Igen in Trouble:  
Using the Internet to Reverse the Decline of Reading Among American Adolescents

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May 13, 2018
The Decline of Reading

Joe\(^1\) gets up every morning at 6:00 AM. After eating breakfast, showering, and getting dressed, Joe, like the typical American teenager, goes to school. Joe’s after-school activities depend on the time of year. In the spring, Joe attends baseball practice, and in the fall Joe tends to return home after school. On Wednesdays, Joe volunteers with the local fire department. When Joe is not at school, at practice, or volunteering he can most often be found in his bedroom—an avid gamer who enjoys the time he spends online in multiple player games. Sometimes Joe connects online with his real-life friends and other times he meets strangers through his gaming system. On the weekends, when he is not looking after his younger siblings or completing household chores, Joe can often be found perfecting his online gameplay. Joe’s room is set up as the perfect gamer paradise. He has his own television, several video game consoles, and even a comfortable gaming chair placed in front of his television. However, Joe’s room seems to be missing one item, books.

Joe is not an atypical American teenager. In fact, in the United States of America, there is a current decline in reading which has significant negative implications for the future. Reading helps people to become creative, empathetic, and connected individuals who are better suited to participation in society. As fewer teenagers read, there is a decline in those benefits of reading, and, ultimately, if this trend is not reversed, there could be serious negative implications for the future. In an increasingly connected world, the ability to understand others is a critical factor in collaborations and international relations. Reading fiction can help people to become good global citizens through its ability to increase the empathetic connection to others. Furthermore, readers develop improved grammar, and language skills as compared to non-readers. As many American teenagers have come to view reading for pleasure as a chore which has little real-world value they have not been able to harness the powerful benefit of doing so. One of the ways to increase reading fiction for pleasure in the population of American teenagers who do not do this activity is to create an online community of teenagers engaged in book discussions.

Many American teenagers are increasingly comfortable in online spaces and communities. These online spaces and communities provide them with a new form of social connection which has not been available to prior generations. For teenagers like Joe, the time spent online is not isolated or solitary. Instead, this online time involves the creation and maintenance of social activities. Using graphic design to create an online community of adolescent readers will provide them with space where reading for pleasure is not a chore, instead, reading for pleasure will become a social activity. In modernity, graphic design is a powerful tool which can be used to reverse the current American trend of the decline of reading by American teenagers.

Defining Generation Tech

“Oh, and there we were all in one place/A generation lost in space/With no time left to start again/So come on Jack be nimble, Jack be quick/Jack Flash sat on a candlestick/Cause fire is the devil's only friend/Oh and as I watched him on the stage/My hands were clenched in fists of rage/No angel born in Hell/Could break that Satan's spell” -Don McLean

It seems as if throughout history there have been concerns about society’s youth. In the 1950’s American parents, psychologists, and even congressmen were fascinated with the idea

\(^1\) This name and all interview subject names have been change to protect anonymity
that rock and roll music was corrupting the youth. In the song, “American Pie” Don McLean writes about the deaths of three influential musicians—Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and J.P. Richardson (the Big Bopper). In this song, McLean says this was “the day the music died.” For McLean, and other members of his generation rock and roll was often characterized as something which the devil sent to America to harm both adolescents and society as a whole. Today’s rock and roll has become technology, the smartphone, and social media. In fact, it seems as if everyone from psychologists to politicians has an opinion on the dangers of technology and the impact it will have on the generation of young people who have grown up in a world with increased connectivity and integration of technology into daily life. As Dr. Jay Giedd says in his article “The Digital Revolution and Adolescent Brain Evolution,” “the danger paradigm that dominates much of the current literature on social media is reminiscent of alarmist rhetoric that had been historically voiced for the telephone, dime novels, comic books, and TV” (2013, p.105). But, the question remains is today’s technology any different than rock and roll, the television, dime store novels and other historic dangers? Does technology really represent the danger to today’s youth that some experts claim? The answers to these questions, like the earlier questions about Rock and Roll are vague, contradictory, and differ widely depending on who you ask. However, what is known is that the daily lives, habits, and values of this emerging generation do differ from that of prior generations. With that being said, every generation is a little bit different from the last, and these differences are the strength of humanity. The ability to evolve, change, and bring forth new ideas is exciting and has led to transformative change for human beings. When it comes to technology, until time has passed, there may be no concrete way of knowing if these changes are as detrimental as some researchers have argued.

It is known that today’s American youth are growing up in a world that is increasingly connected. This generation of American teenagers does not have memories which do not include technology. In the article, “Have Smartphones Destroyed A Generation?” Jean M. Twenge documents changes from prior generations to what she calls the Igen generation. Twenge says that this generation was “born between 1995 and 2012, [and] members of this generation are growing up with smartphones, have an Instagram account before they start high school, and do not remember a time before the internet” (2017). Using her background of twenty-five years researching generation differences, Twenge documents her concerns related to the rise of technologies impact on American teenagers. Twenge found that this generation of adolescents hang out in-person with friends less, are less likely to obtain a driver’s license, do not go out on as many romantic dates, have less sex, are more depressed, more at risk for suicide, are less likely to have part-time jobs and are more sleep deprived than prior generations (2017). Like other researchers, Twenge documents what this generation does with their time and, like those researchers, she concludes that they spend their time connected to others through their smartphones.

Like Joe, many of America’s teenagers spend increasing amounts of time physically alone but connected to their peers through technology. As a means to determine the impact of technology on today’s youth, Sonia Livingston spent a year conducting fieldwork with 13-year-olds. Livingston found that there was significant diversity in how these teenagers spent their time with and without technology. For example, after school, some of the teenagers played computer games with their online friends whereas others used Tumblr for hours. Other teenagers spent their time in more traditional ways such as riding their bikes or hanging out in person with their friends. As the following chart shows, even those teenagers who spend their time engaged in
more traditional activities are likely to be involved in some form of technological use throughout their day.

(Chart data from: Lenhart, 2015)

Teenagers today have many options for online engagement, and they spend a significant amount of their time engaged in some form of online communication or connectivity throughout their day. A Pew Research study found that 92% of teens are online daily and of those 24% report that they are online “almost constantly” (Lenhart, 2015). Over the past twenty years as technology has become more integrated into teenager’s daily lives sports, outdoor activities, and time spent with friends in-person has declined. When I asked several teenagers how they prefer to spend their time I received answers that varied from a simple “hanging out” to “playing Call of Duty” to “Netflix.” It was surprising to me that of the teenagers I talked to few mentioned playing sports or spending time in-person with friends. In fact, “the number of teens who get together with their friends nearly every day dropped by more than 40 percent from 2000 to 2015” (Twenge, 2017). The following chart summarizes a 2013 survey of American teenager’s time.
As this graph shows, American teenagers devote the highest percentage of their time to sleeping and education. Of their remaining time, it is telling that media and communications comprise more time than leisure, sports, and working/volunteering. The shift in how teenagers spend their time includes a new trend of particular concern to society. This new trend is the decline of reading fiction.

Today’s American teenagers read fiction less often than any other prior generation. A study by the National Endowment for the Arts found that between 1992 and 2002 there was a 12% rate of decline among persons aged 18 and 24 reading (“To Read or Not to…,” 2007). Furthermore, this study found that “less than one-third of 13-year-olds” were daily readers and over a twenty-year period “the percentage of 17-year-olds who read nothing at all for pleasure has doubled” (National Endowment for the Arts, “To Read or Not To…” 2007). In a report for Common Sense Media, Victoria Rideout documented the amount of time teenagers in 2014 spent reading. According to this report, 33% of 13-year-olds and 45% of 17-year-olds said that “they read for pleasure no more than one to two times a year” (Rideout, 2014). Furthermore, between 1984 and 2009 the number of teenagers who read for fun declined from 31% to 19% (Rideout, 2014). These declines in reading for fun or pleasure have a significant negative impact on this population.

To Read or Not to Read: Fiction and the Benefits of Reading

"Okay, so it's like each of these books is a mystery. Every book is a mystery. And if you read all of the books ever written, it's like you've read one giant mystery. And no matter how much you learn, you keep on learning so much more you need to learn." - Sherman Alexie
Reading opens doors and windows to other people’s words, thoughts, ideas, and experiences. In the book, *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* Sherman Alexie discusses the importance of reading and education in changing one’s personal circumstances. For Alexie, the way off of the Native American reservation and out of poverty comes from education and reading fiction. Not only does reading open the doors to new possibilities but it also has been connected to increased empathy, civic engagement, professional success and a myriad of other benefits. But what precisely is it about reading that gives people these benefits? Furthermore, in understanding the decline of reading within the iGen population, it is essential to determine if this particular group of people experience these benefits. The reason for the need for this type of understanding is that without some form of benefit of an activity people are less likely to engage in it.

Being immersed in a work of fiction is a unique experience with unique benefits. Even though “there often appears to be a perception that nonfiction is ‘smarter’ than fiction, that the former deals in facts, truths, and information, while the latter is merely ‘made-up stories’ designed to deliver a pleasant escape” the benefits of fiction have been clearly documented by researchers (Haq, 2013). For example, “research in cognitive science, psychology, and neuroscience has demonstrated that deep reading — slow, immersive, rich in sensory detail and emotional and moral complexity — is a distinctive experience, different in kind from the mere decoding of words” (Paul, 2013). This type of slow immersive reading requires reading which is free from distraction and is typically best found in fiction where there can be the kinds of moral complexities, and detail not always present in non-fiction. Furthermore, it has been fiction, not non-fiction which researchers have linked to increased empathy in individuals. The research determined that “individuals who often read fiction appear to be better able to understand other people, empathize with them and view the world from their perspective. This link persisted even after the researchers factored in the possibility that more empathetic individuals might choose to read more novels” (Paul, 2013). Multiple researchers have studied these empathetic connections provided from reading and have documented their findings in numerous research journals. One example of research which documents the increased empathetic connection that reading offers people is from the field of neurobiology.

