



Evidence Summary

An Increase in Academic Ebook Preferences: A Decade Comparison of Ebook Use versus Non-Use

A Review of:

Owens, E., Hwang, S., Kim, D., Manolovitz, T., & Shen, L. (2023). Do you love them now? Use and non-use of academic ebooks a decade later. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 49(3), 102703-102703. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2023.102703>

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Received: 26 Feb. 2025

Accepted: 14 Apr. 2025

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DOI: 10.18438/ebliip30732

Abstract

Objective – To determine the use of library-provided ebooks by faculty and graduate students, the change in use over the last decade, the features, benefits, and challenges of ebook use, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on ebook use in this population.

Design – Survey.

Setting – Medium-sized public university with four campuses: a main campus with a physical library, an online campus, and two satellite campuses.

Subjects – Faculty and graduate students.

Methods – The authors of this study used a Qualtrics survey similar to their previous 2011 survey, which tailored questions based on ebook users versus non-users (Cassidy et al., 2012). They added questions to their survey to assess the impact of COVID-19 on library-provided ebook use. The authors

included language that directed respondents to focus on “ebooks that are being studied closely for class purposes.” Invitations to the survey were emailed to all faculty and graduate students and were posted in campus e-newsletters. The survey was open from September 2021 to October 2021 and included a small incentive to participate. Responses were anonymous.

Main Results – The initial list of survey recipients included 3377 graduate students and 1126 faculty members, a total of 4480 after 23 duplicate email addresses were removed. A total of 508, or 11.3 %, were included in the analysis: 53.2% were master's students, 16.1% were doctoral students, and 30.7% were faculty members. At this university, the College of Education and Humanities and Social Sciences had the most master's and doctoral students and represented most of the responses: 26% and 22.8%, respectively. The remaining responses were represented by the colleges of Criminal Justice, 16.1%, Science & Engineering Technology, 11.4%, and less than 8% Colleges of Business Administration, Health Sciences, Osteopathic Medicine, and Arts and Media. Most respondents were female, 72.8%, and aged 20-29, 36%, or 30-39, 26.4%. The authors noted there was no statistical difference in gender identity nor the average age of ebook users versus non-users.

Most respondents were ebook users, 64.4%, compared to non-users, 35.6%, which did not vary significantly when comparing campuses. When comparing the same results to those from 2011, however, only 38% of respondents were ebook users. For ebook users, 22.3% reported that they would rather use a print book, 15.3% felt the same about ebooks and print, 29.4% reported that they liked some ebooks but disliked others, and 26.3% reported that they would rather use an ebook. The authors stated that the results were surprisingly similar to their 2011 survey. Of the non-users, 24.5% reported that they would rather use a print book, 28.8 % indicated that they did not necessarily dislike library ebooks but had no opportunity to use them, and 7.5 % reported that they specifically disliked the library ebooks. In 2011, slightly more respondents preferred print books, 30.9%, more reported that they did not have the opportunity to use them, 46.4%, and a similar proportion, 7.2%, reported that they specifically disliked the library ebooks. Of the non-users, 38.7% reported that they may or may not use ebooks in the future, 16.6% and 29.3% reported that they definitely or probably will use ebooks in the future, 13.8% and 1.7% probably or definitely will not. Physical complaints were among the most common reasons for disliking library ebooks related to focus and retention, sensory experience of not holding or handling a print book, fatigue, headache, and eye strain. Other complaints were related to their functionality and usability, such as lag time, clunky interface, accessibility, and challenges with annotation and note-taking. Also mentioned was the additional screen time required.

Ebook features reported to be important were searching within the text, 91% of respondents, seeing the search terms highlighted, 78%, downloading the book to read offline, 75.2%, copying and pasting from the ebook, 70.5%, printing pages, 62%, or chapters, 60%. In 2011, features of the highest importance were searching within the text, 63.3%, printing individual pages, 49.0%, copying and pasting from the ebook, 47.7 %, and taking and saving notes, 39.4 %. The authors also collected open-ended comments, and respondents indicated ebook features such as annotation, formatting and compatibility, no print limit, no time limit, navigation, and text-to-speech were important. A little over 72% of respondents used an electronic device, such as a tablet, smartphone, or e-reader, for reading, whereas only 51.2% reported the use of an electronic device for reading in 2011. Of the respondents who attended the university before the COVID-19 pandemic, 71.4% reported their use of ebooks remained the same during the pandemic, which, according to the authors was not as significant as expected. The authors wrapped up the survey by including questions for graduate students regarding the future use of ebooks: 75.9% of respondents wanted the library to purchase more ebooks to support their classes, 59.9% responded that their use of ebooks would likely increase with a recommendation by the professor, and 90.1% would rather use an ebook than wait for a print copy to be returned to the library.

