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FICTION READING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THEORY OF MIND IN YOUNG ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

The connection between narrative engagement and social cognition has long been in the centre of the psychological research, but the specific impact of long-term preferences in reading on multidimensional empathy is a complex field. The dissertation will study the association between primary reading behavior, namely the dichotomy between narrative fiction and informational non-fiction, and the level of empathy in young adults between the age of 18 and 30. By using a comparative cross-sectional study design, 60 respondents were grouped on their self-reported preferences in reading and their results were evaluated using the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI).

The paper assesses three main facets of empathy Empathic Concern, Perspectives taking, and Personal Distress. It aimed at determining the existence of relationship between frequent consumption of fictional stories and increased affective and cognitive empathy compared to an inclination to use non-fictional content.

KEYWORDS: *Narrative Engagement, Social Cognition, Narrative Fiction, Informational Non-fiction, Empathy, Young Adults, Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), Empathic Concern, Perspective-taking, Personal Distress, Social-emotional Growth.*

INTRODUCTION

Social cognition deals with how we think of other people and the way we interpret their behavior and intentions.In a study Ogoshi (2014) finds that we begin to acquire these skills at a tender age when we learn how to make sense out of the facial expression, body language, and the tone of the voice.The system of empathy is two-fold: affective empathy, the emotional response to the situation of another person which is innate and cognitive empathy where it is possible to understand the point of view of another person without always sharing the emotions as stated in a research by Owens (2017) and Ratka (2018). Empathy is an emotion that contributes to compassion and cognitive empathy makes us make rational social decisions stated in a paper by Decety & Yoder (2015) Lehmann (2022). In the modern society, fiction reading is like a social brain insulation. Digital life provides us with shallow, superficial information and results in making snap judgments and stereotypes(Shanmugasundaram & Tamilarasu, 2023; Yousef et al., 2025). Stories do the opposite by providing the rich, full background to make you genuinely consider the way someone else perceives the world. In our case, fiction replaces self-centric thinking with allocentric thinking, which recognizes that other individuals are indeed entitled to having a legitimate mental state(Castano et al., 2020; Chavez et al., 2025).

The following are a few studies that examine the relationship between reading fiction and Theory of Mind-

THE THEORY UNDERPINNING NARRATIVE FICTION

The abstract model of the way fiction shapes human psychology is built around the processes of empathy by the story and perspective-taking. According to Coplan (2004), narrative fictions, in their characterization and narrative techniques, encourage viewers to take part in an imagining process. This enables an emotive response to the emotional condition of a character without the viewer losing his or her perspective. Suzanne Keen (2006, 2010) extends this theory by creating an elaborate model of the phenomenon of narrative empathy.. In contrast to the less complex forms of emotional contagion, the theory presented by Keen focuses on the reciprocal relationship between narrative structure and reader reaction that results in the development of social cognition and moral awareness.Fiction is regarded by other theorists as a kind of mental gymnasium.

ROLE OF EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON THE IMPACT OF LITERARY FICTION

The latter theories have been extensively empirically validated by Kidd and Castano (2013, 2018). Pino and Mazza (2016) confirmed this fact when their study showed that mentalizing performance had increased indeed, and only, after exposure to literary fiction and not science fiction or non-fiction, indicating that the complexity of the genre is a key to social-cognitive improvement.Expanding the scope to lifetime patterns, Mar, Oatley, and Peterson (2009) discovered that with habitual fiction readers, the score is always higher on empathy tasks.

There is additional evidence of the effect of fiction given by longitudinal and clinical studies. Van der Kleij (2025) followed teenagers throughout a number of years and discovered that attending time to narratives is correlated with social-cognitive skill development, but other factors such as vocabulary and family environment were also important.

INTERMEDIATING FACTORS AND CRITICAL VIEWS

A transformation between reading a page and empathy is not a natural process; it is meditated by certain psychological processes. According to Bal and Veltkamp (2013), the study found that a condition of empathy growth requires a degree of empathy-involving emotional transportation of a reader into the story. Likewise, Johnson et al. (2013) discovered that active mental imagery plays a critical role; readers who were told to imagine vividly scenes depicted more prosocial behavior as compared to passives readers.

