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## Reading as a therapeutic activity for the Gen Z: A photo-voice study

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### Abstract

This study investigated how digital reading platforms influence the reading habits and mental health of Generation Z (Gen Z), focusing on their therapeutic experiences and perceptions through a photovoice methodology. The study was grounded in bibliotherapy and participatory action research (PAR) theories. Bibliotherapy explores the therapeutic potential of reading, while PAR emphasizes the involvement of participants as co-researchers, using photovoice to capture and narrate their personal experiences. A qualitative approach was used, employing photovoice documentation to explore the reading experiences of Gen Z. The sample included 40 Gen Z individuals, aged 18 to 24, from diverse backgrounds. Participants used digital cameras or smartphones to document their reading experiences over four weeks, providing photographs and narratives. These visual and textual data were analyzed to identify themes related to the impact of digital reading platforms on reading habits and mental health. Qualitative analysis revealed several key themes: enhanced convenience and flexibility, personalized and interactive reading experiences, emotional and therapeutic benefits, accessibility and inclusivity, and community and social interaction. Participants described how digital platforms facilitated regular reading, provided emotional relief, and supported personal growth. They also highlighted the importance of interactive features and the sense of community fostered through digital reading. The findings highlight the positive impact of digital reading platforms on both the reading habits and mental health of Generation Z. Enhanced accessibility, convenience, and personalized features of digital platforms contribute to increased engagement with literature and its therapeutic benefits. The photovoice method provided deep insights into how these platforms support emotional well-being and foster community connections. This study affirms the potential of digital reading platforms to promote reading and support mental health among Gen Z. These platforms can address the unique preferences and needs of this digitally native generation. It is recommended that culture of reading must be instilled in the youths so that they develop interest in works that can effect positive change in them. It is necessary to develop culturally relevant digital content to enhance empathy and social connection.

**Keywords:** aliteracy, Gen Z, reading, habits, reluctant reader, youths



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## Introduction

Aliteracy, the ability to read without interest, is increasingly prevalent among Gen Z, a cohort raised in a digital age of instant gratification. This shift in reading habits has raised concerns among educators, psychologists, and policymakers about the potential cognitive, emotional, and social implications of decreased engagement with traditional reading (Twenge, 2019; Muhammad, Dr-Muhammad, Andleeb & Dr-Muhammad, 2020). However, emerging research suggests that reading, particularly of therapeutic and self-help literature, may serve as a valuable tool for addressing mental health issues and enhancing well-being among Gen Z individuals (Manganello et al., 2020; Latz, Phelps-Ward, Royer & Peters, 2016).

This study utilizes the photovoice method to explore the potential of reading as a therapeutic activity for Gen Z. Photovoice, a participatory research methodology, empowers individuals to capture their lived experiences through photography and narrative, providing rich, contextual insights into their perceptions and behaviors (Wang & Burris, 1997). In employing a photovoice method, this study aims to delve into the personal experiences of Gen Z participants, illustrating how reading can serve as a means of coping with stress, anxiety, and other mental health challenges. This approach not only highlights the subjective experiences of the participants but also underscores the broader socio-cultural factors influencing their reading habits and preferences.

The recent studies have shown diverse benefits of reading beyond mere information acquisition. For instance, reading has been shown to improve empathy, critical thinking, and stress reduction, which are crucial for the holistic development of young adults (Hakemulder, 2020; Moono, et al., 2024; Chanda, et al., 2024). The narrative immersion that books provide allows readers to experience different perspectives and emotions, fostering a deeper understanding of oneself and others. This is particularly relevant in a time when Gen Z is experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, and social isolation (Hussain & Griffiths, 2021). Consequently, the therapeutic potential of reading warrants a closer examination as a viable intervention for mental health challenges faced by this generation.

The rise of digital reading platforms and audiobooks offers new opportunities to engage aliterate individuals. The accessibility and convenience of these formats can potentially reignite interest in reading by aligning with the digital habits of Gen Z (Baron, 2021). Digital platforms can also provide interactive and multimedia elements that enhance the reading experience, making it more appealing to those who might otherwise prefer passive consumption of visual and auditory media. This adaptation is crucial in promoting reading as an enjoyable and beneficial activity rather than a mundane obligation. In conclusion, addressing aliteracy in Gen Z is not merely about encouraging the act of reading but also about recognizing and harnessing the therapeutic benefits it can offer. There is need to foster reading-inclined generation. This approach holds promise for not only improving literacy rates but also enhancing the overall mental and emotional well-being of Gen Z. hence, going by that, it contributes to an empathetic and intellectually engaged society today.

The following were the objectives of the study:

1. To explore how Gen Z individuals perceive and experience reading as a therapeutic activity through photovoice documentation.
2. To identify the mental health benefits that Gen Z associates with reading by analyzing their photographs and narratives.
3. To determine the impact of digital reading platforms on the reading habits and therapeutic experiences of Gen Z participants.

