

Enhancing knowledge and well-being through leisure reading to promote cognitive, emotional, and social benefits for overall personal growth

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Abstract - This study aims to explore the multifaceted benefits of reading during free time, focusing on its impact on knowledge acquisition, emotional well-being, and social development. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining surveys and focus groups across diverse age groups including adolescents and young adults. Data analysis revealed that leisure reading enhances vocabulary, literacy skills, and critical thinking while also providing relaxation, stress relief, and emotional support. Additionally, reading for pleasure fosters empathy, cultural competence, and ethical reflection, particularly among medical students and youth. The findings highlight the role of accessible resources such as public libraries in promoting leisure reading and suggest that early exposure to books encourages lifelong reading habits. The study concludes that leisure reading is a vital activity for intellectual growth and psychological health, recommending further longitudinal research to deepen understanding of its long-term effects.

Keywords: Leisure reading, vocabulary development, emotional well-being, empathy, public libraries

1. Introduction

Reading during leisure time has gained increasing attention as a valuable activity that supports cognitive, emotional, and social development. Leisure reading has been shown to support cognitive, emotional, and social development across various age groups. Research involving over 14,000 college students found that frequent leisure reading significantly predicted higher social-emotional competencies (SEC), particularly in self-awareness and relationship management, with stronger effects observed in students from rural backgrounds or lower parental education levels (Li et al., 2025).

Studies also suggest that engagement with fiction enhances social cognitive abilities such as empathy and theory of mind, potentially through simulation processes where readers mentally simulate characters' experiences (Mumper & Gerrig, 2019; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017). Longitudinal research on adolescents indicates that reading modern classic literature is positively associated with



prosocial behaviour and social adjustment, although general cumulative reading did not predict these outcomes (Lenhart et al., 2023).

Leisure reading is linked to emotional development by improving interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, empathy, and emotional comprehension across ages (Batini et al., 2020), while early childhood reading interventions promote adaptive emotion regulation strategies like distraction (Schoppmann et al., 2023). Additionally, early-initiated reading for pleasure correlates with better cognitive performance, mental well-being, and brain structure development in young adolescents, suggesting lasting benefits on cognition and emotional health (Sun et al., 2023).

Overall, leisure reading appears to be a valuable activity fostering multiple dimensions of human development. The urgency to understand its benefits stems from growing evidence linking leisure reading to improved mental health, social-emotional competencies, and overall well-being across diverse populations, including adolescents, college students, older adults, and medical professionals (Li et al., 2025; Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2023; Perera et al., 2025; Bian & Xiang, 2023).

Key terms in this study include leisure reading – defined as voluntary reading for enjoyment outside academic or work requirements – and social cognition, which encompasses abilities like empathy and theory of mind that facilitate interpersonal understanding (Mumper & Gerrig, 2019; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017).

Despite widespread recognition of reading's potential benefits, the mechanisms through which leisure reading influences cognitive and emotional outcomes remain underexplored, highlighting a need for comprehensive research (Mumper & Gerrig, 2019; Laermans et al., 2020).

This study focuses on examining how leisure reading enhances knowledge acquisition and emotional well-being while fostering social skills such as empathy and prosocial behaviour. By integrating findings from large-scale surveys and longitudinal studies, the research aims to clarify the role of leisure reading in promoting holistic personal development.

Previous studies consistently highlight that leisure reading positively influences cognitive, emotional, and social domains. Research shows that engagement with fiction enhances social cognitive abilities such as empathy and theory of mind, with simulation theory often proposed to explain these effects, though the exact causal mechanisms remain underexplored (Mumper & Gerrig, 2019; Mumper & Gerrig, 2017).

Large-scale empirical evidence from college students indicates that frequent leisure reading predicts stronger social-emotional competencies, particularly in self-awareness and relationship management, with notable benefits for students from rural or less-educated backgrounds (Li et al., 2025). Longitudinal data on adolescents suggest that reading modern classic literature is associated with increased prosocial behaviour and better social adjustment, although general cumulative reading does not always predict these outcomes (Lenhart et al., 2023). Studies on older adults link regular leisure reading to reduced depression risk, improved cognitive functioning, and enhanced well-being, supporting its role as a health resource across the lifespan (Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2023; Bian & Xiang, 2023; Milani et al., 2025).

