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Exploring Gen Z University Students' Experience in Reading English Novels

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Abstract

This study explores how Gen Z university students' experience reading English novels and how those experiences influence their reading interest. In today's digital era, Generation Z has grown up surrounded by short-form content that has significantly shaped their reading habits, yet little is known about their lived experiences with English novels. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, with data collected through questionnaires as preliminary screening and in-depth interviews as the primary data source. Six fourth-year English Education students participated in this study. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis was guided by Self-Determination Theory, focusing on three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings revealed that participants perceived improvements in vocabulary knowledge, reading confidence, and familiarity with English structures. These positive experiences sustained their interest in reading English novels and motivated them to recommend this activity to others. This study suggests that English language novels can be a meaningful source for language learning experiences and natural reading engagement among Gen Z participants.

1. Introduction

Generation Z, defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012 (Michael Dimock, 2019), represents the first generation to grow up with the internet, smartphones, and social media as integral parts of daily life. In today's fast-moving digital world, where information is consumed in seconds and short-form content dominates daily life, an important question arises: do gen z still engage deeply with e-books or books, especially English novels? Many Generation Z students have been

influenced by digital and short-form content, which may affect their reading engagement with longer texts. Research shows that exposure to short-form digital content has influenced reading patterns among some Generation Z students (Wirayuda et al., 2025), but their engagement with longer texts, such as novels, requires deeper concentration. Extensive reading allows EFL learners to improve their English language proficiency across various areas, including reading, speaking, writing, and listening (Anggia & Habók, 2024). In particular, reading English novels provides Gen Z university students with meaningful exposure to authentic language in context, enabling them to expand their vocabulary, improve their awareness of grammar, and develop their overall proficiency.

Traditionally, textbooks have been the main source of English language learning in the classroom. Although textbooks provide structured knowledge, they sometimes make students less interested in the language and expressions used in real life. Therefore, novels can be an alternative learning material that explores language in a more natural and meaningful context. Novels allow Generation Z in higher education to experience stories, emotions, and cultural perspectives outside of class hours. Furthermore, reading in a second language is not merely decoding words, but a complex process that integrates linguistic knowledge, background knowledge, and strategic processing (Grabe & Stoller, 2019) Therefore, reading novels can create a more meaningful and immersive learning experience for students.

Reading habits are developed through consistent engagement and time spent on reading activities. Habitual reading is typically measured by how often students read, how much material they consume, and how much time they dedicate to it (Alsaeedi et al., 2021) Reading habits among Gen Z university students show a distinctive pattern, many studies indicate that generation Z's willingness to read novels. Even when they do read, their level of interest can vary depending on the format, their interests, and their motivation. Research also indicates that digital reading environments influence not only reading habits but also vocabulary development and engagement, as students tend to read more frequently due to the convenience and flexibility of digital resources (Nur Hidayah et al., 2025)

To understand these experiences more deeply, this study uses Self-Determination Theory developed by (Ryan & Deci, 2020) According to Deci and Ryan, intrinsic motivation develops when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the feeling of having choice and control; competence refers to the feeling of being capable and effective; and relatedness refers to the feeling of being connected to others. In this context, Gen Z students can feel a sense of autonomy when they choose novels based on their personal interests, feel competent when they succeed in understanding the story, and improve their English skills. Additionally, they can also develop a sense of connection by discussing the reading with friends or sharing their reading experiences with others, as the emotional attachment to characters and themes might become a distinct dimension of a meaningful reading experience that can

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support motivation. In light of a fact this study examines how Generation Z students' reading experiences relate to the constructs of Self-Determination Theory (autonomy, competence, and relatedness), the hermeneutic approach allows the researcher to explore both what the students experience and why those experiences are important to them, thereby providing deeper insights into the motivations and psychological needs that shape their engagement with the English language. When these needs are met, students are more likely to develop a genuine interest and sustained motivation in reading English texts. This is further supported by (Chotimmah et al., 2023), who found that EFL students' motivation to learn English can be categorized into intrinsic motivation such as the desire to improve language skills and expand knowledge and extrinsic motivation, including the pursuit of better opportunities in education and career. These motivational categories align closely with the present study, as Generation Z students' engagement with English novels is likely driven by both intrinsic factors, such as personal enjoyment and emotional connection to the story, and extrinsic factors, such as the perceived academic and professional benefits of reading English literary texts.

