



READING HABITS OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN AFRICA: A SCOPING REVIEW OF TRENDS, DETERMINANTS, AND EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Reading is a foundational literacy practice through which secondary school learners access subject knowledge, build language proficiency, develop academic confidence and participate in wider social life. Across Africa, however, concerns persist that adolescents read mainly for examinations, rely heavily on short digital content and have uneven access to functional libraries, print materials and supportive home reading environments. This scoping review maps recent evidence on the reading habits of secondary school students in Africa, with attention to publication trends, reading behaviours, determinants, educational outcomes, challenges and research gaps. The review was guided by PRISMA ScR reporting principles and recent JBI scoping review guidance. Journal articles, reports and repository records published from 2016 to 2025 were identified through Google Scholar, ERIC, AJOL, DOAJ, institutional repositories and journal websites. Sixteen studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa and Zimbabwe met the inclusion criteria and were synthesised descriptively and thematically. Findings revealed that the evidence base is growing but remains uneven, with a strong concentration in Nigeria and limited comparative, longitudinal and intervention research. Across studies, students read most frequently for examinations and academic tasks, while recreational reading is weaker and highly dependent on motivation, access, gendered preferences, parental support, teacher encouragement, library services, peer influence and digital media use. Positive reading habits are consistently linked with academic achievement, language development, comprehension, self-directed learning and critical literacy, while social media distraction, examination pressure, weak libraries, poverty and poor home literacy environments constrain reading development. The study concludes that strengthening adolescent reading in Africa requires an ecosystem response that integrates library renewal, classroom reading routines, parent engagement, digital reading literacy, student-centred text selection and national literacy policies that treat reading for pleasure as a serious educational investment.

Keywords: Academic achievement; Adolescent literacy; Africa; Digital reading; Educational outcomes; Reading culture; Reading habits; School libraries; Scoping review; Secondary school students;



Introduction

Reading is one of the most consequential learning behaviours in secondary education because the curriculum becomes increasingly text-dependent as learners move from basic literacy to disciplinary literacy. Thus, Nwagwu (2025) reports that a secondary school learner who reads regularly is not merely decoding words. Such a learner is building vocabulary, encountering models of grammar, expanding background knowledge, acquiring subject terminology and practising the sustained attention required for independent study. In this sense, reading is both a school skill and a life capacity. It supports examination success, but it also enables learners to interpret public information, participate in civic life, engage with digital knowledge and imagine futures beyond immediate social boundaries.

Recent international evidence provides a sobering background for any African review of adolescent reading. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017) estimated that more than 617 million children and adolescents worldwide were not achieving minimum proficiency in reading and mathematics. The World Bank and partner agencies later reported that learning poverty was especially severe in Sub-Saharan Africa, where 86% of children could not read and understand a simple text by the end of primary school before the COVID-19 disruption (World Bank et al., 2022). Although these figures focus largely on primary and age ten benchmarks, they have direct relevance for secondary schools. Students who enter secondary education without secure reading fluency often experience cumulative difficulty in English, literature, social studies, science and examination-oriented subjects.

The transition from primary to secondary schooling therefore does not remove the reading problem rather it often makes the problem more visible. At secondary level, learners are expected to read longer texts, extract arguments, compare sources, analyse questions, summarise content and write extended answers. Where reading habits are weak, students may become dependent on teachers' notes, memorised summaries, past questions or short digital snippets. Such strategies may temporarily assist examination preparation, but they do not necessarily cultivate deep comprehension, independent judgement or lifelong learning.

African studies published in the past decade, such as Adigun and Aramide (2024), Akande and Oyedapo (2018) and Bamidele (2020), show that the problem is not simply whether students can read, but also concerns what they read, how frequently they read, why they read, where they read, which media they use, who supports their reading and how reading relates to educational performance. For example, Bamise and Akande (2021) found that most public secondary school students in Osun State, Nigeria, were short-duration daily readers, while Bamidele (2020) reported that senior secondary students in Ogun State were hindered by social media, television and radio programmes. In contrast, Molotja and Themane (2018) showed that a structured reading bag strategy could encourage learners in South African secondary schools to use reading strategies more actively.



These findings show that adolescent reading is best understood as an ecosystem rather than as a single personal habit. The ecosystem includes family resources, school libraries, teachers, text availability, language of instruction, peer norms, examination pressure, digital technologies and broader community attitudes toward reading. Where the ecosystem is supportive, reading can become a daily practice of meaning-making and personal development. Where the ecosystem is weak, reading may become narrow, irregular and largely instrumental.

Conceptualising reading habits

Reading habits refer to the relatively consistent ways in which learners choose, access, engage with and sustain reading across academic and non-academic contexts. Rather than being limited to the amount of time spent reading, the construct is multidimensional and is commonly measured through indicators such as reading frequency, reading duration, types of materials read, purpose of reading, reading attitude, reading motivation, preferred medium and reading environment (Balan et al., 2019; Davidovitch & Gerkerova, 2023). This means that a learner who reads textbooks daily for school assignments, newspapers weekly for current awareness and novels during leisure time demonstrates a broader and more regular reading habit profile than a learner who reads only examination past questions shortly before tests. Reading habit therefore reflects not only how long students read, but also how regularly they read, what they read, why they read, where they read, the format through which they read and the level of intentionality with which they approach reading. In this sense, strong reading habits are best understood as sustained, purposeful and diverse reading practices that support comprehension, knowledge acquisition, academic engagement and lifelong learning (OECD, 2011; Mullis & Martin, 2019).

Reading culture is a broader concept because it refers to the social environment in which reading is valued, modelled, resourced and rewarded. A school with a reading culture will not treat reading as an occasional activity reserved for English lessons. It will provide books, timetable for library access, make reading visible in classroom talk, reward voluntary reading, train teachers to guide comprehension and encourage students to discuss texts. A home reading culture may include parents who read, siblings who share books, family discussion of stories, access to newspapers and a belief that reading is worthwhile beyond examinations. Otieno and Hesbon (2021) illustrate the family dimension by showing a significant association between parental involvement and reading culture among secondary students in international schools in Rwanda.

