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Article

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SOCIAL IMAGE IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT – SUSTAINABLE MOTIVE FOR BOOK SALES DURING THE PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Social distancing and the work-from-home setting have determined the development and success of online communication platforms. Most of the communication during the social distancing period took place online, allowing people access to the homes and offices of those with whom they communicated. Since social image is an important aspect of human existence, during pandemics there has been a tendency to translate the attention for social image from real life into the communication carried out through on-line platforms. The use of books as a background for communication through on-line platforms fosters an intellectual image of the respective user, and thus becomes a considerable buying reason during the pandemic. The objective of our research is to determine whether a good-looking, interesting, and attractive book shelf used as a background on online communication platforms is a good reason to buy books during the pandemic. In a mediation model, we empirically demonstrate that the perception that the presence of books confers an intellectual look, mediated by the fact that a background with books induces an intellectual image, becomes a valid buying motive for books. This result has important implications for the future book sales strategy and highlights the major role played by the aspect of book covers in sustainable future sales. Attention is also driven to a slightly superficial development of the digital society we live in, where appearance is often more important than essence. For a sustainable development of our society, it is important to intervene in the educational system and put more emphasis on content and not just on appearances.

Keywords: Consumer, book, online communication platform, pandemic, buying motives, snob effect.

JEL Classification: M30, M31

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the behaviour of consumers in many ways. From social distancing and hygiene habits to working from home and the type and quantities of products bought, the pandemic determined a new normal to which companies had to adapt (Lazaroiu, Horak and Valaskova, 2020; Guthrie, Fosso-Wamba and Arnaud, 2021; Pop et al., 2022; Dassel and Klein, 2023). One of the biggest changes concerned the way communication occurred, given the development of online communication platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and others (Valaskova, Durana and Adamko, 2021). As a result of the conversations conducted through them, more or less voluntarily, the interlocutors exposed their own family environment, thus being put in a situation to get out of their comfort zone (Tohănean et al., 2020). To avoid the reveal of certain aspects of one's own identity, the frequent use of books as a background image became popular. However, this is likely to equally confer the advantage of playing an intellectual person with elevated preoccupations towards reading and research-oriented.

Regardless of the reasons for buying a book, an increase in this market could be observed during the pandemic. According to Watson (2023), the US book market does not appear to have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, but rather the opposite. The 757.94 million books purchased in 2020, 843.1 million in 2021, and 788.7 million in 2022, establish an upward trend. Not only have sales registered unexpected increases, but also traditional bookshops that have gained momentum and seem to be booming (Alter and Harris, 2022). Moreover, some publishing houses have noted a buying tendency of books with colour-matched covers (BBC, 2021), which reinforces the idea that at least some of them were purchased for the pleasant look created in the library or as a background image in the communication through online platforms.

Our empirical research tests whether the use of books as background image for on-line communication platforms constitutes a sustainable reason for purchasing books. For this purpose, we developed a mediation model in which we measure the perception of the intellectual image conferred by the presence of books, the transposition of this perception in the online environment, and the impact of the two have on the intention to buy books. Our paper starts with a documentation of the topic in the literature review. In the methodology chapter, data collection and reliability of the constructs used are presented. In the next chapter, the mediation model is empirically tested, and the results are presented. The article ends with discussions and conclusions on the sustainability of the book market, considering changing buying motives.

1. Literature review

1.1. Buying motives for books

We generally consider books to be both educational and entertaining. We buy books to satisfy our own or a third persons need, for our own use or to give them as a gift, but also for the simple reason that the cover attracts us, the title makes us curious, or the short description on the back makes us want to browse its pages. Often, we buy books because we know the author or because they have been recommended by someone we trust. Studies (Billington et al., 2012; Billington et al., 2013) indicate a multitude of beneficial effects of reading, such as direct and indirect learning, reducing the incidence of depression, gaining an overview of

life, and implicitly developing the ability to overcome obstacles. The high level of concentration that reading entails acts as a protective shield against anxiety, the effect being much stronger and longer lasting than that of a walk with friends or watching TV.

