

# Female Emirati University Students' Book Reading Choices: An Investigation

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## Abstract

The inescapable link between college students' reading habits and their academic success suggests the importance to educators of investigating their students' reading interests and preferences. The study reported here was an open investigation into the book reading choices of first-year female Emirati university students to see what genres, authors, main protagonists and book settings they preferred. Book titles were mined from data which was gathered during a larger in-depth research on students' reading habits over a period of two years, through interviews, journal entries, surveys, emails and conversations. Results showed that, while students had a preference for fiction, they also had a comparatively high interest in nonfiction, particularly self-help books. Gender did not appear to be a major factor in their preferences although male authors were popular. Geography, including author and protagonist nationality and book setting, appeared to be more important, with students showing a preference for American and British authors, protagonists and settings. With students' overall choice of Arab authors and titles at little more than one tenth of their total choices, availability of interesting books would appear to be of paramount importance. There are implications for the Arabic book publishing industry, in general, and the Emirati book publishing industry, in particular. Findings will be of interest also to educators, librarians and others who wish to promote leisure reading among college students in the Arab world and augment the limited literature on Arab students' reading choices.

**Keywords:** leisure reading, book choices, reading preferences, genre and gender, Arabian Gulf, female Emirati college students, ESL/EFL, Arab readers

## 1. Introduction

“Those who develop the habit of reading have a greater likelihood of success in their immediate and long-term future”. (Dewan, 2013, p.311). Nowhere is this more true than at tertiary level, where college students must read copious amounts of lengthy texts in order to succeed. There is a clear link between reading and succeeding at college (Gallik, 1999; Khreishat and Kaur, 2014). Tertiary level is “one of the most important times to read for pleasure” (Dewan, 2015, p.30) because of the hugely positive effect leisure reading has on reading abilities (Krashen, 2004). “When people read for pleasure, they painlessly develop the skills necessary to become skilled at it” (Dewan, 2013, p.311). Investigating students' reading habits may even be a better and less intrusive way to gauge their reading abilities than simply examining them in various reading tests (Datta and McDonald-Ross, 2002). *What* students read also matters. Datta and McDonald-Ross (2002) found that of the 365 potential Open University students they surveyed in the UK, those who read broadsheet newspapers scored higher on cloze passages than those who read tabloid newspapers, and those who had read a book in the previous three months also scored higher than those who had not.

In this digital age college students, in particular, are heavily dependent on their mobile devices, so that Manguel's (1997), “We read to understand ... We cannot do but read. Reading ... is our essential function” (ibid., p.7) has largely been replaced with, ‘*We read to get bits and bytes of information and news, and to chat and exchange messages with friends. We cannot do but click, tap and swipe; it is our lifeline, perhaps our essential function*’. Such extensive use of technology fragments students' reading attention (Lorinc, 2017) so that they lose out on the multiple benefits of reading books or other lengthy texts. As Pieper (2016) succinctly puts it about his own experience with technology, “the more I download, the less I read” (p.64), suggesting that the busy-ness of gathering information leaves little time for reading. Therefore, it behooves educators to get to know their students as readers, which means asking not just *if* they read but what they like to read. Very often reasons for not reading may be explained by the absence of interesting materials, so, knowing what our students like to read is key to overcoming this hurdle.

Viewing our students as readers instead of simply dismissing them as non-readers is a more inclusive approach to our relationship with them and enriches our conversations with them. We legitimize their contributions to class when we refer to their reading. Recently, one of my undergraduate English students, who used to come late but was otherwise attentive if mostly silent, volunteered in class that he had read five books about body language, the topic we were studying at the time. This gave me a point of reference with him in future class discussions where I was able to encourage him to tell us more about a particular point or to share his favorite part of a book or to comment on what we were reading. I started to see him differently, more positively, as someone with something to contribute which I was more than happy to facilitate. I validated his reading choices. I validated him as a reader. Such conversations in front of the class also gave leisure reading some of the importance that I always try to convey to my students, much more effectively than simply telling them they should read.

