CHALLENGES AND SYNERGIES IN AUTHORS' RELATIONSHIP WITH PUBLISHING HOUSES IN ROMANIA. HOW TO GET RECOMMENDATIONS

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Abstract

In recent decades, businesses worldwide have shifted their mindset towards a more customer-centric approach, as customers are essential to business existence. In the publishing sector, where there are diverse types of customers, authors are crucial not only for the business's continuity but also for product creation and development. They become business partners for publishing houses, accompanying them at each step of the publishing process. Ensuring authors' satisfaction leads to long-term business relationships that foster mutual growth. Such partnerships result in gains and benefits for both parties, for instance, trust, reliability, consistency, shared resources, brand development, specific knowledge and expertise, personalization, and customization, among others. This paper assesses Romanian authors' perceptions regarding their business relationship with publishers. The study aims to determine how satisfied the authors are with the partnership and what future improvements they would like to see. Various aspects linked to customer satisfaction are investigated, including financial matters, loyalty, communication, selling and distribution, marketing, end-product quality, and overall satisfaction with the experience. To measure customer satisfaction, the survey uses the Net Promoter Score (NPS) model along with open-ended questions to gain insights. This research can be helpful for authors who wish to publish their works with local publishing houses. They can gain valuable insights into the publishing process by analyzing the perspective of experienced authors. It can also benefit publishing houses by identifying their strengths and areas that need improvement in building business relationships with authors. Ultimately, it aims to enhance the academic understanding of this topic, contributing to the growth and modernization of the Romanian publishing sector.

Keywords

book market; business relations; customer satisfaction; publishing houses; publishing sector; Romania.

Introduction

In the ever-evolving and dynamic landscape of the publishing industry, the relationship between authors and publishers is a multilayered and complex partnership. For publishers, authors are a client segment most actively involved in co-

creation. An editorial project's success implies effective collaboration alongside all the value chain links. Numerous challenges may appear on the way (ideation-related, operational, financial, etc.). Nowadays, even with the more digital and global landscape, publishing still happens within the context of a country and its cultural framework. This can create structural constraints that require both authors and publishers to find solutions to achieve the best outcomes (Clark & Phillips, 2019).

Writing and other creative processes are typically nonlinear, which makes them highly volatile and dependent on numerous factors. These factors include not only rational or measurable elements but also emotional, spiritual, and relational aspects. Creative activities can be challenging due to their mutable nature. However, they can also be synergistic, meaning that different parts of the process can interact and combine to produce a more significant effect than each part separately (Brătianu, 2015). Besides the act of writing, the relationship between the author and the publisher is at the core of the publishing process. As previously mentioned, this may pose a wide array of challenges. However, the same combination of two parts with a central common creative goal and multiple different perspectives allows for significant synergy effects (Greco, Milliot, & Wharton, 2014).

Synergy can arise at every stage of the book publishing process, from editing and design to post-sales activities such as author meetings and autograph signings. However, in activities that involve more creativity and emotional elements, there is even greater potential for synergy to emerge. One such example is the manuscript editing phase, which frequently involves proofreading and beta reading services the publisher provides (Coker, 2016; Kesteven & Melrose, 2022). While this may result in heated debates, such collaboration adds significant artistic and commercial value to the end product, which would have been considerably lower without the active involvement of both parties.

Another important synergy point is related to marketing. A book can be marketed by the author or publisher only or by both separately with reasonably good results if this activity is conducted strategically and persistently. However, when marketing activities are performed in tandem by both the author and the publishing house in a structured collaborative way, the general rule is that the outcome would be much better than in any other circumstances. In such a case, the publisher ideally comes with marketing and data analysis expertise, its networks of bookstores, public figures, and other partners. At the same time, the author brings the personal connection they may create with the readers, sharing stories, the creation process, exciting information for their niche, upcoming events, and other things that may interest the audience. The same is valid for post-sales activities and capturing readers' loyalty and attention (Burgess, Williams, & Curran, 2023).

