

Understanding the Consumer of Books in the Digital Era

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Article history

Received 16 June 2022 | Accepted 22 July 2022 | Published online 05 August 2022.

Abstract

Books have the power to transform people's lives. It is not an understatement to claim that the world we know today would not have developed as it has if books had not existed. Books have long been a staple of education and entertainment, and they remain an important tool for the investigation and dissemination of ideas. Over the years, the book industry has become larger and larger and, like many other industries undergoing transformation, new technologies are facilitating a shift in who determines the industry's value. The Internet paved the way for new technologies to emerge, allowing for changes in sales/distribution, publication, and where material might be accessed. With the rise in popularity of the e-book in the twenty-first century, for businesses and marketers, the process of understanding, analyzing and tracking consumer behavior is crucial for leading to a better understanding of the consumer and consequently, to a successful approach. Therefore, the study of consumer behavior represents the incipient stage of the journey to meeting consumer's expectations and needs. This paper presents the results of a quantitative research with the main purpose of describing a clear perspective on book consumer behavior, what factors influence their book purchasing decisions, reading habits and preferences and some of the individuals' favorite things about reading and books. One of the most conclusive questions for this research focused on the book format the participants use, obtaining a very big and unexpected proportion of respondents claiming that they still read printed book, which proves that books still hold their magic, despite different digital means of reading such as e-books.

Keywords: Book consumer, Marketing research, Consumer behavior.

JEL classification: M31.

1. Introduction

In today's modern society, for businesses and marketers, the process of understanding, analyzing and tracking consumer behavior is crucial for leading to a better understanding of the consumer and consequently, to a successful approach. Therefore, the study of consumer behavior represents the incipient stage of the journey to meeting consumer's expectations and needs.

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This paper presents the results of a quantitative research with the main purpose of describing a clear perspective on book consumer behavior, what factors influence their book purchasing decisions, reading habits and preferences and some of the individuals' favorite things about reading and books. One of the most conclusive questions for this research focused on the book format the participants use, obtaining a very big and unexpected proportion of respondents claiming that they still read printed book, which proves that books still hold their magic, despite different digital means of reading such as e-books.

2. Consumer behavior in the books market

2.1. The importance of studying consumer behavior

It can be considered that consumer behavior represents the totality of decisions (in terms of what, why, how, when, whether, where, how much/how often/how long) about the consumption (purchase, utilization, disposition) of an offering (goods, services, people, activities, ideas, actions) by decision making units (decider, influencer, information connoisseur, buyer, user) over time (from hours and days to months and years) (Hoyer, MacInnis & Pieters, 2012).

When discussing consumer behavior, one big, crucial detail should be emphasized: the relevant distinction operated by marketing between the term's "consumer" and "customer". It is indeed true that in some cases the two terms can be used interchangeably and indicate the same section of people, however the key differences between the two of them should be very clearly expressed.

Customers – that can also be referred to as buyers or clients – could be described as the people that purchase products and services after they pay a particular specified price. In other words, any person, or company or business that buys any sort of products or services from sellers is called a customer. In the specific literature we find the following classification of customers: loyal customers (their needs were satisfied, therefore there are big chances for them to return and buy again), trade customer (people or businesses that buy products and resell them for profit, such as wholesalers, retailers and manufacturers), final customers (anyone that purchase products for themselves), discount customers (only buying goods or services if there are discounts), impulsive customers (people that do not necessarily want to buy something specifically, but anything that catches their eye in that moment), need-based customers (this type of customers have very strict limits of buying just as much as they need, not what they might "treat" themselves with) and lastly, wandering customers (very hesitant of what they really want to buy) (Hoyer, MacInnis & Pieters, 2012).

Consumer behavior is a field usually studied for various reasons by various people in various contexts, from university students learning it and professors teaching it, to advertising and marketing employees. Briefly, it is an important field because it helps people improve their business performances and be successful by understanding the expectations of consumers and what makes them buy a product. Once the likes and dislikes of consumers are being acknowledged, the products and services of a company can be designed based on the results discovered.

