

Department of Information Studies

Faculty of Arts & Humanities



UCL

Rhetorics of 'realness' in reader experiences of books on screen

Laura Dietz
UCL Information Studies
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‘The convenience of e-readers for travel is amazing. I can carry a huge library in my handbag. However I still **prefer real books.**’
(Survey 2015)

‘In many ways I **prefer real books**, but ebooks take up much less space in the house and especially when travelling’ (Survey 2015).

‘Digital reading is a nice convenience, but I hope it doesn’t ever replace **real books.**’ (Survey 2015).

‘I also get [e-books] while reading an **actual book**, to allow me to read when I **forget to bring my book.**’ (Survey 2020)

‘I read both **books and on my kindle.**’ (Survey 2020)

Legitimacy and reputation of digital books

- Survey 2014-17 and 2020-22, n=1,732 (751 March 2020 or later)
- Survey participants aged 18+, half (49.8%) living in the UK
- In English, gathered data from English speakers only
- alpha level of .05, effect size threshold of Cramer's $V > .1$ where degrees of freedom (df)=1.
- Additional interviews and focus groups, FG's 'pre-acquainted' (Barbour, 2007, pp.66-7)
- Qualitative data analysed using Braun and Clark's thematic analysis approach (2006)

Conceptions of an e-book as...

- An ersatz book
- A digital proxy
- An incomplete book
- ...and sometimes a real book

Moving back and forth between conceptions,
according to the reader's needs

‘The convenience of e-readers for travel is amazing. I can carry a huge library in my handbag. However I still **prefer real books.**’
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Not 'real', but not 'fake': survey responses don't mention...

fake

impostor

fraud

sham

hoax

cheat

forgery

unreal

Sample responses, Survey 2022

- ‘[I read e-books but] for some reason, **books feel more ‘real’**. Everything was digital in the pandemic, so reading a physical book became a way of reconnecting to a reality’
- ‘[I read e-books but] I’m a book snob... **prefer the real thing**: how it feels, smells, looks’
- ‘**I prefer real books** [to e-books]’

And all go on, a few questions later, to answer ‘*do you consider e-books to be real books?*’ with **YES**

‘the opposite of “e-book” is sometimes “p-book”, but often *real book*’

(Dietz, Warwick and Rayner, 2015, p.25)

‘I also get [e-books] while reading an **actual book**, to allow me to read when I **forget to bring my book.**’ (Survey 2020)

‘I read both **books and on my kindle.**’ (Survey 2020)

‘I think it's **snobbery** to say that only print books are “real”’. (Survey 2022)

Inflated millennium marketing claims promising the 'the expanded book, the super-book, the hyper-book' (Drucker, 2003).



‘if you want, Kindle 2 will even read to you – something new we added that a **book could never do**’ (Jeff Bezos, Kindle 2 launch event, 2008)

‘in the Amazon world, whether or not we actively purchase any given title, we are being constantly sold the flattering image of ourselves as bibliophiles – literary connoisseurs belonging to an almost secret society of book lovers, replete with its own lingo, rituals, and enthusiasms’ (Murray, 2018, p.54)

‘A Real Bookshop for the Real World’ (Coles Books, 2023), or

‘There’s nothing like a real book & nothing like a real bookshop!’ (Forum Books, 2023)

‘Buy Real Books Online’ (The Real Bookshop, 2023) *(from an online purveyor of print books)*

'actual BOOKS' (Survey 2014)

'(actual) books' (Survey 2015)

'proper, print books' (Survey 2016)

VS.....

'some imaginary thing on screen' (FG 1 participant 3).

‘I had a JOB-job once. [a “real” 9-to-5 office job, as opposed to an academic job]’ (Ghomeshi et al., 2004, p.312)

‘it feels like I’m reading a real book’ (FG 1 participant 1)

‘[e-books] are getting better and better...they resemble books’ (FG 1 participant 5).

(To the latter, a skeptical peer replied ‘why do you not just get a book then?’ [FG 1 participant 3])

Real books - no scare quotes

- 2017 survey of U.S. book and magazine readers (n=1,020)
- Asks about 'consumer attitudes' regarding books and e-books
- **20%** completely or somewhat agreed with the statement '**e-books are not real books**' (Statista, 2017a).