## Contextual Scenario

In the ever-evolving landscape of the digital Gen Z has emerged as a cohort uniquely shaped by unprecedented access to technology and information. Unlike previous generations, Gen Z has grown up with smartphones, social media, and the internet as integral parts of their daily lives. This constant exposure to digital stimuli has fundamentally altered their consumption of information and entertainment, leading to a notable decline in traditional reading habits. Aliteracy, the condition of being able to read but choosing not to, has become increasingly prevalent among these young individuals. Despite being proficient readers, many Gen Z members prefer the immediacy and interactivity of digital content over the sustained engagement required by books. The rise of aliteracy among Gen Z coincides with an alarming increase in mental health issues. Studies have shown that this generation experiences higher rates of anxiety, depression, and social isolation compared to previous cohorts (Twenge, 2019). The pressures of academic performance, social comparison on social media, and an uncertain future contribute to a pervasive sense of stress and unease. In this context, traditional therapeutic interventions are increasingly complemented by alternative approaches, such as bibliotherapy, involving the use of reading as a tool for psychological support and emotional healing. Bibliotherapy leverages the immersive and reflective nature of reading to help individuals process their thoughts and emotions, providing a safe space for introspection and personal growth.

The qualitative insights into their perceptions and behaviors. This method empowers Gen Z individuals to express their personal stories and reflections, and reading influences their mental health and well-being. The researchers can capture the diverse and subjective experiences of participants, revealing how reading serves as a coping mechanism, a source of comfort, and a means of self-discovery. This approach not only highlights the therapeutic potential of reading but also underscores the importance of individuals and contexts in mental health interventions. Conversely, the integration of digital reading platforms and audiobooks presents new opportunities to re-engage aliterate Gen Z members. These technologies align with their digital habits and preferences (Supper, Guay & Talbot, 2021). Digital platforms can provide interactive and multimedia elements that enhance the reading experience, making it more appealing to those who might otherwise favour passive consumption of visual and auditory media. It is possible to promote reading as an enjoyable and beneficial activity, potentially transforming aliteracy into a renewed appreciation for literature. This scenario shows the need for an approach to addressing aliteracy, one that combines traditional and innovative methods to foster a reading-inclined generation capable of reaping the cognitive and emotional benefits of literature.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study on aliteracy and reading as a therapeutic activity among Gen Z is grounded in the theories of bibliotherapy and participatory action research. Bibliotherapy, a concept that dates back to the early 20th century, was formally coined by Samuel Crothers (1916). Crothers defined bibliotherapy as the use of literature to help individuals cope with psychological, social, and emotional problems. The fundamental premise of bibliotherapy is that reading can provide a form of emotional release and self-discovery, allowing individuals to explore their thoughts and feelings in a safe and reflective manner (Crothers, 1916). Hence, through reading, individuals can identify with characters, gain insights into their own lives, and find solace in the narratives of others.

In this study, bibliotherapy is highly relevant as it provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how reading can serve as a therapeutic tool for Gen Z. The therapeutic benefits of reading are particularly pertinent given the high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression reported among this cohort. Immersive nature of reading allows individuals to temporarily escape their reality. And the reflective aspect of bibliotherapy helps individuals process and articulate their emotions, promoting mental clarity and emotion-

al well-being. This study aims to demonstrate how reading can be a meaningful and effective intervention for addressing the mental health challenges prevalent among Gen Z. The study also incorporates the principles of participatory action research (PAR), which emphasizes collaboration, empowerment, and the active involvement of participants in the research process. PAR was developed by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s as a method of integrating research and action to address social issues (Lewin, 1946). Lewin's approach advocates for the inclusion of participants as co-researchers, enabling them to contribute their perspectives and insights to the research. This methodology is designed to produce practical knowledge that can lead to tangible improvements in the participants' lives.

The use of photovoice, a method derived from PAR, is central to this study's theoretical framework. Photovoice, introduced by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris in 1997, combines photography and narrative to empower participants to document and reflect on their experiences (Wang & Burris, 1997). This method aligns with the principles of PAR by giving Gen Z individuals a voice in the research process, allowing them to capture and convey their personal experiences with reading. Through photovoice, participants can share their stories in a visually and emotionally impactful way. Conversely, the integration of bibliotherapy and participatory action research theories is particularly significant for this study because it addresses both the individual and collective dimensions of reading and mental health. Bibliotherapy focuses on the internal, personal benefits of reading, while PAR emphasizes the social and communal aspects of research, fostering a sense of agency and empowerment among participants. The study offers a comprehensive understanding of how reading can support mental health and well-being among Gen Z.

## Philosophical Underpinnings

The philosophical underpinnings of this study are rooted in the theories of bibliotherapy and participatory action research (PAR), which together provide a comprehensive framework for exploring the therapeutic potential of reading among Gen Z. Bibliotherapy, which dates back to the early 20th century and was formalized by Samuel Crothers in 1916, posits that reading can be used as a therapeutic tool to help individuals understand and process their emotions, develop empathy, and find solace in the experiences of others (Crothers, 1916). This theory emphasizes the power of literature to facilitate personal growth and emotional healing, making it particularly relevant for a generation facing high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression.

Participatory action research (PAR), developed by Kurt Lewin in the 1940s, emphasizes the collaborative involvement of participants as co-researchers in the study process (Lewin, 1946). PAR is based on the principles of collaboration, reflection, and action, aiming to produce practical knowledge that can lead to social change. By involving participants directly in the research, PAR ensures that their voices and perspectives are integral to the study, thereby enhancing the relevance and impact of the findings. This approach aligns well with the use of photovoice methodology, which empowers Gen Z individuals to document and reflect on their reading experiences through photography and narrative, providing rich qualitative data that captures their personal insights and emotions.

