Caring for the Self. A Case-Study on Sociocultural Aspects of Reading Chick Lit

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Abstract: The present paper discusses sociocultural characteristics of reader approaches towards reading 'chick lit' by drawing on empirical evidence from a case study. Applying qualitative analysis of fine structures and themes, this paper analyses the experiences of the genres self-proclaimed target audience with two corresponding novels, Beth O'Leary's *The Flatshare* and Josie Silver's *One Day in December*.

The results confirm that chick lit is not only read for the entertaining effect often explicitly attributed to the titles. Instead, readers also find close resemblances between their living circumstances, the plot lines depicted and the respective heroines. Identifying their reading as approaching social artefacts, they see opportunities to individually reflect their perceptions of social norms and values as aspects of their personal world view. In conclusion, the study indicates chick lit's significance as a social phenomenon and adds to our understanding of the genre's vast popularity.

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1. **INTRODUCTION**

As people are increasingly reaching for electronic devices instead of books to spend their leisure time, this has resulted in a number of stakeholders becoming increasingly interested in understanding the dynamics of the book market, including the varying popularity of literary genres. One genre that particularly stands out in the continuously, albeit to varying intensities, proclaimed death of readers and books is 'chick lit', a comparatively young branch situated somewhere between popular romance fiction and women's literature. Since its introduction to the book market in the early 1990s, the genre has not only given rise to the development of numerous sub-genres, but also proves to be a resilient bestseller regarding readers anticipation of the emotionally gratifying feel-good factor of this "cappuccino fiction". Montoro (164, 203) draws on its positive effect on personal mental wellbeing and explains how for many readers the genre represents a source of pleasure. This opinion is widely shared by a whole branch of academia that has begun to discuss reading in general as a source for personal wellbeing and as a "non-medical intervention focused on coping skills and resilience" (Brewster 1). Besides reading's effect as a remedy for manifested mental disorders, it has also come into focus as a substantial preventative measure.[1] In both cases, the strategies applied by readers follow emotive, escapist, social and informational behaviours, as Brewster notes (12—17).

Drawing specifically on chick lit: what is it that people generally read when they read the genre? And what makes it such a popular part of the current book market? In contributing to our understanding of the phenomenon, this article aims to determine how the genre's target audience engages with their reading and analyses its role in their personal lives from a socio-cultural perspective. Thus, the paper will address reader's motivation for reading chick lit and determine essential characteristics of their reading experience. It will thereby contribute to our understanding of chick lit's broader socio-cultural significance and the context of its vast popularity as a social phenomenon.

In depicting a heroine's "quest for self-definition and the balancing of work with social activity" (Harzewski, 28), chick lit is often understood as a depiction of demographics and the socio-cultural circumstances of the everyday life of contemporary young women. With titles such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding (1996) and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1996), chick lit gained first popularity in the mid-1990s in the Anglo-American world. Since their respective origin in magazine columns in the early 1990s, the genre has become globally popular and authors have adapted it for various thematic emphasis, both in the book and film industry. As to the genre's defining characteristics, Mißler (6) summarises that its content is primarily aimed at young women between the ages of 20 and 30, as recipients, authors and characters. The storylines in the novels mostly follow the heroine's efforts to establish a professional career as well as a lasting stable love relationship with an adequate partner. As such, they primarily address what is familiar to readers from their everyday world (cf. Ferriss and Young 13).

With specific reference to *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Whelehan points out how "[the heroine's] life, aspirations and consumer taste" to a large extent resemble "the cultural diet" of many of its original readers (13). Harzewski, in a similar vein, addresses chick lit featuring a "capacity for eliciting readers' identification" (65) as well as how the heroine's "central conflict may mirror [the reader's] own and debate the disgruntlement of not

'getting it together' or of 'missing the boat'" (73). Characteristic plot elements, such as "discussing the latest beauty trend or the ultimate piece of advice on diet matters" in a usually comically exaggerated way, document "current social trends" (Montoro 76). The genre thus further "crystallises some of the most important cultural issues women are currently engaged in addressing", as Benstock concludes mindful of broader socio-cultural "issues of commodification and consumerism, of race and class, of appearance and success" (254). Chick lit may be read for its positive effect on mood, leaving a "'feel-good' factor", as Montoro notes on a study on readers engagement with the genre (15).

