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Academic Reading Engagement and Associated Challenges among Second-Year Social Science and Humanities Undergraduate Students at the University of Gondar, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Academic reading engagement is a fundamental determinant of success in higher education. This study investigates the status of academic reading engagement and its related challenges among Ethiopian higher education, second-year undergraduate students. To address this goal the researchers employed a descriptive cross-sectional survey study design; a total of 200 students were also participated by a census sampling, with a response rate of 91.3%. Data were also collected through closed ended questionnaires and following the assumptions check, the collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the Friedman Test via IBM SPSS version 27. The findings reveal that overall academic reading engagement was relatively moderate (M = 2.98/4.00). Among the academic reading engagement dimensions, cognitive engagement reported as the most frequent (Mean Rank = 2.13), whereas social engagement was the least frequent (Mean Rank = 1.86). This difference was statistically significant, χ^2 (2) = 8.09, p = .018. Regarding perceived challenges, Emotional (Mean Rank = 2.73) and behavioral challenges (Mean Rank = 2.70) were significantly impactful than social barriers (Mean Rank = 2.05), χ^2 (3) = 39.01, p < .001. Based of the findings, the study concludes that students prioritize an independent academic reading engagement style. This lack of social interaction shows that collaborative reading is neither an established practice nor widely recognized as a viable strategy among students. Accordingly, the researchers suggested practical recommendations for instructors, university administrators, students, and researchers aimed to enhance a more integrated and resilient academic reading culture in the context of tertiary education.

Keywords: *academic reading, reading engagement, academic reading challenges*

Introduction

In the level of higher education, academic reading engagement serves as a primary determinant of student success. Reading is a lifelong activity helps college students gain a lot of information or knowledge, broaden perspectives, and develop essential skills. It also supports academic success while fostering a positive cultural and educational environment in

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universities (Legese, & Teshome, 2025; Wang et al., 2022). Unlike the foundational literacy of primary schooling, tertiary-level reading requires students to critically evaluate a vast array of complex, varying texts to construct a body of knowledge within their discipline (McGeown & Smith, 2023; Trowler, 2010; Yulia et al., 2020). Reading engagement is far more than the passive reception of information; it is an active and intentional process that sustains attention to achieve a deeper understanding of the material studied (Bridges et al., 2005; Guthrie et al., 2012; 2013; Kahu & Nelson, 2017). Scholars describe this engagement as a multidimensional construct comprising cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Guthrie & Klauda, 2014; Ng et al., 2012; Wu, 2019) and so far there is no unified standard. Cognitive engagement involves mental processes and metacognitive strategies such as summarizing and inferencing (Minda, 2019; Pressley et al., 1992); emotional engagement captures interest and enjoyment (Deneke, 2024; Reeve, 2012); behavioral engagement manifests as effort and time on task (Fredricks et al., 2004); and social engagement involves collaborative meaning-making with peers and teachers (Guthrie et al., 2012). In the area of reading engagement most studies measure only one or two types of student engagement (e.g., behavioral) and calls for investigating all **types** (social, cognitive, collaborative, behavioral, emotional) to better enhance learning performance **(**Johar et al., 2023). Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that students highly engaged across these four dimensions achieve significantly higher reading comprehension, critical thinking abilities, and overall academic performance (Lei et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022). As a result, improving reading engagement is not seen only as instructional goal but as a key policy input for educational success (Barber & Klauda, 2022).

