




# Corrigendum: Understanding the reading practices of first-year university students through their experiences

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In the published article, 'Cekiso, M., Boakye, N. & Olifant, F., 2025, 'Understanding the reading practices of first-year university students through their experiences', *Literator* 46(1), a2105. <https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v46i1.2105>', there was an error in the affiliation of the third author, Florence Olifant.

Instead of 'Department of Applied Languages, Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria, Tshwane, South Africa', it should be 'Department of Applied Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Tshwane University of Technology, Tshwane, South Africa'.

The authors apologise for this error. The correction does not change the study's findings of significance or overall interpretation of the study's results or the scientific conclusions of the article in any way.




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# Understanding the reading practices of first-year university students through their experiences

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Many studies have been conducted on the important role played by English reading literacy in the South African context and in many higher education institutions around the world. These studies come to the consensus that reading is considered the most important academic skill in any academic context, especially in institutions of higher education. However, because of a range of factors, many students lack the required level of reading proficiency. One important dimension of reading development often overlooked in research is the reading practices that students engage in. The current study, therefore, examines university students' reading practices in the language of instruction, as well as the factors underlying these practices. The study was qualitative in nature and a case study design was followed. A questionnaire with open-ended questions was used to collect data from 65 respondents purposively selected. Content analysis was used to analyse students' responses regarding their reading practices in English. The results showed that students did not read widely or extensively. They only read the books that were required of them to do better on assignments and tests. Additionally, the students' reading preferences were influenced by the accessibility of social media and websites on the Internet. Students reported reading more posts on social media and websites than printed books.

**Contribution:** This study found that a module's recommended reading list significantly influenced students' reading frequency and the time they spent on reading. In other words, the prescribed materials for the module affected both the selection of sources and the amount of time students devoted to reading them.

**Keywords:** reading practices; reading comprehension; reading experiences; reading habits; higher education; South Africa.

## Introduction

The phrase 'practice makes perfect' suggests that one gets better at a skill the more one uses it. Practice, according to Macnamara and Maitra (2019) refers to the purposeful engagement in domain-specific activities designed to improve performance. In addition, Hopwood and Nerland (2019:378) explain 'practice' as 'a complex interplay of social, material, and cognitive elements that shape professional and learning behaviours'. The idea of deliberate practice was first presented by Campitelli and Gobet (2011). It entails paying attention, rehearsing and repeating to acquire new knowledge or skills that can subsequently be developed into more complex abilities. In the reading context, much research has been conducted on students' reading habits and studies (Chauhan & Lal 2012; Shen in Annamalai & Muniandy 2013; Wagner in Chettri & Rout 2013), repeatedly show that this is an important determinant of student reading practices. Thus, it appears that an understanding of students' habitual reading can be more useful in explaining their reading practices. Hence, in the context of this study, reading habits refer to how often, how much and what the readers read (Shen 2006, in Annamalai and Muniandy 2013), whereas reading practices comprise the patterns of reading engagement including frequency, time spent and kinds of materials as well as comprehension strategies including summarising, questioning, re-reading and textual interpretation to improve understanding (Owusu-Acheaw 2014; St Clair-Thompson, Graham & Marsham 2018). However, Baker et al. (2018) declared that many studies focussing on students' literacy practices in higher education have as primary concern writing rather than reading. Specifically, the authors argued that there has been a significant silence in the literature around what constitutes reading practices in higher education. Therefore, the current study sought to improve the existing understanding of the reading practices of first-year higher education students. It is hoped that

lecturers' understanding of their students' reading practices might assist them in improving their students' reading culture, as research has shown that improving reading culture contributes to the development of reading proficiency which has a positive relationship with academic success (Loh et al. 2017; Owusu Debrah & Baah 2023; Wema 2018). In addition, the potential significance of this study lies in its possibility to inform university teaching practices, particularly in contexts where reading proficiency is a concern for academic success.

This inquiry is prompted by the important role played by English reading proficiency in the South African context and in many institutions of higher learning around the world. The importance of this type of proficiency in the academic progression of students is supported by Renuga and Mala (2016), who explain that reading is perceived as the most important academic skill in any academic or higher learning context. They also point out that through reading at a higher proficiency level, students learn new information and are empowered to summarise, evaluate and interpret their topic and learn more about their subject. Bashir and Mattoo (2012) emphasise that reading and academic success are consistent and relatively interdependent. In other words, they have a bidirectional relationship. In this light, Bana (2020) states that the more students read books, the more successfully they will learn, and consequently, achieve academic success.

