the decline in reading for enjoyment is sharper among boys [6]. The reason for this is, perhaps that boys value reading less than girls do. They see female relatives, peers and teachers reading more frequently than fathers, brothers or other male acquaintances and view reading as a feminine activity [8]. Another reason, which is worth considering, might be that the same phenomenon can be observed among mothers and fathers. The impact of that on offsprings' reading attitude deserves detailed measurement and analysis. At the same time boys show greater interest and ability in on-line reading. When it is measured, girls outperform boys in this area as well, however, the gender gap is narrower [6]. Boys' intrinsic motivation, competency beliefs and attitude are more dependent on their reading success than those of the girls' [9]. Findings support that male students are less confident readers and see themselves as having lower skills [10]. Both boys and girls regard girls as better readers [8]. Reading attitude decreases with age, which is true for both genders [11], but girls' reading attitude is more stable in time [12]; that is, the slight differences in the attitude between the two genders at the early years of school [13] are growing into a gender gap by the age of fifteen [2].

Gender difference in reading attitude is a complex phenomenon, which is explained by further factors. Educational aspiration is formed at a young age and greatly influenced by gender stereotyping existing in the family, in schools and society. Considering that children spend their early years exclusively at home, and early childhood is an essential period to stimulate reading and reading enjoyment, the family home is of key importance in this regard [14]. Having a verbally stimulating home environment, where verbal interaction takes place regularly, contributes to a positive reading attitude [7]. In the family home reading attitude is shaped in several ways: parents read to the child, are interested in what the child reads and mediate their own reading habits, which then may be followed by the child. Books and magazines around the home shape children's reading attitude, too. Having friends who like reading and with whom students can discuss and recommend books is a factor that also correlates significantly with positive attitudes [15]. Generally, students who were read to as a child, and who owned personal book collections exhibit more positive attitudes toward reading than those who did not [16].

To discuss the gender differences in students' reading attitude, we are to find an established definition of the attitude. Educational sciences standing on the ground of psychology explain personality as a psychic component system, which consists of personal, social and cognitive components. Each component possesses cognitive, affective and conative components [17]. Attitude in general and reading attitude in particular are sub-components of the component system, and being such they have the same cognitive, affective and conative components. Early definitions of reading attitude by Beck, Ajzen, Petty and Cacioppo had consecutively emphasized one or the other aspect of the attitude [18] until tri-component models have become established. According to

Reeves, there is considerable agreement among researchers that reading attitude is defined by three components: cognitive (personal, evaluative beliefs), affective (feelings and emotions), and conative (action readiness) [18]. This tri-component view is most explicitly stated by Mathewson, and these components can also be identified in McKenna's and Ruddell and Unrau's reading attitude models [18].

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Our research analyzes the relationship between parental reading patterns and students' reading attitude on a sample of 1633 students (815 boys and 786 girls) aged 11-13 and their parents in Hajdú-Bihar administrative county, Hungary. The age of students is somewhere between those participating in PISA and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) because our intention is to see what happens before reading attitude becomes unfavorable by the age of 15. The sampling strategy is designed to draw both from the county seat and from the rural area to represent the social diversity of the county. Thus, schools meeting particular demographic characteristics are selected (e.g., urban middle income population, urban low income population, rural middle and low income populations). Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample.

|                        |   | %    | N   |
|------------------------|---|------|-----|
| gender                 | male  | 50.9 | 815 |
|                        | female                                      | 49.1 | 786 |
| grade                  | 4   | 37   | 605 |
|                        | 5   | 32.4 | 524 |
|                        | 6   | 30.3 | 490 |
| parents' qualification | both graduate                               | 14.3 | 152 |
|                        | graduate mother-secondary qual. father      | 7.9  | 84  |
|                        | graduate father-secondary qual. mother      | 4.1  | 44  |
|                        | both secondary                              | 14.4 | 153 |
|                        | both lower than secondary                   | 53.3 | 566 |
|                        | one graduate-the other lower than secondary | 5.8  | 62  |
| family structure       | whole family                                | 82.6 | 132 |
|                        | father only                                 | 1.9  | 30  |
|                        | mother only                                 | 12.9 | 206 |
|                        | no parents live with the child              | 2.6  | 42  |

