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Webber, Charlotte; Wilkinson, Katherine; Duncan, Lynne G.; McGeown, Sarah

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## Motivating book reading during adolescence: qualitative insights from adolescents

Charlotte Webber <sup>a</sup>, Katherine Wilkinson <sup>b</sup>, Lynne G. Duncan <sup>c</sup>  
and Sarah McGeown <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; <sup>b</sup>Research and Evaluation, Scottish Book Trust, Edinburgh, UK; <sup>c</sup>Psychology, University of Dundee, Dundee, UK

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Research demonstrates a wide range of benefits associated with reading books, from academic and cognitive to social and emotional. Reading motivation has been shown to drive the volitional reading of books; however, international research consistently demonstrates a global decline in reading motivation from childhood to adolescence. As a result, there is considerable research, policy and practice interest in understanding how to increase adolescents' volitional reading. To date, very little research has centred on adolescents' views within this exploration.

**Purpose:** Through collaboration with a Young People's Advisory Panel (YPAP) of young people aged 13–15, and a national literacy organisation, this study sought to identify adolescents' views on factors which would increase their volitional book reading. Research questions were: (1) *What factors do adolescents perceive as their reasons for reading or not reading?* and (2) *How can we inspire and sustain book reading motivation and engagement in adolescence?*

**Methods:** Working with six members of the YPAP, adult- and peer-led semi-structured interviews were carried out with 46 adolescents aged 13–15, 30 of whom were female and 16 male, from six geographically dispersed high schools in Scotland, United Kingdom (UK). Data were analysed using an inductive data-driven thematic process, with findings interpreted in collaboration with the YPAP.

**Findings:** Factors which adolescents reported would motivate volitional book reading included (1) Access to quality books aligned with their interests; (2) Knowledge and skills to choose books aligned with their interests; (3) Autonomy over reading choices; (4) Reading promotion messaging which resonated with them and their ways of communicating; (5) Social reading practices which were personally enjoyable, meaningful, and enriching; and (6) Quality space and time to foster and sustain book reading practices.

**Conclusions:** This study extends current understanding of the factors that could motivate adolescents' volitional reading. It offers researchers, policymakers, and educators novel insights into adolescents' perspectives, which may support continued efforts to increase adolescents' reading motivation and engagement.


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**CONTACT** Sarah McGeown  [s.mcgeown@ed.ac.uk](mailto:s.mcgeown@ed.ac.uk)

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## Introduction

Research demonstrates a wide range of benefits associated with reading books, from academic and cognitive (Jerrim and Moss 2018; Martin-Chang, Kozak, and Rossi 2020; OECD 2010; Torppa et al. 2020) to social and emotional (Currie and McGeown forthcoming; Eekhof, Van Krieken, and Willems 2022; van der Kleij et al. 2022). While adolescents' contemporary reading experiences are diverse (Loh and Sun 2022), there is compelling evidence that reading books, more than any other text type, is important for the development of reading and language skills (Jerrim and Moss 2018; Mol and Bus 2011; Torppa et al. 2020), and other positive outcomes including enjoyment, relaxation, escapism, empathy, social cognition and wellbeing (Currie and McGeown forthcoming; Eekhof, Van Krieken, and Willems 2022; Howard 2011; Wilhelm 2016). Therefore, identifying ways to motivate adolescents' volitional book reading is important to ensure readers can access these rich and diverse benefits.

