

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)

Libraries at University of Nebraska-Lincoln

7-26-2022

Elitism, Escapism and Existentialism: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Reading Habits of Indian Young Adults

Nimisha Ajaikumar
nimisha.ajaikumar@gmail.com

Vipin Roldant
Roldantz Global, vipinroldantofficial@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac>

Ajaikumar, Nimisha and Roldant, Vipin, "Elitism, Escapism and Existentialism: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Reading Habits of Indian Young Adults" (2022). *Library Philosophy and Practice (e-journal)*. 7326.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac/7326>

**Elitism, Escapism and Existentialism:
An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Reading Habits of Indian Young
Adults**

Nimisha Ajaikumar, Vipin Roldant
Roldant Rejuvenation, Roldantz Global

Author Note

Nimisha Ajaikumar <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4514-5081>

We have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Nimisha Ajaikumar and Vipin Roldant, Roldantz Global, 2nd Floor, Milestones Tower, opposite Edappally Block Panchayat Office, Kusumagiri, Kakkanad, Kerala 682030, India. Email: nimisha.ajaikumar@gmail.com

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Abstract

Reading is the core of knowledge and educational success, but it demonstrates a decline among the current young adult population. The present study uses a qualitative approach in the form of semi-structured interviews to study the reading habits of 10 Indian young adults aged 19-24. Interpretative phenomenological analysis revealed three superordinate themes: attitudes towards reading, perceived benefits of reading, and impediments to reading. Findings are consistent with previous literature and can be applied in academic and professional settings and social structures to improve the reading habits of Indian young adults. Future researchers are encouraged to determine strategies for enhancing reading habits within the Indian context. Quantitative studies further investigating the topic are recommended.

Keywords: reading, escapism, elitism, existentialism, young adult, self-help, graphic novels, library

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Elitism, Escapism and Existentialism:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Reading Habits of Indian Young Adults

Reading is the core of knowledge and educational success. The available literature has affirmed several scientific benefits of reading, including mental stimulation of the brain, slowing down mental disorders like Alzheimer's, stress reduction, knowledge acquisition, vocabulary expansion, memory enhancement, improved focus, entertainment, and tranquillity (Beveridge, 2009).

Specifically, for depression, the Get into Reading group programme has helped patients across all levels of well-being (Billington et al., 2010). Social well-being improved by increasing personal confidence and minimizing social isolation. Mental well-being was enhanced by increased concentration and interest in new learning. Emotional and psychological well-being surged when self-awareness and the ability to express issues of self and being were bettered.

However, the general population has marked a surge in the reluctance to engage in reading as a hobby. According to consumer research (McClelland & Powell, 2021), only 53% of British adults have read a book in the past year. Merely 35% of the population can be grouped under heavy readers, mostly aged 55 and above, as those people who read a minimum of 10 books. 15–24-year-old teenagers and young adults comprise only 6% of heavy readers, making them 51% less likely than the average reader. This brings to our notice the importance of increasing reading habits within this population.

Another survey derived that Americans read an average of 14 books per year, with a 7% reduction in the number of books read since 2011 (Perrin, 2015). Surprisingly, young adults aged 18-29 were more likely to read books than their older counterparts. Besides, heavy readers were primarily women, whites, young adults and those with higher education

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

and income levels. Thus, the cultural differences posit the need for findings representing the Indian population instead of relying on foreign surveys.

A study on Korean students deduced a sharp decrease in reading volume after children transitioned from elementary to middle school (Han & Lee, 2021). 75% of the middle school participants in this experiment did not even read one book per week despite harbouring a positive attitude towards reading. Thus, a subjective attitude towards reading is different from the reading volume, so habits should be prioritized over preferences when checking students' performance on goal-oriented tasks.

The aforementioned studies point out the dying reading habit among the younger generation, who are also prone to existential crises characteristic of their lifespan stage prone to psychological, physical and social changes in development. A similar study on this topic has been conducted recently but in the form of a descriptive survey assessing the reading trends of Tamil law students during the COVID-19 pandemic (Suresh & Thanushkodi, 2022). Heavy use of social media, laziness, work/home burden, lack of motivation, and non-availability of resources were accepted as the reading challenges for these students. However, the findings cannot portray Indian young adults who fall outside this limited population. For instance, Tamil law students mentioned reading during the lockdown only for educational purposes, which does not explain the reading habits of non-student young adults nationwide. Reading interventions that support the typical Indian young adult may be introduced by investigating their attitudes towards and experiences regarding this activity.

