



Research article

Born-Digital Literature in the Twenty-First Century: Reader Preferences, Publishing Opportunities, and Emerging Challenges in India and Bangladesh

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Abstract

The study aims to examine the prospects and challenges for emerging and established writers and readers of born-digital literature. Many digital platforms, such as mobile apps Joyread, Webnovel, Wattpad, and Novelcat; blogs, e.g., somewhereinblog; Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms, such as Netflix, HoiChoi, and Amazon Prime, Jio Hotstar, etc., Facebook, and websites, such as Webtoons, have become platforms for new authors. Readers use E-books, PDFs, and Amazon Kindles widely today. However, some readers still eagerly await hard copies of books by their favourite writers. They prefer hard copies rather than e-books. Hence, the researchers distributed a questionnaire among 200 university students from India and Bangladesh. As a result, the researchers could find comparable data for the study. This survey shows the priority of e-books and printed books among the readers. An excellent example of electronic literature is E. L. James's Fifty Shades Trilogy. The writer posted these books online first, then printed them, and then granted permission for motion pictures. These prove that in the capital world, besides e-books, printed books are also published to earn royalties. Hence, electronic literature is important in the 21st century.

Keywords: online, born-digital literature, e-book, OTT, print, movie, Webtoon, digital, mobile apps

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1. Introduction

The widespread use of e-books, PDFs, Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms, and online meeting applications, along with developments in education, language, and literature, indicates that people are becoming accustomed to electronic devices. They read books virtually. Some people read books on mobile apps. Mobile apps for reading and writing novels are becoming popular nowadays. Wattpad, Novelcat, Joyread, Readme, Webnovel, Storytel, Moboreader, Amazon Kindle, iReader, etc., are renowned e-book reader apps. Hayles (2008) said electronic literature was introduced to exclude print literature. Hence, born-digital literature can be included. Macchiano (2011) gave a proper definition for 'born-digital literature'. She said that 'born-digital' can also be called 'digital fiction or e-lit'. Writers do not print them; rather, they use code, Flash, hypertext, and other forms. Born-digital literature involves user interaction that cannot be translated into the printed word. This literature is supposed to be read on computers. PDF files are mostly used as e-books; another file type, e-Pub, requires special software to read. The software is known as an e-Pub reader. Therefore, the definition given by O'Sullivan and Pidd (2023) of born digital literature is

Culture is now largely happening on digital platforms, but the critical edition seems to be almost exclusively reserved for digitised print and handwritten documents from the past—even if that past is as recent as the era of the typewriter. Yet the sources that will one day underpin our understanding of today's culture are born-digital: works that are created digitally from the outset, to be distributed and consumed digitally, while the contemporary discourse that contextualizes them is born-digital too, on blogs and social media platforms (3).

Scott Rettberg has discussed many forms and types of electronic literature, where born-digital literature is only a subgenre. The forms and types were:

- Hypertext fiction and poetry, on and off the Web
- Kinetic poetry presented in Flash and using other platforms
- Computer art installations, which ask viewers to read them or otherwise have literary aspects
- Conversational characters, also known as chatterbots
- Interactive fiction
- Literary apps
- Novels that take the form of emails, SMS messages, or blogs
- Poems and stories that are generated by computers, either interactively or based on parameters given at the beginning
- Collaborative writing projects that allow readers to contribute to the text of a work

- Literary performances online that develop new ways of writing (Rettberg, 2019).

Besides the file types, there are many genres of electronic literature. Hayles (2008) talked about hypertext fiction, at first, which was also known as 'network fiction' coined by David Ciccoricco. The next type of electronic literature is 'interactive fiction' (IF). This fiction is the conversation between the writer and the video game. "The interactor controls a player character by issuing commands" (Hayles, 2008). Generative art is one of the most creative and vigorous forms of electronic literature, in which algorithms generate texts (Hayles, 2008). According to Hayles, the other types of electronic literature are locative narratives, installation pieces, "Code Work", and Flash Poems (2008). However, O'Sullivan (2019) said that print literature is more fixed than electronic literature. Since the fifteenth century, print literature has maintained its originality, whereas electronic literature has been distorted in form several times already in its development (O'Sullivan, 2019). Electronic literature cannot be stored in one form. It changes its forms and types over time as science and technology advance. The forms of E-lit will evolve. There will be scientific advancements, but scholars cannot predict what will happen to e-lit in the future.

O'Sullivan (2019) believed that, as literature cannot be defined, e-lit is also impossible to define. He mentioned Derrida's definition of literature: the freedom of authorship to write anything they want. Then he wrote,

Literature and electronic literature are not so similar that they should belong to a singular criticism, nor are they so separate that they should be treated in isolation.