Furthermore, consumer behavior is a powerful tool to educate consumers and encourage them to make better decision in the purchasing process. Having consumers understand and act responsibly when it comes to buying is benefic for both businesses and consumers themselves. Educating the consumers refers to showing them how to choose the right products that suit their needs and not waste money or the actual product. This kind of behavior is often known as "the dark side of consumer behavior" and more precisely makes references to actions that could jeopardize people such as destructive compulsive purchasing, products overusing or tampering, shoplifting and any other negative demeanors (Belk, 1985). In order to avoid these

circumstances, an accurate study of consumer behavior can result in strategic promotion of products or help in combating harmful behavior or habits.

Last, but not least, studying consumer behavior contributes in understanding the competitive market. Marketers can learn about how to position the products and services to gain competitive advantages by addressing questions like: Is the customer already familiar with a competitor's products? What motivates a customer to purchase from a competitor? Are potential buyers satisfied with the brands of competitors? What are the similarities and differences between your products and those of your competitors? (Tan, 2022).

2.2. The book industry and the marketing within

Books have played a key part in enabling the world to evolve from the dark ages to the hyper-connected telecommunication world, despite being simple products consisting of inked words on pieces of paper. Over the years, the book industry has become larger and larger, today being divided in multiple subcategories. Some of the most important subsectors would be trade books, educational books, religious books, scientific/professional books, biography books, children's books, art/coffee table books. All of these categories are undergoing significant transformations. As with many other industries undergoing transformation, new technologies are facilitating a shift in who owns the industry's value. The Internet paved the way for new technologies to emerge, allowing for changes in sales/distribution, publication, and where material might be viewed.

The book is a cultural asset that, in addition to its educational and cultural functions, is subject to the same research and marketing requirements as any other commodity, cultural or not. Reading is a habit that is always placing and repositioning itself in people's consuming agendas (Laing, 2008) The sale and marketing of a book as a commodity is determined by trading norms and, more importantly, by people's free time resources and desire to make room for book purchases in an otherwise restricted household budget, which must meet a variety of other consumer needs. This means that, in addition to its social and cultural functions, the book, as a cultural object, is subject to the same market norms in terms of consumption and acquisition.

The book industry is heavily reliant on market demand, supply, and competition. A carefully devised marketing strategy is critical to achieving rewarding material and professional results in this industry, and this study is important because it provides information that can serve as useful tools for publishers as well as decision-makers who are directly interested and involved in the book industry or related industries.

There have been studies and authors who look at the book industry as an “ecosystem”, a word derived from biology and ecology (Ceobanu, Dinu, Cristea, 2016). The metaphor alludes to the participants, resources, and environment in which publishing houses, technologies, funding, reading preferences, and readers all coexist. The diagram below depicts the phases that the book publishing industry has gone through throughout history, as well as changes in the interactions between the major stakeholders in the book ecosystem.

Nonetheless, it should not be neglected the sight of the reality that the five essential actors (author, publisher, producer, distributor, and consumer) described below are not wholly independent or isolated in their responsibilities in the market. The most significant point to note here is that, from the consumer's perspective, the last link in this chain has altered the most. The third wave is the one that has pushed things in this business to where they are now. Seeing that the customer has become a manufacturer, the connection among industry actors has not stayed linear, and this is all thanks to self-publishing technologies Anderson (2002).

In terms of trends and changes, the book industry has seen some significant shifts during the last decade (for example, the emergence of e-books, audiobooks, and digital technology).

To take advantage of the altering terrain within publishing, creative sectors have had to be flexible in their marketing tactics due to new difficulties, changes in taste, and technological improvements. From social media influencers to artificial intelligence, there are a number of market research trends to watch in the coming months.

By 2028, the worldwide book market is expected to reach USD 159.3 billion. According to Schultz (2021), from 2021 to 2028, the market is estimated to grow at a CAGR of 2.4 percent. Increasing consumer expenditure on books, fueled by rising incomes and interest, as well as ongoing format improvements that have improved the whole reading experience, are among the primary reasons driving the market forward. Over the previous decade, the market has changed dramatically and is now moving in new directions. The advancement of the commissioning process, aided by a new generation of astute editors.

