

What do we feel when we read: Interpretation of Results of the Readers' Survey

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Abstract: This study combines reader-response theory, affect theory, and embodied aesthetics to examine how readers engage with the emotional aspects of literature. Taken together, these theories suggest that literary reading is an affective, embodied, and culturally embedded activity. Memories, personal contexts, and bodily responses are integral to the reading process, not just peripheral phenomena. To substantiate these insights, I developed an online survey with six closed-ended questions focusing on aspects of the reading experience: (1) how often readers recall personal memories, (2) whether story or style more significantly influences emotional impact, (3) the persistence of emotional effects, (4) the role of cultural background and life experience, (5) the effect of current events, and (6) whether reading is seen as purely cognitive or also embodied and emotional. The analysis of the survey results reveals several consistent patterns regarding how men and women experience the emotional impact of literary reading.

Keywords: reading experience, survey, emotions, gendered reading, memories

Theoretical standpoint

The present study situates itself at the intersection of reader-response theory, affect theory, and embodied aesthetics in order to explore how readers experience the emotional dimensions of literature. Literature is not only symbolic, but it is also alive and realised through embodied experience. Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique* (2015) stresses the importance of the reader's emotional responses in interpreting meaning. She advocates that literary criticism should go beyond revealing hidden truths and encourage a constructive dialogue with the text, so that the reader's emotions can shape their understanding of the text. From the perspective of reader-response theory, reading is not a unidirectional act of consuming a fixed text but a dynamic interaction between text and reader. Wolfgang Iser's notion of the "implied reader" (*The Act of Reading*, 1978) highlights that literary meaning emerges through the filling of interpretive gaps, an activity shaped by the reader's own experiences. Similarly, Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory (*The Reader, the Text, the Poem*, 1978) posits that the meaning of a literary work arises in the transaction between a particular reader and a particular text, in a specific context. Within this theoretical framework, recollections of personal memories or associations with lived experience are not peripheral but essential to the literary work's meaning.

Affect theory extends this model by emphasizing how literature generates not only cognitive but also emotional and bodily responses. Marco Caracciolo argues in *The Experientiality of Narrative* (2014) that literature is more than an abstract system of signs - it is an experiential practice influenced by the reader's sensorimotor and cognitive interactions. The idea that narratives are experienced rather

than merely processed supports the notion that readers simulate perceptual and physical experiences rather than simply imagining the worlds of stories (Caracciolo, 100). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (*Touching Feeling*, 2003) emphasizes the reparative and affective dimensions of reading, highlighting how texts generate intensities that resist purely rational analysis. To develop this further, I will borrow the terminology of Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (2006), who in his text on aesthetic experience presents what he calls the *presence effects* - chills, atmospheres, or moods that saturate the reader's body in ways that escape semantic explanation - which are intimate feelings, impressions, and images that are produced by our consciousness and that are inaccessible to us in our historically specific everyday world - a content of aesthetic experiences. (Gumbrecht, 2006: 305) Joshua Landy notes that the value of fiction lies not in conveying explicit moral lessons or factual knowledge, but in enhancing and developing our cognitive abilities. In *How to Do Things with Fictions* (2012), he describes certain literary works as "formative fictions" that offer readers mental exercise rather than direct instruction. These works develop essential skills such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and self-reflection. For Landy, the importance of fiction goes beyond its narrative content; it also influences the reader through its structural elements, teaching individuals how to navigate complex ideas, embrace uncertainty, and expand their intellectual capacities, much as exercise strengthens the body. These accounts make visible the embodied dimension of literary response, which is particularly relevant to survey items that explore whether reading is perceived as a purely mental or a bodily-emotional activity.