Despite the importance of reading in tertiary education alluded to by various scholars as mentioned, Bharuthram (2012) states that research conducted in South Africa has shown that the reading literacy levels of students entering higher education are lower than the expected reading and writing level, often resulting in students struggling to obtain the necessary academic skills to meet the requirements of their disciplines. As Bharuthram (2017) points out, university-level students are often expected to read extensively in their subject areas, either to prepare for lectures or to supplement their lecture notes. However, from an international perspective, a recent study by De-la-Peña and Luque-Rojas (2021) that focusses on higher education shows that students often are at a literal or basic level of reading understanding; they often have difficulty drawing conclusions and recognising the macrostructure of the written text to develop a situational model (Grabe & Stoller 2020) of the text. This situation is worrying, given that tertiary students are expected to understand what they read so that they can analyse, critique, evaluate and synthesise information from different sources (Bharuthram 2017). The current study, therefore, examined higher education students' reading practices and sought to explore potential factors underlying these practices. To achieve this goal, the current study sought to provide answers to the following research questions: (1) *What are the reading practices of the specific cohort of tertiary students?* (2) *What factors contribute to these students' reading practices?*

## Literature review

### Reading practices

The concept of 'reading practices' is sometimes conflated with 'reading strategies'. Reading strategies are techniques applied for comprehension of texts, whereas practices more rightly refer to how reading is approached in general, which relates to reading habits (Bharuthram 2017; Owusu-Acheaw 2014; Palani 2012; St Clair-Thompson et al. 2018). This article focusses on reading practices in the sense of the habits and practices pertaining to reading.

Reading practices involve the patterns of reading engagement, including frequency, time spent and types of materials, as well as comprehension strategies such as summarising, questioning, re-reading and interpreting texts to enhance understanding (Owusu-Acheaw 2014; St Clair-Thompson et al. 2018). Another reading practice that helps with students' reading proficiency is the frequency of reading and the time spent on reading. At the tertiary level, students are required to spend an average of 25 h per week reading. Students who spend fewer hours reading may be short-changing themselves in terms of their reading development and reading proficiency, as explained by St Clair-Thompson et al. (2018). An interesting aspect of students' reading is text type. In other words, do they read academic texts such as textbooks and journals or non-academic texts such as novels and magazines? Although all types of reading contribute to improving reading comprehension and reading proficiency to an extent (Boakye 2015), it seems that the reading of novels together with academic texts does have a greater impact. In situating assigned reading and independent reading, Erdem (2015) explains that the latter relates to motivation and competence, as students will read on their own when they are motivated and feel competent to do so. If students feel competent to read with understanding, they will be motivated to read on their own, whether intensively around their subject area or widely and extensively for pleasure. Students who do not feel competent to read with understanding are usually not motivated to read (Schiefele et al. 2012; Tiba 2023).

Recent studies have shown that students generally do not engage extensively with reading materials, particularly academic texts (Anwar & Sailuddin 2022).

In relation to the time and extent to which students read, studies have shown that the level at which most students read is far below what is expected. According to Acheson, Wells and MacDonald (2008), students reported that they spent 19.2 h each week reading various texts – both academic (such as textbooks and journals) and non-academic (such as magazines, Internet media, newspapers and novels). Respondents in the study of Huang et al. (2014) reported 7.7 h of reading a week focussing on both academic texts (e.g. textbooks and articles) and non-academic materials like novels and leisure reading. On the other hand, Mokhtari, Reichard and Gardner (2009) reported 10.9 h per week of reading for their students, exploring the influence of

Internet and television use on college students' reading habits and practices. It addresses a range of texts, including print-based materials (e.g. books, newspapers and magazines) as well as digital content accessed via the Internet, reflecting a mix of traditional and modern reading practices. These reading times still fall below the expected 20–25 h per week (St Clair-Thompson et al. 2018) and may not even be devoted solely to academic reading activities. As a skill, reading is developed and improved through positive reading habits and practices. However, the results of previous studies on student reading habits and practices are not encouraging (Anwar & Sailuddin 2022; Nel, Dreyer & Kopper 2004; Ntekere & Ramoroka 2017).

### Importance of reading practices in the learning process

Students' reading practices may either enhance their comprehension of texts and improve their reading proficiency or lead to distorted comprehension and result in low reading proficiency (Mokhtari et al. 2009). Furthermore, their reading practices may help them to become engaged readers who are motivated to read and use appropriate strategies to derive meaning, or to disengaged readers who are not interested in reading and, therefore, avoid reading and utilise poor and inappropriate reading strategies (Bharuthram & Clarence 2015; Guthrie 2004). Positive reading practices are required for successful learning. This requirement is critical at the tertiary level, where students are expected to analyse, integrate, synthesise and interpret information, among other things, to write assignments and examinations and acquire knowledge successfully.

Cronje (2022) commented on reading at the tertiary level, noting that many researchers have emphasised the importance of reading in academic contexts and tertiary education, and that, for successful learning, students are required to spend a lot of time reading. He opines that students need to read to obtain information and gain content knowledge of their subject area. To this end, as Pretorius (2000) explains, there is a growing call for universities to acknowledge the importance of reading, to recognise that most learning occurs through reading the written word, and to recognise the need for university-centred reading programmes. Similarly, Cronje (2022) states that higher education institutions should uphold the important role of reading and investigate the reading challenges that prevent students from mastering reading literacy. Bharuthram (2017) claims that an understanding of some of the challenges students face in relation to reading may encourage academics to play a larger role in motivating students to read course material and to design curricula embedded with reading skills.

