

ALTERNATIVE UNIVERSE NARRATIVES ON X APPLICATION AND THEIR ROLE IN ENHANCING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' READING MOTIVATION IN DIGITAL LEARNING

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Abstract: The use of social media has created new opportunities for digital learning, including reading English Alternative Universe (AU) stories on the X application. This study aimed to explore university students' experiences in reading English AU stories on X and how these stories influence their reading motivation in digital learning. This study used a qualitative case study design involving five English Education students who actively read English AU stories on X. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and screenshot documents and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings showed that AU stories increased students' reading motivation because they were enjoyable, easy to access, and related to students' interests. Participants also felt relaxed, entertained, and less stressed while reading, which encouraged them to continue reading. In addition, they believed that reading AU stories helped improve their vocabulary and understanding of everyday English expressions. Although some challenges, such as distractions and eye fatigue, were reported, participants generally viewed AU stories as a positive digital learning resource. Therefore, English AU stories on X can support students' reading motivation and provide meaningful digital reading experiences.

Key Words: Alternative Universe (AU) stories, X Application, Reading Motivation, Digital Learning, Digital Literacy, EFL Students.

INTRODUCTION

Digital learning has become an important part of education because it allows students to access learning materials anytime and anywhere through digital technology. Today, learning is no longer limited to classrooms or printed books.

Students can use various digital platforms to search for information, communicate with others, and improve their knowledge independently. The rapid development of technology has also changed the way students learn English. Besides using formal learning platforms, many students spend their daily time using social media, which provides opportunities to practice English in a more flexible and enjoyable way. As a result, social media has become one of the alternative digital learning resources that supports students' language learning experiences.

One of the most popular social media platforms among university students is X (formerly Twitter). X allows users to share ideas, communicate with others, and read different kinds of content through features such as posts, threads, hashtags, replies, and multimedia. Unlike traditional learning materials, the content on X is updated quickly and encourages interaction between users. Because of these features, students not only use X for entertainment and communication but also for reading English content, learning new vocabulary, and interacting with online communities. This shows that X has the potential to support informal English learning outside the classroom.

Among the different types of content on X, Alternative Universe (AU) stories have become increasingly popular, especially among young people. AU stories are fan-created fictional stories that place familiar characters in different situations or settings. Most AU stories are presented in a fake chat format combined with short narratives, images, and threads. This format makes the stories feel more natural and interactive because they look similar to daily conversations on social media. Compared with traditional English reading materials, AU stories are easier to follow and often contain interesting storylines that encourage readers to continue reading. Many students read English AU stories during their free time because they enjoy the stories and feel emotionally connected to the characters.

Reading English AU stories can also provide opportunities for students to improve their English skills. While following the story, students are exposed to new vocabulary, informal English expressions, and everyday conversations. They also practice reading English naturally without feeling like they are studying.

Since students usually choose stories based on their own interests, they become more motivated to continue reading. This suggests that AU stories can support reading motivation and provide meaningful digital learning experiences through interest-based reading activities.

Several previous studies have discussed the use of social media for English language learning. Malik and Haidar (2021) found that Twitter helped students improve their English skills through interaction with online communities. Aryatie and Warni (2023) reported that reading and writing AU stories increased students' creativity and confidence in using English. Irzawati et al. (2024) showed that X helped students improve writing skills, vocabulary, and communication because students could express their ideas freely and interact with other users. Pratika et al. (2024) also explained that features such as threads and hashtags encouraged students to read actively, participate in discussions, and share their ideas. Similarly, Karimah et al. (2024) found that students enjoyed reading English texts on X because the content was short, interesting, and easy to access. Furthermore, Yuniasih et al. (2025) reported that AU stories increased students' interest in reading English and helped them improve their vocabulary because the stories were enjoyable and emotionally engaging.