Theoretical frameworks primarily draw on simulation theory and learning-memory processes to explain how narrative engagement fosters affective responses and social cognition; however, gaps remain regarding the diversity of emotional processes involved and the long-term impact of leisure reading on mental health and social skills (Mumper & Gerrig, 2019; Laermans et al., 2020).

Leisure reading has been consistently linked to positive outcomes in cognitive, emotional, and social development across different age groups. Large-scale research with college students shows that frequent leisure reading predicts stronger social-emotional competencies, especially in self-awareness and relationship management, with amplified benefits for those from rural or less-educated backgrounds (Li et al., 2025).

Longitudinal studies on adolescents reveal that while general cumulative reading does not always predict prosocial behaviour or social adjustment, reading modern classic literature is positively associated with these social outcomes (Lenhart et al., 2023). In younger children, shared reading of socially themed picture books enhances prosocial behaviour through increased empathy, highlighting

empathy as a key mechanism connecting reading and social development (Chen et al., 2025; Ciesielska et al., 2025).

Among older adults, regular leisure reading correlates with reduced depression risk, better cognitive functioning, and improved well-being, suggesting its role as a valuable health resource throughout the lifespan (Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2023; Laermans et al., 2020).

Theoretical explanations often invoke simulation theory to describe how narrative engagement fosters empathy and theory of mind, but research also points to diverse emotional processes and learning-memory mechanisms contributing to these effects; however, causal pathways and long-term impacts on mental health remain underexplored (Mumper & Gerrig, 2019; Batini et al., 2020). Overall, leisure reading emerges as a multifaceted activity that supports social cognition, emotional regulation, prosocial behaviour, and cognitive health across the lifespan.

Research problems include limited understanding of the specific mechanisms by which leisure reading enhances social cognition and emotional well-being, inconsistent findings about genre-specific effects, and a lack of longitudinal studies across diverse populations. Additionally, while benefits for medical students' empathy and reflective skills have been identified, more comprehensive research is needed to assess how leisure reading can be systematically integrated into educational settings to promote holistic development (Perera et al., 2025; Cisco, 2025). Addressing these gaps could inform interventions leveraging leisure reading to improve cognitive health, emotional resilience, and social functioning.

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2. Method

The study employs a qualitative descriptive method to explore the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of leisure reading by collecting and analysing rich, contextual data. The first data collection approach is a literature study, which involves reviewing books, scientific articles, and journals related to reading habits and their impact on mental and emotional health. This method provides a



comprehensive understanding of existing knowledge and theoretical frameworks surrounding leisure reading's benefits. The second approach uses an online survey with open-ended questions distributed to respondents to gather detailed insights into their reading patterns, preferences, and perceived effects on well-being. Online surveys as qualitative tools offer flexibility and accessibility while enabling the collection of rich textual data that can capture diverse participant experiences.

Data analysis is conducted using thematic analysis (TA), a widely used qualitative method that identifies patterns or themes within textual data. TA allows for organizing complex data into meaningful categories that reflect participants' behaviours and factors influencing their reading habits. Thematic analysis can be applied inductively or deductively, providing adaptability across different research paradigms and enhancing rigor through systematic coding and theme development. Reflexive thematic analysis emphasizes the researcher's active role in interpreting data while maintaining methodological coherence and quality standards. This approach supports uncovering nuanced insights into how leisure reading influences mental health by highlighting recurring themes such as relaxation, emotional expression, cognitive engagement, and social connection.

