



Teen Reading in the Digital Era



Snapshot Report
March 2017



REPORT AT A GLANCE



Teen Reading in the Digital Era

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Rationale

Recreational reading of books has been linked to significant educational and personal benefits for adolescents.¹ Books, whether print or digital, are also a vibrant part of Australia's cultural expression. Therefore, for educators, librarians, book industry practitioners and policy makers, a clear picture of the reading engagement of Australian youth is important.

Overview of the Pilot Study

The Teen Reading in the Digital Era pilot study investigated Australian teenagers' practice using traditional print and digital platforms for long form recreational reading. Following Naomi Baron² we used long form reading to refer to sustained, attentive reading of texts that are around 2000 words in length or more. In practice this generally means books, longer fiction or non-fiction available in print or digital formats. In the digital era, books and other long form narrative and informational texts can be accessed on a variety of platforms, including print, tablets, phones and dedicated eReading devices. The study, therefore, focused on how and where print books (pBooks), eBooks and other long form digital texts are sourced, whether by purchase, borrowing or sharing, and the geographic, economic and cultural factors that influence such choices.

¹ Daggett & Hasselbring, 2014; Birr Moje, Overby, Tysvaer, & Morris, 2008; Kirsch et al., 2002; Sullivan & Brown, 2015.

² Words onscreen: The fate of reading in a digital world, 2015.

³ Prensky, 2001 ; Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008

Key areas of interest were:

- **Platforms** – Despite the fact that young people are often assumed to be digital natives³ there is little recent research about Australian teenagers' preferences for reading modalities.
- **Access** – because we need to understand the barriers and enablers to participation in a reading culture.
- **Diversity** – because ours is a heterogeneous culture, with young people of different ages from various language, geographical and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Our Approach

We used two methods of investigation:

- 1** A survey of over 550 adolescents from two states, Victoria and Western Australia. The survey was made up of pre-coded questions, with a few examples of open fields, where participants were able to describe their experiences in their own words.
- 2** A short, semi-structured interview with just under 40 young people from our study sites, which were Australian secondary or K-12 schools.

Who was in our sample?

One Year 7, Year 9 and Year 10 class from each of the 13 schools was selected to participate in the survey. Ages ranged from 10 to 18, but 78% of the respondents were between 13 and 16.

Schools were selected to represent a range of socioeconomic, geographic, and cultural factors. Selection was based on a spread of the ICSEA (Index of Community Socioeconomic Advantage) value of the school. The 13 schools included a mix of metropolitan, provincial and rural schools.

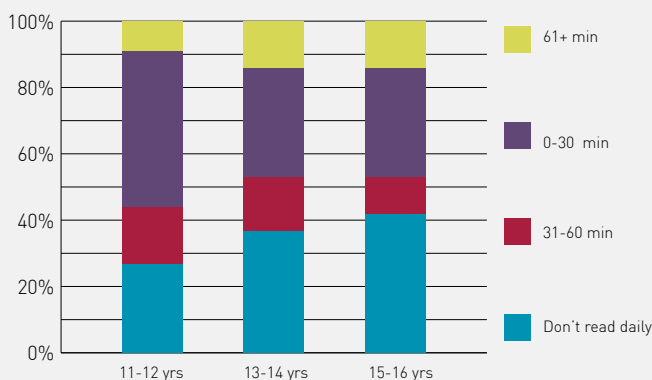
What were the study limitations?

Because we needed to obtain both parent and student consent to taking part, it is likely that we recruited a higher proportion of participants with an existing strong interest in reading. The findings may therefore skew towards higher reading engagement than in the general population of young people. The research did not include teenagers in years 11 and 12 due to concerns about the correct imposition on their learning time of delivering the survey in class, but including older teenagers would have been desirable to provide a more comprehensive picture of leisure reading across the teenage years. While the sample design was rigorous, its size, its geographical range, and the number of regional and culturally diverse locations visited, was necessarily limited by the scope of a small, one-year project.



