

**DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES AND ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES AS FACTORS INFLUENCING THE READING HABITS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS**

BY

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*The paper examined the factors influencing the reading habits of university students by leveraging on demographic variables and academic disciplines. The paper gave an overview from extant literature that showed that writing apprehension, anxiety, problems of critiquing, poor study habits, indulgence and poor reading comprehensions are factors influencing reading habits of university students. The paper is conscious of the ways which issues around university students literacy is treated with caution, it is worrisome that reading rates is generally dropping. The assumptions that student are well informed before coming to read a particular course is then questioned because students come to class not fully prepared to participate. Other activities take up university students' time such as mobile phones, internet, listening to music, watching entertainments at the cost of studying. University students are encouraged to prioritise their efforts to studying to overcome their demographic weaknesses.*

**Keywords:** *Demographic, Academic discipline, Reading habit and University student*

**Introduction**

University students' literacy includes reading comprehension and attitude toward literacy activities. It was reported by Bray (2004) that these factors fluctuate depending on the background variables considered. The variables comprise age, race, gender, and prior literacy activities, academic level and discipline of the student. Later study showed that an individual's initial experiences in learning to read are influenced by both subsequent accomplishment in reading and the development of reading-related self-perceptions (Chapman & Tunmer, 2005). At the tertiary level, students' levels of reading ability are a composite factor that influences their overall academic experiences. Du Boulay (2009), assessed undergraduates' reading and writing skills and reported that undergraduates often experience problems, developing a critique of an argument presented in scholarly articles or textbooks.

Recently, researchers have examined the reading ability of African-American undergraduate students and the degree that reading ability predicts their achievement levels in research, academic level and courses. In another study, Collins and Onwuegbuzie (2003) found a statistically significant and practically significant relationship between African- American postgraduate students' reading comprehension and reading vocabulary scores, as measured by the NDRT (2003) and their achievement outcomes in education research methodology courses. Reading according to Smith, Goodman and Meredith (1985) is a psycholinguistic process. While reading, the reader's through processes interact with written language. He utilises his store of experience, developed concept, and learn responses to construct a message that the writer has encoded in language. His responses are cued by perceptive selection and systems of signals in language, which he has already basically mastered.

Reading is the oral interpretations of written language. The involvement of an individual reading is essential in the field of learning. Reading itself is a habit that is formed at any stage in life depending on individual circumstances and environment. Every action must have a motive, some people read for academic purpose, while some read for pleasure. Reading has pervaded human life for centuries, but the set of skills required for successful reading changes continuously (Kirsch, et al 2000). Reading is understanding using and reflecting on writing texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential and to participate in society. Reading is accorded every seriousness when it comes to academic. He who desires to involve himself in serious academic activities reads and takes up reading as a duty without ceasing to improve his personal values. Undergraduates' personal values is the degree to which they are successful in realising their esteem personal standard, acceptable behaviour expected of literate individuals, skill acquisition and development, employability and income-earning opportunities and the ability to promote environmentally sustainable development.

There is no doubt that Nigeria as a nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can make a profound headway to reading habits, values system and techno-scientific advancement. Unoh (1976) has rightly pointed out that reading is an indispensable tool of learning in various hierarchy of modern educational system. Reading has a place in general development of man and his society. Holt (1998) remarks that a situation where few people read can pose serious problems to a nation in the future. Reading is essential to full participation of undergraduates in modern society. It adds values to life, provides access to resources, empowers and emancipates students in the university (Sisulus, 2004). Reading sharpens the mind, makes one reason rationally and objectively as well as projects greatness in life. That is why scholastic incorporation describes readers as leaders (Gbadamosi, 2007).

Reading habit refers to the behaviour which expresses the likeness of reading of individual types of reading and tastes of reading (Sangkaeo, 2009). It is a pattern with which an individual organises his or her reading. Similarly, Shen (2006) identifies reading habits, as how often, how much, and what students read. Researchers in the past decade have devoted efforts to examining learners' reading habits (e.g. Mokhtari & Sheorey, 2004). With their endeavours, these researchers have discovered that reading habits are associated with students' gender, age, educational background, academic performance and professional growth. There is little knowledge about the everyday reading practices of tertiary education students and how these practices affect their academic achievement. Everyday reading consists of individuals' reading activities for a variety of purposes, such as for relaxation or information. Previous research has documented that, from teenage level through adulthood, reading becomes a major component of studying, and much information learned through studying is initially acquired through reading. A good reading habit is necessary for a healthy intellectual growth and plays a very crucial role in enabling a person to achieve practical efficiency. Furthermore, an individual's interests are determined to a considerable extent by the amount he will read and the intensity with which he will pursue his reading activity. By reading books, one gets confirmation or rejection of one's own ideas, which makes one think more critically about right and wrong in the society. Reading provides people with a sense of values, which enable them gradually to develop the greatest of all virtues, that is the ability to understand rather than condemn. Books can also be very comforting, especially at times when one doubts one's self and one's beliefs.

