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User preferences towards select attributes of digital reading: An exploratory study post pandemic

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Abstract---The pandemic called COVID 19 has altered the ways in which people think, act, and believe and what not. Though morbidity and mortality are the biggest causes for concern, one cannot ignore the effect such a pandemic has over the other aspects of life. One such aspect is reading. While digital reading keeps on gaining further significance due to the pandemic, it becomes necessary to investigate the various facets of the same. Hence the study was conducted with the aim of examining the user preference towards select attributes of reading in the digital format. The present study is a descriptive research using primary data collected through questionnaire. The sample size was 100. It was found through Garrett ranking analysis that the most and least preferred format was 'pdf' and 'azw' respectively. The same for genre was fiction and poetry, whereas for device it was laptop and tablet. Chi-square tests were conducted for testing hypothesis. It was found through analysis that age and occupation had significant association with format and genre respectively. This finding presents a new perspective on digital reading user preferences over the previous studies for the fact that individual groups were focussed here. The magnitude of differences identified through data analysis shows that it is utterly necessary to regard each characteristic with special focus to maximise on the efficiency front from the view point of service provider as well as user. The limitation of the present study is the non-representative nature of the sample.

Keywords---demographic association, devices, digital reading, format, genre, user preferences.

Introduction

'New normal' is the term that has been coined for the world post pandemic. The pandemic called COVID 19 has altered the ways in which people think, act, believe and what not. Though morbidity and mortality are the biggest causes for concern, one cannot ignore the effect such a pandemic has over the other aspects of life as well. One such aspect was reading. As simple as it sounds, it sure is an important aspect of life because, reading is an activity taken up by multitudes of people for reasons ranging from academics to pleasure to work. This was affected by the pandemic (Boucher, Harrison, & Giovanelli, 2020) because people were unable to access books due to being stranded in their places. This is when, in spite of its prevalence in the market for nearly two decades (Wilber, 2020), e-books began to gain importance to a greater extent (Ofgang, 2021). Oxford dictionary defines an e-book as "a book that is displayed on a computer screen or on an electronic device that is held in the hand, instead of being printed on paper". What is perceived as an e-book has evolved over the years (Lebert, 2009). While digital reading keep on gaining further significance it becomes necessary to investigate the various facets of the same. Hence the study was conducted with the aim of examining the user preference towards select attributes of digital reading. The specific objectives of the study can be listed as follows,

- To identify the user preference towards 'format', 'genre' and 'device' with respect to digital reading.
- To examine whether such identified preferences have any association with the users' select demographic characteristics.

Review of literature

Numerous studies have been conducted over the years on the areas surrounding user preference towards digital reading. (Bozkurt, Okur, & Kardeniz, 2016) conducted a survey to identify the perceptions, preferences and attitude of the post-graduate students regarding e-books in a University. More than 80% of the respondents had used an e-book and this data is interpreted by the researcher as an encouraging factor towards e-book adoption. The study also states the open minded nature of the sample in showing that those who had not used an e-book earlier are ready to try it out if feasible. Further when it comes to device used to access the e-books, majority of the respondents were found to prefer laptops followed by mobile phones then tablet, desktop and finally dedicated e-book readers.

(Dhanavandan, 2016) propagates the effectiveness of Garret ranking technique in practically identifying the most significant factor influencing the user preference towards digital resources in his paper. The respondents' preferences towards using 9 specific e-resources were ranked. This data was then analysed using Garret ranking technique to give the finalised ranking of e-resources. The results show that e-journals were the most preferred among the 9 whereas specialized collections were the least preferred. (Kumar & Jayaprakash, 2017) wanted to find out usage of e-resources among the faculty in a specific institution. This was done on the basis of the users' gender, designation, experience, familiarity and frequency. The various resources brought under scrutiny were e-books, e-

journals, online databases and e-newspaper. Ranking analysis was taken up to identify the most preferred e-resource among the users. Data analysis revealed that majority of the respondents ranked online databases first, e-journals second, e-books also were given the second rank by majority while e-newspapers were ranked third. Further analysis established significant difference among the educational qualification of the respondents.