READING AS A SOCIAL PRACTICE

Aspects and characteristics of the emotional effects of reading have been thoroughly discussed in their respective academic contexts. One of the most notable works is Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984). The study illustrates how romance novels may serve as "a Utopian wish-fulfilment fantasy" (151), allowing their typically female readers to respond to everyday life obligations posed by patriarchal structures, like housekeeping and childcare.[2] As they "try to imagine themselves as they often are not in day-to-day existence, that is, as happy and content" (Radway 212), the women found opportunities to claim "the attention and nurturance they do not get enough of in the round of day-to-day existence" (212). This is further echoed in a socio-cultural, medially amplified understanding of the genre. For example, we might see the genre as a sanctuary-like personal space catering specifically to its (usually female) readers and their needs through numerous advertisements for novels marketed under the Harlequin brand

Drawing specifically on Radway's findings, Thumala Olave, in her broader and later study on the effects of intensive fiction reading in British women, observes that this perspective might miss another central aspect of reading, which lies in the "positive, creative practice of self-care and meaning-making [that readers] engage in on a daily basis" (441). Reading thusly would offer them a space to "formulate themselves to themselves and figure out who they are and what they care about" (Thumala Olave 448). In this way, the genre becomes a space for uttering and debating personal matters. Furthermore, the genre provides them with a space to "fashion and refigure their subjectivity", which Thumala Olave not only relates to the individual reader but also to their "relating to others" (448). This distinctly highlights the reading's social aspect, as well as its impact on the individual's meaning-making of social reality (Berger and Luckmann 185). As Váňa further argues on reading as a social practice, literature may convey both "existential understanding and *Zeitgeist*" (*Fiction and social knowledge* 14) for its readers. It can also continue to emphasise its role in "mediat[ing] existential knowledge, which is inherently social and intersubjective" (24). Reading and the characteristic readings of specific genres are thus to be understood as measures for identity formation. and in this regard, they may contribute to how individuals and social communities form their impressions of social reality.

Furthermore, with an increased presence of digital media in everyday life, new formats of "book talk" are currently emerging, as they frequently document how users discuss and share their reading habits. Their presence clearly indicates new relevance for research on the traditional and newly evolving characteristics of reading and its personal value. Considering its value and impact on social dynamics and their development, digital

media is to be regarded as a new ground for reading practices. For example, investigating readers' exchanges about their reading experiences both on- and offline could illustrate the importance of reading as a means and subject of social contact and communication. Peplow notes how these characteristics are particularly evolving since the manifestation of a social media society in many areas of life.[3] Predominantly operating online due to their specialised character, these communities "allow readers to interact with others who have specialist knowledge of and passion for a particular genre" (Peplow 161). This development indicates a relevance of new research on reading practices – both analogue and digital. The significance of studying these two aspects of literary culture as well as how they relate has been indicated by Murray in a study on digital practices of distributing and debating literature online. She concludes that this newly online literary sphere is developing a whole array of new elements which all show decisively pre-digital characteristics and, in their innovativeness, predominantly revolve around recently digital paratext (Murray 178—180). To understand the dimensions and implications of online reading practices, it is thus necessary to analyse the current characteristics of readers' offline-focused reading behaviour.

LOCATING CHICK LIT IN THE LITERARY GENRE CONTINUUM

Comparing chick lit and the popular romance genre is not unproblematic due to their often-unclear relation. Chick lit is commonly understood as a subgenre of the romance novel or as a form of women's literature.[4] The romance genre shares with chick lit a dominant focus on a protagonist's romantic interests and the depiction of a related plotline. Yet, chick lit's main plotline frequently combines other aspects as well. The romance novel focuses predominantly on a love plot that develops between two protagonists, culminating in an emotionally satisfying ending (Harzewski 28; Orr and Tixier Herald 254). Chick lit, in contrast, more broadly depicts a (typically) female protagonist's overall "quest for self-definition and the balancing of work with social activity" (Harzewski 28) in a way often described as humorous and light-hearted. Characteristically, the heroines demographically resemble their target audience (Ferriss and Young 178) and their overall "cultural diet" (Whelehan 13), as Whelehan concludes in reference to *Bridget Jones's Diary*. This and various topical subgenres covering individuals' living circumstances allow readers to develop a strong personal identification with the novels. As Orr and Tixier Herald conclude, they enable many readers to develop a "feeling as though you are that character, you know that character, or you recognise what that character is going through"(254f.). The genres' relationship to romance has also been debated critically by a more feminist-oriented branch of the discourse. Incorporating socio-political and economic aspects, scholars have discussed the post-feminist significance of chick lit as a potential subgenre of, or close relative to, the romance novel. The debate further dedicates itself to chick lit's impact on neo-liberal social forms and elements of social conceptions of ethnicity, post-colonialism, sexuality and political economy.[5]

For the present study I follow Orr and Tixier Herald's approach, regarding chick lit as a genre located in the continuum between romance and women's literature. It is pivotal to add here that the study's target population itself partly coined this understanding. When I posted the first interview invitation on a social media platform, I received only a few quizzical reactions. These reactions illustrated how unfamiliar the respective Austrian

target audience is with the term 'chick lit'. Instead, advertisements and the book market tend to use periphrases like "freche Frauen" ("cheeky women", cf. Folie 1).[6] Nevertheless, they incorporate graphical themes resembling typical characteristics of the chick lit genre, for instance, by drawing on its "bold, pink or pastel-coloured covers with cursive fonts and line drawings" (Montoro 2), this allows it to understand the terms as synonyms. To bypass this semantic confusion in the study and not irritate potential participants with the use of an unfamiliar expression for their preferred genre, the final recruiting invitation and the interviews more strongly focused on referring to the graphic display of the novels.