### Factors influencing students' reading practices

Several factors that influence reading practices have been identified in various studies. St Clair-Thompson et al. (2018) listed six main factors emerging from their study, namely expectations, perceived benefits, course structure, lack of

time, practicalities and confidence and pointed out (with reference to Ryan [2006]) that these factors can determine students' reading practices in either positive or negative ways. The importance of these factors influencing students' reading practices is confirmed in other studies such as Hatteberg and Steffy (2013), Marek and Christopher (2011), Lei et al. (2010), Erdem (2015), Starcher and Proffitt (2011), and Sharma, Van Hoof and Pursel (2013).

Jose and Dhama Raja (2011) point out that teachers are the most important resource for students to cultivate their reading habits as their advice and encouragement are likely to help students take a step further to develop their reading attitudes and practices. Scott and Saaiman (2016) examined the reading attitudes and habits of students in an intermediate programme at a tertiary institution focussing on perceived changes in these attitudes or habits, as well as students' perceptions of the programme's promotion of reading. Teaching reading appeared invaluable at the tertiary level as it helped students to change their attitudes and practices, including recognising academic value, making decisions to pursue reading as a hobby and discovering new genres. Based on these results, certain reading promotion programmes have the potential to change students' attitudes and practices in reading. To gain an understanding of students' reading practices and the factors underlying these practices, this study examined students' reading frequency, the type of texts they read, as well as the reasons for their practices and choices. It is hoped that this research will stimulate discussions across different platforms in higher education on the importance of instilling positive reading habits and practices in students and thereby fostering a culture of reading, as reading is the essence of any formal education.

## Theoretical framework

### Attribution theory

Attribution theory was used to anchor the current study. Originally presented by Heider (1958), Attribution theory clarifies how people understand events (such as reading practices) and assign causes to activities (such as reading habits). Elements that influence reading practices, such as motivation, effort, personal attitudes, environmental influences, available resources or societal expectations are referred to in the Attribution theory as factors, and according to this theory, these factors help to shape decisions, feelings and behaviours. Fundamentally, the Attribution theory emphasises the process people employ to understand their behaviour such as their reading practices, according to Weiner (2018).

The main elements of Attribution theory are related to the several facets of students' reading behaviours as investigated in this study, so offering a useful framework for understanding the reading practices of first-year university students. For instance, reading habits are investigated in terms of students' interaction with academic materials like textbooks and non-academic content, including social media posts. Whether students see reading as an academic obligation or as a means of

personal interest and leisure, with internal factors like interest and perceived competency affecting whether they choose to read extensively or concentrate only on required texts, or external factors that are either perceived as either enabling or limiting students' reading habits, the Attribution theory reflects on the role attributions play in motivating students to engage with reading. Thus, whether students attribute their limited academic reading to external pressures like assignments or internal factors like lack of interest, the Attribution theory can be used as a lens to grasp why and how their reading habits are influenced. In this sense, Attribution theory is applied in this study to frame and explain the complex interaction between internal and external factors that guide students' reading decisions and behaviours, subsequently providing a deeper knowledge of the factors that contribute to their reading practices, so aligning with the theory's premise that behaviour is shaped by the understanding of internal and external causes (Graham 2020) operative in the interest and decision to read, illustrating the multifaceted nature of how reading habits can influence students' reading practices.

## Research methods and design

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. Bhandari (2022) explains that qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data (e.g. text, video or audio) to understand concepts, opinions or experiences. It can be used to gain deeper insight into a problem or to generate new research ideas. This research approach was deemed relevant as the data were collected from students' experiences of their reading practices in English. In line with the qualitative research approach, a case study design was used. Crowe et al. (2011) define a case study as a research design used to generate a deep, multi-faceted understanding of a complex problem in its real-world context. In other words, a case study research design allows researchers to closely examine data in a specific context and thus this research is viewed as a case study because it allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the reading practices of *first-year university students* at a specific institution, using a qualitative case study design to explore the experiences and factors influencing their reading practices in a real-world context (Crowe et al. 2011).

### Data collection method

A questionnaire with open-ended statements (see Appendix 1) was used for data collection. Dossetto (2023) defines open-ended questions as questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no but require respondents to elaborate on their points. According to Dossetto, open-ended questions help researchers perceive the phenomenon from the respondent's perspective because they receive feedback in the respondents' own words instead of standard answers. The use of open-ended questionnaires in the study proved pertinent, as they afforded respondents the opportunity to provide detailed answers, elaborate on responses, express their thoughts, and share their reading practices and

experiences of reading in English. We tailored these open-ended question statements to align with the research questions, distributing them to respondents from August to October 2022.