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Lastly, Tirgany (2025) proposes the concept of mindfulness, which is the key mediator, indicating that the advantages fiction serves might be based on the capabilities of the reader to stay present and active throughout the reading process and not just being exposed to the text.

RESEARCH GAP

Although the connection between the storytelling fiction and the theory of mind has been well-documented , the important gap in the scholarly literature remains with respect to the subtle differences in the distinct profiles of readers in terms of affective and egoistic empathy. Even though the initial studies have mainly focused on Theory of Mind and cognitive perspective-taking, more recent ones have also ventured into specific clinical cohorts or longitudinal studies of adolescent development , currently there is no up-to-date information directly comparing general fiction and non-fiction readers on either side of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI).This gap is what the present research attempts to fill by offering a detailed comparative study of the two groups.

RATIONALE

The underlying reasons behind this study lie in the pressing need to address the so-called empathy gap that modern psychologists see as a growing crisis of the digitally-inundated societies of our time (Knoop et al., 2024; Sultan and Khan, 2025). Our social knowledge has become too shallow and fragmented, and as human interactions shift more towards digital space, where communication is short, anonymous, and subject to algorithms (Azzaakiyyah, 2023; Qureshi-Hurst, 2021). This ecological transformation comes actively to discourage the demanding mentalizing needed to understand complex human reasons, sometimes substituting profound social thinking with quick-and-easy choices and growing tribalism. been a key instrument of human learning over millennia (Kahr-Hojland, 1970; Murmann and Avraamidou, 2016). Finally, fiction can be used as a potent inoculation against the fallacy of fundamental attribution and reactive thinking and putting the study of literature as a significant issue of societal mental health, conflict management, and integrative success, by compelling readers to put themselves in the position of culturally different characters or antagonists.

METHODOLOGY

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to study the relationship between fiction reading and its impact on Empathic Concern, Perspective-taking, and Personal Distress

HYPOTHESIS

There will be a meaningful correlation between fiction reading and its impact on Empathic Concern, Perspective-taking, Personal Distress

VARIABLES

The Independent Variable : Fiction Readers
The Dependent Variables : (Perspective Taking, Empathic Concern, and Personal Distress).

SAMPLE-The study involved a total sample of 60 participants aged 18–30, divided equally into two groups (n = 30 each) based on their primary reading habits: Group A (fiction readers) and Group B (non-fiction readers).

INCLUSION CRITERIA -Participants must be young adults aged between 18 and 30 years old. Participants should not have any severe cognitive impairments or mental health that may hinder their ability to complete the survey accurately.

EXCLUSION CRITERIA -Youth not in the target age (e.g. younger than 18 years old or older than 31 years old). Individuals who are cognitively or linguistically challenged and which can affect their capacity to interpret questions. People who had no access to machines or textbooks to study it.

TOOLS

Information schedule: In this sheet information regarding the subject's age, sex, academic
qualification, time given to reading, preference of reading material.

Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI): is a multidimensional psychometric instrument that is a creation of Mark Davis (1980) comprised of 28 items that are rated on a five-point Likert scale to assess cognitive and affective empathy. In contrast to global empathy scales, IRI splits empathy into four different subscales: Perspective Taking (PT) which determines the cognitive ability to be an other in psychological perspective; Fantasy (FS), which gauges the ability to empathize with fictional characters; Empathic Concern (EC), which measures other-oriented sympathy; and Personal Distress (PD), which measures self-oriented anxiety in interpersonal situations.

