

Reviving Readership on Campus in the Age of Internet Through Extra-Curricular Activities

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Due to the proliferation of ubiquitous internet and smart gadgets, the culture of book reading has been on the decline; lack of this important quality is clearly reflected in the social awareness, creativity, and critical thinking skills of university students. This paper examines the impact of gadgets, online education, and entertainment on academic and recreational book reading. This article presents a brief account of extra-curricular intervention aimed at promoting voluntary readership among university students. Qualitative data was collected through pre and post intervention surveys and via observation. A preliminary survey provided profound insight into the leisure reading habits of the students and extent of reliance on digital gadgets and online resources as a primary source for gathering information. The efficacy of proposed intervention was evaluated through the program mentor and exit survey feedback. According to the survey results the proposed intervention achieved fruitful results; According to authors there is no quick fix to this problem; coherent and consorted efforts are needed to impede the adverse effects of digital technology on university students.

Keywords: free voluntary reading, leisure reading, book reading

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a desirable skill, which is essential for personal and professional growth as well as lifelong success. In the age of electronic media and the internet, the culture of reading has lost its due place in our daily lives; the current day scenario, with the infiltration of social media and its abundant accessibility due to smart phone and other gadgets.

It is felt that educational institutes' efforts alone are insufficient to impart this important skill to our younger generation. This issue needs to be addressed at societal level with active participation of all stakeholders.

Although the situation is bad for the general public, the culture of reading has seen a sharp decline even in the well-educated segment of the society; but the situation is particularly alarming for the younger segment of the society who need to develop their cognitive skills, values and life-long behavior.

With ubiquitous internet access, with many social media and connectivity platforms, on-demand video content and online gaming have spoilt youth for choices; students are mostly engaged in non-value leisure activities.

Due to excessive indulgence in such activities, students can hardly spare time for personality and skill development. Consequently, the average attention span is contracting, mediocrity has permeated while quality has gradually evaporated. Reading is one of the most indispensable quality crucial for uplift and transformation of a student; research has shown that avid readers demonstrate better cognitive skills, leadership qualities and ethical values.

The curriculum of a typical professional degree program may not be able to bring about any meaningful and lasting effects in the attitude and aptitude of students towards desirable attributes such as integrity, resilience, curiosity, open-mindedness, and purpose in life; this goal is even more elusive in the presence of stringent requirements of the accreditation / regulatory bodies. There is little room to maneuver for university administration and educators.

Reading develops the ability to concentrate for extended periods, grasp complex ideas, sift through literature, and find pertinent information. Feeling for the lack of these important qualities in our students, the program steering committee decided to implement extra-curricular interventions to imbue these features in our graduates.

This paper focuses on the following key points (a) drawing a true picture of our students' involvement in leisure reading (b) assessing their preferences in terms of modes and means by which they want to gather information about academic/non-academic activities (c) developing extra-curricular intervention to promote a culture of reading in the university students.

For hundreds of years print has been the only mode for dissemination of information, however this is being gradually replaced by digital content. Book reading is an active and linear process the reader goes through the text, line by line and page by page; this deeper involvement is conducive for learning complex and conceptual material. In contrast, users can find a plethora of information on the internet with a simple query and can traverse from one document to another with just a click; Although this offers great flexibility and yet very often creates a distraction as user tries to process multi documents at the same time.

The cost and unavailability of print material in contrast to abundance and accessibility are the biggest advantages of electronic materials.

This article examines the correlation between the predisposition of university students towards electronic gadgets, online resources for academic and leisure activities and the loss of appetite for book reading for learning and recreation. The propensity towards other non-value leisure activities have resulted in notable decline in the quality of university students. Great urge is felt to arrest and reverse this trend. Several remedial actions have been considered such as revision of curriculum, use of modern tools and teaching methods, continuous assessment and feedback. The proposed intervention considers book reading club as a perspective solution to galvanize students.

This article presents, first-hand account of promoting free voluntary reading (FVR) at our campus. It must be pointed out that the proposed intervention not only supplements proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) but also invokes desirable traits such as creativity, confidence, empathy, social awareness and optimism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The problem of declining culture of reading has been explored widely in the literature. (Nugent, 2011) is a very pertinent article on the decline of readership culture; the author terms 21st century as the age of ignorance, the author argues that more information is available to public than ever before and yet the curiosity to soak it up is almost non-existent.

The deteriorating culture of readership has been reviewed by (Iannone, 2005), the author has cited the results of a survey conducted by National Endowment for Arts (NEA) in the North America between 1985 and 2002 which reports a steady decline in readership from 57% in 1985 to 47% in 2002. According to the latest NEA survey, the readership has further slipped to 40% in 2020.