### Research participants

In this study, 65 respondents were purposively selected on the basis that they were first-year university students majoring in English Introduction to the Study of Language and Literature at one of the oldest historically black universities in South Africa, which has played a significant role in the educational landscape of the country. The course, which introduces foundational concepts in literature and language, was chosen for its suitability in examining reading habits, preferences and challenges among a diverse group of students engaged in substantial reading practices (see Table 1). Black South African students made up most of the sample, with a few students from other racial groups. While a smaller percentage attended Quintile 4–5 schools, usually better-resourced and urban, most participants came from Quintile 1–3 schools, so highlighting prior resource constraints. As is common in the Eastern Cape, the home languages of participants were mostly isiXhosa and isiZulu; smaller groups spoke Afrikaans, English or other South African languages. Participants' ages range between 19 years and 34 years, and reflect the variety usually found in South African higher education. The majority participants ( $n = 45$ ) were traditional students between the ages of 19 years and 24 years; 15 students between the ages of 25 years and 29 years represented re-entry or part-time learners; five students aged 30 years to 34 years were older people juggling other responsibilities in conjunction with their studies.

### Data analysis

Thematic analysis is a flexible and useful research tool that provides a rich and detailed account of the data (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove 2019). Maree's (2016) guidelines on thematic analysis were followed to analyse the data using priori coding for the first two themes of this study. According to Maree (2016), prior coding employs deductive reasoning where themes (i.e. the first two themes) are predetermined before the data analysis begins, and in the context of this study were informed by the research questions. However, the third theme emerged because of the data from the first two themes and was therefore presented in a discussion-style format. This structured approach helps researchers analyse data within a framework aligned with their research objectives. The rationale for using thematic analysis with prior coding is to identify patterns in the data that connect to research questions and extract meaningful insights.

### Ethical considerations

An application for full ethical approval was made to the University of Fort Hare's Research Ethics Committee (UREC) and ethics consent was received on 03 November 2023. The ethics approval number is REC-270710-028-RA Level 01.

**TABLE 1 :** Socio-demographic information of participants ( $N = 65$ ).

Participant indicator	Year of study	Age	Language	Re-entry or part-time learners
S1	First year	22	isiXhosa	No
S2	First year	20	isiZulu	No
S3	First year	19	isiXhosa	No
S4	First year	21	English	No
S5	First year	24	isiXhosa	No
S6	First year	26	isiZulu	Yes
S7	First year	19	isiXhosa	No
S8	First year	20	Afrikaans	No
S9	First year	22	isiXhosa	No
S10	First year	28	isiZulu	Yes
S11	First year	21	isiXhosa	No
S12	First year	23	isiXhosa	No
S13	First year	25	isiZulu	Yes
S14	First year	19	isiXhosa	No
S15	First year	21	isiXhosa	No
S16	First year	20	isiZulu	No
S17	First year	23	English	No
S18	First year	27	isiXhosa	Yes
S19	First year	22	isiXhosa	No
S20	First year	19	isiZulu	No
S21	First year	21	isiXhosa	No
S22	First year	31	isiXhosa	Yes
S23	First year	20	isiZulu	No
S24	First year	24	isiXhosa	No
S25	First year	19	isiZulu	No
S26	First year	26	isiXhosa	Yes
S27	First year	20	isiXhosa	No
S28	First year	22	isiZulu	No
S29	First year	25	isiXhosa	Yes
S30	First year	20	Afrikaans	No
S31	First year	19	isiXhosa	No
S32	First year	33	isiZulu	Yes
S33	First year	21	isiXhosa	No
S34	First year	26	isiXhosa	Yes
S35	First year	23	isiZulu	No
S36	First year	19	isiXhosa	No
S37	First year	28	isiXhosa	Yes
S38	First year	22	isiZulu	No
S39	First year	20	English	No
S40	First year	19	isiXhosa	No
S41	First year	24	isiZulu	No
S42	First year	21	isiXhosa	No
S43	First year	29	isiZulu	Yes
S44	First year	23	isiXhosa	No
S45	First year	20	isiXhosa	No
S46	First year	34	isiZulu	Yes
S47	First year	22	Afrikaans	No
S48	First year	27	isiXhosa	Yes
S49	First year	19	isiZulu	No
S50	First year	21	isiXhosa	No
S51	First year	23	isiXhosa	No
S52	First year	20	isiZulu	No
S53	First year	25	English	Yes
S54	First year	19	isiXhosa	No
S55	First year	22	isiZulu	No
S56	First year	26	isiXhosa	Yes
S57	First year	20	isiXhosa	No
S58	First year	32	isiZulu	Yes
S59	First year	21	isiXhosa	No
S60	First year	19	isiZulu	No
S61	First year	24	isiXhosa	No
S62	First year	28	Afrikaans	Yes
S63	First year	22	isiXhosa	No
S64	First year	20	isiZulu	No
S65	First year	19	isiXhosa	No

S, student

Ethical approval to conduct the study was obtained from the university where it was conducted. The purpose of the study was explained to the students, who were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Students filled out a consent form using codes such as Student 1 (S1) and Student 2 (S2) to ensure their responses remained untraceable, thereby assuring their anonymity and confidentiality. Adhering to ethical principles is crucial in research involving human participants (Maree 2016). According to Maree (2016), the informed consent process must ensure that participants understand the study's purpose, risks and benefits, and that their participation is voluntary. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasise that maintaining anonymity and confidentiality is essential to protect participants' privacy and prevent potential harm. Thus, measures such as obtaining ethical approval from the relevant tertiary institution and allowing respondents to complete an informed consent form demonstrate the researchers' commitment to conducting the study ethically and minimising risks to participants.

