



Effect of Gender Differences in Reading Habits of University Students in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Reading is considered as an important learning tool which comprised of multiple skills. Efficient reading by university students plays a vital role in shaping our society's future. Reading habits of University students is determined by several factors including age, gender, field of study and life style. Hence, this study was conducted to explore the effect of gender differences in reading habits of university undergraduates in Sri Lanka by obtaining data using questionnaires from 192 male and 474 female students of six universities. The results revealed that enjoying reading, reading preferences, how often they are reading and reading frequency significantly varied between the two genders ($p < 0.05$). Females enjoyed reading and spent more time than their male counterparts. Most female students preferred novels (28.5%), while male respondents (7.5%) selected books to read. The majority of the female students responded that preparation for exams (39.6%) was the main barrier against reading, while male students selected social networks (16.5%). In terms of frequency, the majority of the girls (19.5%) read once a week, while 9.3% of boys read less frequently, whereas 0.9% of them never read. Based on this study, female are better in reading and showed positive attitude towards it than male students in Sri Lankan universities. Thereby, it is recommended to the universities in Sri Lanka to provide necessary guidance and motivation in developing reading skills, especially among male students.

Keywords: Gender Differences, Reading Habits, Reading Preferences, Personal Satisfaction

1. Introduction

Reading, a fundamental tool of learning, is considered a way of thinking, a kind of experience, and demands several skills such as the potential to recognize printed words, construct an understanding from them, and coordinate the identified words meaningfully. Braunger and Lewis [6] describe reading as an active, cognitive and affective process, and they agree that reading is a combination of many elements that go much beyond language proficiency [6]. Different people read for different purposes such as for pleasure, knowledge, necessity, information and studies. When an individual's reading practice is repeated consistently, systematic, and critical throughout their lifetime, it is considered a habit [40]. According to Wagner [37], reading habit is determined by the factors such as the number of materials read, reading frequency, and the average amount of time spent in it. Reading as a habit aids

in developing a rich language, a more assertive personality, improved academic success, self-confidence in knowledge and many other things. Reading books, magazines, newspapers, and other materials is essential for developing a long-term reading habit [33].

Researchers believe that individual reading habits vary depending on age, gender, career, and lifestyle. Both internal factors, including home, attitude, and motivation, and external factors, including peers, schools, teachers, and the library facilities available, significantly influence reading behaviors among individuals of various ages and genders [18]. Among these factors, gender disparities have raised concern over the last few decades. Many studies have recorded gender variations favoring girls in reading, spelling, and writing [5, 7, 27, 28, 36].

The university period, the most productive stage of a

student's formal education, plays one of the most critical roles in shaping our society's future. Since university education delivers educated, administrator, and decision-maker candidates for society, university students are considered as a distinct group from other youth classes. During their university years, young people read most frequently and necessarily in order to be successful. A student who feels difficult to engage in serious reading is unlikely to succeed in his or her studies [19]. As a result, university students must develop a strong reading habit, which is one of the prerequisites for personal and social development. Hence, university students' reading habits are significant in both areas they need and in their personal development throughout their lives [10].

In Sri Lanka, National Library and Documentation Service Board (NLDB) [24] did a study and came up with some important conclusions. That are: students' reading habits are low, school libraries are in poor shape with outdated book collections, and most students read "light" materials such as magazines, novels, comic books, and newspapers. In another study done to address the reading issues in Sri Lanka, Gunasekara [14] discovered three major barriers to the promotion of reading habits among secondary school students. These include a preference for chatting and listening to the radio, a lack of borrowing opportunities in school libraries, and a preference for watching television. The majority of the reading was done for exam purposes. Though the reading habits of Sri Lankan students have been studied at the school level [1, 14, 35], no study has been done at the university level. In this context, there is a requirement to investigate the reading habit of university students at a larger scale. Therefore, this study was aimed to explore the gender differences in reading habits of university undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

When it comes to reading, scholars and linguists give varying perspectives and meanings as a talent and beyond that. According to Fatiloro et al. [11], reading is a mechanical process involving the brain and other organs that becomes a habit it is repeated. Reading forms the mind, expands and enriches one's vocabulary, aids in character development, broadens one's mental horizons, and offers a variety of other advantages. Higher education institutions consider reading to be the most critical academic ability. Reading is linked to self-happiness, self-identification, information source, and most importantly, a pleasant source of knowledge for all, starting with the most fundamental tool of education [25]. For a student, it is crucial to cultivate a strong reading habit. Teenagers as readers are required to do much more in the twenty-first century than they were previously [8, 16].

