

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Short-Form Video Consumption and Sustained Language Attention: A Phenomenological Study of College Students' Lived Experiences in the Philippines

Jeric L. Cahiles^{1*}, Divine Grace S. Cajenta¹, Santhia Lavyne A. Bergonio¹, Keincheru Einch D. Abao¹, Edgardo V. Tabigue Jr.¹, Katherine Mae G. Abayabay² and Julie Mae B. Fuentes²

¹Student Researchers, Central Mindanao Colleges, 9400 Kidapawan City, Cotabato, Philippines

²Faculty, Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English, and Coordinators, Center for Research and Creative Works, Central Mindanao Colleges, 9400 Kidapawan City, Cotabato, Philippines

*Corresponding author: jcahiles@cmc.edu.ph

ORCID iDs: J. L. Cahiles 0009-0007-7313-7226 · D. G. S. Cajenta 0009-0009-1200-3253 · S. L. A. Bergonio 0009-0007-7833-785X · K. E. D. Abao 0009-0002-6900-650X · E. V. Tabigue Jr. 0009-0001-1154-8018 · K. M. G. Abayabay 0009-0007-8180-6004 · J. M. B. Fuentes 0003-9992-2928

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ABSTRACT

Context: Short-form video platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have become part of students' daily routines, yet little is known about how learners themselves experience the relationship between habitual viewing and their ability to sustain attention during language-related tasks.

Purpose: Guided by the limited capacity model of mediated message processing, the concept of attention residue, and a stylistic perspective on how people construe experience through language, this study explored how college students who regularly watch short-form videos experience sustained attention during reading, listening, writing, and speaking activities.

Method: A descriptive phenomenological design was used with 15 first-year college students from five higher education institutions in South Central Mindanao, Philippines. Data from asynchronous semi-structured interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method.

Findings: Four clusters of themes emerged: (a) lived experiences of habitual viewing, attention residue, restlessness, and a felt preference for speed; (b) challenges of distraction, procrastination, escape behavior, and endless scrolling; (c) coping strategies centered on removing the phone, task-first rules, chunking, and creative self-accountability; and (d) insights recognizing an inverse link between viewing and focus, growing self-awareness, and modest benefits outweighed by perceived costs. A stylistic reading showed that participants construed attention through metaphors of training, pulling, and decay, and positioned videos as agents acting upon them.

Contribution: Sustained language attention appears to be shaped less by exposure alone than by patterns of use and self-regulation. Educators may pair purposeful short-form content with explicitly scaffolded long-form tasks and teach attention-protection strategies, while students may benefit from deliberate boundaries between entertainment and study.

1. INTRODUCTION

Short-form video has reshaped how young people encounter, process, and share information. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts deliver personalized, algorithmically curated clips that are continuously available and rapidly changing, making short-form viewing a default activity in many users' digital routines (Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Roberts & David, 2025). Users turn to these platforms for entertainment, information, social connection, and self-expression (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Scherr & Wang, 2021). The same features that make the format appealing—brevity, novelty, and infinite scroll—have also raised questions about what habitual exposure does to attention.

A growing body of evidence has examined this question. Higher short-form video addiction has been associated with poorer attention performance (Chen et

al., 2023) and weaker attention-related executive control as measured by EEG (Yan et al., 2024). Rapid context switching during short-form viewing has been shown to impair prospective memory, the capacity to retain and act on intentions (Chiossi et al., 2023). A systematic review and meta-analysis found that greater short-form video use was associated with poorer cognitive outcomes, particularly attention and inhibitory control (Nguyen et al., 2025). Most recently, an experimental and neuroimaging study found that learning content presented as short clips produced lower memory accuracy and weaker synchrony in brain regions supporting attention and episodic memory than the same content presented continuously (Wei et al., 2026). These findings are important but not uniform. Lin et al. (2024) found that self-reported short-form consumption was linked to poorer sustained attention in a survey, yet experimentally altering viewing duration did not

produce consistent effects, and Miedzobrodzka et al. (2024) showed that *self-control failure* in TikTok use, rather than general use, was the stronger correlate of negative academic outcomes. How short-form video is used appears to matter as much as how much.

The question is especially consequential for language learning. Reading extended texts, following spoken input, composing written work, and sustaining a conversation all depend on the ability to hold attention over time. Sustained attention has been linked to learning performance in video-based instruction (Kokoç et al., 2020) and to working memory and language abilities (Smolak et al., 2020), and learners' attention to audiovisual input contributes to vocabulary acquisition (Puimège et al., 2023). At the same time, short-form platforms have been studied as language-learning resources that provide authentic exposure, speaking practice, and motivation (Dewi et al., 2022; Hu & Du, 2022; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2022). Short-form video therefore cannot be treated simply as a threat; its relationship with sustained language attention must be understood in terms of how students actually use and experience it.

