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Buy, Subscribe, or Borrow? Consumers' Use Preferences for Information Products

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Abstract

The information industry has been exploring business models for digital information products, but it was not until recent years that the new access model, especially subscription-based services, became popular. Thanks to the advancement of streaming technology, online advertisement, and DRM technology, information providers were able to design various pricing schemes and provide various services for users with different needs. Consumers seem to favor these services increasingly, but some questions remain: Is there a significant shift in users' general preferences for all media content? Do they prefer any particular models under specific circumstances? What factors are related to users' preferences? This paper reports and compares the results of two surveys on consumers' preferences for obtaining books, music, and movies. One survey focused on general users, using a sample of 304 participants aged between 22 and 75, and the other focused on "Generation Z," using a sample of 323 college students, mostly between 18 and 21 years old. This study found that consumers' preferred ways of obtaining information products vary by age, type of content, and purpose of use; users' preferences for obtaining movie content is quite stabilized; the college students tend to prefer access more than the older group did but not in the case of books. In addition, the "older users" are at least as adapted to the digital format as Generation Z, but the younger groups are less likely to borrow information content from the library.

Introduction

The information industry has been exploring business models for digital information products, but it was not until recent years that the new access model, especially subscription-based services, became popular (Shapiro & Varian, 1999; Watkins, Denegri-Knott, & Molesworth, 2016). Thanks to the advancement of streaming technology, online advertisement, and DRM technology, information providers were able to design various pricing schemes and provide various services for users with different needs. Consumers seem to favor these services increasingly, but some questions remain: Is there a significant shift in users' general preferences for all media content? Do they prefer any particular models under specific circumstances? What factors are related to users' preferences?

This paper reports research findings concerning users' preferences for obtaining different types of information products or media content (books, music, and movies) from two surveys, which were part of a larger project on users' perceptions of ownership, digital rights, and media preferences (Zhu & Cho, 2018). In particular, this paper answers the following research questions: (1) What are the

participants' general preferences for obtaining different types of information products? (2) What are the participants' specific preferences for obtaining different types of information products for different purposes?

Results of the study may be interesting to multiple audiences: academic and public librarians can understand their users better and learn new ways of serving users and promoting their e-resources; and publishers and vendors can gain a better knowledge of their end users, which may help them design, develop, and produce information products.

Research Design

We used the online survey methods to address the research questions. In order to reach out to a wide range of age groups and geographical locations, we recruited U.S. residents via Amazon's Mechanical Turk mechanism. After excluding any incomplete surveys and those who failed the attention check questions, we collected a total of 304 responses for the analysis. The average age of the participants was 40.65 ($SD = 11.48$), with responses ranging from 22 to 75 years old. The gender distribution of the

participants was quite even, although slightly more females participated ($n = 154$ or 50.7%). The majority of the sample was Caucasian/White ($n = 256$ or 84.2%), and 43.1% earned at least a bachelor's degree in college ($n = 131$).

The second group of participants, "Generation Z," were U.S. college students from a research university in the Southeast with over 20,000 undergraduate students. Using a similar survey instrument, we collected 323 valid responses for the final analysis. The participants were freshmen and sophomores ranging from 18 to 27 years old (more than 95% of them were between 18 to 21) with various discipline backgrounds. More males participated ($n = 179$, or 55.4%) than females, and most participants were Caucasian/White ($n = 272$ or 81.4%).

General Preferences for Obtaining Information Content

Tables 1 and 2 summarize some of the major results collected from the two participant groups. We included two categories for books because we assumed the purpose of use played a role in reader preferences. Results showed that, for both age groups, users had different preferences for different types of content.

The results showed a strong preference for purchasing books in both groups. In the MTurk survey, participants demonstrated a much stronger preference for physical copies, for books used for either education/research or leisure purposes (Table 1). Over 40% of participants preferred buying physical copies of education books and almost 48% of them preferred

buying physical copies of leisure books. A relatively large group of participants preferred borrowing education books from libraries (30.9%), especially physical copies of these library books. An almost equal number of participants preferred purchasing digital copies (20.7%) of leisure book and borrowing from libraries (20.4%). Digital copies of education books were much less preferable (7.9%). In this group of participants, very few choose to rent or borrow books.