Neurobiological research has indicated “that becoming engrossed in a novel enhances connectivity in the brain and improves brain function” (Bergland, 2014). The left frontal cortex of the brain is responsible for embodied cognition. Embodied cognition is one way that people develop empathy for others. When people read they trick the brain into thinking it is doing something it is not which results in the people having improved connectivity with others (Bergland, 2014 and Berns et al., 2013). To determine the impact of reading on embodied cognition, Gregory Berns, Kristina Blaine, Michael J. Prietula, and Brandon E. Pye used MRIs to assess the effect of reading fiction on the brain. What these scientists found was that the short-term benefits of reading fiction included increased language comprehension and visual categorization. The long-term benefits of reading revealed increased connectivity which is essential to empathy (Berns et al., 2013). In other words, through reading about other people’s fictional lives, people develop an empathetic connection to their experiences which then increases their overall level of empathetic engagement. Not only has the field of neurobiology established the relationship between empathy and reading fiction but also the field of psychology has determined that reading fiction has a link to empathy in humans that non-fiction does not have. Psychologists Raymond A. Mar, Keith Oatley, and Jordan Peterson (and colleagues) studied the impact of fiction on empathy in their research. Two studies that these authors
published documented that reading increases empathy even when the potential that empathetic people read more often is adjusted for (Mar et al., 2006 and Mar, Oatley & Peterson, 2009). This increased empathy is essential for the functioning of societies.

In societies of people, an understanding of the concepts of justice, good, and bad is vital for the overall functioning of the community. In the Boston Globe article, “Why Fiction is Good for You,” it notes that

for a society to function properly, people have to believe in justice. They have to believe that there are rewards for doing right and punishments for doing wrong. And, indeed, people generally do believe that life punishes the vicious and rewards the virtuous. But one class of people appear to believe these things in particular: those who consume a lot of fiction (Gottschall, 2012).

Reading fiction is particularly suited to understanding justice as well as good and bad. As the same article says “fiction all over the world is strongly dominated by the theme of poetic justice. Generally speaking, goodness is endorsed and rewarded, and badness is condemned and punished. Stories - from modern films to ancient fairy tales - steep us all in the same powerful norms and values” (Gottschall, 2012). Through reading fiction, some people become immersed in the stories, and norms surrounding good and bad are reinforced. However, the benefits of increased empathy or reinforcement of social norms are not benefits the people themselves can always see or appreciate.

The increased empathy and understanding of just societies gained from reading fiction can translate into enhanced performance in one’s profession. Increased professional accomplishments are a tangible benefit that motivates some people to read. For example, as reported in the Christian Science Monitor, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer says that reading makes a judge capable of projecting himself into the lives of others, lives that have nothing in common with his own, even lives in completely different eras or cultures. And this empathy, this ability to envision the practical consequences on one’s contemporaries of a law or a legal decision, seems to me to a crucial quality in a judge (Haq, 2013).

Not only does reading for pleasure increase one’s ability to project into other’s lives, but it is also linked to increased critical thinking, improved vocabulary, and can even improve math skills (National Library of New Zealand). But, it seems as if, for members of the iGen generation, reading to increase their professional capacities is not necessarily enough of a benefit to attract them to it. But, having the improved empathy and the professional abilities which empathetic connections provide is not the only benefit from reading fiction. Reading for many is an enjoyable activity which is part of how some people relax or unwind.

Unlike empathetic connections reading to relax or unwind has a tangible benefit for people. While people might not notice or appreciate themselves becoming more empathetic, they can appreciate the meditative state that reading can provide. According to the National Library of New Zealand, the meditative benefits of reading have been linked to an observed reduction in stress and improved health. According to the research, tension and heart rates slowed when persons were engaged in reading for pleasure and reading reduced stress better than both going for a walk and playing video games (National Library of New Zealand). But, one could assume that for iGen these benefits of relaxation or meditation have somehow become less valuable or less important to them than previous generations. In fact, the decline of reading within this group of persons indicates that a majority of them seem not to have found the benefit of reading. In talking with members of this generation, one
The theme that I have heard repeatedly is that reading is simply not something that teenagers chose to do as they seem not to equate reading with fun. But, by not reading these teenagers are placing themselves in a position where they could have life-long challenges that readers do not have.

The Reader and the Non-Reader: Examples of The Problem of Not Reading

“I read a book one day and my whole life was changed” - Orhan Pamuk

“The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went on olden-day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She traveled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village.” - Roald Dahl

One of the more famous non-readers is President Donald Trump. As President of the United States of America, President Trump’s policy decisions and statements impact not only American citizens but also the entire world. President Trump’s lack of reading is documented not only through his own statements but also through his grammatically incorrect tweets, and desire for less reading in briefings (Graham, 2018). As a President, Trump’s policy statements and decision often reflect shifting opinions, faulty logic, or incorrect factual data. The lack of President Trump’s reading is seen throughout his Presidency. For instance, at times he demonstrates considerable lack of empathy, and at others, he appears to not have a full grasp of the implications of his decision-making. Millennials who aspire to be compassionate, respected, leaders in their fields can look to President Trump as an example of the dangers of not reading. In comparison, Chris Weller of Business Insider notes that “Most successful people credit reading, in some capacity, as a factor in their success” (Weller, 2017). For example, Bill Gates reads at least a book a week, Warren Buffett reads for between five and six hours daily, and Elon Musk spent up to ten hours a day reading science-fiction in his youth. While President Trump’s lack of reading did not stop him from being elected President it has seemingly had a negative impact on his ability to lead. As both Pamuk and Dahl point out, reading opens the door to new worlds, new ideas, and the very act of reading (even if there is no magic involved) has the potential to change one’s entire life.

Today’s adolescents are inheriting a world with both incredible pressures and challenges. For example, the costs of education continue to rise while at the same time there is a growing economic divide between the wealthy and those in the lower class. Furthermore, there are philosophical challenges for young Americans related to healthcare, social security, gun control, and the environment among other things. Today’s youth will receive a world that is increasingly connected, yet, at times more isolated. Rising nationalism among world leaders has led to the potential for trade wars, and the closing of borders. In the United States, it is becoming increasingly common for college graduates to work more than one job as a means to sustain a livable wage. For example, recent attention has been paid to some of America’s teachers whose wages are so low that as a means to make ends meet they work in the evenings as Uber drivers, waitstaff, or even become surrogate mothers. For an adolescent who wants to attend college, graduate, and then go on to a professional career which is productive and fulfilling but also pays a livable wage, reading is the solution. The engaged adolescent reader has a far higher chance of
navigating the future than the non-reading adolescent. Simply put, the non-reading adolescent will not develop the same empathy, cultural awareness, and grammatical skills as the reader.

Joe is an admitted non-reader. Despite his lack of reading, Joe seems to be an intelligent young man who is on track for a good life. Joe wants to attend college for criminal justice and pursue a career in law enforcement. But, being a non-reader will make the ability Joe has to achieve his goals harder than his peers who do read. For example, for Joe to have the life he envisions he must first attend college. Joe is from a lower-middle class family, and he does not have a college savings account. To help finance his education, Joe plans on obtaining some financial aid in the form of Pell grants as well as loans. One of the ways that Joe could decrease the financial burden of loans is through the obtainment of scholarships. But, Joe will be competing for scholarships among peers who read. Those readers who apply for scholarships are more likely to submit essays and applications with an extensive vocabulary, with proper grammar. Without reading it is more likely that Joe’s application will not stand out among the many that scholarship committees receive. For these reasons, not only will Joe have a decreased chance of receiving scholarships for higher education, he also will have reduced chances of enrolling at a top university.

Once Joe graduates from college, he will be in a position to apply for employment. As a college graduate, it is likely that Joe will be able to acquire the necessary grammatical skills to obtain interviews. But, upon the interview, Joe will have less knowledge to draw from compared to other applicants who read. The vocabulary that Joe will have to choose from during his interview will be less sophisticated than the other applicants. Furthermore, the pressures on law enforcement to reduce implicit bias will likely result in Joe being asked several questions related to cultural competency which, as a non-reader, he will have difficulty answering. Due to the trouble Joe will have during the interview process, it will take him far longer than his reading peers to obtain a job in his field post-college. Therefore, when Joe finally can get employment, he will be further in debt than his peers who do read.

Once Joe obtains employment he will continue to experience problems on the job which reading could help to solve. For example, during interactions with the public, Joe will have less empathy than his peers who read. The decreased empathy means that in some situations Joe will lack a connection with the people he is interviewing and interacting with. Therefore, Joe will have a lower rate of crimes being solved than his colleagues. The lack of cultural awareness will also continue to haunt Joe as in his duties as a police officer Joe will have to interact with people from all cultures. During traffic stops, and calls to investigate potential crimes Joe will struggle to connect with the public and his decreased cultural awareness will mean that at times he has a significant disadvantage in the public relations aspects of his employment. Eventually, due to tight budgets, the police force might have to lay off several officers. With a low solve rate and several public complaints against him, Joe will be one of the first to be laid off.

Like Joe, Emily is an ambitious teenager who hopes to work in business when she graduates from high school. Unlike Joe, Emily plans to wait to attend college and hopes to pursue employment immediately after completing high school. But, without the additional education and security that a college degree provides, combined with not being a reader, Emily will have more challenges than Joe in finding a job with a high salary. After gaining experience working in retail, Emily will eventually find a full-time job working as a teller in a bank. But, like Joe, Emily will have challenges in her professional career which would not be present if she were a reader. For example, Emily will have problems with spelling and grammar which her peers who read will not. Unlike those peers who read, Emily’s internal email communications
and memos will contain many errors. These errors will make Emily appear unprofessional, and as a direct result, she will be less likely to be promoted than people who do not have problems with grammar and spelling. In addition to her challenges with grammar and spelling, Emily, like Joe, will have a harder time connecting with the public. As a teller in a bank, Emily will have to be able to interact with customers from all backgrounds. Sometimes those customers will be upset or have a fee on their bank statement that they do not understand. In other cases, potential customers will have questions related to opening an account or banking. Connecting with the customers, answering their questions, and when they are upset, empathetically helping them will be critical components of Emily’s career. Unfortunately, being a non-reader will mean that Emily is at a disadvantage compared to her peers who do read.

