



Faculty Publications

---

2020-07-28

## The Effect of Fiction on Religious Studies Display Shelves in an Academic Library

Marissa Bischoff  
marissa\_bischoff@byu.edu

Gerrit van Dyk  
BYU, gerrit\_vandyk@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Bischoff, Marissa and van Dyk, Gerrit, "The Effect of Fiction on Religious Studies Display Shelves in an Academic Library" (2020). *Faculty Publications*. 4177.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/4177>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

# **The Effect of Fiction on Religious Studies Display Shelves in an Academic Library**

Marissa Bischoff<sup>a\*</sup> and Gerrit van Dyk<sup>b</sup>

*<sup>a</sup>Social Sciences Department, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA;*

*<sup>b</sup>Social Sciences Department, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA;*

*\*Marissa Bischoff; [marissa\\_bischoff@byu.edu](mailto:marissa_bischoff@byu.edu); 2248 Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602*

Gerrit van Dyk is the Church History, Doctrine, and Philosophy Librarian at Brigham Young University. Marissa Bischoff is the Religion and Family History Reference Supervisor at Brigham Young University.

# **The Effect of Fiction on Religious Studies Display Shelves in an Academic Library**

The religious studies librarians at Brigham Young University (BYU) began a book display research project to examine the circulation rates of religious studies titles placed on display and to specifically evaluate the impact of religious fiction on that display in an academic library. Student employees were tasked with curating the displays over several years and maintaining a spreadsheet with the titles displayed and resulting checkout rates. Religious fiction (from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saint tradition) circulated over 80% the first three years, higher than the religious nonfiction on display and the same genre in the stacks. In the final year of study when almost no fiction was displayed and a higher quantity of items were placed on the shelves, the display circulation rates fell sharply. All books on the display circulated better when there was a portion of both nonfiction and fiction and when the shelves held fewer items. The data clearly showed that religious fiction is an important genre to display in an academic library.

Keywords: academic libraries, religious fiction, book displays, religion, fiction, nonfiction, student employees, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

## **Introduction**

Book displays in libraries have been studied sporadically over the years and yielded important data on best practices and benefits. The religion librarians at BYU delegated a book display project to the reference student employees over several years. The student staff selected titles for display according to their preferences and the direction to showcase fiction about and/or by members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We sought to find the impact that fiction has on display shelves in academic

libraries. Latter-day Saint fiction<sup>1</sup> on the display shelf had an 80% and higher circulation rate over three years studied, much more than the 30-40% checkout rate of the same fiction in the stacks. The increase of circulation demonstrates the benefit of a religious fiction display in the academic library of a private, religious university. A subsequent year studied had much lower circulation rates because of a variety of factors and gave some insight into further best practices for curating a display shelf.

### **Literature Review**

Generally, library studies have shown that locating select books in a more viewable location, on a display, increases the circulation of those items. Goldhor conducted a study in 1972 by selecting 110 titles and tracking their normal circulation in the stacks for 6 months in two public libraries in neighboring cities. He then placed those same titles on special display shelves but at only one of the libraries for an additional 6-month period while also tracking those same titles in the stacks at the other library as a control (Goldhor 371). Goldhor found that the copies of the books on the display shelves more than doubled in circulation (374). The data also showed that fictional titles on display circulated to a greater degree than nonfiction (377). Baker examined some possible factors that influence why displays increase circulation including increased accessibility and visibility, and the narrowing of choices for patrons, which can mitigate information overload (237). She found that prime location was a major causal factor in display items circulating more frequently (Baker 248). Roy determined that while a book display caused an increase in circulation for those items on display, it did not

---

<sup>1</sup> In the past, this collection was typically known as Mormon fiction or Mormon literature. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints recently clarified their style guide and Latter-day Saints is preferred.

significantly increase the circulation rates of the entire collection but appeared to displace circulation from the general collection (76).

In more recent years, display studies in academic libraries for specific genres have arisen. Crenshaw created a display for music CDs and found that 65% of CDs and 50% of books placed on a librarian-curated display circulated whereas only 23% of CDs and 27% of books circulated in the control group (229). A curated display was more effective than a randomly selected display. Camacho, Spackman, and Cluff placed business related books on display and found that the titles increased in circulation by an average of 58% (114). Titles identified as low-popularity increased checkout by 323%, demonstrating the effectiveness of displays for less used items and technical titles (Camacho, Spackman, and Cluff 123). Boyd studied circulation trends after leisure reading materials were put on prominent display and found that these 500 books circulated 2,246 times over the course of his 2.5-year study; he argued that leisure-reading in an academic library is important to promote (107).

