



## A Study on Format Preferences: Print versus E-books among Undergraduates Using the Main Library of the University of Colombo

Siththy Shabnam Johoran

Senior Assistant Librarian, Main Library, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

Email: shabnam@lib.cmb.ac.lk

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This study analyses undergraduates' preferences for print and electronic books at the Main Library of the University of Colombo. Despite a substantial collection of print and electronic resources, there remains a significant shortage of e-books, indicating a discrepancy in format availability. The study examines whether undergraduates are prepared to adopt e-books in response to the global shift towards digital resources. It also examines how preferences vary across demographic and academic factors. The study population comprised 9,684 undergraduates, and a sample of 370 was selected using Krejcie and Morgan's sampling table. Structured questionnaires were used to collect data from the study sample. Only 262 students responded to the survey, resulting in a 71% response rate. The data were analysed using descriptive statistics in Microsoft Excel. According to the findings, undergraduates prefer both print and e-book formats as recommended textbooks. In terms of gender, female undergraduates tend to choose the print format for recommended textbooks, whereas male undergraduates prefer the e-book format. The print format is most preferred by Arts undergraduates and is used more frequently. Juniors prefer the print format of the textbook and rarely use e-books. It is recommended that the library consider buying more e-books on a half-and-half basis and utilise the library space for student learning. Increasing the library's e-book collection would support the university's online learning platforms.

**Key Words:** Print Books, E-books, Undergraduate Students, Academic Libraries, Sri Lanka

### Introduction

The University of Colombo (UoC) has ten faculties, and the Main Library primarily supports the Faculties of Education, Management & Finance, Arts, and Law. It serves a diverse community of users, including undergraduate and postgraduate students and university staff, and functions as a central hub for teaching, learning, and research support.

In Sri Lankan state universities, libraries receive annual treasury funding to purchase books and periodicals. According to the University of Colombo's Strategic Plan (2024–2028)<sup>1</sup>, the library maintains a substantial collection of approximately 230,000 print and electronic books, with an annual increase of 5,000–6,000 books. However, library data indicate that as of 30 June 2025, only about 257 e-books had been acquired, highlighting a notable disparity between print and electronic resources, with a ratio of roughly 600:1 favouring print materials<sup>2</sup>. Globally, many academics increasingly favour e-books over printed texts for their convenience and ease of access. Notably, e-books permit multiple users to access the same resource simultaneously, whereas

printed materials are usually limited to single-user access at a time.

Although there are benefits, switching from print to electronic formats raises an important question: are undergraduate students sufficiently prepared for this transition? Understanding students' preferences is essential before making significant changes to resource formats. In this context, there is a noticeable lack of local research on undergraduates' format preferences at the University of Colombo. Therefore, this study aims to examine students' preferences for printed and electronic books, providing evidence to inform decisions on library collection development and service delivery.

### Literature Review

Velde and Ernst (2009)<sup>3</sup> explained that the major difference between print books and e-books available in libraries is that the content of print books can only be accessed by physically visiting a library. In contrast, almost everyone can access e-books online at any time.

Velde and Ernst (2009)<sup>3</sup> observed a medium difference between print and e-books as follows:

In principle, an eBook is quite similar to a print book: only the medium is different. For a traditional print book, the medium is paper. Because an eBook is the digital representation of the printed material (a print book), the medium can vary from a laptop computer to a digital eBook reader, PDA, mobile phone, or even, through a desktop printer, traditional paper. Usually, the content is available in PDF or HTML format, but also in plain text or XML formats. This makes the content much more versatile and flexible than that of a traditional print book (p.570).

With the emergence of new technologies, libraries are considering a paradigm shift in their collection development. For instance, Wiese and Du Plessis (2014)<sup>4</sup> reported, “Some universities have started decreasing the size of print collections to make way for electronic collections and academic e-books, and specifically e-textbooks, are thus becoming an essential component in university library collections” (p.17). Before such a drastic change in library collections, it is essential to consider undergraduates’ preferred formats for recommended textbooks.

As per the study by Wiese and Du Plessis (2014)<sup>4</sup>, e-books have the following advantages for students and the library:

The majority of students still prefer print books to e-textbooks. It is partly the librarian’s responsibility to attempt to change this. E-books offer library staff and students certain advantages, such as being readable on computer monitors and mobile devices, and sometimes allow printing selected sections for further reading or study. In addition, e-textbooks can provide users with up-to-date content and full-time availability. In this sense, libraries are changing from being simply storerooms to becoming information portals which provide access to, among other things, e-books and other electronic resources (p.20).

### Research Objectives

The primary aim of the study is to determine undergraduate preferences for print versus e-books at the University of Colombo’s main library.

