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Reading Habits of Church-Active LDS Women

Marianne Appleton and A. Garr Cranney

Reading research about members of the LDS church is scarce. While scattered and fragmentary data exist from unpublished studies, little has been made available to public view. These studies cover diverse subjects such as reading skills of missionaries, readability levels of Church materials and scripture, description–evaluations of Church literacy projects, family scripture reading practices, comprehension of Church materials in different languages, reading problems in seminary populations, and the reading habits of Brigham Young University students. Except for the original survey by Appleton on which this study is based,¹ however, we are aware of no research, published or unpublished, on the reading habits of LDS adults that is comparable to the several cross-sectional surveys of the reading habits of North American adults of varied socio-economic and educational backgrounds. These surveys tend to produce uniform results: women between the ages of 21 and 40 who are housewives and who are in the highest income brackets make up the largest group of readers.² In view of this predominance of women readers, we thought it might be interesting to survey selected North American LDS women to discover what they read, how much time they spend reading, and where their reading material was obtained, and to relate this data to characteristics of the group, including age, education, employment, income, marital status, length of Church membership, and children in the home.

For the survey, a 21-item forced-choice questionnaire was constructed which asked for information about reading during the

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¹R. Marianne Appleton, "Reading Habits of Selected Mormon Women from Ten Geographical Areas in North America" (research project, Brigham Young University School of Library and Informational Sciences, August 1981).

²Extensive reviews of the adult reading habit literature may be found in John Y. Cole and Carol S. Gold, eds., *Reading in America 1978* (Melbourne, Fla.: John Wiley, 1979) and Larry J. Mikulecky, Nancy L. Shanklin, and David C. Caverly, "Adult Reading Habits, Attitudes, and Motivations: A Cross Sectional Study," *Monographs in Teaching and Learning*, 2 (Bloomington: Indiana University, School of Education, June 1979).

previous 12 months (1980–81). The questionnaire was pretested on three occasions before it was put into final form. Then, with bishopric permission, the questionnaires were distributed in ward Relief Society meetings to be completed at home. Of the 233 questionnaires distributed, 149 or 64 % were returned. Because of the circumstances in which the survey was conducted, all of the respondents were assumed to be active members of the LDS church. The completed questionnaires (which were anonymous) were marked as to geographical area and numerically coded. Then the information was transferred to punch cards and the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data collected. The Frequencies subprogram was used to determine numbers and percentages. The Crosstabs subprogram was used to measure the association of one variable to another. The data from each geographical area were also examined and compared.

Ten North American geographical areas representing Canada and the United States were chosen for the sample. They included the North, South, East, and West, and large, medium, and small cities and towns. No rural areas were studied. The specific areas represented and the percent of the total returns received from each were Calgary, Alberta, 13 %; Houston, Texas, 4 %; Idaho Falls, Idaho, 15 %; Kamloops, British Columbia, 12 %; Kenora, Ontario, 3 %; Salt Lake City, Utah, 8 %; Santa Rosa, California, 10 %; Scarsdale, New York, 15 %; Provo, Utah, 14 %; and Yakima, Washington, 8 %.

The age distribution of the group included 21 % in the 18–25 age bracket, 38 % in the 26–40 group, 31 % between 41 and 60, and 11 % over 61 years of age. Of the respondents, 31 % had earned a four-year college degree or more, 34 % had some higher education, and 21 % had completed high school. For those with post-secondary education, 43 % listed education as a major field of study, 14 % science, 19 % business, and 32 % other fields. Seventy-two percent of the total group were married, and 28 % were single, widowed, or divorced. Total annual gross income in the homes (including spouse income) was in these ranges: under \$10,000, 23 %; \$10,000–\$20,000, 26 %; \$21,000–\$40,000, 36 %; \$41,000–\$80,000, 13 %; and over \$80,000, 3 % . Twelve percent of the respondents had been members of the Church for less than 10 years, 19 % for 11–20 years, and 70 % for more than 20 years. Thirty-five percent of the sample were employed for pay out of the home, and 57 % were not employed. Among those working for pay, 35 % indicated that they worked less than 30 hours per week, 39 % worked 31–40 hours, and 16 % worked more than 40

hours per week. Respondents with children in the home under 18 years of age comprised 66 % of the sample.³

How much time was spent reading? Tables 1, 2, and 3 present the data. Most of the women read both generally and in the scriptures.

