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# Reading Habits of University Students in North Macedonia

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## *Abstract*

This paper will present the findings of a study into the reading habits of university students in North Macedonia, including an in-depth exploration of their reading preferences, their general attitudes towards reading, their history of reading since childhood, and the challenges they face today in their existing (or non-existing) efforts to devote time to reading. Well-developed reading skills and overall literacy are crucial for both academic success and personal growth. The study aims to understand the current reading stage among university students aged 18 and over. The paper will present the results from the qualitative data collected through an online survey conducted among the students at three universities in North Macedonia, including International Balkan University in Skopje. The results will provide valuable insights into the reading habits of the students, showing areas of both strengths and weaknesses, while trying to contribute to a better understanding of the factors which influence reading engagement, as well as inform the development of strategies to help promote a stronger reading culture in tertiary educational institutions.

**Keywords:** reading habits, university students, North Macedonia, reading preferences, reading challenges, attitudes towards reading, higher education.

## Introduction

Reading is a highly valuable skill with a broad reach in individual and mental development. One is exposed to much information by reading, as one reads about other cultures, concepts, and modes of thinking. Reading allows individuals to learn vocabulary, build reading ability, and develop critical thinking ability. It also provides relaxation and enjoyment since it provides relief from everyday tensions. It is also tremendously useful for university students, as it directly affects their academic success. University courses comprise a great deal of reading of textbooks, academic texts, and research papers. Through reading the texts, the students can deepen their knowledge of the subjects, keep themselves updated with the latest research, and have a sound foundation in their field of study. Reading also allows students to prepare for exams, compose essays, and participate in class discussions, all of which are key aspects of university education.

To that end, reading forms a habit of lifelong learning, which is essential in university students. In today's fast-paced world, having the ability to continually learn new things and acquire new skills is invaluable. Through reading practice, students can stay curious and open, constantly seeking to learn and expand their horizons. Such an attitude not only benefits them during their period of being in university but also throughout their future work and personal life.

Reading also enhances intellectual function and mental well-being and renders university students empathetic and emotionally intelligent. Through the exposure to different characters, circumstances, and cultures, reading enables the students to learn and understand other ways of looking at things. This has the potential of making them more empathetic and having better interpersonal relations, an element taking a central position in building efficient relationships and communication in multicultural teams.

## Literature Review

As pointed out above, the skill of reading is a very valuable one with great influence on personal and mental development. Some of the benefits of reading include allowing individuals to learn vocabulary, develop reading ability, and develop critical thinking ability (Suk, 2016). Reading also provides relaxation and enjoyment because it provides a reprieve from the stresses of life (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). To university students, reading is even more important as it directly impacts their academic success. Through the reading of the texts, students can enhance their knowledge of

the subjects, keep abreast of the latest research, and have a good foundation in their field of study (Ali et al., 2024). As previously mentioned, reading also allows students to study for exams, write essays, and participate in class discussions, all of which are essential aspects of university education. Through reading practice, students are able to stay curious and receptive, always seeking to learn and expand their knowledge (Vogrinčić Čepić et al., 2024). Such an attitude not only benefits them during their time at university but also during their professional and personal life.

Studies have also found that regular reading enhances concentration, memory, and analytical ability (Suk, 2016). Reading keeps the mind active and stimulated and keeps it busy, which can avert mental deterioration with age. Reading also reduces stress and enhances mental well-being by causing feelings of relaxation and calm (Vogrinčić Čepić et al., 2024). For university students, who are exposed to great levels of stress, reading can become a powerful tool for maintaining mental well-being. As Maryanne Wolf notes, the act of deep reading “is a bridge to thought and insight, and it is under threat in a digital culture that favors skimming and scrolling” (2010, p. 126).

Lastly, reading helps to make university students empathetic and emotionally intelligent. By exposing them to different characters, circumstances, and societies, reading helps the students learn and value different ways of looking at things. This may translate to higher empathy and better interpersonal relations, an aspect crucial in the development of successful relations and communications in multicultural teams. In a university context, where communication and collaboration are paramount, the ability to gain such skills can go a long way in augmenting the social and academic life of a student (Vogrinčić Čepić et al., 2024).

Statistics from two recent surveys in the United States show a decline, however, in the reading habits of teens, which will have the effect of a decline in the overall reading habits by university age. For example, the American Psychological Association (2018) surveyed and discovered that less than 20% of American teenagers report reading for pleasure on a daily basis, a book, magazine, or newspaper, yet more than 80% report using social media on a daily basis. Also, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) from the Pew Research Centre (2021), the percentage of American 9- and 13-year-olds who read for recreation nearly every day has declined. In 2020, reading for enjoyment almost daily was noted by just 42% of 9-year-olds and 17% of 13-year-olds. The same NAEP report also showed that girls read for enjoyment more than boys. Nearly 46% of 9-year-old girls read for fun almost daily, versus 38% of boys.