We should investigate students' reading habits and choices and not rely on assumptions alone (Kamhieh, Al Hameli, Al Hammadi, Al Hammadi, Nawfal, Al Zaabi & Khalfan, 2011). Our findings will inform not only teachers but also librarians (Diers and Simpson, 2012) and others such as publishers who are keen to accommodate students' reading interests. As more academic libraries open recreational reading sections to promote leisure reading (Hurst, Marsh, Brown, & Forbes, 2017), findings from investigations such as the one reported here, offer evidence of students' choices which helps librarians and educators make informed decisions when selecting and recommending books (Hodgson and Thompson, 2000). There is evidence that having such books available encourages students to read them (Shankar, Dubey, Mishra, & Upadhyay, 2008).

Many studies of reading habits investigated time spent reading (Mokhtari, Reichard and Gardner, 2009), or the preferred medium for reading, such as print or digital (Zhang 2014). Many of those required students to select from a given list of types of materials. For example, keen proponent of investigating college students' reading habits, Gallik (1999) required students in the US to choose from a given list of eight reading item types including novels, (and preferred type), nonfiction, comic books, poetry and the Internet. Among 139 responses, almost one third indicated a preference for reading novels, particularly mysteries and horror, and listed some popular authors' names such as Dean Koontz, Mary Higgins Clark, Stephen King and John Grisham. Under nonfiction, biographies, self-help and religious/spiritual genres were listed as the most popular.

Similarly, Huang, Capps, Blacklock & Garza (2014) requested 1,265 American college students to indicate their reading preferences by selecting from a given list of five main types of reading materials in which they differentiated between online reading materials and magazines and newspapers. The authors found that "online reading materials were the most popular" (p.453), followed by newspapers and magazines, comics, best-sellers/novels and non-major academic books. They also concluded that "students enjoyed using the Internet more than recreational reading or reading for academic purposes" (p.458). Burgess and Jones (2010) asked 209 college students in a US university to rate a range of given genres according to their preferences and found many differences along gender lines including that female and non-remedial college students were more likely to read a book than their male counterparts and that females enjoyed reading mystery/thrillers and romance more than males.

Outside the US, Chen (2007) requested over 80,000 combined first and third-year students in Taiwan to choose from a given list of seven types of reading materials including best-sellers and novels as separate categories. He concluded that newspapers and magazines were the most popular type of reading material, which is consistent with similar US studies. Shafi and Loan (2010) looked at various aspects of students' reading habits in Kashmir, including time, place, topics, language and purpose, all of which had the 'Other' option, allowing for greater freedom in student responses. They found that male students in Kashmir read for information including such topics as religion, politics, science and technology while females read more "for education", and preferred literature.

In the UK, Hodgson and Thompson (2000) investigated the role that reading plays in the lives of medical, biology and law students at Newcastle University. The questionnaire contained closed and open questions about their book reading choices. Students were asked to list authors and books which had (a) impacted on their lives and (b) that they would recommend to fellow students. This was an indirect way of establishing their preferred reading interests. Students' top ten books varied widely from the more traditional classics to the more modern, including many they had studied for their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) English exams. The findings resulted in the opening of a leisure reading section of the university library stocked with titles drawn from the results.

This UK study was replicated in Nepal by Shankar et al (2008) who added magazines, newspapers and other periodicals to the survey and investigated the reading preferences of 165 medical students from three Asian countries. While their results were viewed as being "broadly comparable" (p.312) with those of the original study, there were differences. Students most commonly read contemporary novels as opposed to the greater number of classical choices of the earlier study. These showed a preference for romantic fiction, science fiction, biography and poetry, and Western, Russian and Nepalese authors, with Nepalese students reading more than the others in their native tongue. The books which had the most significant effect on them included *The Alchemist*, *The Da Vinci Code* and the *Harry Potter* series, *Bhagavad Gita* and *The Good Earth*, while the titles most commonly recommended to fellow students were *Doctors* and *The DaVinci Code*. The authors also found that magazines, newspapers and other periodicals were popular, which is consistent with others' findings (Gallik, 1999; Chen, 2007). They were concerned that students were more interested in reading Western authors in English than South Asian authors and languages, and noted that the university library contained mostly titles in English. "The books read by the students were often those available in the college library" (p.312).

