

# READING MOTIVATION, PRACTICES, AND HABITS IN YOUNG ADULTS: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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## Abstract

Exploring the construct of reading motivation plays a crucial role in supporting reading habits across one's lifespan. To counteract the gradual decline in interest in reading and to foster readers capable of maintaining the pleasure of reading over time, it is necessary to adopt a diachronic perspective in which interventions are embedded within an integrated, flexible, and systemic model of reading education. Such a model makes it possible to act both on the development of reading comprehension skills and on the emotional and affective components that sustain reading habits. Reading motivation has been extensively investigated among primary and secondary school students, whereas studies focusing on university students or, more broadly, on the profile of adult readers are far less common. Consequently, validated tools capable of gathering reliable information on adult readers are also less developed. The present study aims to broaden the reflection on the dimensions that influence individuals' engagement in reading practices after the completion of formal schooling. Its main objective was to identify suitable tools to examine in depth the profile of adult readers, with particular attention to the dimension of reading motivation. Within this framework, the process of translating and adapting the Adult Motivation for Reading Scale by Schutte and Malouff (2007) for the Italian context was initiated. This instrument is designed to measure four main dimensions: reading as part of one's personal identity, reading self-efficacy, reading for recognition, and reading as a means of enhancing performance in other domains. Introducing this tool into the Italian context represents a valuable resource for examining the profile of adult readers, particularly among university students.

Keywords: Reading practices, universities, reading motivation, reading pleasure, empirical study.

## 1 READING BOOKS IN ITALY

In Italy, the propensity to read has historically remained at rather low levels: readers who read for reasons that are other than strictly scholastic or professional have always been less than half of the population, with the minimum hitting 39.1% in 2000 ([1]). The temporal analysis of the Italian population as to their interest in reading from 2000 to today shows a growth trend until 2010, which was however followed by a progressive reduction that brought Italy back to the figures of about twenty years ago. The analysis, therefore, highlights the need to invest in the promotion of reading. In particular, in line with what has already been highlighted in the literature ([2], [3]), a recent ISTAT survey ([4]) with a specific focus on reading ([5]), confirms that the age group in which people read the most is pre-adolescence, after which a progressive decline in interest is observed: the highest share of people who have read at least one book for reasons that are other than strictly scholastic or professional in the 12 months prior to the interview is recorded in the 11-14 age group (59.7%), from which the percentage gradually decreases until it halves in the age group of 75 years and over (26.0%). In addition, there is a considerable gender difference, to the advantage of women. In particular, the percentage of female readers is higher than that of readers in all age groups, with a greater disparity in young adults. Therefore, there is a need to support the habit of reading throughout life and to keep the pleasure of reading alive over time [6], especially with reference to young men (Fig.1).

Investigating the motivations underlying the interest in reading, ISTAT notes that the pleasure reading gives is the predominant reason: as shown in Fig. 2, pleasure stands out in all age groups, from a minimum of 47.0% in readers aged 11-14, to a maximum of 72.9% in the 60-64 age group. With particular reference to young adults, there is an increase in this motivation, equal to 8 percentage points, precisely from the 18-19 age group to the 20-24 age group. Other reasons for reading include the desire to learn new things and the pleasure of discovery, both of which are characterized by progressive growth from 11-14 to 20-24 years. Conversely, reading as a duty shows the lowest percentage values and a decreasing trend with age, configuring itself as a typical motivation of school-age age groups (from 6-10 to 18-19 years) and being substantially absent in the following age groups.

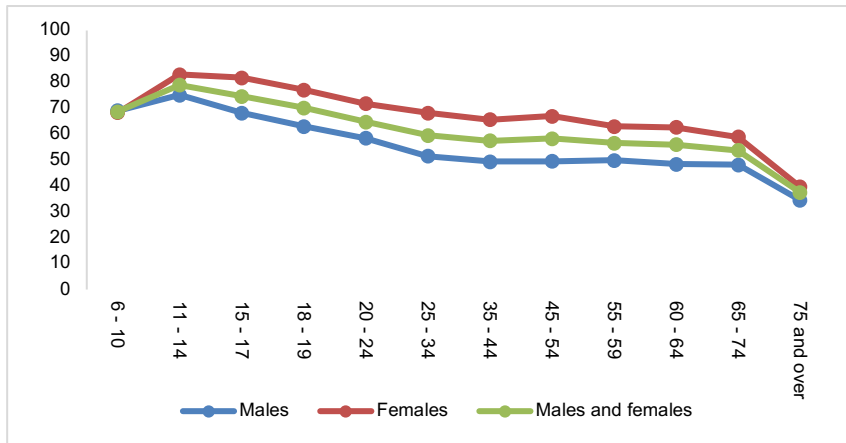


Figure 1 People aged 6 and over who have read at least one book for reasons other than strictly academic or professional in the 12 months preceding the interview, by age group and gender - Year 2024 (percentage values).