Previous studies have examined reading habits and reading interest among Generation Z students in the context of English language learning. (Wirayuda et al., 2025) found that digital media plays an important role in shaping Generation Z's reading motivation and habits, as students perceived digital platforms as accessible, interactive, and diverse. found that digital media plays an important role in shaping Generation Z's reading motivation and habits, as students perceived digital platforms as accessible, interactive, and diverse. Building on this, (Aprilia et al., 2020) found a positive relationship between reading interest and reading comprehension among EFL students, with motivation contributing to students' engagement with English texts. These studies indicate that reading interest, motivation, and the choice of reading media are important aspects of English reading engagement.

However, existing research has largely examined reading habits, levels of reading interest, motivation, or reading outcomes rather than the subjective experiences of students when reading English novels. In particular, limited attention has been given to how Generation Z university students experience and make meaning of reading English novels, including the cognitive, emotional, and motivational dimensions of these experiences. This gap indicates the need for a phenomenological approach that can explore students' lived experiences from their own perspectives. Therefore, this study contributes by examining how Generation Z university students describe their lived experiences of reading English novels and how they perceive these experiences in relation to their motivation and sustained interest in reading English. Guided by Self-Determination Theory, the study further interprets these experiences through the dimensions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, providing a deeper understanding of

students' subjective reading experiences in the EFL context.

Based on the issues above, the problem of this study is the lack of understanding of how Generation Z students experience reading English novels and how these experiences influence their motivation and personal reading interest. To address this issue, this study employs a phenomenological approach to explore students' lived experiences in reading English novels. Therefore, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do Generation Z university students describe their lived experiences of reading English novels? (2) How do students perceive these reading experiences as shaping their motivation and sustained interest in reading English?

2. Method

Research Design

Phenomenological research is a qualitative approach that seeks to deeply understand an individual's lived experience, including how they encounter and engage with the world through their actions, emotions, thoughts, and senses (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). Recent studies highlight that phenomenological research aims to capture participants' subjective experiences and meanings in depth (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022) In the context of educational research, phenomenological qualitative methods provide a theoretical tool that allows researchers to engage in flexible activities that describe and help understand complex phenomena, including various aspects of human social experience. Furthermore, (Khan, 2014) affirmed that the phenomenological approach enables the collection of rich, subjective narratives that highlight individuals' personal insights, perceptions, and emotions.

Specifically, this study employs a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, also referred to as interpretive phenomenology. This approach is particularly well-suited to the present study because it not only describes the participants' lived experiences but also interprets the meanings they construct through reading English-language novels. Hermeneutic phenomenology recognizes that interpretation is fundamental to understanding human experience (Gadamer, 1975). Accordingly, the participants' accounts are understood not merely as descriptions of reading activities, but as narratives containing personal meanings, emotions, motivations, reflections, and interpretations.

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of Generation Z university students in reading English novels. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to understand how participants perceive, interpret, and give meaning to their reading experiences, including the feelings, motivations, and meanings they construct from that activity. In line with this, (Creswell, 2018) emphasize that phenomenological research is especially suitable when the researcher seeks to understand the common meaning of several individuals'

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experiences of a concept or phenomenon. Furthermore, phenomenology as a research method can be employed in educational settings to explore the essence of a certain phenomenon from the perspective of the one who has experienced it (Bonyadi, 2023), making it highly relevant to this study.

This is further supported by (Tavakol, M., & Sandars, 2025), who assert that an essential aspect of phenomenological research is to understand the essence of an experience the most essential and universal characteristic that defines a particular experience with the aim of understanding what it is like to experience something from the first-person perspective. Given that this study explores students' subjective reading experiences through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, the phenomenological approach provides the most appropriate framework to capture the depth and complexity of their lived experiences in reading English novels.

Research Target / Subject

The participants of this study were fourth-year students of the English Education Program at one of the universities in Cirebon. Fourth-year students were specifically selected because they are considered to have more extensive academic experience and exposure to English learning compared to lower-level students.

