
Exploring Digital Reading Habits and Preferences among Undergraduate Students in Kamrup (Metro), Assam, India

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Abstract

The study explored digital reading habits and preferences among undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam, focusing on gender and academic stream differences. It aimed to examine variations between male and female students and among Arts, Commerce, and Science streams. Data from 200 students were collected via a semi-structured questionnaire and analysed using t-tests and one-way ANOVA. Findings showed significant differences in reading habits and preferences by gender and academic stream, with a positive relationship between the variables. Despite the widespread access to digital resources, students are not fully utilizing them for academic enhancement, indicating the need for better integration of digital reading practices in higher education.

Keywords

Digital Reading, Reading Preferences, Undergraduate Students, Kamrup (Metro), Assam

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1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs), the widespread availability of the Internet, and the rapid growth of digital publishing platforms have fundamentally transformed reading practices in higher education. Contemporary students increasingly engage with hyperlinked texts, multimedia resources, interactive platforms, and social networking environments that redefine how information is accessed, processed, and internalised. Digital reading today extends far beyond reading electronic versions of printed texts; it involves behaviours such as skimming, scanning, annotating, bookmarking, hyperlink navigation, multitasking, and engaging with audio-visual content across multiple devices.

Empirical studies conducted in different contexts consistently indicate a steady shift from print-based reading to screen-based reading, particularly among undergraduate students. Earlier studies by Bajpai (2013) and Divya P. (2018) found that although print resources remain valued, students increasingly rely on digital media for both academic and leisure reading. More recent studies confirm that smartphones, laptops and tablets have become the dominant devices for reading, owing to their portability, affordability and constant internet connectivity (Mlay & Sabi, 2019; Packialakshmi et al., 2021; Jabbar & Warraich, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this transition, as emergency remote teaching and online learning modes normalised digital reading as a central academic activity rather than a supplementary one.

In the Indian context, initiatives such as Digital India, SWAYAM, National Digital Library of India (NDLI), e-PG Pathshala and institutional virtual libraries have significantly expanded access to digital academic resources. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places strong emphasis on the integration of technology in teaching-learning processes, promotion of digital literacy, and the use of online repositories for flexible and inclusive education. Similarly, UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4) highlights the role of digital technologies in ensuring equitable access to quality education across socio-economic and geographical boundaries. These developments underscore the importance of understanding how students engage with digital texts in real academic contexts.

Despite the abundance of digital content, access alone does not guarantee meaningful learning. Scholars increasingly conceptualise digital reading habits and digital reading preferences as two interrelated yet distinct dimensions. Digital reading habits refer to the frequency of reading, types of devices used, modes of access (online/offline), and routine behavioural patterns associated with digital reading. In contrast, digital reading preferences relate to learners' choices regarding content type, format (short-form versus long-form), platforms, interaction strategies such as highlighting or note-taking, and perceptions of the usefulness of various digital resources.

Research also suggests that digital reading behaviours are influenced by demographic and academic variables. Gender-based differences have been reported, with female students exhibiting greater inclination towards leisure reading, newspapers and magazines, while male students often prefer non-fiction and technology-oriented content (Arora & Seth, 2018; Jabbar & Warraich, 2023; Hu et al., 2023). Disciplinary variations have also been observed: social science students tend to prefer general literature and newspapers, science students favour technology-related materials, and commerce students show greater interest in socio-economic and current affairs content (Arora & Seth, 2018). However, recent evidence indicates that the widespread use of smartphones and social media platforms may be homogenising reading behaviours across gender and academic streams.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, digital reading surged as students spent more time accessing online content. Reading during this period was also associated with greater emotional well-being and reduced stress. At the same time, several challenges were reported, including limited access to reliable devices and internet, affordability constraints, excessive engagement with social media, inadequate digital literacy, weak self-learning skills, language barriers, heavy academic workload, and reduced concentration (Tyagi et al., 2020; Parikh & Vyas, 2020; Adeyemi, 2021; Abimbola et al., 2021; Mirza et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2021; Nasreen, 2025).

Although a growing body of national and international research documents these trends, there is a notable scarcity of systematic empirical studies focusing on undergraduate students in the North-Eastern region of India, particularly in Assam. Kamrup (Metro) District, which includes Guwahati—

the educational hub of the region—presents a unique socio-cultural and technological environment where rapid urbanisation coexists with infrastructural and digital divides. Understanding how undergraduate students in this region develop digital reading habits and preferences is therefore essential for designing context-sensitive academic interventions. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to empirically examine the digital reading habits and preferences of undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District of Assam, with special reference to gender and academic stream. By analysing patterns of device usage, frequency of digital reading, preferred formats, perceived usefulness of digital resources, and the relationship between reading habits and preferences, the study aims to generate evidence-based insights that can inform institutional policies, curriculum design, and library-led digital literacy initiatives in higher education.

