Executive Report: Booksellers Websites Usability Test

Toni Marie Perilli

College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida

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Dr. Ryan Rucker

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Introduction....3

Project Goals....3

Usability Instrument....4

Results and Findings....6

Figure 1....7

Table 1....8

Figure 2....8

Figure 3....11

Table 2....11

Figure 4....12

Recommendations....12

Conclusion....14

References....15

Introduction

This study assessed the usability and overall effectiveness of the Barnes & Noble (B&N) and Books-A-Million (BAM) websites. The selected booksellers are the two largest online booksellers in the United States, second and third behind Amazon (Zufelt, 2026). It is imperative for booksellers to optimize their digital presence, as online shopping has become more prevalent for convenience, variety, and competitive pricing (Zufelt, 2026). If one site falls substantially behind its competitors, it will likely lose customers to them.

In particular, this test aimed to uncover strengths and areas for improvement in each bookseller's site design, specifically exploring a desktop browser version. By collecting and analyzing performance data through participant observation and user satisfaction through self-reported questionnaires, this project's results would provide insight into how successfully users could complete key tasks and their emotional responses, informing how to optimize each site to enhance user experience.

Project Goals

To evaluate the usability and effectiveness of the Barnes & Noble and Books-A-Million websites, this study collected observational performance data and questionnaire-based satisfaction data. Observational data specifically analyzed time spent per task, number of steps per task, and number of errors per task. Satisfaction data asked participants to report their intent to use, ease of learning, perceived utility, perception of products and services, and impression of usability for each website. Following analysis, this study would develop actionable recommendations based on data and trends to improve usability and effectiveness, supporting broader business goals. Six participants were recruited, making this a small-scale usability test.

Barnes & Noble outperformed Books-A-Million in all 5 user satisfaction categories and the performance categories of count of steps and count of errors for all tasks. Barnes & Noble also outperformed Books-A-Million in time spent per task for scenarios where participants were asked to identify a product price and the distance to their nearest location; but users spent less time on Books-A-Million than Barnes & Noble to locate information about membership discounts. Across both sites, perceived ease of learning received the highest satisfaction scores, while behavioral intent to use the sites received the lowest. Participants located information about membership discounts most quickly and with the fewest steps of any task.

Based on these findings, Books-A-Million should simplify its search experience by reducing redundant results, better addressing misspellings, and aligning dropdown recommendations more closely with search queries. Additionally, Books-A-Million should reduce pop-up frequency, mirror Barnes & Noble's header structure of pairing icons with text at all times, and reevaluate copy to sound more natural to the audience. Barnes & Noble should reformat the page so critical information isn't buried, and users don't have to scroll to find high-priority content. Both sites should make critical links clearly visible in the header and footer to support a wide variety of user pathways.

Usability Instrument

This usability test asked participants to schedule a Zoom call of up to 30 minutes after agreeing to the study terms, which included confidentiality. First, participants completed a demographic survey about their age, gender identity, and familiarity with computers and the internet. All questions, except age, were single- or multi-selection multiple-choice. Then, participants completed scenario tasks for the first website, Barnes & Noble

(https://www.barnesandnoble.com/), via Zoom screen sharing. The moderator asked the following questions:

1. What is the price for the regular print edition of the top book on your “to be read” list?
2. You are considering upgrading to a premium or paid membership since you buy a lot of books every year. What is the membership discount off standard products?
3. You want to visit a physical location to browse. How far away is the closest location to you?

As users navigated the site to find these answers, the moderator timed completion with a stopwatch and recorded notes on performance observations, including errors made. After completing the three tasks, participants completed a post-task questionnaire in which they responded to 27 questions about their experience using the site on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 meaning strongly disagree and 7 meaning strongly agree. The scenario task and post-task questionnaire process was repeated for the Books-A-Million website (https://www.booksamillion.com/).

This study recruited a sample (N = 6) of participants aged 24 to 40 (M = 29.00), with a 50-50 male-female split. All participants reported owning a computer, accessing the internet daily with a high-speed connection, and using the internet for more than three years, with use in the last six months. Five respondents (83.3%) reported learning both computer and Internet fundamentals from a family member. Self-instruction was also substantial, with three participants (50.0%) learning to use computers on their own and four (66.7%) teaching themselves how to use the Internet. Formal training or school-based instruction accounted for two responses (33.3%) in each category, while no participant selected peer learning (friends). For access, 100%

of participants connected from home, 66.7% from school, and 50.0% from other locations; no participants reported using public libraries for Internet access.

