

Children and young people's engagement with comics in 2023

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March 2024

Introduction

Comics span diverse genres and include graphic novels, one-off comic strips, weekly magazines, webcomics, non-fiction and manga titles for children, young people and adults. Despite various attempts to do so, this variety can leave the form difficult to define. Eisner (1985) defined it as ‘Sequential Art’, while others have defined it as “a series of images arranged in a sequence, sometimes with words, to tell a story” (McCloud, 1993) or as “... a sequence of discrete, juxtaposed pictures that comprise a narrative, either in their own right or when combined with text” (Hayman and Pratt, 2005).

Though complex to define as a form, sales of comics indicate that their popularity has been growing steadily in recent years in the United Kingdom. In 2022, the UK comics market had grown to over £50m (Tivnan, 2023), buoyed by the increasing popularity of UK-based creators for children and young people like Alice Oseman and Jamie Smart.

Indeed, comics are a considerable part of the reading diet of many children and young people. When we asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 from across the UK about their reading habits as part of the Annual Literacy Survey in 2023, we found that 2 in 5 (40.7%) read comics or graphic novels in their free time at least once a month.

The popularity of comics among children and young people is important, especially when considering another finding from our survey: only 2 in 5 (43.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoyed reading in their free time. This is the lowest level of reading enjoyment we’ve recorded since we first began researching reading attitudes and habits in 2005 (Clark et al., 2023). Finding ways to encourage reading engagement in children and young people is therefore more vital than ever.

A recent study, conducted by Lakes International Comics Art Festival, indicated that inclusion of comics in the curriculum, and increased access to comics in school, can have a positive impact on enjoyment of reading at home and on motivation to read recreationally (Miles, 2023). Research has also shown that using webcomics can improve comprehension in learners as the sequence of images acts as a learning tool, putting complex events in context (Hartati et al., 2022; Syarah et al., 2019). Comics can also provide a gateway to more complex texts (Uijie &

Krashen, 1996) and support readers to retain information (Aleixo and Sumner, 2017).

What's more, we know that guided choice can be an important influence in reading for enjoyment. By creating ownership and giving children and young people the opportunity to make decisions, readers may have more positive experiences and develop stronger motivation (Clark & Phythian-Sence, 2008). A small primary school study found that children welcomed the addition of comics to their library, especially when the texts were created by their fellow students, as these comics reflected the interests of the children (Thorogood, 2020).

This report

Every year, as part of our Annual Literacy Survey, we ask children and young people aged 8 to 18 from across the UK to tell us about their literacy habits. As part of this survey, we ask whether they read comics and/or graphic novels in their free time at least once a month.

This report draws on data collected in early 2023 from 64,066 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from across the UK to explore the attitudes and beliefs of comic readers. In addition to survey data, we will also highlight comments from children and young people that explore in their own words how they engage with comics, and even the experience of some children and young people who have themselves created comics.

Key findings

Who reads comics?

- 2 in 5 (40.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us they read comics or graphic novels on paper, on screen or both at least once a month.
 - Paper was the most popular format for reading comics.
 - The percentage of children and young people who read comics in their free time remained fairly consistent between 2010 and 2023.
- More boys than girls read comics in their free time at least once a month (44.6% vs 34.8%).
- The percentage of those who read comics decreased with age: 49.7% of those aged 8 to 11, 40.5% of those aged 11 to 14, 31.4% of those aged 14 to 16, and 32.1% of those aged 16 to 18 read comics at least once a month.

- Marginally more children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs) told us they read comics compared with their peers who did not receive FSMs (42.3% vs 39.2%).
- There were few differences in comic reading across different regions in England. However, more children and young people in London (51.7%) read comic books in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. Comic reading was lowest in Yorkshire (38.7%), the South East (37.1%) and South West (33.6%).

Comics and reading engagement

Children and young people who read comics were more engaged with reading, regardless of their age:

- Nearly twice as many children and young people who read comics in their free time told us that they enjoyed reading compared with those who didn't read comics in their free time (58.6% vs. 33.1%).
- More of those who read comics rated themselves as 'very good' or 'good' readers compared with those who didn't read comics (86.0% vs 76.3%).
- More of those who read comics told us that they read something daily in their free time compared with their peers who did not read comics (35.7% vs. 22.8%).