Reading engagement is related but more psychological and behavioural in that it involves motivation, attention, persistence, strategic processing, emotional involvement and social interaction around texts. Lee et al. (2021) emphasise that reading engagement research is concerned not only with whether learners read, but also with what engaged reading means, how it is measured and how it connects to literacy development. In the present review, reading engagement is treated as a mechanism linking determinants to outcomes. Motivation, access and support make



sustained reading more likely; sustained reading then contributes to comprehension, vocabulary and achievement.

Reading frequency and reading preference also require careful interpretation. Frequent reading does not automatically indicate broad or deep reading if the materials are limited to textbooks or past questions. Conversely, recreational reading should not be dismissed as non-academic. Global reviews of reading for pleasure show that voluntary reading can support personal, educational and social benefits when it is sustained and meaningful (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). In African secondary schools, the challenge is to integrate academic reading and recreational reading so that examination success and lifelong reading dispositions reinforce each other rather than compete.

Reading habits among adolescents in Africa

The African literature portrays adolescent reading as contextually diverse but structurally patterned. Nigeria has the largest number of recent studies in the present corpus, with evidence from Ogun, Osun, Oyo, Ondo and Nsukka contexts. These studies repeatedly report the influence of examination pressure, digital media, gendered reading preferences and access to reading materials (Akande & Oyedapo, 2018a; Babarinde et al., 2018; Bamidele, 2020; Bamise & Akande, 2021; Nwagwu, 2025). Ghanaian studies add evidence on gender variation and the relationship between reading habits and academic performance (Ameyaw & Anto, 2018, 2019). Evidence from Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa and Zimbabwe highlights the role of libraries, parental involvement, guided reading and school resource quality (Molotja & Themane, 2018; Muthee & Wamae, 2021; Nzara & Saurombe, 2024; Otieno & Hesbon, 2021; Thage et al., 2021).

The findings are not uniform since some students read for more than one hour daily, especially when school structures or academic aspirations support reading. Other students read very little outside compulsory schoolwork. Some studies show female students reporting more favourable attitudes toward reading, while others show boys favouring examination materials and past questions (Ameyaw & Anto, 2019; Bamise & Akande, 2021). Digital media also plays an ambivalent role because it can widen access to texts and learning resources, but it can also displace sustained reading when it is dominated by entertainment, chatting or short form content (Akande & Oyedapo, 2018a; Nwagwu, 2025).

Language is another important African context since many secondary students learn through English, French, Portuguese or Arabic as official or instructional languages, while their home languages may differ. This linguistic situation increases the importance of reading support because comprehension difficulties may reflect vocabulary, syntax, background knowledge and classroom pedagogy rather than lack of effort. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) argue from South African evidence that teachers need stronger understanding of reading comprehension instruction. Their argument is relevant across multilingual African systems where secondary students are expected to use reading as a vehicle for learning across the curriculum.

**Statement of the problem**

Existing African studies on secondary school students reading habits are fragmented across countries, disciplines and publication outlets. Some are published in library and information science journals, others in education journals, and others appear in institutional repositories. The fragmentation makes it difficult to see continental patterns or to identify which determinants are consistently reported. It also limits the ability of policymakers, school librarians and teachers to base interventions on a consolidated evidence map.

There is also the problem of imbalance in methods and geography such that the available literature is dominated by descriptive surveys and small case studies, while longitudinal, experimental and comparative research remains scarce. Nigeria is strongly represented, but evidence from Francophone, Lusophone, North African and many Central African countries is limited in accessible English-language publications. As a result, the evidence base risks being mistaken for the continent as a whole when it actually reflects particular national and local research concentrations.

The relationship between reading habits and educational outcomes presents another concern since many studies assert that reading is important for academic achievement, but fewer explain the pathways through which reading habits affect outcomes. The field therefore needs a synthesis that connects behaviour patterns, determinants and outcomes in a coherent framework. This review responds to that need by mapping recent African evidence and identifying actionable gaps.

Objective of the review

The broad objective of this scoping review is to map and synthesise recent literature on the reading habits of secondary school students in Africa, with specific attention to publication trends, patterns of reading behaviour, determinants of reading habits, educational outcomes and gaps for future research. The review does not attempt a statistical meta-analysis because the included studies vary substantially in design, measures, countries and outcomes. Instead, it provides a structured, policy relevant and practice-oriented synthesis that can inform schools, librarians, teachers, parents, researchers and literacy policymakers. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. examine trends in research on reading habits of secondary school students in Africa from 2016 to 2025.
2. identify reported patterns of reading behaviour among secondary school students.
3. explore individual, family, school, technological and socio-cultural determinants influencing students reading habits.
4. examine educational outcomes associated with reading habits.
5. identify evidence gaps and future research directions.

Review questions

The review provided answers to the following questions:



1. What are the publication trends regarding reading habits of secondary school students in Africa?
2. What reading behaviours and patterns are reported in the literature?
3. What factors influence reading habits among secondary school students?
4. What educational outcomes are associated with reading habits?
5. What gaps exist in the literature and what future research is needed?

Methodology

Research Design

This paper adopted a scoping review design. This design was considered appropriate because the subject is broad, conceptually diverse and methodologically heterogeneous. The aim of the review was not to estimate a pooled effect, but to map the extent, range and nature of available evidence on the topic. Studies in this area differ in terms of country, school context, sample size, research design, measurement instrument, population characteristics and outcome focus. A scoping review was therefore suitable for identifying what is already known, how the subject has been studied, the major patterns in the literature and the gaps that still require further investigation. The review was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta Analyses Extension for Scoping Reviews, PRISMA ScR, and the Joanna Briggs Institute, JBI, guidance for scoping reviews. These frameworks were used because they support transparent reporting of the review rationale, eligibility criteria, information sources, search strategy, study selection, data charting and synthesis. In line with these principles, the review process involved the identification of relevant studies, removal of duplicates, screening of titles and abstracts, full text assessment and final inclusion of eligible studies.