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the sample

Initially 1913 students were invited to take part in the research, out of whom we finally have 1633 respondents. Data are collected both from students and parents by partly adopted partly self-developed questionnaires. In both questionnaires participants are asked about their reading choice, the frequency and the time of their reading. In addition, parents are asked about the number of books in the household, and how much they spend on reading on a regular basis.

Part of the student's questionnaire is the attitude scale (Cronbach alfa=0.873) with items about students' feelings in different reading-related situations (Table 2). With the attitude scale we examine the affective components of reading attitude. Items are selected so that the statements are relevant to the fourth, fifth and sixth graders and are phrased to be compatible with the comprehension level of the age group, to

reflect experiences relevant to the age of the respondents, and to maintain a consistent response format. We applied the widespread and among subteens very popular emoticons. Students are asked to color the smiling, neutral or sad faces indicating if they feel bad, disinterested or happy in different reading situations. This format allows us to score on a 3-point scale, with higher numbers indicating a more positive feeling.

| How do you feel when                                       |
|--|
| 1. you read a mandatory reading?                           |
| 2. you read your favorite story?                           |
| 3. you have to read something?                             |
| 4. you get a book as a present?                            |
| 5. you start reading a new book?                           |
| 6. you read a mandatory reading during the summer holiday? |
| 7. you read instead of playing?                            |
| 8. in the library?   |
| 9. your teacher asks you about your readings?              |
| 10. before a reading class?                                |
| 11. you read aloud in front of the class?                  |
| 12. you have to do reading tasks?                          |
| 13. you write a reading test?                              |
| 14. your father reads to you?                              |
| 15. your mother reads to you?                              |
| 16. your teacher reads to you?                             |
| 17. your sister reads to you (if you have one)             |
| 18. your brother reads to you (if you have one)            |

**Table 2.** List of the items in the attitude scale

As a method of the research we have chosen the analysis of reading attitude along the number of books at home, the amount of money spent on reading and parental reading habits including reading choice, time and frequency. The number of books owned by the families and the money spent on reading are analyzed as quantitative-scale level variables. Parental reading habits regarding what they read and how long they read in their free time on average are measured by categorical variables. In our analysis we regard these variables explanatory ones, while the attitude scale is the dependent variable.

The cognitive and conative components of the attitude are measured by the respondents' answers to yes/no statements (Table 3) representing the cognitive and conative components of reading attitude. The results are to be discussed in a separate paper.

|   |
|---|
| 1. I have read a book because my friend recommended it to me.               |
| 2. I have read a book because my parents recommended it to me.              |
| 3. I have read a book because my sister recommended it to me.               |
| 4. I have read a book because my brother recommended it to me.              |
| 5. I have read a book (not mandatory) because my teacher recommended.       |
| 6. I have exchanged books with my friends.                                  |
| 7. It has happened that I planned reading but finally I did something else. |
| 8. It has happened that I started a book but did not finish.                |
| 9. It has happened that reading changed my opinion about something.         |
| 10. After reading I usually feel that I have learnt something.              |
| 11. It has happened that I read a story first then I watched the film.      |
| 12. It has happened that I saw the film first then I read the book, too.    |

**Table 3.** Yes/No statements

#### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Testing gender differences, we have found that girls' reading attitude (2.348) is significantly more favorable than that of the boys' (2.164) in the whole sample except along one item that refers to students' feelings toward reading comprehension tasks in the classroom (Anova sig = 0.000). In class 4 girls' (11 years old) reading attitude has proved to be more positive than that of the boys along all the items of the attitude scale (Anova sig = 0.000).

Significant differences have not been verified between the two genders of the students by the number of books in the household or the money spent on reading.

