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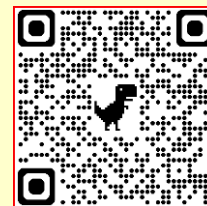
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Why Do We Read in the Digital Age?: A Study of Reading Motivation and Experience Among Young Adults

Katarína Devečková

Constantine the Philosopher's university in Nitra, 949 01, Faculty of Pedagogy, Department of English Language and Culture

Corresponding Author: Katarína Devečková

ABSTRACT

The study explores motivational and experiential differences between reading physical books and digital formats (e.g. Kindle) among young adults in the digital age. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), it examines what drives reading behaviour and how formats influence cognitive and emotional engagement. A mixed-methods questionnaire yielded 155 valid responses from participants aged 18 – 30. Quantitative data were analysed using Likert-scale items and t-tests, while qualitative data were interpreted through thematic analysis. Findings show that intrinsic motivation – particularly enjoyment, escapism, and self-improvement – remains the primary driver of reading, whereas extrinsic motivators like social pressure and academic demands are less influential. Readers reported stronger emotional and immersive experiences with physical books, while digital formats were valued for convenience and accessibility. Kindle use did not significantly affect reading frequency or motivation levels. Results suggest that print continues to hold psychological and emotional appeal, even among digitally literate readers. Hybrid reading practices were common, with format choice depending on context and purpose. The study underscores that while reading formats evolve, the core motivations for reading – learning, escaping, and growing – remain consistent, shaped but not diminished by the medium of engagement.

KEY WORDS: reading motivation; digital reading; physical books; young adult readers; Self-Determination Theory; reading experience

Introduction

Reading practices have undergone significant transformation in the digital age. Whereas reading was once rooted in printed books, it is now shaped by screens, e-readers, and mobile devices, transforming not only how people read, but also why they choose to read. With the growing popularity of digital formats like the Kindle, particularly among young adults, the so-called digital natives, important questions arise about how these shifts affect reading motivation and experience. However, despite the fact, that digital

formats offer considerable convenience, many readers continue to show the preference for physical books. This preference is not merely a product of nostalgia, but rather a reflection of deeper psychological and experiential factors. Research supports these experiences: readers report deeper engagement with print, and studies such as Singer and Alexander (2017a), have demonstrated that reading digitally typically results in lower comprehension and engagement than reading print texts. It seems that format does more than deliver content – it shapes how content is received and

understood.

These findings align with established theoretical framework. Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) argues that intrinsic motivation – which is reading for enjoyment, curiosity, or a sense of autonomy – is far more effective than extrinsic motivators, such as social pressure or obligation. Readers who choose their materials freely and read for personal satisfaction are demonstrably more engaged (Guthrie et al., 2012). This becomes even more relevant as reading shifts from print to screens. The dominance of screens in leisure reading and in education has raised the concerns about the superficial nature of digital reading. As Baron (2021, p.12) points out, “computers (and other digital tools) are good for searching, multitasking, and hyper reading,” often at the expense of deep cognitive and emotional immersion. Yet, these effects are not universal. Digital platforms also offer practical benefits, such as accessibility, portability, and customizable settings that are especially valued in academic settings (Larson, 2010). This suggests that while format plays a role in shaping motivation and engagement, its influence is mediated by individual preferences, goals, and contexts.

In light of these considerations, the study examines the reading motivations and experiences of young adults, with the aim of understanding how these differ across print and digital media. It addresses the following central research questions:

- (1) What motivates young adults to read physical books or digital texts?
- (2) How do reading experiences differ between physical and digital formats in terms of engagement, comprehension, and emotional response?
- (3) To what extent do intrinsic and extrinsic motivators vary between readers who prefer physical books and those who prefer digital formats?

In answering these questions, the study aims to challenge assumptions about the neutrality of reading formats and to seek to deepen our understanding of how medium shapes reading motivation and experience. The findings will be useful not just to scholars, but also to those on the front lines of reading promotions – teachers, librarians, publishers, and policymakers, who seek to promote a culture of reading in an increasingly digital world. As Wolf and Barzillai (2009) remind us, that deep reading processes, which are necessary for reflection, empathy, and critical thinking, are nurtured best in environments that minimize distractions and support sustained attention. In a time, when digital distractions are everywhere, understanding how reading format affects this kind of engagement is more important than ever.