In reading literature, the expression of emotions occurs through a

complex interplay of cognitive judgment, affective empathy, activation of personal memory, and culturally mediated interpretation. Cognitive theories and neuroaesthetic research demonstrate that readers actively engage with literary texts. In reading, the emotional cues of a text combine with an individual's affective predispositions to create a subjective emotional experience (Lüdtke et al., 2014; Jacobs, 2015). The mood empathy hypothesis assumes that readers not only perceive but also internally replicate the moods expressed in poetry, thereby emphasising the situational and experiential aspects of literary affect (Lüdtke et al., 2014). The appreciation of literature depends on readers' use of knowledge derived from their personal experiences. This cognitive process is called personal resonance. Memories of personal experiences and culturally grounded expectations are fundamental in forming emotional resonance, as highlighted by studies on the activation of autobiographical memories during reading (Larsen and László, 1990). From a cognitive perspective, liking something can activate broader neural networks responsible for emotion regulation and memory retrieval, drawing on deeper personal and cultural schemas (Larsen and László, 1990). Literary studies show that the process of reading can enhance these differentiated experiences. While a well-crafted narrative with its cumulative aesthetic effect can trigger a deep emotional experience, expressions of liking can result from enjoying the style or readability of a text without the deeper emotional commitment associated with love (Hogan, 2011; Papp-Zipernovszky et al., 2021). A deepened emotional experience during reading can lead to lasting emotional experiences that reflect the complexity of love. In contrast, liking is often associated with more superficial processing, where the emotional experience is fleeting and primarily guided by the text's immediate aesthetic qualities (Tilmatine et al.,

2024).

Finally, aesthetic and sociocultural perspectives frame reading as a practice embedded in wider cultural contexts. Arnold Berleant (2005; 2017) develops the concept of *aesthetic engagement*, which stresses that aesthetic experience is participatory, embodied, and socially embedded. Martha Nussbaum (*Poetic Justice*, 1995) argues that literature fosters moral imagination by cultivating empathy, suggesting that cultural background and life experience strongly mediate interpretation. Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction* (1984) adds a sociological lens, showing how cultural capital and habitus shape patterns of taste and interpretation. He sees taste as a marker of class (Bourdieu, 1984: 2). Wendy Griswold argues that cultural meanings emerge from the interaction between audiences and cultural objects, which are significantly shaped by their social context. In her article *The Fabrication of Meaning* (1987), she suggests that cultural objects, such as novels, and the individuals who engage with them create a collaborative framework for the development of meaning, not just for its reception.

Taken together, these theories suggest that literary reading is best understood as an affective, embodied, and culturally situated practice. Readers' memories, life contexts, and bodily reactions are not marginal epiphenomena but constitutive of the act of reading itself. This provides a solid conceptual foundation for quantitatively examining demographic differences—especially gender and age—in reported emotional responses to literature.

Empirical structure

The empirical part of this study is based on a quantitative survey

designed to explore how readers describe the emotional and embodied dimensions of literary reading. The survey consisted of six closed-ended questions addressing distinct aspects of reading experience: (1) the frequency of recalling personal memories, (2) the relative importance of story versus style for emotional impact, (3) the presence of lasting emotional effects, (4) the role of cultural background and life experience, (5) the influence of current events, and (6) the perception of reading as a purely cognitive or also an embodied and emotional activity. In addition, participants provided demographic information on gender and age group, which served as independent variables in the analysis.

The survey was distributed online and completed by voluntary participants who read primarily in the Slovenian language. It was completed by 159 participants. While the sample is not representative of the general population, the recurrence of similar patterns in the responses suggests that the data had reached a degree of saturation. In qualitative and survey-based research, such repetition can indicate that the sample is becoming exhausted in terms of variability, meaning that additional participants would likely reinforce existing trends rather than introduce substantially new perspectives. The sample included a range of age groups (18–30, 30–40, 40–50, 50–60, 60–70, 70–80, 80+) and both male and female respondents, with women forming the majority. Regarding the global trends in reading, the gender difference was expected. Multiple studies across diverse populations have consistently shown that women are more likely to read than men, in terms of reading frequency, preference for fiction, and overall book consumption. For example, in the United States, the gender gap in fiction reading remained steady over a decade: in 2022, 46.9% of women but only 27.7% of men read novels or short stories in

