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Academic e-books in Swedish university libraries: acquisition, licensing, and promotion for sustainable collections

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Abstract

Introduction. This paper focuses on the processes relevant to creating sustainable e-book collections, namely, the acquisition, licensing, and promotion of e-books in academic libraries.

Method. Thirteen librarians from eight southern Swedish university libraries participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were recorded digitally, and the transcripts served as the data for analysis.

Analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis, drawing on Schatzki's practice theory, was conducted on the data, and open coding was carried out using MS Word and Excel.

Results. The results show that the acquisition process of e-books is determined by the decisions of librarians. Libraries use title-by-title acquisition, evidence-based acquisition (EBA), demand-driven acquisition (DDA), and the credits model. Difficulties with licensing and digital rights management (DRM) may hinder academic e-books from being fully appreciated by users. A major advantage of e-books is that they can be read by multiple users simultaneously. Promoting e-books meets with varying success, which can be attributed to a lack of knowledge among users, and a lack of promotional efforts by librarians.

Conclusions. The distinction between the management of electronic and print budgets is often not well defined. Academic e-books may become more accepted among users if digital rights management limitations were lifted and proper licensing terms were implemented. Librarians should present thorough marketing plans based on user-centred acquisition and expand communication with the user base through interactive channels such as social media.

Introduction

In Sweden, the use of e-books has increased slowly but steadily during the last fifteen years. In 2024, twenty-four per cent of the population had read at least one e-book during the year (Tattersall Wallin & Gunnarsson Lorentzen, 2025). Although e-books have become a well-known tool for public libraries (Wallin, 2019), it is important to consider whether academic e-books made available by university libraries are similarly popular among students, teachers, and researchers. The reasons for not using academic e-books are manifold, such as users' and librarians' preferences and a lack of promotion. Research on user behaviour and on whether print books offer a more satisfying reading experience than e-books has been well explored, but the work processes (acquisition models, digital rights management, licensing, and promotion) related to academic e-books, especially at Swedish university libraries, have been neglected (Maceviciute et al., 2014). The aim of this paper is to bridge this gap by exploring the key processes involved in developing sustainable academic e-book collections at Swedish university libraries. By analysing how acquisition, licensing models, and marketing initiatives shape e-book availability, this study aims to provide insights into the challenges and opportunities librarians face. Schatzki's (2002, 2005) practice theory provides a helpful lens through which to analyse the data.

In practice theory, practices are described as sets of sayings and doings. These sets can be hierarchically organised and consist of other actions, such as tasks and projects (Schatzki, 2002). Practice theory can be applied to show that people are a part of and interact with the physical world, and that they perform actions and react to circumstances in ways that make sense to them. Organisations are considered places where social practices are performed (Schatzki, 2005) and consist of several practice bundles, such as the selection and acquisition process in a library, and material arrangements, such as office spaces and hallways where these practices can take place. Thus, libraries function as institutions where many social practices take place, collide, and interweave. Actions that form part of these practices involve four processes; practical understandings (abilities related to actions); rules (tenets, instructions, and principles which direct people on what to do); teleoaffective structures (hierarchically ordered tasks and projects), and general understandings (how practices are performed) (Schatzki, 2002). General understandings refers to actors' knowledge of how to perform certain actions.

Librarians know how to identify important parts of the acquisition process, for example, criteria for e-book selection, cost-benefit analysis, and accessibility. Librarians' action intelligibility demonstrates that they understand how things work depending on the context and communication with other actors, such as users, who are also present when practices take place.

Based on semi-structured interviews with representatives from multiple Swedish university libraries, this research offers a comprehensive understanding of how libraries navigate the complexities of digital collections while striving to meet the diverse needs of their academic communities.

The two research questions for this study are as follows:

RQ1: How does the acquisition process of academic e-books work?

RQ2: How do libraries work with the promotion of academic e-books?

Literature review

Acquisition models of academic e-books

The major factors for libraries' purchase of academic e-books are user needs, availability and accessibility, and their use as a complement if print titles are unavailable (Maceviciute et al., 2014). The most frequently used acquisition models are demand-driven acquisition and evidence-based acquisition.

With demand-driven acquisition, titles are available to users, but only those that are read are paid for by the library (Scott & Arthur, 2026). Libraries are relieved of additional costs and provide users with relevant titles, thus ensuring that the process is cost-effective (Coghill, 2019). With evidence-based acquisition, a large e-book collection is made available for a fixed period. At the end of that period, librarians choose the titles for their collections based on usage statistics, cost, and quality (Bucknell, 2012; Proctor, 2015; Scott & Arthur, 2026).

The advantages of demand-driven acquisition are that a large amount of content is made available to users, which in the long term leads to a large e-book collection with instant access to content that is actually read (Bucknell, 2012). Kont (2015) assesses the cost of e-book related ventures by using the time-driven activity-based costing method. In a different study, Kont (2021) applies this method to analyse time and cost efficiency of the e-book acquisition and cataloguing process in contrast to print books. The results show that e-book workflows require considerably less resources than print workflows. Kont (2020) also investigates the time and cost efficiency of demand-driven acquisition with short-term loans and finds that short-term loans are the most cost-effective method for access to e-books.

