

**Using ChatGPT for Story Creation:
One Autistic Teen's Autonomous Reading Motivation**

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Abstract

ChatGPT has experienced exponential growth in its number of users since its launch in November 2022. Researchers studying early adopters of the generative artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot have found positive reactions from those who have used ChatGPT for reading and writing. However, this research is still in its infancy and few studies exist on the impact of AI Large Language Models (LLMs) on reading motivation. No studies have been published on autistic teens' reading motivation and behavior when using AI LLMs for story generation. Framed by Self-Determination Theory and Cognitive Evaluation Theory, this case study explores one autistic teen's use of ChatGPT and his resulting autonomous motivation for leisure reading. Findings reveal that AI-generated stories increased the teen's intrinsic reading motivation, addressed his personal interest in fictional characters, and strengthened his literacy practices. Caregivers and educators may consider permitting the use of AI LLMs for story creation by autistic teens to develop their reading motivation and behavior.

Keywords: *ChatGPT, AI, Large Language Models, autism, self-determination theory, reading motivation*

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In early 2023, Michael, an autistic teen, sat in his living room staring at his smart phone. He began to laugh. His mother asked him what he was laughing at, and he said he was reading a story ChatGPT had written for him. Michael's mother watched as her son read silently. And read and read. Not only had she not seen her son read for such an extended amount of time, she had not had any hands-on experience with ChatGPT. She asked him to show her how it generated a story. Michael showed his mother the 23-word prompt he had typed into ChatGPT and the output of the story. They scrolled through the pages of the narrative. Michael seemed pleased to have a story designed for his personal interest and his mother was thrilled to see him reading for an extended period of time.

Researchers have studied reading motivation in young people for decades (Baker et al., 1996; De Naeghel et al., 2012; Guthrie, 1996; Troyer et al., 2019; Wigfield, 1997). The emphasis on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in the research builds on general motivation theories of Deci and Ryan (1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) and points to the impact intrinsic motivation has on reading engagement and proficiency. Dimensions of intrinsic reading motivation include situational interest (Wigfield, 1997) and activity-specific motivation (Schiefele et al., 2012), which are worth considering when investigating the impact ChatGPT has on leisure reading.

ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence (AI) Large Language Model (LLM) that is available on smartphones in the United States and can generate text for various purposes. ChatGPT generates text when a prompt is typed or spoken into its user interface. The multimodal interface makes ChatGPT usage accessible to many individuals with disabilities. OpenAI introduced ChatGPT on November 30, 2022 (OpenAI, 2022) and defines its text models as “advanced

language processing tools that can generate...text with high levels of coherence and accuracy” (OpenAI, n.d.). ChatGPT gained instant popularity, acquiring 1 million users within five days of its launch, 100 million users within two months, and as of July 2024 has over 180 million users (Duarte, 2024; Jayaputri, 2024; Skjuvi et al., 2024). Over 14% of ChatGPT’s users are in the U.S., while India, Brazil, and Indonesia each make up between 4% and 10% of the users worldwide (Duarte, 2024).

Early adopters of ChatGPT reported that entertainment and creative story generation were among their top uses for the AI tool (Skjuve et al., 2024). Autistic adults in South Korea use ChatGPT to discuss issues they do not want to discuss with family members or others around them and to write poetry and generate ideas for novels (Choi et al., 2024). Autistic adults in the United States report using ChatGPT as a chat partner, with one reporter writing that the AI platform can be therapeutic and can be used to empower people and help them be fully autonomous and experience success on their own terms (Hoover & Spengler, 2023).

One form of autonomous learning is autodidacticism. Autodidacticism is “the process or practice of learning a subject without a teacher or formal education” (dictionary.com). Berger (2022) states that autodidacticism is “motivated by self-determination and enthusiasm for learning independently” (p. 2) and Firat (2023) writes that “autodidactic learning allows learners to take control of their own learning and development, and to learn at their own pace in a way that is tailored to their individual needs and goals” (p. 1).