Strong collaborations between authors and publishers can have significant benefits. Apart from publishing books, these partnerships can also lead to other opportunities, such as nominations for book awards. Winning a literary prize can significantly enhance the author's and publisher's reputation and visibility, resulting in increased book sales. Other events, such as book tours, book launches, organizing book clubs, and other book-related events, may have similar mutual benefits for authors and publishers (Clark & Phillips, 2019).

However, achieving such synergies and a smooth process comes with difficulties, especially in an environment where publishing houses face increased competition both inside the industry and from other entertainment sectors. Other issues publishers face affecting their relationship with authors are the need for more funds, distribution chain problems, editorial workload, and the increasingly dynamic pace of work where business models constantly change and evolve (Banou, 2016).

This research aims to explore authors' perceptions in Romania regarding their collaboration with publishing houses. The study evaluates their partnership's strengths and identifies areas that require a change in approach from the publishers or policymakers. An analysis using the Net Promoter Score (NPS) framework is conducted, along with feedback from authors on their recommendations for publishers they have worked with. The study also includes general comments from authors on the publishing industry in Romania. The paper is divided into several sections: introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion, and study conclusions. The literature review section discusses general recommendations for publishers and covers the NPS scale's meaning, usage, advantages, and criticisms. The methodology section presents the research objectives, methods, tools, and techniques used in the study. The findings and discussion section presents the analysis and commentary of the results obtained, followed by the study's conclusions section.

Overall, the study examines the business relationship between publishing firms and their customers, the authors. It identifies the key challenges in these collaborations and provides recommendations for improvement. The study specifically focuses on understanding authors' perceptions, needs, and desires in their interactions with publishing houses.

Literature review

The current economic landscape is constantly evolving, with significant changes in marketing and customer experience. In the past, companies used to heavily promote their products through aggressive marketing campaigns, telephone sales, and televised commercials. However, with the advent of the internet, customers have become more powerful than ever before. Consumers can now purchase products from anywhere in the world without being constrained by geographical boundaries. They can make informed decisions about the benefits of any purchase by simply searching the internet. Search engines, comparison sites, and online ratings all assist buyers in making informed decisions. Ratings, commentaries, and recommendations are among the most trusted sources of information (Urban, 2005).

The progression of the company-customer relationship should ideally be from a suspect to a prospect, customer, loyalist, and finally an advocate. When customers advocate for a brand, they promote the company via word-of-mouth (WoM) (Ladhari, Souiden, & Ladhari, 2011). This is, in fact, the most cost-effective and persuasive marketing activity. Customer advocacy is a two-way street. The company acts as a consultant in the consumer's best interest, even promoting products that are not theirs. Similarly, consumers recommend the respective company to other people. A permanent mutual dialogue and partnership is imperative in this case. Companies with a strategy based on customer advocacy can reduce marketing costs and focus more on investing in quality and product design, which is often co-created with their customers.

Indeed, to adopt such a strategy, companies need to have first-rate products and be willing to improve and innovate continuously (Urban, 2005).

The quality of the products and/or services is a critical factor in determining whether a customer will become an advocate of the company (Özkan et al., 2020). Since assessing this aspect before purchasing is challenging, consumers often rely heavily on reviews and recommendations, both online and in person. In particular, when it comes to services, perceived service quality is usually a combination of technical quality (which is objective) and functional quality (which is subjective and relates to the customer's emotional state, i.e., how the interaction went and how it made them feel). This is why emotions and meeting and even exceeding expectations can sometimes play a critical role in service encounters, overall evaluation, and company rating. They usually act as mediators and moderators for consumers' responses and behaviors. The positive emotional component is a good predictor of positive recommendations, even better than the rational/cognitive assessment (Ladhari, Souiden, & Ladhari, 2011).

