

# PREFERENCES FOR ONLINE BOOKSTORES AMONG ROMANIAN READERS

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## **Abstract:**

*In 2020, as Statista published in 2022, over two billion people purchased goods or services online, and during the same year, e-retail sales surpassed 4.2 trillion U.S. dollars worldwide. These numbers are possible thanks to a wide internet access and the digitalization of the retail landscape and the convenience online shopping provides to the customers. The book industry considered a traditional one faces also a considerable digital transformation of the business models and customers benefit as a consequence of a variety of products, lower prices and convenience, as they can buy from all over the country.*

*The present paper is the first of one trilogy that explores the preferences for bookstores among the Romanian readers, namely the preferences for online bookstores. The authors applied an online questionnaire to a non-probabilistic sample of 493 respondents, who had to express their preferences by providing points on a 5-point Likert scale. The main findings of the study reveal that: the cheaper online price is considered, the more respondents evaluate online buying as more convenient. Also the general public tends to present higher levels of pragmatism, browsing books in bookstores and buying them online. As the Romanian book market and in particular the bookstore businesses are barely studied, this paper is worthy for both academic and business environments.*

**Key words:** online bookstore, readers preferences, e-commerce, book industry.

**JEL classification:** M10, M30, Z11.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The world book market began to have an orderly, standardized, measurable character - turning it into a veritable industry in the second half of the 19th century. In the US, an expression of the continuity of the industry is the publication *Publishers Weekly*, founded in 1872. Some of the oldest bookstores in the world (Johnson, n.d.) still operating are *Gagliniani* (Paris, 1801), *Hatchards* (London, 1797), and *Betrand* (Lisbon, 1732). Before that, the sale of books was done directly from the printing-publishing houses. In Romania, the first bookstores appeared in the 19th century, among the most important being *Alcalay* (Apostu, 2019).

The idea of a non-physical book store came during the early 90s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Richard Weatherford established, "the first successful online bookseller service" in 1993. Arguing that "our mission is to help booksellers find books for their own customers," Weatherford opened the database to booksellers only (Norman's, HistoryofInformation.com). The database was transformed by a new company called *Alibris*, open to the public. The company still exists (*Alibris.com*). After the success of Amazon, established in 1995, some other players come into the market: Barnes & Noble opened its online bookstore in 1997, and Book-A-Million launched the e-commerce website in 1998 (Bhakat, 2013).

There is no clear information about the first online bookstore in Romania, several entrepreneurs assume this merit. One of the oldest is *librarie.net/ anticariat.online*. Most publishers in Romania have a website that can also function as an e-commerce platform. There are also many e-bookstores made at a very local or family level out of passion or as extra income in addition to the main occupation - for example *pitic.ro*. The most important online stores in Romania are *eMag* and *elefant.ro* (established by a publishing house) which do not sell exclusively books, *libris.ro* - new book, *librarie.net/ anticariat.online* - new book, used, Cărturești, Cartepedia (Librarium), and

Humanitas which are online stores (e-commerce branch) of the bookstore's chains of the same name.

We note that the sale of books by telephone or postal orders, through order slips or special offers (coupons) has been practiced since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both for new and used books. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many bookstores have found a way to survive by a click-and-collect system, valid also for phone orders. Click and collect represents a growing part of the channel strategy of traditional offline retailers, and it was developed before the pandemic (Jara et al., 2018).

Despite the significant challenges and changes determined by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is believed that the book market will continue to grow worldwide. The publishing market share is expected to increase by USD 18.69 billion from 2020 to 2025 (TechNavio, 2021) and the new trends will be more on developing different types of products (audiobooks for example) and on the new methods of influencer marketing, affiliate marketing and “partnerships will take precedence over competition” (Mc Dermott, 2021).