The arrangement of items on a display and on the shelf have been studied as well. Long found that face-front book displays will circulate more than spine out (152). Knowlton and Hackert determined that books with dust jackets and publisher supplied covers circulated more frequently than books with plain covers (118). Broadbent tested how shelf position correlates with usage and found that books more near the center of the shelf and nearer to eye level checked out more than books on the bottom shelf (4).

The scholarly literature has shown the effectiveness of a display to increase circulation of selected items in both academic and public libraries and the arrangement of books that allows for more checkouts. There has not been a study narrowing in on the effectiveness of religion displays specifically. Religious fiction as a genre in an

academic library has not been studied in the literature as well. The authors will discuss four years of data on a religion display to fill these gaps.

## **Background**

Brigham Young University (BYU) is a private institution, sponsored by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. BYU's primary campus is in Provo, Utah. As of the 2019-2020 academic year, it had 30,745 undergraduates and 2,766 graduate students enrolled across 187 majors, 88 master's programs and 32 doctoral programs. 95% of the student population are from the United States with 32% of those coming from Utah (Facts and Figures).

While BYU does not offer a major in religious studies, all undergraduates are required to take 14 credits (typically seven courses) of religious education courses. Most of these courses focus on the sponsoring Church, its scripture, doctrine, praxis, and history. Many of these classes have a semester project or paper. Students often create projects which involve the intersection of Church doctrine and other academic disciplines, particularly in the social sciences, as well as projects comparing other world religions with the Church. There are some religion courses targeting comparative religion specifically but none of these courses are required for graduation.

The Harold B. Lee Library (HBLL) is the main campus library. As of 2017, the HBLL had 4.9 million volumes and had a gate count of 3 million visitors (General HBLL Statistics). While the HBLL has a robust collection for Latter-day Saint titles (BX 8600s), it also has a strong collection in world religions (see Table 1 for a list of area call numbers, volumes, and circulation rates). The HBLL is an Association of Research Libraries member. Circulation rates in ARL libraries are an average of 2.83% when looking at initial checkouts in relation to the overall volume of books (Morris and

Roebuck 8-33). The comparable circulation rate for the HBLL as a whole was 5.21% (Morris and Roebuck 8-33).

The Religion/Family History (RelFamRef) section of the HBLL houses the religion collection. Three full-time professional librarians, a full-time paraprofessional reference specialist, and a team of 10 part-time undergraduate student reference employees manage the section and support faculty and student research in these two subjects (religion and family history). The student employees also help the librarians and the reference supervisor in their research and job assignments. Because the sponsoring Church has an official family history center located in the RelFamRef section, there are also 140 volunteer family history missionaries who serve in the section. These missionaries only assist campus and community patrons specifically doing genealogical work.

Early in 2014, the librarians created a display shelf in the area to highlight books in the collection. The display consisted of ten 40" shelves, allowing for 30-40 books to be displayed at any given time. Librarians placed the shelves close to the reference desk near the main doors to the area where there is a high level of traffic. Student employees were invited to assist the librarians in selecting titles and these students became the primary curators of the display shelf selections. For the first few years, only books from the BX 8600 call number range (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and schismatic groups) were selected. Of those titles all were works of literature (fiction, poetry, etc.) in the BX 8687-88 range, related to the tradition. In 2017, some nonfiction titles were added and in 2018 there was a roughly even split between fiction/literature and nonfiction titles. Since we saw a drastic decline in circulation of the titles in 2019, we decided to examine the data to propose some probable causes and explore future possibilities.

## **Methodology**

The librarian over the BX 8600 collection worked with a student to develop a workflow in which the student would be the primary curator under his direction. The student employee made decisions based on their preferences as well as the aesthetic appeal of the books. If there was no cover, the student would print out its cover found online and add the facsimile cover to the display.

The titles were placed on the shelf face-out for one to two months; titles that were not checked out in that period were swapped out for new titles. Books that checked out from the shelf were put back in the stacks after returning from the patron. Each book on the display had one opportunity for checkout in the experiment.

The student employee assigned to the display kept a detailed spreadsheet beginning in 2016 that listed the title, author, call number, date placed on the shelf, and either date checked out or date pulled off the shelf because it was not selected. It was the student's duty to update this each week by checking the integrated library system against the missing spots on the shelf to ascertain what titles were checked out. The employee would also fill those gaps on the display with new book selections.