WoM refers to the natural and informal communication and recommendation of products and services. It differs from any other marketing form as it arises spontaneously from people's desire to share their experiences and opinions. In the current digital age, WoM has gained momentum and has the potential to become a vital marketing tool. People can access various platforms and forums to read and leave reviews, discuss with other product or service users, share their ideas and opinions, or seek advice. Nevertheless, it seems that people are more prone to share positive reviews than negative ones, or they would likely share negative experiences when they happen to someone else, so there might be a bias towards positive reviews from the desire to make oneself look better in the eyes of the receivers. At the same time, the receivers are more affected by the negative review due to the so-called "Negativity bias." Consequently, the most trusted and persuasive reviews are the moderate ones, two-sided, given in a simple, straightforward language, and written with dispreferred markers (Chen & Yuan, 2020).

What types of products and services are getting more WoM have been discussed in both academic and business contexts. It seems that even though novel and interesting products are getting more immediate WoM, the ones cued by the environment and associated with the immediate environment get more initial, as well as ongoing WoM. Given the context of the current paper, publishers can get WoM through book presence that cues both their sellers and producers. Libraries, bookstores, book events, book clubs, and forums, but also meetings with work colleagues where books are discussed, or services through which employees can order books on the firm's account (such as Bookster) are essential in shaping and encouraging WoM about publishers among end consumers, the readers. However, the same surroundings are conversation triggers for another type of customer: the authors. These contexts/situations might be even stronger for the authors as they often happen to be involved in the literary world in more than one way (have related professions, regularly attend literary events, are part of book clubs, etc.). As books are more visible than, for example, software and discussed by a larger population, publishers need to be attentive to their services and end product quality but also be aware that they have an opportunity in this higher visibility of their products and aim to increase it (Berger & Schwartz, 2011).

WoM and recommendations are highly associated with customer satisfaction, an intensely researched topic in management. It is generally linked to higher customer loyalty rates, increased economic returns, performance, and better reputation (Otto, Szymanski, & Varadarajan, 2020). In fact, research suggests that reputation is the strongest driver of loyalty in the sense of repeat patronage. Positive recommendations and reputation are strongly correlated and create a virtuous circle: recommendations increase reputation, and reputation increases recommendation levels. This suggests that a company's overall image can be enhanced by focusing more on customer satisfaction and recommendations (Bontis, Booker, & Serenko, 2007). This has significant managerial implications for all the departments in any company, especially those that interact with consumers directly. In this sense, satisfaction evaluation seems highly linked to the emotional aspect of the interaction between the customer and the firm/firm's representative(s). Emotions play a crucial role in both pre and post-consumption of a product or service. They can motivate a person to buy and also determine whether they will positively recommend, detract, or remain neutral about the product/service. When a service exceeds expectations, it leads to a positive surprise, resulting in consumer delight, which, in turn, influences satisfaction and propensity to recommend (Prayag et al., 2017). Another determinant for satisfaction and loyalty is the prestige of a brand, which is also linked to a high degree of positive recommendations and increased trust from consumers. Prestige is among the very few non-replicable assets that can be leveraged infinitely and constitute a competitive advantage (Jin, Line, & Merkebu, 2016).

Critical drivers for customer satisfaction, loyalty, and recommendations are perceived service quality, emotional satisfaction, and the company's image and brand prestige. The challenge companies across industries face is not only to attract new customers but also to retain and enhance relationships with existing ones. High levels of recommendations lead to both these positive outcomes and also to increased loyalty (Ashraf et al., 2020). Eventually, this translates into increased market share, lower marketing and operation costs, and overall higher profitability. Some studies suggest that a 5% increase in customer retention can increase profitability by 25-85%, depending on the industry and other market conditions (Reichheld, Markey, & Hopton, 2000). These numbers speak for themselves, highlighting customer satisfaction and the importance of recommendations for business success and recognition.

To assess how satisfied authors are with the mentioned aspects and how they see future prospects with their publishing partners, the Net Promoter Score (NPS) metric has been used for this study. For the first time, NPS was introduced by Fred Reichheld, a partner at Bain & Company, as a measure of the quality of the relationship between a company and its stakeholders and how loyal these individuals are to the respective organizations. This is a widely used metric for measuring loyalty and satisfaction among customers. Over time, it has been extended beyond customers to employees and partners. NPS typically has as basis the survey question, "On a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to recommend (the product/service) to a friend or colleague?". The respondents are then divided into Promoters (those scoring 9 and 10), Passives (7 and 8), and Detractors (6 and less). The promoters are delighted customers who will most likely bring new customers by recommending the service or product provided. The passives are satisfied but not so enthusiastic. They would switch to another provider if offered the right opportunity and are less likely to promote the business by word of mouth. Detractors are dissatisfied, sometimes even angry or frustrated customers who

may spread bad news and negative information in the market. NPS is calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters, and it can range from -100% to 100% (Reichheld, Darnell, & Burns, 2021).