A Snapshot of Select Findings

Daily Recreational Reading by Age in Years



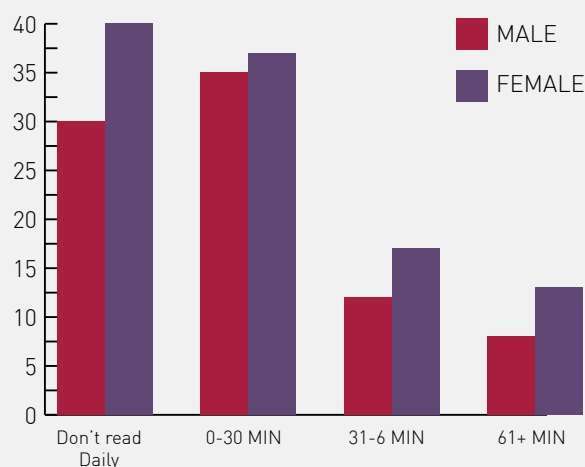
How often do Australian teens read for pleasure?

The frequency of reading is influenced by a number of factors, including age,⁴ gender,⁵ parents' education level,⁶ and place of residence.⁷ As this table shows, those who don't read for pleasure on an average day increases from 27% at age 11-12 to 42% at age 15-16. However, those who we might describe as heavy readers, or those who have a positive identification as readers, experience a much smaller drop-off in engagement as they enter the latter teenage years.

Daily Recreational Reading by Gender

More females than males read for more than half an hour per day, while the pattern is reversed for those who are not reading on a daily basis. Our findings show that there are significant numbers of adolescent girls who are only light or moderate readers, which indicates that there are important differences within as well as between gender categories.⁸

Daily Recreational Reading by Gender



“ I like reading book[s] that I like but I don't like reading them online because it strains my eyes, it's too much of a [hassle] instead when you can just get a book out also some books online you have to pay and make an account, when you can go to the library and borrow something and return it afterwards... ”

⁴ Howard & Jin, 2004; Scholastic, 2015; 2016.

⁵ Zasacka, 2014; Rutherford et al., 2017.

⁶ Christian, Morrison & Bryant, 1998; Davis-Kean, 2005; Evans et al., 2010.

⁷ Ainley & Gebhardt, 2013; Pahl, & Bennett (2013); Pegg & Panizzon, 2007.

⁸ Large scale testing, such as NAPLAN, PISA and PIRLS indicate that race and social class create "gaps" in reading literacy performance which are greater than those created by gender; see Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2013.

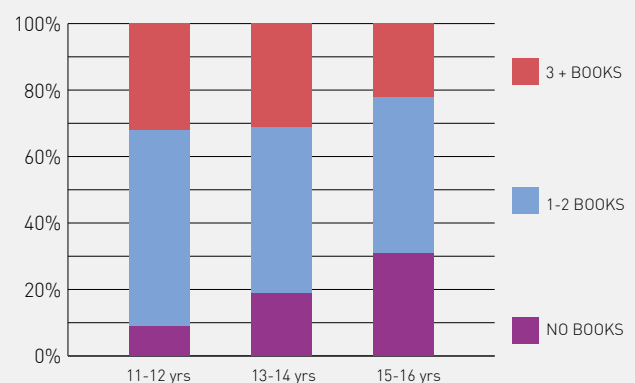


How many books do Australian teens read?

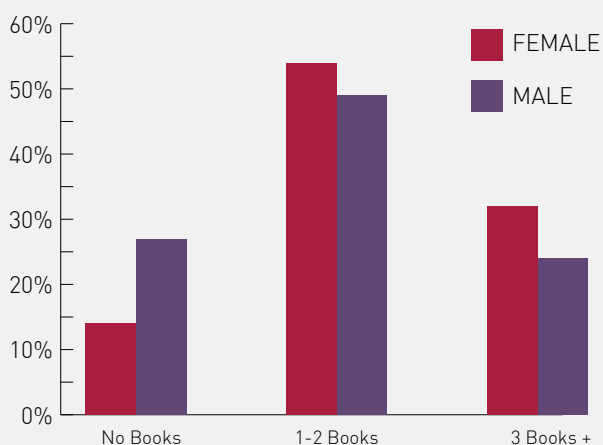
The length or complexity of the books in question might have a real impact on how many could be read in any month. However, when we look at the volume of reading of the teens in our sample, we find a broadly similar pattern to the one discussed above (frequency). Those who don't read any books at all in an average month increases from 9% at age 11-12 to 31% at age 15-16. The number who read 1-2 books drops off less steeply. The percentage of teens reading 3 or more books per month stays fairly constant until age 15-16, where it drops only by 9%.

