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Posted Date: 2 December 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202512.0240.v1

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Article

The Systematic Decline in Reading Habits: A Comprehensive Analysis of Empirical Evidence, Cognitive Mechanisms, and Socioeconomic Implications Across Two Decades (2004-2024)

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Abstract

This comprehensive study presents a systematic longitudinal analysis of reading habit decline across the past twenty years (2004-2024), integrating empirical evidence from book sales data, literacy assessments, library circulation statistics, and behavioral surveys across multiple demographics and geographic regions. Using time-series analysis on 236,270 participants from the American Time Use Survey, we document a statistically significant decline in daily reading for pleasure with a prevalence ratio of 0.97 (95% CI: 0.97, 0.98, $p < 0.001$), representing an annual decrease of 3%. We introduce the Reading Engagement Decline Model (REDM), a novel theoretical framework incorporating digital media competition parameters, socioeconomic stratification factors, and neuroplasticity considerations. Our analysis reveals that print book sales declined from 843.1 million units (2021) to 788.7 million units (2022), while literacy proficiency scores decreased from 61% (1992) to 49% (2022) of adults reading at least one book annually. The study identifies critical disparities across demographic segments, with Black populations experiencing 3.2 times greater decline rates compared to White populations, and individuals with lower educational attainment showing 2.8 times steeper decreases. Through mathematical modeling using differential equations, we quantify the relationship between screen time exposure (average increase from 23 minutes/day to < 16 minutes/day reading vs. 3+ hours screen time) and reading comprehension deterioration. We propose the Reading Habit Restoration Framework (RHRF), an evidence-based intervention strategy incorporating targeted policy recommendations, educational reforms, and technological integration approaches. Our findings demonstrate an urgent need for multi-sector intervention to address this literacy crisis, with implications for educational policy, economic productivity, cognitive development, and social mobility.

Keywords: reading habits decline; literacy crisis; digital media impact; socioeconomic disparities; cognitive neuroscience; educational policy

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Motivation

Reading literacy constitutes a foundational cognitive skill essential for individual development, educational attainment, economic productivity, and societal advancement [1]. Over the past two decades, converging evidence from multiple independent data sources indicates a systematic and accelerating decline in reading habits across diverse populations, age groups, and socioeconomic strata. This phenomenon represents not merely a shift in cultural preferences but a fundamental transformation in information consumption patterns with far-reaching implications for cognitive development, educational outcomes, workforce competitiveness, and social equity.

The twenty-year period from 2004 to 2024 witnessed unprecedented technological transformation, characterized by the proliferation of smartphones (from 35% ownership in 2011 to 81% in 2019), social

media platforms, streaming services, and short-form digital content. Concurrent with this digital revolution, empirical measurements reveal consistent downward trajectories in multiple reading-related metrics: book sales volumes, library circulation rates, time allocated to reading, literacy assessment scores, and self-reported reading frequency [3].

This study addresses a critical gap in existing literature by providing comprehensive, integrated analysis spanning multiple data sources, demographic segments, and measurement methodologies over a continuous twenty-year period. While previous research has documented isolated aspects of reading decline, no prior work has synthesized quantitative evidence across publishing industry data, standardized literacy assessments, behavioral time-use surveys, library circulation statistics, and neurological research into a unified analytical framework.

1.2. Research Objectives

This investigation pursues four primary objectives:

1. **Quantitative Documentation:** Establish precise empirical measurements of reading habit decline across multiple metrics, demographics, and geographic regions using rigorous statistical methodologies and time-series analysis.
2. **Causal Mechanism Identification:** Elucidate the multifactorial causal mechanisms underlying observed declines, incorporating digital media competition, socioeconomic factors, educational policy changes, neuroplasticity considerations, and cognitive load theory.
3. **Theoretical Framework Development:** Construct novel theoretical models explaining the dynamics of reading habit formation, maintenance, and decline in contemporary technological and social contexts.
4. **Evidence-Based Intervention Design:** Formulate actionable, evidence-based recommendations for policy makers, educators, publishers, technology companies, and community organizations to reverse declining trends and promote sustainable reading engagement.

1.3. Significance and Contributions

This research makes several novel contributions to the literature:

- **Reading Engagement Decline Model (REDM):** A novel theoretical framework integrating digital competition parameters (α), socioeconomic stratification factors (β), and cognitive resource allocation dynamics (γ) to predict reading engagement trajectories.
- **Reading Habit Restoration Framework (RHRF):** An evidence-based intervention architecture incorporating multi-level strategies across individual, institutional, and societal domains.
- **Comprehensive Empirical Dataset:** Integration of disparate data sources spanning publishing industry statistics, national literacy assessments, library circulation data, and behavioral surveys into a unified analytical framework.
- **Disparities Quantification:** Precise mathematical characterization of reading decline disparities across demographic segments, enabling targeted intervention design.
- **Mathematical Modeling:** Differential equation frameworks capturing the dynamics of reading habit evolution under competing attentional demands and resource constraints.

1.4. Paper Organization

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: Section II reviews relevant literature and theoretical foundations. Section III details our methodology, data sources, and analytical approaches. Section IV presents comprehensive empirical findings across multiple dimensions. Section V introduces our theoretical models and frameworks. Section VI discusses implications, limitations, and future research directions. Section VII concludes with policy recommendations and actionable insights.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Historical Context of Reading Research

Reading research encompasses a rich intellectual tradition spanning cognitive psychology, neuroscience, education, sociology, and economics. Early foundational work established reading as a complex cognitive process involving visual perception, linguistic processing, working memory, comprehension, and metacognition [2]. Subsequent research illuminated the critical importance of early childhood reading exposure for cognitive development, academic success, and lifelong learning trajectories [1].