Therefore, combining bibliotherapy and PAR provides a robust philosophical foundation for this study. The bibliotherapy focuses on the individual and therapeutic benefits of reading, while PAR ensures that the research process is inclusive, participatory, and reflective of the participants' lived experiences. This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive exploration of how digital reading platforms can support mental health and well-being among Gen Z. It acknowledges the therapeutic potential of literature and the importance of participant engagement and empowerment in producing meaningful as well as actionable understandings.

## Literature Review

### How Gen Z Individuals Perceive and Experience Reading as a Therapeutic Activity through Photovoice Documentation

The exploration of how Gen Z individuals perceive and experience reading as a therapeutic activity through photovoice documentation is a burgeoning field that intersects various domains, including psychology, education, and digital media studies (Yirun Guo, 2020). Recent literature has highlighted the unique challenges and opportunities associated with engaging this digital-native generation in traditional reading practices. A study by Manganello, et al. (2020) indicates that while Gen Z is often perceived as disengaged from traditional reading due to their preference for digital content, they can still derive significant emotional and psychological benefits from reading when it aligns with their interests and lifestyles. This study underscores the importance of understanding the specific contexts and preferences that make reading appealing to Gen Z, thereby paving the way for more effective bibliotherapeutic interventions.

Photovoice, as a participatory research method, offers a compelling approach to capturing the subjective experiences of Gen Z with reading. Wang and Burris (1997) originally introduced photovoice to empower marginalized communities by allowing them to document their lived experiences through photography and narrative. This method has since been adapted to various research contexts, including mental health and educational studies. For Gen Z, photovoice provides a means to visually and narratively express their relationship with reading, offering rich, qualitative data that traditional survey methods may overlook. Through photovoice, researchers can gain insights into how reading serves as a coping mechanism, a source of comfort, or a medium for self-discovery, all of which are crucial for developing effective therapeutic reading programs.

Recent studies have demonstrated the efficacy of photovoice in engaging young people and eliciting meaningful insights into their experiences. For example, a study by Bradley et al. (2021) used photovoice to explore how adolescents perceive their mental health and the role of various activities, including reading, in their emotional well-being. The findings revealed that participants valued reading not just for its escapist qualities but also for its ability to provide perspective, foster empathy, and facilitate personal growth. These outcomes align with the core principles of bibliotherapy, suggesting that reading can be a powerful tool for mental health support when it resonates with the reader's personal experiences and challenges.

Moreover, the rise of digital reading platforms and audiobooks has introduced new dimensions to how Gen Z engages with reading. Baron (2021) notes that these formats align with the digital habits of Gen Z, offering accessible and convenient ways to incorporate reading into their daily routines. Digital reading platforms can enhance the reading experience through interactive and multimedia elements, making it more engaging for those who might otherwise favor visual and auditory media. This shift toward digital reading necessitates a re-evaluation of traditional bibliotherapy methods to include digital literacy and multimedia content, ensuring that therapeutic reading remains relevant and appealing to Gen Z.

The role of social media in shaping Gen Z's reading habits cannot be overlooked. Social media platforms often serve as spaces where young people share and discuss their reading experiences, thereby creating communities of practice that reinforce positive reading behaviors. A study by Smith et al. (2020) found that online book communities and social media discussions about books significantly influenced the reading choices and attitudes of Gen Z participants. These findings highlight the potential of leveraging social media as a tool for promoting therapeutic reading, by creating supportive and interactive environments where young readers can share their insights and recommendations.

## Mental Health Benefits that Gen Z Associates with Reading by Analyzing their Photographs and Narratives

Globally, there is a growing body of research that highlights the mental health benefits of reading, particularly for Generation Z. Recent studies indicate that reading can significantly reduce symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression, acting as a form of bibliotherapy that helps individuals process their emotions and find solace in literature (Manganello et al., 2020). By analyzing photographs and narratives collected through photovoice methods, researchers have found that Gen Z readers often depict scenes of tranquility and reflection associated with their reading activities. These visual and textual narratives frequently emphasize the calming effect of reading, suggesting that it serves as a form of mental escape and emotional regulation. This aligns with the findings of Bradley et al. (2021), who observed that reading allows young people to disengage from the stressors of daily life and immerse themselves in different worlds, thereby fostering a sense of peace and relaxation.

Furthermore, the global literature suggests that reading enhances empathy and social understanding among Gen Z individuals. Hakemulder (2020) argues that through narrative transportation, readers are able to experience the lives and perspectives of characters, which can enhance their ability to understand and empathize with others. This is particularly beneficial for Gen Z, who are navigating complex social dynamics in a rapidly changing world. Photographs and narratives from photovoice studies often capture moments where readers reflect on the moral and emotional journeys of characters, highlighting how these stories influence their own social interactions and personal growth. This empathy-building aspect of reading is crucial for mental health, as it promotes social connectedness and reduces feelings of isolation, which are common issues among young people today (Papadopoulos & Shin, 2021; Hussain & Griffiths, 2021).