Participants could consent to having their session recorded; only one participant provided consent. The moderator did not intervene if a user was struggling with a task and did not answer questions about the task prompts, except to repeat or rephrase a question if necessary. The demographic survey and post-task questionnaires were issued via Google Forms, with an alternative Word Doc version. Neither included a field for name, contact information, or any additional personally identifiable information. The moderator recorded observational notes on a spreadsheet during the session, with structured columns for task completion, completion time, pathway taken, and additional notes. To further protect participant privacy, these notes referred to participants only as "P," with the number corresponding to the order in which sessions were hosted, and used gender-neutral pronouns when necessary.

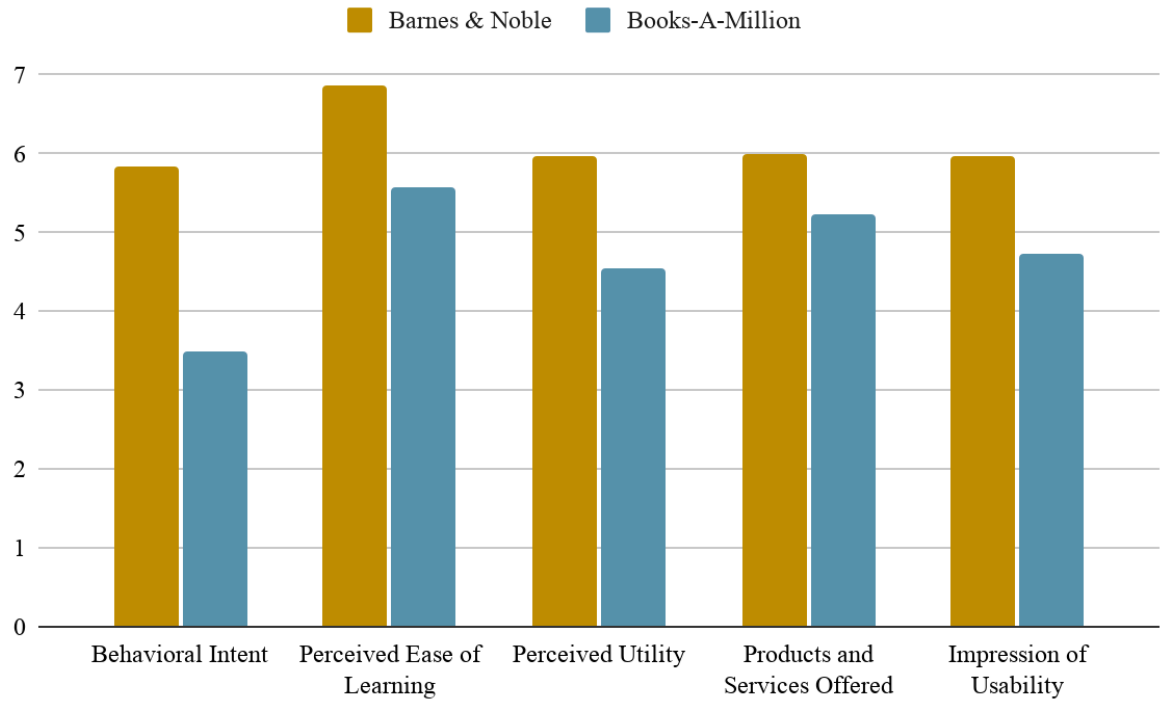
Results and Findings

Barnes & Noble scored higher than Books-A-Million in all user satisfaction-based categories, which included intent to use ($M = 5.83$ vs. $M = 3.50$), ease of learning ($M = 6.87$ vs. $M = 5.57$), utility ($M = 5.96$ vs. $M = 4.54$), products and services ($M = 6.00$ vs. $M = 5.22$), and impression of usability ($M = 5.97$ vs. $M = 4.72$). For Barnes & Noble specifically, participants agreed most on ease of learning ($SD = 0.43$) but differed more on overall usability ($SD = 1.84$). For Books-A-Million, participants had a wider range of opinions, but they also agreed most on ease of learning ($SD = 1.30$) and disagreed most on overall usability ($SD = 2.09$). Across both websites, ease of learning scored the highest ($M = 6.22$), while intent to use scored the lowest ($M = 4.67$). Participants were generally frustrated by excessive pop-ups on the Books-A-Million site

and disliked how search results populated. One participant struggled to spell an author's name, and while Barnes & Noble recognized the attempted spelling, Books-A-Million did not.