Generation Z showed an overall similar but somewhat distinct pattern. In general, the students also preferred to buy physical books for both purposes, and they were less likely to purchase digital copies or rent. However, compared to the MTurk group, the college students were more interested in buying digital copies (15.5%) and renting physical copies (18.3%) for education purposes than the older group was. They preferred borrowing from libraries (14.9%) less than the older group did. In addition, when it comes to leisure reading, a majority of the college students preferred buying physical copies (64.1%), and the second choice was buying digital copies (9.6%). Subscription, rent, and borrowing were not popular choices.

With regard to the preferences for obtaining music content, in general, buying digital songs and music subscriptions were the favorite choices for both groups (Table 2). Compared to their book-related preferences, participants were much less likely to buy physical music, and they were much less likely to borrow music from libraries or family/friends. However, purchasing was still preferred for obtaining music, as 164 (54.0%) participants in the MTurk group preferred to buy music and most of them would buy digital music. In comparison, students

Table 1. General preferences in obtaining information content (MTurk group).

	Buy physical	Buy digital	Subscription	Rent physical	Rent digital	Borrow from library	Borrow from family/friends	Total
Books for education/research	122 (40.1%)	24 (7.9%)	8 (2.6%)	32 (10.5%)	19 (10.5%)	94 (30.9%)	5 (1.6%)	304 (100%)
Books for leisure	145 (47.7%)	63 (20.7%)	8 (2.6%)	9 (3.0%)	8 (2.6%)	62 (20.4%)	9 (3.0%)	304 (100%)
Music	47 (15.5%)	117 (38.5%)	106 (34.9%)	n/a	n/a	16 (5.3%)	18 (5.9%)	304 (100%)
Movies	39 (12.8%)	43 (14.1%)	120 (39.5%)	14 (4.6%)	61 (20.1%)	15 (4.9%)	12 (4.0%)	304 (100%)

Table 2. General preferences in obtaining information content (Generation Z), “other” option added.

	Buy physical	Buy digital	Subscription	Rent physical	Rent digital	Borrow from library	Borrow from FF	Other	Total
Books for education/research	110 (34.1%)	50 (15.5%)	3 (0.9%)	59 (18.3%)	28 (8.7%)	48 (14.9%)	11 (3.3%)	11 (3.3%)	320 (99.1%)
Books for leisure	207 (64.1%)	31 (9.6%)	6 (1.9%)	12 (3.7%)	4 (1.2%)	25 (7.7%)	23 (7.1%)	13 (4.0%)	321 (99.4%)
Music	16 (5.0%)	116 (35.9%)	144 (44.6%)	/	/	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.6%)	42 (13%)	321 (99.4%)
Movies	17 (5.3%)	65 (20.1%)	142 (44.0%)	7 (2.2%)	48 (14.9%)	4 (1.2%)	9 (2.8%)	29 (9.0%)	321 (99.4%)

were more interested in subscription (44.6% vs. 34.9%) and less interested in purchasing CDs than the other group (5% vs. 15.5%).

The pattern of preferences for movies was similar to that for music. In the MTurk group, the subscription model was much more popular than any other option (39.5%). Purchasing (26.9%, DVD and digital copies combined) and rental (20.1%) were also popular choices for watching movies, especially the digital option. In comparison, students were less likely to purchase DVDs (5.3%), more likely to buy digital video (20.1%), and more likely to subscribe (44%).

If we simply define the ownership model as purchasing either physical copies or digital copies and define the access model as subscription, renting, and borrowing, the results revealed different patterns for different types of content. In the MTurk group (Figure 1), there was a bifurcated preference for

educational books (48% preferred owning) and for music (51% preferred owning). For leisure books, the majority of participants (68.4%) preferred owning. However, only 26.9% of participants preferred ownership of movies over accessing movie content.

Generation Z showed a very similar pattern as that of the MTurk results (Figure 2). They showed a stronger preference for owning/purchasing educational books (52%) and leisure books (77%). In addition, they had a stronger preference for the access model over the ownership model for music (53%).