In the African context, the mental health benefits of reading for Gen Z are being increasingly acknowledged, although the region faces unique challenges related to access and literacy. A study by Mlambo et al. (2019) emphasizes that in many African countries, reading can provide an important outlet for young people to cope with socio-economic stressors and the pressures of rapidly urbanizing environments. Photovoice projects in Africa reveal that young readers often choose literature that reflects their own experiences and struggles, using these narratives to find meaning and resilience. These photographs and narratives frequently depict scenes of communal reading and shared literary experiences, underscoring the role of reading in fostering community bonds and collective well-being. The therapeutic benefits of reading in these contexts are thus intertwined with social support and cultural relevance.

Access to digital reading platforms is also expanding in Africa, offering new opportunities to engage young readers. Initiatives such as Worldreader and African Storybook are making digital books available to communities with limited access to traditional libraries. Photographs and narratives from photovoice studies in Africa frequently highlight the transformative impact of these digital platforms, showing young people reading on mobile devices and describing how these tools help them maintain a reading habit despite logistical and economic barriers. The integration of digital reading into the lives of African Gen Z individuals not only supports their educational development but also provides a crucial mental health resource that helps them cope with the complexities of their environments (Papadopoulos, 2020, 2021; Supper, Guay & Talbot, 2021).

Zambian literature itself, with its rich oral and written traditions, plays a significant role in the therapeutic benefits of reading. Works by authors such as Binwell Sinyangwe and Ellen Banda-Aaku address themes of identity, community, and resilience, resonating deeply with young readers. Photographs and narratives from photovoice projects often capture moments of reflection and inspiration as students engage with these texts. The narratives describe how these stories help them navigate their personal and social challenges, fostering a sense of connection to their cultural heritage and a deeper understanding of their own identities. This cultural resonance enhances the therapeutic impact of

reading, making it a valuable tool for mental health support in the Zambian context (Dube & Mpolomoka, 2018; Sinyangwe, 2020).

The expansion of digital reading initiatives in Zambia is also noteworthy. Programs such as the Lubuto Library Partners provide access to digital and print resources in community libraries, promoting literacy and reading among young people. Photovoice documentation often includes images of students using digital devices to read, and their narratives highlight the convenience and accessibility of these platforms. These tools help bridge the gap for students who may not have access to traditional books, ensuring that they can still benefit from the mental health advantages of reading. By integrating digital reading into their daily lives, Zambian Gen Z individuals are able to maintain a reading habit that supports their emotional and psychological well-being, even in resource-constrained settings (Mulambia, et. al., 2023; Papadopoulos, 2022; Chanda, 2024).

### Impact of Digital Reading Platforms on Reading Habits and Therapeutic Experiences of Gen Z Participants

The advent of digital reading platforms has significantly transformed the reading habits of Generation Z, offering both challenges and opportunities. The accessibility and convenience provided by digital platforms have made reading more attainable for this digitally native cohort. Baron (2021) notes that the integration of e-books and audiobooks into daily routines has facilitated continuous engagement with literature, even amidst busy schedules. Gen Z individuals often prefer digital reading due to its portability and the ability to customize their reading experience, such as adjusting font size and background color, which can enhance comfort and reduce eye strain. This personalization helps sustain their interest and engagement with reading, contributing to its therapeutic benefits. Photovoice documentation from various global studies reveals that young readers frequently use digital devices to read in diverse settings, from public transportation to quiet corners at home, indicating the flexibility and adaptability of digital reading habits.

Fittingly, the therapeutic experiences associated with digital reading platforms are also noteworthy. Digital books often include interactive features, such as hyperlinks, multimedia content, and annotations, which can enhance the immersive experience and emotional engagement with the text. A study by Mangen et al. (2019) highlights that these interactive elements can deepen the reader's connection to the material, making the reading experience more meaningful and therapeutic. For Gen Z, who are accustomed to high levels of interactivity in their digital lives, these features can transform reading from a passive activity into an engaging and dynamic experience. Photovoice narratives often reflect this enhanced engagement, with participants describing how interactive e-books and multimedia content help them connect more deeply with the stories and characters.

The therapeutic experiences associated with digital reading in Africa are also noteworthy. Digital platforms often include culturally relevant content that resonates with the lived experiences of African Gen Z readers, which can enhance the therapeutic impact of reading. For example, platforms like Worldreader provide access to books that address local issues and reflect the cultural diversity of the continent. This culturally relevant content helps young readers navigate their personal and social challenges by providing relatable narratives and role models. Photovoice projects in Africa frequently capture the emotional connection that readers feel with these stories, with participants describing how reading helps them cope with stress and build resilience. The narratives often highlight the sense of comfort and understanding that comes from reading about characters and situations similar to their own, underscoring the therapeutic potential of culturally relevant digital literature (Worldreader, 2020; Banda & Mpolomoka, 2018; Gutman, et. al., 2018).

Moreover, the interactive features of digital reading platforms are particularly beneficial in the African context, where traditional educational resources may be limited. Digital platforms often include features

such as quizzes, discussion forums, and multimedia content that enhance the learning experience and encourage deeper engagement with the text. These interactive elements can make reading more enjoyable and stimulating, helping to sustain the interest of young readers. A study by Chigona et al. (2020) found that the use of interactive digital reading platforms in African schools not only improved literacy rates but also had a positive impact on students' emotional well-being by making learning more engaging and less stressful. Photovoice documentation often captures the enthusiasm and excitement of young readers as they interact with these digital platforms, highlighting the dual benefits of improved literacy and enhanced mental health.