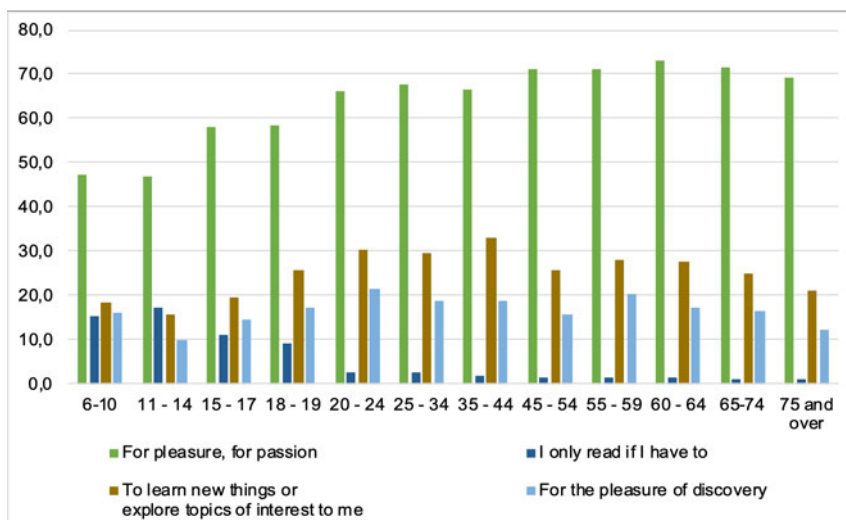


Figure 2 People aged 6 and over who read books in their spare time organized by reasons they generally don't read books and age group - Year 2024 (percentage values).

With reference to the motivations that, on the contrary, hinder the practice of reading, the central role of the motivational dimension emerges again: for readers between the ages of 6 and 34, the lack of pleasure in reading is in fact the main reason given for giving up reading, going from a minimum of 31.6% in the 6-10 age group to a maximum of 55.3% in the 18-19 age group (Fig. 3).

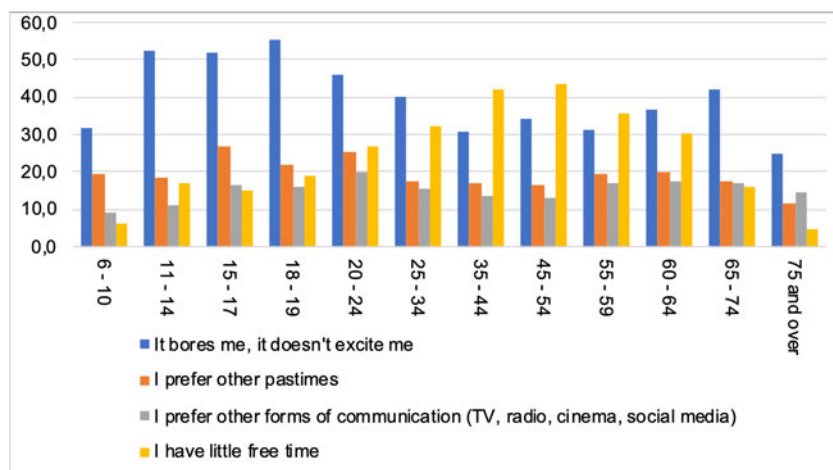


Figure 3. People aged 6 and over who do not read books in their free time organized by reason for not reading and age group - Year 2024 (percentage values).

A further explanation reported by those who do not read is lack of time, which is prevalent in the age groups between 35 and 59 years of age, with a peak of 43.6% in the 45-54 age group. Other reasons for hindering reading include a preference for other leisure activities and other forms of communication, especially among respondents between the ages of 15 and 24. Therefore, in the young adult age groups (18-19 and 20-24), the lack of pleasure in reading is the main reason for giving up reading, followed by the preference for other leisure activities and lack of time, suggesting the need to invest primarily in strengthening motivation and pleasure in reading.

