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3-16-2023

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Recommended Citation

Jallas, Mallory; Ansani, Grace; Schwartz, Jennifer; and McEneely, KatieRose, "eBooks are a life saver" vs. "I'm not a fan of eBooks": Discerning Student Attitudes Towards Academic eBooks as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic" (2023). *Faculty and Staff Publications – Milner Library*. 168.
<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpml/168>

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"EBOOKS ARE A LIFE SAVER" VS. "I'M NOT A FAN OF EBOOKS": *Discerning Student Attitudes towards Academic Ebooks as a Result of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Mallory Jallas, Grace Ansani, KatieRose McEneely, and
Jennifer Schwartz*

Librarians from four different institutions of higher learning partnered to create a survey to ascertain student attitudes towards eBook use in academic libraries as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Survey results have revealed students experienced greater exposure to eBooks in their academic programs as a result of remote learning during the pandemic. Additional student responses will help librarians determine what kinds of investment should be made in eBook collections going forward, and what kinds of support can be provided to enhance academic eBooks experiences.

INTRODUCTION

When the pandemic began and institutions moved to remote learning, many libraries enacted a digital-first strategy and concentrated on purchasing eBooks in lieu of print materials. This event required students to use eBooks for academic purposes. We wanted to know if student attitudes towards eBook usage changed as a result of the forced adoption of eBooks in academic settings. Should libraries continue to focus their collection budgets on eBook purchases? What do students think about using eBooks in an academic context? What tools do they prefer or dislike?

This project emerged as part of CARLI Counts, an Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded research project through the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries of Illinois (CARLI). The third cohort, which convened virtually in October 2021 and ran through July 2022, encouraged cross-institutional research projects that used data to create a narrative surrounding library services.

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The authors of this paper came from four different institutions with four different job functions: a student success librarian from a large public university with a large concentration of undergraduate students; an assessment librarian from a large private university with a large commuter campus; an electronic resources librarian representing a private health sciences university; and a technical services coordinator at a graduate seminary. We were grouped together to explore a common interest in eBooks in academic libraries. At first it was difficult to find commonalities between our institutions and our job responsibilities and we noted that with the pandemic-motivated prioritization of digital-first resources, historic usage data was unlikely to inform the current environment. We eventually settled on the question of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected eBooks in academic settings. This line of inquiry was supported by our CARLI Counts mentor Ruth Lindemann, Reference and Instructional Librarian at Danville Area Community College, and we ultimately created and administered a survey to ascertain student attitudes towards eBook use in academic libraries as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The findings from this project provide insight into student preferences for eBooks in connection to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey could potentially be re-run to solicit greater student response, and could be compared and contrasted with the original data collected as opinions may change over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have been studying the use and accessibility of eBooks in libraries for years, variously investigating user preferences, usability, and publishing models, among other areas. The following literature review will summarize the research into user preference before and after the COVID-19 lockdown, as well as some relevant usability and budgeting considerations.

Research into eBook usage before the pandemic generally found that students preferred print books for narrative reading, and eBooks for academic research. One study (n=306) conducted in 2018 found that students slightly preferred eBooks over print books for research or class assignments (35 percent preferred print books, 45 percent preferred eBooks, 20 percent had no preference), while students preferred print books for narrative reading and pleasure reading by a larger margin (74 percent preferred print books for pleasure reading, and 68 percent preferred print books for assigned narrative reading).¹ Another study from 2017 found that the highest circulation rate for print books was for fiction and literature, while eBook circulation was greater among most of the other curricular areas of the university. This same study also conducted a student survey (n=142), confirming that students favored eBooks over print for school work or research, while preferring print books for leisure reading.²

Beginning in March 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, libraries shifted to remote operations and poured resources into eBooks. In spring 2020, a survey of library responses to COVID-19 found that 68 percent of libraries reported licensing additional eBooks and electronic journals as a primary response to help with online learning, and 67 percent reported licensing additional eBooks and electronic journals to help with remote faculty research.³ The shift to eBooks and their high prices often came into conflict with a pandemic era of budget cuts and generally conservative university spending. In our current landscape, where libraries are navigating a new normal of on-campus classes and activities, eBook purchasing is still up across almost all subject areas. However, budget challenges at many institutions persist.⁴

Did the general closure of libraries and shift to remote learning affect students' preferences for eBooks? Was there a new reliance on eBooks that would justify the additional expenses in a shrinking library budget, even as students returned to in-person classes?