Participants were selected using a purposive sampling method based on criteria aligned with the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach: (1) at least two years of continuous engagement in reading English-language novels, (2) experience reading a variety of novels across diverse genres that enabled them to construct meaningful interpretations of their reading experiences, and (3) demonstrated reflective ability to explain how their reading activities shaped their understanding of the English language and of themselves. These criteria ensure that participants have sufficient life experience in reading English-language novels to provide rich and in-depth narratives suitable for interpretive analysis within the SDT framework.

Table I. Participant Demographic Profile

ID	Age	Experience Reading	Main Motivation	Engagement Pattern	Reflective Capacity
P1	21	Since 2025	Personal interest	Excited but intellectually challenged by second language	Beginning to reflect on emotional responses and reading difficulty.
P2	21	Since 2022	Discussion &	influenced by social trends	Clear about external

			coursework		influences on reading choices
P3	22	Since 2020	Curiosity	Sustained engagement with preferred genre	Identifies genre preferences
P4	21	Since 2022	Academic assignment	Growing personal engagement	emotional connection reflects on character relevance to own life
P5	22	Since 2020	Lifelong reading habit	Established reading habit	Sophisticated reader with established habit
P6	21	Since 2020	Interest in English	Sophisticated reader with established habit	demonstrates sophisticated understanding of reading as language acquisition

As shown in Table 1, Six participants represented varying reading trajectories from recently initiated engagement to established reading habits spanning six years providing diverse perspectives for exploring how Gen Z students construct meaning from English novel reading within the SDT framework.

Data Collection

This study employs a two-stage sequential data collection approach to gain an understanding of participants' real-life experiences in reading English-language novels. A questionnaire serves as a screening tool to identify eligible participants and collect initial contextual data regarding their reading backgrounds, while semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data collection method to explore participants' life experiences in depth. This sequential approach allowed the researcher to intentionally select participants with sufficient life experiences while collecting the rich narrative data necessary for a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis within the framework of Self-Determination Theory.

The questionnaire was distributed to students in the fourth cohort of the English Language Education Program who expressed interest, with two objectives: to screen eligible participants and to gather preliminary information about the students' backgrounds and reading characteristics. The questionnaire used a semi-structured design that included closed-ended questions for demographic

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and frequency data, as well as open-ended questions to allow for an initial exploration of the students' reading experiences. The questionnaire was distributed in a digital Google Forms format to maximize accessibility and participation rates. Students were given 20 to 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

In-depth interviews were conducted as the primary method of data collection to explore the participants' life experiences in detail. The interviews were designed as semi-structured conversations that allowed for flexibility in exploring emerging themes while remaining focused on two main dimensions: the participants' life experiences in reading English-language novels and how those experiences influenced their interest in and motivation for reading through the lens of Self-Determination Theory constructs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The interviews were conducted face-to-face so that each participant could freely express their personal experiences. They took place in a quiet, private room on the university campus, with each interview scheduled to last 15 to 30 minutes, although the researcher remained flexible to extend the conversation if in-depth discussions continued naturally.

However, since this study adopts a phenomenological approach, understanding participants' lived experiences requires more in-depth data. Therefore, in-depth interviews were conducted as the main data collection method. Interviews enable the researcher to explore participants' feelings, thoughts, and personal meanings when reading English novels. Through open-ended questions, participants can freely express their experiences, including emotional engagement, challenges, and motivations, which cannot be fully captured through questionnaires alone.

Data Analysis

This study employed a two-stage data analysis approach integrating inductive thematic analysis with hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation. The analysis process was guided by the six phases of thematic analysis proposed by (Braun, V., & Clarke, 2021), namely data familiarization, initial coding, theme searching, theme reviewing, defining and naming themes, and producing the analytical report while maintaining a focus on participants' lived experiences throughout. This two-stage sequential approach ensured that themes emerged organically from the data before being interpreted through the theoretical lens of Self-Determination Theory, thereby maintaining both phenomenological rigor and theoretical depth.

