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Adolescents' perspectives on the barriers to reading for pleasure

Charlotte Webber, Katherine Wilkinson, Dr Lynne G. Duncan and Dr Sarah McGeown

Abstract

Adolescence is often positioned as a particularly vulnerable period for reading motivation and engagement, both for academic reading and reading for pleasure. However, closer scrutiny of the literature reveals a much more nuanced pattern of changing interest, attitude, and motivation for reading during adolescence. Despite this, there is a distinct lack of research that explores the barriers adolescents' face to reading for pleasure from the perspectives of adolescents themselves. Working with a Young People's Advisory Panel, peer- and adult-led interviews were carried out with 46 adolescents (13–15 years old) from six high schools. Six themes were identified from the thematic analysis, reflecting adolescents' perceptions of the barriers to their reading for pleasure: (1) access; (2) mismatch between provision and needs; (3) social factors; (4) reading experiences in school; (5) reading affect; and (6) time and competing activities. This article makes a novel and significant contribution to the limited literature on reading for pleasure during adolescence and provides important qualitative insights for researchers and educational practitioners interested in supporting adolescents' reading motivation.

Key words: Adolescence, Reading, Motivation, Participatory, Qualitative

Introduction

Recent research has indicated that in the last 50 years, time spent reading for pleasure has declined amongst adolescents (Twenge et al., 2019). Indeed, the adolescent period has been consistently associated with declines in motivation and engagement for both academic and recreational reading (e.g. Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2020; Clark et al., 2023). As reading for pleasure is associated with rich and diverse positive academic outcomes, including reading and language skills (Cunningham et al., 2001), in addition to social and emotional experiences and outcomes, for example, identity development, empathy, perspective taking and well-being (Howard, 2011; Wilhelm, 2016; Wilkinson et al., 2020; Eekhof et al., 2022), understanding the barriers to reading for pleasure during adolescence is necessary to support personal reading practices beyond childhood.

Reading motivation is a complex concept (Schiefele et al., 2012; Toste et al., 2020) and has been described as "the drive to read resulting from a comprehensive set of an individual's beliefs about, attitudes toward, and goals for reading" (Conradi et al., 2014, p. 154). Despite popular discourse surrounding declining reading motivation and engagement during adolescence, much reading motivation research focuses on children (e.g. McGeown et al., 2016, 2020; Stutz et al., 2016; Kavanagh, 2019), and there is a distinct lack of reading motivation research that focuses specifically on the adolescent period (Conradi et al., 2014). This represents a significant gap in the literature and risks assumptions being made about adolescents' reading motivation based on findings from research with younger children.

The transition from childhood to adolescence is associated with a number of contextual changes that situate it as a potentially unique period for reading motivation and engagement. For example, in the United Kingdom, early adolescence is associated with a transition from primary to secondary education, a period within which individuals also navigate changing relationships with peers and parents, greater responsibilities and autonomy over their lives and shifts in the availability of free time (Heath et al., 2009). Such changes have the potential to exert significant effects on adolescents' motivation and ability to read for pleasure and represent a distinctly different context from childhood, yet these factors are often not considered within the discourse surrounding adolescent reading motivation. Furthermore, the majority of reading motivation research has used quantitative data gathering methods to measure reading motivation (Conradi et al., 2014); however, this approach is largely unsuited to understanding adolescents' own perspectives of

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their reading experiences and what does (and does not) motivate them to read (Webber et al., 2022b; Webber et al., 2023). To date, and to the best of our knowledge, there is no large-scale qualitative research that seeks to explore young adolescents' perceptions of barriers to their reading for pleasure.

This research is underpinned by self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci, 2000), the most widely used and comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding reading motivation (Conradi et al., 2014; Schiefele and Löweke, 2018). SDT considers motivated behaviour to be guided by the pursuit of intrinsic needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci and Ryan, 2012) and makes the distinction between intrinsic motivation (internally driven, e.g. reading for enjoyment) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external factors, e.g. reading to please teachers). While assuming these needs are universal, SDT also recognises that the ways in which individuals choose to pursue them is based on contextual factors (Griffin et al., 2017). In this sense, applying SDT to adolescents' reading allows for the consideration of a diverse range of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that could exert an effect on their reading motivation and engagement.

