

**The Impact of Short-Form Video Consumption on Attention Span, Memory Retention, and Academic Performance Among Undergraduates of State Universities in Sri Lanka.**

**RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

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**ABSTRACT**

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# 01.Reserch Tittle.

Impact of Short-Form Video Consumption on Cognitive Functions among Undergraduates in Sri Lankan State Universities.

# 02.Background Study

Nowadays, the short-form video platforms, including Tik Tok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, play a central role in the media consumption of young people in the modern digital environment. The videos are between fifteen and sixty seconds long, and they are made to capture the attention immediately, as they have rapid scenes-switching, bright images, catchy sound, and personalization with the help of algorithms (Paltaratskaya,2023). Even though these platforms can be entertaining and even lead to micro-learning, their layout promotes fragmented and passive consumption, which may interfere with more intricate thinking.

Through the Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller,1988), the human working memory has a restricted capacity to store and process a given amount of information at a given time. The repetitive scrolling of short videos presents a variety of visual and auditory information at once, which causes extraneous cognitive load that overwhelms the ability of the mind to concentrate well. In the working memory model developed by Baddeley (2000), this overload is experienced by the phonological loop (or the auditory information) and the visuospatial sketchpad (or the visual information) leaving very little time to encode meaningful information. This leads to the brain becoming unable to effectively organize and store new information, which reduces the efficiency of short-term memory and long-term memory formation (PsychFuel,2023).

Furthermore, the dopamine-based feedback loops constitute the core of a short-video platform and continuously reinforce a user interactivity. Every like, comment or video is a little burst of satisfaction and it boosts the desire to scroll further (Medrano, 2022). With time, such conditioning causes the brain to desire novelty and immediate gratification and slowly reduces sustained attention, the basis of complex academic tasks like critical reading, understanding, and critical thinking (Hollis and Was, 2016; Firth, Torous, and Firth, 2020).

This problem becomes more topical in Sri Lanka. As the number of users of social media has reached more than 8.2 million actives as of 2025 (DataReportal,2025), with the greatest number of users falling in the 18-24 age bracket (DataReportal,2025), university students are one of the most digitally engulfed population groups. Short videos are usually consumed by many undergraduates during their breaks or at late hours without them usually realizing that such practices are disrupting their capacity to retain information, focus in lecture rooms or grasp academic reading materials (PsychFuel,2023).

To make matters worse are the concerns of privacy and security, which act as moderating elements and further stress the cognitive resources. When the users learn about data surveillance and algorithmic observation, as well as being exposed to fake news, they make a mental trade-off between entertainment and information security, which is what Dinev and Hart (2006) refer to as privacy calculus. This constant background assessment causes a diversion of the mental energy to content processing, causing what Kaplan (1995) refers to as a state of continuous partial attention. Not only does such divided attention interfere with working memory, but it also encourages surface interaction with information which is the exact reverse of deep processing that is required to achieve long-term learning and understanding (Bartlett, 1932; Otto,2025).

Whenever users are insecure about misinformation or manipulation over the internet, they are more likely to be guided by intuitive and fast judgment as opposed to critical and analytical thinking (Petty and Cacioppo,1986). Such a move towards heuristic processing can decrease the quality of decision-making and the critical thinking skills- skills that are necessary to be successful in academics and in the workplace.

Although evidence of the use of short-form videos is extensive among the Sri Lankan undergraduates, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the impact of the digital behavior in question on the essential cognitive processes, including working memory, memory retention, reading comprehension, and decision-making. The knowledge of such interactions is crucial because such mental abilities are the direct sources of academic achievements, concentration and intellectual development of students in the long run.

# 03.Research Problems.

Short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have rapidly reshaped global media habits, yet their cognitive impact on undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities remains unexplored. Although international studies show that excessive short-video use can reduce attention, memory, and analytical thinking (Firth et al., 2020; Otto, 2025; Paltaratskaya, 2023), these findings cannot be generalized to Sri Lanka due to differences in digital literacy, academic culture, and infrastructure. No research has yet examined the combined effects of short-form video use on key cognitive domains crucial to learning—working memory, memory retention, reading comprehension, and decision-making—within the local higher education context.

This gap is critical, as over 8.2 million Sri Lankans are active social media users, most aged 18–24 (DataReportal, 2025). For undergraduates, short-form videos have become habitual, even during study periods. However, the rapid visual pace and dopamine-driven design of these platforms (Medrano, 2022; Paltaratskaya, 2023) conflict with the sustained focus and deep cognitive engagement required for academic performance. Without localized evidence, educators and students remain unaware of how these behaviors affect cognitive and academic outcomes.

