

## **Use of e-books in an academic and research environment: a case study from the Indian Institute of Science**

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**Category of paper:** Case study

**Purpose:** E-books are not as popular as other types of e-publications, such as e-journals and e-newspapers. The possible reasons for this could be because the technology for creating/accessing e-books (both hardware and software) is not yet matured, users' perspectives about e-books need to be changed and the awareness of e-books needs to be raised. The purpose of this study is to investigate the use and usability of e-books from users' perspectives in an academic and research environment.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This study involved an e-mail questionnaire to survey researchers in the academic and research environment of the Indian Institute of Science regarding their use of e-books.

**Findings:** The responses indicated that the students tend to use this new technology more often than faculty members and staff. Those who did use e-books mostly used reference and technical material. The highest response was from the Centre for Ecological Science followed by the Supercomputer Education and Research Centre, and then the Molecular Reproduction Development and Genetics.

The majority of the respondents have used computers for over five years for a variety of purposes including e-mail communication, Internet browsing and text processing as well as for other advanced use such as for numerical computing, and DNA sequence analysis. However, use of e-books appears to be very low indicating a requirement for creating awareness and user education about both software and hardware related to eBooks. Only 37 of the 104 respondents had used the free trial offer to Kluwer and Edutech eBooks during July 2004.

### **Originality/value**

There has been no previous study reported which has investigated the users' perspectives of e-books in an academic and research environment using a questionnaire method.

### **Word length 4,685**

## **1. Introduction**

### 1.1 Background

Ardito (2000) describes how Andries Van Dam, a professor of technology at Brown University in the US coined the phrase 'electronic book while working on the first hypertext system during 1967 and 1968 on an IBM 360 mainframe, and that Alan Kay, in 1968, conceptualised an e-book called Dynabook, a portable interactive personal computer with a flat panel display and wireless communication. Though e-books are not new, their uptake has been slow, especially when compared to other e-formats such as e-journals and e-newspapers. One reason for this is because e-books have been available in many formats and these formats are often incompatible and non-interoperable. Snowhill (2001), for instance, confirms this in a report on an evaluation of e-books undertaken by a taskforce from the California Digital Library in 2000. Also, in a report of a Unesco-funded workshop on e-books held in Bangalore, India in 2004, Urs (2004) noted the diversity of definitions, standards, formats, delivery mechanisms and access models and

explained that one of the primary objectives of that workshop was to “identify, appreciate and understand the issues and complexities involved and to delineate the role of e-books in education, research and libraries from the perspectives of the publishers, intermediaries and users”. Rao (2004) also provides background information on e-books, including their advantages and disadvantages in an educational context and describes how the publication of e-books on a commercial basis is gaining momentum in India.

E-books can be considered as software objects as well as physical devices. Understood as a software object, an e-book is simply an electronic text that serves the same purpose as a conventional printed book and may also share some of the look and feel of a printed book. E-books may also be enhanced with other electronic features such as embedded hyperlinks, bookmarks, annotation, text searching and the linking of complex multimedia objects and may also be of great assistance for those with disabilities (Ingraham and Bradburn, 2003). E-books represent a logical step on the timeline of publishing and the evolution of digital collections. Like all Internet-based resources, e-books break down geographic barriers. As Garrod (2003) states, “if a digital library is defined as an electronic extension of functions users typically perform and the resources they access in a traditional library then e-books are a natural addition to digital collections”.

## 1.2 What are e-books?

According to Cox and Mohammed, as quoted by Lee (2002), an “eBook is a term used to describe a text analogous to a book that is in digital form to be displayed on a computer”. Lee (2002) also included the definitions of an e-book from the *Hi-Tech Dictionary* and *The New Concise Oxford English Dictionary* respectively as “a book that has been converted to digital form and could be read on a computer, usually through network services or CD-ROM. E-books could expand over print media by adding several specific features such as hypertext links, search and cross-reference functions and multimedia” and “an electronic version of a printed book which can be read on a Personal Computer or hand held device designed specifically for this purposes” .

