



“Keep it Interesting for Generation Z.”: Evaluating Immersive Factors in Recreational Reading Activity

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Abstract. This research explores the influence of Generation Z's on the expansion of media varieties and its impact on their recreational reading habits. With the proliferation of digital media, the younger generation has been exposed to a wider range of media choices, resulting in shorter attention spans and transforming the way they engage with fiction as a recreational reading activity. This study aims to examine the extent to which digital distractions affect the level of immersion and overall reading experience among Generation Z. To conduct the research, the author developed a simple three-chapter interactive storytelling scenario with two different endings. The study involved 126 participants aged 19-28, who voluntarily participated in the research. The immersive level experienced by the participants was measured through a series of questions utilizing a 5-point Likert scale to assess their reading experience. The findings indicate that Generation Z's interaction with digital texts poses a threat to the immersive experience in reading activity. This research contributes to the understanding of how the proliferation of digital media and associated distractions impact the reading habits of Generation Z and highlights the importance of maintaining immersive experiences during digital reading, emphasizing the need for strategies to minimize distractions and ensure optimal content reception among younger readers.

Keywords: Generation Z, Recreational Reading, Interactive Storytelling

1 Introduction

According to statistical data, Generation Z refers to the population group born between 1997 and 2012 [1]. In Indonesia, Generation Z occupied 27.94% of the total population [2], making them an important demographic to consider when designing for the future. One of the distinctive characteristics of this generation is their fluency with digitalization. Their exposure to the internet, social networks, and mobile systems has shaped them into individuals who seamlessly navigate the digital realm, transitioning effortlessly between various platforms. Consequently, cross-referencing has become an integral part of their information-seeking process, and they tend to favor online resources over traditional methods of learning [3].

The proliferation of media options, the ability to swiftly switch between platforms and channels, and the vast volume of information that they encounter have collectively contributed to a decline in attention span. Although this phenomenon affects all generations to some extent, Generation Z, as digital natives, have grown up with these characteristics deeply ingrained in their nature. Therefore, it becomes crucial to develop alternative and strategic approaches to reading experiences that align with their unique reading habits. Such adaptations are necessary to sustain their interest and engagement during recreational reading activities [4].

In the era of social media, the act of reading has evolved beyond interacting solely with the narrative content to sharing the literary world with others to gain popularity and social approval [5]. These shifts in behavior have facilitated the nature of sharing within reading society and transforms the essence of reading experience from something that was being enjoyed personally into something to share to the society. Alongside these advancements, there is a notable consequence: readers now tend to possess shorter attention spans. Given that all forms of entertainment can now fit within a screen, if readers lose interest in a particular storyline, they have the ability to swiftly switch to a different book or even transition to alternative platforms or channels that offer more dynamic activities, such as watching short videos or scrolling through other social media that offers engaging visual impulse.

One of the primary objectives of recreational reading is to achieve a state of immersion within a fictional world [6]. The degree of immersion experienced by readers can vary. Technological advancements have introduced immersive experiences through mediums such as virtual reality installations, digital games, and computer simulations. These platforms can provide compelling storytelling and enable readers to explore the story world in a multi-sensory manner, creating a holistic experience that sustains their engagement [7]. On the other hand, there is also a form of immersion that challenges readers' cognitive abilities. This occurs when a book is captivating enough to stimulate readers and encourage them to delve deeper into the story world. In this type of immersion, the physical and technical aspects of the reading material, such as the book itself should ideally remain neutral, supporting the immersive experience without causing disturbances that hinder the reader's immersion. The sense of immersion that comes from connecting with the text in a physical book is lost when activities are transformed into a digital format. Due to the intangibility of digital text, our reading experience of digital texts differs significantly from that of print texts [6]. One significant effect of the intangibility of digital text is that it leads us to read in a shallower and less focused manner. We tend to scan text on the screen, making our reading mode highly vulnerable to distractions, especially when distractions are just a mouse click away.

The appreciation of the fictional world crafted by the author plays a crucial role in immersing readers further into the story [7]. Readers' ability and willingness to suspend disbelief allow them to willingly dive into the story world without hesitation. In order to maintain engagement in recreational reading, authors of interactive storytelling face the challenge of not only creating an intriguing narrative but also ensuring that every aspect of their story components—such as the story world, characters, timeline, dramatization, conflict, and resolution—meets readers' expectations. One effective approach to crafting an engaging narrative is through the creation of characters that readers can

adore and with whom they can relate or identify themselves [7, 8, 9, 10]. Having strong and believable characters enables readers to establish a connection with the narrative, giving them a sense of presence within the story.

