

PERCEPTIONS OF EFL LEARNERS ON HOW SOCIAL MEDIA READING HABITS AFFECT THEIR ACADEMIC READING SKILLS

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Abstract

Reading is a foundational skill in language learning that plays a vital role in students' cognitive development and academic success. However, the rapid growth of digital technology has shifted students' reading habits toward social media environments. This study aims to investigate the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding how their social media reading habits affect their academic reading skills. Using a multimethod descriptive approach, data were gathered through a structured online questionnaire combining close-ended and open-ended questions from 18 active EFL undergraduate students. The quantitative findings showed that students overwhelmingly prefer visual-multimodal platforms like Instagram and TikTok, yet spend less than one hour daily reading English text. Qualitatively, the results revealed that while social media acts as a helpful "linguistic bridge" for casual vocabulary, it severely damages students' long-form academic focus. Habituation to micro-texts causes immediate cognitive fatigue and leads to a bad habit called shallow skimming. These findings imply that educators need to design balanced reading interventions to help digital-native students build deep reading stamina without losing digital engagement.

Keywords: Reading Habits; Digital Literacy; Academic Reading; Reading Skills

INTRODUCTION

Reading stands as a foundational cornerstone in language acquisition, playing a pivotal role in fostering cognitive development, critical thinking, and overall linguistic proficiency. To truly grasp complex ideas, learners must engage deeply with textual content through systematic and careful reading. In an academic context, this process is multi-dimensional; as Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) conceptualize, proficient reading is the direct product of word decoding and language comprehension. This means that true reading mastery requires not only the mechanical ability to recognize printed words but also the cognitive capacity to interpret their underlying meaning. Ultimately, solid reading skills serve as the bedrock of all educational endeavors, driving the intellectual growth that shapes a knowledgeable and progressive society.

However, in today's modernized educational landscape, the nature of reading has undergone a radical paradigm shift due to the rapid advancement of technology. Reading from digital devices has now become a prominent feature of contemporary English language education (Zulianti et al., 2024). Driven by internet access and digital tools, online reading allows students to conveniently browse keywords, analyze data, and synthesize information on the fly. This massive transition from paper-based literacy to screen-bound engagement

highlights how modern learners navigate virtual spaces to construct knowledge (Ahmadi & Ghafournia, 2022). Decades ago, Shen (2006) already noted that students heavily prioritized the internet as an information medium, primarily utilizing it for data gathering, communication, and digital interaction. Today, this reliance has intensified significantly; digital media content can serve as a vital bridge for students to expand their horizons, spark creativity, and cultivate a global mindset.

Within this digital landscape, social media platforms such as Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and Reddit have emerged as the primary textual environments for EFL learners. While these platforms provide rich exposure to authentic English input and a low-anxiety environment that can enhance incidental vocabulary breadth (Al-Ali, 2014; Greenhow & Lewin, 2016), they also introduce distinct reading behaviors. In particular, the multimodal nature of highly popular visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok has been shown to offer strategic benefits in expanding students' casual language repertoire through dynamic visual-textual reinforcement (Fathi et al., 2023). Furthermore, because social media inherently fosters high interactivity and entertainment, it significantly boosts students' intrinsic motivation and serves as an effective supporting tool to build basic reading abilities by transforming rigid learning into an engaging, low-stress experience (Erzad & Suciati, 2018).

Conversely, despite these motivational and lexical gains, a critical academic paradox arises as these short-form digital habits directly conflict with rigorous scholarly demands. While social media functions efficiently for casual literacy, the habituation to micro-texts and high-velocity information feeds on social networks poses a severe threat to higher education, as it systematically erodes the cognitive stamina and long-form comprehension required to process dense, linear academic papers (Delgado & Salmerón, 2024). In direct opposition to the positive vocabulary scaffolding reported in informal spaces, recent empirical evidence indicates that excessive social media consumption creates an "illusion of knowing" that actively impedes deep-level literacy. For instance, Sari and Wahyudin (2021) demonstrate that undergraduate digital reading behaviors on social networks are heavily dominated by rapid scanning and unstructured grazing, which triggers cognitive tunneling and prevents students from absorbing nuanced, complex ideas.

