

Exploring Readers' Relationships with Audiobooks, eBooks, and Physical Books

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ABSTRACT

Reading has a variety of benefits including obtaining information, learning about other perspectives, and providing a distraction from reality. People often picture reading as something done with a physical book with words printed on the pages; however, there are other modes in which people can engage in reading, such as eBooks and audiobooks. This study was conducted using a semi-structured interview design to examine various individuals' viewpoints on what it means to read and preferences in reading platforms. Researchers went into the study with open minds regarding the results and what themes would emerge from the interviews. The analysis revealed the preferred reading platforms for participants, and the key reasoning to back up these claims, including the desire to hold and smell a physical book, the ability to read in the dark with an eBook, and the ability to multitask with an audiobook. We discuss the most prevalent themes that arose during the interviews and provide reasoning given by the participants.

1 INTRODUCTION

Advancements in technology have caused the popularity of eBooks and audiobooks to grow [4]. However, there is still a strong preference for print books. Marca [8] found that 89% of college students preferred using a physical book when accessing stories. This is a controversial subject, especially whether audiobooks should be considered reading, and if eBooks are as effective as reading physical books. However, it is apparent that there are a variety of advantages and disadvantages that occur with each.

EBooks offer several unique advantages as a result of their digital format. They provide easy access to a wide range of materials [2]. Another interesting feature is that they can provide features that printed books cannot. eBook apps often have features including note-taking, searching, ability to adjust background and text color, and the ability to adjust fonts. This can have benefits for those with impairments, including visual impairments and learning disabilities, such as dyslexia. Schneps et al. [9] found that students with dyslexia had significantly improved reading speed and comprehension of eBooks versus print books. This demonstrates that eBooks are a valuable tool in terms of accessibility. While it is a popular sentiment that people do not learn as effectively from eBooks as they do physical books, Kestel [5] found that children can comprehend information presented in eBook and print books about equally well. Mangen et al. [7] found that while reading comprehension was about the same, those who read physical books did significantly better on questions regarding the chronological organization or temporal organization of the narrative. There is also some evidence that readers tend to be more distracted when consuming eBooks versus physical books. Users tend to skim eBooks rather than reading in-depth [2]. Readers often multitask when reading on an eDevice,

such as switching between several apps [2].

Audiobooks are also a popular format for consuming literature. They are useful for those with visual impairments, such as blind individuals. There are also benefits to them besides accessibility. They also support vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension [3]. Another benefit is that audiobooks prevent readers from skimming and force them to listen to every word [3]. Liu et al. [6] found that reading comprehension from the audio channel was better than that of the visual channel. Participants in this study performed the best; however, while they were listening to the audiobook while they also read the physical book. Audiobooks can also be beneficial to the people who use them. For example, they can help make people's commutes more enjoyable and feel less like an extension of work [4]. Users of audiobooks often use audiobooks while moving, including driving, walking, and exercising [1]. Audiobooks are often used while performing some other task, rather than physical reading, which is normally done by itself.

A vital aspect to consider when comparing audiobooks to other forms of reading is that they are different from visual reading. Physical books are a visual and tactile experience where the reader has a large amount of control over the speed at which they read and with the ability to easily jump ahead or backward. This differs from audiobooks, which are an auditory experience of an oral narrative. There are different skills involved in reading a book than listening to an audiobook. Listening to an audiobook allows for more bodily movements and the ability to look at other things at the same time [4]. Narrators also change the experience of readers. Normally the reader has a large amount of control of their interpretation of the narrative; however, in audiobooks, the narrator makes stylistic choices including different accents, intensity, tempo, phrasing, and voice qualities [4]. Readers can still interpret the text to some extent, but it is bounded by how the narrator interprets it and presents the verbal information. The semiotic process of reading and listening to audiobooks differs as it focuses on visual information and choices the reader makes regarding that information, whereas with audiobooks, it is about interpreting oral information while spontaneously negotiating a different space where the reader is often multitasking [4]. Audiobooks, eBooks, and physical books have different affordances from one another. Different things can be done with each platform [4]. This is something that needs to be considered when comparing them.