The analysis process began with reading all interview transcripts repeatedly so that the researcher could thoroughly understand the content of the data. The researcher then highlighted important parts of the transcripts that were considered relevant to the research objectives. These parts were subsequently coded, grouped, and organized into themes that reflected the students' experiences in reading English novels. The themes that had been formed were

then reviewed to ensure that they adequately addressed the research questions. To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, the researcher referred to four criteria of data validity proposed by (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). First, credibility, in which the researcher asked participants to review the interpretations to confirm that they were consistent with what the participants had shared during the interviews. Second, transferability, in which the researcher described the research context in sufficient detail so that readers could understand the situation being studied. Third, dependability, in which the researcher documented every decision made throughout the research process. Fourth, confirmability, in which the researcher continuously engaged in self-reflection to ensure that personal views did not influence the data analysis process.

Stage 1 (Phases 1-3) focused on inductively identifying themes from the data without imposing theoretical frameworks. During data familiarization, all transcripts were read repeatedly while listening to audio recordings to capture tone and emotional nuance. Initial coding was conducted line-by-line, with codes emerging from the data itself rather than predetermined categories for example, coding a participant's statement about a character as "self-recognition through character" rather than immediately applying the theoretical term "relatedness fulfillment." Through systematic organization of related codes, inductive themes emerged that genuinely reflected patterns in participants' lived experiences, such as "Emotional Resonance in Reading" and "Competence Development Through Sustained Engagement." This inductive approach honored the phenomenological commitment to understanding lived experience in its own terms first.

Stage 2 (Phases 4-6) involved interpreting and deepening understanding of these inductive themes through the theoretical lens of Self-Determination Theory. During theme review and refinement, the researcher examined how SDT constructs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness illuminated the lived experiences within each theme. For instance, the theme "Emotional Resonance in Reading" was interpreted as fulfilling relatedness needs, while "Competence Development" illuminated competence building through sustained reading. Importantly, the researcher retained aspects of lived experience that did not fit neatly into SDT, ensuring themes remained faithful to participants' experiences. All interpretations were grounded in direct quotations, ensuring theoretical language never replaced participants' own voices. This two-stage approach maintained phenomenological rigor by preventing theory from imposing on data while allowing meaningful theoretical illumination of participants' experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher employed strategies based on the four criteria proposed by Korstjens and Moser (2018) credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Credibility was addressed through member checking with four participants, who reviewed the preliminary themes and confirmed that they accurately reflected their experiences.

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Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail, including a codebook containing all codes and illustrative quotations, as well as analytical memos documenting the development of themes and decisions related to the interpretation of Self-Determination Theory. Transferability was addressed through the provision of a thick description of the research context, including the participants' demographic characteristics, the research setting, the data collection procedures, and the characteristics of the phenomenon under investigation. Confirmability was enhanced through the use of a reflexive journal in which the researcher documented alternative interpretations, analytical decisions, and reflections on potential researcher bias.

Ethical principles were also applied throughout the research process. All participants provided written informed consent after receiving an explanation of the study's purpose, data collection procedures, confidentiality protections, right to withdraw at any time, and right to request the deletion of their interview recordings. Participation was voluntary, and no incentives were provided. To protect participants' identities, pseudonyms (P1–P6) were used, and personally identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected files, while the key linking participant names to pseudonyms was stored separately. Since the institution does not provide a specific data retention policy, the researcher established a three-year retention period after the completion of the study to allow sufficient time for academic review, clarification, and potential publication. After this period, the recordings and transcripts will be securely deleted, while anonymized analytical materials may be retained for academic documentation.

3. Result

The data were obtained through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with six fourth-year students from the English Education Department who had experience reading English novels. The data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. The analysis generated four interconnected areas of experience: (1) beginning the journey of reading English novels, (2) developing English proficiency through reading, (3) experiencing emotional engagement with stories and characters, and (4) sustaining interest in reading English novels. These areas illustrate how participants' reading experiences developed from their initial encounters with English novels to the formation of personal meanings, perceived language development, emotional involvement, and continuing interest in reading. The findings are presented thematically and supported by participants' quotations, with the interpretation informed by the constructs of Self-Determination Theory.

Personal Choice and External Influences in Reading English Novels

The participants described different pathways into reading English novels.

Some encountered English novels through personal interests and previous reading habits, whereas others were initially introduced to them through university assignments, recommendations, or social-media content. Before selecting a novel, participants commonly considered its genre, synopsis, plot, online reviews, and recommendations from digital platforms such as Goodreads. These findings indicate that participants had access to multiple reading options and often selected books according to their personal preferences. However, the availability of choice should not automatically be interpreted as autonomous motivation. In Self-Determination Theory, autonomy involves not only having alternatives but also experiencing one's actions as voluntary and self-endorsed.