A range of factors are considered to be associated with the reading habit of an individual. Snow *et al.* [34] identified six differences: intra-individual ability, inter-individual ability, social class, culture, language and development that can

make a person to be different in multiple ways in his reading. According to Scales and Rhee [30], a student's reading habits and patterns are influenced by their gender, ethnicity, and educational background. Due to the importance of reading, many researchers have done research to learn more about people's reading habits. Several studies have been conducted to investigate the reading patterns of adolescents and young people [22, 38], college students and adults, as well as specific cultures and societies [13]. Some of the frequent findings on reading habits, as summarized by Ross [29], are that "heavy readers" are more likely to be female than male, younger than older, and have a higher education level than the general population.

A range of research shows that girls prefer to read in their spare time more than boys [2]. According to World Book Day report [39], girls spend more time reading for pleasure than boys. Shafi and Loan [31] discovered that gender significantly impacted students' reading habit, and females had a more robust reading culture than male students. Logan and Johnston [21] also found that girls had better reading skills, read more frequently, and had a better attitude toward reading and learning than boys. In comparison to males, female students read books other than their course books at least once a week. In terms of book purchases, females spend more money monthly than males. These findings are consistent with the findings of a number of other studies [17, 29]. However, in a study done by Ladipo and Gbotosho [20] on how gender differences affect undergraduate medical students' reading habits and academic performance at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, the results revealed that male medical students outperformed female students in terms of academic achievement. The reading habit, on the other hand, was unaffected by gender.

Gender variations have been shown to affect reading preferences also. According to Moffitt & Wartella [23] and Simpson [32], boys favoured sports and adventure, while girls preferred animal and teenage related reading materials. In sixth to eighth grades, Higginbotham [15] observed that children preferred humour and horror, followed by mysteries, historical fiction, adventure, and science fiction. Boys favoured sports and science fiction, while girls preferred romance, friendship, animal stories, and historical fiction. Abilock, [2] found that the girls in his study tended to read books about both males and females, while the boys preferred male-oriented literature. Girls, on the other hand, liked romances. However, Abeyrathna and Zainab [1] found that the habit of reading fiction, non-fiction, and magazines was not gender-specific in a study of 300 students from secondary schools in Sri Lanka. The study also revealed that female students read textbooks more frequently than male students, and males read newspapers more frequently than females. The findings show that male and female students have slightly different reading patterns.

3. Research Method

The data were collected using pre-tested questionnaires

that included 14 open-ended and multiple-choice questions from 666 students of 6 state universities in Sri Lanka (University of Peradeniya, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Eastern University of Sri Lanka, University of Ruhuna, University of Jaffna and Rajarata University of Sri Lanka). Questionnaires were administered to 750 students with the return rate of 88.8%. A random sampling procedure was followed, and descriptive statistics (frequency and percentage) and crosstabs were performed to study the differences in male and female Students' opinions about their reading habits using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software (Version 25) to analyze the data.

4. Results and Discussion

Gender differences had a significant effect on enjoying reading books ($p=0.012$). According to Figure 1, most undergraduates enjoyed reading (71.8%) while (1.8%) did not enjoy it. Female students (52%) enjoyed the reading more than their male counterparts (19.8%). This result is consistent with those of Shafi and Loan [31], Logan and Johnston [21] and Hopper [15], who found out that female students are more active in terms of reading and had greater reading comprehension and a more positive attitude toward reading compared to their male counterparts.