Literature Review

Why We Read: Psychological and Social Drivers

Reading is not just about gathering information – it is a deeply engaging activity that stimulates the mind, nurtures emotional growth, and helps people connect with others. Therefore, we can say that it is deeply embedded in cognitive, emotional and social processes. These roles have always been central to reading, but today’s digital landscape calls for a fresh look at how our reading habits are changing and what it means for these core experiences. Central to the psychology of reading is its capacity to engage the mind on multiple levels. Reading activates key neural pathways related to memory, language, and imaginative projection, supporting critical thinking and sustained attention. According to Mar, Djikic, and Oatley (2008), reading stories, especially fiction, allows us to

understand other people’s actions and emotions by mentally stimulating real-life social experiences (see also Kidd & Castano, 2013). These cognitive and emotional processes form the foundation of reading’s psychological value – yet their continuity across digital formats remains an open and pressing question.

This depth of engagement is supported by the concept of “deep reading,” as described by Wolf and Barzillai (2009), which captures the reflective, empathetic, and analytical thinking that emerges when readers are fully immersed in a text. Therefore, it goes far beyond simply reading words on a page. It involves slowing down, thinking critically, and emotionally connecting with a text. Unlike scanning or surface-level browsing, deep reading is a deliberate act – one that demands cognitive investment, emotional resonance, and uninterrupted mental focus. It is not innate but acquired through sustained engagement and supported by the structure of the reading environment. Print books naturally support this process. This mode of reading through its stable, distraction-free format and through the physical interactions, such as turning pages and sensing narrative progression, further strengthens memory retention and understanding. Digital platforms, by contrast, often disrupt the reading experience through hypertext notifications, and scrolling interfaces, which interrupt flow and undermine comprehension. These disruptions raise critical concerns about the sustainability of deep reading practices in a culture increasingly mediated by screens, particularly among digital-native generations.

Reading is not just good for the brain – it is good for the heart too. Therefore, beyond cognition lies a profound emotional and social function of reading, the one that is particularly activated through literary fiction. Literary fiction draws us into the inner worlds of characters and helps us understand emotions and intentions that may be different from our own. This ability is grounded in Theory of Mind, which enables individuals to interpret the mental and emotional states of others. Kidd and Castano (2013) underscore the importance of fiction in developing this skill, noting that character-driven narratives with moral complexity and emotional ambiguity demand a kind of interpretive effort akin to real-life social reasoning. Yet, this developmental potential hinges not only on content, but on format as well. Physical books, with their immersive and uninterrupted qualities, foster the sustained focus needed for deep emotional processing. Digital reading, on the other hand, fragmented by pop-ups, hyperlinks, and screen fatigue, can make harder for the reader to stay emotionally involved. That is why reading fiction, especially in print, is not just relaxing, it is also a way to build empathy and emotional understanding.

These findings are further supported by research from Djikic, Oatley, and Moldoveanu (2013), who found that literary fiction promotes empathy while simultaneously fostering personal growth by unsettling habitual cognitive frameworks. Similarly, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) showed that the degree of emotional transportation into a story significantly predicted increases in empathy over time. Together, these studies suggest that reading’s emotional effects are not incidental but central, and that they depend heavily on immersive engagement. Crucially, such depth is more readily cultivated in analogue reading environments that resist the cognitive fragmentation often imposed by digital platforms.

Escapism represents another significant psychological motivator. When people get absorbed in a story, they enter a different world and leave their worries behind. This process is known as narrative transportation. Lewis (2009), in a study at the University of Sussex, quantified this effect, showing that just six minutes of reading could reduce stress levels by up to 68%, outperforming other well-known

relaxation activities. This stress relief is frequently associated with the physical and ritual dimensions of print reading: the tactile act of handling a book, the rhythm of page-turning, and the absence of digital interference create an immersive sensory experience conducive to relaxation (Baron, 2021). In addition to its escapist and psychological benefits, reading also serves a significant social function, bringing people together through shared literary experiences. Fuller and Rehberg Sedo (2013) demonstrate how readers today actively seek communal experiences through in-person book clubs or virtual reading forums, that transform reading into a participatory act. These shared spaces make reading more social and meaningful, helping people stay motivated and feel part of something larger. This is especially true when books reflect a readers' background or identity, making the reading experience feel personal and shared at the same time.