However, the prior studies indicate that different contexts frequently shape and often inhibit these levels of engagement through distinct barriers (Fredricks et al., 2004). For example, Emotional (Motivational) barriers are usually emerging when students perceive texts as overly challenging; this may lead them to avoid deep processing (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). These challenges are compounded by cognitive and linguistic barriers, where the demand for higher-order thinking in university combined with the medium of instruction, poses a significant challenge for students with weak foundational literacy (Hermida, 2009). These challenges, often identified in early grades by USAID (2018) and

ANLAS (2020), manifest at the university level as poor metacognitive strategy use. Furthermore, in the current teaching and learning environment, behavioral barriers, like digital distractions, multitasking, and poor time management, can hinder the sustained effort of students required for academic reading (Junco, 2012). As students go through their academic journey, their concentration ability is usually challenged by an increasing number of distractions which decreases their learning efficacy. Finally, social and environmental barriers used as enduring institutional constraints. As stated by Minaye et al. (2024), inadequate library facilities, large class sizes, and a lack of academic support hinders literacy development. The result of this local study aligns with broader theoretical frameworks suggesting that systemic challenges directly inhibit opportunities for meaningful reading engagement (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2004).

Despite the critical role of reading engagement, a significant gap exists in the literature regarding these dimensions within Ethiopian higher education. Specifically the issue was note systematically investigated at the context of University of Gondar. While foundational reading is well-documented through assessments by the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and the Analysis of National Learning Assessments (ANLAS), there is insufficient inquiry into how these early deficiencies translate into disengagement at the tertiary level (USAID, 2018; ANLAS, 2020). Even the students' that enters university often arrives underprepared for the rigorous literacy demands of social science disciplines. Recent local studies show that university students lack a robust reading culture, usually needs simplified handouts over diverse academic texts (Legese & Teshome, 2025; Tekle & Nchindila, 2023). This was also acknowledged by the experience of we the researchers. While studies in Ethiopia have assessed broader student engagement (Minaye et al., 2024), reading motivation (Deneke, 2024; Wondimu & Admas, 2024), and specific reading strategies (Aman & Lemu, 2023; Hirpassa, 2019**;** Jobo, 2023; Minda, 2019), the multidimensional nature of academic reading engagement remains understudied at the university level. Prior studies have investigated pedagogical interventions such as flipped classrooms (Mengesha et al., 2024) and cooperative learning (Tadesse et al., 2024), but these do not explicitly measure engagement across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions. Furthermore, while the correlation between engagement and achievement has been confirmed at the

secondary level (Zenebe & Kebede, 2024), there is lack of empirical evidence on how university level students particularly those facing specific social, behavioral, cognitive and emotional challenges to engage with academic texts.

The findings of this study will contribute to the theoretical understanding of how Western-centric academic reading engagement frameworks apply to the Ethiopian context. Practically, it will provide university policymakers and instructors with evidence-based insights to address the reading culture gap, showing the ways of improving library facilities and academic support systems to foster more meaningful reading engagement (Gambrell, 1996; Guthrie et al., 2004; Legese and Teshome, 2025). Therefore, this study is designed to fill this empirical and contextual gap by focusing on second-year undergraduate students in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Gondar. While data could theoretically be collected from any batch, this study purposively focuses on second-year students due to institutional and developmental relevance. Logistically, they were the only available population; first-year students had not yet entered, the third-year group was off-campus, and fourth-year students exist only in specialized tracks (like, Film & TVE) due to the standard three-year social science curriculum. Pedagogically, having transitioned from common course into specialized disciplinary discourse, these students are uniquely positioned to reflect the institutional constraints and academic reading barriers face in resource-constrained settings (Ayalew & Meaza, 2021; Minaye et al., 2024; Tutturo et al., 2025). To file the stated gaps the researchers were specifically, aimed to assess the following questions:

Q1: What are the statuses of the students' academic reading engagement across the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions?

Q2: What are the major perceived barriers among cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or social dimensions that hinder students’ engagement with academic texts?

Methods

Research Design

Cross-sectional descriptive survey design and quantitative approach were employed in this study. This design enabled us to collect standardized data from a large population, and allowing the researchers to generalize findings related to student behavior. Quantitative data were collected using questioners to measure the participants' levels of academic reading engagement and the reading challenges they faced.