NPS's main advantages and disadvantages are rooted in its primary quality: simplicity and ease of use. There are several criticisms of the NPS metric. One of the main critiques is that it does not provide any information about what needs improvement and fails to understand the reasons behind customer loyalty. To overcome this, additional qualitative questions should be asked to determine how the service can be improved, but NPS alone cannot provide the answers. Another drawback of the NPS is that it does not provide enough data on competition. The calculation can be misleading as NPS can be improved when detractors leave the company for competitors. This may seem like a positive change, but it can actually result in customer loss and sales decrease. The idea of "passive" customers has also been criticized because they threaten the firm's health as they are always looking for better value and alternatives. Once again, this highlights the fact that NPS does not take competition into account. Additionally, NPS is more focused internally, ignoring external factors such as market conditions, systemic conditions, and competitive threats (Fisher & Kordupleski, 2018).

Despite facing criticism from the academic community over methodological issues and inconsistencies, NPS is widely used by major companies such as Apple (Denning, 2011) and General Electric (Gupta & Zeithaml, 2006). Nowadays, it is not only used as a transactional tool to measure customer loyalty but also as a core marketing metric. Consulting companies like Bain & Company and Satmetrix have identified conditions under which NPS can be used correctly to measure a brand's health and competitive position and forecast market growth (Bendle, Bagga, & Nastasoiu, 2019). Currently, there are two uses of NPS: one measures data from current customers after interacting with an organization, and the other uses data from all potential customers, which covers the possible aspects of competitiveness and growth (Fitzgerald, 2017; Markey, 2014). The second type of NPS offers more accurate predictions for sales growth. In fact, changes in NPS over time seem to positively correlate with sales growth, while static absolute levels of NPS are associated with future point levels of sales. However, it is an effective validator only for short-term sales growth; product positioning, distribution strategy, and product range must be primarily considered for long-term predictions. This metric's operationalization and correct use concerning what needs to be found or understood make it efficient. Overall, it would add value to consider NPS as a forward-looking overall brand health indicator. Additionally, tracking NPS for all potential customers, even though more difficult, can prove more efficient. Companies need to focus on assessing and keeping their loyal customers and attracting new ones, fostering growth. Concludingly, NPS serves as a general brand health indicator, but it cannot diagnose specific underlying problems like brand awareness or customer satisfaction (Baehre et al., 2022).

Methodology

The main objective of this study is to evaluate the challenges faced by the publishing sector in establishing relationships between authors and publishers and identifying the areas of synergy between them. The study explores the critical factors in developing trust and loyalty among authors towards publishing houses. It also seeks to

understand how satisfied authors are with different aspects of the publishing process and how likely they are to recommend a publisher to other authors.

The study aims to provide an overall picture of the Romanian publishing sector and examine whether the business relationships in this field are transactional or if they lead to long-term collaborations. Additionally, it seeks to identify the areas that authors find most challenging and offer potential solutions. It is equally important to identify the aspects that authors positively assess, as they can provide valuable insight into the strengths of the industry and good practices that can be used to improve the problematic areas.

These goals can be compressed into three main objectives.
1) Measure author satisfaction across categories: overall, payment, distribution, communication, and deadlines.
2) Evaluate author loyalty by assessing their likelihood to collaborate with the same publishers for future projects and recommend the publisher to other authors.
3) Investigate how the various stages of the publishing process contribute to the overall experience of authors, focusing on key challenges and areas of improvement.