Crucially, the medium through which reading occurs plays a defining role in shaping its psychological and social effects. Mangen, Walgermo, and Brønnick (2013) demonstrated that print reading fosters stronger comprehension and narrative retention, due partly because turning pages and holding a physical book helps the brain organize and remember information. On the other hand, digital formats, particularly those that rely on scrolling, often lack these structural cues, leading to diminished immersion and engagement. These format-based differences are not merely technical but deeply entwined with how readers process, internalize, and connect with texts.

To conclude, people read not just to learn or pass time, but to think, feel, escape, and connect. These motivations are strong and long-standing, but how we experience them depends a lot on the way we read, either we read the printed books or on screen. To fully understand how and why young adults read today, it is important to look closely at how different reading formats affect their motivation and experience.

Reading Motivation Theories

To understand how reading habits are changing in the digital age, it is necessary to look at what motivates people to read in the first place. Motivational psychology offers a lens through which both the choice to read and the depth of engagement with reading materials, across digital and print formats, can be meaningfully analysed. A particularly relevant framework is Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundational needs that support sustained motivation. Within this framework, intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in reading for its own sake – for pleasure, curiosity, personal growth, or emotional connection. When these needs are met, readers are more likely to engage meaningfully and persistently. As Deci and Ryan (1985, p.29) observe, “interest and excitement are central emotions that accompany intrinsic motivation,” suggesting that when young adults read because they want to, rather than because they must, their engagement is deeper and more enduring. This claim is supported by Guthrie, Wigfield, and You (2012), who found that intrinsically motivated readers demonstrate greater comprehension and stronger metacognitive engagement is deeper and more enduring. This claim is supported by Guthrie, Wigfield, and You (2012), who found that intrinsically motivated readers demonstrate greater comprehension and stronger metacognitive engagement with reading tasks. In contrast, extrinsic motivation refers to reading that is driven by external incentives or pressures, such as academic grades, social recognition, or workplace expectations. While effective in triggering initial engagement, extrinsic motivators are generally insufficient for

fostering sustained or meaningful interaction with texts. Wigfield and Guthrie (1997) found that extrinsically motivated students read less and use fewer cognitive strategies compared to their intrinsically motivated peers. This distinction is particularly significant in educational contexts, where reading is often assigned as a requirement. Long-term engagement and deeper comprehension typically emerge only when intrinsic motivation is also cultivated.

A complementary perspective is Expectancy-Value Theory, as developed by Eccles and Wigfield (2002), which asserts that individuals are more likely to engage in a task when they both expect to succeed and attach personal value to the outcome. Applied to reading, this model explains why students who feel competent and view reading as purposeful are more inclined to immerse themselves in texts. Crucially, Eccles and Wigfield (2002) emphasize that expectancy beliefs and subjective task values are closely associated with achievement-related behaviours, including the decision to read voluntarily and consistently.

The format in which reading takes place is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor influencing motivation and engagement. Recent studies suggest that digital environments may undermine intrinsic motivation due to increased cognitive load and the presence of frequent distractions. Singer and Alexander (2015) observed that digital reading is often accompanied by shallower processing and reduced comprehension, which may discourage sustained engagement. Similarly, Schugar, Smith, and Schugar (2013) found that students using e-books were more likely to multitask and reported lower cognitive absorption in reading tasks. In contrast, print reading is strongly associated with sustained concentration and immersive engagement – factors closely tied to intrinsic motivation. Baron (2021) argues that print supports a slower, more focused reading, noting that print reading invites a kind of mindfulness – deliberate attention to the words, ideas, and emotions of the text. This deeper engagement may explain why many students continue to prefer physical books for both academic and leisure reading despite the availability of digital alternatives.