Table II. Autonomy and Self-Directed Book Selection

Sub-theme	Quotation	Notes
Choosing novels based on personal preferences	*"I usually choose the genre first, then I read the synopsis to decide whether the story matches my interest." (P1)*	Genre and synopsis selection
	"If a novel becomes popular on social media, I check the reviews before deciding whether to read it." (P2)	Social media recommendation
	"I often browse Goodreads because readers' reviews help me decide if the novel is worth reading." (P5)	Digital platform and reviews

Perceived Language Development and Growing Reading Competence

In the interviews, participant kept saying that reading English novels is more than just a fun activity. They saw it as a valuable learning opportunity that helped improve their English skills. Most participant said that being regularly exposed to English words and sentence patterns helped them learn more vocabulary, better understand grammar, and get more comfortable with how real English is used. Some participants also said they felt more confident when reading other English content, like journal articles, online news, or academic writings. Instead of trying to translate each unknown word, they slowly started to figure out the meaning by looking at the surrounding words, which made reading smoother and less scary. These accounts suggest that participants perceived reading English novels as contributing to their language development and growing confidence in reading English.

Table III. Perceived Competence and Language-Learning Experience

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Sub-theme	Quotation	Notes
Vocabulary development	*"Reading novels introduced me to many new words, and I usually wrote them down so I could remember them." (P1)*	Vocabulary growth
Improvement of English language skills	*"Besides vocabulary, I became more aware of grammar and sentence structures while reading." (P5)*	Contributed to broader language development.
Building confidence in reading various English texts	*" Reading helped me understand English expressions and improve my pronunciation." (P6)*	Language improvement
	" After reading English novels regularly, I became more confident when reading journal articles and other English materials." (P3)	Confidence in approaching different types of English texts

Emotional Engagement and Identification with Stories and Characters

Participants' experiences were not limited to language learning. Reading English novels also involved emotional engagement with the stories and characters they encountered. Several participants described feeling curious, excited, and emotionally connected while following the development of the plot. Some explained that certain characters reflected their own experiences or perspectives, allowing them to understand situations from different points of view. Others reported that the stories encouraged them to reflect on personal values, relationships, and life experiences. Participants described these emotional responses as making reading more enjoyable and meaningful. For some participants, reading was experienced not only as a language-learning activity but also as a personal encounter that involved reflection, empathy, and perspective-taking.

Table IV. Emotional Engagement and Literary Identification

Sub-theme	Quotation	Notes
Emotional responses while reading	*"I felt excited because every chapter made me curious about what would happen next." (P1)*	Curiosity encouraged participants to remain engaged with the story.

Sub-theme	Quotation	Notes
	"Sometimes I became so immersed in the story that I forgot how much time had passed." (P3)	Deep immersion enhanced participants' reading experiences.
Connecting with story characters	*"Some characters reminded me of my own experiences, so I could understand their feelings." (P4)*	Participants developed emotional connections with fictional characters.
	"Elizabeth Bennet inspired me to be more confident in expressing my opinions." (P6)	Fictional characters became meaningful sources of inspiration.
Personal reflection through stories	*"The stories helped me see situations from different perspectives and reflect on my own life." (P5)*	Reading encouraged self-reflection and perspective-taking.

Reading Experiences That Sustain Reading Interest

These experiences show that when students have positive reading experiences, they are more likely to keep reading English novels and not stop after finishing just one book. As they became more confident, the participants were more open to trying different types of books, reading harder English novels, and interacting with a variety of English texts. Several participants also talked about their reading experiences with friends by suggesting novels they thought would be good for new readers. Some participants described reading English novels was no longer just about improving language skills but had become something they enjoyed and found meaningful in their own learning process. These experiences show that when students have positive reading experiences, they are more likely to keep reading English novels and stay interested in reading English over a long time.

Table V. Sustained Interest and Social Sharing

Sub-theme	Quotation	Note
Growing confidence as an English reader	*"Now I feel more confident reading English texts because I can understand the meaning*	Reading novels strengthened participants' confidence in reading English independently.