Research has been slim so far, and results have been mixed. More than one study found that electronic journal usage increased due to pandemic restrictions, but there wasn't a significant increase in the use of eBooks.⁵ Other libraries found that the use of all electronic resources dropped during the first months of the pandemic.⁶ It is possible that students tend to use electronic resources most often when they are on campus, and in the library. With everything closed, the library—and its online resources—may have been completely forgotten and overlooked. Another library found that usage across all eBook platforms fell in March 2020, but went up in the following semesters, possibly due to faculty having time to re-design courses, and to reference and rely on the library's eBook collection specifically.⁷ Another possibility is that the increased use of eBooks was tied to the

increased availability of eBooks. Many publishers had made their titles available for free to all universities, and the sheer volume of available titles was likely a contributing factor to their increased use.⁸

For obvious reasons, preferences for eBooks are often tied to usability. Since there are so many different vendors and platforms, making blanket statements about student experiences with all eBooks is difficult. Platforms vary in design, and there is no unified eBook experience.⁹ In some studies, however, students have been more positive toward eBooks that provide full-text searching, search-term highlighting, and that clearly identify the number of results, and present them in an order that is understandable.¹⁰ This could be because academic eBooks are not generally read in their entirety, but are instead used as an online reference and searched for discrete facts. Reading sessions are short, and thorough readings involving a large number of pages are rare.¹¹

Another study pre-COVID examined student preferences for and experiences with eBooks and print books in a semester-long course. Researchers found that students were aware of more barriers than benefits to eBooks, which included difficulties printing, downloading, and navigating through the texts. And in fact, the more these students were exposed to eBooks, the higher their frustration levels.¹²

Other studies have noted disparities in users’ stated preference for print books, but relatively high use of eBooks. Despite the stated preference for print, higher usage of eBooks could be attributed to easier accessibility of eBooks, and that renting eBooks can be cheaper than purchasing print books.¹³

METHODOLOGY

In order to gauge student attitudes towards eBooks as a result of COVID-19, four Illinois academic libraries—Illinois State University, DePaul University, Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science, and Chicago Theological Seminary—sent an anonymous Qualtrics survey to students after receiving institutional review board approval at their respective institutions. The survey was distributed to a sample of DePaul students and all students enrolled at the three other schools. The survey was emailed during the spring term of 2022. Student populations that were sent the survey included undergraduate, graduate, and professional degree-seeking students. The survey was delivered to approximately 25,800 students. All questions were optional and students could discontinue the survey at any time. No incentive was given to answer the survey.