Participants

The study population was second year under graduate students from the College of Social Science and Humanities in University of Gondar. The College was selected based on the researchers' experience, because its academic nature is non-clinical and non-laboratory in contrast to natural science disciplines. The social sciences rely almost exclusively on extensive reading, textual analysis, and the evaluation of written arguments. Therefore, measuring academic reading engagement and challenges in this specific College provides a more critical reflection of student academic success than it would in a lab-based Colleges.

All the departments within the College were included. These departments are English, Amharic, Journalism, Ge'ez, History, Anthropology, Film and TVE production, Psychology, social work, Population, Civics, Criminology, Special need education, Sociology, Gender, DEMS, Geography and Population. To collect sufficient data, due to the relatively small number population size, a complete census sampling technique was employed. Data were collected from all students who are presented in class and provided consent. From a total of 219 second-year students, 19 were absent on the day of data collection. Therefore, the final participant sample comprised 200 (61 females, 139 males) with an average age level of 22 years. This represents a response rate of 91.3% of the total population.

Data Collection Instruments, Reliability, and Validity

The study employed two data collection tools- the Academic Reading Engagement Scale and Academic Reading Engagement Challenges Questionnaire. Each item of the instruments has scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly Agree*). The instruments have no neutral midpoint alternatives. This format was

deliberately chosen by the researchers to enhance the quality of validity. By its nature, the scale excludes a neutral midpoint, thereby compelling respondents to adopt a directional stance (Garland, 1991). This approach reduces social desirability bias by removing a safe option for non-committed respondents, ultimately yielding more discriminating and valid data (Johns, 2005, Kankaraš, & Capecchi, 2025, Krosnick, 1991). This was also acknowledged by the researchers live experience that some students are not interested to engage in such personal readings.

The data collecting tools were previously used by researchers. So, the Academic Reading Engagement Scale was adapted from McGeown and Smith (2023) and Whitaker (2003). The scale consisted of 28 items, and four dimensions of engagement: items 1-7 behavioral, 8-14 cognitive, 15-21 emotional, and 22-28 social engagements. The Academic Reading Engagement Challenges Questionnaire was also adopted from Guthrie (2004), Guthrie & Klauda (2008), Lee et al. (2021), and McGeown (2023), comprised 24 items having four dimensions of barriers to reading engagement, that are- items 1-6 measured cognitive, 7-12 emotional, 13-18 behavioral and 19-24 social challenges.

Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate internal consistency of the tools. The overall reliability of the Academic Reading Engagement Scale was .87, while the Reading Engagement Challenges Questionnaire remained .906, both indicating strong internal consistency. The reliability of behavioral, cognitive, and social sub reading engagement dimension were .626, .670, and .683 respectively. Based on Hair et al., (2019); Taber, (2018) these results are acceptable in exploratory research. The academic reading engagement challenges sub-dimensions showed stronger internal consistency. The reliability of cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social sub reading engagement challenge dimension were .724, .756 and .726, .843 respectively. However, after the preliminary analysis, the emotional reading engagement dimension was removed from the final data analysis due to its low reliability (.500). This decision by the researchers is used to better align with the study objectives.

The instruments were also assessed through content and construct validity measures. Primarily, content validity was checked through experts review. Three subject-matter experts evaluated the questionnaires using a structured checklist to ensure the representative nature of

academic reading engagement and challenges items. Based on their evaluations, the Content Validity Index (CVI) was calculated at .99 for instruments, demonstrating acceptable content validity.

To check Construct Validity, Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was employed to the academic reading engagement questionnaire. Prior to factor extraction, the suitability of the data was assessed using KMO. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy yielded a value of .790, which exceeds the recommended threshold of .60 (Kaiser, 1974), confirming that the sample size (N = 200) was adequate for meaningful analysis. Additionally, Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant (χ^2 = 1310.106, df = 378, $p < .001$), indicating that the correlations between items were sufficient to support EFA (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The subsequent EFA revealed factor loadings between .40 and .631. These loadings meet the established requirements for practical significance, ensuring that the items effectively measure the intended dimensions of academic reading engagement (Comrey, 2013; Hair et al., 2019; Henson & Roberts, 2006).