According to Wikipedia (2005), the free encyclopedia, an “ebook is an electronic (or digital) version of a book. The term is used ambiguously to refer to either an individual work in a digital format, or a hardware device used to read books in digital format. Some users deprecate the second meaning in favour of the more precise ‘ebook device’”. The Wikipedia entry continues, “though e-texts are available as digitally encoded books and the term is often used synonymously with the term e-book, that usage is deprecated. The term e-text is used for the more limited case of data in ASCII text format, while the more general e-book can be in a specialised (and, at times, proprietary) file format”. Also, an e-book is commonly bundled by a publisher for distribution (as an e-book, an ezine, or an internet newspaper), whereas e-text is distributed in ASCII or plain text.

### 1.3 Technologies available for reading e-books

There are two types of technologies available for using e-books:

- online or Internet-based
- offline or specific e-book reader based

In the online version the user can read the text through an Internet browser and this opens up possibilities of linking to other resources, cross-text searching, utilisation of dictionaries and so on. There are several organisations which each offer access to tens of thousands of e-books from a range of different publishers. Examples include:

- Netlibrary (<http://www.netlibrary.com>)
- Ebrary (<http://www.ebrary.com>)
- Questia (<http://www.questia.com>)

In addition many publishers (e.g. Springer and Gale) are now also providing e-access to their published printed books.

In the offline version users will read e-books through special e-book reader software, which can be downloaded, from the Internet. Much of this software is format specific, such as:

- Adobe reader in PDF format (<http://www.adobe.com/products/ebookreader>)
- Hiebook reader in HI format (<http://www.hiebook.com>)
- Microsoft reader in LIT format  
(<http://www.microsoft.com/reader/downloads/default.asp>)
- Mobipocket in PRC format (<http://www.mobipocket.com>)
- Palm reader in PDB format  
(<http://www.palmdigitalmedia.com/products/palmreader/free>) (Sulli, 2004; Gibbons, 2005).

There are many e-book online ‘stores’, such as eBookmall (<http://www.ebookmall.com>), which offer downloadable e-books in a variety of formats.

#### 1.4 Advantages and disadvantages of e-books

E-books are becoming popular of late because they have several advantages when compared to printed books. E-books provide multimedia information, full-text searching, reference linking, flexibility in searching and browsing, selection of different types of fonts, portability, and interoperability on a variety of devices. E-book reader software allows users to highlight, annotate, underline and bookmark. Almost all reading devices provide adjustable backlighting which enables e-book users to read comfortably in poor lighting conditions, even in bed at night, without disturbing others. For users who are frequent travelers, or who have to carry out research in remote places e-books offer a substitute for print books and provide easier portability. For teachers and students, e-books are a very good classroom teaching tool and are a good device for those with low hand dexterity. E-books which are available online can be accessed 24/7 from a ‘local’ desktop, are able to be accessed remotely and more than one person may be able to access the same e-book at a time. For publishers, e-books offer economies in publishing costs and involve no storage, shipping and handling charges. For librarians, e-books do not go out of print, are easy to download, can be customised to suit individual needs (especially by those who may be physically handicapped), allow many people to access

the same book at the same time, are free from problems of being misplaced, and do not suffer from wear and tear or theft (Rao, 2001; Snowhill, 2001; Tedd, 2004).

In spite of these advantages, e-books are still not very popular. The possible reasons for this could be:

- the technology for creating and accessing e-books (both hardware and software) is not yet mature;
- lack of awareness of software/hardware available for e-books;
- incompatibility with hardware and software of the e-book readers;
- cost of hardware readers;
- limited availability of titles;
- difficulty in accessing computers or Internet;
- enough printed books in libraries already;
- people are used to reading printed books and do not want to change the habit;
- a lack of awareness of e-books
- problems with printing and downloading (Snowhill, 2001; Tedd, 2004; Urs, 2004).

To understand more about the users' perspective about e-books and their usability, this study surveyed the researchers at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore, India.

