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Last week I gave a presentation to fellow research students in the [Department of Media and Information](#) at [Curtin University](#). This is the paper of my presentation.

As a part of my research I conducted [focus groups with high school students](#). I talked to about 40 students, but I will concentrate on two students here, Leah and Adam. All students' names have been changed to ensure confidentiality. Leah was in Year 9 and 14 years old. Adam was in Year 10 and 16 years old.

Leah proudly declared she had never read a book. This was later contradicted when she mentioned the times she found books and other reading materials she had enjoyed. Adam had not always been an avid reader, but he was now and happily discussed what he liked about reading. The two were very different and contradict the stereotypes found in the literature of girls who read [1] and enjoy fiction and boys who don't read so much but when they do, often enjoy non-fiction [2,3]. They show the diversity that is present among teenagers [4] (as in any group) and the difficulty in making generalisations.

Meet Leah

Leah was adamant in her dislike of reading. She said, "I never read, never read a book" because she found it boring. After repeatedly declaring her dislike, Leah mentioned an assigned text her class read for English, [Hana's suitcase](#) by Karen Levine [5]. Leah's classmate Tanya said, "That was actually pretty good" and Leah agreed saying, "That was actually like one of the first books I've actually read." Leah continued by saying she liked "some sort of documentaries," eg. *Hana's suitcase*. She meant biographies, but didn't know that word. Wide reading leads to a larger vocabulary [6,7] and Leah's ignorance of the word biography may have been caused by her lack of wide reading.

Meet Adam

Adam was an avid reader who "read every night and every morning." He often couldn't sleep at night and would just "keep reading," offering a recent example of looking at the clock and finding it was 1:30 in the morning. These late nights made him sleepy the next day at school and he said this was annoying, but it didn't stop him.

Adam stated his reason for reading as "I don't normally read to find out what happens. I normally read 'cause I think it's just good how it's written." Adam could become emotionally involved in what he was reading, he would feel "distracted" when a character died. Despite Adam saying he was fussy in his reading and stating some of the books he disliked, he enjoyed a wide range of genres, topics and materials, from the *Harry Potter* series and other fantasy books to biographies of cyclist Lance Armstrong.

Books or Magazines

Leah asked,



Why would you want to waste your time reading something that is fiction and probably would never happen?... This won't like teach you anything.

Her classmate Melissa tried to explain why a person would take the time to read a story, but didn't have the words to describe her ideas. This was a topic Leah came back to later in the discussion and we discovered she would be willing to read a true story about a person she was interested in, eg. Paris Hilton (again she didn't use the word biography). Adam felt the same about finding the "right" book, "There's some books that I don't like. If I find one I do like then I'll just be there [reading] for hours." This idea came up in many of the discussions, finding the "right" book (or other reading material) on the "right" subject, will encourage a teenager to read and enjoy reading. This concept is widely discussed in the literature [8].



Leah did like reading magazines (as did most of the students) because she liked to "read about stuff that's actually happening at the moment." Adam also read magazines but the current information they contained made magazines less important to him than reading a book. He preferred "a book that tells you a story." He would "chuck them [magazines] out" after about two weeks, but he would re-read books he liked over and over.

Parental influence on reading

Adam's parents (and grandmother) were a big influence on his reading. His parents "read all the time" and recommended books for him to read, often ones they'd read. Although he didn't always take up their recommendations. Leah's family also encouraged her to read, although not to the extent that Adam's family did. When she was younger Leah told her mother she wanted to read [The Four Fires](#) by Bryce Courtney [9]. Because Leah "was only little" her mother started reading it to her at night. Leah also read "a little bit" on her own.



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Harry Potter and Paris Hilton

Adam didn't always enjoy reading as much as he now did. His parents encouraged him but, he "just never wanted to read." It was the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling (bought for him by his grandmother) which changed things. After seeing the movie of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's stone*, he read the first book in the series [10].

“ I started reading the first book and I never really got the concept of playing the movie [in my head] by reading the book...When it told you that someone did something, I'd just read it. I'd never sort of play it as a movie in my head...Ever since I saw the [actual] movie and I saw the first characters, I just instantly got it and that's when I started reading all my books and playing...the movie [of the story] in my head...If it wasn't for that, I probably still wouldn't read at all.



