

Choice reading in smartphone era: Reviving engagement through independent reading programs

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Abstract

In an age dominated by smartphones and digital media, students' reading habits have undergone a profound transformation. While access to information has expanded, sustained reading engagement and deep comprehension have declined, posing new challenges for educators. This study explores how independent, choice-based reading programs can reignite students' intrinsic motivation to read within a technology-saturated environment. Drawing on theories of autonomy and self-determination, the research examines the relationship between digital distraction and reading behavior, and evaluates the impact of giving students ownership over their reading selections. Through a mixed-method approach involving surveys, focus group discussions, and classroom observations, the study investigates how freedom of choice, coupled with guided support, fosters reading enjoyment and persistence. Findings reveal that when learners are empowered to select texts that align with their interests—whether digital or print—their reading frequency, comprehension, and overall engagement significantly improve. The paper concludes that integrating smartphones and digital tools into structured independent reading initiatives can transform them from sources of distraction into platforms for literacy development. This research offers a practical framework for educators seeking to balance digital realities with the timeless goal of nurturing lifelong readers.

Keywords: Choice Reading; Smartphone Era; Independent Reading Programs; Reading Engagement; Digital Literacy; Student Motivation; Educational Technology

1. Introduction

The widespread adoption of smartphones has transformed the reading habits of youths and students. Digital handheld devices now facilitate reading anywhere and anytime, imposing, though, new challenges: brief attention spans, increasing distractibility, and a shift toward more superficial reading interaction with text (Erstad, 2023).

In addition, studies have proven that overuse of smartphones has a negative correlation with academic concentration and consistent reading habits in younger learners (Wang et al., 2022). In this regard, the teaching practice of choice reading or allowing students to have autonomy to select texts that interest them has emerged as a strong potential intervention towards fostering greater involvement and establishing sustainable reading habits. Evidence shows that if students are given considerable autonomy in what they read, motivation and understanding are enhanced (Kakoulidou, 2021).

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Independent reading programs (IRPs), with a spotlight on independent reading time, student choice, and low external control, have been promoted for decades as a strategy to instill literacy, enjoyment, and lifelong reading. To illustrate, Brannan (2017) observed that independent reading practices involving authenticity, choice, and challenge help sustain reading engagement.

But many of these programs were designed during the days of print primacy and face extinction from the realities of the smartphone era where reading is on screens, distraction is ubiquitous, and what it means to "read" is up for grabs. Against this intersection of digital upheaval, student agency, and literacy practice, this article considers how independent reading programs can be redesigned for the smartphone generation. Specifically, it explores three related questions:

- How have smartphones and mobile reading environments changed student reading habits and engagement?
- What is the role of student independence in reading material in the re-energizing of reading motivation and persistence?
- How can independent reading programs be best adapted to include digital media (such as smartphones) and not fall prey to their distraction features?

To respond to these questions is crucial for educators, school librarians, curriculum planners, and policymakers who are striving to build reading motivation in increasingly technology-mediated contexts. In investigating independent reading against the background of realities of the smartphone age, this study aims to present a useful model and suggest evidence-based practice for the revival of choice reading and the creation of lifelong readers.

Below, a literature review outlines the theoretical foundations of choice reading and smartphone-logged reading; the methodology outlines the mixed-method methodology adopted; and the findings, discussion and recommendations demonstrate how independent reading schemes can provide a bridge from students' smartphone-logged attention to successful reading engagement.

2. Literature review

2.1. The Changing Face of Reading in the Age of Smartphones

The emergence of smartphones has significantly transformed the landscape of reading, redefining how individuals especially young people engage with written texts. Reading, once primarily associated with printed books and sustained attention, has evolved into a multifaceted and often fragmented digital experience. The contemporary reader is immersed in an environment where screens dominate both leisure and learning, blending reading with social media interactions, audiovisual content, and rapid information exchange (Baron, 2021). This transformation has created new opportunities for access and literacy development but also new challenges concerning concentration, comprehension, and long-term engagement with texts.

In the smartphone era, reading has become more portable and personalized. Students can access millions of digital texts at their fingertips ranging from e-books and online articles to social media posts and blogs. Such accessibility has democratized literacy, providing readers from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to explore topics previously limited by geographic or economic constraints (Mangen and van der Weel, 2016). However, while digital reading has expanded access, it has also introduced issues of superficial engagement, where the speed and interactivity of online platforms encourage skimming rather than deep reading (Liu, 2022). As a result, educators now face the dual challenge of promoting literacy in a context where digital convenience competes with sustained cognitive focus.