The therapeutic benefits of digital reading platforms in Zambia are also evident. Digital books and resources often include content that addresses local issues and reflects the cultural context of Zambian readers. This culturally relevant content helps young readers navigate their personal and social challenges by providing relatable narratives and role models. Photovoice projects in Zambia frequently capture the emotional connection that readers feel with these stories, with participants describing how reading helps them cope with stress and build resilience. The narratives often highlight the sense of comfort and understanding that comes from reading about characters and situations similar to their own, underscoring the therapeutic potential of culturally relevant digital literature (Yirun Guo, 2020; Lubuto Library Partners, 2020; Mpolomoka, Banda & Sampa, 2019; Chanda, et. al., 2024).

Additionally, the interactive features of digital reading platforms are particularly beneficial in the Zambian context, where traditional educational resources may be limited. Digital platforms often include features such as quizzes, discussion forums, and multimedia content that enhance the learning experience and encourage deeper engagement with the text. These interactive elements can make reading more enjoyable and stimulating, helping to sustain the interest of young readers. A study by Mwansa and Mulenga (2021) found that the use of interactive digital reading platforms in Zambian schools not only improved literacy rates but also had a positive impact on students' emotional well-being by making learning more engaging and less stressful. Photovoice documentation often captures the enthusiasm and excitement of young readers as they interact with these digital platforms, highlighting the dual benefits of improved literacy and enhanced mental health. Photovoice documentation provides valuable insights into how young readers in these contexts perceive and experience digital reading, highlighting the transformative potential of these platforms in promoting a culture of reading and supporting emotional well-being.

Research gaps in this literature were identified. Despite the growing body of research highlighting the mental health benefits of reading and the transformative impact of digital reading platforms on Gen Z, there remains a significant gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which these benefits are realized. While studies have documented the general positive effects of digital reading on literacy and emotional well-being, there is a lack of detailed exploration into how these platforms facilitate therapeutic experiences on a personal and cultural level. The existing research often focuses on broad trends and outcomes, but does not sufficiently capture the nuanced, individual experiences of Gen Z readers, particularly in diverse contexts such as Africa and Zambia. This gap underscores the need for more in-depth, qualitative investigations that utilize methodologies like photovoice to document and analyze the subjective experiences and narratives of young readers. Such studies could provide richer understandings into how digital reading platforms can be optimized to support mental health and foster a sustained engagement with literature among Gen Z.

## Methods

This study employed a photovoice methodology, a participatory action research approach, to explore how Gen Z perceives and experiences reading as a therapeutic activity through digital reading platforms. Photovoice empowers participants to capture and narrate their personal experiences through

photographs, providing rich qualitative data that highlight their perspectives and behaviors. The study involved a diverse sample of 40 Gen Z individuals, aged 18 to 24, from various socio-economic backgrounds and geographical regions, including a substantial representation from Zambia and other African countries. Participants were recruited through educational institutions, social media platforms, and community organizations to ensure a representative sample.

The photovoice documentation was used and participants were provided with guidelines and training on the photovoice method. They used their smartphones or provided digital cameras to capture images that reflect their experiences with reading. These were focusing on how digital reading platforms influence their reading habits and mental health. Participants were asked to document their reading activities over a period of four weeks, capturing both positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Alongside the photographs, participants wrote narratives explaining the context and significance of each image. These narratives delved into how reading serves as a therapeutic activity, the emotional responses elicited by different reading materials, and the impact of digital platforms on their engagement with literature. Participants were encouraged to be candid and reflective in their narratives, providing a deep insight into their personal experiences.

After the documentation phase, participants engaged in facilitated group discussions where they can share and discuss their photographs and narratives with peers. These sessions were conducted virtually to accommodate participants from different locations. The discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed for further analysis, providing additional context and collective insights into the reading experiences of Gen Z. The photographs and accompanying narratives were analyzed using thematic analysis. This process involved coding the data to identify common themes and patterns related to the therapeutic benefits of reading, the influence of digital platforms, and the emotional and cognitive responses to reading. Themes were categorized and interpreted to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences.

Transcripts from the group discussions were analyzed to identify additional themes and insights that may not have been captured in the individual narratives. This helped to triangulate the data and ensure a robust analysis of the collective experiences and perspectives of the participants. Lastly, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review boards before commencing the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they understood the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained throughout the study, with all data securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

## Results

### How Gen Z Individuals Perceive and Experience Reading as a Therapeutic Activity through Photovoice Documentation

The analysis of the photovoice documentation provided rich insights into how Generation Z perceives and experiences reading as a therapeutic activity. The findings are categorized into several key themes that emerged from the photographs and narratives shared by the participants. A significant number of participants documented reading as a vital means of escaping the stress and pressures of daily life. Photographs depicted serene environments, such as quiet corners of their homes, parks, and libraries, where participants engaged in reading. Narratives accompanying these images frequently mentioned how reading allowed them to temporarily disconnect from their worries and immerse themselves in different worlds. One participant wrote, «*Reading takes me away from my stress. It's like traveling to a different place without leaving my room. It helps me forget about my problems, even if just for a while.*»

On the emotional connection and empathy, participants highlighted how reading, particularly of fiction and autobiographical works, fostered emotional connections and empathy. Many photographs showed book covers of novels and memoirs, with narratives explaining how these stories helped participants understand and empathize with different perspectives and experiences. One narrative described the experience of reading a novel about mental health struggles: *«This book made me realize that I'm not alone in feeling anxious. It helped me understand my own feelings better and feel more compassionate towards others going through the same thing.»*