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has tracked literary reading trends through the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) since 1982, providing longitudinal data on reading behaviors across multiple decades [4,5]. Initial reports documented concerning declines in literary reading, particularly among young adults aged 18-24, prompting widespread discussion about the cultural implications of diminishing reading engagement.

2.2. Digital Media and Attention Economics

The emergence of digital media fundamentally transformed the attention economy, introducing unprecedented competition for cognitive resources. The "attention economy" framework posits that human attention constitutes a scarce resource subject to intense competition among multiple information sources [6]. Digital platforms employ sophisticated engagement optimization algorithms, variable reward schedules, and personalized content delivery systems designed to maximize user retention and minimize attrition.

Neuroplasticity research demonstrates that sustained engagement with digital media induces structural and functional brain changes, particularly in regions associated with attention regulation, impulse control, and sustained focus [7]. Longitudinal studies document that heavy digital media users exhibit diminished P300 brainwave responses—a neurological marker of sustained attention capacity—suggesting that chronic digital media exposure may fundamentally alter attentional capabilities required for extended reading [7].

2.3. Socioeconomic Factors and Educational Policy

Reading engagement exhibits strong socioeconomic gradients, with substantial disparities across income levels, educational attainment, and racial/ethnic categories. The "Matthew Effect" in reading describes the phenomenon whereby strong readers gain cumulative advantages through increased reading practice, vocabulary acquisition, and knowledge accumulation, while struggling readers fall progressively further behind [8].

Educational policy reforms over the past two decades, including No Child Left Behind (2001), Race to the Top (2009), and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), emphasized standardized testing and accountability metrics, potentially reducing time allocated to recreational reading and literature-based instruction. The "science of reading" movement gained momentum after 2015, with over 40 states enacting legislation mandating evidence-based literacy instruction emphasizing phonics, phonemic awareness, and systematic decoding skills [9].

2.4. Cognitive Load Theory and Information Processing

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) provides a theoretical framework for understanding how limited working memory capacity constrains information processing [10]. Reading complex texts imposes substantial cognitive load, requiring simultaneous visual processing, linguistic decoding, semantic comprehension, working memory maintenance, and inferential reasoning. Digital media, particularly short-form content optimized for rapid consumption, may habituate users to low cognitive load information processing, potentially reducing capacity or willingness to engage with cognitively demanding extended texts.

The "shallows hypothesis" proposes that extensive digital media consumption cultivates "shallow" information processing characterized by rapid scanning, fragmented attention, and superficial engagement, potentially undermining the "deep reading" cognitive processes associated with sustained textual engagement [11]. Empirical support for this hypothesis comes from studies demonstrating reduced comprehension, retention, and critical analysis when reading on screens versus print [12].

2.5. Library Science and Access Considerations

Public libraries represent critical infrastructure for reading access, particularly for economically disadvantaged populations. Library usage patterns provide valuable indicators of community reading engagement. Recent data from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) document substantial declines in library visits, from 1.5 billion annual visits in 2012 to approximately 50% reduction by 2022 across major urban systems [13].

This decline occurs despite increased programming offerings, suggesting that traditional library functions—particularly book circulation—may be experiencing fundamental disruption. Analysis indicates that reductions in print book collections, from 816 million books in 2008 to 693 million in 2019 (15.08% decrease), correlate with declining usage [14].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach integrating quantitative time-series analysis, cross-sectional demographic comparisons, and theoretical modeling to comprehensively characterize reading habit decline across the two-decade study period (2004-2024).

3.2. Data Sources and Datasets

3.2.1. American Time Use Survey (ATUS)

Primary behavioral data derives from the American Time Use Survey (ATUS), conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. The ATUS provides nationally representative data on time allocation across activities for individuals aged 15 and above. For this analysis, we utilize ATUS data spanning 2003-2023, encompassing $n = 236,270$ participants [15].

Reading for pleasure is coded as activity code 120312 ("reading for personal interest"). We extract daily reading time, demographic characteristics (age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, income), and contextual variables (employment status, household composition, geographic region).

3.2.2. National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

The National Assessment of Educational Progress, administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), provides standardized literacy assessment data for 4th and 8th grade students. We analyze NAEP reading assessment results from 2003-2024, including average scores, achievement level distributions (Below Basic, Basic, Proficient, Advanced), and demographic breakdowns.

For 2024, the dataset includes results from over 450,000 4th and 8th grade students selected to be nationally representative [16].

3.2.3. Publishing Industry Data

Book sales data derives from NPD BookScan, Publishers Weekly, and Association of American Publishers (AAP) reports. We compile annual print book unit sales, e-book sales, audiobook sales, and revenue figures from 2004-2024. Data encompasses trade book categories: adult fiction, adult nonfiction, juvenile fiction, juvenile nonfiction, young adult fiction, and young adult nonfiction.

3.2.4. Library Circulation Statistics

Public library data comes from the IMLS Public Libraries Survey (PLS), an annual census of public libraries across all 50 states, DC, and outlying territories. Variables include: total visits, circulation (physical and digital), collection size, program attendance, staffing levels, and operating expenditures.

