



Students' Smartphone Use and Reading Interest Beyond Class Hours: Qualitative Study of Bosowa University Students

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ABSTRACT

The rapid development of digital technology has influenced learning behavior in higher education, particularly in smartphone usage and reading activities. This study aimed to explore English Education students' experiences and perceptions of smartphone usage and reading interest outside classroom hours at Bosowa University. The study employed a qualitative descriptive design involving 10 participants selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and follow-up interviews and were analyzed thematically through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing based on Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña's framework. The findings revealed that most participants spent more time using smartphones for entertainment purposes such as social media, short videos, and online communication than for academic reading activities. Participants also preferred instant and visually attractive digital content because it was perceived as more practical and enjoyable than reading lengthy academic texts. Excessive smartphone usage was perceived to contribute to students' reading habits, concentration, time management, and motivation to engage in literacy activities outside classroom hours. In addition, limited literacy support within students' social environments contributed to low reading interest. The study concludes that excessive smartphone usage for entertainment purposes may contribute to lower reading engagement and weaker academic literacy habits. Therefore, balanced smartphone usage and stronger literacy support are needed to encourage more productive reading activities outside classroom learning.

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technology has significantly transformed many aspects of human life, including the field of education. In higher education, the integration of digital technology has changed the way students access information, communicate, and participate

in learning activities. Internet-based learning platforms and mobile technologies enable students to obtain academic resources more efficiently and flexibly. According to Alhumaid (2021), technology integration in higher education provides broader accessibility and flexibility that support students' learning processes both inside and outside the classroom.

Among various digital devices, smartphones have become one of the most frequently used technologies by university students. Smartphones are no longer merely communication tools but also function as media for accessing educational resources, online learning platforms, e-books, academic journals, and digital libraries. In higher education contexts, smartphones support students in conducting both academic and non-academic activities more practically and efficiently. Hsieh (2025) stated that smartphones have become an inseparable part of students' daily academic activities because they provide fast and flexible access to information.

The use of smartphones in education also offers several educational benefits. Smartphones may support independent learning, increase learning flexibility, and help students access academic materials anytime and anywhere. Students can use smartphones to search for references, access online dictionaries, participate in virtual learning, and read academic articles related to their studies. Marpaung (2024) explained that smartphones may positively support students' English learning achievement when utilized appropriately for educational purposes.

Despite these benefits, excessive smartphone usage may also create academic challenges among university students. Many students spend considerable time using smartphones for social media, entertainment, online games, and short-video platforms rather than academic learning activities. Sunday (2021) found that excessive smartphone usage may reduce students' learning focus and academic engagement. Similarly, Rathakrishnan et al. (2021) explained that problematic smartphone usage may contribute to lower academic productivity because students tend to prioritize entertainment activities over educational purposes. Continuous exposure to instant digital content may also shape students' attention span, concentration, and learning behavior.

For English Education students, reading interest is one of the important aspects that supports academic success and language development. Reading activities help students improve vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, critical thinking skills, and language proficiency. In addition, reading enables students to develop broader academic knowledge and deeper understanding of educational topics. Sari et al. (2022) emphasized that reading interest plays an important role in improving students' academic competence, particularly for students in language-related fields.

Despite the importance of reading for academic development, students' reading interest remains a concern in the digital era. Many students tend to spend more time accessing digital entertainment than reading academic books or lengthy texts. The popularity of social media, visual content, and short-video platforms has gradually changed students' reading habits, a shift also documented among Indonesian students (Wiranatha & Santosa, 2024). Liu (2023) stated that problematic smartphone usage is associated with lower academic motivation and

reduced concentration among university students. As a result, students may become less interested in engaging in academic reading activities outside classroom hours.

Based on the researcher's preliminary observation of English Education students at Bosowa University, many students appeared to use smartphones more frequently for social media, entertainment, and communication than for academic reading activities outside classroom hours. Several students also seemed to prefer short digital information and summarized content rather than reading complete academic texts or English learning materials. This phenomenon suggests that smartphone usage behavior may shape students' reading habits and literacy activities outside classroom learning.

Several previous studies have discussed smartphone usage and its relationship with students' academic performance, digital behavior, and literacy practices. However, limited studies have specifically explored how English Education students experience smartphone usage outside classroom hours and how such usage shapes their reading interest, literacy habits, and academic engagement, particularly within the context of an Indonesian private university. Most previous studies focused mainly on smartphone addiction, academic achievement, or general digital behavior rather than students' experiences and perceptions related to reading activities outside formal classroom learning.