Yet, despite the benefits associated with reading books, adolescents are increasingly less likely to choose to read in their own time. For example, in 2018, 49% of the 15-year-old students in OECD countries reported only reading for pleasure if they 'have to', compared to 36% in 2000. Furthermore, in 2018, 28% agreed with the statement that reading is a 'waste of time' (OECD 2018, 78). Low levels of reading enjoyment and engagement are of concern in numerous international contexts, with different countries tracking reading habits in different ways. For example, among adolescents (aged 16–17) in the U.S., the percentage of those who read a book or magazine every day had reportedly declined from 60% in the late 1970's to 16% in 2016 (Twenge, Martin, and Spitzberg 2019). In Australia, in 2018, 53% of 15-year-olds reported reading only to find information, and 54% said they read only if they had to (Darmawan 2020). In the UK, where the research study reported in this article was carried out, attitudes to reading are reportedly at an all-time low (Clark, Picton, and Galway 2023), with a large-scale data collection exercise tracking national reading trends demonstrating that in 2023, only 26% of the young people aged 11–16 read regularly (e.g. daily). This percentage is consistently lower than that found for younger children and has been for almost two decades (Clark, Picton, and Galway 2023). In response to this, 'reading for pleasure' has become increasingly prioritised and embedded within education policy and curricula, in both primary and secondary school contexts. For example, in the National Curriculum for England, secondary schools are encouraged to focus on 'embedding a school culture that values and supports reading for pleasure' (Department for Education [DfE] 2023, 91) and the most recent DfE Reading Framework (2023) has dedicated a section to 'Developing a reading for pleasure culture'. Within the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, teachers are encouraged to focus on 'reading for enjoyment and choice' and support pupils to 'find enjoyment' in reading and to develop an awareness of 'the relevance of texts' in their lives (Education Scotland 2023, 2). Meanwhile, in Wales, the curriculum states that 'learners should experience a language-rich environment where oracy, reading and writing experiences are connected to ensure that they become enthusiastic, independent and reflective readers' (Llywodraeth Cymru [Welsh Government] 2016, 5). Within Northern Ireland, schools are encouraged to support 'reading and viewing for key ideas, enjoyment, engagement and empathy' (CCEA n.d., 1). However, despite this curricular

focus, academic research focusing specifically on adolescents' perspectives and experiences of factors which could motivate them to read books is scarce.

## Background

Understanding what motivates adolescents to read books is particularly important, as reading motivation drives volitional book reading (Schiefele et al. 2012), which in turn improves reading skills (Jerrim and Moss 2018; Torppa et al. 2020; Wang and Guthrie 2004; Wigfield, Gladstone, and Turci 2016). Reading motivation can be defined as 'the drive to read resulting from a comprehensive set of an individual's beliefs about, attitudes towards, and goals for reading'. (Conradi, Gee Jang and McKenna 2014, 154). To date, various theoretical frameworks have been applied to study reading motivation (see Conradi, Jang and McKenna 2014; McBreen and Savage 2021; Unrau and Quirk 2014), with Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci and Ryan 1980, 2012; Ryan and Deci 2020) regarded as the most comprehensive (Schiefele and Löweke 2018) and most frequently applied (Conradi, Gee Jang and McKenna 2014). SDT regards motivated behaviour as being guided by the pursuit of intrinsic needs for competence, autonomy and relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2012), but recognises that the ways in which individuals choose to pursue these needs are subject to personal and contextual factors (Griffin, Adams, and Little 2017).

Applied to the adolescent period, changes associated with moving to a secondary school context (for example, where there is greater focus on skills and assessment), in addition to increasing personal awareness of actual and comparative abilities (Griffin, Adams, and Little 2017) may affect adolescents' competence goals. Furthermore, in many Western contexts, adolescence is recognised as a period of life associated with greater autonomy compared to childhood (Van Petegem et al. 2012), with more choice and agency over whether to engage in leisure reading (Martin-Chang et al. 2021). Finally, changes in adolescents' social environments (for example, changing relationships with others, and the context of social media) (Nesi, Choukas-Bradley, and Prinstein 2018) may affect the adolescents' relatedness goals, that is, whether and how they wish to relate to others through their literacy practices.

## Barriers to book reading

Research has identified a number of barriers to adolescents' volitional book reading, including: poor access; a mismatch between book provision and students' needs or interests; social factors; undermining reading experiences in school; negative reading experiences; and a lack of time or competing activities (Gallagher 2023; Martin-Chang et al. 2021; Mol and Jolles 2014; Webber et al. 2024b; Wilkinson et al. 2020). In addition, during adolescence, individuals encounter a series of unique, age-specific situational contexts (Heath et al. 2009) which, for some, could affect their volitional reading motivation and engagement. For example, during the transition from primary to secondary education, where there is increased pressure to perform and attain, reading may become increasingly associated with educational outcomes (for example, reading to pass examinations), rather than being perceived as a source of entertainment or solace (Bokhorst-Heng and Pereira 2008; Gallagher 2023; Merga 2016). Furthermore, after transitioning to

secondary school, many adolescents experience changes in the availability of their free time, due to increasing amounts of schoolwork and extracurricular activities, and often become more independent in their recreational choices (Thing, Frydendal Nielsen, and Ottesen 2015), choosing to spend their free time on other activities.