2. METHOD

To follow the "process of meaning-making as it occurs within the interaction between the reader and the novel" (Váňa, *Theorizing the Social* 180), the study follows a qualitative, empirically-based design consisting of two group discussions with a specifically founded focus group. The material gathered was then examined for themes and latent structures, following the approaches of Froschauer and Lueger (*Das qualitative Interview*) and Mayring. Conventional one-on-one interviews might have better suited the original purposes of the study. However, I decided to use a group discussion setup to create an atmosphere as casual and natural as possible. The group discussion would allow participants to articulate more freely than traditional one-on-one interviews, which are often described as being perceived as significantly more artificial.[7]

Though the sample size appears considerably small at first glance, it proved sufficient for reaching data saturation and thus for the purposes of the present study. On the one hand, this is due to the analysis methods applied, as nuanced structural analysis only requires very few cases (Froschauer and Lueger, *Interpretative Sozialforschung*). On the other, it is also related to the highly homogenous demographics of the group itself. The focus group met twice within two months, which allowed participants to build trust in one another and get used to the interview scenario. Accordingly, I observed a more intimate atmosphere in the second meeting, which helped participants share even more personal details about their reading experiences than during the first one. It thus contributed tremendously to the "informational power" of the sample to repetitively conduct interviews with the same group (Malterud et al., 1757).

The study participants were acquired from social media platforms a few weeks before the first interview. Print copies of *The Flatshare*, the first novel discussed in the group, were subsequently handed out with approximately two weeks of reading time before the actual meeting. The participants were further encouraged to take note of passages they found remarkable. This gave them the possibility of discussing a variety of scenes and plot elements they deemed essential to their reading experience.

I applied a loosely structured interview guide to understand the characteristics of participants' reading habits, whilst still allowing them to regard personal issues and ideas. It consisted of four scenes (two from each novel) representing critical plot elements from the novels for the participants to discuss. During the discussions, I repeatedly invited the participants to share individual perspectives on the books and any other reading experiences related to the genre they represented. Freely associating ideas and opinions

was encouraged by asking for personal thoughts and impressions regarding the plot depicted. As the group showed great enthusiasm for discussing the books in the first interview and developed a natural dynamic, I decided to limit the number of input sequences discussed in the interview to two. This allowed for a more intense, detailed discussion during the second interview.

Additionally, a questionnaire collected general demographics and personal reading habits, such as frequency and preferred romance novel genres, at the end of the first group meeting. From the beginning, the group was generally characterised by a highly positive, friendly climate with an open, conversational atmosphere. The interviews were conducted in German, the mother tongue of all participants. The novels were also read in their German translation.

SAMPLE

The study participants were selected to roughly represent the genre's general target audience in order to understand the population's specific reading habits and needs. In selecting the texts acting as a basis for the discussions, I decided to focus on maximum proximity to the original chick lit themes depicted in the genre's urtexts *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*. Accordingly, I followed Mißler's definition of the genre. Drawing closely on these urtexts by Helen Fielding and Candance Bushnell, she defines chick lit as a plot structure focusing on a protagonist who "stereotypical[ly] is single, lives and works in an urban center, is surrounded by a network of friends, and is struggling to find a full-filling job and a meaningful relationship" (1).

Despite the original invitation including people of all demographics and not calling for specific ethnic backgrounds or sexual orientations, the sample recruited in winter 2018/19 remained surprisingly homogenous and strongly represented Austria's dominant population. It consisted of four white participants, aged between 19 and 29 with an average age of 24.25 years. All identified as female and heterosexual. One participant was in a relationship, and three were single. None had children, and no one was or had been married before. All participants were Austrian citizens, albeit with a domestic migrant background in the Austrian federal provinces. In all cases, moving to the metropolitan area was motivated by taking up university studies. Three participants attended university at the time the interviews were conducted: two were in a Bachelor's programme and one in a Master's programme. The fourth participant worked as a full-time secretary since she had left university before graduating.[8] All participants had first encountered the romance novel genre as teenagers (ages ranging from 10 to 16 years). Two participants described themselves as highly frequent ("constant" and "weekly") romance readers. In contrast, the others reportedly only read the genre on occasion (an estimate of "two" or "six" related novels per year).