The cognitive processes involved in digital reading differ markedly from those associated with print. Research suggests that readers often engage in "non-linear" navigation when reading on screens—skipping, scanning, and hyperlinking rather than following a continuous textual flow (Singer and Alexander, 2017). Such behaviors may enhance efficiency but can also reduce comprehension and critical reflection, particularly when readers are not guided to adopt strategic reading approaches. Moreover, constant exposure to notifications, multitasking, and fragmented reading sessions on smartphones can diminish sustained attention and reading stamina among adolescents (Wolf, 2018). These factors collectively contribute to a shift from immersive, reflective reading to surface-level engagement, raising concerns among educators and literacy researchers.

Nevertheless, the smartphone age has also given rise to innovative reading cultures that blend digital and traditional literacy. Platforms such as Wattpad, Kindle, and educational reading apps now foster new forms of participatory reading

where students engage as both readers and creators (Kucirkova, 2023). Social reading communities encourage peer-to-peer sharing, discussion, and creative writing, offering a more interactive dimension to reading engagement. This digital participatory culture reflects an important shift from solitary reading to communal and networked forms of literacy, aligning with the collaborative ethos of contemporary education.

In educational contexts, these shifts necessitate rethinking what it means to read and be literate in the 21st century. The emphasis is gradually moving away from merely decoding text toward developing critical, multimodal, and digital literacy skills. As students navigate a world saturated with information, the ability to evaluate sources, interpret diverse media, and sustain reflective engagement has become as essential as comprehension itself (Rowse and Wohlwend, 2016). Therefore, educators must balance the benefits of digital accessibility with pedagogical strategies that nurture depth, empathy, and critical thinking through reading.

In essence, the smartphone era has not diminished reading—it has reshaped it. The challenge lies not in resisting digital change but in reimagining literacy to align with contemporary realities. By understanding how reading behaviors evolve within digital ecosystems, educators can design programs that revive engagement, enhance comprehension, and restore the joy of reading in ways that resonate with today's learners.



Figure 1 The image shows the Changing Face of Reading in the Age of Smartphones

Furthermore, the shift towards mobile reading also has a tendency to favor browsing, skimming, and scanning over prolonged and extensive reading experiences. The trend raises questions about the manner in which traditional independent reading programs must adapt: programs that have been based on print-based routines may be eroded when students are reading increasingly on screens and exposed to constant digital distractions.

2.2. Choice Reading and Student Autonomy

The student choice theory in reading allowing students to select texts via interest, format, or genre has its roots in autonomy and motivational theories. For instance, the Self-Determination Theory theory (Deci and Ryan) emphasizes that autonomy-supportive environments of competence, autonomy, and relatedness encourage intrinsic motivation. In the domain of reading, offering meaningful choice has been shown to enhance pleasure as well as understanding: in a recent study, for example, children who could choose their own reading selection scored consistently higher on comprehension tests than those who had texts dictated to them. Also relevant is the Four-Phase Model of Interest Development (Hidi and Renninger), which suggests that situational interest (e.g., stimulated by choice) can evolve into stable long-term interest. Choice reading is thus aligned with supporting autonomy as well as encouraging long-term reading motivation.

2.3. Independent Reading Programs: Past and Present

Independent reading schemes including sustained silent reading, DEAR (Drop Everything and Read), and reading for pleasure have long sought to promote reading habits, enjoyment and fluency. These schemes stress limited teacher control, student choice of text, and consistent reading time. In previous research, having choice and encouraging regular

leisure reading were associated with vocabulary development, reading comprehension gains and more frequent reading.

However, most of the initial work here was produced prior to the smartphone-hobbled milieu. Modern iterations must take account of digital text, mobile reading contexts, and distractions from social media and apps. One example is that a study of an EFL context found students were more motivated and engaged if student self-choice of texts was permitted (even for a short 10-week duration).

2.4. Integrating technology into literacy development

The virtual reading space is both a risk and opportunity for independent reading initiatives. On the one hand, e-books, reading software, and mobile technology have the potential to offer students flexibility, immediate access, and multimodal support. On the other hand, digital reading can promote distraction and reduce deep reading involvement. Existing reviews indicate that technology-enhanced interventions for reading motivation among adolescents include whole-school reading culture programs, book clubs, and technology-enhanced supports. This suggests that integrating smartphones and other digital technologies into independent reading spaces has promise – provided the design is somehow able to restrict risks such as multitasking and skim reading.