### **Motivators for book reading**

A recent narrative review (Webber et al. 2023) identifies a range of approaches that can support adolescents' reading motivation. These include: reading and literacy skills programmes; promoting a whole-school reading culture; book clubs; technology-supported interventions; and performance and theatre. However, given the myriad approaches to implementation and evaluation, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about the type of approach likely to be 'most effective'. Meanwhile, results from a meta-analytic review (McBreen and Savage 2021, 1141–1142) suggest that approaches which adopt 'self-regulatory instruction, instruction aiming to promote reading interest or value, and instruction aimed at retraining students' attributions to help them adopt a flexible mindset ... as well as autonomy-supportive practices' can contribute towards increased value of reading, self-efficacy, and general reading motivation in school-age pupils. While such narrative review and meta-analysis approaches can synthesise a wide body of research, they risk obscuring the nuance and complexity of individual experiences (Burnett and Coldwell 2021) resulting in a disconnect from adolescents' everyday perspectives and experiences of reading. Qualitative insights from adolescents, particularly where they have been involved in the design and development of the research, have the potential to inform both educational research and practice (Webber et al. 2024a).

### **Study context**

The study reported in this paper was conducted in Scotland, UK, as part of a collaborative studentship between the universities of Edinburgh and Dundee, and Scottish Book Trust. The study aimed to explore young people's motivation towards volitional book reading. Previous research exploring adolescents' reading motivation has been primarily adult-led, with research designs, questions and interpretations often led by adult researchers. In this sense, the voices of adolescents themselves are missing from research which seeks to better understand and support their reading practices (Calderón López and Theriault 2017; Jacquez, Vaughn, and Wagner 2013; Webber et al. 2024a, 2024b). Therefore, in this study, a Young People's Advisory Panel (YPAP) worked with university researchers to design, collect data, and interpret the findings from this qualitative research project. To read a more comprehensive account and reflection on the YPAP's contribution to this project, see Webber et al. (2024a).

### **Purpose**

The aim of the study was to carry out a qualitative exploration into the motivation of young people (aged 13–15) to read books, focusing on barriers and motivating factors. The overarching research questions were: (1) *What factors do adolescents perceive as their*

*reasons for reading or not reading? and (2) How can we inspire and sustain book reading motivation and engagement in adolescence?*

## Method

The study adopts a qualitative research design based on interviews with adolescents in Scottish schools. A qualitative design was identified as the most suitable method for answering the research questions because it is ideally suited to understanding adolescents' own perspectives of motivators to volitional reading.

### *Ethical considerations*

Ethical approval was sought and granted by the Moray House School of Education and Sport University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee prior to data collection [CWEB14122021]. Informed consent was given by all participating school head teachers, parents/guardians and pupils. Information was provided via an accessible information sheet, which described participants' right to withdraw, confidentiality and the procedures for data management and sharing (including procedures for ensuring anonymity). All participants were assigned a unique code, and any identifiable information was stored separately from their interview transcripts. Participant anonymity has been ensured by protecting the identities of participating schools, and only referring to participants' self-reported gender in the context of the quotations used.

### *Data collection*

Six Scottish high schools were identified to take part in the study. These schools were selected because they were demographically diverse and geographically dispersed across Scotland, with both rural and urban areas represented. Each school was asked to invite a demographically diverse sample of approximately 10–15 pupils aged 13–15 with a range of reading attitudes and experiences to participate. We anticipated that approximately 50% of these pupils would show interest and provide their consent for participation, providing an achieved sample in the range of approximately 30–45 pupils across the six schools. It was emphasised that participants did not have to consider themselves avid readers to take part. As school contacts were responsible for inviting pupils, the research team did not have control over the composition of the final sample – there was, for example, variation between schools in terms of how many pupils were interviewed and the gender of those pupils. In total, 46 adolescents (30 females, 16 males) from the six high schools participated in the study, with a range from four pupils in School 5 to 18 pupils in School 1.