This issue is pressing in the Philippines, where young people are among the world's heaviest social media users and where English is learned largely as an academic language. Philippine studies have examined TikTok as a digital learning tool (Decenilla et al., 2022), its association with student engagement (Salasac et al., 2022), and its perceived effects on the attention span of senior high school students (Canila et al., 2023). Research from Cotabato Province has documented that college students' English communication difficulties surface most visibly in sustained, interactive tasks (Osuno et al., 2026) and that confidence and fluency in speaking are built gradually through supported practice (Villaver et al., 2026). Yet no study has examined how Filipino college students experience sustained attention specifically during language-related activities in the context of everyday, multi-platform short-form viewing.

This study also attends to something quantitative attention research typically leaves aside: the language students use to describe their attention. Stylistics examines how linguistic choices construe experience, stance, and identity (Simpson, 2004; Leech & Short, 2007). Philippine stylistic and discourse scholarship has shown how metaphor encodes emotional states (Dafieltomoto et al., 2025), how repetition and fragmented structures signal affective stance (Pajaro et al., 2025), how deixis, modality, and evaluative language construct shifting identities (Debuque et al., 2026), how indexical language encodes gendered ideals and social identity (Gesulga et al., 2025), and how speakers use hedging and repetition strategically (Olbes et al., 2026). When students speak of videos that "train" the brain or of "brain rot," they are not only reporting an experience; they are interpreting it through culturally available metaphors that shape how they understand their own agency. Attending to this language enriches

phenomenological description and connects digital-learning research with stylistics.

Accordingly, the study explores four research questions:

- RQ1. What are the lived experiences of college students who watch short-form videos in relation to sustaining attention during language-related activities?
- RQ2. What challenges do they encounter in maintaining sustained language attention?
- RQ3. What strategies do they use to protect and restore sustained language attention?
- RQ4. What insights do they draw from their experiences with short-form videos and language attention?

The study does not assume that short-form video is either harmful or beneficial. It seeks to describe the phenomenon as students live it and to offer insights for learners, teachers, and institutions, in support of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education).

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Short-Form Video as a Multi-Platform Phenomenon

Short-form video is no longer synonymous with a single application. TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts share core affordances—vertical full-screen clips, algorithmic recommendation, autoplay, and infinite scroll—that have been linked to heightened engagement and, among some users, addictive patterns (Roberts & David, 2025). Bhandari and Bimo (2022) describe TikTok's recommendation system as producing an "algorithmized self," in which users' feeds are continuously tuned to their responses. Uses-and-gratifications research shows that users seek entertainment, escapism, social interaction, information, and self-presentation from these platforms (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Scherr & Wang, 2021). These studies support viewing short-form consumption as a broader media practice rather than as the use of one application.

2.2 Short-Form Video, Attention, and Learning

Studies of short-form video and attention have used different designs and reached broadly convergent but qualified conclusions. Correlational work associates problematic short-form use with poorer attention (Chen et al., 2023), lower learning motivation and well-being (Ye et al., 2022), and lower academic achievement mediated by attention (Gong & Tao, 2024). Survey studies of undergraduates report associations between heavy reel consumption and self-reported reductions in attention span and academic focus (Asif & Kazi, 2024; Haliti-Sylaj & Sadiku, 2024). Longitudinal evidence from adolescents indicates a reciprocal relationship in which short-form video addiction predicts later declines in academic buoyancy, while low buoyancy predicts later addiction (Xiong et al., 2026). Experimental and neurophysiological studies show that rapid context

switching impairs the retention of intentions (Chiossi et al., 2023), that addiction tendency is associated with weaker executive control of attention (Yan et al., 2024), and that fragmented short-clip formats reduce memory accuracy and neural synchrony relative to continuous presentation (Wei et al., 2026). A meta-analysis synthesizing this literature found small-to-moderate associations between short-form use and poorer attention and inhibitory control across platforms and age groups (Nguyen et al., 2025).

Two qualifications run through this literature. First, most evidence is correlational, and experimental manipulations of viewing time have not consistently changed attention (Lin et al., 2024). Second, patterns of use matter: self-control failure, not use per se, is the stronger correlate of academic harm (Miedzobrodzka et al., 2024). These qualifications point to the value of research that examines how users experience and regulate their viewing.

2.3 Short-Form Video as a Language-Learning Resource

In parallel, short-form video has been investigated as a pedagogical tool. Studies report that TikTok can provide English exposure, motivation, pronunciation and speaking practice, and opportunities for interaction (Abdullah et al., 2023; Cahyono & Perdhani, 2023; Hu & Du, 2022; Suciani et al., 2023; Sulistiani et al., 2025; Tan et al., 2022), and that Instagram Reels can support authentic speaking development and mobile-assisted language learning (Dewi et al., 2022; Hikmah et al., 2024). Reviews of TikTok in education and English language teaching describe benefits for participation and engagement alongside concerns about distraction and superficial learning (Caldeiro-Pedreira & Yot-Domínguez, 2023; Sulistianah et al., 2025). Research on instructional video design further shows that visual complexity, presentation style, and social cues shape attention allocation and learning (Gao & Tan, 2022; Meier et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). This work underscores the need to distinguish purposeful educational viewing from everyday, continuous entertainment scrolling, which is the focus of the present study.