Firat (2023) wrote about the potential of using ChatGPT to enhance autodidactic experiences in open education settings. He asserted that “ChatGPT may not only encourage learners’ autonomy but also improve learning experiences” (p. 2). He then articulated six ways that ChatGPT could enhance autodidacticism:

1. Personalized support and/or suggestions for learning materials based on a learner's individual needs and objectives
2. Real-time feedback and guidance
3. Increased accessibility
4. Convenient and flexible learning
5. Enhancing the use of open educational resources
6. Self-assessment and reflection

While a wide range of individuals may have autodidactic tendencies, this ability may be enhanced through the use of AI Large Language Models. For those prone to social anxiety, such as autistic individuals, those with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and those who are demand-avoidant, taking control of one's own learning may be especially beneficial. There is a lack of research on autistic individuals and those with ADHD using ChatGPT in autodidactic ways.

Autism, classified as a developmental disability, is a diagnostic label for naturally occurring variations in brain development evidenced in divergent sensory processing. Evolving understanding of autism moves beyond the deficit-perspective of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual's (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) criteria of repetitive habits and impaired social communication to include physical and mental co-morbidities and the inclination to appear neurotypical by "masking" typical autistic tendencies. Autism is currently identified in approximately 1% of the world's population and occurs across ethnicities and nationalities (World Health Organization, 2023). Many individuals with the diagnosis see it as an indelible part of their identity and prefer the term "autistic" as opposed to being referred to as a "person with autism."

Autism and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) co-occur in 50-70% of the autistic population (Hours et al., 2022). ADHD is an umbrella term for symptoms of inattention (not being able to keep focus) and/or hyperactivity (excessive movement that is not fitting to the setting) and impulsivity (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought) that interfere with functioning or development (American Psychiatric Association, 2024; National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Individuals with ADHD may “struggle with relationships and antisocial behaviors” and ADHD may negatively impact “academic and professional achievements” (American Psychiatric Association, 2024; National Institute of Mental Health, n.d.). Between 2.5% and 8.4% of the population have been diagnosed with ADHD with the top of the range being children (American Psychiatric Association, 2024). While the presentation and support needs of autistic individuals and those with ADHD vary from person to person, a percentage also fit a demand avoidant profile.

Demand Avoidance refers to a profile in which an individual, often autistic, needs “to be in control and avoid other people’s demands and expectations” (Fidler & Christie, 2019, p. 11). This need for autonomy and control is anxiety-driven. An individual with a demand-avoidant profile may feel anxiety from demands of time, questions, praise, transitions, and from being expected to make decisions (PDA Society, 2021). AI LLMs may provide a low-anxiety option for developing intrinsic motivation in literacy practices for those with demand-avoidant profiles.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation, and Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET) are interrelated. SDT focuses on “what kind of motivation is being exhibited at any given time” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 69) with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation being the primary categories of motivation. Intrinsic motivation has to do with “the inherent tendency to seek out

novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one’s capacities, to explore, and to learn” (p. 70). CET focuses on environmental conditions that support intrinsic motivation and posits that “freedom from demeaning evaluations...facilitate[s] intrinsic motivation” (p. 70) and “according to CET, people must not only experience competence or efficacy, they must also experience their behavior as self-determined for intrinsic motivation to be in evidence” (p. 70). While CET research emphasizes the positive impact of support and security from adults in the environment, “many intrinsically motivated behaviors are happily performed in isolation, suggesting that proximal relational supports may not be necessary for intrinsic motivation” (p. 71) and this is especially true for autistic individuals with demand-avoidant profiles whose anxiety is triggered by the presence of perceived authority figures.

Literature Review

AI LLMs and Literacy Practices

Published studies on young people’s use of AI LLMs are still in development, with few articles available in 2024 at the time of this writing. I searched for related articles using a university library’s access to multiple databases including GoogleScholar and EBSCOHost in June 2024. I found 16 articles that included the topic of AI LLM use for literacy practices. Five studies are reviewed below. All the published research on students’ use of AI LLMs is of studies that took place in Asian countries. I was not able to find any published studies on the use of ChatGPT for student literacy practices from the U.S. at the time of this writing.