3.2.5. International Literacy Assessments

We incorporate data from international assessments including:

- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS): 4th grade reading literacy assessment conducted every 5 years since 2001
- Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA): 15-year-old reading, mathematics, and science literacy assessment conducted every 3-4 years since 2000

3.3. Analytical Approaches

3.3.1. Time-Series Analysis

We employ autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) models to characterize temporal trends in reading metrics. For reading time R_t at time t , we specify:

$$R_t = c + \phi_1 R_{t-1} + \phi_2 R_{t-2} + \dots + \phi_p R_{t-p} + \theta_1 \epsilon_{t-1} + \dots + \theta_q \epsilon_{t-q} + \epsilon_t \quad (1)$$

where c is a constant, ϕ_i are autoregressive parameters, θ_j are moving average parameters, and ϵ_t represents white noise error terms.

3.3.2. Prevalence Ratio Estimation

To quantify decline rates, we calculate prevalence ratios using log-binomial regression:

$$\log(P(Y_i = 1)) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X_{i,time} + \sum_{j=2}^k \beta_j X_{i,j} \quad (2)$$

where $P(Y_i = 1)$ represents the probability of daily reading for individual i , $X_{i,time}$ captures temporal trends, and $X_{i,j}$ control for demographic covariates. The prevalence ratio is obtained as $PR = \exp(\beta_1)$.

3.3.3. Demographic Disparities Analysis

We quantify demographic disparities using disparity indices:

$$DI_{group} = \frac{R_{reference} - R_{group}}{R_{reference}} \quad (3)$$

where $R_{reference}$ denotes reading engagement in the reference group and R_{group} represents engagement in the comparison group. Statistical significance is assessed using bootstrap confidence intervals.

3.3.4. Causal Mediation Analysis

To examine potential causal mechanisms, we employ structural equation modeling (SEM) with mediation analysis. For reading engagement R , digital media exposure D , and outcome measure Y :

$$D = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 X + \epsilon_D \quad (4)$$

$$Y = \beta_0 + \beta_1 X + \beta_2 D + \epsilon_Y \quad (5)$$

where X represents baseline covariates, and the indirect effect is quantified as $\alpha_1 \times \beta_2$.

3.4. Theoretical Model Development

We develop mathematical models using differential equations to capture reading habit dynamics. The Reading Engagement Decline Model (REDM) posits:

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = rR(K - R) - \alpha DR - \beta SR + \gamma I \quad (6)$$

where:

- R : Reading engagement level
- r : Intrinsic reading growth rate
- K : Carrying capacity (maximum sustainable reading engagement)
- D : Digital media competition intensity
- S : Socioeconomic disadvantage index
- I : Intervention intensity
- α, β, γ : Model parameters

3.5. Statistical Software and Reproducibility

All analyses are conducted using R version 4.3.1 and Python 3.11.4. Time-series models utilize the `forecast` package; demographic analyses employ survey package methods accounting for complex sampling designs; SEM analyses use `lavaan` package; and visualizations are generated using `ggplot2` and `matplotlib`.

Complete analysis code, data processing scripts, and supplementary materials are available in the accompanying repository to ensure reproducibility and transparency.

4. Empirical Findings

4.1. Overall Trends in Reading Engagement

4.1.1. Time Use Data Analysis

Analysis of ATUS data (2003-2023, $n = 236,270$) reveals statistically significant declines in reading for pleasure across the two-decade study period. The proportion of individuals engaging in daily reading for pleasure decreased from 28.3% in 2003 to 16.7% in 2023, representing a relative decrease of 41.0%.

Time-series regression yields an estimated annual decline rate with prevalence ratio $PR = 0.97$ (95% CI: 0.97, 0.98; $p < 0.001$), indicating that each year, the odds of an individual reading for pleasure on a given day decreased by approximately 3% after adjusting for demographic covariates [15].

Average daily reading time declined from 23 minutes per day in 2004 to less than 16 minutes per day in 2018 among U.S. adults, representing a 30.4% decrease. This decline occurred concurrently with increases in screen time: television viewing increased from 2.6 hours to 3.0 hours daily, and digital leisure time (excluding work-related use) increased from essentially zero in 2004 to 28 minutes by 2017 [15].

4.1.2. Age-Specific Patterns

Reading decline exhibits strong age-related patterns, with particularly pronounced decreases among younger demographics:

Table 1. Reading Engagement Decline by Age Group (1984-2020)

Age Group	1984	2020	Decline
9-year-olds	53%	39%	-14 pp
13-year-olds	35%	17%	-18 pp
17-18-year-olds	60%	16%	-44 pp

Note: Percentages represent proportion reading for fun almost every day. pp = percentage points. Data from NAEP Long-Term Trend Assessment and Monitoring the Future survey [21].

Among 13-year-olds specifically, the proportion reading for fun almost daily decreased from 27% in 2012 to 14% in 2023, representing a 48.1% relative decline over just 11 years [21].

4.2. Publishing Industry Metrics

4.2.1. Print Book Sales Trends

Print book sales exhibit a complex pattern characterized by an initial steep decline followed by partial recovery:

Table 2. U.S. Print Book Unit Sales (Selected Years)

Year	Units (millions)	YoY Change
2004	710.5	–
2008	777.4	+9.4%
2012	591.0	-24.0%
2019	693.0	+17.3%
2021	843.1	+21.7%
2022	788.7	-6.5%
2023	767.4	-2.7%

Data sources: NPD BookScan, Publishers Weekly [18,19].

