

Print Vs. Digital: Reading Preferences Among English Majors

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated English majors' reading format preferences, focusing on the distinction between print and digital texts across academic and recreational reading contexts. Using a descriptive survey design, the researchers collected data from 30 undergraduate English majors (21 first-year and 9 third-year students) through a researcher-made questionnaire assessing demographic profiles, format preferences, and the reasons behind those preferences. Results revealed a clear bifurcation: students strongly preferred print for academic reading (14 strongly prefer print) while overwhelmingly preferring digital for pleasure reading (19 strongly prefer digital). However, granular analysis showed that preferences are highly context-dependent—peer-reviewed journal articles were read mostly digitally (22 respondents), while fiction was read mostly in print (12 respondents). Students cited better retention and annotation as key advantages of print, while convenience, searchability, and cost were cited as advantages of digital. The findings suggest that English majors employ strategic format-switching based on reading purpose, and that neither print nor digital is universally preferred. The study discusses implications for pedagogy, library acquisitions, and digital literacy instruction.

Keywords: reading preferences, print vs. digital, English majors, academic reading, pleasure reading, format switching

INTRODUCTION

This study examines print and digital reading preferences among English majors and analyzes how reading purpose, text type, and individual factors impact format choice. Preferences in reading format such as print versus digital, annotation capability, and searchability frequently shape comprehension, retention, and overall academic engagement. Convenience, cost, and digital distraction also contribute significantly to format selection. Ultimately, identifying these underlying patterns aims to guide evidence-based instructional strategies, library acquisition decisions, and digital literacy interventions that enhance student reading proficiency.

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reading format preferences of the participants in terms of academic reading and pleasure reading?
2. What are the specific format choices of the participants across different reading scenarios (monographs, journal articles, fiction, non-fiction)?

3. What reasons do the participants give for their print and digital preferences?
4. What instructional strategies and interventions can be recommended to address the reading needs of the participants?

Scope and Delimitations

This study analyzes reading format among 30 undergraduate English majors. The research is strictly delimited to format preferences (print vs. digital), reading contexts (academic and pleasure), and the underlying reasons for those preferences. Data collection was restricted to student responses from a researcher-designed questionnaire. The study does not evaluate comprehension outcomes, socioeconomic factors, or longitudinal changes in preference over time, maintaining a cross-sectional focus on self-reported preferences and attitudinal factors.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Reading performance is a complex capability shaped by instructional practices, access to technology, and individual cognitive habits. Print and digital formats serve as distinct reading environments that influence comprehension, retention, and engagement. Print texts provide tactile and spatial cues that support annotation and deep reading (Truss, 2003), while digital texts offer searchability, portability, and cost-efficiency (Biber et al., 1999). Despite the proliferation of digital resources, format preferences remain a significant factor in academic reading behavior, influencing how students engage with texts and perceive their own learning (Lunsford & Lunsford, 2008; Fahnestock & Secor, 2004; Kahn, 2007).

Several underlying factors drive format preferences. A prominent driver is the affordance of annotation and close reading, which print provides more readily than most digital platforms (Graham & Perin, 2007). Additionally, the widespread use of informal digital communication leads students to associate digital reading with skimming and distraction rather than deep engagement (Baron, 2008). For English majors, who must navigate both literary works and theoretical texts, format choice may be further complicated by the nature of the reading material—novels may demand immersive print reading, while journal articles may be better suited to digital search and retrieval (Ferris, 1999). To address these varied needs, pedagogical literature highlights targeted interventions: explicit instruction in format-specific reading strategies improves comprehension (Saddler & Graham, 2005), while digital annotation tools and distraction-free reading apps help students engage more deeply with digital texts (Hyland, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three key theoretical perspectives that explain reading format preference and behavior. First, Cognitive Load Theory serves as the structural foundation, postulating that reading format affects working memory load, with digital reading introducing additional cognitive demands such as navigation and distraction that may reduce comprehension capacity. Second, Media Affordance Theory (Baron, 2008) accounts for the material and functional differences between print and digital texts, explaining how features like annotation, searchability, and portability shape user preference and behavior. Third, Self-Determination Theory frames reading choice as a motivated behavior, suggesting that when students perceive a format as supporting their competence and autonomy, they are more likely to prefer and engage with it.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an Input-Process-Output (IPO) model to analyze student reading preferences and formulate pedagogical solutions:

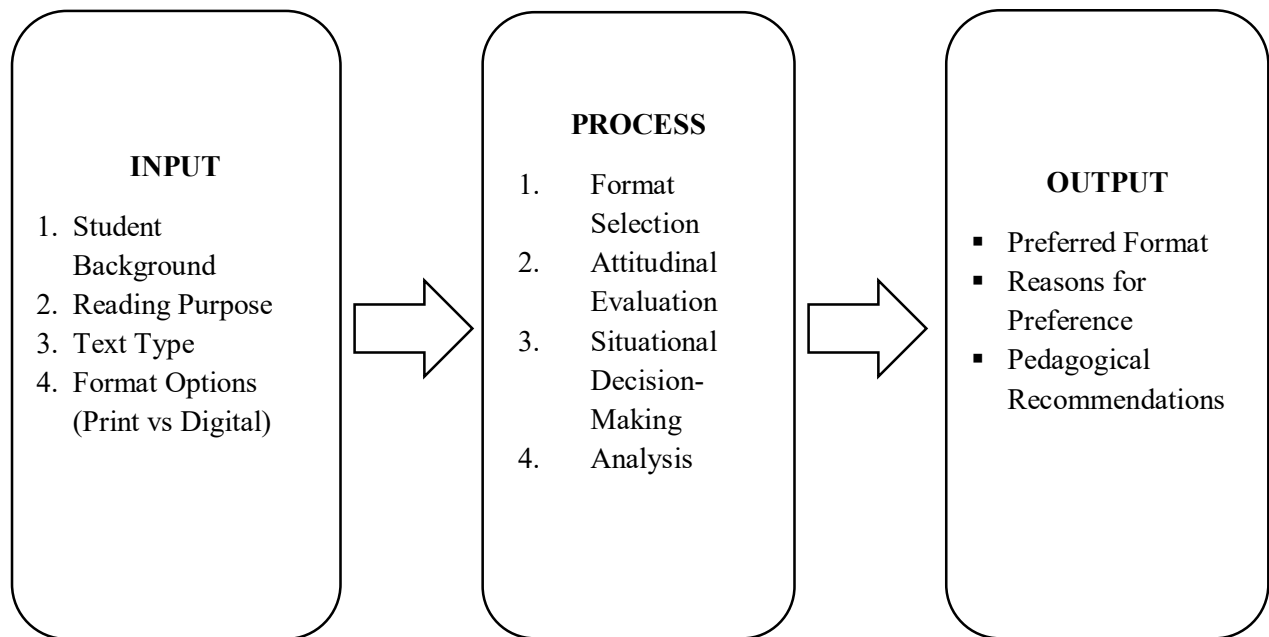


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a descriptive-quantitative research design, using a survey method to gather data on students' print vs. digital reading preferences.

Research Steps

The execution sequence followed a structured, multi-phase analysis to systematically evaluate the reading format preferences of English majors. In Phase 1, data were collected from 30 undergraduate English majors (21 first-year and 9 third-year students) during class hours using a researcher-made questionnaire titled "Print vs. Digital Reading Preferences Survey," while maintaining participant anonymity and voluntary participation. Phase 2 involved systematically coding survey responses into three core sections: demographic and academic profile, format preferences for academic versus pleasure reading contexts, and Likert-scale items evaluating underlying reasons for format choices. In Phase 3, frequency counts and percentage calculations were conducted across the survey metrics to evaluate overall reading hours, general format preferences, specific reading scenarios, and key influencing factors. Phase 4 followed with a qualitative contextual analysis of specific reading scenarios (such as monographs, journal articles, fiction, and non-fiction) to uncover underlying patterns of format-switching and strategic text selection. Phase 5 applied descriptive statistical methods, using frequency distributions and percentages to present clear comparative data across reading contexts without

inferential testing, given the descriptive survey design. Finally, Phase 6 synthesized survey findings and quantitative patterns to develop evidence-based implications for pedagogy, library acquisition strategies, digital literacy instruction, and academic publishing.