The concept of reading the book complementing watching the film was discussed by Fry, "The images of the film help to create a visual reference point that the reader needs to construe the text" [11], exactly as Adam described. Adam subsequently read the *Harry Potter* series more than once.

After this Adam was able to "build a picture" of what he was reading in his head and he really liked that about reading books. His classmate Bianca said of pictures in books, "I think it spoils your imagination" and Adam agreed. He found that if he read a book and then watched a movie version of it, the characters looked different to how he'd imagined them, and he disliked this.

Another aspect of popular culture, Paris Hilton, was the reason for Leah getting excited about a library. Her class had to go to the school library for a free reading session every week. Like a number of her classmates, Leah disliked this session, saying,

“ Half of us sit on the floor, on the couches, you know. We put the books up and then just talk to each other.

Leah never went to a library at other times, except if her printer at home wasn't working and she needed to print out an assignment. Leah's classmate Melissa said a biography of Paris Hilton *Confessions of an heiress: a tongue-in-chic peek behind the pose* [12] was in the school library. Leah said incredulously, "They wouldn't have that here." When Melissa assured her that they did Leah wanted to get it right then, but had to be content with waiting until next lunchtime.

The Internet

Both Leah and Adam used the internet to talk to friends though Instant Messaging (IM), something Adam said his dad didn't understand. The internet was also their preferred source for gathering school assignment information. Adam thought using the internet was "much easier than going to the library to find books." The faith he had in web sources was a bit worrying. Danielle, a classmate of Adam's had earlier said she had a recent assignment on lessons learnt from World War I and couldn't find the information she needed on the internet, but did find it in books from the library. When asked if Adam always found what he wanted on the internet he replied,

“ If you don't there's a chance you could get it in the library, but I only ever go to the library as a backup, if I can't find it on the internet...Ninety percent of the time you're going to find it on the internet. Even if it's not as good as the one in the book, at least you've got it straight away.

Later in the discussion Adam continued on this theme,

“ The internet, it's so much easier for assignments, for everything. You're almost guaranteed to get what you want easily and it's pretty easy to understand. It's all been done properly. Otherwise it wouldn't be there.

His classmate Danielle agreed. They didn't seem to realise that content on the internet may be biased or just plain wrong [13].

Conclusion

Leah and Adam were very different in their reading habits and opinions on reading. But one similarity between them was that it was popular culture that sparked their interest in reading, even if Leah was reluctant to acknowledge this interest.

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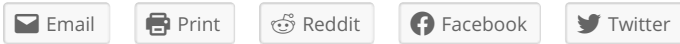
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We have young students coming for one-off Library visits from their Intensive Language Class at the local high school and many use the library as a lounge room to play computer games on the internet and to meet friends. Even so, they are amazed when I show them what resources are here that they are actually interested in and that they were unaware of.



Judy Drayton

12 May 2008 at [9:48 am](#)

ungentlemanly says : I absolutely agree with this !



ungentlemanly

29 May 2008 at [5:51 pm](#)

Somehow i missed the point. Probably lost in translation :) Anyway ... nice blog to visit. cheers, Chiromancer.



Chiromancer

19 June 2008 at [8:58 am](#)

[...] Read more about Leah's love of Paris. [...]



I can get that from the library!? [« Teenagers reading?](#)

3 December 2008 at [2:21 pm](#)

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Teens who read widely can better handle complex concepts, score better on standardized tests, and are often more accepting of those who are different from themselves. And for a lot of teenagers who claim to hate reading, finding the right subject matter may prove the difference between grumbling over finishing their required reading list and devouring a new novel without coaxing. Are bilingual teenagers reading in their mother tongue? • How do teenagers discover new materials To Read? • Where do teenagers read? • Reading Preferences • What non-fiction topics do teenagers Read? • What fiction genres do teenagers Read? • About Books • Are teenagers still reading books? • Where do teenagers get their books From? • About SingLit • Do teenagers read SingLit books? • Motivations and Barriers. 2 Restricted. Most of us spend much more time with digital media than we did a decade ago. But today's teens have come of age with smartphones in their pockets. Compared to teens a couple of decades ago, the way they interact with traditional media like books and movies is fundamentally different. My co-authors and I analyzed nationally representative surveys

of over one million U.S. teens collected since 1976 and discovered an almost seismic shift in how teens are spending their free time. Increasingly, books seem to be
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