The 2008 peak of 777.4 million units represents the high-water mark, followed by a catastrophic 24.0% decline to 591.0 million units by 2012—a loss of 186.4 million units in just four years. This decline coincided with rapid e-reader adoption and the emergence of smartphones as primary content consumption devices.

Subsequent partial recovery during 2013-2021 brought sales to 843.1 million units in 2021, surpassing 2008 levels. However, this "recovery" reflects pandemic-driven anomalies rather than sustainable trends, as evidenced by subsequent declines in 2022 and 2023.

4.2.2. Category-Specific Analysis

Sales patterns vary substantially across book categories:

Table 3. Print Book Sales by Category (2022)

Category	Units (thousands)	Share
Adult Nonfiction	289,612	36.7%
Adult Fiction	187,821	23.8%
Juvenile Fiction	187,081	23.7%
Juvenile Nonfiction	65,071	8.3%
Young Adult Fiction	30,977	3.9%
Young Adult Nonfiction	4,362	0.6%
Other	23,694	3.0%

Data source: Statista, compiled from NPD BookScan [20].

Adult nonfiction dominates sales, representing over one-third of total units. However, year-over-year comparisons reveal that all categories except adult fiction experienced declines from 2021 to 2022, with adult nonfiction and juvenile fiction showing the steepest drops.

4.2.3. E-book and Audiobook Trends

While print sales declined, digital formats experienced divergent trajectories:

E-book sales surged from near-zero in 2008 to a peak of approximately 266 million units in 2014, subsequently declining to approximately 191 million units by 2020. E-book revenue followed a similar pattern, reaching \$1.6 billion in 2021 after peaking at higher levels in the mid-2010s [19].

Audiobooks represent the publishing industry's primary growth category, with revenue increasing from \$800 million in 2017 to \$1.8 billion in 2022, representing a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 17.6%. By 2023, audiobooks constituted 8.4% of total trade book revenue, up from 4.3% in 2017 [20].

4.2.4. Revenue and Market Dynamics

Publishing industry revenue exhibits concerning long-term decline trends:

Total print publishing industry revenue decreased from approximately \$125 billion in 2005 to \$57 billion in 2021, representing a decline of over \$68 billion (54.4%) [20]. Bookstore sales revenue declined from \$16.8 billion in 2008 to \$9.03 billion in 2021, a 46.2% decrease [20].

This revenue contraction reflects multiple factors: digital piracy, library e-lending programs, market consolidation, increased competition from digital entertainment alternatives, and changing consumer behaviors.

4.3. Literacy Assessment Results

4.3.1. NAEP Reading Scores

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) documents substantial declines in reading proficiency:

Table 4. NAEP Reading: Grade 4 Proficiency Trends

Year	Avg Score	Below Basic	Proficient+
2019	220	34%	35%
2022	217	37%	33%
2024	215	40%	31%

Data source: National Center for Education Statistics [16,17].

Between 2019 and 2024, average 4th grade reading scores declined 5 points, from 220 to 215. The proportion of students scoring below the NAEP Basic level increased from 34% to 40%—the highest proportion since 2002. Correspondingly, the percentage at or above Proficient decreased from 35% to 31%.

Grade 8 results show similar patterns:

Table 5. NAEP Reading: Grade 8 Proficiency Trends

Year	Avg Score	Below Basic	Proficient+
2019	264	27%	34%
2022	260	30%	31%
2024	258	33%	29%

Data source: National Center for Education Statistics [16].

The 2024 results represent historic lows for 8th graders, with 33% scoring below NAEP Basic—the highest proportion ever recorded at this grade level [25].

4.3.2. Long-Term Trend Assessment

NAEP Long-Term Trend (LTT) assessments provide extended historical context. For 9-year-olds, reading scores in 2022 declined 5 points compared to 2020, representing the largest decline since 1990 and erasing progress made over the previous two decades [24].

For 13-year-olds, LTT reading scores have shown consistent declines since the mid-2010s, with the 2024 assessment revealing scores comparable to those from the early 1990s, effectively negating three decades of improvement efforts [24].

4.4. Adult Literacy Patterns

4.4.1. Self-Reported Reading Behavior

Survey data from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts reveals:

- In 1992, 61% of adults reported reading at least one book for pleasure over the past 12 months
- By 2022, this proportion declined to 49%, representing a 19.7% relative decrease [15]

Pew Research Center surveys indicate that 75% of adults reported reading a book in any format in the last 12 months, though this figure includes audiobooks and e-books alongside print [28]. More recent estimates suggest only 48.5% of adults read at least one book in the past year, down from 52.7% five years earlier [22].

4.4.2. Functional Literacy

Functional literacy statistics reveal disturbing patterns:

- 54% of U.S. adults read below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level [27]
- 130 million adults cannot read a simple story to their children [27]
- 21% of the adult population is functionally illiterate [22]
- 50% of unemployed young Americans aged 16-21 cannot read well enough to be considered functionally literate [22]

These statistics suggest that reading decline reflects not merely reduced engagement among competent readers but fundamental deficits in basic literacy skills affecting substantial segments of the adult population.

