

PRINTED OR SCREEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STUDENTS' READING PREFERENCES IN DIGITAL AND PRINTED MEDIA

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate students' reading preferences between printed and digital media among students of the English Education Department batch 2025. This study employed a semi-quantitative descriptive approach using questionnaires containing both multiple-choice and essay questions to explore students' preferences and the reasons behind them. The findings revealed that 18 students (85.7%) preferred printed books because they were considered more comfortable, helped improve concentration, reduced distractions from notifications, minimized eye strain, and provided a more enjoyable reading experience. Meanwhile, students who preferred digital reading media highlighted practicality, accessibility, portability, and lower costs as their main reasons. The results indicate that although digital reading media are increasingly popular, printed books still remain the dominant preference among students due to emotional, physical, and academic factors. Therefore, both printed and digital media should be considered complementary tools in supporting students' reading habits and academic activities.

Keywords: Students' Reading Preference, Printed Media, Digital Media, Reading Habits, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

Reading plays an essential role in students' academic lives, particularly in higher education where students are required to engage with various learning materials such as textbooks, journals, articles, and other academic references. According to Sumartana et al. (2026) Through reading activities, students are able to develop critical thinking skills, broaden their knowledge, and improve their academic performance. In today's modern educational environment, reading is no longer limited to printed materials because technological advancement has transformed the way people access and consume information. The rapid development of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and internet accessibility has significantly influenced students' reading habits, shifting them from traditional printed books toward digital reading media.

The emergence of digital books and online reading platforms has contributed greatly to this transformation. Digital books began gaining public attention around 2006 and continued to develop rapidly in the following years. One of the most influential digital reading platforms among young people and students is Wattpad. According to the International Publishers Association (2015), Wattpad had approximately 40 million monthly

users worldwide. Furthermore, TechCrunch (2017) reported that Wattpad's monthly active users increased to more than 60 million globally in 2017. This significant increase demonstrates that digital reading has become increasingly integrated into modern literacy culture, especially among younger generations who are highly familiar with technology and digital devices. Digital reading platforms provide practicality and accessibility because users can access reading materials anytime and anywhere through electronic devices.

In Indonesia, the development of digital reading culture has become more visible alongside the increasing number of internet users. Based on data from the *Asosiasi Penyelenggara Jasa Internet Indonesia* (APJII), internet usage among young people and university students continues to increase every year, allowing easier access to e-books, online journals, and digital libraries. Educational institutions have also increasingly integrated digital resources into learning systems, particularly after the implementation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, students are now more exposed to digital reading materials than ever before. Digital media offer several advantages such as portability, affordability, easy accessibility, and the ability to store large amounts of reading materials in a single device. Students can read various sources without carrying physical books, making digital reading media highly practical for academic purposes.

However, despite the increasing popularity of digital reading platforms and technological advancement, Indonesia's reading interest level remains relatively low. According to data published by *Badan Pusat Statistik* (BPS) in 2017, the national Reading Interest Level *Tingkat Kegemaran Membaca* (TGM) was recorded at 36.48, which is categorized as low. This condition indicates that technological development and easier access to reading materials do not necessarily increase people's reading interest significantly. It also suggests that reading culture is influenced not only by accessibility but also by individual preferences, habits, motivation, and reading experiences. Therefore, understanding students' reading preferences between digital and printed media becomes an important issue to investigate, particularly in the context of academic reading habits.

Within literacy and educational technology studies, reading preferences are closely associated with students' learning experiences and academic effectiveness. Printed books are often considered more comfortable for deep reading because they help readers maintain concentration, reduce eye strain, and provide a more focused reading experience. Many students also develop emotional attachment toward physical books through factors such as book aroma, page texture, and the satisfaction of collecting books physically. On the other hand, digital reading media are frequently preferred because they are practical, economical, portable, and quickly accessible. Students can search information instantly, highlight texts digitally, and store numerous references in one device. Therefore, both printed and digital media possess their own strengths and limitations depending on students' needs and preferences.

Previous studies have discussed the comparison between digital and printed reading media from different perspectives. Several studies focused on reading comprehension and found that students reading printed texts tend to demonstrate better comprehension and retention compared to those reading digitally. Other studies emphasized the practicality and accessibility of digital media, especially among students who frequently use smartphones and laptops for academic purposes. Research conducted by scholars from various educational institutions has also examined students' perceptions and experiences regarding printed and digital reading materials. Some studies concluded that students prefer digital

media because they are cheaper and easier to access, while other findings revealed that printed books are still preferred for academic reading due to better concentration and fewer distractions.

