

Revisiting Textbook Adoption Decisions: Are Students Finally Ready for E-Books?

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Abstract

Textbooks have long been a primary resource for instructional materials in the classroom. Instructors rely on student's use of textbooks to introduce new content, provide detailed explanations of material, and serve as a study guide for examinations. As a result, textbook selection can be a major decision affecting both faculty and students for a class. In the past, students often were not taken into consideration when making book decisions even though professors frequently complained that students do not buy or use required textbooks (Kingkade, 2014; Robinson, 2011). However, with textbook prices skyrocketing, students often argue that they cannot afford to buy the books required for class. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), college textbook prices have risen 87.5% over the last ten years. With the textbook industry facing challenges as publishing increasingly moves from physical texts to digitized content and students' frustration at the continued increase in text book costs, colleges and universities are recognizing that student's attitudes and preferences deserve consideration in the selection process.

As the publishing industry changes, so too does the way students use textbooks. Technology has enabled students to have access to information at all times through the use of smartphones, E-readers, and tablets. Although E-books have become more commonly required for college classes, the move from traditional textbooks to E-books has had mixed results (Brown, 2013; Barber, 2011). The survey was originally completed in 2014 to provide insight into the attitudes that current students have towards different textbook options so that the textbook adoption committee could make a more informed decision (Edmondson and Ward, 2017). An updated survey was completed in 2018 in order to re-examine students' attitudes towards different textbook options since a majority of publishers have modified their textbook offerings to incorporate more e-learning/online materials. In this survey, students were asked about their current textbook purchase and rental behavior, preferences to four different textbook options (hardback, paperback, E-book, and loose leaf), attitudes towards E-books, attitudes towards publisher online resources, attitude towards the new subscription model, and an open-ended opinion question about the respondent's perceptions towards different textbook options.

Results

One hundred eighty-three students currently taking Principles of Marketing from a large public university in the southeastern United States completed the survey. Unlike the 2014 study, where students overwhelmingly preferred paperback textbooks, even when this textbook is at a higher price than other alternatives, the 2018 study found that the textbook choice depended on if an access code to publisher's online course materials was required. When price was not an issue, students preferred the Hardback Textbook. However, when price was considered and an access code was required for the class, students preferred either the paperback textbook or the E-book options. If an access code was not required, students overwhelmingly preferred the rental option.

When students were asked their opinions on the various textbook options, it was clear that price and ease of use were the primary deciding factors as to why they liked and/or disliked the various textbook options. Even though students have more experience with E-books than in 2014, overall student attitudes towards E-books were still neutral, at best. However, when examining the number of negative student comments, students had significantly fewer negative E-book comments than in the 2014 study. This implies that students may be more receptive to E-books due to increased exposure to this type of textbook format. By contrast, the majority of comments regarding physical textbooks are overwhelmingly positive, implying that this textbook style is still desirable to students. Similar to 2014, students still remarked how price was a major deciding factor when purchasing textbooks. Students believe that textbooks are priced too high which may be why students now lean towards the rental option. The new trend towards rental options may also be a contributing factor as to why students found the idea of a subscription model for textbooks to be somewhat appealing.

When examining student attitudes towards online publisher materials, students have used all three of the major publisher's online platforms (McGraw Hill's Connect, Pearson's MyLab, and Cengage's MindTap). Students have also completed a variety of activities on the publisher's online platform, with quizzes, tests, or study modules being the most commonly used. Almost half of students were at least satisfied with the resources provided in the publisher's online platform.

It is important to note that textbook adoption decisions by faculty may become more limited in the future due to changes in the product offerings in the textbook publishing industry. For example, when examining textbook offerings for Principles of Marketing for the Fall 2018 semester, only one of the publishers offered a paperback version of their text for consideration. The other two publishers had eliminated hardback and paperback versions and instead only offered E-book or E-book with loose leaf options. If this trend continues, faculty may find they are forced to adopt E-books with or without a loose leaf version solely because no other option will remain.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

This study re-examines students' attitudes towards four different textbook options. Results show that the textbook option preferred depends on whether an online access code is required. It is important for marketing educators to consider student attitudes when making textbook decisions as this will impact whether students actually purchase and use the required textbook.

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