Joe and Emily are just two examples of teenagers who could have lifelong consequences related to their lack of reading. In fact, it is well documented that literacy and reading are correlated with higher salaries. The report, “Adult Literacy in America” from the National Center for Education Statistics, documents the way that not reading negatively impacts a person’s life. In this report, it says that “relatively high proportions of adults in the lower literacy levels were in poverty and received food stamps […] relatively few reported receiving interest from savings, which helps to protect individuals from interruptions in earnings” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, p. 68). What this information means is that people who have lower literacy are less likely to earn wages which support fulfillment of basic needs. Additionally, those persons who have decreased literacy and can find employment make less money than those who have higher literacy. Not only did those persons who had lower literacy levels make less money than people with higher literacy levels, but they also were more likely to be unemployed than people with higher literacy levels. The report says that “individuals who performed in the lower levels of literacy proficiency were more likely than their more proficient counterparts to be unemployed or out of the labor force. They also tended to earn lower wages and work fewer weeks per year and were more likely to be in craft, service, laborer, or assembler occupations” (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, p. 68). Managers value readers over non-readers even when they do not know if their employees read for pleasure or not.

When I asked several managers about the need for literacy in employment all of them said that they would be less likely to hire someone who prepared a grammatically incorrect application or resume. Also, they said that if someone with lower literacy were hired, they would be less likely to obtain raises or promotions if their professional writing showed grammatical errors. The need for proper grammar was necessary for all employees, even those employees who worked in service jobs. Furthermore, managers whom I talked with in general said that interpersonal communication was an essential skill. For example, Katherine a team leader at a local business noted that it was critical for employees to be able to interact with both each other and clients. In her work, Katherine pointed out that empathetic connections with others were essential because in many cases the team had to troubleshoot technological problems for clients who were upset with a problem which had arisen. In these cases, interpersonal communication, empathy, and cultural awareness were vital skills that separated a great employee with a strong future in the company from a mediocre employee. Additionally, Katherine noted that her team had to not only communicate with clients on the telephone and in person, but there was also the need for email exchanges as well as the preparation of reports. Katherine said that persons who lacked proper grammar and spelling were not considered for promotion as a promotion would require even more written work which needed to be completed correctly. Katherine admitted that a lack of skills in these areas would not result in a person being laid off per say, but she did say
that she noticed that people without these skills were more likely to leave the job due to decreased satisfaction which often resulted from either not receiving a raise or promotion.

Adolescents who do not read are less likely to have lives, as adults, that are fulfilling. The lack of reading results in more economic difficulties and professional challenges that people who read do not face. Additionally, for these adolescents, the lack of reading also results in decreased health as they age. With shorter lifespans, the decreased economic power, and related employment difficulties the non-readers are significantly disadvantaged than the readers. While some of these non-readers could advance to positions such as President Trump, if they happen to be so lucky, once they obtain them they will have a harder time fulfilling their job functions and gaining the respect of others. Furthermore, do we want a world of people who struggle to connect with others, work together to solve the challenges the world faces, and can’t effectively communicate their ideas? Envisioning a world of leaders like President Trump is a scary endeavor and one that could come true if today’s adolescents do not begin reading.

To Read is to Survive
“A book is made from a tree. It is an assemblage of flat, flexible parts (still called "leaves") imprinted with dark pigmented squiggles. One glance at it and you hear the voice of another person, perhaps someone dead for thousands of years. Across the millennia, the author is speaking, clearly and silently, inside your head, directly to you. Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another. Books break the shackles of time — proof that humans can work magic” -Carl Sagan

The ability to read connects people across time and space. I, a student in the United States of America in the 21st Century can connect with ideas and people from all over the world through the written word. Furthermore, I can discover and learn about people from hundreds of years ago through the written record and reading. The ability to read has allowed people to not only survive but also develop complex systems of culture. Furthermore, reading has allowed people to build on each other’s ideas which have led to significant technological advancements. Without language and reading, the fate of human beings could have been similar to our relatives such as the Neanderthals which have been long extinct. Even though the nature of reading and communication has evolved from early language development, the ability to read is still an essential human survival skill.

Communication in both the spoken and written form is a characteristic which is uniquely human. In fact, from what scientists currently know, the development of complex language systems is uniquely human. According to the linguist Noam Chomsky, “it seems that language is one essential component of the human mind. The human brain is the most complex and intricate biological system we know. When we study its properties and manifestations, we are studying what we call ‘mind’” (1987). Language capability first developed in human ancestors approximately 150,000 to 200,000 years ago (Pagel, 2017, p. 1). But, it was not until about 40,000 years ago that the language capabilities and protolanguage developed into the complex language system that human beings have today. The modern human language system’s emergence is reliant on both the evolution of language and human biological evolution. The human brain evolved from brains which were not as capable of symbolic thought. But, as the brain evolved and symbolic thought developed, so too did language ability. Language itself was then subject to a process of evolution which has resulted in our modern language system. According to Pagel, “languages predominantly evolve by a process of descent with modification
from earlier ancestral languages, just as biological species descend from earlier ancestral forms” (2017, p. 2). As human language developed, so too did human cultures.

In its earliest forms, human language allowed human and early human ancestors to survive through cooperation. For example, the development of tools relied on the ability of people to work together. The research notes that

“Possessing language, humans have had a high-fidelity code for transmitting detailed information down the generations. Many, if not most of the things we make use of in our everyday lives, rely on specialized knowledge or skills to produce. The information behind these was historically coded in verbal instructions, and with the advent of writing it could be stored and become increasingly complex” (Pagel, 2017, p. 5).

In other words, language allowed people to pass down information to each other which allowed for the development of new and increasingly sophisticated technologies. As language developed and writing systems were invented, the ability to read and write became critical skills for people to pass down and give permanence to not only specialized knowledge but also human history. Language has been a critical component of the human experience. Pagel notes that “humans can adapt at the cultural level, acquiring the knowledge and producing the tools, shelters, clothing and other artifacts necessary for survival in diverse habitats” (2017, p. 5). In modernity, the ability to communicate with other human beings is essential.

In the 21st Century, the world is increasingly connected through technology. Rapid advancements in communication technologies have given rise to social media, email, and smartphones. These devices and applications have allowed people to connect with others across significant geographic divides. For example, it is possible for me in the United States of America to connect with family in China without any effort. Through my smartphone, I have instant access to these family members in a way that was not possible even a few decades ago. The ability to communicate with others is an important skill set for any professional, and it is becoming increasingly common for people to need to possess strong interpersonal communication skills as part of any type of employment. Furthermore, language and the ability to read is critical for people who have a desire to have new experiences.

Charles is a twenty-seven-year-old young man who grew up in a rural area. In his community, reading was not an activity which was emphasized as something that was done outside of school or professional obligations. This is not to say that Charles did not enjoy reading in school. In fact, Charles says that he greatly enjoyed some of the books he read for school. But, he just didn’t have the time or motivation to read outside of school hours. Charles says that he just “didn’t think of” reading outside of his educational requirements. Today, Charles works for a small construction company and has been becoming increasingly aware that he has not achieved the same level of success as some of his former high-school classmates. Charles says that “you know, other people they moved on I just didn’t.” When I asked Charles to expand further on what he meant by “move on” he said that “here I am. I go to work; I go home, sometimes I go out with friends after work. I am not in a bad place. Just, when I look online or run into someone from High School, I see that a lot of my old friends are doing things and I am just doing the same things.” When I asked Charles if he thought his lack of reading contributed to his “doing the same things.” He said he was unsure. But, then later on in the conversation he brought it back to reading and compared his employment as a non-reader with a friend of his who he assumes was a reader.

Charles’ friend John is currently a teacher. After high school, John attended college and obtained his teaching certification. Now, John works for a school system teaching. Reflecting on
his life compared to John’s, Charles notes that John “had to have read. I mean he teaches now so he must have read.” When I asked Charles if he thought not-reading had any specific negative impact on his life he said, “you know, I have never been the smartest guy in the room. I am okay with that. I am good at other things. But, one thing that bugs me is that I have a hard time saying or writing what I am trying to say.” When I asked Charles for an example, he described texting his girlfriend as being particularly challenging. According to Charles, he does not have strong spelling skills so he finds himself sticking with words he knows he can spell, using autocorrect, or finding a slang or abbreviated version of the word. Charles says that his difficulty with expression has led to some conflicts with his girlfriend who wishes he were more expressive and engaged when he texts. I ended the conversation with Charles by asking him about his future. When I asked Charles about his future, he was unsure. He was unsure of what or if there were any other prospects for him besides working in manual labor type jobs. While Charles says that he “doesn’t mind” working in construction and that he “enjoys making permanent objects” that he can “look at and say, ‘yes I did that!’” he also noted that eventually, people in his profession have physical problems. For example, Charles talked about an older coworker of his who “constantly hurts. His knees, his back, everything.” When I asked Charles what he would do if he could do anything, he said that he would like to travel and experience more of the United States.

During my conversation with Charles, he did not explicitly link his experiences as a non-reader to his current position in society. But, I could not help but wonder, how Charles’ life would be different today had he read for pleasure during high school. The problems Charles described in his life, his dissatisfaction with his lack of success as compared to former classmates of his, the interpersonal communication problems with his girlfriend, and even his indecision about his future could all be solved with the addition of reading for pleasure. Reading for pleasure would help Charles to examine and see new possibilities for his life while at the same time improving his language skills. Furthermore, reading could help Charles to fulfill his dream to travel as books can connect people to new places and ideas. While Charles is surviving without reading, I believe it would be possible for Charles to thrive with reading. Not only do people read to connect to new ideas and other people, but, connections also inform one’s reading practices.

Reading is Social

It is tempting to think of readers in terms of stereotypes. In fact, even though I am an avid reader, I still have an image of the classic reader. In my mind, this traditional reader is alone not connected to others sitting by themselves in a room with a book. While there is nothing wrong with this image, it is not an entirely accurate portrayal of “reader.” In fact, reading is much more social than people give reading credit for being. In the book, Regionalism and The Reading Class it says that “reading is collective: not only do people read together, not only do people discuss what they have read, but even individual reading is shaped by collective memberships” (Griswold, 2008, p. 55). What Griswold is saying is that reading is a social activity which is shaped by connections. The society that one lives in shapes the context for reading.

