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Apathy and Attrition: Exploring Student Disengagement Toward Longer Texts in Literature Classes

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Abstract: This qualitative study explores the factors contributing to student apathy and attrition when reading longer literary texts in higher education literature classes and examines how students perceive the relevance and emotional impact of these extended readings. Using semi-structured interviews with sixteen purposively selected students, the study uncovers themes that reflect both internal and external barriers to engagement. Findings reveal that students often feel overwhelmed by the complexity and length of texts, citing time constraints, mental fatigue, and unfamiliar language as significant deterrents to sustained reading. Classroom-related challenges such as noise, lack of supportive reading environments, and insufficient instructional scaffolding further exacerbate disengagement. Additionally, many students questioned the relevance of traditional texts to their lives, describing a disconnect between the content and their contemporary realities. However, a number of participants acknowledged the academic benefits of reading longer works, particularly in enhancing vocabulary and critical thinking. Emotional responses to reading ranged from frustration and boredom to moments of motivation, especially when themes resonated personally or were unpacked meaningfully in class. By situating these findings within existing literature, the study addresses a gap in understanding how college students experience and emotionally respond to long-form literary reading. It offers implications for creating more responsive, relevant, and supportive literature instruction in the classroom.

Keywords: Student Apathy; Literary Attrition; Literature Instruction; Reading Challenges

1. Introduction

Student disengagement and withdrawal from academic activities, often characterized as apathy and attrition, pose significant challenges in educational settings, particularly in courses demanding sustained cognitive effort. Chipchase et al. [1] introduce apathy as student withdrawal from academic tasks, including low participation and disengagement, particularly in cognitively demanding courses. Onishi [2] defines apathy as diminished emotional and cognitive engagement characterized by avoidance and conflict toward learning activities. Ajawi et al. [3] add that academic failure is an important and personal event in the lives of university students, and the ways they make sense of experiences of failure matters for their persistence and future success, with this apathetic students show disinterest, distraction, and low persistence during class tasks. Tinto [4], describes attrition as a longitudinal process where students' experiences alter their commitment, potentially leading to dropout. Morison defines attrition quantitatively as the percentage of students who do not graduate or re-enroll. In many educational institutions, high student attrition rates are due to a variety of circumstances.

In literature education, reading full-length literary texts has long been considered foundational to developing

analytical thinking, cultural literacy, and empathy. However, growing concerns about student disengagement have prompted educators to re-evaluate how literature is taught. Academic reading is increasingly viewed by students as burdensome and time-consuming, often leading to superficial reading or complete avoidance. Longer literary texts, in particular, are seen as demanding and disconnected from students' interests or immediate academic goals, contributing to apathy and attrition in literature classes.

Academic reading as a "grudging act," driven more by compliance than by intrinsic motivation. This disengagement becomes even more pronounced when students face external distractions, such as digital devices or multi-tasking environments, which compete for their attention and diminish their ability to sustain focus on extended texts. Pérez-Juárez et al. [5] highlight that constant exposure to digital media has shortened students' attention spans, making the deep, immersive reading required in literature classes feel tedious or irrelevant.

Equally important is the role of instructional design and pedagogy in shaping students' reading engagement. Studies by Azizah et al. [6] and Guthrie & Wigfield [7] have shown that social interaction, peer collaboration, and clear instructional goals promote deeper reading comprehension and motivation. Structured group reading strategies, such as literature circles, have proven effective in increasing participation and reducing the emotional distance students often feel toward long texts. Similarly, List et al. [8] argue that behavioral engagement manifested through sustained reading effort—is a key predictor of comprehension, but it often declines without support or perceived purpose.

Student motivation also plays a pivotal role. Barotas and Palma [9] assert that positive attitudes, reading strategies, and personal interest significantly enhance persistence in reading. Lin [10] further emphasized that extensive reading can promote mental well-being and motivation, especially when students see reading as meaningful and self-directed. However, this is not always the case. Cekiso et al. [11] found that many first-year university students read only when required and fail to engage meaningfully unless texts align with their interests or identities.

Despite the wide availability of engaging texts, literature classrooms often default to traditional, lengthy readings without adequate scaffolding, which can discourage students. Supportive instructional structures, particularly in small group settings, can mitigate this disengagement. Meanwhile, Casey [12] showed that learning clubs and interactive environments help re-engage struggling readers by creating spaces that feel less formal and more personally relevant.

While past studies offer valuable insights into motivation and instructional strategies, few directly examine why students disengage specifically from longer literary texts in formal literature settings. Most research treats engagement broadly or focuses on general academic reading, leaving a gap in understanding the emotional and cognitive responses students develop toward lengthy narratives. This study addresses that gap by exploring student perceptions of difficulty, relevance, and affective responses to long literary texts.

The research seeks to uncover the specific factors contributing to apathy or attrition in literature classes that require sustained reading. It aims to provide literature educators with a clearer understanding of how to make extended reading more accessible, engaging, and meaningful. Ultimately, the goal is to help reframe literature instruction in a way that values student experience and fosters lifelong engagement with literary texts.

2. Literature

Student engagement in reading, particularly with longer literary texts, is a critical factor influencing academic success in literature classes. However, increasing digital distractions and shifting student attitudes have contributed to widespread apathy and attrition in reading tasks. This review synthesizes current research on the causes of disengagement, the role of digital distractions, and instructional strategies that foster motivation and sustained reading engagement. It also highlights how socio-cultural factors and teacher discourse shape students' experiences with extended texts, providing a comprehensive foundation for understanding the complex dynamics of reading engagement in higher education.