However, Hayles's definition was far more agreeable to him as Hayles defined e-lit as born-digital objects "created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer" (2008, p. 3). However, O'Sullivan (2019) also mentioned Bouchardon (2016, p. 3) in his book and quoted the following,

We can retain the idea that the mere fact of being produced on a computer is not enough to characterize digital literature. Digital literature uses the affordances of the computer to dynamically render the story. If an e-reader simply displays text in the way a printed book displays text—the only difference being that to advance the text one scrolls rather than turns a page—this is not "digital literature." It is printed work digitized for optimal display in a portable computational environment. Digital literature is algorithmic. It changes as the reader engages it (p. 35).

Literature has been a part of human civilization for centuries. People find literature in thousands of years-old caves, rocks, clothing, and paper, and it is passed down from generation to generation. The latest form of literature is found in digital form, practiced, and preserved in bionic form. Rebecca Rajathi J and S. Kalamani (2020) state in this regard,

The media culture has given new dimensions to the production, preservation, and reading of a literary text. Media literature re-alter the existing form of literary art. Stories through media are equally engaging and empowering (visual culture), challenging the conventional method of reading literature in both education and entertainment (p. 726).

The media practice has encouraged and given new shape to the demand for literary text form. Things are more preferred in electronic form now. From readers to creators, everyone prefers the digital form of literature, prioritizing its benefits. Thus, in this sense, the digital version of literary work is preferred because of the convenience of the reader, creator, and user.

Literature teaches through the information that passes from one end to another. This information creates different actions and reactions among the receivers. Previously, the form of literature learning was tremendously dependent on the printed form. In the 21st century, the forms of literary presentation and preservation have changed and are expected to continue to change. Today, many higher education and commercial institutions offer online learning. Various strategies for increasing student motivation in online learning have been studied, one of which is through gamification approaches. It was found that previous studies have used motivational theories to stimulate the internal and external levels of the gamification approach in education (Saputra et al., 2023).

In the 21st century, the use of digital literature has increased. There are many reasons behind it. The advancement in science and technology, especially in robotics and artificial intelligence, is one of the many reasons for the increase in digital literature. At the end of the 1990s, blog culture was dominating the digital platforms. The writers used blogs to reach readers very easily. If they want to publish or print in any newspaper or magazine, the writing would have gone through different levels of review and editing. However, blogs opened a great opportunity for these writers. Eventually, other writing platforms like Wattpad, fanfiction.net, etc came to the digital world. Many writing applications for Android or Apple phones are a new addition to the writing world. The researchers intend to find out the benefits and drawbacks of these writing websites, mobile applications, fanfiction platforms, etc. The following questions have been answered in this article:

1. Which one is more beneficial: electronic books or printed books? To what extent are they beneficial?
2. To what extent do the authors and the readers prefer born-digital literature?

Readers need laptops, tablets, and smartphones to read e-books. Digital natives no longer want to buy printed books. However, many users based on region, state, and country are not tech-savvy. Recently, development in mobile applications for reading stories has continued. Many apps support emerging writers by helping them write, earn money, and gain familiarity with the world of literature. Hence, mobile applications for emerging writers have been developed. Besides this, on social media, a collection of short reels gets released to show audiences new stories. These mobile applications sometimes create AI-made episodes and stories that are recited alongside the reels. Pocket FM is one of them. As these are recent additions to the world of digital-born, scholars and researchers have yet to discuss them.