## 2 ANALYSIS OF TOOLS THAT DETECT READING MOTIVATION FROM CHILDHOOD TO ADULTHOOD

Bringing children closer to reading from the earliest years of life can promote cognitive, relational and emotional-motivational development ([7]). In particular, reading to children in early childhood, familiarizing themselves with the object-book, sharing reading practices can be configured as resources to promote a lasting interest in reading ([8]). In Italy, national surveys by Istat ([4]) show that disaffection for reading tends to manifest itself at the end of upper secondary school, corresponding to the entry of young people into the university and/or professional world. To counter this phenomenon, it is desirable to adopt the integrated, flexible and systemic model of reading education, aimed at enhancing the variety, quality and different formats of text that are proposed and the plurality of reading contexts ([9]). The attention of all those involved in the processes of promoting reading (including teachers, educators, librarians) should be focused both on the ability to understand texts and on the pleasure of reading. In this sense, it is important to recognize and detect the interests, habits and attitudes that students develop towards reading ([10]).

To this end, an analysis of the international literature was conducted, based on a bibliographic review of scientific research and tools used to investigate motivation to read throughout life. The RomaTreDiscovery search engine was used. It offers access to the University's bibliographic resources, as well as to additional open access online resources including the platforms of periodicals of major publishers, large collections of electronic books and the main national and international multidisciplinary databases such as Web of Science, Scopus, ScienceDirect Elsevier, EBSCOhost, Education research complete<sup>1</sup>. Starting from the use of the specific keywords *reading, motivation, scales, educational, reader profile, reading behavior, reading practices, reading enjoyment, reading pleasure, reading interest, engagement, survey, measurement instrument* combined with each other through the use of Boolean operators (AND, OR), search strings were identified among which the combined terms "*(Reading motivation scales) AND (educational)*" were analyzed in order to broaden and better target the identification of relevant contributions. As shown in Table 1, the research produced a total of 549 contributions. Subsequently, applying the filter relating only to peer-reviewed journals, the number was reduced to 446. In order to focus attention on the most recent research, a twenty-year time span, from 2005 to the present, was therefore chosen, which has led to the detection of 397 articles. A selection was then made through an initial analysis of titles and abstracts. The inclusion criteria concerned empirical and quasi-experimental studies focused on reading motivation, attitudes towards reading and assessment tools used in different age groups. Contributions that are not relevant to the research topic, duplicates, those relating to specific literary genres or particular types of teaching and articles relating to reading in a second language were therefore excluded. Furthermore, papers on school evaluation and those referring to diagnostic medical fields or focused on recipients with specific pathological findings were not taken into consideration.

Table 1. Analysis of the international literature on reading motivation

<i>Initial number of contributions</i>	<i>Number of contributions in peer-reviewed journals</i>	<i>Contributions from 2005 to 2025</i>	<i>Relevant contributions</i>
549	446	397	29

As can be seen from Table 2, and in line with national and international research ([11]), most of the contributions focus on primary and lower secondary schools, while there is a decrease in studies related to secondary school and the university context.