2.4 The Language of Experience: A Stylistic Perspective

Phenomenological research works with language: participants' descriptions are the primary evidence of lived experience. Stylistics offers tools for examining how such descriptions are constructed. Conceptual metaphor theory holds that people understand abstract domains, such as attention or time, through more concrete source domains, such as resources, containers, or forces (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Systemic functional linguistics describes how transitivity choices—who is represented as acting upon whom—construe agency and responsibility (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Modality and evaluative language encode speakers' stance toward their own claims (Simpson, 2004).

Philippine stylistic and discourse studies have applied these tools productively. Dafieltomoto et al. (2025) traced how recurring metaphors of burial and haunting encode attachment and unresolved longing. Pajaro et al. (2025) showed how fragmented structures, repetition, and shifts in discourse stance mark emotional progression. Debuque et al. (2026) demonstrated that shifting deixis, modality, and evaluative markers construct an unstable, negotiated identity, and that apparent inconsistency is itself a meaningful stylistic strategy. Gesulga et al. (2025) showed how indexical language encodes masculine ideals and social identity, and Olbes et al. (2026) traced the strategic use of hedging, repetition, and evaluative language. Although these studies analyze literary, musical, media, and political texts, their methods transfer naturally to interview talk. Applied here, they allow the study to ask not only *what* students experience but *how* they construe that experience in language—for example, whether they position themselves as agents in control of their attention or as subjects acted upon by technology.

2.5 Theoretical Framework

Three perspectives frame the study. The **limited capacity model of mediated message processing** proposes that people have finite cognitive resources for encoding, storing, and retrieving media content, and that structural features such as rapid cuts and novelty automatically draw resources toward encoding (Lang, 2000). Short-form video, with its frequent orienting cues, is designed to capture these automatic resources; sustained language tasks, by contrast, require controlled, effortful allocation over long periods. **Attention residue** refers to the persistence of thoughts about a prior activity after switching to a new one, which reduces performance on the subsequent task (Leroy, 2009). Students who move directly from scrolling to studying may carry residual cognitive activity that competes with the language task. Finally, the **stylistic perspective** outlined above treats participants' descriptions as constructed representations whose metaphors, agency patterns, and stance markers reveal how students make sense of the phenomenon (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Together, these perspectives informed the interview guide and provided sensitizing concepts for interpretation, while Colaizzi's method kept the analysis grounded in participants' own accounts.

2.6 Research Gap

Existing research has examined short-form video in relation to attention, cognition, academic performance, problematic use, engagement, and educational applications (Chen et al., 2023; Gong & Tao, 2024; Miedzobrodzka et al., 2024; Nguyen et al., 2025; Salasac et al., 2022), and has evaluated individual platforms as language-learning tools (Dewi et al., 2022; Hu & Du, 2022; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2023). Lin et al. (2024) specifically called for further investigation of the relationship between short-form consumption and sustained attention. What remains underexplored is how

students themselves experience sustained attention during language-related activities in the context of everyday, multi-platform viewing, particularly in Southeast Asian settings, and how they construe that experience in language. The present study addresses this gap.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design, which seeks to describe the essential structure of a phenomenon as experienced by people who have lived it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The phenomenon of interest was short-form video consumption as it relates to sustained attention during language-related activities. Phenomenology was appropriate because the research questions concerned participants' experiences and meanings rather than the measurement of attention or the estimation of effects (Busetto et al., 2020; Sulkowski et al., 2026).

3.2 Setting and Participants

The study was conducted among first-year college students enrolled in various programs at five private higher education institutions in Kidapawan City and Makilala, Cotabato, in South Central Mindanao, Philippines: Central Mindanao Colleges, Notre Dame of Kidapawan College, Colegio de Kidapawan, Kidapawan Doctors College, and Makilala Institute of Science and Technology. Fifteen participants were recruited through purposive sampling to obtain information-rich accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Inclusion criteria were (a) enrollment as a first-year college student aged 18 to 21 years; (b) regular consumption of short-form videos on TikTok, Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, Facebook Reels, or similar platforms for an average of at least 30 minutes per day; (c) engagement in language-related activities such as academic reading, listening practice, writing, or language coursework at least three times per week; and (d) willingness to participate in an interview and to provide informed consent. Individuals were excluded if they self-reported a diagnosed attention-related or neurological condition that could independently affect sustained attention, consumed short-form videos for less than 30 minutes per day, or had insufficient proficiency in the interview language. Eligibility was screened through a brief demographic questionnaire completed before the interview. Table 1 summarizes the participants' profile.