Overall, combining literature review with qualitative online surveys analysed through thematic analysis offers a robust framework for understanding the multifaceted benefits of leisure reading. This methodology captures both existing scientific evidence and lived experiences of readers, facilitating a deeper exploration of how reading habits contribute to cognitive enhancement, emotional regulation, and social well-being. The use of thematic analysis ensures systematic identification of behavioural patterns while allowing flexibility to adapt findings to diverse contexts related to mental and emotional health.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1 Results

3.1.1 Cognitive and Emotional Benefits of Leisure Reading

Frequent engagement in leisure reading has been consistently linked to a variety of positive cognitive and emotional outcomes, particularly among middle-aged and older adults. A large-scale longitudinal study involving nearly 20,000 participants from 15 countries found that almost daily reading as a relaxed solitary activity was prospectively associated with a lower risk of depression, reduced cognitive impairment, fewer daily functioning limitations, and improved overall well-being. This suggests that reading not only supports mental health by providing relaxation but also actively stimulates cognitive processes that help maintain mental agility and emotional resilience over time. The protective effects of reading were robust even after controlling for sociodemographic factors, personality traits, lifestyle behaviours, and prior health status, indicating a strong independent association between leisure reading and mental health benefits.

Comparative research highlights that active cognitive leisure activities like reading have stronger protective effects against depression than passive activities such as watching television or movies (Bian & Xiang, 2023; Lin et al., 2022). For example, one study showed that individuals who engaged regularly in reading had significantly lower odds of developing depression compared to those who primarily watched television, which was not consistently linked to reduced depression risk (Bian & Xiang, 2023).

This distinction underscores the importance of cognitive engagement in leisure activities; reading requires focused attention, comprehension, and imagination, which may enhance neural plasticity and emotional regulation more effectively than passive entertainment. The cognitive benefits of leisure reading extend beyond mood improvement to include better preservation of memory and executive function. Longitudinal data from Taiwan demonstrated that older adults who read regularly were more likely to maintain higher global cognition scores and experience less cognitive decline over 12 years compared to non-readers (Lin et al., 2022).

Similarly, research on older adults with disabilities found that frequent participation in cognitive leisure activities like reading was associated with better cognitive function; however, this relationship was moderated by depression levels – higher depressive symptoms weakened the positive impact of leisure on cognition (Hao & Kim, 2024). This finding highlights the complex interplay

between emotional health and cognitive benefits derived from reading, suggesting that managing depression may be crucial to fully realizing the cognitive advantages of leisure activities.

In addition to reducing depression risk and preserving cognition, leisure reading contributes to enhanced emotional well-being by promoting relaxation and stress reduction. Reading can serve as a form of escapism or mindfulness that helps individuals regulate emotions and cope with daily stressors. Studies during the COVID-19 pandemic found that college students who engaged in reading reported better self-rated mental health compared to those involved in other types of leisure or online activities (Yan et al., 2022). This indicates that the immersive nature of reading may provide unique emotional benefits by fostering calmness and positive affect.

Shared or group-based reading interventions also demonstrate psychosocial benefits for older adults by improving communication skills, reducing loneliness, increasing social engagement, and enhancing satisfaction with social relationships (Milani et al., 2025). These findings suggest that while solitary reading supports individual cognitive-emotional health, shared reading can further promote social connectedness – a key factor in overall well-being during aging.

Early initiation of regular reading habits during childhood is additionally linked to long-term cognitive advantages and better mental health outcomes in adolescence. Large cohort studies show that children who read for pleasure early on exhibit superior performance on cognitive tests and lower scores on mental health problem scales later in life (Sun et al., 2023). Brain imaging studies reveal structural differences in regions related to language processing and executive function among early readers, supporting the idea that sustained engagement with literature shapes brain development beneficially.

Overall, the evidence strongly supports leisure reading as a multifaceted activity that enhances knowledge acquisition while simultaneously promoting emotional resilience and protecting against cognitive decline. Its active nature distinguishes it from more passive forms of entertainment by engaging multiple brain networks involved in attention, memory, empathy, and emotion regulation. However, the presence of depressive symptoms can moderate these benefits, emphasizing the need for integrated approaches addressing both mental health treatment and promotion of cognitively stimulating leisure activities (Hao & Kim, 2024; Kim et al., 2020).

Encouraging regular leisure reading across the lifespan emerges as a promising strategy for maintaining mental health and well-being among diverse populations. Frequent leisure reading is prospectively associated with lower depression risk, reduced cognitive impairment, improved daily functioning, enhanced emotional well-being through relaxation and stress reduction, better social connectedness via shared reading interventions, and long-term neurocognitive benefits starting from childhood. These findings highlight its value as an accessible non-pharmacological tool for supporting healthy aging and psychological resilience.

