

# What Makes People Want to Read a Book?: An Experimental Study

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## **Abstract**

Readers are exposed to an enormous number of new book releases each year. In this context, getting their attention and stimulating their interest are issues of great importance for publishers. The study presented in this article used an experimental approach to examine the impact of five variables on readers' interest in a new book: the reputation of the author, that of the publisher, the attractiveness of the book cover, the degree to which the cover represents the content of the book, and the type of book (a novel or a technical book). The results showed that the first three variables had a statistically significant impact on readers' interest. However, the effect of the author's reputation was observed only in the case of books with a technical content. These findings are discussed and their implications for the marketing of new books are addressed.

## **Keywords**

Books, Reading, Book Marketing, Book publishing.

Getting consumers' interest in a new book is an important issue for publishers. There are thousands of new book releases each year. In 2003, in the United States only, there were 175,000 new titles published (Bowker News Release, 2004). Thus, the competition for consumers' attention is fierce. What makes people want to read a book? The experimental study presented in this paper was designed to address this managerially important question.

## 1. Background

A book is a special type of product and reading books is a special type of consumption activity. Although people read books for different purposes, like relaxation and learning, in the final analysis to read a book is to live an experience, and that experience is associated to various degrees with utilitarian (e.g., increasing one's knowledge), hedonic (e.g., enjoying oneself), as well as symbolic (e.g., feeling that one is an intellectual) motivations. Because books serve to define one's identity, choosing a book has been described as a highly involving activity (Leemans, 1988).

A limited number of studies have examined how consumers choose books. Leemans and Stockmans (1992) have argued that the choice of a book is a complex process because of the great number of available options and their non-comparableness. Their exploratory study showed that the choice process starts by an elimination phase aimed at reducing the number of options. Several attributes are likely to be used to accomplish this objective. This is followed by a second phase where the remaining options are evaluated on the basis of a restricted number of attributes. Leemans and Stockmans (1992) found that the most important attributes in both phases were the same: the author's reputation, the person's past experience with the author, and the book's content, i.e., its theme and its genre.

In another exploratory study, Kamphuis (1991) identified 13 attributes judged by readers as being important in choosing a book. Among these attributes were the author's reputation, the book's theme, the writing style, the book's appearance, and its perceived cultural value. A follow-up study revealed that readers' expectations were essentially based on their knowledge of the author. This finding led the researcher to propose an analogy between the author of a book and a brand name; a new book by an author would in some way represent a new product marketed under a known brand. The importance of the author in choosing a book was confirmed in a study by Leemans (1988) in which 79% of the respondents admitted buying only books written by famous authors. In this same study, 52% said that they bought books mainly from well-known publishers.

Stockmans and Hendrickx (1994) have noted the important role of the book cover in getting a reader's attention, inciting him or her to read the summary, examine its content and, eventually, buy it. In the case of novels where it is sometimes difficult to infer the book content on the basis of its title only, Piter and Stockmans (1997) have argued that the book cover helps consumers categorize the type of book and that this facilitates the formation of a preference.

In sum, the few studies focusing on the book choice process indicate that among the multiple attributes used by consumers to orient their selection, three stand out as relatively important: (1) the author, i.e. its reputation and consumers' past experience with him or her, (2) the reputation of the publisher, and (3) the book cover.

## 2. Some Analogies with Conventional Products

As mentioned above, Kamphuis (1991) has suggested that the author of a book is analogous to a brand name. A brand name is a powerful source of inference concerning the overall quality of a product (Keller, 2003). Marketing studies have shown that a product's brand name has a significant impact on perceived quality (see e.g., Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991; Teas and Agarwal, 2000), that it is often the most important product quality cue (Dawar and Parker, 1996), and that consumers search for brand information more than for any other type of information

when they want to judge a product's quality (Mazurski and Jacoby, 1985). It is therefore expected that the reputation of the author will have a positive effect on readers' interest in a new book.