Although the available literature has documented the decline in reading habits, the reasons behind this phenomenon and the attitudes of the population towards reading are yet to be ascertained. Thus, the current study aims to interpret common phenomenological themes from the qualitative responses of young adult Indian participants aged 19-24. The present study is the first of its kind to be conducted in India.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Method

Participants

10 Indian young adults aged 19-24 were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. There were five males and five females. 2 were employed graduates whereas the remaining 8 were undergraduate and postgraduate students. Participants hailed from Kerala, Delhi, West Bengal and Kashmir.

Table 1

The participants

Anonymised name (to protect identity)	Age	Sex
Alice	22	Female
Anusha	22	Female
Margaret	22	Female
Teena	19	Female
Trikshi	20	Female
Nabeel	23	Male
Ronak	19	Male
Sean	22	Male
Steve	24	Male
Sumit	24	Male

Procedure

The present study is conducted by Roldantz Global, a mind-behaviour studio in Kerala, India. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in English to collect data from the participants using audio recorders. It is recommended as a tool for interpreting the personal experiences of individual participants rather than generalizing with the majority and allows

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

two-way communication using open-ended questions for revealing sensitive issues (Rabionet, 2011). The interviewees were recorded using audio recorders and were encouraged to discuss their understandings of reading habits in the population based on an interview schedule.

Ethical considerations were followed, so participants were provided information sheets and consent forms prior to the interview and debriefing sheets upon completion. Verbatim transcripts were generated as raw data for the qualitative study, which were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Analytical approach

A qualitative approach was applied for this study as we did not plan to generalize or quantify the findings but rather the meanings made from the exclusive experiences of the interviewees (Clarke, 2009). IPA was applied for data analysis as it provides a phenomenological interpretation of the interviewees' subjective perceptions of their environment (Osborn & Smith, 2008). This method of data analysis seemed most appropriate for this study as we aimed to analyze the responses of Indian young adults. Besides, IPA perseveres to decipher the interviewees' perspectives and accepts mediation by socio-cultural factors (Shinebourne, 2011). Moreover, IPA follows interpretivism for its epistemological position and critical realism for its ontological position (Tuffour, 2017), which is suitable for this study.

The ten transcripts were individually scrutinized to generate codes which were grouped into emergent themes and subthemes. After repeated interpretations, a master table was produced with super-ordinate themes and subthemes encompassing the common content of the three transcripts. Extracts from the interviews were included in the analytic account. This procedure for performing IPA was retrieved from Shinebourne (2011).

Reflexivity

This topic meets my interest as I am a fellow Indian young adult and avid reader.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

From my interactions with my peers, I was dejected to find the decrement in reading habits within this population. I, too, had to reignite my passion recently in response to a decade-long reading slump. I wished to probe into the reasons behind my generation's decline in reading habits and attitudes towards this activity. I aim to control the judgments I may make by reminding myself that they are of different backgrounds from me and consequently have personalized experiences.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Findings

The current study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to focus on the personal experiences of university students who use smoking as a coping mechanism towards stress. Table 2 constitutes the superordinate themes and subthemes emerging from the analysis whose descriptions and interpretations are provided in this section.

Table 2

Superordinate themes and subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Attitudes towards reading	Pleasurable activity
	Social influences
	Reduction over time
Perceived benefits of reading	Existential value
	Escapism
	Cognitive advantage
	Control social media addiction
Impediments to reading	Time constraints
	Elitism
	Distractions

Attitudes towards reading

All ten interviewees harboured a positive attitude towards reading. The first overarching theme comprises 'pleasurable activity,' 'social influences,' and 'reduction over time' as the subthemes.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Pleasurable activity

The participants affirmed that they engaged in mainly reading for pleasurable purposes.

"I read books mostly for the pleasure part. I read academic books but only for exam purposes. I definitely read books as a hobby." (Triksi)

Triksi reads for pleasure unless course material is involved.

"I just feel like reading. As I said before, I think there's no other activity in this world that can expand you as reading... I also read to gain knowledge and, like, understand, get vocabulary. And sometimes, you know, there's, like, a popular book in town. And I also want to talk about it. So, I'll end up reading it. But at the same time, I feel like these are secondary things; the basic thing is that I enjoy reading. And that is why I read." (Alice)

Alice attributes reading as a pleasurable activity, although alternate benefits like knowledge and vocabulary are prevalent. Both Triksi and Alice attest reading as a hobby rather than a task.

