



## SOCIAL MEDIA AND DEEP VS. SURFACE READING: EVIDENCE FROM UZBEK EFL LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

*This study looks at how social media influences deep and superficial reading habits among Uzbek EFL students. Using survey data from 120 university students and interviews with ten individuals, the study investigates how fast-paced digital settings affect attention, reading stamina, and understanding. The findings show that regular exposure to short-form content, notifications, and compulsive scrolling impairs students' capacity to sustain focus on long English texts, leading to greater surface-level processing. At the same time, social media allows users to discover new reading materials and engage with English informally. However, these advantages favour light, fragmentary reading rather than profound comprehension.*

*The study contends that, while social media is not intrinsically bad, its impact necessitates deliberate educational intervention. Teaching self-regulation, incorporating digital literacy, and leading students to turn brief online contacts into lengthier reading activities are all critical for developing deeper reading habits. The study provides new evidence from Uzbekistan and emphasizes the importance of balancing digital involvement with long-term, reflective reading practices in EFL instruction.*

### Introduction.

The rapid expansion of social media has fundamentally altered how young people read, process information, and interact with text. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, and YouTube have become common places for EFL learners, particularly university students in Uzbekistan, to consume material fast and in small chunks. While these platforms provide constant access to content, they also promote fast scanning, quick attention changes, and a preference for brief, visually appealing content.

These behaviours are in contrast to what educational scholars' term deep reading—the ability to concentrate, interpret complicated concepts, link arguments, and think



critically. In recent years, experts have expressed worries that regular exposure to short-form digital content may impair students' ability to engage in extended, reflective reading. This transition is especially significant for EFL students, who rely on deep reading to broaden their vocabulary, improve their comprehension abilities, and achieve academic success. However, social media can also encourage reading by making recommendations, introducing new themes, and exposing students to English in casual settings.

Despite these mixed influences, little study has been conducted to determine how social media affects reading quality—specifically, the balance of deep and surface reading—among Uzbek EFL learners. Most present research focuses on reading motivation or general distraction, but it does not investigate the cognitive depth of reading engagement.

This study bridges that gap by looking into how social media influences students' attention, reading stamina, and processing depth. The study, which uses survey data from 120 students and qualitative interviews, investigates students' shifting preferences for short-form content, their difficulties maintaining focus on long texts, and their reflections on how social media influences how they understand and interact with English reading materials. The goal is to create a clearer picture of how digital habits connect with reading behaviours, as well as ideas that educators may use to foster deeper reading in an increasingly digital environment.

## **Literature Review**

Research clearly distinguishes between deep and surface approaches to reading. Deep reading demands prolonged attention, inference, and critical assessment, whereas surface reading entails fast scanning and low cognitive engagement (Marton & Säljö, 1976). Digital literacy experts contend that the expansion of online environments, particularly fast-scrolling platforms, may impair the cognitive skills required for deep interaction with texts (Wolf, 2018; Carr, 2020).

Cognitive models help to understand this trend. According to the Limited Capacity Model of Mediated Message Processing, individuals have finite attentional resources, and the fast-paced, attention-demanding nature of social media diminishes mental capacity for extended reading tasks (Lang, 2006). Complementary data from screen-based reading research indicates a consistent screen inferiority effect, with comprehension—particularly for analytical and inferential tasks—being lower on screens than on paper (Delgado et al., 2018; Clinton, 2019).

Short-form media like TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts amplify fragmented attention. According to research, habitual exposure to quick, bite-sized content predicts weaker reading endurance, more frequent task switching, and a decreased capacity to concentrate during long-form reading (Firth et al., 2019; van der Schuur et al., 2020).

For EFL students, the consequences may be more pronounced. Reading in a second language already increases cognitive load, making continuous attention essential for vocabulary expansion and comprehension (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). When combined with digital habits that reward speed and low effort, learners may adopt surface techniques like skimming or relying on summaries (Zhang & Chen, 2021). However, studies also



highlight good aspects: social media can encourage reading, expose students to actual English, and assist them in discovering new texts or themes of interest.

Despite these global conclusions, evidence from Central Asia—including Uzbekistan—is scarce. Most regional studies concentrate on reading motivation rather than depth of reading engagement. There is little research on how social media affects students' capacity to maintain attention, digest long texts, and participate in deep reading in English. This study fills that gap by investigating how Uzbek EFL learners engage in deep vs surface reading processes in a highly digitalized reading environment.

