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## Impact of Reels (Short Videos) on Attention Span among College Students: A Psychological Study

Dr.Nareshkumar D. Zala  
(Assistant Professor)  
Department of Psychology,  
D.N.P Arts and Commerce College Deesa

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### Abstract :

The proliferation of short-form video platforms such as Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts has revolutionized digital media consumption, especially among young adults. College students increasingly spend extensive time watching bite-sized videos, raising concerns about potential cognitive and psychological effects. This study explores the impact of frequent engagement with reels and short videos on the attention span of college students. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks such as Cognitive Load Theory and empirical findings, this paper examines associations between short-form video use and reduced sustained attention, fragmented focus, and academic challenges. The review further discusses mediating factors such as stress, sleep quality, and usage patterns. Findings suggest that heavy consumption of reels correlates with attentional deficits and may impair academic performance, highlighting the need for digital literacy and mindful media practices among students.

### Introduction :

In recent years, short-form videos have become a dominant force in social media, captivating global audiences with engaging, algorithmically tailored content. Platforms like Instagram Reels, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts deliver rapid bursts of visual information designed to retain users' attention through endless scrolling. For college students — a demographic marked by high digital engagement — this trend has reshaped leisure time and media use behaviors. While short videos provide entertainment and quick access to diverse content, psychologists and educators have raised questions about their impact on sustained attention, defined as the ability to maintain focus on a task over extended periods.

Attention is a cornerstone of academic success, influencing learning, memory, and complex problem-solving. As such, understanding how contemporary digital content affects attentional capacities is crucial. This paper synthesizes current research on the psychological effects of reels and short videos on college students' attention spans, linking theoretical insights with empirical evidence.



## Theoretical Framework

### Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory posits that the human cognitive system has limited working memory capacity. Tasks that impose excessive cognitive load can overload this system, impairing performance on tasks requiring sustained focus. Rapid, scrolling media—characteristic of short videos—present high information turnover with minimal processing time, potentially overwhelming cognitive resources and reducing the ability to maintain attention on demanding tasks such as studying or lecture listening (Sweller, 1988; cited in general cognitive theory).

### Reward and Arousal Systems

Short videos are engineered to deliver frequent rewards—likes, dopamine hits from engaging content, and novelty—activating the brain's mesolimbic pathways. Hebb's Arousal Theory and reward learning principles suggest that consistent exposure to high-stimulus content can rewire attentional priorities toward immediate rewards, undermining tolerance for boredom and slow-paced tasks. Over time, students may find deep focus activities less stimulating and harder to sustain.

### Empirical Evidence on Attention Span and Short Videos

#### Negative Correlation Between Short Video Use and Attention

A quantitative study exploring short-form video addiction among young adults found a moderate negative correlation between high exposure to short videos and attention span, suggesting that frequent engagement relates to lower ability to sustain attention. Stress partially mediates this relationship, though sleep quality did not significantly mediate effects in that study (RadhaPranathi & Jacob, 2025).

Similarly, research conducted on the broader effects of short-form media indicates that heavy use is associated with deficits in attention and inhibitory control, as revealed in a large systematic review encompassing nearly 100,000 individuals. These studies consistently link higher engagement with short videos to poorer focus and cognitive functioning.

### Attention Span and Academic Performance

Separate research focusing on undergraduate students found that frequent reel consumption significantly reduced attention span and impaired academic outcomes, even after controlling for other factors like study habits. This indicates that attention deficits associated with short video consumption may translate into measurable declines in academic performance.

Another study among vocational college students reported that participants watching short videos for 1–2 hours daily felt less concentrated during study tasks and acknowledged a



perceived impact on attention and overall study habits, suggesting a link between reel usage habits and attentional disruption.

## Attention Fragmentation and Cognitive Load

Research analyzing studies on short video impact shows that rapid context switching—jumping between brief clips—trains the brain for fragmented attention, making sustained engagement with longer tasks more difficult. Frequent shifts from one video to another may condition learners to anticipate instant stimulation, ultimately weakening sustained attention capacity over time.

## Mechanisms of Impact

Mechanisms underlying these effects include:

**Continuous Partial Attention:** Users develop a habit of monitoring multiple streams of information simultaneously, sacrificing deep focus for shallow engagement.

**Dopamine-Driven Reward Cycles:** Frequent rewards reinforce usage patterns that prefer rapid, novel content over prolonged tasks.

**Algorithmic Reinforcement:** Recommendation systems are designed to maximize engagement, increasing watch time and shaping habits.

## Psychological and Behavioral Consequences

Beyond attention deficits, short-form video consumption correlates with stress, anxiety, and disrupted sleep patterns — all factors that indirectly amplify cognitive challenges. Stress, for instance, partially mediates the negative impact on attention span, suggesting that psychological strain contributes to diminished cognitive control.

Excessive short video use, especially before sleep, has been linked to poorer sleep quality and later cognitive fatigue, reducing readiness for attention-intensive tasks such as studying or lecture participation. This aligns with broader evidence showing that heavy screen time at night disrupts circadian rhythms and impairs daytime cognitive performance.

## Moderating Factors and Individual Differences

Not all students experience these effects uniformly. Key moderating factors include:

**Usage Habits:** Purposeful and limited engagement is less harmful than compulsive scrolling.

**Self-Regulation:** Students with better self-control can mitigate attentional disruption.

**Content Type:** Educational short videos may be less detrimental than purely entertainment-focused content.



These individual differences underscore the importance of developing digital literacy and self-regulated media habits among college students.

## Discussion

The emerging patterns from multiple studies suggest a consistent association between widespread use of reels and short videos and weakened attention span among college students. While most findings are correlational — meaning causation cannot be definitively established — the consistency across diverse research designs strengthens the inference that heavy short-form video use is a risk factor for attentional challenges.

Theoretical models from cognitive psychology provide plausible explanations: the high information load and rapid stimuli inherent in short videos may exceed working memory capacity and condition users toward instant gratification and fragmented attention. In academic contexts, where sustained attention is required for comprehension, reflection, and deep learning, these effects may undermine educational outcomes.

## Conclusion

Short-form video platforms have redefined digital engagement, but their cognitive consequences warrant careful attention. Evidence suggests that frequent use of reels and similar content correlates with reduced attention span, fragmented focus, and impaired academic performance among college students. These effects appear mediated by psychological stress and reinforced through algorithmic design that promotes continuous engagement.

Recognizing these challenges is vital for educators, students, and policymakers. Strategies such as digital literacy education, mindful consumption habits, and structured device-free study periods can help mitigate the negative impact of short videos on attention. Further longitudinal and experimental research is needed to clarify causal pathways and develop targeted interventions.

## References (APA 7th Edition)

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