The way that people interact with literature has evolved with technological innovations. These changes in how people interact with literature causes a different relationship between literature and the reader. These changes are interesting to examine because they influence the way people learn, use technology, create literature, and consume it. If these areas are better understood, audiobooks and eBooks can be designed more effectively to suit the user's needs.

Understanding in these areas also has implications on education, as learning is often delivered through books. There is some research in these areas, but the results are often conflicting. Different people have different attitudes towards different reading platforms. This study intends to examine the way people interact with physical books, eBooks, and audiobooks and their relationships with these methods. It also examines why people prefer different reading platforms. Researchers performed semi-structured interviews in order to investigate these questions.

2 METHODOLOGY/DESIGN

2.1 Participants

Participants for this study included 12 adults who have experience with different platforms of reading (n = 12) ages between 20 and 45. Participants did not provide any personally identifiable information with the researcher interviewing them. They did not have to complete an informed consent process due to not being directly involved in the study. Participants were recruited organically; researchers reached out to individuals they knew personally, and those willing and had the time for an interview were selected.

2.2 Interviews

All researchers conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with participants. Before each interview was started, researchers explained the purpose of the interviews and informed them that the interview would be recorded and promptly deleted after the transcribing process.

Interviews consisted of a list of set questions that examined reading platform preferences and habits, with follow-up questions asked for clarification and elaboration. Interviews lasted between 5 minutes to 45 minutes, depending on participant responses. The video conferencing service: Zoom, was utilized to conduct and record interviews, and researchers took additional notes throughout the interviews. Following the completion of the interviews, they were transcribed using Zoom's real-time caption capabilities or by hand. Interview transcripts were then reviewed, analyzed, and annotated to discover potential patterns and the emergence of themes.

2.3 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed closely. One of the researchers developed a codebook with nearly 100 codes, patterns, and sub-themes that were recurring in participant responses. Codes' names were lifted directly from participant responses. Utilizing the codebook, the researchers independently examined each interview transcript and highlighted passages, sentences, and words where the codes were present.

Codes were then combined into categories to represent overarching themes. Themes were separated by the question, as not all themes were applicable to all questions. Researchers again went through the responses to mark how many times each theme occurred in its respective question.

3 RESULTS

The interview transcripts presented various themes that focused on each mode of reading: audiobook, eBook, and physical book. The

reading platforms were separated into their own categories and then analyzed further by the themes presented while discussing that specific mode.

3.1 Audiobooks

In terms of using audiobooks, around half of the participants used them rarely or never used them, while the other half of the participants ranged from using them daily to using them occasionally. Participants were divided nearly evenly between believing that listening to an audiobook can be considered reading the book. The situation that was the most common for participants to use audiobooks for was multitasking. When asked in what situations they might use an audiobook in, a participant replied:

"If I'm gardening or weeding or something like that. If I'm waiting between calls at work I'm listening to my audiobook. If I make food or something like that audiobooks going. I basically have it going anytime people would traditionally have music going."

Other situations that participants mentioned include social purposes, for work or academics, or before going to sleep. Participants were also asked to talk about what they liked about audiobooks. Many participants again mentioned that they liked that they were able to multitask while they used the audiobook. However, others mentioned that they liked it for convenience, the social experience, immersion and that it was easier to focus on. When asked about reasons that they disliked audiobooks, participants often mentioned the narrators, and some mentioned difficulty focusing, frustration, problems with rewinding, price, and someone else giving the characters voices. One participant discussed the problem with bad narrators by saying:

"Definitely comes down to the narrator interpreting those words and then that adds a new layer. So it's not you, the reader, sitting there and interpreting the words and pulling meaning. It's you listening to someone else sitting there, reading the words interpreting the meaning and then portraying that to you."