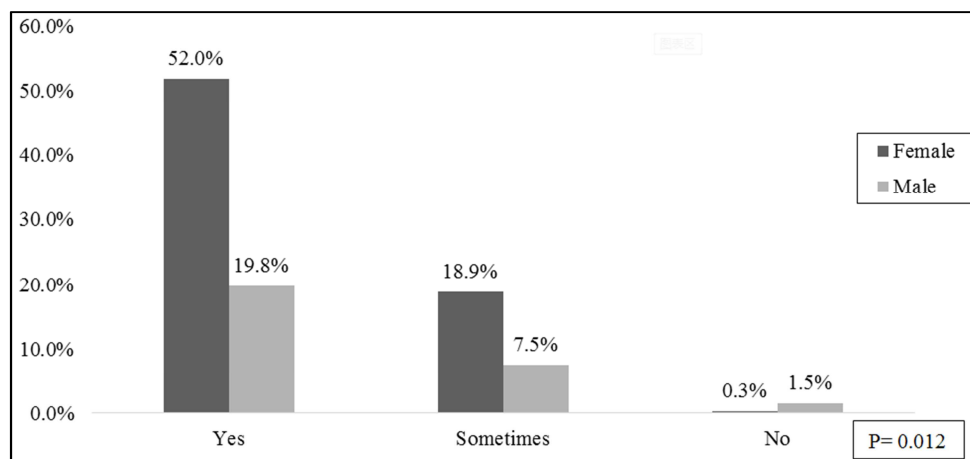


Figure 1. Do you enjoy reading books.

Figure 2 describes the preference of seven types of reading materials, i.e., novel, newspaper, magazine, exam preparation books, poems, articles, and books that significantly affected students' reading preferences ($P=0.008$). The majority of the female students preferred to read novels (28.5%). Following that, 19.5% of the female students preferred books, while most of the male respondents (7.5%) selected books as their preference and the novel was chosen by 6.3%. Both male (1.2%) and female (2.4%) students had the least preferences in poems. These results align with the findings of Frankenstein's [12] research, which found that different genders have different reading preferences. In another study

conducted by Nor Shahriza [26] to evaluate the reading habits of students from International Islamic University Malaysia, it was established that gender difference had a significant effect on types of materials and reading resources preferred by students. Male students prefer to read more newspapers, websites and literature compared to females. Ahmad *et al.* [4] denoted in their study that the majority of the male students chose online reading material while female students selected academic books as the type of reading material they use. Contrary to the present study, the least number of male students preferred fiction or novels while for female students, the least preference was newspapers.

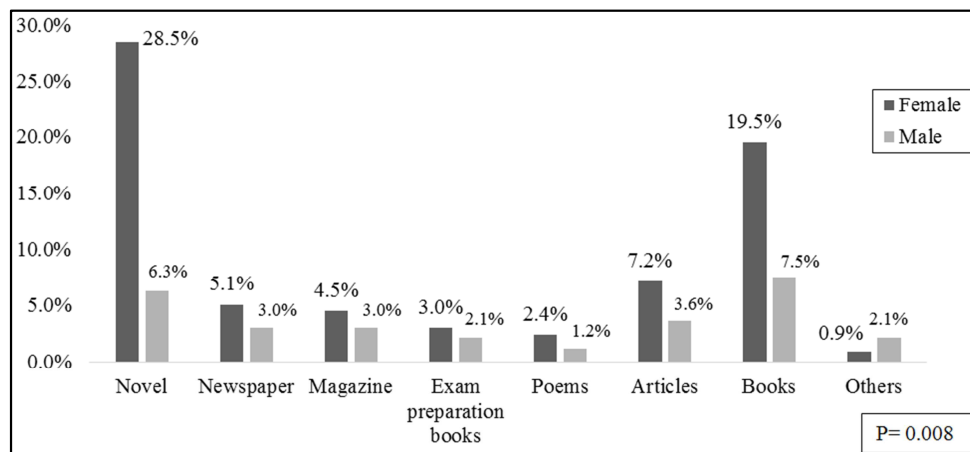


Figure 2. What do you prefer to read in your spare time.