On the surface, the 'reading problem' is a mismatch between university students' reading ability and the difficult level of their textbooks and other readings. Reading achievement of university freshmen has been declining since 1965, while university textbooks have become more difficult to read. Second, books are often used for purposes for which they were never intended. Reference books are often put into the hands of disciplinary novices as primary course teaching and learning tools. Doing so ignores the fact that these books are designed for highly specialized and skilled audiences (Bean, 2006; Leamson, 2009; Maleki & Heerman, 2002). In assessing the course, it is desirable to focus attention on the meaning of "required reading." Presumably, the term indicates that the reading contains information essential to achieving the course's educational outcomes. The inference is that students must read every "required" item in order to achieve an acceptable level of success. Research on students'

reading compliance demonstrates that "required reading" is not an accurate predictor of course grades. Nist and Kirby (2009) wrote that documented reading assignment compliance rates among university students (20 to 30%) "Could be partly due to the fact that students quickly discovered that they did not need to read and study their texts in order to do well in the class. Perhaps attending class and studying lecture notes were sufficient for acceptable performance". A common problem is that instructors tend to lump all course-linked reading assignments under the "required" heading, regardless of how central the reading assignment is to course success. This presents students with several choices about time management and calculated investment of their effort. Undergraduate and graduate students can expect a cumulative course reading load that is equal to or greater than the hours unencumbered by class meetings, recommended sleep patterns, and meals (Lang & Gore, 2008).

### **Student Reading Habits**

Research has treaded softly around issues of reading for university students. A large amount of research on university readers has not been conducted. However, much research has been collected on university students' recollections of early reading experiences (Fowler, 2003). Studies that have been made show that university students' inadequate reading and study skills have existed since the 19th century, not only in public universities, but also in the nation's most prestigious institutions (Bichy, 2003). Over seventy-five years ago, Jenkins lumped readers into three categories: the sponge reader who absorbs material, the sieve reader who reads best sellers, and the duck-back reader who reads newspapers and magazines to keep busy (1928). During the 1970s and 1980s, studies indicated that reading rates dropped (Kingston, 1986). The familiar refrain was, this generation does not read. They are strangers to points of reference and underlying cadences that govern the development of written English. They cannot write because they do not read (Atlas, 1990). In a survey designed to observe the actual study habits of university students, it was determined that even students who were succeeding at a highly competitive major university benefited from efficient study strategies. When average and advanced students enter university from high school, they encounter learning contexts previously unknown to them, and for which they have no experience or training (Bichy, 2003).

Professors make assumptions about students' reading habits before coming to decisions about their reading requirements for a particular course or topic. These assumptions relate to the speed and efficacy of reading together with the recognition and appreciation of the significance of materials to be read. University students are expected to be efficient and proficient readers. Many university courses require students to read 100-150 pages of material per week. When this is multiplied by 4 or 5 courses per semester it equates to 400 or more pages per week. Time management is crucial to keeping up on reading assignments. Students must have good organization skills for university. If they are disorganized, they will quickly find themselves falling behind in assignments, due dates and reading (Glencoe, 2004). A common observation among university instructors is that their students do not seem particularly motivated to read the assigned readings, especially on a regular basis. Students come to class unprepared and worse yet many save the readings until the night before the exam. This problem is universal enough that it tends to be a source of irritation and frustration for many university professors (Instructional Consulting, 2002).

Many university students today are not strong readers; they regularly report that they don't like to read. If their peers report reading in a given course isn't all that essential, students are only too ready to read half-heartedly or not at all. In fact, students and faculty may have different opinions as to the value and necessity of reading textbooks. In one eight year old study, 55 percent of the faculty considered textbooks very important compared to 49 percent of university students (Pringle, 2006). If students see textbooks as less important for success in courses than their professors do, this assumption about the value of the textbook can translate into lax reading habits. The bottom line is that a significant number of students show up for class not having done the reading and are therefore not fully prepared to participate in class activities that presume knowledge of textbook content. Unfortunately, it's a bottom line many professors have experienced, and one that many have come to accept.