From the historical perspective, it is apparent from the literature review that, in the past hundred years, every new technology has adversely impacted the culture of readership. Authors in (Van der Voort, 1991) have identified a correlation between the proliferation of TV and its impact on reading habits in the

Netherlands, with TV becoming a household item in '60s and 70s, the average reading time per week dropped from 2.4 hours in 1955 to a mere 0.9 hours 1985. It is not unreasonable to assume that easy and cost-effective access to audio and visual content in the form of CDs and DVDs in the 90s and the subsequent boom of the internet and electronic gadgets has only exacerbated the situation.

The adverse effect of digital resources has been studied widely in the literature e.g., according to Akinola (2021) the students have developed a culture of viewing instead of reading; The authors emphasize that while ICT brings significant advantages, it should not be considered as a substitute for traditional book reading. The authors also shed light on the role of stake holders such as teachers/educators, school/university administration, libraries, parents, and society at large in promoting this habit.

According to (Kolajo & Agbetuyi, 2021) most students don't use the internet and other digital resources wisely. The proliferation of social media has caused the literate / not-so-literate classes of the society to become obsessed with their electronic gadgets, spending countless hours on social media.

Impact of social media on the reading habits of university students has been studied in (Kojo, et al 2018), the authors contend that the persistent use of social media has stifled culture of readership and students have become passive reader who would rather browse than read. The authors have conducted an extensive on-campus survey to validate their hypothesis and even proposed solutions to alleviate this situation. Similar opinion resonates in (Sotiloye & Bodunde, 2018) the authors have reviewed the preferences of language learning activities of university students at different stages of a degree program. According to the survey, most of the students restrict their focus to academic materials only. Even then, there is a considerable shift in the reading preference of these students as they advance through the degree program.

(Kabir & Jeromes, 2022) is also a comprehensive work looking into the causes of decline in the habit of reading in the digital age (in the context of Nigeria); however, their findings apply to other developing countries as well. According to the authors, the use of internet to gather information can not be a substitute for intensive and extensive reading; developing countries must explore ways to promote readership in youth deeply entrenched in electronic gadgets and online resources.

Another important aspect highlighted in the literature is that screens are replacing paper as the dominant substrate for disseminating information. The Internet has sped up the dissemination of information, global audiences can access latest information instantaneously; the true advantage of digital content is the all-powerful feature of search; at the same time, it solves the environmental issues related to paper-based mode. This has reduced the barrier of cost and accessibility for the masses in the developing countries.

Budnyk, et al., (2021) have delved upon the preferences of younger generations for book formats through empirical evidences. According to authors, most students see the value of e-books in terms of cost, compactness, accessibility, and convenience of use anytime, anywhere. However, the majority of the students still prefer materials in printed form because it helps them to think deeply and retain information in a better way. According to the authors, both printed and e-book mediums must be used in tandem to ensure their synergy for effective learning.

According to (Luong, 2021), reading habits have not diminished but just shifted from traditional to digital documents. However, authors note that due to the digital media's intrinsic characteristics, active reading has been replaced by passive browsing. According to the authors the development of reading culture in digital environment requires better digital skills and information literacy.

Researchers in several developing countries have explored the student's behavior towards readership in the wake of the digital revolution. Interesting examples are available in Banik, et al., (2019) and Mustafa, et al., (2019) both these authors have addressed the same issues, trying to discern the underlying factors effecting the attitude and aptitude of students toward the readership.

A comprehensive review of literature canvassing the state of readership in the context of Pakistan has been presented in Muhammad & Liu, (2021), the authors have echoed the idea that promotion of readership in the digitally native generation requires a fresh approach; since millennials are more likely to utilize open-access e-content materials. Therefore, instead of banishing the technology, we must embrace it; educators, administrators and librarians must adopt digital eco-system and use of digital devices may be considered to promote readership.

A few interventions (promoting readership among university students) have been documented in literature. An excellent example is (Sholeh, 2018); the authors have devised a strategy to promote FVR in the context of EFL. According to authors, reading is the most effective way to increase vocabulary, conceptual understanding, and better world perception. The proposed activity allows students to select the books they want to read; the students' progress was supervised through regular meetings and efficacy of this intervention was measured through observation and student feedback on standardized survey forms. Another interesting implementation can be found in (Ferrer & Staley, 2016) where authors have devised a gaming-based strategy to encourage book reading in a EFL module, promoting creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative learning through reading-based activities. Another interesting intervention documented in (Mulumba, 2016) aims to draw an active participation from students to present summary of literature they have read.