3.1.2 Social-Emotional Competencies in College Students

Large-scale survey data from 14,372 college students across 184 universities in Mainland China demonstrate that leisure reading significantly predicts higher social-emotional competencies (SEC), particularly in self-awareness and relationship management with oneself and others. The study found that leisure reading most strongly enhances the ability to recognize and manage one's relationship with oneself, followed by managing relationships within groups and making responsible decisions, and lastly managing interpersonal relationships. This pattern suggests that leisure reading primarily fosters intrapersonal skills before extending its benefits to social interactions. Importantly, the positive effect of leisure reading on SEC was especially pronounced among students from rural backgrounds or those whose parents had lower educational levels, indicating that leisure reading may help reduce social disparities by providing cognitive and emotional resources that might otherwise be less accessible (Li et al., 2025).

The strength of leisure reading's predictive effect on SEC varies across different levels of baseline competencies. Within the lower 75th percentile of SEC scores, the effect fluctuates but remains above average; however, for students with the highest baseline SEC (above the 75th percentile), the effect decreases, suggesting diminishing returns for those already possessing strong social-emotional skills ¹. This may be because highly competent students have developed these skills through other



experiences or activities, reducing the incremental benefit of leisure reading. These findings align with broader research emphasizing self-awareness and relationship management as core SEC domains responsive to reflective activities like reading, which require perspective-taking and emotional engagement (Li et al., 2025; Sande et al., 2019).

Social-emotional competencies encompass five key domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Leisure reading likely fosters these competencies by exposing individuals to diverse perspectives and complex emotional narratives that encourage empathy and introspection (Li et al., 2025; Sande et al., 2019). For college students facing new academic and social challenges, enhanced SEC can improve emotional regulation, interpersonal communication, and decision-making—skills critical for personal well-being and academic success.

The stronger impact of leisure reading on students from rural or less-educated family backgrounds suggests it serves as an equalizing force by enriching cognitive-emotional development outside formal education. This compensatory role supports the idea that promoting leisure reading can help bridge social gaps in emotional competence development [1](#). Universities might therefore consider targeted programs encouraging leisure reading among underrepresented or disadvantaged student groups to foster equitable growth in SEC.

Additional research links higher SEC with greater student engagement across youth populations regardless of age or background (Santos et al., 2023; Santos et al., 2022). Since student engagement is a key predictor of academic achievement and mental health, developing SEC through activities like leisure reading has practical importance beyond emotional well-being. Interventions such as bibliotherapeutic book clubs have also shown effectiveness in improving both reading attitudes and social-emotional skills among adolescents from low socioeconomic status communities (Tijm, et al., 2018), reinforcing the value of structured reading programs. Gender differences in SEC development have been observed in some studies; for example, females often score higher on self-awareness while males may excel in other areas depending on context (Lin et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024).

However, leisure reading's positive effects appear broadly applicable across genders without significant variation. Tailored approaches may optimize outcomes but do not diminish the overall benefit of promoting leisure reading for enhancing SEC. Frequent leisure reading significantly enhances college students' social-emotional competencies by strengthening self-awareness and relationship management skills. Its impact is particularly strong for students from rural areas or lower parental education backgrounds, suggesting a potential role in reducing social inequalities in emotional development. While benefits taper among those with already high SEC levels, promoting leisure reading remains a valuable strategy for fostering essential life skills critical to personal growth and academic success. Universities are encouraged to integrate support for leisure reading into student development programs to maximize these cognitive-emotional benefits across diverse populations.

3.1.3 Prosocial Behaviour and Social Adjustment in Adolescents

Longitudinal research on adolescents shows that cumulative leisure reading overall does not consistently predict prosocial behaviour or social adjustment; however, reading modern classic literature is positively associated with these social outcomes. This suggests that the type of literature matters, with modern classics potentially fostering deeper social cognition and prosocial tendencies during adolescence by exposing readers to complex moral and emotional themes. The findings highlight that not all reading experiences equally contribute to social development, emphasizing the importance of content quality and thematic depth in promoting prosocial behaviour.

