'Find the book that speaks to you! – A qualitative pilot study for research on Book Consumption

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Abstract

Sales numbers in printed books have been on the slope since many years in Hungary and in many other countries too. Finding the motivations among these decreasing trends of reading and book consumption may eventually help in turning the book industry's way on this downhill backwards and putting the book consumption on rising trails again. A series of interviews and focus group interviews are coming up within the frames of a doctoral research targeting the exploration of motivators for book consumption and the consumer behavior of book consumers. This article presents a pilot study done in the exploratory phase of the research. The study is a mini focus group interview conducted with fiction reader participants. The article summarizes the theoretical background for book consumption. Being a white spot in the academic discussion, the study outlines the Book Consumption areas for exploration: Reading habits; Parallel Reading; Preferences over E-book v. Printed books; Preferences over the physical attributes of a book; Ways of choosing books to read; Motivations for reading; Re-reading; Process of Book purchasing; Giving Feedback and Recommendations. Analyzing the group discussion the article identifies research topics to be covered in future qualitative studies and suggests potential variables for quantitative research. The study makes suggestions for future research.

Keywords: consumption, consumer behavior, purchase decisions, reading, education

1. Introduction

Book sales are on the slope, especially in Hungary. Over a decade the book market has shrunk seriously. Based on the data of the Association of Hungarian Publishing Houses and Book Retailers (MKKE) there might be a small increase in the number of copies sold between 2010 and 2021 (13%), perhaps as an effect of changes in consumption afflicted by Covid. But the gross revenue in the mentioned period has dropped by 10% (numbers are not corrected by inflation). (MKKE, 2022) EUROSTAT data shows that European book sales for newly produced books decreased by 15% from 2019 to 2020 (EU-27). Covid also hit the printed book industry hard in many countries (GUREN et al., 2021; REN – KANG, 2021; KOVAC – GUDINAVIČIUS, 2020). The level of shrinkage of the Hungarian market can be followed in more detail in the previous publications of this doctoral research (LÉGRÁDI et al., 2019; LÉGRÁDI, 2020).

This pilot is one of the first focus group interviews that will compose the qualitative base of the doctoral research on Book-Consuming Behavior. The pilot aimed to show that there is enough interest among readers to provide the necessary information about their consuming habits of books. The participants gave their ideas about reading, their reading methods and habits. Talked about their book related backgrounds, gave detailed description of their book consuming habits. Shared their preferences over the physicalities of books, of the stories, of genres to some extent. Described their book purchasing habits, and their information gathering strategies.

2. Theoretical Background / Literature review

From Hungarian authors the best starting point for research on book consuming behavior is Kultúramarketing (PAVLUSKA, 2014), which is a great compendium of culture-related marketing research, also the works of Törőcsik and her alumni on consumer behavior (e.g. TÖRŐCSIK et al., 2011, 2017). On reading motivations there is one valuable Hungarian source (KAMARÁS, 2007), although it is done from a sociological aspect, which cannot translate into marketing easily.

Checking the academic publications (listed in the bibliographies of LÉGRÁDI et al., 2019; LÉGRÁDI, 2020) concluded that only some aspects of book-consumption have been studied. A real detailed approach to the theoretical background of the book reader behavior have not been found so far.

The book is a cultural product which aims to transfer a certain message to the consumer (PAVLUSKA, 2014), the generic product (LEVITT, 1980) can be this message. Cultural goods are search-, experiential and credence goods (PAVLUSKA, 2014). Consuming novels might meet some attributes that are typical to services (VERES, 2009).

One of the literature reviews on book consumption during this doctoral research (LÉGRÁDI, 2022) identified many sociological studies on reading and cultural consumption. The authors of 'What is a Book?' (KOVAČ al., 2019) try to gather some solution for the same problem. Based on this and the own study done on scientific publications on book consumption, the research gap here seems obviously existent. The behavioral and the product aspects of consuming books / novels are not researched topics so far.

There are papers discussing the differences between print and e-book reading (like ZHANG – KUDVA (2014); SEHN – FRAGOSO (2015)). Many articles aim to describe the observed book consuming behavior, although this category studies consumption preferences (like KETRON – NALETELICH (2016)). The analyzed articles for the mentioned review discussed topics from the book consumption field like: reading experience, surroundings and environments for the activity of reading, choice and purchase motivations and processes, physical expectations of book consumers.