In Italy, Piccoli et al. (2003) investigated the book reading choices of 34 Italian medical students and found that four fifths read novels or short stories, less than one fifth read nonfiction and just over a half read a book about the medical profession. All 34 students wanted a section of the medical school library "dedicated to "non-medical" books about medicine and physicians" (p.55). Underlining the power of leisure reading, the authors suggested that providing a well-stocked leisure reading section of a medical school library would be a good introduction to any proposed humanities courses for future doctors. In other words, students could gain many of the qualities they needed, such as empathy and an overall better understanding of the human condition, from simply reading literature.

Looking at different age groups, Summers (2013) carried out a study of the reading habits of 29 men and 29 women, aged twenty-four to sixty-two years. Interviews included questions about participants' preferred genres, nonfiction topics, authors, author gender and protagonist gender, in addition to questions about their preferred book titles. Women had a stronger preference for fiction than males whose interest in nonfiction outnumbered that of females by almost two to one. Overall, females were less concerned than males about genre, author gender or protagonist gender. When Summers then analyzed the book titles favoured by females, she found similar patterns of preference, albeit with slightly different percentages. In

other words, while stated preferences for their favorite author and protagonist gender remained stable, there were noticeable differences between what they stated as their favorite author and protagonist gender, and what the analysis of their favorite books showed in these subcategories. These differences may be partly explained by the absorption of the stated categories of no preference for author or protagonist gender.

Hughes-Hassell and Cox (2008) found that urban teens like to read "materials that are relevant to their lives" (p.56) and which contain topics related to their own interests. The authors stressed the importance of being aware of students' reading interests in order to provide access to them. They identified a growing genre of books called Street Lit which includes books that are not usually found in libraries, and they make suggestions for certain titles which could be included whose content is less controversial or unsuitable.

### *1.1 Arab World*

In-depth studies of college students' reading habits in the Arabian Gulf countries are scant, but, with the recent influx of foreign universities, and instructors' continuing dissatisfaction with college students' reading skills, there is growing interest in the topic. Khoury and Duzgun (2009) investigated the reading habits of a sample of 482 female Emirati Foundation students and found that a typical Foundation student "is more likely to read the Qur'an than any other reading material, but does also read fiction books, magazines, and poetry" (p.28).

In Saudi Arabia, Al Qahtani (2016) found very poor reading habits in English among 90 high school students and identified a lack of exposure to the language, "unfamiliar and unsuitable reading topics" (p.1) and poor vocabulary, as among the key reasons. He concluded that "Arab students of all levels, including Saudis, do not read enough, if at all" (p.11). He believes "there is a need to promote reading in students' first language and in target languages and to make students want to read" (p.12) by providing better school and classroom libraries and by teachers making reading books more interesting. "Providing students with a reading-friendly environment with plenty of suitable and interesting reading material might prompt students to establish and maintain good reading habits, which could lead them to become effective readers" (p.12).

Also in Saudi Arabia, an investigation of reading habits of 330 male and female Saudi EFL university-level preparatory year students (Rajab and Sadi, 2015), found a low tendency to read a book for leisure, particularly in English. They also found that female students were more likely to have recently read, bought or borrowed a book than the males.

Elsewhere in the Arab world, Martin, Martins and Naqvi (2017) investigated patterns of book reliance of 3,510 Arab nationals and 989 expatriates in six Arab countries, including three Gulf countries, using two concepts from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural approach to learning: cultural tools and more knowledgeable others. They described book reliance as "the extent to which respondents said they rely on print and e-books for both news/information and entertainment" (p.3380). Levels were lower for Arabs than for expatriates in both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Knowledgeable others featured as a key factor and the authors concluded that "conversations with others and social media activity are typically associated

with more book reliance in Arab states, as long as they do not take up too much time” (p.3387). This suggests that such interactions often result in book recommendations.