With the advent of digital technology in the publishing industry, different mediums of marketing products and services in the market have opened the way for better product acceptance among consumers. In the current situation, book royalties come from a variety of places, including retail, subscription services, digital library providers, and regional retailers (Schultz, 2021).

With the normal one-copy purchase business model established by firms like Amazon, Apple Books, Barnes & Noble, Google Play Books, and Kobo, the retail format has a greater reach among global readers. Subscription services, such as Scribd, Bookmate, or Dreame, operate as apps or stores that allow unrestricted access to books in exchange for a monthly charge. OverDrive, Bibliotheca, and Odilo are examples of digital library providers that not only allow individuals to borrow books but also assist organizations such as public libraries, schools, universities, and corporate libraries (McCarthy, 2022).

Publishers are tailoring their books for the customer path to buy by using reader data to work smarter, not harder. According to Howarth (2022), understanding customer behavior and whether the sales plan corresponds with it can be done if the publishers have more aggregated data on rivals, search engine result pages, market trends, and reading habits. Large data sets enable publishers to gain a deeper understanding of their audience - speak their language to improve descriptions, reach out to readers directly - go where your customers are and make sure your products are noticed, being genuine and adding value is a great strategy to increase customer loyalty.

2.3. The Romanian book industry

"In Romania, there are two editorial policies: the "boom" policy and the multi-purpose publishing policy that covers as many segments of the market as feasible," claimed Eliza Maier, a Romanian author. Both methods are paying off, but the Ministry of Culture has adopted a non-involvement strategy with reference to market demand in order to maintain the balance among rivals. Only cultural productions that are representative of Romania's creative potential are supported by the Ministry of Culture. As a result, the Ministry has delegated responsibility for book funding to the National Cultural Fund Administration. This way, books will be funded only when a project is ready, with Ministry of Culture's responsibilities limited to the national library book acquisition program and the expansion of public library services. The Ministry of Culture has maintained its function as a book fair financier, although it has decided to outsource items to organizations that represent authors (Ceobanu et al., 2016).

The Ministry of Culture's key strategic objectives in the book industry are to expand the number of fields and titles to be published, as well as to support alternative publishing forms such as e-books and books published via the Internet. The following is a list of the most important strategic goals in the book business and industry, as believed by Stănciulescu et al. (2020):

- a. Diversify the publisher's offering: published fields and titles;
- b. A more efficient book distribution by diversifying sale techniques (books by mail, book clubs, sale fairs, e-commerce, e-books, etc.) – matching market supply with the interests, tastes, and demands of readers as discovered by market research;
- c. Diversify the addressability of publishing production by designating activities such as the translation of printed books into widely circulated languages or the translation of minority literature as key priority areas for state aid; 4. Supporting alternative forms of book and publication publishing, particularly digital publishing via the Internet.

The book industry market could not survive these days without marketing and all its strategies. On the current changing market, designing a publishing house's offer is not an easy process. If literary tastes and ideals of editors and publishers were relevant points of reference a few decades ago, today a commercial viewpoint demands that the reader be placed at the center of the process. The public and market dynamics dictated new business structures, new sorts of alliances, and multimedia formats, among other things. We assist in the diversification of a book's functional use (Zbucea, Hrib, 2016).

Having strong bonds between publishing houses, authors, and readers is essential for success. The last two sorts of players are becoming more influential, and they may play distinct roles in the book industry, leading to new business models (Ceobanu et al., 2016). The advancement of digital printing has allowed anyone who is interested in printing to do it at a reasonable cost and with high-quality materials. Reading and writing have both been democratized and made more accessible to a wider audience.

3. Quantitative research on Romanian books consumer behavior

3.1. Research methodology

The scope of the present study is to analyze books consumer behavior among Romanian female population age 18 and over, with the following main objectives:

- Preference in terms of means of reading (e-books, printed books, audio books, full books/short summary)
- Buying habits (when, where, how do consumers get their books)
- Factors that influence the decision of choosing a specific book store (prices, large variety of books from which they choose, store/website design etc.)
- Factors that influence the decision of choosing a specific book (author, title, genre, publishing house)
- Sources of information about books
- The book genres the respondents prefer
- Reading habits (how often, where, when they read)
- Consumer's profile (age, education, income, profession).