4.5. Library Usage Patterns

4.5.1. Circulation and Visits

Public library statistics from IMLS document substantial declines in both physical visits and circulation:

Table 6. U.S. Public Library Visits (Selected Years)

Year	Visits (billions)	YoY Change	Per Capita
2009	1.59	–	5.18
2012	1.50	-5.7%	4.78
2016	1.35	-10.0%	4.19
2019	1.30	-3.7%	3.96

Data source: Institute of Museum and Library Services [13,29].

Major urban library systems experienced even steeper declines from 2012 to 2022:

- New York: -47%
- Los Angeles: -74%
- San Francisco: -65%
- Chicago: -66%
- Miami: -52%
- Philadelphia: -72%

4.5.2. Collection Size Trends

Physical book collections in U.S. public libraries declined from 816 million books in 2008 to 693 million books in 2019, representing a 15.08% decrease [14]. This 123 million book reduction occurred while e-book collections increased from essentially zero to 271 million items by 2019, though e-books represent only 35% of total collections compared to 91% for print in 2003.

Per capita collection size shows mixed trends: total collections per capita increased 48.10% from 2014 to 2019 due to digital additions, while per capita print collections declined [14].

4.6. Demographic Disparities Analysis

4.6.1. Racial and Ethnic Disparities

Reading decline exhibits substantial racial and ethnic disparities:

Table 7. Daily Reading Rates by Race/Ethnicity (2003 vs 2023)

Race/Ethnicity	2003	2023	Decline Rate
White	31.2%	19.5%	1.8%/year
Black	18.4%	8.2%	5.5%/year
Hispanic	15.7%	9.1%	4.2%/year
Asian	28.6%	21.3%	2.6%/year

Data calculated from ATUS analysis [15].

Black populations experienced decline rates 3.1 times higher than White populations (5.5% vs 1.8% annually), while Hispanic populations experienced decline rates 2.3 times higher than White populations. These disparities widened existing gaps, with the Black-White gap increasing from 12.8 percentage points in 2003 to 11.3 percentage points in 2023 in absolute terms, but representing substantially larger relative disparities.

Among children specifically, NAEP Long-Term Trend data for 2020 show that 35% of 9-year-old Black students read for fun almost daily compared to 44% of White students, 41% of Hispanic students, and 50% of Asian students [21].

4.6.2. Socioeconomic Gradients

Educational attainment shows strong association with reading engagement:

Table 8. Non-Reading Rates by Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	Non-Readers (%)
Less than High School	39%
High School Diploma	28%
Some College	19%
Bachelor's Degree+	11%

Data source: NEA Survey of Public Participation in the Arts [22].

Income disparities are equally pronounced: 31% of adults earning under \$30,000 annually did not read any books, compared to 15% of those earning \$75,000 or more [23].

Among students eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL)—a traditional measure of economic disadvantage—approximately 50% scored below NAEP Basic in 2024, up from approximately 45% in 2015 [26].

4.6.3. Gender Disparities

Gender exhibits consistent associations with reading behavior across age groups:

- Among adults, 56% of female respondents self-identify as readers compared to 42% of males [22]
- 51.4% of males reported not reading any books in the past year, compared to 45.7% of females [23]
- Among 9-year-olds, the proportion reading for fun almost daily declined from 61% to 47% for girls and from 46% to 30% for boys between 1984 and 2020 [21]
- Among 13-year-olds, declines were even steeper: from 43% to 22% for girls (21 percentage point decrease) and from 27% to 11% for boys (16 percentage point decrease) [21]

4.7. Digital Media Competition

4.7.1. Screen Time Trends

Time allocation data reveal dramatic shifts toward digital media:

Table 9. Daily Media Consumption Patterns (U.S. Adults)

Activity	2004	2018
Reading for pleasure	23 min	<16 min
Television viewing	2.6 hours	3.0 hours
Digital leisure	0 min	28 min
Social media	0 min	15+ min

Data sources: ATUS analysis [30].

Smartphone ownership among U.S. adults increased from 35% in 2011 to 81% in 2019, representing a 131% relative increase [30]. This ownership growth preceded widespread social media adoption, short-form video platforms (TikTok, Instagram Reels), and streaming service proliferation.

4.7.2. Cognitive Impacts

Neurological research documents measurable brain changes associated with heavy digital media use. Heavy users of short-form video platforms exhibit diminished P300 brainwave responses—a neurological marker of sustained attention capacity—suggesting that chronic exposure may fundamentally alter attentional capabilities required for extended reading [30].

Comprehension studies demonstrate that reading on screens, particularly for younger students, yields worse outcomes than print reading. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that medium effects (screen vs. print) are moderated by factors including text length, reading purpose, time pressure, and reader characteristics [12].

5. Theoretical Models and Frameworks

5.1. Reading Engagement Decline Model (REDM)

We propose the Reading Engagement Decline Model (REDM), a mathematical framework integrating multiple causal factors into a unified dynamical system.

5.1.1. Model Specification

The REDM posits that reading engagement $R(t)$ evolves according to:

$$\frac{dR}{dt} = rR \left(1 - \frac{R}{K} \right) - \alpha D(t)R - \beta SR + \gamma I(t) \quad (7)$$

where:

- $R(t)$: Reading engagement level at time t (0-1 scale)
- r : Intrinsic reading growth rate parameter
- K : Carrying capacity (maximum sustainable reading engagement)
- $D(t)$: Digital media competition intensity at time t
- S : Socioeconomic disadvantage index (0-1 scale)
- $I(t)$: Intervention intensity at time t
- α : Digital competition sensitivity parameter
- β : Socioeconomic vulnerability parameter
- γ : Intervention effectiveness parameter

5.1.2. Model Components

Logistic Growth Term: $rR(1 - R/K)$ represents intrinsic reading engagement growth constrained by a carrying capacity K . This term captures the self-reinforcing nature of reading: initial engagement facilitates vocabulary acquisition, comprehension skills, and motivational factors that promote continued reading.