The emotional and aesthetic dimensions of print may also support long-term motivation. In a study on academic reading habits, Mizrachi (2015) found that university students often described print materials as more real, tangible, and satisfying, citing improved focus and comprehension. This sensory engagement with the medium can reinforce motivational alignment with the reading task. When reading feels more personal and engaging, it can be easier to stay motivated, which is something that is harder to achieve when reading on a screen filled with distractions. These individual experiences also connect with social and identity-based motivations. Applegate and Applegate (2010) observed that students are more motivated to read when they can relate to the characters, themes, or cultural contexts presented in the books they select. Such motivations often intersect with digital practices, including participation in online book clubs or sharing reading lists on social media platforms. However, these social motivations appear to be most effective when aligned with personal interests rather than external pressures or expectations. Other studies have similarly drawn attention to how perceived autonomy in reading decisions boosts intrinsic motivation. For example, Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasized that when individuals feel volitional and self-directed in their reading choices, they are more likely to report sustained engagement. Moreover, Ivey and Johnston (2013) observed that adolescent readers developed stronger reading identities and engagement when given choice and meaningful connections to texts,

suggesting that motivational outcomes are enhanced when readers perceive agency in both format and content selection.

Taken together, Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy-Value Theory provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the motivational dimensions of reading. These theories highlight the importance of autonomy, task value, and personal connection to the text – elements that are shaped not only by individual psychology and social context but also by the reading format itself. As digital reading becomes increasingly dominant, recognizing how screen-based formats affect motivation is important, especially if we want to help people build lasting and meaningful reading habits.

The Shift to Digital Reading

Over the past two decades, the rise of digital technologies has significantly transformed how people read, introducing new platforms such as e-readers, tablets, and smartphones. While these tools offer notable advantages in terms of accessibility, portability, and convenience, they also trigger questions about how the format affects key dimensions of the reading experience, including motivation, comprehension, and emotional engagement.

Digital formats have been widely embraced, particularly by younger readers, yet contemporary research reveals that this shift is not without cognitive and motivational consequences. Singer and Alexander (2017b) found that despite readers' perception of increased speed and efficiency on screens, actual comprehension tends to suffer, especially in the context of narrative texts. These findings point to a recurring pattern of overconfidence and diminished processing depth, which aligns with Delgado et al. (2018), who emphasized that digital reading often leads to more superficial engagement, due to scrolling, multitasking, and increased susceptibility to distraction. Such environmental and attentional disruptions have significant implications for intrinsic motivation. Baron (2021) critiques the very design of digital reading interfaces, noting that this design encourages quick skimming over deliberate reflection. In contrast, print offers deep-focused attention and memory encoding through physical markers and sensory cues. This immersive potential is essential for what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) described as a state of flow – a deep, effortless involvement in an activity. However, digital reading platforms also offer unique motivational affordances. Devices such as the Kindle allow for font customization, adjustable lighting, and instant access to large libraries – features that support reader autonomy and competence, two core motivational needs of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Larson (2010) suggests that these features can make reading more accessible for individuals with visual impairments, dyslexia, or other reading-related challenges, thereby expanding inclusivity. Furthermore, for readers who travel frequently or lack access to physical libraries, e-readers offer logistical and economic advantages that can facilitate more regular reading habits. Yet, when it comes to emotional depth and aesthetic satisfaction, physical books continue to dominate. Mizrahi's (2015) findings illustrate that students perceive print as more authentic and emotionally rewarding, a perception likely reinforced by the ritualistic dimensions of print reading. Mangen et al. (2013) provide further evidence, demonstrating how spatial and tactile stability enhance readers' ability to mentally organize and recall narrative information. As they note, "the material affordances of print play a supportive role in building coherent mental models of a text" (Mangen et al., 2013, p. 65). The result is not a wholesale replacement of print by digital formats, but rather the emergence of hybrid reading behaviors. Young adult readers increasingly tailor their format choice to the demands of the reading context. The 2018

National Literacy Trust report found that although more young people were reading on screens, print remained the preferred format for fiction and emotionally rich material. This suggests that digital fluency does not necessarily translate to digital preference – especially when the reading goal involves deep comprehension or narrative immersion.