According to Leitao et al. (2018), approximately one-third of books are purchased only to be given later as a present. Women reportedly buy and read more books than men, and older and educated consumers tend to buy and read more books (Leitao et al., 2018). Studies show that women are more impulsive when buying for themselves, but more thoughtful when giving a book as a gift, considering in this case well-known authors (Mick and Demoss, 1990; Wu and Lee, 2016). In addition to preferences related to physical characteristics of books (size, cover, title, colour, images, etc.) that influence the purchase decision, some authors mention impulse buying based on title or cover as a behaviour typology (Beatty and Ferrell, 1998).

Beyond the pleasure of reading, there is another kind of satisfaction that the reader experiences, namely that of feeling smart or posing as a smart person. On the bus, tram, park, or swimming pool, the right book stimulates not only the intellect and imagination of some people, but also the infatuation, pride, and vanity of others (Sikora, Evans and Kelley, 2019). Not to be neglected is the role of books as a social binder: they often trigger reading clubs, which extend the circle of friends and also stimulate the reasoning capacity and lead to a better concentration and communication (Lareau and Weininger, 2003; Sikora, Evans and Kelley, 2019). Last but not least, the pleasure of displaying your book collection in a library can be a reason enough to purchase books. It feels very good when people see you reading and label you as an intellectual (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Jaeger and Breen, 2016) and there is also a satisfaction triggered by the large number of likes and/or comments to your when people see you reading or to book posts. This can be seen as a form of snobbery caused, on one hand, by social pressure that has the power to modify and/or exacerbate attitudes and behaviours (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Jaeger and Breen, 2016) and, on the other hand, by a personal predisposition toward hoarding, which fuels the unbridled desire to purchase books. The two determining factors are not necessarily independent. There are numerous situations in which the collected volumes are used as evidence for the passion for reading or an exquisite taste in literature (Leitao et al., 2018; Sikora, Evans and Kelley, 2019). However, in times of crisis, reality usually acquires other valences. The deeper the crisis, the greater the volatility of values and daily routines. Some of the first routines affected by the change are book and media consumption, as well as the ways to spend free time (Kafi, 2021).

1.2. Books and the personal library

At the level of individual households, Zhou (2018) talks about an average personal library size (of a teenager today) of about 200 books. Research conducted by Sikora, Evans and Kelley (2019) indicates a dependence of this number (and, by implication, exposure to books), to the culture of each country. Thus, households in Scandinavia and some post-communist countries are shown to have traditionally large libraries. For example, the average size of a library in Norway is 212 books, while in Sweden it is 210 books, in Denmark 192, and in Finland only 162. Central and Eastern European countries count even more books: 218, on average, in Estonian households, and 204 in the Czech Republic. In contrast to this, Turkey can boast no more than 27 books, on average, in a household library (Sikora, Evans and Kelley, 2019).

According to Zhou (2018), there is a positive correlation between the number of books owned (at 16 years old) and subsequent literacy skills. The presence of books and study materials

directly and indirectly influences children's education (Evans et al., 2010). Children from families with personal libraries of approximately 500 books proved to be more interested in education, registering on average a 3.2 years longer academic path, regardless of the education or occupation of the parents. According to the study conducted by Evans et al. (2010) in 27 countries, this is an advantage comparable to having parents with a university education and twice as important as having a father specialised in a particular field. These results are stable, confirmed, and maintained equally in rich and poor countries, regardless of time or political regime. Of course, there is no direct causality between the number of books owned and the number of books read, but access to education also means access to books (in the form of a public or personal library). The more the presence of books is perceived as normality, the better the vocabulary, imagination, ability to understand, and reasoning is developed (Katz, 2018). Consequently, families are facilitators of education due to the tangible and intangible resources (associated with an academic culture) they have. This was also transmitted through online conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic. If in some situations it was a simple way to avoid revealing certain aspects related to one's identity (Tohănean et al., 2020), there were also cases of using books as a background image with the sole purpose of posing an intellectual person, with elevated preoccupations, well-read and oriented toward research (Hrib, 2020; BBC, 2021; Luders, Dinkelberg and Quayle, 2022). In both categories, hoarders are found. These are the ones who obsessively buy books that, most frequently, don't even get to read and to which they attribute, possessively, only sentimental value (Sikora, Evans and Kelley, 2019).