2.OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To assess and quantify the digital reading habits and reading format preferences of male and female undergraduate college students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam.
2. To determine the relationship between digital reading habits and digital reading preferences among undergraduate college students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam.
3. To compare digital reading habits and preferences among undergraduate students enrolled in Arts, Commerce, and Science streams in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam.

3.HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

1. There is no statistically significant difference in digital reading habits or digital reading preferences among undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam, regardless of gender or academic stream, and
2. There is no significant relationship exists between digital reading habits and digital reading preferences among undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam.

4.METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a descriptive survey design to collect quantitative data on digital reading habits and digital reading preferences of undergraduate students

in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam, with gender and academic stream (Arts, Commerce and Science) as independent variables. The population consisted of undergraduate students from 20 provincialised degree colleges, from which eight colleges were purposively selected. Using proportional stratified sampling based on gender and academic stream, a sample of 300 students was drawn. Data were collected through a researcher-developed semi-structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms, comprising two sections on digital reading habits and preferences, mostly on a five-point Likert scale. The tool was validated by experts and pilot tested on 50 students, yielding satisfactory reliability coefficients ($\alpha = 0.82$ for habits and $\alpha = 0.79$ for preferences). After obtaining institutional permission, the questionnaire link was circulated online, and 300 valid responses were retained. The data were analysed using SPSS (Version 22) with descriptive statistics, t-tests for gender-wise comparison, one-way ANOVA for stream-wise differences, and Pearson's correlation to examine the relationship between digital reading habits and preferences, with significance tested at 0.05 and 0.01 levels.

5.RESULTS

Devices used for digital learning

After compiling the data, the information was entered into SPSS version 22 for descriptive analysis of the quantitative data. Analysis of students' responses on the devices used for digital learning, indicated that 63.3% of students used smartphones, 20% used laptops, and 16.7% used both smartphones and laptops for digital reading (Table 1).

Table 1: Preferred Devices Used for Digital Reading by Undergraduate Students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam, India

Types of Devices	Frequency	Percentage
Smartphone	190	63.3
Laptop	60	20.0
Both Smartphone & Laptop	50	16.7

Frequency of digital reading

Analysis of students' responses on the frequency of digital reading for academic purposes (e-books,

articles, blogs, etc.) showed that 29.0% of students read digitally every day, 33.0% several times a week, 18.3% once a week, 14.0% rarely, and 5.7% reported never engaging in digital reading (Table 2).

Table 2: Frequency of digital reading by undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam, India

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Daily	87	29.0
Several times a week	99	33.0
Once a week	55	18.3
Rarely	42	14.0
Never	17	5.7

Modes of accessing digital materials

Analysis of students' responses on the methods of reading digital resources, showed that 52.7% of students read online, 30.0% read offline, and 17.3% utilize all of these methods for digital reading (Table 4).

Table 4: Modes of accessing digital materials by undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam, India

Most Preferred Modes	Frequency	Percentage
Online	158	52.7
Offline	90	30.0
All the above	52	17.3

Methods of interaction with digital content

Of the total sample of 300 students, 165 responded to the question about methods of interacting with digital content. Analysis of students' methods of interaction with digital reading materials, indicated that 28.6% of students print out the content and write notes by hand, 14.6% type notes in separate documents, and 17.6% prepare notes by highlighting within the digital document (Table 5).

Table 5 Methods of interacting with digital reading materials among undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District, Assam, India

Most Preferred Modes	Frequency	Percentage
Highlighting within the digital document (Digital annotation)	35	17.6
Printing the content and writing by hand (manual note taking)	86	28.6
Typing notes in a separate document (Digital note taking)	44	14.6

Students’ digital reading behaviour, format preference, and perceived usefulness of resources.