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Sub-theme	Quotation	Note
	from the context instead of translating every word." (P1)	
	"I used to avoid long English texts, but after reading novels regularly, I feel more capable of understanding them." (P4)	Positive reading experiences reduced participants' anxiety toward longer English texts.
Recommending English novels to others	*"I usually recommend beginner-friendly novels to my friends because I want them to enjoy reading English as well." (P2)*	Participants shared their positive experiences by encouraging others to read English novels.
	"Whenever I finish a good novel, I recommend it to my friends because I believe it can also help improve their English." (P5)	Positive experiences motivated participants to promote English novel reading within their social circles.
Intention to continue reading English novels	*"Reading English novels has become part of my routine, and I want to explore more genres in the future." (P3)*	Participants expressed a long-term commitment to reading English novels.
	"Now I want to challenge myself by reading more classic English novels because I enjoy the learning process." (P6)	Positive reading experiences motivated participants to pursue more challenging reading materials.

4. Discussion

This study explored how Generation Z university students experienced reading English novels and how they perceived these experiences in relation to their motivation and continued interest in reading English. The findings suggest that participants' experiences involved several interconnected dimensions: personal choice and external influences in selecting novels, perceived development of English reading competence, emotional engagement with literary narratives, and intentions to continue reading. These experiences can be interpreted through the three psychological needs proposed by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) autonomy, competence, and relatedness while also

revealing aspects of Generation Z reading practices that are mediated by digital platforms. Rather than assuming that all positive reading experiences directly fulfilled these psychological needs, the findings indicate that participants' accounts reflected experiences that can be interpreted in relation to autonomy and competence, while emotional connections with fictional characters require a more nuanced interpretation of relatedness.

4.1 Personal Choice and External Influences in Selecting English Novels

One important finding concerns the way participants selected English novels. Participants described choosing books according to genre, synopsis, personal interests, previous reading habits, and curiosity about particular stories. Some participants also reported using Goodreads, social media recommendations, author promotion, and online reviews when deciding whether a novel was worth reading. These accounts indicate that participants were actively involved in selecting their reading materials rather than simply reading texts assigned by instructors. However, the findings also show that personal choice did not always occur independently of external influences. Some participants mentioned FOMO, social media exposure, author marketing, and course assignments as factors that encouraged them to read particular novels.

This pattern is relevant to the SDT concept of autonomy, which refers not simply to having choices but to experiencing one's actions as self-endorsed and volitional. In the present study, some participants clearly described reading as something that came from their own interests and longstanding reading habits, while others described a combination of personal curiosity and external demands. For example, participants reported reading because they were interested in a story, while academic assignments or recommendations from social media sometimes initiated their engagement. Thus, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that every instance of book selection represented full autonomy. Instead, they suggest that participants negotiated personal preferences with external influences when deciding what to read.

This finding extends the understanding of autonomy in English novel reading by showing that self-directed reading can coexist with external sources of influence. External recommendations did not necessarily eliminate personal agency because participants still evaluated whether a recommended book matched their interests. The decision-making process therefore appeared to involve both personal preferences and socially mediated information. This distinction is important because it shows that autonomy in reading is not necessarily equivalent to complete independence from other people or digital environments. Rather, participants appeared to exercise agency by accepting, rejecting, or evaluating the reading options available to them.

4.2 Perceived Competence Through Reading English Novels

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A second major finding was participants' perception that reading English novels contributed to their development as English readers. Participants consistently mentioned vocabulary growth, increased awareness of grammar and sentence structures, improved reading comprehension, and greater confidence when encountering English texts. Several participants described searching for unfamiliar vocabulary, recording new words, and applying expressions encountered in novels to speaking or social media writing. These experiences suggest that reading was not perceived merely as exposure to English but as an active process through which participants noticed, investigated, and reused linguistic forms.

This finding can be interpreted in relation to the SDT need for competence. Within SDT, competence concerns the experience of being capable of dealing effectively with tasks and challenges. Participants' accounts suggest that encountering unfamiliar vocabulary and progressively becoming more comfortable with English texts contributed to a sense of capability. One participant, for example, explained that exposure to English classics made it easier to approach texts ranging from simpler to more difficult levels. Other participants described becoming more confident because they could understand vocabulary from context rather than depending entirely on translation. The significance of reading, therefore, was not limited to the number of vocabulary items learned but also involved participants' perception that they were becoming more capable English readers.