‘Real’ books – scare quotes in place

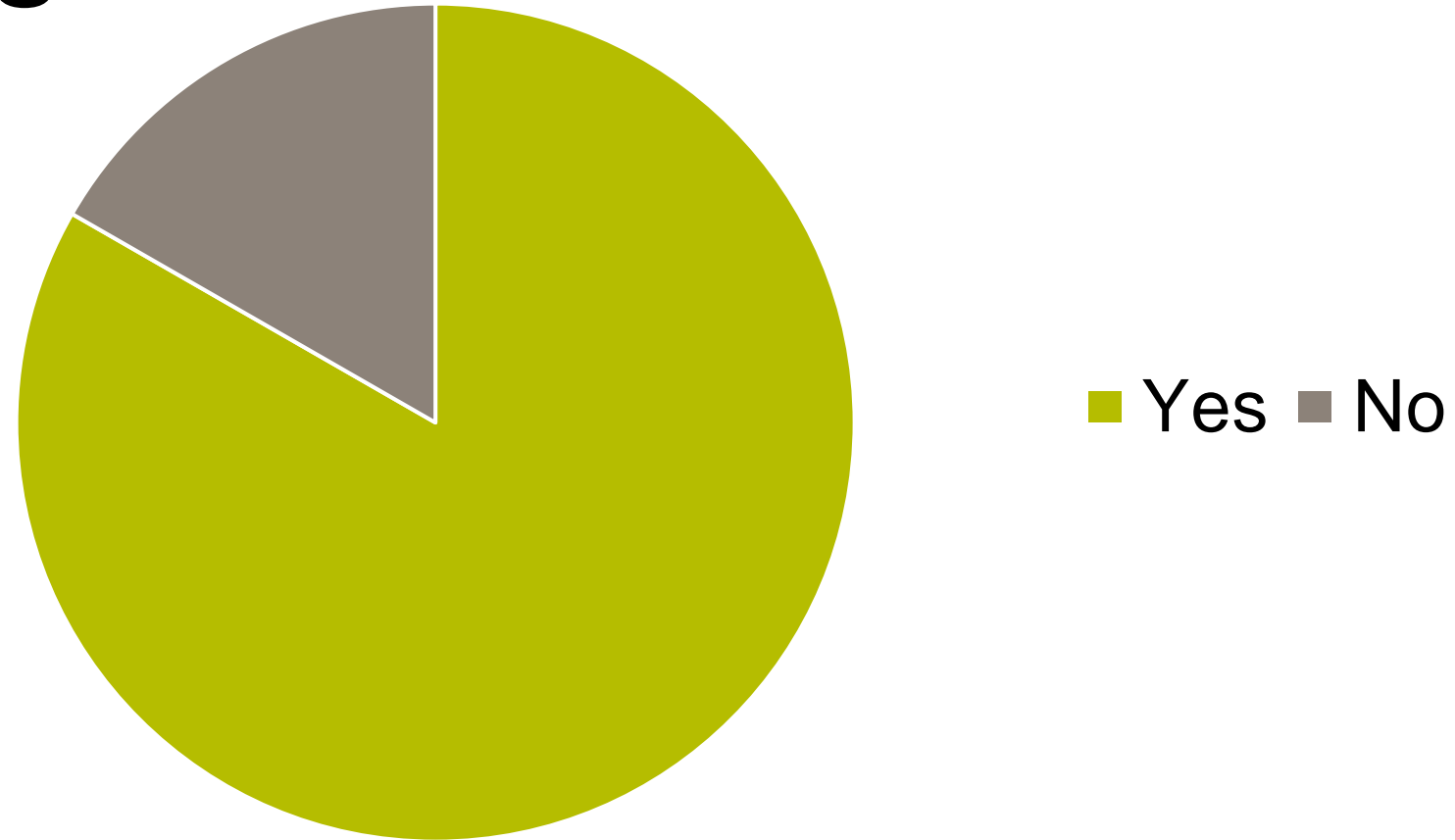
- In contrast, 2017 survey of UK book readers (n=451)
- Asks ‘if you choose a print version of a book instead of an e-book, what are the reasons for purchasing a print book?’
- **55%** agreed with the statement ‘**I want to read a “real” book again**’ (Statista, 2017b).