Jayaputri (2024) used a pretest-posttest experimental design to study the impact of ChatGPT on student motivation in English language development. Jayaputri surveyed 40 academy students in Papua, Indonesia in November and December 2023. The survey assessed intrinsic motivation, perceived ease of use of ChatGPT, perceived usefulness of ChatGPT, and

the participants' behavioral intentions for using ChatGPT in the future. Before and after receiving lessons on using ChatGPT, the students completed surveys to evaluate changes in motivation in learning English. The researcher found that students were more motivated to use ChatGPT as a specific learning methodology after the intervention and that several factors fostered the learner motivation. Factors mentioned in the study include personalized and instantaneous interactions with AI chatbots, heightened sense of engagement and interactivity, augmenting the educational journey for students, and the prompt and pertinent responses provided by ChatGPT.

Lee et al. (2023) also used a pretest-posttest survey with students in English-as-a-foreign-language classes in elementary schools in South Korea. Sixty students were provided with three 40-minute intervention lessons using an AI-based content generator (AICG) that created English texts for them to read, while 61 students served as the control group and did not engage with AICG. The researchers surveyed the students with a focus on foreign language enjoyment and learners' interests in reading English books. The intervention group showed significantly greater foreign language enjoyment and interest in reading English books in the posttest than the control group. The researchers articulated that AICG allows students to generate original passages on themes they find to be interesting.

Li et al. (2023) surveyed and interviewed middle school and high school students at a summer camp in Beijing, China on their behavior and motives for using AI LLMs. They had 76 participants complete surveys – 34 middle school students, 42 high school students, and 19 parents. The survey covered five domains of AI LLM usage: information, practicality, sociality, technical characteristics, and adoption attitude. Fourteen of those surveyed were also interviewed to investigate the behavior, motivation, and attitude of students and parents toward using AI

LLMs for learning. Researchers found that AI LLMs stimulate student interest in learning and that parents had a more positive outlook on using AI LLMs for school education than the students did. However, the parents expressed concern over a potential decline in students' independent learning abilities when using AI LLMs in middle school.

Salas-Pilco et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review of literature published between 2017 and 2021 that focused on ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority students' use of AI in inclusive educational settings. They analyzed 27 studies from nine countries and concluded that AI could help personalize learning based on students' needs. Nine studies demonstrated that AI improved student academic performance, and five studies showed that AI promoted student engagement. The researchers concluded that AI can help support the inclusion of minority students in educational settings.

Toyokawa et al. (2023) conducted a case study in which they studied two students who attended a special education classroom to explore how AI can be used to support learners in inclusive education. This study took place in Japan, where placement in a separate special education classroom is considered inclusive education, a designation different than inclusive education in the U.S. Toyokawa et al. (2023) concluded that AI can be personalized to individual learners' needs and pace and that attention should be given to AI that offers "precise, individualized guidance and feedback for more effective interventions" (p. 11). Moreover, they stated that "it would be possible to use natural language generation to support reading-learning by navigating the contents and the flow of reading activities in an easy-to-understand manner using both text and audio" (p. 12).

Although few, the published studies on students' use of AI LLMs for literacy practices provide descriptions of populations and purposes worth studying in research on autistic students'

use of AI LLMs for leisure reading. Lee et al.'s (2023) study establishes that students use AICG for personal reading pleasure, while Salas-Pico et al.'s (2022) and Jayaputri's (2024) studies provide similar findings about AI positively influencing student engagement. More specifically, Toyokawa et al.'s (2023) research demonstrates the potential of studying AI use by students with disabilities, and Li et al. (2023) includes the vital element of parents' perspectives on the use of AI LLMs among young people. Each of these publications presents findings that demonstrate the need for more research, such as this current case study of an autistic teen who uses ChatGPT to generate stories for leisure reading.

Reading Motivation

Articles on motivation in general and specifically reading motivation abound as the subject has been theorized and studied for more than 50 years. In my review of literature, I focused on intrinsic motivation and found 11 articles specifically related to intrinsic motivation and reading. The following studies are representative of related literature from the past three decades.