Articles published between 2016 and 2025 were identified through four major academic databases and two supplementary information sources. The academic databases were Google Scholar, ERIC, African Journals Online, AJOL, and the Directory of Open Access Journals, DOAJ. The supplementary information sources were institutional repositories and selected journal websites. These sources were deliberately selected because they provided broad and complementary coverage of the literature. Google Scholar was used because it indexes a wide range of scholarly materials across disciplines, including journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports. ERIC was selected because of its strong focus on education related research and its relevance to studies published in educational journals, policy reports and research papers. AJOL was included to strengthen the African evidence base and reduce the risk of excluding studies published in African journals. DOAJ was selected because it provides access to peer-reviewed open access journals from different countries and disciplines. Institutional repositories were searched because they often contain theses, dissertations and locally relevant studies that may not be indexed in major academic databases. Selected journal websites were also searched to capture relevant articles from specialised journals that may not have appeared in the other sources during the database search. The selection of these databases and information sources was therefore based on their relevance to the subject area, disciplinary coverage, geographical spread, accessibility and ability to capture both



international and African based studies. Their combined use helped to minimise database bias and improve the breadth of evidence included in the review.

A total of 335 records were initially harvested from the six databases and information sources. Of these, 130 records were retrieved from Google Scholar, 62 from ERIC, 49 from AJOL, 38 from DOAJ, 31 from institutional repositories and 25 from selected journal websites. This means that the initial 335 records were derived from all six sources used in the search process. These records formed the initial pool of studies before duplicate removal and eligibility screening. After duplicates were removed, the remaining records were screened by title and abstract. Studies that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded, while potentially relevant studies were assessed in full text before the final selection of eligible studies was made.

The PRISMA ScR flowchart presents the process followed in identifying, screening, assessing and selecting studies for inclusion in the scoping review. A total of 335 records were initially identified from six databases and information sources. These comprised 130 records from Google Scholar, 62 from ERIC, 49 from African Journals Online, 38 from the Directory of Open Access Journals, 31 from institutional repositories and 25 from selected journal websites. After the initial search, 68 duplicate records were removed, leaving 267 records for title and abstract screening. At the screening stage, the 267 records were assessed against the review focus and eligibility criteria. Following this process, 182 records were excluded because they were not sufficiently relevant to the review objectives. The remaining 85 reports were sought for full text retrieval, but 6 reports could not be retrieved. Consequently, 79 full text reports were assessed for eligibility. After full text assessment, 48 reports were excluded for reasons such as lack of direct relevance to the review focus, wrong population or setting, publication outside the 2016 to 2026 timeframe, non-empirical article type, insufficient methodological detail, duplicate or overlapping publication and unavailable full text. In total, 31 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final scoping review. The study selection process is presented in Figure 1.

Review framework

The review framework comprised five operational stages of defining the review questions, identifying relevant evidence sources, selecting eligible studies, charting data from each study and collating results through descriptive and thematic synthesis. A consultation stage was not formally conducted because the present review is a desk-based evidence synthesis, but the recommendations section translates findings for key stakeholder groups. The final reporting structure follows the pattern of a formal systematic review article, including abstract, introduction, methodology, results, discussion, recommendations, conclusion, references and appendices.

**Study selection process**

Records were screened through a sequential process that began with an assessment of titles and abstracts to determine their relevance to secondary school reading habits, reading culture, or related literacy practices, after which duplicate entries and studies that were clearly outside the scope of the review were removed. The remaining full-text articles were then examined against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, with particular attention to study context, target population, research focus, publication type, and availability of verifiable bibliographic information. Sources were retained only when their publication details, DOI, or stable web link could be confirmed, thereby strengthening the traceability and reliability of the review evidence. This screening process produced sixteen studies that were suitable for thematic synthesis, while international reports were used mainly to provide contextual background and were not coded as country-level empirical studies unless they contained directly relevant data on students' reading outcomes.