For the Romanian book market, as in the case of other countries, the pandemic accelerated significantly the online bookselling (Hrib, 2020). Therefore, it is important to understand the preferences for online bookstores in Romanians to increase this segment of the market. To gain useful insights, we developed an online survey that generated almost 500 responses from avid readers and representatives of the book industry.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

To begin with, let us establish that by e-commerce we refer to commerce through websites and not to orders placed through coupons or telephone orders. It is important to note that in total book orders in the US from 2003 to 2020 (Coppola, 2022) there is a continuous increase in online sales to the detriment of those through other ordering methods until 2012, when the percentage stabilizes at 89%, which proves a certain conservatism of some customers, conservatism determined by age or lack of access to technology. Even in 2020, during the pandemic, the ratio of online orders - to other types of orders is kept at 89 - 11%. Although the total value of book orders increased from 4.446 billion in 2003 to 20.681 billion in 2020, the largest increase by 19% was between 2019 and 2020.

Still the pandemic forced the book market to raise the online retail as a superstar and to develop solutions in order to compensate the temporary close of the brick and mortar bookstore and those acting in online only had to take advantage of the pandemics to increase their sales. For example Librex decided to eliminate the transport fee, although the decision costs 1.5 million lei then the number of orders raised from 33.000 (March 2019 – February 2020) to 120.000 (March 2020 – March 2021). Another project that shown the power of online was the e-book fairs: Elefant Fest and Lib Fest. Elefant Fest brought 1.6 million visitors (5 times more than in case of a face2face fair) and Lib Fest 250.000 visitors (Revista Biz, 2021).

An online store will be able to benefit from advantages that a bookstore cannot have. E.g., “in some ranges of waiting for cost the online bookstore provides more product variety, charges a lower price, has a larger market share than the physical bookstore and also attracts a higher proportion of consumers who have high preference for variety” (Chu et al., 2012). The determination of the buyer could be relevant. “It is found that there is a positive effect of hedonic shopping and situational variables on the impulse buying behavior” (Bhakat, 2013). However, direct, physical sales can also offer advantages, the possibility to examine the object and control, to directly complete the transaction, without waiting for the subsequent arrival of the product (Muzumdar, 2012). But the high administrative costs of a physical bookstore and implicitly the reduced range of products offered for sale reduce the customer's appetite, especially in the case of a small, independent bookstore. However, there are countless cases when physical bookstores can also operate in e-commerce format (as, for instance, Eminescu bookstore from Bucharest). To summarize, “online bookstore system not only can easily find the information and purchase books,

and the operating conditions are simple, user-friendly, to a large extent to solve real-life problems in the purchase of books” (Zhai and Lu, 2016).

There are no studies about Romanian e-bookstores and the only analyzes are those made by bloggers or journalists without taking into account figures: like Rosoga (2021) or Mateoc (2020). Both bloggers use a very subjective point of view regarding the best online book store regarding the prices policies and the size of their offers. A general overview of onlinebookstores was done by Dobreanu(2021), stating that this model of business is more efficient that the classic physical bookstores in term of speed of reaction and a larger variety of books on sale.

## METHODOLOGY

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a process registered for the past years – an increase in online shopping for all categories, including books. The data for Romania in this matter is incomplete and sometimes imprecise. Statista reports that in April 2020, almost half of the Romanian adults who bought online acquired books, citing a study by the Romanian Institute for Evaluation and Strategy (Statista, 2020a). Another study developed by GPeC in 2020 shows that the Romanian online Books, music, and movies market increased during the first months of the pandemic by 22% (Statista, 2020b). Nevertheless, most Romanians (more than 65%) did not buy books the previous year, according to a Consumer report developed by Starcom and Data Intelligence (2020). The same study reveals that the preferred place of buying is the bookstore (for 25% of the Romanians) and only 7% prefer Romanian websites. Before the pandemic, the Eurobarometers show that Romania had among the lowest percentages of individuals buying online books, magazines, and e-learning materials – registering 4% in 2019 among those living in cities compared to the European average of 23% (Eurostat, 2022). During the pandemic, the Romanian Barometer of Cultural Consumption registered that in July – October 2020 14% of the Romanians used the internet to buy books, CDs, theater tickets, etc. (Croitoru et al., 2021, 70).