## Findings

The findings are presented based on the pre-established themes derived from the research questions, with each theme informed by the students' responses to the open-ended questions aimed at addressing the study's objectives. Verbatim excerpts from student responses that were most relevant to the study's focus are included to support the researchers' narrative for each theme. However, to maintain the study's emphasis on understanding the reading practices of first-year university students based on their experiences, only the most illustrative and relevant excerpts were selected for analysis. *To ensure respondent anonymity*, the code 'S' (representing 'student') was used, with identifiers such as S1, S2, S3 and so forth applied consistently throughout the analysis.

The first two themes, Theme 1: 'Types of texts students read' and Theme 2: 'Time spent reading different materials', were established based on the research questions. These themes provided a structured framework to explore students' reading practices comprehensively. Theme 3, 'Factors influencing reading practices', emerged from the data presented under the first two themes and was therefore analysed and discussed in a more interpretative, discussion-style format. Together, these themes created a holistic understanding of first-year university students' reading practices.

### Theme 1: Types of texts students read

The type of texts that students read was one of the major themes. Because students showed interest in various types of reading materials, the authors decided to present sub-themes based on the different types of texts students claimed to read. Below are the sub-themes that are related and form part of students' choice of reading materials.

#### Sub-theme 1.1: Reading books

Students said that they only read the relevant module content in the prescribed books. Although some students, that is

forty five out of sixty-five ( $n = 45$ ), specifically mentioned that they liked to read non-fiction because it recounts real-life experiences and events, they added that they read the books that were recommended in the English Language and Comparative Literature (ECL) module but were too lazy to read books that were not prescribed. This indicates that they did not engage in a significant amount of reading, regardless of whether it was for academic purposes or reading for pleasure. They simply engage with content that is relevant to the advancement of their studies in this particular module. However, a few students, that is fifteen out of sixty-five ( $n = 15$ ) mentioned that they liked reading books because they were available in a variety of genres, such as romance novels, thriller novels and short stories. Students also mentioned that they read because they believe that books reflect their own experiences. For instance, they held that people write to express themselves through writing about experiences and things they have gone through.

Responding to the question:

'I read books because books are a reflection and firsthand experiences; people write about things they went through and experienced, and many people express themselves through their writing. Even scientific books – most are written from firsthand experiments and findings.' (S5)

In response to the same question, S17 responded in a manner which was slightly different from S5, who claimed that he loves books because their content reflects his own lifestyle. In contrast, S17 indicated that she loves reading books because they depict a lifestyle different from hers. She emphasised this point by stating:

'I enjoy reading books because they are interesting and different from my real life. Books come in different genres, so there is a variety of choice.' (S17)

S23's response emphasised her passion for reading the prescribed books. She justified her choice as follows:

'I read books as it is required of me in the module I am doing, which is ECL, but outside of that, I don't read books out of interest.' (S23)

As reflected by the verbatim quotes above, one student indicated their love for reading books, while most students' reading interest was limited to the prescribed module content. Although university students are supposed to read a wide range of texts inside and outside the classroom, which is likely to guarantee independent reading rather than relying on the support provided by their lecturers in class, this study found that students mostly focussed narrowly on prescribed texts. This study's finding aligns with Mbhele's (2016) research that indicated that while students claimed to enjoy reading, their reading practices reflect the opposite with minimal engagement, reading only once per week. This pattern is particularly concerning given Bharuthram's (2017) emphasis that university students are expected to read to prepare for lectures and supplement their notes. The reading practices seen in this study thus reflect a broader pattern in

higher education, where students' limited focus on prescribed texts falls short of the reading practices expected at the university level.

### Sub-theme 1.2: Social networking and websites

Most students ( $n = 53$ ) admitted that they read more websites, Google platforms and social media posts than printed books. To explain this, the students brought up the ease of access to these resources in contrast to pricey hardcopy books. Students also brought up the fact that many of them enjoy gossip, which is provided by social media. A few students ( $n = 17$ ) mentioned that they selected websites because they enjoyed doing research and learning new things. A different set of students stated that they used social media to keep themselves informed about events occurring both domestically and internationally. Responding to the question, a student said:

'I read social network sources because I want to update myself on events happening around the country and the world. Also, I mostly read books available on internet websites, owing to the fact that my generation is not occupied with holding newspapers simply because, for us, newspapers are boring, since we are generation that is technology orientated, and besides, what is in the newspapers is always on the internet website.' (S24)

Expressing a similar sentiment:

'The types of material I prefer is social media and internet websites. Social media has become the main source of news. I use social media 24/7, so getting updates from social media and reading stories from social media is how I get updated. I also prefer internet websites. When I do not understand something or want information on a topic, it is so easy to just google information about that particular topic and read about what I do not understand.' (S12)

In response to the same question, one indicated:

'The reason I am more in social networks, it's because most of the time, I'm using social networks, and I check for threads and current issues – for instance, in Twitter [now X]. Moreover, I choose to read materials from social networks and internet websites because these materials are the most accessible materials for me and that it is easy to find the information I am looking for on time.' (S60)

Most students ( $n = 58$ ) own laptops and other electronic devices like tablets and smartphones, so the excerpts are not surprising. These technological devices could be utilised to engage students because technology is now a crucial tool for influencing the development of literacy in the rapidly changing field of education.

## Theme 2: Time spent reading different materials

Like the presentation of the previous theme, this theme was also broken down into subthemes. This was done because students reported varying interests in different reading materials, and as such, time spent reading each material differed accordingly.

### Sub-theme 2.1: Time spent on conventional academic reading

Students reported spending little time reading texts required for academic credit and indicated that they only engaged seriously in academic reading when reading for tests and assignments. As such, the amount of time dedicated to traditional academic reading was dictated by the frequency of assignments and tests. Responding to the question, one indicated:

'On academic reading, it depends on whether I have an assignment or test. It means that I do not do it on an hourly or daily basis.' (S1)

Responding to the same question, another indicated:

'I hardly spend time on conventional academic reading unless I have to do academic work.' (S18)

The finding, exemplified by S18's statement about only reading for academic work echoes the work by Nel et al. (2004) and Ntekere and Ramoroka (2017) that provide evidence that poor reading habits and practices among university students are not a new phenomenon. To put it differently, the results of this study also point to the current generation of students' negative reading practice, suggesting a persistent limited, assessment-driven reading approach challenge in higher education rather than a unique characteristic of current students.

### Sub-theme 2.2: Extracurricular reading

Extracurricular activities are generally characterised as those that take place outside of the regular school or work curriculum. Extracurricular reading is a term used to describe reading activities that require students to be exposed to the target language on a regular basis outside the academic context. Within the current study, reading outside of the curriculum is referred to as 'extracurricular reading' when it is done frequently. In contrast to the conventional academic reading mentioned above, where the reading was not done on a regular basis per day or week, students who engaged in extracurricular reading specified the number of hours they spent doing so each week. Specifically, students reported reading non-academic material for 1 h to 4 h a week on average. Compared to the number of hours spent on traditional academic reading, which was covered previously, this average is much better. Responding to the question:

'I spend about three to four hours per week on extracurricular reading.' (S33)

Similarly:

'I spend about one to three hours per week on extracurricular reading.' (S55)

The excerpts above demonstrate that students do not spend an excessive amount of time on extracurricular reading. Because extracurricular reading exposes students to the English language in its natural form, lecturers should consider ways to get their students involved in it. Additionally, it will probably

help students with their writing, reading comprehension and vocabulary development. There are several ways to accomplish this goal. For instance, lecturers may ask their students to present what they have read. Although this technique could possibly increase the amount of time students spend reading for extracurricular activities, it can also assist in possibly increasing students' interest in spending time on conventional academic reading.

### Sub-theme 2.3: Internet reading

More than any other reading medium, students read on the Internet. Most students ( $n = 43$ ) indicated on the questionnaire that the hours they spent reading online each week varied from 4 h to 12 h. The students did not quantify their reading hours per week; instead, they reported that they were exposed to online reading daily, showcasing their passion for it. Responding to the question two students indicated:

'I do internet reading almost every day.' (S41)

'I spend most of my time on the internet reading – more than any other form of reading.' (S17)

Expressing a similar opinion, another said:

'Every day, I am on social media.' (S15)

These excerpts show how enthusiastic the students are about reading on the Internet. Because reading materials are no longer limited to print formats, lecturers should encourage their students to read online, as this could improve their reading practice.

## Theme 3: Factors contributing to the students' reading practices

This theme arose from the data presented in Themes 1 and 2. The factors influencing the reading practices of the selected cohort of tertiary students were identified through verbatim quotes from the students recorded in the first two themes and are presented in a discussion-style format under the following subthemes.

### Sub-theme 3.1: Prescribed material

We found that variables such as students' choice of sources and the amount of time spent reading them were influenced by the module's prescribed material. According to the students, this factor made them read the required texts to get ready for assignments and tests. This factor is supported by S1, as quoted in sub-theme 2.1. They did not appear to be in the mood to read those sources every hour, day or week. It is implied that students' reading habits were poor in relation to this factor. This deduction is based on the fact that the term 'reading habit' describes a systematic, intentional study routine that students have developed over time to comprehend academic material (Chettri & Rout 2013:13). The study's cohort of students ( $N = 65$ ) showed no signs of frequent reading, reading interest, daily goal setting or a regular reading schedule. As a result, it is fair to assume that the

module's test and assignment schedule had an impact on their reading habits.