Question added 2022, end of survey

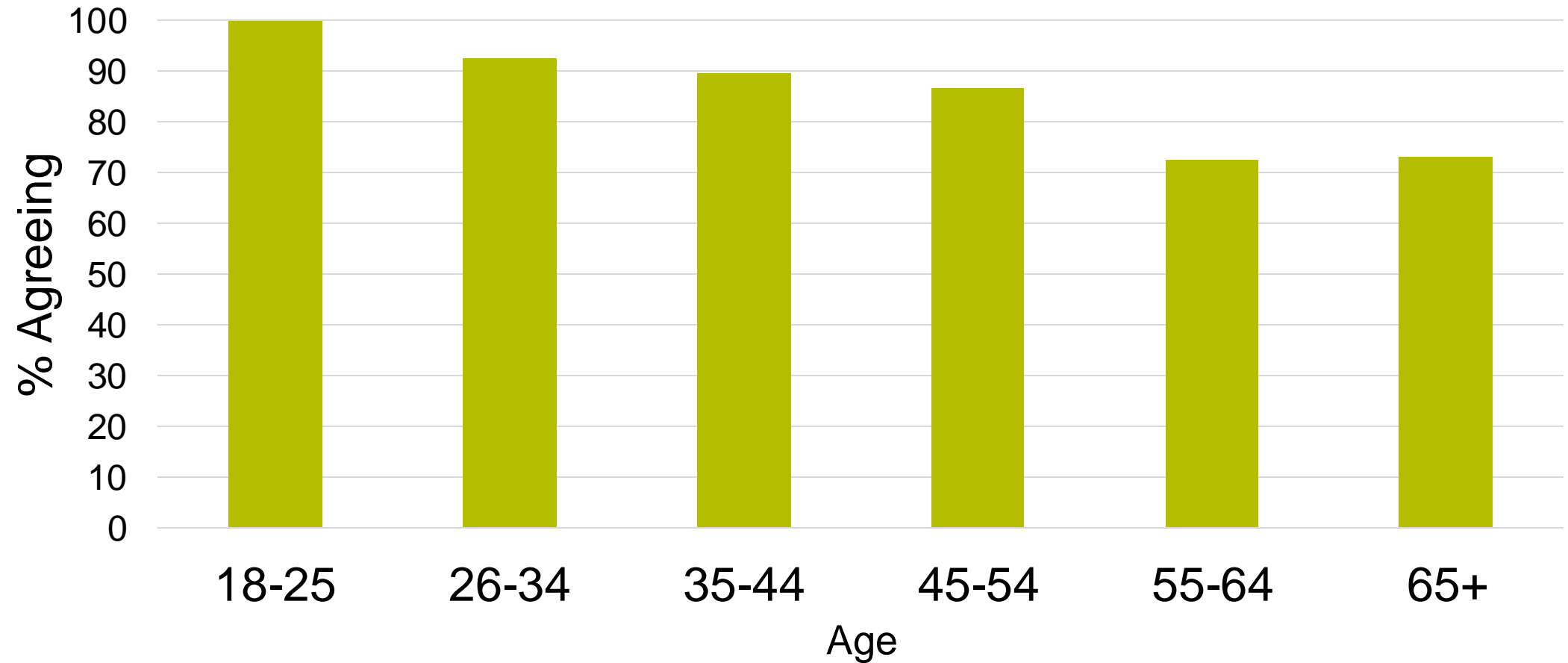
‘Do you consider e-books to be real books?’

followed by ‘why?’