The distribution of different genres preferred to read by different genders is shown in Figure 3. Majority of both male (14.5%) and female (33.1%) students selected education as their preferred genre, while politics and poetry were preferred by the least number of female students (6.6%) and male students (2.1%), respectively. Next to education, female students were interested in romantic (31.3%), history (27.1%) and psychology (24.1%), while male students were interested in history (11.4%), professional (7.5%) and psychology (7.2%). Skenderi and Ejupi [33] believe that different people,

especially depending on their age, prefer different book genres to read. Their survey on reading habits of University students in Macedonia showed that 49% of the participants read romantic books, which is closely connected to their age. Psychology is the preference of 32.2% of them, followed by the economy which was chosen by 21.5%. The study of Erdem [10] in Turkey showed that the three first preferences university students were History (53.7%), Romantic (38%) and other genres.

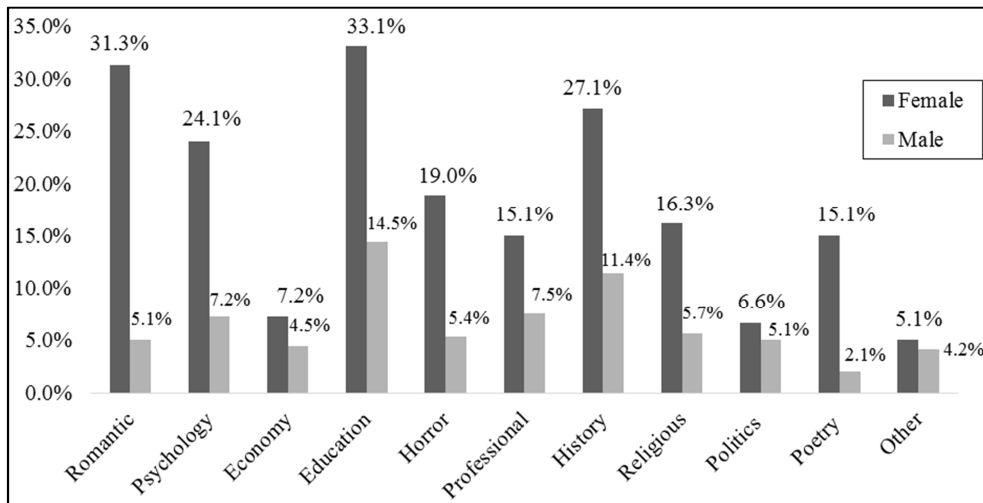


Figure 3. Genre prefer to read.

Personal satisfaction was the main reason for reading to both the male (17.4%) and female students (39.9%) while the least number of male (2.1%) and female (7.2%) students read for reinforcing their lessons. Next to personal satisfaction, most of the female students selected relaxation (37.8%), entertainment (35.1%), gaining general knowledge (30.9%) and making the best of spare time (27.6%) as the reasons for reading while male students responded gaining general knowledge (14.7%), entertainment (12.6%) and relaxation (11.4%) (Figure 4). However, a study conducted by Erdem

[10] concluded that most of the students in the universities of Ankara and Erciyes chose to be informed, followed by personal development while leaving relaxation in the end as a reason for reading. Dilshad *et al.* [9] studied the gender variations in reading habits of university graduates in Pakistan and stated that the primary objective of both male and female students to read is to increase their knowledge while doing research was the least response. Another study showed that personal satisfaction was the main reason to read for university students [33].

