Books, comfort and discomfort

Observations from six focus group interviews

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This article explores the (dis)comforts of reading in print vs. digital formats. We ran a qualitative study with 36 student respondents across six countries and found that reading can be uncomfortable, but that physical discomfort is sometimes the reader’s preferred choice. Based on our data we discuss how the reading device, type of text and purpose of reading relate to different bodily postures and physical environments. We conclude with a discussion of the material advantages of the single-purpose nature of print books.

Reading on different devices

Continuous reading is usually associated with bodily comfort. It is also often assumed that, along with increasingly efficient and practical reading devices, the activity of reading is becoming more and more comfortable: from the ancient scrolls that could only be read while supporting them with both hands to the much more convenient and easy to handle codex, first hardback, then paperback – and now the ‘no-back’ e-book materialized via various digital devices.

Computers, laptops, tablets, smartphones and dedicated e-readers all eliminate the book as a three-dimensional object. Even though the text per se is immaterial, its ‘sinking’ into an e-device seems to undermine its physical autonomy. This “lack of textual tangible presence” (Piper 2012) inevitably changes its status as a whole. It no longer exists on its own, but only together with other contents, communicated through the device. We are seldom alone with an e-text and e-reading is thus rarely just reading, since we are usually multitasking, perpetuating a state of continuous partial attention (Stone 2007).

Reading on a stationary computer means sitting behind a desk and is usually done at home, in a library, at school or at work. Laptops can be carried along and (when space and battery allow) used in cafés, on public transport, or in parks, while tablets and especially smartphones can be used practically everywhere, creating a zone of intimacy even in the midst of a subway crowd. Because smartphones are small and multi-purpose, their use is exploding worldwide.1 Despite functioning primarily as devices for personal communication, or rather exactly because of it, their role as reading platforms is increasing.2 With the most limited repertoire of services, dedicated e-reading devices are less widespread, and usually associated with more devoted and also older readers,3 perhaps also because these gadgets most resemble a traditional book.

Throughout history, we can trace a progress towards lighter,

1 For 2018 the number of smartphone users is forecast to reach 2.53 billion. See statista.com/statistics/330695/number-of-smartphone-users-worldwide.
2 Pew research (September 2016) states that in the US, multipurpose devices (smartphones, tablet computers) are used more often than dedicated e-reading devices to access digital content: See www.ceneopublisherservices.com/blog/2016/9/7/pew-research-center-publishes-latest-findings-for-book-reading-2016.
3 Research shows that young adults are more likely to read e-books on their mobile phones than those over thirty (Baron 2015, 10).
smaller, more easily portable, cheaper, more inclusive reading devices with greater capacity. If 24 books of the Illiad took up 24 papyrus scrolls, one codex could easily encompass them all, while an e-reading platform can today store up to 6000 titles. Scholarly overviews of the evolution of reading tend to submit to a teleological story of a development from the awkward towards the effortless (Price 2004, 309). However, this story wrongly takes for granted that the most physically pleasant circumstances are always the reader’s first choice. A closer look at how people actually read reveals that this is not necessarily the case. Below we present a cross-national study of students’ reading practices that attests to a number of perceived advantages of discomfort.

Our study

Our findings are based on an exploratory study aiming to analyse reading practices and preferences across different technological devices. We conducted focus groups in Croatia (HR), Czech Republic (CZ), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES) and Sweden (SE).

The participants were 36 undergraduate and graduate students, the only criterion for participation being that they should be frequent readers and state that they enjoy reading. Their mean age was 21 and a half, and 21 were females. Most participants were enrolled in university programmes, but some attended professional training below university level. A wide range of subjects of study was represented, including anthropology, communication, economics, education, library

and information science, literature, modern languages, physiotherapy, social work, sociology, technology and theology. Students came from urban and rural backgrounds, some of them mentioning frequent or even daily commutes between their place of study and a rural home.

This multi-subject and multi-national design introduced a high degree of diversity and added some weight to any trends emerging across the groups. There were six participants per session on average. The sessions took place between March and October 2016, and they lasted approximately an hour. Audio and/or video was recorded and later transcribed with anonymization of the participants.

The primary goal of the study was to explore the roles of a number of variables (purpose of reading, type of text and reading device) in selecting physical environments for reading, but in this article we focus on the question of how materiality in reading is experienced, evaluated and discussed. The act of reading will be interrogated to explore the materiality from an environmental point of view, mainly focusing on how embodied interaction, substrate affordances and ergonomic postures interact with environmental attributes experientially related to comfort and discomfort. Far from the discourse of a paper-free future, our participants revealed that each device serves different purposes for them, affording different bodily experiences in different types of environments.