SPECIFIC PREFERENCES FOR OBTAINING CONTENT

Tables 3 to 5 reveal more details about users’ preferences for different ways of obtaining digital media content. We listed eight or nine scenarios for each media type and asked about the participants’

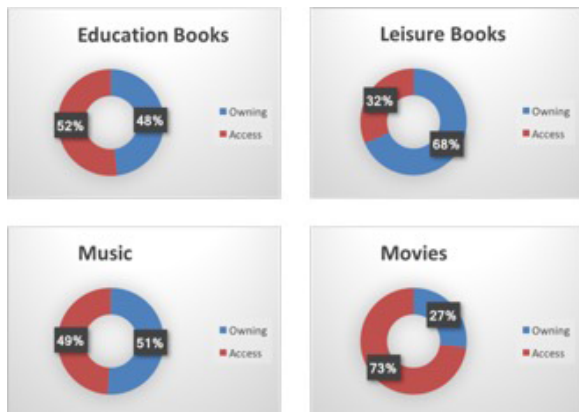


Figure 1. General preferences in obtaining information content, in terms of owning vs. access, MTurk.

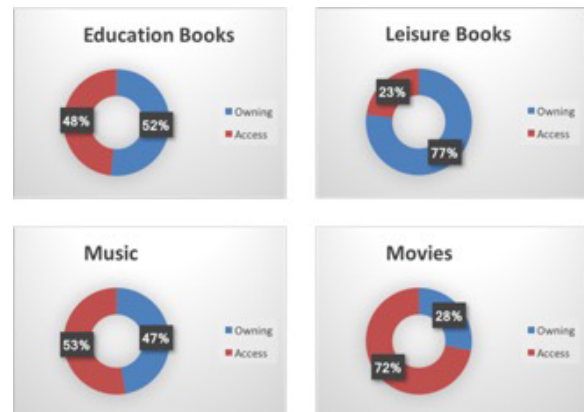


Figure 2. General preferences in obtaining information content, in terms of owning vs. access, Generation Z.

Table 3. Preferences regarding obtaining book content.

Scenario	Purchase Print	Purchase e-book	Subscribe	Borrow Print	Borrow e-book	Rent Print	Rent e-book	Not Sure	Total
Favorite author	198 (65.13%)	59 (19.41%)	10 (3.29%)	25 (8.22%)				12 (3.95%)	304
	260 (80%)	18 (5.54%)	7 (2.15%)	12 (3.63%)	2 (0.62%)	3 (0.92%)	3 (0.92%)	20 (6.15%)	323
Special edition	235 (77.30%)	29 (9.54%)	10 (3.29%)	9 (2.96%)				21 (6.91%)	304
	257 (79.08%)	11 (3.38%)	10 (3.08%)	17 (5.23%)	3 (0.92%)	3 (0.92%)	6 (1.85%)	18 (5.54%)	323
Classroom/ academic use	116 (38.16%)	31 (10.20%)	32 (10.53%)	115 (37.83%)				10 (3.29%)	304
	114 (35.08%)	49 (15.08%)	22 (6.77%)	42 (12.92%)	13 (4%)	47 (14.46%)	24 (7.38%)	14 (4.31%)	323
Training/ occupational use	112 (36.84%)	42 (13.82%)	35 (11.51%)	103 (33.88%)				12 (3.95%)	304
	126 (38.77%)	55 (16.92%)	17 (5.23%)	49 (15.08%)	11 (3.38%)	30 (9.2%)	20 (6.15%)	17 (5.23%)	323
Reading for leisure	122 (40.13%)	88 (28.95%)	37 (12.17%)	48 (15.79%)				9 (2.96%)	304
	225 (69.23%)	30 (9.23%)	5 (1.54%)	31 (9.54%)	3 (0.92%)	11 (3.38%)	1 (0.31%)	19 (5.85%)	323
For books that I may resell	257 (84.54%)	11 (3.62%)	1 (0.33%)	10 (3.29%)				25 (8.22%)	304
	261 (80.31%)	12 (3.69%)	6 (1.85%)	14 (4.31%)	3 (0.92%)	7 (2.15%)	1 (0.31%)	21 (6.46%)	323
For repeated use	225 (74.01%)	54 (17.76%)	12 (3.95%)	3 (0.99%)				10 (3.29%)	304
	249 (76.62%)	37 (11.38%)	7 (2.15%)	7 (2.15%)	1 (0.31%)	6 (1.85%)	2 (0.62%)	16 (4.92%)	323
Gifts	268 (88.16%)	17 (5.59%)	2 (0.66%)	4 (1.32%)				13 (4.28%)	304
	285 (87.69%)	8 (2.46%)	6 (1.85%)	6 (1.85%)	2 (0.62%)	2 (0.62%)	0 (0.00%)	16 (4.92%)	323

preference in each scenario. To enable direct comparisons, in Tables 3–5, each scenario has two corresponding rows, representing the MTurk group (white background) and the Generation Z group (gray background), separately. For the student group, we have included more detailed options in the survey. For example, we provided options such as “borrowing physical,” “borrowing digital,” “renting physical” (when applicable), and “renting digital” (when applicable) as opposed to “borrowing/renting” in the MTurk survey.