Although previous studies have shown that social media and AU stories can support English language learning, most of them focused on vocabulary learning, writing skills, reading interest, or students' perceptions of using X as a learning platform. Only a few studies have explored university students' experiences in reading English AU stories, especially how these stories influence reading motivation, emotional engagement, and digital learning practices. In addition, most previous studies discussed the benefits of social media in general, while limited attention has been given to English AU stories as a form of informal digital reading in the Indonesian EFL context. Therefore, more research is needed to understand how students experience reading English AU stories and how these stories support their motivation to read in digital learning.

This study also has a different method from previous studies. Before collecting the main data, the researcher conducted a preliminary study using a

screening questionnaire. The questionnaire was used to identify students who actively used the X (Twitter) application, regularly read English AU stories, and met the research criteria. This step helped the researcher select participants who had relevant experience with the topic of this study. As a result, the interview data were more focused and closely related to the research objectives.

Therefore, this study aims to explore university students' experiences in reading English Alternative Universe (AU) stories on the X application and how these stories influence their reading motivation in digital learning. The findings of this study are expected to provide a better understanding of the role of English AU stories as an alternative digital learning resource. In addition, this study is expected to contribute to the development of English language learning by showing how interest-based digital reading activities can encourage students to read English more actively outside the classroom.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a single case study design to explore university students' experiences in reading English Alternative Universe (AU) stories on the X application and how these stories influenced their reading motivation in digital learning. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed the researcher to understand participants' experiences, opinions, and feelings in depth. The case study design was used because the research focused on a specific group of university students who actively read English AU stories on X.

The participants were five students from the English Education Department at the Islamic University of Malang. They were selected using purposive sampling because they met the research criteria. Before the main data collection, the researcher conducted a preliminary study using an online screening questionnaire distributed through Google Forms. The questionnaire asked students about their experience using the X application, how often they used it, whether they read threads, and whether they regularly read English AU stories. The preliminary study helped the researcher identify students who had relevant experience with the research topic. Based on the questionnaire results, five

participants who actively used X and regularly read English AU stories were selected for the interviews.

The main data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This interview method allowed the researcher to prepare guiding questions while still giving participants the opportunity to explain their experiences freely. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through Google Meet, depending on the participants' availability. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian so that participants could express their opinions and experiences more comfortably. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' permission. During the interviews, participants were asked about their reading habits, reading motivation, emotional experiences, reading strategies, English learning experiences, and challenges while reading English AU stories on X.

To support the interview findings, participants also completed an Emotional Engagement Questionnaire after the interviews. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). It was used to provide a general description of participants' emotional engagement while reading English AU stories. In addition, participants were asked to provide screenshots of English AU stories that they had previously read on X. These screenshots were analyzed as supporting documents to strengthen and confirm the interview findings.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis began by transcribing the interview recordings and reading the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data. The researcher then generated initial codes, grouped similar codes into themes, reviewed and refined the themes, and finally interpreted the findings based on the research questions. The screenshot documents were analyzed using Bowen's (2009) document analysis through skimming, reading, and interpretation to support the interview data. The questionnaire results were analyzed using percentages to describe participants' emotional engagement. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, member checking was conducted by asking

participants to review the interview transcripts and confirm that the information accurately reflected their experiences. Participants' identities were kept confidential by using codes A1–A5 throughout the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that reading English Alternative Universe (AU) stories on the X application positively influenced university students' reading motivation and digital learning experiences. Based on the interviews, all participants explained that they regularly read English AU stories because the stories were enjoyable, easy to access, and closely related to their personal interests. Most participants preferred AU stories to formal English reading materials because they were presented in a fake chat format with short conversations and simple language. This format made the stories easier to understand and less intimidating than academic texts. Participants also explained that reading AU stories became part of their daily routine during their free time, especially after classes or before going to bed. Instead of feeling like they were studying English, they felt that they were simply enjoying a story while naturally being exposed to English.

