

Mapping the Intrinsic Reading Profiles of Generation Z: A Multi-Dimensional Framework for Modern Literacy

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ABSTRACT

As digital natives, Generation Z exhibits distinct reading behaviours that often deviate from traditional literacy models. This study identifies and analyses the dimensions of intrinsic reading motivation among university students, focusing on the interplay between habits, attitudes, and interests. Utilizing a quantitative approach with an adapted and refined research instrument, the study categorizes students into specific reading profiles based on their engagement with on-screen content. Key findings indicate that intrinsic motivation is constructed through specific dimensions, with certain factors exhibiting higher influence over sustained reading engagement. The research moves beyond superficial understanding to provide a robust analysis of how these three domains are defined and operationalized in a public university setting. These results offer significant contributions toward a proposed framework for cultivating lifelong reading habits and practical implications for curriculum design in higher education.

Keywords: Reading Profiles, Intrinsic Motivation Dimensions, Generation Z, Habits, Attitudes, and Interests

INTRODUCTION

The transition from traditional print to screen-based mediums has fundamentally altered literacy patterns across higher education (Liu, 2005). Tertiary students, predominantly belonging to Generation Z, navigate an information ecosystem dominated by digital platforms, social media, and transmedia storytelling (Gutiérrez-Ángel et al., 2022). While conventional literacy paradigms emphasize print-bound reading routines, modern digital natives engage with text in fragmented, interactive, and highly visual formats (Prensky, 2001). Consequently, traditional frameworks struggle to fully capture what motivates these students to read independently without external pressures (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Intrinsic reading motivation—defined as reading driven by innate curiosity, personal pleasure, and individual interest—plays a critical role in academic success and lifelong learning (Guthrie et al., 2000). However, university educators frequently report declining engagement with long-form texts and structured academic readings (Annamalai & Muniandy, 2013). To address this challenge, researchers must look beyond superficial metrics of reading frequency and examine the psychological and behavioural pillars that sustain reading engagement (Bandura, 1997; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

This study addresses these gaps by evaluating how intrinsic reading motivation is operationalized among Generation Z university students. Specifically, this research focuses on three core domains: reading habits, reading attitudes, and reading interests (Abid et al., 2023). By examining how these domains interlock, this paper establishes a multi-dimensional framework designed to inform curriculum design and pedagogical strategies within tertiary education (OECD, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Generation Z as Digital Readers

Generation Z refers to individuals born into an environment defined by ubiquitous internet connectivity, mobile computing, and instant media access (Prensky, 2001). Unlike previous cohorts who adapted to digital technology, Generation Z processes information through a screen-first lens (Gutiérrez-Ángel et al., 2022). In tertiary education, this demographic exhibits distinct textual preferences. Screen-based reading encourages hyper-linking, skimming, and multi-modal engagement (Liu, 2005). However, screen reading also exposes learners to persistent digital distractions, making sustained attention a primary hurdle (OECD, 2021). Understanding how intrinsic motivation survives within this hyper-stimulated setting requires re-evaluating established literacy theories (Guthrie et al., 2000).

The Core Construct: Habits, Attitudes, and Interests

Intrinsic reading motivation is not a monolithic trait; rather, it is constructed through the interplay of behavioural, affective, and cognitive factors (Bandura, 1997; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

- **Reading Habits:** Represent the behavioural routines, frequency, and time dedicated to reading both printed and digital texts (Abid et al., 2023).
- **Reading Attitudes:** Refers to the affective domain—students' feelings, evaluations, and psychological dispositions toward reading as an activity (Annamalai & Muniandy, 2013).
- **Reading Interests:** Reflects the cognitive drivers—the personal topics, genres, and digital formats that naturally command a student's attention (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

When these three domains align, students demonstrate higher resilience against digital distractions and exhibit deeper engagement with texts (Guthrie et al., 2000).

Evolving Paradigms in Modern Literacy Frameworks

Recent scholarship emphasizes that intrinsic reading constructs must account for transmedia platforms (Gutiérrez-Ángel et al., 2022). Students no longer limit their reading to conventional books or journal articles (Liu, 2005). Instead, "pleasure reading" encompasses web novels, digital fan fiction, online forums, and digital news aggregators. Higher education curricula must bridge the gap between informal digital reading habits and formal academic requirements (Annamalai & Muniandy, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Geographical Context

This study utilized a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to systematically measure and map the intrinsic reading profiles of university students. Data collection was conducted over an eight-week period at a selected public university in Malaysia. The target population comprised approximately 35,000 active full-time undergraduate students enrolled at the campus. To ensure proportional institutional representation across disciplines, a stratified random sampling strategy was implemented.