1.3. Books as an indicator of social and intellectual status

We live in a world obsessed with image and appearances in which, despite the changing models we aspire to and the access criteria, the psychological mechanisms have remained the same. Enhanced by the media, the temptation to imitation is greater than ever (Bindra et al., 2022). Falsehood takes many forms and is triggered by a multitude of reasons. Far from referring only to the display of a non-existent wealth or professional fulfilment, manifested through an extravagant lifestyle, this dissimulation is also present on the book market. A surprising phenomenon is recorded: the purchase of books not for the sake of reading but for the sake of social integration and for the desire to build a certain personal image. If some people buy books to read for their own interest, as a recommendation from friends or family, some others do it just for the feeling of belonging, and others to profile themselves as an intelligent person, dedicated to study and education (Sikora, Evans and Kelley, 2019). This is also confirmed by consumer behaviour researchers who include books in the category of experiential products, with intrinsic utilitarian value but which, along time, have determined hedonic responses and simultaneously served as a symbol (Chen and Granitz, 2012).

Social influence catalyses the decision to buy books, triggering a mass contagion effect (Huang and Hsieh, 2012). For example, with the advent of electronic book reading devices, a segment of buyers emerged who showed interest regardless of cost because of the desire to improve their image among peers and gain a social status (Lamont and Lareau, 1988; Jaeger and Breen, 2016). In the same way, the existence of must-have/must-read titles is emerging as a norm/normality from which only the elderly or middle-aged can escape. This trend for award-winning book lists can be framed as a new form of snobbery (Leitao et al., 2018).

Generally defined as a form of social mimicry, snobbery represents the elitist attitude by which aspirants to a certain social or intellectual status seek to appear above their peers, dissociating themselves from them, and at the same time unnaturally adhering to the category

they consider superior (Leibenstein, 1950; Steiner and Weiss, 1951). Originally used since the time of Seneca 2000 years ago, the term comes from the phrase "s.nob", a short form for "sine nobilitate", which means "lacking nobility". In economic decisions, snobbery is introduced by Veblen (1899) and Leibenstein (1950) by introducing the "snob effect" motivation, which includes the choice and purchase of luxury products, viewed by the respective consumers as investments, objects that could be collected or inherited. This demonstrative consumption (conceptualised since the end of the nineteenth century) is caused by the desire to be included in certain social categories and implicitly to be different from the crowd (Leibenstein, 1950; Steiner and Weiss, 1951).

Today, snobbery is frequently associated with the digital environment and on-line communication networks (Luders, Dinkelberg and Quayle, 2022), which are often used to create a positive, often exaggerated, or enhanced social image of a user. Moreover, today's society, influenced by the social network culture, enhance self-praise and the promotion of the best version of the personal image (Mishra and Samu, 2021; Sampat and Raj, 2022), thus amplifying superficiality, vanity (Annisette and Lafreniere, 2017) and, implicitly, snobbery. An increasingly large segment of the population is addicted to the real or virtual appreciations of those around them (Mishra and Samu, 2021; Sampat and Raj, 2022). Sholomova and Skorobogatykh (2018) report a change in the motivation behind the snob effect due to an increased number of digital consumers. Thus, the concept of the "Di-elite effect" is proposed, coming from the digital elite (Sholomova and Skorobogatykh, 2018).

Considering the increasingly frequent association of snobbery with the intellectual or academic environment (Weaver, 2013; Martin and Sorensen, 2014) and with the moral leaders of our society (Henkel and Ade, 2022; Yu et al., 2022), the idea of using books to create an improved self-image comes as a complement to these new forms of snobbery, even if nowadays they are mostly manifested in the virtual environment.

1.4. Books and background image of communication platforms during the pandemic

Social distancing has imposed a series of changes in the way consumers communicate, contributing to the implementation and development of online communication platforms such as Zoom, GoogleMeet, and others. These communication platforms facilitated people not only verbal interaction but also the possibility of non-verbal communication (image, framing, etc.). Thus, users had access to images from the private space of those they communicated with (Dassel and Klein, 2023). To restrict access to private space, many platforms developed virtual backgrounds, allowing users to choose from predefined backgrounds or by blurring their existing one. However, a large number of users chose to partially expose their private space, selecting a background that represents them or contributes to their social image (Zoom, 2023). In this context, a number of consumers opted for backgrounds with libraries or books to create an image of well-read, bookish, and science-orientated people (BBC, 2021). Moreover, some went so far as to pick out only certain titles or volumes with a certain aspect (Zoom, 2023). Consequently, some studies during the pandemic focused on identifying the optimal number of books displayed, the impact of the titles contained in the library, the combination of colours, and the age of the books viewed in the background of the online communication platform. According to some theories, an overcrowded shelf could distract the interlocutor, who could thus become absorbed in studying the background, neglecting communication. Similarly, a taste mismatch can cause unwanted and unanticipated effects (Pelta, 2021). Thus, the idea of the need to adapt to each individual situation emerged. In the present case, the need to adapt the selection of displayed

books to the type of communication, the profile of the people involved, and the subject of the communication (Warren, 2004; Dabija and Babuț, 2019).