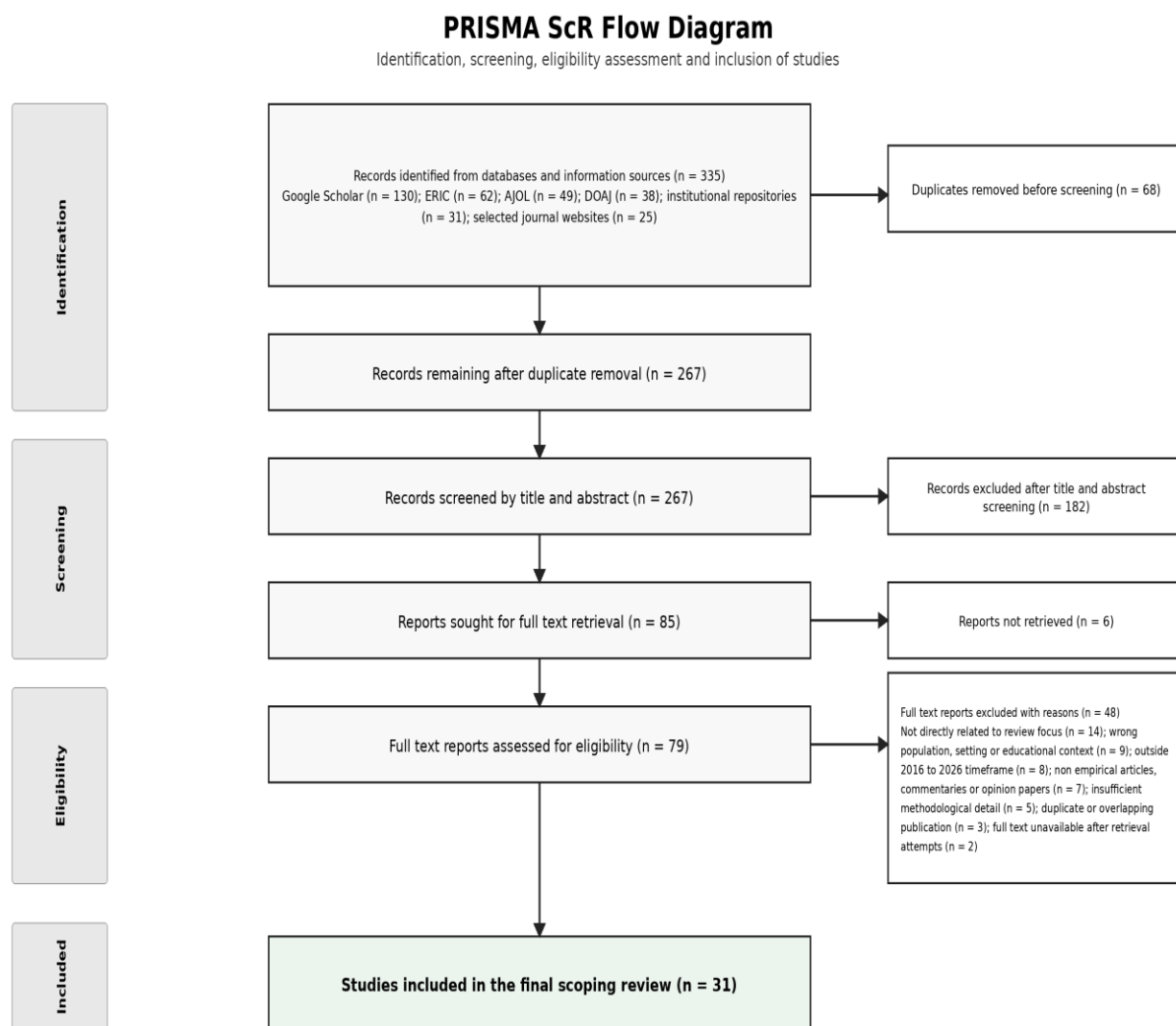


Figure 1. PRISMA ScR flowchart showing the identification, screening, eligibility assessment and inclusion of studies in the scoping review.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart for studies selection on reading habits of secondary school students in Africa

Data extraction process

Data were charted into a structured matrix. The extraction variables were author, year, country, title, publication outlet, study aim, design, sample or evidence source, data collection method, reading behaviour variables, determinant variables, educational outcome variables, major findings, limitations and policy or practice implications. The extraction form is reproduced in Appendix C. Where findings were numerical, the key reported percentages or associations were extracted. Where findings were qualitative, the main themes and illustrative claims were extracted.



Data analysis and synthesis

The review used descriptive analysis and thematic synthesis. Descriptive analysis summarised the distribution of studies by year, country, region, design and thematic focus. Thematic synthesis grouped findings into five domains of reading behaviour patterns, determinants of reading habits, educational outcomes, challenges and evidence gaps (See Figure 2 and 3). A narrative synthesis was then developed to explain relationships across the domains. Because measures were not standardised across studies, no meta-analysis was conducted. The focus remained on mapping the field and producing a coherent framework for future research and intervention.

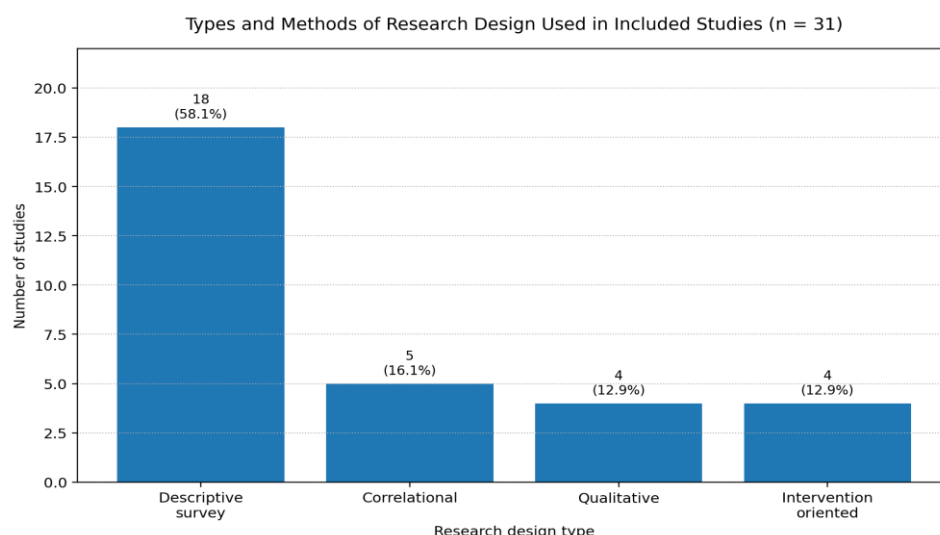


Figure 2: Types of descriptive analysis used for the review

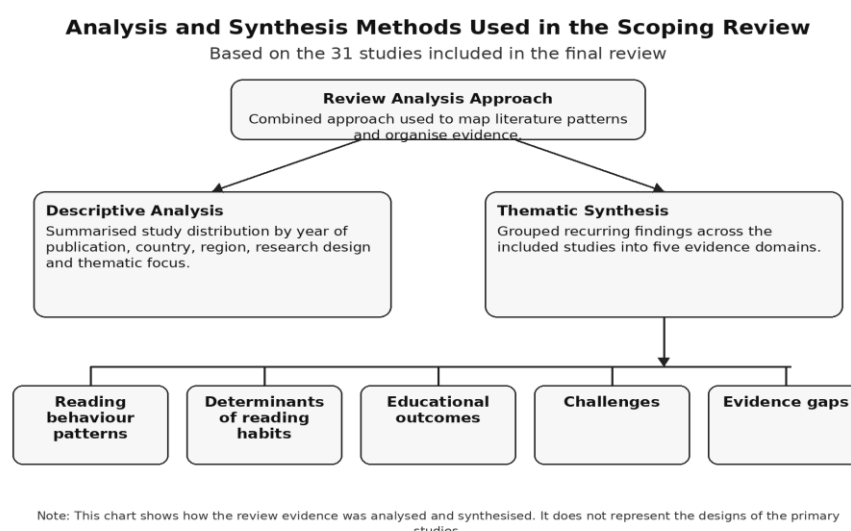


Figure 3: Analysis and synthesis used in the scoping review



Results and Interpretations

Characteristics of included studies

Sixteen African studies met the inclusion criteria which covers Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa and Zimbabwe. Nigeria accounts for the largest share of studies, followed by South Africa and Ghana. This distribution indicates both the visibility of Nigerian scholarship on reading habits and the under representation of several African regions in accessible English language literature. Studies from North Africa, Central Africa and Lusophone Africa were not prominent in the verified corpus, which is an important geographic gap.

