

Reading Practices of the MTSU Community

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ABSTRACT

While the cognitive and emotional benefits of reading are well documented and researched, many adults report difficulty sustaining reading practices due to time constraints, limited access to engaging materials, and a lack of guidance or support. To better understand these challenges, we conducted a study to explore the reading habits, obstacles, and motivations of adult readers within the MTSU community, including students, faculty, and staff. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining existing scholarly research with an MTSU Institutional review Board-approved Qualtrics© survey distributed between April and July 2025. The survey collected both qualitative and quantitative data on participants' reading habits, perceived benefits, and obstacles, yielding 313 responses. Findings indicated that although many adults have the desire to read more, there are structural and motivational barriers that often prevent sustained engagement. Based on these findings, we propose community-centered, educator and librarian-led strategies to alleviate reading barriers, such as book clubs, digital media literacy, reading kits, reading challenges, and workshops. By fostering creativity, support systems, and intentional collaboration, we seek to reengage adults with reading and build long-term, enriching, and meaningful reading habits.

Introduction

Considerable time, effort, and resources are devoted to supporting the development of early readers. In childhood and adolescence, reading has a framework: structured curricula, accountability systems, guided encouragement. Yet as individuals transition into adulthood, these external supports largely disappear, and reading becomes a self-directed practice. This is the point at which many adults report a decline in reading frequency and motivation, despite continuing to possess the view that reading is valuable. This study seeks to understand that transition, in an effort to address why reading habits have become difficult to sustain once formal support structures are removed. How, we ask, can adults be supported in reengaging with reading on their own terms?

Reading is universally recognized as a fundamental element of the human experience—a practice that supports intellectual development, emotional growth, and cultural understanding. However, contemporary research highlights tensions between this perceived value and shifting engagement patterns shaped by time constraints, the rise of digital media, lack of access, and evolving entertainment habits (Gelles-Watnick & Perrin; Faverio & Perrin). Although technological change has expanded reading formats through e-books and audiobooks, it has introduced myriad new forms of distraction, reflecting broader transformations in how individuals locate, consume, and prioritize texts (Pew Research Center). These shifts suggest that reading practices today are influenced as much by lifestyle and access as by individual interest.

Scholars further emphasize the role of autonomy and early reading experiences in shaping lifelong engagement. Studies of adolescent motivation indicate that agency and genre choice significantly influence willingness to read independently (Webber et al.), while research on negative reading histories demonstrates how early academic struggles can produce long-lasting disengagement from reading practices (Hall). At the same time, educators argue that exposure to intellectually challenging texts remains valuable for cognitive growth, highlighting a persistent tension between reading for pleasure and reading for development (Gallagher). Together, these contemporary conversations about reading reveal a reflective and dynamic landscape where the value of reading endures and overcomes all the while the ways and reasons people read continue to evolve.

Central to this evolving understanding is the recognition that reading is often described as a source of knowledge and entertainment, but also a profound emotional and existential lifeline, especially for older adults. For many, reading connects them to meaning, purpose, pleasure, and social connection (Rothbauer and Dalmer 170), existing as a vital part of their well-being and sense of identity. This emotional relationship with reading shows its role as more than a recreational activity; it is also a way for people to find comfort and connection. In addition, there is growing recognition that truly engaging in reading requires a mindful and intentional approach. Rather than just consuming texts, readers benefit from immersing themselves in the experience and reflecting on the significance of what they read. Deeper engagement such as this transforms reading into a deliberate and enriching practice that can create lifelong appreciation and connection to literature. These perspectives underscore reading as an emotional foundation and a meaningful process that shapes identity and well-being over time.

Thus, although reading continues to hold significant cultural value, a growing number of sources suggest that many adults in the U.S. are reading less, and sometimes not at all, suggesting a decline in the frequency of adults reading. According to a 2021 Pew Research Center report “Who Doesn’t Read Books in America,” nearly one in four American adults said they hadn’t read a book in any format, including print, digital or audio, over the past year (Gelles-Watnick and Perrin). Still, these patterns are not evenly distributed, and research shows that adults with college degrees are significantly more likely to read than those without, and higher-income adults read more than lower-income adults. This underscores that reading practices are shaped by privilege and access, where those with educational privilege have more access to books and more positive associations with reading.