Moreover, the research discovered that the expansion of digital media has tremendously encroached on the time consumed on conventional reading. Teenagers now spend six hours daily on digital media such as texting, the internet, and social media. These results refer to a deep-seated transformation in teenagers' reading culture, with digital media progressively replacing conventional reading and this may be one of the contributing factors to an overall decline in reading among all ages, including university students.

## Methodology

Our research was carried out among students from three universities in North Macedonia, namely, over 80 students from the International Balkan University, Ss. Cyril and Methodius and the American University of Europe – FON. The participants differed in terms of background, age, and the department/faculty they attended. To be more specific, 35.8% of the participants were over 22, 33.3% were aged 21, 13.6% were aged 22, and 12.3% were aged 20, with lesser unspecified percentages for the ages of 18 and 19, and most (nearly 84%) were women. In relation to their studies, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (37.5%) and the Faculty of Education (35%) were the most dominant, with several other faculties like Engineering, Law, Economics, and Administrative Sciences (16.2%) trailing. The participants completed 20 questions via Google Forms that covered areas of reading as a child, reading at school (primary and secondary), and their current reading habits.

## Results And Discussion

The results from questions one and two are indicative of a high relationship between early reading exposure and parental reading. A significant proportion (65.4%) of the participants experienced early reading exposure and were read to by parents before school entry. This indicates that a high number of parents were engaging in early literacy practices, which are generally attributed to better language development and school readiness among children. Regarding their parents' reading habits, while 30.9% of participants stated that their parents still read, more (39.5%) stated that their parents read before but they no longer do. Quite surprisingly, nearly a third (29.6%) stated that their parents were never interested in reading. These findings may be able to suggest that early reading experience is not necessarily dependent on parents being long-term readers. Even parents who

don't read or never enjoyed reading may still recognize the benefit of early reading to their children. This indicates that parents may be aware of the educational value of reading, regardless of their personal reading behavior. In the choice of childhood reading materials, the participants revealed that an overwhelming majority enjoyed reading fantasy, fairy tales, and adventure stories when they were children, with a love of fictional and imaginative books that had mythical creatures, magical powers, or exciting plots.

Some spoke of reading illustrated storybooks, comics, or short stories. A few participants stated they did not enjoy reading when they were children, but developed an interest later on. Overall, the answers show a liking for engaging, creative, and visually stimulating material, with the exception of a few. We were also interested to see the connection between early reading and learning basic literacy, and found that 53.1% of participants learned to read at school and 46.9% before attending school.

It was also revealed that 84% of the participants did not recall having difficulties learning to read, whereas 9.9% did and 6.2% were unsure. These results suggest that nearly half of the participants had early reading experience before they started school, which may be reflective of home support or access to early learning services. The very high percentage of participants who did not struggle to learn to read in school could be an indication of effective early literacy instruction or strong foundational skills built in the home. Together, these findings indicate the benefit of early reading exposure and the generally positive reading acquisition experiences in the students surveyed. We then proceeded to determine the participants' reading habits while they were undergoing their primary education and found that 74.1% of the participants read the books they were given in primary school, 23.5% read some of them, and a small minority did not read them at all.

The following questions about how they felt about reading assignments revealed that while many of them did read the assigned books, some were bored, irrelevant, or uninteresting. Some were not engaged or did not find value in reading at the time, many times due to a lack of parental involvement or simply a lack of interest on their part. While most complied with reading for school, the qualitative responses suggest that engagement and enjoyment were often low. This suggests a potential mismatch between the texts assigned and students' interests or reading readiness. It also suggests the importance of engaging, relevant content and reading-friendly environments—both school and home—toward the cultivation of a sustaining interest in reading, as a large majority of the participants (84-85%) were encouraged to read by teachers and parents in the home.

The aforementioned disparity between assigned reading and student interest was even more evident in their secondary education where although 86.4% of the participants read the assigned books in high school (and only 13.6% did not do so), many were uninterested in the content, stating that the books were not in their preferred genre, not engaging, or were taught by uninspiring teachers. Some chose to read replacement books or only read if the material was presented in a preferred language (e.g., English). A few also mentioned education system limitations, such as open models of education that didn't include required reading. Based on these responses, we can conclude that although the majority read according to assignments in high school, the qualitative responses suggest that compliance did not necessarily constitute engagement. A majority of the students read due to obligation rather than interest, and factors like teacher enthusiasm, book selection, and personal interests had a significant part to play in their reading. This highlights the necessity of student-directed book selections and passionate teaching in a bid to foster genuine interest in teenage reading.