the past year (Iyengar, 2025). A 2025 iScience analysis of the American Time Use Survey revealed a persistent difference in leisure reading, with 18.6% of women versus 13.7% of men reading for pleasure (Bone, Sonke, & Fancourt, 2025). Also, other studies around the world (readers from USA, readers from Philippines, International students in China) consistently show that women favor fiction and read for entertainment more often, whereas men lean toward informational genres such as newspapers, biographies, or factual books (Thums, Artelt, & Wolter, 2021; Milal, Jannah, Sa'adah, & Fitria, 2021; Hu et al., 2023). In Slovenia, several editions of the *Knjiga in bralci* surveys shed light on national reading patterns. While neither report provides a direct gender breakdown, they offer insights into reading frequency and book consumption trends. The 2024 edition of the survey showed a modest increase in reading trends: non-readers decreased from 49% to 42%, occasional readers increased, and regular readers remained stable at approximately 13% (Gerčar, Kovač, Blatnik, & Rugelj, 2024). It also showed that fiction for adults remains the most commonly read genre among leisure readers, followed by practical and factual literature. Although the Slovenian data does not yet differentiate by gender, the sustained prevalence of fiction among readers suggests that, aligning with broader international trends, women may again comprise the larger share of fiction readers. Future editions of the *Knjiga in bralci* surveys (survey is held every five years) with gender-disaggregated data would be valuable for confirming this hypothesis.

To explore gendered differences in emotional responses to literature, the survey data underwent quantitative cross-tabulation and descriptive analysis. Responses were first extracted and organized into categorical variables representing six thematic areas: memories,

emotional impact, lasting effects, cultural background, influence of current events, and nature of reading. The data were then grouped by gender to allow comparative analysis of responses. Then I created data visualizations to identify patterns across questions. This approach allowed for the detection of both subtle and obvious gender differences, such as women's stronger association of reading with emotion and embodiment versus men's tendency to see reading as a cognitive activity. I interpreted percentages qualitatively within the context of the theoretical framework, rather than as population estimates, since the sample was non-representative and voluntarily composed. This combined statistical and interpretive method provided a solid empirical foundation for connecting quantitative patterns to theoretical ideas. This design enables us to bring empirical evidence to longstanding debates about whether literary reading is primarily cognitive or affective, disembodied or embodied, universal or culturally situated.

The results

The analysis of the survey results revealed several consistent patterns regarding how men and women experience the emotional impact of literary reading. Although the dataset is not representative of the general population, it provides sufficient grounds to identify meaningful trends within the sample.

A first area of difference emerged in the responses to the question of whether readers recall personal memories when moved by a literary work. Both men and women frequently reported this phenomenon. However, women were somewhat more likely to select the option "*always*", whereas men more often opted for "*sometimes*". This suggests that autobiographical memory plays a key role for both

genders, but women tend to draw on personal associations more consistently. This pattern implies that women might engage in a more introspective reading style, where literary experience becomes linked with self-reflection and personal stories. The finding aligns with Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (1978), which views reading as a reciprocal process where the text and the reader’s lived experience work together to create meaning. According to Rosenblatt, the reader’s affective and experiential background serves as an interpretive lens that highlights certain aspects of the text while downplaying others. Similarly, Iser’s concept of “filling the gaps” (1978) highlights the reader’s active role in completing unclear parts of the text through imagination and memory. In this context, the greater use of autobiographical memory among women can be seen as a form of aesthetic participation—transforming reading into a deeply personal, emotionally engaging experience.