The (print) book can be uncomfortable

Respondents across focus groups spontaneously mentioned various situations in which a reading device – either print or digital – can be experienced as clumsy and uncomfortable. Interestingly, many of these comments were directed at print,

4 The study was conducted within the COST Action IS1404 E-READ project and was carried out by nine researchers: Anežka Kuzmičová (lead), Patrícia Dias, Ana Vogrincic Čepić, Anne-Mette Bech Albrechtslund, André Casado, Marina Kotli Topić, Xavier Minguez López, Skans Kersti Nilsson and Inês Teixeira-Botelho (see also Kuzmičová et al. 2017).

5 Some variation attributable to cultural differences was observed, but it was difficult to generalize and was not something we focused on.
even though print was largely considered the only ‘proper’ means of reading and was in general absolutely preferred amongst all reading devices. Most commonly it was considered too heavy, but this referred mainly to bulky science fiction volumes with several hundred pages.

Lying on your bed with a three hundred-page volume over you, it’s very heavy. (PR5)

When I read a printed book, I need to change posture more often. (ES4)

My hand hurts, especially if it’s a large book. (HR4)

However, while the print book was considered expressly ‘uncomfortable’ with reference to leisure reading, this is the type of reading which assumes the highest degree of comfort, pleasure and enjoyment, and is most often associated with the home environment in general and comfortable furniture (bed, couch, sofa) in particular.

The notion of comfort in reading is of course not limited to the strict physical handling of the reading device, but extends to other circumstantial and contextual elements of the reading experience. Our respondents often linked comfort to their general enjoyment of reading. They mentioned having their own particular rituals that help them achieve a higher level of comfort, even when they use devices that are not their favourite. For example, some participants mentioned taking off their shoes or tying up their hair before reading.

When I’m studying in a public place and I want to read something personal while taking a break, I take off my shoes. It’s a little gesture, but it changes the way I read. (ES3)

If I have to read I tie up my hair. I associate that with relaxing. (ES2)

On the other hand, and quite to the contrary, playing with one’s hair while reading can also be perceived as relaxing, privileging e-books, since they are easier to handle with one hand:

I’m used to fiddling with my hair when reading, so this is another reason to use the e-book. I can handle it with one hand. (ES4)

Reading pleasure can also be enhanced by ‘external’ factors, such as a specific type of light, weather, temperature, background noise and so forth. But when it comes to studying, comfort can become irrelevant or even disturbing.

**Uncomfortable can be good**

Our respondents do not always make their choices with the aim of maximum bodily comfort. Certain levels of bodily discomfort are sometimes deliberately chosen, depending on the purpose of reading. Leisure is usually associated with relaxed bodily postures that would be considered awkward in studying, which, on the other hand, is associated with upright postures.

For pleasure I read on the sofa, in the armchair or in bed. When I read for my studies, I sit at the desk; I have to sit upright. (SE1)

An article for the faculty I read at my desk, because [my desk] is reserved for my university stuff. However, when I take a book for pleasure I calmly lay down on the couch, I grab a cushion, a small blanket in the winter, and that’s a wholly different posture. (ES2)

Our respondents strategically force themselves into upright positions and corresponding settings in order to regulate their attention.

Fiction works fine in bed. Non-fiction would be difficult, I’d feel I’m not alert enough. I need a chair and desk or something. (CZ3)

When I am reading for studying, I do it at my desk, and I use a pen. (PR6)
The purpose of reading also emerged as the main determinant in choosing specific forms of the book (print or digital in various formats and on various devices). Leisure is usually associated with print, while laptops and stationary computers were reported as a common study device and their limitations to bodily comfort were sometimes explicitly praised.

However, for notetaking as well as for a more intensive study experience, especially longer texts are sometimes printed and – it seems – would be printed more often if facilities were available and free of charge.

It’s super uncomfortable to underline on the computer. (ES1)

I read research articles in PDF files directly on the computer rather than in print. I take notes in a special file. But when it comes to monographs, I have to read in print. (SE2)

These observations align with the findings of two recent meta-studies that summarized the results of empirical studies on differences between print and screen reading (see Singer & Alexander 2017 and Delgado et al. 2018), which in short reveal that comprehension is better when the text is read from paper, especially when it comes to non-narrative texts.

Also, non-dedicated settings, such as home and outdoors, were commonly associated with leisure, while studying is often reserved for dedicated settings such as libraries. Less comfortable technological devices, less comfortable bodily postures, and dedicated settings are strategically used as resources to increase concentration and to make studying sessions more effective.

I really appreciate the constraints of the library ... It’s both [temporal and spatial constraints]. Having the time slot certainly makes a difference, but it’s mainly about this special environment that is so totally dedicated to reading ... I have several favourite libraries that I choose from depending on my mood. (CZ1)

**Being bookish today**

Finally, we would like to highlight an aspect of the print book that is accorded new meanings when our respondents have the option to choose from multiple reading devices: its single-purpose nature. In contrast to digital supports, which are inherently multi-purpose, print books cannot be used for much more than reading. Sticking with the p-book can therefore be interpreted as a statement, proving one’s devotion to ‘pure’ reading activity. This means that books have gained an additional symbolic value, representing the primacy of this activity, and a true love for reading proper.