Ultimately, the digital transformation of reading has opened pathways for greater accessibility and individualized reading experiences, yet it has also reconfigured the cognitive and emotional terrain of reading itself. Motivational depth, attention, and narrative immersion are no longer neutral experiences, but ones shaped profoundly by the medium through which texts are consumed. As young adults negotiate these shifting formats, a clearer understanding of how reading is practiced and felt is essential for those invested in preserving the cultural, educational, and personal value of reading in an increasingly digitalized world.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to explore how young adults engage with and are motivated by reading across different formats – specifically, physical books and digital platforms such as Kindle. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the study sought not only to map general trends but also to access the deeper meanings and subjective experiences that shape contemporary reading practices. Central to this approach was an online questionnaire designed to elicit both statistical patterns in reading frequency, format preferences, and motivational orientations, and richer, open-ended reflections on the emotional and cognitive dimensions of reading. The study was conceptually grounded in Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which distinguished between intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation, providing a framework for interpreting why individuals choose to read and how sustained engagement is fostered. This psychological lens was complemented by empirical models of digital reading and engagement (e.g. Singer & Alexander, 2017a; Baron, 2021), which helped contextualize format-specific differences in reading depth, comprehension, and attention. The mixed-methods design enabled a dual analytic strategy: quantitative data were subjected to descriptive statistics and inferential testing, while qualitative data were subjected to descriptive statistics and inferential testing, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically to uncover patterns in reader motivation, emotional immersion, and the ways in which participants navigate and negotiate between formats.

Three central research questions guided the study:

- (1) What motivates young adults to read physical books or digital texts?
- (2) How do reading experiences differ between physical and digital formats in terms of engagement, comprehension, and emotional response?
- (3) To what extent do intrinsic and extrinsic motivators vary between readers who prefer physical books and those who prefer digital formats?

Data collection took place between April and May 2025, providing a total of 155 valid responses. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 and primarily consisted of university students, recent graduates, and early career professionals. The questionnaire was disseminated through university mailing lists, academic forums, and social media platforms to maximize reach. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Demographic data included age, education level, and reading frequency. Participants were also asked

to self-identify a print-dominant, digital-dominant, or hybrid readers, offering a typological lens for comparative analysis.

The questionnaire was created using Microsoft Forms and consisted of four sections: (1) demographic information (age, gender, education level, and general reading habits); (2) reading habits and format preferences (frequency of reading, preferred genres, and use of digital vs. physical formats); (3) reading motivation, measured through six Likert-scale items adapted from validated models (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997; Guthrie et al., 2007), assessing intrinsic factors (e.g. enjoyment, escapism, emotional connection) and extrinsic drivers (e.g. academic obligation, social expectations); and (4) reading experience, focusing on perceived cognitive engagement, emotional immersion, and format convenience. Open-ended questions further invited participants to elaborate on their format preferences and to share significant reading experiences. The survey remained open from April 28, 2025, and was distributed digitally to ensure access across diverse geographic locations.

All data collection adhered to GDPR regulations and broader ethical standards; no personally identifiable information was gathered. Ethical approval for this study was not required under the institutional and national guidelines of the Faculty of Education, Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia, as the research involved only anonymous voluntary participation in an online questionnaire with no collection or sensitive data.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation. Participants provided written (digital) consent by confirming their voluntary agreement on the opening page of the Microsoft Forms questionnaire. The consent form outlined the purpose of the study, assured participants of anonymity and confidentiality, and emphasized that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Quantitative data were analysed using Microsoft Excel and IBM SPSS, employing descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential tests (independent samples t-tests, ANOVA) to examine format-based differences in motivation and experience. Qualitative responses underwent thematic coding through a line-by-line review, allowing for the identification of recurring motifs such as emotional resonance, motivational reasoning, and context-driven format switching. These qualitative insights served not merely to supplement but to deepen the interpretation of statistical findings, highlighting the lived experience behind the numbers.

As with any study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. Although the sample was diverse in terms of education and geography, it leaned toward individuals engaged in academic or professional environments, potentially narrowing the applicability of results to other young adult populations. The use of self-report measures introduces the risk of response bias, particularly regarding socially desirable answering or subjective misjudgement. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the design captures motivation and engagement at a single point in time, limiting the ability to track how reading behaviours evolve longitudinally. Nonetheless, this mixed-methods investigation offers valuable insight into how reading is being reimaged in a digital context, revealing the complex interplay of format, motivation, and reader identity in the habits of young adults today.

Results

This section presents the findings from the mixed-methods analysis of reading motivation and experience among young adult readers. The data are drawn from 155 valid responses to an online

questionnaire, comprising Likert-scale ratings and open-ended reflections. Results are structured around general reading motivation, format-specific experiences, differences by format preference, and insights from qualitative responses.