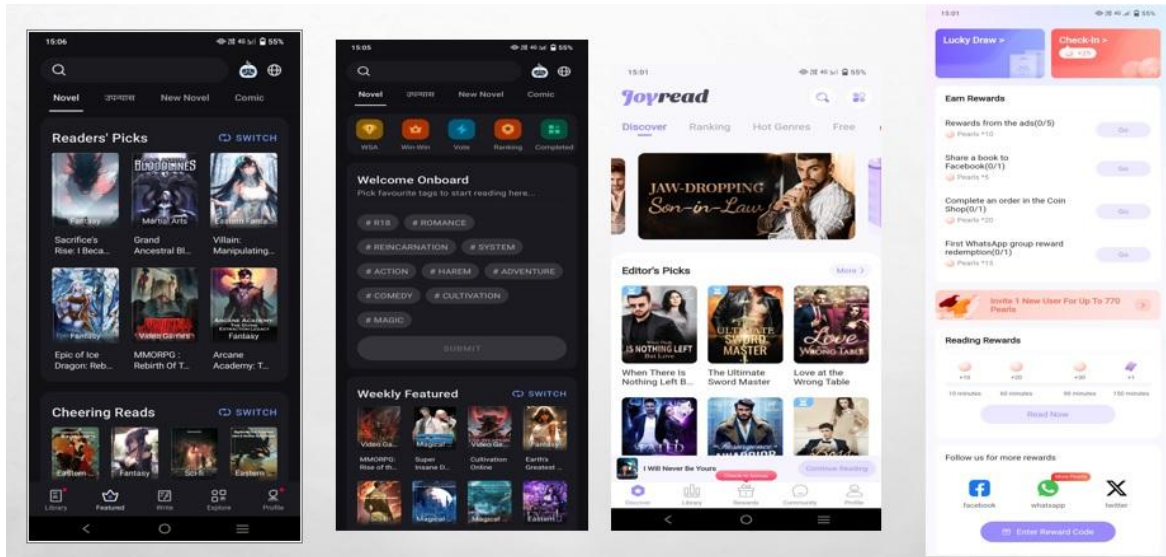


Figure 1: Mobile Apps for Story Reading

Webtoon is another platform for digital-born comic books and graphic novels. Webtoon has two interfaces. Readers can download the applications on their smartphones, or they can read the comic or graphic novels online. The most popular Korean dramas are adapted from this website.

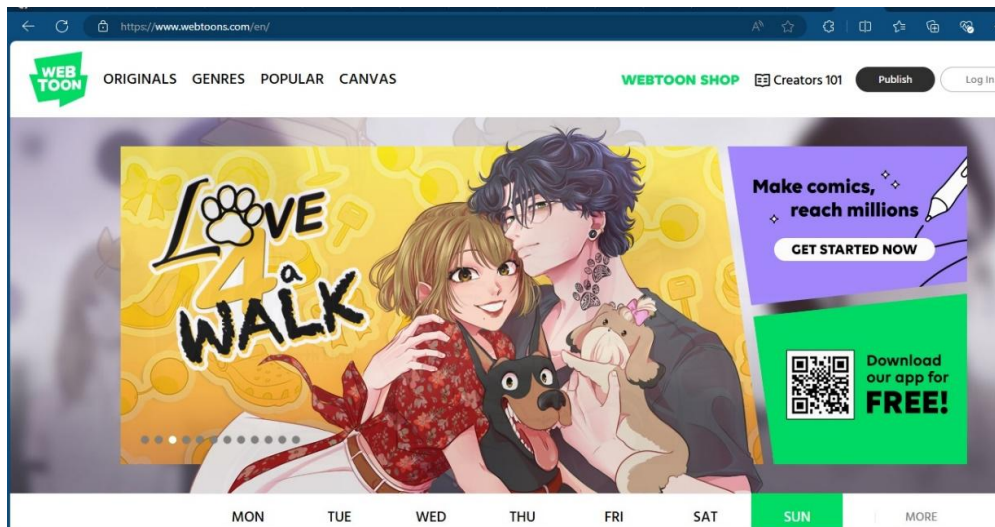


Figure 2: Webtoon Front Page

Hence, it is necessary to investigate the current situation regarding born-digital literature. The researchers intended to focus on the benefits and losses for the authors and readers.

2. Literature Review

Digital narratives started to boom after the publication of Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga*. Web 2.0 completely emerged in fanfictions. While defining fanfiction, or fanfic, Thomas (2006) said that,

Borrowing settings, plots, characters and ideas from all forms of media and popular culture, fans weave together new tales, sometimes within the accepted canon (the real works from which they are borrowing), sometimes blending several ideas from different sources (e.g., Star Wars meets Middle Earth) together in a type of fiction called 'Crossovers', and sometimes imagining new possibilities for additional characters, different histories or different settings to build on existing stories, called 'Alternative Universe' fiction (276).

Among many fanfiction websites, Webtoon, fanfiction.net, and Wattpad are multipurpose. The sites offer opportunities for new artists and writers to earn a living. Besides these, in Bengali literature, people have started to write their stories on Facebook groups and pages. Recently, the practice of reading in Facebook groups and pages has increased in Bangladesh. As a result, publishers are risking publishing Facebook stories in printed books. Each year, new books are published in the Ekushe Boi Mela (International Mother Languages Book Fair). Besides that, there is a dedicated group of comic book writers and digital artists who have started to flourish the marketplace for born-digital comic books, and graphic novels.

As a fanfic writer, E. L. James was the first author to post her novel online rather than publishing it first (Alter, 2019). James's *The Fifty Shades Trilogy* became a success after major publishing houses rejected it, and James turned to an online platform to publish it. The fanfiction of *The Twilight Saga* became quite successful overnight. In an article posted by *The Telegraph* and written by Irvine in 2012, where Salman Rushdie quipped, "I have never read anything so badly written that got published. It made *Twilight* look like *War and Peace*." From this incident, the researchers can see that if there had been no electronic platform for James, *the Fifty Shades Trilogy* might not have been published or adapted into a successful motion picture. Though the movie series received negative critical reviews, it became one of the 7th-highest-grossing R-rated film series and franchises of all time (List of highest-grossing R-rated films, 2023, para. V). Hughes (2023) published a list of 7 digital novels that were published on Wattpad or fanfiction.net. *After* (2019-2023) series, *Cupid's Match* (2018), *Kissing Booth* (2018-2021) trilogy, *Light as a Feather* (2018-2019), *Perfect Addiction* (2023), *Turn On* (2021-2023), and *Through My Window* (2022), all these stories were first published on Wattpad, and then they were turned into motion pictures and OTT series. To support him, Zinman (2024) mentioned in her article that Netflix produced *After* (2019), a romance film that was previously published on Wattpad and became instantly popular. As the writers in fanfiction platforms are getting recognized by the readers and also by the film producers and directors, the researchers tried to point out the advantages and disadvantages of born-digital literature.