Further supporting these findings, Rogers (2018) analyses usage statistics for e-book titles selected by library users and librarians at the University of Mississippi Libraries and finds that user-selected titles are read more frequently than those selected by librarians. Similarly, Downey et al. (2014) research demand-driven acquisition and its corresponding work processes and compare them to print collections, considering costs, publishers, circulation, and publication. The authors state that demand-driven acquisition results in more active e-book use than print. Schroeder and Wright (2011) also conclude that demand-driven acquisition is favoured at Brigham Young University, as the use and circulation of large e-book packages and print collections are decreasing. Likewise, Walker and Arthur (2018) compare the use and subject matter of demand-driven acquisition e-books to print collections at the University of Alabama Libraries. Here, demand-driven acquisition e-books are used more and align more with the subject matter as compared with print titles.

Yilmaz and Ünal (2022) assess the issue of cost-benefit ratio regarding e-books at Hacettepe University Libraries and note that although evidence-based acquisition may lower costs by focusing on frequently used titles and thus benefit library budgets, it can also lead to difficulties for smaller libraries that have only limited experience with collection management. Tran and Guo (2021) also analyse the implementation of the evidence-based acquisition model in engineering and science faculties by comparing this approach to an existing STEM e-book collection. Their results show that evidence-based acquisition is more cost-effective, noting that it should not be a replacement but rather a supplement to e-book collections. The authors also state that evidence-based acquisition can be useful in other fields, such as medicine, the humanities, and social sciences, as it may be more cost-effective than demand-driven acquisition. In addition, Palazzolo et al. (2024, as cited in Scott & Arthur, 2026) investigate librarians' attitudes, motivations, adoption, and selection criteria during evidence-based acquisition. Preliminary findings indicate that title selection is influenced by usage statistics, implementation in the curricula, title availability, long-term use, titles corresponding to the content of current e-book collections, short-term cost per use, electronic formats, and print duplication. The renewal or discontinuation of evidence-based acquisition is influenced by the amount of titles used, long-term cost per use, changes in content, and management-related issues.

Bergstrom and Skinner (2025) note that academic libraries purchase e-books through different acquisition methods aligned with local requests and current library budgets. Demand from researchers and faculties remains crucial to the e-book acquisition process, and it is the librarians' duty to guarantee access, availability, and preservation of e-titles. Their research shows that a majority of librarians favour evidence-based acquisition because of the cost-benefit ratio. However, acquisition through demand-driven acquisition is often avoided because of maintenance

issues. The challenges related to e-book acquisition include a lack of expertise among librarians and complicated licensing and publisher contracts.

According to Bergstrom and Skinner (2025), a standardised model would ease the acquisition process and relieve librarians of unnecessary workload. To circumvent recurring licensing and administrative problems, librarians would opt for print instead. In this context, Walters (2013) notes that licensing restrictions and digital rights management may complicate the work with and use of e-books and lead to frustration among librarians and users, as content cannot be easily accessed due to limitations on viewing, printing, highlighting, and downloading. Licensing issues may further limit the number of simultaneous users (Armstrong & Lonsdale, 2005; Coghill, 2019). The benefits of evidence-based acquisition are shown in an array of recently published titles within a large e-book collection. Challenges include pricing, the saturation of already known titles, and that new titles may not yet be well documented (Scott & Arthur, 2026).

Promotion of academic e-books

Andreasen and Kotler (2003) and Dolnicar and Lazarevski (2009) describe libraries as non-profit organisations that should use a customer-centred approach that focuses on user behaviour. Customer service can be considered a form of social marketing. The aim of this kind of marketing strategy (Kaur, 2009; Kotler, 1979) is to create greater value for library services rather than selling a product. Marketing techniques applicable to non-profit organisations may include the 4P model: product, place, price, and promotion (Kwan et al., 2023). This can be extended by including people, physical evidence, and process. The mixed marketing strategy can be successful, as it entails both material dimensions, such as product and place, and social dimensions, such as library patrons. The promotion of e-books to users may be essential for making university libraries' supply of e-books more accessible and provide users with the opportunity to become more experienced with e-books.

In their study on user awareness of academic e-books, Blummer and Kenton (2020) observe that students, faculty, and library staff are predominantly uninformed about academic e-books. They state that inferior user interfaces and incomplete metadata are some of the reasons why there is a lack of knowledge about e-books in academic libraries. The authors therefore encourage university librarians to promote e-books to gain wider readership. Research by Lonsdale and Armstrong (2010) and Vasileiou and Rowley (2011) shows that promotional efforts include websites, online public access catalogues (OPACs), emails, newsletters, bulletin boards, and physical or online workshops.

Social media can also be applied as a more recent method for promoting e-books (Choi & Joo, 2021; Kaushik, 2016; Muhammad & Zhiwei, 2021). Other studies analysing the marketing of e-books conclude that promotional efforts may positively influence user awareness. Jain (2014) considers social media marketing to be more time- and cost-effective and argues that it also attracts younger audiences. Social media here serves as an interactive discussion forum between library staff and users (Kaushik, 2016). Problems and challenges to successful social media marketing of e-books include lack of staff and financial resources, lack of expertise among librarians, and issues relating to IT infrastructure (Choi & Joo, 2021).

Method and research design

Participants and institutions

The study was conducted with thirteen participants from eight southern Swedish university libraries (see Table 1). For reference, there are 108 libraries at thirty-nine universities in Sweden. The eight university libraries in this study vary in size and house a multitude of faculties and departments. They specialise in business, engineering, communication, health sciences, social sciences, information science, physics, mathematics, biomedicine, theology, and the humanities.

The number of registered students at the universities ranges from 10,000 to 53,000, and e-book acquisitions range from 157,000 to 928,000 per library. The librarians who participated in the interviews were either employed at a specific faculty or unaffiliated. In the latter case, they were part of the university's media division or similar services.