## **Analysis**

Due to student graduation and turnover, several student employees had stewardship over this process from 2014-2019. This accounted for variance in the data and some differences in process and execution which introduced some limitations to the data. The student employees from 2016-2018 placed fewer titles on each row and did not place as many books on the back of the display shelf. This meant far fewer books were displayed at the beginning of the experiment. The student employees in the earlier years were specifically directed by the librarian to place fiction on the display. The only fictional religious works in the area and collection are from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-

day Saints tradition. This meant that the displayed items in the earlier years of the study were predominantly Latter-day Saint titles.

The student employee in 2019 was not given the guidance to place mostly fiction on the shelves, but rather was directed to place items from all the disciplines in the area including fiction. She chose to display nonfiction almost exclusively and she introduced a wider variety of religious traditions. In addition, she filled the shelves to capacity and was the most diligent about updating the spreadsheet in a timely manner and taking titles off after a month of inactivity, which resulted in a much higher volume of titles on the shelf.

In 2016, 171 books were featured on the display shelves over the course of the year. (See Table 2). All but one of these books were Latter-day Saint fiction titles. 82% of the fiction titles circulated, and the solitary nonfiction book was not checked out. In 2016, Latter-day Saint fiction titles circulated 40% in the general stacks. Thus, the circulation of fiction doubled when put on display.

In 2017, only 115 books were featured, all from the Latter-day Saint faith tradition including fiction and nonfiction. (See Table 3). There were more nonfiction titles featured during this year than in 2016, amounting to 20% of the total displayed. 92 fiction books were displayed and 87% of these were checked out. Of the 23 nonfiction books featured, 70% were checked out. These are much higher rates of circulation than the corresponding genre in the stacks. 34% of the total area Latter-day Saint fiction and nonfiction circulated. Therefore, fiction checkouts increased by 156% and nonfiction checkouts increased by 103% when titles were placed on the display.

A total of 157 titles were placed on the display throughout the course of 2018. (See Table 4). Of these, 52% were fiction titles, and 83% of them circulated. Of the nonfiction titles featured, 59% were checked out. Although most of these were Latter-

day Saint nonfiction titles, three titles were from other religions and two out of these three were checked out, or 67%. When compared with the circulation rates of their corresponding genre, fiction checkouts increased by 153% and nonfiction checkouts increased 57% when put on display.

The data in 2019 is considerably different because of the previously stated change in student employee assignment. (See Table 5). In this year, 434 books were featured on the display shelves-- triple the average of the previous three years. In a complete reversal from 2016, predominantly nonfiction titles were placed on the display and only 6 fiction titles were displayed. 50% of the fiction books were checked out and only 14.5% of the nonfiction books were checked out. From 2016-2018, the emphasis on the display shelf was Latter-day Saint titles, particularly fiction. Because of this, the circulation rates for those genres were compared. In 2019, the numbers are compared to the circulation totals for the whole area because of the different composition of the display, which attempted to be representative of the area offerings.

In 2019, the low display checkout rate of 15% was still a 26% increase from the 12% total checkout rate in the area. To look at the overall checkout rate of the display with a more comparable figure, we calculated the percentage of unique circulations in the area which totalled the number of books that checked out at least once in the year and divided that by the total number of books. As the books on the display could only circulate once, this comparison is suitable. The percentage of unique circulations was 8.3% in 2019 for the RelFamRef area. With the display increasing circulation to 15%, there was an 80.5% increase in unique checkouts when put on display instead of in the stacks. This shows that even when a display is overloaded, the items check out significantly higher than the stacks.

This study is consistent with previous studies on the subject which showed that books on display are checked out more frequently. The checkout numbers were incredibly high for years 2016-2018 but the proportion of books that were checked out fell precipitously in 2019. There are three main factors that could explain this sharp decline: the increase of nonfiction titles and near elimination of fiction, the overall marked increase of books displayed, and the increased display of non-Latter-day Saint titles which have lower checkout rates in general. All three factors had an effect to a varying degree, but it is difficult to ascertain with certainty which affected checkout rates the most because the three variables were generally introduced at the same time.