Societies either give contexts which lead to more reading or decrease reading. Not only is the context for reading set through the large society but it is also set through micro-interactions between friends and within families. According to Griswold “contexts, everyday needs, and collective life shape reading practices at the micro level of the household (Mommy’s quiet time is respected except when a kid gets hurt” and the macro level of the society (war derails a generation’s reading proficiency)” (2008,p. 55). In other words, the culture shapes and forms the
context for reading. Griswold explains that “Contexts first and foremost involve the material and institutional circumstances of reading: whether people are literate, whether they have access to print materials, free time, and sufficient light; whether they read for school, for work, for leisure, whether their buses are comfortable or packed; whether their electricity is reliable” (2008, 55). In modernity, the context for reading has shifted from reading for pleasure being emphasized to values emerging which have decreased contexts and opportunities for reading.

To read is to survive. One’s ability to read is critical for survival. Compared to non-reader, readers are more likely to have high paying jobs, personal satisfaction, and even cultural competencies. For people like Charles, Joe, and Emily, not reading leads to personal dissatisfaction and decreased opportunities. While people do not always explicitly link their life dissatisfaction to non-reading, it is clear that reading can increase satisfaction in numerous ways. But, helping people to understand the many ways that reading can improve their lives is not as easy as it seems. In fact, to help people understand the benefits of reading, the first step might very well be getting them to read so that they can have a first-hand experience of those benefits. One of the ways to increase people’s desire to read and to increase their reading is through creating the context for them to do so.

The decline of reading among the iGen is a multi-faceted problem with many researchers proposing different reasons for it. From increased technology and time-constraints to seeing reading as a chore the one connecting element which emerged from the research is simple, many members of iGen simply do not value reading. In interviewing Joe about his experiences as a member of iGen a comment he made, “we just don’t see reading as fun” stuck with me. Joe and most of his classmates concluded that they don’t enjoy reading due to “constantly” being forced to read in school. While Joe has linked school to a decreased enjoyment of reading, what Joe seemed not to include is that one of the functions of school is to help young people become adept at reading and writing. Every generation has had to read for school and, until recent years, there have not been the documented declines in reading. But, the way that reading is taught in schools and society has changed. To understand the decline of reading and to solve it an important task is to understand what messages younger people are sent about reading and how society is teaching them about it.

Reading as a Chore: Young People’s Understanding of Reading and the Decline of Reading

Fiction for Pleasure

“I want to do something splendid before I go into my castle, something heroic or wonderful that won’t be forgotten after I’m dead. I don’t know what, but I’m on the watch for it and mean to astonish you all someday. I think I shall write books, and get rich and famous, that would suit me, so that is my favorite dream” -Louisa May Alcott

Millennials and younger generations are taught that reading is part of their school obligations or jobs. This teaching of reading as something that simply has to be done removes the pleasure from reading or the enjoyment and places reading into a category of “chore.” Placing reading in the category of “chore” means that this generation is less likely to pursue reading outside of “professional” settings such as school. Aliteracy is defined by Margaret Merga and Brian Moon as “the state in which the skill to read has been acquired, but not the will” (2016, p. 122). For the millennial generation and younger, aliteracy has developed as the focus of education has been on the skills of reading as opposed to the pleasure of reading. Furthermore, there have been changing societal norms which have enforced the idea that reading is not something that people engage in for fun. Instead, programs such as summer library reading challenges where young people are given a prize for reading send a strong message to young
people that reading is not something that people do because they want to. Instead, these types of programs teach kids that the reason for reading is to win a prize. Simply put, in the adolescent population, the understanding of reading has changed from something that people do for fun to something that people do because they have to.

Reading for pleasure is a distinct experience from reading for school or work. Even though some people find reading for school or work a pleasurable activity, this type of reading commands a different approach than reading for pleasure. In Jean-François Vernay’s book chapter, “The Multiple Possibilities of Reading” he makes a critical distinction between professional readers and those who read for pleasure. Vernay says that the professional reader is anyone who has to read to fulfill their duties. While professional readers do not have the diversion that reading offers they do retain some flexibility in unraveling the texts they read and due to the need to read as part of fulfilling their obligations the reading is not in competition with other tasks (Vernay, 2016). But, professional readership also has constraints. For example, Vernay notes that reducing a piece of fiction to a scientific methodological process of interpretation and understanding “does not encourage readers to express their feelings, nor to develop a critical outlook by promoting a wider perspective on the story and its concern” (Vernay, 2016). In particular, Vernay points out that reading in schools has resulted in the training of minds to summarize stories, finding signposts, and in general dissect text at the expense of enjoyment and fulfillment of reading (Vernay, 2016). Reading for pleasure, on the other hand, allows one to become immersed in the text and find deep satisfaction and connections with the characters. Nell Victor examined this type of deep reading and published his findings in the Reading Research Quarterly. According to Victor, when a person becomes immersed in a book, their rate of speed with reading slows down. Instead of speeding up to get the book over with or to end the task, people who are reading for pleasure and become immersed in the story seem to savor their favorite passages as evidenced by this natural slowing of reading pace. The benefits obtained from this slow immersed reading are tangible benefits of reading which some people of the iGen generation seem to have lost.

In the article, “Do Teens Read Seriously Anymore,” David Denby examined the reasons why adolescents are not reading at the same rate as prior younger generations. After talking with teenagers and examining the evidence, Denby found that “after spending a lot of time talking to teenagers in recent years: reading anything serious has become a chore, like doing the laundry or prepping a meal for a kid brother. Or, if it’s not a chore, it’s just an activity, like swimming or shopping, an activity like any other. It’s not something that runs through the rest of their lives.” (Denby, 2016). When I first contacted Joe and asked him what his thoughts were on the decline of readership by adolescents, and if he personally enjoys reading he said that

It all depends on the book. Though in mentoring and leadership [a class he is taking at his local high-school] we had an interesting talk about this. We came to an agreement that many of us, myself included, enjoyed reading very much at younger ages. However due to constantly being forced to read books we didn’t like in school, we no longer really enjoy it […] so now all of us just don’t really care to. Every now and then we do find good books, but we aren’t actively looking anymore (personal interview)

In The Guardian’s Teen Opinion section, a teen site member, Ayesha, echoed Joe’s comments. Ayesha said that “I feel as though in school students learn to loathe the books: we have to analyze and interpret and remember quotations… and sometimes we start to believe that what we are taught for our exams is all reading is about when of course it isn’t” (2016). In an article
reprinted by The Washington Post, Alfie Kohn explains seven ways that he believes schools are “killing” reading in teenagers. Echoing what Joe and Ayesha said, Kohn points out that when skills and tests are the focus of English education teenagers began to equate reading not with fun but with a job or chore (2016).

The decline in reading among member of the iGen is at least in part linked to changes in how reading is taught and perceived within society. Rather than something that is enjoyable, reading is taught as something that must be completed scientifically. Instead of encouraging young people to get lost in a book the focus of today’s mandated reading is to dissect, memorize, and on some level master it. These exercises in reading are not all bad. In fact, teaching these skills in high-school or secondary education is not a new endeavor for teachers. But, when the only form of reading that is taught is the professional type, then people are not educated about the possibilities and pleasure of reading. As Paul says

“If we allow our offspring to believe carnal reading [pragmatic and instrumental reading] is all there is — if we don’t open the door to spiritual reading, through an early insistence on discipline and practice — we will have cheated them of an enjoyable, even ecstatic experience they would not otherwise encounter. And we will have deprived them of an elevating and enlightening experience that will enlarge them as people” (Paul, 2013)

In the United States of America, there has been a shift in formal education policy to one which encourages a form of standardization and common core curriculums. While these policies intend to make education equal across the nation an impact of these changes has been a change in how education is delivered. Furthermore, these standards place literacy demands not only on English but also other disciplines such as mathematics. As funding is tied to the common core curriculum and the passing of standard tests and accomplishments the focus of education has shifted to teachers facing increasing pressure to prepare students to meet the demands of the exams and curriculum (Johnson & Wells, 2017). These changes in the United States could account for the experiences of Joe who talked about reading become a chore through the forcing of reading certain books. Even though Ayesha is in the United Kingdom her perception of reading declining was focused on how reading has become less pleasurable for young people related to the need to pass specific assessments. Interestingly enough, in other countries, there are also pressures on students to pass certain exams or complete specific English tasks which also have a negative experience on reading. For example, researchers in Western Australia found that “English teachers in high school were generally perceived to provide less encouragement to support recreational book reading than did primary school teachers” (Merga & Moon, 2016, p.135). A changing world where there are more pressures on secondary education to prepare students for careers, or higher education, as well as productive members of their societies who can compete in the global community, seems to have resulted in more focus being placed on assessment or testing rather than learning for learning’s sake. However, changing education policy or standards do not completely explain why these young people are saying that reading has become a chore.

A new development which has begun to reinforce the idea that reading is not a pleasurable activity is the offering of rewards or incentives for reading. In the Boston Globe article “Let’s Stop Teaching Kids that Reading is Boring” Alison Lobron talks about her experiences with summer reading programs. Lobron recounts that her six-year-old son was very excited to participate in his local libraries summer reading program. According to Lobron the kids who participated in the program would be able to vote on a movie to be viewed at the library upon completion of the program. But, once her son learned of a friend whose library offered tickets to Disneyland for completion of a similar program he lost interest in both the
program and reading (2017). Lobron points out that in Massachusetts libraries had summer reading programs which offered a variety of different rewards for the completion of reading a set number of books over the summer. These prizes for reading included the movie which her son lost interest in, and other libraries had prizes which involved bicycles, movie passes and food. Lobron says that “there’s nothing wrong with movies, or sports, or amusement parks - or with programs aimed at spurring children to read. What’s wrong is the underlying message that books are a chore and that kids who endure them deserve payback” (Lobron, 2017). What Lobron is highlighting is how these programs communicate to kids that reading is something that requires a reward and when society links a reward to a task it enforces a message that the thing which requires the reward is a chore. As Lobron says “the messages we send to kids (and adults) about what is and is not fun are both subtle and powerful. When we set something up as a chore, we make it a chore. And when we declare it fun, well, almost anything can be fun” (Lobron, 2017). The result of rewarding reading through the establishment of library reading programs which rewards reading is that it can impact the way that the participants see reading. As Kohn found “you may succeed in getting students to read a book by dangling a reward in front of them for doing so, but their interest in reading, per se, is likely to evaporate – or, in the case of kids who have little interest to begin with, is unlikely to take root - because you’ve sent the message that reading is something one wouldn’t want to do” (2016). Rather than encouraging reading through the use of rewards motivating students to read and removing the barriers to motivation might be a better solution to increased readership.