To increase accessibility, participants could select either (1) a peer-led interview, led by a member of the YPAP (this option was available only for interviewees attending the same school as a YPAP member;  $N = 11$ ); (2) an 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 an adult researcher present remotely via Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19 restrictions in place in Scotland at the time of study. Adult-led interviews were carried out online

using Microsoft Teams – again, due to COVID-19 restrictions, which meant that adult interviewers could not visit school sites. All interviews were recorded via Microsoft Teams, with automatic transcription enabled. Two of the six YPAP members acted as peer interviewers. Both peer interviewers and the adult interviewer (the first author of this article) followed the same interview schedule. In peer-led interviews, the adult researcher introduced themselves and then handed over to the 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. Initial analysis confirmed that there were no differences in interview content (i.e. themes identified) between peer- and adult-led interviews, and so both datasets were combined for the full analysis.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed collaboratively with the YPAP based on the consensus definition of reading motivation (Conradi, Gee Jang and McKenna 2014), existing measures (e.g. Motivation for Reading Questionnaire; Wigfield and Guthrie 1995) and group discussions about items the YPAP felt were most important to explore. Items in the final schedule 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 interviewees to comment not only on their own reading motivation but to hypothesise more broadly about the reading experiences of their peers.

### *Data analysis*

A primarily data-driven inductive approach to thematic analysis was carried out, following the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Two researchers (the first and final authors of this article) initially read the first five interview transcripts independently (Phase 1), generating initial codes that identified interesting features of the data in a comprehensive way (Phase 2), and sorting the codes into themes (Phase 3). The researchers then met to discuss codes and preliminary themes, ensuring the themes reflected both barriers and motivating factors. While this process was primarily inductive, based on the dataset, the researchers had knowledge of relevant literature and had conducted similar work with children (McGeown et al. 2021) which led to the recognition of some similar themes (specifically access, choice and social factors) which were clearly identified within the data, in addition to new themes specific to this age group. This process (Phase 1–3) was then repeated for the entire dataset by the first author. Once completed, the themes were reviewed and refined by all authors to ensure they accurately represented the data and by the YPAP to ensure they aligned with their interpretations of the findings (Phases 4–5; see Webber et al. 2024a), before being written up for publication (Phase 6). During the writing up process, the authors drew upon self-determination theory (SDT) to reflect on the themes emerging, although this theoretical framework was not used in the coding or analysis process.

### *Findings*

The analysis process outlined above identified six themes, which captured participants' perceptions about what motivated them, or could motivate them and/or their peers, to read books more frequently. These were: (1) Access; (2) Choice; (3) Autonomy; (4)



Relatable messaging; (5) Social factors; and (6) Environments conducive to reading. Findings in relation to these themes are presented below, situated in the context of existing literature. Where relevant, extracts from the data are included to exemplify points made by interviewees.

### Access

The adolescents interviewed frequently noted that greater access to books aligned with their interests, preferences and abilities was important for motivating volitional book reading (see also Gambrell 2011; Merga 2014, 2016). However, given that the cost of new books can be prohibitive for young people (Todd 2021; Wilkinson et al. 2020), and that adolescents more frequently need to purchase their own books (in comparison with childhood, where book gifts or parent purchases are more common), improved access at school and through other means (e.g. online) was seen as essential. For example, one female participant noted that books should be 'cheaper to buy' because 'it's pretty expensive to go and buy' them, and a male participant commented: 'it would help as well if I had a lot of good books at home, which I don't . . . if I had some good books, even at school, it would help'. Adolescents also commented on a desire to have access to shorter books, but without compromising on quality. For example, this male participant suggested: '[it would help] to, like, read thinner books. But it's hard to find lots of those that are, like, actually good' (see also Wilkinson et al. 2020). In contrast, some self-reported frequent readers notably spoke of feeling pride in reading long books, demonstrating the importance of catering to a range of preferences. Finally, digital access, via eBooks or online texts, was seen to be an effective way to increase access to books (e.g. 'reading on the go'), with one participant noting that reading digitally means 'you don't have to go through the hassle of going to a library or looking through your cupboard. So, I think it makes it a lot easier to do'.

When examined within the context of SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000), these findings suggest that supporting adolescents to feel confident in their ability to access books, whether physically or online, can support their autonomy (e.g. being able to access books without adult intervention or support) and competence goals (e.g. feeling confident in their ability to obtain books with which they can expect to have positive experiences).