Beyond functional or academic outcomes, reading is also understood as an emotionally meaningful and identity-forming practice. Research with adult readers suggests literature provides

connection, purpose, and well-being (Rothbauer & Dalmer), while broader cultural commentary such as Maria Popova drawing from author and philosopher Alain de Botton, who positions books as tools for reflection and emotional articulation that support navigating human experience, while they help us “live and die with a little bit more wisdom, goodness, and sanity” (Popova). Yet despite these benefits, global data indicates decreasing voluntary reading engagement amongst young people, raising concerns about long-term reading motivation into adulthood (Webber et al.). When thinking about what might account for the changes in adult reading habits, it’s possible that part of the issue is that adults are made to feel that what they enjoy does not count as reading. Reading can be enjoyable and intellectually challenging and while motivations to read vary, there is not a “wrong” reason to read.

Rather than assuming disengagement, this study approaches adult reading as a complex and evolving practice shaped by motivation, access identity, and social support. By focusing on adult readers within the MTSU Community, this research examines adult readers’ self-reported reading habits, perceived obstacles, motivation, and benefits.

This study highlights the personal, intellectual, and cultural benefits of literature. Reading can support life-long learning, broaden one’s worldview, and foster emotional well-being. By drawing attention to these benefits, this study advocates for more inclusive and accessible reading practices that empower adults to engage with texts on their own terms. It is not just designed for readers, but for educators, librarians, and community organizers invested in adult literacy and life-long learning.

Literature Review

A recurring theme in current literature regarding reading is the importance of choice and autonomy in fostering lifelong reading habits. The idea of choice and reading a variety of genres is prevalent in literature, as young adults would feel more prone to make an autonomous choice to read if they had a guide or recommendations on what to choose (Webber et al. 85-86). In school settings, books are usually chosen for students, so when one transitions to adulthood, one may be left wondering how and what to read. In their article, “Motivating Book Reading During Adolescence: Qualitative Insights from Adolescents,” Webber et al. describe their study as aiming to understand young people’s motivation to read on their own. The results underscore how the lack of reading agency in school settings during youth could contribute to feelings of uncertainty about what and how to read later in life. If adults were never given a choice of what to read as students, how would they know what to choose on their own? A participant in the study expands on this notion by saying, “When you read different books in school, if you’re enjoying them, it gives, like, more of an insight of why you would read at home” (85). Supporting reading choices in school settings may set adults up for when they are left to read on their own, as when one explores new genres and finds something they like, this may lead to a personal interest in reading. (86) This is an important notion as the lack of early exposure to a variety of genres or reading choices can harm adult literacy, as reading can be seen as inaccessible or intimidating to navigate by oneself.

The idea of guided autonomy is echoed in Kelly Gallagher’s work, specifically *Readicide* and *Deeper Reading: Comprehending Challenging Texts*, 4-12, where he advocates for a “balanced reading diet” that includes reading intellectually challenging texts alongside equally engaging and enjoyable material to prevent burnout from only reading academic texts. Gallagher argues that while challenging texts cultivate intellectual depth and mental stamina, one should not neglect enjoyment, as pleasure and difficulty can balance each other out. Webber et al. expand on the idea of variety in terms of reading and argue that young adults would feel more likely to read independently if provided with guidance or recommendations on what to read. Guidance and agency are two different things, yet they can complement each other when aiding young readers to seek out mindful reading choices that will hopefully guide their further reading practices as adults. When Gallagher’s ideas are considered alongside Webber et al.’s study, it becomes clear that reading habits formed in youth, whether they be empowering or restrictive, can affect adult perceptions of reading as a meaningful practice or a burdensome task.

Much like the formative nature of early reading experiences, the acceleration of digital media exerts significant influence over adult reading habits. Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy* explains how reading can become an afterthought with the acceleration of online media. He suggests that these competing forms of media harm reading tangible literature, as he says, "We live in a culture that urges and thrives on speed and efficiency; capitalism demands getting rid of the old to make room for the new" (Keller 69). This points to a cultural shift where quick information consumption is favored over deep engagement. Scrolling aimlessly is much easier to do than sitting down and reading a book. When Keller interviewed high school and college students about their habits when scrolling on the internet, a participant stated, "I don't mean to spend so much time online, but after a while, you look at the clock and wonder how an hour went by" (Keller 85). We can unknowingly hinder our reading practices by passively consuming digital media. One may struggle to read not because one dislikes reading, but because digital environments are made to consume our time without us realizing it, leaving us no room for other activities.