- **Strata Allocation:** The population was divided into three primary academic clusters serving as strata: Humanities & Social Sciences (N \approx 14,000), Science & Technology (N \approx 12,600), and Business & Management (N \approx 8,400). Proportional sample allocation was calculated based on each cluster's percentage of the total student body.
- **Sampling Frame & Randomization:** Official student registry rosters from each faculty cluster served as the sampling frame. Within each stratum, individual student identification numbers were assigned a

random sequence using a computerized random number generator (SPSS RV.UNIFORM function) to select prospective participants unbiasedly.

- **Recruitment & Response Rate:** Selected students received targeted recruitment invitations via their official institutional email addresses with personal single-use access links to an online questionnaire. Of the 450 invitations distributed, 392 responses were collected. After screening for incomplete or straight-lined submissions, 380 valid responses were retained, yielding an 84.4% net response rate.

Participant Characteristics

Participants met the explicit birth-year criterion for Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2005; aged 18 to 26 years old. Female students comprised 62.1% (n = 236) of the sample, while male students accounted for 37.9% (n = 144). A total of 57.9% of participants were enrolled in Bachelor's Degree programs (n = 220), and 42.1% were pursuing Diploma qualifications (n = 160) across various study fields.

Research Instrument and Psychometrics

Questionnaires were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree"). Mean scores were derived for each construct, where higher values represented stronger intrinsic motivation. Data were gathered using a structured, 30-item self-administered questionnaire divided into four dedicated subscales:

1. Demographics and Digital Access (5 items): Assessed age, gender, program level, primary reading devices, and average daily screen time.
2. Reading Habits Subscale (8 items): Adapted from Abid et al. (2023) to measure behavioural routines, session duration, and reading frequency across print and screen media. Two items measuring frequency of non-academic screen distractions were reverse-coded prior to composite score calculation.
3. Reading Attitudes Subscale (8 items): Adapted from Annamalai & Muniandy (2013) to measure affective evaluations, emotional satisfaction, and the perceived cognitive/academic utility of reading.
4. Reading Interests Subscale (9 items): Adapted from Guthrie et al. (2000) and modified specifically to capture digital natively preferences. Items were updated to incorporate contemporary transmedia formats (e.g., serialized digital fiction, webtoons, interactive web articles) alongside traditional subject categories.

Prior to main data collection, the refined instrument underwent pilot testing with an independent sample of n = 45 undergraduate students to verify construct clarity and internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha (alpha) coefficients confirmed high reliability across each individual subscale:

- Reading Habits: alpha = 0.83
- Reading Attitudes: alpha = 0.86
- Reading Interests: alpha = 0.89
- Overall Instrument: alpha = 0.88

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Dimensional Hierarchy of Intrinsic Reading Motivation

The empirical analysis reveals a distinct dimensional hierarchy in how Generation Z constructs intrinsic

reading motivation .Factor analysis identified three primary underlying constructs: Curiosity-Driven Interest, Affective Attitude, and Habitual Engagement (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Construct Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Primary Construct Level
Reading Interests (Curiosity & Topic)	4.12	0.62	High
Reading Attitudes (Affective Perception)	3.85	0.71	Moderate-High
Reading Habits (Routine Execution)	3.21	0.84	Moderate

Table 1: Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Intrinsic Motivation Constructs

Data from Table 1 indicates that Reading Interests (M = 4.12, SD = 0.62) represent the strongest driver of intrinsic motivation among digital natives (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Students demonstrate strong personal motivation when the material directly aligns with their personal choices, career goals, or specialized topics (Guthrie et al., 2000). Reading Attitudes (M = 3.85, SD = 0.71) scored moderately high, indicating that while students acknowledge the value and enjoyment of reading, this positive evaluation does not automatically translate into structured routines (Annamalai & Muniandy, 2013). Reading Habits scored lowest (M = 3.21, SD = 0.84), exposing a clear discrepancy between positive attitudes and sustained behavioural practice (Abid et al., 2023).

Analysis of Reading Interests: Topical Autonomy and Multimodal Platforms

An in-depth examination of the sub-dimensions within Reading Interests demonstrates that Generation Z students are highly selective readers who prioritize immediate value and personal agency. When respondents were asked to rate the factors that ignite their reading engagement, topical autonomy scored highest (M = 4.45, SD = 0.51) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students express a distinct preference for self-selected materials over mandatory course texts, aligning with Self-Determination Theory's assertion that autonomy is fundamental to intrinsic drive (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).Furthermore, media format plays a pivotal role in shaping interest. Multimodal platforms, including webtoons, serialized digital fiction, and interactive articles, achieved higher interest ratings (M = 4.28, SD = 0.58) than uninterrupted printed narrative blocks (M = 3.10, SD = 0.92), (Erya & Pustika, 2021). The inclusion of visual cues, hyper-linked references, and integrated comment sections provides social relatedness and immediate cognitive stimulation, which traditional paper texts lack (Erya & Pustika, 2021; Gutiérrez-Ángel et al., 2022). As a result, reading interest is no longer tied solely to subject matter, but is inextricably linked to digital accessibility and user-interface design (Liu, 2005).