Even during the pandemic in 2020, the world came to a halt. The governments restricted people's movement, closed markets, and put all sources on hold. The COVID-19 pandemic was a time when the internet flourished even more, digital platforms received a boost, and people from different corners of the world began to depend on the virtual market for books and other essential items. Literature-related works are increasingly choosing digital forms. Literature through video games is another digital medium for reviving literary works. It helps the new generation to learn different characters, events, and settings through video games. This trend has become very popular worldwide now. Rajathi *et al.*, in this regard state,

Video games provide a narrative experience by walking in the shoes of the characters; for instance, the classical poem of Dante's "Inferno," the first canticle from *The Divine Comedy* is made into a videogame. The player is Dante and in the game presented as the Templar Knight; he explores the entire area of hell to rescue Beatrice from Lucifer and to defeat all his enemies. The game concludes in a manner giving an option to the player to choose whether to kill or punish the enemies. The very concept of transforming an epic poem to fit into the trends of modern literature achieved such a massive success that within the first month nearly half million copies were sold (2020).

The success rate of video games in learning and teaching literature through digital media continues to grow. Many well-known business groups have already invested to continue the journey. In this way, it will be possible to revive old legends and introduce them to the new generations.

Rettberg (2021) discussed three speculative interfaces that are very important for electronic literature and digital humanities: "Christopher Strachey's *M.U.C. Love Letter Generator* (1952), Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (1990), and Kate Pullinger's *Breathe* (2018)." Strachey programmed a mainframe computer that could write love letters, Joyce worked on hypertext fiction, and Pullinger invented a narrative for smartphones that generates a story using readers' locations and surroundings.

Now, in 2023, the researchers can see that readers used to read on many dedicated devices, such as Kindles, iPhones, and notebooks. Writers have written many literary works with this particular type of reader in mind. There are many blogs dedicated to literature where new writers around the world publish their literary works in digital form. Again, readers from different places read, comment, share, and preserve those works.

The proliferation of smartphones has again contributed to the acceptance of digital literature. Many people have now shifted their focus to content creation while accessing information from anywhere. The future seems to be mobile SIM-less, as big tech companies are continually updating systems and modes of data transfer and storage. Literature has also changed the way it used to charm readers 50 years ago.

A survey conducted by Statista's Advertising & Media Outlook journalist Anna Fleck can help readers distinguish between printed books and e-book demand. This data is relevant to many issues, such as resource availability, cultural habits, history, and market economies, which contribute to the result. The survey results are given below.

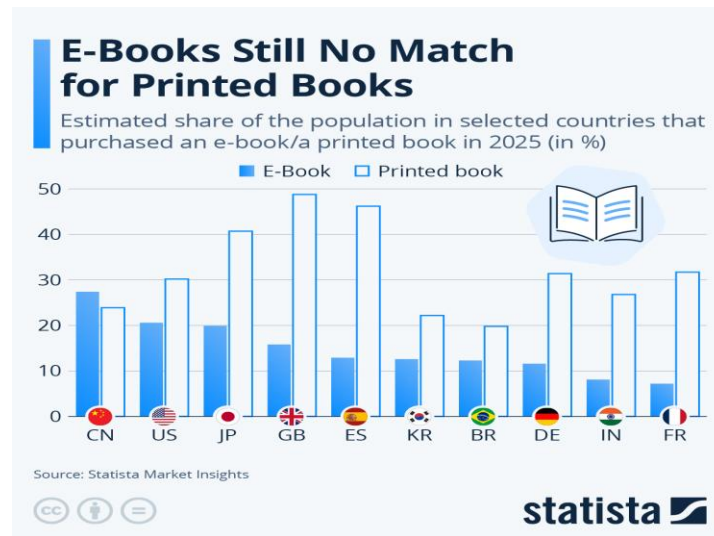


Figure 3: Statista's Advertising & Media Outlook. (Source: <https://cdn.statcdn.com/Infographic/images/normal/24709.jpeg>)

If born-digital books, e-books, EPUBs, PDFs, and websites were sufficient for readers, writers, and publishers, then born-digital writings would not have been printed by publishing houses. However, not all digital books get printed. Only select authors are allowed to be published. Hence, e-books are published, and printed books become bestsellers.