Table 2. Reading motivation tools divided by unit of analysis

Reading Motivation Tools	School Level	Year	Authors	Country
SRERS - Shared Reading Engagement Rating Scale	Kindergarten	2023	Son, Baroody, Osgood Opatz	USA
Reading Motivation Scale for Texts	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2012	Aydemir, Ozturk	Turkey
Motivation for Reading Questionnaire adapted based on MRQ (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2019	Moretti, Morini, Giuliani	Italy
SELM - Survey of Early Literacy Motivation	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2019	McTiguea, Solheima, Walgermoa, Njål Foldnes	Norway
CMRQ - Chinese Motivation for Reading Questionnaire adapted based on MRQ (Wigfield & Guthrie, 1997)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2021	Wang, Jin	China
ESMS - Elementary School Motivation Scale	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2010	Guay, Chanal, Ratelle, Marsh Larose, Michel Boivin	Canada
MICI - Motivating Instructional Context Inventory	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2007	Lam, Law	China
SRQ-Reading Motivation	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2012	De Naeghel, Van Keer, Vansteenkiste, Rosseeel	Belgium
ERAS - Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990) + MRP - Motivation to read profile (Gambrell et al., 1996)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2016	Long, Szabo	USA
Questionnaire adapted based on MRQ - Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (Guthrie, 2010)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2017	van Rijka, de Meyc, de Haand, van Oersc, Monique Volman	Netherlands
Pictorial Scale of Perceived Literacy Interest and reader self-concept	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2018	Walgermo, Frijters, Solheim	Norway
EMAPRE - the Motivation Assessment Scale for Learning adapted based on Escala da Avaliação da Motivação para a Aprendizagem (Zenorini & Santos, 2010)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2018	dos Santos, de Moraes, Helena Lima	Brazil
Leisure reading predictor scales based on the TPB Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2014	Elisabeth Maria Schüller	Germany
R&MS - The Reading and Me Survey	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2019	Adelson, Cash, Pittard, Sherretz Patrick Pössel, and Allison D. Blackburn	USA
Questionnaire developed by adapting scales to measure motivation in Academic Self-Regulation Questionnaire - SRQ-A (Deci & Ryan, 1999) and SDT theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2022	Winberg, Tegmark, Vinterek, Alatalo	Sweden
Questionnaire adapted based on Motivational Orientation Scales (Nicholls, 1989)	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2013	Hamilton, Nolen, Abbott	USA
EML - AJ Escala de Motivação em Leitura	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2016	Gomes, Boruchovitch	Brazil
Reading Self-Efficacy Scale	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2013	Fidalgo, Arias-Gundin, Olivares	Spain
RAS - Reading Attitude Scale	primary school and/or lower secondary school	2009	Murat Özbay, Yusuf Uyar	Turkey
MORQ - Motivations for Online Reading Questionnaire adapted based on MORQ (Forzani et al., 2021)	upper secondary school	2024	Xie, Huang	China
HRMQ - Habitual Reading Motivation Questionnaire adapted based on FHLM (Möller & Bomerad, 2007)	upper secondary school	2023	Engler, Westphal	Germany
ARMS - Adult motivation for reading scale	university/adult	2007	Schutte, Malouff	Australia
Questionnaire adapted based on Wigfield and Guthrie's scale for measuring reading motivation (1997)	university/adult	2024	Al-Sobh, Al-Zoubi	Jordan
PoLR - Predictors of Leisure Reading (PoLR)	university/adult	2021	Martin-Chang, Kozak, Levesque, Calarco, Mar	Canada

The 29 articles considered relevant were then read in full. The included studies were analyzed taking into account the age group of the recipients as a categorization criterion. Particular attention was paid to the theoretical models of reference and to the type of instrument for measuring reading motivation. By way of example, for each school level, some tools for detecting reading motivation are listed below.

In kindergarten, the *Shared Reading Engagement Rating Scale - SRERS* measures reading motivation through the analysis of children's behavioral involvement, pleasure and degree of attention during shared reading aloud in class ([12]). It consists of 19 items designed to analyze two macro-areas: involvement and interaction characterized by verbal, cognitive, social exchanges and active involvement related to physical participation and individual attention. The questionnaire is completed by teachers, who evaluate the behavior of individual children during group or whole class readings with the use of a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = almost never to 5 = almost always) to indicate the frequency with which the child manifests certain behaviors. The results demonstrate that only engagement and active interaction are predictors for the development of early literacy skills, such as phonological awareness and text comprehension.

In primary school, most research makes full or partial use of the *Reading Motivation Scale - RMS*. The scale consists of items of varying numbers depending on the version used and is designed to recognize different components of student motivation ([13]), including self-efficacy in reading, perceived difficulty in reading, intrinsic reading motivation, and avoidance of reading ([14]). The survey uses a Likert scale, generally 4-point for primary school students, which quantifies the degree of agreement with each item from 1 to 4. This tool has been used in various contexts, in research on engagement and reading education, to assess the effectiveness of educational interventions and is often integrated with the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire – MRQ ([15]). The MRQ recognizes the multidimensional construct of reading by measuring recognition, engagement, competition, and social aspects related to reading practices across different dimensions ([16]). The research highlighted here reveals the influence of the family environment on reading motivation and the correlation between reading motivation and academic success ([17], [18]).

In lower secondary school, the *Reading Self-Efficacy Scale* measures confidence in one's reading skills, considered as a determinant of academic success ([19]). The questionnaire consists of 15 items that consider two main factors: self-efficacy in decoding and situational modeling (reading fluently, pronouncing

words correctly, and understanding the global or inferential meaning of the text) and textual self-efficacy (analyzing the structure of the text, identifying the main ideas, and establishing relationships between them). A 5-point Likert scale from "not at all sure" to "very safe" is proposed to answer this. This tool allows you to become aware of your effectiveness and strengthen your confidence in your reading skills.