### **Sub-theme 3.2: Availability of social networks and websites**

The availability of social networks, search engines and websites had an impact on the students' reading preferences. This is a result of how technology has advanced both domestically and globally. The information demonstrated how social media and websites encouraged students to develop better reading habits. This is because many students already use social media and websites, making it simpler for them to incorporate these technologies into their reading routines. This factor is supported by S24 and S60, as quoted under sub-theme 1.2. The ease of accessibility of these technologies lessens the need for students to purchase pricey books or spend their time in the library. A possible technique for meeting students' reading needs is to employ the use of new reading technologies.

### **Sub-theme 3.3: Choice of reading material and time spent reading**

The study's findings demonstrated that one of the elements influencing students' reading habits was the selection of reading material and the amount of time spent reading. There is a connection between this factor and the students' reading interest. *Twenty-nine* of the 65 students opted to read books that interested them, and they appeared to spend more time with these books. This factor is supported by S1 and S2, as quoted under sub-theme 2.1. This element affects how reading instruction should be taught. Lecturers are expected to identify their students' reading preferences to provide reading materials that reflect their choices. Giving students reading materials that correspond with their interests would probably encourage them to read more often, which would enhance their reading habits.

## **Discussion of findings**

The goal of the study was to provide insight into the reading habits and practices of first-year university students, focussing on the factors that influence these practices. The findings of the study showed a connection between the factors that influence reading and the students' reading practices.

This assertion is consistent with the Attribution Theory, which served as the study's framework. The information about students' reading habits and/or practices is covered in the next discussion followed by the factors that underlie these practices.

This study's findings demonstrated that most students read books, especially those that are prescribed or suggested for their modules. This suggests that despite the advantages of reading, the students did not read widely, regardless of whether it was for academic purposes or for pleasure reading. They only read the content in the prescribed books that were required of them to do better on assignments and tests. The results of a study on first-year university students' reading

habits by Mbhele (2016) are consistent with this finding. Mbhele found that although students reported that they enjoyed reading, they only read once a week, suggesting that academic books were not as well-liked as they should have been and that students were not in the habit of reading regularly. Liswaniso and Mubanga (2019) found similar results in their study on the reading habits of University of Namibia students at the Katima Mulilo Campus. Their study showed that the students had poor reading habits and only read books for academic assessment purposes.

Our findings also demonstrated that students read more posts on social media and websites than printed books. This was because social media and online resources were easily accessible to students. This reading practice is consistent with technological advancements and their impact on education. This result runs counter to Bana's (2020) study on students' opinions of using the Internet to form reading habits. In his study, Bana started from the premise that the widespread use of the Internet in education has brought a plethora of digital tools to the teaching and learning process, radically altering many facets of academic life, including reading habits among students. However, according to the study's findings, only 43% of respondents believed that their reading habits were positively influenced by the Internet. Bana concluded that not all members of Generation Z completely disregarded printed reading materials. The results of a study carried out by Adu-Sarkodee, Asante and Akussah (2015) are consistent with the findings of the current study. Their research aimed to investigate the connection between social media use and how it affects reading practices. They discovered a significant interrelationship between all the social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Yahoo Messenger, Skype and Tango) and the dependent variable, reading habits.

The findings produced by this study also showed that students participated in extracurricular reading activities to some degree. Students indicated that they spent an average of 1–4 h per week reading extracurricular material. Even though the students utilised extracurricular materials far more frequently than the required texts for the module, they still showed poor weekly reading time for extracurricular materials. This is concerning because extensive reading increases students' exposure to a wider range of reading materials. Other possible advantages are improvements in students' vocabulary, writing and reading comprehension. The results of the current study are consistent with a study by Chiang (2014) that investigated students' extracurricular reading in terms of amount and habits. Chiang's study showed that many of the students lacked extracurricular reading experience.

Finally, the factors influencing students' reading preferences showed that the factors that influence students' reading practices had a relationship with the reading habits discussed above. The Attribution theory, which serves as the theoretical foundation for the current investigation, supports the link between reading habits and practices, as well as factors that

factors that contribute to students' reading practices. Heider (1958) asserts that the Attribution theory addresses how people understand events, perceive the information they are given and use this information to determine their causality. According to Heider, no one would act or decide without first attributing it to a cause or circumstance. This theory is applied in the context of the current study to explain the factors influencing students' reading practices. It was discovered that the prescribed materials for the module had an impact on the selection of sources and the amount of time students spent reading them. The students claimed that they felt compelled to read the prescribed material to prepare for examinations and assignments. In other words, they read those sources to get ready for tests and assignments, not because they wanted to do so. This discovery validates the findings of a study carried out by Bharuthram (2017), which demonstrated that most students reported that they only read when they were forced to do so.