2.1 Research Gap

Scholars and researchers have published research articles and theoretical books on electronic literature. Researchers and scholars have done very few works on born-digital literature. They explored the emergence and technological characteristics of born-digital literature. Every day, digital literature has flourished with many online stories, reels, online FMs, etc. This research article investigated the advantages and disadvantages of born-digital literature. Researchers and scholars have not yet addressed these questions. In terms of born-digital literature, all the stakeholders of it, writers and readers, are connected. If one stakeholder benefits, another may be harmed. Hence, it is necessary to assess its prospects.

3.0 Research Methods

This research is mixed-method. The researchers collected the data using an online questionnaire because it was convenient for them. The respondents were from different locations. The researchers analyzed the data to answer the two research questions. For each question, the researchers entered the numerical data into a Microsoft Excel sheet. Besides that, E. L. James's *Fifty Shades Trilogy* was used to determine whether printed books or electronic versions were

more popular and more beneficial from a capitalist perspective. The researchers applied the theory of capitalism to analyze the data.

4.0 Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers collected the data from a random group of respondents. Only 200 participants across different age groups responded to the questionnaire.

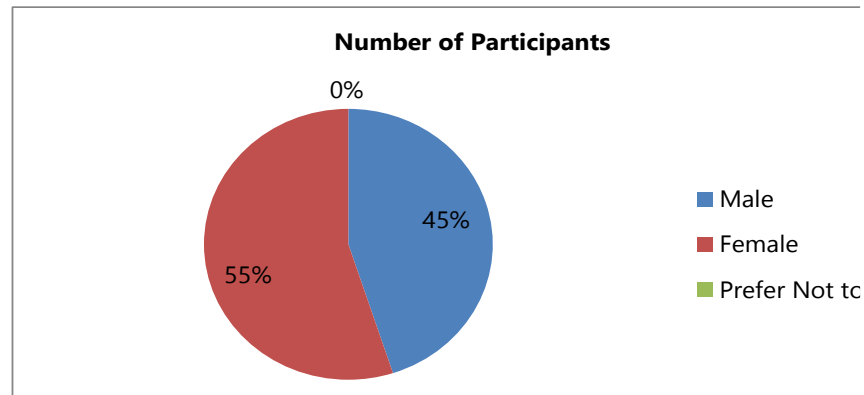


Figure 4: Male and Female Readers Ratio

Among 200 participants, 110 (55%) were female, and 90 (45%) were male.

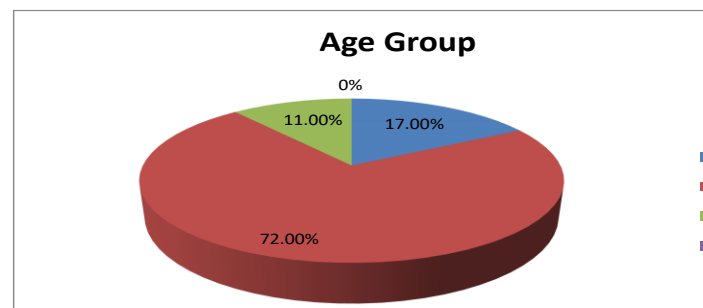


Figure 5: Age Group

From Figure 5, the researchers can determine that the majority of the respondents (72%) belong to the 26-40 years age group. The next highest group is 13-25 years old; 17% of respondents belong to this group. The smallest age group is 41-50 years old; 11% are from this age group. There is no one in the 51-60 age group.

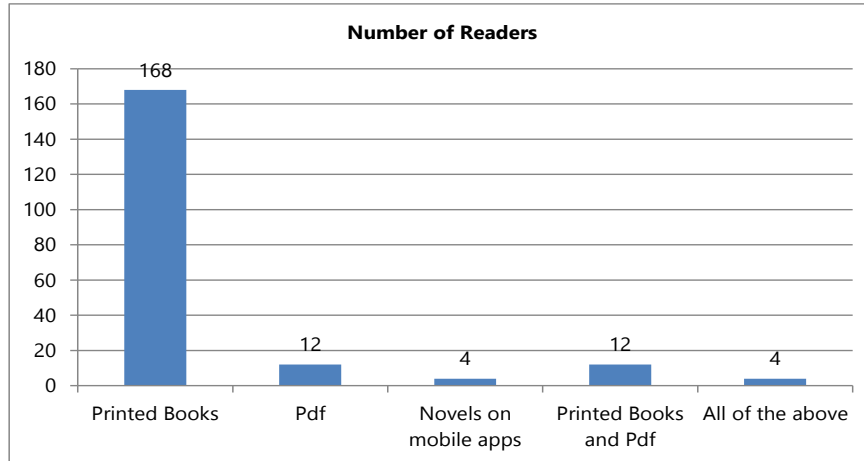


Figure 6: Respondents' reading preferences

From Figure 6, it can be seen that among 200 respondents, 168 readers preferred printed books to e-books or mobile apps (84%). Only 4 participants (8%) liked to read all the media of reading. The researchers conclude that printed books remain popular among readers.