Table 1. Profile of Participants (N = 15)

Characteristic	Distribution
Age	18–19 years: 7; 20–21 years: 8
Gender (self-identified)	Female: 5; male: 5; LGBTQ+: 5
Program (all first year)	Secondary education (BSEd): 6; business and management: 3; allied health: 2; engineering: 2; criminology: 2
Institutions	Five private HEIs in Kidapawan City and Makilala, Cotabato

Characteristic	Distribution
Platforms used regularly*	TikTok: 15; Instagram/Facebook Reels: 15; YouTube Shorts: 15
Average daily short-form viewing	30–60 min: 5; 1–3 h: 7; more than 3 h: 3

Note. Participant codes P1–P15 are used to attribute quotations. *Multiple responses were allowed; all participants reported regular use of all three platform types.

3.3 Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide with four main questions, each with three follow-up probes, was developed from the research questions and the sensitizing concepts in the theoretical framework. Questions invited participants to describe typical viewing routines, specific occasions when they moved from watching short-form videos to a language task, challenges they encountered, strategies they used, and what they had come to understand about the relationship between viewing and attention. The guide was reviewed for clarity, relevance, and appropriateness by three experts in qualitative research and language education and revised accordingly. A brief demographic questionnaire collected the information reported in Table 1. The full guide is available from the corresponding author upon request.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected from January to March 2026. After informed consent was obtained, interviews were conducted asynchronously through a messaging application: the researcher sent each question in turn, and participants responded through recorded voice messages, with follow-up probes sent as needed. This format allowed participants to respond at their own pace and in a familiar digital environment, an approach suited to a study of digitally embedded experience, although it limited the spontaneous probing possible in face-to-face interviews. Each participant's responses totaled approximately 15 to 30 minutes of audio. Participants could respond in English, Filipino, or Cebuano; non-English responses were translated into English by the researchers and checked by a second bilingual researcher.

Voice messages were transcribed using TurboScribe, an AI-assisted transcription tool. A researcher then reviewed every transcript against the original audio, correcting errors and preserving participants' wording, and removed identifying information. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, that is, until the final interviews yielded no new significant statements.

3.5 Data Analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method. The researchers (1) read all transcripts repeatedly to gain a sense of the whole; (2) extracted significant statements pertaining to the phenomenon; (3) formulated meanings from each significant statement; (4) organized formulated meanings into clusters of themes and emergent themes; (5) integrated the results into an exhaustive description

of the phenomenon; (6) reduced the exhaustive description to its fundamental structure; and (7) returned the findings to participants for validation. The formulated meanings were organized into 16 themes within four theme clusters, one cluster for each research question. Coding was conducted independently by five researchers, who met to compare and reconcile interpretations.

In a supplementary interpretive layer, the researchers re-read significant statements with attention to their linguistic form, noting recurrent metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the representation of agency in clause structure (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014), and stance markers such as modality and evaluation (Simpson, 2004). This stylistic reading did not generate separate themes; rather, it deepened the description of how participants construed the phenomenon.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

Trustworthiness was addressed through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. *Credibility* was supported by member checking, in which five participants reviewed the exhaustive description and confirmed that it reflected their experiences, and by investigator triangulation during coding. *Dependability* was supported by an audit trail documenting analytic decisions. *Confirmability* was supported by verbatim quotations and by bracketing: before analysis, the researchers recorded their own short-form viewing habits and assumptions—as young adults and regular viewers themselves—and revisited these notes during interpretation to reduce the influence of preconceptions. *Transferability* was supported by describing the setting and participants so that readers can judge applicability to other contexts.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of Central Mindanao Colleges (protocol no. CMC-REC-2025-101). Participants were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and they provided written informed consent. Pseudonymous codes replaced names, identifying details were removed from transcripts, and audio files were stored on password-protected devices accessible only to the research team, in compliance with the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). The study involved no more than minimal risk.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis yielded 16 themes organized into four clusters corresponding to the research questions. Each cluster is presented with a summary table, followed by the themes, illustrative quotations, and discussion in relation to the literature. A stylistic reading of participants' language is presented in Section 4.5.

4.1 Lived Experiences of Watching Short-Form Videos and Sustaining Language Attention

Table 2. Themes on Lived Experiences of Short-Form Video Viewing and Language Attention

Theme	Formulated meaning
Habitual use and focus disruption	Viewing has become an automatic daily habit that extends into study time; fast-paced content creates a craving for novelty that conflicts with the slower demands of language learning.
Attention residue and time loss	Images and emotions from videos linger after viewing, delaying the start of academic work and turning brief sessions into prolonged scrolling.
Restlessness and slower processing	Students feel impatient, bored, and mentally tired when studying after viewing, and their thoughts repeatedly drift back to the phone.
Shortened attention and preference for speed	Students perceive that regular viewing has shortened their attention and made quick, rewarding content preferable to longer language tasks.