This project focused on early–mid adolescence, as middle adolescence (14–16 years old) is a particularly vulnerable period for reading attitudes and engagement in comparison with younger and older ages (Clark et al., 2023). Exploring adolescents' own perspectives of the barriers to reading motivation is important for aligning educator and researcher knowledge with the lived experiences of adolescents themselves, rather than simply reinforcing adult assumptions about their lives (Fielding, 2004). Therefore, a Young People's Advisory Panel (YPAP) collaborated with the adult research team throughout this project, co-designing the project, collecting data alongside adult researchers and interpreting the findings together (see Webber et al., 2022b). In this way, the voices of adolescents have been built into the project from the outset, representing a unique contribution to the literature on adolescent reading motivation. It is hoped that these insights will be useful for researchers and education practitioners seeking to identify barriers to reading for pleasure and support adolescents to find and maintain a love of reading.

Method

Participants

In total, 46 adolescents (13–15 years old; 22 male) from six high schools participated (Table 1). No criteria were placed on participants' reading motivation or skill level; adolescents with a diverse range of reading experiences were invited to participate, and it was emphasised that participants did not have to consider themselves avid readers. Participating schools were geographically dispersed across Scotland, with both rural and urban areas represented. Students and their parents provided written consent to participate. Following group discussions with the YPAP, members of the panel also decided to be interviewed for data collection. Therefore, five of the participants were also members of the YPAP.

Interviews

To increase accessibility, participants could select either (1) to be interviewed by a member of the YPAP (peer-led interview; $N = 11$); (2) to be interviewed by a researcher (adult-led interview; $N = 34$); or (3) to submit a written response to interview questions ($N = 1$). Peer-led interviews were conducted in-person in participants' schools with the adult researcher present remotely via Microsoft Teams. Adult-led interviews

Table 1: Demographic information of participating schools (data extracted from Scottish Government, 2022)

School	*School population*	*SIMD Q1%*	*ASN %*	*FSM %*	*EAL %*	*Ethnic minority %*	*Rural/ urban area*	*N YPAP members*	*N participants*	*Participant gender*
1	1496	3	22	13	3	8	Urban	3	18	3M 15F
2	698	0	39	6	1	<1	Remote rural	2	8	4M 4F
3	1038	7	36	10	6	<1	Urban	0	15	8M 7F
4	1588	8	30	12	3	6	Urban	0	13	7M 6F
5	1298	39	37	25	1	2	Urban	0	4	0M 4F
6	889	31	36	28	2	3	Urban	1	1	0M 1F
Total									59	22M 37F

ASN, additional support needs; EAL, English as additional language; FSM, free school meals; SIMD, Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation.

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were carried out online using Microsoft Teams. All interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams, and automatic transcription was enabled. Peer and adult interviewers followed the same interview schedule (see below). In peer-led interviews, the adult researcher introduced themselves and then handed over peer interviewer to conduct the interview in full. The adult researcher did not intervene in peer-led interviews but was on hand to support if necessary. Following analysis, there were no differences in interview content (i.e. themes identified). However, there were some differences in interview length (e.g. peer interviews were shorter, on average) and communication style (e.g. more informal), as previously identified in research regarding peer-led interviews (Webber et al., 2022a).

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule (see https://osf.io/xrk6e) was developed collaboratively with the YPAP based on the consensus definition of reading motivation (Conradi et al., 2014), existing measures (e.g. Motivation for Reading Questionnaire; Wigfield and Guthrie, 2004) and group discussions about items the panel felt were most relevant to explore. Items related to reading beliefs, attitudes and goals, social reading practices, emotional experiences with reading and perceived barriers and motivators for reading for pleasure. Item wording was flexible to allow participants to comment not only on their own reading motivation but to hypothesise more broadly about the barriers other adolescents might face to reading for pleasure.