While the author is certainly a very important cue for forming an impression of a new book, the reputation of the publisher should not be ignored. A publisher is an entity that distributes different authors (brands). Several studies have shown that a distributor's reputation (e.g., a store name) impacts positively on product quality perception (Bearden and Shimp, 1982; Dodds, Monroe, and Grewal, 1991; Render and O'Connor, 1976; Wheatley and Chiu, 1977). Readers know that launching a new book on the market represents a commercial risk and that well-known publishers do not take such risk without some guarantee of success. Similar inferences concerning a product's quality are presumably made on the basis of information concerning a company's advertising expenses (Kirmani, 1990).

In a hierarchy-of-effects perspective (e.g., McGuire, 1978), getting people's attention is a required step before persuading them to buy. The visual cues that are part of a product's package are likely to play a significant role in attracting the attention of consumers, but they may also lead to evaluative inferences. Stokes (1985) has shown that a product's package has a significant impact on perceived quality, especially when consumers are not familiar with the brand. A book's cover is analogous to a product's package. Like a package, it fulfills technical and marketing functions. Thus, in addition to serving as a container and a protection for the book's content, the cover delivers direct (e.g., the title, the drawings and pictures) as well as indirect (e.g., the colors, the cover material) information about the book quality and content. According to balance theory, linking a positively-valued object to a target object makes the latter object more positive (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993; Heider, 1946). Consequently, the attractiveness of the book cover should have a positive impact on readers' impression of a new book.

In general, a product's package conveys explicit information about the product that it contains (e.g., packages of frozen pizzas). However, this is not always the case with book covers. Sometimes book covers directly reflect the content of the book (e.g., two persons interlacing for a romance novel), at other times there may be a more or less relevant allusion (e.g., a dollar sign on the cover of a book about the stock market), or the cover may have no relationship at all with the book content. The degree to which a book cover is representative of the book's content would seem to be a pertinent variable. Studies conducted in different domains have shown that consumer evaluations of related objects are generally more positive when the objects fit well together. This has been observed in the case of sponsors and sponsored events (McDonald, 1991; Meenaghan, 1983), promotion tools and products (Chandon, Wansink, and Laurent, 2000), and brand alliance partners (Simonin and Ruth, 1998). Therefore, the representativeness of the book cover should impact positively on readers' evaluation of a new book.

### **3. Preliminary Study**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with readers and managers of publishing companies. The objective of these interviews was to inquire about the attributes influencing the choice of a book and to validate the importance of the author, the publisher, and the book cover. Because it was felt that the type of book might moderate the importance of the attributes, two different kinds of books were considered: novels and technical books.

The readers interviewed were three French-Canadian graduate students in marketing selected by convenience. All said that they enjoyed reading novels. The attributes that emerged from the

interviews were the title, the summary, the author, the publisher, and the book cover. The author's reputation as well as the reader's experience with the author were confirmed as being determinant elements in the choice process. The three participants agreed that the appearance of the book cover was important. As one participant said: "*I don't like plain covers, all white with only the title, it gives me the impression that the book is dull, drear... a small picture which represents the content and the title incites me to buy...*". The reputation of the publisher was acknowledged as being important, especially when the author was unknown and in the case of technical books. Finally, all three participants said that their friends had some significant influence on their decision.

The interviews with the managers were conducted in three different countries, namely Canada, France, and Tunisia. The director of the publishing company was the interviewee in each case. The Canadian company published novels and academic books in different disciplines, the French publisher was specialised in school books, whereas the Tunisian publisher's products were novels and art books. The results of the interviews confirmed the determinant role of the author, the publisher, the book cover, and the summary in guiding people in their book choice. The managers also mentioned that advertising and word-of-mouth were very important sources of information for readers.

