

Literature online: Research into reading habits almost in real time

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Young people make intensive use of digital networks to read, write and comment on literary texts. But their reading behavior varies considerably depending on whether the title is from the world of popular or classic

literature, as revealed by a new study that takes the reading platform Wattpad as an example. This computer-aided analysis under the direction of the University of Basel was published in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

Time and time again, people complain that young people no longer read enough—with the habit of deeper reading, in particular, becoming lost. But this overlooks the fact that young people not only read printed books, but also use several different forms of media to read and write literature. Many teenagers turn to networks such as Goodreads, BücherTreff and LovelyBooks in order to read literature, discuss it with other readers and even write their own literature. This is termed "social reading."

The phenomenal scale of "social reading" is clear from the Wattpad platform, on which more than 80 million predominantly young people worldwide exchange some 100,000 stories in more than 50 languages every day. Fanfiction, in which fans write continuations of famous stories such as Harry Potter, is a particularly popular genre.

Computer-aided analysis

For the first time, a team of researchers from Switzerland and Italy have researched the use of the digital reading platform Wattpad in greater detail. Their research incorporated computer-aided techniques, such as network analysis and sentiment analysis, in order to detect patterns in reading behavior within the millions of datasets.

Using statistical techniques, the researchers analyzed which books young people around the world read and comment on, and also write themselves on platforms such as Wattpad. The analysis looked at reading preferences, the emotionality and intensity of comments made about books, the networking between young readers and the potential

educational impact.

Passionate reading

This revealed how intensively [young people](#) read not only youth literature—"teen fiction"—but also classic literature by, for example, Jane Austen or Hermann Hesse, commenting on individual sentences up to several hundred times and using the works as a model for stories of their own. It is also striking to see that the young readers are highly emotionally involved in this process.

Nevertheless, there are clear differences depending on whether a text is classified as popular [literature](#) or belongs to the classical literary canon. For example, teen fiction is read and commented on much more frequently on Wattpad than classic works. The researchers also observed that readers often stop reading classic works after the first few chapters, whereas teen fiction manages to captivate readers over longer sections of the plot.

Another aspect that varied by genre was the degree of interchange between users: readers of teen fiction formed networks with strong social bonds, with frequent interaction. Among readers of the classics, on the other hand, the researchers identified a more cognitively oriented style of interaction, in which users helped one another to understand and interpret the works.

A new understanding of culture

"For the first time, we're able to analyze reading behavior almost in real [time](#)," says study leader Professor Gerhard Lauer, from the Digital Humanities Lab at the University of Basel. "Social media is ushering in a revolution in our understanding of culture. Platforms such as Wattpad,

Spotify and Netflix enable culture to be understood in a density and accuracy that goes way beyond previous approaches in the humanities and social sciences."

More information: Federico Pianzola et al, Wattpad as a resource for literary studies. Quantitative and qualitative examples of the importance of digital social reading and readers' comments in the margins, *PLOS ONE* (2020). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0226708](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0226708)

Provided by University of Basel

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