Habitual Use and Focus Disruption

Participants described short-form viewing as an automatic routine that had expanded from leisure moments into meals, commutes, rest, and time set aside for study.

"Watching Instagram reels and Facebook videos daily has become an automatic habit for me. While entertaining, it severely delays my responsibilities and disrupts my study routine." (P2)

Participants contrasted the rapid stimulation of the feed with the slower, deliberate demands of reading, listening, and writing, describing a craving for novelty that made language tasks feel effortful by comparison. These accounts are consistent with survey evidence linking heavy reel consumption to self-reported declines in attention and academic focus among undergraduates (Asif & Kazi, 2024; Haliti-Sylaj & Sadiku, 2024) and with the limited capacity model, in which structural novelty automatically recruits processing resources (Lang, 2000). The term "automatic" is telling: participants experienced viewing not as a decision but as a default.

Attention Residue and Time Loss

A clear before-and-after contrast ran through participants' narratives. Many reported that they could sustain focus for longer before viewing; afterward, scenes and feelings from the videos lingered, delaying task initiation. The intention to watch "just a few" videos frequently expanded into an hour or more.

"One experience I remember was when I planned to study for an hour but decided to watch Reels first. I thought I would only watch for a few minutes, but I ended up watching videos for almost an hour. When I finally started studying, I quickly became bored and had difficulty understanding what I was reading." (P5)

This experience closely mirrors Leroy's (2009) account of attention residue, in which thoughts about a prior activity persist after switching and reduce performance on the next task. It also echoes

experimental findings that rapid context switching during short-form viewing impairs the retention of intentions (Chiossi et al., 2023): participants lost track not only of time but of the plan they had made.

Restlessness and Slower Processing

When participants turned to longer language activities after viewing, they reported impatience, boredom, slower comprehension, mental fatigue, and a recurring urge to return to the phone.

"I need a lot of time to process the information, and reading long stories or paragraphs feels tiring for my brain. The content of the videos keeps lingering in my mind and distracts me." (P8)

These subjective reports are compatible with recent neuroimaging evidence that fragmented short-clip formats are associated with weaker synchrony in brain regions supporting attention and episodic memory, alongside heightened engagement of regions tied to automatic, stimulus-driven processing (Wei et al., 2026). The present data cannot establish such mechanisms, but they show how a similar contrast is *felt*: continuous language input becomes "tiring" after a period of rapid, effortless stimulation.

Shortened Attention and Preference for Speed

Participants widely perceived that regular viewing had shortened their attention and reduced their willingness to engage with extended tasks, though a minority acknowledged incidental benefits such as new vocabulary.

"My attention span has significantly shortened; I struggle to grasp instructions quickly when listening. Given the choice, I now prefer sitting passively with entertaining reels over socializing or doing demanding coursework." (P10)

This perception aligns with meta-analytic associations between short-form use and poorer attention and inhibitory control (Nguyen et al., 2025). Importantly, it is a perception; participants' sense of a shortened attention span may also reflect heightened awareness of distraction rather than measured decline. Notably, the participant above reported preferring reels not only to coursework but also to socializing, suggesting that the preference for low-effort reward extended beyond academic contexts.

4.2 Challenges in Maintaining Sustained Language Attention

Table 3. Themes on Challenges in Maintaining Sustained Language Attention

Theme	Formulated meaning
Easy distraction during extended tasks	Residual video content and the urge to check the phone interrupt concentration during long readings, lectures, and discussions.
Procrastination and incomplete work	The "just one more video" pattern displaces study time, leading to rushed work, fatigue, and unfinished tasks.
Impatience and escape behavior	Students become restless during longer tasks and turn to their phones as an easy escape.

Theme	Formulated meaning
Rapid novelty and endless scrolling	Constant novelty and infinite scroll are experienced as training the brain to expect frequent rewards, making academic work feel dull.

Easy Distraction During Extended Tasks

Participants reported heightened distractibility during long reading passages, lectures, and discussions after viewing. A key difficulty was not noticing the drift until it had already occurred.

"The biggest problem is that I do not notice when I am already wasting time. I can start watching videos during a short break and suddenly realize that I have been scrolling for an hour. When that happens, I usually have less time left for my schoolwork." (P3)

This lack of awareness during viewing is consistent with descriptions of short-form platforms as absorbing environments that minimize stopping cues (Roberts & David, 2025) and with associations between problematic use and academic inattention (Asif & Kazi, 2024).

Procrastination and Incomplete Work

Initiating or completing language tasks became more difficult once scrolling began, especially under fatigue and deadline pressure.