Additionally, privacy and security concerns may further moderate these effects. Continuous awareness of data tracking, misinformation, and surveillance anxiety (Baruh et al., 2017; Dinev & Hart, 2006) creates cognitive multitasking (Ophir et al., 2009), dividing attention and reducing comprehension (Ayres & Sweller, 2014). Yet, this moderating factor has not been tested in Sri Lankan contexts where privacy literacy remains low.

Therefore, this study addresses the lack of empirical evidence on how short-form video use influences cognitive performance among Sri Lankan undergraduates and how privacy and security concerns shape these effects. The findings aim to support evidence-based strategies for digital wellness, cognitive health, and improved academic performance in higher education.

# 04.Literature Review.

## 4.1 Cognitive Psychology.

Cognitive psychology explores how people acquire, process, store, and retrieve information. It focuses on mental processes such as attention, memory, comprehension, reasoning, and decision-making—core elements that shape learning and academic performance (Eysenck, 2012). These processes evolve with the environment, particularly the digital ecosystems that dominate modern life. Today’s university students function in highly digital surroundings that continuously stimulate and sometimes overwhelm their cognitive systems. This study builds on four key cognitive variables—working memory, memory retention, reading comprehension, and decision-making—identified by Senarath and Rathnayake (2021) in their research on social media-driven mind wandering among state university students in Sri Lanka. Their study revealed that constant digital engagement weakens attention, shortens focus spans, and reduces memory retention, highlighting the importance of these domains in academic success.

Sweller’s Cognitive Load Theory (1988) explains that working memory has limited capacity and can easily be overloaded when exposed to excessive stimuli. Baddeley’s Working Memory Model (2000) adds that the phonological loop (for auditory and verbal information) and the visuospatial sketchpad (for visual and spatial input) can both be strained by continuous audiovisual exposure. Craik and Lockhart’s Levels of Processing Theory (1972) further clarifies that deep, meaningful engagement enhances long-term memory, while shallow, surface-level processing weakens recall. Likewise, Bartlett’s Schema Theory (1932) and Mayer’s Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2009) emphasize that comprehension relies on integrating new material with existing mental frameworks.

Similarly, Simon’s Decision-Making Model (1947) and the Elaboration Likelihood Model by Petty and Cacioppo (1986) highlight that reflective, evidence-based decision-making demands deliberate cognitive effort. Repeated exposure to rapid, high-stimulation environments can disrupt this deliberative capacity. Collectively, these theories provide the foundation for analyzing how short-form video (SFV) engagement influences the cognitive mechanisms that support academic learning.

## 4.2 Short-Form Video Platforms

Short-form video (SFV) platforms including TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have revolutionized content consumption among young audiences. These videos, often lasting between 15 and 60 seconds, are crafted to seize attention through fast transitions, bright visuals, and algorithm-driven personalization (Duffy & Hund, 2019). Their design aims to maximize engagement, keeping users scrolling through streams of customized content. While SFVs offer entertainment and short learning experiences, their format imposes substantial cognitive strain. The quick bursts of sound, visuals, and text give little time for reflection, promoting fragmented attention and shallow information processing. Studies indicate that such fragmentation disrupts the brain’s ability to sustain focus and absorb meaning (Paltaratskaya, 2023; Medrano, 2022).

From a cognitive psychology standpoint, SFVs challenge the principles of Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) by introducing excessive sensory input that increases extraneous cognitive load and depletes working memory. Likewise, Baddeley’s (2000) model shows that continuous auditory and visual stimuli overload key memory systems, weakening processing efficiency. Over time, habitual exposure trains the brain to seek novelty and instant gratification reducing endurance for long, focused tasks critical to academic performance (Firth et al., 2020).

## 4.3Impact of Short Videos on Cognitive Psychology

The cognitive effects of SFV consumption are multidimensional. Working memory suffers when users face simultaneous visual and auditory cues, causing overload and decreased retention. Memory retention declines because the fast-paced structure encourages surface-level processing, contrary to Craik and Lockhart’s (1972) deep learning principle. The spacing effect (Cepeda et al., 2006) also explains that spaced learning strengthens memory, while the rapid, unbroken flow of short videos prevents effective consolidation leading to weaker recall (Otto, 2025).