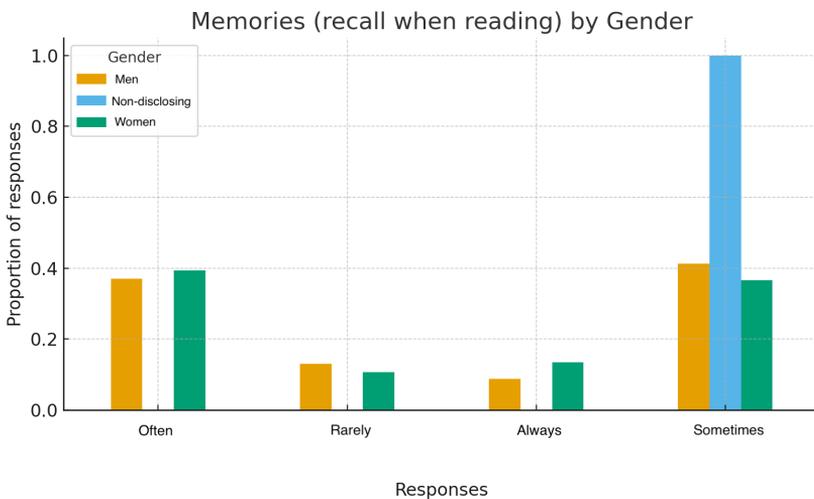


Figure 1: Memories when reading

A more noticeable gender difference was seen in responses to the

question about the source of emotional impact—whether it stems primarily from the story or from the style. Women tended to emphasize “both equally”, indicating a balance between narrative content and aesthetic form. Men, by contrast, leaned more heavily toward “story”, privileging plot and events over stylistic qualities. This difference shows a subtle but meaningful distinction in how men and women perceive the mechanisms of literary affect. Women’s balanced responses may indicate a heightened sensitivity to the interplay between what is told and how it is told. Men’s stronger focus on story may reflect a more linear and content-oriented engagement, where affect is derived chiefly from narrative progression or identification with events and characters. These differences can be understood through Bourdieu’s (1984) framework of cultural dispositions, suggesting that interpretive preferences may reflect broader, socially constructed orientations toward cultural goods. The tendency to value form and texture alongside content suggests a cultivated mode of reading. At the same time, Sedgwick’s (2003) notion of *reparative reading*, a form of attention oriented toward texture, nuance, and affective possibility, resonates with the female pattern of integrating form and content. This reparative orientation situates emotional reading as an act of openness rather than mastery, allowing literature to be experienced as a dynamic aesthetic event rather than a closed narrative structure.

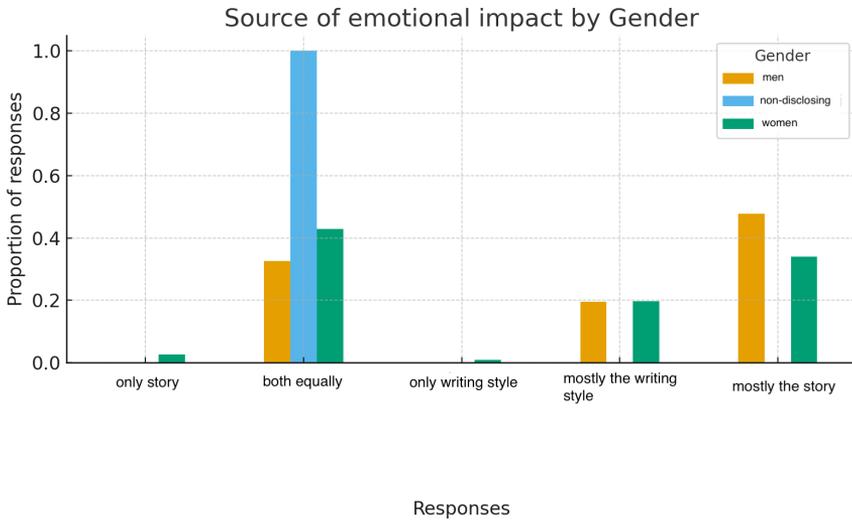


Figure 2: Source of emotional impact

When asked about lasting emotional effects, both genders responded mostly positively, with 92% of women and 89% of men indicating that a literary work left lasting traces on their mood, perspective, or thinking. Here, the gender gap was minimal, suggesting that literature’s long-term transformative power is broadly shared across demographic groups. The widespread acknowledgment of such enduring effects, regardless of gender, highlights literature’s ability to serve as a shared emotional medium—one that connects readers through feelings and reflections that extend beyond the reading experience. In this way, literature becomes both a personal and collective space of transformation, where emotional experiences are linked with ethical and existential growth. This aligns with Gumbrecht’s (2006) idea of presence effects, where literature creates atmospheres, moods, and emotional intensities that last beyond the act of reading and stay embedded in daily life. These effects show literature’s ability to generate not just