The methods were dominated by descriptive surveys, with a smaller number of correlational, qualitative and intervention-oriented studies. Survey instruments commonly measured reading time, reading materials, reading preferences, reading purpose, library use and perceived barriers. Qualitative studies provided contextual evidence about school libraries and reading environments. Intervention studies, particularly reading bags and guided reading, demonstrated that structured school actions can influence learners' reading strategies and proficiency (Molotja & Themane, 2018; Thage et al., 2021).

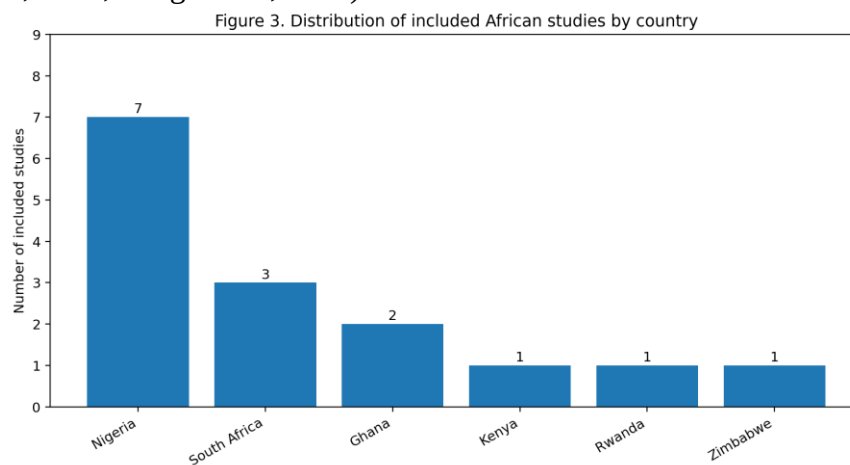


Figure 4: Distribution of included African studies

Trends in reading habits research in Africa

The temporal trend indicates a notable increase in studies examining reading habits from 2018 onward, a pattern that appears to be influenced by multiple converging factors. Growing concerns regarding the decline of reading culture emerged as digital technologies and social media became increasingly integral to adolescents' daily routines, altering the way they accessed and engaged with text. Concurrently, school libraries and researchers in library science began to frame reading culture as an outcome that could be systematically measured, evaluated, and enhanced within educational settings, leading to a surge in empirical investigations. Additionally, global awareness of the learning crisis, compounded by disruptions to schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic, renewed scholarly and policy attention on foundational reading skills and the promotion of independent learning, further contributing to the rise in published research on adolescent reading practices.



Geographically, the strongest cluster is West Africa, especially Nigeria and Ghana. Nigerian studies cover several states and themes, including social media, gender differences, public secondary school reading habits, electronic media and digital fluency. Ghanaian evidence focuses on gender and academic performance. East African evidence is represented by Kenya and Rwanda, while Southern African evidence includes South Africa and Zimbabwe. The absence of many countries does not prove that research is absent; rather, it indicates that accessible, traceable, English language studies were not easily retrieved within the present evidence window.

Thematic trends also show a movement from general concern about poor reading culture toward more specific determinants. Earlier studies in the corpus frequently emphasise poor reading culture, lack of materials and examination pressure. More recent studies examine digital fluency, social media, parental involvement and the functional condition of school libraries. Nwagwu (2025), for instance, connects reading habit with computer literacy, internet use, social media engagement and academic achievement, which signals a more integrated view of reading in the digital age.

Reading behaviour patterns among secondary school students

The dominant reading behaviour across studies is academic reading. Students read textbooks, teachers notes, past questions, examination materials and subject specific content because these materials are directly connected to assessment. In Bamise and Akande (2021), boys were more likely to read past questions and solutions, while girls were more likely to read textbooks and teachers notes. This suggests that reading purpose is shaped by examination strategies as well as gendered study practices. Academic reading is valuable, but when it becomes the only recognised form of reading, it may narrow students exposure to vocabulary, genre diversity and voluntary exploration.

Reading duration varies substantially in that Bamise and Akande (2021) reported that 81.4% of surveyed students in Osun State were short duration readers, reading zero to one hour per day, while 18.6% were daily long time readers. Bamidele (2020), by contrast, found that many public senior secondary students in Ogun State spent between one and two hours reading daily and preferred reading at home. These differences may reflect state context, class level, school type, measurement differences and variations in home or school support.

Recreational reading is present but uneven since students may read novels, magazines, newspapers, religious materials, comics, sports content or online resources, but such reading is often less structured and less valued than examination reading. Ameyaw and Anto (2018) show that students recognised the importance of reading, yet home environment and access constraints limited consistent practice. Studies repeatedly imply that pleasure reading needs institutional support. It is not



enough to instruct students to read; schools must make attractive texts available and create time, space and social encouragement for voluntary reading.

Digital reading is now unavoidable in the reading habit literature. Smartphones, internet access and social media platforms expose students to information constantly, but the quality and depth of that reading differ from sustained engagement with books or long form academic texts. Akande and Oyedapo (2018a) and Babarinde et al. (2018) treat electronic media as a major influence on students reading habits. Nwagwu (2025) provides a more nuanced account by showing that computer literacy and selective internet use may support academic achievement, while excessive social media engagement can have negative effects. The implication is not that digital media should be rejected. Rather, digital reading must be guided, purposeful and integrated into literacy instruction.