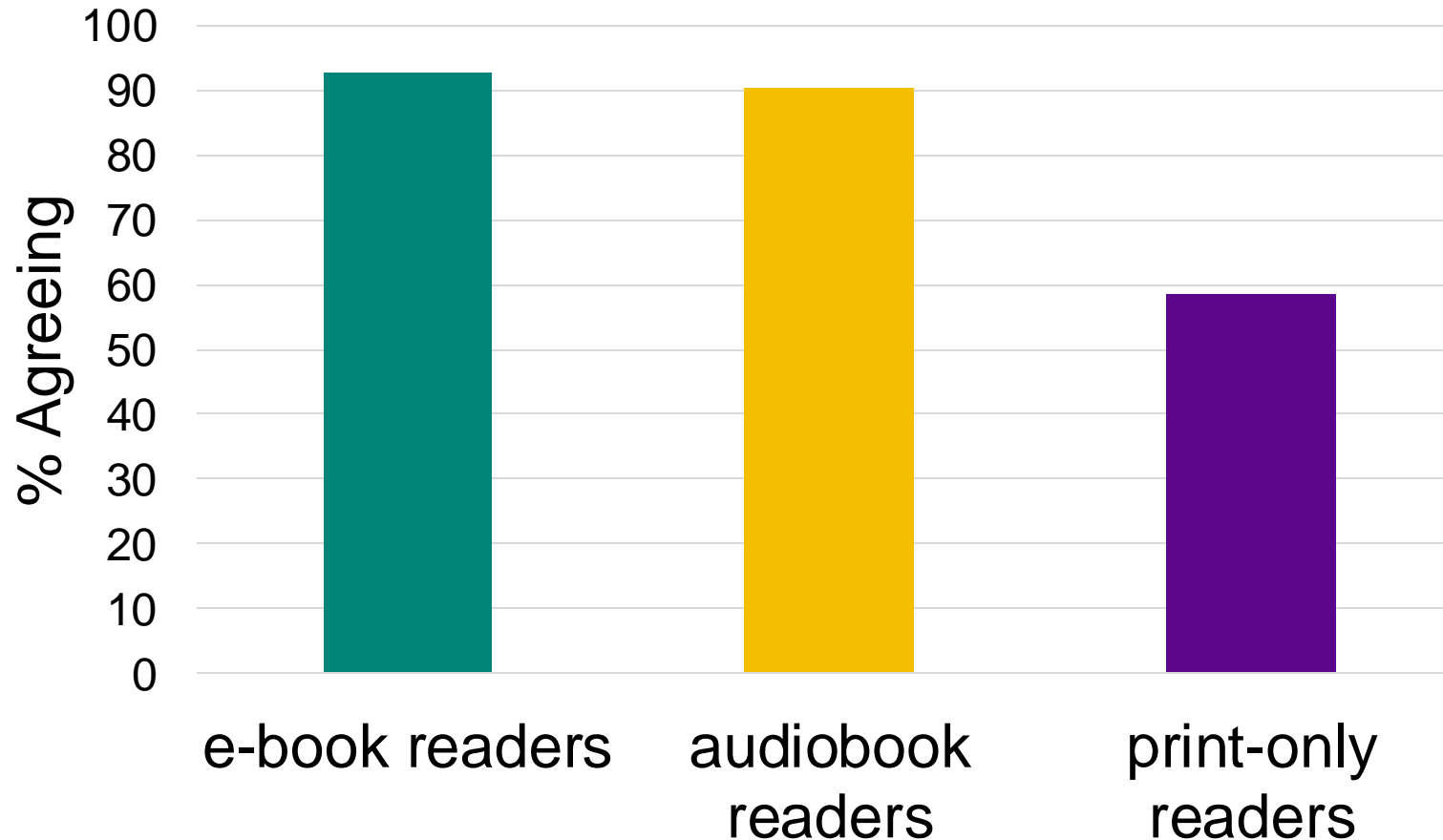
% agreeing, e-book readers vs print-only readers



