

Promoting the Purchase of Textbooks in the Vietnamese Higher Education Sector

Thi Thu Hoai Phan¹ · Tuan Khanh Cao² · Thu Hang Hoang³ ·
Phuong Anh Vu² · The Ninh Nguyen¹

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Abstract Higher education textbooks sales account for a significant portion of the overall book market. This study makes an important contribution to the extant literature by examining students' purchase of original textbooks in a developing market, Vietnam. Notably, it seeks to investigate why students do not purchase original textbooks as well as the difference in purchase behavior between different groups of students. The findings reveal that some key obstacles to students' purchase behavior include high prices, insufficient availability, low perceived value, and the emergence of pirated textbooks. Another notable finding is that senior students who are female tend to purchase more textbooks. In light of these findings, marketing strategies are suggested for publishers, bookstores and universities who aim to promote the sales and consumption of original textbooks.

Keywords Textbooks · Higher education sector · Purchase behavior · Marketing strategies · Reducing piracy · Vietnam

Introduction

Promoting the purchase of higher education textbooks is important for both educators and the publishing industry. From the educator's perspective, textbooks are an essential component of the teaching mix [1]. They are designed to address

✉ The Ninh Nguyen
ninhnguyen@tmu.edu.vn

¹ Faculty of Marketing, Thuongmai University, Ho Tung Mau Road, Hanoi 100000, Vietnam

² Department of Marketing Management, Thuongmai University, Ho Tung Mau Road, Hanoi 100000, Vietnam

³ School of International Business - Marketing, University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, 54 Nguyen Van Thu, Ho Chi Minh City 700000, Vietnam

specific curriculum and facilitate students' comprehension of course content [2, 3]. From the publishing industry's perspective, textbook sales contribute significantly to their total revenue. Nevertheless, students have been concerned about the high price of textbooks [4, 5]. In addition, the college textbook industry has been threatened by the scourge of piracy, resulting in a decline in sales of original textbooks [6].

This study makes a major contribution by investigating factors determining students' purchase of original textbooks and later suggesting marketing strategies to promote such behavior. Notably, it seeks to examine why students do not purchase original textbooks as well as the difference in purchase behavior between different groups of students. Whilst previous research particularly focuses on Western and developed countries, this study enriches the extant literature through its research context of Vietnam, which is a promising emerging market for the sale of textbooks [7]. According to the Statistical Year Book of Vietnam 2015, there are over 2.1 million students enrolled in 445 higher education institutions nationwide [8]. Furthermore, developing and promoting textbooks are essential components in reforming teaching and learning in Vietnam's Higher Education system [9]. The key stakeholders in the book publishing industry including publishers, bookstores and universities, all of which have made every effort to increase students' demand for textbooks. Whilst publishers seek to expand their distribution network, some large universities provide subsidies for their students to purchase textbooks at the universities' bookstores.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: initially the research methodology including the survey method and research design is provided. Thereafter, the data analysis and key findings are discussed. Finally, marketing implications, conclusion and future research directions are presented.

Research Methodology

Structured questionnaires were employed to obtain data from Vietnamese students who had purchased original textbooks in the last 12 months. Prior to the data collection, the survey instrument was developed using inputs from several relevant studies [4, 7, 10], plus a focus group with 8 students and in-depth interviews with 4 marketing professors. The purpose of the focus group was to flesh out the obstacles hampering students' purchases of textbooks. The marketing professors were invited to assess the reliability and validity of the survey instrument, which was eventually a compelling two-page booklet with a cover page including information statement and brief instructions. It consisted of three main sections: (1) General information about the purchase of textbooks; (2) Reasons for not purchasing textbooks; and (3) Demographic information.

The questionnaires were administered to eligible respondents by university lecturers who agreed to assist the researchers in the data collection. Respondents provided responses on a voluntary basis and they were given as much time as they needed to complete the questionnaires in their classrooms. The lecturers remained in the classrooms to provide assistance and collect the completed questionnaires. A

total number of 472 students, who met the recruitment criteria, voluntarily agreed to participate in this study. The number of returned questionnaires was 388, hence the response rate was approximately 82%. Of these, 197 were male (50.8%) and 191 females (49.2%). Additionally, there were 200 (33.0%) junior students who were in their first year and 188 senior students who were in their second year and third year. The respondents hailed from different areas of study including accounting (42 or 10.8%), economics (56 or 14.4%), management (69 or 17.8%), marketing (142 or 36.6%) and finance (79 or 20.4%).