Analysis. An inductive, data-driven approach to thematic analysis was used, applying the six phases outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006). Full details of the thematic analysis approach used for the article are available in the preregistration (OSF). Credibility strategies included consensus-building, member-checking and dialogues with the YPAP in order to review themes and to ensure adolescents' perspectives were central to the interpretation of the interview findings. From the entire data corpus, three datasets were created: (1) reading motivation; (2) barriers to reading practices; and (3) adolescents' perceptions about the importance and benefits of reading for pleasure. To do justice to the depth and complexity of the qualitative data, this paper draws upon dataset 2, although it is complementary to data relating to the factors that motivate reading for pleasure.

Results and discussion

Six themes were identified as acting as barriers to adolescents' motivation to read for pleasure: (1) access; (2) mismatch between provision and interests/needs; (3) social factors; (4) history of negative reading experiences; (5) reading affect; and (6) time and competing activities. These themes were discussed with the YPAP, and their interpretations have been incorporated into the discussion. Participants' quotes have been anonymised using pseudonyms.

Theme 1. Access

Having access to reading materials in a preferred format is fundamental to reading for pleasure (Merga, 2015). Previous research has indicated that students are more motivated to read when they have access to a wide range of reading materials (e.g. Nielen and Bus, 2015). However, to obtain reading material, individuals must overcome several access barriers, for example, developing personal knowledge about where to find books, having physical access to these spaces (e.g. proximity to a local library or bookshop, Internet access for reading online) and having resources available for these tasks (e.g. money, time). In the current study, adolescents noted several barriers to accessing reading material, including not having up-to-date books at home, not having the financial means to buy books and encountering structural barriers to access in school. These responses align with a previous, albeit smaller-scale, qualitative exploration of the barriers that adolescents perceive to reading for pleasure (Wilkinson et al., 2020).

> *I just don't have very many good books at home. James, male, school 2*

> *[A] lot of people can't be bothered to get [a library pass] and go and get the book … I just can't really be bothered to get it. Lachlan, male, school 2*

> *"Well, this is going to sound really bad but, like, our school library, it doesn't get updated a lot … if you update that and gave us more access to different kinds of books that would help out." Violet, female, school 1*

Notably, barriers to obtaining books can be both objective (e.g. not physically having access to a local library) and subjective (e.g. perceiving the process of borrowing books from the library to be challenging). Such barriers may also conflict with adolescents' feelings of autonomy (e.g. being able to access books without adult intervention) and competence (e.g. feeling

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capable of the task of obtaining books). It is also notable that the mere presence of books does not necessarily mean that adolescents are able—or motivated—to access them (Merga, 2016). Texts should also be attractive, diverse and relevant to adolescents' interests, lives and experiences to foster situational interest and motivation (Merga, 2016). Adolescents also require effective choosing strategies to support selection from available texts (Merga and Roni, 2017).

Theme 2. Mismatch between provision and needs

This theme relates to the ways in which adolescents' reading experiences align (or do not align) with their wider needs, goals, skills or interests. This links closely with the theme of *access*—adolescents require access to texts and reading experiences which meet their needs—but focusses more specifically on the gaps between what is available and what is motivating.

Interests. Adolescents are motivated to read books which are relevant to their lives and interests (Lapp and Fisher, 2009) and being unable to find relevant reading material could contribute towards declining interest and engagement (Applegate et al., 2014; Merga, 2016). However, adolescents often perceive teacher-assigned texts as boring and irrelevant (Guthrie et al., 2012). Indeed, in the current study, adolescents reported a mismatch between the books they encountered in school and their own interests.

> *In my free time, I would pick, like, more like, like, kind of crime kind of novels, which we don't usually read in class. Caelen, male, school 2*

> *[We'd read more books] if they were about stuff we actually enjoy rather than just books about war and stuff we don't like. Rebecca, female, school 5*

The reading material encountered in school has the potential to foster interest in reading, especially "if the situational experience is accompanied by enjoyment, delight, and learning" (Guthrie et al., 2005, p. 93). Furthermore, increases in situational interest are linked with longer-term increases in reading motivation when the classroom context is continually supportive (Guthrie et al., 2005). Therefore, failing to align in-school texts with adolescents' interests is, at best, a missed opportunity to support situational and long-term motivation, and at worst, demotivating for pupils who come to align classroom reading with feelings of boredom or irrelevance (Guthrie et al., 2012).