During the pandemic, this identification and delivery of titles suitable for each individual on-line communication was a means of survival for some bookshops (Acitelli, 2020; McKinsey & Company, 2020; Alter and Harris, 2022). For example, some libraries provide, for sale or rent, a wide range of books, from traditional and contemporary to those of a certain age, in a large variety of colours, cover types, and assortments for display purposes in residential, commercial, exhibition, and media locations (Acitelli, 2020; Hunt, 2022). There were also other ways to use a book background, even for free, simply by visiting your favourite local bookshop and going online from there. Some companies developed free virtual backgrounds for online communication (Fosslien and Duffy, 2020; Hass, 2020).

2. Methodology of research

The objective of our research is to determine whether the perception regarding an intellectual image influenced by the presence of books on online platforms influences the buying decision of the consumer. In this sense, we developed a model in which we tested the relationship between the role that the socio-intellectual image and the presence of books as a background image on communication platforms have on the purchase intention. For this model, we defined the perception of consumers regarding the creation of a socio-intellectual status through the presence of books as an independent variable. The use of books as a background image on communication platforms was included as a mediator, and purchase intention as a dependent variable. Practically through this model, we tried to empirically determine if the presence of books is associated with socio-intellectual status and if the presence of books in the online environment enhances this perception, both having an impact on the purchase intention for books.

For each of the constructs, we used self-determined items that were evaluated with a 7-point Likert scale, where 7 represents total agreement and 1 represents total disagreement. We measured perception regarding the creation of a socio-intellectual image based on five elements, namely, if the presence of a library creates an intellectual profile ($M=2.84$, $CFA=0.856$), reading experienced ($M=2.98$, $CFA=0.927$), smarter ($M=2.69$, $CFA=0.902$), well-documented ($M=3.00$, $CFA=0.885$) and research-oriented ($M=2.82$, $CFA=0.783$). The validity of this item is given by the Cronbach alpha value of 0.920, the composite reliability value of 0.941 and the average variance extracted value of 0.760.

The mediator on the presence of books in the background of the online communication platform was measured with the same five items. The respondents had to evaluate whether a person looks intellectual ($M=2.58$, $CFA=0.917$), is reading experienced ($M=2.54$, $CFA=0.934$), smarter ($M=2.37$, $CFA=0.927$), well-documented ($M=2.49$, $CFA=0.937$) and research-oriented ($M=2.43$, $CFA=0.889$), if they use a background containing books on on-line communication platforms. This construct was also validated by the Cronbach-alpha value of 0.955, the composite reliability value of 0.965 and the average variance extracted value of 0.848.

The buying decision was initially measured with five items. One of them, related to the existence of acquaintances who buy books for the background image of communication platforms, was omitted during the analysis because it had a low significance in the convergent

analysis. The final construct was measured based on four items, namely the intention to buy ($M=1.36$, $CFA=0.913$) and invest ($M=1.31$, $CFA=0.943$) in books, to have a book background, past behaviour ($M=1.18$, $CFA=0.849$) and recommendation to friends ($M=1.28$, $CFA=0.804$) to buy books for background. This item also has good significance by having a Cronbach-alpha value of 0.904, a composite reliability value of 0.931 and the average variance extracted value of 0.722.

Data collection was carried out with the help of a survey and took place during a book fair in December 2022. Taking into consideration the place where data collection took place, it must be mentioned that all respondents are people interested in books, with higher education and intellectual jobs. After eliminating biased responses, 370 valid responses were collected. Data analysis was performed with the help of Smart-PLS.4.0 software (developed by Ringle et al. 2015) by applying structural equation models with the help of a two-tailed bootstrapping method, based on 5000 distinct samples. Convergent validity was assessed by analysing the loading in the outer model. Based on this process, an element was eliminated and the final model, while all other elements proved convergent validity (all $p < 0.000$). The divergent validity was tested with the help of the heterotrait-monotrait criterion (HTMT), while all values < 0.900 (Henseler and Sarstedt, 2013; Henseler et al., 2015).