#### **4. Research Hypotheses**

Based on the literature and on the results of the preliminary study, the following research hypotheses were put forward:

- H<sub>1</sub>:** Consumer interest in a new book is greater when the author is more famous than when he/she is less famous.
- H<sub>2</sub>:** Consumer interest in a new book is greater when the publisher is well established than when it is unknown.
- H<sub>3</sub>:** Consumer interest in a new book is greater when the book cover is attractive than when it is not.
- H<sub>4</sub>:** Consumer interest in a new book is greater when the book cover is representative of the book's content than when it is not.

#### **5. Method**

##### **5.1 Overview**

Five variables were selected for this research: (1) the author's reputation, (2) the publisher's reputation, (3) the attractiveness of the book cover, (4) the representativeness of the book cover, and (5) the type of book. An experiment was designed to examine the effects of these variables on consumers' interest in a new book.

One hundred and twenty people were intercepted near a book shop in a large French-Canadian business school and were asked to express their interest in reading and buying eight new books planned to be published shortly. The eight books differed with respect to the author's reputation (2 levels: less famous, more famous), the attractiveness of the book cover (2 levels: less attractive, more attractive), and its representativeness (2 levels: less representative, more representative). These three variables acted as within-subjects factors in the experiment. The participants in the experiment were randomly assigned to one of four conditions defined by

crossing the levels of two other variables: the publisher's reputation (2 levels: unknown, well established) and the type of book (2 levels: novel, management book). These two variables were between-subjects factors in the experiment.

## 5.2 Stimuli and Experimental Conditions

The participants were led to believe that a publisher had the project of launching a new collection composed of foreign books which would be translated. They were asked to examine and evaluate eight different book projects. All stimuli were either novels or management books, from a well-known or an unknown publisher. That is, each participant was randomly assigned to one of four different groups ( $2 \times 2$ ).

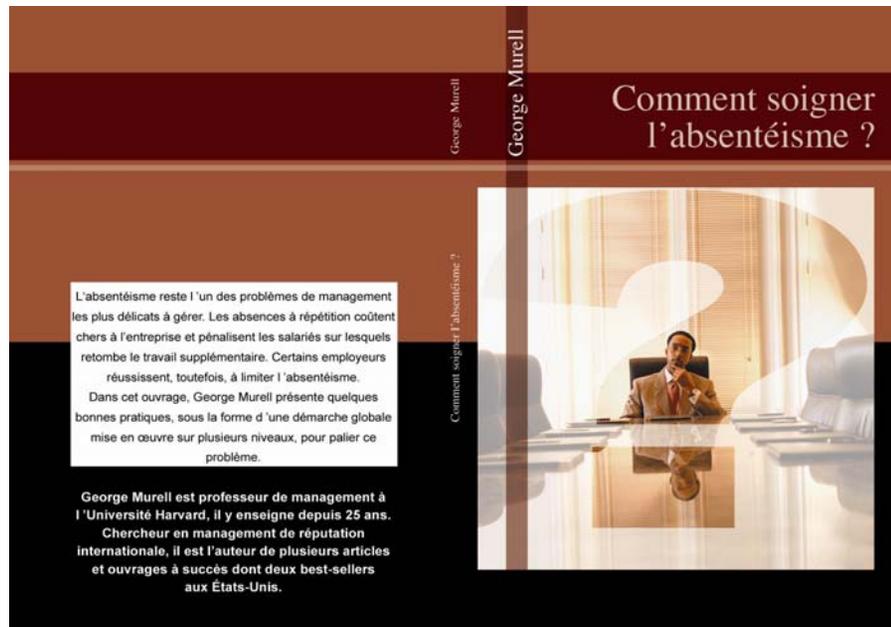
The eight stimuli, which were presented in a random order, differed with respect to the author's reputation as well as the attractiveness, and the representativeness of the book cover ( $2 \times 2 \times 2$ ). Each stimulus was presented in the same format: the book cover showing the title, the summary of the content, and a short description of the author. The reputation of the publisher was manipulated in a letter presented to the participants before they were shown the stimuli.