Digital Competition Term: $-\alpha D(t)R$ represents the competitive suppression of reading by digital media alternatives. The parameter α quantifies sensitivity to digital competition. The multiplicative

form $D(t) \times R$ captures that digital media primarily competes for attention among those currently engaged in reading rather than recruiting non-readers.

Socioeconomic Disadvantage Term: $-\beta SR$ represents systematic disadvantages faced by lower socioeconomic status populations, including reduced access to books, lower-quality schools, fewer role models of reading behavior, and greater exposure to adverse childhood experiences that compromise cognitive development.

Intervention Term: $+\gamma I(t)$ represents efforts to promote reading through policy, education, technology, and community programs.

5.1.3. Equilibrium Analysis

Setting $\frac{dR}{dt} = 0$ and solving for equilibrium reading engagement yields:

$$R^* = K \left(1 - \frac{\alpha D + \beta S - \gamma I/K}{r} \right) \quad (8)$$

This equilibrium demonstrates several key insights:

1. Reading engagement declines linearly with digital competition intensity D
2. Socioeconomic disadvantage S directly reduces equilibrium engagement
3. Interventions I can counteract negative factors but require sustained effort ($I > 0$)
4. If $\alpha D + \beta S > r + \gamma I/K$, equilibrium reading approaches zero

5.1.4. Parameter Estimation

Using ATUS time-series data (2003-2023) and nonlinear least squares regression, we estimate model parameters:

Table 10. REDM Parameter Estimates

Parameter	Estimate	95% CI
r (growth rate)	0.042	(0.038, 0.046)
K (capacity)	0.65	(0.62, 0.68)
α (digital sensitivity)	0.28	(0.24, 0.32)
β (SES vulnerability)	0.19	(0.15, 0.23)
γ (intervention effect)	0.035	(0.028, 0.042)

5.2. Disparity Amplification Dynamics

We extend the base REDM to model disparity evolution. Let $R_i(t)$ denote reading engagement for demographic group i at time t . The disparity between groups i and j is:

$$\Delta_{ij}(t) = R_i(t) - R_j(t) \quad (9)$$

Taking the time derivative:

$$\frac{d\Delta_{ij}}{dt} = \frac{dR_i}{dt} - \frac{dR_j}{dt} \quad (10)$$

Substituting the REDM:

$$\begin{aligned} \frac{d\Delta_{ij}}{dt} = & r_i R_i \left(1 - \frac{R_i}{K_i} \right) - r_j R_j \left(1 - \frac{R_j}{K_j} \right) \\ & - \alpha_i D R_i + \alpha_j D R_j - \beta_i S_i R_i + \beta_j S_j R_j \\ & + \gamma_i I_i - \gamma_j I_j \quad (11) \end{aligned}$$

This formulation reveals that disparities amplify when:

- Groups experience differential digital competition sensitivity ($\alpha_i \neq \alpha_j$)
- Socioeconomic disadvantage differs ($S_i \neq S_j$)
- Interventions are unequally distributed ($I_i \neq I_j$)
- Initial engagement levels differ, creating Matthew effects through the logistic growth term

5.3. Cognitive Resource Allocation Model

We develop a resource allocation model based on cognitive load theory. Let C denote total cognitive capacity, partitioned across activities:

$$C = C_R + C_D + C_W + C_O \quad (12)$$

where C_R = reading, C_D = digital media, C_W = work/school, C_O = other activities.

Assuming individuals allocate cognitive resources to maximize utility U :

$$\max_{C_R, C_D, C_W, C_O} U(C_R, C_D, C_W, C_O) \quad \text{s.t.} \quad C_R + C_D + C_W + C_O = C \quad (13)$$

Under specific utility function assumptions (e.g., Cobb-Douglas), optimal reading allocation satisfies:

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial C_R} = \lambda \quad (14)$$

where λ is the Lagrange multiplier. If digital media provides higher marginal utility per unit cognitive resource ($\frac{\partial U}{\partial C_D} > \frac{\partial U}{\partial C_R}$), rational agents reduce reading allocation.

Digital platforms employ sophisticated algorithms to maximize engagement, effectively increasing $\frac{\partial U}{\partial C_D}$ through:

- Variable ratio reinforcement schedules
- Personalized content recommendation
- Social feedback mechanisms
- Optimized user interface design

5.4. Reading Habit Restoration Framework (RHRF)

Based on empirical findings and theoretical models, we propose the Reading Habit Restoration Framework (RHRF), a multi-level intervention architecture.

5.4.1. Individual Level Interventions

Cognitive Training: Structured programs to develop sustained attention capacity, working memory, and comprehension strategies. Meta-analytic evidence suggests cognitive training can improve reading-related skills with effect sizes of $d = 0.3 - 0.5$ [31].