De Naeghel et al. (2012) developed and used the SRQ-Reading Motivation questionnaire to assess recreational and academic reading. They surveyed 1,260 Flemish fifth graders and 67 of their teachers. They found that autonomous (intrinsic) motivation plays a significant role in recreational reading motivation, behavior, and performance. They concluded that "students spend more of their leisure time on reading, are more deeply and attentively engaged in reading, and perform better on a standardized reading comprehension test, when they read for their own enjoyment or believe it is personally relevant" (p. 1017).

Schiefele et al. (2012) published a review of 20 years of research on reading motivation. They concluded that intrinsic reading motivation makes a positive contribution to reading

behavior and reading competence. They further affirm forms of intrinsic reading motivation such as object-specific reading motivation, in which “the person is motivated to read because of an interest in the topic of the text” and activity-specific reading motivation, in which “the person is motivated to read because the activity of reading provides positive experiences” (p. 429). They also considered categories of reading motivation, and their review of literature found interest, enjoyment, and relief from boredom to be among those identified.

Troyer et al. (2019) enrolled 4,529 rising fourth- and fifth-grade students from 59 elementary schools in North Carolina for a 2014 study on intrinsic motivation. The researchers had students answer questions about reading involvement, curiosity, self-efficacy, and autonomous recreational reading motivation. They found that intrinsic motivation has a greater effect than reading amount on achievement. They also concluded that the quality of reading material, meaning the text matches the reader’s interest and skill level, matters for less-skilled readers.

Wigfield (1997), in a seminal article on reading motivation, described the development of the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) and subsequent studies’ findings that students’ reading motivation is multidimensional. One key dimension is that of situational interest, when the reader’s “interest is sparked by a particular text or other features of a particular reading act” (p. 63). Wigfield connects reading motivation to other aspects of reading and concludes that when compared to extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation is the stronger predictor of the amount and breadth of reading students do.

Methodology

Given the rapid growth in the use of AI, the multiplying population of autistic teens, and the growing awareness of autodidacticism, I conducted qualitative research using a single case

study method. “Qualitative research gathers participants' experiences, perceptions, and behavior. It answers the hows and whys instead of how many or how much” (Tenny et al., 2022, p. 1). A “case” may be an individual, as it is in this study, and the purpose of a case study is to “explore a phenomenon about which not much is known” (Ashley, 2012, p. 102). Creswell and Poth (2018) note that a case, regardless of size, must be bounded in time and setting and that the study is composed “to illustrate a unique case, a case that has unusual interest in and of itself” (p. 98). This case study came from two audio-recorded interviews and follow-up questions sent by text.

The participant in this study is a 16-year-old autistic male with ADHD who fits the demand-avoidant profile. He attends school in an intensive therapeutic setting, and his core academics are taught in a one-on-one format. At home, he is resistant to any work or activities that remind him of school. He does not choose to read books or other print material. His use of ChatGPT occurs in the home, outside of school hours. He uses ChatGPT independently, with his mother's permission, and decided to create stories using the LLM tool without adult prompting. This study covers the participant's use of ChatGPT from March 2023 to June 2024. During this time, no curricular, pedagogical, or home environmental factors changed. Assent from the participant and parent consent were provided for this case study.

Two interviews, with semi-structured questions and follow-up text correspondence with clarification questions took place in June and July 2024. The participant also provided a copy of his original ChatGPT prompt and the story the AI chatbot generated. To analyze the data, I listened to the audio-recorded interviews several times and transcribed the questions and responses. I also transferred the text responses to the secured document with the transcribed interviews. I then sorted the transcript excerpts, placing similar responses together and identifying themes.

Findings

I identified four themes in Michael's responses related to the use of ChatGPT for leisure reading. The following section contains excerpts from the interviews organized by the themes of interest, enjoyment and engagement, behavior, and participant concerns.

