

# Print matters: How physical books still matter in a digital world

By Dr Chin Ee Loh

## Snapshot

Dr Chin Ee Loh joins *Synergy* as our guest author of the Reflections and Actions section for 2023. Her first article for us explores the continuing role of printed books in a digital world and the role of the school library in supporting pleasure reading.

With the improvement in reading technology and greater access to devices, the perennial question that haunts policymakers and educators is whether print is still relevant in today's educational context. Furthermore, with the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 study reporting that teens read less and enjoy reading less compared to previous cohorts, it is vital to consider whether print or digital books can better engage our students in reading for pleasure (OECD, 2019).

In this article, I explain why print still matters and how it matters to cultivate students' reading for pleasure.

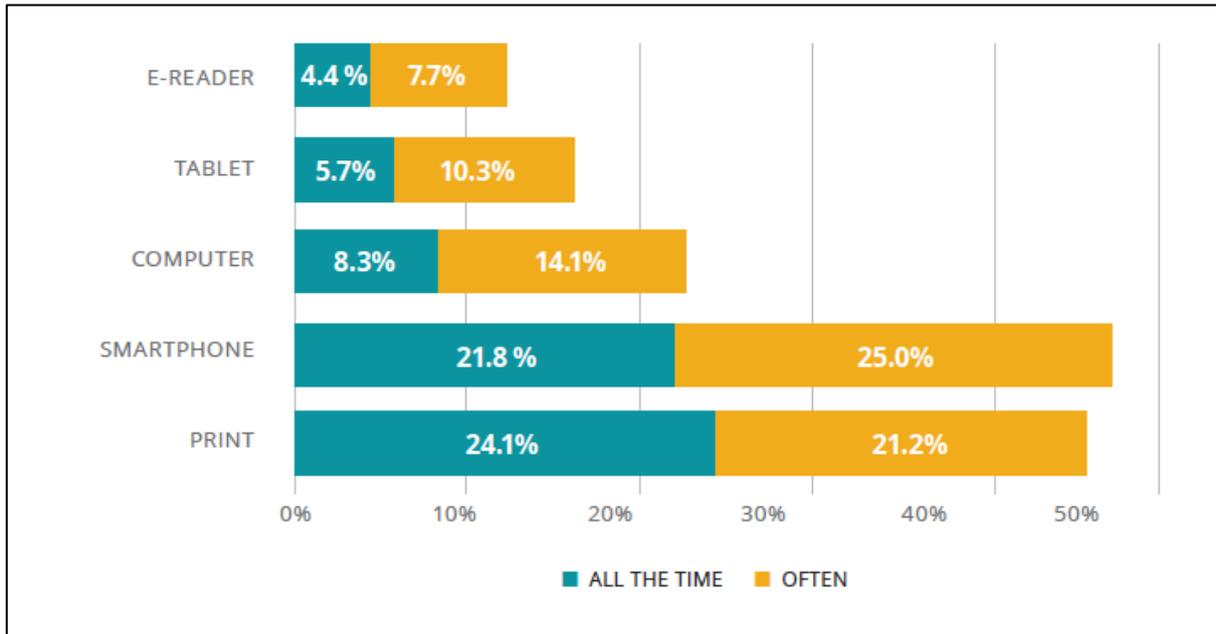
## Print preferred for long-form reading

Jerrim and Moss (2019) highlight the 'fiction effect' where young people who read fiction more frequently tend to have stronger reading skills than those who do not. In fact, many studies have shown that it is only the reading of fiction that is correlated to reading proficiency and academic achievement (Moje et al., 2008; Torppa et al., 2019). It is likely that the extended reading required for fiction reading supports the development of reading proficiency. As such, it's crucial to support students' fiction and other long-form reading. Knowing whether they prefer to use print or digital mediums for reading can help.

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Studies prior to 2020 showed that children and adolescents preferred print (Merga & Roni, 2017; Rutherford et al., 2020). In my research on adolescent reading, I have found shifts in adolescent preferences for different reading devices before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While print was the top 'device' of choice in 2017 (Loh & Sun, 2019), we found in our 2021 study that students prefer to read using their smartphones (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Teens' Preferred Reading Device.

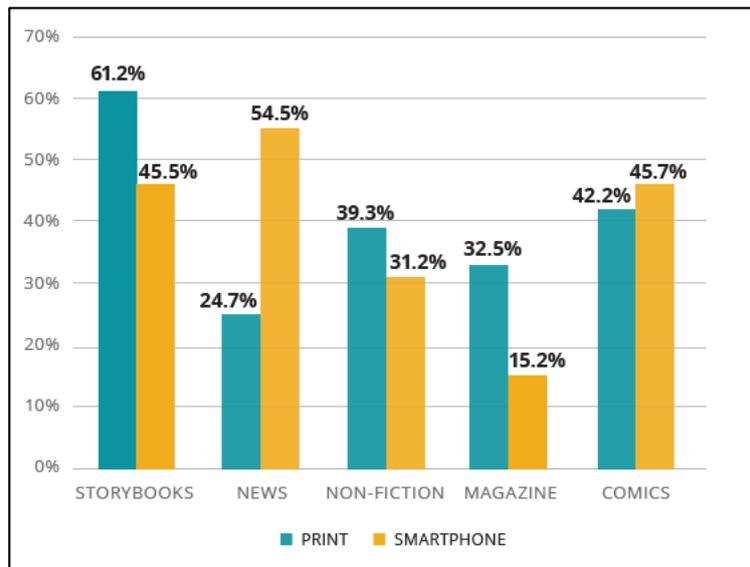


Credits: Loh, C. E. & Sun, B. (2022) Reading Habits of Singapore Teenagers 2021. Office of Education Research

**In other words, print was preferred for long-form reading.**

However, when we delved deeper into the data, we found distinctions between what students preferred to read in print and digitally. More students preferred print when it came to storybooks, non-fiction and magazines but more preferred smartphones for news and comics (Figure 2). In other words, print was preferred for long-form reading.