The experimental manipulations were defined following an extensive set of pre-tests with students from the same business school. All titles and summaries were fictitious and presented about the same degree of interest. The author's reputation was manipulated in the description provided to the participants. For instance, in the case of one management book, the more famous author was described as being an internationally recognized scholar, professor of management at Harvard University, who had published two best-sellers whereas the less famous author was described as having a diploma from Saint Louis University, working as a consultant in an unknown firm, and wishing to transmit the product of his work experience in this first publication. Similar manipulations were made for novels. The well-established publishers were existing publishing companies with a high level of awareness and an excellent reputation whereas the names of the unknown publishers were fictitious.

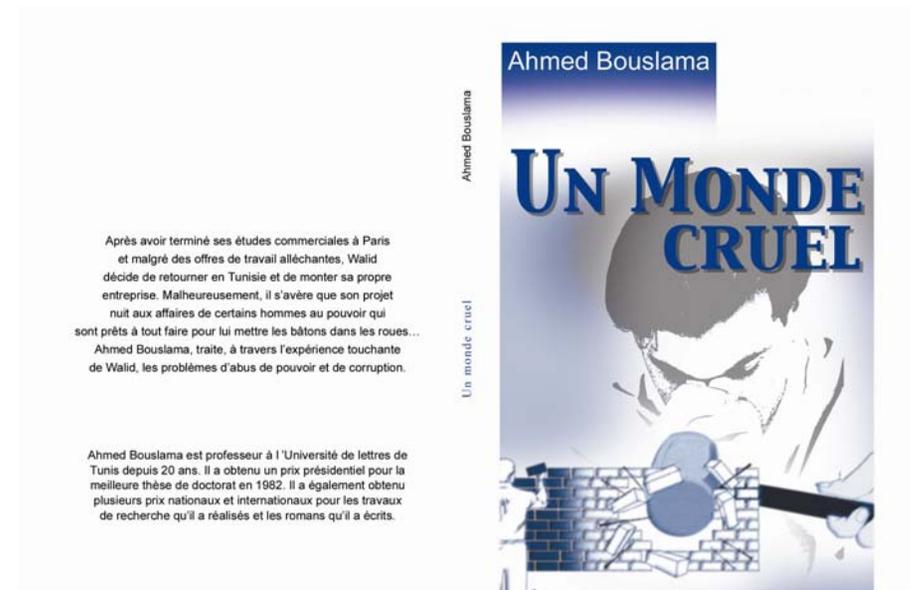
The preparation of book covers was an arduous task. A total of thirteen covers were pre-tested in order to retain covers differing systematically and significantly as regards their attractiveness and representativeness. Because these are subjective dimensions, decisions were made strictly on an empirical basis. That is, the selected covers obtained the highest and lowest scores on two seven-point bipolar scales aimed at measuring the constructs ("I find this cover attractive", "This cover represents well the content of the book" – with anchors *not at all/completely*). All covers were in full colors and looked very professional. Two book covers are shown in Figure 1 to provide an illustration of the experimental stimuli.

**Figure 1:  
Examples of Book Covers Used in the Experiment**

Panel a:  
A more attractive and more representative cover  
of a management book titled “How to Heal Absenteeism”



Panel b:  
A less attractive and more representative cover  
of a novel titled “A Cruel World”



### 5.3 Measures

The participants' interest in the book stimuli was measured with the help of eight items divided in two groups. The first group was composed of five items associated with seven-point bipolar scales with anchor points *not at all/completely*: This is a novel (a management book) "That I would like to discover", "That I wish to read", "That interests me", "That I would not hesitate to buy", and "That looks original". The wording of these items was decided following three semi-structured interviews with students who were asked to write what they thought of a book when they saw it for the first time. The second group of items were three evaluative seven-point bipolar scales: In general, this novel (management book) leaves an impression that is "unfavorable/favorable", "negative/positive", and "bad/good" (see Burton and Lichtenstein, 1988).