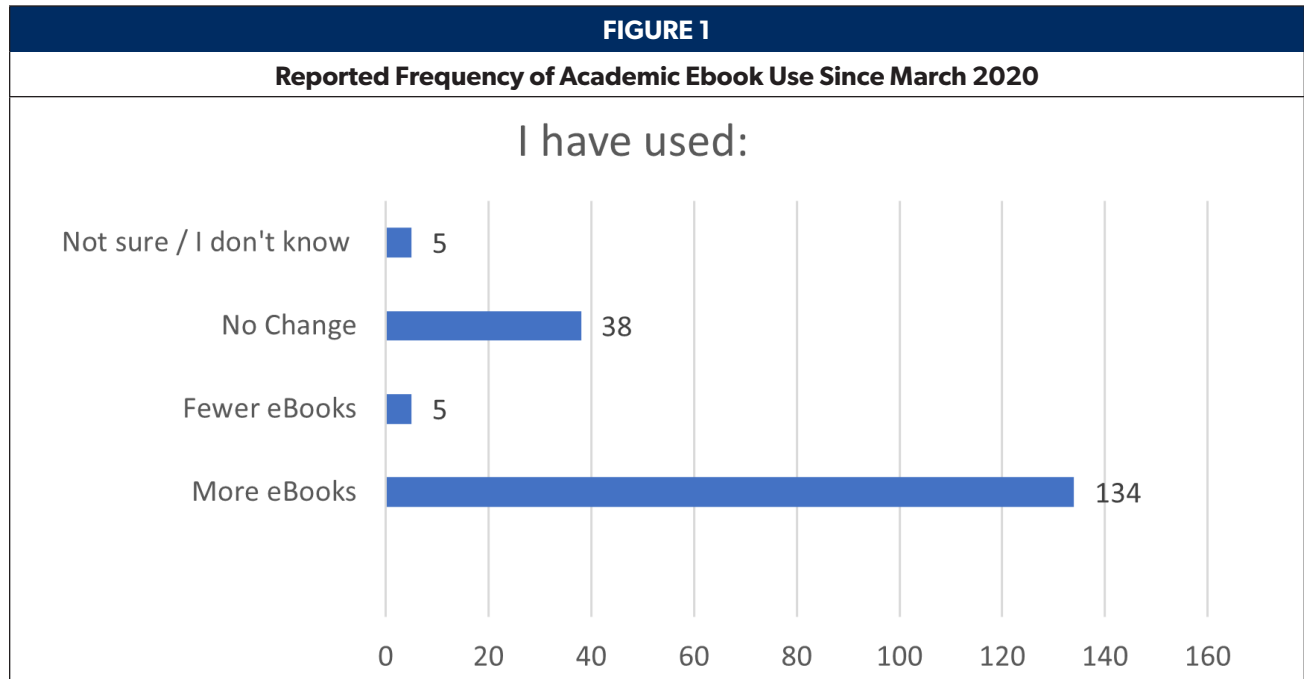
The survey had a total of twenty-nine questions, eleven of which were demographic or consent questions. The other eighteen questions asked students about their usage and perceptions of eBooks before March 2020 and afterward, since Illinois imposed its stay-at-home order on March 21, 2020. Students were asked about their past and current usage and preferences for both personal and academic eBooks. The survey defined academic use as material read, consulted for, or related to coursework including textbooks, essays, citation style guides, or other books used as reference when writing a paper, preparing for class discussions, or completing assignments. Personal use was defined as material read or consulted for enjoyment or development unrelated to coursework. Other questions focused on how student attitudes toward academic and personal eBooks had been affected by the COVID-19 lockdown, and what they thought their likelihood of future *academic* use of eBooks would be.

The survey was a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. One question on the survey was an open-ended qualitative question, asking students for “anything else you would like to share,” which forty-one students answered. Two hundred ninety-one students agreed to participate in the survey; 207 met the criteria. A total of 182 students completed the entire survey.

FINDINGS

The survey results indicate that since March 2020 students had more exposure to eBooks in academic environments, when COVID-19 closures began broadly affecting higher education. Only 13 percent of survey participants (n=182) reported that before March 2020, they had not used eBooks at all, and all participants reported using eBooks at the time of the survey. Students reported a 22 percent increase in academic use of eBooks during the pandemic. Beyond the use of eBooks, students indicated that their preference for eBooks for academic use had shifted considerably during the pandemic. Before March 2020, only 23 percent of participants indicated that they preferred eBooks for academic work, but at the time of the survey, 48 percent of participants noted

their preference for eBooks for academic work. This is a 115 percent increase in respondents indicating a preference for eBooks. A final question in this section of the survey asked participants if the frequency of eBook use for academic use had changed since March 2020. The responses indicated that 134 participants (79 percent of respondents) reported using more eBooks, and 38 participants (21 percent of respondents) reported no change in their academic eBook usage since March 2020.