In upper secondary school, an interesting tool is the *Habitual Reading Motivation Questionnaire - HRMQ* ([20]). The tool detects the student's intrinsic reading motivation with items that aim to capture the interest and pleasure in reading, regardless of the context. The results indicate the importance of teacher behaviour as a key protective factor in preserving young people's reading pleasure. The student-centered approach is adopted to enhance students' skills and aptitudes, offering them opportunities for choice and enhancing the motivational dimension ([21]).

Considering the disaffection for reading that manifests itself at the end of secondary school, and the phenomenon of returning illiteracy, it is appropriate to reflect on strategies to consolidate the pleasure of reading and reading competence even in adulthood ([22]). The *Adult Reading Motivation Scale - AMRS* represents one of the few questionnaires on reading motivation specifically developed for the adult population, translated and adapted in multiple territorial contexts ([23]). It consists of 21 items that people respond to using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 5 "strongly agree". The final score reflects the overall motivation to read by dividing it into four dimensions: reading as part of one's self, effectiveness in reading, reading for recognition, reading to succeed in other areas. The results indicate that the scale scores are significantly related to reading pleasure, how often you read, and the time spent reading ([24]).

The tools considered share a socio-cognitive theoretical framework and a multidimensional conception of the construct and allow one to measure the different components of reading motivation that influence reader engagement and support the affective-emotional dimensions underlying reading attitudes and habits throughout life.

### **3 RESEARCH ON READING MOTIVATION IN YOUNG ADULTS**

On the basis of the data that emerged from Istat on the propensity to read and the analysis of the international literature, based on a bibliographic review of scientific research and the tools used to investigate reading motivation throughout life, the need emerged to identify a tool that could detect reliable data on reading motivation in young adults to be introduced in the Italian context. Among the internationally validated tools, the research team identified the Adult Motivation for Reading Scale (AMRS) by Schutte & Malouff ([24]). The instrument in its original version was developed based on the theory of reading motivation ([25]; [26]; [27]) and the Reading Motivation Questionnaire (MRQ) for children ([15]). A factor analysis conducted by Schutte & Malouff ([24]) on a population of adults (average age 28) revealed four main factors. The first has been called "Reading as part of one's self", in which items are presented that reveal how reading can represent an essential part of the self, a part of one's identity. The factor reflects the importance of being a reader and relating to others as a reader. This dimension is the one that differs most from the dimensions found in children's reading motivation. The items that belong to this first factor report the developmental changes in the cognitive system and self-perception that characterize adulthood. The second factor called "Reading Effectiveness" focuses on the interest in being an effective reader. In particular, the items report the possibility of facing challenges in reading and considering the opportunity to master difficult reading texts. The third factor "Reading by recognition" collects the items that have in common the reader's desire for others to appreciate and show recognition of their reading. The items that characterize this factor are located in the extrinsic sphere of motivation. The fourth and final factor "Reading to succeed in other areas" has as its central aspect the possibility of using reading to succeed in other areas and obtain the desired results. It is characterized by being a functional dimension. The 21 items that make up the Adult Motivation for Reading Scale have good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha of .85. The study by Schutte & Malouff ([24]) also investigated the correlations between scales and how scales relate to recreational reading hours and compulsory reading hours. It emerged that the more specifically intrinsic factors are correlated with leisure reading while those reflecting extrinsic motivation are significantly correlated with compulsory reading.

In order to introduce the tool in the Italian context, the process of translating the tool from English into Italian was started. The items were initially translated literally. The reverse translation process was then carried out so that the text was semantically equivalent in the two languages, and accuracy could be verified, highlighting potential inaccuracies. A group of experts in the field then proceeded to readapt the items respecting the cultural context of reference. In fact, some items were not sufficiently

comprehensible and for this reason the possibility of integrating the text with examples was evaluated. The try-out phase of the tool is underway, which involves the administration of the tool in the translated version and adapted to a group of young adult students. The results will lead to the definitive revision of the instrument. The plan is to use the tool with a non-probability and convenience sample that includes both secondary school students and university students. The data collected will permit the start of the validation process through factor analysis that will allow us to verify whether the dimensions of the Adult Motivation for Reading Scale and the 21 original items can also be confirmed in the Italian context or will need modification.