For books written by their favorite author, the two groups showed similar patterns—both groups preferred purchasing, but students were more likely to buy print copies, and the older people were more likely to buy e-books (Table 3). The case of special editions was very similar to favorite author.

For classroom use or academic use, they also showed very similar patterns. However, in the borrow/rent category, the MTurk participants were mostly borrowing print copies from libraries (not shown in the

Table 4. Preferences regarding obtaining music.

Scenario	Purchased CD	Purchased digital music	subscription	Borrow CD	Borrow digital	Not Sure	Total
Favorite artists	95 (31.25%)	139 (45.72%)	49 (16.12%)	2 (0.66%)		19 (6.25%)	304
	48 (14.86%)	117 (36.22%)	134 (41.49%)	1 (0.31%)	4 (1.24%)	19 (5.88%)	323
Special features edition	150 (49.34%)	84 (27.63%)	43 (14.14%)	3 (0.99%)		24 (7.89%)	304
	68 (21.05%)	111 (34.37%)	112 (34.67%)	3 (0.93%)	5 (1.55%)	24 (7.43%)	323
Classroom/academic use	45 (14.80%)	82 (26.97%)	67 (22.04%)	75 (24.67%)		35 (11.51%)	304
	16 (4.95%)	84 (26.01%)	110 (34.06%)	27 (8.36%)	53 (16.41%)	33 (11.76%)	323
Training/occupational use	48 (15.79%)	80 (26.32%)	65 (21.38%)	76 (25.00%)		35 (11.51%)	304
	17 (5.26%)	85 (26.32%)	112 (34.67%)	27 (8.36%)	44 (13.62%)	38 (11.76%)	323
Listening for leisure	43 (14.14%)	116 (38.16%)	120 (39.47%)	8 (2.63%)		17 (5.59%)	304
	15 (4.64%)	116 (35.91%)	162 (50.15%)	4 (1.24%)	6 (1.86%)	20 (6.19%)	323
For albums that I may resell	222 (73.03%)	30 (9.87%)	17 (5.59%)	9 (2.96%)		26 (8.55%)	304
	144 (44.58%)	55 (17.03%)	68 (21.05%)	7 (2.17%)	6 (1.86%)	15 (13.31%)	323
For music that I may listen to repeatedly	55 (18.09%)	166 (54.61%)	68 (22.37%)	2 (0.66%)		13 (4.28%)	304
	22 (6.81%)	131 (40.56%)	143 (44.27%)	5 (1.55%)	7 (2.17%)	15 (4.64%)	323
Gifts to friends/family	203 (66.78%)	50 (16.45%)	17 (5.59%)	4 (1.32%)		30 (9.87%)	304
	152 (47.06%)	73 (22.60%)	64 (19.81%)	5 (1.55%)	4 (1.24%)	25 (7.74%)	323
Reuse for creative activities	71 (23.36%)	108 (35.53%)	36 (11.84%)	10 (3.29%)		79 (25.99%)	304
	39 (12.07%)	127 (39.32%)	87 (26.93%)	6 (1.86%)	11 (3.41%)	53 (16.41%)	323

table), while students split almost evenly between borrowing print and renting print (Table 3). Only a small portion preferred borrowing or renting digital copies. The case of training and occupational use was very similar to education/academic use.

In terms of leisure reading, similar to what is described in the previous section, both groups preferred to buy; but students preferred to purchase leisure books in print format (69.23%), while the other group also liked purchasing e-books (28.95%).

For the scenarios of possible resale, repeated use, and giving gifts, most users preferred buying physical copies, as one would expect.

Preferences for music showed more differences between the two participant groups. For favorite artists, the MTurk participants preferred buying either CD or digital music. The college students liked subscription much more than the other group did (Table 4). Students also preferred to buy, overall, but their preference for digital format was more apparent than the other group.