Results and Discussion

General Information About the Purchase

As for the distribution channels, the majority of respondents (251 or 64.7%) considered university bookstores as their favorite places to buy academic books, whilst 95 (24.5%) preferred to order online. With regard to the time of their purchases, merely 28 (7.2%) had bought textbooks before the semester commenced, 168 (43.3%) in the first half of semester, and 128 (33%). Interestingly, 64 (16.5%) purchased textbooks during the exam preparation period.

Figure 1 illustrates sources that students utilize when they need initial information about textbooks. Notably, 125 respondents (32.2%) demonstrated that they consulted lecturers and tutors first, and 89 (23%) initially sought relevant information from their friends and classmates. In addition, 77 (19.8%) collected

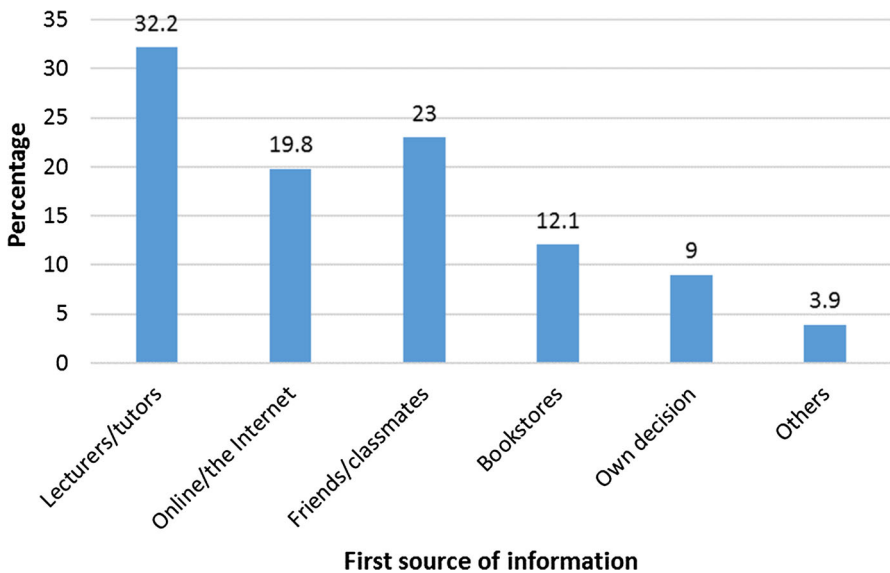


Fig. 1 Sources that provide students initial information about textbooks

data regarding textbooks online, whilst 47 (12.1%) visited bookstores to search for information.

Reasons for not Purchasing Original Textbooks

As shown in Table 1, high price (Mean = 4.15) was the most relevant reason for not purchasing textbooks. This arguably results from the widespread financial constraints faced by students, especially by those who are not employed. Notably, the second largest barrier was that students could easily buy photocopied books instead of the original versions (Mean = 4.05). This finding reflects the proliferation of book piracy in the higher education sector in Vietnam. These pirated textbooks are cheaply and widely available at various photocopying shops [7]. Furthermore, students perceived that there were no significant changes in the later editions of textbooks (Mean = 3.99). Hence, they generally felt that newer and original textbooks did not offer value for their money.

Interestingly, there was a relatively high level of agreement in that textbooks were not useful for understanding subjects (Mean = 3.88). Moreover, students perceived that textbooks were not sufficiently available in bookstores (Mean = 3.85). The possible explanations for such a shortage include the difficulty of estimating numbers of students enrolled in courses and their need for textbooks, and also inefficiencies in the textbook supply chain management. This finding emphasizes the importance of reducing stock-out occurrences that cause inconvenience for buyers. In addition, students did not purchase textbooks because they could find course content from alternate sources (Mean = 3.44) such as the Internet or from textbooks which they borrowed from libraries or friends (Mean = 3.34).