## **2. The study**

### **2.1 Objective**

The basic objective of this study was to make a detailed analysis of use and usability of e-books from users' perspectives in an academic and research environment taking IISc researchers as a study sample.

## 2.2 Indian Institute of Science and e-books

Started in 1909, by J.N.Tata, IISc (<http://www.iisc.ernet.in>) is a premier institution of advanced research and teaching, with more than 2220 active researchers (544 faculty/staff and 1676 students) working in almost all frontier areas of science and technology. There are six divisions with 35 departments in IISc and the National Centre for Science Information, one of the departments where this study was carried out, is engaged in facilitating access to well-organised scientific and technical information for the IISc community through the utilisation of contemporary technologies and a host of science and engineering databases. Trial access to e-books from ebrary (<http://www.ebrary.com>), Kluwer (<http://www.kluwer.com>) and Engineering Village (<http://www.engineeringvillage2.org/>) were given to the IISc researchers during June and July 2004. Figures 1-3 show the opening screens of these three services respectively.

Figure 1. Opening screenshot for trial access to ebrary

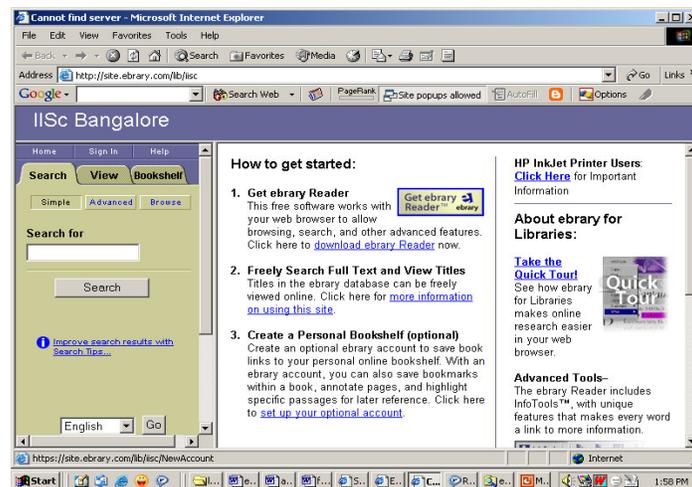


Figure 2. Opening screenshot for trial access to Kluwer

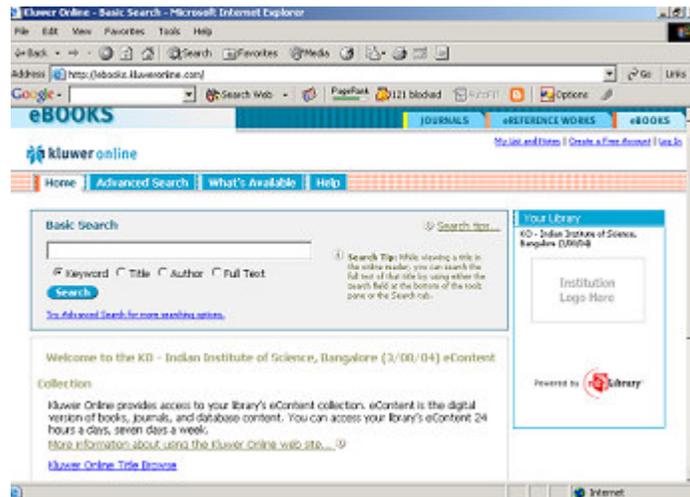
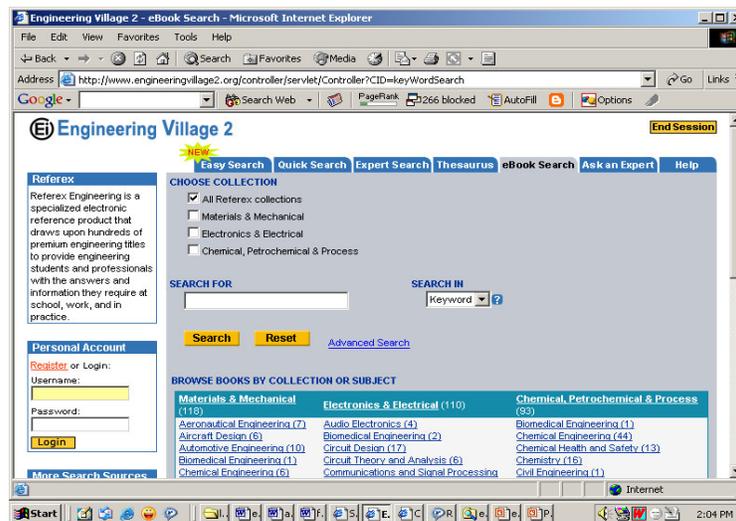