From September to October 2023, a questionnaire based on the Net Promoter Score (NPS) research metric was developed and distributed to authors who collaborated with publishing houses in Romania. The questionnaire used a 7-point Likert scale to rate the responses. The ratings were divided into three categories: Promoters (scores 6 and 7), Passives (scores 4 and 5), and Detractors (scores less than 3). The questionnaire covered five main aspects of the collaboration: payment and compensation, selling and distribution, deadline adherence, communication and cooperation, the likelihood of future projects/collaborations, and the overall perception. The calculation was derived by subtracting the percentage of detractors from the percentage of promoters for each aspect. The dimensions and questions included in the questionnaire can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. NPS proposed framework (Source: Authors' own research contribution)

Dimension investigated	Question
Overall	How likely are you to recommend this publishing house to other authors?
Future projects	How likely are you to continue working with this publishing house for future book projects?
Communication & Cooperation	How likely are you to recommend this publishing house to other authors based on their communication and how they cooperate with authors?
Deadline adherence	How likely are you to recommend this publishing house to other authors based on its ability to meet established deadlines?
Selling & Distribution	How likely are you to recommend this publishing house to other authors based on its ability to distribute and sell books?

Payment & Compensation	How likely are you to recommend this editor to other authors based on your payment and compensation experience?

Besides the above questions, the authors were encouraged to express their opinions through additional open-ended questions on recommendations they would make to publishing houses for improving their services.

The analysis included a total of 119 different answers. While these responses offer valuable insights, they cannot be generalized to all authors working with publishing houses in Romania. A limitation of the study is that the respondents are primarily from large and very large urban areas (70% of the total), but this might be due to their proximity to publishing houses' locations and the overall larger population of cities. Other study limitations are associated with the NPS metric, which was mentioned earlier. However, these limitations are mitigated through the open-ended question on recommendations and areas for improvement. Two tools, Excel and SPSS, are used for data analysis. Basic NPS calculations, charts, and graphs are created using Excel, while SPSS handles more advanced statistical capabilities, as it is designed specifically for social science research.

Results and discussions

Authors' profiles, involvement, and perceptions

Authors responding to the questionnaire are very diverse in terms of age, residency, type and number of works published, and other characteristics, as presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Profile of the respondents (Source: Authors' own research results)

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Man	56	47.1
Woman	63	52.9
Age		
<=35 years	12	10.1
36-50 years	53	44.5
51-65 years	32	26.9
>65 years	22	18.5
Place of residence		
> 1,000,000, urban, very large	69	58.0
200,000 - 500,000, urban, large	26	21.8
50,000 - 200,000 urban, medium	16	13.4
< 50,000, urban, small & rural	7	5.9
Literature type		
Nonfiction	66	55.5

Fiction	53	44.5
No. of published books		
1-2 books	23	19.3
3-5 books	37	31.1
6-10 books	27	22.7
11-15 books	15	12.6
>15 books	17	14.3
No. of collaborations with publishers		
1-2 collaborations	47	39.5
3-5 collaborations	54	45.4
>5 collaborations	18	15.1

Mature women, authors from Bucharest or other large cities, and nonfiction writers tend to dominate the sample. Nevertheless, most respondents have experience both in writing and publishing with diverse publishing companies. The oldest respondent is 77 years old, while the most prolific author has published 50 books.

To understand more about the respondents and how they perceive Romanian publishing houses, we asked using a 7-point Likert scale about how satisfied the authors are with the collaboration throughout the editorial process (satisfaction) and with their books published by Romanian publishing houses (quality). Table 3 shows that respondents tend to be happy about the books published. However, how they cooperate with the Romanian publishers to this end is not so much appreciated (7 is the maximum evaluation).

Table 3. Evaluation of cooperation with the publishing houses (Source: Authors' own research results)

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Satisfaction	4.81	1.709
Quality	5.25	1.622

Women tend to evaluate both dimensions a little bit more, but the differences registered among genders are not statistically significant, according to T-tests. The same can be observed in the case of nonfiction writers – they appreciate both aspects a little more, but the variation is not statistically relevant. Younger authors tend to be more severe in evaluation than other respondents, especially those aged 51-65, but one-way ANOVA shows no significant differences in assessment. Also, there are no statistically validated differences considering the place of residency or the experience of working with publishing houses (both regarding the number of books published or the number of companies with which authors cooperated).

