



The Role of Social Media in the Purchase of Books: Empirical Evidence from Vietnam’s Publishing Industry

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Abstract

The remarkable growth of social media has proven to influence the publishing industry. Social media has become an important marketing tool for publishers and booksellers, and it has been increasingly used by customers and readers. The objective of this paper is to explore the role of social media in the customer decision-making process with regard to the purchase of books. Data were obtained from 313 customers of major bookstores in Vietnam. The results demonstrate that the majority of customers use social media to gather user-generated content, such as customer reviews and comments, and information about promotions. They also reveal that social media provides the buyers emotional values including fun and the feeling of engagement with the related buying community. Moreover, customers believe that social media plays an important role in the post purchase stage as its allow customers to share their opinions and experiences with others. The findings of this study provide important implications for publishers and book distributors both domestically and internationally. These findings would assist them in developing and implementing effective social media marketing strategies.

Keywords Social media · Publishing industry · Book purchase · User-generated content · Emotional values · Vietnam

Introduction

The phenomenon growth of social media has impact on various industries and sectors including the publishing industry [1]. Social media has become an important marketing tool for publishers and retailers in this current digitally social age. Kaplan and Haenlein [2] refer to social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow

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the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (p. 61). Publishers and bookstores can use social media to reach domestic and international readers, expanding their market coverage globally. Essentially, such a platform allows publishers and retailers to network with customers, facilitate transaction, generate sales, provide services and support, enhance brand equity and customer relationship [1, 3].

Understanding the influences of social media on customer decision making is essential for publishers and retailers to develop and implement social media marketing campaigns. Nevertheless, little knowledge is known about how customers and readers use social media to make book purchase decisions. In general, social media can serve as an important information source and an innovative communication channel [4]. As an illustration, book customers and readers can find relevant information about titles, authors, publishers, booksellers as well as they can share opinions through social media sites such as Facebook. They can also communicate with book distributors for support and assistance during and after their purchases.

This study aims to explore the role of social media in the customer decision process with regard to book purchases. It particularly focuses on customers and readers in Vietnam, where the book market has been growing substantially [5]. Vietnam presently has 45.3 million of Facebook users and this number is expected to increase to 52.4 million in 2023 [6]. This trend is facilitated by the increasing penetration of Internet and the rise of mobile devices in this country [7, 8]. Publishers and booksellers’ social media pages have gained increasing attention from customers. For instance, whilst Nha Nam Publishing House’s Facebook has 824,018 followers, FAHASA Book Distributor’s Facebook page has 561,504 likes.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Initially, we present the research method and sample. This is followed by a detailed discussion of the findings. Finally, we provide important concluding remarks and implications for key stakeholders in the publishing industry, including for domestic and international publishers and booksellers.

Research Method

We collected data using paper-based surveys from Vietnamese customers who visited four major bookstores. Eligible respondents included customers who had used publishers or booksellers’ social media sites (i.e. Facebook) in their purchase decision with regard to books. The survey instrument contained questions used to collect information on what customers searched for, how the social media pages provided utilitarian and hedonic values, and the importance of social media in different stages of the purchase process. Most of these questions were adopted from Powers et al. [9] and Cox et al. [10]. Demographic questions were also included. The survey instrument was pretested using a pilot study with 30 volunteers to identify potential issues associated with answering the questions.

This research followed the ethics standard and protocol approved by the Department of Research Administration at Thuongmai University (Vietnam University of Commerce). The convenience and voluntary sampling method was used to recruit respondents [11]. Specifically, four authors and four research assistants were

stationed at the bookstores to approach customers and request their voluntary participation. Completion of the survey was taken as informed consent to participate in the study. The main data collection phase lasted 2 months, during which 326 surveys were collected. The authors conducted data screening including checking for missing values and outliers. Ten surveys were removed because they contained missing values, and 3 other surveys were eliminated as they possessed outliers. The final usable sample therefore consisted of 313 respondents.

Within the sample, there were 172 females (55%) and 141 males (45%). The number of respondents aged below 25, 25–34, 34–44, and 45 and above were 137 (43.8%), 107 (34.2%), 42 (13.4%) and 27 (8.6%), respectively. Notably, the majority of the respondents were young consumers who appeared to enthusiastically adopt social media platforms [12]. Furthermore, 177 (56.5%) were married and 165 (52.7%) held bachelor's degrees.

Findings

Respondents were asked to indicate which types of information they search for on social media of publishers and book distributors. They could provide multiple responses. As illustrated in Fig. 1, 81.2% of respondents sought user-generated content such as reviews, comments and posts that are generated by customers and readers. User-generated content, which refers to any content media generated by the general public, has considerable impact on customer decision making process because of its trustworthiness and reliability [13]. The majority of respondents also looked for information relating to promotion programs (68.4%), new books and titles (51.1%) and book fairs or events (50.2%).