"During all-nighter study sessions for major exams, short-form videos heavily disrupt my workflow. As fatigue sets in, the quick entertainment on my phone constantly pulls me away from my reviewers. Struggling to stay focused on dense material, I waste valuable time scrolling instead of preparing effectively." (P15)

Longitudinal evidence among adolescents suggests a reciprocal cycle in which short-form video addiction predicts later declines in academic buoyancy—the capacity to cope with everyday academic setbacks—while low buoyancy predicts later addiction (Xiong et al., 2026). Participants' accounts illustrate this loop from the inside: fatigue and difficulty made the phone more attractive, and scrolling, in turn, deepened the difficulty.

Impatience and Escape Behavior

When language activities extended beyond the brief durations to which participants had grown accustomed, restlessness set in quickly, and the phone offered an immediate alternative.

"I get bored when a task takes too long. When this happens, checking my phone becomes an easy way to escape from the activity." (P7)

Escape is one of the core gratifications that draw users to short-form platforms (Bucknell Bossen & Kottasz, 2020; Omar & Dequan, 2020). In this context, the platform functions less as entertainment than as a relief from task-related discomfort, a pattern consistent with findings that self-control failure, rather than use itself, predicts academic harm (Miedzobrodzka et al., 2024).

Rapid Novelty and Endless Scrolling

Participants identified the design of the platforms themselves—brevity, novelty, and infinite scroll—as the main force undermining sustained attention.

“The endless scrolling makes it difficult to stop. There is no clear ending because another video appears immediately. Sometimes I think the next one might be funny or interesting, so I keep going.” (P4)

This account captures the intermittent-reward structure of algorithmic feeds: the next clip is uncertain but potentially rewarding. Research on platform affordances links such features to engagement and addiction risk across TikTok, Reels, and Shorts (Roberts & David, 2025), and the limited capacity model predicts that continual orienting cues sustain automatic attention at the expense of controlled processing (Lang, 2000).

4.3 Strategies for Protecting Sustained Language Attention

Table 4. Themes on Strategies for Sustained Language Attention

Theme	Formulated meaning
Removing the phone	Physically distancing the phone (silent mode, bag, or another room) is the most common and effective strategy.
Task-first rules and limits	Students set rules such as finishing schoolwork first, setting time limits, or disabling notifications.
Breaks, chunking, and environment	Dividing tasks into smaller parts, taking non-phone breaks, and creating quiet study spaces help maintain focus.
Separation and creative self-accountability	Combining phone separation with structured breaks and self-devised accountability methods, such as time-lapse recording, sustains concentration.

Removing the Phone

The most frequently reported strategy was physical distance: silencing the phone, placing it in a bag or another room, or logging out of applications.

“I put my phone away, take a 5–10 min quiet break, then return. I read slowly and take simple notes to stay engaged.” (P1)

Reducing the device’s availability lowers the self-control required to resist it, an approach consistent with the finding that regulation of use, rather than use alone, distinguishes harmful from benign patterns (Miedzobrodzka et al., 2024).

Task-First Rules and Limits

Many participants set rules in advance, such as completing schoolwork before using social media, setting time limits, disabling notifications, or using airplane mode. One participant described an inventive approach.

“One of the most effective strategies to stop myself from holding my phone or iPad and getting lost in reels is recording myself in timelapse. Since my devices are busy, I cannot use them, and I look forward to seeing the final video of myself studying in fast motion. This tricks my brain into finishing my tasks while keeping me focused, a method I have used since the pandemic.” (P6)

This strategy is notable because it repurposes the device and the appeal of short video itself: the phone is occupied, and the reward is a brief, satisfying clip of one’s own effort. It illustrates that students are not merely passive consumers but can design their environments creatively.

Breaks, Chunking, and Environment

Participants also described dividing work into smaller segments, taking breaks away from the phone, keeping fixed schedules, and preparing quiet study spaces.

“I study better when I divide my work into smaller parts. Instead of thinking about finishing everything at once, I focus on one task first. I take short breaks in between, but I try not to spend those breaks scrolling.” (P4)

Chunking reduces the duration of continuous effort each segment requires, which may be especially helpful for learners whose tolerance for sustained tasks has decreased. Taking breaks without the phone also addresses attention residue by avoiding a fresh round of rapid stimulation before returning to the task (Leroy, 2009).

Separation and Creative Self-Accountability

Participants reported that separation strategies worked best when combined with structured breaks or gradual focus-building, and some had sustained these practices over years.

“The pandemic served as a true testimony to how effective recording myself on timelapse can be, as keeping me excited about the video outcome helps me stay engaged and complete my tasks effectively. This strategy worked successfully from late junior high school all the way into college.” (P10)

These accounts suggest that effective strategies combine environmental redesign with personally meaningful motivation, and that such habits, once established, can endure across educational stages.