It has been found that reading preferences of both students and parents are defined by gender. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they read any of the given eleven different types of reading materials. As shown in Table 4, mothers read – with the exception of the newspaper – each reading material on a larger scale than fathers. Our results indicate the further differentiation that gender is also associated with reading *certain types* of reading materials. Long and short stories, magazines, tabloids and poems are preferred by female parents while newspapers and internet articles seem to be as much popular among mothers as fathers. When gender of the students is not taken into account, the results show that most students read academic books and poems – two types of reading material that strongly relate to school. Long and short stories may as well belong to students' studies, let them be mandatory or leisure time readings. It is surprising, however, that a great number of subteens read newspapers and tabloids, which are not very characteristic reading materials of the age group [19]. The reason for this is perhaps the increasing spread of online reading and the popularity of social networks among the respondents. Belonging to 'generation Z' our subteens are likely to visit Facebook

frequently, where they encounter a great deal of short news and celebrity news.

| reading material | % mothers | % fathers |            |
|------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
|                  |           | % fathers | % students |
| long story       | 36,2*     | 19,8      | 60,8       |
| short story      | 28,8      | 18,5      | 58,1       |
| comic            | 2,4       | 2,2       | 43,9       |
| academic book    | 34,4*     | 12,4      | 77,3       |
| newspaper        | 49,1*     | 52,7*     | 39,3       |
| magazine         | 38,7*     | 16,6*     | 44,7       |
| encyclopedia     | 4,2       | 2,9       | 11,6       |
| internet article | 53,4*     | 48,2*     | 51,7       |
| e-mail           | 40,8      | 36,2      | 47,4       |
| tabloid          | 17,7      | 12,2      | 18,2       |
| poem             | 20,2      | 4,7       | 60,3       |

**Table 4.** Distribution of respondents on reading material

With crosstab analysis we have compared reading materials preferred by the parents with those of the students. In the case of long stories, we have found a significant relationship between mothers and children. It can be stated that children whose mother read long stories are represented among long story readers in higher percentage (65%) than those whose mother did not (58%) (Chi-square = 0.012).

As far as academic reading, newspaper, magazine and internet articles are concerned, the same phenomenon can be observed, that is, children whose mother read the listed types of reading materials in the researched period, read the same type of reading in a higher ratio than those whose mothers did not (starred items in Table 4) Fathers' reading preferences, though have had an impact, too, influenced children's reading significantly in less areas than that of the mothers'. Children whose fathers read newspapers, magazines and internet articles read the same type of reading in higher percentage than those whose fathers did not (see starred items in Table 4).

The influence of parental habitual paper-based and on-line reading on males' and females' reading attitude has also been tested. Mothers' paper-based reading has proved to be affecting only girls' attitude along two items when books appear directly, either as a new book (Anova sig=0.029) or books in the library (Anova sig=0.050) while it has no effect on boys' attitude at all. Fathers' paper-based reading affects the attitude of both genders, on the girls' side the attitude is more positive towards the social aspects of reading, while the boys' attitude is more favorable in task-oriented situations.

As far as digital reading is concerned, boys' reading attitude is significantly more positive along only two items provided the mother reads on-line as a habit (when more than one items are involved, the exact significance will not be listed, in all cases the level of significance is lower than 0.050). Girls' reading attitude is affected by the mother's on-line reading along six out of the eighteen items of the attitude scale. These items mainly represent reading for enjoyment.

| Mother reads on-line |  |       |       |
|----------------------|--|-------|-------|
|                      |  | value | sig   |
| girls                | How do you feel when you read your favorite story?                           | 2,98  | 0,019 |
|                      | How do you feel when you start reading a new book?                           | 2,7   | 0,001 |
|                      | How do you feel when you read a mandatory reading during the summer holiday? | 1,76  | 0,014 |
|                      | How do you feel when you read instead of playing?                            | 1,7   | 0,05  |
|                      | How do you feel when your mother reads to you?                               | 2,82  | 0,006 |
|                      | How do you feel when your father reads to you?                               | 2,71  | 0,026 |
| boys                 | How do you feel when you start reading a new book?                           | 2,25  | 0     |
|                      | How do you feel when your father reads to you?                               | 2,58  | 0,009 |