Extensive research has explored the emotional, cognitive, and systemic dimensions of apathy and attrition, highlighting how student withdrawal behaviors develop and the complex interplay of factors influencing students' academic continuity and motivation. According to Steffens et al. [13], Apathy is a common condition that involves diminished initiative, diminished interest and diminished emotional expression or responsiveness. These studies provide insight into the cognitive and emotional processes behind student disengagement. Tinto's theoretical framework, as explained by Ascend Learning, offers a model of how academic and social integration affect attrition.

Morison provides empirical data on attrition rates, while Ryan and Deci [14] caution that attrition is multifaceted, encompassing academic failure, voluntary withdrawal, and transfer decisions. These sources collectively deepen understanding of attrition's causes and implications.

2.1. Digital Distractions and Their Impact on Student Engagement

Student disengagement and apathy toward longer literary texts have been increasingly linked to the pervasive presence of digital distractions, which impede the sustained focus necessary for deep reading. Giunchiglia et al. [15] demonstrated that excessive use of mobile social media platforms negatively correlates with academic performance, highlighting the detrimental effect of digital distractions on students' ability to concentrate on extended academic tasks. Similarly, Lyngs et al. [16] found that targeted design interventions, such as removing distracting elements on social media, significantly help users regain self-control and maintain task focus. Rykard [17] further identified cyberslacking behaviors among students during class time as a factor reducing attention and academic success, illustrating the urgent need to address digital distractions in learning environments.

The broader impact of internet usage was confirmed by Hazelhurst et al. [18], who reported a significant relationship between heavy web browsing and lower academic results. Task-irrelevant visual distractions were also shown to diminish cognitive resources during assessments. Flanigan et al. [19] explored students' own perspectives on digital distractions, revealing that students recognize the interruptions as a key barrier to academic success and engagement with longer texts. This suggests a critical link between the digital environment and students' ability to sustain reading engagement.

Moreover, multitasking behaviors affect reading habits beyond the classroom. Fan et al. [20] examined media multitasking's impact on teachers' reading habits, suggesting that such multitasking impairs deep engagement a finding likely applicable to students. Park et al. [21] demonstrated that intervention strategies in secondary classrooms can effectively reduce digital distractions, thereby improving student focus and academic outcomes. Bellur et al. [22] emphasized that digital multitasking outside the classroom also hampers study efficiency, indicating a pervasive distraction problem that extends into students' independent learning time.

Wang et al. [23] propose empowering students with self-regulated learning strategies to mitigate the effects of digital distractions. Their findings show that fostering students' capacity to manage their own learning processes leads to better academic performance and sustained engagement with reading materials. Collectively, these studies emphasize the need to address both environmental and personal factors to enhance sustained engagement in reading longer texts.

2.2. Student Engagement and Disengagement in Reading

Student engagement is a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive involvement in learning tasks. Reading engagement, specifically, refers to sustained attention, motivation, and active participation in reading activities. Conversely, student apathy in reading manifests as a lack of interest, motivation, or persistence, especially with challenging or lengthy texts. Attrition in literature classes, marked by dropping out or incomplete reading, often results from this disengagement.

Mann [24] describe academic reading as a "grudging act," where students experience reading as stressful and tedious, leading to avoidance behaviors. Koessmeier and Büttner [25] corroborate this by highlighting how digital distractions reduce students' ability to focus on long reading assignments, intensifying attrition risks. The emotional dimensions stress, boredom, and frustration also negatively impact reading persistence, compounding the problem of disengagement.

2.3. Instructional and Social Strategies to Foster Engagement

Several studies point to cooperative and socially interactive strategies as effective in rekindling motivation among disengaged readers. According to Talenta Pratama & Himawati Ulya [26] cooperative learning strategies such as literature circles foster discussion-based engagement, improving critical thinking and comprehension. Roberts et al. [27] emphasize that structured support in group reading instruction significantly enhances engagement with lengthy texts.

Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) integrates purpose, strategy instruction, and social interaction to maintain student engagement. This approach contrasts with traditional lecture-based methods, which often

exacerbate reading apathy. Kheang et al. [28] further highlight that high motivation, strategic reading, and positive school attitudes are key to reading persistence, suggesting a multifaceted approach to engagement.

2.4. Reading Motivation and Text Selection

While intrinsic motivation is widely recognized as central to reading engagement, external factors like instructional design and material relevance are also crucial. Ilyas and Istaryatiningtias [29] posit that extensive reading improves motivation and critical thinking, but intensive reading focusing on details may induce fatigue if not supported appropriately. Fadillah & Athis [30] argue that alignment between reading materials and students' interests is critical for sustained engagement, a factor often neglected in curriculum design. Their findings suggest that attrition may partly arise from the disconnect between assigned texts and students' personal or cultural contexts.

2.5. Student Perceptions and Socio-Cultural Contexts

Students' attitudes and perceptions toward reading are vital indicators of engagement. Gebremariam and Weldeyohannes [31] reveal that students with positive attitudes toward school and reading strategies tend to have higher motivation and persistence. However, many students perceive extended literary texts as irrelevant or disconnected from their lives, fostering disengagement.