4.4 Insights from Experiences with Short-Form Videos and Language Attention

Table 5. Themes on Insights from Experiences with Short-Form Videos and Language Attention

Theme	Formulated meaning
Inverse link between viewing and focus	Students perceive that heavier short-form viewing is associated with weaker sustained attention for language tasks.
Greater self-awareness of attention	Students realize that distraction is often self-initiated and take more personal responsibility for protecting their focus.
Limited benefits versus clear costs	Benefits such as vocabulary and relaxation are acknowledged but perceived as outweighed by reduced patience and weaker deep processing.
Advice: limits, priority, and distance	Students recommend prioritizing academic work, keeping the phone out of reach, setting daily limits, and treating videos as controlled leisure.

Inverse Link Between Viewing and Focus

Participants articulated a generally inverse relationship between the amount they watched and their capacity for sustained language attention.

"More short-form videos results to shorter focus. Fast content trains quick switching. Language learning needs slow, steady focus. They pull in opposite direction." (P13)

This lay theory parallels meta-analytic findings (Nguyen et al., 2025) and the logic of the limited capacity model (Lang, 2000). It should be read, however, as participants' interpretation of their experience rather than as evidence of a causal relationship; Lin et al. (2024) found that changing viewing duration alone did not reliably change attention.

Greater Self-Awareness of Attention

Many participants came to recognize that distraction was frequently self-initiated, triggered by phone proximity, boredom, or task difficulty.

"My experience made me realize that I need to be careful with how I use my time. I now see how easily my focus gets ruined by bad phone habits. It forced me to notice when I am wasting time on "brain rot" videos so I can stop and protect my study time." (P15)

This growing metacognitive awareness is a meaningful finding in its own right. It suggests that reflecting on one's viewing—as the interviews themselves invited participants to do—may be a first step toward self-regulation.

Limited Benefits Versus Clear Costs

Participants acknowledged benefits such as incidental vocabulary learning, relaxation, and quick access to information, but they judged the costs to be greater.

"There is a small benefit—sometimes I learn new words from the videos and look them up so I can use them later. But overall, the disadvantages are bigger because the videos make studying and reading feel more tiring and less interesting." (P12)

This balanced judgment is consistent with research documenting the language-learning potential of short-form platforms (Hu & Du, 2022; Tan et al., 2022) alongside evidence of attention-related costs (Nguyen et al., 2025). The participant's practice of looking up new words shows how incidental exposure can become intentional learning when the learner takes an active step.

Advice: Limits, Priority, and Distance

Participants' advice to peers emphasized boundaries: completing important work first, keeping the phone out of reach, setting daily limits, and treating short-form video as controlled leisure.

"My advice to other students is to find a study habit that effectively distances you from "brain rot" activities. What works for me, like timelapse recording, might not work for you if you are not driven by the same enthusiasm. The key is discovering a personal strategy that keeps you accountable and focused on your goals." (P11)

This advice reflects a shift from reactive self-control toward proactive, individualized environmental design, and a recognition that no single strategy fits every learner.

4.5 A Stylistic Reading: How Participants Construe Attention in Language

Beyond what participants reported, the way they spoke about attention revealed how they understood the phenomenon. Three stylistic patterns recurred across the significant statements.

Metaphors of training, pulling, and decay. Participants construed attention through concrete source domains (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Attention was something that could be *trained*: "Fast content trains quick switching." It was subject to physical *force*: videos "pull me away from my reviewers," and short-form and language learning "pull in opposite direction." Most strikingly, attention could *decay*: several participants used the Gen Z expression "brain rot," and others described their focus as "ruined." Participants also used spatial metaphors of being *lost* ("getting lost in reels") and described video content that kept "lingering" in their minds. Like the metaphors of burial and haunting that Dafieltomoto et al. (2025) found encoding unresolved attachment, these metaphors encode a sense of slow, partly involuntary loss. The training metaphor, however, carries an implicit hope: what can be trained in one direction may be retrained in another.

Shifting agency. Clause-level representation of agency (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) shifted systematically across the four clusters. When describing experiences and challenges, participants frequently cast videos or habits as the actors and themselves as those affected: "the videos make studying and reading feel more tiring," "the quick entertainment on my phone constantly pulls me away," "my focus gets ruined by bad phone habits." When describing strategies, the grammatical subject became the self: "I put my phone away," "I divide my work into smaller parts," "I focus on one task first." In the insights cluster, participants explicitly reclaimed responsibility, recognizing distraction as largely self-initiated and as something they could "stop" in order to "protect my study time." This movement from patient to agent mirrors the trajectory Debuque et al. (2026) identified, in which identity is not fixed but negotiated through shifting linguistic positioning. One participant's statement that time-lapse recording "tricks my brain" is especially revealing: the self is split into a strategist and a brain to be managed.