Participants were recruited by email sent to the head librarians of university libraries in southern Sweden. The reasons for choosing university libraries in southern Sweden were to facilitate in-person interviews, as the authors reside in this part of the country, and because the south is more densely populated and consequently has more university libraries. Of the fifteen university libraries that were contacted by the researchers, eight agreed to participate. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with librarians or other staff affiliated with the acquisition of electronic media or similar tasks.

As this study is based on a small number of interviews with representatives of Swedish academic libraries, it does not attempt to make generalisations about other academic institutions. The answers provided should not be considered generalisable to the whole population or to library staff across Swedish institutions. Furthermore, the fact that the chosen libraries are situated in southern Sweden could be seen as introducing geographical bias. Five libraries chose one representative whose knowledge covered all aspects of the research and interview questions, whereas the remaining three libraries selected several representatives from different faculties with expertise in e-book acquisition processes and policies. Seven of the eight interviews were conducted on site, whereas the final interview was conducted via Zoom. Five of the eight interviews were conducted in Swedish and three in English. Swedish interviews were translated into English by the study's first author. The participants' responses were edited for grammar but were otherwise unchanged.

Interview sessions	Role of participants	Department	Participant code
#1	Librarian	University Services	P01
#2	Librarian	Professional Services	P02
#3	Librarian	Department for Acquisitions	P03
#4	Librarian	Department of Information	P04
#5	Librarian Librarian	Media Division Media Division	P05 P06
#6	Librarian Librarian Librarian Librarian	E-resources and Library Search Systems E-resources and Library Search Systems Media Team, Biomedical Libraries Media Team, Social Sciences	P07 P08 P09 P10
#7	Librarian Librarian	Social Sciences Faculty Library Libraries of the Joint Faculties of Humanities and Theology	P11 P12
#8	Librarian	Information Resources and Scientific Publishing	P13

Table 1. Interview schedule with participant code

Interview guide

An interview guide was prepared beforehand (see Appendix). The guide was essential to ascertain that all necessary topics relating to the research questions were covered in the interviews (Wildemuth, 2017). To find relevant questions for the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with a librarian from the University of Borås. The questions asked in the pilot interview formed the basis for the subsequent research interviews.

The interviews followed the same structure. The participants were first asked to state their respective occupation and faculty or division at the library. This was followed by questions on the acquisition and selection criteria for e-books, including whether the libraries have distinct acquisition policies or plans. The next section focused on acquisition models, such as evidence-based acquisition, demand-driven acquisition, and the credits model, as well as which models were used by the libraries. Participants were then asked about the acquisition process, including the number of e-books acquired annually and, if possible, other e-media, as well as their subject areas. This section also covered whether there was a budget for e-books or e-media, distinct from that for print media.

Further questions covered licensing (licences for one or more users), digital rights management (saving and downloading content), and open access. Participants were also asked how they promote e-books and to what degree they were successful in making e-books visible to users. The following section covered librarians' acceptance of and feedback on e-book use and, if possible, feedback from students and researchers. The last segment of the interview guide dealt with the similarities and differences between the working processes of print and e-books, as well as future trends in academic and non-academic e-books and the technological development of the medium.

Reliability and validity

The design of this study supports methods that strengthen both reliability (consistency) and validity (accuracy) in the research process (Bryman, 2016). Reliability refers to the use of an organised data collection method consistent with the research problem and its questions (Poortman & Schildkamp, 2012). In this study, reliability, that is, whether the study can be replicated, was ensured by the use of a concise interview guide with questions related to the research goal and topic. The interview guide was assessed beforehand, and the interviews were recorded to guarantee objectivity and minimise errors during the interview sessions. Reliability was further enhanced by all participants receiving the same questions and by conducting the interview process in the same way. The interview process was as follows: participants signed a consent form; their names were anonymised; and the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and evaluated. Participants were free to add their own opinions and thoughts relevant to the topic. This led to a variety of responses to the same interview questions. The data were analysed thematically and coded consistently across all interviews.

The validity of the research was ensured by identifying similarities and differences in patterns and opinions among participants, and by distinguishing important elements and reasons for these patterns (Poortman & Schildkamp, 2012). The similarities and differences among participants' responses were identified and summarised. By engaging with the participants, the researchers were able to identify relevant information and observations. Inconsistencies or differing views among participants were also noted, and the motivations for these differences were pursued.

Research ethics

The study was conducted according to the guidelines of *Good Research Practice* (2017) and adhered to the ethical standards for research in the humanities and social sciences issued by the Swedish Research Council (2002). These standards required consent by the participants, confidentiality, and the proper use of the research material gathered by the authors. The consent forms were signed by the participants before the interviews and the participants were informed that they

could withdraw at any time. During the interviews, no personal or sensitive information was requested, and only participants' names appear in the transcripts. For the Zoom interview, only an audio recording was used in the analysis and evaluation of the text. The participants were later anonymised, and no names are present in the final text and citations. It should therefore not be possible to identify the participants. The participants were also informed that the data would be treated confidentially and not be shared with third parties.

The interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and a mobile phone with built-in recording software. The transcripts were later approved by the participants and, in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines, digital copies of the interviews were deleted once the study had been completed and reviewed.

Coding and analysis

During data analysis, open coding was employed (Bryman, 2016), where data considered important to the research questions were gathered and grouped into several themes and topics for further analysis. The ensuing analysis of these categories generated the findings (Bryman, 2016; Wildemuth, 2017).