The specific objectives are derived as:

1. To investigate the overall preference of undergraduates for print books and e-books.
2. To examine the gender-based differences in preferences for print books and e-books.
3. To examine the faculty-wise differences in preferences for print books and e-books.
4. To examine the academic year-wise differences in preferences for print books and e-books.

### Research Questions

- What is the overall preference of undergraduates for print books and e-books?
- What are the gender-wise differences in format preferences (print versus e-books) among undergraduates?
- What are the faculty-wise differences in format preferences (print versus e-books) among undergraduates?
- What are the academic year-wise differences in format preferences (print versus e-books) among undergraduates?

### Research Method

The library serves various user groups: undergraduates, postgraduates, and university staff members. This study focuses on undergraduates using the main library. The main library serves undergraduates from the Faculty of Arts, the Faculty of Management and Finance, the Faculty of Law, and the Faculty of Education. The study population comprises 9,684 undergraduates utilising the main library. A random sample was selected. Using Krejcie & Morgan’s table for determining sample size for a specific population<sup>5</sup>, the required sample size was 370 undergraduates. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire available in English, Sinhala, and Tamil, allowing respondents to choose their preferred language. Responses were gathered anonymously, without requesting any personal information (e.g., name, registration number), and participation was voluntary. Furthermore, the researcher obtained ethical approval from the Library Research Committee on 18th February 2026 to conduct the research and distribute the questionnaire among library users. Additional data were obtained through a review of previous research studies. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Data analysis and visualisation were performed using Microsoft Excel.

### Results

Of 370 participants, 262 responded to the questionnaire, yielding a 71% response rate.

#### *Undergraduates’ overall preferences for print books and e-books*

The first objective of the study was to investigate undergraduates’ overall preference between print books and e-books.

**Figure 1** elaborates on the preferred reading format of a recommended textbook for undergraduates’ curricular requirements. Only 10% of respondents

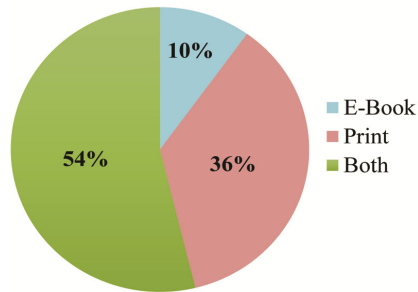


Fig. 1 — Undergraduates' preferred reading version of a recommended textbook Source: Survey Data, 2026

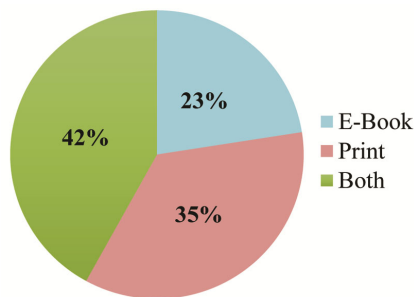


Fig. 2 — Undergraduates' preferences in terms of taking notes Source: Survey Data, 2026

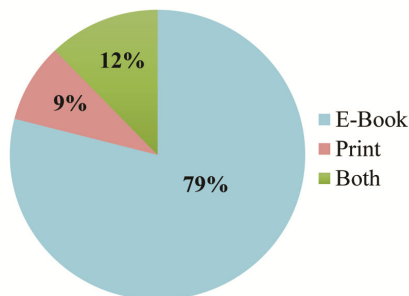


Fig. 3 — Undergraduates' preferences in terms of ease of carrying Source: Survey Data, 2026

prefer e-books exclusively, while 36% prefer print books. Both formats are preferred by 54% of respondents for reading the recommended textbook. According to the findings, both print and e-book formats are preferred by undergraduates as recommended textbooks.

The preferred note-taking format among undergraduates is shown in Figure 2. Only 23% of respondents prefer e-books, while 35% only favour print books. Both print and e-book formats are preferred by 42% for taking notes. It seems that the majority prefer to use both formats together when taking notes.

Figure 3 depicts undergraduates' preferred format based on ease of carrying. E-books are chosen by 79

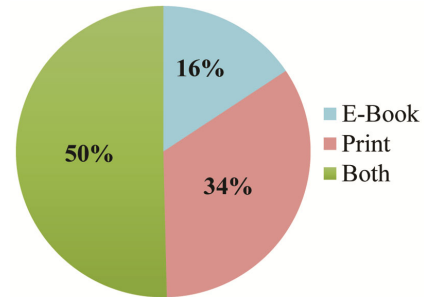


Fig. 4 — Undergraduates' preferences in terms of preparation for exams Source: Survey Data, 2026

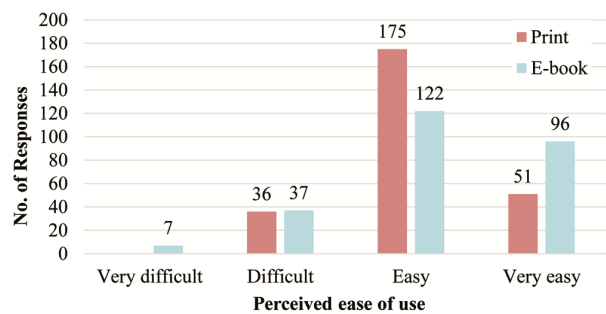


Fig. 5 — Undergraduates' perceived ease of use of print books and e-books Source: Survey Data, 2026

per cent of respondents for their convenience, while only 9 per cent consider print books easy to carry, and 12 per cent prefer both formats. These findings indicate that e-books are the preferred format among undergraduates because they are easier to carry.