One popular form of digital recreational reading among Generation Z is fan fiction, which has gained significant traction on online platforms [5]. Fan fiction refers to the creative expression of fans who are inspired by existing intellectual properties (IPs) and develop their imaginative storylines, often borrowing names, places, timelines, or the story world from the original IP to create additional content for readers to immerse themselves in. Fan fiction can emerge from various fictional worlds, ranging from tales of wizards and creatures on an adventurous quest to return a ring, to vampire romances, superhero comic books, and fandoms of pop stars. With the global rise of the K-Pop industry, particularly in Indonesia, fandoms have expanded their narrative IPs to involve multiple levels of participation [11]. According to the theory of transmedia storytelling, IPs have the potential to extend their consumption across various categories, including audience contributions resulting from fans' desire for more content; this is where fan fiction comes into play [12]. Despite potential conflicts with intellectual property rights [13], fan fiction continues to thrive through various online platforms due to fans' insatiable appetite for additional materials featuring their idols. Engaging in fictional stories that center around their favorite bias as the main character allows fans to maintain their fantasy of forging a closer connection with these idols.

By incorporating the interactive storytelling model and infusing it with characterization based on an established intellectual property (IP) of a K-Pop idol, which already boasts a dedicated fan base, the author hypothesizes that the resulting narrative will have a solid foundation for generating interest among the fandom as their motivation to engage with the fan fiction, thereby motivating their engagement with the reading material and ultimately enhancing the immersive experience. However, the question remains whether these interactive storytelling models alone will sufficiently captivate Generation Z readers, encouraging their interest in reading interactive storytelling and enhancing their immersion in the reading material during recreational reading activities.

2 Immersion in Interactive Storytelling

Reading is a multi-sensory activity that engages various cognitive processes to maintain the meaningfulness of the reading material [4]. In the traditional reading experience, the content itself served as the driving force that compelled readers to sustain the reading activity. The narrative within traditional printed books skillfully infused suspense, capturing readers' attention and propelling them to read until they reached the final pages [6]. With the progression of digitalization, the once tangible and thick pages of books have undergone a transformation into various digital formats, such as e-books, PDFs, and online postings for the convenience of readers. Consequently, the level of interaction provided by the reading material has also undergone significant changes.

As maintaining the interest of digital natives has become a challenge in reading activities, interactive storytelling has emerged as a potential solution [14]. In a digital

interactive story, the reader is tasked with creating or influencing the storyline by controlling a protagonist's actions and choices throughout the narrative progression. Interactive storytelling combines two popular entertainment concepts: interactivity and narrative [15], thereby offering a heightened experience compared to traditional linear storytelling, where the reader serves as a passive recipient of the narrative. The opportunity for readers to actively participate in the storytelling transforms their passive role as readers into that of players, adding purpose to the activity. In interactive storytelling, readers possess agency, which refers to a sense of power or control they hold, knowing that their choices or actions will yield different outcomes and significantly impact the storyline [16]. An interactive narrative encompasses an interactive experience where readers actively influence a dramatic storyline through their actions. This can be achieved by assuming the role of a character in a fictional virtual world, issuing commands or decisions that impact the unfolding storyline, or directly manipulating the fictional world itself. In the realm of interactive storytelling, readers possess the ability to control a protagonist or shape events, thereby exerting their influence on the dramatic storyline. This unique form of storytelling offers different user experiences, promising innovative and transformative way to a recreational reading [15, 17, 18].

Interactivity within interactive storytelling relies on two key aspects. First, it revolves around the reader's active participation and intervention in the progression and outcome of the story. Readers assume the role of protagonist, engaging in communication and interaction with other characters within the story world, thereby driving and constructing the entire narrative. Second, interactivity allows players to select solutions for the challenges presented within a prewritten narrative, thereby exerting control over the future developments of the story world. This dynamic nature of interactivity leads to the existence of multiple endings, each revealing different facets of the storyline [19]. The process of navigating through the storyline in interactive storytelling is anticipated to foster a deeper level of engagement in the reading activity. The fundamental distinction between a linear storyline and interactive storytelling lies in the possibilities and variations encountered by each reader, all while still enjoying the overarching narrative crafted by interactive storytelling authors. This allows for an idealized experience where readers can explore different pathways and endings within the narrative structure [16].