Why do children and young people read comics?

Readers of comics were motivated to read for a range of reasons:

- Children and young people told us that they read comics because they were accessible, engaging, supported their wellbeing, and provided opportunities to learn about different cultures.

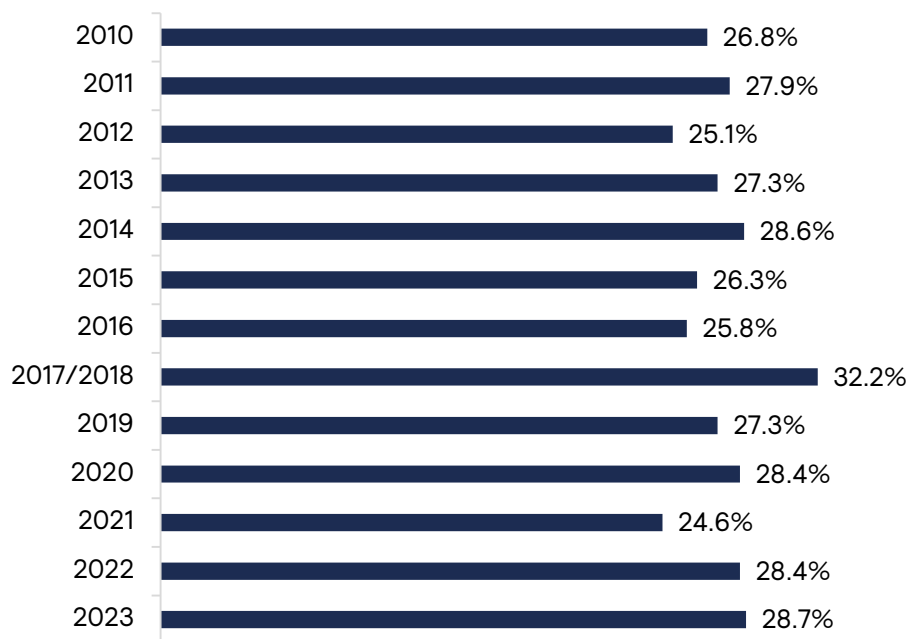
“Reading comics is my main and my favourite hobby, it makes me so happy. The thing I look forward to the most is reading comics.”

(Did not share their gender, Y11)

Who reads comics?

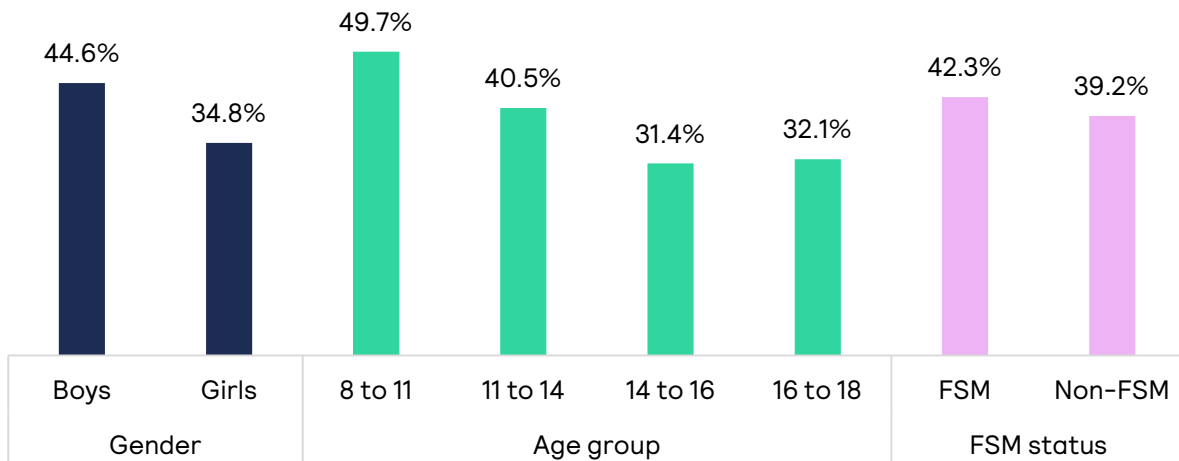
In 2023, 2 in 5 (40.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us that they read comics or graphic novels on paper, on screen or both in their free time at least once a month. Paper was the most popular format for engaging with comics. Figure 1 shows how consistent children and young people’s engagement with comics/graphic novels on paper has been over the past 13 years.