When we look at gender as an influencing factor, we find that males make up a much greater proportion of those who don't read at least one complete book in an average month, while females are more likely to read 3 or more books.

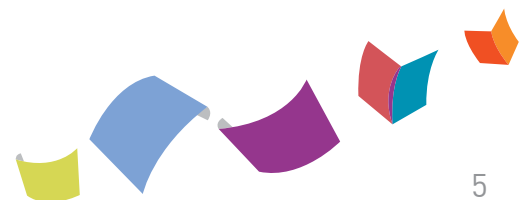
Volume of Books Read per Month by Age Group



Volume of Books Read per Month by Gender

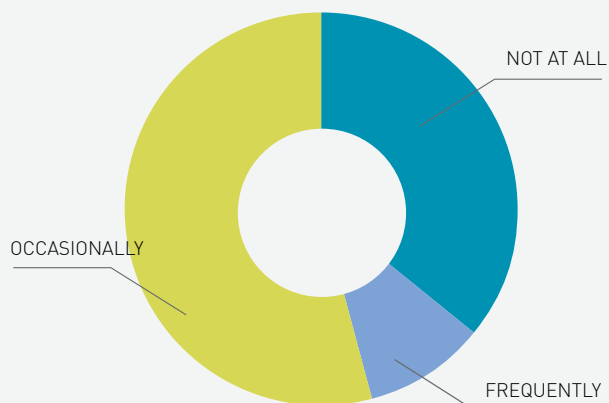


“[Reading on devices] hurts my eyes and I find it hard to concentrate. I just prefer paper books.”



What Platforms do Teens Prefer for Reading?