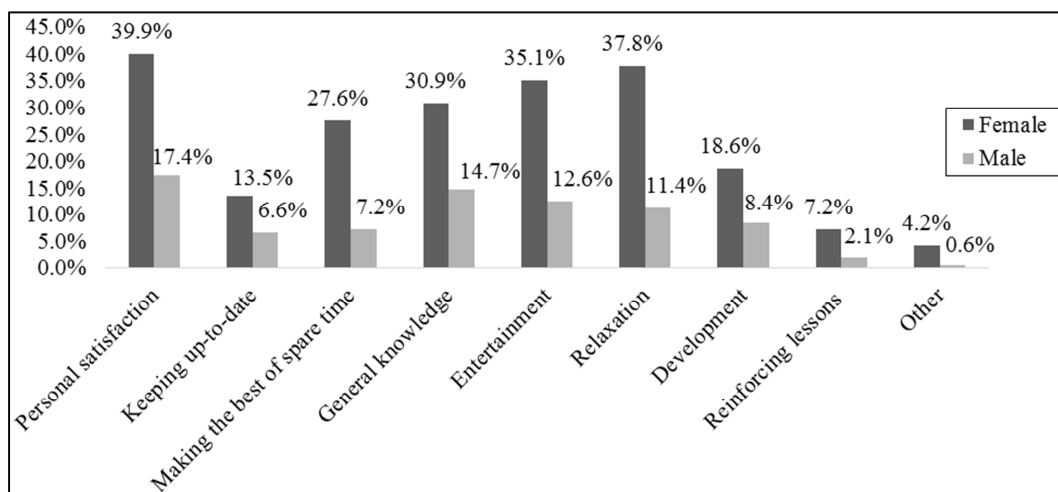


Figure 4. Reasons for reading.

Reasons that negatively effects the reading was one of the critical questions of the survey. The majority of the female students responded that preparation for exams (39.6%) was the main reason for not showing interest in reading. It was followed by social networks (36.0%) and the intensity of studies (33.3%). For male students, social networks (16.5%) was the primary reason, and it was followed by preparations for exams (12.0%) and intensity of studies (11.7%). “I do not want to read was the least response by both male (2.4%) and female (1.5%) students (Figure 5). Several internal and external factors negatively impact the reading habit of the

younger generation. In a previous study conducted, 36% of the total respondents answered that social networking is the main reason that distracts them from reading [10]. Aforo [3] also stated that “most of the students do not see social media and its components as a tool for enhancing reading for education”. Ahmad *et al.* [4] further confirmed the strong influence of social media on the reading attitudes of different genders. Skenderi and Ejupi [33] stated that participants chose a busy schedule as a reason, followed by preparation for exams, which leaves them behind with reading.

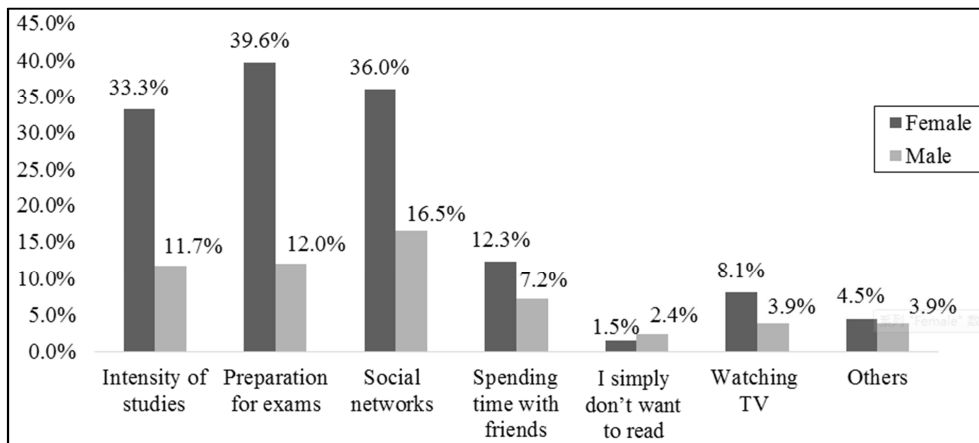


Figure 5. Reasons that negatively affect reading.

The majority of the male (15.6%) and female students (42.3%) obtained books from libraries for reading. This depicts that students are well utilizing the library source in their universities. Following to library, most of the female students (27.9%) borrowed books from friends and male students (13.8%) purchased from shops (Figure 6). In

contrast to these results, Nor Shahriza, [26] observed no association between gender and the sources of reading materials. However, according to Dilshad *et al.* [9] around one-fourth of students borrowed books from friends, and more male students were involved in this exchange compared to female students.