**Table 5.** The impact of mothers' on-line reading on girls' and boys' reading attitude

Fathers' digital reading habits affect significantly daughters' reading attitude along eleven items including various reading situations. Boys' attitude is significantly influenced only in task-related reading situations (Table 5).

| Father reads on-line |  |       |          |
|----------------------|--|-------|----------|
|                      |  | value | sig      |
| girls                | How do you feel when you have to read something?                             | 2,18  | 0,037    |
|                      | How do you feel when you get a book as a present?                            | 2,87  | 0,001    |
|                      | How do you feel when you start reading a new book?                           | 2,76  | 0        |
|                      | How do you feel when you read a mandatory reading during the summer holiday? | 1,82  | 1,60E-05 |
|                      | How do you feel when you read instead of playing?                            | 1,73  | 0,00914  |
|                      | How do you feel in the library?  | 2,38  | 0,008    |
|                      | How do you feel when your teacher asks you about your reading?               | 2,37  | 0,022    |
|                      | How do you feel before a reading class?                                      | 2,42  | 0,038    |
|                      | How do you feel when your father reads to you?                               | 2,75  | 0        |
|                      | How do you feel when your mother reads to you?                               | 2,89  | 0,008    |
|                      | How do you feel when your sister reads to you?                               | 2,52  | 0,05     |
| boys                 | How do you feel when you start reading a new book?                           | 2,45  | 0,06     |
|                      | How do you feel when your father reads to you?                               | 2,61  | 0        |
|                      | How do you feel when your mother reads to you?                               | 2,67  | 0,02     |
|                      | How do you feel when your teacher reads to you?                              | 2,51  | 0,05     |
|                      | How do you feel when your brother reads to you?                              | 2,1   | 0,37     |

**Table 6.** The impact of fathers' on-line reading on girls' and boys' reading attitude

It has been mentioned earlier that the purpose of reading among parents as a potential explanatory factor of students' reading attitude has raised our interest. Therefore, it has been tested whether there is a relationship between parents' reading for enjoyment or to get information on the one hand and students' reading attitude on the other hand. It has been found that girls' attitude is most influenced by fathers' reading for enjoyment while that of the boys' by fathers' reading to get information. Mothers' purpose for reading seem to have very little if no influence either on girls' or boys' reading attitude.

The relationship between the reading frequency of parents and students' reading attitude is as follows. Boys' reading attitude is not influenced by the mother's behavior in this respect, while that of the girls' is the more positive the more frequent the mother is engaged in reading. The same phenomenon characterizes the impact of the father's behavior on both genders. Girls' attitude proved to be more affected by parental reading frequency.

## 5. CONCLUSION 1: A SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

Research results suggest that students' reading behavior is influenced in various ways by materialized aspects of reading and parental reading behavior. Girls' attitude appears to be more positive on condition that either parent reads either on paper or online as opposed to boys, whose attitude is less

influenced. When purpose for reading is discussed, the impact of fathers is stronger as it makes the attitude of both genders more favorable. Female students have better attitude towards reading if either parent reads on a regular basis while male students' attitude is less affected by parental reading frequency. All the explanatory variables we applied through the research relate to the consequence of gender differences; i. e. girls' reading attitude is facilitated mainly by social interactions; in other words, talking about reading inside and outside the family, appreciating a book as a present, and so on. In contrast, boys seem to obtain more favorable attitude by being engaged in task-oriented reading situations.

## 6. CONCLUSION 2: INFERENCES AND PROPOSITIONS

The above findings make us infer that we are dealing with a declining situation – and the decline is a threat both for the individual and society – and the question arises whether there is anything to be done, is there anything we can propose? Since much research attention has been devoted to the problem in general – nor do we want to sink into commonplaces at the end of a paper, which comprises a very specific research – let the propositions be limited to the age group and the gender specifics of this work.