(McElvany & Schwabe, 2019) stressed the need to understand the difference in reading activities post digitisation, especially in the context of addressing the gender gap, if any. The authors indicate that education being the core of development and gender being the core of human being, it becomes necessary to study them in intervening concepts. This was done in the context of students' perception and motivation. Regression analysis revealed significant gender gap in digital reading. Further a gap of similar conviction was found between gender groups in motivation and self-concept for reading digitally. (Prokop & Stejskal, 2020) identified among others, the preferences of three different age cohorts with respect to usage of e-books in a study conducted among the library users. They are students, economically active and pensioners. The user preference regarding the device used for e-reading as well as the preference for different genres of e-books among the identified cohorts was addressed in this article. Analysis shows that e-book reader is the most significant device for all three groups with Tablet gaining significance just for students. When it comes to genre of e-books, students prefer to read world novel, historical novel, sci-fi, fantasy and travel guides in the digital format. When it comes to pensioners the categories got reduced to historical novel, sci-fi and fantasy. Whereas the economically active were found to prefer books for children and a non-fiction category called 'The fates of the famous'. The authors suggest that e-book service providers consider such individual needs while providing service.

(Chelsea & Vijayakumari, 2021) set about to identify the user expectations from digital reading devices. The paper also embarks upon identifying the effect of demographic variables on user expectations. Also, among the six demographic variables that were tested for significant influence on preferences, it was found that educational qualification, income level, and place of residence were significant while gender and age were insignificant. The paper concludes with the proposition that the present is the best time to promote digital reading in light of the pandemic and resultant digitisation of various fields. (Arun & Jirli, 2021) conducted a study with the objective of identifying the user perception towards effectiveness of digitised educational efforts in the context of growing digitization. The article focussed on the areas such as internet access, affordability of devices, resource saving perception due to adoption of e-reading etc. With the help of acquired data and its analysis the author establishes that having complete access to internet in addition to owning high end digital devices enhances the users' ability to effectively extract the utilities that digitised educational efforts has to offer. Further garret ranking of perception of learners regarding adoption of e-learning found that using such resources for free is ranked first among four others.

Methodology

Research type: This is a descriptive study where the researcher presents the facts as it is. In other words, the researcher tries to address the 'what' question related to the subject under study, rather than the 'why, how' questions.

- Data type: The present study is based on primary data.
- Tool used for data collection: Questionnaire was used to collect primary data.
- Sample Description: The sample size was 100 respondents and the sampling technique adopted is convenience sampling
- Statistical Analysis used: Simple percentage analysis, Garrett Ranking Technique and Chi-square tests for association
- Tools used in Analysis: Microsoft Excel and Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS.20)

Analysis and Discussion

Descriptive Analysis

The demographic details of the respondents regarding five main variables were collected. They were gender, age, educational qualification, nature of occupation, and their place of residence. Among the sample of 100 respondents 58% were women and 42% were men. Majority of the respondents belonged to the age group of 21 to 31 years amounting to 64% of the sample, followed by 'less than 20 years' which were 16% and the other two categories were 31 to 40 years 11% and above 40 years 9%. When it comes to educational qualification of the respondents it was found that 51% of them were UG degree holders, 32% being PG degree holders and above, 11% were qualified with professional courses and the remaining 6 % had school level education. Further, 44% of the respondents were employed in an organization and 41% were students. The other two categories being self-employed and unemployed constituted 9% and 6% of the sample respectively. With respect to distribution of sample respondents based on place of residence, around 3/4th of the sample lived in urban areas (76%) while the rest lived in rural areas (24%).

Garret Ranking Analysis

The potential of Garrett ranking technique in identifying user preferences in a scientific way is established through various literature such as (Dhanavandan, 2016), (Geetha & Prabu, 2020), (Ismanto, Azhari, & Arsyad, 2018), (Rao, Kalvakolanu, Sarma, & Kumar, 2019), (Ao & Jamir, 2020) and (Sanghvi, Talati, & Misra, 2017). Under this method, the percentage position is first computed using the formula,

$$\text{Percent position} = 100(R_{ij}-0.5)/N_j$$

Where, R_{ij} is the rank given for i^{th} variable by j^{th} respondent

N_j is the number of variables ranked by the j^{th} respondent

Using the above formula, the percentage value was first identified. For the first two attributes namely format and genre there were seven categories and subsequently seven ranks. Hence the Percentage value for both will be the same (Table 4.2.1). Whereas for the third attribute device, there are only five categories to be ranked, so it has a separate computation (Table 4.2.2). This computed value is then compared with the garret ranking conversion table to identify corresponding scores.