It is also important to consider the relevance of Young Adult (YA) texts, which are available outside of school. For example, YA authors of colour are still not visible in the bestseller charts, prominent books festivals and prestigious literary prizes (Ramdarshan Bold, 2019, 2021). As reading books that are relevant to their lives offers adolescents the opportunity to explore personally meaningful content (Schachter and Galili-Schachter, 2012), many adolescents may feel that their lives and interests are not represented in YA texts that are available to them.

Autonomy. Adolescence is often conceptualised developmentally as a period of striving for increased independence and autonomy, while still maintaining a level of connection and interdependence (Spear and Kulbok, 2004). SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2000) views adolescence as a time of movement towards greater autonomy, internalisation of values and identity development (Griffin et al., 2017). However, in the current study, adolescents indicated that the reading experiences they had in school often did not support their autonomy as readers.

> *Because we're forced to read a lot of, like, old books like old poetry, like Shakespeare and everything, that we're not really interested in. So, like, when you're forced to read stuff like that it makes us think negatively of reading as a whole. Katarina, female, school 1*

> *[I]n school, it feels more like you're getting told to do it, which like, makes me feel like, "oh, why am I even doing it? There's not really any point". Aisling, female, school 1*

> *I get very invested in [the story]. I get very, like, interested. And then it's kind of annoying when you get told to stop reading, at school especially. James, male, school 2*

Environments that support autonomy are associated with increases in motivation, engagement and success, especially when perceived autonomy is high early in the academic year (Hafen et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important that classroom environments are perceived as autonomy-supportive (De Naeghel et al., 2012; Spear and Kulbok, 2004). Reeves (2004) recognises the lack of autonomy adolescents have over their in-school reading choices as somewhat of an anomaly, noting that "only in middle school and high school are people's reading choices so controlled" (p. 242). Therefore, finding ways to negotiate the balance between meeting curriculum requirements and supporting autonomy is necessary for aligning adolescents' needs with the reading experiences they have in school.

Goals. Supporting reading motivation and engagement is a key focus in reading research, policy and practice. The primary aim of this work is often on improving reading skills (Aukerman and Chambers Schuldt, 2021). However, there is a potential tension between pupils' personal goals and school priorities

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for literacy. In the current study, for example, one member of the YPAP noted that although they were told in school that reading for pleasure can expand their vocabulary, this was not the main reason they chose to read. Another noted that the messages they receive about the benefits of reading often felt repetitive and did not align with their own goals.

> *It doesn't really affect me in, like, how much I want to read. I'm gonna read it for the story, not really for the kind of words that are there … I don't really read to learn new words. Amelia, female, school 1*

> *It's the same thing over and over again if they do advertise it like, you know, it's a way to escape or something like that, which is true, but it's on every single poster or every single advertisement. Stephen, male, school 4*

Previous research also contends that school literacy instruction does not recognise the social needs of adolescents, generating a mismatch that can lead to resistance to in-school reading (Mathers and Stern, 2012). Understanding adolescents' own goals for reading is necessary to align support with what is important to them, rather than relying on adult assumptions about their needs.

Comprehension and reading skills. Reading motivation and engagement have previously been correlated with reading skills, and there is accumulating evidence for a causal effect from skills to engagement, which begins the reciprocal relationship between the two (Toste et al., 2020; van Bergen et al., 2021). However, despite the assumption that pupils will have secure reading skills by the time they reach secondary education, many adolescents still struggle with reading proficiency (e.g. Jerrim and Shure, 2016; Ricketts et al., 2020). In the current study, finding texts difficult to understand was aligned with a lack of enjoyment and engagement.

