

#PERSPECTIVE

How reels and shorts contribute to a **LACK OF READING**

Growing up, reading was my absolute favourite pastime. Three decades ago, my friends, cousins, and the other children I knew cherished reading as a leisurely activity. We borrowed books from each other and gave books as birthday presents. I would often see my grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles reading during their free time, too. Many homes subscribed to two daily newspapers and one or two magazines. In short, reading for enjoyment was an integral part of our daily lives.

Was it all because entertainment was not available 24/7 and thus, we had to find ways to keep ourselves entertained? Perhaps. I grew up in the '80s and '90s, and I'm grateful that I did not have to deal with the digital clutter of today while growing up. The absence of 24/7 TV programmes and the internet helped me tremendously in fostering a lifelong love for books. I must also thank my mother for not subscribing to satellite TV until I finished my O' Levels. Our home was perhaps the only one in our extended family that did not have "dish channels" until 1999. By the time we had satellite TV at home, I had already lost my interest in television. Luckily, my love for leisure reading was still going strong.

A recent study conducted by researchers at the University of Florida and University College London and published in the journal *iScience* showed that between 2003 and 2023, the proportion of Americans reading for pleasure daily declined by more than 40 per cent.

The study analysed data from over 236,000 Americans over a period of 20 years. This trend is not unique to the United States, though; if you look around, or ask friends, family, and co-workers, you will see that people read much less than they used to; some do not read at all.

So, why are we reading less?

24/7 access to entertainment

Round-the-clock access to entertainment is certainly part of the story. Once you start watching Reels or Shorts, you know how quickly time passes. Unlike reading, watching short videos does not demand focus or attention. Open eyes and ears are all that you need.

Short-form content is contributing to a decline in our attention spans. A friend of mine, who was an avid reader until her twenties, recently mentioned that even watching movies on Netflix has now become a tedious task for her due to her short attention span. She now struggles to watch a 90-minute film in one sitting and has stopped reading for enjoyment altogether.

This shift in my friend's ability to focus is relatively recent, and she is not the only person with a shorter attention span; more and more of us now have difficulty concentrating on one task for extended periods. Anything that is slower-paced or demands undivided attention quickly becomes boring.

We now watch less TV and more YouTube videos. Unlike TV shows, we can fast-forward YouTube videos and watch them at our convenience from anywhere in the world. Among these YouTube videos, the short-format videos are more popular, reflecting our declining attention span.

Rabeya A, a Bangladeshi expat and an HR professional based in Sydney, Australia, shared that, "I can no longer watch YouTube videos that are longer than ten minutes. If a video is longer than that, I'll just fast-forward it unless it's an intriguing podcast or something similar."

When we asked her about her television-viewing habit, she said, "At the end of the day, if I ever sit down to watch TV, I do not watch anything in particular. Watching an entire show is too much for my brain to handle these

days. I keep switching channels until I am finally ready to fall asleep."

A lack of work-life balance

In today's fast-paced, digitised world, where we are running after success non-stop, we find ourselves expending all our energy to climb the 'intangible' ladder of accomplishment. We have become slaves to our workplaces, sacrificing our personal lives and well-being in the name of professional advancement. We have also become slaves to our phones. Just imagine for a second how you react when you cannot find your cell phone!

When we return home from work, we are too exhausted to leaf through the pages of a book.

Our minds seek quick, momentary pleasure, and the perfect source of that sort of pleasure lies in scrolling Facebook newsfeed, Reels, and Shorts. We mindlessly scroll, swipe, and slide through our feeds, oblivious to how these actions are harming our brains.

Reading books is a complex yet rewarding task. However, once you get used to receiving momentary pleasure and, in the process, suffer from a short attention span, it becomes difficult to read books solely for pleasure because the enjoyment derived from reading follows a slow process. There is no such thing as a momentary dopamine rush when it comes to reading, because reading requires concentration and undivided attention.

Reading prevents cognitive decline

The benefits of pleasure are reading for so many!

However, one particular benefit of reading that I find particularly important to focus on in today's world is that reading prevents long-term decline in cognitive functions.

People are living longer than before, thanks to medical advancements. However, I am noticing how senior members of my own family are beginning to suffer from memory loss, poor judgment, difficulty making decisions, trouble finding the right words, and losing their train of thought.

Studies have consistently linked frequent reading activities to a reduced risk of cognitive decline in older adults. Therefore, while medications can extend our physical lives, it is upon us to nurture our brains and minds to enjoy this extended life to the fullest.

My neighbours are a 74-year-old couple who have chosen travelling as their passion after retirement. On most days when Bill and Alison are in town, I catch a glimpse of them reading in their backyard, on the porch, or in their living room. Both husband and wife are avid readers and when I converse with them, I am amazed at how sharp their minds are, even at 74. They do not sound or act like typical 74-year-olds; they exercise, eat healthy, drive, remember little details, joke, volunteer, garden, rake leaves in autumn afternoons, and even babysit their grandchildren. They are an inspiration to me.

Among other things, people like Bill and Alison have slowed down their old-age cognitive decline through regular and engaged reading. Recreational reading alone will not prevent or slow down mental decline (eating healthy, sleeping well, and exercising are also important), but it will help you tremendously in preserving your brain health in old age.

My friends and family, who are in their thirties and forties, have started complaining about brain fog. They are too young to experience such a decline in cognitive functions! While there is no quick solution to these problems, we can start by saying 'no' to excessive screen time and 'yes' to exercising, sleeping well, eating healthy, and of course, indulging in pleasure reading.

**By Wara Karim
Photo:
Collected**