An additional element found to impact students' reading habits was the accessibility of social media and websites on the Internet. The students' preferences for reading were impacted by it. The results of the abovementioned study by Adu-Sarkodee et al. (2015) are also supported by this finding. These authors concluded that university students take advantage of the fact that social media and websites have expanded the availability of information and use them to garner information.

Another factor influencing students' reading practices, according to the study, is the selection of reading material and the amount of time spent on it. Similar results were obtained by Kulikauskiene and Naujokiene's (2023) study, which specifically stated that the reader's perspective is formed by their reading choices and preferences, emphasising the variables that influence reading practices. The study's conclusions demonstrated that reading practices can be measured in terms of the books read, how often reading is undertaken and how much reading is done.

## Conclusion

This study provides insight into the reading practices of first-year university students and the factors that influence their reading practice experience. This study's findings demonstrate how students' narrow reading focussed on prescribed materials, preference for social media and online sources over printed books, and limited engagement in extracurricular reading adversely impact their reading experiences. The requirements for the modules, the availability of online resources, and individual reading preferences are important variables influencing these practices. To cultivate more positive and extensive reading practices among university students, the following recommendations are made.

**Lecturers should actively encourage students to read beyond the prescribed texts, promoting engagement with a diverse range of print and digital resources relevant to their subjects:** Instead of just telling students to 'read more', teachers can help them do it by giving them specific tasks to

do. For instance, in a first-year literature module, teachers could use a 'text constellation' approach in which the main text (e.g. a novel) is accompanied by other texts, including academic articles, podcasts, video essays and social media posts that are relevant to the subject matter. This way, students can create digital reading portfolios that showcase not only the required texts but also the self-selected ones. These should be chosen so that they are challenging enough for all students without being so difficult that only some students can manage them, and so that they will be interesting to a wide range of learning styles.

**Universities should use students' affinity for technology by availing and promoting online reading materials and platforms that blend academic and extracurricular content in an engaging format:** For example, once a week, students may be asked to write about one assigned text and one text of their own choice from a given list and to document their thoughts through brief digital notes or discussion posts. This way, it ensures that students' choice is respected, but at the same time, the achieved results meet the academic standards. Because many students enjoy reading in the digital environment, especially on social media platforms, universities should learn from this and not attempt to keep students from engaging in online reading.

**Lecturers should integrate regular, extensive reading activities into module curricula to motivate students to read more frequently and extensively, enhancing their literacy skills and academic performance:** For instance, lecturers could take advantage of the students' familiarity with certain platforms to create module-specific online environments for reading. Using hashtags for modules on platforms like Instagram can help direct attention to relevant academic and non-academic materials for reading. It is also possible to create course-specific content channels that would include sections like 'reading of the week' where students can share their views on both academic and pop culture material connected to the topic. Teaching assistants or tutors may also be useful in these areas to ensure that students are using them appropriately for learning.

**Online forums and discussion boards:** Through peer interpretation sharing, these forums help students engage in critical analysis and debate about readings. Students can benefit from this popular tool for facilitating their interactions, which can greatly improve their learning process and raise their performance (Du, Wang & Xiao 2022).

**Access to a range of viewpoints:** This gives students access to a variety of academic papers and perspectives on a subject. A range of perspectives, experiences and cultural backgrounds should be actively incorporated into the classroom by lecturers letting students interact with various viewpoints on a subject. Exposing students to experiences outside of their personal experiences is likely to foster critical thinking and a more comprehensive understanding of the world.

Implementing these recommendations could assist in fostering a reading culture among university students that would enable them to experience the benefits of reading for their educational and personal development. With the help of particular strategies and resources, it is possible for lecturers to develop a 'reading promotion approach' that will encourage universities to foster a reading culture for students, while also recognising the current practices of students and the need to develop critical reading skills for academic success.

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## Authors' contributions

M.C. collected the data, conceptualised the article and wrote the discussion of findings. N.B. wrote the literature review, discussion of findings and the conclusion. F.O. presented the data, wrote the methodology and collated the final draft.

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## Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available in the research article.

## Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency or that of the publisher. The authors are responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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Appendix starts on the next page →

# Appendix 1

## Interview Questions

### Instructions

This research explores your experiences about reading in English. The findings of the research will make your lecturers aware of your reading preferences and challenges so that reading materials that match your reading choices can be used in the classroom. The findings are also likely to assist your lecturers design a reading intervention programme that seeks to address your reading challenges. Answer by writing your opinion on the spaces provided. **Do not write your name on the questionnaire.** It will take approximately 30–35 min to complete this questionnaire. If you have any questions or concerns, please ask a member of the research team.

1. How would you describe yourself as a reader?

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2. What material do you read and why?

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3. How much time do you spend weekly on 1. Conversational academic reading, 2. Extracurricular reading and 3. Internet reading?

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4. In your opinion, how important is it that a university student should enjoy reading?

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5. What could your English lecturers do to help you enjoy reading more or read more in English?

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6. Which challenges do you experience in the reading exercise?

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7. Is there anything else about your reading experiences that you would like to share?

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Thank You