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read comics on paper in their free time between 2010 and 2023



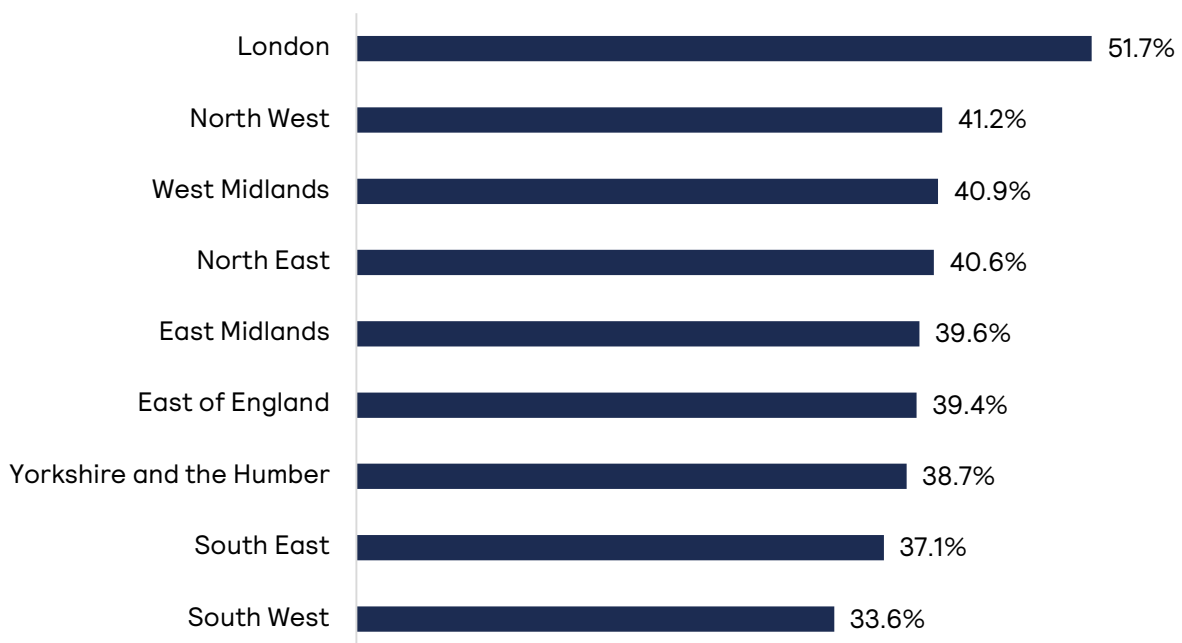
There were differences in comic reading by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake. As shown in Figure 2, more boys (44.6%) than girls (34.8%) told us they read comics in their free time at least once a month. Reading comics also decreased with age: while 1 in 2 (49.7%) children aged 8 to 11 told us they read comics at least once a month in their free time, this decreased to 2 in 5 (40.5%) for those aged 11 to 14, and to 3 in 10 for those aged 14 to 16 (31.4%) and those aged 16 to 18 (32.1%). Finally, marginally more children and young people who received free school meals told us that they read comics (42.3%) compared with their peers who did not receive FSMs (39.2%).

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read comics at least once a month by gender, age group and free-school-meal status



We further broke down comic reading among children and young people by region in England. As shown in Figure 3, more 8- to 18-year-olds from London (51.7%) read comic books in their free time at least once a month compared with their peers in other regions in England. Comic reading was lowest in Yorkshire (38.7%), the South East (37.1%) and South West (33.6%).

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read comics at least once a month in 2023 by region in England