Frequency of Reading on Tablet



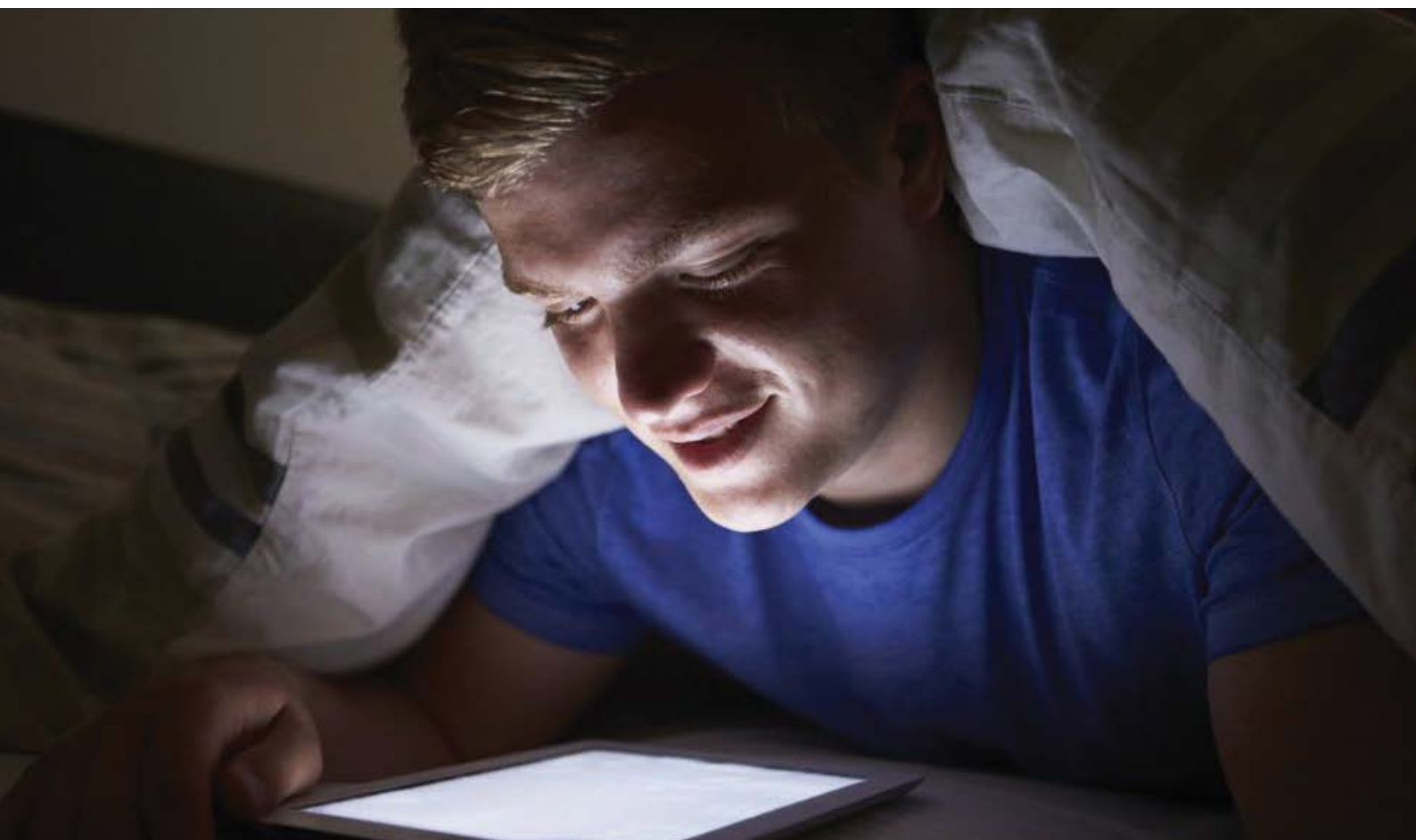
One of the study's principal aims was to investigate how far reading on digital platforms was a major element in adolescents' practice. Survey and interview questions canvassed what devices were used, how teens sourced eBooks, whether they shared them, and what alternatives there were for longer form reading in digital formats.

Our participants were asked about the digital platforms they had regular access to. Only 24% of those surveyed said they had access to a dedicated eReading device such as a Kindle or Kobo. Of these, only 16% read frequently on their eReader, while just over half read occasionally on it.

Over half of eReader users have a Kindle. This is interesting from a library practice perspective, as it is currently not possible for legal reasons to borrow books from Australian libraries in the format that Kindles use. A few participants commented that they were unaware that it was possible to borrow eBooks from libraries. Others felt that it was too much trouble to install and use eBooks when print sources were readily available.

The proportion of our sample with access to a tablet, such as an iPad, was much higher, while mobile phone access was almost universal (90%). Of tablet users, 10% reported that they read frequently on their device (fewer than eReader users). Fewer tablet users than eReader users report reading occasionally on their device. Responses to other questions and in interviews suggest that tablets are more attractive for other uses, such as gameplay.

“Just found [my Kindle] really expensive, and you could borrow books from the library, so it was just easier, you don't have to buy it, and if you didn't like it you could give it back, which with the Kindle you just buy it and you can't do anything with it.”



“ I do not like reading on a digital device as it takes away the pleasure of reading a book, such as turning the page, holding the book in your hands and smelling the book. Reading on a device, although helpful if you're on the go, is nowhere as fun and enjoyable as reading an actual book.”

What are the barriers to reading more eBooks or eBooks?

Prior research tells us that reading more helps adolescents get better school results and better employment after leaving school. So we surveyed our participants about the barriers and enablers to their reading more, either print books or eBooks. Students could choose more than one kind of barrier. The top barrier given was the difficulty of choosing a good book (61%), followed by lack of free time (56%), though half indicated that they would not choose to read given alternative options

Despite over half of our sampled teens reporting that they had a borrower's card at their local public/ community library, school libraries seem to be the primary enablers of access to, or advice about, good books. Forty-eight per cent (48%) said that having more good books at their school library would help them read more, contrasted with only 30% for their public library. This suggests that a priority should be resourcing school libraries with trained teacher-librarians to drive collection and provide informed reader advice.