Formulaic expressions and generational style. Expressions such as "just one more video," "brain rot," and "endless scrolling" recurred across participants. These formulaic phrases circulate on the platforms themselves and index a shared generational stance toward digital life, in the way that indexical choices align speakers with recognizable social identities (Gesulga et al., 2025). Their use is often ironic and self-deprecating: participants named the problem in the platform's own idiom even as they criticized it. Repetition of such

formulas also functioned as an affective intensifier, much as repetition signals emotional stance in the musical discourse analyzed by Pajaro et al. (2025). Hedged advice (“might not work for you,” “the key is discovering a personal strategy”) further shows participants positioning themselves as reflective, non-prescriptive peers rather than authorities (Olbes et al., 2026; Simpson, 2004).

These patterns matter for interpretation and practice. The predominance of force and decay metaphors in the experience and challenge clusters suggests that students initially understand their attention as something done *to* them, which may discourage self-regulation. The shift to agentive language in the strategy and insight clusters suggests that reflection itself can reposition students as agents. Teachers who invite students to examine how they talk about their attention—and to reframe “my focus got ruined” as “I can retrain my focus”—may support the metacognitive shift observed here.

4.6 Essential Structure of the Phenomenon

Integrating the four clusters, the essential structure of the experience may be described as follows. For these students, short-form video consumption is an automatic, everyday habit whose rapid, rewarding rhythm lingers after viewing and makes the slow, effortful rhythm of language tasks feel heavy and dull. They experience this tension as a pull between two competing modes of attention, and they often lose time and intention before noticing the drift. Through repeated experience, they come to see their attention as both vulnerable and trainable, move from feeling acted upon toward taking responsibility, and construct personal strategies—above all, physical distance from the phone—to protect the sustained focus that language learning requires. Short-form video is not experienced as wholly harmful; it offers small gains, but these are judged worthwhile only when viewing is bounded and purposeful.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO PRACTICE AND SDG ALIGNMENT

For **students**, the findings support setting viewing boundaries before study sessions, keeping the phone physically out of reach, avoiding scrolling during breaks, and breaking extended language tasks into manageable segments. Students may also find it useful to notice the language they use about their own attention and to adopt more agentive framings.

For **teachers**, short-form video can be used purposefully when content is closely linked to lesson objectives, for example as a brief hook, a model of authentic speech, or a stimulus for discussion (Dewi et al., 2022; Hu & Du, 2022; Tan et al., 2022). Such use should be paired with explicitly scaffolded long-form tasks—extended reading with guided stopping points, listening tasks with focus questions, and staged writing—that gradually build students’ capacity for sustained attention (Kokoç et al., 2020). Teachers may also teach attention-protection strategies explicitly and

invite reflection on digital habits. In general education courses such as Purposive Communication, instructional materials can integrate digital texts while deliberately cultivating sustained engagement with longer texts (Osumo, 2024).

For **institutions**, orientation programs and student support services may address digital well-being without framing short-form video as wholly harmful, emphasizing self-regulation rather than prohibition, consistent with evidence that self-control failure rather than use per se is associated with academic harm (Miedzobrodzka et al., 2024).

Taken together, these implications support Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) by helping students build and protect the sustained attention that extended language learning requires.

6. CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study described how college students experience the relationship between everyday short-form video consumption and sustained attention during language-related activities. Participants experienced habitual viewing as automatic, carried residual attention from videos into study, felt restless and slower when facing extended language tasks, and perceived a growing preference for speed. They struggled with distraction, procrastination, escape, and the pull of infinite scroll, and they countered these challenges by distancing the phone, setting task-first rules, chunking work, and devising creative accountability strategies. Over time, they came to view their attention as trainable and their distraction as partly self-initiated, judging the modest benefits of short-form video to be worthwhile only under deliberate limits. A stylistic reading showed that participants construed attention through metaphors of training, force, and decay and moved from representing themselves as acted upon to representing themselves as agents. Together, these findings suggest that sustained language attention in the age of short-form video is shaped less by exposure alone than by patterns of use, self-awareness, and self-regulation.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations should be noted. First, as a phenomenological study of 15 first-year students from five private institutions in South Central Mindanao, the findings describe the experiences of this group and are not statistically generalizable. Second, the asynchronous voice-message format, while suited to digitally embedded experience, limited real-time probing and nonverbal cues. Third, participants’ accounts are retrospective self-reports and may be influenced by public discourse about “brain rot” and attention spans; the study does not measure attention or establish causation. Fourth, AI-assisted transcription, though checked against the audio, may have introduced minor errors. Finally, the stylistic reading was a supplementary layer applied to significant statements rather than a full discourse analysis of complete transcripts.

Future research may (a) combine qualitative accounts with objective measures of viewing time and sustained attention; (b) compare heavy and light users or users of different platforms; (c) test the effectiveness of the strategies identified here, such as phone separation and chunking, in classroom interventions; (d) examine purposeful educational uses of short-form video alongside long-form tasks; and (e) conduct fuller stylistic and discourse analyses of how students talk about attention and digital media across cultures and age groups. Such work would extend the dialogue between digital-learning research and stylistics initiated in this study.

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