When asked for their reading preferences regarding the broader context of the romance fiction genre, all four participants referred to contemporary romance and chick lit. Three of four participants liked erotic and fantasy content. Two were interested in historical romance novels and those with elements of crime and thrillers. One person declared a further interest in spiritual romance and a second in science fiction elements.

BOOKS

I structured the focus group discussions primarily around two novels which were read and debated consecutively in the meetings. Even though chick lit has since developed various related sub-genres, the reading material was selected to suit its original concept, as represented by urtexts like Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*.[9] Since their first introduction to the book market, the dedicated discourse has repeatedly problematised chick lit as a the term or implicating whiteness and heteronormativity.[10] Although I was aware of these limitations, I still closely followed Mißler's 2016 definition of a "classic" chick lit text to narrow down the study's subject.

To ensure that none of the participants would have previous knowledge about the novels and no previous reading experience with them, I decided on two books published as close to the time of participant acquisition as possible. One of them was released only weeks before recruiting the participants, and the other was still in press and due to be published half a year after conducting the interviews. To compensate the participants for partaking in the study, they received paperback copies of the books as gifts.

As Kuijpers questions the potentially different levels of immersion for digital and print reading grounds, I restricted the study to a strictly analogue-oriented setup, providing the participants with print copies. Interestingly, from the very beginning the participants themselves clearly distinguished between the experiences of digital reading and print reading in the discussions.

The first novel to be read and debated in the focus group was a Beth O'Leary's *The Flatshare* (2018). In the story, Tiffy and Leon become roommates after Tiffy had just ended an emotionally difficult previous relationship. They then get to know one another mainly by leaving each other notes and messages throughout the flat. They fall in love over the course of the plot while Tiffy is still gradually processing the emotional abuse she had suffered from her ex-boyfriend. To initiate discussion of the novel in the focus group, I selected a scene where Tiffy first introduces herself to Leon in a chaotic voice mail message left when she calls to declare interest in his flat-sharing advertisement (23). I further included a scene where they first get physically closer, and Tiffy briefly doubts her interpretation of Leon's interest in her and her own desirability as a woman after her last relationship (288). The third scene was from the epilogue, which depicts their relationship two years later (472). I also decided to include two short scenes depicting Tiffy's perspective on her previous relationship and her gradual realisation of the emotional abuse she suffered (80, 295).

The second novel was *One Day in December* by Josie Silver (2018). This story follows a generally more unconventional approach. It stretches the plot over ten years, following the heroine and hero in a friends-become-lovers theme. The novel begins with Laurie's first eye contact with Jack, whom she briefly sees from a bus ride, leaving her immediately and utterly in love. The story continues over the next ten years until both characters can commit to their mutual feelings. Before this, the heroine's best friend Sarah starts a relationship with the hero while Laurie becomes engaged in another marriage with Oscar, a businessman with an aristocratic family background. For discussion of this novel in the group, I included one scene from the beginning of the novel. This scene takes place ten months after Laurie's first – and only – encounter with the hero, where she fell in love with

him after seeing him from a bus. Despite continuously looking out for him in her everyday life, she has not seen him again and this results in Laurie doubting her infatuation with him (29). As a second, contrasting scene I chose one from Laurie getting to know the mother of Oscar, her interim partner and husband. This sequence captures Laurie's overall relationship with Oscar and her difficulties adapting to his lifestyle (168).

Based on Mißler's definition of the genre, both novels qualify as chick lit. Their primary focus is not exclusively on pursuing the love plot but on the heroine's — and her friends' — general quest for personal happiness and content. None of the characters are solely looking for a (potentially temporary) romantic relationship but are concerned with establishing themselves socially and professionally as adults by launching professional careers and making up their minds about personal attitudes and mindsets. Both heroines are recent university graduates: one in a secure but poorly remunerated position as a publishing assistant and the other in a precarious temporary job as a receptionist. Gradually, both manage to lay the foundations for promising careers, come to terms with themselves, and specify personal goals and ideals.

Demographically, both heroines identify as British citizens. Tiffy has a non-migrant background and Laurie has grown up in the British countryside, referring to a French grandmother whose physical appearance she has apparently inherited (52). Tiffy is twenty-six, making her the closest in age to the combined average of the study participants (24.25 years). In contrast, Laurie is 21 at the start of her story and 30 at the novel's close, which roughly spans the age range of the study participants. In terms of family status, Tiffy was closer to the sample, as a single woman.

3. RESULTS

Reading chick lit and how it further influences individuals' thinking was extensively debated in the discussions. Personal issues, opinions and obstacles were reportedly processed during the participants' reading. This illustrates how their reading initiates and affects individual opinion formation. The readers sought general possibilities for reflecting upon everyday life; one participant specifically explained how the flat, which acts as the primary site of action in *The Flatshare,* evoked positive emotions and a sense of personal comfort for her.