In the case of special feature editions, the MTurk group showed a strong preference for buying CDs

(close to 50%). The college students were only slightly more likely to buy physical media in this case than they would in the previous scenario (Table 4).

For educational use of music, again, students liked subscription more than any other option. The MTurk group were more likely to purchase. In addition, both groups also preferred borrowing for educational purposes. Training/occupational uses showed an almost identical pattern.

In the case of listening for leisure, the patterns were similar between the two groups, but students preferred subscription more than the other group did, and they were less likely to buy than the other group would.

For the scenarios of possible resale, repeated use, and giving gifts, quite different from the preferences for obtaining book content, participants' choices varied for each scenario. For albums they might resell, most preferred buying physical copies, as expected. However, a considerable number of students chose digital copies and subscription (Table 4). Also, many participants were not sure about this situation, possibly because they had not thought about this right.

Table 5. Preferences regarding obtaining movies.

Scenario	Purchased DVD	Purchased digital video	Rental DVD	Rental digital video	Subscription	Borrowed DVD	Borrowed digital video	Not Sure	Total
Favorite actors/directors	106 (34.87%)	65 (21.38%)	12 (3.95%)	14 (4.61%)	79 (25.99%)	9 (2.96%)		19 (6.25%)	304
	115 (35.60%)	72 (22.29%)	16 (4.95%)	14 (4.33%)	75 (23.22%)	1 (0.31%)	7 (2.17%)	23 (7.12%)	323
Special features edition	145 (47.70%)	51 (16.78%)	14 (4.61%)	11 (3.62%)	53 (17.43%)	7 (2.30%)		23 (7.57%)	304
	117 (36.22%)	63 (19.50%)	19 (5.88%)	10 (3.10%)	77 (23.84%)	2 (0.62%)	6 (1.86%)	29 (8.98%)	323
Classroom/academic use	50 (16.45%)	39 (12.83%)	47 (15.46%)	38 (12.50%)	55 (18.09%)	46 (15.13%)		29 (9.54%)	304
	33 (10.22%)	67 (20.74%)	35 (10.84%)	36 (11.15%)	66 (20.43%)	22 (6.81%)	31 (9.60%)	33 (10.22%)	323
Training/occupational use	47 (15.46%)	43 (14.14%)	50 (16.45%)	31 (10.20%)	58 (19.08%)	48 (15.79%)		27 (8.88%)	304
	32 (9.91%)	68 (21.05%)	33 (10.22%)	29 (8.98%)	69 (21.36%)	25 (7.74%)	34 (10.53%)	33 (10.22%)	323
Watching for leisure	44 (14.47%)	39 (12.83%)	29 (9.54%)	36 (11.84%)	134 (44.08%)	9 (2.96%)		13 (4.28%)	304
	50 (15.48%)	77 (23.84%)	23 (7.12%)	27 (8.36%)	113 (34.98%)	3 (0.93%)	6 (1.86%)	24 (7.43%)	323
For videos that I may resell in the future	230 (75.66%)	16 (5.26%)	5 (1.64%)	3 (0.99%)	17 (5.59%)	4 (1.32%)		29 (9.54%)	304
	158 (48.92%)	46 (14.24%)	7 (2.17%)	12 (3.72%)	42 (13.00%)	5 (1.55%)	5 (1.55%)	48 (14.86%)	323
For videos that I may watch repeatedly	114 (37.50%)	97 (31.91%)	2 (0.66%)	11 (3.62%)	62 (20.39%)	5 (1.64%)		13 (4.28%)	304
	95 (29.41%)	93 (28.79%)	10 (3.10%)	10 (3.10%)	85 (26.32%)	2 (0.62%)	5 (1.55%)	23 (7.12%)	323
Gifts to friends/family	236 (77.63%)	30 (9.87%)	3 (0.99%)	4 (1.32%)	12 (3.95%)	1 (0.33%)		18 (5.92%)	304
	195 (60.37%)	39 (12.07%)	11 (3.41%)	5 (1.55%)	44 (13.62%)	3 (0.93%)	0 (0.00%)	26 (8.05%)	323
For creative or educational activities	72 (23.68%)	65 (21.38%)	10 (3.29%)	14 (4.61%)	36 (11.84%)	13 (4.28%)		94 (30.92%)	304
	71 (21.98%)	90 (27.86%)	12 (3.72%)	17 (5.26%)	55 (17.03%)	4 (1.24%)	6 (1.86%)	68 (21.05%)	323

Regarding repeated use, students still preferred subscription; the MTurk group preferred to buy, either CD or MP3, but MP3 was more popular (Table 4). This is quite similar to their responses to the favorite artists scenario. Interestingly, even in the case of sending gifts to friends and family, students still preferred subscription (19.81%) more than the MTurk

group did (5.59%). Both groups chose purchasing CDs as the first option (Table 4).

