



Do consumers judge a book by its cover? A study of the factors that influence the purchasing of books



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ABSTRACT

Research addressing the critical success factor of books and how people choose them is scarce. This study examines the factors that influence consumers when purchasing fictional books and explores whether there are differences between purchasing books for personal use or as gifts. Furthermore, it also studies impulsiveness regarding the purchase. A quantitative empirical analysis was conducted based on 487 valid responses obtained through an online questionnaire.

The results of this study show that approximately one third of books are purchased as gifts, women buy and read more books than men and higher educated and older consumers tend to read and buy more books. The purchase is less impulsive when the book is a gift and women are more impulsive, when buying for themselves.

In the decision-making process, the features most valued in a book are: the "Title", "Synopsis", "Subject covered in book", "Recommendation of family and friends" and "Books with discount/on sale". Twenty-four items were considered based on these features and the same factor structure was found for both buying books for personal use and as gifts. Consumers tend to value more the "Recommendation of family and friends" when buying a book for themselves rather than as a gift. However, "Author and book recognition" is more important to the consumer when the book is purchased as a gift.

The findings of this study provide important insights regarding consumer preferences, which will be useful for marketers to define strategies. Moreover, by comparing the factors that influence people to buy books for themselves as opposed to buying them as gifts, bookstores can strive to satisfy consumer demands, by conceiving and implementing new ideas in order to increase their book sales.

1. Introduction

According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2017), a book is "a set of printed pages that are fastened inside a cover so that you can turn them and read them; a written work published in printed or electronic form". However, a book is much more than "a set of printed pages". According to *Neves et al.* (2012):

"the cultural nature of books and the cultural importance of book publishing activities are widely recognized. It is known that the value of a book cannot be reduced to a mere commodity. Its cultural value depends largely on the relationship with reading, of which it is a noble support, especially in the case of literature" (p. 17).

Although books are "a major factor in the cultural life of a nation" (*Hjorth-Andersen, 2000, p.27*), *Febvre and Martin (2000)* attributed merchandising importance to books, in the true commercial logic, acknowledging that publishers and booksellers work for a profit in this economic sector. The decision-making factors in Marketing are

transversal and similar to other consumables and undergo market analysis, needs identification, segmentation, positioning, marketing mix (product, price, distribution and promotion policies), strategic planning, competition analysis, amongst others. *Carneiro (2005)* argues that authors can play a prominent role in the promotion of their books.

It appears that the international book publishing industry currently faces a significant challenge, where opportunities and strengths are marred by weaknesses and threats (*Neves et al., 2014*). For instance, technology, which can be seen as both an opportunity and a threat, has dramatically changed the way people buy books, with the possibility of purchasing them online, and the way they read books, with the arrival of e-books. Another opportunity that the book industry cannot ignore is the significant amount of books purchased as gifts (*Neves, 2011; Nielson, 2016*). At the same time, the book industry faces several threats. Indeed, the number of books available for purchasing far outweighs the demand for them. Therefore, publishers and bookstores have to fight hard for consumers of their books. For this reason, it is necessary to better understand the range of variables that influence the

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book buying decision-making process, such as: buying and reading habits, selection criteria, the importance of the main factors influencing the purchase (personal use versus gift giving), impulsiveness to buy, preferences regarding physical characteristics of the books (size, cover, title, color, images, amongst others) and other important related factors. Moreover, despite the importance of book gift giving, no study has effectively grasped the features surrounding the purchase of books with regards to distinct consumer situations (Gift-giving and Personal Use). Carneiro (2005) alludes to the pertinence of developing knowledge related to a dichotomy of purchasing books for gift giving and for personal use.

Therefore, the main aim of this study is to identify the key factors that influence the purchase of fiction books and to examine if these factors differ when the book is for personal use or for gift giving purposes. Additionally, it explores buying books regarding several socio-demographic variables, such as gender, age and education. Only fiction books were considered since they are the type of books that are most read in several countries, including Portugal (Santos et al., 2007; Schmidt, Park et al., 2013; Nielsen, 2016). This latter bit of information is particularly important given that the sample used in this study are readers from Portugal.

The Portuguese book market is quite intriguing. According to a report released by the Federation of European Publishers (2017), Portugal, has a similar number of titles published per inhabitant as the UK, one of the leading countries regarding daily book readers (GfK, 2017). The report also reveals that Portugal is one of the European countries with the highest number of specialized stores selling books compared to the number of inhabitants. This is not surprising considering a survey conducted in 2008, which indicates that the Portuguese do recognize the importance of reading in today's society and believes that Portuguese reading habits have increased over the past few years. This same study, however, also reveals that when comparing reading habits to other EU countries, these same Portuguese people (68%) believe that they read less than other Europeans (Costa et al., 2008). Also interesting to note is that 78% of respondents of this survey recognize the importance of reading in their lives and 61% state they read for pleasure. This indicates that a large majority of the Portuguese population are potential regular book buyers and that strategies to promote book sales are necessary to improve the profits of publishers and bookstores.