The influence of digital media is far-reaching, with its effects becoming increasingly measurable across many populations. A 2025 Pew Research Study "Teens, Social Media and Mental Health" found that 45% of teens report spending too much time on these platforms, notably a substantial increase from 36% in 2022 (Faverio et al.). Additionally, nearly half (48%) perceive social media as having a mostly negative effect on their peers, suggesting a growing awareness that digital environments may disrupt one's well-being. These patterns highlight the possibility that the dominance of digital media impacts reading and even mental health across all ages, contributing to reduced attention spans and little time for reflective reading. The appeal of quick, visually engaging content can easily overpower text-based literature.

Yet, as evident in Leigh A. Hall's exploration of interactive reading apps, digital environments also hold potential to reframe reading as accessible and engaging. In her article, "How Youth and Adults with Negative Reading Histories Found a Way to Enjoy Reading," Hall redirects the idea of online media competing with tangible literature and finds how online applications may assist with youth and adults becoming engaged with reading again. She explains how the app *Delight Games*, which includes interactive novels, narrative gameplay, and the option to create one's own stories could help youth and adults reengage with reading after past negative experiences when reading. Hall focuses on the challenges adults face, noting that "Within this group of respondents, five youths and 37 adults self-identified as poor readers and claimed that they did not enjoy reading" (676). Many of these adults recalled feeling inadequate as readers during their youth, believing they were not smart enough to understand the material or that they could not simply read for enjoyment. These early experiences contributed to their limited relationship with reading later in life. Online platforms such as *Delight Games* explore narrative gameplay that lets readers feel a sense of agency, and this sense of control can be crucial in reframing adults' perceptions on reading as something empowering, not burdensome (Hall 678-679).

The Pew Findings exist as common ground between insights from Hall and Keller, as many teens recognize the negative effects of digital media and there are a majority who still view social media as spaces for creative expression (63%) and connection (74%). This gives digital media dual abilities to distract and enable, suggesting that reading practices can coexist with digital engagement and promote further literacy. Thus, technology can both inhibit and facilitate adult reading, depending on how it is.

Beyond questions of media competition, scholarship consistently emphasizes reading's cognitive and developmental value. Maryanne Wolf in *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* emphasizes that reading is a biologically unnatural act that must be continuously developed. Drawing on neurological studies, she warns that "all adolescents go through key development brain stages and that when they are not stretched in these periods of life their cognitive windows run the risk of shutting down" (Qtd. in Gallagher 57). Similarly, research on cultural competence highlights reading's social and ethical impact. Gloria Ladson-Billings frames cultural competence as the ability to engage with multiple cultural perspectives, while Rudine Sims Bishop's metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors positions literature as both reflective and expansive, enabling readers to affirm identity while encountering

diverse worldviews. Together, these frameworks underscore reading's capacity to foster empathy, awareness, and connection in increasingly global contexts.

Reading's emotional and existential benefits are particularly evident in adulthood and aging. Rothbauer and Dalmer describe reading as a "lifeline" that connects older adults to meaning, pleasure, and identity, as they say, "Whatever is on the other end of the lifeline varies from reader to reader, but the older participants in this case give ample evidence that reading does connect them to meaning, to purpose, to pleasure, to people, and to the world" (170). Participants reported using reading to cope with physical pain and maintain agency, demonstrating its role in emotional sustenance and well-being. Currie et al. extend these findings through interviews with adults aged 63–83, showing that fiction reading promotes belonging, joy, and personal growth while strengthening empathy and self-reflection (5). These studies collectively position reading as central not only to cognitive engagement but to emotional resilience and social identity across the lifespan.

Calling for beneficial reading and deepening one's experiences with reading, Ellen C. Carillo's work offers a reflective framework that positions reading as not only a beneficial practice, but a deeply intentional one. In *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*, Carillo writes, "The term 'mindful,' when modifying reading, describes a particular stance on the part of the reader, one that is characterized by intentional awareness of and attention to the present moment, its context and one's perspective" (118). Becoming a mindful reader is a way to rediscover reading and see it in a new light, appreciating it more than one once did, by immersing oneself in a text and doing more than just reading but deliberately reflecting on the experience of reading. Carillo describes how she uses this term of mindfulness to "underscore the metacognitive basis of this frame wherein students become *knowledgeable, deliberate, and reflective* about how they read and the demands that contexts place in their reading" (117). Mindful reading thus offers a framework for reconnecting adults with literacy by shifting reading from passive consumption to purposeful engagement.