To make informed choices within interactive storytelling, readers are expected to possess both interest in and cognitive capabilities to comprehend the reading material. These decisions often revolve around the characterization of the protagonist, as readers consider the implications of their choices on the unfolding story [16]. However, it is important to note that this ideal scenario does not always occur. At times when readers fail to become fully immersed in the recreational reading activity, their minds may wander, leading to decisions based solely on fleeting mood or intuition, ultimately resulting in a less immersive experience. By providing opportunities for participation or even co-narration of a story, applications of interactive storytelling promise entirely new modes of user experiences and likely create more immersion in the reading activity [18].

The concept of immersion is metaphorically derived from the sensation of being submerged in water. The process of immersion begins with engagement, which requires readers to invest their time, effort, and attention to a certain degree in order to reach

this level. As readers become more deeply involved with the narrative, they enter a state of engrossment. During this stage, they become less aware of their surroundings and less self-aware compared to before. The ultimate level of involvement is achieved when readers experience a state of total immersion [19]. This immersive state is often referred to as the "Flow Experience." When the task or challenge presented to readers matches their cognitive skills, they enter a state of flow where they feel a sense of ecstasy. They lose track of time, become oblivious to their surroundings, and become completely absorbed in the world of the activity [20]. Hence, understanding the readers' persona is crucial in determining the level of challenge appropriate for the interactive storytelling narrative to ensure future immersion throughout the story line.

The enjoyment of reading interactive narratives can be categorized into three main aspects: appreciation of interaction, appreciation of narrative, and the combined outcomes of both [21]. Among these aspects, immersion plays a significant role and is closely related to the attention span of readers. Immersion allows readers to immerse themselves in the fictional world and is further examined through the following components:

2.1 Flow

According to Csikszentmihalyi, flow is a psychological state that lies between boredom and anxiety, occurring when we engage in an enjoyable activity that challenges our skills [20]. It is characterized by a task that is neither too easy nor too difficult to complete. When in a state of flow, we become fully absorbed in the activity, experiencing a focused state, a sense of serenity, a feeling of timelessness, and gaining inner clarity.

In the context of interactive storytelling, sustaining flow can be achieved by providing enough opportunities for readers to make choices for the protagonist within the narrative and witnessing the consequences unfold. This ongoing activity is maintained by incorporating cognitive clues throughout the storyline, helping readers to identify with the protagonist and keeping the challenge of decision-making present.

2.2 Presence

Being immersed in a recreational reading activity entails a sense of being surrounded by the story world. It involves active engagement and absorption in the narrative content to the extent that one feels transported into the fictional realm [21]. Presence, in this context, can be understood through three distinct types: 1) Spatial presence, which creates the illusion of being physically present within the story world. 2) Social presence, which provides a sense of being in the company of the story's characters. 3) Self-presence, which reflects our identification with and connection to the story world, encompassing our self-identity within its narrative context. These three forms of presence contribute to the overall immersive experience, allowing readers to deeply engage with the story, characters, and setting.

2.3 Role-identification

Readers have the potential to experience a sense of empowerment once they identified themselves with fictional characters. By placing themselves in the shoes of these characters, readers can evoke positive emotions, including feelings of pride, enhanced self-esteem, and increased self-efficacy [21]. The act of identifying with a protagonist's decision-making can be particularly influential, as readers recognize the significance of their own choices. It is important, however, to make decisions based on the personality traits of the characters rather than solely relying on personal mood or preferences. This approach encourages a deeper engagement with the narrative and reinforces the notion of making choices that align with the fictional character's motivations and actions.

2.4 Curiosity

Engaging and sustaining user interest in forthcoming narrative events is a fundamental aspect of storytelling. One key element in achieving this is curiosity, which can be fostered through the implementation of various strategies. Tieben [22] propose the strategies to include: 1) Novelty, Introducing something new to the narrative or the overall reading experience. 2) Partial exposure: Gradually revealing the truth or important details throughout the narrative. 3) Complexity: Presenting a narrative that offers layers of depth and intricacy. 4) Uncertainty, Maintaining a level of unpredictability and suspense within the narrative. 5) Conflict, Introducing conflicts or tensions within the storyline. These conflicts serve as focal points of interest for readers, as they become invested in finding resolutions and understanding the dynamics between characters and events. By incorporating these strategies into the narrative, authors can effectively engage readers' curiosity, enhance their immersion in the story, and ensure an engaging and captivating reading experience.