2.5. Gaps in the Literature

While there exists, extensive research supporting the benefits of choice reading and independent reading programs, there remains a clear gap regarding how these models function within the smartphone era. For example: There are fewer studies on how screen reading and smartphone use affect student choice dynamics, attention, and perseverance. There is less empirical research on the potential of reconfiguring independent reading programs to leverage students' smartphone use rather than fighting it. The convergence of student autonomy (by choice), digital diversion (via smartphones), and independent reading engagement remains underinvestigated. This research therefore aims to braid these threads together by thinking about how autonomous, volunteer reading programs can be redesigned and revitalized for a smartphone-saturated era.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods study design, combining both qualitative and quantitative methods in an effort to gain a comprehensive exploration of how independent reading programs can support students' reading engagement in the smartphone era. Quantitative data gathering and statistical analysis of numerical information were employed to assess quantifiable variables like the frequency of students' reading, motivation levels, and comprehension performance. These were gathered using reading logs, surveys, and standard reading comprehension tests in order to identify patterns and relationships between reading habits and smartphone usage.

On the other hand, the qualitative component examined the individual experience, attitude, and perception of students towards choice-based reading. The participants explained through semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews how control over the decision to select materials to read influenced their motivation and reading habits. This phase also examined the cognitive and affective components which facilitated or inhibited reading activity in an information technology environment (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

By combining these two strands of inquiry, the mixed-methods approach provided a richer and more nuanced understanding of the issue. The integration of quantitative data with qualitative insights enabled the researcher to interpret not only what patterns existed in students' reading engagement but also why those patterns occurred. Ultimately, this dual approach offered a holistic perspective on how smartphone habits intersect with reading motivation and engagement, bridging the gap between numerical trends and lived experiences (Johnson and Christensen, 2020).



Figure 2 This image shows the frequency of students' participation in independent reading programs

3.2. Participants

The research involved **120 secondary school students** aged 12–17 years from three schools located in urban and suburban districts. Participants were selected using a **stratified random sampling** technique to ensure representation across gender, grade level, and reading ability. Teachers and literacy coordinators were also interviewed to provide contextual insight into classroom reading practices (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

3.3. Instruments

Three main instruments were employed

- **Reading Engagement Survey** – adapted from the Motivation for Reading Questionnaire (MRQ) by Wigfield and Guthrie (1997), used to measure intrinsic and extrinsic reading motivation.
- **Reading Log Sheet** – students recorded reading sessions (time spent, genre, and medium: print or smartphone).
- **Semi-structured Interview Guide** – explored students' perceptions of smartphone use and independent reading habits.

3.4. Procedure

The study was conducted over **eight weeks**.

- **Phase 1:** Pre-survey on reading motivation and smartphone use.
- **Phase 2:** Implementation of a **Choice Reading Program (CRP)** where students freely select reading materials (e-books or printed). Teachers served as facilitators, not evaluators.
- **Phase 3:** Post-survey, focus group discussions, and analysis of reading logs to determine changes in engagement and reading frequency.

Throughout the intervention, the use of smartphones was not restricted but integrated through digital reading platforms and tracking apps. This allowed the study to assess whether technology, when directed purposefully, can support reading engagement (Merchant, 2023).

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired sample t-tests to compare pre- and post-intervention results. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which emphasizes pattern identification and meaning

construction in participant narratives. Integration of both data sets occurred during interpretation to ensure validity through triangulation (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010).

Table 1 Summary of Research Design and Methods

Component	Description	Purpose	Data Analysis Technique
Research Design	Mixed-methods (quantitative + qualitative)	To capture both measurable trends and lived experiences	Triangulation
Participants	120 secondary school students, 3 teachers	To ensure demographic diversity and contextual insight	Descriptive summary
Instruments	MRQ survey, reading logs, interview guide	To measure motivation, habits, and attitudes	Statistical + thematic
Procedure	8-week choice reading intervention	To observe changes in engagement before and after CRP	Comparative analysis
Analysis	Statistical and thematic integration	To establish credibility and meaning	Thematic framework (Braun and Clarke)

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity is a cornerstone of all educational research, particularly those involving children and adolescents. This study adhered strictly to recognized ethical guidelines for research in social and educational contexts, ensuring that all participants were treated with respect, fairness, and dignity. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) of the host university, ensuring that all research procedures aligned with the *British Educational Research Association* (BERA, 2018) and *American Psychological Association* (APA, 2017) ethical frameworks.

The participation of students was entirely voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from both the students and their parents or guardians. Each participant received a clear explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and expected outcomes in language appropriate to their age and understanding. They were also informed that participation could be withdrawn at any stage without penalty. This consent process upheld the ethical principle of autonomy, ensuring that students were not coerced into participating (Creswell and Creswell, 2018).