Unlike previous studies that primarily examined smartphone addiction, academic performance, or general digital behavior, this study explores how smartphone use shapes reading interest among English Education students in an Indonesian private university, a group that is expected to develop strong academic literacy through courses such as Reading Comprehension and Intensive Reading. Rather than simply identifying the negative effects of smartphone use, this study highlights context-specific patterns, including students' dependence on academic requirements for reading, the influence of peer culture on reading habits, and the preference for instant digital content despite their academic background. These findings provide a more contextual understanding of how smartphone use interacts with literacy practices beyond classroom learning.

Therefore, this study aims to explore English Education students' experiences and perceptions of smartphone usage and reading interest outside classroom hours at Bosowa University. This study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of students' smartphone usage behavior and its relationship with reading interest in the digital era. Furthermore, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to the improvement of students' literacy habits and encourage more productive smartphone use for academic purposes.

Research Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore English Education students' experiences and perceptions of smartphone use and reading interest outside classroom hours at Bosowa University. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand students' habits, perceptions, and opinions rather than to measure or manipulate variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The descriptive design

allowed the researcher to portray students' actual reading habits and digital behaviour in their natural academic setting, yielding detailed and contextual information without intervention.

Research Participants

The participants were 10 English Education students (six female and four male, aged 18–21) from the 2025 batch at Bosowa University, selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015). This batch was chosen because the students were active smartphone users who had already taken reading-related courses such as Reading Comprehension and Intensive Reading, making them relevant for examining reading interest and literacy activities beyond the classroom. Ten participants were considered sufficient for a small-scale qualitative study aimed at obtaining rich, detailed information rather than statistical generalisation.

Data Collection Technique

Data were collected through an open-ended questionnaire of 10 items and follow-up semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire explored students' smartphone use, reading habits, and perceptions of reading beyond classroom hours, with open-ended items allowing participants to describe their experiences freely and in detail (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2021); the complete questionnaire and interview guide are provided in Appendix A and Appendix B. Follow-up interviews were then conducted with five participants purposively selected for the richness and diversity of their questionnaire responses, in order to clarify and deepen the findings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Each interview lasted 15–25 minutes and was conducted in Indonesian so participants could express themselves comfortably; interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis Technique

Data from the questionnaires and interviews were analysed using qualitative descriptive analysis, following the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). Participants' responses were first coded on the basis of recurring ideas and meaningful statements; similar codes were then grouped into broader categories and developed into eight themes. Through this thematic process, the researcher examined how smartphone use was perceived to shape students' reading activities and the internal and external factors related to their reading interest outside classroom learning.

Trustworthiness of the Data

Trustworthiness was strengthened through several strategies. The researcher repeatedly reviewed and compared questionnaire and interview responses to ensure consistency, and applied data triangulation across the two sources to enhance credibility (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Member checking was conducted by confirming interpreted responses with participants, and peer debriefing was used to discuss the coding and thematic categorisation with academic peers in order to reduce researcher bias.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants about the purpose of the study, ensuring voluntary participation, obtaining participants' consent before data collection, and maintaining participants' anonymity through the use of participant codes such as Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3. Participants were also informed that their responses would be used only for academic research purposes.

Research Procedure

The study was carried out in four stages: preparing the questionnaire and interview instruments; selecting participants and administering the questionnaire; conducting follow-up interviews to clarify and strengthen the responses; and organising, analysing, and interpreting the data descriptively to draw conclusions.

Findings

The analysis of the questionnaire and interview data identified eight interrelated themes describing English Education students' smartphone usage and reading interest outside classroom hours. These themes were organised into two broader categories, namely internal and external factors influencing students' literacy practices. Together, the themes suggest that participants perceived excessive smartphone use, a preference for instant digital content, weak reading habits, and limited academic demands as factors associated with reduced engagement in reading activities outside classroom learning.

Low Reading Habits

Low reading habits became one of the major findings in this study. Most participants admitted that they rarely spent their free time reading books, journals, or English academic texts unless they had assignments, presentations, or examinations from lecturers. Reading activities had not yet become part of their daily routines because students preferred using smartphones for entertainment activities such as social media, online games, videos, and chatting.

Participant 3 stated, *"I usually read only when I have assignments or exams. When I have free time, I prefer scrolling TikTok or Instagram because it is more relaxing."*

Participant 6 added, *"Reading English texts takes more effort and concentration, while social media is easier and more enjoyable."*

Participant 8 explained, *"Sometimes I want to read English books, but after opening social media I forget about reading because the content is more entertaining and easier to enjoy."*

The participants' responses demonstrate that students' reading habits have gradually shifted from academic reading activities to entertainment-oriented digital consumption. Most participants reported spending more time accessing social media, short videos, and other entertainment content than reading books or academic materials outside classroom hours. This finding indicates that reading activities were often replaced by more engaging forms of digital entertainment in students' daily lives.