3. Results

The results of our proposed mediation model confirm that the background of the on-line communication platform may be a significant buying motive for books. Although the mean values of the elements and constructs are not very high (all items < 3.1), there are significant relationships between the elements and the mediation is also confirmed. The direct relation between the perception of the presence of books as a sign of intellectual activity and the intention of buying books is only partially significant. Although the t statistics have an acceptable significant value of $t=1.922$ ($p=0.055$), the confidence interval $CI=[0.000; 0.204]$ includes the value 0, so it can be concluded that the relation is not significant. The simple perception that the presence of books makes a person more intellectual does not determine the intention to buy books. Despite this, the use of online platforms mediates this relationship and proves to be a total mediation. For the a -path, the perception that the presence of books makes a person look more intellectual has a significant positive impact on the use of books as background for online communication platforms, having a $\beta=0.589$ ($t=14.622$, $p=0.000$, $CI = [0.508; 0.664]$). The R -square for this relation has a value of 0.347. For the b -path, the use of books as a background for online communication platforms positively impacts the buying intention of books, having a $\beta=0.150$ ($t=2.612$, $p=0.009$, $CI = [0.032; 0.258]$). The total effect is significant, having $\beta=0.188$ ($t=4.177$, $p=0.000$, $CI = [0.103; 0.267]$) and the indirect effect of the mediation is significant, by having $\beta=0.088$ ($t=2.548$, $p=0.011$, $CI = [0.020; 0.157]$). These results confirm the full mediation of the use of books as a background for online communication platforms. The results of the mediation model can be observed in table no. 1, while the graphical representation of the model can be observed in Figure no. 1.

Table no. 1. Results of the mediation model

Relation	β	t-statistics	p	CI
Books as intellectual activity \rightarrow Books as background (a-path)	0.589	14.622	0.000	[0.508; 0.664]
Books as background \rightarrow Intention to buy (b-path)	0.150	2.612	0.009	[0.032; 0.258]
Books as intellectual activity \rightarrow Intention to buy (c-path, direct effect)	0.100	1.922	0.055	[0.000; 0.204]
Books as intellectual activity \rightarrow Intention to buy (c'-path, total effect)	0.188	4.177	0.000	[0.103; 0.267]
Books as intellectual activity \rightarrow Intention to buy (ab-path, indirect effect)	0.088	2.548	0.011	[0.020; 0.157]

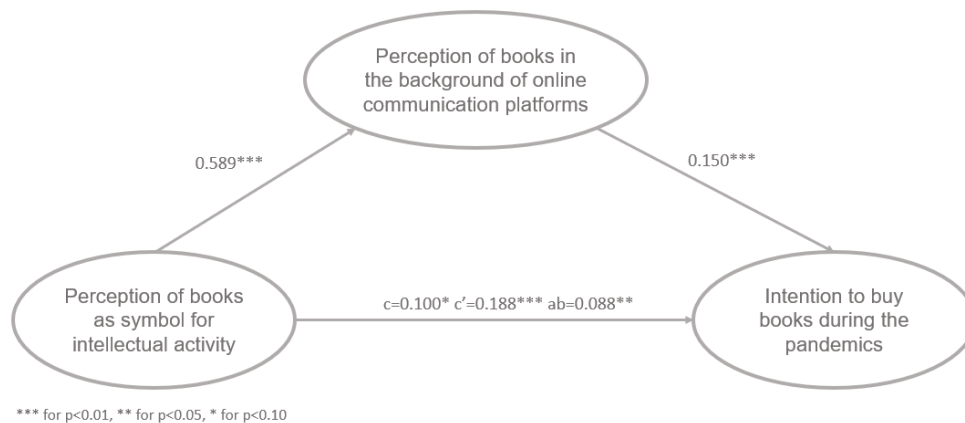


Figure no. 1. Graphical representation of the mediation model

Source: Own research results

4. Discussion

The restriction during the pandemic has led to a period of social isolation that has dramatically increased the use of online communication platforms for both professional and private interactions. Virtually most professional interactions have taken place using these platforms, and perhaps for the first time, the pandemic has exposed people's private/personal environment. *Our mediation model confirms that the use of books as a background for online communication platforms is a good and significant reason to buy books during and after the pandemic.* The results of our research confirm that the presence of books is associated with a certain intellectual status in both the real and the virtual environment. However, it is the interaction in the online environment that determines the purchase intention. The mere perception that the presence of books makes a person appear more intellectual and intelligent is not enough to make a consumer buy books, but the use of online communication platforms and the use of books as background is a good reason to make a purchase decision. Our mediation model shows that it is not just simple perception that determines purchase