Some teachers are recognizing the negative impact that professionalization of reading has had on adolescents enjoying or engaging with fiction. In the article, “The Social Side of Engaged Reading for Young Adolescents” Gay Ivey reports on the results of a study she and Peter Johnson completed with seventy high school students. In this study, Ivey and Johnson were interested in this group of students because their teachers had radically changed the way reading was covered as part of their high-school curriculum. According to Ivey

They shifted to students all decisions about what to read (or not to read) and what to do (if anything) with their reading […] They did not require students to create projects on the books they read, answer questions to prove their comprehension, or even write about their books in response journals. They did not present short lessons on cognitive reading strategies […] They did not set goals, or have students set goals” (2014, p. 165). The results of changing how reading was taught to these students are encouraging to say the least. Ivey reports that “the young adolescent readers that we studied, supported by their teachers, made reading a deeply relational, intellectual, and moral enterprise. They did so without sacrificing achievement on the narrow set of academic outcomes shaped by high-stakes tests” (2014, p. 170). More than that, these adolescents include reading in their social engagements and have discovered a motivation to read that other young people have appeared to have lost. As Johnny told the researchers, he and his friends will be “sitting in McDonald's for instance, and we’re just teenagers talking about normal stuff, and all of a sudden we’ll just be talking about […] something interesting that you read” (Ivey, 2014, p. 165). It seems that when the core curriculum, testing, or standardization is abandoned in favor of encouraging reading through supporting student choice the results are students who are excited about reading.

In the book, Little Women Louisa May Alcott’s semi-autobiographical heroine, Jo is an avid reader. The depiction of Jo as an avid reader does not detract from her appeal as a heroine. Instead, Jo is both a reader and a strong young woman who-chases her dreams with passion. During the time that Little Woman was written, it is hard to believe that Alcott could have
envisioned a world where young people view reading as boring or a chore that merely has to be completed. Changing the perception of reading as a chore will require more than simply telling young people to read. Rather, changing the perception of reading will involve an examination of the current education system and the societal messages that are sent to young people which have resulted in them viewing reading as something that has to be done. As Merga and Moon say, “encouragement and support are more complex mechanisms than overt vocal promotion of the activity; even the place of books within the curriculum has been perceived by students to communicate a valuing, or lack thereof, of book reading” (2016, p. 136). Changing young person’s perceptions of reading will require more than telling them to read. Encouraging the passion for reading that is seen in Alcott's character Jo requires a society which values reading and supports the student’s making autonomous choices about their reading which is not based only on the acquisition of reading associated skills.

Productivity, Busyness and Connectivity and the American Teen

“From that time on, the world was hers for the reading. She would never be lonely again, never miss the lack of an intimate friend. Books became her friends, and there was one for every mood” - Betty Smith

Many teenagers view reading as a chore which has partly contributed to the decline of reading. In addition to seeing reading as a chore, many teenagers have come to value productivity, busyness, and social connectivity over perceived solitary activities such as reading. These values have trickled down to American teenagers from increased awareness of social issues, and the adult’s in their lives. Furthermore, societal concerns related to the economy, the growing wage gap, and social justice issues have all impacted the lives of teenagers. In a world where the messages that most teenagers have gotten about reading have been about it being more chore than an act of relaxation or pleasure the additional pressures adolescents face related to performance and achievement contribute significantly to the overall decline of reading for pleasure. Therefore, a solution to the problem of the declined of reading must take into account the pressure and responsibilities that most American teenagers face. Without taking into account these factors, the solution will not be as effective as it would not be one which teenagers would value.

Contributing Factors and Changing Social Landscape

Teenagers in the 2010s have had increasing levels of pressure placed on them. Writing for the Washington Post, Rachel Simmons says that “young people are more burdened than ever by pressure from others, and that includes parents” (2018). Some parents in modernity have become what is known as helicopter parents. These parents are overly involved in their children's lives and pressure them to be successful while simultaneously doing for their children what their children could do for themselves. In the article, “The Four Cultural Shifts that Led to the Rise of the Helicopter Parent,” Julie Lythcott-Haims says that there are four cultural events from the 1980s which have led parents to place increased pressures on adolescents. These four cultural shifts were, increased awareness of child abductions, the Nation at Risk Publication which said that American kids were not doing enough schoolwork and thus couldn’t compete internationally, the self-esteem movement, and the creation of the play-date (Lythcott-Haims, 2018). According to Lythcott-Haims, these cultural changes have resulted in the rise of “helicopter parenting.” This type of parenting places a high burden on teenagers and has been correlated with high levels of anxiety, stress, and depression in some of the adolescents who
have this type of parent. Furthermore, with every aspect of their lives scheduled and increased performance pressures the teenagers with these types of parents do not necessarily have the time to read for pleasure. Not only do some teenagers have these increased pressures from parents, but there are also pressures on many of today’s adolescents from friends and social media.

There are increasing burdens placed on many adolescents to be perfect. According to work by Simmons, “young adults have described pressure to appear flawless in every domain, often effortlessly so - in schoolwork, athletics, activities, and looks- since the early 2000s” (Simmons, 2018). For example, a recent study of 40,000 college students in Canada, Britain, and the United States found that over the past three decades there has been a 33% spike in “the kind of perfectionism where teens feel they must be perfect to win approval from others, whether it be friends, social media followers or parents” (Simmons, 2018). This increase in pressure to be perfect translates into some adolescents spending increasing amounts of time engaged in activities which help them to portray this version of perfection. For example, spending excessive amounts of time on social media monitoring their likes, deleted posts with too few likes, and re-posting (Simmons, 2018). Not only do some teenagers have these social pressures but the larger social issues related to the economy have placed additional burdens on many teenagers.

A contributing factor to the increased pressures on adolescents is the impact of the recession. In the article “The American Teenager in 2015 on the Fringe Of Something New” it says that “today’s teens are coming of age in the shadow of the largest financial calamity since the Great Depression. College tuition, room and board has increased more than tenfold since 1965” (Luckerson, 2015). The economic recession has created an awareness in some teenagers that not only is college harder to afford but also job prospects post-education are harder to obtain. This awareness has meant that for some teenagers there are pressures to excel academically in high school while at the same time participating in multiple extracurricular activities. Furthermore, both teenagers and their parents’ are increasingly aware of the growing wage gap within the United States. The research says that “after remaining relatively stable in the 1960’s, the income gap between the wealthiest 1% of Americans and everyone else has been growing for three decades is now is the largest it’s been since 1928” (Luckerson, 2015). What this information means is that American teenagers and their parents are aware that for many people today working has become not only essential but the time spent working has also increased. Many adolescents have parents who both work one or more jobs, and these teenagers are aware that it will be difficult for them to both find employment and find employment which will pay enough for them to support themselves.

Productivity

The economic recession, rise of helicopter parenting, and social media all have contributed to increasing pressures on adolescents to be “productive.” These pressures mean that activities which are defined as pleasurable are not as supported by social norms. Rather, the focus is on accomplishment, completion of projects, and tangible products as opposed to activities which are enriching. In the article, “Why the Gap Between Worker Pay and Productivity is so Problematic” from The Atlantic says that “Though productivity (defined as the output of goods and services per hours worked) grew by about 74 percent between 1973 and 2013, compensation for workers grew at a much slower rate of only 9 percent during the same time period” (White, 2015). What this information means is that people are working more but not getting compensated the same. For American teenagers, the focus on productivity in society has meant that they too are pressured to produce. For some teenagers, this means participation in sports or clubs while maintaining high-grade point averages. When teenagers are pressured to be
productive reading becomes less of a priority because there is not a tangible product associated with getting lost in a book.

Busyness

Today, people in the United States and in particular the New York region place a high value on “busyness.” But, the value of busyness comes at a cost. Being “busy” means that there is less time for deep intimate friendships, relaxation, and reading. After spending time with many teenagers, David Denby found that “these kids are very busy. School, homework, sports, jobs, clothes, parents, brothers, sisters, half brothers, half sisters, friendships, love affairs, hanging out, music, and, most of all, screens (TV, Internet, games, texting, Instagramming)—compared with all of that, reading a book is a weak, petulant claimant on their time” (Denby, 2016). In talking with people of the iGen generation, it is clear that they do have demands on their time. In fact, it is common for this generation to play multiple sports, participate in school activities, and in general, they are torn between a large variety of activity. For example, one college Freshman I talked with said that while she was in high-school, she danced with a studio which required weekend rehearsals and weeknight classes, played varsity Softball, and field hockey, volunteered, and maintained a GPA of As. When I asked her if she spent time reading for pleasure she asked me when she would have had the time to do so.

Writing for the New Yorker in 2002, Adam Gopnik chronicles the development of his three-year-old daughter Olivia’s imaginary friend Charlie Ravioli. In the article, Gopnik discusses his concerns about Mr. Ravioli who always was too busy to play with Olivia. In the article, Olivia said to Gopnik on more than one occasions “Mr. Ravioli is too busy to play.” In observing Olivia, Gopnik discovered that his daughter’s imaginary too busy for her friend was an example of the value that the New York culture has placed on busyness. Gopnik writes that we are instructed to believe that we are busier because we have to work harder to be more productive […] Like Charlie Ravioli, we hop into taxis and leave messages on answering machines to avoid our acquaintances, and find that we keep missing our friends. I have one intimate who lives just across the Park from me, whom I e-mail often, and whom I am fortunate to see two or three times a year. We are always . . . busy” (2002).

For the iGen generation who, like Olivia, have watched their parents, aunts, uncles, teachers, and role models exemplify this busy, productive lifestyle reading has become one more task on their already full plates. When the act of reading has become a chore and technology has become increasingly addictive it follows that reading would decline.

