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CHANGES IN READING HABITS AMONG YOUNG STUDENTS

Annotation: the ways people engage with reading have undergone profound transformations over the last few decades. From traditional print media to digital platforms, these shifts have affected how individuals absorb, interpret, and retain information. Key drivers of change include technological innovation, the rise of multitasking behaviors, and the evolving preferences of younger generations. This article delves into these changes, the cognitive impacts of digital reading, and the future implications for education and literacy.

Keywords: reading habits, digital reading, print books, attention span, screen reading, education, libraries, cognitive changes.

Reading, as a fundamental tool for knowledge acquisition, has undergone profound transformations over centuries. Historically, the process of reading was tied to physical formats—books, newspapers, and handwritten manuscripts. It was characterized by deep engagement, extended focus, and a linear approach to content. The advent of technological innovation, however, has significantly reshaped these habits, introducing dynamic ways of consuming information that prioritize speed, accessibility, and convenience. These changes are not merely about the medium but also about the cognitive and cultural shifts in how people interact with text. The transition from traditional to digital reading habits highlights the interplay between technology and human behavior. While digital platforms have democratized access to information, they have also fragmented reading behaviors, raising questions about attention spans, comprehension, and the cultural value of books. This shift is particularly evident among younger generations, who navigate a world of hyperconnectivity and screen-based learning. However, it is important to understand these changes in the context of historical shifts, such as the transition from oral traditions to written text and from manuscripts to print books.

This introduction explores the factors driving changes in reading habits, the challenges posed by digital media, and the implications for education, culture, and personal growth. By examining these shifts, we can better understand the evolving relationship between readers and the written word.

For much of history, reading was a solitary, immersive activity. Books and manuscripts were rare and valued commodities, and their content required careful, sustained attention. This linear mode of reading fostered deep comprehension and critical thinking. The printing press revolutionized access to books, making reading more widespread and contributing to the spread of literacy and knowledge across Europe and beyond. However, even with the mass production of books, the act of reading remained largely unchanged for centuries—linear, focused, and requiring physical interaction with text. Libraries became central hubs for this engagement, serving as places where individuals could study and reflect without distractions.

The rise of digital technology in the late 20th and early 21st centuries disrupted traditional reading practices. E-books, online articles, and multimedia content have made reading more flexible and convenient but have also introduced challenges. Digital platforms like Kindle, Google Books, and online academic journals have democratized access to information. Readers can now access vast libraries of content instantly, often at little or no cost. Audiobooks and podcasts further expand the definition of reading by allowing individuals to consume content while multitasking.

Digital reading is characterized by behaviors like skimming, scanning, and multitasking. Unlike traditional reading, which requires extended focus, digital readers often interact with content in short bursts, jumping between hyperlinks and prioritizing efficiency over depth. Studies have shown that this fragmentation can lead to reduced comprehension and retention, particularly for complex or abstract material.

Reading on screens promotes "network thinking," where readers navigate information non-linearly. This approach is effective for quick information retrieval but may hinder deep understanding and critical analysis. Researchers argue that this shift in cognitive processing reflects broader changes in how the brain adapts to technology.

Younger generations, often referred to as digital natives, have grown up with technology as an integral part of their lives. While they are adept at navigating digital tools, studies suggest that many still prefer physical books for leisure reading. This preference may be attributed to the tactile and immersive qualities of print, which offer a break from the distractions of screens.

Conversely, older generations, who were introduced to digital reading later in life, may experience greater resistance to these changes. Libraries, educational institutions, and publishers must navigate these generational differences, balancing traditional and digital formats to meet diverse needs.

Despite its benefits, digital reading has faced criticism for its impact on attention, comprehension, and the overall reading experience. Deep reading, which involves immersive engagement with complex texts, is becoming less common in the digital age. Scholars argue that the constant distractions of digital devices make it difficult to sustain focus, resulting in a decline in critical thinking and analytical skills.

Libraries have adapted to these changes by incorporating digital resources and creating hybrid spaces that support both traditional and digital reading. However, educators report that students often struggle with extensive research tasks, relying on quick searches rather than thorough exploration. This trend underscores the need for teaching digital literacy skills that balance efficiency with comprehension.

While digital reading is often promoted as eco-friendly, its environmental impact is complex. The production and disposal of electronic devices contribute to e-waste, challenging the perception that digital formats are inherently sustainable. The transformation of reading habits has far-reaching implications for education, culture, and personal development. As reading extends beyond traditional text to include multimedia and interactive content, the definition of literacy is evolving. Digital literacy, which encompasses the ability to navigate and critically evaluate online information, is becoming a fundamental skill in the modern world.

Educational institutions must adapt to these changes by integrating digital tools while preserving the value of deep, reflective reading. Blended learning approaches, which combine traditional and digital methods, can help achieve this balance. Individuals must navigate the benefits and challenges of digital reading by developing habits that support cognitive health. Setting aside time for screen-free reading, engaging with diverse formats, and prioritizing quality over quantity are essential strategies for fostering meaningful reading experiences.

The evolution of reading habits marks a profound shift in how individuals interact with and consume information in the 21st century. The transition from print to digital formats has offered unprecedented access, convenience, and portability, allowing readers to engage with texts anytime and anywhere. E-books, online articles, and multimedia content have become integral to modern reading practices, reshaping not only individual preferences but also societal norms. However, these advancements come with notable challenges, including the decline of deep, linear reading and the rise of superficial engagement with text. The fast-paced nature of digital reading has implications for comprehension, memory, and cognitive skills, particularly among younger generations accustomed to screen-based content.

At the same time, traditional reading practices continue to hold value. The tactile experience of physical books, coupled with their ability to foster focused and immersive reading, remains a critical part of many people's lives. Fiction, in particular, stands out as a bridge between the old and new, attracting both digital and print readers with its timeless ability to tell compelling stories.

The key to addressing these shifts lies in achieving a balance. Educational institutions, libraries, and publishers must adapt to these changes by encouraging a hybrid approach to reading. This includes integrating digital literacy into educational curricula, promoting critical thinking skills, and providing access to both digital and print resources. Moreover, fostering habits that encourage intentional, deep engagement with texts—regardless of format—will be essential in preserving the intellectual and cultural benefits of reading.

Ultimately, as society continues to navigate this transformation, the goal should be to leverage the advantages of digital tools while preserving the depth and richness of traditional reading practices. By doing so, we can ensure that the act of reading continues to enrich minds, foster creativity, and sustain the cultural fabric of future generations.

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