What if participants would like to reuse music for creative activities such as creating their own music or videos? The responses were distributed. The most popular choice for both groups was buying a digital

copy, but the MTurk group was more likely to buy physical copies and less likely to prefer subscription than the student group (Table 4). A considerable number of participants were not sure what to do.

Preferences for movies showed the least variation between the two participant groups and among different scenarios. For favorite actors and directors, the two groups' responses were almost identical—purchasing DVDs came first, followed by subscription and then purchasing digital videos (Table 5). Special features likely would encourage the MTurk group to buy instead of subscribe, but not the students.

For classroom/academic use and training/occupational use, the choices were almost evenly distributed for all options. However, students were more interested in buying digital copies and less interested in buying DVDs than the other group.

In the case of watching for leisure, the patterns were similar between the two groups, but the MTurk group preferred subscription more than the other group did, and they were less likely to buy digital copies than the other group would, which was the opposite of the music preference under the same scenario.

For the remaining scenarios (possible resale, repeated use, giving gifts, and reuse), the patterns were very similar to those of the music preferences. In general, the Generation Z participants were not as interested as the other group in purchasing DVDs, but a little more interested in purchasing digital videos in certain cases.

Discussion and Conclusions

The two surveys have high internal validity because we used various mechanisms to ensure data quality. The external validity, or generalizability, may be limited due to the nature of the sampling methods. However, some general observations about information consumption patterns can be drawn from the findings, which will be further tested in future research. These points are summarized below.

First, consumers' preferred ways of obtaining information products vary by age, type of content, and purpose of use. As described in the previous sections, the two groups of participants showed some distinct preference patterns in many of the scenarios that we investigated. It may be worth mentioning that we also examined other demographic

factors—gender, income, educational level, employment status, race—using statistical tests but did not find those factors to be significant. The previous session also detailed how participants favored different consumption models for books, music, and movies in general and in different specific scenarios. This observation is also partly supported by a few previous studies (Berger, Matt, Steininger, & Hess, 2015).

Second, in general, the college students tend to prefer access more than the older group did. In particular, the participants showed a strong preference for accessing/subscribing music content over purchasing physical or digital copies. Even for repeated use and giving gifts, the college students preferred subscription more than the older group did. However, with regard to books, Generation Z preferred physical copies strongly—even stronger than the older generations, especially in the case of reading for leisure. However, it is difficult to say whether this is due to their preference for the print book format or because of the lack of affordable and flexible pricing models for e-book purchasing and/or subscription. In any case, it may be too early to decide whether there has been a fundamental change in people's preference for ownership (Perzanowski & Schultz, 2016).

Third, the “older users” are at least as adapted to the digital format as Generation Z. In some cases, the participants were more likely to choose e-books and digital movies than the college students. Combining with the previous point, these patterns indirectly refuted a common speculation that young people growing up with ICT were more likely to use digital information. Maybe what matters is not the format, but a mixture of the importance of the content, the specific business models provided, and financial factors.

Fourth, users' preferences for obtaining movie content seem to be quite stabilized, where the access model has won. Although for different purposes consumers may prefer different ways of access, their consumption behaviors are quite predictable, and people of different ages have very similar preferences. This may be due to the nature of movie content consumption—people tend not to watch movies repeatedly and therefore ownership may not be essential compared to other media types. Online streaming and the pay-per-view models fit this consumption pattern well.

Last but not least, we noticed that the college student participants, compared to the other group, were less likely to go to the library for information

products/media content for any purpose. This result obviously cannot be generalized to the whole Generation Z, but it is worth further investigation. Perhaps this represents the consumer culture that the younger generation is used to with regard to media

content as well as entertainment material. As Rifkin feared, every aspect of people's life might become a paid-for experience (Rifkin, 2000, 2014). If this is true, then library professionals may need to redesign their collections and programs.

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