> *Well, if I don't enjoy it, it's because I don't, like, understand it, really. It's kind of just like-, seems like a bit of a chore to read it. Lachlan, male, school 2*

> *[I]it's quite hard to, like, understand them and be, like, fully like engaged with it. Celeste, female, school 2*

Furthermore, previous research has indicated that reading difficulties are often related to negative reading self-efficacy and an increased likelihood of experiencing reading anxiety (McArthur, 2022). Therefore, it is important both to support adolescents' comprehension skills and to facilitate access to reading material that align with current comprehension levels.

Theme 3. Social factors

Previous research has conceptualised reading as a social process (e.g. Merga, 2016). As adolescence is often conceptualised as a period of heightened social awareness (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005) and where there is an increased focus on peer-group relationships, sense of belonging and acceptance (Gilbert and Irons, 2009), the social context of reading may be particularly relevant for adolescents (Merga, 2014, 2016).

Portrayals of reading in the media. Popular culture depictions of readers often portray images of solitary individuals deeply immersed a single text (Nichols and Loh, 2019). However, these images may not accurately represent the ways in which adolescents engage with reading. In the current study, adolescents noted that the way 'readers' are portrayed in the media could create a negative perception of reading more generally. Films and other books arose as key sources of these negative depictions of readers, with characters who engaged in reading often being perceived as 'nerdy' or 'uncool'.

> *[I]n movies-, it's always, like, the nerdy one in movies … it's kind of like a … reputation of reading that it's, like, not good. Lola, female, school 1*

> *Yeah, 'cause, it's not seen as, like, a cool thing. It's always seen as, like, nerdy or, you know, like that, 'cause that's how the movies portray it. Like, in the movies which we like, they portray it as being, like, uncool or nerdy, and, you know, like, something that you don't want to do. I think that has an impact. Amelia, female, school 1*

Where there is an increased focus on a sense of belonging and acceptance during adolescence (Gilbert and Irons, 2009), young people might be especially attuned to social information about the 'acceptability' of different activities, choosing to focus attention on those which bring them closer to others, rather than those that isolate them.

Negative judgement from others. In the pursuit of relatedness goals, avoiding the judgement of others is considered an externally motivating factor (Ryan and Deci, 2000). As individuals will feel less motivated to engage in activities that threaten their basic needs (La Guardia, 2009), negative judgements from others regarding reading could make it less attractive. This was reflected in adolescent responses in the current study.

> *[On] social media, like, so people actually judge people who read books. They's be like "oh my gosh, she's such a nerd", and then like, you just feel so insecure and then you just stop reading. Priya, female, school 1*

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[Other young people] also might feel like they might get bullied for it as well. Christopher, male, school 4

However, it is notable that some adolescents felt that this stereotype was outdated. Furthermore, even where they felt that this stereotype did exist, it did not always act as a barrier to reading for pleasure, especially where readers 'owned' this identity.

I feel like that's something that said [that reading is uncool] but no one believes. Like it's said, but no one really cares that much to keep that stereotype going. Eilidh, female, school 3

[laughing] Well, as a person who is considered "uncool and nerdy", yeah. I'm sorry fellow book readers, but it's the truth. Fiona, female, school 1

This suggests that although the judgement of others (whether actual or perceived) may affect reading motivation for some, this is not necessarily the case for all adolescents. For example, Sellers (2019) links adolescents' willingness to identify as a reader with the extent to which reading was perceived as being consistent with the identity of, and facilitated or hindered participation within, their peer group. Portrayals of 'readers' in the media can also provide evidence about how reading might support relatedness goals (e.g. showing examples of a 'social reader'). Furthermore, TV, film and social media are not the only sources of social information; peers, friends, teachers, parents and other reading role models also provided information about reading which can create a more diverse picture of what it means to 'be a reader'.

Theme 4. Reading experiences in school

Previous research has indicated that negative experiences with reading can affect reading attitude (Gallagher, 2009) and enjoyment (Martin-Chang et al., 2021). Furthermore, negative experiences with reading in youth can pervade into adulthood, informing reading behaviour and reading identity (Hall, 2020; Martin-Chang et al., 2021). As a significant proportion of adolescents' reading experiences take place in school (Allred and Cena, 2020), an accumulation of negative reading experiences in school could significantly impact motivation to read for pleasure.