Interest

Michael created his first story using ChatGPT in March 2023. He would be considered an early adopter of ChatGPT as the AI LLM had been publicly available for less than six months when he began creating stories to read. His first prompt was 23 words long and included character names from the long-running and popular cartoon *SpongeBob*. Michael's favorite cartoon is *SpongeBob*, so he built his reading around his personal interests.

Michael's reading interests are currently dominated by one genre. During the interview, Michael identified himself as a lover of fiction, and his primary access to fiction is through ChatGPT rather than through hardcopy books: "I'm a big fiction guy. I haven't read any copies of any books as of recently, particularly in the fiction variety."

Enjoyment and Engagement

I asked Michael about his motivation for using ChatGPT for story generation. He said the following:

"I think it's mostly fun for experimentation."

"It's good for experimentation and it helps when you are bored."

Researcher: "How does it make you feel to use ChatGPT when you are bored?"

Participant: "Mildly entertained."

Michael discovered the ability of ChatGPT to address one of his personal needs – the need to resolve his boredom. He was able to find a free, personalized, non-disruptive way to entertain

himself at home. He said that he enjoys that the plots ChatGPT creates are *ambitious* and *over the top*.

When asked how many stories he has had ChatGPT generate for him since March 2023, Michael opened his notes app on his phone and began counting. He counted under his breath for more than a minute and stated: “Approximately 75 or 76 story prompts I made with ChatGPT.” In the 15 months since he started using ChatGPT, Michael has autonomously created more than six dozen stories for his leisure reading. He has transitioned from reading no narratives at home to creating and reading more than a story a week.

Reading Behavior

Although Michael sees his mother reading frequently at home, he associates his reading behavior with the practice of oral reading expected in his therapeutic school setting. At one point in the interview, he clarified his style of reading when using ChatGPT: “I do read in my head, just not out loud.”

By engaging with ChatGPT without parents or teachers around, he was able to expand his repertoire of reading practices. Michael’s use of ChatGPT changed not only his modality of reading but also changed the amount of reading he does and where he does it.

Researcher: “Do you read more on ChatGPT or more at school?”

Participant: “If I were to be brutally honest, these days I read on ChatGPT. I don’t have to worry about getting a physical book.”

Michael’s changed reading behavior also reinforces the literacy skills he has learned at school. Each time Michael asked ChatGPT to generate a story, he used a prompt similar to a Mad-Libs template. In the paper-and-pencil word game Mad-Libs, players write story templates with key words missing, as other players are asked to provide parts of speech without knowing

the sentences in which the parts of speech are going to be placed. During one interview, Michael explained how he provides information to ChatGPT: “Here’s the prompt I would normally give: Write me a blank (adjective) story where this character, this character, this character, that character, that character, etc., (verb, verb that), and other details adjacent to the plot.”

Michael named the parts of speech in his explanation, indicating that while his topical interest may change from story to story, he provides parameters for ChatGPT’s stories. He continued to demonstrate his understanding of language features when he described ChatGPT’s work: “These stories do tend to fill in some generic tropes and cliches into the stories it creates for me.”

Participant Concerns

Michael’s understanding of ChatGPT showed evidence of ethical considerations. He mentioned risks associated with the proliferation of AI chatbots that extended beyond his own use and captured some universal cautions: “People are becoming more and more concerned about AI being used to generate stories and pictures because it is going to replace writers and artists. That and AI is kind of a lazy way to do something.”

Michael included in his responses to questions about good uses of ChatGPT warnings about the potential misuse of AI. He also expressed concerns about AI LLM hallucinations and how ChatGPT may deliver content that is not true.

Discussion

This case study gathered data on Michael’s experiences, perceptions, and behavior with ChatGPT. The phenomenon of autistic teens using AI to generate stories for leisure reading has not been widely studied and is not well understood. Michael’s responses to interview questions

were sorted into four themes, which provided insights into both the use of ChatGPT and intrinsic reading motivation.

