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# INTRA-INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN THE PREFERENCE TO COMPLEX FICTION BOOKS

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## Introduction

About 82% of the Dutch population spends (spare) time reading books. At the same time, huge diversity is observed in the complexity of the genres of books being read. These observations trigger the question about the relation of reading complex fiction books and characteristics of the reader. This paper, focuses on the intra-individual differences in the preference to read complex fiction books as a spare time activity. Usually this topic is studied in a cultural sociological perspective (Bourdieu, 1984; Ganzeboom, 1989). In this paper this perspective is enriched with an information processing approach (see for example Bettman, 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) which indicates that psychological characteristics of an individual affect the preference to complex texts (such as fiction books). In the following we will firstly formulate a preliminary definition of complexity of fiction and then go into the variables that affect the preference to read complex books.

### *Complexity of fiction books*

Complexity of fiction books is a problematic construct about which many different definitions are formulated in literary studies as well as in cultural sociological studies. In this paper the definition of complexity of fiction is derived from the cultural participation theory of Ganzeboom (1989). In this theory the complexity of cultural information is implicitly defined as the comprehensibility of a text (Stokmans, 2000), where comprehensibility regards the extent to which an individual makes an extensive mental representation of the contents of the text (Noordman & Maes, 1993). Comprehensibility is affected more by the (world) knowledge of the reader than by the lexical complexity of the text (Freebody & Anderson, 1983). This suggests that formal indices of complexity (based on, for example, the lexical complexity) are less valid than experts' judgments indicating the comprehensibility of a fiction book. Experts indicated that on average romantic fiction is less complex than mystery novels which are less complex than literary novels (Kraaykamp, 1993). One can argue that individual books within a specific genre category differ in their complexity. However, for this study the global ranking of genre categories as indicated, is accepted, since the preference of complex books is also operationalized at this global level.

### *Characteristics affecting the preference to complex fiction books*

The framework put forward to describe intra-individual differences affecting the preference to complex fiction books is based on the cultural participation theory of Ganzeboom (1989). According to Ganzeboom's model reading complex fiction can be regarded as a mode of information processing and is affected by cultural competence and amount of spare time. In this study, reading attitude, need for cognition and involvement are added to this model, since

these variables affect the preference to complex fiction according to consumer behavior theories. Next, these five variables will be discussed.

Cultural competence parallels the construct “ability” in information processing models. It is defined as the amount of experience with reading and knowledge about fiction books (Ganzeboom, 1989). According to the theory of Ganzeboom, a positive relation is hypothesized between the extent complex books are read and the cultural competence of the reader (Hypothesis 1). This hypothesis is based on the assumption that readers optimize the level of arousal when reading; if a fiction book is too simple, the reader gets bored and if the book is too complex the reader becomes frustrated.

Spare time or nonobligatory time is defined as the time that remains after time for existence (meeting biological requirements) and time for subsistence (working at one’s job or obligatory tasks attached to housekeeping or the family) are taken into account (de Hart, 1995). In the theory of Ganzeboom, the preference of a particular book is dependent on the ratio between the amount of time to be invested and the available amount of spare time. Since it is assumed that reading complex books costs more time, it is hypothesized that complex books are less preferred by readers who have less spare time (Kraaykamp, 1993) (Hypothesis 2<sup>a</sup>). In an information processing approach, this hypothesis is challenged. According to this perspective, the ability to read affects the amount of time it takes to read a complex book. So, it is hypothesized that the preference to more complex fiction books is affected by the interaction between the amount of spare time and cultural competence (Hypothesis 2<sup>b</sup>).

The theory of Ganzeboom implicitly assumes that cognitive stimulation is the only benefit when reading fiction. According to Means-end chain theory (Olson & Reynolds, 1983) all expectations about the consequences of reading a particular genre will affect the preference to this kind of genre. In studies about reading attitude (Stokmans, 1999), three important consequences of reading fiction in one’s spare time are identified:

1. *Self-development*: this function relates to the value placed on reading for attaining educational or vocational success for managing one’s life or to gain insight into self, others, and/or life in general.
2. *Enjoyment*: this function refers to the pleasure derived from reading by entering another world and experience an adventure.
3. *Escape*: in this function, reading is used as a distraction or as a means of relaxing and forgetting personal worries.

In this perspective, an important question is to what extent the genres, literature, romantic novels and mystery, differ in the consequences expected when reading them. On the basis of intuition it is suggested that self-development is an important consequence when reading literature, the most complex genre of fiction books. Furthermore, it is suggested that enjoyment is an important consequence when reading less complex fiction genres while escape is suggested to be an important consequence when reading romantic novels, the least complex genre. Based on this intuition, it is hypothesized that the preference to complex fiction books is positively affected by the reading attitude component self-development and negatively affected by enjoyment and escape (Hypothesis 3).