Social Connectivity

There are high values in modernity on connectivity and social connections. These high values on connectivity mean that people are more engaged in superficial activities such as social media as opposed to activities such as reading. In the Times article, “The American Teenager in 2015 on the Fringe of Something New,” Luckerson interviewed adolescents about the impact of increased connectivity on their lives. In one of the interviews that Luckerson conducted, he found that some teenagers have increased pressures due to the high value placed on connectivity related to technology. The article says, “We have more responsibilities because of all the technology that we have,” says Sharon Bayantemur, a 17-year-old student at East Side Community High School in New York City. “People expect more from you because they know you have a cell phone and they can contact you, and you have to pick up. Back then you didn’t really have that obligation” (Luckerson, 2015). These increased pressures to be connected to others mean that there has been a shift away from reading as a solitary activity.
Implications

Increased pressures on most adolescents have resulted in them prioritizing other activities over reading. Thus, this generation of Americans is not receiving the benefits of increased empathy, civic engagement, critical thinking skills of health benefits which reading for pleasure provides. Decreases in these benefits could have implications for many of the adolescents’ futures as they are important for professional success as well as the health of society. To help these adolescents (and their parents) see the value of reading there must be a solution which focuses not only on the intrinsic benefits of reading such as increased empathy and pleasure but also the extrinsic benefits of reading such as increased job preparedness, cross-cultural awareness, and skill development. As the quote from Betty Smith highlights, books can be friends, and there is a story for every mood. More than that books can open up doors for people to new experiences and new cultures. Combining reading for pleasure with a social media site which increases professional connections and helps adolescents to find the extrinsic benefits of reading has the potential to reverse the decline of reading within most of this population.

A Community of Readers

'Why did you do all this for me?' he asked. 'I don't deserve it. I've never done anything for you.' 'You have been my friend,' replied Charlotte. 'That in itself is a tremendous thing.'” -E.B. White

Deep, immersive reading of fiction does not have to be an entirely isolating experience. Instead, the shared connections that come from having read the same book can bring people together as opposed to isolating them. When I first began to explore the topic of the decline of reading I had a notion that for most of the young persons who did not read that the reason was that they had not yet been exposed to a book which caught their attention. I thought that perhaps these persons were too busy with technology to read and the solution would merely entail finding a way to make books appealing to them. I had thought to myself that all I had to do was create stunning, visual designs which would entice the younger people to pick up a book and once they had the book in their hands the problem would miraculously be solved, and a life-long reader would be engaged. Sadly, the answer is not as simple as people not having been exposed to books. While I am encouraged by the number of young people who said that they remember enjoying reading when they were in primary or elementary school, I am also discouraged by some of the changes in society which have made reading less enjoyable for these same young people. I also have a deeper understanding and appreciation of why so many of these younger people tend to stop reading as they enter adolescence. But, this increased understanding has allowed me to see that my first solution to the problem of the decline of reading fiction by young people through the creation of a visual element for novels is not enough. Rather, engaging young readers involves not only creating engaging content and making reading appealing, but it also includes meeting the reader where the reader is at. For many of today’s young people there is by and large a focus on connecting with others through social media, they enjoy spending time with friends in online platforms such as video games and social networks, and they have come to see reading as a chore. Thus, technology and design can both be leveraged to change reading from a chore to a fun activity. Using social media as a platform to connect young people with reading as a fun and social activity has the potential to give life to reading.

Brief and Relevant History of Graphic Design

It is unlikely that early graphic designers could imagine the graphic design landscape which exists today. Today’s graphic design comes from ancient traditions of typology, illustrations, and adding visual forms to early written communications. Even those these
activities have been a part of human expression which dates back to ancient times it was not until the 1920s that the term Graphic Design as a unique profession emerged. In 1922, “book designer William Addison Dwiggins coined the term graphic design to describe his activities as an individual who brought structural order and more visual form to printed communications” (Meggs, & Purvis, 2016, p. VIII). The emergence of graphic design as a unique discipline did not fully occur until after 1945. Before 1945, even with Dwiggins’ officially coining the term Graphic Design in 1922, persons who engaged in the activities of a graphic designer were thought to be commercial artists. But, “the profession grew extensively during the second half of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century” (Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p. VIII). Increasing technological innovations have fueled the evolution of graphic design and not more than ever graphic design is now recognized as a unique profession.

The internet has dramatically changed the activities of graphic designers, and it has opened up new possibilities for collaboration and design. But, when the internet first emerged graphic designers believed that there would be an ensuing “collapse of design standards” caused by the limitations of HTML language, the constraints of screen size, and the increased access to website design by people who did not have any design training. However, graphic designers like Jessica Helfand “demonstrated that graphic designers can create identity, aid navigation, and bring visual interest to websites” (Meggs, & Purvis, 2016, p. 592). Not only did these graphic designers demonstrate the possibilities of web design but also advances throughout the 1990s included programs such as flash and javascript continued to expand what designers could do with technology. As the capabilities of the internet evolved more and more persons had access, and the changing technologies gave designers increasing tools to use to create engaging design content. From these beginnings, interactive media emerged.

Within the field of graphic design, interactive media has recently become a significant aspect of design work. According to Meggs and Purvis, “interactive media are a combination of audio, visual, and cinematic communications, connected to form a coherent body of information. Unlike books or films, which present information in linear sequences, interactive media have nonlinear structures, allowing each viewer to pursue information along a personally chosen path” (2016, p. 591). Interactive media requires a multi-disciplinary team. This team is often composed of a combination of audiovisual specialists, writers, computer programmers, directors, image-makers, graphic designers, content specialists, and producers (Meggs, & Purvis, 2016, p. 591). In today’s technological landscape, interactive media engages users and has been integrated into most web-based experiences. Closely related to interactive media are smartphone applications and mobile technologies.

With the invention of the Smartphone, more and more persons began to demand interoperability of web content which was equally useful on mobile devices. Websites began to incorporate principles of design which functioned on the smaller screens, and interactive media started to incorporate apps. In discussing mobile devices and graphic Design Meggs and Purvis say that “while these devices can easily render traditional web content within a browser screen, their full capabilities are best to take advantage of by applications, or apps, that are made specifically for them” (p. 595). Today, people are well versed in mobile apps, and many people use them or everything from obtaining discounts to their favorite stores to tracking their exercise or eating habits. For young people, mobile applications are a part of their web consumption, and these users often have seamlessly integrated them into their daily activities.
Design Possibilities

New possibilities for design are continually being thought of and developed and as technology advances so too do the opportunities for design. Julian Bleecker coined the term Design Fiction and wrote the sentinel work “Design Fiction: Short Essay on Design, Science, Fact, and Fiction.” In this work, Bleecker says that “I think of design as a kind of creative, imaginative authoring practice a way of describing and materializing ideas that are still looking for the right place to live. A designed object can connect an idea to its expression as a made, crafted, instantiated object” (p. 6). For example, Kelly O’Brien’s article, “Designing for a Science Fiction Future” discusses how graphic design can help to bring life to science fiction as a way for people to visualize new ideas as part of science fiction/technological advances. Using these principles of design as a means to bring to life new ideas, and to connect people with concepts and each other, I propose that graphic design has the potential to make reading more appealing and interactive for this younger generation who value connectivity and interactivity over reading in isolation. Furthermore, this generation has found that reading has become a chore or an activity that must be done as part of their school obligations. Offering a new way to interact with books and reading has the potential to re-open the possibilities of reading as fun.

Community and Reading

“One of the marvelous things about community is that it enables us to welcome and help people in a way we couldn't as individuals. When we pool our strength and share the work and responsibility, we can welcome many people, even those in deep distress, and perhaps help them find self-confidence and inner healing.” -Jean Vanier

In general, stereotypes about quiet bookworms locked away in their personal spaces and reading alone have resulted in collective thinking which says that reading is a solitary activity. But, as I have previously discussed, people are social beings, and at the core of it, even reading is social. The history of the development of reading teaches us that writing and reading were developed to connect people and ideas. In the article, “Reading as a Social Process” David Bloome notes that there are three social dimensions of reading. According to Bloome, “First, all reading events involve a social context. Social interaction surrounds and influences interaction with a written text. Second, reading is a cultural activity. That is, reading has social uses which are an extension of people’s day-to-day cultural doings. And third, reading is a socio-cognitive process. Through learning to read and through reading itself, children learn culturally appropriate information, activities, values, and ways of thinking and problem solving” (1985, p. 134)

Reading is a social activity and process which is influenced by a large number of factors. To engage people, and to encourage reading behavior, developing the social process of reading is critical. Furthermore, the creation of a reading community will allow adolescents to engage with each other. In fact, throughout human history, the community and a sense of belonging have been powerful societal influencers.

The creation of communities is an essential part of being human. In history, communities provided practical protections and were critical for survival. Communities help people fill practical needs such as food, water, and shelter along with psychological needs such as the need to feel loved. Today, communities offer protections in the form of laws and policies which help people to survive, obtain a sense of belonging as defined through community membership, and the sharing of ideas, innovations, and information which fosters human development. In fact,
human beings do best when engaging as part of a community. According to the CNN article “The Importance of Belonging,” “belonging is a psychological lever that has broad consequences, writes Walton. Our interests, motivation, health and happiness are inextricably tied to the feeling that we belong to a greater community that may share common interests and aspirations” (Enayati, 2012). This sense of belonging not only fosters positive connections and improved mental health, but it also shapes human behavior. In modernity, online communities have been used to both inform people and shape their behaviors.

An advantage of the internet is its ability to connect large numbers of people. The rise of social media demonstrates the human desire for connection and the way that the internet has redefined and shaped those connections. In the article, “The Science Behind Using Online Communities to Change Behavior,” family medicine professor and behavioral psychologist Sean Young discusses research conducted by himself and his colleagues in the medical school. In this work, Young and his colleagues “created online communities designed to improve health by getting people to do things, such as test for HIV, stop using methamphetamines, and just de-stress and relax” (2013). In his work, Young found that even when a study of online communities ended, the people enrolled in that community continued to use the site and connections which they created. Throughout the research by Young and his colleagues, they found that the online community is a powerful way to change behavior as long as it meets people’s psychological needs.