First, Michael revealed that his situational interests (Wigfield, 1997) guide his use of AI LLMs for story reading. He provides prompts that include some of his favorite fictional characters. This is an example of object-specific reading motivation, as described by Schiefele et al. (2012) in their synthesis of research. Object-specific reading motivation is a form of intrinsic motivation that has been shown to have a strong effect on reading achievement and performance (De Naeghel et al., 2012). Li et al.'s (2023) study on students using AI LLMs at a summer camp in China revealed that ChatGPT is a good tool for stimulating student interest in learning. It is likely that there is a reciprocal relationship between Michael's intrinsic motivation to read stories about fictional characters and his use of ChatGPT to create new stories. Each reinforces the other – as Michael uses ChatGPT to create fictional stories, his motivation to read increases, and as his object-specific motivation increases, he creates more stories on ChatGPT. This supports Lee et al.'s (2023) finding that AICG, like ChatGPT, allows students to create stories they find interesting. For Michael, this is a form of autodidacticism.

Second, Michael identified one of the key categories of reading motivation – relief from boredom – as one of the main reasons he uses ChatGPT to make stories. He has found ChatGPT to be entertaining and fun, a good form of help when he's bored. Schiefele et al.'s (2012) summary of Greaney and Neuman's (1990) analysis of students' reading motivation identifies "escape" as a factor of reading motivation. They stated, "Students scoring high on this factor read to avoid boredom and when they have nothing better or more exciting to do. For these students, reading functions as a source of distraction and relaxation" (p. 435). Michael has found ChatGPT's story generation to be so enjoyable and engaging that he has created 76 stories in a

little over a year. Salas-Pilco et al.'s (2022) literature review found five studies that concluded that AI promotes student engagement. De Naeghel et al. (2012) also found that engagement and time spent reading stem from enjoyment. To relieve his boredom, Michael used his activity-specific motivation to increase reading activity because it provided positive experiences (Schiefele et al., 2012).

Third, Michael's reading behavior with ChatGPT stories reinforces his school-based literacy learning and provides him with the opportunity to practice literacy in new and autonomous ways. This allows him to practice his autodidacticism. With his ChatGPT stories, he is free to read silently. He has become proficient at autonomous recreational reading and is motivated to continue. Troyer et al. (2019) found this to play a significant role in reading achievement. Schiefele et al. (2012) concluded that intrinsic reading motivation positively impacts reading behavior.

Finally, I found Michael's inclusion of concerns about ChatGPT to show adeptness. Although he uses ChatGPT independently, with his mother's permission, he is aware that there are reasons to be cautious about an overreliance on the AI chatbot. Most of the published literature on the use of ChatGPT also warns of the misuse and misrepresentation of AI-created material. Michael's autodidacticism extends beyond reading; it includes wanting to learn about and act in an ethical manner when using ChatGPT.

The use of an AI LLM for story creation afforded an autistic teen the opportunity to control enough content in AI-created stories to motivate him to read for pleasure and to read in environments outside of school settings. According to CET, this environmental freedom facilitates intrinsic motivation. Of interest when considering reading motivation among autistic students is Deci et al.'s (2001) findings that tangible rewards have an undermining effect on

intrinsic motivation. It comes as no surprise that an autistic teen who has worked within an extrinsic reward system for more than a decade in school has developed the habit of not reading at home, but this case study shows that with ChatGPT, he can create his own stories using AI-generated literature to read for enjoyment. By using ChatGPT, Michael simultaneously fulfills his needs for agency and reading for enjoyment.

Conclusion

ChatGPT is a beneficial tool for teens to extend their reading behaviors to leisure settings. In this case study, findings show that one autistic teen's intrinsic reading motivation increased with the use of the AI language processing tool. There have been more than 30 years of research on reading motivation but very little on reading with AI text models. The body of research on student use of ChatGPT is still in its infancy, and the exploration of ChatGPT's use in the autistic community is new. ChatGPT gives autistic individuals control over the characters and settings in the stories they prompt the chatbot to create so that their interest level is sufficient for extended engagement in reading.

Teachers and parents may consider using AI with their teens who are developing readers. Depending on individual support needs, adults may have to guide young people in using the prompt interface. Alternatively, adults may gather information on characters and actions of interest, input the prompt into ChatGPT for the students, and then give the AI-generated stories to them to read.

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