Differences in the Number of Textbooks Purchased by Student Groups

On an average, students purchased 3.85 original textbooks per academic year. In order to investigate the difference in the number of textbooks purchased between male and female students and between junior students (first year) and senior students, independent samples *t* Test was employed. The *t*-Test results are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 1 Reasons for not purchasing textbooks

Main reasons	Mean	SD
The price is too high	4.15	0.88
There are little changes from edition to edition	3.99	1.09
Textbooks are not useful for understanding subject matter	3.88	0.95
I can easily purchase photocopied textbooks instead of original ones	4.05	1.01
Textbooks are not sufficiently available in bookstores in and around my university	3.85	1.03
I can find course content from alternate sources, e.g. Internet	3.44	1.25
I can borrow textbooks from libraries or friends	3.34	1.13

Table 2 Summary of t-Test results between males and females

	Male students		Female students		<i>p</i> value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Number of textbooks purchased	3.66	1.15	4.03	0.86	0.000

Table 3 Summary of t-Test results between junior students and senior students

	Junior students		Senior students		<i>p</i> value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Number of textbooks purchased	3.67	1.08	4.04	0.94	0.000

Specifically, the independent samples t-Test results demonstrate that female students (Mean = 4.03) purchased significantly more original textbooks than their male counterparts (Mean = 3.66) at the 0.001 level ($p = 0.000$). One interpretation could be that females tend to have higher concern about purchasing pirated textbooks as compared to males [6]; hence, they are more likely to purchase more original and authorized textbooks.

As illustrated in Table 3, junior (first-year) students (Mean = 3.67) purchased lesser amount of textbooks as compared to senior students (Mean = 4.04) at the significance level of 0.001 ($p = 0.000$). A likely explanation for this is that senior (older) students apparently develop a higher level of ethical behavior as compared to the junior (younger) ones [11].

Marketing Implications for Promoting the Purchase of Textbooks

This study's findings would assist key stakeholders in the textbook supply chain in selecting target markets and developing marketing strategies to foster the purchase of textbooks. Specifically, publishers, bookstores and universities would do well in considering the following recommendations:

1. *Target consumer segments* The results demonstrate that female students who are seniors tend to purchase more original textbooks. Such targeted consumers generally develop high levels of ethical concern and behavior. Therefore, bookstores should particularly target these segments by developing communication programs emphasizing that purchasing original textbooks contributes to the development of the publishing supply chain that may arouse their moral and ethical obligations to purchase original textbooks.
2. *Pricing and sales promotion* Although some universities have provided textbook subsidy scheme, high price appears to be the most relevant barrier, which hampers the purchase of original textbooks. Hence, it is incumbent upon

- all stakeholders in the supply chain to reduce expenses associated with the production and distribution of textbooks such as printing, packaging, delivery and stores' operating costs. Sales promotions in the forms of discounts for pre-orders prior to the commencement of semester and vouchers on special occasions such as orientation weeks can be also resorted.
3. *Ensuring the availability of textbooks* Given students' perceptions that textbooks are not sufficiently available in stores, it is critical to estimate students' demands and improve associated logistical activities. Hence, bookstores should work closely with universities to forecast number of enrolments in each course. Conducting surveys on students' demands for textbooks prior to the commencement of semesters would be also helpful in determining stock levels. Furthermore, publishers should improve the efficiencies and effectiveness of their order processing and delivery systems. In addition, it would be desirable to develop a multi-channel strategy that utilizes brick-and-mortar and online stores.
 4. *Reference groups* The finding that lecturers and tutors are the most popular source of information suggest their important roles in influencing students' purchase behavior. Specifically, they should provide clear description of the textbooks used as well as ensure the relevance of textbooks for their subjects. Additionally, they should encourage students not to purchase photocopied textbooks. In order to promote information sharing between students with their friends and classmates, organizing book clubs and events would be beneficial. Such initiatives can serve as communication channels that improve students' awareness about the textbook market and piracy issues.
 5. *Loyalty and referral programs* In order to build long-term relationships with students, bookstores should offer loyalty programs or reward schemes that provide students with discounts on future purchase. Another possible solution is referral programs that encourage existing customers to make referrals to the bookstores/textbooks in exchange of benefits such as discounts, gift cards or cash. In addition to acquiring new customers, such referral programs also enhance the loyalty of current customers.

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Given the significance of the textbook market and the proliferation of textbook piracy in Vietnam, this study is one of the few that attempts to investigate key factors associated with Vietnamese students' purchases of original textbooks. Notably, it provides new insights into the purchase barriers and also the differences in textbook purchases between different demographical groups. Furthermore, this study discusses important marketing implications for publishers, bookstores and universities that if implemented would augment the original textbook market.

More research would be valuable to extend this study's findings and to enrich the current understanding about the textbook market in Vietnam. Future research could investigate students from different areas such as arts and humanities, design,

education and engineering who are likely to have different purchase behavior. Furthermore, it would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study that examine changes in students' purchase behavior. Lastly, future studies could explore the difference in the purchase of textbooks between students in urban areas and those in rural areas.

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