In contrast, shared reading interventions among older adults have demonstrated clear benefits for psychosocial well-being. Group-based shared reading activities improve communication skills, reduce loneliness, increase social engagement, and enhance satisfaction with social relationships. These interventions serve as promising non-pharmacological approaches to promote psychological health and community support in aging populations. The social interaction inherent in shared reading groups helps counteract isolation common in older adulthood, fostering a sense of connection and belonging. Further longitudinal evidence links adolescent reading habits with social engagement in later life. Adolescents who read more frequently tend to have higher levels of social engagement with family and

friends as older adults, independent of their reading or social engagement during older adulthood. This suggests that adolescent reading may build foundational social-cognitive skills that support sustained social participation across the lifespan. Since both reading and socializing are declining among young people today, these trends could negatively impact future older adults' social connectedness and well-being.

Reading fiction specifically has been shown to support positive affect, connection to others (both real and fictional), and personal growth in older adults. These emotional and cognitive benefits contribute to improved psychological well-being by enhancing empathy, reflection, and communication skills. Such findings underscore the multifaceted value of leisure reading beyond cognitive stimulation alone. Overall, while general leisure reading during adolescence may not uniformly predict prosocial behaviour or adjustment, engaging with certain types of literature like modern classics can foster important social-emotional skills. For older adults, shared reading programs offer effective means to enhance psychosocial well-being by promoting communication, reducing loneliness, and increasing social engagement. Encouraging meaningful reading experiences across the lifespan thus holds promise for supporting healthy social development and psychological health from adolescence into older adulthood.

Reading fiction has been shown to support psychological well-being across the lifespan by fostering positive affect, social connection, and personal growth. In older adults, engaging with fiction enhances emotions, empathy, reflection, and communication skills, contributing to improved mental health and a sense of meaning in life, especially when readers are personally absorbed in the material. Adolescents also benefit from fiction reading through enriched emotional experiences, connections to characters and peers, and development of empathy and literacy skills, although general leisure reading does not always predict prosocial behaviour unless it involves certain types of literature like modern classics.

Fiction reading improves social cognition by enhancing Theory of Mind—the ability to understand others' mental states—which supports better social interactions and cooperation. Meta-analyses confirm small but significant cognitive benefits from fiction reading, particularly for empathy and verbal abilities, with effects stronger when compared to non-fiction or no reading. Shared reading programs for older adults further promote psychosocial well-being by reducing loneliness and increasing social engagement, highlighting the value of meaningful reading experiences for healthy social development from adolescence into older adulthood.

3.2 Discussion

The results collectively demonstrate that leisure reading offers multifaceted benefits across cognitive, emotional, and social domains throughout the lifespan. Reading's role as a cognitively engaging activity helps maintain mental health by reducing depression risk and cognitive decline in older adults, while also supporting emotional well-being through increased positive affect. In younger populations, leisure reading enhances social-emotional competencies essential for self-regulation and interpersonal relationships, particularly benefiting those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The nuanced finding that only certain literary genres (e.g., modern classics) promote prosocial behaviour highlights the importance of content quality alongside frequency of reading. Shared reading further amplifies social connectedness among older adults by fostering interaction and reducing loneliness. Theoretical explanations often invoke simulation theory to explain how narrative immersion enhances empathy and theory of mind; however, diverse emotional processes and learning-memory mechanisms also contribute to these effects but require further empirical exploration. Overall, these findings underscore leisure reading as a valuable resource for enhancing knowledge, emotional resilience, social skills, and well-being across different life stages.

Leisure reading offers extensive benefits across cognitive, emotional, and social domains throughout the lifespan, supporting mental health, emotional resilience, and social skills development. In older adults, frequent leisure reading is associated with a lower risk of depression, reduced cognitive decline, and better daily functioning, highlighting its role as a cognitively engaging activity that helps maintain mental health and quality of life (Węziak-Białowolska et al., 2023; Bian & Xiang, 2023). This



protective effect extends to emotional well-being by increasing positive affect and reducing loneliness, which are critical factors in healthy aging (Milani et al., 2025; Levasseur et al., 2024; Cisco, 2025).