The research method chosen for this study was the survey, precisely the online survey, as the research population is represented by book lovers and reading enthusiasts within the Romanian population, age 18 and over.

In terms of sampling, although the calculated sample size necessary for a representative research was 385, we have conducted an exploratory research, thus the number of respondents was reduced from 385 to 100.

For this research, stratified random sampling was used, a method in which a population is divided into smaller sub-groups called strata. Strata are produced in stratified random sampling, or stratification, depending on shared features or characteristics among members, such as age. The quota for age segments was the following:

- 18-24 years – 20% - because younger people have access to much more technology and information, thus they can read on their phones, tablets, computers or Kindles; however, they

may not have enough time to read so much considering most of them attend universities or/and have jobs, so the percentage is only 20%.

- 25-34 years – 25% - because just like the previous category of younger people, they can access books in many ways and are more attentive and take advantage of book fests and bookshops/retailers' offers and sales.

- 35-49 years – 35% - this age group has the biggest percentage because people have more time than the younger ones and they may also read/buy books for their children; it is also a group that is familiar with both online means of reading and offline means of reading.

- 50-64 years – 15% - this group is composed of people that usually have enough time to read, but they are not necessarily very familiar with e-books or audio books and start to have eyesight problems.

- 65 years and over – 5% - because people in this age group tend to choose different things to do, just like the previous group, because they tend to have eyesight problems and cannot concentrate well.

3.2. Research results

In terms of book format, it can be easily stated that printed books represent the largest proportion, with almost 70%, while audio book is smallest proportion, with just 1%. E-books have the intermediate proportion, with 29.05%.

The next topic is about the reason why participants choose to read their books in this specific format and the proportions of them. The largest proportion is represented by the smell of books (43.8%), followed by accessibility with 22.9%. The third reason is represented by eyes health (16.2%) and the next two proportions are very close to each other (9.5% and 8.6%) and represent the feelings the participants have when having a book in their hands (the authenticity of the sensation) and habitude. The book collecting (6.7%) and reading the ending (5.7%) are the last smallest proportions.

A correlation between age and book format was conducted in order to see if the age influences the book format – online (e-book, audio book) vs. offline (printed books). For the demographic ages to be significant and influence the answers (more precisely, if younger participants chose e-books/audio books, while older ones choose printed books), the chi coefficient should not be over 0.05. The results displayed 0.044 which means that age do influence the decision when choosing from e-books/audio books and printed books. However, the contingency coefficient resulted was 0.362, which shows that the intensity level between age and book format is average.

When it comes to book length, the largest proportion is represented by full length books, with a very big percent of 97.1, while only a total of 2.09% of the participants chose summary books.

Figure 1 shows the results of a survey in which people were asked where they get the books from. It is clear that the majority prefer to buy book from online stores, while bookshops falls in the second place, with 28.06%. The least preferred options are libraries and antique shops, with only 2.34% difference between the two of them.

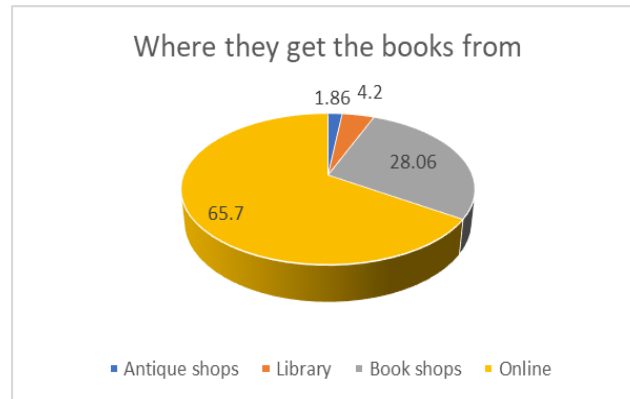


Figure 1. Place of purchase for books

In terms of occasions people usually buy books for, the majority of participants (47%) claimed that they do not need a special occasion to buy books, while the smallest proportion refers to people that buy books when they go on holidays (3,79%). The second most chosen option with 34% is represented by people that go shopping when they find out about a book they want. People that buy book because they finished all the books at home and people that want to offer gifts fall into the second and third places of the least preferred options, with a difference of 2,28% between the two of them.