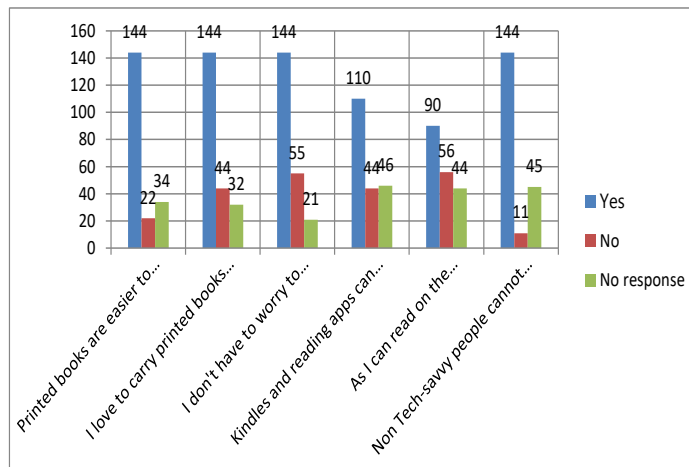


Figure 7: Statement Responses

From Figure 7, the researchers found that 72% (144 out of 200) of the readers prefer printed books to PDFs or novels on mobile apps. They believe that reading printed books is beneficial because they can mark them, write notes on them, and sometimes carry them if needed. They also asserted that with printed books, they were not worried about frequently charging the reading devices. They also showed the concern that non-tech-savvy people might not benefit from all those

reading devices and reading applications. On the other hand, 55% of readers believed they had to worry about the weight of printed books when carrying them everywhere. Therefore, 45% of readers said they would rather carry Kindles, tablets, smartphones, etc, for reading books everywhere.

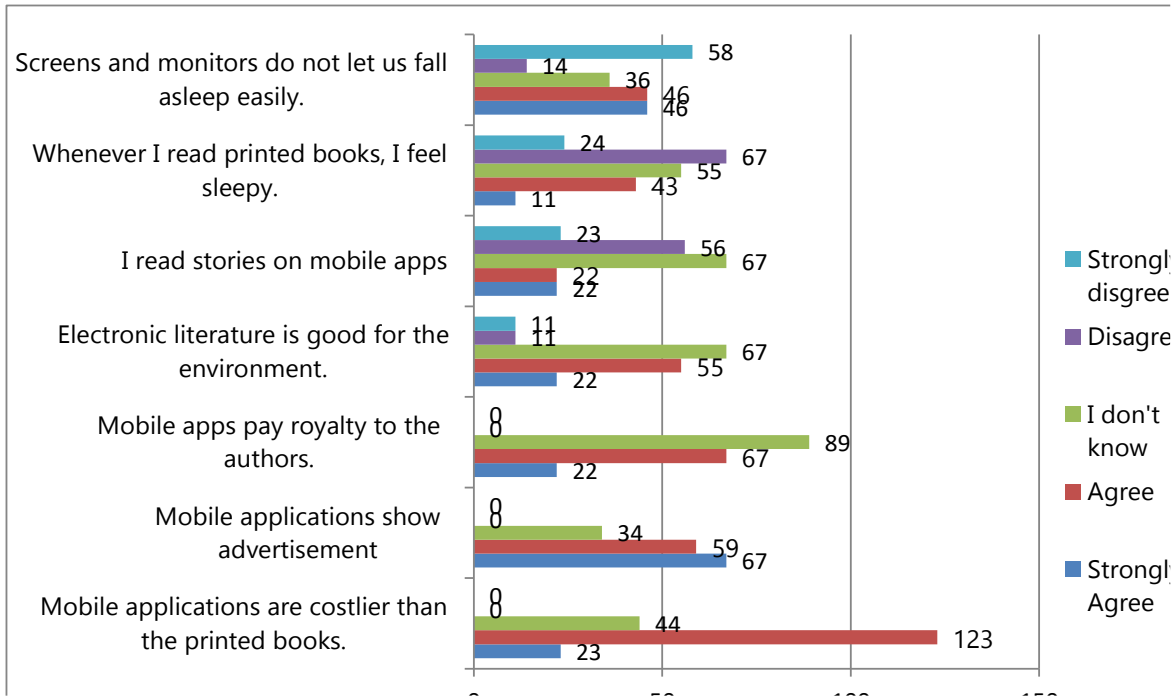


Figure 8: Participants' responses regarding Electronic Literature and Printed books

In Figure 8, the researchers found that the respondents held very similar opinions. For the first statement in the figure, the majority (29%) of respondents (56) strongly disagreed that screen time does not hamper the sleeping schedule of any reader. On the other hand, 46 respondents (that is, 23 %) agreed, and 46 respondents (that is, 23%) strongly agreed with the statement.