Conclusion – The authors report that library ebook users compared to non-users have significantly increased since their 2011 survey, yet the feelings about ebooks remain consistent, and the use of ebooks before and after the COVID-19 pandemic remained the same for most respondents. They acknowledged that many frustrations with library ebook use are related to copyright restrictions and device compatibility and suggested that publishers could improve compatibility and increase usability by loosening restrictions. They suggested that libraries communicate with their local users before making major changes in their print versus ebook collection. Electronic availability alone may not be enough, and users are looking for accessibility, ease of use, and device compatibility with fewer restrictions. The authors suggest more research into strategies for promoting ebooks to teaching faculty and advocating for publisher improvements.

Commentary

This research was appraised with Burns and Kho's (2015) guide to assessing survey research. The authors presented a clear research question into the use of ebooks in their graduate population and elicited valuable information for their institution. The survey questions were clear, and the authors had the benefit of administering a similar survey in the past. This would allow them to understand how respondents interpreted the individual questions and assess if this research would provide the information they set out to obtain. The response represented master's and doctoral students and faculty from multiple disciplines. The authors acknowledged as a limitation to their research that it would be hard to differentiate whether the answers reflected ebook use in the classroom or was used in research, dissertation, or publication. They also acknowledged that self-selection bias, which commonly occurs in survey research, may be a potential limitation. Restricting inclusion to graduate-level students creates a narrow population that can limit the applicability of this research. In this moderate-size institution with 20,000 full-time equivalent students, graduate students reflect approximately 16% of the student body. Authors report that their university is considered a Carnegie Research 2 school, where graduate and doctoral students are highly engaged in research. Research students and faculty may spend less time in the classroom or have a limited need for ebooks. If research students and faculty felt the survey invitation did not apply, it may have contributed to the low response rate.

A response rate of over 80% helps reduce potential bias and helps ensure that the survey findings are representative of the target population (Burns and Kho, 2015). A low response rate may be a limitation in survey research. The response rate of 11.3% makes it difficult to generalize the findings to the intended population. This may be reflective of the short 4-week period in which the survey was available for completion. Extending the time, including persistent follow-up, or connecting with faculty colleagues and their students to relay the importance of the survey, may have improved engagement. Although the response rate was low, it was higher than the authors' earlier 2011 survey, which had a response rate of 8.5% (Cassidy et al., 2012). The low response rate introduces bias but does not necessarily invalidate the data. The two surveys allow for the comparison of the data and allow authors to identify trends over time for their own institution.

In 2011, the institution held approximately 71,000 ebooks, and in 2021, more than 1,440,800. The significant increase in ebook users is consistent with the increased exposure to ebooks and the adoption of ebooks over time by students in the institution. This helps strengthen the results along with the reporting of multiple consistent behaviors between surveys.

Academic libraries have faced several challenges that ebooks have addressed. With the advent of online education, ebooks provide access to learning materials that are convenient and can be accessed on multiple devices. Academic institutions are often confronted with space restraints, and ebooks allow for the restructuring of space to better fit the student and their learning. Student and faculty preferences may differ, but ebooks are becoming more accessible and more familiar.

In their review of the literature, the authors point out that ebooks can be more expensive than print versions. Budget implementation is an ongoing challenge for a university library. The Association of College & Research Libraries report that libraries are spending more on subscriptions to electronic content than on physical content (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2024). In their 2023 report, including all universities, electronic content represented more than 80% of the library content collection. At bachelor universities, physical circulation accounted for only 3.2% compared to doctoral universities, where physical content accounted for 71.6%. Since electronic materials come at a significant cost, it becomes important and beneficial for university libraries to understand the use versus non-use of ebooks in their collection and tailor purchasing for their constituents. This was outside the scope of this survey, but by combining the information from usage reports of the required ebooks in the graduate programs of the university with the survey results of user preferences, the authors would gain valuable information for budget implementation.

This research showed that the use of electronic content at the graduate level is growing, but that it is important for academic libraries to promote their ebook collection. It highlighted frustrations with library ebook use that may be common to other institutions and suggested that academic libraries encourage publishers to improve accessibility features and licensing restrictions.

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