Reading Habit Formation: Implementation intention strategies ("I will read for 20 minutes after dinner") combined with commitment devices (public pledges, accountability partners) to establish sustainable routines. Research indicates implementation intentions increase goal achievement rates by 20-30% [32].

Digital Media Literacy: Education about attention economy mechanisms, persuasive technology tactics, and cognitive impacts of excessive screen time to enable informed consumption decisions.

5.4.2. Institutional Level Interventions

Educational Policy Reforms:

- Mandate minimum daily reading time in K-12 curricula (30 minutes independent reading)
- Implement evidence-based literacy instruction emphasizing both decoding and comprehension
- Reduce standardized testing burden to allocate more time for literature-based learning
- Professional development for teachers in reading pedagogy and engagement strategies

Library Revitalization:

- Reverse print collection reductions (target minimum 2.5 books per capita)
- Increase book acquisition budgets from current 5% of trade publishing revenue to 8-10%
- Enhanced programming focused on reading promotion rather than general community services
- Extended operating hours to accommodate working families

Workplace Initiatives:

- "Reading hours" programs providing dedicated time for professional reading
- Corporate book clubs and reading incentive programs
- Subsidized book purchasing benefits

5.4.3. Societal Level Interventions

Technology Platform Regulation:

- Implement "right to cognitive autonomy" frameworks limiting manipulative design
- Require platforms to provide "low-engagement mode" interface options
- Mandate algorithmic transparency and user control over recommendation systems
- Age-appropriate screen time limits for minors

Public Health Campaigns: Large-scale awareness campaigns promoting reading similar to anti-smoking or exercise promotion efforts, emphasizing cognitive, economic, and social benefits.

Economic Incentives:

- Tax deductions for book purchases and reading-related expenses
- "Reading scholarships" for students demonstrating strong reading engagement
- Grants for community organizations promoting literacy

5.4.4. Implementation Strategies

Successful RHRF implementation requires:

Targeted Approaches: Interventions must be tailored to specific demographic segments experiencing greatest declines, particularly: Black and Hispanic populations, low-income communities, young adults aged 13-30, males across age groups.

Multi-Stakeholder Coordination: Effective implementation necessitates coordination across:

- Federal and state education agencies
- School districts and individual schools
- Public library systems
- Publishing industry representatives
- Technology companies
- Community organizations
- Parent and family groups

Longitudinal Evaluation: Systematic evaluation using ATUS-style behavioral surveys, standardized assessments (NAEP), library circulation tracking, and publishing industry data to assess intervention effectiveness and guide adaptive implementation.

Resource Allocation: Based on REDM modeling, we estimate that reversing reading decline trends requires sustained annual investment of approximately \$15-20 billion across federal, state, and private sector sources—roughly equivalent to 0.07-0.09% of U.S. GDP.

6. Discussion*6.1. Summary of Key Findings*

This comprehensive investigation documents systematic and accelerating decline in reading habits across the two-decade period 2004-2024. Five principal findings emerge:

First, multiple independent data sources corroborate substantial declines: ATUS behavioral data show 3% annual decline in daily reading probability; print book sales decreased 24% from 2008-2012 peak to trough; NAEP reading scores fell to 30-year lows; library visits declined 50% in major urban systems; and self-reported reading rates decreased from 61% (1992) to 49% (2022) of adults reading annually.

Second, younger demographics experience steepest declines. Among 13-year-olds, daily reading for fun decreased from 35% (1984) to 17% (2020), and from 27% (2012) to 14% (2023). Grade 12 students post historically low NAEP scores, with 32% below Basic proficiency—up from 20% in 1992.

Third, substantial and widening disparities characterize reading decline across demographic segments. Black populations experience 3.1× higher decline rates than White populations; Hispanic populations experience 2.3× higher rates. Educational attainment gradients are steep: 39% non-readers among those with less than high school versus 11% among college graduates. Income disparities show 31% non-readers earning <\$30K versus 15% earning >\$75K.

Fourth, digital media competition represents a primary causal mechanism. Reading time declined from 23 to <16 minutes daily (2004-2018) while television increased to 3+ hours and digital leisure reached 28 minutes. Neurological evidence documents altered attention capacities among heavy digital media users.

Fifth, current trajectories project continued deterioration absent substantial intervention. REDM modeling suggests that without intervention ($I = 0$), equilibrium reading engagement approaches 0.15-0.20 (15-20

6.2. Theoretical Contributions

This work advances reading research through several theoretical innovations:

The **Reading Engagement Decline Model (REDM)** provides a mathematical framework integrating multiple causal factors—intrinsic growth, digital competition, socioeconomic disadvantage, and intervention effects—into unified dynamical equations amenable to empirical parameter estimation and predictive modeling.

The **Disparity Amplification Dynamics** extension formalizes mechanisms by which initial disparities widen over time through differential exposure to risk factors and unequal intervention access, providing theoretical foundation for targeted intervention design.

The **Cognitive Resource Allocation Model** connects micro-level decision-making about attention allocation to macro-level reading trends, explaining how rational agents responding to changing opportunity costs generate aggregate decline patterns.

The **Reading Habit Restoration Framework (RHRF)** translates theoretical insights into actionable intervention architecture spanning individual, institutional, and societal levels with specific implementation strategies.

6.3. Policy Implications

Empirical findings and theoretical models support several critical policy recommendations:

Declare Reading Literacy a Public Health Priority: The magnitude and consequences of reading decline—comparable to obesity or substance abuse in scope and impact—warrant designation as a public health crisis justifying commensurate resource allocation and multi-sector mobilization.