While existing literature offers valuable insight into the cultural, emotional, and social benefits of reading across the lifespan, as well as challenges that are associated with reading engagement, there remains a gap in observational studies that explore the reading practices of adults outside of academic contexts. Most of the literature seems to focus on the development of adolescents, structures in schools, or older adult reading habits, but few studies directly examine how everyday adults are personally engaging with reading and what motivates and discourages them. Little research attends to how these adults perceive the value of reading beyond academic contexts. Still, these trends suggest that reading is not disappearing, but it is constantly changing, and access, background, emerging digital media, and personal preference all influence and shape who reads, how often they read, what they read, and how they engage with texts. By examining the reading practices, motivations, and perceived obstacles of adults within the MTSU community, this study contributes observational data to an underrepresented area of literacy research. It foregrounds adult readers' voices and situates their experiences within broader conversations about agency, digital media, and mindful engagement. In doing so, the study offers insight into how reading continues to evolve and how intentional, community-supported stages may sustain adult literacy and enjoyment of reading.

Methodology

To examine the reading practices of adults within the MTSU community and offer practical recommendations, this study employed a mixed-methods survey design. The survey was designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from MTSU students, faculty, and staff in order to gauge reading practices, perceived benefits and obstacles, and factors that might motivate increased reading engagement. Following approval from the MTSU Institutional Review Board committee, the survey was administered through Qualtrics®. The IRB committee reviewed the submission to ensure participant protection and evaluate potential risks. The survey was distributed via e-mail to all MTSU faculty and staff members as well as the MTSU Honors College between April and July 2025, receiving a total of 313 responses.

The quantitative component of the study involved calculating response percentages and identifying dominant patterns related to participants' reading habits, perceived benefits of reading, obstacles to reading, and motivators for increased engagement. Data was then organized and analyzed using Microsoft Excel, allowing for the identification of trends and correlations within the dataset. Visual representations, including bar charts, pie charts were created to clearly illustrate the distribution of responses. The quantitative analysis helped evaluate whether existing findings in literature held true within the MTSU community and if MTSU adult readers found value in reading literature as an adult.

To complement the numerical data, the survey included open-ended responses questions that allowed respondents to elaborate on their personal reading experiences, motivations, challenges, and value related to reading outside of academic requirements. These responses provided deeper contextual insight into participants perspectives and experiences. Qualitative data was analyzed through manual coding techniques informed by Geisler and Swart's *Coding Streams of Language*, including guided exploration and attention to recurring themes (32). Responses were coded according to patterns relating to enjoyment, motivation, obstacles, values, and self-directed reading practices.

In addition, Rothbauer and Dalmer's framework was applied to categorize qualitative responses into four thematic areas: purpose, pleasure, connection to people, and connection to the world. Responses coded as purpose reflected reading as a lifelong or meaningful practice. Pleasure encompassed enjoyment and emotional connection to texts or characters. Connection to people included references to social engagement through reading, such as discussion or shared experiences. Connection to the world captured responses describing reading as a means of cultural understanding or exposure to diverse perspectives. Further analysis drew on Geisler and Swart's concept of code schemes, focusing on "words and phrases that indicate values, attitudes, and beliefs expressed in the verbal data stream" (124).

Using a mixed-methods approach allowed for a comprehensive analysis of adult reading practices within the MTSU community. Quantitative data addressed "what" questions regarding reading behaviors and attitudes, while qualitative data provided insight into the "why" and "how" behind those patterns. By analyzing both data types in tandem, this study was able to capture not only measurable trends, but also the values, motivations, and beliefs that shape adult readers' relationships with reading. This integrated approach contributes a nuanced understanding of adult literacy and self-directed reading practices.

Results

Demographics and Participants

The survey was distributed on April 23, 2025, and closed on July 9, 2025, yielding 313 responses. Participants were primarily aged 45 and older (56%), followed by ages 35–44 (19%), 25–34 (13%), and 18–24 (11%). The majority identified as female (73%), with 22% male, 3% non-binary, and 2% preferring not to disclose gender. Respondents were predominantly MTSU faculty (46%) and staff (31%), with students representing 12% and administrators 11%.