What are the barriers to reading more on digital devices?

Specifically considering reading eBooks, the primary reason our sampled teens say they do not read more on their digital device is a preference for print books.

The second most popular reason is not liking reading that much. Other popular reasons reported include concentration issues, visual fatigue and the cost of eBooks. When given the opportunity to comment in their own words about how they felt about digital reading, some objected to the cost of eBooks when library borrowing was an option, while others felt that it was easier to source eBooks free-of-charge.

“ Apps like Wattpad are a great example, people (anyone really) can write about anything they desire and we can read anything we want ... for free! Its a new, simple and great way of reading books.”

What are the alternatives to traditional e- and pBook formats?

The study also asked about long form digital reading that wasn't the usual eBook or print book, and about applications for sharing and discussing books. It is clear from both our survey and interviews that fan fiction and other participatory writing and reading sites are a popular choice for fiction. Not all adolescents reported using file sharing fiction sites (around a third of our sample), but of these Wattpad was the most frequently mentioned (41% of those who read or download from sharing sites). Goodreads (10%) was the next most popular site; with over a quarter of such users not knowing – or possibly preferring not to disclose – which sites they used.

How are teens accessing books?

Interview data suggests that both bricks and mortar bookstores and online retailers are used to purchase books. But many teens strategically borrow books from libraries to avoid the perceived high cost of books.

Other respondents felt that digital versions of books were readily available free of charge. A number of interviewees mentioned just "Googling" the pdf of the book.

Who pays for eBooks and how are they shared?

Because the pilot study focused in some detail on reading using digital platforms, our questions about paying for or sharing books honed in much more closely on eBooks. Parents or other family members (38%) are the most usual resource for financing adolescents' reading choices. While a substantial proportion reported buying eBooks for themselves (18%), the majority of sampled teens (56%) do not purchase eBooks at all.

Only about a tenth of the sample reported sharing eBooks with friends or other family members. Of those, sharing one device, or sharing accounts were frequent practices, while others used formats that could be readily swapped between devices.

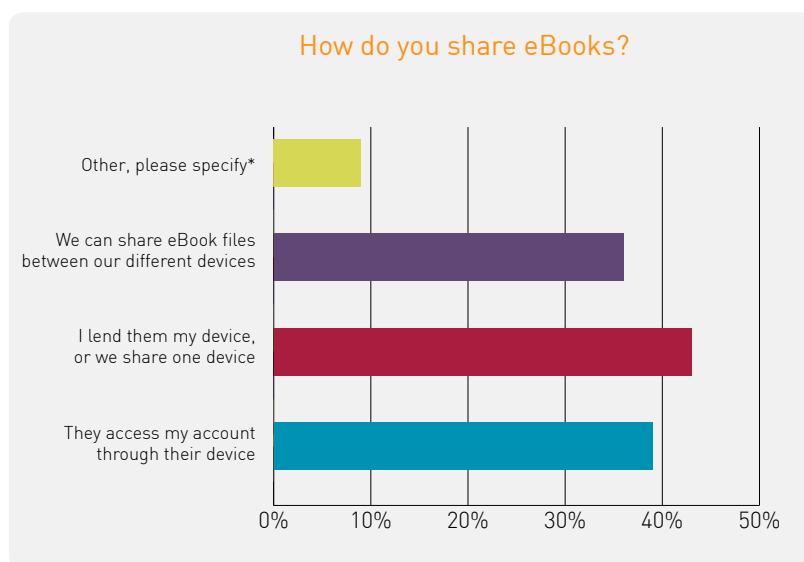
Responses in interviews and in the "Other" option within the survey also show that adolescents often trade information about where to find books, and consider this to be "sharing" as well.

Though young people are often quite strategic about finding websites and other sources of books, less than a quarter of the sample reported using social media to discuss books (18%). Of those who do, 63% do so once per month or less. But there is a core of keen participants in online book cultures who talk about books on social media 1-3 times per week (13%) or daily (5%). Instagram, Wattpad and GoodReads are the most popular book talk sites.