The participants also explained that the storyline was one of the main reasons they continued reading. They became curious about the next chapter and often waited for authors to upload new parts of the story. This curiosity encouraged them to spend more time reading English without external pressure. Several participants mentioned that they could read AU stories for one to three hours in one sitting because they wanted to know how the story would end. These findings suggest that students' personal interests and curiosity can encourage continuous reading habits in digital environments. This finding supports Yuniasih et al. (2025), who reported that AU stories increased students' interest in reading English because they were enjoyable, emotionally engaging, and closely related to students' preferences. Similarly, Karimah et al. (2024) found that students enjoyed reading English texts on X because the content was interesting, short, and easily

accessible. Therefore, interest-based digital reading can become an effective way to encourage students to read English more frequently outside formal learning.

The Emotional Engagement Questionnaire also supports the interview findings. The questionnaire results showed that participants had positive emotional engagement while reading English AU stories. All participants agreed that they enjoyed reading English AU stories, while most participants also agreed that reading AU stories helped them feel relaxed, reduced stress, improved their mood, and encouraged them to continue reading because they enjoyed the emotional experience. Participants explained during the interviews that reading AU stories helped them escape from academic pressure and became a form of entertainment after completing university assignments. Several participants also stated that they often forgot the time while reading because they became emotionally involved in the story and wanted to know what would happen next.

Another important finding is that participants developed emotional connections with the characters and storylines. They felt happy when the story had a positive ending, worried when conflicts appeared, and excited whenever a new chapter was uploaded. Some participants explained that they even discussed the story with friends who shared similar interests. These emotional experiences made reading more meaningful because participants were not only reading English texts but also emotionally engaging with the stories. These findings support Self-Determination Theory proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), which explains that intrinsic motivation grows when learners enjoy an activity and feel personally interested in it. In this study, enjoyment, curiosity, and emotional involvement became important factors that encouraged participants to continue reading English AU stories without being required by teachers or academic assignments.

Besides increasing reading motivation, participants believed that English AU stories also contributed to their English language learning. All participants reported learning new vocabulary while reading AU stories. They explained that unfamiliar words were often understood through the context of conversations between characters. Since AU stories mostly used informal English and everyday

conversations, participants became more familiar with natural English expressions commonly used in daily communication. Several participants also mentioned that they remembered new vocabulary more easily because they learned it repeatedly through interesting story contexts instead of memorizing vocabulary from textbooks. This indicates that AU stories provide opportunities for incidental vocabulary learning through enjoyable reading activities.

Participants also described different reading strategies when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary or difficult expressions. Some participants guessed the meaning from the context before checking the dictionary. Others reread the previous conversation to understand the storyline more clearly. Several participants skipped difficult parts temporarily and continued reading before returning to those sections later. Digital tools such as Google Translate and Google Search were frequently used when participants could not understand certain words or expressions. Some participants also searched for explanations on TikTok or other online platforms. These findings indicate that students actively developed independent reading strategies while reading English AU stories. Similar findings were reported by Irzawati et al. (2024), who found that X supported students' vocabulary development, communication skills, and independent English learning through continuous interaction with digital content.

The findings also reveal that social interaction influenced participants' engagement while reading AU stories. Participants frequently interacted with other readers by liking posts, reading comments, replying to tweets, and sharing their opinions about the story. Although not all participants actively commented, they often followed discussions between readers and authors to understand different perspectives about the storyline. Some participants explained that recommendations from friends or other users also encouraged them to start reading new AU stories. These interactions created a sense of belonging within the AU reading community and encouraged participants to continue reading English content on X. This finding is consistent with Malik and Haidar (2021), who explained that interaction within online communities can increase language

learning opportunities because learners communicate with others who share similar interests.

Although participants reported many positive experiences, they also faced several challenges while reading English AU stories on X. The most common challenge was distraction from other social media content, including notifications, trending topics, and unrelated posts that interrupted their reading. Some participants also experienced eye fatigue after reading for a long time using their smartphones. In addition, slang, abbreviations, and cultural references sometimes made English AU stories more difficult to understand. However, participants explained that these challenges did not reduce their motivation to continue reading because they enjoyed the stories and could use different strategies to overcome reading difficulties. These findings support Arifudin (2025), who stated that digital learning provides flexible access to learning resources but also creates challenges related to maintaining learners' attention and engagement in online environments.