Besides the implicit assumption that the only benefit derived from reading fiction is cognitive stimulation, the theory of Ganzeboom also implicitly assumes that all individuals enjoy effortful cognitive endeavors to the same extent. However, according to Petty & Cacioppo (1981) this tendency, known as the need for cognition, differs across individuals. Since, complexity is defined in terms of comprehensibility, one can hypothesize that the

preference to complex fiction books is positively affected by the need for cognition (Hypothesis 4).

In information processing theories, it is commonly assumed that people differ in the motivation to process complex information (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981). An important determinant of motivation to read is involvement (Stokmans, 1999). In the cognitively based approach (Laaksonen, 1994), involvement is defined as the perceived personal relevance of this kind of stimuli (i.e., works of fiction) to the individual in terms of his or her basic values, goals and self-concept. In line with this reasoning it is hypothesized that involvement positively affects the preference to complex fiction books (Hypothesis 5).

## Research method

### *Respondents*

Respondents were approached in a shopping center of a city in the south of the Netherlands (Tilburg) and asked to participate in a study about reading behavior. During all opening hours (also on Saturday and in the evening) respondents were approached to fill in the questionnaire. This study made use of a quota sampling (N=177) to ensure that all participants read fiction books (read at least one fiction book last year) and had a minimum age of 18.

### *Design and procedure*

During the data collection period, passers-by were stopped by pollsters. If respondents met the requirements set for inclusion and agreed to participate in the study, the respondent was taken to a lunchroom where she or he was offered a cup of coffee or tea. Then the questionnaire was filled in by the respondent without interference of the pollster. The questionnaire enclosed items about the extent complex books were read, cultural competence, amount of spare time, aspects of reading attitude, need for cognition, and involvement with reading. Each concept will be discussed successively.

#### Preference to reading complex fiction books

The preference to reading complex fiction was derived from the proportion of books of a specific genre read last year. Respondents were asked to divide 100 points between literature, romantic novels, and mystery by the relative amount to which each genre was read last year (a constant sum approach). The preference to reading complex fiction was calculated by weighing the proportion read of a specific genre by the complexity index of the genre and then summing these weighed proportions across the three genres. The complexity index was derived from the complexity ranking of fiction genres presented in the introduction in such a way that the ranking of the complexity of the genres was preserved in the index. This resulted in a complexity index of three for literature, two for mystery, and one for romantic novels.

#### Cultural competence

Two determinants of cultural competence are distinguished in the theory of Ganzeboom: The global intellectual capacities and the acquired knowledge and skills about fiction (Kraaykamp, 1993). In the context of Ganzeboom's theory, the global intellectual capacities are usually operationalized as the educational level. The question on educational level asked respondents to indicate the highest level of education they had completed (a seven-point scale).

The acquired knowledge and skills about fiction are operationalized as the number of names of authors a respondent can recall. Research indicates that the number of names of authors mentioned correlates with vocabulary knowledge as well as comprehensive reading (Allen, Ciplewski & Stanovich, 1992; West, Stanovich & Mitchell, 1993). Furthermore, the

author's name can be regarded as a brand name (Leemans, 1994) and in marketing research product knowledge is often operationalized by means of recalling brand names (Zinkhan, Lockander & Leigh, 1986; Singh, Rothschild & Churchill, 1988).

### Spare time

A short description of the concept 'spare time' preceded the four open-end questions about the amount of spare time. The first question regarded the number of days in an average week respondents are obligated with work and/or study. The second question was about the average amount of spare time on such a 'working-day'. The third question referred to the number of days in an average week one was free of work and/or study. The last question asked for the average amount of spare time on such a 'day off'. The total amount of spare time was estimated by summing the amount of spare time of the 'working-days' and the amount of spare time of the 'days off'.

### Aspects of reading attitude

In the forgoing it was stated that studies about reading attitude identified three important consequences of reading fiction: self-development, enjoyment, and escape. These consequences were operationalized by means of 21 Likert-items ( a five-point scale appended with a "don't know" response category). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of each aspect of reading attitude was good (self-development: 0.79; enjoyment: 0.77; escape: 0.81) (Nunnally, 1978).

### Need for cognition

Need for cognition was operationalized by the Need for Cognition Scale (Cacioppo et al., 1996). The Dutch translation (Pieters et al., 1987) of this scale was used in this study. In this study, the reliability of this scale is 0.89 (Cronbach's alpha).