The finding is broadly consistent with research on extensive reading, which suggests that sustained engagement with English texts can support language development, including vocabulary and reading-related development (Hamada, 2020; Robb & Ewert, 2024). However, the present study should not be equated directly with an extensive-reading program. Participants were not involved in a controlled extensive-reading intervention, and their reading frequency, book difficulty, and reading purposes varied considerably. Nevertheless, their experiences shared some characteristics with extensive reading, particularly repeated exposure to English, engagement with meaningful texts, and opportunities to encounter vocabulary in context. The present findings therefore suggest that self-selected English novel reading may provide experiences that participants perceive as supporting their competence, even when it does not constitute a formal extensive-reading program.

At the same time, participants did not report identical levels of confidence. Some participants felt more confident reading other English materials, whereas others noted that novels and academic texts involve different types of language. Academic articles and journals were sometimes perceived as more difficult because of their formal and specialized vocabulary. This difference is important because it prevents the findings from being interpreted as evidence that reading novels automatically improves all aspects of English proficiency. Instead,

participants primarily perceived benefits in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and confidence, while recognizing that different genres require different linguistic resources.

4.3 Emotional Engagement, Literary Identification, and Relatedness

Participants also described strong emotional experiences while reading English novels. They reported excitement, curiosity, immersion, and emotional responses to characters and storylines. Several participants explained that particular characters reminded them of their own experiences, perspectives, or personal characteristics. One participant described feeling particularly connected to Auggie in *Wonder* because the character's experience of adapting to an unfamiliar environment and dealing with fear of rejection reminded the participant of a personal experience. Other participants described connections with characters such as Nymphadora Tonks, Florian, and Elizabeth Bennet.

These findings demonstrate that reading English novels involved more than linguistic processing. Participants sometimes used fictional narratives to understand alternative perspectives, reflect on personal experiences, and experience emotions through the stories they read. This emotional involvement may help explain why some participants described reading as enjoyable and meaningful. However, the finding requires a careful distinction when interpreted through SDT.

Emotional attachment to fictional characters should not automatically be classified as interpersonal relatedness. In SDT, relatedness concerns feeling connected to and cared for by other people. Therefore, participants' identification with fictional characters is more appropriately understood as literary identification or emotional engagement, rather than direct evidence of relatedness. The data show that participants sometimes recognized themselves in characters, shared characters' emotions, or regarded characters as sources of inspiration. These experiences demonstrate meaningful engagement with literary narratives, but they are conceptually different from interpersonal relationships.

Stronger evidence for relatedness can be found in participants' social responses to reading. Several participants reported recommending English novels to friends, sharing opinions about books, and encouraging others to read novels that they considered enjoyable or accessible. For example, participants explained that they would recommend books based on friends' interests or share the synopsis of a novel to encourage others to read it. These practices suggest that reading experiences extended beyond the individual reader and entered social interaction. Therefore, the findings may be interpreted as showing emotional engagement with fictional narratives alongside socially mediated forms of relatedness, rather than assuming that emotional attachment to characters itself constitutes SDT relatedness.

4.4 Reading Experiences and Continued Interest in English Novels

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Participants' accounts also indicate that positive reading experiences were associated with their current interest and intention to continue reading. Several participants expressed a desire to explore additional genres, read more English classics, or challenge themselves with more difficult books. Others explained that enjoyable stories increased their curiosity about additional books. These accounts suggest that participants' experiences were related to their willingness to continue engaging with English novels.

This pattern can be understood as a possible connection between perceived competence, enjoyment, and continued reading interest. When participants felt more capable of understanding English texts, reading could become less intimidating and more enjoyable. Similarly, when stories were emotionally engaging or matched personal interests, participants had additional reasons to continue reading. The combination of linguistic development and meaningful literary experiences therefore appeared to contribute to participants' current motivation to engage with English novels.

However, the findings should not be described as demonstrating long-term maintenance of reading interest. The study was cross-sectional and relied on participants' retrospective accounts rather than longitudinal observation. In addition, the participants' descriptions revealed variation in reading frequency. Most participants described themselves as mood-dependent readers, while one participant reported experiencing a reading slump after becoming busier with university and work. Therefore, the findings are more appropriately interpreted as participants' reported current interest and intentions to continue reading, rather than evidence that their reading motivation was sustained over a measured period of time.