Participants responded to the same questions about their use and preference for eBooks for personal use. The use of eBooks for personal use barely changed from before March 2020 to the time of the survey, with 53 percent reporting that they used them for personal use before the pandemic and 53 percent reporting that they currently use them for personal use. In terms of preference, only 13 percent of participants indicated a preference for eBooks for personal use in March 2020, which increased to 23 percent at the time of the survey. While this represents an 83 percent increase for eBooks for personal use, the majority of respondents maintain a preference for print books. Before March 2020, 69 percent of participants selected a preference for print books for personal use, and that figure only slightly dipped when asked about current attitudes toward personal use to 63 percent. These findings, coupled with open-field responses like “I will always prefer print books” and “I just prefer holding a physical book...” indicate a strong preference for some participants that is not likely to change.

The survey had participants select the importance of various eBook features to determine which were most important. The top three important features were immediate access online, searching eBooks by keyword, and the ability to annotate the text. The ability to print and download portions was appreciated but not valued as primary importance for students. More than half of all respondents expressly indicated that printing an entire eBook is not at all important.

In contrast to important features of eBooks, participants were also asked to share how often they encountered specific obstacles with eBooks. Interestingly the most common obstacle for students was the ability to print and download eBook content. A few more frequent obstacles reported were the inability to access eBooks without the internet and limitations on citation tools.

Some students did not always consider their university libraries as a source for eBook access or support. Respondents were asked if they had ever used an eBook from their university library, and 46 percent responded yes, while 42 percent responded that they had not used an eBook from their library. More than one student indicated they would generally seek a free or pirated version of a book online. One participant shared, “pirating pdfs of textbooks is pretty

easy, and is the major source of ebooks for most students." Of the 26 percent of survey participants that had asked for assistance accessing or reading an eBook, only 42 percent had asked a librarian for assistance. The most common sources for assistance with an eBook were friends (54 percent) and instructors or professors (52 percent).

A series of questions in the survey gauged student preference for print or eBooks in the context of the amount of reading assigned for a course with both an eBook and print book available from their university library. Participants indicated that for a reading of twenty-five pages, 59 percent would select the eBook. When the hypothetical reading increased to 100 pages with all variables remaining the same, the eBook preference dropped to 43 percent. In contrast, 34 percent of students preferred reading a print book for a twenty-five page assignment, which increased to 48 percent when the reading was extended to 100 pages. Students had another option that allowed them to enter other text for their responses to the scenario questions. One participant offered the following that illustrates this question's contextual nature: "It is easier to go to my computer than go all the way to the library for twenty-five pages. If I was already at the library, I would probably read the print book."

One final survey question asked students to share any additional thoughts on their experiences or feelings about eBooks. The overall responses indicate a tension between eBooks' perceived convenience and the hurdles with access. A selection of these responses is highlighted in Table 1. Students surveyed have an acceptance of eBooks in an academic setting while also revealing challenges and opportunities librarians may need to consider when making future eBook purchases and when providing students with research support services.

TABLE 1	
Sample Of Qualitative Survey Responses By Theme	
Response Theme:	Survey Participant Quotation:
Pandemic Considerations	<p>"As a student undergoing chemotherapy the ability to access ebooks is super important as I cannot always go to the library due to risk from COVID."</p> <p>"I am not a fan of looking at screens at all times, so reading my books virtually have raised eye problems since the pandemic."</p> <p>"while I prefer print books (easier to use), having an academic ebook immediately available for use is AMAZING. It was particularly useful during the pandemic when libraries were closed or I didn't feel safe going out. Without the ebooks offered, I could NOT have been able to continue my research and academic coursework as a grad student as successfully."</p>
Accessibility Features:	<p>"As a student with dyslexia the font the ebook is in is often more accessible than the print book, as it is often changeable."</p> <p>"academic eBooks are much more convenient for studying. The keyword search helps a lot to be able to find a specific piece of information very quickly rather than having to skim through multiple pages to find something."</p>
Print Book Preference	<p>"I will always prefer printed books. If the assigned reading is limited or I'm not particularly passionate about the book, I prefer accessing an e-book and ideally printing off selected readings"</p> <p>"I just prefer holding a physical book, it is much easier on my eyes."</p>
eBook Preference	<p>"They are more practical for use. No longer worrying about carrying multiple books for a whole day is nice. Also many eBooks have added in resources such as videos or interactive practice problems or definitions that aren't available in a physical copy."</p>
Situational Preference	<p>"...after looking at a screen during COVID-19 for a majority of my day, the last thing I want to do is come home and read more things on my screen. In small doses, eBooks are a fantastic resource that I plan to keep using, but for personal use/longer readings? I much prefer the physical copy."</p> <p>"I like to use eBooks when I am in search of quick answers or specific topics because they are quick to use, no burden of carrying the book/always with me if I have my computer, and mostly free at my library. If I am supposed to read 20+ pages, I prefer paper textbooks."</p>