The participants' reading was thus not only confined to the story elements laid out in the texts, but quickly expanded beyond their actual content and drew on presumptions and ideas derived from the characters' depiction in the novels. It became specifically apparent in *One Day in December,* where the protagonist's annual New Year's resolutions are documented as lists without further context. The group extensively debated how they had depicted the nature of these lists in relation to the protagonist's character during and after reading. They discussed whether they were part of a diary the heroine may have kept or if they just existed in thought or as a paper list that she might have hung on the wall or kept in a specific drawer.

Furthermore, there was a significant difference between the thematic focus of the texts and the discussions While the group extensively discussed the characters and their everyday lives, these passages were no big part of the texts and held to an absolute limit

wordcount-wise, only significantly contributed to the content of the opening chapters. Another key feature of both novels, that distinctly contributed to the heroines' wellbeing and the happy ending, was their struggle with establishing a career and building a professional reputation. Two of the participants stated they worked full-time at the time of the group discussion, and all had attended university at one point in their lives. Yet, in the discussion, they only briefly touched upon these themes, with no particular focus on the heroines' choice of field of study, career or any specific aspect of their work life. Instead, the participants debated how personal relationships related to their professional lives and how these environments might have influenced the heroines' wellbeing.

     The stories and their key elements quickly became a loose guideline, with the discussion expanding far beyond the textual descriptions. Reading turned from solely absorbing the predetermined setting of the stories to a more individualised examination of their broader setup and scenery. This allowed the readers to address personal issues and experiences they needed to understand. One of the participants explained how reading about the heroine's breakup from a traumatic relationship in *The Flatshare* had helped her reflect on and re-evaluate a former partner's behaviour.

     In direct relation to the texts, the participants all showed great care for the heroines' fate. They made their general wellbeing a primary interest of their reading, which they understood as central to the novels' happy endings. In this regard, characteristics of authenticity and sustainable solutions for a story's positive and subjectively satisfactory ending were vividly debated and compared across several genre-related novels.[11] The participants vibrantly discussed the heroines' development over the course of the plot. These discussions included their depicted reactions to and thoughts about essential elements as well as happenings in the group to determine dimensions of personal growth throughout the story and whether these could lead to an ending wherein the heroine is genuinely happy and fulfilled. According to the participants' discussions, the heroine's growth and specifically the obstacles she confronted at the beginning of the plot had a crucial impact on each participant's reading experiences.

     What is specifically remarkable in this respect is their reaction to *One Day in December*'s ending. Laurie, the heroine, is described as mentally insecure and on the verge of depression throughout the novel. Laurie constantly tries to stand up for her interests instead of those of her first husband or his mother. The group jointly agreed that for the heroine, a truly happy ending would not necessarily have included her engaging in a relationship with the hero. Instead, it should have depicted more extensively how she dealt with her failed marriage and finally developed more self-esteem. Despite the whole plot following the alternating and at times even difficult relationship between the heroine and the hero — who fell in love with each other in the very first chapter of the text — for the participants, the actual happy ending should have focused on the heroine's wellbeing and how her burgeoning relationship with the hero would help her maintain this status.

     In a similar notion, the participants discussed various plot elements and their impact on the heroines. Each of the participants clearly illustrated how the structure and logic of the heroine's reactions and the general shifts of atmosphere this implied for the plot were fundamental for the overall reading experience. These reactions were further compared to personal everyday life experiences and how they influenced the participants' demeanour in the situations depicted. Interestingly, the discussions never referred to the author's choices in designing the scenes or the novels' general plot structure and narration.

Instead, they always directly addressed the characters as if they had acted individually and as actual living beings. This indicates how their reading processes focused on relationships between readers and characters while neglecting authors, editors or publishers as actors engaged in or defining the novel's general design. As the participants discussed and compared their interpretations, they discovered a joint interest in opinions shared by other readers, as e-book reading allows. When graphically integrated into the text—for example the default labelling of sequences highlighted and commented on by other readers in Amazon's Kindle reading applications—this can structure the readers own reading experience. Furthermore, when looking for new reading recommendations, participants would follow recommendations by friends and family and take an active interest in customer reviews on social media platforms like Goodreads. Thus, despite the potential of reading to become a highly personal experience, the participants expressed general interest in the perspectives of others. and their opinions on the novels they read, indicating how their actions as readers were socially contextualised.

In general, personal issues, thoughts and everyday life, were constantly included in the reading and its processing. For example, this was initiated by the textual depiction of minor details of the plot such as a described piece of furniture or clothing, specific atmospheres, plot elements or habits of the characters and their reactions to the story, as described above. One of the participants related to the heroine's personal development in *The Flatshare*, as she herself had just gone through a dramatic period of self-discovery. Though she did not reveal whether she had suffered similar heartache or an abusive relationship, the heroine's development as depicted over the course of the novel had intensely reminded her of a past relationship. With that said, the group generally reflected on Tiffy's heartache as she went through a difficult breakup and this prompted discussions on how they had experienced similar situations. However, they did not draw close similarities between their own experiences and the story elements.