4.2.1 Table showing Garret values for format and genre			4.2.2 Table showing Garret values for Device		
Item no	Percentage value	Garret Ranking score	Item no	Percentage value	Garret Ranking score
1	7.142857143	79	1	10	75
2	17.14285714	69	2	30	60
3	35.71428571	57	3	50	50
4	50	50	4	70	40
5	64.28571429	43	5	90	25
6	78.57142857	35	Source: Computed data		
7	92.85714286	21			
Source: Computed data					

The computed garret ranking scores is substituted with the responses recorded by the respondents. The resultant data is then ranked based on the average of each category. The highest score being allocated the first rank and lowest score with 7th or 5th rank depending on the number of items in that attribute.

4.2.3 Table
Table showing overall Garret ranking for Format, Genre and Device

Format	Avg Score	Rank	Genre	Avg	Rank	Device	Avg	Rank
Text	62.2	3	Poetry	42.96	7	PC	50.15	3
Doc	64.08	2	Drama	52.02	4	Laptop	59.8	1
Pdf	67.86	1	Fiction	54.13	1	Smartphone	59.5	2
Html	46.84	4	Self-help	50.89	5	E-reader	41.65	4
Epub	45.83	5	Magazine	52.63	2	Tablet	38.9	5
Mobi	39.17	6	Textbook	52.36	3			
azw	28.02	7	Newspaper	49.01	6			

Source: Computed data

It can be noted from table 4.2.3 that the most preferred format for e-books is pdf while the least preferred is azw. Expanded as the Portable Document Format, documents in pdf format gives the user the ability to present the document irrespective of the hardware, software or operating system in use. This being relevant in today's world with the variety of hardware, software and operating systems available for the users. Thus, signifying their choice. Further this finding is in line with the findings of Oriogu et al, (2018) where majority of the respondents preferred PDF for the convenience factor attached to it. Azw is the format which is exclusive for the e-reading device called Kindle. With the steady

decline of Kindle users (Haines, 2021), it is only understandable that this format has been chosen as the least preferred by all the segments.

When it comes to genres, fiction seems to be the most preferred category and poetry falls under the least preferred. (Alexandrov, 2018) established similar findings, stating that the most preferred genre among e-book users was fiction in its various facets. The least preferred genre is undeniably poetry. Though this preference is in relation to reading poetry in the digital format, the fact that reading poetry in general is declining (Creely, 2019) cannot be neglected. Hence this finding is justified. About the devices preferred to access e-books, the most preferred one is laptop and the least preferred is Tablet. Though laptop ranks first, the leading margin between smartphone and laptop is very minimal (0.3). Thus, it can be inferred from table 4.2.3 that, smartphones also fall under the 'most preferred device' tag line. Previous studies have showed that users prefer smartphones (Subha & Kalaiselvi, 2017) as well as laptops (Kumbhar, 2018) for digital reading needs. (Kumbhar, 2018) established in his findings how users preferred laptops and smartphones over tablets. The reason behind this choice can be attributed to these devices' ability to perform multiple functions above and beyond the limited functionality offered by tablets and e-readers.

Hypothesis Testing

Testing the data for 2nd objective required the formulation of 5 main hypothesis pertaining to the five demographic variables under study. To take up a detailed analysis 3 sub-hypothesis were framed for each of the 5 main hypotheses bringing the total number to 15. Thus, 15 chi-square tests were run to identify association. The results are presented below.

Gender

Alternate Hypothesis, H₁: There is significant association between gender and user preferences towards digital reading

Table 4.3.1

Table showing chi-square test results between gender and preferences

S.No	Alternate sub-hypothesis	p-value	Result
H _{1.1}	There is significant association between gender and format preference	0.059	Rejected
H _{1.2}	There is significant association between gender and device preference	0.627	Rejected
H _{1.3}	There is significant association between gender and genre preference	0.528	Rejected

Source: Computed data

From the table 4.3.1, it can be noted that all the alternate hypothesis are rejected due to the p-value being more than the significance level of 0.05. Thus, it can be stated that there is no significant association between gender and user preferences regarding digital reading and this finding is in line with that of the study conducted by Bozkurt et al in 2016.