In the 2nd statement, 33.5% of participants believed that printed books never made them bored. Hence, they never fell asleep while reading the printed books.

In the 3rd statement, the majority of respondents, that is, 67 participants (33.5%), did not know that there were many mobile apps for reading novels on smartphones and tablets. 28% of participants (56 respondents) disagreed with the statement. They do not read stories on mobile apps. Hence, it can be said that the majority of participants do not read novels on mobile apps.

In the 4th statement, 67 respondents (33.5%) did not know whether electronic literature would be harmful to the environment. 55 participants agreed, and 22 participants strongly agreed that electronic literature is harmful to the environment. Generally, electronic literature is read on electronic devices. These devices are based on different types of rays. These rays are harmful to the human body and the environment.

In the 5th statement, 89 respondents (44.5%) do not know whether the publisher's house pays royalties to the authors of electronic literature. As they do not read mobile apps, they also do not know about this.

In the 6th statement, 59 respondents (29.5%) agreed, and 67 participants (33.5%) strongly agreed that mobile phones display advertisements in mobile apps. The publishers earn money and pay authors of online novels a share of the revenue from these ads.

In the 7th statement, 123 (61.5%) participants agreed that mobile applications are costlier than printed books. Therefore, it is better to read printed books.

Based on the data analysis, mobile applications are not yet popular among readers. Only one of the 200 readers consented to reading novels on mobile applications. The question arises now: if the mobile apps are not popular, how did E. L. James's *Fifty Shades Trilogy* become popular among readers? Grinberg (n, p) investigated it and reported through the CNN online portal that this series was originally released as online novels by an Australian publishing house named 'Writer's Coffee Shop'. As the series is a fanfiction of the *Twilight Saga* written by Stephenie Meyer, it is erotic and became an instant hit. After the e-book series, the author released the printed books, and then the film production house released the movies. The researchers found out that readers can read e-books in secret. Therefore, female readers can have privacy while reading erotica and romance. Grinberg (2017) also reported that the covers of published books are a changing factor in the book market. Despite this scenario in the Western world, Kapoor of *The Times of India* reported that the series became more popular among women over 30. Though the series became popular for its erotica, the readers were not happy with the authors' writing style. James was not good at writing. She had many grammatical flaws and mistakes in her writing.

5.0 Results and Findings

5.1 Answer to the Central Research Questions 1: Which is more beneficial: electronic or printed books? To what extent are they beneficial?

The researchers found that print literature remains appealing to readers on many levels. Electronic literature has its advantages, but readers prefer printed books to e-books. The researchers discussed the next section based on the analysis of the data collected from the readers.

5.1.1 Advantages and disadvantages of born-digital literature

Advantages for the Authors:

- Websites and mobile apps are introduced to offer readers many reading options. There are many sites for reading fiction and non-fiction e-books online, such as Project Gutenberg, Wattpad, and the Internet Archive. For online writers, there are many websites,

including Wattpad, Medium, NaNoWriMo, and Tumblr, where they can post and publish their writing. However, among all these websites, fanfiction.net and AO3 are the most familiar to readers.

- Online authors receive reader feedback instantly, so they can improve as they write the next part.
- The mobile apps have introduced advertisements in their software. Hence, this brings huge money to the mobile apps, and they pay the remuneration of the authors with this.
- The fanfic writers focus on many levels while writing stories. They write an extended version of the characters from the original stories, stories that might have never been focused on by the original writers. "Dragons" (2015, June 16), written by GrayJay from X-Men Fandom in AO3, is an extended story about Scott Summers. They might write a new version of the original stories; for example, the *Fifty Shades Trilogy* is a completely new version of *The Twilight Saga*.
- The websites, mobile apps, and Facebook pages can be utilized as a practice ground for students of the Creative Writing course.

Disadvantages for the Authors:

- If the online authors post their stories on Facebook groups and pages, they will not receive any remuneration or royalties.
- Readers might give negative remarks. Authors might become demotivated.
- Due to a technical issue, authors might lose their work or be unable to save it.

Advantages for the Readers:

- The primary advantage of e-lit is that readers can access it from anywhere in the world. Readers get more connected to the writers.
- Readers do not have to carry a printed book everywhere. They can read e-books on their smartphones, tablets, Amazon Kindles, and many other devices.
- The readers of erotica and romance, particularly female readers, will have some privacy while reading electronic literature.
- The capitalist world gets more money by publishing books like the *Fifty Shades Trilogy*. Publishing books is good, as authors receive substantial royalties from publishers.
- The global capital world talks about the green economy, where they intend to save trees, but they forget to mention the harmful effects of using electronic devices.
- Readers will read various unknown facts about the original characters from an original story in the future.