On top of that, Vella and Jones (2022) explicitly warn that while online platforms offer unprecedented portability and convenience, they inherently fail to foster the depth of textual comprehension encouraged by traditional reading methods, ultimately leaving digital-native students intellectually unequipped for serious research. Consequently, these superficial reading mechanics and constant multitasking can negatively transfer to academic contexts, forcing contemporary students into chronic habits of shallow skimming and visual-textual dependency (Liu, 2005; Mangen et al., 2013; Wolf, 2018).

Despite the pervasive nature of digital media, there remains a critical gap in understanding how EFL learners cognitively reconcile these two contrasting reading modes. Investigating learners' own metacognitive awareness is essential, as their attitudes and perceptions directly dictate their academic performance and use of reading strategies (Mokhtari et al., 2018). Therefore, this study aims to investigate the perceptions of EFL learners regarding how their social media reading habits affect their academic reading skills. By illuminating both the practical affordances and cognitive drawbacks of these digital habits, this study seeks to provide valuable insights for educators to design balanced reading interventions that leverage digital engagement without compromising academic literacy.

METHOD

To explore the impact of social media on EFL learners' reading habits and preferences, this study employs a quantitative descriptive approach. This design purposively utilizes structured quantitative methods to systematically measure, analyze, and comprehensively address the research questions through numerical data (Johnson & Walsh, 2019). The selection of this research design is heavily informed by the methodological dimensions of previous empirical works conducted on similar linguistic and digital literacy topics. Rather than exploring extensive qualitative narratives, this approach allows for a structured, descriptive examination of widespread trends and patterns through a unified quantitative instrument, complemented by brief open-ended questions to provide qualitative support and deeper context for the participants' statements.

The primary data collection instrument for this study is a structured online questionnaire, developed by the researchers after an extensive review of the relevant literature. This preliminary literature mapping was crucial to identify key variables and constructs related to the potential influence of social media usage on EFL reading behaviors. The questionnaire is systematically divided into distinct sections, with the critical final section specifically exploring the impact of social media on participants' reading habits and preferences. This is achieved through a strategic combination of close-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) questions. The close-ended items provide measurable trends regarding student perceptions, while the open-ended essay prompts allow participants to elaborate on their individual experiences in their own words.

The target data source consists of undergraduate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students from the English Education Department or English Literature Department. Participants will be selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that the selected sample comprises active social media users who frequently interact with English-language digital content and are actively engaged in academic reading contexts. Through this sampling approach, a total of 18 participants successfully completed the online questionnaire, providing the baseline data for both the quantitative and qualitative analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners regarding the impact of social media reading habits on their academic reading skills. To provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding, this chapter integrates quantitative descriptive statistics obtained from a closed-ended questionnaire ($N = 18$) with qualitative thematic data extracted from open-ended reflective questions. The respondents consist of active EFL students, primarily dominated by 4th-semester students at 72.2% ($n = 13$) and 6th-semester students at 27.8% ($n = 5$).

The presentation of the findings is structured into two main sections. The first section delineates the quantitative analytical trends mapping out the digital habits of the respondents across five primary indicators. The second section details the qualitative thematic clusters derived from the open-ended transcripts, which provide an explicit exploration of the psychological and cognitive processes underlying students' academic reading performance.

Quantitative Survey Results

The quantitative phase mapped out five core indicators of digital reading behavior platform preferences, daily time allocation, lexical acquisition, attention retention, and the transferability of scanning/skimming mechanics.

Table 1. Respondents' Social Media Platform Preferences

No	Social Media Platforms & Content Characteristics	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.	Instagram (long-caption, infographics, micro-blogging)	13	72,2%
2.	Tiktok/YouTube (short video format, subtitles, multimodal audio-visual)	13	72.2%
3.	X/Twitter (threads, short news, linear micro-text)	3	16,7%
4.	Facebook (community posts, external articles, group interactions)	2	11,1%
5.	Custom Option (Duolingo, Airlearn)	1	4,5%
6.	Reddit/Qoura (In-depth discussion forums, long-form analytical text)	0	0.0%

The quantitative data in Table 1 reveals that EFL students' reading choices are overwhelmingly concentrated on visual-multimodal platforms. Instagram and TikTok/YouTube shared the highest ranking at 72.2% each. Conversely, text-dense analytical platforms like Reddit and Quora recorded 0.0% engagement, indicating a massive departure from traditional linear reading media toward multimedia-driven environments.