Next, respondents had to talk about their sources of information when it comes to books. The largest proportion of people said that social media helps them (57.4%), while a very insignificant proportion of people said that they get inspired when they go to a book fest (1.16%). The second largest proportion is represented by family and friends (21%), followed by mass media influences (10.15%), bestseller lists (6.07%) and staff recommendations.

One of the most interesting topic is the one about the preferred book genre. The first most preferred genre is Romance with a total of 22.09%, followed right away by Thriller with only 3.08% difference between them. Action and adventure books fall into the third place with 16.74%, and very closely come the Classics with 15.02%. Fantasy and Sci-fi books and Mystery books occupy the middle of the graphic with 11.05% and 8.06%, while the last three preferred genres seem to be Personal development books (4.45%), Historical books (2.49%) and Biography/Autobiography books (1.09%).

Figure 2 shows the proportions of the reading frequency. The largest proportion is formed by people who read 3-4 times a week (44.8%), followed by people who read every day (almost 30%). People that read once a week take the third place with the percentage of 16.02%, while the smallest proportions are represented by people who read two times a month and everyday month, with a 1.29% difference between them.

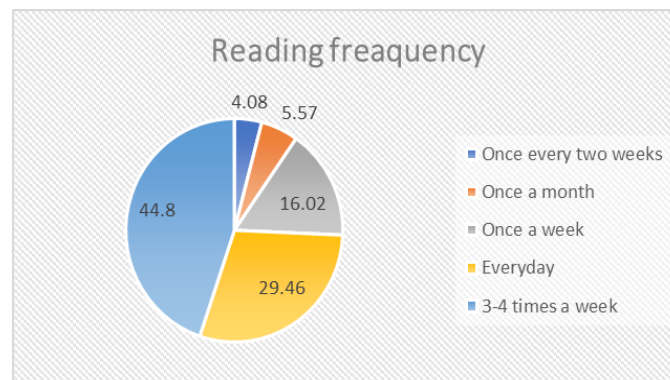


Figure 2. The frequency of book reading

When it comes to the place (*where*) the participants usually read. It can be seen that a very big percentage of the participant (81%) choose to read at home, while very few of them choose to read outside, in nature (2.09%). The second most preferred place in on the subway/train (7.66%), followed by the 5.08% of people that prefer to read while on holiday and people that read on their job break (3.08%).

In close connection to the above-mentioned topic comes the reading time (*when*) the participants choose to read. The biggest proportion (76.2%) belongs to people that read whenever they have the time, while the smallest proportion belongs to people that read while on holiday (2.11%). The second most preferred option is occupied by people that read before bed/in the afternoon (15.62%), followed by people that read when waiting for the subway/train (6.07%).

4. Conclusions and discussions

This study's main purpose was to present a clear perspective on book consumer behavior, from are the book consumers are, what factors influence their book purchasing decisions, reading habits and preferences and some of the individuals' favorite things about reading and books.

The theoretical approach aimed to provide information about all the concepts regarding consumer behavior that must be known in order to conduct an accurate (and later, useful) research. Concluding, studying consumer behavior represents a key element for a profitable business and a successful approach, by looking into the consumer buying psychology and taking notes of needs, desires and frustrations consumers have. Moreover, consumers have learned to adapt to new ways due to time flexibility but location rigidity because of the pandemic and embraced the idea that the store must travel to customer if the customer cannot visit the store.

The second part of the theoretical approach explained the book market, describing the book introduction and evolution over the time, finishing off with trends in consumer book buying process. The information emphasized how the book industry has evolved, from ink on paper to e-readers, all the subcategories of books that have appeared, the book publishing ecosystem and the most successful ways of promoting books nowadays. Advertising is crucial in to raise awareness, make the offer known, and make it enticing. Digital innovations such as apps and social media platforms are linked to new kinds of communication, promotion and public interaction.

The research conducted in the present paper has provided answers from 100 female book consumers, thus giving the opportunity to have various opinions regarding their behavior, from people that belong to different age groups (18-24, 25-34 35-49, 50-64, 65 and over).