DISCUSSION

The findings of this survey present some future considerations for librarians in a shifting eBook landscape. Our survey results indicate that the COVID-19 closures caused a change in student usage and attitudes toward academic eBooks (less so for personal use). We are unsure, however, if these patterns of student usage and attitudes toward eBooks will persist. COVID-19 lockdowns greatly accelerated the trend of increased eBook usage that existed prior to the pandemic, but we cannot say definitively that this is a long-term trend. The pandemic is ongoing, but may recede or become endemic, and a return to pre-pandemic usage or new paradigms may arise. This could necessitate different needs for academic eBooks in the future. Students may also choose to use print and eBook formats concurrently, depending on subject matter or reading length. The survey could bring valuable information for the many academic libraries that adopted digital-first or e-preferred acquisition models at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdowns. Future surveys could help gauge changing student attitudes and methods of format usage.

Knowing which factors of eBook usage students prefer or dislike may guide librarians in their eBook purchasing decisions, and per Dinkins, enable them to work with publishers and other providers to develop uniform standards for eBook delivery and functionality.¹⁴ Librarians may also choose to rethink or refine this strategy, given the many comments which mentioned screen fatigue or format choice based on reading type and length. Students having a strong preference for print materials in certain subjects (fiction/novels vs. textbooks) should also be noted. Considering these multiple factors will help librarians decide which materials to buy in e-format versus print format, and guide them in determining future acquisition models.

In addition, our findings indicate that students are not turning to their libraries to find eBooks, or to ask for help with eBook issues. There is great potential for student frustration, but librarians could use this as an opportunity to explore or devise new methods and modes of instruction around eBooks. Students appear to be experiencing some common challenges with printing and downloading eBooks. Integrating these topics into instruction, or even featuring them in promotion and outreach about eBook collections, could help mitigate some frustration. In addition to highlighting these topics in instruction, it would be advisable to increase library marketing and promote how users can get assistance with eBooks. Based on the survey findings, all libraries involved in this project could benefit from raising this awareness.

We recognize some limitations of this study. In the survey, for example, we cannot guarantee that the students defined certain terms in the way that was intended. Although we defined ‘academic’ use in opposition to ‘personal’ use, it can be assumed that the students could easily confuse these different uses of eBooks. In addition, the definition of an eBook itself could be misinterpreted. Many students may have been thinking of journal articles, or various other readings posted or found online for use in their courses. We also question if students were aware of those instances when they were in fact accessing eBooks from their university library. If students found an eBook through their course management system, or a link was forwarded to them from a fellow student or instructor, they might not assume this was a book acquired by the library.

This study was also limited in the data it collected. We only looked at stated preferences, and claimed use. We did not look at usage data to confirm or refute any of these survey answers. And finally, the timing of the survey, created through a structured group project, didn’t necessarily correspond to the best timing for each institution to distribute. The low response rate may have been improved if we had been more flexible with the term and month during which the survey was deployed.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the topic of eBook usage during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on students’ experience with eBooks is still a critical topic for exploration. We believe the survey instrument remains a viable tool for future research to revisit or compare changing student attitudes. Further research, in survey or mixed-method form, could discover in greater detail the advantages and obstacles of academic eBooks that students experience. Attitudes may change with further exposure to eBooks. As publishers enhance their eBook platforms, the survey could be given periodically to gauge how these factors affect student attitudes toward eBook usage.

This could further illuminate if the changes in usage during the early phase of COVID-19 persisted. Additional adaptation and usage of the survey instrument by public or school libraries could also help identify attitudes and perception shifts.¹⁵

NOTES

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