Disadvantages for the Readers:

- There might be some reading materials that are not suitable for children and teenagers, but children and adolescents might read them and learn immoral things.
- Anyone can publish with grammatical errors. It will encourage others to publish whatever they want. The quality of writing is not up to the mark for many online authors.
- The mobile phone apps are full of similar types of stories. The common theme is that the husband has a previous girlfriend who has met with an accident, and either she is in a coma, or she has become physically unable. He marries a girl from a family to help them financially, but with a contract. However, they seem to fall for each other and live happily ever after at the end of the novel. Living happily ever after is a repetitive theme in English literature. However, in Bengali literature, the common story is love between cousins. The readers sometimes give negative remarks about these stories, as marrying or having affairs between cousins is not supported in the Bangladeshi family environment.
- Both printed books and electronic literature affect the environment. For printed books, trees are cut; on the other hand, devices used for reading e-books and mobile apps have harmful effects on people's minds and bodies.
- People will become more technology-dependent.
- Readers may develop eye problems after prolonged use of devices.
- Ads pop up frequently on the screen, creating a distraction for readers. They might get irritated and stop reading using mobile apps.

5.2 Answer to the Central Research Question No. 2: To what extent do the authors and the readers prefer electronic literature?

The researchers found that technology is replacing many traditional ways of life. Earlier, people used to have printed newspapers at home. A New generation can read the news on their smartphones. However, the older generation aged 50 and above still prefers reading printed newspapers. As time passed, the circulation of printed newspapers decreased. Similarly, the use of technology has also increased in the education sector. Students prefer e-books, PDFs, and other online reading formats to buying printed books. However, e-books, PDFs, and e-pubs are the most notable forms of digital literature. Websites for fanfiction and mobile apps have yet to receive their acknowledgment. Renowned authors have their websites for promotional purposes, but they have not published or posted their stories online yet. They prefer printed books.

Electronic literature is still unfamiliar to many people. A large number of students use PDFs and e-books, but readers still prefer printed books. There is a Korean drama on Netflix, "Doom at Your

Service," that portrays online authors and a publishing house that manages them. However, the number is still far behind the popularity of printed books. Digital literature has its benefits but also its disadvantages.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Readers around the world are increasingly reading novels on mobile applications. Facebook groups and pages are also dominant in this regard. Authors publish their writings on Facebook groups and pages. When their writing becomes known to readers, they publish it as books. In the 2023 International Mother Language Day book fair organized by the Bangla Academy, a few online authors published their stories. A well-known Bangladeshi online bookstore, rokomari.com, also sells these books. However, publishing on Facebook groups and pages does not have financial benefits for online authors. It only popularizes their writings among the authors. On the other hand, if they use a mobile app, they might be able to earn royalties from the stories they create.

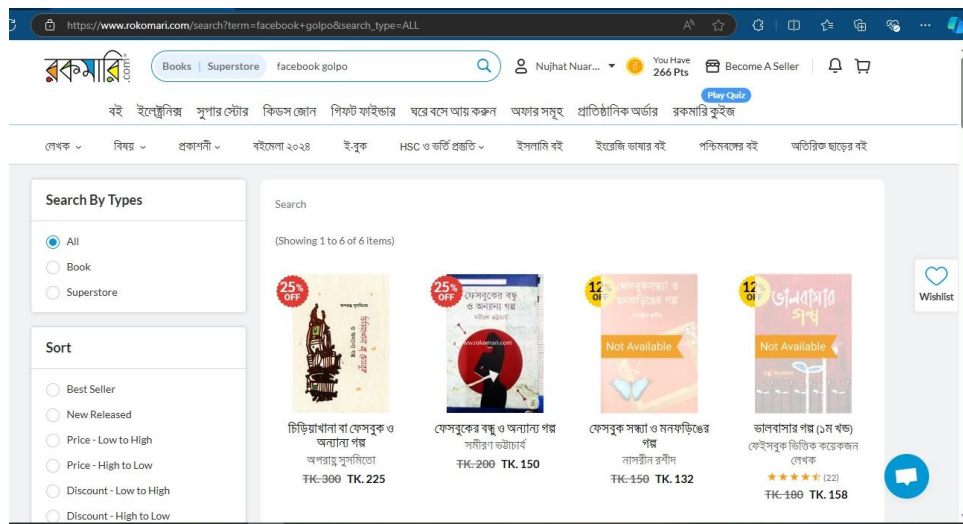


Figure 9: Published books from Facebook Groups and Facebook pages

In the end, digital literature is now a booming field, whether in academia or the publishing sector. The engineers use Digital Literature creations to produce anime, daily soaps, and TV series for OTT platforms. South Korea has become a pioneer in using OTT platforms for digital literature and webtoons. They have even produced several drama series concerning the digital literature industries. Therefore, researchers and scholars should work in this field to determine the future of this literature. Although Hollywood has started to focus on digital literature, it still seems like a long journey to focus on electronic literature.

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