Excluding scripture reading, 60 % of the sample read more than 20 hours per month, and 36 % spent 1–10 hours per month reading (Table 1). Sixty-five percent of the respondents read the scriptures 1–10 hours per month, or about 20 minutes a day at most (Table 2). Table 3 relates general and scripture reading time. It indicates, for example, that 23.4 % of those who read generally 1–10 hours per month also read the scriptures 1–10 hours in the same period, and that 21.4 % of those who read 1–10 hours generally also read the scriptures 11–20 hours per month.

Apart from the scriptures, what did the group read? Ninety-seven percent read the *Ensign*, 45 % the *New Era*, and 69 % the *Church News*. The most commonly read non-Church magazine was *Reader's Digest*; 67 women (45 %) listed it. *Family Circle* and *Good Housekeeping* were each listed 36 times (24 %), and *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Woman's Day* were each listed 35 times (24 %). *Time* was listed 30 times (20 %), *National Geographic* 28 (19 %), and *Newsweek* 24 (16 %). In all, 125 magazine titles were mentioned, ranging from professional journals to recreation magazines.

The single most frequently read Church book was *Spencer W. Kimball*, which was mentioned 43 times (29 %). *Camilla* was listed 29 times (20 %) and *The Miracle of Forgiveness* 23 times (15 %). Some Mormon classics, such as *Jesus the Christ* and *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, were mentioned several times, as were a number of popular Mormon fiction titles of the period, including *Sam*, *Charly*, and *The Bishop's Horserace*. The non-Mormon fiction books most often listed were *Shogun*, *My Antonia*, *Kane and Abel*, and *Masada*. Many other best sellers of the period (1980–81) were mentioned as well as older titles such as *Gone with the Wind* and *Pride and Prejudice*. There was a great diversity of types of fiction: literary, mystery, historical romance, humor, science fiction, and juvenile. There were only two titles which would be considered Gothic romances. The nonfiction books listed indicated a wide range of interests in subjects such as finance, history, science, politics, poetry, and genealogy. One topic more common than others was the family, including such areas as birth, death, rearing children, gardening, cooking, marriage,

³Characteristics of the sample are summarized and are rounded off to the nearest percentage point. Tables in Appleton's original study include more detailed data.

TABLE 1
General Reading Per Month Excluding Scripture

Amount of Time	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Sample
Under 1 hour	6	4.1
1 to 10 hours	53	35.8
11 to 20 hours	45	30.4
Over 20 hours	44	29.7
Total	148	100.0

TABLE 2
Scripture Reading Per Month

Amount of Time	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Sample
Under 1 hour	21	14.4
1 to 10 hours	95	65.1
11 to 20 hours	20	13.7
Over 20 hours	10	6.8
Total	146	100.0

divorce, and house management. The only title in this category repeated more than twice was *Orphan Train*.

Although 43 women (29 %) indicated they read only one newspaper, the majority of the women polled read more than one: 47 (32 %) read two, 25 (17 %) three, 18 (12 %) four, and 10 (7 %) reported reading five newspapers. The local newspaper was the most common one read.

In response to the question of where they obtained their reading materials, 25 (17 %) said the church library, 68 (47 %) the public library, 29 (20 %) a university or college library, 142 (99 %) their own collection, and 75 (52 %) indicated that they borrowed from someone. (These figures total more than 100 % because some women obtained materials from more than one source.)

The traditional relationship between reading and education was supported by the findings. The more education the women had, the more they read. Whereas 50 % of those with a master's degree or more read over 20 hours a month, only 25 % of those with a high school education or less read 20 hours per month. However, 64 % of these women read at least 10 hours per month, suggesting that while there is

TABLE 3

A Comparison of the Number of Hours of General Reading Per Month (V1) with the Number of Hours of Scripture Reading Per Month (V2)

Count Row Pct Col Pct Tot Pct	V1				Row Total
	Under 1 hour	1 to 10 hours	11 to 20 hours	Over 20 hours	
V2					
Under 1 hour	2 33.3 9.5 1.4	4 66.7 4.3 2.8	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	0 0.0 0.0 0.0	6 4.1
1 to 10 hours	13 25.0 61.9 9.0	34 65.0 36.2 23.4	4 7.7 20.0 2.8	1 1.9 10.0 0.7	52 35.9
11 to 20 hours	3 6.7 14.3 2.1	31 68.9 33.0 21.4	7 15.5 35.0 4.8	4 8.9 40.0 2.8	45 31.0
Over 20 hours	3 7.1 14.3 2.1	25 59.5 26.6 17.2	9 21.4 45.0 6.2	5 11.9 50.0 3.4	42 29.0
Column Total	21 14.5	94 64.8	20 13.8	10 6.9	145 100.0

a relationship between higher education and time spent reading, those without higher education still did some reading.