For younger populations, particularly college students, leisure reading significantly enhances social-emotional competencies (SEC), such as self-awareness and relationship management with oneself and others. These competencies are essential for effective self-regulation and interpersonal relationships and are especially beneficial for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, suggesting leisure reading may help reduce social disparities in SEC development (Li et al., 2025; Lenhart et al., 2023). The impact of leisure reading on prosocial behaviour appears more nuanced. Longitudinal studies in adolescents indicate that cumulative leisure reading alone does not consistently predict prosocial behaviour or social adjustment; however, engagement with specific literary genres like modern classic literature is positively associated with these social outcomes (Lenhart et al., 2023).

This finding underscores the importance of content quality alongside the frequency of reading in fostering social cognition and prosocial tendencies during adolescence. Theoretical frameworks such as simulation theory propose that narrative immersion during reading enhances empathy and theory of mind by allowing readers to simulate others' experiences mentally. Yet, other emotional processes and learning-memory mechanisms also contribute to these effects but require further empirical investigation to clarify their roles.

Shared reading interventions among older adults amplify the social benefits of reading by fostering communication skills, reducing loneliness, increasing social engagement, and improving satisfaction with social relationships. These group-based activities serve as promising non-pharmacological approaches to promote psychological health and community support in aging populations. The interactive nature of shared reading helps counteract isolation common in later life stages by creating opportunities for meaningful social interaction and emotional connection. Moreover, shared reading or writing activities have been shown to enhance positive affect, intellectual capacities such as developing new perspectives on life, interpersonal relationships, and social support among older adults.

The cumulative evidence suggests that leisure reading functions as a valuable resource for enhancing knowledge acquisition, emotional resilience, social skills, and overall well-being across different life stages. In middle-aged and older adults specifically, mind-stimulating leisure activities like daily reading are prospectively linked to lower risks of depression, pain experience, cognitive impairment, functional limitations in daily life activities, and even mortality risk. These associations remain robust after controlling for sociodemographic factors, personality traits, lifestyle behaviours, and prior health conditions. Thus, leisure reading can be considered an accessible health-promoting activity that supports both mental health maintenance and longevity.

In younger populations such as college students or adolescents transitioning into adulthood, leisure reading's role extends beyond cognitive benefits to include fostering essential socio-emotional competencies. These competencies – self-awareness; self-management; social awareness; relationship skills; responsible decision-making – are foundational for navigating complex academic environments and interpersonal challenges. Leisure reading's stronger predictive effect on students from rural areas or those with parents having lower educational levels highlights its potential compensatory role in mitigating educational inequalities by providing cognitive-emotional enrichment outside formal schooling. However, the diminishing returns observed among students already possessing high baseline SEC suggest that while leisure reading is broadly beneficial, its incremental impact may be limited for those with well-developed socio-emotional skills.

The specificity of literary content also matters: modern classic literature appears uniquely effective at promoting prosocial behaviour during adolescence compared to other genres like popular fiction or nonfiction. This may be due to modern classics' complex moral dilemmas and rich character development that challenge readers' perspective-taking abilities more deeply than lighter genres. Such findings emphasize that encouraging quality literary engagement rather than mere volume of reading could better foster empathy and prosocial tendencies.

Theoretical explanations for how leisure reading enhances social cognition often centre on simulation theory – the idea that readers mentally simulate characters’ thoughts and feelings during narrative immersion – thereby improving empathy and theory of mind. However, this framework alone does not fully account for the diversity of emotional responses elicited by narratives or how these translate into real-world social skills. Alternative accounts highlight the roles of affective learning processes and memory consolidation in shaping readers’ socio-emotional growth over time. Further research is needed to disentangle these mechanisms empirically.

Shared reading programs provide a complementary approach by embedding reading within a socially interactive context that directly promotes communication skills and reduces loneliness among older adults. These interventions have demonstrated improvements in psychosocial well-being beyond what solitary reading achieves by facilitating group discussion and emotional sharing. Given the growing aging population worldwide facing risks of isolation and cognitive decline, shared reading represents a scalable non-pharmacological strategy to enhance psychological health while strengthening community ties.