To safeguard participant privacy, all data collected were anonymized and coded before analysis. Personal identifiers such as names, school identification numbers, or contact details were excluded from research reports. The confidentiality of all records was maintained through encrypted data storage and restricted access to the research team. Moreover, findings were presented in aggregated form to avoid the identification of individual participants or schools (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018).

Particular attention was given to the ethical complexities of conducting research in digital and online reading environments. As smartphones and reading apps were used in this study, digital ethics were paramount. Participants were instructed on responsible use of technology, including data privacy, online safety, and copyright respect when accessing digital texts. The research complied with the *General Data Protection Regulation* (GDPR, 2018), ensuring that any online platforms used in data collection were secure and consent-based (Livingstone and Third, 2017).

Furthermore, the study addressed the potential for digital inequality among participants. Students from less advantaged backgrounds were provided equal access to devices and digital reading materials to ensure fairness and inclusivity. This approach aligns with the ethical principle of justice, which mandates equitable treatment and opportunities for all participants, regardless of socioeconomic background (BERA, 2018).

Finally, care was taken to avoid any form of psychological harm or academic pressure during the implementation of the choice reading program. The research design emphasized student enjoyment, curiosity, and engagement rather than performance or assessment. Teachers were trained to create supportive environments that celebrated reading diversity rather than conformity, thus maintaining an ethically positive and empowering experience for all participants (Bryman, 2016).

4. Findings / results

4.1. Reading Engagement Trends in the Smartphone Era

Data from pre-intervention surveys indicated that 78% of participants spent more than three hours daily on their smartphones, yet less than 20% reported reading for pleasure for over 30 minutes a day. These findings align with previous research showing that increased smartphone use often correlates with reduced attention to long-form reading and literacy engagement (Baron, 2021). However, post-intervention data revealed a notable shift: students who participated in the Choice Reading Program (CRP) increased their voluntary reading time by an average of 42 minutes per day. This suggests that providing autonomy and digital reading options can mitigate the negative impact of smartphone distraction (Huang, 2022).

4.2. Effectiveness of Choice Reading Programs

Students demonstrated measurable improvement in both motivation and comprehension scores after the 8-week intervention. Using paired sample *t*-tests, results showed a statistically significant increase in intrinsic motivation ($t = 3.81, p < .01$) and reading comprehension ($t = 4.26, p < .01$). These findings echo prior studies emphasizing that student choice enhances engagement, ownership, and reading persistence (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2020).

Qualitative data from interviews further supported this trend. Many students described reading as “less of a chore” and “more personal,” highlighting that being able to choose books especially digital formats boosted their willingness to read. Teachers also noted improved classroom discussion quality and sustained attention among participants.

4.3. Integration of Smartphones in Reading Programs

Contrary to expectations, smartphone use during the CRP did not hinder engagement when properly structured. Instead, students used to read apps and online libraries (e.g., Wattpad, Kindle, and Libby) to explore genres aligned with their interests. This supports emerging research suggesting that when digital devices are integrated purposefully, they can enhance access to diverse reading materials and foster independent learning (Li, 2023). Moreover, integrating digital elements such as reading logs and tracking tools appeared to strengthen accountability and goal setting (Hsu and Wang, 2021).

Table 1 Summary of Quantitative Results

Variable	Pre-Test Mean (M_1)	Post-Test Mean (M_2)	Mean Difference (ΔM)	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Reading Motivation Score	2.85	3.74	+0.89	3.81	< .01	Significant improvement
Reading Comprehension Score	68.4%	79.6%	+11.2%	4.26	< .01	Significant improvement
Average Daily Reading Time	28 min	70 min	+42 min	3.12	< .05	Increased engagement
Smartphone Use for Reading (%)	23%	61%	+38%	2.96	< .05	Increased productive use
Reported Reading Enjoyment	2.41	3.65	+1.24	4.02	< .01	Higher intrinsic interest

Note: Ratings based on a 5-point Likert scale; comprehension measured via standardized reading tests.

4.5 Summary of Qualitative Findings

From thematic analysis, three dominant themes emerged

- **Autonomy sparks curiosity** – Students felt more motivated when they could select reading materials reflecting their interests (Deci and Ryan, 2017).
- **Smartphones as literacy tools** – When guided, mobile devices became gateways for reading exploration rather than distractions.

- **Social sharing enhances accountability** – Students who discussed their reading in online groups or chats sustained interest longer.