The findings also suggest that continued interest was not necessarily limited to English novels. One participant explained that although they became interested in reading more books, English novels could sometimes be difficult because of complex language structures. This variation demonstrates that positive experiences with English novels do not produce a uniform reading trajectory. Instead, continued engagement appears to depend on factors such as perceived difficulty, genre preference, mood, and the extent to which the reader finds the text meaningful or manageable.

4.5 Digital Mediation in Generation Z English Novel Reading

An additional finding that deserves attention is the role of digital media in participants' reading practices. Although Generation Z is often associated with short-form digital content, participants' accounts show that digital media and long-form English novel reading were not necessarily oppositional. Social media, Goodreads, online reviews, author promotion, and digital recommendations were described as sources through which participants discovered or evaluated books. Digital platforms therefore appeared to function as part of the process through

which participants selected and circulated English novels.

This finding complicates the assumption that digital media simply replaces or discourages sustained reading. In the participants' experiences, digital environments could instead facilitate access to long-form reading by introducing books, providing reviews, generating curiosity, and supporting social sharing. The relationship can therefore be understood as a sequence in which digital exposure may lead to book discovery, personal evaluation, selection, reading, and subsequent recommendation to others.

This interpretation is also consistent with previous research suggesting that digital media plays an important role in shaping Generation Z's reading habits and motivation (Wirayuda et al., 2025). However, the present findings add a more specific perspective by showing that digital media may operate not only as a competing form of entertainment but also as a gateway to English novel reading. For these participants, digital platforms were incorporated into the reading process rather than existing completely outside it. This provides a useful contribution to understanding Generation Z reading practices because it moves beyond a simple digital-versus-print distinction.

4.6 Contribution and Limitations

Taken together, the findings suggest that Generation Z students' engagement with English novels is shaped by an interaction among self-directed book selection, perceived growth in reading competence, emotional engagement with literary narratives, and digitally mediated discovery and social sharing. From an SDT perspective, participants' accounts reflected experiences that can be interpreted in relation to autonomy and competence, while the evidence for relatedness was more nuanced. Personal choice was sometimes accompanied by social or academic influences, perceived competence emerged through participants' experiences of linguistic growth and confidence, and emotional connections with fictional characters represented literary engagement rather than direct interpersonal relatedness. Social recommendation and sharing provided stronger evidence of interpersonal connection.

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, the study involved six participants from one English Education program at one university, which limits the transferability of the findings to other Generation Z university students. Second, participants were fourth-year English Education students who already had experience reading English novels; therefore, their experiences may differ from students with little or no experience with English novels. Third, the purposive selection of participants may have favored students who were willing and able to articulate their reading experiences. Fourth, the findings relied primarily on participants' self-reported and retrospective accounts rather than objective measures of English proficiency or reading behavior. Fifth, the study was cross-sectional and did not measure changes in reading interest or motivation longitudinally. Finally, because SDT was used as an interpretive

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framework, there is a possibility that the theoretical framework influenced the interpretation of participants' experiences. To address this concern, the interpretation should remain grounded in the participants' accounts before relating the resulting themes to the SDT constructs.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to the understanding of English novel reading among Generation Z university students by showing that their engagement cannot be reduced to either resistance to digital media or preference for traditional reading. Instead, their experiences indicate an interaction among personal choice, perceived linguistic development, emotional engagement with narratives, social sharing, and digital forms of book discovery. In this sense, English novels may function not only as language-learning materials but also as meaningful reading experiences through which students exercise preferences, perceive their development as English readers, engage emotionally with stories, and participate in reading-related social practices.

5. Conclusion

This study looked at how Generation Z university students experience reading English novels, using the ideas from Self-Determination Theory as a way to understand their motivations and feelings. The results showed that reading English novels was not just about learning the language. It gave participants a chance to choose their own books, feel more confident in their English skills, and form real emotional bonds with the stories and characters. These experiences met the psychological needs for feeling in control, feeling capable, and feeling connected to others, which helped keep their motivation and interest in reading English novels alive.

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