Nevertheless, most previous studies primarily focused on comparing reading effectiveness, comprehension, or learning outcomes between digital and printed media. Limited attention has been given to exploring the deeper reasons behind students' preferences toward digital or printed books. Previous research has not fully explained why some students strongly prefer digital books while others remain attached to physical books despite technological advancement. Factors such as price, accessibility, practicality, eye strain, concentration level, emotional attachment, reading comfort, and even book aroma may influence students' preferences differently. Therefore, there is still a research gap regarding the underlying motivations and considerations shaping students' reading preferences in modern academic contexts.

Understanding students' reading preferences is important because reading habits significantly influence academic performance and learning quality. University students, especially at the end of the semester, are required to complete assignments, prepare presentations, conduct research, and study for examinations, all of which demand intensive reading activities. Students who feel comfortable with their preferred reading media may experience better concentration, motivation, and learning effectiveness. In contrast, unsuitable reading media may reduce reading engagement and academic productivity. Consequently, investigating the factors influencing students' preferences toward digital and printed reading media is necessary to better understand students' reading behaviour in today's digital era.

Based on the explanation above, this study aims to investigate students' reading preferences in digital and printed media and explore the factors influencing those preferences. This research is expected to contribute to the broader discussion of literacy, educational technology, and students' reading culture in modern academic environments.

METHOD

This study employed a semi-quantitative descriptive method to investigate students' reading preferences between printed and digital media. A semi-quantitative approach was used because the study combined numerical data with descriptive responses from participants. According to Creswell (2014), descriptive research is used to describe and interpret phenomena occurring in a particular population, while the combination of quantitative and qualitative responses can provide a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives and experiences. In this study, quantitative data were obtained from the number and percentage of students who preferred printed or digital reading media, while qualitative data were gathered from respondents' essay answers explaining the reasons behind their preferences.

The participants of this study were students of the English Education Department then it is called as PBI or *Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris* batch 2025. The data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed from May 12, 2026, until June 1, 2026. During this period, the questionnaire was shared with respondents and remained open until the closing date. A total of 22 respondents participated in this study. The questionnaire consisted of close-ended questions to identify students' reading preferences and open-ended essay

questions to explore the reasons influencing those preferences. According to Brown (2001), questionnaires are effective instruments for collecting information regarding participants' opinions, attitudes, and experiences in educational research.

After collecting the data, the researcher analyzed the responses descriptively. The quantitative data were calculated in percentages to determine the dominant reading preference among students, while the qualitative responses were categorized based on recurring themes such as concentration, accessibility, comfort, eye strain, practicality, and emotional attachment toward books. This method allowed the researcher to gain a broader understanding of students' reading behavior and the factors influencing their preferences between printed and digital media.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Building upon the empirical data gathered through the questionnaires, this section offers a deeper interpretation of students' reading preferences between digital and printed media. The survey configuration revealed a distinct polarization in student habits; while digital media is favored for its accessibility, printed texts remain dominant for deep comprehension. The following analysis explores why these preferences exist and how they impact learning outcomes.

This study involved 22 respondents from the English Education Department batch 2025. The respondents were divided into four classes consisting of PBI A with 7 respondents, PBI B with 4 respondents, PBI C with 6 respondents, and PBI D with 5 respondents. The involvement of students from different classes provided broader perspectives regarding students' reading preferences between printed and digital media. Although the respondents came from different classes, the findings demonstrated relatively similar patterns regarding reading habits and preferences among students. The distribution of respondents also strengthened the reliability of the findings because the researcher collected opinions and experiences from students with different classroom environments within the same department. These findings suggest that students' reading preferences are not limited to one specific class but represent a broader tendency among English Education student batch 2025. Therefore, the respondent distribution helped provide a clearer picture of students' reading culture in higher education contexts, especially regarding their attitudes toward printed and digital reading media.

Students' Preferences toward Printed and Digital Reading Media

The findings of this study revealed that printed books remained the dominant reading preference among students of the English Education Department batch 2025. Out of 22 respondents, 18 students or 85.7% stated that they preferred printed books over digital reading media. These findings indicate that despite technological advancement and the increasing popularity of online reading platforms, printed books continue to hold an important role in students' academic and personal reading activities. Many respondents explained that printed books helped them maintain better concentration and focus while reading.