Collectively, these results affirm that a restructured independent reading model one that incorporates student choice and smart technology can meaningfully revive reading engagement among digital-age learners.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce the growing body of evidence that independent, choice-based reading programs can effectively counteract declining reading engagement in the smartphone era. The observed improvement in motivation, comprehension, and daily reading time suggests that student autonomy is a critical determinant of reading persistence. When learners are given the freedom to select reading materials that align with their interests, they are more likely to experience deeper cognitive and emotional engagement, which supports sustained literacy growth (Guthrie & Klauda, 2016). This outcome confirms that intrinsic motivation, rather than external enforcement, remains the most powerful driver of reading engagement, particularly among adolescents exposed to constant digital stimuli.

The integration of smartphones into the reading process also yielded positive outcomes when guided by structured learning frameworks. Contrary to earlier assumptions that smartphones only serve as distractions, this study found that they can become enablers of reading access and personalization. Students leveraged mobile applications to locate texts, track progress, and share reading reflections, transforming what was once a leisure device into a productive learning tool. This aligns with recent findings by Kucirkova (2023), who argued that digital technologies, when aligned with learner autonomy and pedagogical goals, can foster self-directed literacy development. Such integration is not merely technological but pedagogical—it requires intentional design that reframes smartphones from threats to allies in education.

Furthermore, the improvement in comprehension levels following the Choice Reading Program supports the principle that engagement and understanding are interdependent. As Taboada Barber et al. (2021) emphasized, students who are intrinsically motivated to read not only engage more frequently but also comprehend more effectively, as motivation enhances focus and information retention. The results of this study extend that notion by illustrating that engagement can thrive even within digital contexts when students exercise agency over both the medium and content of their reading.

However, the success of the program also depended heavily on teacher facilitation. The teacher's role shifted from that of a traditional evaluator to a literacy coach someone who guides, recommends, and models reading enthusiasm. This echoes the work of Clark and Teravainen-Goff (2020), who highlighted that adult encouragement and authentic reading culture within schools are pivotal for nurturing lifelong readers. Therefore, teacher involvement remains a cornerstone of effective independent reading programs, even when digital tools are employed.

The findings collectively indicate that the future of literacy in the smartphone era lies in balance rather than opposition. Restricting technology is unlikely to succeed in modern classrooms; instead, purposeful integration that promotes autonomy, accessibility, and curiosity offers a sustainable path forward. Students are more likely to engage deeply with texts when their digital environments are leveraged for learning rather than restricted. As Baron (2021) noted, the challenge is not in the medium itself but in how educators guide its use to cultivate critical reading habits and meaningful engagement.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the understanding that choice reading, when reimagined through digital tools, holds the potential to revive reading engagement among young learners. It emphasizes that the smartphone, often blamed for literacy decline, can instead become an instrument of revival provided educators reshape reading experiences to match the realities of the 21st-century learner.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *choice reading* remains an indispensable strategy for reviving student engagement in literacy within the smartphone era. The findings underscore the importance of autonomy, interest, and accessibility in promoting reading motivation among digital-native learners. When students are empowered to choose texts that resonate with their identities, experiences, and aspirations, they develop intrinsic motivation that sustains reading beyond the classroom (Deci & Ryan, 2012). This intrinsic drive, when supported by meaningful teacher guidance and technology integration, leads to measurable improvements in comprehension, critical thinking, and self-expression.

The smartphone, often vilified as a distraction, can be reframed as a bridge to literacy when coupled with structured pedagogical models. By leveraging reading apps, digital libraries, and interactive platforms, educators can create ecosystems where technology enhances rather than undermines literacy development. As Merchant (2020) notes, digital reading can deepen textual engagement when students are guided to use devices reflectively and critically. This redefinition of smartphone usage—from consumption to creation—marks a paradigm shift in literacy instruction that embraces the realities of 21st-century learning.

Furthermore, the study calls for a pedagogical transition from teacher-controlled to learner-centered models. Teachers should act as facilitators, curating diverse reading materials and nurturing authentic discussions around student choices. As Gambrell (2015) emphasizes, when teachers build a culture of reading anchored in choice, relevance, and social connection, reading engagement flourishes naturally. Schools should thus prioritize policies that allocate dedicated time for independent reading, integrate digital platforms responsibly, and provide access to varied texts across genres and formats.

In conclusion, reviving reading engagement in the smartphone era requires a balanced approach that respects both student agency and technological realities. Independent reading programs when aligned with digital literacy frameworks—can transform how students perceive and experience reading. The goal is not to compete with technology but to collaborate with it in ways that sustain curiosity and lifelong learning. Future research should explore scalable models for implementing such programs across diverse educational contexts and examine long-term impacts on academic performance and identity formation. As the landscape of literacy evolves, the enduring truth remains: when students choose to read, they choose to grow.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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