Figure 4 outlines the preferred method for undergraduates to prepare for exams. While only 16% of respondents exclusively use e-books, 34% prefer print. Notably, half of those surveyed favour both formats when preparing for exams.

Figure 5 illustrates undergraduates' perceptions of the ease of use of print books and e-books. Print books were found to be easy to use by 175 respondents, while 122 respondents said e-books were easy to use. No one found print books very difficult, but 7 undergraduates found e-books very difficult to use. A similar number of undergraduates reported difficulty using e-books (37) and print books (36). Overall, most undergraduates perceive print books to be easier to use than e-books.

Figure 6 shows the frequency of use of print books and e-books. Results reveal that undergraduates frequently use print books, with 203 responses regarding daily and once-a-week use of printed formats. A total of 96 undergraduates responded that they rarely or never use e-books. Overall, the results

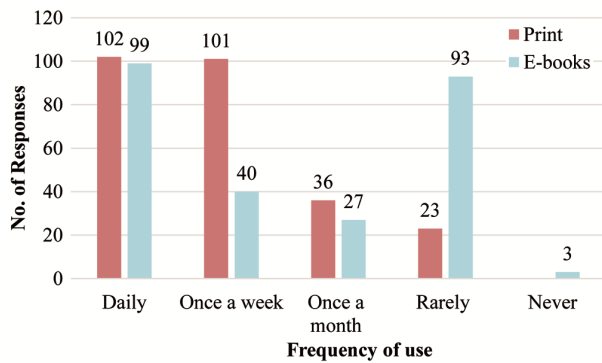


Fig. 6 — Undergraduates’ frequency of using print books and e-books Source: Survey Data, 2026

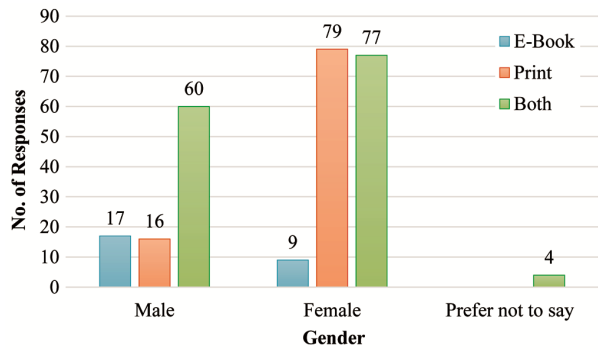


Fig. 7 — Preferred reading version of a recommended textbook (gender-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

indicate that undergraduates prefer print books to e-books.

**Gender-based differences in preferences for print books and e-books**

The second objective of the study was to examine the gender-based differences in preferences for print books and e-books.

Figure 7 shows undergraduates’ gender-based preferences for the recommended textbook. According to the findings, female undergraduates (79) have a greater preference for print formats than male undergraduates (16). The preference for e-books as recommended textbooks is higher among male undergraduates (17) than female undergraduates (9).

Figure 8 illustrates the preferred note-taking method based on gender. The majority of female undergraduates (76) favour both note-taking formats, whereas male undergraduates (36) prefer the print format. Female undergraduates (57) are more likely to favour the e-book format for note-taking than male undergraduates (23). Male undergraduates (36) show a stronger preference for the printed format for note-taking than female undergraduates (32). The results

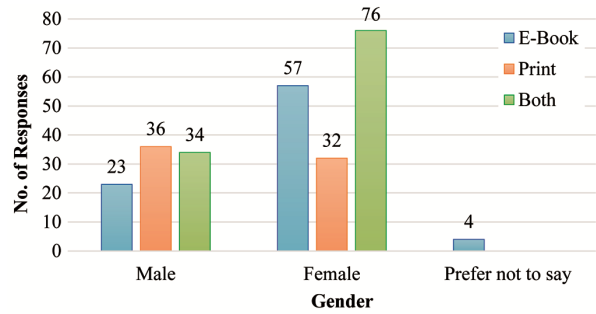


Fig. 8 — Preferred version in terms of taking notes (gender-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