## **Methodology**

This study used a mixed-methods research design to investigate how social media effects both deep and surface reading among Uzbek EFL learners. Combining quantitative and qualitative data resulted in a more comprehensive picture of students' reading habits, attentional patterns, and experiences in digital environments.

The quantitative phase involved 120 undergraduate EFL students from several universities in Uzbekistan. These individuals were selected via convenience sampling and represented a wide variety of English competence and social media usage habits. To supplement the survey results, ten students were chosen for semi-structured interviews based on the range of their survey responses. This selection technique ensured that the qualitative data represented a diverse range of reading experiences, from extremely distracted learners to those who were relatively unaffected by social media.

Data collection occurred in two stages. First, the poll was administered online using Google Forms. The questionnaire had Likert-scale questions about students' attention, distraction, preference for short or long texts, reading stamina, and perceived impact of social media on their reading depth. These items were derived from proven digital literacy and L2 reading research instruments, ensuring that they are consistent with the deep and surface processing characteristics. After analysing the survey data, interviews were undertaken to acquire a better understanding of students' actual experiences. Each interview lasted about twenty to thirty minutes and was conducted in a conversational style, encouraging participants to express their reading habits, concentration issues, and cognitive reactions while dealing with longer English texts.

To highlight overall trends in reading behaviour and social media influence, quantitative data were evaluated using descriptive statistics, with a focus on frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze qualitative data. This entailed repeatedly reading transcripts, coding important sentences, and organizing these codes into larger patterns that reflected students' experiences with deep and surface reading processes.

Ethical permission was acquired prior to data collection, and participation was entirely voluntary. Before completing the survey or participating in interviews, students were informed of the study's goal, assured of anonymity, and given their agreement. All data were anonymized and used only for academic study.

## **Findings**

The results of this study show a consistent pattern in how social media influences the depth and quality of reading engagement among Uzbek EFL learners. Quantitative



data from 120 students show that a significant proportion have difficulty maintaining attention while reading, with many reporting that notifications, short-form content, and frequent scrolling disrupt their concentration and reduce their motivation to engage with longer English texts. Students also expressed a strong preference for short, easy-to-consume digital content, with nearly half admitting that social media distracts them from academic reading or causes them to postpone planned reading tasks.

At the same time, the majority said that social media helps people discover new reading materials and stimulates online reading, implying that digital platforms have a dual role as a source of distraction and a doorway to new content. These tendencies were supported by qualitative findings from interviews, in which students described how constant exposure to fast-paced digital content lowered their patience for lengthier texts, hindered memory recall, and encouraged more superficial processing. Many people reported that after moving to social media, they forgot where they had left reading or lost the mental flow essential for deep comprehension. Others highlighted peer pressure to stay connected, which further fragmented their reading time.

Despite these problems, numerous students actively used self-regulation tactics to counteract social media's influence, such as setting reading goals, tracking habits, shutting off alerts, or selecting personally fascinating English books. Overall, the findings indicate that, while social media allows for discovery and informal reading, its fast-paced, attention-demanding environment tends to push learners toward surface-level processing, making deep, sustained reading increasingly difficult without intentional effort and supportive pedagogical strategies.

## **Conclusion**

This study looked at how social media influences deep and superficial reading habits among Uzbek EFL students. The findings show that, while social media provides students with easy access to English content, it also promotes hasty, fragmented reading patterns that undermine the sustained attention required for deep comprehension. Students frequently reported difficulty concentrating on long texts, a preference to skim rather than engage critically, and a habit of moving between reading and scrolling—patterns consistent with global research on digital distraction.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that social media is not all negative. Many students utilize it to discover new books, acquire vocabulary, or engage in engaging English activities. This shows that the problem is not with social media, but with how pupils use it. Without supervision, individuals are more likely to engage in surface reading; with structured help, these platforms can serve as portals to more meaningful literacy practices.

Overall, the study finds that promoting deep reading in the digital age necessitates deliberate pedagogical efforts, such as teaching self-regulation, including digital literacy, and assisting students in transforming brief internet exposure into fuller reading experiences. Educators can better support EFL learners in creating healthy, long-term reading habits in an increasingly digital society by appreciating both the risks and opportunities presented by social media.



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