Participants Profile and Reading Habits

The sample consisted predominantly of university students and recent graduates, aged between 18 and 30, with a majority identifying as female. Reading frequency was generally high: 15.1% of participants reported reading daily, 49.1% read several times a week, and 29.1% read a few times a month. Regarding format preferences, 43.6% favoured physical books, 24.8% preferred e-readers such as Kindle, and 31.5% reported widespread adoption of hybrid reading practices among young adults.

General Reading Motivation

Participants rated six motivation items on a five-point Likert scale. As shown in Table 1, intrinsic motivation was consistently higher than extrinsic motivation across the sample. The strongest motivational driver was enjoyment ($M = 4.42$), followed by self-improvement ($M = 4.16$), and personal connection to books ($M = 3.79$). In contrast, extrinsic motivations such as reading due to obligation ($M = 3.34$) and social expectation ($M = 1.69$) scored considerably lower.

Table 1. Mean Reading Motivation Scores ($N = 155$)¹

Motivation Item	Mean Score
I read because I enjoy it.	4.42
I read to improve my knowledge and skills.	4.16
I feel personally connected to the books I read.	3.79
I read to escape from everyday life.	3.50
I read because I have to (e.g. for school / work).	3.34
I read because others expect me to.	1.69

These results confirm the central role of intrinsic factors in young adult reading behaviour. In line with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), readers are more likely to be engaged when reading serves personal interest and emotional satisfaction rather than fulfilling external demands.

Format-Specific Motivation and Experience

Three additional Likert-scale items examined format-specific experiences. As shown in Table 2, the highest-rated item was immersion in physical books ($M = 4.08$), followed Kindle convenience ($M = 3.24$), and increased reading frequency with Kindle ($M = 2.73$). This suggests that while e-readers are appreciated for their practicality, they do not necessarily foster more frequent or immersive reading.

Table 2. Format-Specific Experience Scores ($N = 155$)

Statement	Mean Score
I feel more immersed in a physical book than	4.08

¹ M refers to the arithmetic mean (average) score calculated from participant responses on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Mean scores were computed separately for each item based on all valid responses.

when reading on Kindle.	
The Kindle is more convenient to use than physical books.	3.24
I read more frequently when using a Kindle than when reading print.	2.73

These findings align with research by Mangen et al. (2013) and Baron (2021), which show that digital formats may reduce cognitive and emotional immersion, even while offering functional advantages.

Table 3. Motivation and Format-Specific Experience by Format Preference

Format Preference	Enjoyment	Connection	Escapism	Obligation	Social Pressure	Convenience
Physical books	4.33	3.79	3.59	3.36	1.77	2.07
Kindle	4.42	3.84	3.47	3.13	1.47	3.97
Both	4.49	3.79	3.57	3.04	1.92	2.72

These results highlight the differentiated affordances of each format. Print supports deeper emotional and cognitive engagement, while Kindle promotes accessibility and frequency. Readers who use both formats appear to adjust their practices based on purpose and context.

Insights from Open-Ended Responses

Qualitative responses added nuance to the qualitative findings. Many participants described physical books as sensory and emotionally grounding:

- *Books calm me. I disconnect from my phone and other distractions.*
- *Turning pages is part of the experience – it helps me think and remember more.*

By contrast, Kindle users emphasized convenience and portability:

- *The Kindle makes reading in bed easier because I don't need a light.*
- *I use Kindle for study – it helps me highlight and annotate easily.*

Hybrid users articulated strategic format-switching:

- *I use Kindle for travel or academic texts, but physical books for deep reading and emotional investment.*

These reflections support the notion that reading format not only affects practical habits but also shapes emotional and cognitive engagement. The qualitative responses underscore the reality that reading in the digital age is not a fixed behaviour but rather a situational and adaptive practice, where readers choose formats based on context, purpose, and desired depth of engagement. This aligns with findings by Trakhman et al. (2019), who emphasize that readers vary their strategies and comprehension depending on the medium they use.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the motivational and experiential dimensions of young adult's reading habits in the digital age, with particular attention to differences between physical books and digital formats such as the Kindle. Informed by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and enriched by insights from cognitive and emotional reading research, the findings reveal a layered interplay between habit and intention, suggesting that today's reading