This finding reflects a gradual transition from sustained academic reading to fragmented digital consumption. For English Education students, this condition is particularly important because reading activities are closely related to vocabulary development, grammar awareness, comprehension skills, and academic writing competence. If students rarely engage in deep reading activities outside classroom hours, their language development and academic preparation as future English teachers may also be negatively affected. This situation suggests that excessive engagement with digital entertainment may weaken students' academic literacy practices over time.

Lack of Interest in Reading Activities

Students' lack of interest in reading activities was reflected in their perception that reading academic texts was less enjoyable than accessing digital entertainment. Several participants indicated that reading required more concentration, time, and mental effort, while smartphone-based entertainment provided immediate pleasure and relaxation.

Participant 2 stated, *"Reading books sometimes feels boring because the process is long, while watching videos is faster and more entertaining."*

Participant 5 explained, *"I often feel tired when reading long English texts, so I prefer watching short videos or social media content."*

The findings reveal that students tended to associate reading activities with academic pressure instead of personal enjoyment. Many participants considered reading as an obligation that had to be completed only for academic purposes rather than as a habit that could support self-development and knowledge improvement.

This finding is consistent with Liu (2023), who explained that problematic smartphone usage may reduce students' academic motivation and concentration because students become more accustomed to instant digital entertainment. The increasing preference for entertaining digital content may gradually weaken students' willingness to engage in deep and reflective reading activities.

This phenomenon also indicates that students' emotional attachment to digital entertainment may shape their academic behavior and learning priorities. When reading is viewed as tiring or less enjoyable, students may gradually avoid literacy-related activities outside classroom requirements. As a result, reading becomes associated only with academic pressure instead of intellectual curiosity and independent learning development.

Preference for Instant Activities

The preference for instant activities became another important finding in this study. Most participants admitted that they preferred fast, practical, and entertaining activities such as scrolling through social media, watching short videos, and chatting through digital applications rather than reading books or academic texts.

Participant 1 stated, *"Watching short videos is easier because I can get information quickly without spending too much time reading."*

Participant 7 explained, *"Smartphones are more practical and entertaining than reading books for a long time."*

Participant 9 added, *"I prefer content that is short and direct because reading long texts makes me lose focus easily."*

These responses demonstrate that smartphones have become students' primary source of instant entertainment and quick information. Students appeared to prioritize activities that provide immediate satisfaction rather than activities requiring concentration and analytical thinking.

This finding supports the argument of Hsieh (2025), who explained that excessive smartphone usage may reduce students' academic productivity and learning engagement because students become more focused on instant digital activities rather than deep learning processes. Furthermore, Wolf (2020) stated that continuous exposure to instant digital information may reduce individuals' deep reading abilities because people become accustomed to processing information superficially and rapidly.

This phenomenon demonstrates how digital culture has shifted students' learning preferences from reflective reading toward fast and fragmented information consumption. For English Education students, this condition may reduce opportunities to develop critical reading abilities that are essential for academic and professional competence. If this pattern continues, students may experience difficulties engaging with complex academic texts that require interpretation, analysis, and critical understanding.

Poor Time Management

Poor time management also became one of the important findings in this study. Several participants admitted that they experienced difficulties balancing academic responsibilities, rest time, and smartphone usage in their daily activities. As a result, time that could have been allocated for reading was mostly spent on social media, videos, games, and other entertainment activities.

Participant 4 stated, *"I often plan to read at night, but I end up spending hours scrolling social media without realizing it."*

Participant 6 explained, *"Sometimes I delay reading because I think I still have enough time later, but eventually I become too tired to read."*

The findings indicate that students were generally aware of their academic responsibilities, but they often failed to manage their time effectively because smartphones continuously distracted their attention. Excessive smartphone usage indirectly reduced students' opportunities to maintain consistent reading habits outside classroom hours.

This finding is consistent with Rathakrishnan et al. (2021), who explained that smartphone addiction negatively affects students' academic productivity and learning engagement because students become more focused on entertainment activities than academic responsibilities. Similarly, Liu (2023) stated that excessive smartphone usage may

reduce students' self-control and academic concentration, making it difficult to maintain consistent reading habits.

This finding also suggests that smartphones may indirectly shape students' academic discipline. Although students were aware of their academic responsibilities, they often failed to regulate their digital behavior effectively. Consequently, reading activities were repeatedly postponed and eventually neglected.