Self-directed reading practices

Most participants identified as readers, with 87% reporting that they consider themselves readers (Figure 1). Self-directed reading frequency was high: 47% reported reading "very frequently," 27% "frequently," and 18% "occasionally," while only 6% reported reading rarely and 1% never. These results indicate sustained engagement with independent reading among respondents, aligning with the broader argument that adult reading motivation often stems from autonomy rather than obligation; an idea central to contemporary literacy studies, and this project's emphasis on engagement driven by values.

Participants reported a wide range of genre preferences. Fiction was the most selected

category (17%), followed by Non-fiction (13%), Mystery/Thriller (11%), Historical Fiction (10%), Biography/autobiography (9%), Fantasy (8%), Science fiction (7%), and Self-help/Personal development (7%). Smaller percentages consisted of Romance (6%), Other (5%) graphical Novels/ Comics (4%) and Poetry (3%).

Respondents who selected “Other” were asked to specify additional genres and forms of reading they enjoyed. Although representing a small portion of responses, this category included diverse materials such as horror, religious texts, academic articles, magazines, catalogs, and investigative journalism. Participants were also asked whether they engaged in reading outside of literature (e.g., news, blogs, magazines). Because this study adopts a broad definition of reading, respondents determined what qualified as reading within their own practices. Their responses demonstrate that reading frequently extends beyond literary texts into informational and interest-driven media, reinforcing Keller’s argument that contemporary reading manifests in diverse forms shaped by digital engagement and personal interest rather than strictly literary habits.

**The Majority of the MTSU Community
Identifies as a Reader**

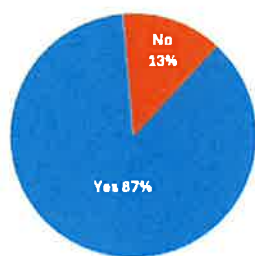


Figure 1

Benefits

The central goal of this study was to examine how respondents define the benefits of reading and how those perceived benefits motivate engagement. Participants described enjoyment in varied ways, including immersion and escapism, with one noting that reading allows them to “disengage and take yourself into another time or place.” Many also reported identifying with characters, suggesting that reading fosters emotional reflection and connection, consistent with Rothbauer and Dalmer’s claim that reading sustains identity and one’s sense of place in the world.

Responses also revealed tension between reading for intellectual growth and reading for escape. Some participants emphasized knowledge acquisition and academic development, echoing Gallagher’s argument that reading provides enduring cognitive value (57). Others valued reading precisely for the opposite reason because it allowed them to disengage from academic thinking. These answers convey the value that comes from reading that Gallagher speaks of but completely contrast with answers of other participants who find value simply in enjoying a book and escaping everyday life.

This contrast suggests that adult readers navigate competing perceptions of reading as both intellectual labor and leisure. As Rothbauer and Dalmer observe, reading often evolves into a personal and affective practice over time, providing comfort, meaning, and connection beyond academic purposes. Participants’ responses similarly indicated that reading functions simultaneously as pleasure, emotional engagement, and social connection. Rothbauer and Dalmer explore this idea in their study of reading as a lifeline in older adults’ lives as a participant in their study stated, “I used to when I was younger, --I would often read for information. I don’t do that so much anymore. I just read for enjoyment” (169-170). This parallel between the MTSU community and Rothbauer and Dalmer’s participants suggest that as adults grow, reading becomes a more

personal and emotional experience, one that brings *purpose* to life, as a self-sustaining practice providing comfort, escape, and meaning beyond academic purposes. Rothbauer and Dalmer emphasize that adult reading becomes an act of both pleasure and connection, pleasure in narrative immersion and reflection, but also connection to others and the world beyond the page. Their participants described reading as a practice that sustains identity, creates a sense of companionship by enabling readers to emotionally engage with characters, and foster a sense of belonging to broader conversations. Similarly, MTSU readers' responses suggest that the act of reading allows them to feel connected to other people and ideas, even when done alone. The data revealed that adult readers find as much value in the emotional and relational dimensions of reading as in its intellectual or escapist aspects.

When asked to identify the most important benefits of reading, personal enjoyment ranked highest (21%), followed by social connection (7%), with other responses distributed across cognitive and cultural outcomes (see Figure 2). Open-ended responses emphasized vocabulary development, comprehension, and understanding the world. These perspectives align with Bishop's concept of "window texts," through which readers engage with broader cultural experiences, and further reflect Rothbauer and Dalmer's findings that reading supports empathy, awareness, and self-understanding. Overall, the data indicates that adult readers value reading as both an inward process of personal growth and an outward means of connecting with culture and community.