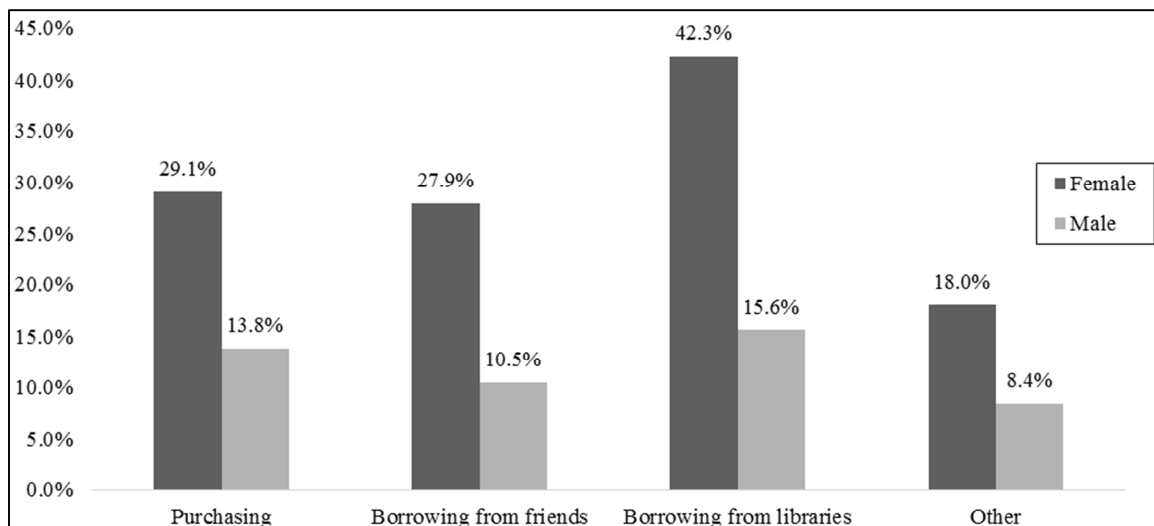


Figure 6. Means of obtaining Books.

Gender variation had a significant impact on how often students read a book ($p = 0.042$). Figure 7 shows that 46.8% of females and 15% of males read at least one book once a

month, while 3% of the students never read one book. Erdem [10] in his study, recorded that 29% out of 326 students in the universities of Ankara and Erciyes read one book a month.

The same results were obtained in a survey done in Macedonia, where students mostly read once a month [33]. However, this result is lower than the result of a similar study conducted in Nigeria, where most of the students read once a

week, whereas some (41%) read novels every day [11]. In another study, more female students (23.4%) compared to male students (21.47%) told about reading books once in a week [9].

