

# Consumer Psychology Insights and their Use for Operational Book Marketing

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*The aim of this article is to provide first insights on how Consumer Psychology could enhance operational book marketing through book design in particular. After highlighting the current German book market and its highly competitive and fast transforming market situation, the article summarizes recent findings from the field of Consumer Psychology relevant for the book market. The focus lies in the book design which has a large influence on the buyer's decision making. Three facets of consumer psychological book design (text design, book body and cover design) will be the object of this research. Research from Consumer Psychology focuses on optimization of stimulus design in order to achieve better information perception, processing and memorization to gain better customer awareness and increase the likelihood of a positive buying decision. Overall, especially in such a highly competitive market as the book market, there is much to gain from applying findings from the field of Consumer Psychology.*

**Keywords:** Consumer Psychology, Operational Book Marketing, Book Design, Book Market, Buyer's Decision Making, Consumer Psychological Book Design, Stimulus Design, Buying Decision

**JEL Classification:** L82, M31

## 1. Introduction

When it comes to the publishing industry - and the book market in particular - we face a highly competitive and fast transforming market. The digitalisation changed this traditional market dramatically: e-books, internet sales and new marketing tools exert their influence. Meffert (2015, p.9) distinguished the publishing and media industry as particularly affected by the digitalisation as the printed book not only needs to compete with its digital edition, but also needs to prevail based on the fact that information is so easy to reach and available as never before.

People used to buy books in bookstores for decades but now the buying behaviour is changing. In 2016, the internet sales held a market share of 18.2% which is a plus of 5.3% in comparison to 2015 while the classical stationary books stores held a market share of 47.3% which is a decrease of 0.8% compared to 2015 (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 2017a). Seven years before, in 2009, internet sales had a market share of 12.2% only (Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 2010). As depicted in Figure 1, the German

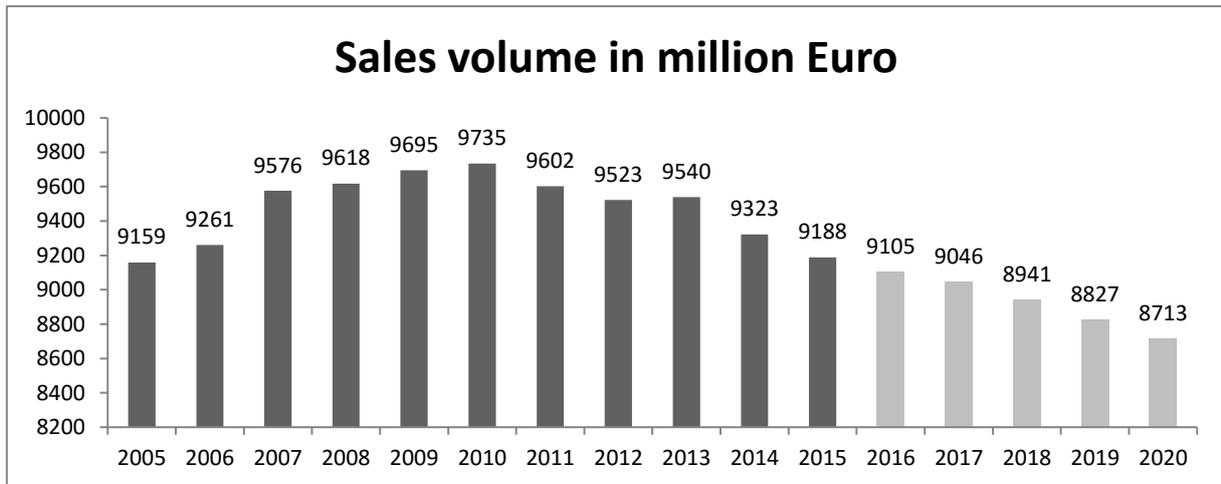
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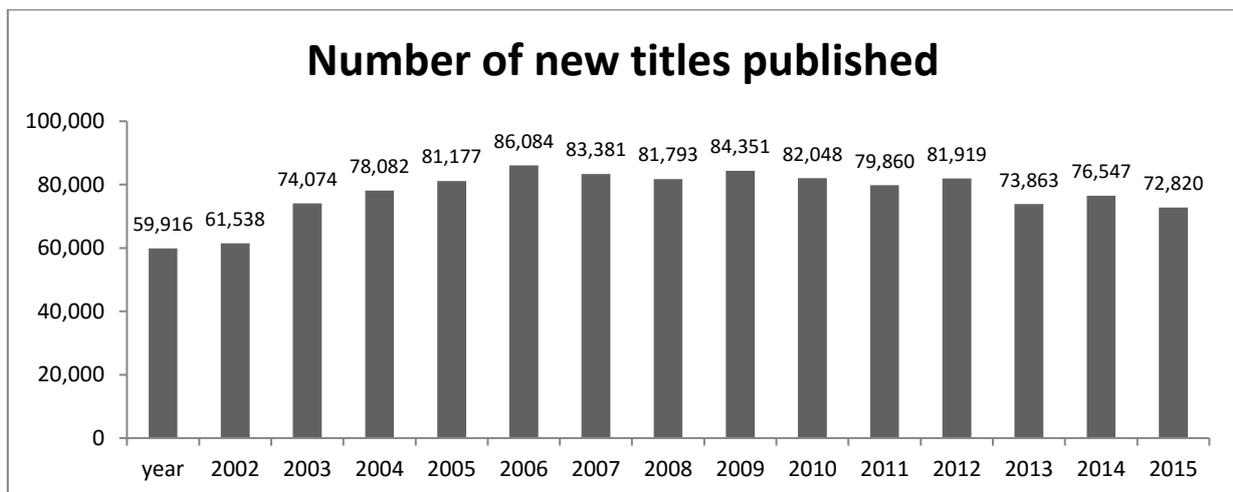
book market currently finds itself in a phase of stagnation with a slight decline since 2010 and based on the analysis of PwC Germany (PricewaterhouseCoopers GmbH), this trend is expected to continue for the next few years.