Adolescents also discuss books in family and peer networks, though taking up this opportunity, where available, is influenced by a number of factors, including common reader identities and genre preferences, mutual exposure to books to be talked about, and family or peer networks that support rather than denigrate reading as a social practice.⁹

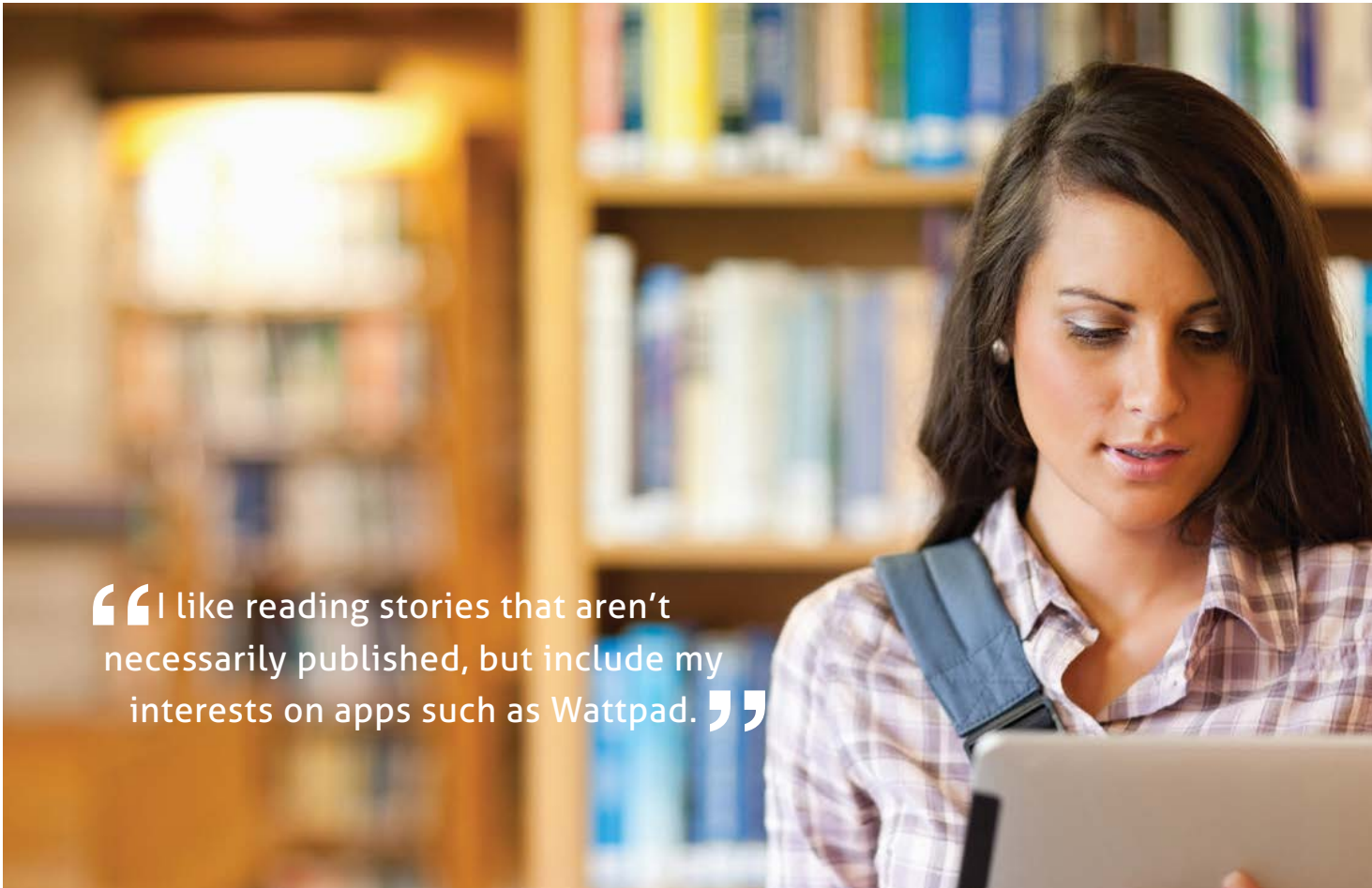
What kinds of books do teens like to read?