The highest percentage of books displayed were checked out in 2017 when the fewest number of items were placed on the display shelf. In 2016, when the greatest proportion of books on the shelf were fiction (99% of the total displayed), 82% were checked out, a high number but a little lower than 2017. Fiction books were consistently checked out over 80% of the time from 2016-2018. When the shelves were stuffed to capacity in 2019, the fiction (albeit a small number) checkout rate fell to 50%. Figure 1 shows the correlation between the higher quantity of books on the shelves per year and lower checkout rates. This seems to corroborate that a large factor in 2019 was the sheer number of items placed on the display. Perhaps patrons choose not to engage with the display because there are too many titles to take in.

The total amount of fiction placed makes an impact as well. In 2018, fewer fiction titles were placed as part of the whole than in previous years and the circulation rate fell quite a bit even though the total number of books on the display was comparable to 2016.

In 2019, there also was the introduction of more non-Latter-day Saint titles on the display and this was a factor in the decreased circulation. The non-Latter-day Saint

titles checkout to a lesser degree, as the area circulation rate is lower than the Latter-day Saint literature checkout rates. For example, in 2017, 34% of the Latter-day Saint material circulated whereas 12.5% of the total books in the area circulated.

Figure 2 shows that from 2017 to 2019, the more fiction there is on the display, the more that the nonfiction on display circulates. 2016 is inconclusive because there was only one nonfiction book placed. 2017 had the highest rate of nonfiction checkout from the display and had a 4:1 ratio of fiction to nonfiction. 2018 had the second highest and had an almost equal proportion of fiction and nonfiction. The lowest years for checkouts on the display in both categories, 2016 and 2019, were overwhelmingly composed of one type, fiction and nonfiction, respectively.

There is a positive correlation between the saturation of fiction and resulting display circulation rates in both fiction and nonfiction. A confounding variable is the number of items placed on display, though, which is inextricably connected here as well, because the lowest years for checkouts, 2016 and 2019, also had the greatest quantity of display items. But even with this confounding variable, the data supports our conclusion that combining fiction and nonfiction on a display yields the highest circulation rates.

The percent increase in circulation of display items from the circulation of the same genre in the area stacks was more pronounced for fiction titles. (See Figure 3). In 2017 and 2018, fiction increased in circulation 150% when put on display but nonfiction increased 104% and 57%, respectively.

## **Conclusion**

In the first three years of this study, over 80% of the Latter-day Saint religious fiction titles placed on display were checked out, a markedly high circulation rate for religion books in an academic library. When fewer fiction titles were displayed in 2019,

the circulation rate of all books declined sharply. Fiction was checked out at a higher rate than its counterparts in the stacks and to a greater degree than nonfiction.

From our data, there seems to be two main factors which impact display shelf circulation of religious materials: how much fiction is included, and the number of items on display. We found that adding fictional titles increases overall pickup of display shelf offerings. Further, the higher the ratio of fictional titles to nonfiction titles displayed, the more likely all display shelf books are to circulate, both fiction and nonfiction.

From our 2019 data, we discovered there also seems to be a limit to the number of books to display, after which the circulation drops. Anderson (25) noted that having fewer items on a display shelf helps items to sell better in a bookstore; the library display shelves may have a similar bias. A lower number of titles and less cluttered display shelves leads to higher overall circulation.

Finally, student employees were primarily responsible for curating the display and maintaining statistics on usage. They learned how to market materials in the area and gained an opportunity to explore librarianship further. However, it is clear that turnover, inexperience, and the personal preferences of these students had an adverse effect on selection, further demonstrating the need of a professional librarian in collection management activities. We anticipate librarian curation of titles might even more profoundly affect the display shelf circulation. This will need to be tested in future studies.