Social influences

Participants agreed that social factors influence their reading habits. Only three interviewees were friends with fellow readers and felt pressured to "appear smart."

"I have, yeah, I have not forced myself to continue reading but maybe to pick up the book again and again, you know, to try it again? Yeah, I've done that. Especially because the book is, like, maybe wildly popular. So then, you have this feeling like why am I not? Like, something is wrong with me. So I try to get into it... maybe because I feel like, oh, you know, I'm not reading that much. That I'm not getting, you know, I'm not as enlightened as the others. So maybe that's a struggle to feel enlightened." (Anusha)

Anusha endures an inferiority when she discovers that she does not share the general public's taste, especially concerning non-fiction books for presumably intelligent readers. The

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

other participants pinpointed the limited prevalence of reading among their family and friends, affecting their reading patterns.

"If reading becomes a trend, people can recommend new books to me and improve my taste. My sister reads some books, and my mother reads motivational ones. They encourage me to read more books, which I sometimes do. My friends do not read. We do not see reading as fun when hanging out." (Ronak).

Ronak acknowledges the effect of social factors on his reading. Family members and peers can act as role models who promote reading habits.

"BookTubers are a thing. Booktalk is a thing. Bookstagram is a thing. And like, you see a lot of pages coming up solely based on the amount of books they've read, or they'll just post like, aesthetic pictures of books lying on the beds and read them. So that's a trend now. And also, it's, it's nice in a way, because people have started reading, from what I've seen, even those people who have never read books in their life." (Alice)

Alice suggests that social media can have a positive influence on the reading habits of the tech-savvy young adults in the form of subcommunities like BookTube, Bookstagram and BookTok.

Reduction over time

8 out of 10 participants stated that their reading consumption has reduced over the years.

"At that time, I don't know how many pages were Enid Blyton books and all, but they seemed like something I would take one month to read now. But back then it was like weekly two to three books and so on." (Anusha)

Anusha shares that she is presently unable to match her past reading speed.

"I think I read less now because I used to read one book daily. Now it takes 3-4 days to complete a book. If a book is very interesting, I take my time and complete it in 2 days..."

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

nowadays people like the fast culture, like fast food and fast travelling. Similarly, people want fast reading also. They just think that the film version is available, so why they should read the book. People now make movies over books, so they think watching the movie is equivalent to reading the book. They don't get the same experiences because in movies, they cut out some particular scenes which are the perfect ones, and in the book, you will get that. But people don't get these things. When a reader tells them you just missed that part, they say that it was not necessarily like that, leave it." (Triksi)

Triksi shares that a 'fast culture' is reducing the popularity of reading within her generation. She used to be a voracious reader who is now unable to spend as much time on this hobby.

Perceived benefits of reading

The next over-arching theme was 'perceived benefits of reading,' wherein the interviewees mentioned 'existential value,' 'escapism,' 'cognitive advantage', and 'control phone addiction.'

Existential value

Participants reported a temporary resolution of their existential crises and deriving meaning in life when reading books.

"I do miss reading books and having the sense of self-accomplishment after reading a book. Yes, I miss that." (Steve).

Steve confides that he reads comparatively less, due to which he is deprived of the resulting sense of self-accomplishment and resultant meaning-making.

"I don't think my life is going to get ruined because I didn't read, but it will get better." (Ronak)

Ronak attributes positive improvements in life as a result of reading.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

“Coming to self-help, I guess the Monk Who Sold His Ferrari by Robin Sharma is a good book. After reading this book, I saw changes in myself. I became more consistent while doing my work. I read this book in 12th grade and I scored more marks and achievements. It gave me a drive in life.” (Sean)

Reading motivational books helped Sean inculcate some existential value in life to strive for further accomplishments.

Escapism

The participants shared escapism from reality as a significant benefit of reading. They can forget about their difficulties and indulge in the content of the books.

"Reading makes me less anxious about the future. Like, I'm trying to find the course and join something, you know, for the post-graduation course, yeah, makes me less anxious of it, uh, you know. It's, it's kind of... now forty-five minutes or something, there will be a complete concentration of twenty minutes and I feel like, you know, escapism might be an understatement. It's like, yeah, escape. I'll be disconnected from whatever that's bugging me or whatever that that I should be anxious about." (Nabeel)

Nabeel reveals that reading provides a mode of escape from the anxiety and uncertainty regarding his postgraduate admission.