Participants indicate that when a poor narrator is reading the book, it can cause difficulty because of their control of stylistic choices, including the characters' voices, and the way that they tell the story. One-fourth of the participants stated that they learned the best from using audiobooks. One of the participants explained why audiobooks were the best for their learning:

"The nice part listening to an audiobook is that you can listen and it's not based on your own comprehension and interpretation. It is somebody else portraying that information for you. It's kind of like sitting there and listening to a lecture like you can retain some of what you hear based on the way somebody says it. Um with the inflection in their voice, the way they pause and start and how fast they're speaking. You can retain some of that information in terms of "how did they encode this to be able to portray it to me" versus when you have that book in front of you."

When it came to what platform participants preferred only two stated that they preferred audiobooks. Both stated that the reason

they liked audiobooks best was mostly that they can listen to the audiobook while performing some other task.

3.2 eBooks

When compared to other reading platforms, eBooks had the most diverse set of responses when asked how often they were used. Nearly half of the participants used them daily or weekly, a fourth used them occasionally, and the remainder never used them at all. Almost a fourth of participants preferred reading an eBook, as opposed to physical books and audiobooks. All participants believed that reading an eBook was equivalent to reading a physical book, with a few exceptions, the following is an example:

"If the author has like illustrations or something that go along with the story sometimes, they don't always get reflected in the eBook so you're kind of lost with that."

The situations in which participants used eBooks varied. Most participants used eBooks, in any setting, while others used them while relaxing. Traveling was also another popular response, as nearly a third of the participants answered this. The exclusive use of eBooks in purely academic settings was also a recurring theme in responses, this concept was presented in the following replies:

"If I ever run into like a situation where I'm bored or like you're waiting in the doctor's office or something like that, so, I have that it's like a backup kind of thing so, I'm not completely bored out of my mind in those situations."

"I use them for textbooks, mostly in school. So, I would use them for textbooks. Um just because they were easier to access, and I didn't want to just carry around huge textbooks around."

Participants were asked what they liked and disliked about eBooks. A majority of participants commented on the convenience, portability, and accessibility factor of eBooks as the main reason they enjoyed using them. The affordability and availability were also notable factors that participants commented on, the following are some responses that support this claim:

"Convenience. They're very just easy to access on like multiple devices as well. Um yeah, I just sometimes don't like carrying a lot of books just because they're heavy."

"I started reading the first [book of the series] on the e-book because it was easy. I didn't have to go wait for it to be in a library and have to go buy the book somewhere and pay that extra money. I could just pay the dollar and that was it. I got it digitally and I didn't have to put in any effort to try to get the book."

Additionally, participants enjoyed the features that are uniquely available to eBooks. Notable features are the ability to annotate, highlight, comment on pages, search, and the lack of dependence on a light source. These features are mentioned in the following participants replies:

"They are also lit so you don't have to have a light with you. [Participant's father] even read outside now, even when it is getting dark out he can read outside without a problem. And I don't know, I think it's incredibly convenient."

"When I use eBooks, I used to use them mainly on my tablet. So, for school I'd be able to take notes"

A common dislike that participants commented on was the digital fatigue associated with the use of eBooks. Many noted the eye strain and headaches they got from heavy use. Another theme that participants tended to dislike was with the very nature of eBooks. eBooks are typically read through phones or other digital devices, and participants missed the feeling of holding a book and the idea of a physical connection with a book. Participants also noted the disadvantages of reading books on a piece of technology:

"You're not seeing the progression within the book because one of the things about e-books is like you must go back to your table of contents and then see where you are within the book. That's not as satisfying as actually being able to see how many pages you have left."

"Also, there's always like the chances of where like the technology could crash and you're in mid-sentence and your phone could die."

When asked which platforms that participants learned the best from, a fourth of participants responded with eBooks. Participants cited reasons that were discussed in the reasons individuals enjoyed using eBooks. Some participants stated that it depended on the genre or type of book they were reading or replied with a combination of physical books and eBooks, the following are some examples from the participants:

"eBooks. The reason why is they have software where you can like highlight different passages that might be important or like bookmark certain pages so it's easier to like um uh go through."

"For the self-help books, it's the physical books. For academic information textbooks, it's the eBooks."