Khreishat and Kaur (2014) investigated the reading habits of 225 mostly female English major students in a Jordanian university where they were asked to indicate their frequency of reading in the following categories: newspaper, magazines, e-mail/chatroom/facebook, novels and nonfiction books. The authors found a significant correlation between reading novels (“quality reading” p.27) and students’ cumulative grade point average. E-mail/chatroom/facebook, the most popular type of reading, had no significant correlation. They called for the provision of more recreational reading materials at university and for more detailed research using qualitative or mixed methods on Arab EFL reading habits.

### *1.2 Types of Investigations*

It is essential that we get to know our students’ highly diverse reading interests, so that we value their complexity “rather than making sweeping generalizations” (Brendler, 2012, p.7) when recommending books to them. However, we should bear in mind that requiring students to choose from pre-set classifications in our investigations may limit our findings. Gallik (1999) advises, “to get a full and complete picture of reading interests, survey questions regarding the type of reading preferred by respondents would need to be much more detailed” (p.487). She believes that “more specific information in this regard would provide a richer picture of the recreational reading habits of college students” (p.487). Simply asking students more frequently about their book reading habits would also help (Datta and McDonald-Ross, 2002) in gathering that rich data. An example of one such open investigation is Ross’s (2014) open-ended interviews with more than 300 avid readers in which she asked specific questions which allowed respondents to answer freely and this resulted in many interesting findings.

Another aspect of our investigations to be considered is how we define leisure reading (Gallik, 1999). When we limit students to naming only non-academic or non-assigned texts, we make it difficult for them to distinguish between extracurricular and academic reading if they decide to read an academic book for leisure. Excluding any types of texts would conflict with the generally accepted definition of leisure reading as reading what we want because we want to. Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, and Morris (2008) for example, found that although there was a low incidence of novel reading among their high-school sample in midwestern US, “school-based texts were named as favorite books on the open-ended portion of the survey” (p.11). This could be explained by their school being their only source of reading materials in a largely economically disadvantaged area. A third area of potential difficulty arises when we separate online reading from newspaper or magazine reading which suggests that the two are discrete. At an estimate, many readers today try to read such items online and so would have difficulty answering a questionnaire that separated the two formats.

Open-ended explorations of students’ reading choices enable them to report more fully on their reading interests and are in keeping with the essence of leisure reading. They are, however, more laborious to analyze for the researcher has to identify and label emerging categories. The open investigation reported here aimed to augment the literature by asking:

What are first-year female Emirati university students' book reading choices and what do they tell us about their preferred genre, author, protagonist and setting?

## 2. Method

A convenience sample of approximately forty female Emirati university students, contributed the book titles discussed in this paper. They came from a number of cohorts of my first-year university advising classes, including some whom I had also originally taught in Foundation year. All were female Emirati students who were living at home with their families or with their husbands and new families. Although their native language is Arabic, English is used by all, either as their first or second language and is the medium of instruction at the university. I secured the necessary institutional permission to carry out research and followed proper ethical procedures in gaining students' written consent to use their data anonymously.

Students' book preferences emerged as part of a more extensive and in-depth exploration of the factors that affect students' overall leisure reading habits. A variety of instruments was used including snapshot surveys, questionnaires, interviews, journal entries and conversations, both in person and by email. This allowed for a more exploratory approach to investigating students' reading habits so that they were not put on the spot and required to recall the books they had read within a certain period. The names of books and authors were mentioned as evidence for their reading when they enthused about or criticized a particular book or author. I combed through every data transcript, questionnaire, snapshot survey, journal entry and conversation to find book titles specially for this paper. I analyzed them as a sample of the books read by students to indicate their reading preference patterns, not as a tally of the number of books they read in any one period of time. Being truly explorative enabled me to approach data-gathering from the ground up rather than starting with pre-conceived categories from which students had to choose. In the true spirit of grounded theory, book titles were analyzed through constant comparison, until categories emerged showing patterns of preferences.