To further understand the roles of social media in the purchase decision making process, respondents were also asked whether or not they are agreed with a set of questions about the utilitarian (rational) and hedonic (emotional) values provided by social media. The results are illustrated in Fig. 2. Interestingly, respondents emphasized the emotional values as 53% agreed that social media makes them feel engaged with their friends and the book community, and 46.3%

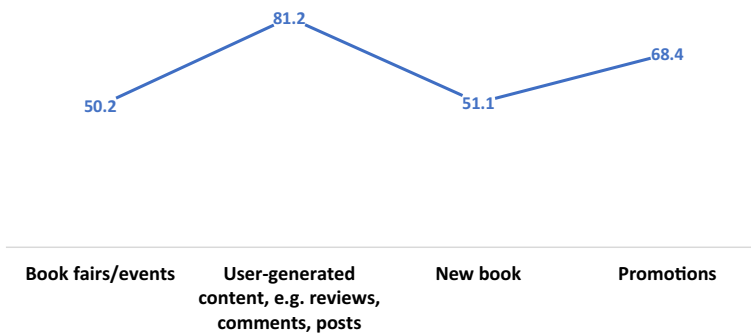


Fig. 1 Information customers search for on social media

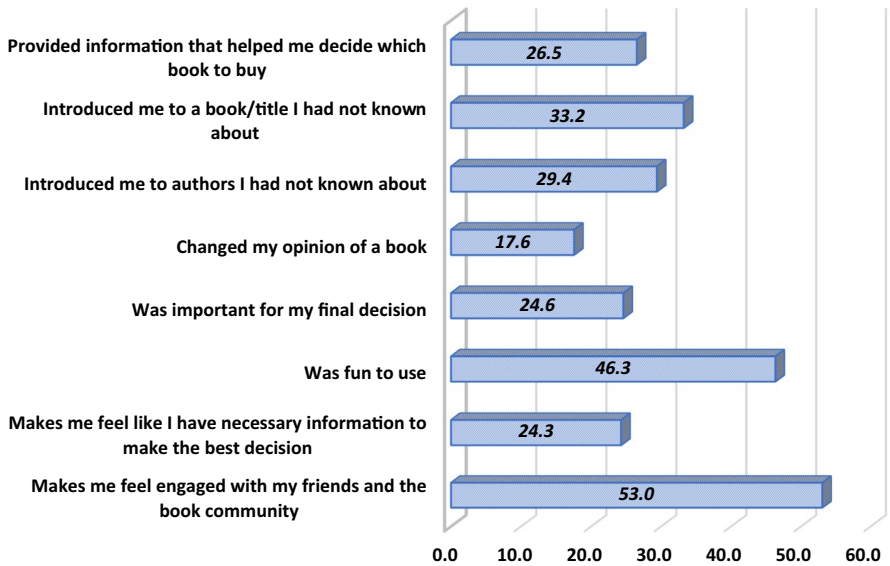


Fig. 2 The role of social media in providing utilitarian and hedonic values

demonstrated that it was fun to use social media. Respondents also went to social media because this platform introduced new books (33.2%), new authors (29.4%) and helped them decide which book to buy (26.5%). Additionally, whilst, 24.6% agreed that social media was important for their final decision, 17.6% indicated that it changed their options of a particular book.

Finally, we asked respondents to indicate the level of importance social media had in each stage of their purchase decision on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 being ‘not important at all’ to 5 for being ‘very important’. As shown in Table 1, social media played the most important role in the post purchase phase (Mean = 4.12), as customers could share opinions and satisfaction about the chosen books as well as compare their experiences with others. Respondents also recognized the role of social media in the information search (Mean = 3.94) and evaluation of alternatives (Mean = 3.92).

Table 1 The importance social media has in stages of purchasing books

Stages of purchasing books	Mean	SD
<i>Information search</i> : when searching for relevant information	3.94	0.906
<i>Evaluation of alternatives</i> : when trying to narrow down my choice of books	3.92	0.978
<i>Purchase</i> : when I was making purchase online or in stores	3.36	1.122
Allowing me to ask questions about my order	3.74	0.865
<i>Post purchase</i> : allowing me to share my opinions and compare my experiences with those of other readers	4.12	0.978

Implications and Conclusion

The main objective of this research was to explore the role of social media in the decision-making process with regard to purchase of books. Given the growth of the book market in Vietnam and the rise of social media in this country, the present study focuses on such an emerging market. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study that investigates the role of social media in Vietnam's publishing industry. Our findings provide several important implications for publishers and booksellers both domestically and internationally who wish to use social media marketing strategies to influence their customer purchase behavior.

First, given that the majority of customers look for user-generated content on social media pages, publishers and book distributors should encourage customers and readers to share their opinions and reviews on books. Second, social media managers should use discussion and interaction forums to facilitate the sharing of purchase experiences among customers. These two initiatives will create the feeling of engagement among customers. Third, it is important to provide clear and attractive messages or posts about promotion programs and book events. Games and contests should be also embedded on social media pages as these can provide fun and enjoyment for customers. Fourth, it would be desirable to audit the quality of the posts, videos and pictures. Fifth, social media should be used to promote new books and new authors. Finally, customers should be encouraged to share feedback via private messages. The foregoing measures will undoubtedly assist publishers and booksellers to improve their social media marketing strategies.

The findings of our provide initial insights in exploring how customers use social media in their purchase decision-making process with regard to books, which may be a starting point for further research. Whilst not the intent of this study, future research can investigate how social media play different roles among different demographic groups. Also, it would be desirable for future studies to test the relationship between utilitarian values, hedonic values and actual purchase behavior. In this regard, longitudinal studies could be conducted.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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