**Figure 1.** Overall sales of the German Book Market 2005 to 2015 and a forecast for 2016 to 2020 (in Million Euro)

Source: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 2017a, Ovum; PricewaterhouseCoopers published by statista; slightly adapted by the author

At the same time Figure 2 shows that the number of new titles published per year in Germany has increased overall compared to 2002 with a slightly decrease since 2007.



**Figure 2.** Number of new titles published in Germany between 2002 and 2016.

Source: Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels, 2017b, published by statista; chart slightly adapted by the author.

A book on the shelf in a bookstore or on a virtual shelf in an internet book store finds itself in competition for attention not only with other books but also with other kinds of information interfering as stimuli on a person at the same time. Already in the year 2011 61% of survey participants occasionally felt to frequently be flooded by information from media (ARIS/Bitcom 2011, published by statista 2017) and assumedly this ratio has only further increased since 2011.

So taking all those figures into account we see a stagnating market where more books struggle for shelf space and for the consumer's awareness. In this kind of saturated and highly competitive market the research insights provided by Consumer Psychology could help publishers improve their market situation and increase the chance for their titles to get noticed by the consumers.

## 2. Literature Review

While there have been many studies published on Consumer Psychology in general within the last years, most of those adopted a more general perspective or focused on a single detail. It is hard to find a

scientific publication giving an overview of the wide range of applications of Consumer Psychology specifically for book marketing. Gießler (2006) gave an overview of this topic and the most important tools for book marketing. But it does not cover many of the currently discussed Consumer Psychology topics in other fields e.g. nudging respectively nudge interventions like priming (e.g. Minton et al., 2017, pp. 309–321.; Friis et. al., 2017; Lades 2014, pp. 114-128) or even Neuromarketing (e.g. Stanton et al., 2017, pp.799-811; Nasr, 2014, pp. 255-267).

Widely studied concepts are not yet transferred to book marketing. This academic void is hard to comprehend, since Consumer Psychology developed a wide range of tools which proved beneficial for highly competitive markets just like the book market.

### **3. Premises**

This article provides an outlook for the possibilities Consumer Psychology holds for book marketing. The focus is on the operational book marketing and introduces a selection of tools from the field of book design which could be useful especially for series design.

Why focus on the operational level instead of the strategic? Tools for strategy and planning include individual company analyses such as its target group, positioning and brand building. As a consequence, those tools depend on the specific market situation of each single publishing house and therefore are too narrow to provide beneficial conclusions which could also be relevant for other publishers. Tools on the operational level allow for conclusions which can be relevant for a wide range of publishing houses.

And why focus on series? This should be based on two reasons: First of all, series are generally created to stay in the publishers program for a longer time, sometimes even for years. For examples the series C.H.Beck Wissen started in spring 1995 with twelve titles and since then more than 500 titles within this series were published without posing the need to do bigger design changes (C.H. Beck, 2017). Second of all, there is usually a higher marketing budget set for series than for single titles. Publishers are open to a wider range of marketing tools for series in order to minimize the risk of bad investments.

Again the example of C.H. Beck Wissen can make this point more clearly. As mentioned above the first titles published in this series were released in spring 1995 but the first drafts for the series design were already discussed in November 1992 with the publishing house (Gießler 2006, p. 145). C.H. Beck Wissen is a good example for the time and effort publishers sometimes spend into the series design and it shows also that this time and effort is well-invested in terms of market success.