Similarly, EFA was conducted to verify the construct validity of the Academic Reading Challenges Questionnaire. The researchers' follow the same steps to check EFA. The KMO measure for this instrument was .887, indicating adequate sampling and suitable for factor analysis (Kaiser, 1974). Bartlett's Test of Sphericity also reached statistical significance (χ^2 = 1784.396, df = 276, $p < .001$). This confirms that the results are sufficient inter-item correlations (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). The analysis showed that factor loadings ranged from .40 to .684, which fulfills the criteria for construct validity. These results confirm that the questionnaire items are strong indicators of the challenges associated with academic reading (Comrey & Lee, 1992; Hair et al., 2019).

Data Collection Procedure

The study used two questioners to collect data from the respondents. Before data collection, the researchers gave clear orientation to the participants. The orientation contains the purpose of the study, voluntary nature of the participation, and the confidentiality of the data. The nature of the questioners that were planned to measure the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions of reading engagement and challenges were also presented

to the participants. By defining these categories prior to data collection, the researchers sought to minimize participant bias and ensure that the students' responses were directly controlled by the theoretical framework. The questionnaires were delivered during class time and took approximately 15–25 minutes. The collected data were saved safely, feed and processed using IBM SPSS v.27 software to investigate the participants' reading engagement status and the reading challenges faced.

Data Analysis

After the data were collected, the completeness of the questioners was checked. And it was feed in to SPSS version 27 for statistical analysis. The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential methods (Friedman Test). The selection of this non-parametric method was because of the violation of normality required by the alternative parametric technique of Repeated Measures ANOVA. Rather than trimming the data or applying mathematical transformations to force normality, which can compromise the original scale and meaning of the results, the decision was made to use rank-based methods to maintain the integrity of the original dataset.

As the mean Friedman test was significant, post hoc tests (pairwise comparisons) were needed to determine exactly which pairs of groups differ significantly. This was tested by using Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests for each pair of variables and applying a Bonferroni adjustment to the p-values. To analyze the effect size, Kendall's W test was also applied. The effect size was interpreted using Cohen (1988) benchmarks: r=.10 (Small effect), r=.30 (Medium effect), and r=.50 (Large effect).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns were addressed seriously in the course of research. Participants' anonymity was maintained since no personally identifiable information was gathered and their privacy was preserved. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and students were informed about their choice to withdraw at any time without incurring a penalty. The study had a minimal risk for participants. Verbal informed consent was obtained by reading a script to the participants before distributing the questionnaires. The consent was documented in the researchers' notes book including the date, and the class representatives' phone number. These

were done from 18/04/2025 to 20/04/2025 by the data collector at their classroom during their class time. Ethical approval by the relevant university boards had also been established before data collection, which ensured that all the research processes conformed to institutional and ethical standards. The University research approval committee provided an approval letter at 16/04/2025 by Ref.No. VP/RC/95/362/2025

Results and discussion

Results

The first question of the study was, `To what extent do students report academic reading engagement across the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social dimensions?` Accordingly, the data examined using descriptive statistics and Friedman test. The table below demonstrates about students reading engagement measure in all three dimensions (behavioral, cognitive, and social), that indicates relatively high reading engagement among participating students. Moreover, cognitive engagement ranked the highest followed by behavioral (Table 1 and 2).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Results of the Friedman Test for academic reading Engagement Measures

Measure	n	25th percentile	50th percentile (Median)	75th percentile	Mean rank
Behavioral engagement	200	2.71	3.00	3.29	2.01
Cognitive engagement	200	2.86	3.00	3.39	2.13
Social engagement	200	2.57	3.00	3.29	1.86

Note. A Friedman test indicated that engagement levels differed significantly across the three dimensions, $\chi^2(2) = 8.09$, $p = .018$.