Differences by Format Preference

Participants were categorized into three groups based on their preferred reading format: physical books, Kindle, or both. As shown in Table 3, preference significantly influenced both motivation and experience. Physical book readers reported the highest levels of immersion ($M = 4.14$), while Kindle users rated convenience ($M = 3.97$) and reading frequency ($M = 4.00$) more highly. Those who used both formats scored consistently across dimensions, suggesting flexible and context-sensitive reading habits.

practices emerge from a dynamic negotiation of preference, convenience, and intrinsic psychological drives. Data were collected between April and May 2025, a period that reflects contemporary post-pandemic reading trends and a high level of digital literacy among university-aged participants. Based on the data obtained through the practical research, several key conclusions can be drawn regarding how format influences motivation and the overall reading experience among young adult readers.

Intrinsic Motivation as the Primary Driver

The findings of this study underscore the centrality of intrinsic motivation in shaping young adults' reading engagement. Enjoyment, emotional resonance, and the pursuit of personal growth consistently emerged as the most influential drivers, far outweighing externally imposed factors such as academic obligation or social expectation. These results echo the foundational claims of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which contends that behaviours rooted in autonomy and internal interest are more likely to yield sustained and meaningful engagement. This pattern also reinforces the work of Guthrie et al. (2007), who highlight the pivotal role of self-initiated interest in promoting deep reading involvement, both in and beyond educational contexts. Notably, the commonly cited motivation to "read for knowledge and skill development" – while ostensibly extrinsic – was frequently framed in qualitative responses as a self-directed and personally fulfilling aim. This ambiguity illustrates the boundary between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, a dynamic recognized in Wigfield and Eccles' (2000) expectancy-value model, which posits that when individuals assign personal value to task, it can acquire intrinsic meaning, even if initially driven by external goals.

Format Shapes Experience, Not Motivation

While intrinsic motivation remained consistently high across all format preferences, nuanced distinctions emerged in the way readers engaged with physical versus digital texts. Readers who favoured physical books reported the highest levels of immersion ($M = 4.14$), supporting the findings by Wolf and Barzillai (2009), who conceptualize "deep reading" as a reflective, emotionally resonant process best nurtured in uninterrupted, tactile environments. The linearity and sensory materiality of print appear to foster attentional continuity, narrative empathy, and deeper cognitive absorption – patterns also supported by the work of Mangen et al. (2013) and Kidd and Castano (2013).

In contrast, Kindle users prioritized convenience and reading frequency, suggesting that digital formats facilitate accessibility and efficiency rather than sustained engagement. This shift in emphasis reflects a broader recalibration of reading strategies, aligning with findings by Singer and Alexander (2017b), who observed a tendency toward faster, less immersive screen-based reading, and by Trakhman et al. (2019), who demonstrated that readers adjust their cognitive and motivational investments based on the perceived affordances of each format.

The Rise of Hybrid Reading Practices

The prominent presence of hybrid readers, those who engage with both print and digital formats in roughly equal measure, signals a broader shift toward flexible and adaptive reading practices. These individuals demonstrated balanced scores across both motivational and experiential dimensions and, in open-ended responses, articulated a nuanced awareness of when and why they switch formats. Their accounts revealed a purposeful division of reading contexts: digital platforms like Kindle were often favoured for academic tasks or reading on the move, while physical books were chosen for leisure and emotional immersion. Such behaviour resonates with Baron's (2021) notion of "strategic reading," wherein format choice is shaped not merely by preference but by situational demands, goals, and affective states. This supports a reconceptualization of digital natives – not as print-averse, but as contextually responsive readers who tailor their media use in accordance with task, mood, and setting, thereby reinforcing the view of reading as a situated and adaptive practice (Trakhman et al., 2019).