In this article we have documented our efforts to instill this important skill in our students, but also investigated the change in the modes and means of reading preferences of the university students for academic and leisure reading. More specifically we articulate the proposed intervention and positive changes brought about as a consequence of this intervention.

Our implementation approach is similar to (Sholeh, 2018) and customized to suit our context i.e., voluntary in nature. This intervention is more specifically intended to promote FVR and not as a reinforcement exercise for EFL.

METHODOLOGY

This study was organized in three distinct phases. In the initial phase, a survey was conducted in fall 2022 to gauge the attitude of university students towards FVR and their preference in means and modes of reading, in the light of this survey an intervention was devised to remedy this issue through extra-curricular activities. The proposed intervention was executed in the spring 2023 semester and finally, the efficacy of the intervention was evaluated through an exit survey at the end of spring semester.

PARTICIPANTS

A comprehensive survey was organized to review various facets of student's reading attributes, such as extent of involvement in voluntary reading, the preferred means and modes of gathering information for academic/non-academic activities. The survey was conducted with 104 (73 male and 31 female) freshmen, sophomore and senior students from different academic programs. The survey process was executed following ethical and privacy policies laid out by the concerned authorities of the university. The participants were informed about the objectives of the survey. The survey forms didn't collect any personal information.

INSTRUMENTS

The primary instrument used for the pre-intervention assessment was a carefully designed survey comprising closed and open-ended questions. Owing to the nature of the questions, some responses were obtained on Likert scale, some on binary yes / no options, while open-ended questions were used to draw more specific responses from the students.

STUDY PROCEDURE

The preliminary survey was conducted with following objectives (a) to gauge the extent to which students were engaged in FVR, (b) to ascertain their preference as a primary tool/resource for academic activities, (c) their preference of the type of book format; (d) to better understand the preferred modes and means of university students doing self-study (e) to form an opinion about the adeptness of students to use

literature and resources available online, and last but not the least (f) to assess their comfort level in using a mobile phone and other electronic devices for reviewing electronic textbooks and other online resources.

The preliminary survey results were deliberated at the program steering committee with a lot of concern and various short and long-term remedial actions were proposed to alleviate the situation.

The Book Review Club was initiated under the Public Speaking and Literary Society (PSLS) framework as a pilot project. The cross-disciplinary composition of the club created a bridge between students from different academic programs. Weekly sessions were organized to keep the students motivated and connected with the process; in every session selected participants presented their reviews with the rest of club members.

During the execution of the extra-curricular activity, mentors observed the performance of students in groups as well as individually. To assess the efficacy of the intervention an exit survey was performed on a Likert scale. The participation ratio in the exit survey was 65%. The pre and post-intervention survey findings are presented in the next sections.

RESULTS

The initial survey was conducted in the fall 2022 semester. The objective of this survey as explained in the introduction section, was to obtain a realistic assessment of how deeply our students are rooted in digital tools and technologies for academic and leisure activities and also to gauge the extent of involvement in free voluntary reading. Key findings of the preliminary survey are illustrated in Figure 1.

According to the survey results 95% of the students own a smartphone, 30% own a personal laptop and only 6% of the students own a desktop computer.

It is also apparent from the survey that students are highly dependent on their gadgets for learning and leisure, 65% of the students used mobile phone as a primary device for academic and leisure activities, 25% of the students use other electronic devices while only 10% students preferred to use printed materials. Similarly, 60% of the students spend their leisure time on digital activities such as social media, online gaming, and mobile apps. In contrast, the rest are engaged in sports, socializing with friends and family.

It was interesting to note that, although the majority of the students use their smartphones for gathering information, only 33% of the students agreed that they were comfortable reading textbooks and other literature on their mobile phones, 61% of the students said that they were somewhat uncomfortable using mobile for academic activities. In comparison, only 6% of the students said that they preferred reading from printed text materials.

The survey shed light on the profound shift in the mode of learning in the age of internet; Since internet offers immediate access to pertinent literature as well as blogs and vlogs from an ever-growing community of contributors, a staggering 77% of the participants preferred online platforms such as youtube.com for academic learning, while only 12% students preferred textbook for academic reference.

