



Evidence Summary

Preference for Print or Electronic Book Depends on User's Purpose for Consulting

A Review of:

Rod-Welch, L.J., Weeg, B.E., Caswell, J.V., & Kessler, T.L. (2013). Relative preferences for paper and for electronic books: Implications for reference services, library instruction, and collection management. *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*, 18(3-4), 281-303.
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Abstract

Objective – To determine patron format preference, perceived usability and frequency of e-book usage, and to study use and preference of e-reading devices.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – Large public research university in the United States of America.

Subjects – 339 students, faculty, and staff members

Methods – An anonymous 23-item survey was available in online and print formats. Print surveys were distributed in the lobby of the

library and throughout various buildings on campus. A direct link to the online version of the survey was included in e-newsletters, on the library homepage, and on the library's Facebook site. A definition of e-book was placed prominently at the beginning of the survey. Questions included information on preference of format (11), experiences using e-books (3), ownership of particular devices for reading e-books (1), attitudes regarding library purchase of e-books and readers (3), demographic information (4), and additional comments (1).

Main Results – Of the 339 completed surveys, 79 were completed online and 260 in print. When asked about preference in format for reading, 79.6% of respondents preferred print

books compared to 20.4% choosing e-books. If the library was purchasing a book to support class research and projects, 53.9% preferred print and 46.1% preferred electronic, but if the library purchased a book for leisure reading, 76% preferred print and 24% preferred electronic. In response to the question about how often they used e-books from the library, 50.1% of respondents never used library e-books, 21.1% used once per year, 20.8% monthly, 7.4% weekly and 0.6% daily. Of those who used e-books, 38.1% read only sections they needed, 31% searched keywords, 24.2% downloaded and printed pages to read later, 21.8% read the most relevant chapters, 17.1% skimmed the entire book and 14.2% read the entire book. If both formats were available, 25.1% felt that the library should purchase the print book, 16.7% the e-book, and 58.2% chose both formats. When asked about downloading e-books, 51.1% of respondents would use an e-book only if they could download it to a hand-held device. A majority of the respondents, 81.7%, felt that the library should provide e-readers for checkout if the library purchased e-books instead of print books. When asked which types of books they preferred to read in electronic format in an open-ended question, 22% preferred textbooks, 21% leisure reading, 18% research books, 15% other types, 6% journals, 5% reference books, and 3% anything. Regarding which types of books were preferred in print format, 42% preferred leisure reading, 21% other, 14% all, 11% textbooks, 6% research books, 2% no e-books, 2% journals and 2% reference books.

Conclusion – Preference for book format (electronic or print) depends on the users' purpose for reading the text. This will likely change over time, as users gain more familiarity and experience with e-books, and better support is provided from the library.

Commentary

Although e-journals have become popular with most university users, the adoption of e-books in the academic setting has been slower. A variety of literature discusses issues with platform, e-reader downloading, lack of uniformity in licencing, and other time-

consuming access issues. This paper looks at attitudes toward e-books and how patrons use e-books in an academic setting.

The EBL Critical Appraisal Checklist (Glynn, 2006) was used to determine strengths and weaknesses of the study. Data collection and research methodology were clearly described and the use of a survey was appropriate for learning more about book format preferences. It would have been preferable for a copy of the survey to be available as an appendix for others to refer to for their own research. However, the researchers referred to the questions throughout the article, giving one a good sense of the questions asked.

Although demographic information was attained during the study, the article does not refer to any particular information about the users. This was a strong paper that explored some limitations to the study (such as confusion related to the definition of an e-book), however, the lack of demographic information makes this reader question the findings. Were the respondents mostly faculty? Undergraduates? Graduates? Staff? What was the age range of respondents and was there a difference in answers depending on the age of the respondent?

Information regarding how respondents use an e-book (read or skim sections, read or skim entire book, or download and print some pages for further reading) was very interesting and useful for librarians who may be trying to convince others that reading in electronic format is not entirely different from reading in print. Recommendations related to library instruction for both students and faculty are appreciated. Reference staff have heard students say, "I need a source but my professor said it CAN'T be from the internet," not realizing an e-book is an appropriate resource for a research paper.

Respondents slightly preferred print (53.1%) to electronic (46.1%) books that support class research projects, which corresponds to answers in the open-ended question, where a total of 45% indicated they preferred e-books for textbooks, research books, or reference books. What are the implications for collection

development strategies when there is a major divide between those who prefer print versus electronic, and the fact that if both formats were available, 58.2% would prefer the purchase of both? E-book use is still in the early stages of acceptance in the university setting, but with space constraints and evolving budget issues, e-books are not going away. Acceptance of e-books will continue to be a major challenge for librarians. This divide is in sharp contrast to the journal world, where the e-format has been adopted very successfully over the past decade. This paper shows different perspectives of format preference, and taken with other papers about e-book concerns, can help librarians make more informed choices about e-book purchasing for their particular library.

Reference

Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, 24(3), 387-399. doi: 10.1108/07378830610692154