Regarding the theories of recepting cultural products and texts the main experience theories of cultural consumption of the 19th century based on Tatarkiewicz's summarization (TATARKIEWICZ, 2000; cited in PAVLUSKA, 2014) are basically showing different extremes of similar approaches:

- Basic – aesthetic experience cannot be reduced to other experiences, it is a primordial
- Hedonistic – aesthetic experience is a feeling of pleasure, or in negative experiences: pain
- Cognitive – aesthetic experience is acquiring knowledge about the world by intuition and looking for further understanding
- Illusion – aesthetic experiences form and exist in the world of illusion and imagination
- Empathy – the subject draws the sources of joy from themselves and projects it onto the object, and the new source of joy is the recognition of similarities
- Contemplation – aesthetic experiences have a passive nature, the subject focuses on things outside of themselves, they get submitted to and merged into the experiences and their memories and ideas mirroring the experience - that gives the aesthetic experiences
- Euphoria – without conscious participation the aesthetic experiences comes from the felt euphoria and catharsis.

The modern hermeneutics (=study of the methodological principles of interpretation, "Hermeneutic." Merriam-Webster, 2023) originates from Gadamer who states that a text needs an active relationship with it. Reading is inherently an interpretation as well, therefore the understanding of a text is not only reproductive (in mind), but has a recreating aspect too. So in this regard the text is not a finalized object, but something to make new interpretations about over and over again with every reader and every read (GADAMER, 1984; cited in PAVLUSKA, 2014).

Reception aesthetics by Wolfgang Iser operates by treating literary texts as unfinished works with spaces in them left blank which has to be filled by the readers imagination (co-creation) (CARLSON, 2000: 40).

The Reader-response Theory according to Tyson (2006:170.) basically focuses on the reader as an actor who creates everything that can be found in a literary text as a transaction between the reader and the text.

During this transaction, following Kamarás (2007), the perception of the read text has many distinct factors, like cultural background, values, reference groups, motivations, gender, age and generational group, social and cultural capital, lifestyle, world views and taste.

The main purpose of personal taste is to make quick, mainly emotion-driven but full decisions about different aestethic qualities (SZERDAHELYI, 2003).

3. Methodology

Based on the topics studied by the previous researchers a guideline has been written covering the following topics:

- T0: Reading habits and Background
- T1: Parallel Reading or Reading more books at once
- T2: Preferences over E-book and Printed books
- T3: Preferences over the physical attributes of a book
- T4: Ways of choosing books to read
- T5: Motivations for reading
- T6: Re-reading
- T7: Process of Book purchasing
- T8: Giving Feedback and Recommendations

This study used the focus group interview for exploratory goals to start the qualitative research from a fresh point, while clashing the ideas collected so far about book consumption with the actual experiences of real book reading members of the public.

The literature suggests focus group interviews to be held with the number of participants between 7-12, however, there is mention of mini groups having lower number of interviewees. The literature emphasizes that holding a low numbered group interview might level the intensity of group dynamics (MALHOTRA, 2009). Although, there are a lot of reasons for these micro groups. For one instance, with limited financial and time resources a low numbered group is more easy to arrange and manage.

Further scientific sources for preparing this pilot was the Alternatív Kvalitatív Kutatási Kézikönyv (HORVÁTH – MITEV, 2015) and Marketingmenedzsment 2012 (KOTLER – KELLER, 2012). The all-time basic scientific source for cultural marketing in this doctoral research is Pavluska's Kultúramarketing (2014).

The literature suggests having people in a group coming from similar backgrounds or having similar positions in life to avoid conflicts. (MALHOTRA, 2009). This time the call was

made through a few social media groups (Facebook) for people interested in sharing their thoughts about book reading.

The interview was held on the 15th of December, 2022 on one of the campus of Budapest Business School. The discussion was consensually recorded by two smartphones. The moderation was done by the author helped by a copy of the printed guidelines.

The Guideline was written with the intention of providing topics and lightly detailed questions for the moderator. Guidelines are not for strict following, but to serve as a helpful framework for the moderator to lean on if the discussion is getting out of his control, and for outlining the path of the preferred direction of the discussion (MALHOTRA, 2009). Notes about the discussion were taken by hand.

After the interview the recordings have been listened to over and over, and a transcript was written into an Excel file. Each participant's responses had their own column. Separated remarks and comments were made into whole or broken, but topically sorted sentences. The transcript is more or less verbatim. From this transcript an analysis was made, grouped the results into topics, and from this analysis came a section of conclusions.