Marital status did not seem to have much relationship to either general or scripture reading, nor did the presence or absence of children under 18 in the home. The married women in this group read as much as the single women. Single women, however, spent slightly more time reading scripture. Women who had been members of the LDS church for more than 20 years tended to spend more time reading the scriptures than newer members: 67 % of the 20-year members read the scriptures more than 11 hours per month. The survey also indicated that many employed women found time to read. Among those who worked for 31 or more hours per week, 35 % read more than 21 hours per month, and 31 % of this same group read the scriptures up to 10 hours per month.

There was a relationship between age and amount of general reading. Of those who read more than 20 hours per month, 89 % were in the 26–60 age group, including 44 % in the 26–40 group and 45 % in the 41–60 group. However, the age of women in this study seemed to have little relationship to the number of hours of scripture reading. The largest group of women reading up to 10 hours of scripture per month was in the 26–40 age group and comprised 25 % of the total group.

In general, there seemed to be little relationship between income and amount of scripture reading. Of the women polled, 35 % were in the household gross income range of \$21,000–\$40,000; 28 % of that group read up to 10 hours of scripture per month. Those women who had a total household income of \$41,000–\$80,000 and who read over 20 hours per month of scripture were 36 % of the group in that income range.

Methodologically, the study is not without fault. The percentage of returns (64 %) was lower than desirable, and rural data were not included. In such survey research, one always wonders how data from the nonrespondents would have affected the findings. Or what if the questionnaires had been distributed in some other meeting than Relief Society? Would the results have been the same? The anonymity of the questionnaires might also have been improved. Though the questionnaires were unsigned, they were not returned in sealed envelopes. This might have intimidated some subjects, each of whom was asked to return her questionnaire to someone who was an acquaintance. Consequently, some subjects might not have returned questionnaires or might have written socially desirable but inaccurate responses. In addition, the survey relied on the memory of subjects to indicate what they had read in the previous 12 months or the past week. As every researcher knows, memory-based data are often imperfect measures. A further weakness of the study was the ranges of the scripture reading categories. More restricted ranges would have provided more useful data. Finally, though the questionnaire was piloted three times, a few items were obviously misunderstood by some respondents; such items could have been improved.

From the data of this survey, it would be possible to define a composite woman. She was between 26 and 40 years of age and had an annual gross family income between \$21,000 and \$40,000. She had attended college, majoring in education, but was not employed for pay outside her home. She was married and had children under the age of 18. She had been a member of the LDS church for more than 20 years, was currently active, and read the scriptures for about 20 minutes each

day. For about 30 minutes a day she also read a newspaper and/or magazine and/or book which she had purchased or received as a gift.

Of what significance is the study to LDS reading educators? Despite the limitations of the study, four important generalizations can be drawn. First, Church-active LDS women, at least in this sample, do follow the encouragement of the Church leaders to read the scriptures and Church periodicals. Second, apart from the specifically LDS reading material, the reading habits and tastes of this group are not markedly different from those found in non-LDS reading surveys. They read best-sellers, classics, fiction and nonfiction, and newspapers. They read the same magazines with about the same frequency as U.S. readers as a whole.⁴ Like most other adults, they prefer to read books they own rather than obtain them at the library. Third, Mormon women have similar reading habits no matter where they live in North America. Geographical location and size of community do not seem to have much bearing on either the time spent reading or the reading materials chosen. Fourth, LDS women with less than a higher education are readers. While more education generally means more reading, those with less education are reading more than would be predicted from studies of other adults of similar educational backgrounds.

When viewed in the light of LDS teachings, which emphasize the study of scriptures, "all good books," and the acquisition of learning generally, this survey is encouraging. It is to be hoped, however, that more research will be directed toward studying the reading practices of Latter-day Saints. Most educators believe that reading has an influence on thinking and on the conduct and values of life. The influence of Church membership and activity on reading, however, is much less understood. If, as commonly assumed, moral and religious values are central to Latter-day Saint life, these things should have some effect on reading choices, habits, and practices. There is a wide field open for research on these relationships. For example, do the time spent reading and the choices of reading materials correlate in any way with varying degrees of church activity and belief? Does strength of religious commitment determine what is and what is not read? How do Latter-day Saints compare with members of Protestant and Catholic groups in their reading habits? It is to be hoped that LDS reading educators and others will give more attention to the religious variable, a neglected area in adult reading research.

⁴Carma Wadley, "Periodicals Aren't on the Endangered Species List Yet," *Deseret News*, 9 June 1981, 8.