Last but not least, we wanted to study the current reading habits of the university students and, against expectations, found that 84% of the participants do read in their current stage of life and a majority of them to a great extent as well.

We were able to group the readers into several categories, such as:

- Low readers (1–5 books/year): A number of participants reported reading 1 to 5 books a year, typically because they did not have the time or interest.
- Moderate readers (6–15 books/year): Most fell into this category, typically attempting to read a book a month or reading when they had time.
- High readers (16–30 books/year): Some participants reported reading 20–30 books, typically with a set reading habit.
- Very high readers (30+ books/year): Some people indicated that they read 40–150 books per year, regularly tracking their reading or reading several books each month.

The responses indicate a broad spectrum of reading habits, from occasional readers to dedicated book lovers. Time availability, interest, and reading purpose are significant parameters that influence the degree to which individuals read. While most attempt to be frequent (e.g., a book monthly), others do concentrated reading during specific periods like vacations. Some interviewees also differentiate between voluntary reading and reading books for academic purposes, implying that motivation and volition are at the core of adult reading practice.

There were, however, participants who said they do not read, with the most common reason provided being lack of time, provided by an overwhelming majority of participants. Several others indicated they do not enjoy reading, particularly when it comes to educational or mandatory reading. Others indicated that they would prefer to read other media like films, TV, or video games, which they find more interactive or immersive. Others fell under the category of “Other”, suggesting reasons not overtly expressed, and others stated that they do read, but only for school or selectively for pleasure. The answers identify insufficient time and lack of personal interest as the greatest barriers to reading. Even among non-readers, there’s a hint of interest in reading under the right conditions, such as more engaging content or more free time. This leads one to suspect that promoting reading might be more successful if it’s done in harmony with individuals’ lives and interests, and if other formats (like audiobooks or graphic novels) are considered. The majority of the participants’ daily reading is digital, if not all digital content, with 52% of the total reading devoted to social media posts, 21% for online articles, 15% for chat, and only about 10% for other types of reading texts. Most of the participants assert that they read every day or nearly every day, yet the nature, frequency, and purpose of their reading differ enormously from person to person.

One dominant trend is reading online material—social network posts, internet news, blog entries, email, instant messaging, and gossip websites—which indicates that light, fragmented reading has become a common practice in everyday life. Despite this, there is a large number who still manage to find time for books, both in paper and electronic formats. Fiction is the most popular genre of reading, with many pointing to a liking for romance, mystery, fantasy, thrillers, and drama. Fanfiction and classical literature, including books by authors such as Dostoevsky, are also mentioned, showing a broad circle of literary interest. Non-fiction is less frequent but not rare, with self-help books, psychological texts, religious texts, and academic or instructional texts most frequent. A lot of the reading is academic requirement-related. Many read assigned texts, study guides, and course texts on a regular basis, and some admit to reading solely for school or when they have to.

Others try to balance academic reading and reading for personal growth or enjoyment. There is a heavy emphasis on reading as personal growth, especially through genres like psychology, education, or spirituality books. Some readers set and accomplish specific goals—e.g., pages read per day or chapters per week—while others read based on mood, energy, or availability of leisure time. To others, reading is a disciplined habit—a customary part of their daily routine, especially before bed

or during public transportation—while some read more sporadically or seasonally, i.e., while on vacation. Some describe themselves as voracious readers, reading hundreds of pages a week, while others admit they don't read much at all except what they must.

## Conclusion

Despite these differences, the general indications show that reading, in all its forms, remains an important activity. Academic, informational, or merely for pleasure, reading is generally viewed as a beneficial way of learning, unwinding, staying current, and linking to the world. It has broad implications for scholastic success, individual growth, and emotional intelligence, especially for university students confronted by an increasingly complex world. From initial contact with books in childhood through the same university students' reading habits today, the statistics respectively reveal that while the mechanisms and incentives for reading have changed—transferring to a great degree to online content—the intrinsic value of reading persists. University students possessing ongoing active reading habits not only benefit from their studies and mental development but also from empathizing, effective communication, and stress relief. However, the declining trend of leisure reading among younger generations, largely due to the onset of digital distractions, points to a need to enhance reading more interestingly, accessibly, and realistically. This can include the integration of more student-centered content, the acceptance of multimedia presentations, and the promotion of reading habits that accommodate personal interests and current lifestyles. Eventually, the promotion of a lifelong reading habit among university students is not only beneficial to their academic advancement but also to professional adaptability and personal fulfillment in the long run.

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