Coding was done by identifying topics from the actual question and the contents of the given responses. To the previously collected topics were added one, the recommendations, because it gained so heavy emphasis during the interview. Motivations for reading has been split to make a new topic - re-reading, which was an unexpectedly well discussed subject in the interview. For future reference coding could be extended to creating groups around certain phrases or words, in this exploratory pilot research there seemed no necessity of that.
The interviewees:

- T. (25), high school educated young female, employed as an Assistant Lab Technician.
- L. (40), male, having a BA in Social Work, working as a Lead Investment Advisor for a bank in Budapest.
- N. (40), female, having a PhD in Management Sciences, working as an Associate Professor at a University.

4. Results

The transcript of the conversation held 4308 words, took 16 pages and consisted of 23518 characters without spaces. No word analysis showed any interesting facts or ideas. After removing all the words that would hold the text together, and eliminating every expression directly connected to reading like 'book' or derivatives of 'reading', there was not left a word which occurred more than 5 times showing any significance beyond the mere fact that they cover the actual topics of the conversation.

The conversation brought up 27 different authors and 30 different novels or book series. The titles of the topics here are underlined with direct quotes from the interview which give a good grasp on the gist of the topic.

T0: Reading habits and background – *'I missed novels like old friends.'*

All three interviewees are avid fans of books. They read regularly, every day, maybe with a habitual pattern. They have different social status and background, but books are part of the usual surroundings for them. They usually read while commuting to the workplace or before getting to sleep. The two lower educated respondent consider books as means to acquire a higher knowledge, or to get a better position among their peers. The well-situated associate professor did not mention anything like this. They all take books as a representation of their intellect or knowledge of the world. Also as a mirror to their personality or personal taste.

T1: Parallel reading or reading more books at once – *a 'wholesale amount' of books'*

They all read more books at once, depending on the topic or the quality of the read books. Having more books lined up to choose from is a way to continue the action of reading, while having the possibility of changing the subject of the activity. They all told, that they change the book if it is disturbing, uninteresting, too difficult to read, or just requires too much mental effort to follow.

T2: Preferences for e-book and printed books – *It does not matter if it is old or new, I just like the smell of the books.'*

Only two of the interviewees spoke about e-books. They told that e-books give a different reading experience. One preferred the physical form, the other one enjoyed the advantages of both format. For her e-books mean more physical freedom and give more and easier choices for new books.

T3: Preferences over the physical attributes of a book – *a real book comes with a hard cover'*

They all like physical books. Smell is an important issue, a big advantage printed books have over e-books. Weight and having a hard cover are also main points in the physicality of a printed book. A hard cover is more reliable to survive in different damaging situations that might include transporting the book. Without having a hard cover, it is debatable, if it is a real book.

T4: Ways of choosing books to read – *It must have something more to it!'*

They all mentioned reading books after watching the movie version of them first. Movies, films are great inspiration for choosing new books. Even hearing a book name dropped in movies is enough for making a choice. They described the power of watching movies so strong, that it was able to turn previous emotional choices for a book.

Sifting through their everyday experiences and choosing certain elements from them as subjects for reading is a trivial method, they are all doing that. They are following the titles of their favorite authors as they want to live through the same or very similar experiences that writer's work gave them before.

They all have topics of interest which they are looking up on the internet or in libraries or other databases, like online bookstores' product portfolios.

They are very careful with books recommended to them, because they consider their personal taste being too difficult to get measured up by outsider (out of their immediate families). Even from friends they are not taking any reading material advice easily.

T5: Motivations for reading – *the horror at the workplace is enough'*

Reading a book can be a mean for personal education and development, and they use reading as a function for that. Reading has to be put effort in from them otherwise, so if they are not consuming products well known and soothing enough, they are struggling with the larger process of reading. They describe this process as conquering an unknown land which needs a lot of work and suffering. Some of them tells, that they leave the too hard books behind, but one of them keeps going, and is always adamant in reading what she has started. The most important de-motivator for reading seemed to be that disturbing nature described by them as taboos. Though they mentioned twists and unexpected turns as positive aspects, really hard

turns drove them away from the disturbing novel – in the case of the assumed escapist reading mode.

T6: Re-reading – *'You are in a completely different world! And I'm missing to be there!'*

In re-reading they are looking for an experience which takes them out from the everyday problems and soothes their mood. But for novels they spoke about having a time out from the small hardnesses of life.

They find very different novels to have that effect on them. One is Fight Club – which is a postmodern crime novel, which depicts the mental degradation of a man being in a full blown existential crisis induced by the consumer society. The other one is Harry Potter, a fairy tale for young adults about a young boy in grave danger, born with hidden magic talent, getting accepted for a wizardry school. The third one is a science fiction, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, which is a post-existentialist sci-fi about humanity spreading out to Mars after wrecking Earth, and having androids as their servants on the Mars colonies – finding that these androids are trying to escape and live as people. The actual book is about a hunter for these escaped androids. These books are quite differing from each other in topic and nature as well, but all depict humans among dangerous conditions, while they are having emotional problems as well. Nevertheless, they all find the respected books soothing, relaxing, amazing and thought inspiring for themselves. This seems obvious escapism. This kind of reading for them is a habit which should not be broken by a badly chosen book. It is checking into a mental resort more or less independently from the actual book.