fleeting emotional responses but also ongoing emotional impressions—lingering feelings that influence the reader’s continuous view of the world. This also matches Laundry’s (2012) idea of “formative fictions,” where he sees literature as mental exercise rather than direct teaching. This way of reading helps develop critical skills, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness.

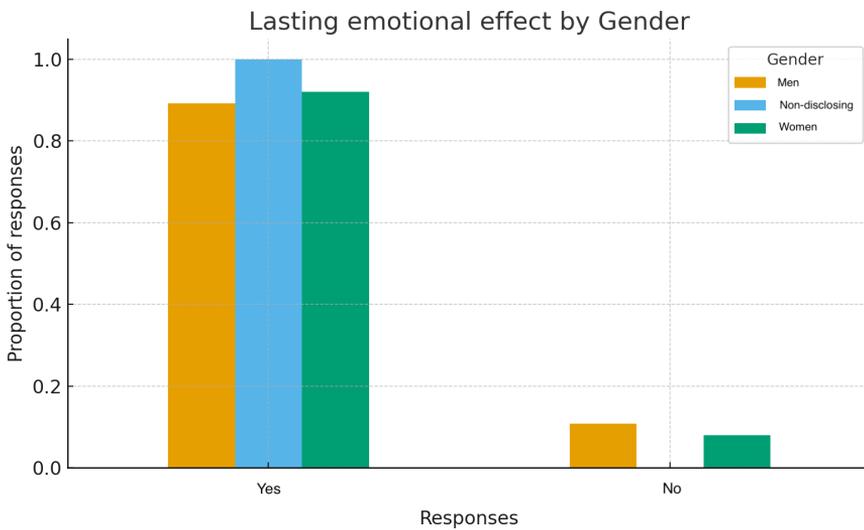


Figure 3: Lasting emotional effect

By contrast, sharper distinctions re-emerged in relation to cultural background and current events. Women more often answered that their cultural and personal contexts strongly influenced how they interpreted a text, while men were more likely to downplay these factors. Similarly, women tended to perceive contemporary events—whether domestic or global—as shaping their reading experiences more than men did. This suggests that women situate literature more readily within broader socio-cultural frames, whereas men more frequently treat it as an autonomous object of interpretation. Such

results directly engage with Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus, which explains how cultural background shapes patterns of interpretation, and with Berleant's (2005, 2017) notion of aesthetic engagement as a relational process embedded in context. The gendered variation underscores that recognition of cultural embeddedness itself may be a socially shaped disposition. This finding also situates women's responses closer to what Sedgwick (2003) calls reparative reading, a mode attuned to external contexts and affective resonances. By contrast, men's responses reflect a more autonomous or formalist stance, treating literature as separate from current realities. These orientations reflect a long-standing tension in literary theory between contextualist and text-centered approaches, here manifested in gendered reading practices.