Analysis of students’ responses on digital reading behaviour, format preference, and perceived usefulness of digital resources, as presented in Table 6, revealed that the most frequently accessed digital materials (*only 110 out of the total 300 sampled students responded to this question*) are lecture notes and slides shared digitally (13.6%), followed closely by social media content (13.0%) and e-books (10.0%). This indicates that students primarily engage with institution-driven academic content and informal social platforms rather than traditional structured e-resources alone. Secondly, half of the students (49.6%) prefer both short-form and long-form content, while 32.3% prefer short-form content only. The comparatively low preference for exclusively long-form content (7.6%) suggests a growing inclination towards concise, easily consumable digital texts, although students still value detailed materials when required. Thirdly, regarding the most beneficial digital resources (*only 102 out of the total 300 sampled students responded to this question*), Table 6 highlighted that students perceive online video lectures (10.6%), educational websites (8.0%) and online textbooks (6.6%) as the most beneficial digital resources. Interestingly, although e-books are frequently used (10.0%), only 3.3% consider them the most beneficial resource, and merely 1.6% find online research journals and databases beneficial.

Table 6: Usage Pattern, Form Preference and Beneficial Digital Resources

Dimension	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Frequently Used Digital Reading Materials	E-books	30	10.0
	Lecture notes / slides shared digitally	41	13.6
	Social media	39	13.0
	No preference	31	10.3
Preferred Length of Digital Reading	Short-form	97	32.3
	Long-form	23	7.6
	Both short & long form	149	49.6
	Online textbooks	20	6.6
Most Beneficial Digital Resources	Educational websites	24	8.0
	E-books	10	3.3
	Online research journals & databases	5	1.6
	Educational apps	11	3.6
	Online video lectures	32	10.6

Results on Digital Reading Habits and Digital Reading Preferences between male and female undergraduate college students in Kamrup (M) district

Analysis of the data on Digital Reading Habits among male and female college students in Kamrup (Metro) District, with a computed t-value of 0.015, as presented in Table 8, indicates that there is no significant difference between male and female students in their digital reading habits.

Similarly, analysis of data on Digital Reading Preferences among male and female students, with a

computed t-value of -0.874, indicated that there was no significant difference between the groups (Table 7).

Table 7: Difference in Digital Reading Habits and Digital Reading Preference between Male and Female students

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean difference	t	df	P-value
Digital Reading Habit	Male	96	30.9062	7.37485	.01592	.015	298	.979
	Female	204	30.8897	7.70210				
Digital Reading Preference	Male	96	34.1753	5.37281	-.60759	-.874	298	.378
	Female	204	35.7150	4.34571				

Results on the Correlation between Digital Reading habits and Digital Reading Preferences among college students in Kamrup (M) district.

Analysis of the data on the correlation between Digital Reading Habits and Digital Reading Preferences among college students in Kamrup (Metro) District, with a computed Pearson correlation of 0.388, indicated a significant correlation at the 0.01 level of significance. This suggests that students’ digital reading habits influence their adoption of specific digital reading preferences, and vice versa (Table 8).

Table 8: Correlation between Digital Reading Habit and Digital Reading Preference

Digital Reading	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Pearson Correlation	P-Value
Digital Reading Habit	300	29.7761	7.63343	.388**	0.000
Digital Reading Preference	300	36.59242	4.59231		

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

Stream-wise Difference in Digital Reading Habits and Preferences

A one-way ANOVA was conducted to examine differences in digital reading habits and digital reading preferences among Arts, Commerce, and Science students. The analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in digital reading habits among the three streams, $F(2, 297) = 2.569, p = .075$. Likewise, no significant difference was observed in digital reading preferences, $F(2,297) = 0.262, p = .760$. This indicates that students’

academic stream does not significantly influence their digital reading behaviour or preferences (Table 9).

Table 9: One-Way ANOVA on Digital Reading Habit and Preference across Streams

Variable	Source	df	F	p
Digital Reading Habit	Between Groups	2, 297	2.569	.075
Digital Reading Preference	Between Groups	2, 297	0.262	.760

6. DISCUSSION

The present study set out to explore the digital reading habits and preferences of undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District of Assam with reference to gender and academic stream, and to examine the relationship between digital reading habits and preferences. The study's findings provide several important insights into the evolving nature of students’ engagement with digital resources in higher education.

The predominance of smartphones (63.3%) as the preferred device for digital reading reflects the growing reliance on mobile technology among undergraduate students. This finding corroborates earlier studies (Kala et al., 2013; Mlay & Sabi, 2019; Packialakshmi et al., 2021) that reported that portability, affordability, and consistent internet connectivity make smartphones the most accessible digital learning tools for students. The comparatively lower use of laptops suggests infrastructural and economic constraints, as well as a preference for quick, flexible access to content over sustained, in-depth reading on larger devices.