Figure 2. Print and smartphone usage for different reading materials.



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In our interviews with students, they told us that they preferred print for storybooks and long-form texts because they like the materiality of the book and could get a sense of progression when reading. Reading in print helped them to take a break from the screen. They reported that reading on their mobile phones could result in eye strain and be distracting with numerous notifications and distractions. Furthermore, children are 'print natives' who are more familiar

with finding print books than looking for books online (Sun et al., 2021). Browsing in the libraries and checking out new arrivals are serendipitous ways of finding new reads.

## Print and deep reading

Another reason print books matter is because it facilitates deep reading. Maryanne Wolf in her book, *Reader Come Home*, explains the difference between the information gathering mode of skimming and scanning and the slow, reflective mode we adopt when reading slowly and deeply. We can learn to read deeply online but sometimes, it's easier to focus when reading in print. Digital devices can be distracting (Loh & Sun, 2022; Twenge et al., 2018) and putting devices away for a print book might be one way to focus one's attention on thoughtful reading.

Librarians and educators can encourage deep reading by creating social opportunities for reading texts together. Reading literary texts in the language arts or literature classroom allows students to slow down their reading, to re-read and to ponder over a text together with their classmates and teachers. When studying a text with literary lenses, students ask why the author chose to take particular perspectives or use certain words to present a character, scene or idea. Outside of the classroom, book clubs can facilitate students' voluntary deep reading. Students can meet physically or even online to discuss new books read. The school library could organise [silent book clubs](#), where individuals just come together to read, without the need to engage in small talk.

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## Helping students find quality books

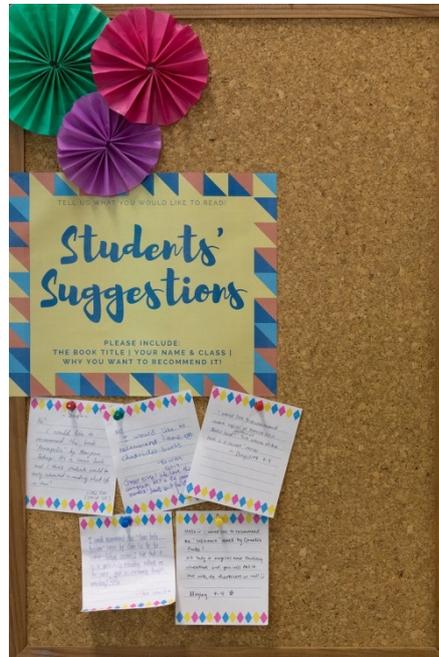
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Helping students to find quality books is a key step to getting them motivated to read. Neil Gailman (2013) in The Reading Agency annual lecture in the UK argued that the simplest way to train literate children to read for pleasure is to help them with "finding books that they enjoy, giving them access to those books, and letting them read it". This is especially crucial for low-income students who may come from homes with less support for reading.

I had the good fortune to conduct a study in a well-resourced and well-staffed library in an international school in Singapore (Loh et al., 2022). The library had a huge print collection as well as access to other e-resources, and the collection was constantly being refreshed to include new titles that the students would enjoy. Library periods and other activities encouraged children to visit and borrow books from the library. Students in that library borrowed an average of 84 loans per student that year, largely due to the high quality of the physical book collection and active library programming.

Other ways to match students to books include having a book recommendation board in a visible location (Figure 3). In one of our research schools, students are sent a short survey every six months and asked to recommend book titles. When their recommended book arrives, the librarian sends them an email to collect the book. In this same school, student library ambassadors take charge of the monthly book display because they understand what their fellow students like to read.

Figure 3. Student Recommendations for New Books



## Digital support for reading

While we support our students by ensuring we have a quality print collection, we can make use of digital resources to encourage even more reading. For example, members of most public library systems in Melbourne can borrow up to ten e-books and members of the Singapore National Library can borrow up to 16 e-books. Making sure our students are connected to the public library system can help them access e-books for free. Project Gutenberg is another way to help students get more e-books to read.

Besides e-books, Japanese manga, which used to be only available in hardcopy and were expensive to purchase, can now be easily read online, for free. Online-first reading material such as fanfiction, Chinese web novels and Korean webtoons, expand reading possibilities. In my conversations with many students over the course of my research, I often find that their reading experiences are embedded in their experiences of popular culture. Students watch anime and read manga to continue their experience of the same story. One boy reported being unwilling to read the later "thicker" books from the Harry Potter series until he watched the movie and was then motivated to read for details. Avid readers follow #BookToks and #Bookstagram to discover new reads. Making popular culture connections can be another way to enthuse students towards reading for pleasure.

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## To conclude

At the end of the day, it is important to support our students' wide pleasure reading, and we can make use of various print and digital resources to support their reading. Print continues to matter very much, especially when it comes to supporting students' extended reading, facilitating deep reading and helping students to take a break from their technological devices. If funds are tight, my advice is to focus on the print copies and make use of community and online resources to support adolescents' access to a wide range of reading resources.

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Read more about print and digital reading in the following Synergy articles:

- [What does one typical cohort of year nine students really think about reading and reading experiences](#) by B. Keane
- [The experience of reading: exploring format](#) by Susan La Marca
- [Ereaders: enhancing boys reading experience](#) by Elizabeth Avery
- [The best of both worlds: reading in print and digital environments](#) by Carol Gordon

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