As shown in Table 1, the median score for all three engagement dimensions was 3.00 on a 4-point scale, indicating a consistently high level of self-reported engagement across behavioral, cognitive, and social aspects. Despite this overall consistency, the distributions varied slightly. Cognitive engagement showed the most positive response pattern, with the

highest 25th percentile (2.86) and 75th percentile (3.39), placing it as the top-ranked dimension (Mean rank = 2.13). Behavioral engagement followed closely (Mean rank = 2.01), while social engagement had the lowest distribution (25th=2.57, 75th=3.29) and was ranked lowest (Mean rank = 1.86).

Table 2

Friedman Test and Post-Hoc Comparisons for reading Engagement dimensions

Dimensions	Friedman Mean Rank	Pairwise Comparison	Z	p	r (effect size)
Cognitive	2.13	vs. Social	-2.46	.014	.17
Behavioral	2.01	vs. Cognitive	-1.44	.151	.10
Social	1.86	vs. Behavioral	-1.20	.231	.08

Note. Friedman test: $\chi^2(2, N = 200) = 8.09$, $p = .018$, Kendall's W = .020. Bonferroni adjusted $\alpha = .0167$.

In table 2, a Friedman test revealed significant differences in reading engagement across dimensions, χ^2 (2, N = 200) = 8.09, p = .018, with a small overall effect size (Kendall's W = .020). The small aver all effect size indicating a **very** small level of agreement among participants and a negligible practical difference **b**etween the dimensions. Therefore, while a statistically detectable pattern exists, the ranking of dimensions should be interpreted with considerable caution. Post-hoc Wilcoxon tests with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = .0167$) showed that only the comparison between cognitive and social engagement was statistically significant, Z = -2.46, p = .014, with a small effect size (r = .17). The other pairwise comparisons were non-significant with small effect sizes (behavioral-cognitive: Z = -1.44, p = .151, r = .10; behavioral-social: Z = -1.20, p = .231, r = .08).

The second basic question of the study was ` What are the major perceived barriers among cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or social dimensions that hinder students' engagement with academic texts?` The data related to the question were analyzed by descriptive statistics and Friedman test. The analysis demonstrates that, emotional and behavioral challenges were the most significant and common barriers to academic engagement. Friedman test revealed significant difference between each challenges and confirm that social barrier were markedly lower than others (Table 3 and 4).

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics and Results of the Friedman Test for Challenges Hindering Academic reading Engagement

Measure	n	25th percentile	50th percentile (Median)	75th percentile	Mean rank
Emotional Challenges	200	2.00	2.50	3.00	2.73
Behavioral Challenges	200	2.00	2.50	3.00	2.70
Cognitive Challenges	200	2.00	2.50	3.00	2.53
Social Challenges	200	1.50	2.17	2.83	2.05

Note. A Friedman test indicated that the perceived challenges differed significantly across the four dimensions, $\chi^2(3) = 39.01$, $p < .001$.

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for perceived barriers to reading engagement. Emotional and Behavioral challenges shared identical distributions, each with a median of 2.50 and interquartile ranges from 2.00 to 3.00. These were identified as the most frequently encountered barriers with the mean ranks of 2.73 and 2.70, respectively. Cognitive challenges followed closely, with a median of 2.50 and a mean rank of 2.53. In contrast, Social challenges were considerably lower, with a median of 2.17 and a 25th percentile of just 1.50. This pattern suggests that social barriers are the least problematic for students, as reflected in the lowest mean rank of 2.05.