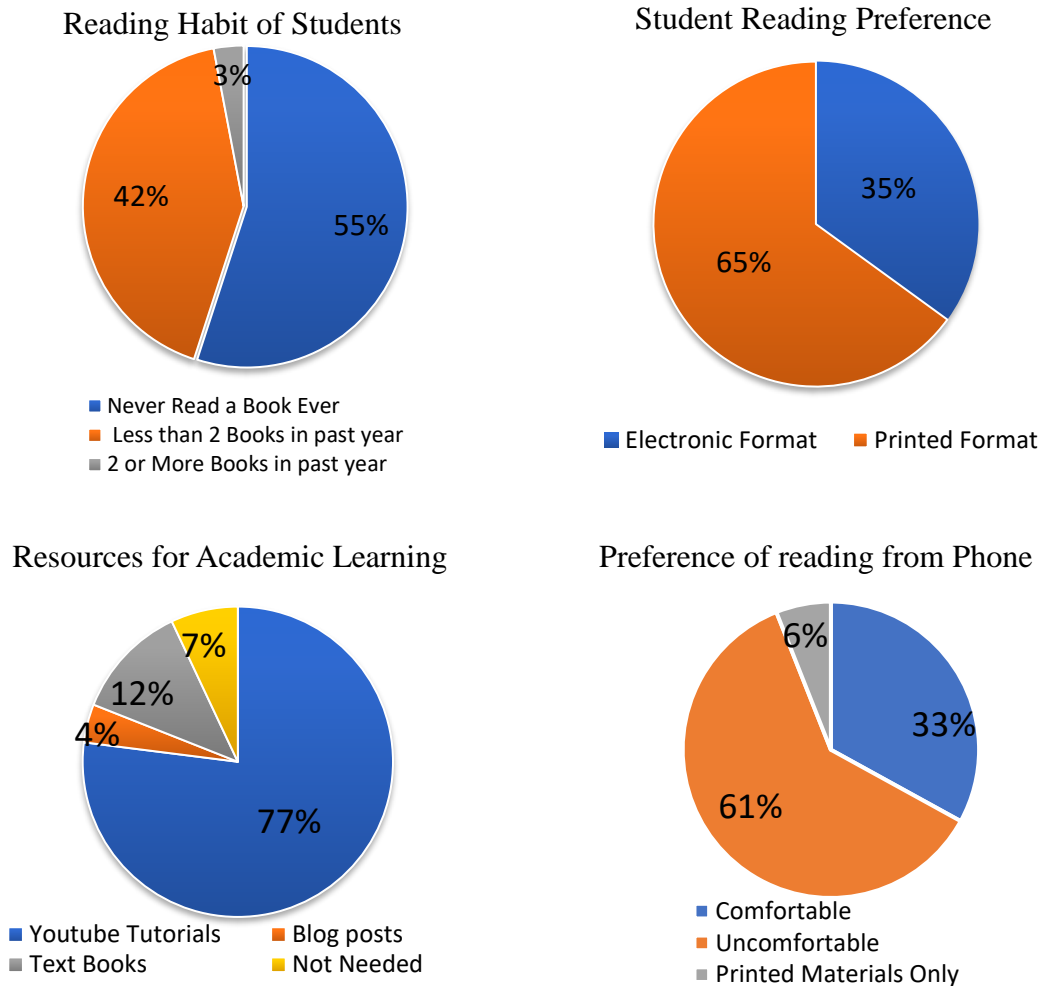
The survey also gauged the opinion of students about the value they attach to electronic format of books, almost 50% of the students said that they preferred electronics books because they were widely available on the internet free of cost, while 29% of the students said that they preferred electronic books because they are portable and can be read anytime anywhere.

It is pertinent to note that the findings of this survey about the preferences of format of reading materials are in line with similar studies available in the literature e.g. Banik, et al., (2019) and Budnyk et al., (2021).

It was interesting to note that while students prefer mobile phone to gather information related to their studies. Yet, 65% of the participants suggested that they would prefer to read the materials in the printed form, where as 35% preferred the use of electronic materials for reading. According to the survey, almost all participants said they possessed the necessary skills to access required information on the internet.

Summary of the key findings is presented in figure 1. The survey also brought to light the attitude of university students towards voluntary reading.

FIGURE 1
KEY FINDINGS OF THE READING PREFERENCE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS



According to the survey, 55% of the participants had never read a book for leisure, while 42% percent have read one or two books in the past one year and only 3% of the students had read more than two books in the past year. More than 60% of the participants admitted that they do not have time for casual reading in their daily routine. As many as 80% of the participants admitted that they had never purchased a non-academic book.

Keeping in view of the precarious situation, the management decided to take adequate measures to promote the culture of readership on campus. It is apparent that there is no instant solution, rather this requires an enabling eco-system to slowly and steadily immerse students into this process. The remedial approach considered for spring 2023 semester was to establish a voluntary reading club, this arrangement involved students from different academic programs, studying at different stages of degree program, in an informal environment, at a flexible schedule.