The approved interview transcripts were printed and grouped into themes and topics. They were then labelled and further assembled into similar themes. MS Word and Excel were used to arrange the material into distinct units, and similar topics were colour-coded for a better understanding of the data. Some interview questions were subsequently chosen by the first author of the study as individual topics in the final text, for example those concerning digital rights management and the promotion of e-books. Other topics were added later during the coding process, such as the division between print and e-books, accessibility, availability, and cost-effectiveness. Topics that were recognised at a later stage during the coding process were licensing, accessibility, cost-effectiveness, and the credits model. The last step in the coding process was reorganising the data (Kvale et al., 2014) to assemble the relevant data and draw conclusions.

Findings

This section presents the findings from interviews with thirteen participants from eight Swedish university libraries. The findings presented here consider the research questions introduced at the beginning of this paper. Drawing on practice theory as the theoretical framework, the analysis explains the recurring practices in e-book acquisition processes within academic libraries.

The university libraries in this study function as organisations, that is, as places and settings with material arrangements where social practices are performed by actors. Processes such as acquisition, licensing, and promotion, can be viewed as practices that entail actions, tasks, and projects.

The acquisition process consists of several steps, resulting in multiple action chains that are, in turn, part of practices set in different material arrangements. Practice bundles in the acquisition process are staff responsible for the whole acquisition process, the criteria for the selection of relevant e-book titles, the negotiation of licences, the purchasing of titles, and the implementation of metadata records. The practices in this process share the same goal, which is the acquisition of e-books. Practices can be connected, for example when selection is connected to purchase; overlap, when titles are available in both print and digital formats; and conflict, for example when practice bundles are not justifiable, such as in cases where an e-book purchase has been revoked or the subscription has been cancelled. Since practices are open-ended because of their teleoaffective structure, the whole process can be interrupted or cancelled because of disputes between different actors (Schatzki, 2002).

Acquisition models and processes

Packages, subscriptions, title-by-title

According to Schatzki (2005), a practice is understood as 'organized human activities'. The acquisition process of e-books is linked to user demand, as is unanimously stated by all interview participants. Thus, acquisitions are doings that in this case are informed by sayings, as user demand is the driving force (Schatzki, 2002).

According to the participants, e-book acquisition is performed through the purchase of e-book packages, title-by-title acquisition, and subscription services. A major discussion point in the interviews concerns the content of e-books and whether the acquisition models would satisfy the libraries' requirements, such as the preferences regarding use by students, teachers and researchers, and whether the titles purchased are considered to be of high quality to be accepted by university departments. Title-by-title acquisition is useful because librarians have the most control over the content: they can decide whether the purchase of individual titles is valid or can be delayed if it is deemed unfeasible or unnecessary. If certain titles are considered to be of inferior quality or too expensive, librarians can choose to purchase the print version of the book instead or to deny the purchase of the title entirely. Here we can see how practices and actions are guided by rules that are formed by principles (Schatzki, 2002).

Most of the participants state that they rarely deny purchase proposals by users. Several participants state that they use the Global Online Bibliographic Information (GOBI) Library Solutions from EBSCO for the purchase of individual e-book titles. Another possibility is to have contact with smaller publishers that do not have their own online platform but allow access to e-books through different aggregators. Titles from these aggregators often do not have digital rights management limitations (P03).

Some actions require hierarchically ordered tasks, that is, one action must happen before the next can be completed (Schatzki, 2002), as in the case of digital rights management restrictions. Participants (P04, P06) state that because of digital rights management, some e-books require additional software, such as Adobe Digital Editions, in order to be read and downloaded. This makes the use of e-books more challenging because users have to acquire an Adobe ID beforehand, and libraries have to adapt to the restrictions set by publishers. As one participant (P04) states, there are recurring problems regarding e-books with digital rights management in Adobe Digital Editions:

This gives quite a high threshold for the user to understand the concept of Adobe Digital Editions and the Adobe ID. The problem is that if you have downloaded a book, and you have it in Adobe Digital Editions for a week or thirty days, and you make notes in that one, those notes will disappear when the loan runs out. We always tell our students not to download the e-books if it is on the platform that uses DRM. [...] But if you read the books online, almost all platforms have the possibility to add notes or highlights in the text. If you do that on the online platform, it will still be there because it is connected to your personal account.

Although title-by-title acquisition is beneficial for both librarians and users, many publishers do not offer individual e-book titles. Libraries are thus forced to acquire titles through e-book subscriptions or packages. A disadvantage of these models is that librarians lack control over the content of the packages and subscriptions. Librarians also lament the financial drawbacks of subscriptions because libraries lose money in the long term. Moreover, in contrast to print books, e-books cannot be stored physically. Participant P05 therefore comments that e-book subscriptions are inferior to packages because of the lack of control and overall quality. It is argued that the content of e-book subscriptions is unpredictable and that popular e-book titles disappear after a subscription has ended (P03, P13).

The advantages for libraries regarding the acquisition of e-books are manifold. The acquisition process is advantageous, as the titles can be downloaded and used once the publisher has sent the book electronically (P11, P13). E-books do not need physical storage space and can be accessed once they are registered in the libraries' online catalogue. However, print books need storage space, which can lead to problems because of high rents and limited space (P6, P11). For users, e-books are advantageous because of their instant availability, because they can be accessed by many users simultaneously, and because there is no overdue fee, as there is no time limit. It is mentioned (P10, P11) that librarians favour open access e-books where possible because they have the fewest limitations regarding digital rights management and accessibility.