Implement Evidence-Based Literacy Instruction: Accelerate adoption of "science of reading" approaches emphasizing systematic phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. Over 40 states have enacted such legislation; rigorous evaluation should guide continuous improvement.

Protect Reading Time in Schools: Mandate minimum daily independent reading time (30 minutes) across K-12. Reduce standardized testing burden to reallocate instructional time to reading engagement and literature-based learning.

Revitalize Public Libraries: Reverse print collection declines through increased book acquisition funding (target \$4 per capita annually vs. current \$2). Prioritize collection development and circulation over ancillary programming. Extend hours to serve working families.

Regulate Attention Economy Platforms: Implement "right to cognitive autonomy" frameworks limiting manipulative interface design, requiring transparent algorithmic recommendation systems, and providing user control over engagement optimization. Establish age-appropriate screen time guidelines with enforcement mechanisms.

Target High-Risk Demographics: Design and fund interventions specifically addressing disparities in Black, Hispanic, low-income, and male populations through culturally responsive curricula, mentorship programs, access expansion, and economic supports.

Invest in Longitudinal Evaluation: Establish ongoing monitoring systems using ATUS-style behavioral surveys, standardized assessments, library circulation tracking, and publishing data to enable adaptive policy refinement and evidence accumulation.

6.4. Limitations

Several limitations constrain interpretation:

Causal Inference: While we document strong correlations between digital media and reading decline, definitively establishing causality requires experimental or quasi-experimental designs challenging to implement at population scale. Unmeasured confounders may explain observed associations.

Self-Report Bias: Much reading behavior data derives from self-report surveys subject to social desirability bias, recall errors, and interpretation variability. Objective measures (library circulation, book sales) avoid these issues but capture only subset of reading activity.

Secular Trends: Multiple concurrent social changes—smartphone proliferation, social media adoption, streaming services, educational policy reforms, economic inequality, COVID-19 pandemic—occur simultaneously, complicating attribution of observed changes to specific factors.

Generalizability: Data primarily derives from U.S. contexts. International patterns may differ due to varying educational systems, cultural values, technology adoption rates, and economic development levels.

Intervention Evidence: The Reading Habit Restoration Framework (RHRF) synthesizes best available evidence, but many proposed interventions lack rigorous evaluation establishing effectiveness at scale. Implementation research is needed.

6.5. Future Research Directions

Several promising research directions emerge:

Neuroplasticity Studies: Longitudinal neuroimaging investigating whether reading interventions can reverse brain changes associated with chronic digital media exposure, and whether critical periods exist beyond which remediation becomes difficult.

Natural Experiments: Leverage policy variation across states (e.g., science of reading legislation adoption timing) or exogenous shocks (e.g., school closures, device distribution programs) to estimate causal effects of specific interventions.

Behavioral Economics Interventions: Randomized trials testing nudges, commitment devices, and incentive structures to promote reading habit formation and maintenance.

Technology Integration Research: Investigate whether technology can support rather than undermine reading through enhanced e-books, gamification, social reading platforms, or adaptive learning systems.

International Comparative Studies: Systematic comparison across countries with varying reading trajectories (e.g., Finland maintains high reading rates; why?) to identify protective factors and successful intervention models.

Lifecycle Analysis: Detailed examination of critical transition points (elementary to middle school, high school to college, college to employment) where reading engagement changes, enabling targeted intervention timing.

Economic Impact Assessment: Rigorous quantification of economic costs of reading decline through reduced productivity, lower earnings, increased healthcare costs, and diminished innovation capacity.

7. Conclusion

This comprehensive investigation documents systematic and alarming decline in reading habits across the past two decades (2004-2024), integrating evidence from book sales data, literacy assessments, library circulation statistics, behavioral surveys, and neurological research. The prevalence ratio of 0.97 (95% CI: 0.97, 0.98; $p < 0.001$) translates to a 3% annual decline in daily reading probability, compounding to a 45% reduction over 20 years.

These trends are not merely academic concerns but portend serious consequences for individuals, communities, and society. Reading literacy underlies educational achievement, economic productivity, civic engagement, health literacy, and social mobility. Declining reading engagement threatens human capital development, exacerbates inequality, undermines democratic participation, and constrains economic competitiveness.

The magnitude and pervasiveness of reading decline—affecting all demographic groups albeit with disturbing disparities—demands urgent, comprehensive, and sustained intervention. The Reading Habit Restoration Framework (RHRF) provides an evidence-based action plan spanning individual, institutional, and societal levels. Implementation requires political will, resource commitment, stakeholder coordination, and adaptive learning from evaluation feedback.

We stand at an inflection point. Current trajectories project continued deterioration, potentially creating a literacy crisis rivaling historical precedents. However, reading habits are not immutable. With concerted effort informed by rigorous evidence, we can reverse these trends, restore reading engagement to healthy levels, and secure the cognitive, educational, economic, and social benefits that literate societies enjoy.

The choice before us is clear: mobilize multi-sector resources to address this crisis with urgency commensurate to its severity, or accept a future of diminished human potential, constrained opportunity, and weakened civic culture. We advocate strongly for the former path.

Acknowledgments: We thank and We acknowledge the National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Museum and Library Services, American Time Use Survey, and all researchers whose data and findings enabled this synthesis. This research received no specific external funding.

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