I would never leave home without a book. (CZ5)

Although mobile phones are by all means a highly affective technology (Kuzmičová et al. 2018), they also prevent readers from manifesting their affection towards reading in general and to specific books in particular. For this very reason, multifunctional digital devices are sometimes perceived as contradictory to the image of a passionate reader, since others can never tell whether one is ‘really’ reading or just browsing on social media. This was a cause of concern for a parent of two:

Since I have two little daughters, I don’t like them to see me all the time with my mobile phone. I’m reading, but they don’t know it. They don’t know if I’m playing or reading or what I’m doing. I like to buy a book so that they can see me with the book in my hands. (ES1)

But it is, paradoxically, precisely the multi-purpose nature of digital devices that allows continuous reading in situations that are seemingly incompatible with reading activity, as in busy and uncomfortable settings or in other people’s company.
In digital, you read everywhere. It doesn’t matter if you’re on the bus or in class. (PT1)

Since using mobile phones in company is perceived as more socially acceptable than print reading due to its purportedly less immersive, and therefore less isolating, nature, our respondents sometimes use their mobile phones for reading unbeknownst to their social surroundings.

That’s why I prefer reading on my mobile, because not everyone can tell I am reading, they might think I’m scrolling on Facebook ... There would be a lot of comments in the classroom at school [if the participant’s classmates knew she was reading fiction during recess]. (HR2)

Returning to the issue of comfort, it should be noted that more (physically) comfortable does not necessarily signify more pleasant. For many the absence of the scent component makes e-reading experience much less satisfying.

I also think about the sensory impressions of holding a book. I don’t think that e-books will ever smell. From a printed book there is a stream of scent coming up from the paper when turning pages. This is very important to me... (SE1)

Also, one could claim that being bookish means precisely insisting on reading regardless of the device or circumstance.

If the book is very absorbing, my back hurts. (SS3)

**Conclusion**

The main outcome of our study is that readers manage the various aspects of reading, including its materiality and environmental context, strategically in accordance with their purposes and preferences. Putting the comfort and pleasures of reading aside, it is the practical aspect that often decides the choice of a reading platform – for example for a mother with a child sleeping in her lap the fact that smartphones enable reading in the dark can be decisive in choosing it over a print book. Readers thus constantly negotiate a number of issues in order best to manage their reading practices.

Studying is very obviously perceived as an activity different from reading for leisure. It clearly represents something more than 'just' reading, with 'just' standing for 'free', i.e. devoid of any particular intention, purpose or obligation. On the other hand, when you read for your studies, your reading is by default burdened by the fact that you will need to learn, understand and know what you have just read, and use it in one way or another, which gives the whole exercise an air of constraint. Studying is a kind of backstage, preparatory phase for some future performance. Being aware of this already takes away the liberty of unstructured reading according to one's own will and associates it with effort and some sort of subordination.

This doesn’t mean that academic reading cannot be pleasurable, but pleasure is simply not its primary purpose. Above all it needs to be efficient. This is why it is often accompanied by little 'tricks' that sharpen one's attention and lessen one's comfort.

It is therefore crucial for dedicated settings such as libraries to keep some degree of traditional spatial organisation, including silent areas with hard chairs and desks for study purposes, as this seems to play a crucial role in facilitating a studious atmosphere. Reading is not a stereotyped activity, moulded by a single standard; it is diverse and it should be allowed and supported in its diverse forms. Readers do not play by a certain logically predictable set of rules. The way people read and what they do to make the most of their reading experience (either in terms of pleasure or knowledge) turns out to be a very creative practice.

Our study also shows how the materiality of reading readily plays a part in the preparatory phases of reading (Mangen &
van der Weel (2016), since the knowledge and culture built around print- and e-reading predetermine one's choice of device with regard to purpose. This is also why the implications of comfort and discomfort are hard to grasp. Our participants often seem to be more comfortable with what they are used to. Even though familiar and comfortable do not mean the same thing, the effort required to get used to something new sometimes leads one to choose the physically less comfortable option. As one of our participants noted, backache is what marks a gripping book.

References


University students’ reading and the use of digital resources and devices

Case study in Iași, Romania

Adrian Netedu

The global transformation of educational strategies and learning techniques implies a massive use of digital devices and the transition from printed to virtual learning resources. There is more and more social research on the impact of new technology on learning processes, development of certain skills, and dedicated leisure activities among university students. Within this context, the amount of time spent on the Internet and social networks has increased. The use of a large variety of devices and virtual resources has become common for all university students. We conducted a sociological study at the Alexandru Ioan Cuza University of Iași, Romania, regarding the role and place of reading in students' daily activities, and some of our questions were related to the students'