In terms of frequency, more than sixty per cent of the students reported engaging in digital reading either daily or several times a week. This indicates that digital reading has become an integral part of students' academic routines. However, the presence of a substantial proportion of students who read rarely (14.0%) or never (5.7%) points to persistent digital divides related to access, motivation, and digital literacy, as also reported by Adeyemi (2021) and Mirza et al. (2021).

The preference for online modes of accessing digital materials (52.7%) suggests that students primarily depend on real-time internet connectivity for reading, rather than downloading and storing resources for offline use. This heavy reliance on online access may limit students' engagement with scholarly materials in areas with unstable internet connectivity, particularly in semi-urban and rural parts of Assam. With respect to methods of interaction with digital content, a notable proportion of students preferred printing digital materials and writing notes manually (28.6%), followed by digital annotation and digital note-taking. This indicates that, despite the availability of advanced digital tools, students still feel cognitively more comfortable with traditional handwritten modes of learning. Similar trends were observed by Sun et al. (2021), who found that many students perceive handwritten notes as more effective for comprehension and retention than purely digital interactions.

An important finding of the study relates to the types of digital materials most frequently used. Lecture notes and slides shared by teachers emerged as the most accessed materials, followed closely by social media content and e-books. This pattern suggests that students' digital reading is largely teacher-driven and platform-mediated rather than self-initiated through structured academic databases. More critically, only a negligible proportion of students identified online research journals and databases as the most beneficial resources (1.6%). This indicates limited exposure to or awareness of high-quality scholarly resources, echoing concerns raised by Parikh and Vyas (2020) and Abimbola et al. (2021) about the inadequate academic use of digital platforms.

The preference for both short-form and long-form content by nearly half of the respondents (49.6%), and the strong inclination towards short-form content (32.3%), indicate a shift towards concise, easily digestible digital materials. This finding aligns with global trends in digital reading behaviour, where

learners increasingly favour modular and visually enriched content due to time constraints and reduced attention spans (Hu et al., 2023).

Contrary to expectations from the reviewed literature, the study found no statistically significant differences between male and female students in digital reading habits and preferences. This finding diverges from studies by Arora and Seth (2018) and Jabbar and Warraich (2023), which reported gender-based differences in reading behaviour. The absence of such differences in the present context may be attributed to the homogenising influence of smartphones, social media platforms, and institutional digital practices, which provide similar exposure and learning experiences to both male and female students. Similarly, no significant stream-wise differences were found among Arts, Commerce, and Science students in their digital reading habits and preferences. This suggests that disciplinary boundaries are becoming less relevant in shaping digital reading behaviour, possibly due to the uniform availability of digital platforms and common academic practices such as sharing lecture notes and accessing online video lectures across streams.

The statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.388$) between digital reading habits and digital reading preferences indicates that students who read more frequently in digital formats are also more discerning in their format and resource preferences. This confirms the second objective of the study and indicates that habit formation plays a crucial role in shaping students' engagement with digital content. Overall, although digital reading is well integrated into students' academic lives, the findings reveal that its potential for deep academic engagement remains underutilised. Students largely depend on easily accessible, institution-driven content and social media, while advanced academic resources such as online journals and databases remain marginal in their reading practices.

7.CONCLUSION

The study concludes that undergraduate students in Kamrup (Metro) District have widely adopted digital reading as part of their academic routine, with smartphones emerging as the dominant device and online access as the preferred mode. Digital reading is undertaken frequently by a majority of students, indicating that technology-mediated learning has become an established feature of higher education in the region. However, the nature of digital engagement

remains largely surface-level and convenience-driven.

Students primarily rely on lecture notes, social media content, and online video lectures, while scholarly e-resources such as online research journals and databases are minimally utilised. This suggests a significant gap between access to digital technologies and their effective academic use. The absence of significant gender-wise and stream-wise differences indicates that digital reading behaviour among undergraduate students is becoming increasingly uniform, shaped more by shared technological environments than by demographic or disciplinary factors.

The significant positive relationship between digital reading habits and preferences further underscores the importance of nurturing sustained digital reading practices. The findings underscore the need for systematic institutional interventions to enhance students' digital literacy, particularly in the effective use of academic e-resources. Orientation programmes, library-led digital training sessions, integration of e-databases into coursework, and faculty encouragement to use scholarly digital materials are essential to move students from passive consumption to meaningful academic engagement. In line with the objectives of NEP 2020 and SDG 4, higher education institutions in Assam must focus not merely on providing access to digital resources but on cultivating informed, reflective, and research-oriented digital reading practices among undergraduate students. Such initiatives will be critical in ensuring that digital transformation in higher education translates into genuine academic enrichment and improved learning outcomes.

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