Online communities have the potential to shape and change human behavior. However, to be most effective the online community should address several psychological needs. First, the need to trust is a critical component of an online community. According to Young, “in our studies, we found that sharing personal information (even something as small as describing what you did today) can help increase trust and change behavior” (2013). The need to trust is directly related to the second need related to online communities which is the need to fit in. When a new group or community forms, so too do social norms and customs. In an online community, the creation of social norms can influence human behavior as people have a desire to fit in with others. The next psychological need that an online community can fulfill is the need for self-worth. According to Young, “when people feel good about themselves, they are more open to change and feel empowered to be able to change their behavior. When an online community is designed to have people support and care for each other, they can help to increase self-esteem” (2013). In addition to the need for self-esteem people also need to be rewarded for good behavior and a need to feel empowered. When creating a website related to a behavioral change Young recommends considering these needs. Young says that “Throughout my research career I’ve found that understanding psychological needs is the core of behavior change and engagement across all domains” (2013). The social connection reading website that I envision as a solution to solve the problem of non-reading by the igen generation will integrate Young’s behavioral change ideas to encourage reading.

Social Media and Design

To increase reading among today’s adolescents, a social media site which uses principles of design will connect young readers with each other on web-based platforms. Currently, social media sites for persons who enjoy reading do exist. But, there are limitations to the current offerings. A Lifewire list created by Daniel Nations lists the following Book Social Networks: Goodreads, Shelfari, LibraryThing, Book Crossing, Reader 2, and Revish (2016). Of these listed
sites, BookCrossing is about leaving one’s favorite books in public and Shelfari was recently merged with Goodreads. When I tried to find more information on the other sites and join them as a means to gather more information on their uses, functions, and members I could not find Reader2, or Revish with a Google search. Instead, these sites seem to exist no longer. I was able to find LibraryThing and was encouraged by the site as it allows for people to discuss books, connect with others, and it incorporates existing social media accounts. But, the site seems to engage persons who are already active readers. With that said, some of the principles that LibraryThing uses could be applied to a new site designed for young readers. In addition to LibraryThing, I explored the literature published about and website of Goodreads.

In the article “Goodreads: A Social Network Site for Book Readers” Mike Thelwall and Kayvan Kousha discusses the Amazon-owned website Goodreads which allowed members to “share books, read, review books, rate books, and connect with other readers” (2017, p. 972). Goodreads does have some aspects of social media, but, it is also used as a traditional website where people read content. Mike Thelwell and Kayvan Kousha completed a statistical analysis of Goodreads users activities and determined that “Goodreads seems to be a book-based social navigation SNS rather than being primarily either a book website or a general SNS” (2017, p. 981). In reviewing the Goodreads site, one can easily see how the social aspects of creating reviews and discussing books have been employed. But, the site does not directly appeal to younger persons and the fact that it combines principles of both a book website and social networking site detracts from the social aspects of it.

The solution that I envision involves the creation of a specific social networking site which has the sole purpose of acting as a social network for younger persons to connect over books and reading. Rather than a book review site or a site which makes recommendations, this site will incorporate the principles of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram with the topic of discussions being fiction and reading. The designs on this site will be used to engage users, but the critical work of design will be to make the site easy to read and become engaged. Like LibraryThing, this site will allow users to create book lists, and there will be a component of chat and forums which focus on specific books or topics. However, unlike LibraryThing, this site will target younger users.

Engaging young persons with a fiction orientated social media site has the potential to create motivations for reading as well as to connect people over the topic of books. As E.B. White’s story, Charlotte Web says being a friend is a “tremendous thing.” The power of connection is an important part of the human experience. In understanding today’s adolescents, one of the themes that emerged was that some members of this generation use technology as a means to connect and interact with friends. Providing a forum for engagement and connection over the topic of books will give these younger persons an opportunity not to have to read in isolation. Instead, the site will serve as a means to make reading a social experiment. Furthermore, the site and the related app will be interactive. For some young persons, the interactivity of the internet has overshadowed the joys of reading. Thus, this site has the potential to give young readers the interactivity of the internet with the benefit of immersive reading. As the benefits of reading come from immersive experiences changing the books themselves to be online or incorporating graphic design would detract from the immersion. Therefore, offering a social media site will engage young persons around the idea of reading and encourage them to read, but it will not take away the benefits of getting lost in a book.
“The original idea of the web was that it should be a collaborative space where you can communicate through sharing information” - Tim Berners-Lee

**Overview of Concept**

To encourage adolescents to read the social connection reading website will combine Social Media news feed principles with book information and recommendation. As the image shows, this site will aim at helping the young reader to discover new possibilities through reading. The purpose of the site will be to increase reading among younger persons and connect them with a community of young readers. Building on the work by Young and others that point out that behavior change must take into account how a web-based site meets user’s needs this site will incorporate behavioral psychology principles and proven graphic design concepts.

The central concept for the site will be to connect adolescent readers. The words: connection, engaging, sharing, and passion all describe the site’s primary role for the users. The site will be different than the existing reading websites as it will combine the social aspects of Good Reads with the connections aspects of Library Thing. But, the site will be primarily for the adolescent reader. The screenshots and descriptors below capture the main concepts related to the sites. For instance, as you can see, the “readers online now” part of the Good Reads site will be integrated into the adolescent reading connection site.
Design Principles

The social connection reading website will be designed to engage the user. Therefore, the colors and fonts must be enticing to the user. The style tile, shows the potential fonts, colors, and textures for the site. As one can see from the style tile, the color tones are not too bright, but they are also contrasting. The use of contrasting colors will highlight various site elements. For example, the sample button is an orange which will rest on the blue background. Using the contrast of orange and blue will draw the reader’s eye to the buttons. Furthermore, the head text will be a deep red. The use of brighter colors to draw the readers eye combined with the more soothing muted blue will allow the site’s users to interact with the site without growing quickly fatigued.

Psychological Needs

The creation of a social connection reading website relies on users signing up and being active participants on the site. Therefore, the site must fulfill the user’s expectations as well as provide the user with value. One of the ways that this site will create value for the user (outside of the encouragement of reading) is through meeting and fulfilling their psychological needs. Not only will the site meet and fulfill the user’s psychological needs, but it will also use psychological principles to encourage reading. For instances, persons who add ten books to their libraries will be rewarded with a special badge which they can display on their website. The collection and sharing of badges are a means of rewarding people for reading as well as interacting with the site. In addition to this, the site will be designed to meet multiple needs of the user.

The Need for Trust:

Sharing is a way the trust between users is created. The sharing of personal stories, book reviews, and the creation of content is a way that trust will be encouraged on the website. Trust
will also be conveyed to the user as the user can select activities which are either public or private.

The Need to Fit In:

The site will be all-inclusive, and any adolescent who wishes to join will be allowed to do so. When a user signs up on the site a brief and interactive message will pop up. This message will provide the users with a brief overview of the inclusion policies on the site and will inform users that bullying or harassment of other members is not tolerated. To ensure that the site remains all-inclusive algorithms and adult moderators will detect any instances of online-bullying or exclusion and address them appropriately. The site’s accessibility, as well as the large variety of groups, will allow any teenager to find a part of the site to engage in and connect with others.

The Need for Self-Worth and Empowerment:

The development of empowerment begins with the user creating the profile and designing their avatar. Through the ability to select private or public as well as the creation of a unique avatar the user is empowered to make their own choices and create their own experience. To further foster self-worth and empowerment among the users the site will allow for user-generated content, as well as, tracking one’s own personal virtual library. The ability for users to create their own groups, book reviews, and content will engage them with the topic of books and increase their self-esteem, as well as empower them to design their own reading experience based on their personal preferences, likes, and dislikes. Finally, the ability to take ownership of and produce creative content will empower users to interact with books in new and exciting ways.

The Need to Be Reward for Good Behaviors:

The social connection reading website will allow users to unlock badges and rewards related to various levels of engagement with the site. For example, posting books reviews, engaging with the news feed, or the creation of groups will all result in the user receiving a special badge that they can display on their profile. Rewarding the desired behavior will result in people doing the desired behavior more often. For example, if a user can earn a badge for adding ten books to their library, they will be more likely to add books to their library as the presence of the reward influences behavior.

The Reader and the Social Connection Website

The website that I envision begins with the creation of one’s profile and avatar. The user will create their login credentials where they can select a unique username, password, and provide basic information. To increase trust between the site and the user, the profile’s information can be set to either public or private. The creation of the avatar begins with choosing a type of animal which will be representative of the user. For example, the user can select cats, dogs, birds, fox, or wolf character bases. Then the user can customize the colors and accessories of their avatar. The creation of an avatar is essential for the user to connect to the site as well as develop a sense of autonomy. In video game design, “avatars allow the players to adopt or create another identity and, in cooperative games, to become part of a community” (Sailer et al., 2017, p 374). For the purposes of this website, the creation and use of avatars as opposed to profile pictures allow the user to remain anonymous and develop their autonomy as it relates to this website. Once the site’s user has set up their avatar and created their profile, they have several
choices of activities. The activities that a user can engage in are story creation and adaptation, reading groups, book reviews, social sharing posts, and cultivating their personal libraries. In addition to these four primary activities, the user has the option to perform other tasks on the site. These other tasks include reading posts, completing research, or reading other’s stories.

Story Creation and Adaptation

As part of this site, users are encouraged to create stories, share stories, and modify existing stories. Before the official website launch, some classic works will be completed as examples of story creation and adaption. For example, offering illustrations to classical literature, writing alternative endings, or the creation of additional stories using an existing story’s characters. The interactivity related to story creation and adaption is meant to encourage creative thinking and empowerment among the website’s members.

Reading Groups

The website allows users to form specific reading groups. These reading groups can be based on a single book, a genre of writing, or personal connections. For example, if a person has friends who use the site that group of friends can create their own private reading group. In another instance, someone might enjoy reading science fiction. To that end, the user can see a list of recommended public science fiction reading groups to join. Once a book group is created on the website, a forum is then assigned to the group. In the forum, the group creator can select a book, and create a reading schedule if desired. The users then read the same book and use the forum for book discussions. The live chat feature can be used within the reading groups to foster conversations, or the group can use the forum to post. A reading group can be made either public or private. The content in a public group can be accessed by any of the website’s users whereas, in a private group, the information and forum can only be accessed by those in the group.