Socio-cultural relevance plays an important role as well. Anderson et al. [32] stressed that culturally relevant reading materials that resonate with students' backgrounds improve motivation and comprehension, suggesting the need for contextualized content in literature classes.

Self-Determination Theory focuses on human motivation and personality, emphasizing the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in learning behaviors. According to Chiu [33], students are more likely to engage and persist in academic tasks, such as reading longer texts, when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy (feeling in control of one's learning), competence (feeling effective and capable), and relatedness (feeling connected to others). When these needs are supported by the learning environment and instructional practices, students develop higher intrinsic motivation, leading to greater engagement and persistence. Conversely, if these needs are thwarted such as when students feel pressured, incompetent, or isolated motivation diminishes, resulting in apathy or attrition.

2.6. Teacher Discourse, Classroom Communication, and Engagement

Discourse patterns in the classroom significantly affect student engagement. Chavez et al. [34] analyze how language and classroom communication practices can empower or alienate learners. Their discourse analysis underscores the importance of teacher responsiveness in mitigating student disengagement and fostering inclusive learning environments. Such findings highlight the relational and communicative dimensions of reading engagement, emphasizing the role of educators not only as knowledge transmitters but also as facilitators of motivation and inclusion.

The reviewed literature underscores that student disengagement with longer texts is multifaceted, driven largely by digital distractions, motivational challenges, and misalignment between texts and learners' interests. Effective strategies, such as cooperative learning, culturally relevant materials, and empowering self-regulation, have demonstrated promise in mitigating apathy and fostering sustained engagement. Moreover, teacher responsiveness and inclusive classroom discourse play pivotal roles in shaping students' attitudes toward reading as supported by Lapidot-Lefler [35]. These insights collectively inform the need for holistic approaches that address both environmental and individual factors to enhance student engagement in literature classes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' perceptions, experiences, and emotional responses toward extended literary reading tasks. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for the rich, contextual understanding of how and why students disengage from longer texts phenomena that are best understood through narrative accounts rather than numerical data. Specifically, qualitative description is effective in providing straightforward, low-inference interpretations of participant experiences, ideal for generating practical insights for educators and curriculum planners.

The study aims to uncover both internal and external factors that contribute to reading apathy or attrition in literature classes. This method also aligns with the goal of investigating how perceptions of relevance, difficulty, and emotional impact influence reading behaviors. The design ensures flexibility in data collection and analysis while preserving authenticity and contextual accuracy.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The participants of this study consisted of 16 college students enrolled in literature classes at a private tertiary school in the Philippines. These students were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to ensure that participants can provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon being studied [36].

To qualify for inclusion, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) Currently enrolled in a tertiary literature course; (2) had experience reading at least one full-length literary text (e.g., novel, epic, or narrative prose) as part of their curriculum; (3) willing to share their personal experiences, attitudes, and perceptions regarding extended reading tasks; (4) possessed the ability to articulate their thoughts clearly in either English or Filipino during interviews or written reflections. This group was chosen to reflect a range of perspectives based on gender, academic performance, and reading preferences. Selecting students with direct engagement in reading longer texts, the study ensured a deeper exploration of the emotional, cognitive, and contextual factors affecting reading motivation and disengagement.

3.3. Instrument

This study utilized a semi-structured interview guide as the primary research instrument to gather in-depth insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and emotional responses toward reading longer literary texts. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to explore specific themes while also providing flexibility to probe for clarifications or emerging ideas during the conversation. This approach is particularly effective in qualitative research, as it encourages participants to express themselves freely while keeping the discussion aligned with the research objectives [37].

The interview guide was composed of open-ended questions grouped into two areas: (1) experiences and attitudes toward reading extended texts; (2) perceived relevance, difficulty, and emotional response of such texts. To enhance content validity, the instrument was reviewed by two senior literature instructors and a research methods specialist. Their feedback led to refinement of the questions to ensure both theoretical alignment and age-appropriateness for college students.

In addition, pilot testing was conducted with two non-participant students to assess the clarity, sequencing, and interpretability of the questions. Feedback from the pilot interviews led to minor revisions in phrasing and logical flow, ensuring accessibility and coherence. The **Table 1** below presents the instrument of this inquiry:

Table 1. Instrument of the study.

Objectives	Interview Questions	Participants
To explore the factors that contribute to student apathy or attrition when reading longer literary texts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What goes through your mind when you are assigned a long literary piece to read? 2. What specific parts or aspects of long texts do you find most difficult or discouraging? 3. Can you talk about any distractions or challenges inside the classroom that affect your reading habits? 	Filipino College Students
To examine how students perceive the relevance and emotional response to extended reading materials in literature classes.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In your opinion, how relevant are these long texts to your life or learning? 2. Have you ever felt frustrated, bored, or motivated while reading longer texts in your literature class? Can you explain what caused those feelings? 	

3.4. Data Gathering Procedure

Before the actual data collection, the researcher sought and secured ethical clearance from the appropriate institutional review board. Following this, informed consent was obtained from all participants and their guardians,

ensuring they understood the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any point without penalty.

Once consent was secured, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen college students who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. The interviews were held in a quiet, private setting within the school premises to promote open communication and minimize distractions. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was audio-recorded, with participants' permission, to ensure accuracy in transcription and analysis.

The interviews were conducted in English or Filipino, depending on the participant's preference, to ensure ease of expression and reduce language-related barriers. Field notes were also taken to record non-verbal cues, emotions, and contextual factors that supported data interpretation.