Age

Alternate Hypothesis, H₂: There is significant association between age and user preferences towards digital reading

Table 4.3.2
Table showing chi-square test results between age and preferences

S.No	Alternate sub-hypothesis	p-value	Result
H _{2.1}	There is significant association between age and format preference	0.000***	Accepted
H _{2.2}	There is significant association between age and device preference	0.796	Rejected
H _{2.3}	There is significant association between age and genre preference	0.489	Rejected

Source: Computed data (***) indicates statistically significant at 99% confidence level)

Table 4.3.2 clearly indicates that there is significant association between age and format preferences through the acceptance of H_{2.1} due to the p-value being less than 0.05. Where as the other two associations (device and genre) with age is rejected (p-value > 0.05), thus establishing that there is no association between them. (Ashkanani, 2017), in her thesis partially confirmed the hypothesis associating age with attitude towards digital learning which is similar to the present findings.

Table 4.3.3
Table showing cross tabulation between age and format preferences of the respondents

S.No	Particulars	Most Preferred Format							Total
		Text	Doc	Pdf	Html	Epub	Mobi	Azw	
1	Less than 20 years	8	0	7	0	0	0	1	16
2	21 to 30 years	21	0	39	1	2	1	0	64
3	31 to 40 years	4	2	1	0	2	2	0	11
4	Above 40 years	3	2	2	0	1	0	1	9
	Total	36	4	49	1	5	3	2	100

Source: Computed data

The results presented in the table 4.3.3 clearly indicates that the most preferred format is text for all the categories of age group except one which is 21 to 30 years preferring pdf the most. Since the alternate hypothesis establishes significant association between age group and format preference (refer table 4.2.3), it becomes necessary to include text format as an important category as well. Further, it has to be noted that the findings of Garrett ranking analysis and that of Table 4.3.3 does not correspond, making this finding even more important. It is more important because of the fact that segmenting of the digital reading market based on age group is deemed necessary by this finding.

Education

Alternate Hypothesis, H_3 : There is significant association between educational qualification and user preferences towards digital reading

Table 4.3.4
Table showing chi-square test results between education and preferences

S.No	Alternate sub-hypothesis	p-value	Result
H _{3.1}	There is significant association between education and format preference	0.386	Rejected
H _{3.2}	There is significant association between education and device preference	0.085	Rejected
H _{3.3}	There is significant association between education and genre preference	0.241	Rejected

Source: Computed data

It can be inferred from table 4.3.4 that there is no significant association between educational qualification and preferences towards digital reading. The p-value for all the three sub-hypothesis testing for association between education with format, device and genre were found to be 0.386, 0.085, and 0.241 respectively, were well above 0.05, thus rejecting the alternate hypothesis. In other words, whatever the educational qualification of the user, their preferences regarding digital reading aspects do not differ. This can be attributed to the fact that digital devices, especially smartphones are used by all, irrespective of their education.

Occupation

Alternate Hypothesis, H_4 : There is significant association between occupation and user preferences towards digital reading

Table 4.3.8
Table showing chi-square test results between occupation and preferences

S.No	Alternate sub-hypothesis	p-value	Result
H _{4.1}	There is significant association between occupation and format preference	0.787	Rejected
H _{4.2}	There is significant association between occupation and device preference	0.439	Rejected
H _{4.3}	There is significant association between occupation and genre preference	0.042**	Accepted

Source: Computed data (** indicates statistically significant at 95% confidence level)

As far as occupation is concerned significant association has been established only with respect to genre preferences, as the p-value for the test is 0.042 which falls below 0.05. Whereas for the other two, the alternate hypothesis has been rejected thus stating that there is no significant association between occupation and format as well as device.