High Smartphone Usage

High smartphone usage became one of the major external factors related to students' low reading interest. Seven out of ten participants stated that they spent more time using smartphones for entertainment activities such as accessing social media, watching videos, and consuming digital content than for reading books or English academic materials.

Participant 2 stated, *"I use my smartphone almost all day, but mostly for social media, videos, and chatting with friends."*

Participant 7 added, *"I rarely use my smartphone for reading journals or e-books because entertainment applications are more attractive."*

The participants' responses indicate that smartphones have become students' dominant daily activity and entertainment medium. Although smartphones may support academic learning, most participants tended to utilize smartphones more frequently for non-academic purposes.

This finding supports Marpaung (2024), who explained that smartphones may support English learning achievement when used effectively for educational purposes. However, excessive smartphone usage for entertainment activities may weaken students' literacy habits and academic engagement. Similarly, Alhumaid (2021) stated that excessive digital exposure may reduce students' concentration and reading behavior.

This finding suggests that students' smartphone habits may reshape their literacy orientation. Although smartphones provide access to academic materials, students' dominant use of smartphones for entertainment may weaken their ability to engage in sustained reading activities. For English Education students, this condition may limit vocabulary expansion, exposure to authentic English texts, and academic discourse development. In the long term, limited engagement in deep reading practices may also affect students' academic literacy and professional preparation as future English teachers.

Social Environment with Low Reading Culture

Students' social environment also became one of the factors related to low reading interest. Several participants admitted that reading activities were rarely practiced within their social circles. Discussions among friends were generally dominated by social media trends, entertainment content, and online activities rather than academic topics or literacy-related discussions.

Participant 5 stated, *"My friends rarely discuss books or academic materials. We usually talk about social media or trending videos."*

Participant 8 explained, *"I feel less motivated to read because people around me are also more interested in entertainment content."*

The findings suggest that the absence of a supportive literacy environment reduced students' social motivation to engage in reading activities outside classroom hours. Students tended to follow the habits and interests that were more dominant within their social groups.

This finding is consistent with Rahman et al. (2023), who explained that social media exposure and entertainment-oriented environments significantly shape students' literacy behavior and academic motivation. Students surrounded by digital entertainment culture tend to demonstrate lower engagement in reading activities and academic literacy practices.

This situation suggests that reading interest is influenced not only by individual motivation but also by social interaction and environmental habits. When literacy culture is weak within students' social environments, reading activities become less socially encouraged and gradually lose their importance in students' daily routines.

Access to More Attractive Digital Content

Easy access to attractive digital content became another important factor related to students' reading interest. Most participants stated that visual and interactive digital content such as short videos, pictures, and social media posts were considered more interesting, faster, and easier to understand than reading long academic texts.

Participant 1 stated, *"Watching videos is more enjoyable and easier to understand than reading long English texts."*

Participant 9 added, *"Social media content is more attractive because it is short, visual, and does not require too much concentration."*

The participants' responses indicate that students became more accustomed to obtaining information through visual and entertaining digital platforms instead of engaging with lengthy written materials that require deeper concentration and interpretation.

This finding supports Chen and Huang (2023), who explained that smartphone dependency may affect students' reading comprehension and academic focus because students become increasingly dependent on instant digital information.

For English Education students, this condition may become a serious academic issue because language learning requires consistent exposure to written texts and deep comprehension practices. If students rely excessively on short visual content, opportunities to develop analytical reading skills, vocabulary mastery, and academic literacy competence may become increasingly limited.

Lack of Academic Demands Outside Classroom Hours

The lack of academic demands outside classroom hours also became one of the factors related to students' low reading interest. Most participants admitted that they rarely engaged in reading activities unless lecturers assigned tasks, presentations, or examinations.

Participant 4 stated, *"I usually read only when lecturers give assignments or presentations."*

Participant 6 added, *"Without academic tasks, I prefer spending my free time on social media rather than reading books."*

The findings demonstrate that students' reading activities were still strongly dependent on external academic obligations rather than internal motivation or personal reading habits. Reading activities outside classroom hours had not yet developed into independent literacy practices among students.

This finding is supported by Sari et al. (2022), who found that students' reading interest is strongly influenced by internal motivation and external academic support. Students who receive limited literacy encouragement outside classroom activities tend to demonstrate weaker reading habits and lower academic engagement.

This condition suggests that reading has not yet become an independent literacy culture among students. For English Education students, this issue is significant because reading activities should function not only as academic requirements but also as continuous efforts to improve language proficiency, critical thinking, and professional readiness as future educators.