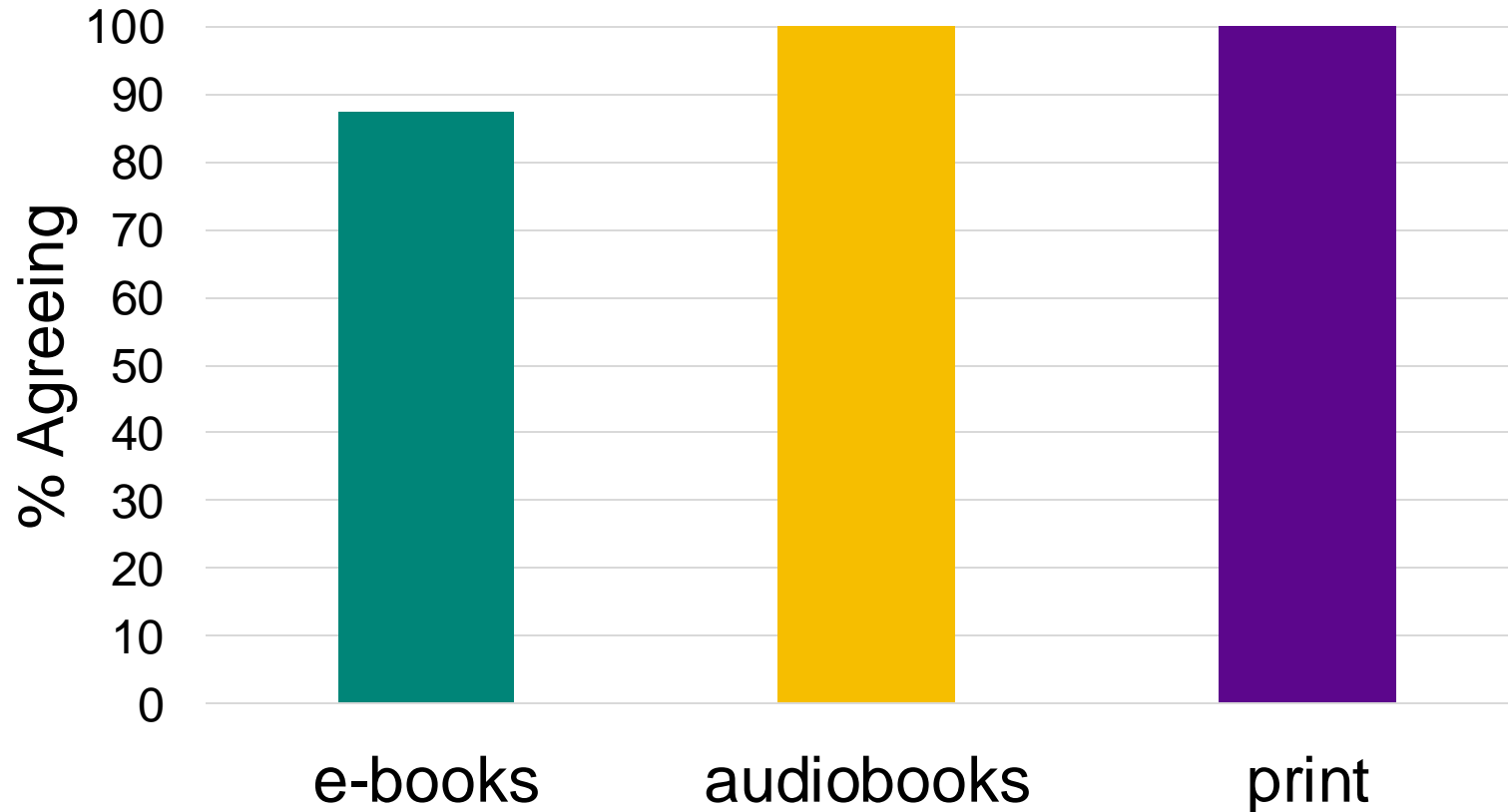
'E-books are real books', % by age



'E-books are real books', digital readers vs print-only



'E-books are real books', % of readers choosing format for health reasons



‘?’

6 key themes in 'why?' responses

1. Equivalence
2. Materiality
3. Ownership
4. Utility
5. Certainty
6. **Elitism/Ableism**

Elitism/Ableism

‘[an e-book is real because] it’s a narrative or informative text in **the same way braille books might be.**’

'I loved reading a book as a child but as I've got older health has made holding a book more difficult and listening is better on the eyes'

‘The **argument** about what constitutes real reading is **very annoying for those of us with disabilities** who have less choice of how we read’

...an argument made (but also rejected) elsewhere in this survey

'I'd just like to make it clear that listening to an audio book is NOT the same as reading a book.' (2020)

'It doesn't feel like reading unless it's a printed book. And it hardly counts as "reading" if you're listening.' (2020)

'[before COVID] I tended to think that listening to a book was 'cheating' and didn't count as reading - now I don't care' (2022)

‘snobbery’

‘privileging materiality over accessibility’

‘defining a “book” strictly by the dead trees is like defining a “human” as having a penis. Reductive and incorrect’.

‘I don’t like the arguments made about why they are not real books – they tend to be **elitist or ableist**’,

‘Only classing physical books as “real books” feels **outdated and ableist**’

‘this is also very **ableist**...Implying that [e-books] are somehow less valid is not okay’

‘...its identity as a set of aesthetic functions, cultural operations, formal conceptions, and metaphysical spaces’ (Drucker, 2004, p.7)

‘what something *is* has to be understood in terms of what it *does*, how it works within machinic, systemic, and cultural domains’ (Drucker, 2013, emphasis hers).



Ford handed **the book** to Arthur.

...

‘You press this button here you see and the screen lights up...’

(Adams, 2012, p.42-43)