Following the examination and evaluation of the eight book stimuli, the participants completed a series of scales designed to measure several individual characteristics. When necessary, the scales were adapted to the type of book associated with the respondent's experimental condition (i.e., novels or management books): perceived expertise with respect to reading books, susceptibility to social influence when buying books, involvement in reading books, reading frequency, amount of money spent on buying books, consumption habits, importance of choice criteria when buying books, hedonist versus utilitarian value associated with reading books, need for cognition, visual versus verbal information processing, and socio-demographics (gender, age, income, marital status, education).

After having finished the stimulus evaluation task and completed the questionnaire, the participants were invited to look at each book cover stimulus a second time and rate each one relative to its attractiveness ("I find this cover attractive") and representativeness ("This cover is representative of the content of the book") using seven-point bipolar scales with anchor points *not at all/completely*. These measures were intended to be used to verify the effectiveness of the manipulations.

## 6. Results

### 6.1 Description of the Sample

The sample was composed of 120 participants aged between 19 and 52 with a mean of 26. The great majority (84%) were students attending the business school where the book shop was located. There were about as many males (48.9%) as females (51.1%). The average number of novels read per year was 18.6 as compared to 8.0 in the case of management books, a statistically significant difference ( $t = 3.6$ , 113 df,  $p < 0.001$ ).

#### *Definition of Variables*

The scale data representing the respondents' evaluations of the book stimuli were subjected to a principal components analysis in each within-subjects condition (eight analyses in all). In each case, a single dominant factor emerged explaining an important proportion of the variance (mean explained variance = 78.71%). This factor was interpreted as the *overall interest* in the book. The mean score of the items was computed to serve as the dependent variable for subsequent analyses. The reliability of this measure was high across the eight within-subjects conditions (mean Cronbach's alpha = 0.96).

## 6.2 Manipulation Checks

In order to verify the effectiveness of the cover attractiveness manipulation, a within-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed using the cover attractiveness measure as the dependent variable (Keppel and Wickens, 2004). As expected, the participants found the attractive covers more attractive (novels: mean = 4.36; management books: 4.69) than the less attractive covers (novels: mean = 3.37; management books: mean = 3.75). These differences were statistically significant in both conditions (novels:  $F = 36.45$ , 1 df,  $p < 0.001$ ; management books:  $F = 39.47$ , 1 df,  $p < 0.001$ ). The representativeness measure was analyzed in the same fashion. As expected, the representative covers were judged as being more representative (novels: mean = 4.75; management books: mean = 4.79) than the less representative covers (novels: mean = 3.42; management books: mean = 3.21) and these differences were statistically significant (novels:  $F = 65.79$ , 1 df,  $p < 0.001$ ; management books:  $F = 82.57$ , 1 df,  $p < 0.001$ ).

## 6.3 Analysis of Variance

A mixed within-subjects ANOVA was used to analyze the effects of the manipulations on the participants' level of interest in the book stimuli (Keppel and Wickens, 2004). In this model, the dependent variable was *overall interest*, the between-subject factors were *publisher's reputation* and *type of book*, and the within-subjects factors were *author's reputation*, *attractiveness of the book cover*, and *representativeness of the book cover*.

Table 1 presents the results issued from the ANOVA. To simplify the presentation, the statistics for all main effects and for statistically significant interactions only are reported. As can be seen, three main effects and one two-way interaction were statistically significant. As predicted by  $H_1$ , consumer interest in the book was greater when the author was famous (mean = 4.50) than when he/she was not (mean = 4.34). However, this effect needs to be qualified because it interacted significantly with the type of book. The reputation of the publisher also had a significant impact on consumer interest, as books from a well-established publishing company were judged to be more interesting (mean = 4.53) than books from an unknown publisher (mean = 4.29). This result gives empirical support to  $H_2$ . Judging from the magnitude of the  $F$  statistics, the most important effect appears to be that of the attractiveness of the book cover. As predicted by  $H_3$ , more attractive book covers led to greater consumer interest (mean = 4.58) than less attractive covers (mean = 4.26). Figure 2 presents the plot of the marginal means of these three statistically significant effects.