Data Collection and Sample Selection

The study compiled a sample of 30 undergraduate English majors selected from coursework submissions and class attendance. The sample consisted of 21 first-year students (70%) and 9 third-year students (30%). Data were gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire titled "Print vs. Digital Reading Preferences Survey, administered during class hours with instructor permission. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and data were tallied and organized systematically for descriptive evaluation.

Data Analysis Methods

Data analysis involved descriptive statistics, specifically frequency counts and percentages, to measure reading format preferences, weekly course reading hours, and agreement levels across Likert-scale items evaluating print and digital advantages. Granular cross-tabulations and frequency distributions analyzed specific reading contexts, including academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, recreational fiction, and non-fiction. Given the descriptive study design and sample size, the analysis was strictly quantitative and percentage-based, without inferential statistical testing. The study also used qualitative contextual analysis to synthesize patterns of format-switching and the individual cost-benefit factors driving student choices.

Research Hypothesis and Validation

The research evaluated the descriptive premise that English majors maintain a fixed, uniform preference for reading formats across all academic and recreational contexts. The study established the content validity of the researcher-developed "Print vs. Digital Reading Preferences Survey" by aligning its items with established reading behavior frameworks and cross-validating core preferences, scenario-specific contexts, and underlying reasons against published reading literature (e.g., Liu, 2005; Mangen et al., 2013). Content and face validity were verified to ensure the questionnaire accurately captured demographic profiles, academic versus pleasure reading habits, and tactical format-switching behaviors among undergraduate English majors.

Study Limitations and Ethical Considerations

The study's generalizability is limited by the small sample size of 30 undergraduate English majors drawn from a single academic institution, as well as an uneven year-level distribution skewed toward first-year students (70%). Additionally, the findings rely on self-reported survey data on reading preferences rather than objective measures of reading comprehension or retention. Ethically, instructor permission was obtained before data collection, participation was entirely voluntary, and responses were collected anonymously with no identifying details to safeguard participant identity and maintain data confidentiality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

SOP 1: What are the reading format preferences of the participants in terms of academic reading and pleasure reading?

For academic reading, English majors demonstrated a clear preference for physical texts, with 63.3% of respondents preferring print to some degree (46.7% strongly prefer print, 16.7% slightly prefer print). In contrast, only 13.3% preferred digital formats (6.7% slightly prefer digital, 6.7% strongly prefer digital), while 20.0% remained neutral. These findings align with the "print superiority" hypothesis in reading research (Mangen et al., 2013), which highlights a general cognitive preference for physical paper when processing complex text. A granular analysis of specific academic materials further shows this tendency: monographs and literary novels were primarily read in physical format or in an equal mix of formats, whereas peer-reviewed journal articles were read overwhelmingly digitally (22 out of 30 respondents) because of ease of online access and searchability. Overall, while digital access is utilized for shorter scholarly papers, print remains the preferred medium for sustained academic reading.

SOP 2: What are the specific format choices of the participants across different reading scenarios (monographs, journal articles, fiction, non-fiction)?

The findings reveal a dramatic reversal in format preferences when transitioning from academic to pleasure reading contexts, supporting the notion of strategic "format switching" based on reading purpose (Liu, 2005). While 63.3% of students preferred print for academic reading, an identical proportion (63.3%) strongly preferred digital formats for pleasure reading. Only 13.3% of respondents strongly preferred print for pleasure reading, while 23.3% remained neutral. Despite this strong overall digital preference for leisure, scenario-based responses showed nuance by text type: fiction and literary novels for pleasure still leaned toward print (12 mostly print, 3 exclusively print), whereas non-fiction, news, and essays showed a balanced distribution across formats. These results indicate that English majors do not have a fixed format allegiance; instead, they adaptively select print or digital formats based on functional needs, reading goals, and content type.

SOP 3: What reasons do the participants give for their print and digital preferences?