Adolescents taking part in the survey were asked to give the titles of their three favourite books. Series feature heavily in the selections, as does fantasy. Australian texts appear alongside international titles. Graphics-heavy humorous texts that are generally be considered to be aimed at younger children are clearly popular choices with some readers.



⁹ Merga, McRae & Rutherford (paper under review).





“I like reading stories that aren't necessarily published, but include my interests on apps such as Wattpad.”

Favourite Reads

Top 10 books or series

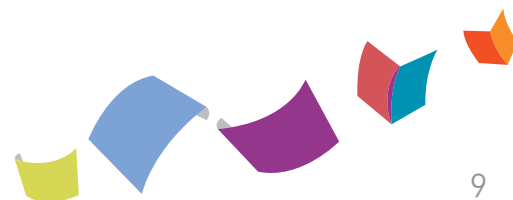
1. *Harry Potter series* by J. K. Rowling
2. *The Hunger Games trilogy* by Suzanne Collins
3. *Diary of a Wimpy Kid series* by Jeff Kinney
4. *The Maze Runner series* by James Dashner
5. *Divergent trilogy* by Veronica Roth
6. *Once series* by Morris Gleitzman
7. *The Fault in our Stars* by John Green
8. *Percy Jackson & the Olympians series* by Rick Riordan
9. *The Treehouse series* by Andy Griffiths
10. *Skulduggery Pleasant series* by Derek Landy

Top 10 books by Australian authors

1. *Once series* by Morris Gleitzman
2. *Treehouse series* by Andy Griffiths
3. *Tomorrow series* by John Marsden
4. *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak
5. *Boy Overboard* by Morris Gleitzman
6. *WeirDo series* by Anh Do
7. *Deltora Quest series* by Emily Rodda
8. *Ranger's Apprentice series* by John Flanagan
9. *Zac & Mia* by A. J. Betts
10. *Rondo series* by Emily Rodda

The top 5 genres

1. *Fantasy*
2. *Contemporary realist fiction*
3. *Science Fiction*
4. *Autobiography/Biography*
5. *Action/Adventure*



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Where Is Our Research Communicated?

Stakeholder Engagement

In December 2016, Deakin University hosted representatives from the Australia Council, Australian Library and Information Association, departments of education, school and community librarians, English teachers, publishers and booksellers for a roundtable on the Teen Reading research.



Media Conversations

Australian Bookseller & Publisher, 'Deakin academics to research teen reading habits', Australian Bookseller & Publisher, 23 November 2016.

Copyright Agency, 'Most teens prefer print books', Copyright Agency, 28 February 2017.

Doherty, E. 'Books popular with teenagers, Deakin and Murdoch University pilot study finds', Herald Sun, 28 November 2016.

Earp, J. 'Infographic: Teen reading habits', Teacher, 28 November 2016.

Glover, A. 'Teenagers snub ebooks, prefer print', ProPrint, 28 November 2016.

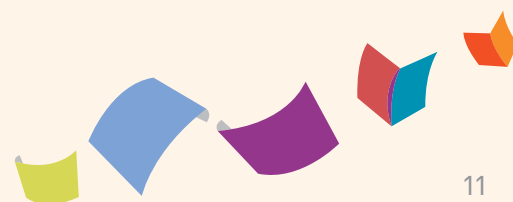
Mills, E. 'Teen reading in the digital era', Australian Publishers Association Blog, 8 December 2016.

Wells, J. 'Teens prefer print over e-books: study', Campus Review, 12 December 2016.

Research Papers

Rutherford, L., Waller, L., Merga, M., McRae, M., Bullen, E., & Johanson, K. (2017). The contours of teenagers' reading in the digital era: Scoping the research. *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 23(1), 1-20. doi:10.1080/13614541.2017.1280351

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