One of the most conclusive questions for this research regards the book format the participants use. A very big and unexpected proportion of respondents (almost 70%) claimed that they still read printed book, which prove that book still hold their magic to these days when there are different means to read such as e-books (which was the second largest proportion – 29.5 %) and audio books (an extremely contrary percent to the other two – 1%). As a recommendation, when debating translating or publishing new books, the book retailer, publishing house and the authors should consider primordial to go for printed books to reach the standards of the majority of readers and after that to launch e-books.

Living the in Internet Era, the research would not be completed without having an overview about what means the participants use when buying a book. Hence, the results have shown that a very eloquent percentage of 66% of the respondents choose to purchase their books online, while the other 28% still go to physical book shops. Consequently, it can be

deduced from a following up questions that places such as antique shops or libraries do not attract people anymore, only 1.86 % and 4.2% of participants still visiting these places.

The power that the Internet has over people can be easily seen in other questions' results as well. When asked what are the main mean of finding out about books, almost 58% of the participants has chosen to respond that social media and the pages specially dedicated to books are the major instrument helping them make a decision. In contrast with the big proportion the social media holds, the smallest proportion belongs to people that choose book fest as a way of finding about new books (1.16%).

More evidence sustaining the power held by the Internet can be deduced from the difference between the percentages of the answers to the question regarding online vs. offline shopping. 74% of the participants have claimed that they choose to do online shopping, while the rest of 26% said that they still go to physical stores.

Taking into consideration the previous three results, the general recommendation would be to focus more on the online environment, because this is the place most consumers are and this is what suits them best, especially in terms in time. Thus, websites and social media accounts and should come up with innovative ideas and offers to make the customers' buying experience easier and ideal, and leave them wanting to always come back for more.

In regards of book consumer purchasing decisions, it can be concluded that the participants choose to buy from a specific retailers based on price and a big variety of books from which they can choose whatever book they like and want to have. The best thing all book retailers should do is focus their power on having more and more books (from different genres) so that the customers can choose from and create good, irresistible offers and deals (for example buying 3 books and getting another one for free, buying one book and the second one for half its price, etc.).

To achieve a profile of the book consumer habits, it resulted that the majority of the participants (almost 45%) read 3-4 times a week, followed by the second biggest percent (almost 30%) that claim to read every day. Having asked them also they when they do their reading, a very meaningful percent of 76.2% responded that they read whenever they have the chance to do it. The second most significant percent of 15.62% belongs to people that choose to respond they read before bed.

Still under the consumer habits umbrella, the participants were asked what makes them choose a specific book, to which the most chosen response was the genre the book belongs to, followed by the title of the book and very closely by the author (if they have previously read book from that author). The more attractive the book title, the more chances for a customer to choose a book, so the publishing houses and authors should have fresh and interesting ideas to catch the eye so the customers will be tempted to buy that book.

The most predominant answers when participants were asked about their favorite book genre are romance book and thriller books, with a difference of 3.8% between them. Action and adventure books fall on the third place of the top, with 16.74%, and the lowest percentage belong to biography and autobiography. Even though nowadays there are many new and fresh authors that come up with unique ideas of book, there is still a portion of 15% that chooses to go for classic authors and books. These results should be a sign for authors to try and write romance and thriller books, and for publishing houses to promote, publish and commercialize more of these two genres.

After the statistics showed the age and the book format percentages, a correlation between the two of them was conducted in order to see if the age influences the book format choice. The results showed that there is relationship between the age group and the book format chosen by the participants - younger participants tend to choose e-books/audio books, while older ones choose printed books- but the influence is rather weak.

In conclusion, the results that this research revealed tend to be very positive, showing that there are still many people passionate about books and reading, especially an impressive majority of people doing it in the old traditional way with printed books and a solid desire to have a collection of their own. So many people claimed that nothing in this world compared to the sensation they get from reading, from the smell of books, the way the pages feel on their fingers and how flipping pages makes them not only understand the story better, but also makes them feel like they are living in the book, to even cracking a book's spine and making annotations.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by a grant of the Romanian Ministry of European Funds, POC program, project number P_40_382/119598– ASECOMP.

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