Acquisition models: evidence-based acquisition, demand-driven acquisition, credits, and licensing

The different acquisition models used at academic libraries are part of the practices that librarians have acquired through experience and actions, in this case practical understanding, that is, abilities related to actions (Schatzki, 2002). The acquisition models are title-by-title, evidence-based acquisition, demand-driven acquisition, and the credits model. These models have been met with varying success, and many participants state that they are in favour of evidence-based acquisition rather than demand-driven acquisition. It is also mentioned that because of the disadvantages of subscription models, librarians are more eager to purchase e-books in packages with evidence-based acquisition as an acquisition model which gives them more control over the titles. Several librarians say that this approach can be regarded as user-based acquisition, as only used e-books are purchased. It is also stated (P03) that although more titles are purchased than needed, evidence-based acquisition can still be seen as cost-effective because librarians know that the titles contained in the package are read. Demand-driven acquisition is considered more complicated and less user-centred than evidence-based acquisition. One of the reasons for this problem is that librarians lack direct control over the e-book selection process, as P11 states:

We tried it for over a year and a half. It was a lot of work to choose which titles should be included in the DDA stock. This was also due to the fact that ProQuest was our supplier, and they had an odd classification system and strange titles, so we were forced to remove a lot beforehand. This is a rather unsafe system, we had to put a lot of effort into it and had little control. For us, it was ineffective.

Regarding evidence-based acquisition, the cost per title is reduced if purchased as part of an e-book package in contrast to title-by-title acquisition. According to P03, a combination of different methods is a viable alternative. E-textbooks that are part of an e-book package can be acquired with evidence-based acquisition, whereas other important titles can be purchased individually through title-by-title. This combined approach can prove to be more time- and cost-efficient than using only one acquisition model (P03). Motivated by negative experiences, some participants mention the option of not using either model. Other participants state that combining both models works best for them because they complement each other. Participant P04 notes good experiences using demand-driven acquisition:

We have a platform where we set up an account and have a lot of titles that are accessible on the platform. When people use it the first and second time, it costs us only a small amount for that loan. The third time a user is using the same book, it is automatically purchased.

Here, demand-driven acquisition is present on an aggregated platform with e-books from different publishers, whereas with evidence-based acquisition there is only one publisher with many different e-book titles. In this way, the two methods complement each other, matching both the need for user-based acquisition and the librarians' preferences. In relation to ownership, participants P03 and P11 state that e-books belong to the libraries after they are purchased,

whereas P05 explains that libraries and staff cannot own e-books per se, but only buy the licence to use them. According to the participants, e-books are used instead of shared and licensed instead of owned.

Because of their intangible nature, e-books are distinct from physical books in terms of accessibility, availability, and use. Librarian P05 further explains:

You cannot own an e-book. You can only buy a licence. We usually say that we own e-books but the publisher can pull them back at any time, and that it is in fact a licence. If you want something that you want to own, or if I want a book that I can lend to somebody else, then it has to be in print. If I buy [an e-book] online, I cannot do anything with it because I do not own it, as I have only paid for borrowing it indefinitely. That is why print will not disappear.

The credits model entails a deposit paid for titles, which can be used for a limited time, usually one year. The advantages of this model are unlimited access by multiple users and cost efficiency when counted per user and per title (P03, P11). Libraries can buy new credits once the previous credits have been depleted. Participant P11 comments: 'Either you can wait until the new year starts, or you buy more credits once they run out. It is not often that they run out, these are large course books'. Participants P11 and P12 also state that they do not accept e-textbooks that allow only one or three users because this would not be feasible. Participant P12 further points out: 'We boycott titles where it is not possible to upgrade to an unlimited number of users. We choose to not buy those titles'. The credits model can also be useful in avoiding accessibility limitations because once the credits are purchased, there is an unlimited number of users (P11).

Regarding licensing, users can indirectly influence multiple licences for e-books (P03, P04, P10). It is possible that if more than one user reads a title, more licences can be purchased after librarians have assessed usage statistics (P03, P07). The librarians have acquired experience in their practices of working with e-book acquisition, which has informed their doings about the licensing model. There is also the possibility that single-user licences may be sufficient if it is certain that multiple users will not read the title. P03 notes that:

EBSCO and ProQuest have a service. When we purchase books which only they offer and no other publisher, and we do not have any other information that the item is not a textbook, then we assume that it is only this one person who is interested in the book. Then we purchase a user licence only for one user.

The approach to working with licences for only one user may also be specifically reserved for researchers or PhD students, as P10 points out:

We always want to buy e-books with unlimited users, if the price is right. But it can also happen that we receive a purchase proposal from a PhD student and we get the feeling that it is only this PhD student who will read this book. Then we purchase only for one user, in the end this is cheaper for us.

Complicated licensing procedures lead several librarians to the conclusion that open access e-books may be better than e-books with digital rights management. Because open access titles can be accessed by an unlimited number of users, many participants perceive them as a useful complement to e-books with digital rights management (P05, P07).