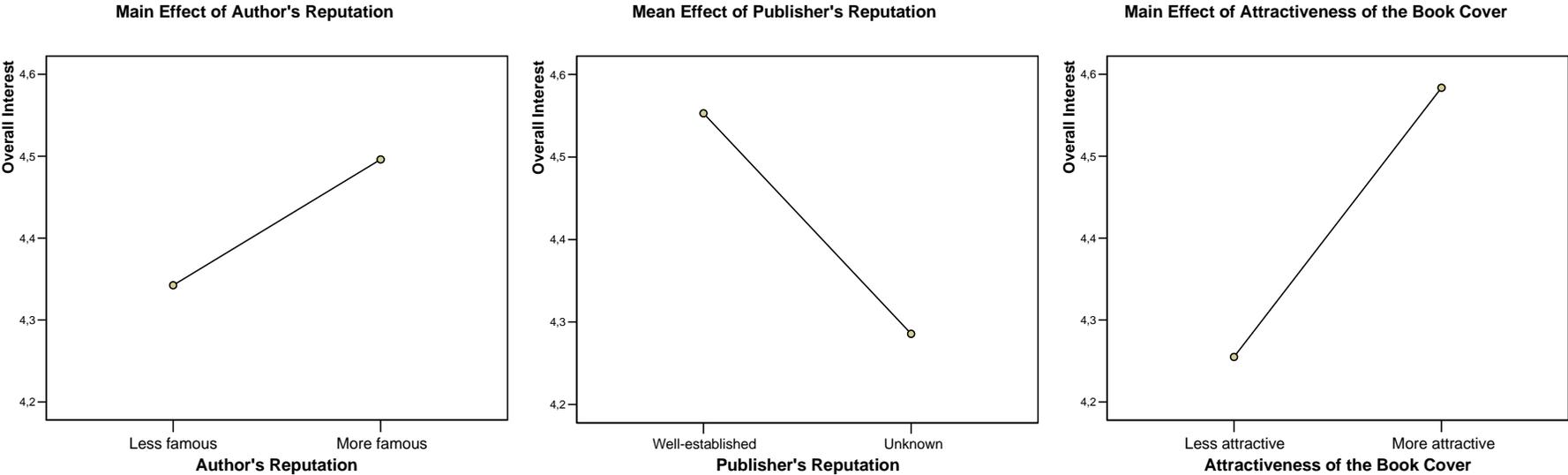
**Table 1:**  
**ANOVA Results**

Source of Variation	F statistic	Statistical Significance <sup>a</sup>
Author's Reputation (A)	3.76	$p < 0.05$
Publisher's Reputation (B)	2.83	$p < 0.05$
Attractiveness of the Book Cover (C)	15.74	$p < 0.001$
Representativeness of the Book Cover (D)	3.36	NS
Type of Book (E)	1.89	NS
A × E	6.31	$p < 0.05$

a Effects in the direction predicted by research hypotheses are tested using a one-tailed test procedure. Otherwise, a two-tailed procedure is used.

NS : not statistically significant.