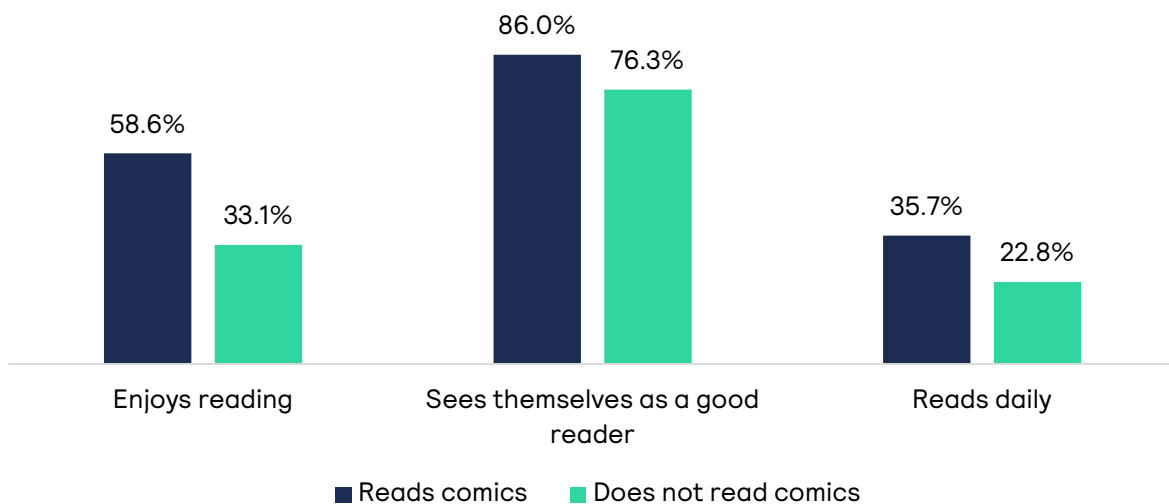


Comics and reading engagement

To explore possible links between comics and reading engagement, we looked at the reading attitudes and behaviours of those children and young people who told us that they read comics at least once a month and compared them with those who told us that they did not read comics in their free time.

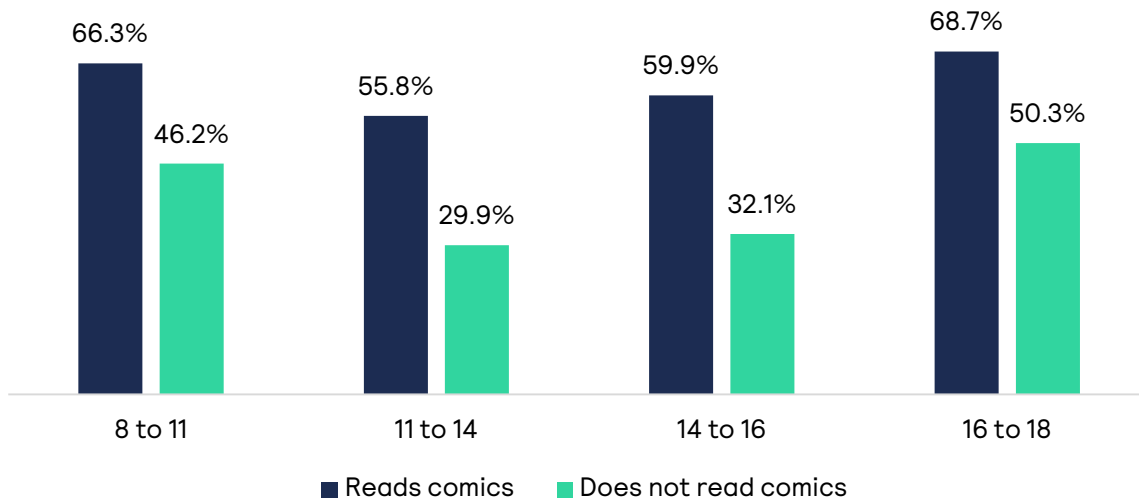
As Figure 4 shows, nearly twice as many children and young people who read comics in their free time told us that they enjoyed reading compared with those who didn't read comics in their free time (58.6% vs. 33.1%). More of those who read comics at least once a month also rated themselves as 'very good' or 'good' readers (86.0% vs 76.3%), and more told us that they read something daily compared with peers who did not read comics (35.7% vs. 22.8%).

Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people who read and did not read comics in their free time and how this relates to their enjoyment of reading, their perceptions of their own reading skill and daily reading



Given that reading comics was particularly popular for younger children (see Figure 2), and knowing that younger age groups show higher levels of engagement with reading more widely (see [Clark et al., 2023](#)), we also explored whether comic readers' engagement with reading varied by age. We found that reading enjoyment, confidence and frequency were higher for comic book readers regardless of their age (see Figure 5 below and Figures 6 and 7 in the Appendix).

Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people who read and did not read comics in their free time and how this relates to their enjoyment of reading, by age group



Children and young people as creators of comics

Although we did not ask children and young people whether they created their own comics, a small group told us in their comments that they had done so. Indeed, some told us about how reading comics led to them writing their own:

“I will write a comic at lunchtime, or I will read one.” (Boy, Y8)

“I read most of the time because I play video games and read comic books. I also like to write comics myself, so I do quite a lot of writing too.” (Boy, Y6)

“I read comics [and] make comics.” (Boy, Y4)

Others told us about how they wrote comics in their free time:

“[I write] comics.” (Girl, Y5)

“I like writing adventure or comics.” (Boy, Y5)

“I write to make comics with my friends.” (Boy, Y4)

“I don’t like writing, only if I’m making a comic.” (Girl, Y7)

“I only write in my own made comics.” (Boy, Y7)

Children and young people also said more about why they created comics. There were a variety of reasons highlighted. For example, some found creating comics to be good for their wellbeing, while others said that it helped further their goals or made others happy:

“I draw my own comics or pictures more [than reading] to calm myself down/pass the time.” (Girl, Y7)

“I write stories and Mangas in my free time because I love creative writing and want to become an author.” (Girl, Y7)

“I write because I enjoy it. I write songs, I write short stories, I even write manga. I simply find it therapeutic and entertaining.” (Girl, Y7)

“Writing is fun, especially making comics, stories and seeing people enjoy what you made and giving you praises for it.” (Boy, Y7)

Why do children and young people read comics?

Children and young people also told us in their own words why they read comics. Some children and young people said that they read comics to support their mental wellbeing:

“Terrible mental health, but some manga helps.” (Boy, Y10)

“Comics help me escape the troubles and worries of the real world by having stories in a fictional universe where it won’t affect reality. It helps [take] my mind off stuff.” (Boy, Y4)

“Personally, I enjoy reading romance and action comics/books because it helps me escape from daily worries that might cloud my mind.” (Girl, Y7)

“It helps distract me from things I worry about. It makes the world seem less miserable, as I read lots of sci-fi, fantasy and romance. I love fantasy comics.” (Did not share their gender, Y11)

Some highlighted how they chose to read comics because they found them to be more accessible to read:

“Yeah, [...] I like to read comics but as I have dyslexia and I struggle to read, I get help from my parents.” (Girl, Y7)

“I read every day, mostly graphic novels because I find them easiest to read. [I also read] comics.” (Girl, Y8)

“I read comics a lot of the time – almost all of my free time is spent reading comics and occasionally books. Reading comics is my main and my favourite hobby, it makes me so happy. The thing I look forward to the most is reading comics. I love them. I like reading books, too, but it’s really hard for me and I only like reading that entertains me.” (Did not share their gender, Y11)

“I like to read comics as I find them easy to read and they are quite funny.” (Girl, Y7)

Children and young people also told us that the narratives in comics kept them engaged:

“I read for enjoyment. Reading comics makes me excited and makes me want to read more.” (Girl, Y8)

“I like to read comics because they are very interesting and have wacky adventures.” (Girl, Y9)

“I love comics – they set a completely new type of plot, and they make me really happy.” (Girl, Y6)

“I read Mangas which are like Japanese comics, and it has so much story and action and learning about the Japanese.” (Girl, Y8)

And enabled them to bond with others:

“My brothers like reading comics and anime and I started reading it to talk and have fun with them. I got into it and now I like reading it.” (Girl, Y7)

Finally, children and young people were inspired by comics, and many went on to create art and stories, or learn more about cultures, as a result of reading comics:

“It’s fun because I can read a comic and then write a similar story.” (Boy, Y9)

“Reading is fun and it helps me expand my imagination so I can draw. I especially like reading comics.” (Girl, Y7)

“Manga has inspired my interest in Japanese culture.” (Boy, Y7)

“I read comics which encourages me to write a lot of poems.” (Boy, Y8)

“I read because it helps me get ideas for mini books or comics that I may write.”
(Girl, Y7)

Conclusion

Over the past 13 years, the percentage of children and young people who have read comics has remained relatively consistent, even as overall reading enjoyment has declined. That reading enjoyment, confidence and frequency is higher for those who read comics suggests that comics may be a valuable tool for counteracting such a trend. This may be due to the unique combination of genres, visuals and texts that comics offer, which can make reading more immersive and enjoyable.