The credits model, although regarded as beneficial for users, receives criticism from some interview participants. Participant P13 considers the credits model flexible because the focus is primarily on usage. For example, as e-textbooks are often needed prior to examinations, titles can be purchased on short notice by using the credits model (P13). However, a common disadvantage of the model is that the credits initially purchased are exhausted rather quickly. This can lead to

frustration among users because new credits can only be purchased after the time period has ended. As participant P04 explains, if credits for a frequently accessed e-book run out, it is possible either to buy more credits or to wait until new credits can be purchased. Participant P04 further explains:

Each time an e-book is used, one credit is used. You only have a certain amount of credits for that. So let's say that you have 300 credits and you have a countdown for every use of that. If it is a heavily used book and the credits run out, then you can actually purchase another copy of the e-book. You cannot see that you have one or three or five books as an end user, but I can see at the back end that we have actually purchased more than one e-book. If we have purchased a book January 1st, and the credits run out last day of October, then we get new credits January 1st next year. And then the book will be available again. If we see that it is heavily used, then we purchase another copy of it. If it is not heavily used, then the credits will not run out.

If a title is unavailable because the credits are exhausted, it can be difficult for libraries to inform users. Participant P07 continues: 'It is a pedagogical problem because in a course with many students the credits can run out after only one or two months, and then the title can be inaccessible for ten months.'

Because of the aforementioned problems, the credits approach is not favoured by librarians (P04, P05, P09, P10). Instead, librarians recommend digital rights management-free titles with unlimited users, or open access titles. If open access is not possible, there is also the alternative of purchasing the print title (P12). In order for work with e-books to be more feasible, licensing processes should be less complicated (P12). Both librarians and users would benefit from proper licensing with unlimited access because e-book accessibility would then be more manageable.

Promotion of e-books

The majority of interview participants mention that the promotion of academic e-books is either lacking or insufficient. The main reason for this problem is that plans or policies are incomplete or non-existent. The libraries have attempted to advertise their e-books to users, with varying results. Several participants (P05, P11, P13) also emphasise that they would use the term *make aware* rather than *promotion* when referring to e-books. In addition, several librarians state that the terms *promotion* and *advertising* are connected to for-profit organisations, whereas libraries are non-profit institutions with an altruistic goal. Here we can see an example in which the practice of promotion is considered to come from organisations other than libraries, and the reasoning behind this in regard to the doings is unclear, as libraries are in fact promoting e-books (Schatzki, 2002).

Several participants (P04, P12) point out that the methods for promoting e-books are digital communication channels, such as social media, newsletters, and emails. Using this approach, librarians intend to raise awareness among students and researchers of the existence of e-books. Other methods are, for example, placing bookmarks inside physical titles that are also available as e-books, and the use of QR codes on bookshelves where both the physical and electronic versions of a title are available (P04, P06, P12). Participant P04 continues:

We don't [promote e-books], I would say. Sometimes there is a newsletter within the university. If we have purchased something bigger for our collection, we can put it in the newsletter. But then it is for the employees and the teachers at the University, not for the students. Earlier we had QR codes in the library on the shelves, next to the printed books. If we have the book in print and we have the same book as an e-book, we used to have a little square with a QR code with a link to the book. When they went out to the shelves for the printed books, they could actually tell that this book is also available as an e-book.

Several participants mention that these efforts were unsuccessful and did not improve the visibility of e-books. This is because users do not understand the purpose of the bookmarks in physical books, nor do they realise that the QR codes are important for searching e-books. The practice is unclear to the library users, as they do not understand the point of the QR codes, and thus the general understanding of the action fails (Schatzki, 2002). The aggravating factor is that there must be both a physical and a digital copy of a title for QR codes to work. Participants P12 and P13 also mention that it is tedious to add QR codes to each title that is also available electronically. If a specific title is born digital, users may not know that the title exists.

Other promotion methods include TV screens, billboards, personal meetings, and workshops held on campus or via video calls. Most of the librarians refer to the fact that users are themselves responsible for finding e-books in the university libraries' online catalogues. It is suggested that once there is a need for a specific e-title, users act accordingly and search for relevant titles. Participants P05 and P13 explain that e-books, especially e-textbooks, promote themselves because they are part of the curriculum. Therefore, if the practice is clear, the doings and actions follow. In this context, user demand influences the supply of e-books. According to one participant (P05), 'It is because of user demand that we purchase e-books'. E-books are therefore read because they are in demand.

Personal meetings and conversations with library staff can also be a form of social marketing in which librarians make users aware of e-books: 'Promotion in this context also means that staff meet users at the counter and in workshops. Our colleagues teaching in workshops help students and researchers to be acquainted with our resources which are databases, search functions etc.' (P05). If these methods are not feasible, librarians then rely on complete metadata records to make e-book titles more visible and searchable in the libraries' online catalogues (P12).

The role of teachers and the curriculum is also debated. Instead of promoting e-books, it is argued (P11, P13) that users ask for specific titles that are obligatory reading for courses. Teachers request the titles before the semester, and librarians purchase them. In this case, additional promotion through social media or newsletters is unnecessary. Participant P11 further explains:

If users have a demand, if a title is given as a source or is part of the reading list, then they do not find the e-book through promotion. Instead, they come to us and ask if they can read this book, and then we show them where they can find it. [...] Then we have the opportunity to show only e-material in our online catalogue, and there you can also see book covers of e-titles. [...] it is some kind of promotion that you can see that the e-title is new and that there are many subjects.

According to P13, having a dialogue with teachers is essential for purchasing e-books that are required for the seminars. Making e-books visible to users would then be the teachers' task through communication with students and researchers. Librarians would refer to available e-book links in the online catalogue. Participant P13 continues:

It is also different how teachers look at this issue. I have received a number of questions last year that they are searching for course books as e-titles, because they think that students do not buy and read printed books. They want rather an e-book because then they do not have to hunt for a printed book. It is actually easier to make students read course literature if it is available this way. Yet a number of teachers also think the opposite, it is very different.