Table 4

Friedman Test and Post-Hoc Comparisons for Challenges Hindering Academic reading Engagement

Dimensions	Friedman Mean Rank	Pairwise Comparison	Z	p	r (effect size)
Emotional	2.73	vs. Cognitive	-1.37	.171	.07
		vs. Behavioral	-0.81	.418	.04
		vs. Social	-6.17	.000*	.31
Behavioral	2.70	vs. Cognitive	-0.81	.420	.04
		vs. Social	-5.96	.000*	.30
Cognitive	2.53	vs. Social	-4.35	.000*	.22
Social	2.05				

Note. Friedman test: $\chi^2(3, N = 200) = 39.01$, $p < .001$, Kendall's W = 0.065, Bonferroni adjusted alphaf = .0083. Asterisks (*) indicate significant differences at the adjusted alpha level.

In Table 4, a Friedman test revealed significant differences in the perceived challenges hindering academic reading engagement across the four dimensions, $\chi^2(3, N = 200) = 39.01$, $p < .001$, with a small overall level of agreement among participants (Kendall's $W = .065$).

Post-hoc Wilcoxon signed-rank tests with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = .0083$) showed that social challenges were significantly lower than all other dimensions; emotional ($Z = -6.17$, $p < .001$) with a medium effect size ($r = .31$), behavioral ($Z = -5.96$, $p < .001$) with a medium effect size ($r = .30$), and cognitive ($Z = -4.35$, $p < .001$) with a small to medium effect size ($r = .22$).

In contrast, the differences between the top three challenges were not significant with very small effect sizes: emotional-cognitive ($Z = -1.37$, $p = .171$, $r = .07$), emotional-behavioral ($Z = -0.81$, $p = .418$, $r = .04$), and behavioral-cognitive ($Z = -0.81$, $p = .420$, $r = .04$). These results indicate that while emotional, behavioral, and cognitive factors are the primary hindrances to reading engagement, social factors are perceived as significantly less problematic.

Discussion

Dimensions of Academic Reading Engagement

The primary purpose of the present study was to investigate the extent to which students report academic reading engagement across the cognitive, behavioral, and social dimensions. The study found that, significant differences in reading engagement across dimensions, the comparison between cognitive and social engagement was statistically significant but the other pairwise comparisons were non-significant**.** As Abao et al. (2016); Amerstorfer, et al. (2021); Delgado et al. (2018); Krause and Coates (2008); Mihret, & Joshi (2025) and Zhang et al. (2014**)** state that, understanding how students interact with academic texts is crucial, as reading engagement constitutes a fundamental component of knowledge construction, academic success, and sustainable learning.

The findings of this study indicate a prioritization of cognitive engagement (mean rank = 2.13), characterized by deep processing and self-regulatory strategies. This result is parallel with the study finding by Fredricks, et al. (2004), who contend that cognitive effort is

crucial for achieving academic mastery. Similarly, this fining is also confirmed by the study of Minda et al. (2019), who reported that Ethiopian university students actively use diverse reading strategies to go through academic challenges. The predominance of internal cognitive effort suggests a heightened metacognitive awareness among students regarding the strategic demands in the context of tertiary education. This is also strengthened by Jobo (2023), who noted an emergent awareness of reading strategy utilization among students enrolled in Communicative English Skills course across Ethiopian higher education institutions.

However, social reading engagement reported the lowest mean rank (Mean Rank = 1.86), signifying a clear deficiency in collaborative reading task among students. This finding is aligned with Tadesse and Getachew (2024), who found that while students in Ethiopian public universities frequently demonstrate behavioral presence, meaningful social engagement continued a significant challenge. The Friedman test showed a statistically significant difference in engagement levels across the three dimensions, $\chi^2(2) = 8.09$, $p = .018$, suggesting that student engagement is not uniformly distributed across cognitive, behavioral, and social domains.

Following the descriptive result, post-hoc analysis clarified this disparity, revealing that the only statistically significant difference existed between cognitive and social engagement ($Z = -2.46$, $p = .014$, $r = .17$). However, this finding is considerably tempered by a very low Kendall's W coefficient ($W = .020$), which indicates substantial individual variability in responses. This indicates that participants did not consistently agree on which form of reading engagement was most prevalent. As such, rather than identifying cognitive reading engagement as the primary form of reading, it is more accurate to describe it as having a marginally higher average ranking, albeit with limited consensus among the study participants.