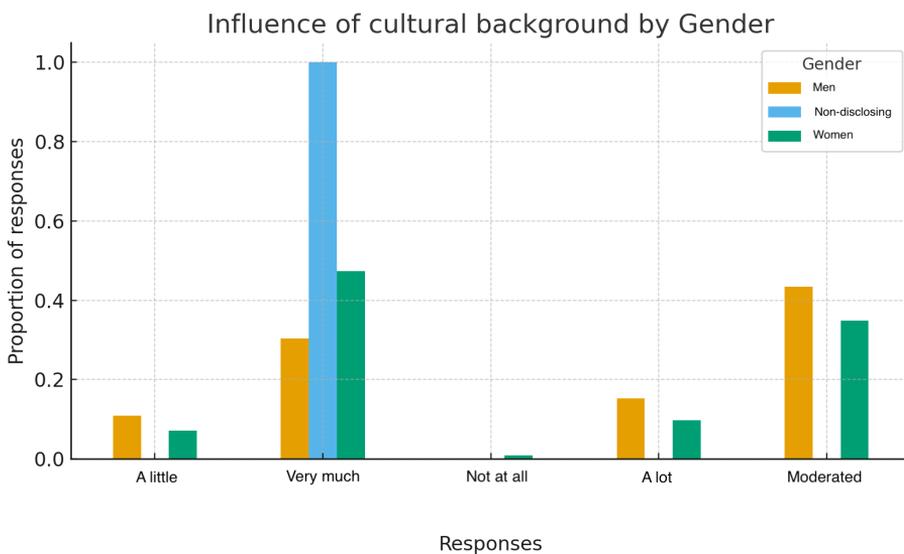


Figure 4: Influence of cultural background

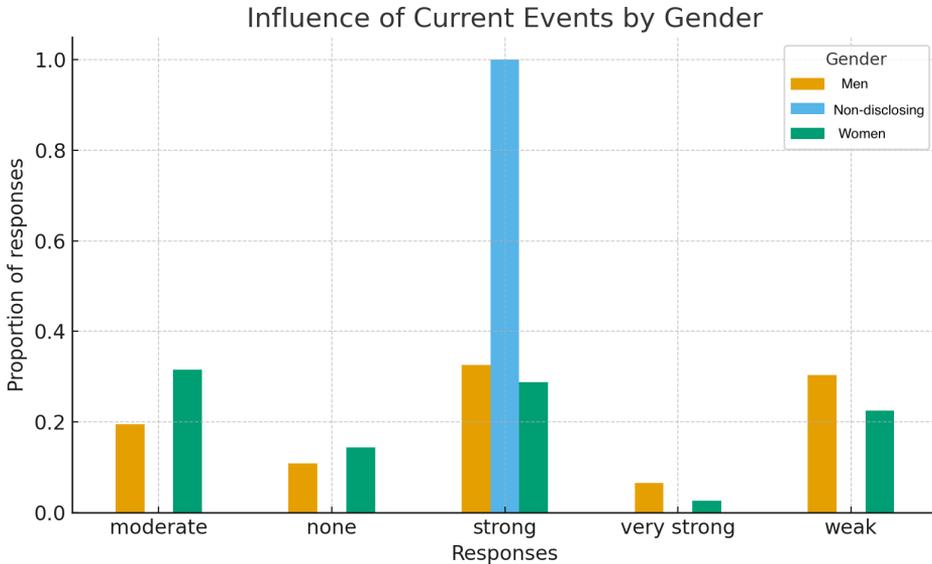


Figure 5: Influence of cultural events

The divergence appeared in responses to the final question on the nature of reading. Women in the sample were more likely to describe reading as either balanced—combining cognitive, emotional, and bodily dimensions—or as mostly emotional/physical. Men also tended to frame reading as a mostly balanced activity. However, they were more often emphasizing intellectual engagement over affective or embodied responses. This divergence resonates with the theoretical perspectives of reader-response and affect theory. Rosenblatt’s transactional model (1978) underscores that meaning emerges through the interplay of text and reader, including emotional and experiential input, while Sedgwick (2003) and Gumbrecht (2006) highlight how affective intensities and presence effects are constitutive of reading rather than incidental. The tendency of women to report reading as balanced or embodied supports these frameworks by showing how readers themselves

articulate literature as more than a mental exercise—it is a felt, situated practice. Conversely, the male tendency to privilege cognition aligns more closely with a traditional, text-centered view of literature, echoing Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of cultural dispositions that shape interpretive stances. Taken together, the results suggest that gendered orientations toward reading reflect broader theoretical debates: whether literature is to be understood primarily as a cognitive object or as an embodied, affective, and socio-cultural event.