This research is important considering that not much has been done in addressing the critical success factor of books and how people choose them (Schmidt-Stölting et al., 2011; d'Astous et al., 2006). The few studies that do exist do not focus on the real factors that influence the purchasing of fiction books, nor do they discuss management measures and marketing strategies capable of developing mechanisms inherent to the commercial dynamics of the book business.

Understanding the factors that influence the consumers main buying decision of fiction books will enable all professionals working in the book industry to adopt strategies that promote the buying and reading of books, making them more attractive visually, physically and even emotionally thus responding to references and subjectivity of the intent to buy of each consumer. Furthermore, knowing the size of the market in terms of gift giving and personal use, will make it possible to design marketing plans that meet the demands of the consumers, turning the subjective expected utility into an effective tool for idealizing and personalizing books.

2. Literature review

2.1. The bookselling Industry

The bookselling industry worldwide has undergone considerable changes over the last few decades. Carneiro (2005) refers to the changes that have taken place, especially since 1990, with the gradual disappearance of many small independent bookstores, due to the emergence and growth of current major book distributors and the growth of

online book sales. The Internet has made the book market much more competitive (Lubiana, Gammon et al., 2004). In fact, books and music are the product category that most sells online (Statista, 2016). Online book stores have gained popularity because they offer consumers convenience, access to a great variety of books and significant cost savings (Chen et al., 2016). Considering the American book market, 42% of book purchases are made online (Schmidt, Park et al., 2013), therefore a significant number of purchases are still made offline. In Portugal, the number is considerably lower, with only 8% of the Portuguese population purchasing books and magazines online (Federation of European Publishers, 2017). This percentage is below the European Union average, as it is the case in many other countries such as Spain, Poland, Belgium, Italy and Greece.

Many bricks-and-mortar book retailers shut down from 2010 to 2015 because of the success of online book shopping. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that the number of independent bookstores have increased by 21% and even Amazon has physical stores in several cities across the USA (Bowman, 2017). A possible explanation for this is that most customers go to online bookstores only when they have specific targets (Chen et al., 2016). On the other hand, brick and mortar bookstores have the advantage of being able to create in-store experiences, such as readings, author signings, discussion about books, among others, and they enable consumers to browse and discover books in a way that an online environment cannot. Readers like to visit bookstores, see and touch books and get expert advice (Federation of European Publishers, 2017). In fact, browsing in a physical store is the top discovery method for print books (Nielsen, 2016).

Another significant change occurred with the appearance of e-books. In 2012, one fifth of American adults had read an e-book in the past year and the number of e-book readers had grown after a major increase in ownership of e-book reading devices and tablet computers (Rainie et al., 2012). Due to the increase popularity of e-books, the sales of printed books in the USA declined from 2008 to 2012 (Statista, 2017), with many questioning the future of printed books. However, after 2012, the sales of printed books started to increase, while digital sales fell (The Publishers Association, 2016). It should be noted that 65% of book readers in the USA still prefer printed books (Statista, 2017). Zaid (2003) affirms that although reading text on a screen is theoretically more appealing, cheaper and even easier to handle than print books, technology seems to be more likely to reinforce rather than substitute paper books. In fact, consumers value physical goods more, despite lifestyles becoming more and more digitalized (Dover, 2016). Research has found that 60% of consumers have purchased a print book in the last twelve months, compared to only 25% who have bought an e-book (Dover, 2016).

Regardless of all of these challenges and a small decrease in book sales between 2008 and 2015, the book market has recovered and there are more units being sold (Federation of European Publishers, 2017; Nielsen, 2016).

Furthermore, despite the significant changes at the diversified distribution level, the connection of key players defined by Martins (1999) continues to support the multidisciplinary process of implementation of this economic sector, starting with the authors who write the books, followed by the publishers and graphic designers who help promote them and finally culminating with the distributors who have to adapt to the constraints of the existing market(s). Publishers are the central agents in the bookselling industry because they decide which books are to be published and determine the prices (Hjorth-Andersen, 2000).

2.2. Factors affecting book purchasing behavior

Getting consumers to purchase a book can be challenging for authors and publishers. Firstly, choosing a book is a difficult task because of the great number of available options that are not comparable (Leemans and Stokmans, 1992). Secondly, consumers can read books without purchasing them. For example, they can visit a local public

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