We gratefully acknowledge the hard work of the student employees who worked on the display research project.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, James. "Catching the Eye: Merchandising Your Shop is Paramount, Even More So at this Busy Time of Year." *The Bookseller*, 12 Dec. 2008, pp.24–25.
- Baker, Sharon L. "The Display Phenomenon: An Exploration into Factors Causing the Increased Circulation of Displayed Books." *The Library Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 3, 1996, pp. 237-257.
- Boyd, Christopher W. "Inside the Front Door: Tailoring a Leisure Reading Collection to Attract an Academic Population." *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2019, pp. 88-108.
- Broadbent, Dan. "The Highs and Lows of Physical Browsing: How Shelf Position Affects Book Usage in Academic Libraries." *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2019, pp. 1-5.
- Camacho, Leticia, Andy Spackman, and David Cluff. "Face out: The Effect of Book Displays on Collection Usage." *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship*, vol. 192, no. 2, 2014, pp. 114-124.
- Crenshaw, Clayton. "Promoting Music Library Resources—With Mixed Results." *Music Reference Services Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2014, pp. 226-236.
- "Facts and Figures." *Brigham Young University*, [www.byu.edu/facts-figures](http://www.byu.edu/facts-figures). Accessed 20 May 2020.
- Goldhor, Herbert. "The Effect of Prime Display Location on Public Library Circulation of Selected Adult Titles." *The Library Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 4, 1972 pp. 371-389.
- "General HBLL Statistics." *Harold B. Lee Library*, <https://lib.byu.edu/about/statistics/>. Accessed 20 May 2020.
- Knowlton, Steven A., and Lauren N. Hackert. "Value Added: Book Covers Provide Additional Impetus for Academic Library Patrons to Check out Books." *Library Resources & Technical Services*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2015, pp. 112-119.
- Long, Sarah P. "The Effect of Face-Front Book Display in a Public Library." *North Carolina Libraries*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1987, pp. 150-153.
- Morris, Shaneka, and Gary Roebuck. *ARL Statistics: 2016-2017*. Association of Research Libraries, 2019.
- Roy, Loriene. "Displays and Displacement of Circulation." *Collection Management*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1994, pp. 57-77.

Table 1. Volume Count and Circulation Rates by Call Number and Subject Area in RelFamRef

Call Number Range	Religious Tradition	Number of volumes (2020)	% Books that Circulated (2019)
BL 1100-1295	Hinduism	1,075	6.05%
BL 1500-1590	Zoroastrianism	148	15.54%
BL 1300-1380	Jainism	40	0.00%
BM	Judaism	7,652	5.24%
BP	Islam	5,359	9.00%
BQ	Buddhism	2,761	14.41%
BR	Christianity	21,566	7.80%
BS	The Bible	24,183	8.35%
BT	Doctrinal Theology	10,682	6.69%
BV	Practical Theology	10,785	5.23%
BX 800-4795	Catholic Church	16,005	3.49%
BX 8600-8695	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	30,815	28.23%
BX 1-799, 4796-8599, 8696-9999	Other Christian Denominations	13,765	2.60%

Table 2. 2016 Display Circulation Rates Compared

2016	Total Books	Books Checked Out	% checked out
All Books Displayed	171	140	81.87%
Fiction Books (Latter-day Saint) Displayed	170	140	82.35%
Nonfiction Books Displayed	1	0	0.00%
Fiction (Latter-day Saint) In Area	4094	1633	39.89%
Nonfiction (Latter-day Saint) in Area	21151	7113	33.63%
Entire Religion Area Collection	129824	15709	12.10%

Table 3. 2017 Display Circulation Rates Compared

2017	Total Books	Books Checked Out	% Checked Out
All Books Displayed	115	96	83.48%
Fiction Books (Latter-day Saint) Displayed	92	80	86.96%
Nonfiction (Latter-day Saint) Books	23	16	69.57%

Fiction Books (Latter-day Saint) In Area	4138	1388	33.54%
Nonfiction (Latter-day Saint) in Area	21397	7301	34.12%
Entire Religion Area Collection	131068	16397	12.51%

Table 4. 2018 Display Circulation Rates Compared

<b>2018</b>	Total Books	Books Checked Out	% Checked Out
All Books Displayed	157	112	71.34%
Fiction Books (Latter-day Saint) Displayed	81	67	82.72%
Nonfiction (mostly Latter-day Saint) Books Displayed	76	45	59.21%
Fiction Books (Latter-day Saint) In Area	4169	1365	32.74%
Nonfiction (Latter-day Saint) in Area	21668	8074	37.26%
Entire Religion Area Collection	132073	17040	12.90%

Table 5. 2019 Display Circulation Rates Compared

<b>2019</b>	Total Books	Books Checked Out	% Checked Out
All Books Displayed	434	65	14.98%
Fiction Books (Latter-day Saint) Displayed	6	3	50.00%
Nonfiction Books (mostly non-Latter-day Saint) Displayed	427	62	14.52%
Entire Religion Area Collection	133516	15845	11.87%