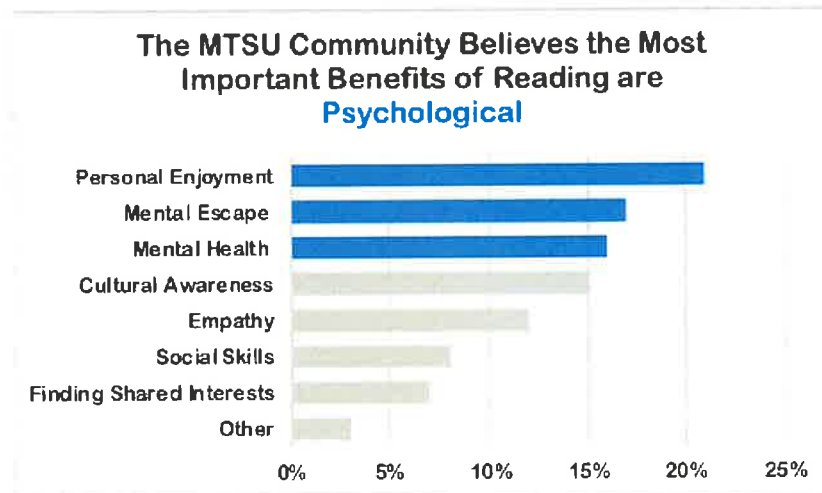


Figure 2

Obstacles

To foster a better understanding of the challenges adults might face when trying to read and how to remedy these barriers, members of the MTSU community were asked to identify the greatest obstacle they face when attempting to read. The choices given were in alignment with previous studies such as Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy* on competing forms of entertainment and Webber et al.'s article on adolescent motivation to read. The results demonstrated in Figure 3 show that lack of time and competing forms of entertainment are the most reported obstacles that participants face when trying to read, with lack of access to reading material and less external engagement being the lowest reported obstacle.

To gauge any obstacles that might have not been listed, participants were asked to specify any other obstacles they face when reading in an open response. Some participants stated that the interest in reading exists for them, but the ability might not match that, with one respondent stating how an obstacle they face is health constraints, or "Being sleepy/tired, sick or unwell, mentally exhausted, etc." This complicates Rothbauer and Dalmer's idea of reading to alleviate pain. While

reading may be a lifeline for aging readers, this shows that sometimes the desire is there, but for someone who is struggling, finding the energy to dedicate time to reading can be overwhelming.

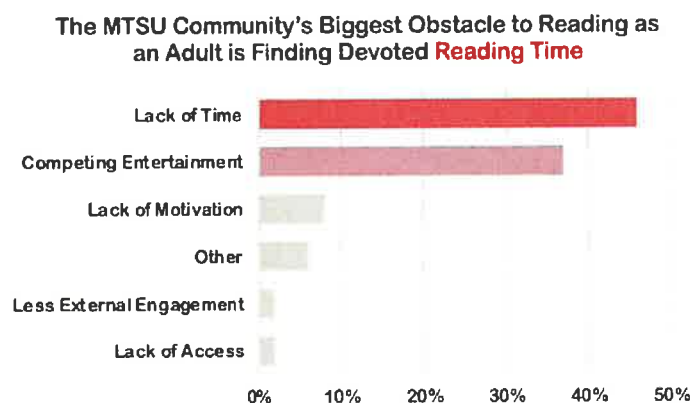


Figure 3

A primary observation of this study is that adult readers often lack the structural support systems present in school settings. Participants were asked whether their reading practices changed once reading was no longer assigned, and most reported a shift. Among those respondents, 61% indicated they read more independently, while 39% reported reading less, suggesting that autonomy can motivate engagement but does not benefit all readers equally.

To capture broader perspectives, participants were asked what aspects of school-based reading they missed, if any. Responses varied from contentment of not having to deal with assigned work as one said, “I want to choose my reading material, not have it assigned” to respondents who felt like assigned work challenged them more to think outside of their own bubble. They stated, “Being ‘forced’ to read things outside what you prefer, stretches your thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives,” a concept that aligns with Gloria Ladson Billings’ “cultural competence” that can be found from reading texts one might not reach for initially, but will give them insightful information into other cultures, or others’ “thoughts, beliefs, and perspectives,” as one respondent described. This shows that even among independent adult readers, there is recognition of intellectual and social growth that comes from encountering diverse texts. Reading can be fostered in many ways, but structured assignments often provide motivation that may be absent in adulthood. Some participants read more with freedom of choice, while others relied on assigned texts for challenge, highlighting diverse motivations and reading habits among adults.

