

Libby, OverDrive, and the Physical Library

Without a doubt the best app I downloaded this year was Libby. Libby is a free app that links with your library card(s) to provide a digital library experience. Users can browse books from their associated libraries, check out available books, or put unavailable books on hold. In the last six months the app has allowed me to borrow 30 library books I otherwise would not have had access to. My experience with Libby has been vastly positive, however I have some frustrations with the residual traits of the physical library that appear on Libby and are contradictory to Libby's innovative, digital format. Throughout this paper, I will consider how Libby has used the residual physical library to boost its popularity and why Libby's parent company, OverDrive, chose Libby as its exclusive app. Despite the vitality of the present day public library, for my purposes, I will be considering the public library as residual compared to Libby's emerging status to analyze Libby's meaningless conformities that could be bypassed by its digital format.

Libby is the new and improved user interface for OverDrive, "a free service offered by your library or school that lets you borrow digital content (like ebooks and audiobooks) anytime, anywhere" ("What Is OverDrive?"). As of February 23rd, 2022, Libby completely replaced OverDrive in the mobile app market. Although Libby and OverDrive share the exact same database of books, Libby offers a more friendly interface, mimicking the public library by design. OverDrive's complete transition to Libby as its sole digital library service implies that Libby reached a level of success that OverDrive's own app never did. I attribute this success to Libby's imitation of the residual physical library in terms of the practices it employs but also its nostalgic and welcoming feel. OverDrive's app felt more like the database that OverDrive is. An

old, bright and sterile looking interface (Fig. 1)-- not the warm and welcoming interface of Libby (Fig. 2-4).

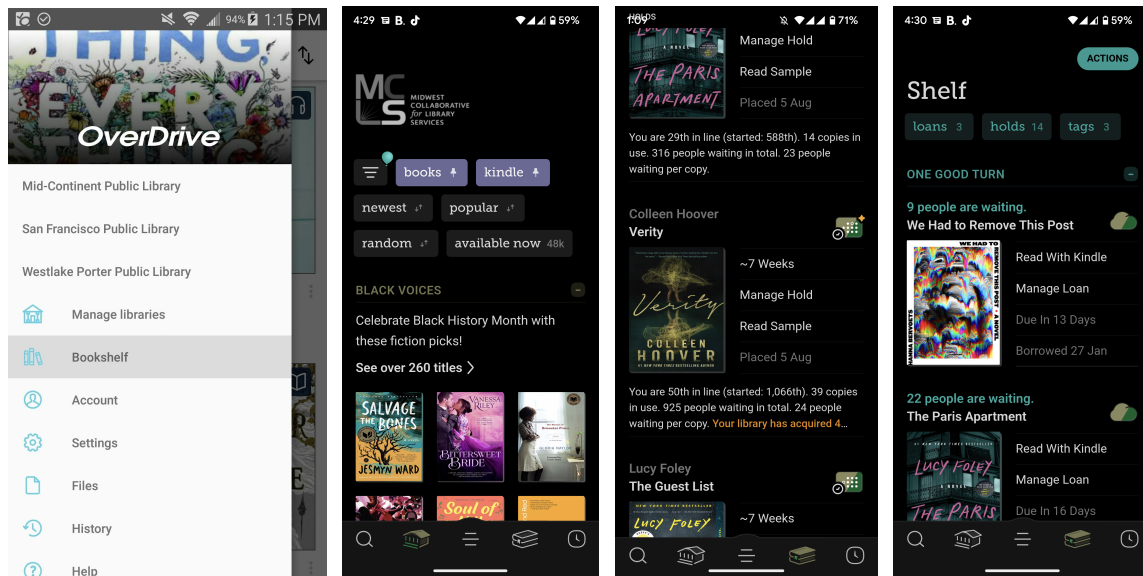


Fig. 1, Fig. 2, Fig.3, Fig. 4

Libby's constant dark-mode look offers the perfect, comfortable environment for book browsing at all hours of the day while also evoking a technologically advanced feeling when coupled with the bright pink and blue color scheme. Libby also includes many accessibility features to customize your app, including reducing motion or vibrations. In addition to custom personalizations, Libby automatically adjusts the app's color scheme to reflect the library you are currently using (Fig. 2-4). Finally, Libby offers a much more welcoming logo of a smiling woman enjoying a book compared to OverDrive's simple logo consisting of an 'O' and a 'D'. Whereas OverDrive approached its digital library service as simple access to a database of books, Libby creates a well-rounded browsing experience.

On the downside, on August 5th, I placed a hold on *Verity* by Colleen Hoover and was 1,066th in line. Six months later, I am 59th in line and have an estimated seven more weeks of waiting (Fig. 3). The unnecessary "holding" design choice is skeuomorphic in that the digital

form of Libby is capable of letting users go beyond the classic lending and borrowing scheme of the physical library; Libby's creators chose to mirror the library experience that's familiar to people. As Jeremy Morris says, "by depending on a logic that uses familiarity with previous ways of thinking, previous ways of seeing as a way to make the new seem less new, skeuomorphs perpetuate old patterns, practices, and conceptual frame-works, even if the technology itself has progressed beyond it" (58-59) and "the incorporation and remediation of past appearances and design ideas smooth the process of adoption and makes new technologies feel more familiar" (50). Because there is no physical book involved, this waiting period on Libby can be seen as a way to prevent overwhelming users with too much choice and ease them into the new digital library format.