Every effort was made to establish book genre, protagonist and setting, and author name, gender and nationality through use of all online booksellers' sites, book reviews and more. Summers (2013) used a *NoveList* database to determine the gender of various protagonists and authors in her study which may be more accurate and more convenient, and is something that could be used in future studies.

## 3. Results

The aim of this study was to investigate first-year female Emirati university students' book reading preferences to identify their preferred genre, author, protagonist and setting. A total of 263 book titles which were mined from the larger body of rich data, were placed on a spreadsheet followed by a column for each of the above categories. Figures were calculated as percentages of each total with the use of an online calculator.

### 3.1 Genre

Identifying different genres may not be quite as simple as adding the prefix *non-* to fiction to separate the two main categories, or is it? (Luey, 2010). Although we know fiction to mean “novels, short stories, works of the imagination” (Luey, 1998, p.7), it is sometimes divided into literary fiction and genre fiction with their respective subgenres. Then there is realistic fiction, urban fiction, and high/low fiction (based on different reading levels) (Raison and Sajonas, 2010). Further blurring the lines in this study, four self-help titles were also described as fiction, even though self-help books are usually included under nonfiction. Under nonfiction, Luey (1998) differentiates between serious and poor-quality nonfiction and relegates self-help and biographies to the latter label. I used her later (Luey, 2010) more inclusive definition of nonfiction as “everything else” (p.7) that is not fiction, and consulted mainstream booksellers’ websites, readers’ forums and other sources when categorizing book titles. The main genres which emerged from my study are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Genres and subgenres; subgenres are not mutually exclusive

Chosen genres			
Fiction	<u>59.7%</u>	Nonfiction	<u>39.4%</u>
Novels	85.3%	Self-help	54.7% (+4 fiction)
Classics	14.0%	Biography	15.8%
Children’s	5.1%	History	8.4%
Drama/poetry	5.1%	Business/economics	3.3%
		Philosophy/wisdom	1.7%
		Religion; Politics	1.2% each

The most popular title was Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*, perhaps the most translated book by a living author (Racoma, 2013). Of the novels, 15.9% were chicklit and 15.1% were young adult literature or YA. These categories may have considerable overlap.

### 3.2 Geography: Book Settings, Author Nationality and Main Protagonist Nationality

Only books set in specific geographic locations were counted under settings which meant excluding those listed as general, middle earth, unspecified and worldwide. Authors from nine Arab countries were listed as Arab rather than by individual nationalities because of their one-time common identity as an Arab nation and common language. Four titles whose authors were unknown were given presumptive author nationalities based on book content. This produced 22 different country settings, 21 author nationalities and 22 main protagonist nationalities. Table 2 shows the commonalities between these three categories including the three most popular: the US, the UK and the Arab world.



Table 2. <sup>1</sup>Book settings, and <sup>2</sup>author and <sup>3</sup>main protagonist nationalities that were the same.

Afghanistan
America (US) 48.4%
Arab world 10.8%
Austria
Britain (UK) 18.8%
China
Columbia
Denmark
France
Germany
Greece
India
Ireland
New Zealand
Russia
Sweden
Turkey

<sup>1</sup>Book settings not included in Table 2 are: Anguilla Island, Italy, Japan, Switzerland and Spain.

<sup>2</sup>Author nationalities not included in Table 2 are: Australian, Belgian, Brazilian and Canadian.

<sup>3</sup>Protagonist nationalities not included in Table 2 are: Argentinian, Brazilian, Japanese, Pakistani and Spanish.