Another important finding is that participants viewed English AU stories not only as entertainment but also as part of their digital learning experiences. Although they initially read AU stories for enjoyment, they gradually realized that they were also improving their English skills through regular reading activities. Participants believed that reading English outside the classroom made them more confident in understanding English texts because they were exposed to vocabulary and sentence patterns every day. Unlike formal learning materials, AU stories allowed participants to learn naturally according to their own interests and reading pace. This finding is consistent with Wong et al. (2025), who explained that digital learning resources encourage independent learning and increase students' engagement. While Wong et al. focused on formal digital learning platforms, the present study demonstrates that social media platforms such as X can also function as meaningful digital learning resources when students engage with English reading activities that match their interests.

The findings of this study indicate that English AU stories on the X application can support university students' reading motivation by providing

enjoyable reading experiences, positive emotional engagement, meaningful social interaction, and opportunities to improve English skills through informal digital learning. Although participants experienced several challenges related to digital reading, they generally viewed English AU stories as an enjoyable and valuable learning resource. These findings suggest that integrating students' personal interests into digital reading activities can encourage more active reading habits and create meaningful English learning experiences beyond the classroom.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study explored university students' experiences in reading English Alternative Universe (AU) stories on the X application and how these stories influenced their reading motivation in digital learning. The findings showed that English AU stories provided positive reading experiences because they were interesting, easy to access, and closely related to students' personal interests. Unlike formal English reading materials, AU stories presented in fake chat and thread formats made reading feel more enjoyable and less stressful. As a result, participants became more willing to spend time reading English without feeling that they were completing an academic task. This finding suggests that students' personal interests play an important role in encouraging regular reading activities in digital environments.

The study also found that emotional engagement was one of the main factors that influenced participants' reading motivation. The interview data and the Emotional Engagement Questionnaire showed that participants enjoyed reading English AU stories, felt relaxed, experienced less stress, and became emotionally connected to the story and its characters. These positive emotional experiences encouraged them to continue reading and made English reading more meaningful. In addition, participants developed different reading strategies, such as guessing word meanings from context, rereading difficult parts, and using digital tools like Google Translate. They also believed that reading English AU stories helped improve their vocabulary, understand everyday English expressions, and become more confident in reading English texts. Although participants experienced

several challenges, such as distractions from social media, unfamiliar slang, and eye fatigue, these difficulties did not reduce their interest in reading because they enjoyed the stories and found the activity beneficial.

Overall, this study demonstrates that English AU stories on the X application have the potential to become an alternative digital learning resource that supports students' reading motivation and informal English learning. By combining entertainment, emotional engagement, and language exposure, AU stories encourage students to practice reading English voluntarily outside the classroom. These findings also show that digital reading through social media can complement formal English learning by creating meaningful and interest-based learning experiences.

Based on these findings, several suggestions can be offered. For English teachers and lecturers, English AU stories can be considered as additional reading materials to increase students' motivation and encourage more enjoyable reading activities. Using digital reading materials that match students' interests may help create a more engaging learning environment and encourage students to read English more frequently outside class. For students, English AU stories can be used as an informal learning resource to improve vocabulary, reading comprehension, and familiarity with everyday English expressions while enjoying interesting stories.

For future researchers, it is recommended to involve a larger number of participants from different universities or educational backgrounds to obtain broader perspectives on students' digital reading experiences. Future studies may also compare English AU stories with other forms of digital reading materials, such as Webtoon, Wattpad, fan fiction websites, or other social media platforms. In addition, researchers may use mixed-methods or quantitative approaches to examine the relationship between emotional engagement, reading motivation, and English language development in greater depth. Such studies will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital reading activities can support English learning in different educational contexts.

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