This evidence shows reading is practiced in a disjointed and individual approach to literacy instruction. As Legese and Teshome (2025) reported, a deficient institutional reading culture frequently restricts students to isolated study habits, thereby preventing the cultivation of a vibrant social discourse around texts. Despite Guthrie and Klauda's (2014) focuses on the role of social motivation in fostering academic achievement, our data do not support this reality, the students in this group remained primarily fixed to traditional, individualistic

reading practices, a systemic concern that has recently been highlighted by Tadesse et al. (2024).

Interestingly, the absence of a significant difference between behavioral engagement (mean rank = 2.01) and cognitive engagement ($p = .151$) suggests that students' outward actions, such as effort and persistence, are generally parallel with their mental efforts. This is supported by the study of Appleton et al. (2008) showing that, the multidimensional view where engagement dimensions reinforces one another. Despite a moderate overall median of 3.00, the study by Tekle and Nchindila (2023) revealed that these behaviors are frequently limited to meeting immediate academic requirements rather than reflecting a more expansive, self-directed reading culture.

Challenges Hindering Academic Reading Engagement

Assessing the perceived challenges that hinder students from reading engagement with academic texts across cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or social dimensions was the last objective of the current research. Accordingly, the findings reveal that emotional challenges (mean rank = 2.73) and behavioral challenges (mean rank = 2.70) constitute the most substantial obstacles. A Friedman test further confirmed that the intensity of these barriers varies significantly across dimensions, $\chi^2(3) = 39.01$, $p < .001$. This is aligned with the study of Fredricks et al. (2004), who argued that the behavioral and emotional facets of engagement are inherently interconnected. The result of this study is also aligned with the conclusions of Yulia et al. (2020), who identified affective engagement as a critical antecedent to academic success. Likewise, Deneke (2024) reports that internal psychological factors are significantly associated with the reading comprehension outcomes of Ethiopian EFL students. Tutturo et al. (2025 also show that Emotional disengagement often undermines students' behavioral persistence, thereby obstructing deep comprehension and hindering effective career preparation.

Cognitive demands (mean rank = 2.53) emerged as a substantial barrier, ranking as statistically similar with emotional and behavioral barriers. This result is parallel with Hermidas (2009) claim that university level reading necessitates a level of critical

engagement that demands high mental effort to many students. This inherent difficulty is significantly compounded by a pronounced deficit in metacognitive strategy awareness, a documented challenge within the Ethiopian student population (Jobo, 2023). As a result, without integrating strong high-order thinking reading strategies like self-regulation and prior knowledge, students struggle to bridge the critical gap between surface and deep level understanding. This gap prevents the transformative engagement required for academic success (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Minda, 2019).

Our finding diverge from previous studies that, social challenges (mean rank = 2.05) were perceived as the least significant problematic dimension. This finding suggests that while social environments can improve reading engagement (Guthrie & Humenick, 2004), their absence does not represent the primary obstacle to students' reading practices. Instead, difficulties in reading engagement appear to stem predominantly from internal factors. This aligns with the study of Tadesse and Getachew (2024) who found that an individual's emotional and cognitive state plays a more critical role at the level of reading tasks. However, the study by Legese and Teshome (2025) caution that students' capacity to identify these internal barriers remains contingent upon institutional support.

Moreover, the low level of concordance among participants (Kendall's W = .065) points to pronounced individual variability in students' perceived difficulties, despite the top three barriers sharing a median value of 2.50. This variability likely stems from students' diverse educational backgrounds and disparate levels of prior academic preparation (Aman & Lemu, 2023). As ANLAS (2020); Tadesse et al. (2024) and Tekle and Nchindila, (2023) observe, navigating complex instructional landscape is further compounded when prior exposure to active learning and institutional support systems differ markedly across regions.