4. DISCUSSION

The study results illustrate how reading chick lit should be perceived as far more than just a source of entertainment in academic and social discourse. The participants' reading experience of the genre did not solely absorb the depictions of characters or plot. Instead, they integrated characters and their behaviours into a personally relatable context world assembled by each reader individually and evolving from individual living circumstances. This elucidates what Váňa describes as literary fiction's "capacity to unravel deeper meanings from the textures of human subjectivity" (*Theorizing the Social* 194). From a sociological perspective, the findings emphasise how, for their readers, the novels of the genre mirror significant cultural challenges contemporarily faced by women (Benstock 254) and how to handle them. Regarding the similarities between text content and reader circumstances, van Monsjou and Mar demonstrate that the resemblance drawn is not immediate but, instead, a complex compound of personal interests determines the readings (11—12). As the participants further indicated, by reading the novels, they found opportunities to playfully engage in subjectively related issues in a secure context. This essentially allowed them to find personal strategies for further dealing with the issues that

the novels displayed. All study participants developed unique approaches of engaging with the two novels and came up with their interpretations relating to personal circumstances. Furthermore, all participants could specify why exactly the texts had attained this specific significance for them.

Radway also exemplified this in her influential 1984 study on the romance reading behaviour of US-American housewives. Radway's study illustrated how the depictions of heroines in "relative positions of weakness" would offer readers opportunities for "examining an all-too-common state of affairs to display possible strategies for coping with it" (Radway 75). The present findings show a slightly different picture, conditioned partly by the differing study focus and socio-cultural changes. It is impossible to compare today's findings with Radway's results directly. Still, in comparison with her research, the results illustrate how combative and compensatory readings may blend into one another. Contemporary readers of chick lit still engage in nurturing reading behaviours and seek personal comfort in their reading. However, given the varying demographic and cultural circumstances of both studies, what remains unclear are the similarities of these behaviours and the nurturing aspects they offer. The individuals in the respective samples and their everyday lives are too fundamentally different for these similarities to be assessed in greater detail.

As Thumala Olave indicates, for many avid female readers today, their reading may not primarily act as a combative or compensatory measure, but might rather serve as an act of self-care. Thus, these readers might apply such self-care in similar circumstances to find relief from inadequate or overwhelming personal conditions. Thumala Olave draws explicitly on three cases of women's reading during times of sickness: (1) as a means to socially connect to her social surroundings and for distraction; (2) as emotional support during childcare; and (3) as a source of "self-understanding and reflexivity" (*Reading Matters*, 445). Similarly, the present study's participants consciously engaged with their reading to find, in Thumala Olave's words, "devices to fashion and refigure their subjectivity" (448). My participants, too, reported specific reading practices when sick, to relax after an exhausting day or to complement a particular mood. They would seek a comfort in these situations and consciously choose books from one subgenre or reread individual texts. They might pursue personal intentions like processing experiences or influencing their mood. In doing so, the reading gains social value as readers integrate it into processes of opinion formation and their perception of the world surrounding them. The participants implicitly regarded the novels as what Thumala Olave describes as "highly valued social goods" (*Exploring the Sacrality of Reading* 101). As artefacts of their social world, these novels were firmly embedded in the personal world view of readers. More specifically, these novels offered opportunities to question or expand individual perspectives and pre-existing social experiences, contributing to the individual's social knowledge. For instance, the reading helped one participant overcome their own body challenges.

Váňa notes how reading may serve as a mediator for "existential knowledge which is inherently social and intersubjective" and regards novels as "anthropological studies" (*Fiction and Social Knowledge* 24—27). In reading chick lit, the participants in the study found ways to engage with social conventions and challenge their general knowledge of their own world perception. For example, the participants expressed strong personal opinions on passages which focused on Tiffy's breakup and her processing of the abusive

relationship with her ex-partner. A participant in the study explained how reading the passages had helped her overcome a recent separation. For this particular participant, reading about the described relationships and their implications for the protagonist—which is a foundational element of chick lit—offered a source of self-understanding and contributed to her overcoming these private obstacles. As Harzewski observes, the genre thus reflects aspects of its readers' everyday lives (65–67), offering them the desired context for addressing matters of their subjectivity (see Thumala Olave *Reading Matters* 448–449).