### **4. Consumer Psychology Insights Applied in Operational Book Marketing**

This article is based on the marketing concept by Meffert (2015) which sees marketing as a multi-level management process. It all starts with the planning phase: based on the situation analysis the strategic marketing planning constitutes the base for the operative marketing planning (including the marketing mix-instruments). Next level is the realisation of the plan and finally it ends with marketing controlling (Meffert. 2015, pp. 20-24). With the focus of this article being on tools to improve book design in order to attract consumer's awareness, those tools should be included for the operational marketing planning, more precisely for product marketing planning.

Within the operational book marketing, Consumer psychological Book design can have a big impact with little financial input. Furthermore, it can be used for a wider range of publishers.

All facets of consumer psychological book design aim on the optimization of stimulus design in order to achieve excellent information reception, processing and memorization with the potential customers. We can distinguish between text design, book body and cover and series design.

#### **4.1. Text Design**

The first facet of book design is the level of text design which means that the reader should not be overstrained nor unstrained when reading the text. It requires that the editor in charge knows the target group very well. This could be through long-term work experience which includes a deep knowledge of the market. Alternatively a clear target group orientation within the company based on a target group analysis may help to adopt the text to the readers' needs. A fitting text level, adapted to the specific language level of the target group, will deliver an important aspect to ensure that the inner reading resistance (i.e. the inner resistance of a person to read a specific text) is as low as possible. Neumann (2013, p. 129) mentions the positive influence on inner reading resistance through elements like a clear inner structure of a text as well as of text and image

elements which support each other and help to understand the text better. Of course, it is also the chosen topic of the title which influences the inner reading resistance as well.

#### **4.2. Book Body**

Second facet of book design refers to the physical book itself: The design of the book body. Especially the so called external reading resistance which affects the formal conciseness plays an important role and was object of Consumer Psychology. How does the text need to be designed so that it is comfortable to read and easy to grasp? The external reading resistance is based on formal criteria like typography, type size and line pitch and determines if somebody is rather willing to read a text or rather not (Neumann 2013, p. 96). Consumer Behaviour has identified several design elements which reduce the external reading resistance. As with all research finding, they need to be understood as proposals only and each situation needs to be evaluated individually but at least Consumer Psychology could find general aspects which are very helpful for a wide range of applications. The references for reducing the external reading resistance of a text would be to use a serif font like Times-New-Roman, upper case and lower case character, a well-structured layout, left justified setting and adequate but not to oversized line pitch for a longer text (Neumann 2013, p. 97).

Rosenstiel and Neumann (2002, pp. 171-172) provide an overview on different methods to test the external and internal reading resistant, but it is quite unusual for publishers to work with this kind of methods. The point is that good editors normally stand out with their extraordinary know-how about suitable text level for their target group and books are still the outcome of an author's creative process. Furthermore, publishers are working closely with graphic designers and producers, often they are even part of the publishing team. So overall, publishers find themselves in the extraordinary position to work with people who are already experts in terms of text design, however, often principles of Consumer Design frequently get neglected for the benefit of creativity and artistic freedom.

#### **4.3. Cover and Series Design**

Third facet of book design refers also to the physical book itself: The cover and series design. The impact of cover design respectively series design cannot be overlooked. Based on the differentiated, integrative market psychological S-O-R-model, developed by Rosenstiel and Neumann (2002, p. 82) it is essential for all kinds of stimuli to stand out due to formal conciseness and/or relevance of content in order to be perceived. According to Neumann, (2013, p. 94) the stimulus, respectively the information, has a much lower probability to be discerned if it does not fulfil at least one of those two criteria.

What does this mean transferred to cover design and series design? The very moment when a reader has physical contact with a cover for the first time, either when strolling through the bookstore or gaze at a publishers' advert, this is crucial for the purchase decision. Wherever the first touchpoint, the probability that the title will be noticed increases when the cover shows a high formal conciseness and/or a high relevance of content for this person. Based on Consumer Psychology a high formal conciseness could be reached through stylisation and reduction to the essential which means e.g. the use of simple forms like circles, quadrat, ellipse or rectangle (Neumann 2013, p. 95). Furthermore, scientists estimate that the capacity of our short-term memory where the information of the first contact will be processed is limited to about seven so called 'information chunks' (Bourne and Eckstrand 1997, 177). In this case, information chunk is defined as "(...) a subjective defined information bloc, which could consist of several different information bits on the objective level", whereas an information bit is defined as "(...) the smallest possible objective information element" (Neumann 2013, p. 122).

In this light, a cover is much more likely to be recognised when reducing the number of elements on the cover. Typical information chunks could be the logo of the publishing house, title, author or cover pictures (photos or drawings).