Figure 1. Total Books on the Display Compared to Percent Checked Out

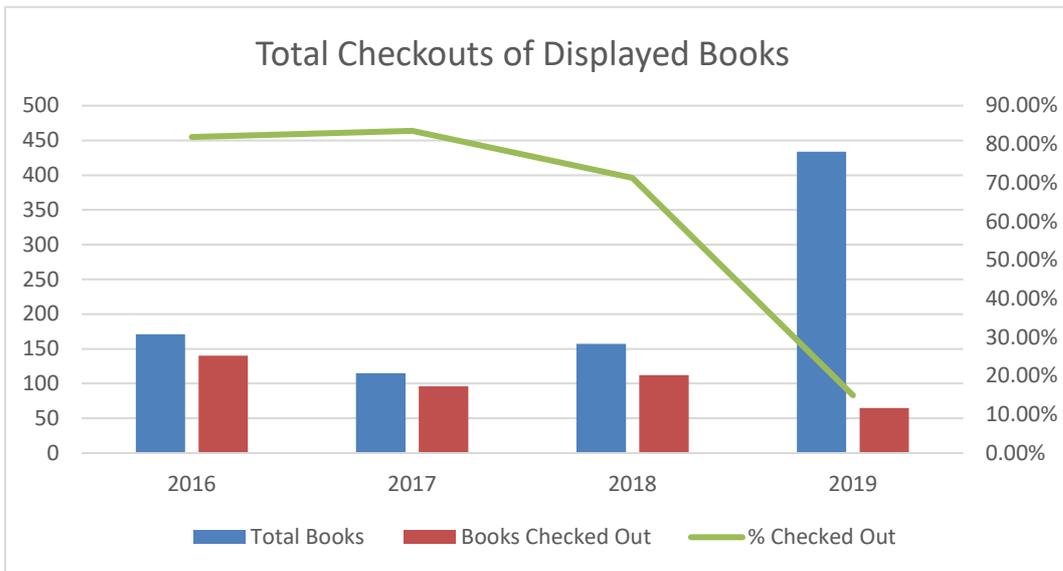


Figure 2. Total Fiction and Nonfiction Placed on Display Compared to Circulation Rates for Both

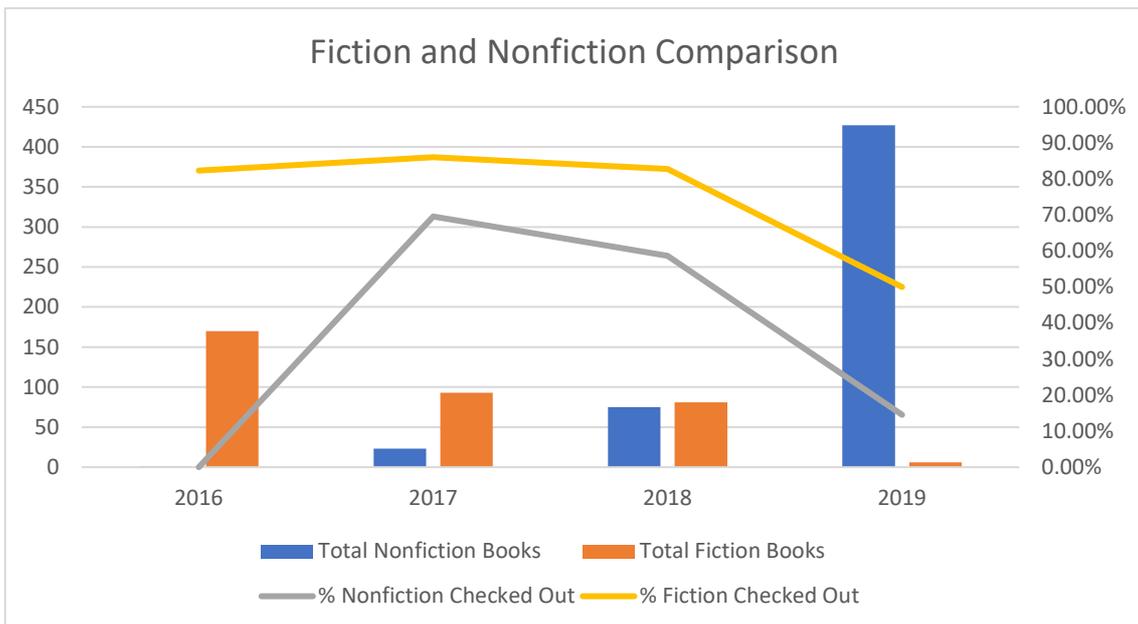


Figure 3. Comparison of Percent Increase in Circulation of Fiction and Nonfiction from Stacks to Book Display