Figure 3 Opening screenshot for access to Engineering Village



### 2.3 Methodology

In order to find out the usage of e-books among the IISc users, we developed a structured questionnaire (see Appendix 1). After outlining the expectations and obligations, a questionnaire was prepared and circulated to all the staff and students of IISc during July 2004 using e-mail for staff and students of the six divisions of IISc. A reminder was sent again during August 2004 to acquire more responses.

### 3. Analysis of survey

There were 27 questions in the questionnaire and a summary of the responses grouped into seven topics is given below.

#### 3.1 Overall response to the survey

In total 101 questionnaires were completed, of which 16 were from staff (15.84%) and 85 from students (84.15%). The overall response rate was 2.94% (or 16/544) of faculty/staff and 5.07% (or 85/1676) of students. The breakdown of responses by Division within IISc is as shown in Table I.

Table I : Breakdown of responses by Division

Division	No. of responses	% (n=101)	% of Division
Biological Sciences	13	12.87%	13/308 or 4.22%
Chemical Sciences	13	12.87%	13/283 or 4.59%
Electrical Sciences	9	8.91%	9/538 or 1.67%
Information Science	15	14.85%	15/129 or 11.62%
Mechanical Sciences	33	32.67%	33/666 or 4.95%
Physical and Mathematical Sciences	18	17.82%	18/296 or 6.08%

Table II shows a breakdown of responses by Department

Department	No. of responses	% (n=101)	% of Department
Aerospace Engineering	8	7.92%	8/179 or 4.46%
Centre for Atmospheric and	1	0.99%	1/26 or 3.84%

Oceanic Sciences

Centre for Ecological Science	5	4.95%	5/21 or 23.80%
Centre for Electronic Design and Technology	3	2.97%	3/101 or 2.97%
Centre for Product Design and Manufacturing	3	2.97%	3/43 or 6.97%
Chemical Engineering	3	2.97%	3/53 or 5.26%
Civil Engineering	11	10.89%	11/125 or 8.8%
Computer Science Automation	1	0.99%	1/145 or 0.68%
Electrical Communication Engineering	1	0.99%	1/128 or 0.78%
Electrical Engineering	1	0.99%	1/130 or 0.76%
High Voltage Engineering	3	2.97%	3/34 or 8.82%
Inorganic and Physical Chemistry	5	4.95%	5/78 or 6.4%
Instrumentation	5	4.95%	5/68 or 7.35%
Management Department	6	5.94%	6/62 or 9.67%
Materials Research Centre	2	1.98%	2/56 or 3.57%
Mechanical Engineering	3	2.97%	3/131 or 2.29%
Metallurgy	4	3.96%	4/98 or 4.08%
Molecular and Cell Biology	2	1.98%	2/81 or 2.46%
Molecular Reproduction and Development and Genetics	6	5.94%	6/45 or 13.33%
Physics	13	11.81%	13/151 or 8.60%
Solid State Structural Chemistry	6	5.94%	6/71 or 8.45%
Supercomputer Education and Research Centre	8	7.92%	8/55 or 14.54%

### 3.2. Use of e-books

Thirty seven of the respondents had used the free trial offer during June/July 2004. This represents 36.63% of the 101 respondents and 1.66% (33/2220) of IISc personnel as a whole. However, among survey respondents 59.40% (60/101) had used e-books at some point. In response to Question 12 about satisfaction with e-books the following responses were given:

	No.	% (n=60)
Very unsatisfied	0	
Unsatisfied	5	8.33
Somewhat satisfied	33	55
Very satisfied	22	36.66
Extremely satisfied	0	

In response to Question 16, 52 of the 60 respondents who had used e-books (or 86.66%) indicated that they would want to use/read e-books from the Library. Question 15 asked these 60 respondents to indicate the purpose for which they would use e-books and the responses were:

Academic	35 (58.33%)
Leisure	1 (1.66%)
Both	27 (45%)

Users were asked in Question 17 to indicate how they obtained e-books and the following responses were given:

Purchase	3 (5%)
Borrow	11 (18.33%)
Obtaining Free Titles	52 (86.66%)

As to their future use of e-books the following responses were given:

Definitely use/purchase	20 (33.33%)
Probably use/purchase	20 (33.33%)
Might or might not use/purchase	12 (20%)
Probably would not use/purchase	7 (11.66%)
Never use	1 (1.66%).

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate the types of e-books that they would be interested in reading and here are the responses (n=60):

Maps/Travel Guides	21 (35%)
Reference Materials	50 (83.33%)
Technical Books	48 (80%)
Trade magazine/Product Guides	20 (33.33%)
Recreational Books (fiction etc)	25 (41.67%)
Others	7 (11.66%)

### 3.3. Use of computers

All the 101 respondents had used computers for over a year with 81 (or 80.19%) having used computers for more than five years. Computers are used for a variety of purposes including (n=101):

Text processing	75 (74.25%)
Email	85 (84.15%)
Internet	88 (87.12%)
Others (specify)	70 (69.30%)

The 'other' category covered software for data analysis and simulation analysis. Forty six of the 101 (or 45.54%) were familiar with the Linux Operating System, and many more, 85 (or 84.15%), were familiar with the Windows operating system. Ten respondents indicated that they were familiar with other operating systems like Solaris and Novell

Netware. Question 22 asked respondents about whether or not they had used specific e-book reading devices. Their responses were (n=60):

Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader	54 (90%)
Ebrary Reader	11 (18.33%)
Microsoft eBooks Reader	7 (11.66%)
Mobipocket	1 (1.66%)

No respondent had used hardware devices such as the Franklin eBook, Hiebook Reader, Gemstar eBook, Pocket PC and Palm device.

### 3.4 Definition and opinion about e-books

Only 57 of the 101 respondents answered Question 9 where they were asked to define an e-book. Some definitions provided were:

- Books that are available in digital format
- A virtual book is called an e-book
- Books available in digital form, and read off a computer screen
- Soft copy of a book mimicking the actual book

In Question 10 respondents were asked “Do you think an e-book is not an e-book without the hardware and the book-like features - such as turning pages and other book metaphors?” Twenty five (or 24.75%) agreed with this statement whereas 30 (or 29.71%) disagreed and 46 (or 45.5%) failed to answer that question.

### 3.5 Features of e-books

In Question 20 respondents were asked which features of e-books impressed them and the answers were as follows (n=60):

Mobility	30 (50%)
Search tools to locate words or quotes	43 (71.66%)
Ability to bookmark pages	22 (36.66%)

Instant access to content	38 (63.33%)
Multimedia feature	25 (41.66%)
Ability to maintain my own collection/bookshelf	25 (41.66%)
Ability to personalise the look and feel	13 (21.66%)

In Question 23 respondents were asked about features of e-books that they disliked. Responses were (n=60):

Different e-books from different sources are not compatible	18 (30%)
Lack of awareness or demand for e-books	12 (20%)
Not familiar with relevant technology	7 (11.66%)
Not user-friendly	11(18.33%)
Problems associated with usernames and passwords	10 (16.67%)
Rapidly changing technology	7(11.66%)
Variety of devices available	9 (15%)

As to the price of e-books, 10 of the 60 (16.67%) found the price comparable to that of print books, whereas five people found the price comparable to either hard-copy or DVDs and three thought the price comparable to music CDs – 37 respondents did not answer that question.