Regarding the demographic similarities between readers and heroines, the chick lit genre offers its readers an ideal starting point for addressing these everyday life issues (see Harzewski, chapter 1, particularly 56). The analysis indicates how these similarities encourage the readers to become aware of the conditions of their existence. Consequently, the emotional turmoil that characterised many of the reading experiences reported in the discussions is also regarded as an expression of self-reflection against social values and norms represented in and associated with the novels' contents.

As the study illustrates, in many cases, reading may serve as an everyday self-care habit without specifically being marked as such (see Thumala Olave *Reading Matters*). It may serve as a remedy for helping to process issues and obstacles which might otherwise be left unexamined and leave a long-term impact on the general state of personal mental health. This self-nurturing behaviour comprises reflecting on experiences and the reactions they evoke, as well as more abstract concepts like personal ideals and desires. In reading a genre resembling their everyday lives, the participants were able to analyse their subjective worldview regarding specific situations. This allowed the participants to explore different ideas or apply personal solutions to previously unknown circumstances.

However, as contemporary society is increasingly influenced by social media spheres that alter and expand reading experiences through giving ample opportunities for exchange, we need to assess the implications of such practices critically. In Murray's 2018 study, she emphasises the impact of digital reading communities and notes how they influence literary practices (see specifically chapter 5). Murray notes how digital culture facilitates new, communal reading modes with low hierarchies and a discussion culture within interpretative communities allowing "readers [to] become more intensely vocal [with dictates] simultaneously more open to dispute" (160). Details from my discussion group already illustrate how the slightest traces of the reading behaviour of others (in this case, the indication of marks and notes in Kindle files) can influence individual attitudes. The participants expressed interest in each other's reading experiences as they stumbled across these marks when reading the respective e-books, but this also corresponds with the dynamics of their discussions in the group. Although this was not emphasised in the study conducted, the results still indicate that the participants were very open-minded towards such online communities, which debate readings and thus possibly further influence their opinion formation.

5. CONCLUSION

What is it that makes the chick lit genre so popular with its readers? There is yet no definite answer to this question. However, the present study indicates that readers greatly enthuse over the resemblances they draw between the novels' content and their personal everyday lives. In particular, these readings offered strategic tools to approach profound matters of their own subjectivity. The present study indicated divergences between the texts' content and what the participants as dedicated frequent readers focused in in their reading. Like Thumala Olave's work on "intensive women readers" (418), my study concludes that reading, for these women, serves as an act of self-care with effects lasting long after the actual reading is over.[12] As a result, this research confirms pre-existing works arguing that chick lit is popular due to its "feel-good factors" (Montoro 137) and the resemblance of its texts to readers' everyday lives (Harzewski 65), as protagonists and readers draw from the same cultural diet (Whelehan 13). Chick lit's habitat expands far beyond the limits of what readers may discover between the novels' covers, particularly when taking into account new social media communication habits. Throughout the focus group discussions, the participants demonstrated that they do not simply follow a story already laid out for them when attending to the novels. Instead, they read and establish relations between the texts and their own lives, thoroughly integrating their reading experiences and everyday social lives. As I pointed out, elements of chick lit fiction helped participants overcome body issues and heartache, and they frequently utilised it to impact their mood. These findings conclusively indicate the genre's social relevance for its readers and indicate the potential for new research on the general nature, intensity and depth of ideological links between the content of texts and the readers' everyday lives as members of specific social milieus and groups.

Nowadays, the content of novels and their interpretations are often debated across space—and often time (see Murray 160) —in digital media communities, and we should pay closer attention to their implications for reading as a cultural practice. It is not only the novels themselves that resemble "an anthropological study" (Váňa, *Fiction and Social Knowledge* 27) and may claim further relevance for the individual's worldview. Readers' online behaviours of discussing and recommending books are another similarly relevant aspect that needs to be factored into contemporary reading and literary discourses as cultural expression. Various works have already indicated that reading practices have gained new areas of activity through the large-scale digitalisation of modern everyday life.[13] Considering the steady expansion of the book market and the multitudinous spheres of the internet, we need to investigate further the characteristics that chick lit and any other genre develop under these new circumstances of highly specified web communities and their relation to the book market. Another factor is that self-publishing has increasingly diversified its content categories. We now need to closely investigate what these web communities look like and what potentially distinguishes their characteristics from others.

Due to the circumstances of data gathering, this study focuses strongly on Western-oriented chick lit as it first became popular with the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*. Its findings only depict reading patterns of a definite, demographically strictly limited group. Furthermore, following a qualitative design, it cannot represent all

readers of the chick lit genre or the reading experiences of its numerous subgenres. There are thus plenty of possibilities to expand the study results in the future. To improve and refine our understanding of the subject, we need to implement broader quantitative surveys and further qualitative research on general reading habits across multiple demographic backgrounds. Additional analysis of digital and analogue reading disparities is required to detect the genre's significance across various gender identities, age, ethnic groups, educational and overall cultural backgrounds. Only when we consider all these factors properly in their social, historical and cultural dimensions is it possible to draw a fuller picture of chick lit's popularity and the sociocultural interconnections and conditions of the phenomenon.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

This research received sample copies of both novels read in the focus group from Randomhouse Germany in November 2018. However, no further obligations were made on the study's design, outcome or way of publication in this regard. All interviews were initially conducted in German. I translated any quotations from the interview material to include them in this paper.