Language of reading is under analysed in the corpus, even though it is crucial in Africa. Many students read for school in English, while their strongest oral language may be a local language. This can affect comprehension, motivation and material preference. Studies from South Africa are particularly important because they address English second language learners and comprehension instruction (Molotja & Themane, 2018; Pretorius & Klapwijk, 2016; Thage et al., 2021). Future research should examine how mother tongue literacy, language of instruction and access to multilingual reading materials shape secondary students reading habits.

Determinants of reading habits

Individual factors include motivation, attitude, self-efficacy, reading confidence, gender and perceived usefulness of reading. Students who believe that reading improves grades, language competence and future opportunities are more likely to read. However, motivation is not purely internal because it is cultivated by success experiences, interesting materials, teacher encouragement and peer validation. Gender findings should be interpreted cautiously because Ameyaw and Anto (2019) found more positive attitudes among female students in a Ghanaian junior high school, while Bamise and Akande (2021) found gender differences in reading purpose and materials in Nigeria. These findings point to socially shaped preferences rather than fixed biological differences.

Family factors include parental education, parental modelling, availability of books at home, family income, homework monitoring and communication about reading. Otieno and Hesbon (2021) found that parental involvement was significantly associated with reading culture in Rwandan international schools. This finding resonates with broader literacy theory such that students are more likely to read when reading is normalised at home and when parents provide encouragement, materials and routine. However, poverty, caregiver workload and low adult literacy can limit family support. Interventions should therefore avoid blaming parents and instead provide practical home reading strategies that can work in resource constrained households.



School factors are central because teachers influence reading habits through text selection, questioning strategies, feedback, modelling and classroom routines. Pretorius and Klapwijk (2016) argue that teacher knowledge of reading comprehension is critical in South African classrooms. Thage et al. (2021) demonstrate that guided reading can enhance proficiency among English second language learners. School libraries is also important since Muthee and Wamae (2021) show that library hours, book clubs and teacher or librarian support can promote reading culture in Kenya. Nzara and Saurombe (2024), however, caution that libraries do not promote reading simply by existing; they must contain relevant resources, be functional and be managed by qualified personnel.

Technological factors operate in two directions of internet access, digital libraries, educational websites and e books can widen access to reading materials. Yet unregulated social media, gaming, short videos and constant notifications can reduce sustained attention. The most useful interpretation is therefore one of digital balance. Nwagwu (2025) shows that reading habit, computer literacy and internet use can be considered together when predicting achievement. Thus, schools should teach students to use devices for purposeful reading, annotation, vocabulary development and research, while also teaching self-regulation and time management.

Socio cultural factors include peer influence, community reading norms, religious and language practices, public library availability, book affordability and the prestige attached to reading. In communities where students rarely see adults reading or where books are scarce, reading may appear to be only a school obligation, because peer groups can either weaken or strengthen reading habits. Book clubs, reading circles and student-led discussions can transform reading from a solitary academic task into a socially meaningful practice. The included studies suggest that the development of reading culture requires coordinated action across learners, homes, schools, libraries and communities.

Educational outcomes associated with reading habits

Academic achievement is the most frequently reported outcome associated with reading habits. Nwagwu (2025) found that reading habit had a strong positive association with academic achievement among public secondary school students in South-West Nigeria. Ameyaw and Anto (2018) similarly linked reading habits to academic performance in a Ghanaian senior high school context. These findings align with the logic that students who read regularly encounter more vocabulary, retain content better, understand questions more accurately and develop stronger written expression.

Literacy development and language proficiency are also recurring outcomes. Reading exposes students to vocabulary, sentence structures, discourse patterns and subject specific language. For English second language learners in South Africa, guided reading and explicit comprehension support are particularly important because reading proficiency in the language of instruction affects performance across subjects (Thage et al., 2021). Molotja and Themane (2018) further suggest



that reading strategies can be developed through structured approaches that provide access to texts and encourage regular practice.

Critical thinking and independent learning are less frequently measured directly, but they are important implied outcomes. Students who read diverse materials learn to compare ideas, infer meaning, recognise evidence, evaluate claims and build background knowledge beyond the immediate lesson. Reading for pleasure can also support imagination, empathy and identity development. Global reviews of reading for pleasure indicate that voluntary reading has relevance for education and personal development (Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). African secondary education policy should therefore avoid treating pleasure reading as a luxury. It is part of the foundation for independent learning and human capability.

The relationship between reading habits and outcomes is not automatic. It depends on text quality, comprehension, language support and reading purpose. A student may spend time with text without deep understanding if vocabulary and background knowledge are weak. Conversely, a short but focused reading session with discussion, annotation and teacher support may produce more learning than longer passive reading. The field therefore needs more outcome studies that measure not only time spent reading but also reading quality, comprehension strategy use and transfer to subject performance.

Identified challenges affecting reading habits

One significant challenge concerns inadequate library provision. Evidence from a Zimbabwean study by Nzara and Saurombe (2024) illustrates that some schools maintained libraries that were largely unused because the resources were outdated, irrelevant, or the facilities were non-functional. This underscores that the mere presence of a library room does not guarantee meaningful reading support. Effective school libraries require current, engaging, and age-appropriate materials, trained staff, scheduled access, and integration with classroom instruction to foster literacy development. Limited access to reading materials presents another obstacle, as economic constraints prevent many families from purchasing books, magazines, newspapers, data bundles, or digital devices. Even when materials are available, they may not align with students' interests, language proficiency, or curriculum requirements. Learners benefit most from graded, culturally relevant, and engaging texts that facilitate success and enjoyment, turning reading into a rewarding activity rather than a compulsory task.