Figure 1

Mean Descriptive Statistics For Barnes & Noble And Books-A-Million Websites



Note. This figure shows the calculated averages from post-task questionnaire response groups for each website. Participants self-responded using a 7-point Likert scale.

Performance data mirrors satisfaction data. For scenario questions 1 and 3, participants spent less time on Barnes & Noble (M = 24.07 seconds, M = 15.73 seconds) than they did on Books-A-Million (M = 26.34 seconds, M = 35.51 seconds). Participants were often confused by Books-A-Million's search results page, which listed different formats of the same title separately. Additionally, one participant struggled to navigate to the Books-A-Million store locations page, taking about one minute longer than the other participants by using the "Help" library.

Participants spent more time on Barnes & Noble than Books-A-Million for question 2 (*M* = 15.77 seconds vs. *M* = 14.28 seconds), though the results were the most comparable of the three tasks. Since Books-A-Million places the membership discount much higher on the page than Barnes & Noble (see Figure 2), users spent less time scrolling after navigating to the page. At the same time, more than half of users questioned if "Millionaire's Club" was the membership before clicking on the header link.

Table 1

Mean Time Spent Per Scenario Task (In Seconds)

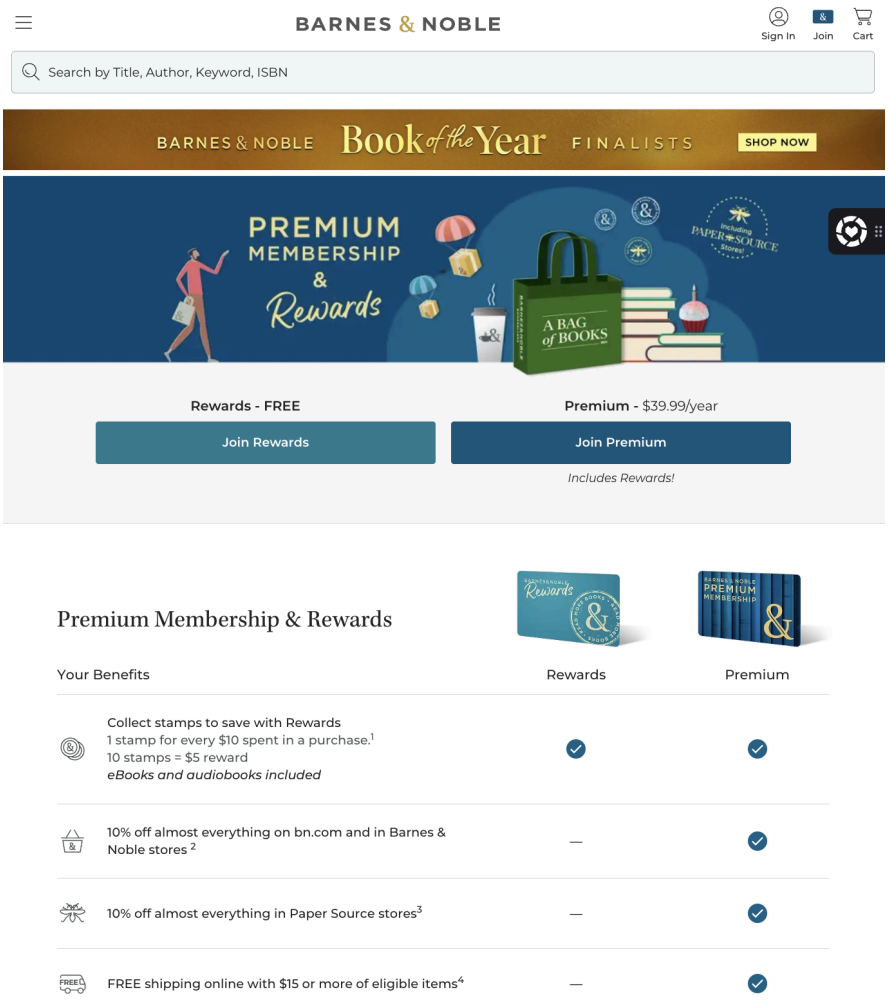
Task	Barnes & Noble	Books-A-Million
Book Price	24.07	26.34
Membership Discount	15.77	14.28
Nearest Location	15.73	35.51

Note. This table demonstrates the average duration spent on each scenario task. This data does not reflect completion, but rather the time spent until the task was determined to have failed if it was not completed.