Especially cover pictures earn a special role: They help to recognise information in a very fast and easy way and they can activate more intense (which is positive for the relevance of content which leads to faster recognition again), they can bundle a multiplicity of information and can be recognised faster, hence be remembered more easily because they activate the person looking at it (Kroeber-Riel and Esch 2004, pp. 18-22; Rosenstiel and Neumann 2002, p. 194; Neumann 2013, pp. 99-105, Kroeber-Riel and Weinberg 2003, pp. 350-359). Each cover picture needs to be reviewed individually, but according to Neumann (2013, pp. 100-101) the following contents are generally more effective in terms of activation:

- Humour
- People (especially attractive people – also in an erotically way)
- Animals (especially baby animals)

- Signal colours
- Uncommon design
- Unusual heading
- Surprising content of pictures (or alienated contents).

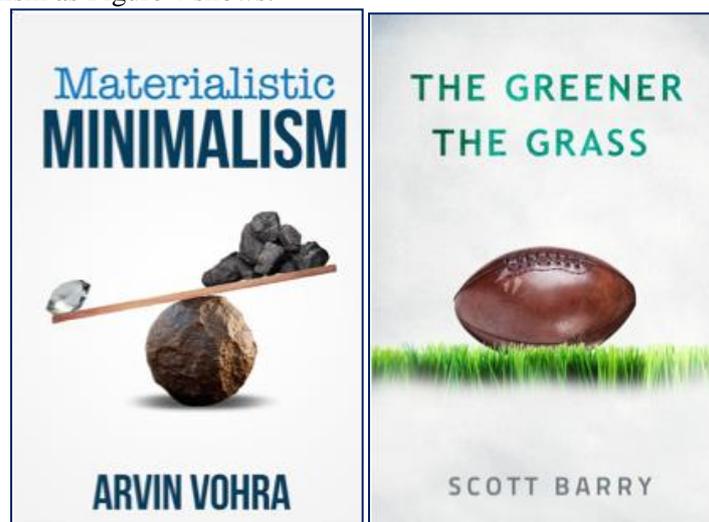
To stay with our example of C.H. Beck Wissen we can see in Figure 3 the implementation of the design elements mentioned above. A minimalist cover design composed of two graphic elements (the big coloured background element and the small quadratic design element in the middle), the series name including the typical chessboard elements, the author's name and the title and sometime subtitle. When the series started in 1995, graphic elements were only allowed on the covers, but after a while the publishing house found it more awareness enhancing to place pictures/illustrations of persons and landscapes on the little quadrat of the cover. Already, this little change led to increasing sales numbers of the titles.

Each of the cover elements has a meaning and is well elaborated: The chessboard element in the series name stands for wisdom, the author and title are always positioned at the same place in order to build habits with the consumers which help them to capture the topic even faster and the title is always written in upper-case letters and in bold font in order to emphasise the importance of topic before author (Gießler 2006, pp. 146-147).



**Figure 3.** Cover Design of C.H. Beck series: Schipperges 2005, Lepenies 2017 and Mühle 2017.  
Source: C.H. Beck, 2017.

C.H. Beck Wissen furthermore alleviate the fear that a minimalist cover might leave no room for creativity. More than 500 different covers published C.H. Beck Wissen shows the wide range of unique cover layout alternatives even within this tight requirement on series design. But not only series, also single titles work well with minimalism as Figure 4 shows:



**Figure 4.** Minimalistic cover design for single titles: Vohra, 2017 and Barry, 2017  
Source: Zimmerlich, 2017

Moreover, many of the activating picture elements mentioned above (humour, baby animals, attractive persons, etc.) could help publishers to develop their unique design which stands out from others.

## 5. Conclusion

The article aimed to provide a first glimpse on the possibilities that Consumer Psychology holds for the operational book market. Focusing on book design, it outlined how text design, followed by design of the book body and cover design can influence consumer perception. All three facets of book design targeted to achieve better information perception, processing and memorization within the potential customers in order to stand out from the multiplicity of titles on the shelves of the bookstores.

With the aim to provide a glimpse, those three facets represent only a very small piece of a large box full of tools that could improve the chance to capture the consumers' attention. Operational marketing tools from the fields of pricing, place and promotion are further relevant tools, that could not be mentioned in this article, but deserve closer consideration. This is also recommended for tools of analysis and strategic marketing planning, which can also benefit from Consumers. This broad topic offers numerous topics for further studies, e.g. Which Customer Psychology findings were applied by the most successful series of the last decade in reference to the different facets of their marketing concept? How did the cover design change in the last years and are there elements as proposed by Consumer Psychology to be recognised? Are book adverts up to date of marketing? What kind of role does Consumer Psychology already play with publishers?

While critics might argue that even after applying all Consumer Psychology insights available, there is no guarantee for success as the book market has its own rules and bestsellers cannot be 'engineered'. While this holds some truth, Consumer Psychology nonetheless has proven to increase chances of books gaining the attention of consumers.

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