Following the interviews, all recordings were transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Transcripts were anonymized using participant codes (e.g., P1, P2) to protect student identities. The data were stored securely in a password-protected digital folder accessible only to the researcher.

The entire data collection process took place over a span of two weeks to accommodate students' schedules and ensure the quality and depth of the data gathered.

3.5. Data Analysis

The data collected from the interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis, a widely used method in qualitative research that involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within data. This approach allowed the researcher to systematically organize and interpret the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding student disengagement with longer literary texts.

Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, the researcher began by familiarizing themselves with the data through repeated reading and transcription verification. Initial codes were then generated based on significant statements related to student apathy and attrition. These codes were systematically collated to form broader themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the dataset and research objectives.

To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis, member checking was employed, wherein preliminary themes and interpretations were shared with selected participants to confirm accuracy and resonance with their experiences.

Throughout the process, the researcher maintained an audit trail of coding decisions and thematic development to provide transparency and replicability. The final themes provide insights into factors contributing to student disengagement and perceptions of literary texts, which directly inform the study's conclusions and recommendations.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

This study followed established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Approval was secured from the institution's ethics review board prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and their parents or guardians, emphasizing voluntary participation and the right to withdraw without penalty. Participant confidentiality was ensured through the use of coded pseudonyms, and all data were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the researcher. The interview questions were designed to be developmentally appropriate and non-intrusive, with protocols in place to refer participants to support services if any emotional distress occurred during data collection. These measures ensured the protection and well-being of participants throughout the study.

4. Results

Research Objectives 1. To explore the factors that contribute to student apathy or attrition when reading longer literary texts.

Question No. 1. What goes through your mind when you are assigned a long literary piece to read?

1) Overwhelmed by Length and Complexity

Many students expressed feeling overwhelmed and anxious when assigned long literary texts. The sheer length

combined with unfamiliar vocabulary and complex themes often led to a sense of dread, causing mental blocks and avoidance behaviors. This emotional and cognitive overload contributed significantly to their apathy and disengagement, as they struggled to maintain focus and motivation. The participants described how lengthy texts seem intimidating at first glance, which can discourage them from even starting to read. Difficult language and intricate storylines add to the challenge, making comprehension more laborious. This mental resistance often results in procrastination, partial reading, or dropping the task altogether.

“When I see a long book or poem, I feel immediately overwhelmed. My mind starts racing, thinking about how much time I’ll need and whether I can understand all the difficult words. Sometimes, I just avoid it because I feel like it’s too much for me to handle in one go.”

“Honestly, the complexity scares me. I get confused by the old-fashioned words or the complicated sentence structures. It feels like I need to read it multiple times just to get the basic meaning, and that’s exhausting.”

2) Time Constraints and Competing Priorities

Students consistently mentioned that their apathy towards longer readings stems from limited time and numerous academic and personal responsibilities. The pressure to balance multiple subjects, assignments, and extracurricular activities often forces them to prioritize tasks they perceive as more urgent or manageable, sidelining extensive literary readings. This practical barrier highlights how external factors, such as workload and time management challenges, impact engagement. Students feel they lack sufficient time to devote to long texts, resulting in rushed reading or neglect.

“I have a lot of homework and projects for other classes. When a long reading is assigned, I try to fit it in, but usually, I end up skimming or leaving it for the last minute because other tasks take priority.”

“Sometimes it’s just about time. I have sports practice, family responsibilities, and other subjects demanding attention. Reading a long story feels like something I can’t afford to spend hours on.”

3) Apathy and Fatigue Experienced During Reading of Longer Texts in Literature Class

Many students expressed feelings of mental fatigue and disinterest that set in while reading longer literary texts during literature classes. The length and complexity of the texts made sustained focus difficult, leading to boredom and apathy despite understanding the importance of the material. This fatigue was often linked to the demanding nature of extended reading combined with other academic pressures, making it hard to stay motivated. This theme centers on the intrinsic challenge of maintaining concentration and enthusiasm when reading longer works. Even when students recognize the value of literature, the cognitive load and time commitment can overwhelm them, fostering a sense of disengagement that diminishes their learning experience.

“When the story is really long, I start to lose focus halfway through. It feels like my brain just shuts down, and I don’t really care what happens next anymore.”

“Even if I like the story, the long chapters drain my energy. I get bored, and it’s hard to keep going. It feels more like a punishment than learning.”

Question No. 2. What specific parts or aspects of long texts do you find most difficult or discouraging?

1) Complex Language and Vocabulary Barrier

Many students found the archaic, difficult, or unfamiliar vocabulary and sentence structures in long literary texts discouraging. Complex language made comprehension slower and more frustrating, reducing motivation to engage deeply with the material. Students struggled to decode dense or outdated language, which impeded their understanding and enjoyment. This linguistic difficulty created a barrier to meaning-making and contributed to feelings of inadequacy or discouragement.

“There are words I don’t even know. Sometimes I have to look up every other word, which makes reading slow and boring.”

"The sentences are so long and complicated. I get lost in what the author is trying to say, and that's really frustrating."

"Old-fashioned language or unfamiliar words make me feel dumb. It's like the story is written for someone else."