### Choice

While access was an important motivator of volitional book reading, it was not sufficient. Being able to successfully choose books that facilitate positive reading experiences was also identified as important for motivation (see also Brandt, Sharp, and Gardner 2021; Guthrie, McRae, and Lutz Klauda 2007). Research demonstrates that young people often have poor strategies for choosing books (Merga and Mat Roni 2017) and adolescents in this study commented that explicit teaching on how to choose books, and to experience different genres, could help them identify books they would enjoy, and inform their future reading choices. For example, one male participant noted that 'when you read different books in school, if you're enjoying them, it gives you, like, more of an insight of why you would read at home'. Another suggested that teachers could help pupils become more familiar

with different genres and text types by: 'show[ing] them different varieties of, definitely different, genres. But like, they could show them different types of books, like, see if they'd like comic books or to have books on a Kindle'. Many adolescents spoke of finding 'that one book' or genre which could lead to a new or renewed interest in reading. As one said: 'Once you find that one book it's like, they'll never, ever find it boring again. They're like, "I want another book". That's what got me into reading'.

To support their reading choices further and to make books more appealing, some adolescents suggested that promoting social media recommendations could make choosing texts easier, as illustrated through these quotations: 'because everyone's on there all the time'; 'you don't have to go through as many books to find one you like, you can get told one that you can try, rather than you having to look at hundreds of them'. One female participant suggested that simply having more information about a book prior to starting it could help adolescents feel more confident in their choices, noting that:

... with books you don't really get much about what it's going to be like, apart from the blurb. So, I think if we had more, like, information on what books are like so that people could actually get, like, a sense of what they're going to read and then not just be like, 'I'm not gonna read that 'cause, what if I didn't enjoy it?'

This emphasises the essential role of qualified library staff in supporting pupil choice (Webber, Bohan, et al. 2024). For example, multiple participants from School 4 referenced how 'library book talks' – in-depth book review sessions led by their school librarian – helped them discover new books.

Guiding one's own reading, while also being able to make more informed reading choices without relying on others, links to the SDT concepts of autonomy and competence (Deci and Ryan 2012). Supporting students in 'the process of making choices and taking control of their reading activities' (Guthrie, Wigfield, and Perencevich 2004, 64) is vital for 'scaffolding' motivational development, that is, releasing responsibility to the student as they are increasingly able to make informed reading choices. Indeed, making successful book choices can be considered a competence-supportive practice, as positive experiences with a chosen book can enable adolescents to attain valued outcomes such as enjoyment, immersion and learning, enhancing perceptions of their own proficiency. Notably, while high levels of perceived autonomy can be motivating, too much choice (or not enough support for choosing) can reduce motivation (Guthrie, Wigfield, and Perencevich 2004). By adjusting the extent to which they scaffold choice, teachers and librarians can support pupils to develop their choosing skills so that they can become increasingly independent and self-directed. That said, recommendations from informed others are also important and could support pupils' need to relate to others and subsequent autonomous motivation (Wang et al. 2019).

## **Autonomy**

Adolescence is a period associated with increased independence and autonomy, both generally (e.g. Van Petegem et al. 2012) and in terms of volitional reading (Martin-Chang et al. 2021). Autonomy is distinct from independence; autonomous

behaviour is that which is perceived to be volitional and self-endorsed, rather than being separated or detached from others (Guay 2022; Ryan and Deci 2020). Autonomous motivation is observed when behaviour is initiated and governed by the self, contrasting with controlled motivation, which is governed by external factors (Ratelle et al. 2007). In this study, autonomy was identified by adolescents as being important in its own right (and distinct from having choice over what to read); they highlighted that the decision to read, or not, should be their own. Indeed, lacking autonomy and feeling pressured to read in school can be demotivating (Webber et al. 2024b), as noted by one female participant, who emphasised that reading books has ‘got to be people’s [own] choice, because if you’re trying to force someone into it, they’ll get bad feelings associated with it’. Another noted that adults should ‘just make some suggestions’ and ‘not pressure them [to read] but suggest it’.

The adolescents interviewed also felt that setting their own standards for success and making these achievable was preferable to having reading goals or targets imposed on them by adults. The definition of reading success varied for different participants. For example, one young person aimed to read a certain number of pages each day, explaining: ‘I set a low standard for what I want to read, like, about three pages a night, just so I could achieve that’. And then you feel better about doing it ‘cause you’re just doing a little bit every day’. In contrast, this participant reported that being able to see how many books she had read contributed towards a sense of achievement:

There’s a whole section in my room that’s dedicated to books and there’s just, like, stacks of books. I’m, like, so proud of it. It makes me want to read more so I can like, add them and arrange them all and stuff. And it’s cool ‘cause you can like, see how much you’ve read and feel like you, like, achieved something’.