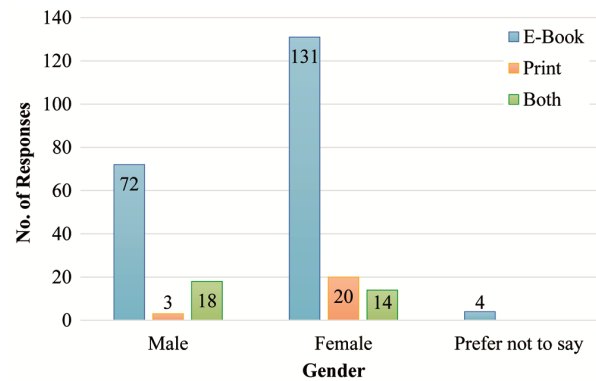


Fig. 9 — Preferred version in terms of ease of carrying (gender-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

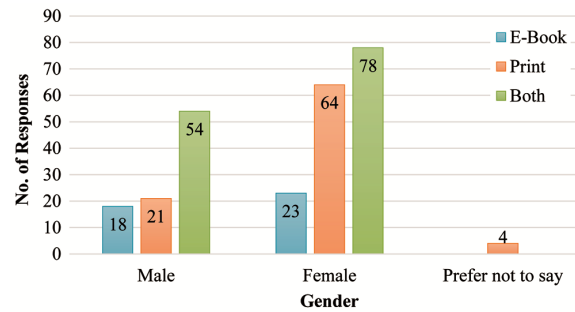


Fig. 10 — Preferred version in terms of ease of exam preparation (gender-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

reveal that female undergraduates prefer the e-book format for note-taking, while male undergraduates prefer the print format.

Figure 9 presents the preferred format among undergraduates, by gender, in terms of ease of carrying. In this regard, female undergraduates (131) prefer the e-book format more than male undergraduates (72). The e-book format is the most preferred format for both genders for ease of carrying.

Figure 10 depicts the results of the gender-wise preferred version in terms of exam preparation. Both male and female undergraduates preferred both print and e-book formats most. Print format is preferred by

female undergraduates (64) more than by male undergraduates (21).

The mean ratings of undergraduates' perceived ease of use of print books and e-books are presented in Table 1. A four-point Likert scale was used to measure responses, with 4 = Very easy, 3 = Easy, 2 = Difficult, and 1 = Very difficult. The mean values range from 1 to 1.75, denoting "Very Difficult"; 1.76 to 2.50, denoting "Difficult"; 2.51 to 3.25, denoting "Easy"; and 3.26 to 4, denoting "Very Easy". The results indicate that print books are easy to use for both male and female undergraduates, with mean values of 3.05 and 3.06, respectively. In the context of e-book use, male undergraduates find them very easy to use, while female undergraduates find them easier. Male undergraduates perceive e-books as much easier to use than print books.

Figure 11 shows the frequency of undergraduates using print books by gender. Female undergraduates (138) use print books more frequently than male undergraduates (61). Print books are rarely used by male undergraduates (16).

Figure 12 shows the frequency of undergraduate e-book use by gender. E-books are rarely used by female undergraduates (60), compared with male undergraduates (33).

Table 1 — Mean ratings of perceived ease of use of print books and e-books (gender-wise)

Gender	Print books		E-books	
	Mean	Decision	Mean	Decision
Male	3.05	Easy	3.31	Very Easy
Female	3.06	Easy	3.10	Easy
Prefer not to say	3.00	Easy	3.03	Easy

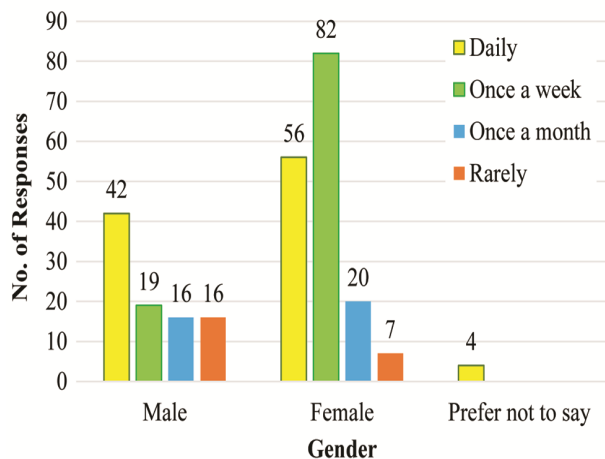


Fig. 11 — Undergraduates' frequency of using print books (gender-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

**Faculty-wise differences in preferences for print books and e-books**

The third objective of the study was to examine the faculty-wise differences in preferences for print books and e-books.

The preferred recommended textbooks among undergraduates across different faculties are shown in Figure 13. The majority of undergraduates in other faculties (12) prefer E-books as recommended textbooks, followed by the Faculty of Management & Finance (11). Print books are the most preferred option among undergraduates at the Faculty of Arts (41). The majority of Management & Finance undergraduates prefer both formats (45) as recommended textbooks.