Overall, the findings indicate that excessive smartphone usage has gradually shifted students' learning behavior from deep academic reading toward instant digital consumption. Although smartphones provide educational opportunities and easy access to information, most participants tended to utilize smartphones more frequently for entertainment purposes than academic learning. This condition contributed to declining reading interest, weaker literacy habits, and reduced engagement in deep reading activities outside classroom hours.

The findings also reveal that low reading interest among English Education students was related not only to technological factors but also to emotional preferences, social environments, digital culture, and limited independent literacy habits. Therefore, improving students' reading interest requires not only balanced smartphone usage but also stronger literacy culture, independent reading motivation, and greater awareness of the importance of reading for academic and professional development.

In addition, lecturers and educational institutions may encourage more effective digital literacy strategies and provide activities that motivate students to engage in reading outside classroom hours. Through balanced smartphone usage and stronger literacy support, students may develop more productive academic habits and better professional competence as future English teachers.

Table 1. Factors Related to Students' Low Reading Interest

No	Category	Theme	Description

1	Internal Factor	Low Reading Habits	Students rarely read outside academic purposes.
2	Internal Factor	Lack of Interest in Reading Activities	Reading was perceived as less enjoyable than digital entertainment.
3	Internal Factor	Preference for Instant Activities	Students preferred fast and practical digital content.
4	Internal Factor	Poor Time Management	Students spent more time using smartphones than reading.
5	External Factor	High Smartphone Usage	Smartphones were mostly used for entertainment activities.
6	External Factor	Low reading culture	Students' social environments did not support reading habits.
7	External Factor	Attractive digital content	Visual digital content was considered more interesting than reading.
8	External Factor	Lack of academic demands	Students rarely read without assignments or academic obligations.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the influence of smartphone usage on students' reading interest extends beyond the amount of time spent using digital devices. Rather, the findings indicate that smartphone use interacts with students' reading habits, content preferences, self-regulation, and social environment, creating a pattern that shapes literacy practices outside the classroom. These interconnected factors demonstrate that the decline in reading interest cannot be explained by smartphone use alone but by the way digital technology is integrated into students' daily lives.

The findings support previous studies suggesting that the digital environment encourages quick access to information and short-form content instead of sustained reading. As argued by Wolf (2020), frequent exposure to fast-paced digital media may reduce opportunities for deep reading, which requires concentration and critical thinking. Similarly, Chen and Huang (2023) found that students increasingly favour concise and visually engaging content over lengthy academic texts. The present study reinforces these arguments by showing that students often choose entertainment-oriented digital content, making academic reading a lower priority outside formal learning activities.

Another important implication concerns students' ability to regulate their learning behaviour. Although many participants recognised the importance of reading, they reported difficulty managing their smartphone use and balancing academic and non-academic activities. This finding is consistent with Rathakrishnan et al. (2021), who argued that excessive smartphone use may weaken self-regulation and reduce academic productivity. Therefore, the issue is not merely the presence of smartphones but students' capacity to use digital technology purposefully to support learning rather than distract from it.

The study also highlights the importance of the social environment in shaping reading behaviour. Participants described limited interaction related to books or academic discussions within their peer groups, suggesting that literacy practices are influenced by social norms as well as individual motivation. This finding supports Rahman et al. (2023), who emphasised that supportive social environments can strengthen students' academic engagement and reading culture. Consequently, efforts to improve reading interest should involve not only individual students but also lecturers and universities in creating learning communities that encourage reading beyond classroom requirements.

Overall, this study demonstrates that smartphone usage has a complex relationship with students' reading interest. Smartphones should not be viewed solely as a source of distraction because they also provide access to educational resources, digital libraries, e-books, and academic journals. Consistent with Alhumaid (2021), the educational value of smartphones depends largely on how they are used. Therefore, promoting balanced smartphone use, strengthening digital literacy, and fostering supportive academic environments may help students develop sustainable reading habits beyond classroom learning.

Conclusion

This study explored English Education students' smartphone use and reading interest outside classroom hours at Bosowa University. The findings showed that most participants used smartphones more for entertainment—social media, short videos, and online communication—than for academic reading, and perceived this excessive use as contributing to weaker reading habits, lower reading interest, and reduced concentration while reading. For prospective English teachers, these perceptions signal potential challenges in developing vocabulary, comprehension, critical thinking, and academic literacy.

Because the study relied on a small qualitative sample, future research should involve more participants and deeper methods. Given that smartphones can also support learning when used purposefully, lecturers might assign digital reading logs and integrate smartphone-based reading tasks and reading communities into Reading Comprehension courses to strengthen students' literacy habits and academic engagement.

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