2.5 Suspense

The concept of excitement is closely intertwined with curiosity, as both experiences are rooted in the presence of uncertainty [21]. However, suspense encompasses additional emotional elements, including fear and empathic concern. Unlike curiosity, suspense emerges from an emotional connection with a character or the overall narrative. Consequently, suspense represents a somewhat distressing form of entertainment. Nevertheless, when the anticipated or feared outcome finally transpires, a profound sense of relief, accompanied by either sadness or satisfaction, ensues [23].

2.6 Believability

In order for readers to establish a connection with the protagonist and the story world, it is essential for them to perceive the narrative as plausible, regardless of the level of fantasy embedded within the story. The credibility of the plot and characters plays a crucial role in determining whether readers will suspend their disbelief or not. The creation of a sense of positive belief necessitates an interactive environment in which the

story unfolds in a coherent and realistic manner, while the characters respond in a believable fashion, enabling the reader to experience a sense of agency [21].

3 Methods

3.1 Preparation

A descriptive research method was employed in this study, utilizing a survey approach that involved two types of questionnaires to gather comprehensive insights. The first questionnaire administered to the participants consist of inquiries regarding their demographics, preferred media for recreational reading, reasons for their media selection, the duration of uninterrupted reading sessions, and—if any—the primary distractions encountered during reading activities. The second phase of the research involved inviting participants to engage in an interactive storytelling experience centered around a romantic storyline involving a K-Pop idol. Following the completion of the reading activity, participants were asked to complete an evaluation questionnaire, which probed into the time taken to finish the reading, the nature of distractions experienced during the activity, and the entertainment value derived from the reading experience. The questionnaires were administered through a Google form, with each choice made by the readers during the interactive storytelling activity being recorded until they arrived at one of the two available endings.

3.2 Participants

In order to conduct the survey, the author enlisted participants who were born between the years 1997 and 2012 and identified as member to a specific fandom, ensuring the generational group and their interest in the protagonist and storyline. The readers involved in this research provided their informed consent and willingly volunteered to participate in the recreational reading activity. As a token of appreciation, participants received a gift upon completing and submitting their final form. The data collection period for this study spanned from April 15 February – 28 February, 2020. A total of 126 respondents took part in the survey, all of whom shared a collective admiration for a particular member of a K-pop idol group who served as the main protagonist in the interactive story, ensuring a consistent level of general interest among the respondents.

3.3 Data Collection

The data collected during this experiment focused on two main aspects: the media preferences of Generation Z participants and the immersive nature of their recreational reading experiences. The analysis of media preferences aimed to understand the types of media commonly used by Generation Z participants and the specific distractions they encountered during their reading activities.

To assess the immersive aspect of the reading experience, the author employed the Dimension of User Experience Toolbox by Roth & Koenitz [21]. This toolbox was used because of its adjustable flexibility to relate with various entertainment contexts. In this research, the original segment in the toolbox was extended to include explanatory adjectives, allowing readers to rate their reading experiences using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. The immersion aspect was measured through various clusters, which are as follows:

Table 1. The Explanatory Adjective Adapted and Adjusted from The Dimension of User Experience Toolbox by Roth & Koenitz [21]

Immersive Lenses [21]	Customised Question
Flow	I was submerged within the storytelling
	The reading activity kept me constantly engaged
	I feel competent to make choices throughout the story line
	The presence of the protagonist (the idol I adore) enhanced my absorption in the story world
Presence	I had a strong sense of being a part of the story world
	I was aware that the storyline could change based on my choices
	I feel like I could interact with the objects and the other characters
	I felt as though I was engaged in real conversations with the protagonist
Role-Identification	I felt like I was experiencing the story through the perspective of the protagonist
	I constantly wish that my chosen storyline would lead to the best outcome
	I based my choices on the characteristics and traits of the protagonist
	I developed a deep understanding of the protagonist within the story world
Curiosity	I am inclined to reread the story to explore different outcomes based on alternative choices
	I consistently contemplated the cause and effect of the protagonist's experiences base on my choices
	The non-monotonic nature of the reading experience motivated me to continue reading
	I felt a sense of agitation and curiosity about the potential outcomes of different choices

Suspense	I experienced tension when reaching points where the storyline branches
	I became more cautious and thoughtful during the reading activity
	I developed a heightened sense of awareness and thoughtfulness during the reading activity
	I felt some anxiety and concern about the consequences of my choices
	At times, I worried about the unfolding of the story after making my choice
Believability	I believed what the protagonist experienced in the story was plausible
	My choices were influenced by how I imagined the protagonist would behave in the storyline
	The reading experience prompted me to reflect on the correlation between my choices in the story and my real life
	To some extent, I recognized the potential for events in the story occur in real life

By analyzing the data collected within these clusters, the study aims to gain insights into the immersive reading experiences of Generation Z participants and their responses to different aspects of interactive storytelling.