### 3.3 Gender: Author and Main Protagonist Gender

The most widely read authors were Von Ziegesar, of the *Gossip Girl* series (4.2%), Coelho (including one translated into Arabic) (3.5%), Dickens (including abridged version) (2.3%), JK Rowling, Gabriel Marquez and Barbara and Allen Pease (1.9%), Meyers, Koontz, Kinsella and others, and in the Arab world, Al Fiki and Al Makhtoum (1.5%), Al Qarni, Bellawi and others in dwindling numbers. For the purpose of author gender analysis, I discounted eight books which have authors of both genders, as neither their inclusion nor their omission affects the percentages. The four titles whose authors were unknown were assigned a probable author gender based on their content and context. All four were therefore listed as probably Arab authors: two male and two female. For example, *Binat Jeddah* and *Folktales of Joha* were listed as having “probably female Arab” and “probably male Arab” authors, respectively. This gave a total of 255 authors of known and presumed gender. Only books with human protagonists of either gender were included in this analysis, which excluded books with both genders and nonhuman protagonists. (Table 3).

Table 3. Overall author and main protagonist gender

Author gender		Main protagonist gender
Male	60%	50.9%
Female	40%	49.1%

Table 4. Top three author and main protagonist nationalities with gender

Author nationality with gender		Main protagonist nationality with gender
American	47.9% (53.2% m; 46.8% f)	40.3% (32.8% m; 61.1% f)
British	20.2% (54.7% m, 42.3% m)	20.8% (66.7% m; 33.3% f)
Arab	11.8% (80.6% m, 19.4% m)	10.7% (58.8% m; 41.2% f)

#### 4. Discussion

This study investigated the book choices of a sample of first-year female Emirati university students to identify preference patterns for genre, book settings, authors and main protagonists.

##### 4.1 Genre

Students' preference for fiction, particularly novels, is consistent with many other studies' findings about female readers' preferences (Schultheis 1990; Gilbert & Fister 2011; Merga, 2017). Tepper (2000) found that women were more likely than men to have read fiction in the past year. Summers (2013), too, found that over half of the females in her study preferred fiction. This may not be surprising in view of its many benefits including its correlation with students' CGPA (Khreishat and Kaur, 2014) and ability to develop readers' social skills and empathy (Mar et al. 2006; Dewan 2013). "We can now with confidence claim that reading fiction is beneficial for individuals and for humanity as a whole" (Nikolajeva, 2016, p.2). While romance novels did not emerge as a subcategory, chicklit, classics and young adult genres often contain romance stories within them.

Students' relatively high interest in nonfiction is consistent with Luey's (1998) and Ross's (2014) findings that most readers read both genres and that, like Ross herself, "often have several books on the go" (p.120). It supports Merga's (2017) rejection of what she calls, "essentialist conceptions of gender" (p.1) whereby females read fiction and males read nonfiction. It also supports Long's (2003) statement that there is "no automatic association between ... women and Women's Books" (p.132). She found that women's reading groups have always selected both fiction and nonfiction. However, it contrasts with Khreishat and Kaur's findings (2014) that almost half of the mainly female Jordanian university students rarely read nonfiction.

Students' keen interest in self-help books, most of which were American, is consistent with Luey's (1998) findings that one third of her majority female respondents read self-help books. Dolby (2008) studied a sample of more than 300 self-help books and concluded that they indicate independence of mind, interest in self-education and a focus on individuality rather than the community. They allow the reader to mediate between their own personal values and those of the culture presented by the books' authors (pp.158-9). It is possible, therefore, that

the students in this study were mainly mediating between the values of American culture and their own, although they also chose self-help books of four other nationalities, including 15.6% which were Arab.

#### *4.2 What's Gender got to do with it?*

Very little, it seems. Students' even balance of protagonist gender overall is somewhat consistent with Schultheis' (1990) study where female readers chose a greater percentage of opposite-gender protagonists than did males. It is also similar to Brendler's (2012) findings, where many of her female readers "named texts with male protagonists as their favorites" (p.204) and Summers' (2013) findings that almost four times as many females as males expressed no preferred protagonist gender. Students' high interest in male authors also reflects Summers' (2013) findings that while half of females did not differentiate between author genders, 69% of the rest preferred male authors. Similar findings were also found in a study of the reading preferences of 40,000 people in the UK by Goodreads, as reported by Flood (2014), where female readers were more likely than males to read authors of both genders, although both groups preferred authors of their own gender. The topic was more important than the author's gender. This study suggests that female Emirati university students have little difficulty identifying with protagonists or reading authors of either gender.