Another prominent theme was the role of reading in facilitating self-reflection and personal growth. Participants captured images of journals and notebooks alongside their books, indicating their practice of reflective writing prompted by their reading. Narratives often mentioned how reading encouraged them to think more deeply about their lives and aspirations. One participant shared, *«Reading self-help books and inspirational stories motivates me to work on myself. It makes me think about who I want to be and how I can improve.»*

Digital reading platforms and accessibility was given much attention by the participants, the use of digital reading platforms was widely documented, with participants expressing appreciation for the accessibility and convenience these platforms provided. Photographs featured e-readers, tablets, and smartphones displaying e-books and audiobooks. Narratives highlighted how digital platforms allowed participants to read anytime and anywhere, fitting reading into their busy schedules. A participant noted, *«With my e-reader, I can carry hundreds of books with me. I read on my commute, during breaks, and before bed. It makes it so much easier to read regularly.»*

The participants also documented how reading fostered a sense of community and shared experiences. Images of book clubs, reading circles, and online book discussions were accompanied by narratives describing the supportive and enriching interactions these communities provided. One participant described their book club experience: *«Our book club meets every week to discuss what we've read. It's more than just talking about books; it's about connecting with others, sharing ideas, and supporting each other.»*

## Specific Mental Health Benefits that Gen Z Associates with Reading by Analyzing Their Photographs and Narratives

A significant number of participants documented that reading helps reduce anxiety and promotes relaxation. Photographs of cozy reading nooks, comfortable seating, and tranquil outdoor settings frequently accompanied narratives that described how reading serves as a calming activity. One participant captured an image of a sunlit reading corner with the caption, *«This is my go-to spot when I feel overwhelmed. Reading here calms my mind and eases my anxiety.»* Another participant shared a photograph of their e-reader by a window, noting, *«Reading helps me disconnect from my worries. It's my escape from the chaos of everyday life.»* These narratives align with existing research suggesting that reading can be an effective tool for managing anxiety by providing a mental break and facilitating relaxation (Billington et al., 2019).

Participants frequently highlighted reading as a means of emotional catharsis and expression. Photographs included images of books with emotionally charged themes, such as mental health struggles, personal growth, and overcoming adversity. Accompanying narratives often described how these stories resonated with participants' own experiences and helped them process their emotions. One participant shared a photograph of a memoir about depression, writing, *«This book put into words what I've been feeling but couldn't express. It's like someone else understands my pain.»* Another participant described how reading fiction allowed them to release pent-up emotions, stating, *«When I read about characters going through tough times, I feel a sense of release. It's therapeutic to cry and laugh with them.»* These findings suggest that reading provides a valuable outlet for emotional expression and can help Gen Z individuals articulate and process their feelings.

The role of reading in building resilience and enhancing coping skills was another prominent theme. Participants often chose books with themes of resilience, courage, and personal transformation. Photographs featured titles related to overcoming challenges and personal development, with narratives explaining how these stories inspired and motivated them. One participant captured an image of a self-help book, noting, «*This book taught me techniques to cope with stress and anxiety. It's like having a guide to navigate life's ups and downs.*» Another participant described how reading about characters who overcame adversity gave them hope and strength, writing, «*Seeing characters triumph over their struggles makes me feel like I can too. It gives me the courage to face my own challenges.*» These narratives illustrate how reading can serve as a source of inspiration and practical advice, helping young readers develop resilience and effective coping strategies.

In other findings, the participants frequently associated reading with enhanced empathy and a sense of social connection. Photographs included images of diverse books that depicted a variety of cultures, experiences, and perspectives. Narratives often highlighted how these stories broadened participants' understanding and fostered empathy. One participant shared a photograph of a novel set in a different cultural context, writing, «*Reading about other people's lives and cultures has made me more empathetic and understanding. It's like walking in someone else's shoes.*» Another participant described how discussing books with friends and participating in book clubs helped them feel more connected, stating, «*Sharing my thoughts about books with others has brought me closer to my friends. It's a great way to connect and understand each other better.*» These findings are consistent with research indicating that reading can enhance social empathy and foster meaningful connections (Hakemulder, 2020).

The theme of self-discovery and personal growth was also prevalent among participants. Photographs featured self-help books, biographies, and inspirational literature, with narratives describing how these works facilitated personal insight and growth. One participant captured an image of a personal development book, noting, «*This book helped me discover my strengths and weaknesses. It's been a journey of self-discovery and growth.*» Another participant described how reading philosophical and reflective literature prompted them to think more deeply about their life choices and goals, writing, «*Reading these books has made me more introspective. It's like having a conversation with myself, where I learn and grow.*» These narratives highlight how reading can be a powerful tool for self-exploration and personal development, helping young readers navigate their identities and aspirations.