Having in mind the increased interest in online book acquisition, we aimed to investigate in more detail this phenomenon. Several items have been considered, as presented in Table no. 1.

**Table no. 1. Items investigated**

Item	Description
Physical bookstore attachment	I am very attached to the idea of visiting the bookstore.
Online bookstore attachment	I prefer to buy books online.
Reason – price	Online books are cheaper than physical bookstores.
Reason - comfort	It is more convenient to buy books online.
Behavior – pragmatism	I usually browse books in bookstores, but buy them online.
Behavior - routine	Type of bookstore from which books are usually bought: online, any physical bookstore, a certain bookstore in town, preferred several bookstores

Source: the authors

A 5-point Likert scale has been considered, with the maximum value of 5 indicating a very strong preference/ phenomenon. The questionnaire has been applied online, using Google forms, in March 2022. A snowball technique was used to increase the number and the diversity of the respondents. The non-probabilistic sample includes 493 respondents.

## THE PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

The respondents are not representative at a national level, since more than half of them live in Bucharest and only 5% are in rural areas. Nevertheless, the study is significant for frequent readers. The average number of books read by the respondents during the past year is 23 books, while the average number of books bought is 26 books. We do not have clear statistics at the national level, except for the 2011 study of IRES showing that among the Romanian readers around 25% bought one book, around 25%bought less than 5 books, and cca. 20% bought more than 10

books (IRES, 2011, p.49). Considering that book reading did not evolve much, as well as the little available information on the book market, these figures are probably valid today, too. Therefore, the sample is representative of avid readers and bookstore customers.

Table no. 2 shows the profile of the respondents: people living in Bucharest, adult women, highly educated, working in the cultural sector (16%), education (28%) and marketing & communication (13%), earning more than the national average (which is almost 500 euros).

**Table no. 2. Structure of the sample**

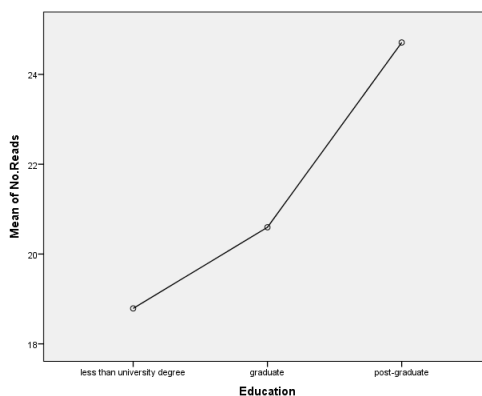
	<b>Segments</b>
Gender	76.5% women 23.5% men
Age	25% - less than 30 years old 61% - between 31 and 50 years old 14% - 50+ years old
Residency	56% - cities with more than 500.000 inhabitants 19% - cities between 300.000 and 500.000 inhabitants 11% - cities between 100.000 and 300.000 inhabitants 10% - cities with less than 100.000 inhabitants 4% - rural area
Education	4% - less than university degree 40% - graduated 56% - post-graduate
income	9.5% - less than 200 euros 12% - between 300 and 500 euros 38.5 - between 500 - 1000 euros 27% - between 1000 - 2000 euros 9% - between 2000 - 3000 euros 4% - more than 3000 euros
Profession	5.5% - writer 8.5% - librarian 5.5% - book professional (bookshop assistant, editor, literary critic, etc.) 2% - blogger 78.5 - general public