This skeuomorphic protocol of the physical library also helps control Libby's usage script. "Since these protocols affect the uses and ends to which media and technologies can be put, they are, at their core, about control. They are a way to ensure certain outcomes or at least limit the possible number of uses to which a device or technology can be put" (40). The loan period ensures that Libby remains an online library, not a bookstore.

Libby also claims to provide "librarian curated" book guides. Who's to say whether this is true or whether books are recommended to users using AI. In early talks about Libby, the creators wanted to add an AI librarian chatbot to the app; however, this has yet to happen. In both instances of name-dropping "librarians," Libby is striving to ease users to the digital format using, once again, a residual feature of the physical library.

Emerging new media are often designed and imagined in relation to residual forms of technology. In this case, Libby is a redesigned, digital format of the residual physical library. In

conforming to the norms of the library with a user friendly interface, Libby has created a seamless transition from physical books to digital for readers.

In “Reappraising the Residual,” Jenkins, Ford and Green describe how “the residual can linger in popular memory, become the object of nostalgic longing, be used as a resource for making sense of one’s present life and identity, serve as the basis of a critique of current institutions and practices, and spark conversations. In short, residual content may become a prime candidate for spreadability” (97). In today’s world, social media is a primary form of entertainment for young people; however, these people may have nostalgic longing for the libraries of their childhoods. Libby brings the library back into these people's lives and, thanks to its digital form, it is spreadable, unlike the physical library. Additionally, as Jenkins, Ford and Green say, the “residual” library can serve “as a basis of a critique of current institutions and practices.” Libby makes the library residual while keeping with its practices and norms but in doing so, it allows for the critique of the current practices in that it begs the question of why we follow the physical library practices that the digital format of Libby can easily bypass?

Libby imitates the library but it also improves the library. Libby improves upon the physical library by allowing for accessibility, spreadability and providing reading with a much larger range of books. Libby offers a way to preserve books, digitize them, and make them available more widely. However, Libby’s digital format can create frustrations for users when it conforms to physical library practices. Why should users have to wait months for a digital copy of a book that technically could be shared immediately? Why should users have to return books after just 21 days when an infinite copy of the book is possible?

Although Libby seems to compete with the physical library by drawing users to the app with evocations of the nostalgic physical library, Libby is actually supporting the public library.

Libraries collect statistics on ebook checkouts just as they do with physical books, so use of the library, digital or otherwise, benefits the institution. People are nostalgic for the library, Libby offers to exploit that nostalgia while not overtaking small libraries.

Many people, including myself, break the scripts encouraged by Libby thanks to a simple “hack.” I learned this hack from a TikTok that has garnered 17.6 thousand likes (Malham): in order to keep a book for longer than 21 days, you simply need to set your reading device to airplane mode until you are finished with the book. This trick is restricted to users who read their Libby books on a device used only for reading that can be kept on airplane mode for extended periods of time with no consequence. Users also cannot loan a new book during this time as you need wifi to get the book onto your device; however, this is still a useful little hack to use when you haven’t found time to finish a book yet. The circulation of this hack on TikTok indicates the distribution of Libby through social media sites and the spreadability of the platform.

Libby’s popularity since its initial release can be seen as mildly surprising due to the “difficulty” older readers have with technology and the aversion young people supposedly have towards ‘slow’ entertainment. However, this popularity does make sense considering how the app increases accessibility and makes the tedious tasks of going to a physical library unnecessary in an age when people increasingly crave convenience. Additionally, any skeptics of digital book browsing can be convinced through the skeuomorphic nature of Libby. Those who seek out the nostalgic feeling of the physical library may be pleasantly surprised by Libby’s representation of the residual library and perhaps this accounts for the app’s recent popularity.

Although it is clear that Libby’s skeuomorphic and residual nature helped it gain popularity and eclipse OverDrive, the question remains of why users submit to unnecessary usage scripts. As discussed above, Libby’s digital format increases accessibility but begs

questions of why we're still following the classic library lending and loaning scheme. You are supposed to "check out a book" and "hold it" for only 21 days, even though the app is digital and there are theoretically infinitely many copies. Despite "hacks" to temporarily bypass this feature, users submit to and accept the classic library format despite it being unnecessary due to the digital format. This question goes beyond the analysis of skeuomorphism and the residual and requires the consideration of capitalism's roots in our society and how it underlies even the public library, despite its characterisation as a free and widely available resource.

Bibliography

- Fig. 1. “OverDrive App Browser Screen.” *Google Play Store*,
https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.overdrive.mobile.android.mediaconsole&hl=en_CA&gl=US&pli=1. Accessed 12 Feb. 2023.
- Fig. 2, 3, 4. “Libby, by OverDrive.” *Google Play Store*, Google,
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.overdrive.mobile.android.libby&gl=US>.
- Jenkins, Henry, Ford, Sam, and Joshua Green. “Reappraisal of the Residual.” *Spreadable Media*, NYU Press, New York, NY, 2013, pp. 84-112.
- Malham, Harmony [@harmonymalham]. “Sorry not sorry #boktok #books #libby #kindle #kindlebooks” *TikTok*, 23 Jul. 2022, <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTRteobYe/>
- Morris, Jeremy. “Music as a Digital File.” *Selling Digital Music, Formatting Culture*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2015, pp. 30–65.
- “What Is OverDrive?” *OverDrive Help*, 18 Jan. 2023,
<https://help.overdrive.com/en-us/1100.htm>.