“You can escape into something, which is not here, which is like an 18th century Russian village, you're not going to find that anywhere else.” (Alice)

Alice appreciates how reading takes her into a universe different from her natural surroundings.

Cognitive advantage

Participants suppose that improved knowledge, vocabulary and attention span are some cognitive benefits of reading.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

“There is this part of my job where I have to write and you know, where my writing has to look good. Not specifically smart or anything, but it has to have a catchy, you know, that is that factor? So, I feel, sometimes I feel like maybe if I read a lot, I will get you know, better. Because I've been hearing it ever since I'm a child that, you know, reading improves your vocabulary and stuff.” (Anusha)

Anusha ascertains that reading improves vocabulary, which can support her in her writing job.

"Sometimes I feel with reading books we get more knowledge rather than scrolling through social media, so I think it is necessary to read books. We know our life, gather experiences from reading books. Also, we gather knowledge and learn from the literature how they have represented their thoughts." (Sumit)

Sumit believes that books present a more nuanced understanding of the world and provide more profound knowledge than digital media.

Control phone addiction

Reading provides the participants with an alternative activity over prolonged screentime.

"You know, to combat my phone addiction, I keep the phone away from my bed, then I keep a book over there. So when I wake up and when I go to bed, I read. I find it difficult to wake up and sleep... Like, uh. it's not a cure. Reading is not a cure for phone addiction and it's like a, you know, it's like a regulator for phone addiction. (Nabeel)

Nabeel uses reading to regulate his phone addiction and fix his sleep schedule.

Impediments to reading

Participants, despite enjoying reading, complained that several impediments interfered with their ability to fully dedicate themselves to this activity. These include 'time constraints,' 'elitism' and 'distractions.'

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Time constraints

Priorities and responsibilities like academics and work deadlines make it challenging for participants to engage in reading for pleasure.

"Because of the academic pressure. I don't get enough time to read and all other things." (Trikshi).

"Yeah, like when you've got other things to do then you kind of you don't prefer reading so much that it's not like in your priority." (Margaret).

Trikshi and Margaret fail to dedicate time to reading when they face more urgent tasks.

Elitism

Some participants preferred hard copies over reading online, making them cite reading as an elitist hobby.

"One factor would be that I'm still in a hostel away from my home, so I have a shortage of finance. Food and all the other expenses take a large chunk of money, so I try to get the remaining to buy books." (Sean)

"Reading can be just kind of elitist in some ways. If you have to, if you can afford a book and all that is good." (Anusha)

Anusha and Sean highlight how alternate expenses can overpower their interest in reading.

Distractions

Another impediment to reading comprised the distractions that interviewees had to fight in order to focus on the activity.

"I really love to read books. But it takes a lot of attention. There are so many distractions. So, I tend to stay on my phone a lot and scroll instead of reading so that I can make use of my time. So, I would really like to read more." (Teena)

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Teena finds her phone to be a major distraction that stands in the way of her reading.

“You know, the instant gratification, part that we get from our phones? I think, yeah, reading is a much more elaborate process. You have to read and then, the gratification is late, you know, when you get to know the suspense or something. But this phone is like, you know, you're entertained like every second. So, there's no need to even pick up a book in that case.” (Alice)

Alice believes that the instant gratification provided by phones can act as a distraction from reading.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Discussion

The present study endeavoured to review common themes among the reading habits of ten Indian young adults. IPA retrieved four prevalent themes among the interviewees: attitudes towards reading, perceived benefits, and impediments to reading.

Overall, the findings of this study are consistent with available literature. The interviewees maintained a positive attitude toward reading and acknowledged its benefits, which suggests that young adults need more support in combating the impediments to reading. The role of social influences in promoting this habit has been identified in the past but in the context of high school students (Merga & Moon, 2016), so the relevance of social media subcommunities is an added finding. Nevertheless, social networking sites can be a distraction (Dukper et al., 2018), leading to the interviewees using reading to control their phone addiction. As defined by previous surveys (McClelland & Powell, 2021), the young adult interviewees acknowledged the reduction in their reading time. Students who read for pleasure had higher scores than non-reading counterparts in English, mathematics, science, and history (Whitten et al., 2019), which supports the cognitive advantages cited by the participants of the present study. The existentialist and escapist values of reading are especially advantageous for young adults as, in this stage, they strive to secure their self-identities through their interactions with the world (Neupane, 2022). Elitism and time constraints pertain to the non-availability of resources that 464 law students in a similar Indian study revealed as their reading barriers (Suresh & Thanushkodi, 2022).