Feeling pressure to read in school. While feeling encouraged to read by teachers was identified as supporting motivation to read for pleasure, feeling pressured to read in school was identified as being demotivating.

I think it's the pressure of always having to read. We have to read at least 100 pages a week, so I just I felt like I was just rushing it and not actually taking the time to find out what I enjoy reading. Mia, female, school 5

[I]n school, it feels more like you're getting told to do it, which like, makes me feel like, 'oh, why am I even doing it?' There's not really any point 'cause at that point I don't, really … I don't have the motivation to read. Aisling, female, school 1

Previous research has also suggested that feeling the need to prove comprehension through formal assessment can lead to stress or anxiety associated with reading (Hall, 2020). This also links with Theme 2; being required to read at times when they do not feel motivated to do so represents a mismatch between the activity and adolescents' situational needs.

Reading becomes associated with schoolwork. Mandated reading in school could also contribute towards an association between reading and school, positioning it as in opposition with leisure time (Pitcher et al., 2007). In the current study, some adolescents hypothesised that the increase in day-to-day engagement with literacy activities in secondary school, and the association between these tasks and exam performance, contributed towards an association between reading and academic tasks at this age.

I think other people my age that don't like to read just think it's a bit boring because they think of reading as if it's school and, like, some people just get like tired of, like, writing in school, and maybe they think reading is just like doing extra school work. Kasia, female, school 1

And because we're also reading, like, so much in school … we're reading a lot as it is so [other adolescents] don't want to do it at home because we're already doing it so much at school and it feels like you're doing work all the time. Violet, female, school 1

And because you do so much work in, like, school … Yeah. Why would you want to do the same thing you do at school back home, because that's just, like, another two hours of torture. Nataliya, female, school 1

Pressure to read may lead to negative attitudes associated with reading (Gallagher, 2009), which may lead to a decline in reading motivation and engagement (Schiefele et al., 2012). Furthermore, having to read at school when not 'in the mood' may conflict with young people's feelings of autonomy (De Naeghel et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important that the reading experiences adolescents have in school

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are positive and focussed on cultivating a love of reading, rather than merely to meet the demands of school.

Theme 5. Reading affect

While positive affect has previously been linked with increased engagement, persistence and preference for challenge in academic tasks (e.g. Wigfield and Eccles, 2002), experiences of failure and challenge have been linked with negative affect, feelings of incompetence and withdrawal of engagement (e.g. Elliot and Dweck, 2013). In particular, 'deactivating-negative emotions' (e.g. boredom and hopelessness) have been linked with diminished motivation for academic tasks (e.g. Zaccoletti et al., 2020). In the current study, adolescents noted that their motivation to read for pleasure was influenced by negative emotions associated with reading (e.g. boredom, frustration, disappointment, anger and self-criticism), particularly when reading books that they did not enjoy or were not interested in.

> *I think it's kind of laborious and then I kind of get bored of doing it. James, male, school 2*

> *If it's like, you can't read it, 'cause it's like, I don't know, like, older language or like small writing or whatever, it makes you a bit angry and like upset with yourself, I guess. Adaline, female, school 2*

Experiencing negative affect while reading may not only impact adolescents' reading motivation and engagement in the moment (i.e. during the act of reading itself) but may also influence motivation to engage in reading activities in the future (Martin-Chang et al., 2021).

> *[It makes me feel] just kind of like I don't want to pick up that book again, and disappointed and stuff. Aoife, female, school 1*

Moment-to-moment emotional states dynamically change during reading (Graesser and D'Mello, 2012), and it is, of course, impossible for a reader to always experience positive emotions at every literary encounter. However, repeated or habitual experiences of negative emotions when reading may begin to accumulate, contributing towards an association between reading and negative affect.

Theme 6. Time and competing activities

Adolescence is characterised by many changes to everyday life. As well as facing increasing academic demands, many adolescents also take on part-time jobs, have greater responsibilities at home and want to spend more time with peers to form and strengthen interpersonal relationships (Nielsen et al., 2011). To manage these competing priorities, adolescents may reduce their engagement with leisure time activities (Thing et al., 2015). These changes in allocation of free time are part of the process of becoming autonomous, independent adults (Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986).