Table 1. Respondents' Distribution

No	Respondent	Preference	Reason
1	R1	Printed Book	I prefer reading printed books because they are more comfortable to read for a long time and help me stay focused while reading.
2	R2	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because they are easy to access for everyone.
3	R3	Printed Book	I like reading printed books because we can directly see and hold the book, and we can read anytime if we bring it. Unlike online books, phone batteries may run out and stop us from reading.
4	R4	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because my level of focus is higher compared to online books since online reading is easily distracted by social media notifications.
5	R5	Printed Book	I prefer reading printed books because they help me focus more. When I tried reading online, I got distracted by opening other applications.
6	R6	Printed Book	In my opinion, reading printed books helps me focus more compared to reading through gadgets because notifications and messages easily distract me.
7	R7	Online Book	I prefer online books because they can be read anywhere and are accessible in one hand through a smartphone.
8	R8	Printed Book	I prefer physical books because online reading is usually disturbed by notifications on devices.
9	R9	Printed Book	Printed books are easier to access.
10	R10	Printed Book	Printed books feel better and give a special "feel" when reading, especially when flipping the pages.
11	R11	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because even though they are expensive, they look good on social media feeds or Instagram stories.
12	R12	Printed Book	I read printed books because they are better for eye health compared to phone radiation.
13	R13	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because of the unique aroma when opening a new book, which online books do not have.
14	R14	Printed Book	I choose printed books because my eyes get tired quickly when reading online books.
15	R15	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because of their aroma.
16	R16	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because they can be held physically and look more aesthetic when photographed for Instagram stories.
17	R17	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because the vibes and sensation of reading feel more real, there are fewer distractions, and physical books can also become collections or decorations.
18	R18	Online Book	Online books are easier to access, free, and can be carried anywhere using only a phone.
19	R19	Online Book	Online books are usually free and easy to access.
20	R20	Online Book	Compared to printed books, I prefer e-books because they are practical, easy to obtain, and do not require costs. Physical books are more difficult because we need to buy, borrow, or go to the library first.
21	R21	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because they help me stay focused and are not easily distracting compared to online books read through gadgets.
22	R22	Printed Book	I prefer printed books because they help me to focus during reading the content. Also, I love when the paper is scrolled during the reading session.

Several students stated that reading through smartphones or digital devices often led to distractions caused by social media notifications, messages, and other applications. R4

stated that online reading was easily interrupted by notifications from social media, while R5 explained that reading online often tempted them to open unrelated applications. Similarly, R22 emphasized that printed books helped them stay focused without being easily distracted by digital interruptions. These findings align with previous studies suggesting that printed reading environments support deeper concentration and comprehension compared to screen-based reading activities.

Research conducted by Bresó-Grancha et al. (2022) also found that printed reading often requires less attentional effort compared to digital reading environments. In addition to concentration, comfort also became one of the major factors influencing students' preferences. R1 mentioned that printed books were more comfortable for long reading durations, while R10 described the enjoyable "feel" experienced when flipping book pages. Other respondents highlighted sensory and emotional aspects such as the aroma of books and the realistic reading sensation provided by printed books. R13 and R15 explained that the aroma of printed books created a unique experience unavailable in digital media. Furthermore, R7 described printed books as providing more "real vibes" and fewer distractions while also functioning as collections or decorations.

Health-related reasons also appeared in students' responses. R12 explained that printed books were better for eye health compared to smartphone screens, while R14 stated that their eyes became tired quickly when reading digital books. These findings support research by Jeong and Gweon (2022), which reported that reading printed materials often provides better reading comfort and reading attitudes compared to screen reading. On the other hand, respondents who preferred digital reading media mainly highlighted practicality, accessibility, portability, and affordability. R17 explained that online books could be read anywhere through smartphones, while R18 emphasized that online books were easy to access and free of charge. Similarly, R20 stated that e-books were more practical because students did not need to buy or borrow physical books. Overall, the findings demonstrate that printed books remain more preferable among students because they support concentration, reduce distractions, provide comfort, and create stronger emotional engagement, while digital reading media remain important because of their practicality and accessibility.

Frequency of Reading Online Books

The questionnaire results revealed that students had varying levels of experience reading books through digital platforms. Based on the collected data, 38.1% of respondents stated that they had read online books approximately 2–4 times, while 23.8% reported reading online books more than ten times. In addition, 14.3% of respondents stated that they had read online books around 8–10 times, and 9.5% reported reading online books approximately 5–7 times. A small number of respondents also mentioned that they had never read online books before. These findings suggest that digital reading has become relatively common among university students, particularly because online reading media provide easier access and portability.

Students can access reading materials quickly through smartphones without carrying physical books, making digital reading practical and efficient for academic and entertainment purposes. This finding supports previous studies stating that digital technology has significantly transformed students' reading habits and increased accessibility to educational resources. However, despite the increasing use of online reading

media, the overall preference toward printed books remained stronger among respondents. This indicates that frequent exposure to digital reading does not necessarily replace students' attachment to physical books because students still associate printed books with better focus, deeper understanding, and a more enjoyable reading atmosphere compared to screen reading environments.