2) Length and Dense Descriptions

Lengthy passages filled with extensive descriptions or detailed exposition made texts feel overwhelming. Students felt fatigued by the sheer volume and found it difficult to maintain interest through long stretches without clear action or dialogue. Excessive descriptive detail, while sometimes enriching, often slowed the pace and tested students' attention spans. This overload contributed to disengagement, especially when students sought more concise or action-driven narratives.

"The story drags because of too much detail. It's hard to keep interest when nothing much seems to happen for pages."

"Sometimes there's a lot of description, and it goes on forever. I just want to get to the part where something happens."

"Long paragraphs about the setting or characters slow me down. I lose focus and start skipping parts."

3) Unfamiliar Cultural or Historical Contexts

Students found it difficult to relate to or understand texts set in unfamiliar times, places, or cultures. The lack of background knowledge made some parts confusing or irrelevant, diminishing motivation to continue reading. When students could not connect the text to their lived experiences or prior knowledge, comprehension suffered. This contextual disconnect lowered engagement and sometimes caused students to give up prematurely.

"Sometimes it talks about history or culture I'm not familiar with, and it just doesn't make sense."

"I feel lost when the story assumes I know things about the setting or the people, but I don't."

"The story is set in a time or place I don't know about. I get confused about the customs or what's going on."

Question No. 3. Can you talk about any distractions or challenges inside the classroom that affect your reading habits?

1) Noise and Interruptions from Classmates

Many students cited classroom noise, side conversations, and disruptions from peers as major distractions that break their concentration while reading longer texts. These interruptions made it difficult to maintain focus and absorb complex material, leading to frustration and decreased motivation. Classroom noise creates an unstable environment that hampers deep reading and comprehension. Students often had to pause repeatedly or reread sections, which made reading laborious. These disruptions sometimes led to feelings of irritation and a desire to disengage altogether.

"It's hard to get into the story when people are chatting or making noises. I try to read, but then someone starts whispering or moving around, and I lose my train of thought. Sometimes I just give up and wait until the class ends."

"There are moments when classmates just talk loudly or joke around during reading time. It breaks my focus, and I feel like I'm the only one trying to pay attention. It makes reading a struggle."

2) Limited Time Allotted for Reading

Several students expressed that the classroom time given to read long literary texts was insufficient, forcing them to rush through the material. The pressure to finish quickly decreased their ability to comprehend fully and appreciate the texts. The tight time constraints created a rushed reading environment, where students felt compelled to skim rather than engage deeply. This undermined learning outcomes and fostered anxiety about meeting deadlines rather than cultivating genuine interest.

“The teacher expects us to finish reading during class, but sometimes it’s just not possible with the long texts. I get stressed trying to keep up, and I don’t really understand everything.”

“I wish we had more time for reading. Sometimes we just read quickly to move on to the next activity, so I don’t get the chance to really think about the story or the characters.”

“We’re often given long texts to read in a short amount of time, and it feels like a race. I try to read carefully, but the clock is always ticking, so I end up skimming or missing important parts.”

3) Lack of Engaging Reading Environment or Support

Students also reported that the classroom environment often lacked supportive elements like quiet reading spaces, clear guidance, or encouragement. Without these supports, reading became a solitary and uninspired task, leading to disinterest and avoidance. A non-conducive reading environment reduces motivation and engagement. Students feel isolated in their struggles, especially with challenging texts, when teachers or peers do not provide scaffolding or positive reinforcement.

“If the teacher encouraged us more or gave us strategies to read difficult parts, I think I’d be more motivated. But mostly, it feels like we have to just figure it out alone, which makes reading frustrating.”

“Sometimes the classroom just feels dull and noisy, and there’s no space where I can focus. I wish there was a corner for reading or if the teacher checked in to see if we’re following along.”

Research Objectives 2. To examine how students perceive the relevance and emotional response to extended reading materials in literature classes.

Question No. 1. In your opinion, how relevant are these long texts to your life or learning?

1) Disconnect and Limited Perceived Relevance to Current Realities

A group of students felt that many long literary texts were outdated or irrelevant to their contemporary experiences. They struggled to relate the content to their own lives, leading to disengagement and questioning the value of the readings. This theme points to the gap between traditional literature curricula and the lived realities of students. Some perceived the texts as distant or disconnected from modern-day contexts, making it harder to find personal meaning or motivation to engage.

“The stories talk about things that happened a long time ago or in other countries, so I can’t really relate. It feels like I’m just reading because I have to, not because it’s useful for me.”

“Sometimes I wonder why we have to read these really old stories when there are so many new books or movies that talk about today’s problems. These old texts just don’t feel relevant.”

“Honestly, a lot of these stories feel like they’re from another world. The language and settings don’t connect with what I see or live every day, so it’s hard to feel like they matter to me.”

2) Struggling to See Real-Life Application

Some students expressed difficulty finding relevance in the longer literary texts, often questioning how these readings apply to their day-to-day lives or future goals. They felt that the content—though rich—often lacked immediate applicability, especially compared to more modern or functional texts. This theme shows a practical disconnect. While students value time and efficiency, they struggle to justify the prolonged effort of reading texts whose lessons or content don’t clearly align with their perceived academic or real-world needs.

“Some of these texts are beautiful, but they don’t really prepare me for anything practical. I wish we were reading more modern stuff that reflects what we deal with today, like technology, social issues, or mental health.”

“Honestly, I don’t see how reading something from centuries ago helps me with what I’m going through now. I get that there’s meaning, but it feels more like a school requirement than something useful in real life.”