Motivation

The first part of the survey gathered information on the MTSU community’s personal reading practices, focusing on their identity as adult readers and the benefits and obstacles associated with reading. Participants were then given a list of factors that might motivate them to read more frequently and asked to select those they resonated with most. As shown in Figure 4, neighborhood or friend book clubs were the most selected option at 29%, followed by setting personal reading goals at 23%. Community or library book clubs accounted for 17%, access to free or low-cost texts 16%, and “other” 15%.

The popularity of both neighborhood-based and community-driven book clubs suggests that many participants value the social dimensions of reading. These shared experiences foster discussion, collective purpose, and belonging. Richard Beach and Steven Yussen argue in “Practices of Productive Book Clubs” that collaborative reading environments encourage interpretive exchange and deepen engagement through shared reflections. This finding indicates

that respondents associate reading not only with individual enjoyment or intellectual development but also with social connection. For MTSU readers, reading functions as a means of sustaining community and building relationships through shared texts, reinforcing its significance as both an intellectual and emotional practice.

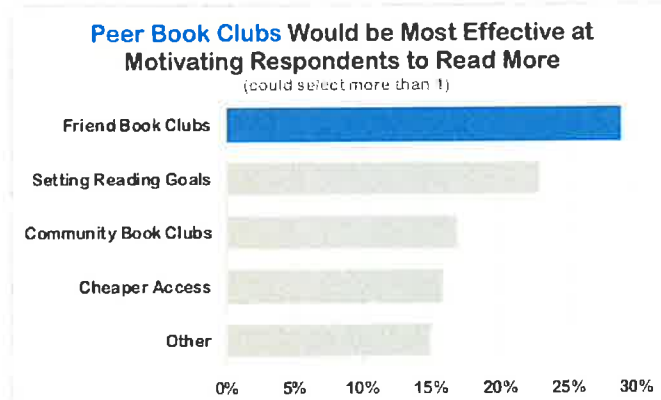


Figure 4

Setting and tracking reading goals emerged as a key motivator in both the literature and survey responses. Leigh A. Hall's study found that the Delight Games app reengaged youth and adults with past reading difficulties by allowing autonomy in reading choice and self-directed progress, a form of agency similarly valued by MTSU respondents. In the survey, setting personal reading goals ranked among the strongest motivational factors, reflecting this emphasis on autonomy. This aligns with Keller's discussion of navigating competing literacies in a digital age, as participants demonstrate adaptability in using tools and strategies to maintain focus and purpose. Likewise, these findings support Webber et al.'s argument that intrinsic motivation thrives when readers exercise choice, suggesting that self-directed goal setting represents a shift from externally assigned reading to personally meaningful engagement.

Open-ended responses further highlighted challenges and motivations shaping this engagement. Participants described "choice paralysis," noting that "so many options and so little time" hinder decision-making, and recommended curated reading lists to reduce overwhelm. Others cited online book groups and podcasts as motivators, while many emphasized time constraints as a persistent obstacle. Together, these responses illustrate that literacy engagement depends not only on motivation, but on navigating abundance of choice, time limitations, and competing priorities.

These findings align with broader literacy research showing that adults value reading as a cognitive, social, and emotional practice. While the structures that once guided their habits have faded, MTSU responses indicate that motivation persists when supported by autonomy, flexibility, and social connection. Like Rothbauer and Dalmer's participants, respondents frame reading not in terms of productivity alone, but as a source of purpose, pleasure, and understanding; a balance that makes up the modern adult reading experience.

Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this study offer deep insight into adult reading practices, motivators, and obstacles that inform the recommendations that this thesis seeks to address by fostering a supportive and engaging reading culture for adults. Although a strong majority of participants (87%) considered themselves readers, the data reveals significant variation in reading frequency, genre preference, and perceived barriers. These findings seem to challenge the idea that adults are disengaged from reading, but it also highlights the complexity of adult readers and their identities. Some appear deeply immersed, and others struggle due to personal time constraints, motivations, or

past negative associations with reading, usually academic ones.