For these young people, feeling in control of their reading experiences and not feeling under pressure to achieve adult-defined outcomes was important for supporting both autonomy and competence goals. However, adolescents often have very little control over the structures that dictate their reading experiences such as curriculum and classroom practice (Webber, Santi, et al. 2024), with teachers and parents often acting as ‘gatekeepers’ in their reading lives (Beckton 2015). Previous research has shown that, for children, feeling a sense of control over their independent reading activities is central in supporting their motivation to read (Guthrie, McRae, and Lutz Klauda 2007). The satisfaction that comes with autonomy may be even more central to our understanding of motivated behaviour during adolescence (e.g. Griffin, Adams, and Little 2017; Hansen and Jessop 2017). Therefore, considering how to foster autonomous reading experiences – especially within school structures – is important for sustaining volitional reading motivation beyond childhood. Notably, as autonomy and independence are not necessarily equivalent, teachers or parents can help adolescents achieve self-endorsed goals while supporting (rather than suppressing) autonomy (Brown et al. 2020).

### *Relatable messaging*

Participants spoke of the importance of promoting reading in ways which resonated with them, which were authentic and relatable, which communicated with them ‘on

their own terms', and which recognised that different young people have different preferences and goals for reading (Bokhorst-Heng and Pereira 2008; Webber *forthcoming* 2024; Wilkinson et al. 2020). For example, one male participant expressed frustration that 'advertising' around reading often felt repetitive, noting that 'it's the same thing over and over again if they do advertise it like, you know, it is a way to escape or something like that, which is true, but it's on every single poster or every single advertisement'. Use of social media and celebrity culture was identified as a potentially effective way to engage adolescents, as this could make reading feel more immediately relevant to their lives. One male participant thought that '... if someone I look up to would say 'read more, it's good for you', then probably I would read a bit more. So, I like rugby and stuff, so I'd say if my favourite sportsperson, [name of sportsperson], were to say 'reading really helps with rugby', I'd probably starting reading a bit more'.

Others noted that: 'people that are like in the spotlight right now ... like maybe an actor or an influencer or something', could encourage more young people to read because 'people look up to them and some people probably want to, like, be like them and, like, respect them and stuff'. However, they also noted that this type of messaging needed to be authentic, because 'if you just release an advert of a celebrity suddenly changing what they usually do and being like 'reading is cool', I don't think it would actually convince anyone'. This emphasises the importance of understanding the types of messaging which feel authentic and relatable to adolescents and embedding these within the communities that adolescents already engage with.

This aligns with the concept of relatedness within SDT (Deci and Ryan 1980, 2012) that is, the desire to feel connected to others (Ryan and Deci 2000); sharing in a reading identity or experience with celebrities or a wider community of peers could support adolescents' pursuit of relatedness goals. Connecting reading with their lives outside of school could help situate it as an activity which has 'social capital' (Moje et al. 2008) and is relevant to their contemporary experiences. For schools and libraries, leveraging the language of existing adolescent communities (e.g. 'BookTok' on *TikTok*) can support insider signposting and link adolescents' online lives with real reading practices (Merga 2021). In this vein, it is important to consider the potential disconnect between the language which is meaningful to adults (e.g. teachers and researchers) and that which is meaningful to adolescents. For example, videos on *TikTok* with titles, such as '*Books that feel like a hug*' (library 2023), speak to reading experiences that academic researchers might define as generating 'positive affect'; working more closely with adolescents in refining the messaging around book reading could ensure that it reflects their existing communication styles and feels 'relatable'.

### **Social factors**

Participants also spoke about the role of others in their lives (such as friends, peers and teachers) in supporting their reading choices and reading engagement. Specifically, receiving recommendations, and physically borrowing books from peers were identified as factors with the potential to initiate or sustain reading engagement. For example, one male participant noted that some of his friends 'tend to say, like, 'this looks really good' and I'm like, 'oh, I'll have to read it' and they let me borrow it ... So that keeps me going'. Having conversations about reading with others who share or understand their reading interests,

and spending time with others who are also ‘readers’, can also support motivation. For example, one female participant talked about being encouraged by a friend to ‘keep reading’: ‘... if I’m on a certain part she’d be like, ‘oh that’s a good bit’, like, ‘keep reading on’ and stuff. So yeah, I think that’s better to do it that way because you’ve got somebody to talk to about it’. Another noted that conversations with her friends didn’t have to revolve around reading explicitly – just knowing that she was part of a community of readers helped her maintain the motivation to read: ‘most of my friends like reading books so it’s-, not like-, it’s not like a conversation where it’s like-, it’s just we all like reading books so it’s actually quite nice, you know, to know that people around you like to read as well’.