intention, but online exposure and interaction with other people. The fact that people are more visible to the social circle and the public through the use of on-line communication platforms than through the exposed library at home matters for purchase intention. This confirms the importance of the social image in the interaction in the digital environment. Both results, related to the association between books and socio-intellectual image (Weaver, 2013; Martin and Sorensen, 2014; Henkel and Ade, 2022; Yu et al. 2022) and the importance of social image (Mishra and Samu, 2021; Luders, Dinkelberg and Quayle, 2022) are popular topics in the present literature, but the connection between the two is hardly investigated. Therefore, our research contributes to the state of knowledge by highlighting the importance of social image in the online environment.

Although the mean values of the items used in order to assess the perception regarding the presence of books as a sign for intellectual activity show rather a disagreement with the statement, the mediation model shows that in an unconscious way the consumer that a book background may be a good buying motive for books. Even if it might seem a superficial reason to buy books, the image of a person, both in real life and virtual environments, is an important social aspect that can lead to acceptance and appreciation. This activity is similar to avatars in the metaverse. If people are willing to invest in virtual images of themselves, they will also be willing to invest in a nice background for the online communication platform. These results of our research have important implications for book companies and book retailers. In addition to the titles that they aim to sell, it is important to design good-looking book covers in order to create a nice background for their owner.

Conclusions

The results of our research have important implications not only for publishers and book retailers but also for developers of social communication and other platforms. From the book seller's point of view, the question arises whether this type of behaviour is sustainable. In a world where social image is becoming more and more important and digitisation tends to capture the classic book market (Hrib, 2020), buying books for a library or a good-looking background can become a sustainable reason for reviving the classic book industry. Although it seems a superficial reason, the typology of book buying during the pandemic has proven that this is a valid reason for buying (Fosslien and Dufy, 2020; Hass, 2020), which is largely supported by a snobbery in academia and leadership (Weaver, 2013; Martin and Sorensen, 2014; Henkel and Ade, 2022; Yu et al., 2022). In order to maximise profits from this type of behaviour, publishers and producers must not only consider the titles they intend to sell, but also create nice and attractive book covers that fit a library or background as beautifully as possible. It is important for developers of social or on-line communication platforms to include books in this virtual environment, as they remain a symbol of science and are used to enhance the socio-intellectual image of a science-oriented intellectual.

Last but not least, our research has important implications for developing values and defining behaviour in the society in which we live. Our research indirectly confirms the superficiality of a society in which appearances are more important than content. This research confirms the existence of consumers who buy books because they look good, not necessarily because they want to read them. This behaviour is also confirmed by other studies that show that often the picture or title posted on a social platform is more important than the activity itself (Pelau et al., 2023). In an information-overloaded society, we tend to tick certain activities without

having the ability to deepen them (Pelau et al., 2023). For this reason, we align ourselves with the authors who believe that the first step to reduce this superficiality and digital snobbery caused by social platforms is to be aware of it (Weaver, 2013).

The limitations of our study are related to the fact that the data for the research were collected at a book fair. So, the respondents are active book buyers, a fact that can slightly intensify the phenomenon of intellectual snobbery related to the presence of books in personal libraries or on online communication platforms. To sustain sustainable development in our society, it is important that those who buy books to have a good looking background on social media will have the curiosity to open and browse these books. For a sustainable society, it is important not only to own books, but also to read them and understand their content. Thus, a final implication can be for the academic and teaching environment, which must determine pupils and students to love books, not only because they look well on communication platforms, but also for their content.

This research expands the field of knowledge on the role of social image in the online environment. If until now, the social image of an individual was developed through his presence and appearance in society, along with the development of on-line communication methods, the social image becomes important in the digital environment, through the pictures displayed as a profile picture or even through the avatar used for games or virtual realities. In future research, we will focus more on the importance of this social image in the online environment and on the motivation of users to develop this image.

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