### 3.6. Recommendations regarding e-books

In Question 21 respondents were asked whether or not they would recommend the use of e-books to others. The responses were ( n=60):

Definitely	42 (70%)
Probably	10 (16.67%)
Might or Might not	6 (10%)
Probably not	1(1.67%)
Definitely not	0
Do not know	6 (10%)

Thirty-eight people gave recommendations for improving e-books and these included:

Better awareness of content of e-books

Need to reduce the time taken to browse pages of e-books

### 3.7. Awareness of e-book technology

Thirty-eight of the 101 respondents were aware of e-books and their technology whereas 26 respondents claimed not to be aware of the technology. Some of the reasons for not using e-books were (n=101):

Cost	17 (16.67%)
Lack of compatibility	9 (8.91%)
Difficulty in accessing computers/Internet	11 (10.89%)
Enough books in libraries	9 (8.91%)
Hard to read and browse	22 (21.78%)
Limited number of titles	15 ( 14.85% )
Lack of confidence with relevant technology	6 (5.94%)
Lack of familiarity with products	19 (18.81%)
Used to reading print books and no wish to change	18 (17.82%)

A good number of respondents, 81 (80.19%), indicated that they would want to try and use e-books in future whereas a mere 2 (1.98%) indicated that they did not.

## 4. Conclusions

A comparison of e-book usage with number of students and degrees offered by different departments (*Handbook*, 2004) indicates that there is no correlation. The Aerospace Engineering department tops the list with 135 students, four degrees offered and with 4.46% of its users responding to this questionnaire. This is followed by: Computer Science and Automation with 119 students, three degrees and 0.68% e-book usage, Electrical Engineering with 107 students, three degrees and 0.76% e-book usage. The department with the highest proportion of its students and faculty/staff using e-books was

the Centre for Ecological Science (23.8%), followed by Supercomputer Education and Research Centre (14.54%) and then the Molecular Reproduction Development and Genetics Department (13.33%).

Also there is no correlation between Internet usage (as of Sep, 2004) and e-book usage. The top three departments in Internet usage are the Supercomputer Education and Research Centre, followed by Management Sciences and then Electrical Communication Engineering.

The proportion of students using e-books and answering the questionnaire was greater than the proportion of staff, which would seem to indicate that youngsters are more likely to use this new technology.

The respondents used computers for a variety of different types of work and 60% had some experience of using e-books. However, a very small proportion (1.66%) of all IISc students and staff had used the free trial offer to Kluwer and Edutech e-books during June/July 2004. The reasons for this could be various, covering lack of awareness of e-book technology, lack of user education and lack of publicity regarding the availability of the service.

About one third (35%) of the respondents were very satisfied with their use of e-books, and over half were 'somewhat satisfied' and less than 10% were not satisfied. The main features of e-books, which were disliked, were the incompatibility between different suppliers, lack of user friendliness of the interfaces, the problems associated with usernames and passwords, and the variety of devices available in the market. In fact, none of the respondents had used hardware devices like Franklin eBook, Hiebook reader, Gemstar eBook. Those who had used e-books had done so online with the majority (90%) using the Adobe Acrobat e-book reader software, although some had also used Ebrary Reader (18.33%), Microsoft e-books reader software (11.66%) and one had used Mobipocket. This reading software is free to download from the Internet and can then be used to read an e-book on a PC. The type of material that respondents would be

interested in using in e-book format varied, with reference material and technical book being most popular.

Most of the respondents in our survey read their books on the screen although a few printed the material. They used the word/phrase search more than other functions such as book marking, annotation/notes, or copy text for quotations.

Turning to factors that might discourage use of e-books, the respondents suggested that one major factor is the cost, both of the e-books themselves and the equipment needed to access them. The majority of those who replied to this question indicated that e-books are hard to read and browse, and that they are used to reading printed books and do not want to change the habit. Many gave suggestions for improving e-books (e.g. by reducing the time taken to browse pages) and for creating awareness among users of the existence of relevant material.