Nevertheless, 86 percent of university courses require a textbook, 26 percent require some materials in electronic format, and 36 percent require a course pack, reader or customized material. The percentage of university courses that require a textbook has dropped 8 percent since 2009 when 94 percent required a textbook and 9 percent since 1998 when 95 percent required a textbook. However, a required textbook is not a guarantee that a textbook will be purchased. Students purchase 85 percent of their required texts, down from 91 percent in 2009 and 94 percent in 1998. Just over half (55 percent) purchase all of their required course material (National Association of University Stores, 2004). The trend toward not purchasing materials is a concern when 72 percent of university courses use textbooks in reading assignments, and 70 percent base examinations on information found in textbooks (National Association of University Stores, 2002). Students complain about the prices and try to get through the semester without buying books. Textbook prices have gone up 26 percent since 2000 and 56 percent in the last decade. However, as a group, students pay more for their cell phone calls than for textbooks (Rosenberg, 2004). Reading is essential to academic success and to intellectual growth. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) surveyed 17,000 individuals and discovered that in 1982 57 percent of adult Americans read literature and in 2004 the figure has fallen to 46.7 percent.

#### **Reading and Cumulative Grade Point Average**

The rate of decline for the youngest adults, those aged 18 to 24, was 55 percent greater than that of the total adult population. The NEA study did not include nonfiction or university student reading, however, it is believed that decline of reading threatens not only America's arts heritage but its economic position in the world as well. Reading requires sustained focused attention, working with the powers of memory and imagination. Economic success depends on innovation and creativity which comes from reading. Television, video games, and even the internet are more passive than reading. Reading forces the reader to think; watching allows escape. University students nowadays do not have the traditional sense of the role that reading plays in the development of one's life (NEA, 2004). Many believe that recreational reading or reading for pleasure has a relationship with academic success. Reading is the cornerstone for success, not just in school but throughout life. A study conducted in 2009 looked for evidence to support this assumption and found a significant correlation between recreational reading and cumulative grade point average.

The study found that 63 percent of the students spent less than two hours per week reading for pleasure, but did not find differences between males and females or student classification. Seniors did not spend more time reading for pleasure than first year students. Therefore, it was concluded that reading habits are already well established by the time students enters university. So the experience of being in university does not influence how much time will be spent on reading recreationally. In fact, recreational reading habits are acquired early in an individuals' school life, probably in elementary school. Considering what university students read for recreation, 75 percent read magazines, 65 percent read letters, e-mails and chat room correspondence, 54 percent read newspapers, 46 percent read novels, 20 read nonfiction, and 1 percent read comic books frequently (Gallik, 2009).

According to a survey to determine internet use, 95 percent of university students use the internet at least once a week. A total of 22.5 percent indicate that they believe that the internet is the most effective way to reach a university students The survey results also found that 70 percent of the students surveyed said that search engines are their primary method of doing research online (Shay, 2000). Undergraduate students on the average send 3.6 e-mails and receive 10.5 e-mails daily (Noll, 2001). Students spend far less time on the Internet than watching television or listening to the radio but they spend more time on the Internet than reading magazines and newspapers (Hintze & Lehnus 1998). One explanation as to why students do not spend time reading is that they have too many additional responsibilities that prevent them from spending this time. Research has found the opposite to be true. Students have tremendous leeway in their leisure activities, and do have sufficient time available to study.

The British Broadcasting Corporation News (2005) reported that access to books in Africa is often difficult and expensive and only a few countries like Kenya, South Africa and Nigeria have a significant book trade. Thus, if a large number of people rarely read, either because they lack the skill, not motivated, high cost of books or simply because it is not yet examination period, it will surely pose serious problems in the future because reading adds quality to life and provides access to culture and cultural heritage (Holte, 1998). It helps to uncover the understanding of somebody else's wisdom- wisdom that may have taken a lifetime to regurgitate in the pages (Rijal, 2005). Moreover, to ensure that reading thrives among university undergraduates and in Africa bearing in mind that Africa is a predominantly oral society, Makenzi (2004) posits that concerted efforts would be required to improve the social and reading infrastructure, promote reading across the school curriculum and develop reading extension services. In addition, lecturers should make use of modern teaching technology and give out continuous assignments that involve students making use of the library to encourage undergraduate reading.