Examination-oriented learning also poses challenges, as many African secondary school systems place strong emphasis on terminal examinations. This emphasis often channels students toward rote memorisation, past questions, and condensed notes at the expense of broad reading experiences. While exam preparation is necessary, its dominance can promote shallow learning strategies that support recall but fail to develop comprehension, critical interpretation, and independent knowledge construction. Digital distraction represents a further difficulty. Social media platforms and other electronic media frequently compete with traditional



reading, diverting students' attention (Akande & Oyedapo, 2018a; Bamidele, 2020; Nwagwu, 2025). Effective policy responses should avoid moral panic and instead focus on digital reading education, teaching students to search, evaluate, and read long-form texts, annotate effectively, manage notifications, and differentiate recreational scrolling from purposeful educational engagement.

Finally, weak reading culture within homes and communities limits literacy development. In environments where adults do not model reading, public libraries are scarce, and books are expensive, students encounter fewer opportunities to internalise reading as a routine practice. Addressing this challenge requires structural and cultural interventions, including family literacy campaigns, community reading spaces, renewal of school libraries, and public messaging that frames reading as valuable for employability, citizenship, creativity, and overall well-being.

Evidence gaps identified

The review highlights several critical gaps in the existing evidence base on reading habits among African secondary school students. Geographic coverage is limited, with many countries, particularly Francophone, Lusophone, North African, and Central African contexts, underrepresented or absent from the literature. Methodologically, the field is dominated by descriptive surveys, whereas longitudinal studies, quasi-experimental designs, ethnographies of reading practices, and mixed-method intervention evaluations are scarce, restricting the capacity to draw causal or nuanced inferences. Theoretical development is also limited, as many studies employ the concept of reading culture without clearly articulating the mechanisms through which cultural factors shape reading behaviour.

Policy-related analyses are underdeveloped, with few investigations examining the influence of national curriculum policies, library regulations, textbook procurement processes, or digital education strategies on students' reading habits. Digital literacy and engagement constitute another evidence gap, with limited research exploring e-books, online libraries, mobile reading applications, artificial intelligence tools, digital annotation, and the distinction between shallow digital exposure and sustained digital reading. Outcome evidence remains constrained; although academic achievement is frequently discussed, studies rarely employ robust achievement measures, account for relevant control variables, or incorporate longitudinal tracking. Measures of critical thinking, independent learning, civic literacy, and wellbeing are infrequent. Future research in Africa should move beyond whether students read to examine what types of reading produce specific outcomes, for which groups, under what conditions, and through which mechanisms.

Discussion

Overview of major findings

This scoping review shows that reading habits among African secondary school students are shaped by an interaction of personal motivation, family support, school resources, teacher practice, digital media and socio-cultural conditions. The



evidence base is sufficiently consistent to confirm that regular reading matters for academic and literacy outcomes, but it is not yet sufficiently broad or methodologically strong to support continent wide causal claims. The strongest conclusion is that adolescent reading should be treated as an educational ecosystem. Students are more likely to read when they have access to relevant materials, supportive adults, structured time, meaningful purposes and social encouragement. A second major finding is that academic reading dominates the student reading profile. This reflects the high stakes nature of secondary education in many African countries. Reading is often tied to passing examinations, completing assignments and preparing for tests. The danger is not academic reading itself, but the narrowing of reading to examination survival. Students who read only past questions and notes may pass certain tests but remain underprepared for higher education, employment and civic life that require interpretation, research and judgement.

Trends and evolution of reading habits research in Africa

The field appears to be moving from general descriptions of poor reading culture toward more analytical work on determinants and outcomes. Earlier studies emphasised poor reading culture, social media distraction and the absence of reading materials. Later studies increasingly connect reading with parental involvement, digital fluency, library functionality and specific interventions. This evolution is positive because it encourages practical solutions. However, the field still requires stronger theory and more rigorous designs. The Nigerian dominance in the corpus is both a strength and a limitation. It offers multiple local insights and a basis for comparing state level findings, but it also risks skewing the continental picture. Africa has diverse school systems, languages, economies and reading traditions. Evidence from one country cannot stand for all. Future scoping reviews should include French, Portuguese and Arabic search terms and should partner with regional scholars who can access local databases and repositories.

Factors shaping reading habits among secondary school students

The determinants identified in the review operate at multiple levels. At the learner level, motivation, confidence and gendered reading purposes becomes important while at the family level, parental involvement and home literacy resources matter. At the school level, teacher support, library quality, reading programmes and peer structures matter just as at the technology level, digital fluency and media self-regulation are important. The socio-cultural level reveals reading norms, affordability and community infrastructure as evidently prevalent. These factors should not be treated separately. For example, a motivated student may still struggle to read if the school library has outdated books and the home has no quiet space. Similarly, a school with a library may fail to build reading culture if teachers do not integrate library use into lessons.

The evidence also suggests that interventions should be student centred in that students should participate in selecting reading materials, discussing books and creating reading communities. Muthee and Wamae (2021) show that school librarians, teachers, library hours and reading groups can support a reading culture.



This points to a practical model in which reading is built into school life through timetabled practice, social interaction and accessible resources.

Reading habits and educational outcomes

The relationship between reading habits and educational outcomes is supported across the corpus but requires careful interpretation. Regular reading can improve academic achievement by strengthening vocabulary, comprehension, content knowledge and written expression. Nwagwu (2025) provides recent quantitative evidence linking reading habit to academic achievement in public secondary schools. Yet achievement is affected by many other variables, including teacher quality, socioeconomic status, school resources, prior learning and language proficiency. Future research should therefore use stronger designs that isolate the contribution of reading habits while recognising the wider educational context. Reading also has outcomes beyond examination performance because it can cultivate curiosity, independent learning, empathy, critical interpretation and lifelong learning dispositions. These outcomes are central to education, but they are less frequently measured because they are harder to quantify. A narrow achievement lens may undervalue recreational reading, library use and student choice. The review therefore supports a balanced approach of academic reading for subject success and voluntary reading for broader literacy and personal development should be advanced together.