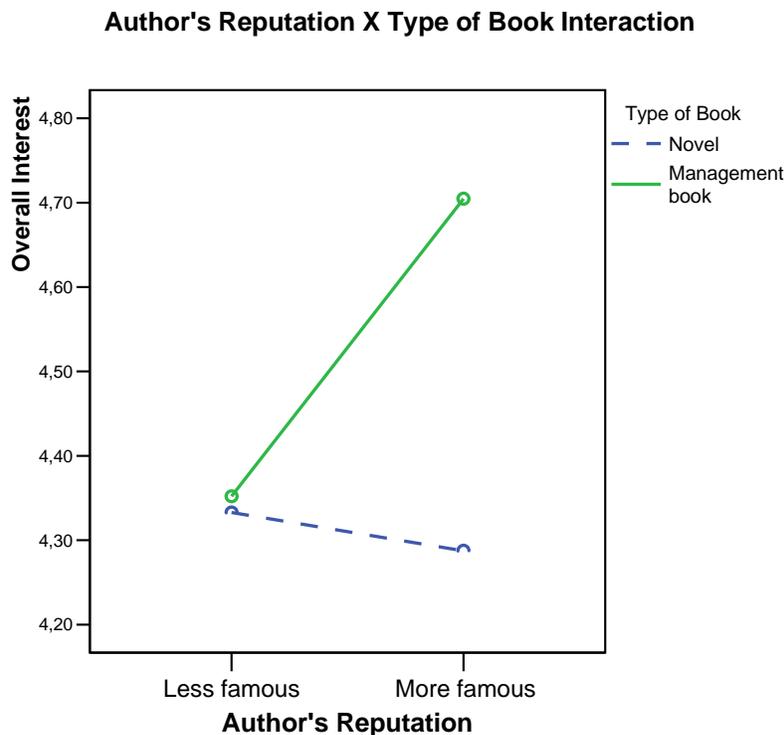
**Figure 2:**  
**Plots of the Marginal Means of the Statistically Significant Effects**



The representativeness of the cover had no impact on the participants' overall interest in the book stimuli and  $H_4$  was therefore not supported. No research hypothesis was formulated with respect to the possible effect of the type of book on consumer interest. As can be seen in Table 1, this factor had no statistically significant impact on the dependent variable.

The statistically significant interaction between author's reputation and type of book can be interpreted by examining the joint marginal means of the relevant experimental conditions plotted in Figure 3. It can be seen in this figure that the effect of the author's reputation was present only in the case of management books. Thus, although the overall effect of the author's reputation was significant (see Table 1), it must be concluded that this finding does not hold for novels.

**Figure 3:**  
**Means Plot of the Author's Reputation × Type of Book Interaction**



## 7. Discussion

The results of this study provide some useful information concerning the impact of five variables on readers' interest in a new book. It was found that the reputation of the publisher had a positive and significant impact on consumer interest. Little was known before this study about the effect of the publisher's reputation on readers, with the exception of a survey conducted in the Netherlands by Leemans (1988) in which it was reported that a fair proportion of readers (52%) said that they only bought their books from a well-established publisher. Previous research in marketing has found that consumer quality perceptions are affected by the reputation of the store in which the product is distributed (e.g., Wheatley and Chiu, 1977). The observation of an analogous effect in the book publishing domain is a noteworthy extension. It

suggests that well-established publishing companies should not hesitate to insist on their excellence and reputation when they promote new books and new authors.

While most actors in the book publishing industry would certainly agree that the book cover is an important marketing tool, there has been surprisingly little research on this issue. The results reported in this article show that an attractive book cover is likely to stimulate readers' interest in a new book. It is worth noting that this experimental study was not concerned with exploring the book cover's potential as an attention getting device since the participants were voluntarily exposed to all book stimuli. What this study showed is that attractive book covers can not only get readers' attention (see Stockmans and Hendrichx, 1994), they are also likely to make a new book appear more interesting, all other things being equal. This seems to be an important finding for those people involved in the production and diffusion of books. It points to the importance of investing seriously in the conception of book covers that buyers of books will like.