Also in the psycholinguistic scientific field, Gardner & Smith (2007) have produced a body of research that suggests that some students may not enjoy reading because of a basic psychological problem: the lack of the ability to take the perspective of another person, which can affect their enjoyment of literature and their ability to understand what they have read. This relationship between the reader and the text has also been studied by Sager (2009), who states that reading demands a quality of engagement beyond the application of skills and processing of text and that students need not only to decode the text but also to think through it and experience it, anticipating, questioning, appreciating, puzzling over, confirming, being curious about, imagining. College reading comprehension programmes in some universities have also been the basis for the elaboration and publication of study guides specially directed to students. In McWhorter's reading and study guide (2001) the author emphasizes the importance of critical thinking approaches to reading and of study as an active learning process. The author presents the basic techniques for college success, including active reading and note taking, offering strategies for strengthening literal and critical comprehension, improving vocabulary skills and developing reading flexibility, using methods for reading and learning from textbook assignments and for taking exams. Wong (2000), Pauk (2001) and Hopper (2001) developed guides for students where we can find exercises and explanations on particular techniques for taking useful notes, reading in an effective way and retaining a textbook assignment.

In fact, there are numerous studies about reading and study strategies of higher education students and many have focused, using different approaches and methodologies, precisely on many Reading/Comprehension specific strategies as the visualization of content in a text, main idea identification, vocabulary assimilation, key words detection, context usage, the use of mnemonics for memorization and highlighting, the use of dictionaries and grammars, and so forth. Some of these studies found that the most successful individuals understand and use a variety of active study strategies to control and monitor their learning (Garner, 2007; Yaworski, 2008), applying particular strategies only when appropriate and that these students can also explain the strategies they use and can describe whether or not particular strategies prove to be useful in particular situations (Ruzic, 2001). The theoretical perspective of this study therefore is that students will become active, interested readers if they develop intrinsic motivations such as curiosity, aesthetic enjoyment, and challenge. Equally important to active reading is the development of the cognitive strategies associated with searching for information, comprehending literary works, and communicating to others in writing. *The Challenges of Developing Good Reading Interests and Habits in Nigeria* The problem of illiteracy is still pervasive in Nigeria, as it is in other Third world countries; one of the main factors militating against reading habit formation and sustenance in Nigeria. Okekwe (2006) reported the outcomes of The Lumina Foundation, some of which include certain indicators on the appalling level of literacy in the country: Literates 19%; Semi-literates 14% and Illiterates 67%. Some of the reasons for the persistent

illiteracy rate; especially from the social and economic perspectives as revealed by the study include the followings:

1. Wealth is priority
2. Poverty level is high
3. Alternative ways of getting rich abound
4. Education is unfortunately devalued by the state and the society. For example, the Universities are not well funded, teachers are not well remunerated. Both teachers and students keep protesting the situation, which disrupts the academic system
5. Getting educated is made unattractive and is no longer a priority because of unemployment of graduates
6. Moral values are low.
7. Insensitivity to knowledge acquisition.

This probably explains why only a few people engage in reading while this few do not have healthy reading habits as depicted by the reading patterns of Nigerians with emphasis in the following areas: reading soft sells for vanity and gossip 22%; reading newspapers for information 13%; not reading due to low buying power 41%; reading for utilitarian purpose 22% and reading for leisure 2%. Thus, most Nigerians are associated with reading for utilitarian purpose, have aversion for sustained reading; lack the habit of reading for leisure and pleasure, live under hostile economic constraints of underdevelopment; contend with limited relaxation time and extended family pressure as well as wrong perception of books and their importance.

Cabral (2002) studied the main Reading/Comprehension strategies applied by higher education first-year students during their daily learning academic tasks and their major difficulties in this field. The research process consists in a measuring frequency Likert scale questionnaire completed by 1,000 students from four of the main Portuguese state universities from science and engineering courses. Reading/Comprehension level groups were formed according to the competence and abilities of the students. Results indicate that the majority of the students had an intermediate level of proficiency in this field even as they tend to use general strategies connected with their specific academic tasks and study habits. However, they tend to avoid the usage of strategies that involve interaction with teachers and more specific strategies that may control/determine their academic writing tasks and that imply a higher scope of proficiency. Smith (1992) examined the everyday reading activities and reading attitudes of gifted and non-gifted high school students. The results indicated several differences in reading activities between the two groups pertaining to types of materials read and amount of time-spent reading. Takase (2007) investigates factors motivating Japanese high school students to read English extensively, assessing 219 female high school students who participated in an extensive reading program for one academic year. The results showed that the two most influential factors were students' intrinsic motivation for first language (L1) reading and second language (L2) reading.

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