Students' format choices are guided by a pragmatic cost-benefit analysis that balances cognitive efficiency with practical convenience. The primary driver for preferring print was annotation capability, with an overwhelming 93.3% of participants (28 out of 30) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they annotate and highlight more effectively on paper. Participants also cited retention and reduced eye strain as notable print advantages, though responses on retention and emotional ownership were polarized. Conversely, digital formats were favored for practical advantages: 83.3% strongly agreed that digital texts are more practical due to cost and availability, 83.3% agreed or strongly agreed that search functions (Ctrl+F) improve research efficiency, and 76.7% highlighted physical convenience and portability. However, digital reading presented significant cognitive drawbacks, with 60% of students strongly agreeing that they are easily distracted when reading on digital screens. Thus, students actively

trade off the ease and cost-effectiveness of digital access with the focus and tactile engagement of print.

SOP 3: What instructional strategies and interventions can be recommended to address the reading needs of the participants?

To address the distinct reading habits, context-dependent format preferences, and digital distraction challenges identified among English majors, a comprehensive pedagogical framework combining digital literacy training, strategic course material distribution, and hybrid library support is recommended. First, educators should implement explicit digital reading strategy instruction, focusing on active digital annotation tools (such as GoodNotes, Hypothesis, or PDF markups) and distraction-reduction techniques, to help the 60% of students who report high susceptibility to digital distractions during screen reading. Second, instructors should adopt purpose-driven format assignment strategies by recommending print for dense, analysis-heavy literary texts and canonical works that require deep close reading, while leveraging open-access digital platforms and searchable databases for journal articles and secondary scholarship. Third, academic libraries and institutions should maintain a hybrid acquisition model that prioritizes digital journal subscriptions to maximize searchability and cost-efficiency while continuing to offer print copies of primary literary texts and monographs to support long-form comprehension and student retention.

SUMMARY

This study investigated the reading format preferences of 30 undergraduate English majors (21 first-year and 9 third-year students) across academic and pleasure reading contexts. Data from a researcher-made survey revealed a clear split in format choice by reading purpose. Overall, 83.3% of respondents reported reading for their English courses for less than 5 hours per week. For academic reading, 63.3% of participants preferred print texts, citing superior annotation capabilities (93.3%) and improved retention as primary benefits. Conversely, 63.3% strongly preferred digital formats for pleasure reading, driven by affordability (83.3%), searchability via Ctrl+F (83.3%), and physical convenience (76.7%). However, granular scenario analysis demonstrated strategic format-switching: peer-reviewed journal articles were read mostly digitally (22 respondents), whereas fiction for pleasure leaned toward print (12 respondents). Furthermore, 60% of students identified susceptibility to digital distraction as a major drawback of screen reading.

CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that English majors do not maintain a single, rigid preference for either print or digital media. Instead, their reading behaviors are defined by pragmatic, context-dependent "format-switching" that balances cognitive processing demands against practical accessibility. Students favor physical print for tasks requiring deep close-reading, sustained focus, and extensive margin annotation—such as literary monographs and complex theoretical analyses. Conversely, they favor digital formats for quick information retrieval, cost savings, and light recreational reading. Pervasive digital distractions and polarized views on retention highlight that print and digital media serve complementary rather than mutually exclusive roles in higher education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To support the evolving reading habits and academic needs of English majors, implement several targeted strategies.

First, writing and literature instructors should incorporate explicit digital literacy instruction into coursework, teaching students active digital annotation tools and distraction-reduction techniques to mitigate screen-reading focus issues.

Second, faculty should adopt intentional, purpose-driven format assignments—assigning physical print texts for complex literary analysis while leveraging searchable, open-access digital platforms for secondary research articles.

Third, academic libraries should maintain a hybrid collection model that prioritizes digital subscriptions for academic journals to optimize searchability and cost, while preserving physical inventory for canonical literature and monographs.

Fourth, academic publishers should refine digital reading software by incorporating enhanced annotation features, offline accessibility, and distraction-free layout modes tailored for close scholarly reading.

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AI DECLARATION STATEMENT

Artificial intelligence tools were used to process this document, assist with formatting and structural organization, and create illustrative visualizations of survey metrics. The researchers verified and authored all underlying survey data, analysis, and strategic recommendations.

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