Figure 2

Membership Web Pages

(A) Barnes & Noble Membership Web Page



Note. This figure illustrates the page displayed when "Join Membership" is clicked from the navigation header. When captured, the window was narrower than a standard browser window to display all relevant information in a single image

(B) Books-A-Million Membership Web Page



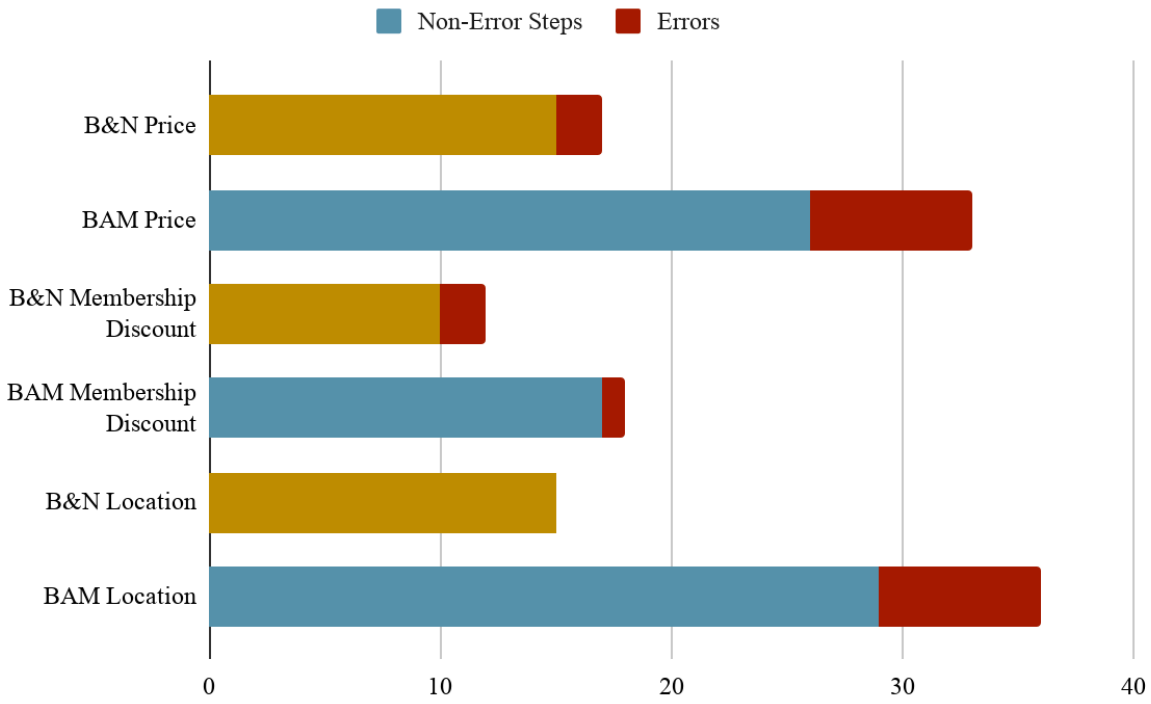
Note. This figure illustrates the page displayed when "Millionaire's Club" is clicked from the navigation header.

This trend extends when analyzing the steps taken and errors during the scenario tasks. The total number of non-error steps and errors in the Books-A-Million site scenario tasks (N = 87, N = 15) exceeds that of the Barnes & Noble site scenario tasks (N = 44, N = 4) (see Figure 3 and Table 2). All participants completed all Barnes & Noble scenario tasks successfully, but one participant could not complete scenario task 1 on the Books-A-Million site. They made several attempts to locate the price of their intended book, including multiple respelling attempts, but could not locate the title or author name in the search results. For scenario task 3 specifically, users took more steps on Books-A-Million than Barnes & Noble (N = 15 vs. N = 36), as most participants missed the store location icon, represented by a location pin in the header (see Figure 4). Similar to completion times, the number of steps and errors for Books-A-Million reflects that

one user needed to navigate to the “Help” section to access the store locator, which is the only instance of the “Help” section being accessed in this study. Conversely, one user was extremely efficient, completing all questions and finding all scenario task answers on the product page from the first prompt by reading descriptive banners and using buy online, pick up in-store features. In contrast, the other five participants navigated to different pages for each scenario task.

Figure 3

Count Of Steps And Errors For Barnes & Noble And Books-A-Million Websites



Note. This figure shows the total number of steps taken by all participants for each task scenario, broken down by non-error and error steps.