Figure 14 shows undergraduates' note-taking preferences across different faculties. In terms of

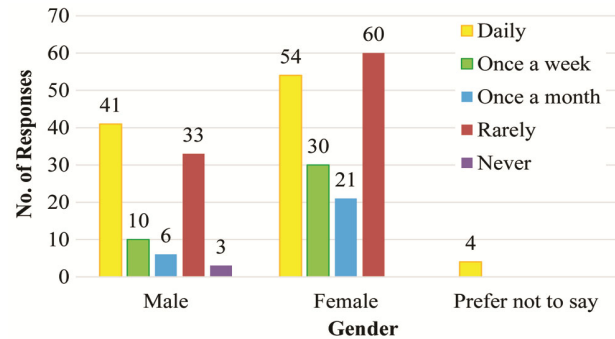


Fig. 12 — Undergraduates' frequency of using e-books (gender-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

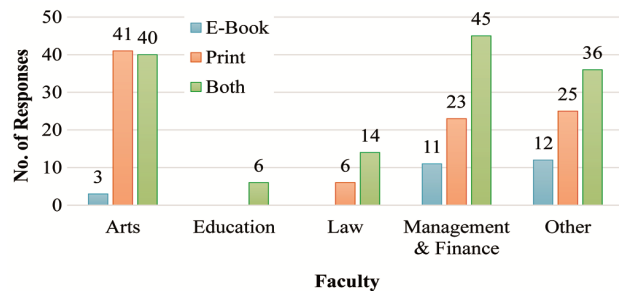


Fig. 13 — Preferred reading version of a recommended textbook (faculty-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

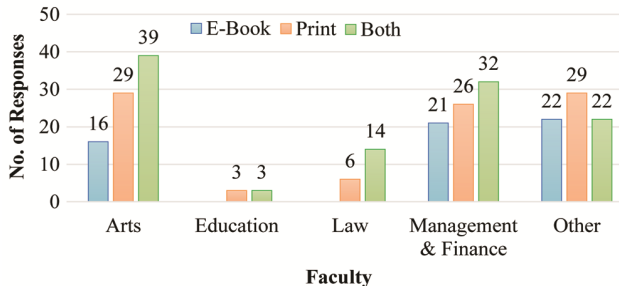


Fig. 14 — Preferred version in terms of taking notes (faculty-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

note-taking, undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts, Education, Law, and Management & Finance prefer to use both formats. However, undergraduates from other faculties prefer the print format for note-taking.

Figure 15 depicts the preferred format among undergraduates from different faculties in terms of ease of carrying. The preference for E-books among most students may relate to their portability and convenience. In contrast, the small number from the Faculty of Arts (23) and the Faculty of Law (12) favour print formats, possibly due to familiarity or study habits. Understanding these reasons can inform future resource development. Figure 15 illustrates the preferred format for resources among undergraduates from various faculties, with a focus on ease of transport. The majority of students prefer E-books, likely because of their portability and convenience. However, fewer students from the Faculty of Arts (23) and the Faculty of Law (12) still favour print formats. This preference may stem from their familiarity with physical books or their established study habits. Understanding these preferences can help guide the development of future resources.

Figure 16 shows the faculty-wise preferred version for exam preparation. Undergraduates in the Faculty

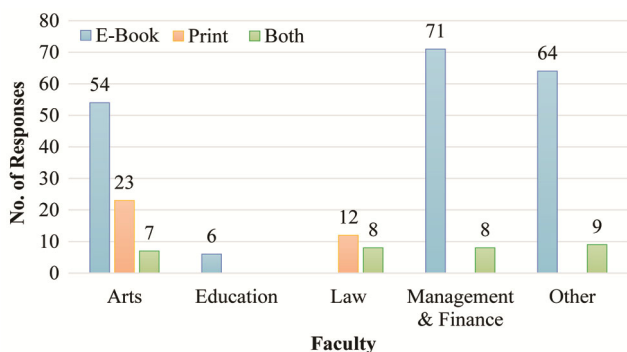


Fig. 15 — Preferred version in terms of ease of carrying (faculty-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

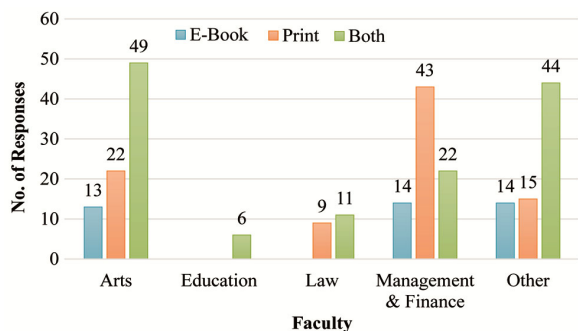


Fig. 16 — Preferred version in terms of ease of exam preparation (faculty-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

of Management and Finance prefer the print format, while the rest of the faculties opt for both formats for exam preparation.