Previous research has conceptualised reading as a social process (e.g. Francois 2013; Merga and Moon 2016), with the SDT concept of relatedness having emerged as the strongest contributor to autonomous motivation, in comparison with autonomy and competence (Wang et al. 2019). As discussed above, supporting social connection appears paramount in positioning reading as complementing relatedness needs, rather than being antithetical to them (see Webber et al. 2024b). In this sense, it is important for the adults in adolescents’ lives to encourage (e.g. model) and support (e.g. provide regular opportunities) for informal conversations about books so that reading-related activities may form a part of adolescents’ social lives. Specific practices that could support relatedness in school include self-selected book clubs, which can help pupils feel a sense of connection over a shared interest or topic (Svrcek and Abugasea Heidt 2022); teacher-led read-alouds, which can support relatedness across the whole class community (López and Friedman 2019); and sharing book recommendations, which can build relationships between peers over new texts and topics of shared interest (Svrcek and Abugasea Heidt 2022).

### *Environments conducive to reading*

Finally, environments conducive to reading were also identified by participants as important. These included physical environments such as a welcoming and comfortable school library or reading space, which could reduce distractions; and non-physical environments such as more, or regular, time to read; school library visits; visits to a local library; or school-based reading routines. When talking about the physical environment, one female participant noted that she would feel more motivated to read if she could do it ‘somewhere that’s, like, comfortable and not, like, plastic chairs to sit on and that ... not like, formal, you know, like what you do in, like, reg [registration] and English ... so like, if it was a nicer environment you know, like, cosier’. Others noted: the importance of ‘getting the time without phones to actually pick up a book’; the importance of making sure ‘[your phone] is on silent’; and that ‘you have to turn off social media’.

Having reading routines or schedules and incorporating reading-related activities into their lives more regularly were also identified as means of promoting reading. As these participants commented: ‘just going more often to like, libraries and stuff and ordering more books’; ‘using the library more’; and ‘having a schedule, like, even if you read like 20 minutes, 10 minutes, a day or something’. Some participants identified the benefits of reading routines they already engaged with within school, for example, reading during registration or ‘10 minutes reading in English’. One female participant described these

mandated reading periods as 'handy, because it does give you that opportunity if you do want to read something ... it gets you in that mindset of reading every day'.

These quotations indicate a feeling among participants that motivation to read could result from regular reading (behavioural engagement), rather than necessarily needing to precede engagement. While empirical (see Miyamoto, Pfof, and Artelt 2019) and theoretical (see Unrau and Quirk 2014) literature suggests that motivation precedes engagement, it may also be possible that by encouraging regular reading and ensuring adolescents have access to books they enjoy during this time, motivation to read can be initiated and sustained. It is also important to consider that when supporting adolescents to develop a reading routine, this should not conflict with their feelings of autonomy; for example, allowing flexibility over what they choose to read, where, and for how long, rather than 'imposing' reading practices and schedules onto them. Reading routines should also be achievable for adolescents in order to support feelings of competence.

Popular discourse surrounding the decline in adolescent reading often presents contemporary adolescents as prioritising time on online platforms, especially social media (Johnsson-Smaragdi and Jönsson 2006). However, as the above quotations illustrate, some adolescents may still need support to negotiate the use of technology with other activities. Where used intentionally (for example, for engaging with online reading communities, writing or reading book reviews, or looking for book recommendations), social media may, in fact, support reading engagement (Jerasa and Boffone 2021; Vlieghe, Muls, and Rutten 2016). This highlights that it is essential to support adolescents to gain the skills to use social media in this way, if they wish to, and to develop strategies to manage the use of social media, where they feel this may be impeding the pursuit of other activities.