Book Reviews

Users are encouraged to create book reviews. These books reviews can take on any format. For example, some people might want to write a detailed review whereas others might want to create a bulleted list of their favorite moments from the books. The book reviews are created and shared in the book review forum. This forum is a searchable database. What this means is that people can search for a book title or genre and the prior posts about that book or related to the genre are included in the search results.

Social Sharing Posts

The main home page offers a scrolling news feed where anyone can post any thought on any topic. While it is encouraged for people to connect their posts to reading, the main news feed can contain posts of any content, about any topic, and is updated on a constant basis to reflect the most recent community posts. Unlike other social media sites, what is posted to the main news feed is public, and anyone can post or see posts on the main site page. The main site page is a simple way for people to engage in the site.
Cultivation of Personal Libraries

Users can create their own personal library. The personal library is a social cataloging application where the user selects and adds books to their library. The user is able to share their library with other users, click on one of their titles and be directed to related site content, or create book reviews and content directly from the library page.

Other Tasks

While each of the above categories will have a specific link to the category contained in the page’s heading, there are other tasks that users can complete on the site that do not have a specific tab. These tasks include searching for specific books and sending private messages to other site users. The flexibility of the site and the encouragement of users creating and customizing their site experience is critical to the site’s success. Therefore, there will be a suggestion link where users can send suggestions for additional tasks, or improved functionality.

Case Study: The User and the Site

After developing the concept for the website and the various tasks that users can do on the site I went back and talked with some of the non-reading adolescents presented in this paper. I wanted to determine if this idea would be valuable for these non-readers or improve their reading habits. The non-readers all agreed that they would use the site. But, the level of engagement varied among responses, and there was a definite correlation between the non-readers desire to use them and if their friends were also using the site. For example, Joe pointed out that he would be more likely to use the site if he were interacting with his current friends. When I asked him for more information about this idea, he said that in his current online use he plays video games where people are allowed to hang out in rooms or towns with other people. Joe uses a headset in these interactions and talks out-loud over audio chat with his friends in these spaces. Joe said that often the gameplay is secondary to the talking with his friends. Joe said that if the reading website encouraged this type of hanging out in some way that he would be more inclined to spend time on the site. When I discussed the idea of avatar creation with Joe, he was invested in this idea and thought that the use of an avatar as well the book groups having an element of hanging out would encourage him to be on the site more often. When I asked Joe if he thought the site would help him to read more often, he was not sure. Joe said that if other people were reading and talking about reading he would be more likely to read. But, Joe also said that he couldn’t guarantee if the site would make him excited about reading. Joe’s feedback was valuable and interesting as it highlighted the need for the site not only to be a place for adolescents to connect but it also had to be designed in a way that not only got the teenagers to visit the site but also got them to read. In comparison to Joe, Emily was excited about the ability to create her own stories and content. Emily said that she would enjoy reading other people’s contributions and looking at illustrations of books. Emily also noted that for her the ability to create her content would encourage her to read more often so she would have inspiration. Unlike Joe, Emily describes herself as a creative person who enjoys spending time engaged in artistic pursuits. In addition to talking with Emily and Joe, I also asked other people to read a brief description of the website and to provide feedback about the concept.
The feedback I received from the social connection reading website survey was mostly positive. The ideas that seemed to resonate the most with people was the ability to search for books and the creation of content. To determine which site features would be most useful, I had people read a brief description of the features and then rank the various site features on a scale of 1-10 with ten being would use "the most" and one being "rarely used." Both activities of searching for book titles and creating content were ranked high. The following chart shows the average responses to the survey.

I also asked people to write a brief sentence or two about how they might use the site. Most people responded that they would use the site to learn more about books they want to read or to find book recommendations. Finally, I asked people if they believed joining a website such as the one I described would increase the number of books they read. The majority of respondents said that the site would increase the number of books that they read.

Some people might argue that even when websites have been developed to promote reading in adolescents that those websites have not worked. But, despite the popularity of social media among adolescents, a reading website which combines social media, reading, and focuses on community creation for only adolescents has not been designed efficiently, created, or marketed to teenagers. First, a critical difference between the reading social connection website I envision and other websites is that the reading social connection website incorporates psychological principles which are designed to encourage specific behaviors. Second, the website provides users with a range of tasks and activities. Instead of only offering a social cataloging option, or just allowing book reviews, etc. this site enables the user to determine which features to use and which ones not to. The freedom of choice and autonomy built into the site mean that for the independent adolescent they maintain control of their reading activities and decisions. Finally, the website provides some preplanned designs, stories, and content. But, the users are free to develop, create, and add their own content. The ability for users to interact and create will give them ownership over the site in a unique way that other reading websites do not. The combined impact of the site will be to engage teenagers to have a desire to read and share with others.
Conclusion

Reading for pleasure is declining among generation iGen. To people who understand how reading can improve one’s life, these declines are alarming. The solution to this problem is not simple. Instead, after completing in-depth research, and exploring this problem in-depth, my solution is to create a social media website which encourages reading among the iGen non-readers. Through this website reading will be encouraged, rewarded, and fully linked to community. Without an intervention such as the website, the non-readers of iGen will continue to be disadvantaged in their future lives. More than that, society will be harmed through the lack of empathy and cultural awareness that these non-readers have not developed. It is truly my hope that through the social connection reading website, young persons will become excited about reading. This excitement will translate to increased reading. Ultimately, there is much at stake for both the non-reader and the communities that they live in.
Outline

Thesis: Graphic design is a powerful tool which can be used to reverse the current American trend of the decline of reading by American teenagers.

I. Introduction
   1. Reading fiction among young people in the United States of America has been declining since the popularization of the iPhone and increased prevalence of the internet.
   2. Reading fiction has an incredible array of benefits which cannot be replicated with new technologies or entertainments.
   3. There is a unique opportunity for graphic design to increase reading among the technological generation.

II. Claim of Fact: Why has reading declined and the associated problems of lack of readership
   Evidence for this section: Brain imaging, statistics documenting the decline of reading from Gallup, pew, and National Endowment for the Arts, literature review including psychology today articles, journal articles, and newspaper articles.
   1. The decline of reading fiction
      a. Poll results indicating decline of reading
   2. The problems of not reading fiction
      a. Empathy
      b. Civic engagement
      c. Decreased reading comprehension
   3. Case Studies and Examples
      a. Comparison hypothetical future of reader vs. non-reader
         i. Joe
         ii. Emily
            1. Employment and reading
            2. Economic futures and reading
   4. The ability to communicate is a unique function of human beings. Unlike animals, human beings have developed complex language systems which include the ability to read.
      a. Historically, language and reading played an essential role in the survival of the human species
      b. Case example: Charles and non-reading
      c. Reading is social
         i. Reading contexts are important to increase reading. The context is part of the values related to reading which either increase or decrease reading. These values lead people to either reading more often or less often depending on the message sent.
   5. Counterclaim: College graduates are more likely to be readers and the millennial generation is more likely to attend college than the older generations.
      a. Given education policy, income inequality, and increased costs this is not necessarily true for the future
   6. Counterclaim: The millennial generation is still reading they are just not reading books or for pleasure
III. Claim of Value: The millennial generation does not perceive reading to be a pleasurable or enjoyable experience. Rather, this generation values busyness, social activity, and connectivity over the solitary activity of reading which has become to be viewed as a chore by this generation.

Evidence for this section: literature review (Adam Gopnik, Denby, National Endowment for Arts, Interviews with millennials to document their time/activities)

1. “Professional readership”
   a. Millennials and younger are educated that reading is part of their school obligations or jobs. This teaching removes the pleasure from reading or the enjoyment and places reading into a category of “chore.” Placing reading in the category of “chore” means that this generation is less likely to pursue reading outside of “professional” settings.

2. Productivity
   a. There are increasing pressures on people to be “productive.” These pressures mean that activities which are defined as pleasurable are not as supported by social norms. Rather, the focus is on accomplishment, completion of projects, and tangible products as opposed to activities which are enriching.

3. Busyness as important
   a. Today, people in the United States and in particular the New York region place a high value on “busyness.” But, the value of busyness comes at a cost. Being “busy” means that there is less time for deep intimate friendships, relaxation, and reading.

4. Social and connectivity
   a. There are high values in modernity on connectivity and social connections. These high values on connectivity mean that people are more engaged in superficial activities such as social media as opposed to activities such as reading.

5. Counterclaim: Throughout human history new technologies have evolved, and persons have wonder about the impact that the new technology will have on society.
   a. Despite past fears about new technologies people have overcome the negative parts of it and continued to survive and thrive.

IV. Claim of Policy: Graphic design has the potential to transform classic literature and new stories to make reading more appealing and interactive for this generation which values connectivity and interactivity over reading in isolation.

1. Brief history of graphic design
2. Design fiction
   b. Kelly O’Brien’s article, “Designing for a Science Fiction Future” discusses how graphic design can help to bring life to science fiction as a way for people to visual new ideas as part of science fiction/technological advances.

3. Graphic novels
4. The importance of community
   a. Human beings are social animals who require a feeling of belonging.
   b. Human behavior is shaped by community.
c. Through meeting psychological needs the online community is a powerful way that human behavior is shaped.

5. The role of graphic design revisited
   a. Graphic Design and Websites
   b. The Reading Website
      i. The style tile is a way to convey the fonts, colors, textures etc. of your site. The reading site will use engaging, but also, relaxing colors with easy to read fonts.
      ii. The mood board sets the tone for the idea for the websites. The mood that I will invoke with my website will be to inspire the reader as well as provide them with connections.
      iii. The concept for the site is to connect the reader with others as a way to create a community of readers.

6. Counterclaim: Websites such as this one already exist and other people have tried to create websites to engage readers and have failed.

7. Case Study a fictional user and the ways they would use the website
   a. The user will be able to use the site in a variety of ways which will connect them to others and encourage immersive reading.
   b. The user begins with the creation of a profile. The profile allows them to create connections in the website.
   c. The user can post book reviews, comments, and questions.
   d. The user can look up books that have been discussed.

8. Counterargument: The website will be designed with psychological principles, and design which engage the user.
   a. The reading website will fulfill the need to trust, the need to fit in, the need for self-worth and empowerment, and the need to be rewarded for good behaviors

V. Conclusion
Bibliography