Source: the authors

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **READERS PROFILE**

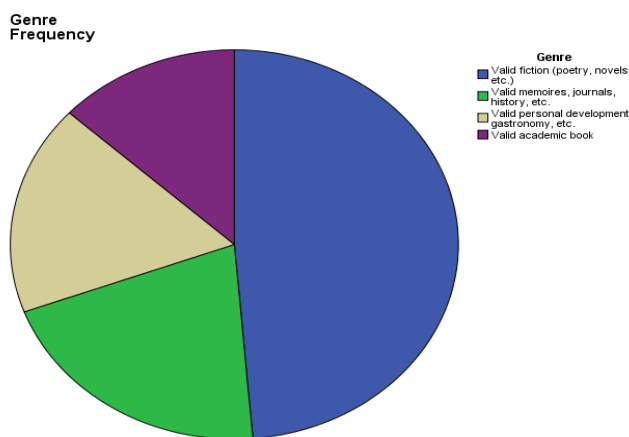
In our sample women tend to read less than men (22 books per year compared to 26 books, but the difference is not statistically significant). Both men and women consider reading a little more than their peers. In terms of the number of books read, there is a significant difference between respondents who earned less than a university degree and post-graduates, as presented in Figure 1.



**Figure no. 1. The average number of books read, by education**

Source: the authors

Figure 2 shows the preference for a specific genre of the respondents. More than half of the respondents prefer non-fiction books. This might be related to the structure of the sample, which include a large number of persons working in education and highly specialized. Writers and bloggers also read significantly more fiction than librarians and the general public.



**Figure no. 2. Genre preferences**

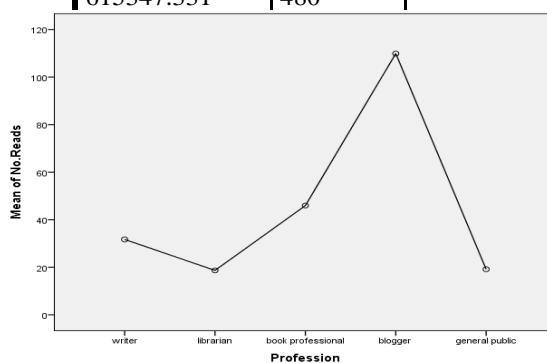
Source: the authors

T-test shows a significant difference between men and women (T-test,  $F=3.979$ ,  $sig.=0.000$ ). This is also confirmed by the Pearson test (.196\*\*). Women prefer more than men fiction.

ANOVA test (Figure 3) presents significant differences between professional segments, both considering the number of books read and the preference for some genres.

**ANOVA**

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
No.Reads	Between Groups	82886.215	4	20721.554	18.524	.000
	Within Groups	532461.116	476	1118.616		
	Total	615347.331	480			



**Figure no. 3. Comparison of the number of reads by professional status**

Source: the authors

Nevertheless, book bloggers and instabookers read much more considering their profession. They receive a significant number of books from editors to evaluate and present them to the wider public.

**BOOK ACQUISITION**

The respondents prefer to buy books from physical bookstores. The T-test shows that women are significantly more attached to physical bookshops than men (Table no. 4).

**Table no. 4. T-test for bookstore category attachment by gender**

Group Statistics						
	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Error
PhBookstoreAttach	Woman	377	4.07	1.018	.052	
	Man	115	3.64	1.118	.104	
OnlineBookstoreAttachment	Woman	377	3.07	1.035	.053	
	Man	115	2.98	1.026	.096	

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
PhBookstoreAttach	Equal variances assumed	3.992	.046	3.880	490	.000	.431	.111	.213	.649
	Equal variances not assumed			3.692	175.644	.000	.431	.117	.201	.661
OnlineBookstoreAttachment	Equal variances assumed	.345	.557	.809	490	.419	.089	.110	-.127	.305
	Equal variances not assumed			.813	190.285	.417	.089	.110	-.127	.305