Table 2 presents the mean ratings of undergraduates’ perceived ease of use of print books and e-books among different faculties. A four-point Likert scale was used to measure responses, where 4 = Very Easy, 3 = Easy, 2 = Difficult, and 1 = Very Difficult. The mean values range from 1 to 1.75, denoting “Very Difficult”, 1.76 to 2.50, denoting “Difficult”, 2.51 to 3.25, denoting “Easy”, and 3.26 to 4, denoting “Very Easy”. According to the results, undergraduates in the Faculty of Education perceive print books as very easy to use, compared with those in other faculties. Undergraduates from the Faculty of Education, the Faculty of Law, and other faculties find E-books easy to use.

Figure 17 shows the frequency of print book use among undergraduates from different faculties. Print books are used more frequently by undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts (71), followed by those in the Faculty of Management & Finance (69).

Figure 18 shows the frequency of e-book use among undergraduates from different faculties. E-books are frequently used by undergraduates from other faculties (55). E-books are rarely used by undergraduates in the Faculty of Management & Finance (43), followed by those in the Faculty of Arts (31).

Table 2 — Mean ratings of perceived ease of use of print books and e-books (faculty-wise)

Faculty	Print books		E-books	
	Mean	Decision	Mean	Decision
Arts	3.01	Easy	3.02	Easy
Education	3.50	Very Easy	3.50	Very Easy
Law	3.20	Easy	3.35	Very Easy
Management & Finance	2.99	Easy	3.14	Easy
Other	3.11	Easy	3.30	Very Easy

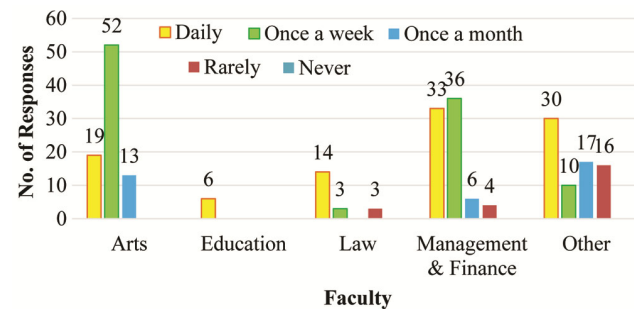


Fig. 17 — Undergraduates’ frequency of using print books (faculty-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

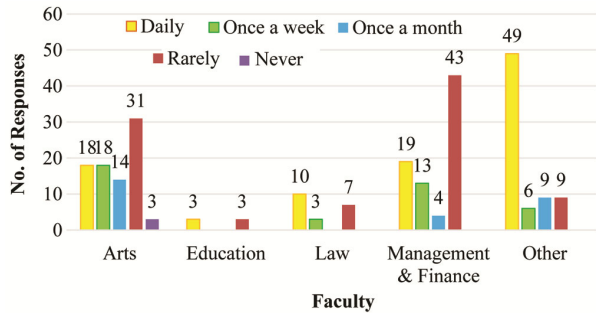


Fig. 18 — Undergraduates’ frequency of using e-books (faculty-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

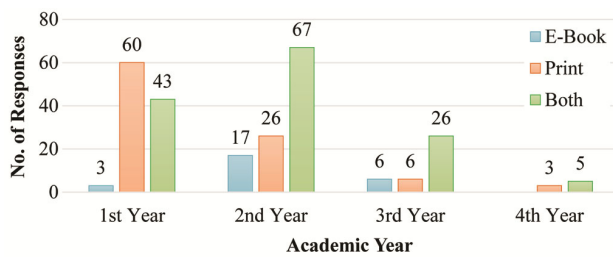


Fig. 19 — Preferred reading version of a recommended textbook (academic year-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

*Academic year-wise differences in preferences for print books and e-books*

The fourth objective of the study was to examine differences in preferences for print books and e-books across academic years.

Figure 19 presents the results for recommended textbooks preferred by undergraduates across different academic years. The print format of the recommended textbook is preferred by juniors (1st-year undergraduates, 60) and 2nd-year undergraduates (26).

Figure 20 elaborates on undergraduates’ preferences regarding note-taking across different academic years. The print format is preferred for note-taking by juniors (2nd-year undergraduates, 42) and 1st-year undergraduates (39).

Figure 21 shows the preferred format among undergraduates from different academic years in terms of portability. According to the results, undergraduates from all academic years prefer e-books for their portability.

Figure 22 shows the results for the preferred version by academic year for exam preparation. The results reveal that undergraduates across all academic years prefer to use both formats most for exam preparation.