Authors were also asked to evaluate on a 7-point Likert scale to what extent they believe that the success of a publishing project depends more on the editor they work with (the publisher's representative) than on the publishing company. Respondents offered the full range of options, but the mean value registered is 4.74. Therefore, authors tend to consider that the publishing house's representative is slightly more

important than the company itself when ensuring the success of an editorial project. There are no statistically significant differences among the respondents. However, those with broader experience with publishing, as well as authors in rural and small urban areas and older respondents, tend to consider the editor a little more important than the publishing house to ensure the successful closure of the editorial process.

We also checked how professionals are considered Romanian publishing houses compared to foreign ones. The professionalism was evaluated with 3.18 (7 meaning Romanian publishing houses perform much better). This evaluation shows a lack of contentment with the Romanian companies in this field and that authors would have higher expectations. Nonfiction authors and men tend to evaluate the Romanian publishing companies a little better; still, the differences are not statistically significant. The younger authors, those living in small towns or urban areas, and those cooperating with more publishing houses tend to be harsher on the Romanian publishing houses. However, the ANOVA tests still show no statistically relevant difference among groups.

We also checked if COVID-19 has changed the perceptions of collaboration with Romanian publishing houses. They have been asked to evaluate if this has been more challenging. On average, authors consider the relationship similar (M = 3.93), even if women, older authors, and fiction writers tend to believe the cooperation is a bit more difficult (the T-test and ANOVA do not show any statistically relevant variations).

We also checked how involved the authors perceive to be in the promotion/marketing activities of their volumes. They evaluate it as being involved to some extent (M = 4.76 – where 7 is very involved). There are no significant differences between respondents considering their status and experience with publishers.

The last aspect we present concerns funding the books published by the respondents. Three possibilities were checked, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Funding for the editorial projects of the authors (Source: Authors' own research results)

Indicator	Question	Mean
Funding1	The editorial projects I have been involved in were funded by the publishing houses I collaborated with.	3.71
Funding2	The editorial projects I have been involved in were funded through various sources of funding for cultural and editorial projects, sponsorships, etc.	3.44
Funding3	The editorial projects I have been involved in were funded by me.	3.87

The answers show that all three situations occur with almost equal frequencies. As expected, nonfiction tends to be funded more by third-party sources than fiction. Also, men tend to fund their works more, while those with more publishing experience rely more on publishers' funding, but the differences are not statistically significant.

We investigated the contract-related relationships. Two dimensions have been considered and evaluated as follows: "There has always been a contract between me and the publishing house at the basis of the editorial projects I have been involved in"

(Contract1); "Most of the time, Romanian publishing houses I have collaborated with have adhered to the financial clauses established" (Contract2). In most cases, there is a contract at the base of the author-publisher partnership (the mean for Contract 1 is 5.91, where 7 describes the situation when there is always a contract involved). According to respondents, the publishers respect the contractual clauses to some extent (the mean for Contract2 is 4.87, where 7 represents full compliance).

Authors were also asked about the best and the worst practices among the publishing houses they worked with. The variety of answers was extensive – more than 75 publishers have been mentioned as good practices and more than 50 as bad examples. The first aspect we observed is that more than 10% of the respondents stated they could not give examples because all publishers were similar (some mentioning similar bad, others similar good) or because their experiences were all good or all bad (depending on the question)... Another aspect we observed is that smaller publishing houses tend to be appreciated more. Except for two publishers (one specializing in non-fiction books and another publishing both fiction and nonfiction), no publisher was mentioned favorably more than five times. One of the largest publishers on the market was nominated most times among the bad examples. The third aspect worth mentioning is that the two lists – of good and bad examples – overlap to some extent. This would indicate no standardized practices inside those publishers and/or the extended subjectivity and diversity of needs among authors.