The dynamic nature of this format negotiation is further supported by Takacs and Bus (2016), whose meta-analysis suggests that the structure and design of the medium itself can shape the trajectory of reading engagement, particularly in multimodal environments. Although their work focuses on younger readers, the implications extend to young adults as well, especially regarding how interactivity and design features influence sustained motivation. Additionally, studies by Liu (2005) and Jeong (2012) affirm that screen-based reading alters traditional comprehension processes, particularly through reduced linearity and changes in attention span. Hybrid readers in this study appear to navigate these challenges by adjusting their strategies, selecting the format best aligns with the cognitive or emotional depth required by the reading task. Together, these findings highlight the emergence of a reading paradigm in which format is not fixed, but fluid, responding dynamically to the evolving needs and habits of contemporary readers.

Implications for Education and Reading Promotion

These findings carry important implications for those involved in shaping reading culture – educators, librarians, and designers of reading programs alike. Central to this is the need to prioritize intrinsic motivation as the foundation for fostering sustained reading engagement. Programs that centre on reading for pleasure, emotional resonance, and personal relevance are more likely to cultivate deep and lasting connections with texts. Equally vital is the recognition that access to both print and digital formats is not merely a logistical matter, but a pedagogical strategy that acknowledges the diverse preferences and adaptive behaviours of contemporary readers. Supporting hybrid engagement through multimodal availability empowers young adults to exercise autonomy and align reading choices with context, mood, and purpose. Moreover, the design of digital reading environments warrants critical attention. Informed by research such as Singer and Alexander (2017b), future digital

platforms should aim to foster immersion by minimizing distractions and enhancing cognitive flow, through interface elements that reinforce linearity, narrative coherence, and emotional connection.

Taken together, these insights contribute to a more layered understanding of reading in the digital era, one that foregrounds the interplay of motivation, media, and context, and affirms the continued relevance of deep, reflective engagement in an age of technological abundance.

Conclusion

This study investigated the motivational drivers and reading experiences of young adult readers across physical and digital formats. The findings highlight the enduring importance of intrinsic motivation – particularly enjoyment, emotional connection, and personal growth – as the primary reason young adults choose to read. These results support the core tenets of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), reaffirming that autonomous, interest-driven reading leads to deeper engagement. Although extrinsic motivations such as obligation or social expectation were present, they were significantly less influential, confirming that sustained reading behaviour is most effectively supported by internal rewards.

While motivation remained consistently high across all format preferences, the medium clearly influenced how reading was experienced. Participants who preferred physical books reported stronger immersion and emotional resonance, in line with prior research suggesting that print facilitates deep reading and reflective thinking (Wolf & Barzillai, 2009; Mangen et al., 2013). Kindle users emphasized convenience and portability valuing the digital format's practicality over its affective qualities. Those who used both formats described their reading habits as flexible and context-driven, selecting print or digital media depending on their goals, setting, or mood. This adaptability supports the notion of reading as a situated and strategic practice (Trakhman et al., 2019; Baron, 2021), where the format becomes a functional tool rather than a fixed preference. The study contributes to our understanding of contemporary reading by illustrating that although the reading landscape has evolved technologically, the psychological foundations of why we read remain largely unchanged. However, the findings should be interpreted with some caution. The sample consisted predominantly of university-educated young adults, limiting the generalizability of the results to other age groups, educational backgrounds, or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of social desirability bias or selective memory. The quantitative design, while effective for identifying general trends, may not have captured the full depth of readers' experiences and emotional responses. In addition, the focus on Kindle as the primary digital format may not reflect reading practices on smartphones, tablets, or emerging digital platforms.

Future research will benefit from more diverse samples and mixed-methods approaches, including in-depth interviews or longitudinal studies that examine how reading motivation and habits evolve over time. It would also be valuable to investigate how specific genres or reading purposes interact with format preference, and whether digital platforms can be modified to support deeper cognitive and emotional engagement. Comparative studies across generations could offer further insight into how digital natives differ from older cohorts in their reading behaviours, while experimental designs could explore how different reading environments affect comprehension, empathy, and focus.

Ultimately, the study underscores that while the technologies of reading continue to evolve, the motivations that drive us to read

remain deeply rooted in personal meaning, emotional engagement, and the desire to understand ourselves and others. Recognizing these core motivations – and the nuanced ways they interact with format – can help educators, librarians, and platform designers create more effective, inclusive, and engaging reading experience for a digitally literate generation.

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Disclosure of Interest

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author upon reasonable request. Due to the anonymous nature of the questionnaire responses and ethical considerations regarding participant privacy, the data cannot be publicly shared.

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