Less free time. In the current study, adolescents reported having less time to read for pleasure than when they were younger. In particular, after-school clubs, schoolwork and chores took up large amounts of spare time.

> *[When I was younger] I didn't have as much homework or schoolwork and stuff to have do after school and stuff, so I generally had more time. Grace, female, school 6*

> *I've just got a lot of things after school. I don't have much time to do it … I've got football training and I still have to walk my dogs after school. Niko, male, school 4*

Where there are increases in 'non-negotiable' spare time activities (e.g. homework), many adolescents are left with less spare time to allocate to other leisure activities (whether this is reading or another chosen activity).

Changed priorities for free time activities. Due to the increased demands on their spare time, adolescents may view time as a limited resource (Thing et al., 2015) and negotiate how much time they allocate to different activities based on their goals and priorities. In the current study, adolescents noted that even if they did not have less free time available, they often preferred to prioritise other activities. These included other hobbies, entertainment through other means (e.g. phones, the Internet) and time spent with friends.

> *Usually when I'm at home I don't even pick up a book. I'd rather be, like, drawing or doing art and that. And going outside. Logan, male, school 4*

> *[T]here's so much more you could be doing rather than reading a book, like, you've got the Internet now and you could be on your phone, or you could go outside and do something outside with friends. Shannon, female, school 4*

> *And also, you want some free time in your life to go out with your friends. Mia, female, school 5*

Adolescence is characterised by a shift towards having greater autonomy over how individuals spend

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their leisure time (Spear and Kulbok, 2004); adolescents often strive to take part in activities which help them to develop their identities, and which connect them with peers (Dworkin et al., 2003). Striving towards these goals may affect their selection of leisure time activities—for example, spending more time with friends to fulfil connectedness needs. In the current study, some adolescents reported preferring to engage in entertainment from film, TV or short-form video (e.g. YouTube, TikTok), noting that these mediums could better fulfil their needs and priorities (e.g. being quicker and easier to consume, helping them feel connected to others).

> *YouTube is kind of just like reading a book except it takes less time and less effort. Lachlan, male, school 2*

> *[S]ome people prefer to watch TV … it's more interesting with, like, you can see people's facial reactions. Like, it's more, like, fun, I guess. And then, it's just- it's a bit more, like, engaging and not as hard. But like, when you're reading … it's like, to get through it can be quite, like, tiring, I guess. Maeve, female, school 2*

As decisions about recreational behaviour may be driven, in part, by a trade-off between effort and immersion (Merga, 2016), the greater cognitive demands of reading in comparison with other forms of entertainment may play a role in inhibiting motivation to read. This might be especially pertinent during adolescence, where increased academic demands and reduced availability of free time (either actual or perceived) may make less cognitively demanding activities more attractive.

Perception of reading as a time-consuming activity. The perceived amount of time reading activities take up may affect adolescents' decisions regarding whether it is a good use of their free time, especially where free time is limited (see Thing et al., 2015). In the current study, the perception that reading it is a time-consuming activity was viewed as off-putting.

> *Well, most books are like, like, maybe three- or four-hundred-page books, and like, [adolescents] just like, I don't know, they don't feel like reading because they think it would take too long. Rami, male, school 1*

> *[When you're reading] in your house … you're like, 'oh I kinda have to plan this out, how long am I gonna read for? Like, do I really want to read for that long? Kasia, female, school 1*

Adolescents also noted that reading can often feel like a 'commitment', which requires significant time investment and/or scheduling. If time is viewed as a limited resource during adolescence, many may feel they do not have time to read (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Scheduling in specific times to read may help adolescents to overcome this barrier; however, it would be important to ensure that this process does not interfere with their feelings of autonomy, or with time dedicated to pursuing other goals and interests.