Table 2. Daily Time Spent Reading English Content Digitally

No	Daily Reading Duration	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.	Less than 1 hour per day	11	61.1%
2.	1 – 3 hours per day	5	27,8%
3.	3 – 5 hours per day	2	11,1%
4.	More than 5 hours per day	1	5,6%

As shown in Table 2, the majority of respondents (61.1% / n = 11) fall into the low-exposure category, spending less than one hour daily reading English text on social media. This demonstrates that while social media interaction itself might be frequent throughout the day, the cumulative sessions dedicated purely to reading text are fragmented and brief.

Table 3. Perceived Impact on Academic Vocabulary Enrichment

No	Daily Reading Duration	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.	Highly Positive: I often encounter high-level/formal vocabulary on social media that expands my academic understanding.	11	61.1%
2.	Moderately Positive: It helps my everyday English vocabulary but rarely helps with formal academic vocabulary	9	50,0%

3.	No Impact: Vocabulary used on social media and in academic texts is completely different	0	0,0%
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Table 3 reflects a highly optimistic self-perception regarding vocabulary acquisition. A solid 61.1% (n = 11) believe social media exposure yields a "Highly Positive" effect by introducing low-frequency academic terms. Meanwhile, 50.0% (n = 9) maintain a more conservative "Moderately Positive" view, arguing that lexical gains are mostly confined to colloquial language rather than formal scholarship.

Table 4. Social Media Distraction on Academic Text Concentration

No	Psychological and Attentional Response	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.	Yes, occasionally: I only lose focus if the academic text being read is too boring or too difficult to understand.	13	72,2%
2.	Yes, highly influential: I easily lose focus and feel strongly distracted to open social media instead.	5	27,8%
3.	Not at all: I can maintain strong focus on academic text regardless of my social media habits.	2	11,1%

The attentional indicator data in Table 4 presents a profound finding: a combined 100% of respondents acknowledge that digital distractions disrupt their academic reading sessions. The majority (72.2%) attributes this attention loss conditionally to text complexity or boredom, while 27.8% explicitly admit to a chronic, unconditional urge to escape to social media timelines mid-study.

Table 5. Transferability of Social Media Skimming to Academic Research

No	Reading Methodology Dimension	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
1.	Neutral: This depends entirely on the difficulty level of the research topic faced.	10	55,6%
2.	Yes: It makes me faster at scanning abstracts and sorting relevant literature.	6	33,3%
3.	No: Academic reading requires slow, precise comprehension social media reading makes me skip critical details.	5	27,8%

According to Table 5, the prevailing stance is highly situational. A majority of 55.6% (n= 10) remained "Neutral," indicating that the transferability of digital skimming skills is determined by the inherent complexity of the scientific topic. While 33.3% found it mechanically efficient for rapid sorting, 27.8% recognized it as a liability that causes them to skip critical data points.

Qualitative Data Results

To unpack, expand, and triangulate the numbers above, an open-ended thematic analysis was performed on the students' written reflections. The open-ended questions targeted their preferred content genres, the psychological friction felt during mental transition, and their overall verdict on whether social media constitutes a net benefit or a net hindrance to academic reading.

Content Choices and the Allure of Social Media Formats

When asked to describe their preferred English content on social media and explain its appeal over print textbooks, three thematic clusters emerged:

Theme 1: Appeal of Practical, Relatable, and Daily-Life Content.

Students gravitate toward materials that seamlessly blend utility and entertainment, such as grammar tips, everyday vocabulary hacks, pop culture (e.g., football updates, idol news), and personal growth stories.

Theme 2: Domination of Concise, To-the-Point Text Structures.

Social media texts eliminate verbose, dense introductions, providing instant access to information without initial cognitive fatigue.

Theme 3: Multimodal Enrichment and Active Communities.