In general, this study shows the fundamentally individual and cognitively demanding nature of academic reading at the university level, wherein relatively moderate reading engagement is heavily inclined toward individual mental exertion rather than collaborative scholarly practice. Although students exhibit a clear metacognitive awareness of the strategic demands inherent in higher education, their academic progress is markedly impeded by internal affective and behavioral challenges, most notably anxiety, boredom, and a lack of

persistence. Surprisingly, a critical gap is evident in the social dimension of literacy, which remains conspicuously absent from the student experience, functioning neither as a utilized resource nor as a perceived obstacle. This individual approach compels students to understand complex cognitive tasks in isolation, underscoring the need for institutional interventions that transcend the mere instruction of individual strategies. Instead, efforts must be directed toward cultivating a socially supported reading culture that fosters emotional resilience alongside academic competence.

Conclusion

The current study concludes that while university students maintain a relatively high level of academic reading engagement, the experience is characterized by a significant imbalance and a distinct lack of social connection. Students prioritize cognitive strategies, reflecting a strong individual commitment to the strategic demands of higher education. But, this mental investment is frequently undermined by internal barriers. Emotional challenges, specifically anxiety and boredom, emerged as the most prominent obstacles, suggesting that the struggle to engage with academic texts involves a complex combination of psychological distress and the demanding nature of high-level cognitive processing.

A notable paradox emerges regarding the social dimension of academic reading in the current study population. Although social engagement is the weakest aspect of students' actual reading practices, students themselves do not perceive this lack as a significant obstacle. This shows that collaborative reading is largely absent from their understanding of what the reading process entails. The study result shows the isolated academic survival rather than collaborative intellectual growth.

In the end, the finding of relatively high reading engagement scores suggests that, students are meeting basic requirements while understanding emotional challenges on their own. The low level of agreement (Kendall's W = .065) shows that although the social gap reflects a systemic trend, the specific emotional and cognitive obstacles students face are highly individualized. This variability likely stems from inconsistent academic preparation within the Ethiopian context. This low consensus implies that interventions must be flexible enough to account for diverse perspectives and individual needs, rather than targeting a single

primary factor. To foster high-intensity, self-directed engagement, institutions must shift their focus from individual decoding toward socially integrated and emotionally resilient reading practices. This approach can help transform academic literacy into a shared and sustainable endeavor. How it could be is the next question for further investigation.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations for instructors, universities, students, and researchers are proposed:

- As the difference between cognitive and emotional dimensions is low, instructors should adopt an integrated socially mediated pedagogy using peer-led seminars, literature circles, and strategy modeling to holistically address students' interrelated cognitive and emotional burdens while minimizing isolated reading practices.
- It is better that, the University must cultivate a collaborative literacy environment by institutionalizing reading clubs and communal study centers, supported by affective resilience workshops designed to address the specific emotional stressors of reading anxiety and boredom.
- Students should engage in collaborative reading through informal peer study groups, not to replace but to transform individual cognitive strain into a shared intellectual experience that offers psychological support.
- The researchers' want to see that, the efficacy of social reading approaches in reducing affective barriers should investigate deeply by others, to provide the empirical evidence required to shift institutional policies toward integrated literacy.

Limitations of the study

It is important to acknowledge some methodological constraints of the study to practitioners and common audiences. As the study lack the longitudinal nature of the findings. The delimitation of the study may also affect the generalizability of our findings to other colleges, students at different academic levels, and other similar Ethiopian institutions. In addition, the reliance on self-reported approach of data collection may introduce biases related to respondents' perceptions and honesty. Students might have over or under-reported

about their feelings. A cross-sectional quantitative nature of the study has also limits to show causality, which may not show changes over time. It is also limited in its ability to explain the underlying reasons and motivations behind these trends. Except acknowledging limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the reading engagement levels and its associated challenges of students at the University of Gondar.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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