Table 3 presents the mean ratings of undergraduates’ perceived ease of use of print books and e-books by academic year. A four-point Likert

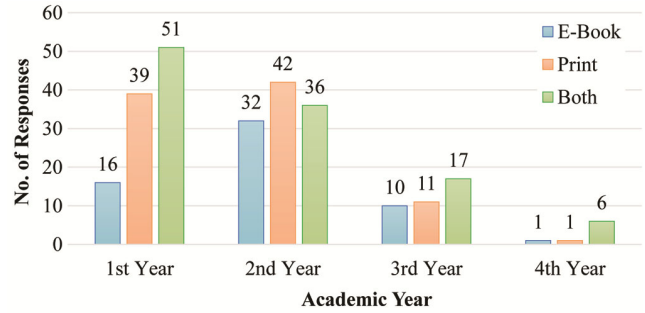


Fig. 20 — Preferred version in terms of taking notes (academic year-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

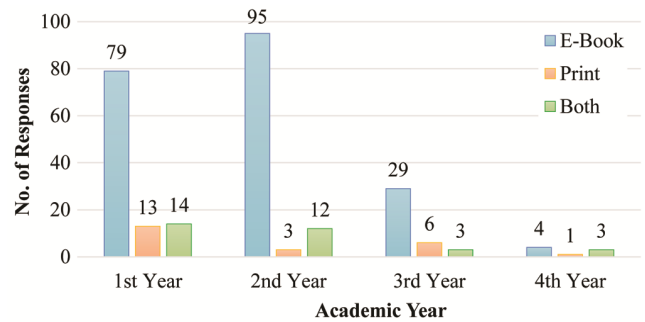


Fig. 21 — Preferred version in terms of ease of carry (academic year-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

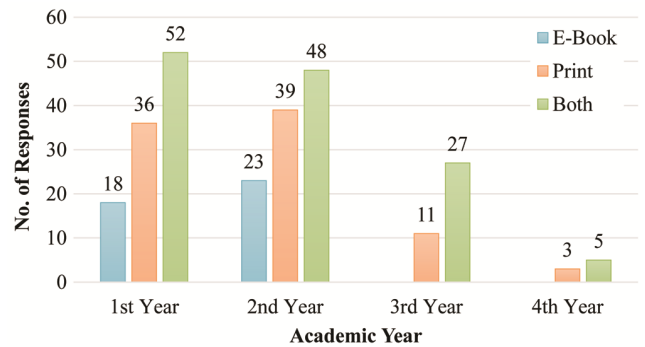


Fig. 22 — Preferred version in terms of ease of exam preparation (academic year-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

scale was used to measure responses, where 4 = Very Easy, 3 = Easy, 2 = Difficult, and 1 = Very Difficult. The mean values range from 1 to 1.75, denoting “Very Difficult”, 1.76 to 2.50, denoting “Difficult”, 2.51 to 3.25, denoting “Easy”, and 3.26 to 4, denoting “Very Easy”. The results show that all academic years find both formats easy to use, with 3rd-year undergraduates rating e-books as very easy to use.

Figure 23 shows the frequency of print book use among undergraduates across academic years. According to the results, print books are more frequently used by juniors, 2nd-year undergraduates (87), and 1st-year undergraduates (81).

Table 3 — Mean ratings of perceived ease of use of print books and e-books (academic year-wise)

Gender	Print books		E-books	
	Mean	Decision	Mean	Decision
1 <sup>st</sup> year	3.07	Easy	3.23	Easy
2 <sup>nd</sup> year	3.06	Easy	3.05	Easy
3 <sup>rd</sup> year	3.00	Easy	3.39	Very Easy
4 <sup>th</sup> year	3.13	Easy	3.00	Easy

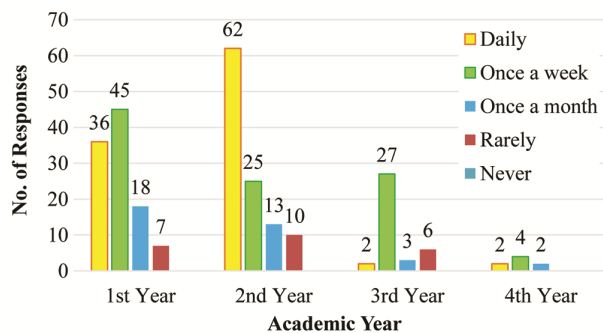


Fig. 23 — Undergraduates' frequency of using print books (academic year-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