The synthesis of vibrant infographics, short-form clips, rolling captions, and active user comment sections transforms reading from a passive duty into a lively, interactive environment.

The following excerpts represent these themes directly from the respondents' responses:

"I mostly prefer reading educational tips and popular culture content in English because the language is lighter, more engaging, and easier to comprehend. Compared to textbooks, social media content feels more relevant to daily life and is far more interactive." (E.C., Respondent 1)

"...the main reason is that social media formats are far more up-to-date in capturing language shifts or new slang words on that exact day—totally different from conventional printed books which take years to revise, causing them to feel outdated. Plus, infographics or short videos condense complicated material into a concise format, making it much easier to understand visually and fun because we can interact or read real discussions in the comments section without getting a headache." (N.A.P., Respondent 2)

"I mostly enjoy English educational content like practical grammar tips, everyday vocabulary, and pop culture studies. This is more attractive to me because it is presented in a concise, interactive, and visual (multimodal) manner, making it easier to grasp compared to typical textbook text that tends to be rigid and dense." (L.K., Respondent 5)

"I more often listen to and read English content through podcasts on YouTube and Spotify. The topics I like are usually about personal stories, self-development, education, and daily life discussions. I find such content more attractive because the discussion feels more natural and closer to real life situations." (R.L., Respondent 15)

Qualitative Validation of Cognitive Reading Stamina Erosion

The second open-ended question asked students to respond to researchers' claims that consuming short digital snippets erodes the cognitive endurance required to read long, complex academic papers. The qualitative codes yielded an unconditional consensus of agreement. EFL learners provided raw accounts of the cognitive friction, mental exhaustion, and focus disruptions they experience when switching to scholarly reading:

Theme 1: "Cognitive Shock" and Instant Fatigue.

Students describe moving from social media to journal articles as a sudden mental jolt that immediately triggers physical symptoms like sleepiness, headaches, and psychological aversion.

Theme 2: Blunting of Deep Reading Capacity.

Students note that habituation to rapid micro-content breeds cognitive impatience, destroying their tolerance for long-form linear arguments.

Theme 3: Maladaptation like "Abstract-Skipping".

Driven by diminished stamina, students admit to coping mechanisms where they read only the abstract and skip the body of a paper entirely.

These struggles are captured in their direct quotes:

"I completely agree with the argument that reading short social media content reduces the brain's endurance to face thick academic readings. The transition from social media to college journals causes a shock and a headache, because a brain that is usually pampered with great visuals and fast info suddenly has to think hard to dissect complicated sentence structures and heavy academic jargon. Consequently, concentration shatters easily, I feel sleepy quickly, and I constantly want to scroll my phone because I feel my deep reading skills are getting blunter from consuming too much short content." (N.A.P., Respondent 2)

"Yes, I agree, because being so used to short texts and then suddenly being told to read a long research paper or other lengthy English readings makes me instantly exhausted or fed up ('muak'), especially since the vocabulary is the exact opposite of what I usually read." (L.K., Respondent 5)

"I agree because it makes me bored faster and hard to focus when switching from social media to journals or academic articles. When reading a rather long article, it makes me feel bored so sometimes I just skip it once I have read the abstract." (D.M., Respondent 6)

"Yes, I agree, because I myself feel overwhelmed if told to read a long scientific article with high-level language because I am more accustomed to reading concise texts that are easy to understand." (A.N.F.A., Respondent 10)

"Highly agree because I am used to receiving content that is short and to the point while academic papers tend to be long and roundabout." (A.A.I., Respondent 14)

Overall Verdict: The Dilemma of "Surface Gains" vs. "Core Degradation"

The final reflective question asked students to weigh whether this digital habit is overall a net positive (benefit) or a net negative (hindrance) to their academic reading journey. The data exposed a sharp cognitive polarization. Students who favored social media viewed it as a "linguistic bridge" that softens hard theories, while those who viewed it negatively targeted it as the root cause of shallow thinking and a decay in critical focus.