One enlightening possible explanation for this better gender balance by female readers is posited by Gabriel and Smithson (1990) who reason that because, "the traditional literary canon emphasizes the male experience, female students are continually being asked to identify with feelings and experiences which are not consistent with their experiences as women" (p.130). Therefore, they argue, "female readers, who are trained within this literary curriculum, evidently learn to identify equally well with either male or female characters" (p.130). In other words, female readers are no strangers to the male psyche, a theme that also has resonance in the research setting. Male members of Emirati families have a strong presence in and influence over female students' lives so that no major decision is taken without their approval and, in many cases, their consent. Certainly, even in less conservative families, the advice of a key male family member is readily sought when a major decision is to be made. In most government sponsored universities in the research setting, for example, students cannot leave the university campus without the written consent of their male guardians. Findings here support Gabriel and Smithson's (1990) theory if we substitute the patriarchal structure of society in the research setting for the traditional literary canon that emphasizes the male experience.

Readers need to be able to identify with the characters they read about (Schultheis, 1990) and series provide the necessary familiarity of character. Gossip Girl and Harry Potter were among the most popular series in this study. Among the authors selected by my respondents six match those in Gilbert and Fister's (2011) study: JK Rowling, Dan Brown, Nicholas Sparks, Sophie Kinsella, Von Ziegesar (ghostwriter) and Khaled Hosseini. This shows a significant similarity among reading choices of two very different groups of students separated by thousands of miles and major cultural differences.

Reminding us of the importance of our research method, we recall that Summers (2013) found some slight differences between her respondents' stated gender preferences for author and protagonist, and her findings from an analysis of their listed favorite books. One big difference was that in the former, many students stated 'no preference', a category which disappeared in the latter. Similarly, in this study, there was no chance for students to state 'no preference' as all book titles were gathered from their actual reading choices. It is just possible that had students in my study been asked to list their favorite authors the results may have been slightly different to the findings presented here.

#### *4.3 What's Geography got to do with it?*

A lot, it seems. Book setting, author nationality and protagonist nationality often come as a package in that writers usually write about what they know, so they frequently write about people from their own home town or country. Therefore, a reader's choice of a foreign author usually involves reading about people from other cultures and parts of the world outside their home country. Few if any studies have looked at protagonist nationality and book setting, so the findings here are a significant contribution to the literature. According to Gabriel, Allington and Billen (2012), "leisure reading habits may support academic achievement when the reading material requires a focus on plot, character development, and setting, as do many academic texts within English/language arts" (p.186). Thus, there is some benefit to be gained by exploring the settings and protagonists that students choose for leisure reading.

America has dominated book publisher's lists in the English-speaking world for some years (IPA Report 2015-2016, p.15), joined by China in overall world book publishing statistics. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that students' reading choices reflect that dominance and show a considerable preference for American authors, protagonists and settings (as none of the students spoke Mandarin). Their second choice of British authors, protagonists and settings also shows their interest in and preference for the English-speaking world over their own world because Arab authors, protagonists and settings came in at little over one tenth of their reading choices. Referring to a similar dilemma in their own findings in Nepal, Shankar et al (2008) suggest two factors which may result in respondents' low interest in reading South Asian authors: "the higher socioeconomic class of the respondents and education in English medium schools" (p.312), both of which could also be key factors in the reading choices of the Emirati students in this study.