### Involvement with reading

Involvement was operationalized as statements reflecting the extent reading fiction helps a person to express him/herself, to show who she or he is, or what she or he believes she or he is like. These topics were verbalized in 15 items and respondents had to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each item (a five-point Likert-scale appended with a "don't know" response category). The items were partly based on the work of Laurent & Kapferer (Laurent & Kapferer, 1985) regarding the symbolic value component of their involvement scale. The Cronbach's alpha of this scale is 0.93.

## **Results**

The effects of cultural competence, amount of spare time, aspects of reading attitude, need for cognition, and involvement were examined in a multi-variate model. To this model two demographic variables, namely gender and age are added, since research indicates that they affect the preference to more complex fiction books (Kraaykamp, 1993). A regression analysis with all these variables resulted in an  $R^2$  of 0.526 ( $R^2$ - adj. = 0.488). The effect of each of the variables mentioned, is shown in Table 1.

This result indicates that younger people prefer complex books more than older people. This effect is contrary to the results of the study of Kraaykamp (1993). The effect of gender is as usually: Men prefer complex books more than females.

The effects of cultural competence are as expected. Educational level as well as knowledge of authors' names have a positive effect on the preference of complex books. These results are in line with Hypothesis 1 that states that the higher the cultural competence of an individual the higher the preference to complex fiction books.

Table 1: The extent to which the independent variables affect the preference to complex fiction books.

Variable	standardized effect	t-value	p-value
age	-0.126	-2.101	< 0.05
gender	0.273	4.109	< 0.01
competence			
educational level	0.116	1.825	= 0.070
knowledge of authors' names	0.479	6.867	< 0.01
spare time	-0.067	-1.121	> 0.05
interaction time-competence			
spare time * educational level	-0.134	-2.196	< 0.05
spare time * knowledge of authors' names	0.078	1.304	> 0.05
reading attitude			
enjoyment	-0.233	-3.220	< 0.01
self-development	0.165	2.442	< 0.05
escape	-0.010	-0.153	> 0.05
Need for Cognition	0.178	2.839	= 0.05
involvement	0.021	0.255	> 0.05

The effect of spare time is less clear. On the basis of Ganzeboom's theory a direct and positive effect of the amount of spare time on the preference of complex books was expected (H2<sup>a</sup>). This hypothesis is rejected by the data. On the basis of an information processing approach, however, it was hypothesized that the interaction between spare time and cultural competence would positively affect the preference of complex fiction books (H2<sup>b</sup>). The results indicate that only the interaction of one of the indicators of cultural competence, namely educational level, has a significant effect on the preference to complex fiction books. However, this effect is in the opposite direction (negative).

Regarding the aspects of reading attitude it was hypothesized that enjoyment should have a negative effect on the preference of complex books while self-development should have a positive effect on the preference of complex books (H3). This part of the hypothesis is supported by the data. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that escape should have a negative effect on the preference to complex books (H3). This part of the hypothesis is rejected by the data.

The effect of need for cognition of the preference to more complex fiction books is significant and as hypothesized: the higher the need for cognition the higher the preference to complex books (H4). The effect of involvement on the other hand is somewhat surprising. Contrary to the hypothesis (H5) the results indicate that involvement has no effect at all on the preference to complex books read!

### Discussion and conclusion

The brief theoretical exposé in the introduction suggested that the theory of Ganzeboom needed to be expanded by the consequences expected when reading fiction books (the aspects of reading attitude), the need for cognition and involvement in order to get a better understanding of the intra-individual differences that affect the preference to complex fiction books. The results of this study partly support the theory of Ganzeboom in the sense that the higher the cultural competence of an individual the higher the preference to complex fiction books. However, the direct effect of spare time on the preference of complex books as suggested by the theory of Ganzeboom was not supported. The suggestion based on the

information processing approach, that the interaction between spare time and cultural competence affected the preference to complex fiction was neither supported. The results indicated that only the interaction of one of the indicators of cultural competence, educational level, has a significant but negative effect on the preference to complex fiction books. This result may suggest that highly educated people with a lot of spare time are less choosy about the fiction books they read compared to highly educated people with scanty amounts of spare time.

This study showed that all consequences expected when reading fiction have an effect on the preference of complex books. This result parallels the Means-end-chain theory (Olson & Reynolds, 1983), which indicates that people chose those products that meet their desires, expressed in terms of consequences of product use, best. This study indicates that this is also the case for a hedonic product as fiction.

Additionally, the results indicated that need for cognition positively affects the preference to complex books, while involvement has no effect on this preference. This result contrasts the effect of need for cognition and involvement on the amount of fiction books read. A recent study (Stokmans, 1999) indicated that regarding the amount one reads involvement has a significant positive effect while need for cognition has no effect. These results contradict the hypothesis based on the elaboration likelihood model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981) that involvement and need for cognition affect information processing in the same way. More research is needed to explore the suggestion that involvement and need for cognition may have a different effect on the processing of information.

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