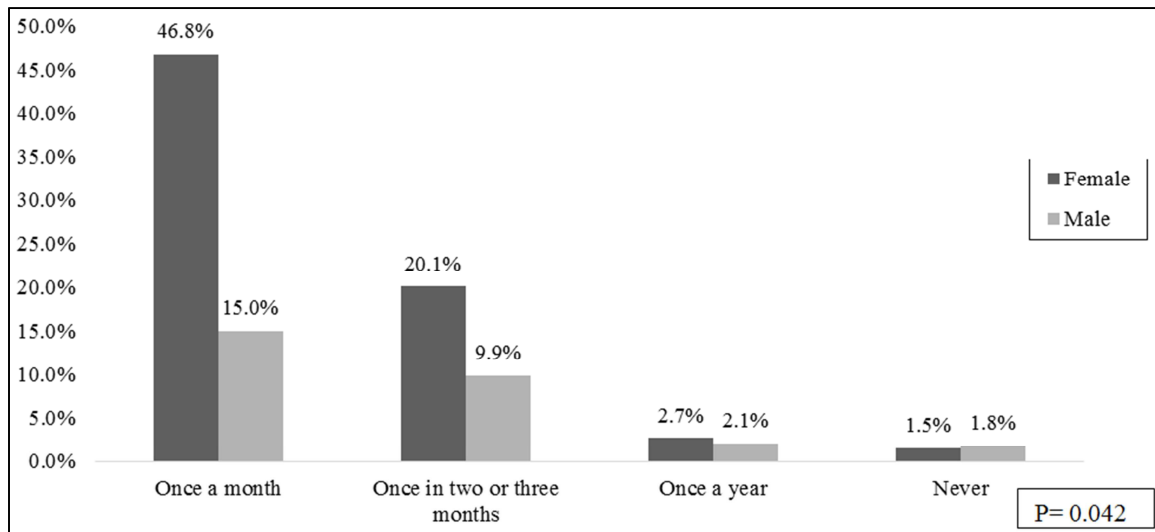


Figure 7. How often you read a book.

Figure 8 depicts the frequency of reading time by undergraduates that showed significant differences between genders ($p = 0.042$). According to the results, 17.4% of the female students and 4.2% of male students were reading every day. Majority of the girls (19.5%) read once a week, following to that 19.2% of them read once in a couple of days while 0.6% of the girls never read. Majority of the male respondents (9.3%) read less frequently while 0.9% of them never read. Overall, this reading frequency is not enough

compared to their age and needs. Several studies have proved that female students spend more time for reading compared to males [29, 31]. However, in contradictory to these results, Nor Shahriza [26] observed no significant differences in frequency of reading time between male and female students conversely, Dilshad *et al.* [9] found out that more males students had the reading frequency on daily and weekly basis compared to their female counterparts.

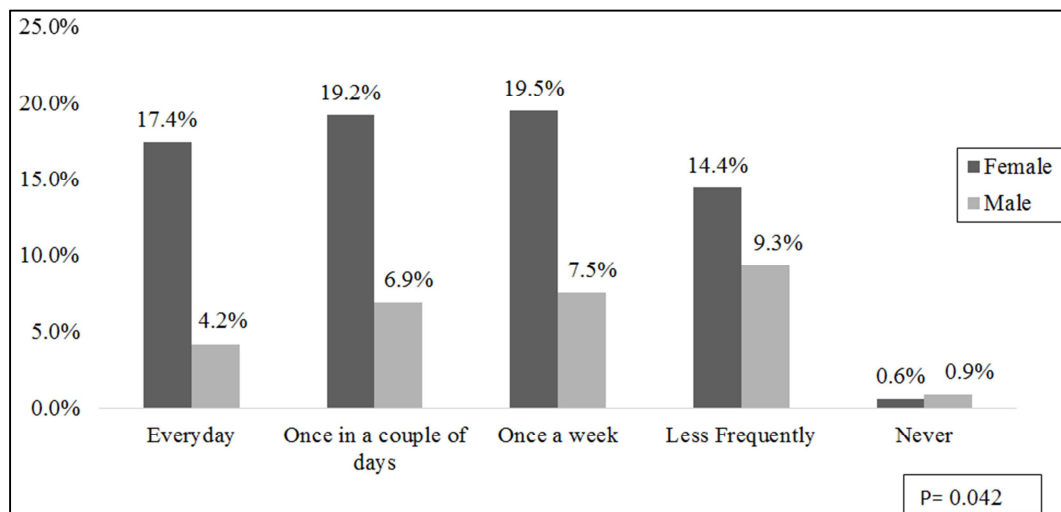


Figure 8. Frequency of reading time.

5. Conclusions

The reading and reading habits of university students play an essential role in the Sri Lankan education system. For

consistent and uniform advancement in academics at the university level, students must improve their reading habits in order to achieve individual learning improvement. Based on the present study, female students in Sri Lankan universities had a more optimistic attitude about reading than

their male counterparts though their reading frequency is insufficient to develop them as intellectuals. The majority of the female students preferred novels to read, whilst most male respondents selected books as their preference. Both genders responded that personal satisfaction is the main reason to read and the major barriers for reading are exam preparation and social networks. A more detailed study is needed, including more specific questions about reading habits of both genders, and the participation of a larger number of students in the survey would give reliable results. Moreover, it is recommended that universities play a vital role in guiding students to develop reading skills, especially among male students.

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