To remain within the range of the age-group problematic of the present paper (the subteeners), we can propose to ourselves a NO-GOAL, for example. It would be a big step forward if the Generation Z subteeners of today would not, in a few years, end up in the sorry situation of the present young-adult (18-25) age group, 65% of whom - according to the Ipsos survey (quoted above) – practically live their life without books. They do not read newspapers or books on a regular basis, they watch TV or surf on the internet instead, and gain the daily news from the latter two sources [22] So, to prevent Generation Z subteeners from falling into this trap, one inference as well as one proposition as for what is to be done is self evident. The present paper, with its data and findings, does provide an impetus concerning the direction in which future research should go in this context. But can we assign ourselves more concrete research tasks inside the framework outlined in this paragraph? In other words, can we find any *concrete* hints among our data and findings which could be a springboard toward research projects in more concrete terms?

One point of departure is offered by the highly concrete gender difference in reading attitudes: although there is a sharper decline in reading for enjoyment among boys [6], they show greater interest and ability in on-line reading. Add that boys, as a general rule, express interest in the technical earlier and more intensely than girls, inclusive of technical devices like computers, iPads, iPhones, e-book readers, smart phones, etc., and that all of these generate a greater motivation for on-line reading.

The e-world, as an extra stimulus, can lend us help in achieving with the boys the same level of willingness to read that most of the girls have achieved in the first place (a method that can work well also with girls who are lagging behind like the boys are). Clearly, reading digital texts is not the same as reading printed texts as we gather from the conflicting views of researchers (Nicholas Carr, Mark Bauerlein, Paul Socken and others); we would use the e-devices and digital texts only *as means* to serve our goal. And

the main goal is to make the young love reading texts and lead them back to the Gutenberg galaxy. In the battle of the Gutenberg and the Neumann galaxies the Gutenbergian world seems to be on the losing side more and more (although a long-term prognosis can be that they will exist side by side, mutually complementing each other), as at present the vivid colourfulness, the speed and the animation of the cyber world are gaining the upper hand, as opposed to the lonely reader of printed media. These factors are changing the narrative of reading, fragmenting the text through digitalization (hyperlinks, moving images, embedded videos, etc), thus making us lose track of the narrative just being read. Hyperlinks may be “designed to grab our attention” in the case of popular-science and scientific texts as argued by Carr [Carr], but they can confuse the reader of literary narrative. It would be vital for us to re-evoked the willingness to read in Generation Z if we think of the alarming signs of the marked decline in their cognitive faculties claimed by other researchers.

The school (library) has at least one corrective set of means at its disposal: making e-devices, such as e-book readers, available; familiarizing students with major literary databases; downloading the latter on to the students' own e-devices (smart phones, iPads, tablets); developing student skills of converting between different file types. All of this means making use of the students' interest in technicals, informatics and giving them the chance to be willing to read – with the help of the technical world. Aggressive demand to make them read will take us nowhere, the result will be aversion and resistance. But these are already matters of didactics and methodology and no concern of the present paper.

The global market of digital devices is extremely competitive, on the one hand; on the other hand, the majority of students strive to be trendy, i.e. to possess the latest/most efficient/most fancy-looking, etc. models of the various electronic devices – to show off if for nothing else. Whether we regard it as the young's desire to keep up with constantly developing models and designs or an addiction to ever-changing fads, what weighs in, in our context, is that the digitalization of belles-letters itself also keeps up with the new trends; it has developed formats for the different operational systems; and free softwares that convert between different file types are available on the market. Therefore, downloading an e-book from Amazon or from the Gutenberg Library or from MEK [Hungarian Electronic Library] can awaken interest in the handled text, although this latter intent is masked as a technical five-finger exercise. So, again, assignments involving technical devices, based on the young's interest in technicality, would amount to far more than simply chatting, browsing and using social media. They would bring literary texts much closer to the student.

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