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[1] See works by Marrs (1995), Sturm (2003), Cuijpers et al. (2010), Brewster, Sen and Cox (2012), McCulliss (2012), Longden et al. (2015), Brewster (2016), Carlbring et al. (2017), Ford et al. (2019), and Niman et al. (2019) as well as more specific studies on bibliotherapy's influence, for example: on eating disorders by Rodríguez-Martín et al. (2013) and Troscianko (2018); on depression by Morgan and Jorm (2009), Floyd (2003), and Ching-Huang (2004); and on anxiety disorders by Morgan and Jorm (2009) and Wootton et al. (2018).

[2] This effect may also be attributed to issues posed by greater social circumstances such as violence-positive and criminal milieus as Snyman and Penzhorn (2011) assess in their study on romance reading behaviour in South Africa.

[3] For further works on reading groups as well as their social implications, compare the iconic study by Long (2003) as well as works by Fuller & Rehberg Sedo (2013), and Driscoll (2014).

[4] Orr and Tixier Herald (254) explain how romance fiction and women's literature may instead be seen as a continuum with a variety of contextual gradations, as a clear distinction is not always possible and numerous intermediate forms exist.

[5] For an overview on the discourse see Whelehan (2002), Ferriss and Young (2013), Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006), McRobbie (2008), Regis (2013), and Roach (2016) on post-feminist aspects of chick lit and the romance novel genre as well as their socio-cultural relations. For a more detailed view on branches of feminist discourse concerning chick lit and concerns of ethnicity and neoliberalism, see Butler and Desai (2008), Mißler (2016), and Folie (2018).

[6] This is also reflected in bookstores' categorising of genres. Currently, the shelf labeling for romance novels, women's literature and chick lit seem to fall into a continuum between the two categories "frech und charmant" ("cheeky and charming") and "große Gefühle" ("great feelings"), as could for example be observed in the Tyrolia branch in

Maria-Theresien-Straße 15, Innsbruck in June 2021. On the representation of chick lit in Austria and the German-speaking area see Folie.

[7] Compare further Frey and Fontana (1991), Kühn and Koschel (2011) as well as Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr (2014) for critical considerations on influencing factors for interview situations.

[8] It becomes clear from these demographics alone that the study focuses on the reading experience and habits of a highly specific subgroup of readers of chick lit. This sample solely consisted of representatives of one gender and age group with little variation and with homogenous sexual orientation and educational achievements. Furthermore, the study sample only comprises participants with a predominantly urban living environment. When the empirical material was collected, all participants were residing in the same city in which their private, educational and professional everyday lives were based. This meant living conditions from other regions, namely smaller towns and rural areas, could not be considered. This puts the study's informational value under limitations and further analysis should be considered on the subject.

[9] Examples of these sub-genres may include but are not limited to those outlined in Yardley's categorising list (qtd. in Montoro 13): "1) Chick Lit Mystery and Tart Noir; 2) Rise of the Antiheroine; 3) Small towns, Chick Lit style; 4) Mommy Lit; 5) Lady Lit or Hen Lit; 6) Widow Lit; 7) Bride Lit; 8) Full-figured Chick Lit; 9) Young Adult Chick Lit; 10) Lad Lit; 11) Paranormal Chick Lit; 12) Ethnic Chick Lit; 13) Christian Chick Lit; 14) Chick Lit Nonfiction". As Montoro (ibid.) suggests, these genres may at least partially be understood as "the logical progression for the twenty- and thirty-something heroines of the 1990s who are now 'grown-ups'".

[10] Significant contributions to this debate have been brought forward by Mißler herself as well as Folie, Hurt and Butler and Desai.

[11] Prominent novels mentioned besides Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* were Cecilia Ahern's *Where Rainbows End* (2005) and *How to Fall in Love* (2013), Jojo Moyes' *Me Before You* (2012) as well as Cathy Woodman's *The Sweetest Thing* (2011).

[12] However, it remains unclear how the reading experience might also have been affected by the focus group setup, as the participants came to know each other and shared more intimate, personal experiences during the second focus group meeting. Shifting modes of intimacy are a genuine phenomenon of group discussions, as Lamnek (2005) points out.

[13] Besides Murray (2018), see Kutzner et al. (2019), Pianzola et al. (2020) and Zhang et al. (2021) for current contributions on characteristics and practices of digital reading and communities.

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