Implications for schools and educational systems

Schools should treat reading as a whole school responsibility rather than as the sole duty of English teachers. Science, social studies, mathematics, business studies and vocational subjects all require reading. Subject teachers should therefore teach students how to read diagrams, word problems, textbook explanations, historical sources, practical manuals and examination questions. Reading across the curriculum can reduce the false division between literacy and subject learning. School leaders should also protect time for reading. Library periods, silent sustained reading, guided reading groups and book discussion sessions should be embedded into the timetable. The evidence suggests that reading habits are unlikely to develop where reading is always postponed until after school or treated as optional. Secondary schools should also use diagnostic reading assessments to identify struggling readers early and provide targeted support rather than assuming that all adolescents have mastered reading.

Implications for school libraries and librarians

The review strongly supports the centrality of school libraries, but it also shows that library provision must be functional. A library without relevant books, trained personnel, opening hours and curricular integration is unlikely to change reading behaviour. Nzara and Saurombe (2024) show that outdated resources, lack of qualified personnel and inadequate funds can make school libraries ineffective. Conversely, Muthee and Wamae (2021) show that library hours, study groups and librarian involvement can promote reading culture. School librarians should be positioned as literacy partners rather than book custodians. Their work should



include reader advisory services, book displays, reading challenges, orientation sessions, digital source training, support for reluctant readers and collaboration with teachers. Where full time librarians are not affordable, education authorities should provide cluster library support, mobile libraries, teacher librarian training and digital resource hubs.

Implications for literacy policy in Africa

African literacy policy should extend beyond early grade reading. The global learning poverty agenda is essential, but secondary school reading requires equal attention because weak reading skills continue to affect adolescents and because secondary education is a gateway to higher education, employment and civic participation. National policy should therefore include adolescent literacy frameworks, secondary school library standards, minimum book to learner ratios, digital reading resources and teacher professional development in disciplinary reading. Policy must also address equity such that rural schools, low-income urban schools, refugee serving schools and schools teaching through second languages may require additional support. Without equity measures, reading interventions may benefit already advantaged students most. Public investment in school libraries, community libraries and open educational resources can reduce the gap between students who can buy books and students who cannot.

Comparison with global literature

The African evidence aligns with global reading research in several ways. International reviews show that motivation and engagement are central to literacy development, and that reading for pleasure has educational and personal value (Lee et al., 2021; Vogrinčič Čepič et al., 2024). The African evidence similarly highlights motivation, access, family support and school environment. However, the African literature places stronger emphasis on structural constraints such as weak libraries, poverty, language of instruction and examination pressure. The comparison also shows that digital reading is not simply a technological issue. High device access does not guarantee deep reading since globally and in Africa, students need guidance to move from digital exposure to purposeful digital reading. The distinctive African challenge is that digital platforms may be expanding faster than libraries and reading programmes, creating a risk that students gain connectivity without the sustained literacy practices needed to benefit from it.

Future research directions

Future research should prioritise comparative African studies that use shared instruments across countries. This would allow researchers to compare reading frequency, purpose, library access, digital reading and outcomes in more meaningful ways. Longitudinal studies are also needed to track how reading habits develop from lower secondary to upper secondary school and how they affect examination performance, retention and transition to higher education. Intervention research should test reading programmes under realistic school conditions. Possible interventions include reading bags, guided reading, library hour reform, book clubs, student-selected texts, mobile library access, digital reading platforms and parent



reading workshops. Studies should measure not only whether students liked the intervention but whether reading duration, comprehension, vocabulary, academic performance and voluntary reading changed over time. Researchers should also develop stronger theory. A useful future model would combine sociocultural literacy theory, self-determination theory and ecological systems thinking. Such a model would recognise that reading is motivated by autonomy, competence and relatedness, but also constrained or enabled by home, school, technology and policy environments.

Conclusion

This scoping review mapped recent evidence on reading habits of secondary school students in Africa from 2016 to 2025. The review found that research is growing but uneven, with Nigeria strongly represented and many African regions underrepresented. Students' reading behaviours are often dominated by textbooks, notes and examination materials, while recreational reading is weaker and dependent on motivation, access, family support, school libraries, teacher encouragement and peer culture. Digital media is a double-edged influence, capable of expanding access but also capable of distracting students from sustained reading. The review also found that positive reading habits are associated with academic achievement, literacy development, language proficiency, critical thinking and independent learning. However, the evidence is mainly descriptive and correlational. The field requires stronger designs, broader geography and better measurement of outcomes beyond examination scores. The review contributes to the literature by consolidating fragmented African evidence into a structured framework of trends, behaviours, determinants, outcomes, challenges and gaps. It also presents a conceptual framework and thematic map that can guide future studies. For practice, the review shows that improving reading habits requires more than telling students to read. It requires materials, time, motivation, library access, teacher support, family involvement and digital self-regulation. Reading habits among African secondary school students are not declining or improving in a uniform way. They are being reshaped by examinations, digital media, school resources, family practices and wider social change. The key policy lesson is that reading culture cannot be produced by exhortation alone. It must be resourced, modelled, scheduled, celebrated and connected to students' lives. If African secondary schools strengthen both academic and recreational reading, they can improve examination outcomes while also preparing young people for lifelong learning, informed citizenship and creative participation in society.

Recommendations

1. Policy makers should adopt national adolescent literacy policies, fund school libraries, create minimum resource standards, support local publishing and integrate digital reading platforms into public education
2. Schools should implement timetable for reading periods, establish book clubs, monitor reading progress, provide quiet reading spaces and make reading a whole school responsibility
3. School librarians are to develop reader advisory services, book displays, reading challenges, digital source training and collaborations with subject teachers



4. Teachers should teach comprehension strategies explicitly, model reading, assign diverse texts, guide students in reading subject materials and balance examination reading with broader reading.
5. Parents should provide home reading routines where possible, discuss books and school texts, reduce avoidable distractions and encourage children to read for interest as well as examinations.
6. Researchers should conduct longitudinal, comparative, mixed method and intervention studies across underrepresented African regions and languages.

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