Frequency of Reading Printed Books

The results also demonstrated that students had significantly higher reading frequency with printed books compared to online books. Around 61.9% of respondents stated that they had read printed books more than ten times, indicating that physical books remained highly dominant in students' reading activities. Meanwhile, 19% of respondents reported reading printed books approximately 2–4 times, and 14.3% stated that they had read printed books around 8–10 times. These findings reflect students' familiarity and comfort with physical reading materials, especially for academic purposes requiring deep concentration and intensive reading. Printed books are often associated with academic seriousness, better comprehension, and reduced distractions. Several respondents explained that reading printed books allowed them to stay focused longer without interruptions from notifications or social media applications. These findings align with research conducted by Jeong and Gweon (2022), which found that printed reading environments often support stronger reading performance and reading attitudes compared to digital devices. Besides that, fact that 9 out of 22 respondents, representing 42.86 percent, do not read through online applications at all is a significant finding that should not be overlooked.

Digital Reading Applications Used by Respondents

Although most respondents preferred printed books, many students still utilized digital reading applications for both entertainment and academic purposes. The questionnaire results showed that Wattpad became the most frequently used digital reading platform among respondents, with 5 students using the application. Other platforms used by respondents included Wiser, Z-Library, iPusnas, Google Books, Noveltoon, and built-in smartphone reading applications such as S Lime. The popularity of Wattpad among respondents may be influenced by its accessibility, free reading content, and interactive features that attract young readers. Wattpad is widely recognized as one of the largest digital storytelling platforms among teenagers and university students because readers can access stories freely while interacting with writers and other readers through comments and feedback features. This interactive environment creates a more engaging and social reading experience for users.

Meanwhile, applications such as Google Books and Z-Library were generally associated with academic and informational reading purposes because they provide easier access to journals, references, and educational books without requiring students to visit libraries physically. Similarly, iPusnas was utilized because it provides free access to digital books through Indonesia's national digital library service. Noveltoon and Wiser were mostly associated with entertainment reading because they offer various genres of digital novels and stories attractive to young readers. Some students also utilized built-in smartphone reading applications such as S Lime due to their practicality and direct availability on mobile devices. Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital reading applications have become an important part of students' reading habits in the digital era. However, although students

actively use digital platforms for accessibility and entertainment, printed books still remain the primary preference for focused and intensive reading activities.

Table 2. Digital Reading Applications

<i>Application</i>	<i>Number of Respondents</i>
<i>Wattpad</i>	5
<i>Wiser</i>	1
<i>Z-Library</i>	1
<i>iPusnas</i>	1
<i>Google Books</i>	1
<i>Noveltoon</i>	1
<i>S Lime / Built-in Phone Reader</i>	1

The data from our research involving 22 respondents reveals a compelling picture about how people in Indonesia prefer to read novels and other reading materials in the digital age. Out of the total 22 respondents, 9 people do not read through online applications at all. This means that nearly half of our respondents, specifically 42.86 percent, still maintain traditional reading habits using physical books or digital content accessed through websites without dedicated applications. This finding is particularly significant because it shows that despite the rapid advancement of digital technology and the proliferation of reading applications, a substantial portion of readers still prefer conventional reading methods. The remaining 12 respondents who do use online reading applications are distributed across seven different platforms, with Wattpad emerging as the clear leader in terms of user preference.

The distribution of respondents across different reading applications shows a clear hierarchy of popularity. Wattpad dominates with 5 respondents, representing 41.67 percent of all users who read through online applications. The other six applications: Wiser, Z-Library, iPusnas, Google Books, Noveltoon, and S Lime or Built-in Phone Reader. This distribution pattern is highly telling because it demonstrates that when Indonesian readers choose to read online, they overwhelmingly gravitate toward certain platforms that offer specific types of content and user experiences. The fact that Wattpad has five times more users than any other single application in our sample suggests that it has successfully captured a unique market position that resonates strongly with local readers.

This dominance of Wattpad is particularly interesting when compared to more formal or institutional reading platforms like iPusnas, which is the official digital library application from Indonesia's National Library. Despite iPusnas being a government-backed platform with access to thousands of legitimate book titles, it only attracted 1 respondent from our sample. Similarly, Google Books, which is backed by one of the world's largest technology companies and offers millions of books, also received only 1 respondent. This pattern suggests that readers in our sample prioritize entertainment value and ease of access over institutional credibility or the breadth of academic content.