“They always say literature reflects life, but sometimes it reflects a life that’s no longer relevant to us. The characters are from a time or society I can’t connect with, so I just read to pass.”

3) Relevance to Academic Skills and Critical Thinking

Several students expressed those longer texts enhanced their critical thinking, vocabulary, and analytical skills, which they saw as useful not only in literature class but in other subjects and future academic work. Students appreciated the cognitive benefits of engaging with extended texts. They recognized the role these readings play in improving comprehension, interpretation, and academic language proficiency, which they consider relevant to their overall educational goals.

“Reading long texts improves my vocabulary and understanding of complex ideas. Sometimes it’s frustrating, but I realize that this kind of practice makes me smarter and better prepared for college.”

“I think these long readings help me get better at analyzing stories and finding hidden meanings. It’s hard work, but I know it helps me think deeper, which is useful for writing essays or discussions in other subjects.”

Question No. 2. Have you ever felt frustrated, bored, or motivated while reading longer texts in your literature class? Can you explain what caused those feelings?

1) Frustration Triggered by Dense Language and Archaic Style

A significant number of students expressed frustration when reading older or classical texts due to complex sentence structures, unfamiliar vocabulary, and dated writing styles. These made the texts feel inaccessible, requiring constant re-reading and discouraging sustained engagement. Language barriers act as emotional barriers. When students struggle with comprehension due to archaic or high-level language, they begin to associate reading with stress and failure, not growth or enjoyment.

“I remember reading *El Filibusterismo* and feeling so mentally drained. The sentences were long, and I had to pause every few lines to look up words. I just wanted to understand the plot, but I got stuck on the way it was written.”

“I got so frustrated reading this short story in English class—it was full of old terms. I wanted to appreciate the message, but I couldn’t even enjoy the process because the words felt like obstacles.”

“Sometimes, I read and reread the same page three times and still don’t get it. It feels like the story is hiding behind complicated words.”

2) Boredom Rooted in Lack of Emotional Connection or Pacing

Students frequently noted that longer texts became boring when the plot developed too slowly or when they couldn’t connect with the characters, setting, or conflict. Without an emotional hook, reading felt mechanical. Pacing and relevance are critical for maintaining student interest. When these are absent, especially in lengthy texts, students disengage, seeing the task as a chore rather than a meaningful experience.

“The chapters were so long, and most of it was description. I kept flipping pages, hoping it would get better, but it never did. I wasn’t angry—I was just bored.”

“The characters didn’t even feel real to me. They spoke so differently, and their problems didn’t feel relatable. That made reading feel like just another school task instead of something I wanted to do.”

“There are times when I just space out because nothing is really happening in the story. It takes so long to reach anything exciting. It feels like I’m waiting forever for something to care about.”

3) Motivation Sparked by Realization and Meaningful Themes of Texts

Despite the challenges, some students recalled moments when longer texts inspired them—usually because of powerful messages, personal resonance, or insightful class discussions that revealed hidden depth in the material. When students perceive value or relevance—whether emotional, intellectual, or moral—they persist through the difficulty. These breakthroughs create motivation and a sense of accomplishment.

“I didn’t enjoy the book at first, but when we talked about the theme of injustice in class, I started seeing it differently. Suddenly, I wanted to know what happened next. The message kept me going.”

“When I realized the story was about something real—like depression or colonialism—it clicked. I wanted to read more because it wasn’t just fiction anymore. It was about life.”

“It felt rewarding when I actually finished it and understood the point. I felt like I had achieved something that mattered. That motivated me to keep trying with the next one.”

5. Discussion

This study sought to explore two critical aspects of student engagement with longer literary texts: first, the factors contributing to student apathy or attrition during reading, and second, how students perceive the relevance and emotional impact of these extended readings in literature classes. The findings reveal a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and contextual factors that shape students’ reading experiences. The discussion goes beyond mere description by interpreting how and why these factors emerge and interact in classroom settings, thereby deepening our understanding of student disengagement. For Objective 1, students’ apathy was closely linked to feelings of overwhelm, time constraints, and mental fatigue, underscoring both intrinsic and extrinsic barriers to sustained engagement.

Many participants reported immediate mental resistance upon encountering long literary pieces. They described feelings of dread, anxiety, and avoidance due to the combined weight of length, vocabulary difficulty, and narrative complexity. This aligns with Fernandez-Sanchez et al. [38] who highlighted how textual and verbal discourse when not intentionally inclusive can feel alienating or mentally taxing. Cognitive overload, exacerbated by a lack of classroom support, led to emotional withdrawal from literature activities. These findings affirm the observations of Will & Meesha [39] who emphasized that university students often regard academic reading as a “grudging act” fueled by stress and a sense of obligation rather than intrinsic motivation. Similarly, Xue et al. [40] found that behavioral engagement in text comprehension declines when the cognitive demand exceeds students’ processing capacity leading to surface-level reading or avoidance. These findings suggest that student disengagement is not just a reading issue but a symptom of systemic pressures including overloaded curricula, inadequate instructional scaffolding, and lack of differentiated support.