Thus, by carrying out user education, publicity, raising awareness about the software/hardware used for e-books, increasing the bandwidth and making available e-book reader devices along with e-books through libraries, the use of e-books can be increased.

### **Acknowledgement**

We would like to record our appreciation to all researchers of IISc who responded to our questionnaire.

### **Editor's Note**

This paper is based on the project "eBooks access and use models: an analytical comparative study" carried out by H.S. Usha and guided by K.T.Anuradha as part of a training programme in Information and Knowledge Management at the NCSI. This followed the completion of her Masters degree in Library and Information Science from Kuvempu University, Karnataka State, India

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### **Appendix 1. Ebooks Usage Questionnaire**

1. Your name: Mr/Ms/Prof./Dr. ....
2. Address:
3. Are you: (a) Faculty (b) Staff (c) Student (d) Any other: please specify.
4. What is your area of research?
5. Have you used free trial offer during July 2004 for Kluwer and Edutech eBooks?
  - Yes
  - No
6. How long you have been using computers?
  - More than five years
  - More than a year
  - Recently
7. What do you use the computer for?
  - Text processing
  - Email
  - Internet
  - Others (specify)
8. Which Operating System you are familiar with?
  - Linux
  - Windows
  - Others (specify)

(If you have not used eBooks kindly answer question number 26 and 27)

9. How do you define eBook?

10. Do you think an eBook is not an eBook without the hardware and the book like features- such as turning pages and other book metaphor?

- Yes
- No

11. Have you used eBooks?

- Yes
- No

12. Overall, how satisfied are you, with eBooks?

- Very unsatisfied
- Unsatisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Very satisfied
- Extremely satisfied

13. How likely are you to use/purchase eBooks again?

- Definitely
- Probably
- Might or might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not
- Never used

14. What types of eBooks you want to use?

- Maps/Travel Guides
- Reference Materials
- Technical Books
- Trade magazine/Product Guides
- Recreational Books (fiction etc)
- Others

15. Do you read eBooks mainly for what purpose?

- Academic
- Leisure
- Both

16. Would you want to use/read eBooks from your library?

- Yes
- No

17. How do you usually obtain eBooks?

- Purchase
- Borrow
- Obtaining Free Titles

18. Do you find the eBooks priced the same as

- Print books
- Hardcopy
- DVD
- Music CD

19. Were you aware of the eBook technology before using it?

- Yes
- No

20. What features of eBook impressed you in going for eBook?

- Mobility
- Search tools to locate words or quotes
- Ability to bookmark pages
- Instant access to content
- Multimedia feature
- Search and browse dictionary and indices
- Ability to maintain my own collection/bookshelf
- Personalize the look and feel
- Others

21. Would you recommend eBooks to others?

- Definitely
- Probably
- Might or Might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not
- Do not know

22. Have you used any specific eBook reading device?

- Adobe Acrobat eBook Reader
- Ebrary Reader
- Hiebook
- Microsoft eBooks Reader
- Mobipocket
- Other please specify

23. What features of the eBooks do you dislike?

- Different eBooks from different sources are not compatible
- Lack of awareness or demand of eBooks
- Not familiar with relevant technology
- Not user friendly
- Problems associated with usernames and passwords
- Rapidly changing technology
- Variety of devices available
- Other Please Specify

24. What Hardware do you use for reading eBooks?

- Franklin eBookman
- Hiebook Reader
- Gemstar eBook
- Pocket PC
- Palm Device
- Handheld PC

25. What recommendations would you offer for improving eBooks?

26. What are your reasons for not using any eBooks?

- Cost
- Different eBooks from different sources are not compatible
- Difficulty in accessing computers or internet
- Enough printed books in libraries
- Hard to read and browse
- Limited number of titles I would like to read available
- Not confident with the relevant technology used
- Not familiar with this kind of products
- Used to reading printed books and do not want to change the habit
- Others please Specify

27. Do you want to try eBooks in the future?

- Yes
- No