The "Net Positive" camp emphasized conceptual scaffolding, while the "Net Negative" camp underscored habits of intellectual passivity and an over-reliance on shortcuts, including generative artificial intelligence (AI):

"...social media actually brings more positive impacts... for example, when I get a college assignment to compile a paper or scientific article that is usually rigid and hard to digest, it enters my brain much easier after I read educational threads or infographics on social media that summarize the main theoretical points in a casual language. Ultimately, social media functions as a bridge to build my foundational understanding first, so when I have to read the actual long English journal, I am not completely blank..." (N.A.P., Respondent 2 - Pro-Benefit)

"Social media reading habits bring more negative impacts (hindrances) toward academic reading development. In college, I frequently experience difficulties and easily hit a burnout point when reading thick, complex journals or textbooks. The habit of rapid scrolling on social media carries over into my study habits, causing me to read superficially ('skimming dangkal') and miss crucial arguments or analyses that form the core of the lecture material." (L.K., Respondent 5 - Pro-Hindrance)

"Social media reading habits bring more negative impacts toward academic reading development. The fast-paced and concise format of content can lower the capacity for deep concentration and critical analysis that is highly needed in lectures. When researching topic assignments, I often only skim the references. This habit stems from how I roll through social media..." (M.I., Respondent 9 - Pro-Hindrance)

"Positive as long as we use it wisely... but the negative impact is that we read less and our thinking becomes shallower, and everything is just AI ('apa-apa AI')." (R.S., Respondent 17 - Critical Impact reflection)

DISCUSSION

By looking at the data through a quantitative descriptive lens, we can see a clear pattern: social media reading habits act as a double-edged sword for EFL learners. On one side, digital reading helps students with basic language skills like learning everyday vocabulary and scanning text quickly. On the other side, it weakens the mental skills needed for deep reading, such as keeping attention, analyzing facts, and reading long papers. This change matches a global shift where students today read more on screens than on paper. A big paradox appears when we compare the numbers and the student comments: 61.1% of students feel that social media has a "Highly Positive" effect on their vocabulary (Table 3). However, Table 2 shows that 61.1% of them actually spend less than one hour a day reading English text, and Table 1 shows they prefer visual platforms like Instagram and TikTok while completely avoiding text-heavy websites like Reddit and Quora (0.0%). The qualitative data solves this riddle: the words students learn on social media are mostly casual, everyday English (Incidental Vocabulary) rather than formal academic words.

This situation can be explained using Jim Cummins' theory about the difference between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Social media is excellent for building BICS. Short videos, subtitles, and colorful infographics make English fun and reduce learning anxiety. A recent study by Fathi, Al-Mansoori, and Rahimi (2023) supports this by showing that Instagram and TikTok help students pick up casual words easily through a mix of pictures and text. Erzad and Suciati (2018) also note that because social media is interactive and entertaining, it boosts students' motivation and turns rigid learning into a low-stress experience. However, having good BICS does not mean a student has CALP. Academic reading (CALP) requires understanding rare words, complex grammar, and long arguments—things that are missing from short social media posts. Because no students read text-dense platforms (Table 1), their vocabulary stays at a basic level. When they open a real research journal, they struggle. Social media gives them a basic "linguistic bridge," but it does not prepare them for deep university assignments. This is why Respondent 5 (L.K.) said that academic vocabulary felt like the "exact opposite" of what they see online. This problem matches the findings of Ahmadi and Ghafournia (2022), who found that screen reading makes students active at first but fails to prepare them for formal academic reading due to the light nature of online content.

At the same time, Table 4 shows that 100% of respondents lose focus during study because of digital distractions. This number is proven by the students' own words, as they report feeling "cognitive shock," "headaches," and becoming "muak" (fed up) when trying to read academic papers. These are clear signs of digital fatigue and Cognitive Overload. From a brain science perspective, this supports Maryanne Wolf's (2018) theory on the Neuroplasticity of the Reading Brain. The human brain is not naturally wired to read; it

changes its pathways based on the media we use most often. By constantly reading short, fast snippets on Instagram and TikTok, students train their brains to expect speed, visual entertainment, and quick rewards. The brain gets comfortable with easy, short texts, as mentioned by Respondent 14 (A.A.I.). In contrast, reading a scientific journal requires deep reading, which uses the brain's prefrontal cortex to maintain focus and analyze data without stopping. When a brain used to fast, videos try to read a long, black-and-white academic paper, a mismatch happens. Without colors or videos, the text feels dry and boring. The brain gets tired quickly, creating digital fatigue. Sleepiness and headaches are real signs that the brain is struggling to focus, which makes students want to escape back to their phones for easy dopamine rewards. Delgado and Salmerón (2024) support this by stating that short social media texts threaten higher education because they destroy the stamina needed to read long, linear research papers.