Source: the authors

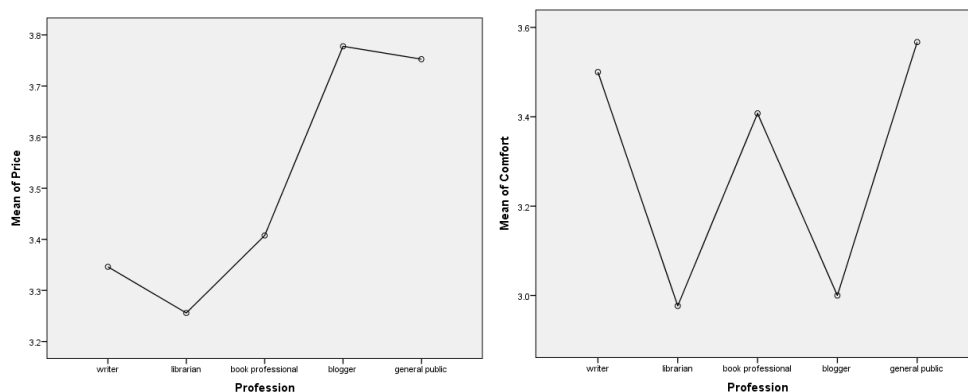
Person test reveals positive correlations between age and physical bookstore attachment (.180\*\*). The older the respondent, the more s/he prefers physical bookstores. There is no correlation between education and income, on one hand, and the preference for a type of bookstore, on the other hand. Also, there is a weak negative correlation between physical bookstore attachment and the type of books read (-.141\*\*), showing that those reading fiction tend to prefer physical bookstores.

**REASONS TO BUY BOOKS ONLINE**

We tested two reasons to buy from online bookstores: price and comfort. Women tend to consider that prices online are cheaper than offline (M=3.69 for women and M=3.62 for men, out of the maximum of 5). Men tend to consider that buying online is more comfortable than women (M=3.63 compared to M=3.46 for women, maximum 5). Neither values are statistically significant. There is no statistical difference considering age, income, or level of education. Pearson correlation shows a medium connection between price and comfort. The cheaper online price is considered, the more respondents evaluate online buying as more convenient (.380\*\*). There are also some statistical differences in connection to the professional status. Figure 4 shows the largest differences between the general public and librarians, both in the case of price and mostly price.

**ANOVA**

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Price	Between Groups	14.715	4	3.679	3.262	.012
	Within Groups	550.392	488	1.128		
	Total	565.108	492			
Comfort	Between Groups	15.972	4	3.993	3.188	.013
	Within Groups	611.253	488	1.253		
	Total	627.225	492			



**Figure no. 4. Comparison of reasons for online buying by professional status**

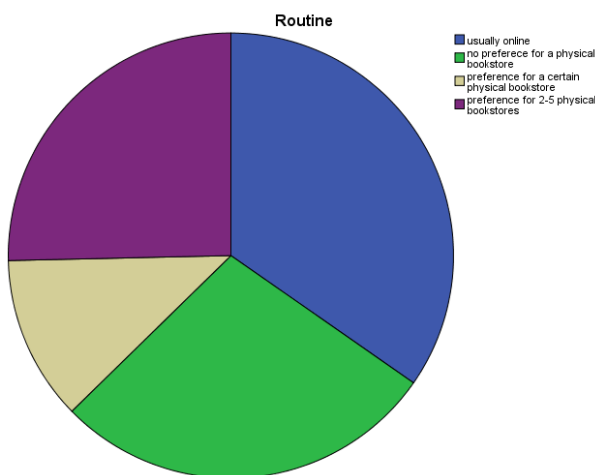
Source: the authors

**BOOK BUYING BEHAVIOR**

Two dimensions have been considered. The pragmatism in book acquisition investigated the habit of browsing books in bookstores but buying books online. The routine in book acquisition considered the type of bookstore from which books are usually bought:online, any physical bookstore, a certain bookstore in town, preferred several bookstores.

The mean value for pragmatism is medium towards low both for men and women, with no significance between the two values (M=2.71 for women, M=2.69 for men).