With most families in the Gulf (and Arab world at large) preferring to have their children educated through English from a very young age, Arab authors who are writing for younger readers have to work very hard to meet their needs. The decision by most students to read in English reflects the predominance of English in their environment, homes and schools, and their fascination with most things represented by the English-speaking world. This most international of countries, with its constant look to the West and elsewhere in spite of its conservative culture, appears to have relegated Arab authors to its blind spot. "Despite a population of 280 million native Arab speakers spread between Morocco and the Gulf, an Arab book market hardly exists." (Wischenbart, 2014, p.82).

#### *4.4 What have Availability and Accessibility got to do with it?*

Everything, it seems. It may be stating the obvious but we can only read what is available and accessible. Accessibility to interesting reading materials clearly makes a difference not only to students' interest in reading but to their reading choices, also. The library at the university where the research was carried out has a very well stocked learning enhancement centre which caters solely to students whose English is weak. It provides a range of reading packs containing abridged versions of well-known and classic books at different levels of reading difficulty, together with a CD or DVD. This helps students understand the text and thus makes the reading experience more enjoyable. A small number of the students in this study chose their titles from this expansive selection. It shows that if we have interesting books available, there is no reason to doubt that students will read them. 503 Emirati nationals attending the Sharjah International Book Fair in 2011 were asked, "What would make you read more?" and almost ninety percent responded, "More books on topics I am interested in" (Wischenbart, 2012, p.15). Therefore, we must wonder, to what extent students' book choices reflect their preferences or simply what is available.

There is a severe shortage of interesting books for young Arab readers for, although Arabic is listed as the fifth top world language (Weber 1999), "only 0.43 % of all information is available in the Arabic language" (Lobachev, 2008). This is echoed by Wischenbart and Jarrous (2012), "Imports of reading materials in the English language predominate those in Arabic at an estimated ratio of 65 to 35 per cent ... reflecting the reading practices of an audience that generally lives in a multilingual and multifaceted cultural environment" (p.4). Sobering statistics are proffered by Martin, Martins and Naqvi (2017), "Arab publishers release one new title for every 12,000 citizens each year; in comparison, UK publishers release one new title per 500 citizens" (p.3377). There are few, if any, popular bestseller lists in Arab states and no publicizing of the works of Arab authors, in sharp contrast to the behemoth of Western media and entertainment which has a huge publicity machine that links movies to books and has that cool modern appeal.

#### *4.5 What do Readers Need?*

Bishop (1990) beautifully captures the two main types of reading choices open to readers: mirrors, in which they can see reflections of themselves in the books they read, and sliding glass doors through which they can enter other worlds and cultures. Mirrors are present when respondents read books containing people similar to themselves. Examples include medical students in Piccoli et al's (2003) study stating that their preferences are books about doctors, and Nepalese students in Shankar et al's (2008) study reading in their native tongue, which enabled them to find themselves in their reading. Readers everywhere, surely need to be able to choose from within an array of interesting books in which they can see themselves reflected there. To adapt Bishop's (1990) words, where will Arab readers find themselves? "Where will they find their mirrors?"

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study shows that the first-year female Emirati university students in this study have found many sliding glass doors in their wide variety of reading choices, contrary to the widely held belief that “Arabs don’t read”, but it also strongly suggests that they lack mirrors. The fledgling Emirates Publishers Association is working hard to address this omission and identifies as one of its goals to publish more high-quality Arabic texts, admitting, “The industry still has a far way to go in meeting increased demand for Arabic content” (p.10). Such an increase will greatly aid the many local initiatives that are currently being undertaken to promote a love of reading among both the local population and the Arab world in general.

It is hoped that studies such as this will help us move away from any expectation of homogeneity when referring to college students’ reading choices or recommending books for them to read. Future studies could perhaps investigate the reading preferences of male college students using a more representative sample, and students’ reasons for their book choices. Perhaps the most accurate approach to investigating students’ reading preferences may be to look simply at the books they have read. While it is true that we do not always read what we prefer, over a period of time in a large-scale investigation such as the one which contributed the data reported here, actual reading choices are more likely to offer proof of reading preferences in all categories. That is what this study provides: proof of students’ reading choices.

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