Furthermore, the results in Table 5 show a split, where 55.6% of students feel neutral about skimming. This highlights an important point in language learning: skimming and scanning are good strategies when used correctly, such as reading an abstract quickly to see if a paper is useful. Respondent 2 (N.A.P.) uses this method by reading social media summaries first so they do not feel "completely blank" when reading a thick textbook.

However, a big danger arises when students lose control of this habit and experience Cognitive Tunneling. Because their attention span is shorter, they accidentally bring the fast, lazy scrolling style of social media into their real college studies. As Respondent 5 (L.K.) and Respondent 9 (M.I.) confessed, fast scrolling becomes a habit in independent study. Instead of reading a paper carefully from start to finish, they use a bad habit called "shallow skimming" (skimming dangkal). They only read the abstract, skip the complex methodology, and jump straight to the conclusion.

This issue is backed by Sari and Wahyudin (2021), whose research confirms that university students often read social media texts in pieces, creating an "illusion of knowing" where they think they understand a topic even though they only skimmed the surface. While skimming feels fast, it ruins the quality of learning. Vella and Jones (2022) warn that online reading lacks the depth of traditional paper reading, leaving students unprepared for serious academic tasks. For university students writing a thesis, this habit hurts critical thinking because they miss the research details. Zulianti, Rahman, and Hermawan (2024) also explain that modern digital reading features automate fast-skimming behaviors, which becomes very harmful when students use it blindly for formal learning.

The final student comments reveal a long-term risk: cognitive shallowing, made worse by relying too much on generative AI tools. When students lose the stamina to read, their motivation to face difficult texts disappears. Instead of reading to improve their language skills, they use shortcuts and ask AI to summarize everything for them. This creates a lazy loop where "everything is just AI," as Respondent 17 (R.S.) warned. In conclusion, this study proves that social media reading habits are not simply good or bad. It all depends on the student's self-discipline. As a helper tool, social media is a good bridge to learn casual words and get quick ideas. However, it becomes a dangerous liability if it replaces deep reading completely. Without conscious practice reading long, linear texts, EFL students will blunt their analytical minds and struggle to survive the reading demands of higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that social media reading habits have both good and bad impacts on EFL university students' academic reading skills. On the positive side, social media acts as a helpful "bridge" or tool to start learning. Because content on social media is short, colorful, and interactive, students find it fun and easy to understand. It helps students find new everyday English vocabulary and reduces their stress when facing hard topics in class. By reading short summaries or educational posts on screen, students can get a general idea about a topic before they read the actual, complicated lecture materials.

First, for EFL university students, it is highly recommended to cultivate strong metacognitive awareness and self-regulation when navigating digital media. Students must consciously separate their digital scanning habits from their academic study sessions, ensuring that micro-content is treated strictly as an introductory supplement rather than a substitute for primary literature. Second, for EFL educators and university lecturers, there is an essential need to adapt pedagogical designs to address the changing cognitive profiles of digital-native students. Faculty members are encouraged to incorporate guided reading frameworks and critical reading workshops directly into the syllabus, explicitly teaching students how to move past superficial skimming and analyze complex methodologies or structural arguments systematically.

On the negative side, reading too many short texts on social media harms students' deep reading focus. Because students are used to fast scrolling on Instagram or TikTok, their brains become impatient. When they have to read long and serious scientific papers, they quickly feel tired, dizzy, or bored. This problem makes students develop a bad reading habit called shallow skimming. Instead of reading a research paper carefully to understand the whole argument, students often just read the abstract and skip the rest of the text. Furthermore, because their focus is weak, students become too lazy to read by themselves and depend too much on AI tools to summarize their readings. In short, while social media helps students find quick info and casual words, it makes them lose the deep concentration and sharp thinking needed for university study.

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