Net Promoter Score

The survey results indicate that authors have a generally positive outlook on their relationship with publishing houses, but some challenging and sensitive aspects still require attention. The unfavorable aspects that demand the most attention are "payment and compensation" and "selling and distribution," with a negative NPS. On the other hand, authors generally perceive "communication and cooperation" and "deadline adherence" positively, with a higher NPS. Nevertheless, even in these cases, the NPS is moderate, so there is room for improvement. These areas have more passives than detractors, so publishers can adopt a strategy to transform their passive customers into promoters through better customer services and reevaluating their activity scheduling process. Table 5, as well as Figure 1 and Figure 2, reveal the NPS results.

Table 5. NPS survey results (Source: Authors' own research results)

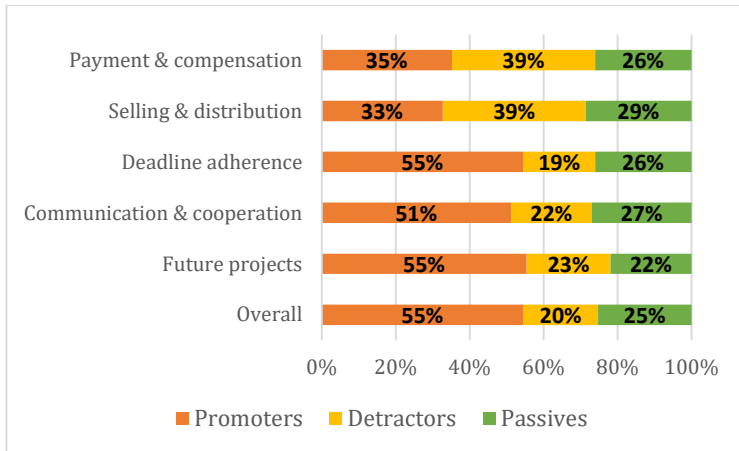|	Promoters	Detractors	Passives	NPS
Overall	55%	20%	25%	34%
Future projects	55%	23%	22%	33%
Communication & Cooperation	51%	22%	27%	29%
Deadline adherence	55%	19%	26%	35%
Selling & Distribution	33%	39%	29%	-6%
Payment & Compensation	35%	39%	26%	-3%

Figure 1. NPS results graph: Promoters, Detractors, Passive ratios (Source: Authors' own research results)
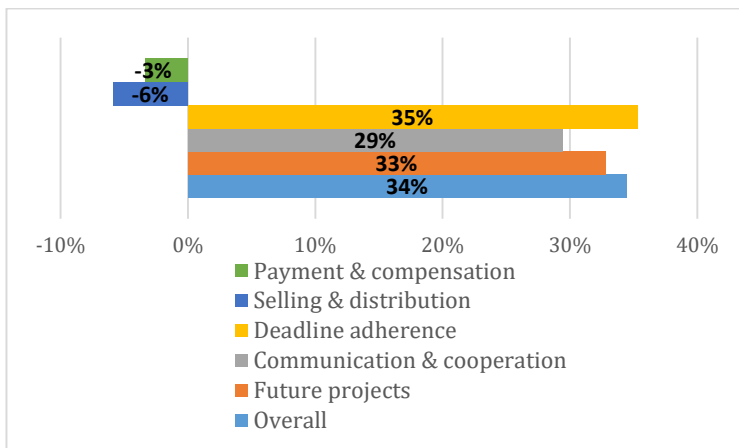

Figure 2. NPS results (Source: Authors' own research results)

It seems that the problems related to "Payment & Compensation," as well as "Selling & Distribution," are not necessarily specific to the publishing houses mentioned in the survey but rather systemic and related to the industry as a whole. This is indicated by the fact that companies tend to answer positively when asked if they would collaborate with the same publishing company in the future, suggesting that these issues are likely to be challenging regardless of the publisher. This is further supported by the fact that the survey authors have worked with different publishers, yet their ratings are similar. It should be noted that the lowest score in the "Selling & Distribution" dimension may be because many publishing houses do not offer any support in these areas. This is particularly true for small publishers that lack the required infrastructure or extensive business relationships in bookselling.