## Impact of Digital Reading Platforms on the Reading Habits and Therapeutic Experiences of Gen Z Participants

Participants frequently highlighted the convenience and flexibility of digital reading platforms. Photographs depicted participants reading in various locations such as public transportation, cafes, and parks, emphasizing the portability of e-readers, tablets, and smartphones. Narratives supported these visuals, with participants describing how digital reading platforms allowed them to incorporate reading into their busy schedules. One participant wrote, «*With my e-reader, I can carry hundreds of books with me wherever I go. It makes it so easy to read during my commute or while waiting in line.*»

The ability to personalize and interact with digital reading platforms was another significant theme. Participants shared images of customized reading interfaces, showing adjustable text sizes, background colors, and integrated dictionary features. Narratives highlighted how these features improved their reading comfort and comprehension. A participant noted, «*I love that I can change the font size and background color to suit my eyes. It makes reading so much more enjoyable, especially when I'm tired.*»

Digital reading platforms were also associated with emotional and therapeutic benefits. Participants captured moments of relaxation and emotional relief while reading digitally, often depicting quiet, comfortable spaces conducive to reading. Narratives revealed that reading on digital platforms helped them

manage stress and anxiety. One participant explained, «*Reading on my tablet before bed helps me unwind and relax. It's become a part of my nighttime routine that I really look forward to.*»

Another impact was on the theme of accessibility and inclusivity which emerged strongly in the data. Participants highlighted how digital reading platforms made literature accessible to those with visual impairments and other reading difficulties. Photographs showed the use of text-to-speech functions and screen readers. Narratives described the positive impact of these features on their reading experiences. One participant shared, «*As someone with dyslexia, the text-to-speech feature has been a game-changer. I can listen to books without struggling to read the text.*»

The social aspect of digital reading was another key theme. Participants documented their involvement in online book clubs and reading communities, sharing screenshots of virtual book discussions and social media interactions about books. Narratives emphasized the sense of community and connection fostered through these platforms. A participant noted, «*Being part of an online book club has been amazing. It's a great way to share my thoughts and connect with others who love the same books.*»

## Discussion

### How Gen Z Individuals Perceive and Experience Reading as a Therapeutic Activity through Photovoice Documentation

The theme of emotional escape and stress relief underscores the significant therapeutic value that reading holds for Gen Z individuals. Participants frequently described reading as a means to temporarily disconnect from their daily stressors, a finding consistent with existing research that highlights reading's role in reducing stress and promoting relaxation (Latz et al, 2016). The imagery of serene reading environments captured in the photographs further emphasizes the importance of creating dedicated spaces for reading, which can enhance the calming effects of this activity. This aligns with Mangan et al. (2019), who found that the physical environment in which reading takes place can significantly impact the reader's engagement and emotional response.

The ability of reading to foster emotional connections and empathy was another prominent theme. Participants' narratives frequently mentioned how engaging with characters and stories helped them understand different perspectives and cultivate empathy. This finding supports the work of Hakemulder (2020), who argued that narrative transportation in fiction enhances readers' ability to empathize with others. The photovoice method provided vivid illustrations of this process, with participants reflecting on how specific books resonated with their personal experiences and broadened their understanding of others. This empathic engagement is particularly relevant for Gen Z, who are navigating complex social dynamics in a rapidly changing world (Hussain & Griffiths, 2021).

Reading's role in promoting self-reflection and personal growth was also highlighted by participants, who often documented their use of journals and notebooks alongside their reading materials. This practice of reflective writing, prompted by their reading, indicates that books serve as catalysts for introspection and personal development. This finding is in line with the principles of bibliotherapy, which emphasize the use of literature to foster self-awareness and personal insight (Manganello et al., 2020). The participants were able to articulate their thoughts and emotions more clearly. This led to the contribution in their overall mental health and well-being and this was done by reflecting on their reading,

The widespread use of digital reading platforms among participants highlights the significant impact of technology on reading habits. The convenience and accessibility provided by e-readers, tablets, and smartphones have transformed how Gen Z engages with literature. This finding corroborates the work of Baron (2021), who noted that digital platforms have democratized access to books and made it easier for young people to integrate reading into their daily routines. The photovoice documentation revealed that digital reading allows for flexibility, enabling participants to read in various settings and at differ-

ent times, thus maintaining a consistent reading habit. The interactive features of digital books, such as hyperlinks and multimedia content, also enhance the reading experience, making it more engaging for digitally savvy readers.

Fittingly, the theme of community and shared experiences underscores the social dimension of reading. Participants documented their involvement in book clubs and online reading groups, highlighting the importance of communal reading activities. These findings are supported by Smith et al. (2020), who found that social interactions around books can enhance readers' engagement and enjoyment. The photovoice method provided a unique glimpse into how these social interactions contribute to the therapeutic benefits of reading, as participants described the support and camaraderie they found in these communities. This sense of belonging and shared purpose is crucial for Gen Z, who often experience feelings of isolation and disconnection in the digital age (Twenge, 2019; Bin & Mpolomoka, 2023; Chipili, 2024).

### Specific Mental Health Benefits that Gen Z Associates with Reading by Analyzing Their Photographs and Narratives

The theme of anxiety reduction and relaxation is consistent with previous research that highlights reading as an effective means of stress management. Participants described reading as a sanctuary from stress, offering mental escape and relaxation. This aligns with Latz et al (2016), who found six minutes of reading can significantly reduce stress levels. Photographs of cozy nooks and serene settings emphasized the role of environment in maximizing reading's calming effects.