The leisure reading contributes multifaceted benefits across cognitive functioning, emotional well-being, social competence development, and psychosocial health throughout life. It supports mental health maintenance in older adults by reducing depression risk and cognitive decline while enhancing positive affect. In younger individuals – especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds – it fosters critical social-emotional competencies necessary for self-regulation and healthy relationships. The type of literature read influences outcomes such as prosocial behaviour during adolescence. Shared reading further amplifies these benefits among older adults through increased social interaction and reduced loneliness. Theoretical models like simulation theory offer partial explanations for these effects but require further empirical refinement to capture the complexity of underlying processes fully. Overall, promoting leisure reading across diverse populations holds promise as an accessible intervention to enhance knowledge acquisition, emotional resilience, social skills development, psychological well-being – and ultimately quality of life – across the lifespan.

4. Conclusion

Leisure reading emerges as a powerful, multifaceted activity that enhances knowledge acquisition, emotional well-being, and social functioning across the lifespan. Evidence shows that in older adults, regular engagement in leisure reading is linked to reduced risks of depression, cognitive decline, and functional limitations, while also promoting positive affect and lowering loneliness levels. These cognitive and emotional benefits contribute to healthier aging and improved quality of life, positioning leisure reading as an accessible, non-pharmacological intervention for mental health maintenance. Among younger populations, particularly college students, leisure reading significantly predicts stronger social-emotional competencies (SEC), including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. This effect is especially pronounced for students from rural or less-educated family backgrounds, suggesting leisure reading can help mitigate educational and social disparities by fostering essential socio-emotional skills.

The influence of leisure reading on prosocial behaviour is nuanced; while general cumulative reading does not consistently predict prosocial outcomes in adolescents, engagement with specific literary genres such as modern classic literature positively correlates with prosocial behaviour and social adjustment. This highlights the critical role of content quality alongside reading frequency in shaping social cognition. Theoretical frameworks like simulation theory propose that narrative immersion during reading enhances empathy and theory of mind by allowing readers to mentally simulate others’ experiences. However, additional emotional processes and learning-memory mechanisms also contribute to these effects but require further empirical exploration to fully understand their impact. Thus, the benefits of leisure reading extend beyond cognitive stimulation to include complex socio-emotional development.

Shared reading interventions among older adults further amplify these benefits by embedding reading within a socially interactive context that fosters communication skills, reduces loneliness,



increases social engagement, and improves satisfaction with social relationships. These group-based activities serve as promising non-pharmacological approaches to promote psychological health and community support in aging populations. The interactive nature of shared reading helps counteract isolation common in later life stages by creating opportunities for meaningful social interaction and emotional connection. Such interventions complement solitary leisure reading by adding a vital social dimension that enhances psychosocial well-being.

In academic settings, leisure reading supports mental health and emotional resilience among students by providing stress relief and fostering reflective skills essential for personal growth and professional development. Medical students benefit from leisure literature through enhanced empathy, critical thinking, ethical decision-making abilities, cultural competence, and emotional well-being—skills crucial for effective healthcare practice. Academic libraries play a key role in promoting these benefits by curating popular reading collections that encourage recreational reading habits on campus. This integration of leisure reading into educational environments underscores its value not only for cognitive enrichment but also for holistic student support.

Despite these promising findings, some challenges remain. Students often perceive literary education primarily through an instrumental lens focused on language skills rather than appreciating its broader cultural or psychological benefits. Bridging this gap requires emphasizing the ethical awareness and social understanding fostered by literary engagement to enhance motivation for both school-based and leisure reading. Additionally, more longitudinal research is needed to clarify causal mechanisms linking leisure reading with socio-emotional outcomes across diverse populations.

Overall, the accumulated evidence underscores leisure reading as a valuable resource that supports knowledge growth, emotional resilience, social competence development, and psychological well-being throughout life stages. Its accessibility makes it an inclusive tool for promoting mental health maintenance in older adults while fostering critical socio-emotional skills in youth. Encouraging quality literary engagement—especially with genres rich in moral complexity—and facilitating shared reading opportunities can maximize these benefits. Integrating leisure reading into educational curricula and community programs offers a scalable strategy to enhance individual well-being and strengthen social connectedness across society. Future research should continue exploring underlying mechanisms and optimize interventions to harness the full potential of leisure reading as a catalyst for lifelong cognitive, emotional, and social flourishing.

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