Understanding Wattpad's Dominance in the Indonesian Reading Market

The fact that Wattpad has 5 respondents while other applications have only 1 each is not a random occurrence but rather a reflection of strategic positioning and content appeal. Wattpad has successfully positioned itself as the go-to platform for casual, entertainment-focused reading, particularly among younger demographics. The platform specializes in light reading content including teen literature, romance novels, school drama, and stories

featuring popular tropes like the bad boy and his bumped- into girlfriend narrative. These genres resonate strongly with teenage and young adult readers who are looking for quick, engaging stories that can be consumed during short breaks or commute times.

The popularity of Wattpad content is demonstrated by the staggering view counts of successful stories. For instance, the novel *Santri Pilihan Bunda* has been read more than 53 million times, *Galaksi Kejora* has accumulated over 42 million reads, and *Aldara* has reached 32 million reads. These numbers are not just impressive statistics but represent actual engagement from millions of readers who have chosen Wattpad over other platforms. When our respondents choose Wattpad, they are joining a massive community of readers who have validated the quality and entertainment value of content on this platform through their reading choices.

Another crucial factor is Wattpad's interactive community features. Unlike traditional reading platforms where readers simply consume content in isolation, Wattpad creates a social reading experience where users can comment on stories, interact with authors, and engage with fellow readers who share similar interests. This social dimension adds value beyond just the reading experience itself. Readers can become part of a community, discuss plot developments, share theories, and even influence the direction of ongoing stories through their feedback. This level of engagement creates stickiness and loyalty that competitive platforms struggle to match.

Wattpad's Growth and User Base in Indonesia

Research conducted in 2025 shows that Wattpad has experienced significant growth in both the number and variety of users in Indonesia. The platform has seen a particular surge in adoption among female users aged from teenagers to young adults, which aligns perfectly with the dominant user demographics for romance and teen literature genres. This demographic targeting has been strategic and effective, as these age groups are the most active consumers of casual reading content and are also the most comfortable with mobile reading applications.

Surveys conducted by Jakpat in the second semester of 2025 indicate that interest in reading books among Indonesian young people is showing positive trends, and Wattpad has emerged as one of the primary platforms driving this trend. This is particularly significant because it challenges the common narrative that young people are abandoning reading altogether. Instead, what we're seeing is a transformation in how reading happens, with digital platforms like Wattpad serving as gateways that introduce millions of young people to reading habits they might not have developed through traditional channels.

The platform now has more than 2 million writers worldwide and serves as a community for both readers and writers. This dual-sided marketplace creates a virtuous cycle where the presence of more writers attracts more readers, and the presence of more readers attracts more writers. Authors on Wattpad have the opportunity to discover their audience, build a following, and even monetize their work through features like Paid Stories. This creates additional motivation for writers to produce quality content, which in turn benefits readers with a steady stream of new and engaging material.

CONCLUSION

Research from 2025 shows that eastern Indonesia now has the highest reading interest according to the 2025 Perpustakaan survey. This finding is particularly interesting because it may be related to the increasing access to reading applications in these regions. This study employed a semi-quantitative descriptive approach using questionnaires containing both multiple-choice and essay questions to explore students' preferences and the reasons behind them. The findings revealed that 18 students (85.7%) preferred printed books because they were considered more comfortable would not have been possible without the participation and cooperation of all 22 respondents who generously shared their reading habits and preferences. Their willingness to participate in this study provided the foundational data that made this analysis possible. We extend our sincere gratitude to each respondent for their time and honesty in sharing their experiences with various reading applications.

Internet infrastructure improves and smartphones become more affordable, readers in previously underserved regions are gaining access to the same digital reading platforms as those in more developed areas. This democratization of access could potentially even out regional disparities in reading habits and literacy levels.

The growth of platforms like Wattpad also reflects broader changes in how content is consumed in the digital age. Young readers are accustomed to quick, accessible, and engaging content that can be consumed in short bursts. They value social interaction and community engagement as part of their media consumption experience. Platforms that successfully cater to these preferences, like Wattpad, thrive while those that maintain traditional models, like iPusnas with its queue system, struggle to capture the same level of engagement.

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Special thanks to the various organizations and institutions that have made data and research publicly available, including the Central Statistics Agency (BPS) of Indonesia, UNESCO's reading interest reports, and technology news platforms that continue to document the evolution of digital reading in Indonesia. The transparency and accessibility of information from these sources enabled us to contextualize our findings within broader national and international trends.

We also acknowledge the developers and companies behind the applications we analyzed, including Wattpad Corporation, *Perpustakaan Nasional RI* for iPusnas, Google for Google Books, and the various teams behind Wiser, Noveltoon, and other reading platforms. Their work in creating and maintaining these applications has fundamentally changed how people read and access content, making studies like this both necessary and timely.

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