General discussion

This study provides novel insights into some of the barriers that early–mid adolescents (13–15 years old) perceive to reading for pleasure. These include (1) access; (2) mismatch between provision and needs; (3) social factors; (4) reading experiences in school; (5) reading affect; and (6) time and competing activities. Notably, not one of these themes could be considered the most significant barrier; for many adolescents, it was the combination of multiple barriers that contributed towards changed patterns of reading motivation and engagement.

Within popular discourse, the prevailing image of the disinterested adolescent reader continues to legitimise narratives of adolescence, which position it as a problematic period that requires adult intervention (see Heath et al., 2009). However, of the barriers to reading for pleasure identified in the current study, many reflected structural and environmental factors rather than strictly personal ones. For example, adolescents recalled negative experiences or structural barriers to reading in school, which they perceived to have impacted their motivation to read. Adolescents usually have very little control over the educational structures (e.g. curriculum, policy, teacher practices), which dictate the reading experiences they have in school. Furthermore, the physical reading spaces that they have access to (e.g. libraries) and the contents of these spaces (e.g. library stock) are predominately created, monitored and modified by adults. This creates a power imbalance whereby adults are often gatekeepers of adolescents' reading lives (Beckton, 2015). Despite this, the perception remains that adolescents should take responsibility for their own reading motivation and practices. By acknowledging the imbalance of power that exists between adults and adolescents (see Heath et al., 2009; Bennett and Brunner, 2022), and by meaningfully involving adolescents in reading research and practice, their experiences and needs can be at the heart of the work which seeks to support them (Webber et al., 2022b; Webber et al., 2023).

Another popular discourse surrounding the decline in adolescent reading motivation presents modern adolescents as prioritising time on online platforms, especially social media (Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson, 2006). However, this narrative often fails to

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consider the ways in which online reading practices can form part of adolescents' literate lives. For example, social media sites such as TikTok and Instagram can function as a spaces for literacy engagement, where individuals can find recommendations for books and connect with reading communities (Vlieghe et al., 2016; Jerasa and Boffone, 2021). Furthermore, online platforms often provide personalised recommendations, making text selection easier (Wilkinson et al., 2020). Furthermore, connecting with peers is an important part of adolescent life (Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005); online platforms are a valuable resource for facilitating this and could help support adolescents' relatedness goals. As adolescents' 'online' and 'offline' worlds are intricately connected (West et al., 2021), rather than trying to curb or stigmatise adolescents' online activity, linking online spaces with real reading practices has the potential to bridge the gap between their preferred leisure activities and reading for pleasure.

Finally, it may be tempting to assume that simply working to remove barriers to reading for pleasure will necessarily result in increases in motivation and engagement. While there is evidence that interventions that target specific barriers can be beneficial (e.g. Guthrie and Klauda, 2015), it is also important to recognise that the absence of barriers does not necessarily equate to the presence of motivators (see Coddington, 2009). For example, addressing access barriers by ensuring the availability of a diverse range of relevant texts in school does not necessarily mean that adolescents will be motivated to read them (e.g. Merga, 2016). Likewise, the presence of motivating factors does not necessarily reflect the absence of barriers. In this sense, support for overcoming the barriers to reading for pleasure should be individualised and paired with strategies which facilitate motivation.

Conclusions

Adolescents identified a number of barriers to motivation to read for pleasure. These include (1) access; (2) mismatch between provision and needs; (3) social factors; (4) reading experiences in school; (5) reading affect; and (6) time and competing activities. These barriers often worked in combination with one another to affect reading motivation. While it has been possible to distil these barriers into themes, reported barriers were also often highly individualised. Therefore, supporting adolescents to identify the barriers that are relevant to them, and working alongside them to address these in meaningful ways, could help build reading environments which complement their lives.

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*Some names may be pseudonyms, as requested by panel members.

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Ethics statement

This research received a favourable ethical approval statement from University of Edinburgh. Approval reference number CWEB14122021.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors report no conflict of interest. The research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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CONTACT THE AUTHORS
Charlotte Webber, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
email: c.webber-1@sms.ed.ac.uk

Katherine Wilkinson, Scottish Book Trust, Edinburgh, UK

Dr Lynne G. Duncan, Psychology, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

Dr Sarah McGeown, Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

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