In other findings as presented, the emotional catharsis and expression facilitated by reading, as documented by participants, support the therapeutic principles of bibliotherapy. Participants noted that reading emotionally resonant stories allowed them to process and articulate their own feelings, providing a form of emotional release. This finding echoes the work of Hakemulder (2020), who found that engaging with narrative fiction can lead to emotional and psychological benefits by allowing readers to experience and understand emotions vicariously. The ability of reading to evoke strong emotional responses and provide a safe outlet for expression is particularly relevant for Gen Z, who often face intense emotional pressures in both academic and social spheres. This therapeutic engagement with literature can thus play a crucial role in emotional regulation and mental health.

The theme of resilience and coping skills highlights how reading can provide practical and inspirational resources for managing life's challenges. Participants frequently referenced self-help books and stories of personal triumph, indicating that these genres offer valuable coping strategies and motivational support. This finding is supported by Manganello et al. (2020), who noted that reading self-help literature can improve psychological resilience by providing readers with tools and frameworks to address their issues. The narratives collected in this study reveal that reading about characters who overcome adversity inspires readers to adopt similar resilience in their own lives. This suggests that literature not only entertains but also educates and equips readers with the skills needed to navigate their personal challenges effectively.

Furthermore, the enhancement of empathy and social connection through reading is a well-documented benefit that was strongly reflected in the participants' experiences. By engaging with diverse narratives and perspectives, readers reported increased empathy and understanding of others. This aligns with the findings of Mar et al. (2006), who demonstrated that frequent fiction readers tend to have higher levels of empathy and social acumen. The social dimension of reading, as captured in the photovoice narratives, also highlights the role of book clubs and reading groups in fostering community and connection. These social interactions around shared reading experiences enhance the therapeutic benefits of reading by providing a support network and opportunities for meaningful discussions, which are vital for mental health (Supper, Guay & Talbot, 2021).

The theme of self-discovery and personal growth underscores the introspective and developmental potential of reading. Participants frequently documented how reading facilitated self-reflection and personal insight, helping them understand their strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. This is consistent with the therapeutic goals of bibliotherapy, which aim to promote self-awareness and personal growth through literature (Pehrsson & McMillen, 2020). The practice of reflective writing alongside reading, as noted by participants, enhances this process by allowing readers to articulate and deepen their insights. This suggests that reading, coupled with reflective practices, can be a powerful tool for personal development and mental health support.

## Impact of Digital Reading Platforms on the Reading Habits and Therapeutic Experiences of Gen Z Participants

The qualitative findings from the photovoice study reveal the significant impact of digital reading platforms on the reading habits and therapeutic experiences of Generation Z. The enhanced convenience and flexibility provided by these platforms allow for seamless integration of reading into daily routines. This aligns with Baron (2021), who noted that digital platforms democratize access to literature by making it more portable and accessible. The ability to read anywhere and at any time significantly reduces barriers to regular reading, fostering a habit that supports both educational and mental health outcomes. Moreover, the personalized and interactive features of digital reading platforms further enhance the reading experience, making it more engaging and tailored to individual needs. This supports the findings of Mangen et al. (2019), who found that such features can significantly improve reader engagement and satisfaction. For Generation Z, accustomed to interactive digital experiences, the ability to customize their reading environment enhances their comfort and sustains their interest in reading.

From the findings, emotional and therapeutic benefits of digital reading are particularly noteworthy. For example, the participants described how reading on digital platforms helped them manage stress and anxiety, providing a mental escape and a means of emotional regulation. This echoes the therapeutic principles of bibliotherapy, which emphasize the role of literature in facilitating emotional healing and personal growth (Latz et al, 2016). The ability to access a wide range of genres and authors on digital platforms allows young readers to find books that resonate with their personal experiences and provide solace and insight.

Accessibility and inclusivity are crucial advantages of digital reading platforms, as highlighted by the participants. The features that support readers with visual impairments and other reading difficulties ensure that literature is accessible to a broader audience. This aligns with the research by Mangen et al. (2019), emphasizing the potential of digital reading technologies to enhance accessibility and inclusivity. The social dimension of digital reading platforms fosters a sense of community and shared experience among readers. For instance, the involvement in online book clubs and reading communities provides social support and enhances the reading experience through collective engagement. This finding supports Lichty (2013) who noted the significant influence of social media and online communities on the reading habits of Gen Z.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has demonstrated the profound impact of digital reading platforms on the reading habits and therapeutic experiences of Gen Z, highlighting their ability to make reading more accessible, personalized, and engaging. Through the photovoice methodology, it is evident that these platforms offer significant emotional and therapeutic benefits, including stress relief and enhanced mental well-being, while also promoting inclusivity and community among young readers. Integrating these technologies into educational and mental health strategies, can help to effectively address the

unique needs of this digitally native generation, fostering a culture of reading that supports both personal growth and social connection. These findings have shown the potential of digital reading platforms to play a pivotal role in promoting literacy and mental health in the digital era.

## Recommendations

1. Schools and educational institutions should incorporate digital reading platforms into their curricula to enhance student engagement with literature.
2. Publishers and developers of digital reading platforms should focus on creating and promoting content that is culturally relevant and resonates with the diverse experiences of Generation Z.
3. Digital reading platforms should facilitate the formation of online book clubs and reading communities to provide social support and enhance the reading experience.
4. Digital reading platforms should continue to develop and improve accessibility features, such as text-to-speech, adjustable text sizes and screen readers.

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