Participant P12 further mentions that because of their intangible nature, it is difficult to promote e-books visually as opposed to physical books. The materiality of tools, in this case books, has an impact on how practices are carried out.

The routinised practices connected to physical books are non-transferable to digital books (Schatzki, 2002). Moreover, librarians refer to e-book lending statistics as proof that they are used and, therefore, do not need to be promoted or advertised. This can, however, be considered negligent and counterproductive in the promotion of e-books, as the same can be said for printed books. The practice of promotional efforts could thus be aimed at users who are unfamiliar with e-books or want more information about them.

Other participants (P04, P12) state that, to make users aware of their e-books, they promote e-media monthly, predominantly through social media. This method can entail, for example, e-books and databases, with the goal of making e-resources more visible to library users. Other methods for promoting e-books are personal meetings with library staff or digitally, via video calls. Although being ambitious, these approaches have either been very unsuccessful, as promotional efforts regarding e-books would not reach students, or the planning was not sophisticated enough, as P04 points out:

We have discussed if we put on screens in the library on the shelves, with a list of new books running across the screen within each subject. But we have not gotten an OK from IT and have not found a good solution for that yet. So there is a technical problem as well like buying screens and putting them in several places. At some places in the library and the physical shelves we have put an A4 paper where we have dictionaries as e-books, so that can they see that. [...] We have a screen outside, near the entrance of the library with some information. It might be possible to put something there, but then you have it for a couple of weeks and then remove it for something else.

Technical and organisational limitations may contribute to promotional efforts for e-books not being well received by users. Because of their intangible nature, e-books may be more difficult to promote than printed books. Moreover, a lack of staff, funding, and expertise in marketing further compromises promotional efforts. Making digital content visible can thus be a cumbersome process, as the study's participants frequently point out. Digital channels such as social media, newsletters, and emails can prove to be a fruitful approach to promoting academic e-books to users. Participant P03 highlights this method:

We have editorial staff, and when we purchase something new, editorial can take care of it. They use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but we do not have any particular policy regarding promotion. At the beginning of each term we send out information via Instagram, and we are talking about 400,000 e-books here, and that users can access them. We also had a project, we had an agreement with Cambridge University Press and the textbooks i.e. course books they offer. We informed teachers so that they knew where to find e-books which they can use for their education. Last year we had a so-called monthly e-resource, this could be anything from a database to an e-book.

Participant P03 also explains that teachers play a major part in requesting e-books because they need them for their seminars. This also means that specific e-books that are not necessarily part of the curriculum are requested by students and researchers. Additionally, teachers can inform their colleagues about recent e-books and are encouraged to use open access material for their coursework. Participant P03 further mentions that the university's online public access catalogue is intended merely for external users and that students, teachers, and researchers use the intranet instead. As P03 explains, giving out information about new arrivals can be confusing for users, and larger promotional efforts regarding e-books are difficult to manage. Hence, the institution with which P03 is affiliated relies on small campaigns instead of advanced marketing methods, as smaller ventures may be easier to manage.

Participants P09 and P10 further argue that promotional efforts for academic e-books are difficult to realise because promotion in this case would not only be applied to the digital but also to the physical library. According to P09, using statistics may help assess users' lending behaviour, and ventures such as QR codes and TV screens may help to make e-resources visible to users. Participant P09 continues: 'You come into a physical library and see many printed books. How should one know that there are also a huge number of e-resources? That is a challenge for us'. Participant P10 agrees with P09 that making e-books visible is a rather difficult task and further explains:

Our communication team has their channels with newsletters, our student portals and intranet, and distributes via these channels to all researchers. There are certain ways trying out to release information via the Web, but then thinking how we in our team can realise that both physically and digitally. Yet, we do not have a specific working method.

Furthermore, P10 describes personal contact with users at the library counter as a way to gain knowledge about specific titles or areas of interest. For instance, during the examinations period certain titles are more important for users, and librarians should communicate which titles are relevant. A prerequisite in this regard is that librarians should be responsive, offering the right information at the right time. As P10 explains:

When students write their examinations and there is a database with many titles about, for instance, methodology, we can emphasise on that and highlight titles that are relevant. The problem here is that we have to be on time, or otherwise we highlight titles that are not relevant. We have to be certain when we do that. We also collaborate with our instruction team and have a dialogue regarding what is important to highlight.

Participant P09 explains that collaboration with the instruction team is seen as fruitful because it allows librarians to obtain the necessary up-to-date material for educational purposes, and to be on schedule with essential information for students and researchers. Regarding students, P09 states: 'In the beginning of the term [students] should try to understand how to search, and at the end of the term they are writing exams and there are a lot of questions regarding that'. Participant P10 adds that there is an opportunity for digital meetings where researchers and students can meet library staff. Through these meetings, library staff can promote their services and inform users about e-books and other e-resources, which library users appreciate.

Participant P10 further refers to the question of whether they use a marketing plan at their institution as follows: 'We rather do not want a marketing or promotion plan, [...] we have to be responsive and on time'. This implies an ad hoc approach towards promoting or making e-books visible to users. Hence, it can be deduced that work processes (acquisition, licensing, and promotion) in university libraries are centred on user demand.

During the interviews it became obvious that, despite a lack of a marketing plan for e-books, librarians are inspired to make users aware of e-books, although the effects vary and promotional methods could be improved.