PROCEDURE

This was carried out as a structured and remote, online research with the use of Google Forms to provide anonymity of participants and easy accessibility. The process had started with an Informed Consent page specifying explicitly the purpose of the research: to investigate the connection of reading patterns and social-cognitive tendencies, and making it clear that the participation in the research was voluntary and that the data will be encrypted and kept confidential according to academic standards. In order to reduce the risk of social desirability bias, the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) itself was oriented with pre-instructed rules that no answer was good or bad; to increase the validity of answers, the participants were requested to focus on the first-impression responses. After this classification, the participants were given the 28-item IRI.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis in the current study was done in SPSS. The initial calculations were descriptive statistics, which aimed to determine the mean and standard deviation of the variables to be able to see how the scores were distributed. Moreover, Pearson Product-moment correlation was performed in SPSS version 31 to apply bivariate correlation in order to study the relationship between the variables.

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RESULT AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1 represents mean and standard deviation for measures of achievement emotion across two groups of social media use.

IRI Subscale	Group	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)*
Empathic Concern	Fiction	20.97	*~4.52*
	Non-Fiction	13.97	*~5.10*
Perspective Taking	Fiction	20.17	*~4.85*
	Non-Fiction	14.87	*~5.30*
Personal Distress	Fiction	12.33	*~5.90*
	Non-Fiction	14.73	*~6.15*

Descriptive statistics of the three Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) subscales showed that Fiction readers rated higher on Empathic Concern (M-20.97), and Perspective Taking (M-13.97) when compared to Non-Fiction readers. On the other hand, the Non-Fiction readers had a greater mean score of Personal Distress (M=14.73). These average scores provide reason to believe that fiction reading can be related to increased amounts of cognitive and affective empathy.

Table 2 represents Pearson correlations between reading group and IRI subscales and the significance levels for all variables (N=60)

Variable	1. Group	2. EC	3. PT	4. PD
1. Group (1=Fic, 2=NF)	—			
2. Empathic Concern (EC)	-.809**	—		
3. Perspective Taking (PT)	-.498**	.603**	—	
4. Personal Distress (PD)	.248	-.260*	.054	—

Note: * Significantly Correlated at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Note: ** Significantly correlated at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Negative correlations with "Group" indicate higher scores for the Fiction group (coded as 1).

The Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationship between the reading group and the level of empathy. There was a very strong negative correlation between Group and Empathic Concern, and a moderate to strong negative correlation with Perspective Taking .These negative values show that there is an overall decline in the empathy scores of the participants when they switch from Group 1 (Fiction) to Group 2 (Non-Fiction).

Table 3 displays summary of hypothesis status-

Hypothesis	Description	Pearson Correlation (r)	Significance (p)	Outcome
H1	Frequent fiction reading is positively associated with Empathic Concern.	**-.809^****	**<.001**	**Supported**
H2	Frequent fiction reading is positively associated with Perspective Taking.	**-.498****	**<.001**	**Supported**
H3	Frequent fiction reading is negatively associated with Personal Distress.	**.248**	**.056**	**Marginally Significant Trend**

This statistical analysis presented clear evidence of the main objectives of this study. The outcome of Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 shows a strong and very significant correlation between preference of fiction and the high levels of affective and cognitive empathy.

In Hypothesis 3, although the correlation trended in the direction predicted, that non-fiction readers might be more likely to experience higher levels of Personal Distress, the value fell short of the conventional level of statistical significance (p =.056).

DISCUSSION

The aim of the current research was to establish whether cognitive and affective profiles could change depending on the long-term exposure to fictional and non-fictional storytelling. The empirical results indicate that the relationship between reading practices and empathy is statistically significant, implying that fiction reading can be seen as a social-cognitive conditioning. The empathetic arsenal that readers of fiction seemingly build seems to be much more resilient than that of readers who read more fact-friendly materials. The mean scores in these areas were higher in the fiction group than in the non-fiction group, points to the fact that engagement with the narrative promotes the warmth needed to be caring, and the cognitive flexibility needed to comprehend different perspectives. The results all point to a higher ability of fiction readers to employ empathic concern and perspective-taking than non-fiction readers. After all, literature, by its role in being a safe social simulator, fills the gap between the self and the other and provides a critical instrument to building a more resilient and empathetic world in an increasingly polarized world.

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