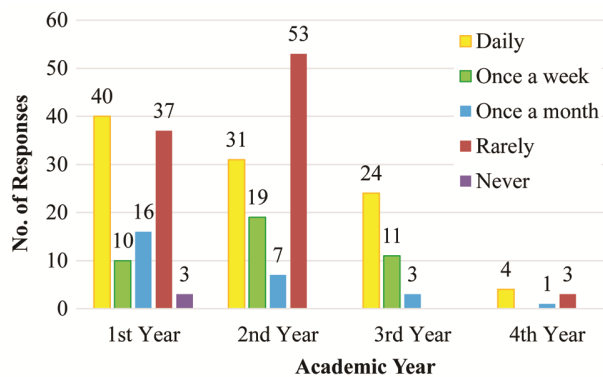


Fig. 24 — Undergraduates' frequency of using e-books (academic year-wise) Source: Survey Data, 2026

Figure 24 shows the frequency of e-book use among undergraduates across different academic years. According to the results, e-books are rarely used by juniors, 2nd-year undergraduates (53), and 1st-year undergraduates (37).

## Discussion

The findings of the present study indicate that undergraduates prefer both printed and e-book formats for recommended textbooks. Similarly, Wiese and Du Plessis (2014)<sup>4</sup> found that “Most students would prefer to have both a printed textbook and an e-textbook. Although almost half of the respondents

indicated that they would prefer it if the library were to buy more e-textbooks” (p.17). Kiilu et al. (2019)<sup>6</sup> reported that when e-books and print were equally accessible, e-books were preferred. In contrast, Asunka (2013)<sup>7</sup> found that students were strongly reluctant to use e-books instead of print books for academic purposes. The present study further shows that undergraduates rarely use e-books. Wiese and Du Plessis (2014)<sup>4</sup> likewise reported that 82% of respondents had never or rarely used e-books. Their study also found that “E-textbooks are not perceived as more useful than print textbooks” (p.17). As in the present study, undergraduates have been shown to prefer print books to e-books. The present study indicates that e-books are the most preferred format among undergraduates in terms of ease of carrying, and half of the respondents prefer both formats for exam preparation. Amirtharaj et al. (2023)<sup>8</sup> likewise found that “Students prefer e-books as they spend more time reading from e-books and are easy to carry; while traditional printed copy is comfortable to use and easy to take notes and study for exams” (p.1). According to the literature, males are more inclined to use e-textbooks than females<sup>7,9</sup>. According to the present study, female undergraduates prefer the print format, whereas male undergraduates prefer the e-book format for recommended textbooks. In contrast, Milal et al.'s (2021)<sup>10</sup> study found that female students are more likely to read e-books, whereas male students are more interested in printed books.

## Conclusion

The findings indicate that undergraduates prefer both print and e-book formats as recommended textbooks. It seems that the majority prefers to use both formats together when taking notes. According to the results, e-books are the most preferred format by undergraduates due to their ease of carrying. When preparing for exams, half of these respondents prefer both formats. According to the results, most undergraduates find print books to be easier to use than e-books. The results reveal that undergraduates frequently use print books rather than e-books.

Female undergraduates prefer the print format most, while male undergraduates prefer the e-book format for recommended textbooks. The results reveal that female undergraduates prefer the e-book format for note-taking, while male undergraduates prefer the print format. Female undergraduates prefer the e-book format more than male undergraduates in terms of ease of carrying. Male undergraduates perceive e-books as much easier to use than print. Female

undergraduates use print books more frequently than male undergraduates. Compared to male undergraduates, female undergraduates rarely use e-books.

Undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts most prefer the print format of recommended textbooks. Undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts, Education, Law, and Management & Finance consistently use both formats for note-taking. However, undergraduates from other faculties most prefer the print format for note-taking. The majority of faculties opt for both formats for exam preparation, with the print format most preferred among undergraduates in the Faculty of Management & Finance. Compared with all other faculties, undergraduates in the Faculty of Education perceive print books as very easy to use. Undergraduates in the Faculty of Arts more frequently use print books than those in other faculties. Undergraduates from other faculties frequently use E-books. E-books are rarely used by undergraduates in the Faculty of Management & Finance, followed by those in the Faculty of Arts.

Juniors prefer the print format of the recommended textbook, particularly for note-taking. E-books are preferred by undergraduates of all academic years for their portability. Undergraduates of all academic years most often use both formats for exam preparation. Both formats are perceived as easy to use by undergraduates of all academic years, with 3rd-year undergraduates finding e-books especially easy to use. Print books are used more frequently by juniors, while juniors rarely use e-books.

### Recommendation

The study shows that students prefer both print and e-book formats for recommended textbooks, and the library could consider buying more e-books on a half-and-half basis. The library could also consider adding more e-books to its recommended textbook collection, since print books require more storage space in the library building. Instead of using library space to store printed books, it can be used for student learning. Furthermore, due to the limited transport facilities in Sri Lanka, most government universities encourage the use of online learning platforms and conduct

lectures online. Therefore, the library could consider increasing the e-book collection relative to the print book collection to support this.

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