T7: Process of book purchasing – *'Find that book which speaks to you!'*

One of them rarely buys any books, the others just buy the selected book as it comes. One respondent worked for a used book shop, she collected many pieces there, the other one regularly buys e-books online, but takes trips to bookshops as well. The atmosphere of a library and the social environment of a bookshop have been mentioned marginally.

T8: Feedback and recommendations – *'Getting through 900 pages and not liking it'*

They did not like the idea of recommending books either for to them, or to others. They felt it is too much of a burden, because reading a book means a huge commitment and it should not be imposed on anyone against their will. They are not looking really for recommendations, from humans at least. Algorithmic recommendations, suggestions can be okay for them.

For the same reasons they really prefer not to give books as presents either, maybe only for very close relatives. They do not give online feedbacks, and when they do, they don't expect any interest or response about it.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The most interesting result of this research is the idea of consuming books for the two reasons mentioned before: Conquering New Worlds and Re-Visiting a Welcoming Place.

Escapism is a topic under exploration among book and reading related literature. Escapism by Merriam-Webster Dictionary is a "habitual diversion of the mind to purely imaginative activity or entertainment as an escape from reality or routine" (MERRIAM-WEBSTER ONLINE, 2023). Castro et al. (2021) finds escapism is a reason behind binge watching shows. The Reading Agency presents a survey in which stated that 31% of the responders said that reading was a form of escapism for them during the lockdown (cited by

GIOVANELLI, 2022). In her study Thumala Olave (2018) show escapism as being in contrary with confronting the problems of reality – which means a certain way of dealing with it.

Escapism in book consumption seems worthy investigating.

Conquering New Worlds, or the positive advantages readers acquire by reading is the other main topic line should be followed. What actual readers can gain by reading new novels?

Recommendations is an interesting and unexpected point of this pilot, because in the previous research done on the subject (LÉGRÁDI, 2019, 2020) respondents pointed out in focus group interviews and surveys as well, that they like to leave online reviews and recommendations. Maybe there is a change in the consumer's behavior, or this mini focus group's sample did not match the population of the previous studies.

The topic of re-reading is strongly connected to the concept of escapism.

The Print vs E-book-topic did not stir any real emotions in the interviewees, which is a bit surprising, given the previously explored, definitely existing ongoing academic discussion over the possibilities and reader preferences of the two technologies. Respondents here knew both medium well, and while having their preferred type, did not react with hot emotions. The discussion over the process of book purchase really did not gain any wind in the focus group, but it has to be covered in other sessions, because it is one of the main topics in this doctoral research.

Mentioning methodology conclusions about the Focus Group, the interview went smoothly, there were not any real problems with it, this mini group worked perfectly.

The interviewees find the mutual tone quickly. The author/moderator was helping in the elevation of the mood, and started the conversation with light remarks and introductory stories, to which the respondents reacted very positively. They were open to each other's experiences, opinions, backgrounds. They started having a conversation among themselves, most of the time moderation only took to just making notes and having the covered topics crossed off of the guideline. Most of the topics came out without having to drop them into the conversation. The talks were not to be heavily moderated, the moderator only intervened if someone took too much control over the others, which happened a few times, but they were still keeping the positive mood.

There was an interesting incident, because the author/moderator feeling himself at ease, knocked his glass of water over, and made a mess of the table and of the shoes of one of the respondents. There was a definite fear of ruining the mood and the whole interview, but after cleaning up the room, they continued the conversation without missing a beat. It was a fun episode and gave them the opportunity to have a short pause and to step out for a minute.

Future research should be focusing on the two types of consumption outlined in the analysis of this focus group - escapist and conquering. For further qualitative research other groups consisting of members from different social backgrounds by groups should be arranged to gather enough ideas for building the basis for the quantitative research. Different groups for high-brow readers and low-brow readers might bring forward some differences in consumption patterns and motivation. Interviews with the members of the publishing industry might shed light on the patterns of the other side. How publishing watches these motivations? What products they offer to them?

After setting up the conceptual boundaries of this book consumption research, some mutual auto-observatory or partially participatory experiments might follow, hopefully in cooperation with publishing houses and other researchers.

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