This research has made its place in literature as the first qualitative research in India to apply IPA for studying young adults' reading habits. Moreover, all participants were of a similar age group, with five participants of each sex, thus providing representative accounts. An added strength of this study is the inclusion of participants having employed or student status, presenting alternate perspectives on this topic. A shortcoming of this qualitative study

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

is that most of the participants were Keralites, which may affect the findings due to their high literacy rate.

Future researchers are advised to replicate this study with alternate populations to achieve implications for different age groups. For instance, interventions to improve the reading habits of school-going children can be designed. If interested in specifically studying the experiences of employees or students, the interview schedule could be modified accordingly to reveal more detailed explanations.

The findings of this study can be considered when devising relevant interventions for improving the reading habits of Indian young adults. Escapist and existentialist values of reading can be applied in mental health settings and positive psychology programmes, especially for the resolution of quarter-life crises experienced by young adults. As time constraints have been reported to impede reading, academic and organizational authorities can allocate a 'reading period' for young adults to profit from the benefits of reading. Elitism was cited as another impediment to reading, which emphasizes the need to publicize and restock libraries in this generation so that books are accessible to all. Electronic applications that control phone addictions or improve time management may be marketed to increase reading time spent. Besides, book clubs must be installed in communities, organizations and academic settings to improve social connectedness among young adult readers and promote this habit. There is also a need for further popularization of subcommunities like BookTok, Bookstagram and BookTube to make reading a trendier activity within this population rooted in technology.

Thus, the present study contributes to the extensive literature on reading habits and ensures societal value by promoting this beneficial habit in the current time and age.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Conclusion

Conducting IPA to determine the reading habits of Indian young adults aids the in-depth learning of their personal stories instead of using generalized scores relative to the population. The study has successfully highlighted the causes behind the decline in reading in this generation, the factors affecting its practice, and its perceived benefits. It is speculated that their accounts will prove helpful in designing interventions to implement literary advocacy among young adults.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

References

- Beveridge, A. (2009). The benefits of reading literature. *Mindreadings: Literature and psychiatry*, 17, 1-14.
- Billington, J., Dowrick, C., Hamer, A., Robinson, J., & Williams, C. (2010). *An investigation into the therapeutic benefits of reading in relation to depression and well-being*. Liverpool: The Reader Organization, Liverpool Health Inequalities Research Centre.
- Clarke, C. (2009). An introduction to interpretative phenomenological analysis: A useful approach for occupational therapy research. *British Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 72(1), 37-39.
- Dukper, K. B., Agyekum, B. O., & Arthur, B. (2018). Exploring the effects of social media on the reading culture of students in tamale technical university. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 9(7), 47-56.
- Han, D., & Lee, G. H. (2021). The Effect of Reading Habits in Elementary School Students on Reading Behavior in Middle School Students. *Science of Emotion and Sensibility*, 24(3), 61-70.
- McClelland, C., & Powell, J. (2021, March 12). Are people still reading physical books? *Kantar*. <https://www.kantar.com/uki/inspiration/sport-leisure/are-people-still-reading-physical-books/>
- Merga, M. K., & Moon, B. (2016). The impact of social influences on high school students' recreational reading. *The High School Journal*, 99(2), 122-140.

READING HABITS OF INDIAN YOUNG ADULTS

Neupane, S. (2022). *Determinants of existential crisis among young adults* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. Kathmandu University.

Osborn, M., & Smith, J. A. (2008). The fearfulness of chronic pain and the centrality of the therapeutic relationship in containing it: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 5*(4), 276-288.

Perrin, A. (2015, October 19). Slightly fewer Americans are reading print books, new survey finds. *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/10/19/slightly-fewer-americans-are-reading-print-books-new-survey-finds/>

Suresh, N., & Thanuskodi, S. (2022). A survey on reading habit of law students in tamil nadu during covid-19: a case study. *Library Philosophy and Practice, 1-11*.

Shinebourne, P. (2011). The Theoretical Underpinnings of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). *Existential Analysis: Journal of the Society for Existential Analysis, 22*(1), 16-31.

Tuffour, I. (2017). A critical overview of interpretative phenomenological analysis: A contemporary qualitative research approach. *Journal of Healthcare Communications, 2*(4), 1-5.

Whitten, C., Labby, S., & Sullivan, S. L. (2019). The impact of pleasure reading on academic success. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Graduate Research, 2*(1), 48-64.