Analysis of Reading Attitudes: The Cognitive-Affective

The evaluation of Reading Attitudes revealed a noteworthy psychological phenomenon among tertiary learners: a distinct disconnect between intellectual appraisal and emotional execution (Annamalai & Muniandy, 2013). A vast majority of respondents (88) agreed or strongly agreed that reading is essential for professional advancement and intellectual development (M = 4.30, SD = 0.60) (Huang et al., 2022). However, when evaluating the affective item "I find long-form academic reading relaxing and emotionally rewarding," the mean score dropped significantly (M = 3.12, SD = 0.95) (Huang et al., 2022).

This gap suggests that Generation Z holds a highly utilitarian view of traditional text (Mullis et al., 2017). They view reading as a vital instrument for information acquisition rather than an intrinsically rewarding leisure activity (Annamalai & Muniandy, 2013). Cognitive fatigue caused by continuous screen time and multi-tasking contributes to this affective resistance (Liu, 2005; OECD, 2021). While students maintain a positive cognitive attitude toward literacy's utility, their emotional attitude is strained when encountering dense, non-interactive texts (Bandura, 1997; Huang et al., 2022).

Analysis of Reading Habits: Behavioural Disruption in the Screen Era

The lower mean score observed in Reading Habits ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.84$) highlights how digital environments reshape behavioural execution (Abid et al., 2023). The survey examined three key metrics of habit formation: consistency of reading schedules, session duration, and environment management (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Mapping the Intrinsic Reading Framework

To illustrate how these dimensions interlock within a tertiary environment, Figure 1 outlines the proposed multi-dimensional framework derived from the data.

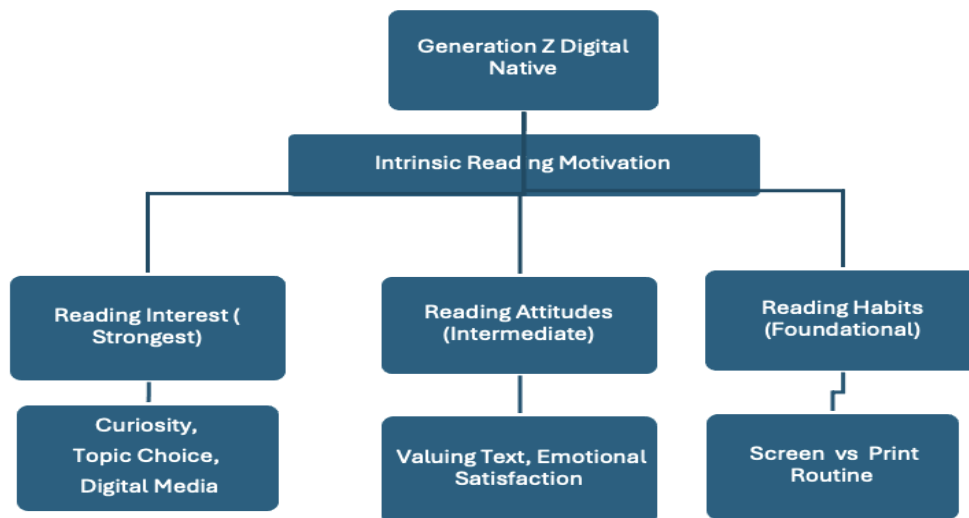


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Generation Z Intrinsic Reading Motivation Dimensions

Figure 1 details the core pathway driving modern literacy. Intrinsic reading motivation among digital natives is primarily ignited by Interests (topical relevance and medium accessibility) (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). This ignition shapes student Attitudes regarding the value of reading (Annamalai & Muniandy, 2013), which ultimately solidifies long-term Habits (Abid et al., 2023). Without leveraging high interest as an entry point, attempts to forcibly build reading habits in higher education yield limited success (OECD, 2021).

DISCUSSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings confirm that Generation Z students are not averse to reading; rather, their motivation is highly selective and medium-dependent (Liu, 2005). The lower score in Reading Habits underscores the influence of digital fragmentation, students read constantly throughout the day (social feeds, messaging, short articles), but struggle to maintain dedicated, uninterrupted long-form reading routines (Gutiérrez-Ángel et al., 2022).

For higher education educators and curriculum designers, particularly within English as a Foreign/Second Language (EFL/ESL) contexts, these results offer clear practical direction:

- Interest-Led Curriculum Design: Modules should incorporate transmedia elements and diverse text selections that leverage students' innate curiosity (Guthrie et al., 2000).
- Scaffolding Digital Habits: Rather than banning screens, educators should provide structured strategies for digital deep-reading to help bridge the gap between positive attitudes and consistent habits (OECD, 2021).

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