Additional research should be carried out in order to shed some light on the psychological processes underlying the book cover attractiveness effect. The balance theory explanation which was proposed in this article (I like the cover; the cover is associated with this book; therefore, I like the book) is interesting from the point of view of predicting readers' interest in a new book, but it is unsatisfying from that of understanding how this effect was produced. One possible explanation may be found in the literature having examined the influence of mood on perceptions and behaviour. Several studies have shown that people's mood has a significant impact on how they perceive their environment and react to it (see Isen, 1984). Presumably, being in a good mood activates positive mental structures and makes it more likely that the positive aspects in the environment be perceived (Bower, 1981). It is possible that in this study attractive book covers induced a positive mood among the participants and made the books' summary appear more interesting. As some have noted (e.g., Bierhoff, 1988), the effects of mood are stronger in ambiguous situations, which was the case in this study because the participants had access to limited information to form their impression of the new books.

The hypothesis that a book cover that fits well with the content of the book would generate more interest from potential readers was not supported in this study. This is a surprising result given the role that fit has been shown to play in domains like sponsorship, promotion, and branding. Because this lack of result does not seem to have been caused by inefficient manipulations, it must be tentatively concluded that the representativeness of a book cover does not matter, at least from the point of view of having some impact on consumers' level of interest in a new book. Simple observation confirms that some publishing companies do not care about creating book covers that relate to the book's content. In fact, some publishers always use the same standard cover which has become a sort of trademark. The results of this study attest that this might not be a bad marketing strategy, as long as the selected cover is attractive.

As many studies have shown, the author is a major facet of the process of choosing a book. Like high-reputation brands, good authors reduce the risk of selecting an uninteresting book. The results of this study confirm the influence of the author's reputation, but only for books with a technical content; in the case of novels, the influence of the author's reputation had no significant effect on readers' interest. This result may be explained by the presumably higher risk associated with technical books. Perhaps the participants in the experiment believed that it is possible to find a very good novel written by an unknown author whereas good management books are generally written by experts. The fact that the majority of participants were business students and had consequently some experience with reading managements books may have contributed to this result. It should be noted also that the names of authors considered in the experiment were fictitious. Knowledge of the author and past experience with an author have

been shown to be important attributes in the book choice process (Kamphius, 1991; Leemans and Stockmans, 1991). The use of authors known by the respondents as experimental stimuli in this study could therefore have brought different results. Nevertheless, the implication for publishers of books with technical content is clear: the use of high-reputation authors has a definite impact on readers' interest in a new book.

## 8. Conclusion

Most studies having looked at the process by which readers choose a book have used the survey method. While the information collected by means of direct questions to people reading books is certainly worthwhile, one should keep in mind that people may not always be the best informant about their own mental processes and behaviour (Nisbett and Wilson, 1977). Moreover, they may voluntarily hide some information that could possibly threaten their self-image. For instance, they may resist admitting that they are sometimes influenced by a nice-looking book cover, because this might reflect an irrational behaviour.

By using the experimental method, researchers can estimate the real impact of systematic changes in the environment on people's cognitive and affective reactions, if the participants are not aware of the research objectives and manipulations. The experimental method has its limits however and it is important that they be identified. Thus, the people having participated in this experimental study were not in a normal book purchase situation. They were exposed to a specific set of book stimuli in a well-defined research environment and were not given the possibility to browse around as one typically does in a book store. Collecting the data near a book shop may have attenuated the artificiality of the experimental setting, but it is hard to tell. In addition, the stimuli themselves were not comparable to what is usually found in book stores. They provided only limited information about the book content and were presented in a much different format. Moreover, because they were specifically asked to examine the book stimuli, the participants may have paid more attention to certain features (e.g., the book cover) which they would possibly ignore in a real purchase situation. Another limitation concerns the fact that the people having participated in the experiment were mostly students. It is not clear however whether the effects observed in this study would be different had a probabilistic sample of readers been used.

The book publishing business is highly competitive. Given the huge number of new book releases each year, it is important for publishers to understand how consumers decide which book to buy. This study has shown that people's interest in a new book can be influenced by at least three variables: the reputation of the author (in the case of books with a technical content), the attractiveness of the book cover, and the reputation of the publisher. More research is needed to corroborate these findings and to bring additional knowledge on this managerially relevant problem.

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