4 Result and Discussion

Utilizing the research methods outlined in the previous chapter, data was collected from the participants to examine their preferences for reading media and their ability to sustain attention during recreational reading activities. Furthermore, the reasons behind their difficulties in maintaining attention were gathered and subsequently summarized.

The participants' choices of reading media were recorded and analyzed to determine their preferred platforms for engaging in recreational reading. Additionally, the duration for which they were able to sustain their attention during these activities was assessed and documented. To gain insights into the factors contributing to attention lapses, participants were asked to provide reasons for their struggles in maintaining focus during recreational reading. These responses were carefully examined and synthesized to identify common themes and patterns.

By employing the methods discussed in the previous chapter, the study effectively collected and analyzed data pertaining to participants' choice of reading media, their attention spans during recreational reading, and the underlying reasons for attention difficulties. The findings derived from this analysis provide valuable insights into the factors influencing attention in the context of recreational reading activities. The analysis of the results indicates that three key factors significantly influence the attention of Generation Z individuals during their reading activities:

1. Cognitive Skills: To effectively engage with a narrative content, readers must possess certain cognitive skills. They need to be capable of mentally visualizing the story world, empathizing with the protagonist, comprehending the underlying conflict, and possessing basic language skills to understand the narrative itself.
2. State of Mind: The emotional state experienced during the reading activity plays a crucial role. Often, distractions originate not from external sources but from within the reader. To fully immerse themselves in recreational reading, individuals must wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to the purpose of reading. Sustaining this purpose requires the reading material to remain captivating, continually challenging their cognitive abilities, and maintaining an optimal level of suspense to sustain interest.
3. Environment: An individual's reading experience can be significantly impacted by their surrounding environment. Factors such as being situated in a crowded market, having an uncomfortable reading position, receiving notification messages on the screen, or being interrupted by others can hinder their ability to immerse themselves in the story world. Therefore, creating a conducive environment for reading becomes crucial in ensuring a satisfying reading experience.

In conclusion, the attention of Generation Z readers during their reading activities is influenced by their cognitive skills, state of mind, and the environment in which they read. Understanding and addressing these factors can contribute to enhancing their overall reading experience.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how these factors influence immersion in recreational reading activities among Generation Z, the respondents were instructed to engage with a fan fiction piece presented in the format of interactive storytelling. This particular narrative emphasized a romantic relationship between two protagonists: one being an idol transformed into an ordinary individual within the story world, and the other being an original character created by the author.

Among the 126 respondents, 33 individuals acknowledged experiencing significant distractions during their reading activity. These distractions encompassed various activities such as watching television, engaging in chats, or browsing different platforms on their smartphones. On the other hand, the remaining 93 respondents were able to progress through the story without any interruptions, fully engrossed in the reading experience.

An interesting contrast between the two groups can be observed in terms of the time taken to complete the story. Approximately 18% of the distracted group required multiple days to finish the storyline, whereas only 3.2% of the focused group required a similar duration. The extended time taken by individuals to complete an interactive storytelling experience appeared to impact their level of immersion. To further explore this observation, the researcher conducted a follow-up investigation into the immersive entertainment value of the interactive storytelling experience, drawing from Roth & Koenitz framework [21] and adapting it to the context of reading experiences (as outlined in Table 1). The resulting data were represented visually using a spider diagram,

effectively highlighting the notable differences observed. The specific findings are presented as follows:

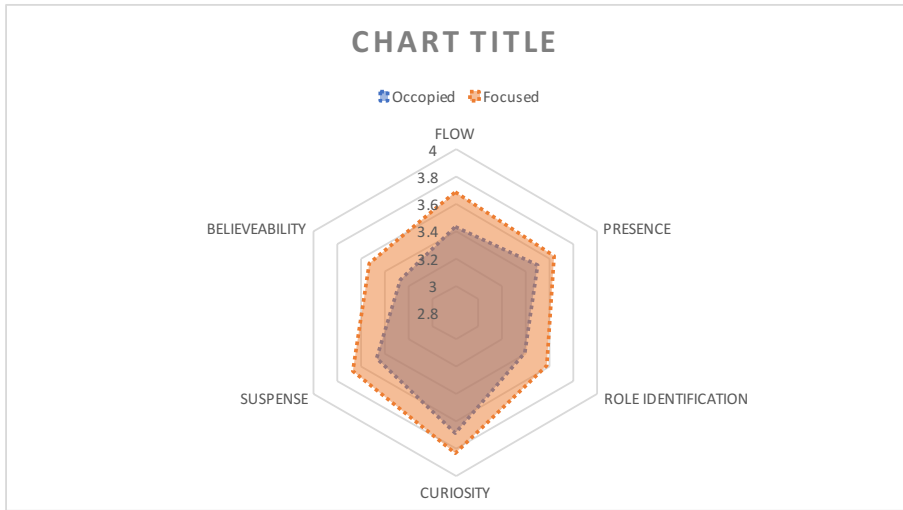


Fig. 1. Result of Interactive Storytelling Activity

Based on the analysis of the spider diagram, the following observations can be made:

In the lens of immersive experience, the focused group of readers generally reported a high level of immersion, as indicated by all variables being measured above the median value on the 5-point Likert scale. This suggests that they were highly engaged and absorbed in the interactive storytelling experience. Curiosity was the most prominent variable in the diagram, indicating that the focused readers experienced a strong desire to know how the story would unfold after making their choices. This curiosity was closely linked to a sense of suspense, as they felt a heightened anticipation and uncertainty about the outcomes of their decisions. The diagram shows that both the focused and distracted groups exhibited similar levels of role identification and believability. This suggests that readers in both groups have difficulties to completely surrender their general common sense about the idol protagonist in order to accept the protagonist with his own new character traits composed for the story world. They tended to choose their options based on personal preferences and desires for how the two protagonists would interact, rather than strictly adhering to the established characteristics of the protagonists. However, this approach sometimes led to bad endings and diminished their overall enjoyment of the story.

The diagram clearly demonstrates that the distracted group had significantly smaller areas across all six variables. This indicates that readers who engaged in multitasking during the reading experience felt less immersed in the narrative and experienced lower levels of flow, presence, role identification, curiosity, suspense, and believability.

In summary, the spider diagram analysis reveals that the focused group of readers experienced a higher level of immersion and engagement in the interactive storytelling compared to the distracted group. Curiosity and suspense were strong driving factors for the focused readers, while both groups displayed similar patterns in role identification and believability. The findings highlight the negative impact of distractions on the immersive aspects of the reading experience.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings reveal that Generation Z faces challenges in maintaining attention and immersion during reading activities due to the constant distractions prevalent in the digital era. The introduction of interactive storytelling has shown promise in capturing and sustaining their immersion, but the inherent nature of shifting through multiple platforms remains a significant obstacle to achieving a truly immersive reading experience. To address this issue, interactive narrative designers need to adapt and explore alternative forms of storytelling to balance Generation Z's inclination to switch platforms. Distributing the narrative across various platforms becomes essential to help readers gain a comprehensive understanding of the story world, moving away from relying solely on lengthy texts. Embracing narrative distribution across digital platforms can effectively support Generation Z readers in obtaining a holistic understanding of the story.

Despite their rapid shifts between platforms and channels, Generation Z can still grasp a larger narrative if it is presented in easily digestible portions. Authors of linear or interactive storytelling should consider structuring their content in bite-sized pieces to prevent comprehension loss while readers skim through the texts. To embrace Generation Z's behavior, fictional authors can opt for the interactive storytelling model or expand into the transmedia storytelling model. The transmedia approach offers readers various entry points into the story world through different platforms, while ensuring non-repetitive content and maintaining contextual coherence across platforms. This facilitates effortless engagement for Gen Z readers, providing them with a holistic and immersive story world experience.

While reader motivation and compelling content for recreational activities remain crucial, they are no longer the sole factors on which fiction authors can rely. Generation Z's relationship with hyper-textual elements presents a challenge, requiring fictional authors to expand their media and channels to align with Gen Z's behavior. By doing so, authors can effectively sustain the interest and commitment of Generation Z readers, even in the face of ongoing distractions.

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