Survey responses demonstrated a wide range of preferred reading materials, including fiction, fantasy, self-help, science fiction, magazines, and academic journals. This diversity of genre signifies the importance of reader agency and choice, a critical insight that demonstrates how adults are more inclined to read if they feel empowered to choose genres that align with their interests and identities. Institutions such as libraries and educational organizations can support adult readers by can support these adult readers by curating inclusive collections, promoting genre diversity, and offering book clubs. Participants most frequently identified personal enjoyment as a primary motivation for reading, followed by immersion, escapism, cultural awareness, intellectual growth, and emotional connection. There is a duality between leisurely reading versus reading for mental and intellectual growth and these responses highlight the need to frame reading not solely as an academic based activity but also a meaningful and recreational practice. Programs designed by educators and librarians should acknowledged this duality by supporting both leisure reading and intellectually enriching engagement, allowing adults to pursue reading in ways that align with their personal goals.

Responses regarding assigned reading revealed mixed attitudes. some participants needed the extra push to read outside their personal preferences, while others turn the other way when they are told what to read, and enjoy the freedom of choosing their own material. Tensions such as this reveal that adults have different motivators, and once again, programs should account for both readers and their preferences. To accommodate both groups, librarians and educators might offer optional reading challenges, thematic prompts, and recommended reading lists that suggest rather than prescribe. Many adults in the MTSU community felt overwhelmed with the volume of reading material that is available and reported having limited time to explore all these options, so these suggestions give adults a chance to look at recommended books to reduce this decision fatigue or choice paralysis.

Lack of time and competing forms of entertainment were the most frequently reported obstacles according to survey results, aligning with research on attention spans and digital distractions from Keller's *Chasing Literacy* and findings from the 2025 Pew Research Center report "Teens, Social Media, and Mental Health" that suggest digital media impacts reading and mental health across all ages. These findings contribute to reduced attention spans and minimal time to read. This presents an opportunity for educators and librarians to explore time-efficient reading opportunities such as short story clubs or "quick read" collections, which often consist of shorter fiction and non-fiction books, usually aimed at adults to read easily while not being faced with lengthy, traditional texts. It can also be noted that while digital tools are often framed as distractions, they can be advantageous and allow for flexible engagement, such as eBooks, audiobooks, and reading apps such as *Goodreads* or *Delight Games*.

Notably, a popular motivator that encouraged more reading was neighborhood or friend book clubs (29%), followed by personal reading goals that are tracked via apps and challenges (23%). This reinforces the importance of frameworks that rely on goal-oriented tasks to help sustain adult reading habits. Book clubs offer accountability and a sense of community - one that adults might find themselves missing from previous school settings.

Richard Beach and Steven Yussen mention in their article "Practices of Productive Book Clubs" that book clubs become productive when they foster collaborative dialogue, shared interpretations, and balance between structure and reader autonomy (122). This gives adults something to capitalize on with the help of librarians, educators, and the community around them through neighborhood and community-based reading groups. Adults can also engage in their own time with forums of reading that take place online, as well as listening to podcasts about reading and listening to discussions of books, as suggested by some survey respondents, to still feel a sense of community by discussing books online.

Based on these findings, this study recommends community-driven initiatives led by librarians, educators, campus organizations, or anyone who is invested in the promotion of adult literacy. Potential strategies include campus or public library book clubs that consist of adult readers, such as a creation of "take home" reading kits with access to free or low-cost literary

texts or the organization of a month-long reading challenges with incentives to promote reading habits. Further strategies include workshops focused on time management and digital literacy. Organizations supporting nontraditional and adult students may find these approaches especially beneficial, as these populations often balance academic, professional, and family responsibilities.

A final recommendation draws from Carillo's *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*. Carillo's study promotes becoming a "mindful reader" and encourages reflection and deliberation when reading to remain present. Following Carillo's suggestions could help redirect adult readers to a new and enriching way to approach reading. Educators and librarians can encourage mindful reading with guided reading questions to think about after reading, prompts to journal about, or group discussions to find a personal connection to the literature that others connect with as well.

These recommendations emphasize that improving adult reading practices is most effective when approached collaboratively, intentionally, and with community-driven support. Professionals such as educators and librarians are at a unique advantage to help foster these environments where reading is sustainable and deeply engaging. Through creativity, commitment, community, and collaboration, the reading obstacles adults face can be addressed, allowing them to reconnect with literature and integrate reading into their daily lives as a meaningful task.

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