## Discussion

This study provides novel and important insights, foregrounding adolescents' views on the factors they think could motivate them, and their peers, to read books more often. These findings extend previous research, which has primarily examined adolescent reading motivation using adult-led and/or quantitative approaches (Webber et al. 2023; albeit see Wilkinson et al. 2020) and build upon previous research which has identified barriers to volitional reading during adolescence (e.g. Webber et al. 2024b). Factors identified as motivating reading include access to a broad range of interesting and relatable texts; opportunities and skills to facilitate choice; autonomy over their reading experiences; relatable, authentic messaging which aligns with their interests and ways of being; social reading recommendations and experiences which support their need to connect and relate; and environments which are conducive to supporting volitional reading.

This research is timely and important, as across different international contexts, volitional reading, or reading for pleasure, is becoming increasingly prioritised within education policy and practice (Cremin and Scholes 2024; Department for Education 2023) thus it is important that policy guidance reflects contemporary research findings. For example, in the UK (Department for Education 2023), the revised Reading Framework does not provide clear guidance on effective strategies to choose books, or to ensure that the messaging around reading for pleasure is authentic and relatable to adolescents. Within

the context of low levels of reading enjoyment and engagement among adolescents both in the U.K. (e.g. Clark, Picton, and Galway 2023) and internationally (e.g. OECD 2018), this study provides new and important insights into the factors that adolescents (aged 13–15 years old) perceive as motivating their book reading. In doing so, it can support educators (high school teachers and librarians), literacy organisations, public library staff, policy-makers, and researchers involved in creating guidance, programmes and/or resources which aim to increase adolescents' reading motivation and engagement.

### *Limitations*

While the sample for this study exceeded the size required for saturation in qualitative research, that is, there was a larger than required sample to generate themes and draw conclusions (Hennink and Kaiser 2022), it should not be considered demographically representative of adolescents across Scotland. Further, information was not gathered at the individual level on, for example, the young people's ethnicity, first language, or reading skills. This was in accordance with data-minimisation principles applied by the research team in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, it was not possible to identify factors that may have been more or less relevant to different demographic groups, or for different reading ability profiles. Additionally, given that the sample was skewed towards girls, which may be reflective of the finding that, on average, girls are more likely to read in their leisure time (Clark, Picton, and Galway 2023), conclusions regarding gender differences cannot be made. Future research could potentially explore whether there are gender differences in the factors that motivate volitional reading.

It is also important to consider that participants were in school when they took part in interviews and that this might have influenced the quality or nature of the discussions and their responses; for example, whether they framed their discussions around types of reading or texts that might be considered more acceptable within an education context. That said, adolescents were explicitly asked to reflect on what would motivate volitional reading in their leisure time, rather than reading in school. Future research into volitional book reading could potentially be carried out within home or community settings to mitigate this concern. Given that the decline in reading during adolescence is a recognised international issue (OECD 2018), comparative research could also be conducted across different international contexts using the methodological approach applied in this study. Indeed, exploring similarities and differences across countries would improve understanding of the generalisability of these findings, and would underpin collective efforts to support reading motivation and engagement during adolescence.

This study has centred on adolescents' views about the factors they felt could motivate volitional book reading. However, notably absent are the views of experienced professionals, such as school librarians and teachers, and the practices and pedagogies they find to be effective in motivating adolescent reading. Previous research on the primary school phase (pupils aged 5–11 years) in the UK has highlighted the importance of teachers' perspectives and experiences of reading practices (Steel, Williams, and McGeown 2021) and/or exploring students' perspectives of existing reading for pleasure practices (Oxley and McGeown 2023). While both would potentially be useful additions to the current study, adding nuance to our understanding of approaches that can increase adolescents' volitional reading, the specific strength of this study lies in the insights gained from the in-



depth, qualitative analysis of rich data, which have allowed adolescents to describe their reading motivation and engagement in their own words.

## Conclusion

In the context of low levels of reading motivation and engagement among adolescents, identifying factors that can increase adolescents' volitional book reading is essential if they are to reap the many benefits that arise from reading books (e.g. Jerrim and Moss 2018; Howard 2011; van der Kleij et al. 2022; Wilkinson et al. 2020) and enjoy positive and meaningful reading experiences. Research which centres adolescents' views on this topic is vital. This study suggests that introducing school-based practices which foreground access, choice, autonomy, relatable messaging, social factors, and both physical and non-physical environments conducive to reading is important and that, when combined, could support necessary and important efforts to increase adolescents' reading motivation and engagement.

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## ORCID

Charlotte Webber  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4030-1281>

Katherine Wilkinson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6190-735X>

Lynne G. Duncan  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3573-5288>

Sarah McGeown  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4877-8204>

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