Reading comprehension is similarly affected. When users process captions, visual effects, and music at once, the split-attention effect (Ayres & Sweller, 2014) occurs, increasing mental load and lowering comprehension accuracy. Research confirms that students heavily exposed to short videos tend to perform worse in comprehension and analytical reasoning tasks compared to those engaging with text-based content (Otto, 2025).

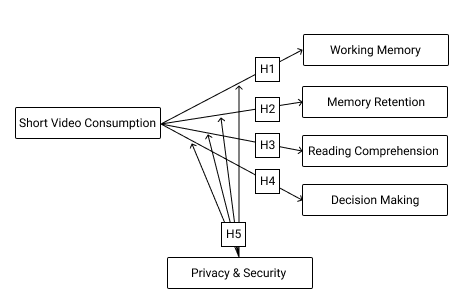
Decision-making, another key cognitive process, is also impaired by excessive SFV use. The dopamine-driven feedback loops in these platforms through likes, views, and instant feedback reinforce impulsivity and quick reward-seeking (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986; Pennycook & Rand, 2019). As a result, users may rely on intuitive, heuristic judgments rather than reflective reasoning, affecting their ability to manage time, evaluate information, and make sound academic decisions (Simon, 1947).

Adding complexity, privacy and security concerns serve as moderating variables that further tax cognitive resources. According to the Privacy Calculus Theory (Dinev & Hart, 2006), users constantly weigh the benefits of using a platform against potential risks a mental balancing act that consumes attention and reduces learning efficiency. Heightened privacy anxiety leads to continuous vigilance, diminishing deep engagement (Baruh, Secinti, & Cemalcilar, 2017). The Attention Restoration Theory (Kaplan, 1995) and Limited Capacity Model of Motivated Mediated Message Processing (LC4MP) by Lang (2000) both argue that cognitive resources are finite; when divided between privacy concerns and content processing, efficiency declines across all cognitive domains.

However, much of the existing evidence stems from Western and East Asian contexts. Sri Lanka’s educational and digital environment differs in infrastructure, literacy, and cultural attitudes toward technology. Therefore, this study seeks to bridge that gap by investigating how SFV consumption influences working memory, memory retention, reading comprehension, and decision-making among Sri Lankan undergraduates, while considering privacy and security concerns as moderating factors.

By situating global cognitive theories within the Sri Lankan context, this research aims to contribute localized insights that support digital literacy initiatives and enhance students’ cognitive well-being in an increasingly media-driven academic landscape.

# 05. Conceptual Framework.



# 06.Research Questions.

## 6.1 General Research Question.

What is the impact of short-form video consumption on cognitive functions and academic-related outcomes among undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities, and how do privacy and security concerns moderate these relationships?

## 6.2 Specific Research Questions.

1. How does the frequency and duration of short-form video consumption affect students’ working memory capacity?
2. What is the relationship between short-form video consumption and students’ ability to retain and recall information over time?
3. How does habitual short-video consumption influence reading comprehension and analytical understanding of academic materials?
4. In what ways does short-form video usage affect students’ decision-making processes and critical evaluation abilities?
5. To what extent do privacy and security concerns moderate the relationship between short-form video consumption and cognitive performance among undergraduates?

# 07. Research Objectives.

## 7.1 General Objective.

To examine the impact of short-form video (SFV) consumption on cognitive functions including working memory, memory retention, reading comprehension, and decision making among undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities, and to assess the moderating effects of privacy and security concerns on these relationships.

## 7.2 Specific Objectives.

1. To investigate the relationship between the frequency and duration of short-form video consumption and students’ working memory capacity.
2. To assess how short-form video consumption influences memory retention and recall ability among undergraduates.
3. To evaluate the effect of habitual short-form video usage on students’ reading comprehension and analytical understanding of academic materials.
4. To determine how short-form video engagement impacts students’ decision-making and critical evaluation skills.
5. To examine the moderating role of privacy and security concerns in the relationship between short-form video consumption and cognitive outcomes.

# ****08. Hypotheses****

**H1:** There is a significant negative relationship between short-form video consumption and working memory capacity among undergraduates in Sri Lankan state universities.

**H2:** There is a significant negative relationship between short-form video consumption and memory retention among undergraduates.

**H3:** There is a significant negative relationship between short-form video consumption and reading comprehension among undergraduates.

**H4:** There is a significant negative relationship between short-form video consumption and decision-making ability among undergraduates.

**H5:** Privacy and security concerns significantly moderate the relationship between short-form video consumption and cognitive outcomes (working memory, memory retention, reading comprehension, and decision-making).

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