This exercise also stimulates collaborative learning, communication, and presentation skills, drawing participants' attention to diverse topics outside the scope of the academic program.

Sukkur IBA University has a network of societies, creating a conducive environment where students can socialize and pursue their diverse interests through engaging extra-curricular activities.

As previously described the intervention is based on extra-curricular activities executed under the framework of PSLs. Students from different programs were called in to join the voluntary reading program; group of 3-4 students could come together to review a book as a team; the students were allowed to select

any book of their choice; the mentors helped them locate digital / printed copies of the books; students spend their spare time (usually 4-6 weeks) reading the book; the mentors held frequent meetings with the students, monitoring their progress; These interactions were held in a very informal and friendly setup, allowing students to share their opinion about the book; the mentor acts as a mediator and facilitator helping students gather key facts and organize their narrative for the presentation. The students were asked to deliver a brief presentation shedding light on the author’s profile, motivation for selecting the specific book and key take aways of the book with other members of the society. The mentor would provide constructive feedback to the students, helping them improve the content of their slides and the delivery.

At the end of the semester the participants of the PSLS program were asked to provide their feedback through standardized forms on Likert scale. The accumulated responses are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
STUDENT FEEDBACK SURVEY RESULTS AT THE COMPLETION OF PROGRAM
(34 PARTICIPANTS)

Survey Proforma	SA	A	N	D	SD
My interest in reading before participation in book review program.	4	3	15	12	-
My interest in reading after participation in book review program.	11	19	4	-	-
At the end of semester, I feel my comprehension skills have improved.	17	12	5	-	-
Book review program helped to me improve my presentation skills.	12	16	6	-	-
Reading sessions created a congenial environment for discussion.	13	16	5	-	-
I found the feedback provided by the mentors helpful.	8	15	8	3	-
I have benefitted from book reviews presented by others.	6	13	9	6	-
I managed to find book in print form easily.	3	7	13	11	-
I use mobile phone as a primary device to study literature.	10	14	8	1	-
I would like to continue with book review program next semester.	8	15	6	5	-

DISCUSSION

This article presents a factual assessment of students’ engagement in voluntary reading, their preference for leisure activities, means and mode of gathering information for academic and non-academic requirements at the University level. From the pre-intervention survey, it is apparent that there is paradigm shift in how people access information in the internet age; owing to the immense wealth of audio-visual resources available online, preferences have changed considerably over the past few decades.

The proposed intervention managed to create a positive effect on the participating students. However, bringing about a noticeable change on the campus level is still a distant goal; consistent and coordinated efforts would be required to cultivate readership at our campus. This activity is a first step in that direction.

According to the student’s feedback there is a considerable impact of this intervention; the participants noticed an improvement in their language proficiency; many students admitted that these sessions have improved their perception about the things discussed during presentations. From the moderator’s

perspective, a few interesting observations on the execution phase of the activity are as follows: (a) Retention of participants for extended duration of time was a challenging issue. Since these students were never rooted into reading, they had a very difficult time holding on to the books; Several students dropped out of the activities as initial excitement fizzled and burden of books weighed in. The moderators had to motivate the students constantly (b) provision of print-copies was a challenge, as most of the books selected by students were not readily available off the shelf (c) quality of student presentations varied significantly; there were several groups who could not do justice with the book under review (d) it was difficult to encourage students to explore literature out of their comfort zone.

Finally, it must be said that promoting FVR through extra-curricular activities has been a worthwhile experience. The eye-opening survey revealed how drastically the younger generation has forlorn the good old culture of book reading and how extensively they have come to rely on online resources as a primary source for academic and non-academic activities. Lack of book reading clearly reflects in their social awareness, critical thinking and creative writing skills. However, tackling this problem on a societal level is a massive endeavor and can not be fully addressed without coherent and coordinated effort of all the stakeholders. The proposed intervention is (albeit) a small but positive step in that direction.

CONCLUSION

It is a fact that the quantity and quality of reading among the society determines the trajectory of a nation. Every effort must be made to revive and resuscitate the culture of readership, especially among the younger segment of the society. University students who have never engaged in free voluntary reading, find it incredibly hard to get involved.

In this article we have presented a case of promoting the culture of book reading in a higher education setup. Although, this intervention is a work in progress, preliminary results have been encouraging. It is fair to admit that years of neglect can not be fixed over a few semesters; however, several students have picked up the books and felt the excitement of making friends with it through this activity. Authors believe there is no quick fix to this chronic problem; the culture of reading can only be improved through a systematic and coordinated effort of all stakeholders right from the school level.

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