Moreover, the mental fatigue reported by students supports Nurhadi and Larasaty [41] who noted that student reading motivation decreases when learners feel overwhelmed or lack autonomy over their reading pace. The initial negative reaction to lengthy texts often sets the tone for the rest of the reading experience, predisposing students toward disengagement. Another key contributor to attrition was the burden of academic load. Students commonly deprioritized long literary readings in favor of tasks perceived as more manageable or urgent. This supports the findings of Singun [42] who reported that digital distractions and fragmented schedules have made sustained attention toward reading increasingly difficult for learners. As students struggle to balance multiple academic demands, lengthy reading tasks especially those requiring deep reflection are often sidelined. Further, Bermillo and Merto [43] highlight the value of structured small-group reading instruction in helping students remain engaged with longer texts, especially when time is managed collaboratively. The lack of such support mechanisms in this study’s context left students feeling isolated and rushed, reducing the likelihood of meaningful literary engagement. These findings highlight the urgent need for literature instructors to reconsider how longer texts are introduced and scaffolded in class. When students are mentally overwhelmed and unsupported, even texts with rich literary value can become sources of stress rather than insight. Structured pacing, collaborative reading strategies, and greater autonomy may empower students to engage more meaningfully with extended texts amid competing academic demands.

Participants also described a pervasive sense of boredom and exhaustion during extended reading sessions in class. Despite recognizing the importance of literature, the length and complexity of assigned texts often made reading feel like a burden. These experiences echo Sukovieff and Kruk [44], who found that struggling readers disengage not only due to difficulty but also because of negative emotional associations with reading. When reading feels forced and unaccompanied by guidance or enthusiasm from the learning environment, students develop resistance toward it. Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction framework stresses the necessity of cultivating interest,

autonomy, and purpose in reading tasks. Without these motivational elements, long texts become barriers rather than bridges to learning. This calls for a shift toward interest-driven, student-centered reading approaches that foster autonomy and purpose. Embedding motivation into instruction, educators can transform long texts from burdensome assignments into meaningful learning experiences.

A recurrent theme in the data was the difficulty students had in decoding unfamiliar words and navigating complex sentence structures. This aligns with Kang et al. [45], who emphasize that literature circles when implemented can reduce these difficulties through peer support and vocabulary sharing. However, in the absence of such mechanisms, students in this study felt discouraged and unable to appreciate the text's meaning. The cognitive strain associated with unfamiliar language echoes extensive reading boosts motivation only when readers can make connections with the text something difficult to achieve when the language is inaccessible.

Participants frequently criticized overly descriptive sections for slowing down the pace of reading and breaking their focus. First-year university students often favor action-driven or character-based narratives, particularly when their reading stamina is still developing. This theme illustrates how content design—especially in canonical or traditional literature can alienate modern readers who are more accustomed to faster-paced, multimedia narratives.

The inability to relate to the setting, values, or context of some texts also contributed to disengagement. These findings resonate with Kelley et al. [46] who argue that personal relevance and cultural familiarity enhance reading motivation. When students fail to see themselves or their world in the literature, it becomes abstract and difficult to connect with. This issue ties into Ulbricht et al. [47] call for contextualized and culturally responsive teaching that allow students to bring their own perspectives into the reading process, which can bridge understanding and foster engagement. The struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary and dense descriptions reveals a gap between traditional literary materials and students' current reading capacities. Without scaffolding or collaborative support, texts become cognitively taxing and emotionally demotivating. This underscores the need for instructional designs that bridge linguistic complexity and student readiness through vocabulary aids, guided reading, or literature circles to sustain engagement and promote comprehension.

Distractions such as noise and peer disruptions were also cited as significant barriers to sustained focus. Students described classrooms as noisy, hurried, or lacking in emotional and academic support. Reading engagement is shaped by both individual motivation and environmental conditions. When the latter is neglected, the former is compromised. The absence of a reading culture that encourages reflection, peer interaction, and personal exploration contributes to the development of apathy over time. This also echoes A certain discourse patterns including casual micro aggressions or exclusionary humour can disempower learners and disrupt equitable learning environments. When the classroom atmosphere lacks sensitivity or focus, students are less likely to engage meaningfully with complex reading tasks. The lack of support systems during long reading tasks was described by students as an absence of validation or empathy in the classroom. Asrifan et al. [48] emphasized that when discourse lacks responsiveness or fails to engage with learners' diverse needs, it reinforces exclusion and limits learner participation. This mirrors how students in your study felt isolated during challenging readings, with little space for questions, feedback, or scaffolding.

For Objective 2, perceptions of relevance and emotional responses varied widely, ranging from disconnection and frustration to motivation sparked by meaningful themes and academic growth. Together, these results provide nuanced insights into the challenges and opportunities of teaching longer literary texts, emphasizing the need for curricular responsiveness, scaffolding, and fostering personal connection to the material.

Several students expressed that many longer literary texts felt outdated or disconnected from their contemporary lives, causing disengagement. This finding echoes Ribeiro [49] who noted that students are more motivated when reading materials reflect their realities and interests. The perceived gap between traditional literature curricula and students' lived experiences creates challenges for engagement, as students struggle to find personal meaning in texts set in distant times or unfamiliar cultures. This aligning texts with students' backgrounds increases relevance and reading persistence.