3.3 Physical Books

All but one participant stated that they used physical books, the range of use presented by the participants were: every day, weekly, monthly, occasional, rare, and never. The situations in which physical books were used consisted of academic/work, lack of internet connection, relaxing/pleasure, and any other time. The majority of the participants discussed that physical books were good for any time reading, for example relaxing outside (beach, pool, hammock), reading though textbooks for school, and wanting to relax and escape reality. For example when one of the participants was asked in which situations they use physical books they replied:

"Usually in situations where I'm not sure how the WiFi is going to be in a place I'm going to. Or I might potentially want a more relaxed kind of feel. If I want to go in a hammock or something I'll bring a book, or if I'm down by the lake, lake books are great and beach books are too."

Participants were also asked about what they liked and disliked about using physical books. The themes that were prevalent when participants were asked what they liked consisted of: the feel of holding a book, smell, aesthetics, having sentimental feelings towards the books, gratification and the ability to see one's progress in the book, history of book, notes taking on the pages, and the

wear and tear of the book. The most common theme was the ability to hold the book and feel the pages, as expressed in one of the interviews:

"I like the idea of holding it in your hands, actually feeling the paper. Being able to like open a book."

While many of the participants enjoyed the wear and tear of the books, it was also a common feature of physical books that many disliked. Other themes that were found when analysing the dislikes of physical books were storage/size, cumbersome, price, and difficulty focusing. The commonality present is that physical books can be awkward when carrying or storing for later use, and physical books are more expensive than eBooks or audiobooks. One of the participants expresses the frustration of the different sizes of books:

"The size you know like the height difference between book. It looks weird on my bookshelf and sometimes I can't fit certain books on my bookshelf."

The participants were asked to address which platforms they preferred and which platform they learned the best from. The majority of participants stated that physical books were their preferred method of reading as well as the platform in which they learned the best from. The concept of being a visual learner was presented, as described by the following participant:

"I like to see to learn, I am much more of a visual learner, and I also like to hold it in my hands to have the ability to flip back and forth."

Participants had an overall good experience using physical books, and most participants preferred to use them over other reading platforms. The biggest barrier for the use of physical books was the availability and the affordability (being more expensive than other platforms) of the physical books.

4 DISCUSSION

The participants' interviews disclosed several key themes about the three reading platforms; audiobooks, eBooks, and physical books. The interviews were designed to examine the different viewpoints people have on what it means to read and preferences in reading platforms. The results discuss the likes and dislikes regarding each platform, as well as addressing whether or not people believed eBooks and audiobooks were a form of reading. While most people believe reading an eBook was indeed a form of reading, the participants were split more towards audiobooks, not being a form of reading. The researchers entered this study with open minds about individual's perceptions of different reading platforms. However, it was surprising to the researchers that a nearly half of the participants believed audiobooks were a form of reading. The explanations were very similar in the manner that audiobooks still provide the content of the reading, and the reader still gets the same information they would if they were physically reading the book.

4.1 Limitations

The present study has several limitations. The participants were selected according to the convenience of being an acquaintance with researchers and the ability to set up a Zoom call quickly. Also, the sample size of 12 participants is too small to generalize across a diverse population. Not all participants had experience with all

three platforms, and therefore could not provide their likes and dislikes based on experiences.

4.2 Future Work

The data presented leads to the question of which platform is actually best for reading comprehension. For future work, an experimental design can be put in place that has the same information on all three platforms. The participants would be assigned to a platform and asked questions about what they learned or remembered from the reading. Participants should be assigned randomly into groups for more control on what the data is presenting.

5 CONCLUSION

This study consisted of semi-structured interviews that took a deeper look into what reading platforms people prefer, why, and what people considered reading. The data shows that people prefer to read physical books when affordable, which allows them to be able to hold and get a whiff of the book. The key theme presented for individuals' likes about audiobooks was the ability to multitask when listening to a book, many participants mentioned driving and road trips while listening to audiobooks. Finally, eBooks, the major admired theme presented was the convenience and availability for eBooks, while participants were still missing the real feel of holding a physical book. The data showed that most participants believed that they learned best with physical books, while the others were equally split between eBooks and audiobooks. Our findings show the need for future work on the comprehension of the platforms, an experimental design could test the understanding of information displayed on the three platforms.

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