Table 4.3.9
Table showing cross tabulation between occupation and genre preference

S.No	Particulars	Most Preferred Genre							Total
		Poetry	Drama	Fiction	Self-help	Magazine	Textbook	News	
1	Student	9	5	7	3	4	9	4	41
2	Employed in an Organisation	5	6	7	6	2	2	16	44
3	Self-employed	1	0	1	0	0	0	7	9
4	Unemployed	2	0	1	1	0	1	1	6
	Total	17	11	16	10	6	12	28	100

Source: Computed data

It is observed from table 4.3.9 that textbook is most preferred by students; news is most preferred by employees (self-employed or otherwise) and poetry is most preferred by students as well as unemployed. Alexandrov (2018) established that academic or professional reading, also known as textbooks, along with fiction, is the most suitable genre for digital reading. Here again the findings seem to be inconsistent with Garrett ranking analysis (refer table 4.2.3). The genre called 'poetry' has been identified as the most preferred by students from the above table whereas it is the least preferred according to Garrett ranking. Similarly, 'news' is the second least preferred genre as per Garrett analysis whereas it is the most preferred by 'employees' as per table 4.3.9. Further, the most preferred genre according to Garrett analysis called 'fiction' is not preferred most by any single segment when analysed separately. The magnitude of these differences presents the vitality of approaching user preferences based on occupational status with special focus.

Residence

Alternate Hypothesis, H_5 : There is significant association between place of residence and user preferences towards digital reading

Table 4.3.8
Table showing chi-square test results between occupation and preferences

S.No	Alternate Hypothesis	p-value	Result
H _{5.1}	There is significant association between place of residence and format preference	0.137	Rejected
H _{5.2}	There is significant association between place of residence and device preference	0.402	Rejected
H _{5.3}	There is significant association between place of	0.616	Rejected

	residence and genre preference		
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Source: Computed data

From the above table it can be observed that there is no significant association between place of residence and digital reading preferences among the identified respondents of rural as well as urban areas. Because the calculated p-value is more than 0.05, thus rejecting all three sub-hypothesis. Previous studies (Sampath Kumar & Shiva Kumara, 2018) in this field found stark differences among users from rural and urban areas with respect to digital reading behaviour. The present finding is in contrast to such findings and this may be attributed to the reducing digital divide between the rural and urban areas due to growing reach of technology. Further the geographic location where the data was collected presented few differences in the infrastructure between its identified rural and urban areas.

Conclusion

Reading is an integral part of everyone's lives irrespective of their specific demographic orientation. But the reason for taking up reading, differs based on their present demographic state (Anderson, Tollefson, & Gilbert, 1985). The concept of reading has evolved very much over the years. Especially with the advent of digital reading, the availability of multifarious content for the multifarious reading needs is well established. Also, the pandemic has fuelled the proliferation of digital reading further. The trends in e-book research have seen multiple dimensions. Exploring the demographic orientation of the users in tune with their preferences towards e-books is an interesting area of study. Though previous literature focussed on this perspective, it was on a limited number of characteristics. The necessity to present a comprehensive account of the same was felt. With this in mind the present study was conducted to identify user preferences towards e-books, focussing on three characteristics. It was found through analysis that the most and least preferred format was pdf and azw respectively. The same for genre was fiction and poetry, whereas for device it was laptop and tablet.

The study went on further to check whether or not it was important to focus on individual demographic characteristics in relation to the above identified preferences by identifying if there was any significant association among the various segments. Acceptance of two sub-hypothesis (refer table 4.3.2 and table 4.3.8) among the fifteen identified ones, shows the necessity to evaluate preferences based on market segments specific to those demographics. The present study presents a new perspective on digital reading user preferences over the previous studies for the fact that individual demographic segments were focussed here. The limitation of the present study is the non-representative nature of the sample. The scope of this area of research is limitless. There are numerous focal points to explore such as psychographic differences in preferences, role of cost factor in choices, to name a few. Further studies can also focus on the 'why' factor behind these choices.

The need to cater to individual preferences has been felt increasingly on all sectors. These individual preferences seem to differ profusely on all fields and this

study has proved that digital reading is no exception to this paradox. Though limited, the magnitude of differences identified through data analysis shows that it is utterly necessary to regard each characteristic with special focus to maximise on the efficiency front. This will help both the users and the marketers to extract the maximum that digital reading have to offer via niche marketing efforts.

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