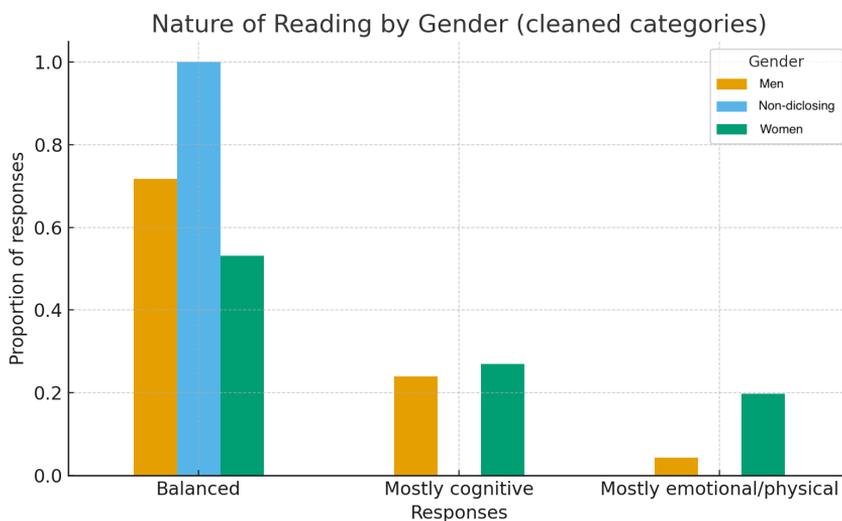


Figure 6: Nature of reading

Conclusion

The findings of this study confirm that literary reading is not just a mental exercise but also an emotional, embodied, and contextually grounded activity. The survey responses show that readers consistently rely on autobiographical memory, experience deep emotional resonances, and see literature as intertwined with their

cultural backgrounds and current realities. These findings align closely with reader-response theory, which highlights the interactive relationship between reader and text (Rosenblatt, Iser), and with affect theory, which emphasizes the physical and emotional aspects of engaging with literature (Sedgwick, Gumbrecht, Caracciolo). They also support aesthetic and sociocultural theories (Berleant, Nussbaum, Bourdieu, Griswold), which argue that meaning develops within social and cultural environments and is influenced by dispositions and embodied participation.

Gendered patterns in the survey responses further clarify these theoretical claims. Women in the sample tended to balance cognitive, emotional, and embodied perspectives, framing literature within broader social and cultural contexts and describing literary reading as an experience that simultaneously involves thought, feeling, and sensory engagement. Their answers often positioned literature within wider social, cultural, and ethical frameworks, indicating an understanding of reading as a practice that is both personally affecting and socially significant. Men, on the other hand, more frequently adopted a primarily cognitive approach, viewing reading as an intellectual or analytical activity focused on comprehension and interpretation rather than emotional immersion. These perspectives reflect long-standing theoretical debates—whether literature should be approached as an autonomous, text-focused object, as argued in formalism and structuralism, or as a lived, emotionally charged, and socially embedded practice, as argued by reader-response, affect theory, and cultural aesthetics. The survey results demonstrate that contemporary reading practices cannot be easily categorized into purely cognitive or purely emotional domains. Instead, they occupy a continuum of interpretive approaches shaped by socialization,

education, and personal experience. The findings thus call for a reevaluation of literary engagement as a diverse and interconnected practice, where cognition and affect, autonomy and context, coexist in a dynamic tension rather than mutually exclude each other.

The implications go beyond this study. For reading practices, the results emphasize the importance of recognizing emotion and embodiment as central to interpretation, encouraging readers to engage with texts not only analytically but also with openness to emotional and personal resonance. For teaching, they promote pedagogical strategies that build links between literature, students' real-life experiences, and contemporary cultural events, thereby cultivating empathy, critical self-reflection, and moral imagination. For literary analysis, they support moving past purely critical or cognitive approaches toward methods that incorporate emotional, embodied, and sociocultural aspects. This approach not only enhances our understanding of literature's influence but also redefines reading as a crucial practice for intellectual, emotional, and ethical development.

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