In their own words, children and young people have told us that they read comics because they are fun, cool and relatable. Our findings also showed that it’s not just about reading. Creating their own comics can also be a valuable pastime for children and young people because it allows them to express themselves creatively, explore their imaginations and relax.

These findings highlight the importance of children and young people having access to a diverse range of reading materials, including comics. Comics offer a unique and engaging way of connecting with young readers, particularly young boys, regardless of their free-school-meal status. By continuing to advocate for comics as a fun and legitimate reading format, we can continue to inspire a future generation of readers and creators.

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Appendix

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people who read and did not read comics in their free time and how this relates to their perceptions of their own reading skill, by age group

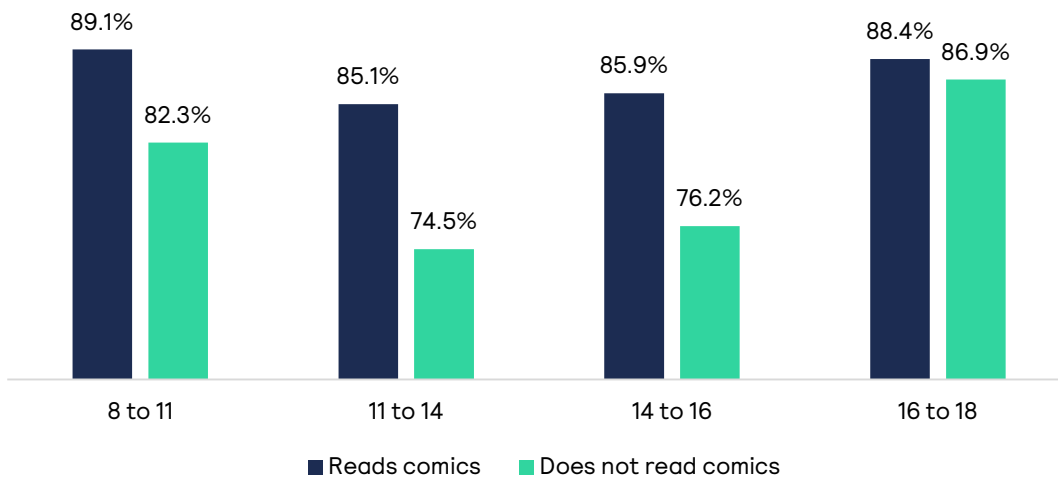
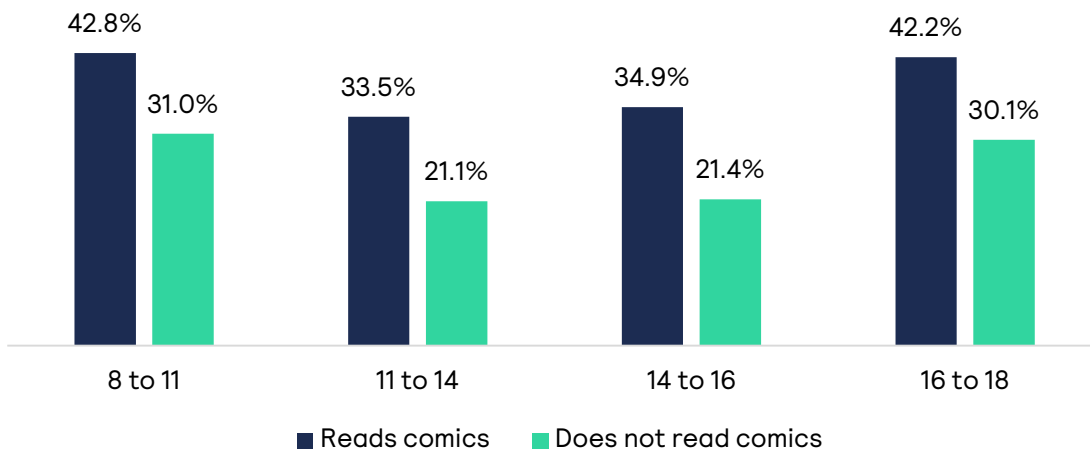


Figure 7: Percentage of children and young people who read and did not read comics in their free time and how this relates to their daily reading, by age group



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