Table 2

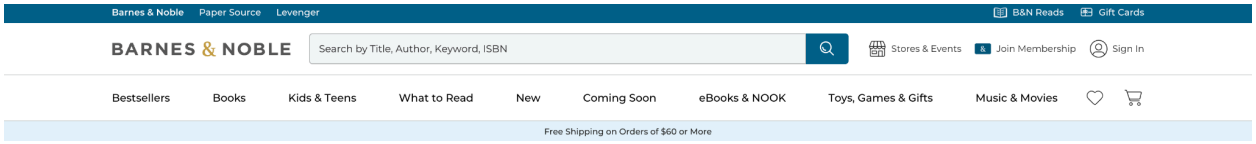
Count Of Steps And Errors For Barnes & Noble And Books-A-Million Websites, By Scenario Task

Task	B&N Steps	B&N Errors	BAM Steps	BAM Errors
Book Price	17	2	33	7
Membership Discount	12	2	18	1
Nearest Location	15	0	36	7

Figure 4

Website Headers And Navigation Bars

(A) Barnes & Noble Website Header And Navigation Bar



(B) Books-A-Million Website Header And Navigation Bar



Note. These figures illustrate the primary navigation source most participants used to answer the scenario task prompts.

Recommendations

While this study revealed several current strengths that should remain unchanged, it also identified several areas for improvement. The most critical change is to Books-A-Million's search results. This can be done by consolidating listings on the search results page so each title appears as one product result, rather than listing each distinct format separately. To further improve the search experience, adjust the search algorithm to handle misspellings better.

Additionally, in the recommendations dropdown under an active search bar, the images shown should be for the most relevant search results, not products similar to the search. These adjustments would reduce users' task time, steps, and errors to find products, and improve perceptions of the products and services offered, all of which are currently lagging behind Barnes & Noble. A second high-priority alteration would be to Books-A-Million's heading navigation bar. Barnes & Noble currently scores well here by pairing all icons with text, but both sites should follow this format across all areas with clickable icons to support recognition over recall (Rogers et al., 2023). This change would create smoother navigation and support perceived utility and usability.

While less critical, both sites should reexamine the placement of key information on their respective pages. As in print, place the content that needs the most attention "above the fold" (Romano, 2026). For Barnes & Noble specifically, this would require reformatting the memberships page so users don't have to scroll to view key membership details. This extra step adds time to complete the task, which is the only area where Books-A-Million outperformed Barnes & Noble, and it led some participants to scroll past the information they were looking for at first glance. Beyond this, both websites should ensure that critical navigation links are clearly visible and logically organized in both the header and footer, as users may navigate to either depending on where they are on the page. Furthermore, Books-A-Million should reduce the frequency of pop-ups, as the current frequency created frustration and increased time spent per task, reducing overall effectiveness and efficiency.

While not as high-priority as the above recommendations, Books-A-Million would benefit from conducting Voice of Customer (VoC) research to enhance its copy, particularly in its header and navigation (see Figure 4). As mentioned earlier, several participants hesitated when

selecting the “Millionaire’s Club” header link, assuming it would lead to membership information, but they were not confident. This experience might be extrapolated to other site components, including the “Adult Collectibles” and “Toys and Games” heading items, which may not be intuitive for all audiences, especially when compared to Barnes & Noble’s “Toys, Games & Gifts” competing category. Books-A-Million’s free-shipping banner is also less concise than Barnes & Noble’s. These unintuitive copy choices increase cognitive workload and reduce overall user satisfaction, leaving ample room for improvement.

Conclusion

While Barnes & Noble’s current site interaction is more usable based on this study’s findings, both Barnes & Noble and Books-A-Million have actionable steps to improve their site usability and user experience. This study revealed that both sites have the most room for growth in users’ behavioral intent, indicating how likely they are to use the site again. Furthermore, participants made errors on both sites in two out of three tasks, reflecting that neither site received a mean score above a 6 in the satisfaction categories of intent to use, utility, products and services, and impression of usability.

By improving its search results experience, reducing pop-ups, and enhancing its copy, Books-A-Million can improve its user performance results and bridge the gap between its satisfaction results and Barnes & Noble’s. By adjusting the placement of critical content, Barnes & Noble can minimize user errors and task completion time, further increasing its already high satisfaction scores. Ultimately, these improvements will increase the usability and effectiveness of each site, leading to stronger interactions and more positive user perception. With stronger usability, users are more likely to complete their objectives, including locating product

information, finding membership details, or visiting the nearest store location, which translates to improvements in metrics like sales, revenue, and customer engagement.

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