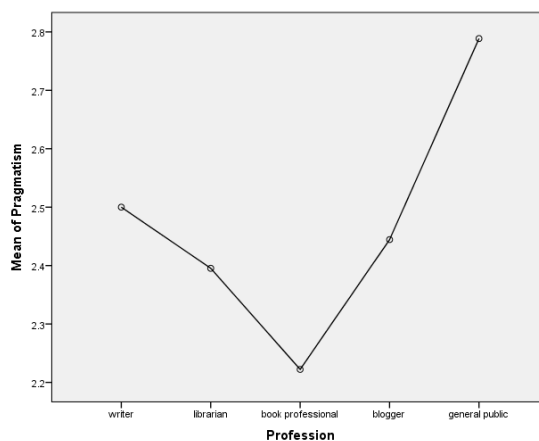
In terms of acquisition routine, more than one-third of the respondents prefer to buy books online (see Figure 5).



**Figure no. 5. Preference for bookstores**

Source: the authors

The general public tends to present higher levels of pragmatism, browsing books in bookstores and buying them online to a slightly higher degree than the others, especially book professionals (see Figure 6).



**Figure no. 6. Post Hoc Test for pragmatism and professional status**

Source: the authors

Table 5 shows a relatively weak negative correlation between pragmatism and age. The younger the reader, the more s/he tends to browse books in bookstores and buy them online.

**Table no. 5. Correlation between pragmatism and age**  
Correlations

		Pragmatism	Age
Pragmatism	Pearson Correlation	1	-.156**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	493	493
Age	Pearson Correlation	-.156**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	493	493

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: the authors

In terms of routine, there are no significant differences by professional status, age, education, or income.

**CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS**

In a world potentially in a succession of crises - medical, climate, energy, or resources -the book industry has to choose the path of adaptation not to face disappearance (Săniuță et al., 2021). Investments in online bookstore can be one of the solutions, especially for those business that do not have enough resources to invest in expansion the brick and mortar chain. On the other hand omnichannel retail is nowadays a must more than ever, as our research highlights the youngsters tend more to browse books in bookstores, also another aspect to be taken into consideration by the decidents in the book market (so the results of the study) is that more respondents evaluate online buying convient as far the online price is cheaper. When it comes to segmentation the results show that those who earned a university degree and the post-graduates read more books. Interesting is that women are more attached to brick and mortar bookstores than men, an explanation could be that men tend to be more technically and to adopt earlier tech products and services.

Based on previous studies (2020, 2021) developed by the authors and their experiences working in the book market the following recommendations are to be highlighted:

- Experience counts both in online and brick and mortar formats;
- Price plays an important role in buying decision from online or brick and mortar bookstores, so the entrepreneurs should have a clear price positioning in online (especially) and also the discount tactics should be taken into consideration;



- Innovation among all four elements of the marketing mix is a must, creativity in communication, a smooth user experience, price differentiation, elimination of transport fee, in terms of distribution the players should take into consideration also the possibility to deliver the online orders in smart lockers (for the moment only eMag has this possibility as it developed a nationwide network of easyboxes), when it comes to innovation also the loyalty programs should be disrupted, for example for those clients buying regularly books from a certain online seller the company can assure free transport or can develop partnerships with cultural events (for example Festivalul Enescu, Art Safari) or cultural places (such as museums, theatres) and offer free tickets;
- A must for whole book industry is to start developing, with NGOs and government, educational programs in order to raise the awareness of reading and its importance for each individual development.

Also the entrepreneurs acting in the book market have to regularly revise the business models, to assess their unique selling proposition, to keep an eye on their customers' needs and to always try to develop campaigns, especially for the youngster to encourage reading (Săniuță et al., 2021). And of course they have to follow the new international trends of the book industry regards the clients demands because 'over the past few years, we have seen [print overtake digital delivery](#), with some readers, in fact, investing in both versions of the books they love. The easy access to electronic platforms services the demand for instant content, but print is holding up, likely because of the experience that accompanies reading a physical book' (Mc Dermott, 2021).

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