Discussion and conclusion

Acquisition criteria and models

In this study, the librarians prioritise user-based acquisition when purchasing e-books, which is also discussed by Maceviciute et al. (2014) in their study. Participants highlight cost-effectiveness, especially when buying e-book packages, an advantage also mentioned in research (Coghill, 2019; Kont, 2015, 2020, 2021; Scott & Arthur, 2026; Tran & Guo, 2021; Walters, 2013; Yılmaz & Ünal, 2022).

Rao et al. (2018) suggest a hybrid model combining print and digital books based on demand, availability, and pricing, thereby benefiting both users (in terms of availability) and libraries (in terms of cost efficiency). Likewise, Bergstrom and Skinner (2025) favour a standardised model that would ease the acquisition process.

To secure high-quality e-book collections, e-books are often purchased in packages from renowned publishers. For the selection and acquisition process to work seamlessly, clear policies on budgets and collection development are essential (Evans & Saponaro, 2005; Walters, 2013). Sustainable e-book management requires integrating user-based acquisition into policies (Lee & Boyle, 2004).

The participants find evidence-based acquisition beneficial, as only used titles are purchased, although opinions on evidence-based acquisition and demand-driven acquisition remain divided (Coghill, 2019; Kwok et al., 2014; Palazzolo et al., 2024; Polanka, 2011; Scott & Arthur, 2026). Studies highlight the financial advantages of evidence-based acquisition and demand-driven acquisition over individual or print purchases (Bucknell, 2012; Carrico et al., 2015; Rao et al., 2018; Schroeder & Boughan, 2018).

In this study, media or acquisition plans regarding e-book selection exist, but it is not always explicit how the budget is administered between electronic versions and print. Most participants favour unlimited user licensing, with the credits model serving as an alternative if existing models prove either impractical or unfeasible.

Promotion of academic e-books

This study shows that marketing plans for e-books are often lacking or unavailable and that past promotional efforts have been largely ineffective. Despite the absence of a consistent marketing plan, some participants employ various strategies to promote e-books to researchers and students. Still, many library users remain unaware of academic e-books because of limited promotion (Mulholland & Bates, 2014; Rowlands et al., 2007; Shelburne, 2009). Assessing the reasons for the gap between potential use and actual e-book users and ineffective promotion may improve future e-book acquisition. Promotional methods include emails, workshops, newsletters, QR codes, bookmarks, and social media, which offers interactive engagement (Kennedy, 2011; Vasileiou & Rowley, 2011). Social media may enhance visibility and foster discussions (Choi & Joo, 2021; Kaushik, 2016; Muhammad & Zhiwei, 2021). Customer service also plays a marketing role through direct interaction (Kaur, 2009). To improve e-book outreach, libraries should craft structured marketing plans incorporating users and channels such as social media and newsletters.

Limitations

The authors acknowledge that the research has limitations. As only a limited number of interview participants were included, the authors do not draw general conclusions for other university libraries. The responses given by the librarians should not be regarded as generalisations to other libraries. Participants in this study have different backgrounds, such as biomedicine, social sciences, humanities, and theology; others are not associated with a specific faculty but are responsible for other areas such as media division or scholarly publishing. This study should be regarded as an analysis of work with e-books at a selection of university libraries in Sweden. The opinions and experiences of the participants may differ from those of their colleagues and superiors.

Future research

As the study covers the opinions and assessments of only eight Swedish university libraries, future research could adopt a more extensive approach by including a larger number of university libraries and representatives. The results of such a study would be more substantial, as it would

include a larger dataset. Another topic briefly mentioned during the interviews is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 and subsequent years. Whether there is a connection between the pandemic and changing attitudes towards the perception and use of e-books could also be a focus for future research.

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This article builds on the Master's thesis *Going digital? The work processes with e-books at academic libraries in Sweden*, written by the first author. It can be regarded as complementary, as it focuses on two specific aspects of the thesis, namely the acquisition and promotion of academic e-books.

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Appendix: interview guide (English)

position or role of the participants

1. What is your position or role within the university library?

policy e-books

2. Is there a policy or plan regarding the purchase and acquisition of e-books?

selection process

3. What are criteria or requirements for selection and acquisition of e-books?
4. What are reasons for acquiring and purchasing e-books (motivation, goal)?

acquisition models

5. What acquisition models do you use at your library? (DDA, EBA etc.)?

acquisition process

6. How many e-books do you purchase annually?
7. What are corresponding subject areas (e.g. humanities, economy, computer sciences)?
8. Is there a budget for e-books? Has the budget changed over the past 5-10 years?
9. Is there a policy or plan regarding storage and sorting out e-books that are not necessary (i.e. *weeding*)?
10. What languages are the e-books you acquire written in (English, Swedish, German etc.)?
11. If there is an electronic and print version of a title, which format does the library acquire first (e-book, print, or both)?

open access

12. Do you work with open access at your library?
13. Do you have open access e-books which are free to use for everybody?
14. Are there additional costs involved for the library?

digital rights management

15. How does the library work with digital rights management (DRM)?
16. How do you work with licensing (one, three or unlimited users)?
17. Can e-books be downloaded by users?
18. Can e-books be downloaded a limited number of times and is there a time limit (e.g., 30 days)?

promotion of e-books

19. How do you promote e-books at the library?
20. Do you have a policy or plan regarding promotion and marketing of e-books?

usage of e-books

21. How are e-books perceived by the librarians (in terms of reading behaviour, effective studying etc.)?
22. Do you prefer digital over print or vice versa? (personal opinion)