Many participants questioned the practical value of long texts, viewing them as academic requirements rather than tools for real-world learning. This parallels the findings of Budjalemba and Listyani [50] who found that students often see academic reading as a burdensome task when the immediate application is unclear. Students in this study echoed frustrations about the seeming lack of connection between classic literature and their current or

future lives, indicating that motivation wanes when purpose is not evident. This aligns with Dera [51], who stressed that motivation hinges on perceiving the usefulness of reading tasks beyond school requirements. The findings suggest a critical need to bridge the gap between prescribed literature and students' personal realities. When texts feel outdated or irrelevant, motivation declines, and reading becomes a task rather than an enriching experience. This highlights the importance of purposeful text selection and contextual framing ensuring students not only read for academic credit but also find contemporary value, cultural resonance, or personal meaning in the literature they encounter.

On the other hand, some students acknowledged that engaging with longer texts improved their vocabulary, critical thinking, and interpretative skills, which are essential for academic success. The reported frustration with difficult vocabulary and archaic language structures corresponds with findings on the impact of linguistic complexity on reading engagement and comprehension. Students' emotional responses mental fatigue, discouragement, and repeated rereading highlight the cognitive load imposed by classical texts, echoing Hao et al. [52] observations on how distractions and comprehension challenges undermine focus on extended reading.

Boredom, stemming from slow pacing or unreliable characters, was a common theme, supporting Jiménez-Pérez [53] who emphasized the importance of engaging narratives and emotional hooks to maintain student interest. When texts fail to evoke empathy or curiosity, students experience reading as a mechanical, unenjoyable task, which increases attrition. This finding illustrates how pacing and emotional connection are critical to sustaining engagement with longer literary works. While long texts can enhance academic literacy, they must be paired with engaging content and scaffold support. The balance between cognitive challenge and emotional connection is vital without it, students may disengage despite recognizing the academic value. This underscores the importance of carefully selecting texts and designing instruction that nurtures both skill development and sustained interest [54].

Finally, moments of motivation were often linked to students' discovery of deeper meanings, relevant themes, or powerful messages within texts. This transformative experience resonates with Odanga [55], who highlighted how recognizing thematic relevance enhances learner motivation and persistence. When students connect themes like injustice, identity, or resilience to their own lives, they experience reading as meaningful and rewarding. Such affective engagement fosters persistence despite earlier frustrations, aligning with Berhanu Jarssa et al. [56] emphasis on the social and cognitive benefits of purposeful reading. This implies that students are more likely to persevere through challenging texts when they find personal relevance in the themes. These meaningful connections transform reading from a task into an enriching experience, reinforcing the value of literature as a tool for reflection and growth.

6. Conclusions

This study moves beyond identifying surface-level barriers to reveal a deeper narrative: that student disengagement with long literary texts is not merely a matter of preference or workload, but a reflection of unmet pedagogical and affective needs. While traditional literary texts can offer rich cognitive and cultural value, they often fail to resonate when delivered through rigid, one-size-fits-all curricula that ignore students' lived realities. The findings suggest that emotional resonance and personal relevance are not optional extras but essential drivers of motivation.

Importantly, the data challenges the assumption that academic rigor must come at the cost of accessibility. Instead, it calls for a paradigm shift—from literature as passive consumption to literature as active meaning-making. When students are positioned as co-constructors of literary understanding, empowered by contextualized support and cultural relevance, their engagement deepens.

Therefore, meaningful literature instruction in higher education must evolve. It should reframe long texts not as isolated academic hurdles, but as springboards for dialogue, self-discovery, and social connection. By embracing student-centered strategies and recognizing the affective dimensions of reading, educators can transform apathy into agency. This study thus advocates for a more humanized, responsive approach to literature teaching one that respects both the demands of the text and the voices of the readers.

Author Contributions

H.G.A. conceptualized and designed the study, conducted the semi-structured interviews, transcribed the data, performed the thematic analysis, and wrote the original draft of the manuscript. A.-B.A.B. contributed to the review of the research design, provided guidance during the research process, and critically revised the manuscript for intellectual content. C.D.P. assisted in the organization of data, supported the literature review process, and helped in manuscript editing and formatting. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Funding

The authors confirm that no grants, money, or other types of support were acquired to develop this work. Furthermore, the researchers carried out the research independently, with no financing from a government agency, academic institution, commercial organization, or research group. The researchers were in charge of all expenditures connected with the design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this work. Furthermore, no funds were provided to cover the costs of publishing.

Institutional Review Board Statement

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki's ethical criteria. An institutional review method, which is similar to an Institutional Review Board protocol, was utilized to examine and approve this study. This ensured that all ethical requirements for human-subject studies, such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality, were followed. According to the university's institutional procedures, formal ethical assessment and consent were deemed met.

Informed Consent Statement

Every participant in the research provided informed consent. Prior to participating, participants were explicitly and extensively informed about the study's purpose, the procedures to be used, the expected duration of their involvement, and any potential risks or benefits. They were also informed of their right to depart at any time without paying any expenses. To enhance openness, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and get clarification before providing their consent.

Participants were also given guarantees that their personal information would be kept secret and used just for this study. Prior to data collection, individuals provided written informed permission, confirming that they were fully informed and willing to participate in the study.

Data Availability Statement

This study does not generate or analyze any new datasets. All of the material utilized to support the study's results was obtained from previously published sources, which are fully cited and available in the paper's reference section.

Acknowledgments

The researchers acknowledge the cooperation provided by university during the duration of this work. The institution's commitment to academic excellence and creative research supplied the necessary structure and resources for this undertaking. The goal and purpose of this study served as the foundation for the development and assessment of instructional resources. In addition, the researchers thank all of the survey participants.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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