### 3.1 The profile of young adult readers

In parallel with the start of the process of adapting the Adult Motivation for Reading Scale to the Italian context, a deeper understanding for what young adults mean by motivation to read was sought. The reason was an interest to know the point of view of young adults in order to identify strategies and practices that can promote the pleasure of reading throughout life. The target audience was secondary school students and university students. The research made use of non-probability convenience sampling. A total of 1,371 students were involved. The largest percentage of respondents was concentrated in the 19-21 age group (50.1%). For research, this group is particularly significant as it represents the period in which the decline in reading habits is most strongly manifested in Italy ([4]). A semi-structured questionnaire was used as a data collection tool to better define the profile of young adult readers. The questions on the questionnaire detect age, gender, secondary school attended, reading frequency, and number of books available at home. Respondents are then asked to describe themselves as readers (or non-readers) using 5 adjectives of their choice. They were also asked to briefly define their motivation for reading and to choose a key word to represent it. The analysis of the open-ended answers was carried out with a textual analysis, using a bottom-up evidence-based approach.

The majority of respondents indicate that they have a maximum of a hundred books available at home (41.8%) while 30.5% are between 100 and 500 books. A very small percentage is made up of those who claim to have more than 500 books (only 7.8%) as well as those who perceive that they have less than 10 books (7.2%). With regard to the number of books read for personal reasons (not related to study or work activities) in the year prior to the administration of the questionnaire, the lowest percentage (7.2%) is represented by the so-called strong readers, i.e. those who read an average of one book per month. 10.4% define themselves as non-readers. The largest share is made up of those who read between 1 and 3 books for personal interest, they can be defined as weak readers, while 38.3% read between 4 and 11 books, classifying themselves as average readers. With a question they were asked to define their profile as readers using a maximum of five adjectives. A total of 5,862 words were analyzed. The most frequent words were considered to be those detected more than 50 times. The most recurrent adjectives are curious, attentive, passionate, interested and reflective, which are connected both to the affective-emotional dimension of reading and to the cognitive sphere. The adjective "constant" was considered particularly interesting as one of the objectives of the research is to identify, in perspective, the strategies to maintain the pleasure and habit of reading over time. For this reason, it has been studied in depth to detect its placement in relation to the other adjectives. The adjective "constant" has been associated 78 times with the word curious; 34 times with the word attentive; 22 times with the interested.

To refine the profile of the respondents who included the adjective constant in the words to describe themselves, the number of books read and the number of books owned at home were analyzed. The majority of subjects who defined themselves as constant are in the 19-21 age group (46.3%) and declare that they read between 4 and 11 books a year (53.6%). Only 9.7% are strong readers, who read more than 12 books a year. The number of book available in the house is approximately 100 books. In describing the motivation to read, the majority define it as the interest in reading in order to acquire information that can be useful for different purposes, for example *"It is the drive for cognitive and emotional development, which allows you to develop and consolidate language skills"*, or *"In my opinion, the motivation to read is to enrich oneself from a cultural and lexical point of view"*. Others refer to the sphere of identification and empathy, *"The motivation to read in my opinion is given by the feeling of identifying with the lives of the characters and detaching oneself from reality"*, or even to the dimension of involvement *"The motivation to read in my opinion, consists in involving the reader sentimentally, helping him to continuously overcome new challenges so as to learn more and more"*.

## 4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

The results of the research contribute to better understanding the construct of reading motivation, with a diachronic look that recognizes the importance of making use of an integrated and flexible model of reading education that favors the consolidation of the reader's profile over time. Knowing and consciously introducing valid and reliable tools that can detect data on the propensity and interest in reading is important in order to identify the most effective strategies to promote the pleasure of reading. The analysis of the international literature has provided an overview of the most widespread and used tools, showing that research in the sector is primarily focused on the school of the first cycle of education. The data on the number of readers, at a national level, highlight the need to broaden the perspective by also paying attention to the young adult age group. In this sense, the introduction of the Adult Motivation for Reading Scale (AMRS) by Schutte & Malouff ([24]) in the Italian context is configured as a potential resource to support the motivation to read in the most delicate period in which young people move from secondary school to university or professional life and risk moving away from reading.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors shared the drafting of the article in all its parts. In particular, G. Moretti wrote § 4; A. L. Morini § 3; F. Gabrielli § 1; B. Ambu § 2. The contribution is the result of a research project funded by the Department of Education of Roma Tre University in the year 2025.

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