The Payment & Compensation indicator of the publishing industry is a sensitive matter in Romania and other countries, including those with a longer publishing tradition and a more structured industry. This challenge is rooted in the complex dynamics of the sector, which involve compensation structure design and the subjective valuation of

authors' work. Issues such as royalty rates fairness and timely compensation are present across physical boundaries and, unfortunately, exist regardless of the maturity of the publishing sector. Achieving a balance that satisfies both authors and publishing houses is an ongoing challenge that requires careful consideration of industry standards, legal frameworks, and evolving market dynamics.

Regarding this matter, it is noteworthy that in Romania, only a few authors can rely on their writing as the primary source of income for their daily lives. In this case, out of the 119 authors who took the survey, only 2% consider book sales as their primary income source, as indicated in Figure 3. It is essential to mention that these authors specialize in writing fiction books for children. This data suggests that this segment of the book market might be more profitable, and it is possible that due to limited leisure time and competition from other sectors, books that target adults may not be performing very well in terms of sales.
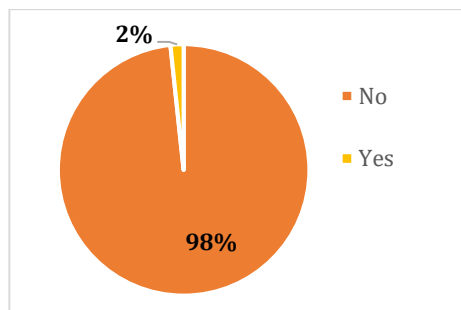

Figure 3. Primary income from book sales (Source: Authors' own research results)

We note that the authors gave the full range of responses, which means that some are extremely skeptical, while others highly recommend the publishing houses. Table 6 presents the means and standard deviation for all six dimensions considered.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics (Source: Authors' own research results)

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Overall	5.13	1.965
Future projects	5.08	2.069
Communication & Cooperation	5.04	2.023
Deadline adherence	5.17	1.950
Selling & Distribution	4.20	2.181
Payment & Compensation	4.14	2.226

Considering that 7 is the highest recommendation, we observe that respondents' perceptions and satisfaction are not really high. Cronbach's Alpha (of 0.951) shows a high inner consistency of the scale. The respondents' opinions are independent of their personal characteristics or experience in publishing. Nevertheless, it is somewhat surprising that even though the evaluation of various aspects of the editorial project, such as Selling & Distribution and Payment & Compensation, are not highly appreciated, the overall recommendation given by the respondents is still higher than almost all other aspects. This may suggest that publishers have generally low expectations. This information, coupled with the fact that book sales are not a significant source of income for most respondents, may also imply that their

motivation to write and publish is not commercial but related to their profession (academic authors, popularization books' authors) or their passion for literature (non-academic authors). Another possible interpretation is that the publishing houses offer similar services, and the satisfaction levels are somewhat similar in the market. Payment and commercialization dimensions may not receive much attention at the industry level by the publishers. Therefore, authors-customers rate these aspects systematically low but evaluate the publishing houses' services quality based on other dimensions and recommend them accordingly.

Recommendations for publishing houses

After completing the questionnaire, the authors could offer their recommendations to the publishing houses in a special section. Most of the responses shared similar recommendations. Below are some common points frequently mentioned in the suggestions provided.

- **Transparency and accountability** are critical during the publishing process, from manuscript selection criteria to final product sales. The authors recommend that publishers carefully review all books before publishing them. They should also hire specialized editors and proofreaders to provide personalized services to the authors. Additionally, specialized designers should collaborate with the authors to create the book's final form. Publishers should pay special attention to creating a fair contract with the author and complying with the financial clauses included in the contract. The word "pay" was frequently mentioned in all the comments provided by authors.
- **Authors' support** is one of the most important aspects of a positive experience. In their recommendations, the authors emphasize the importance of respectful treatment and comprehensive services for all clients. They note a common issue in that publishers tend to invest more in well-known authors and offer them better contracts while providing less support to newcomers, less established authors, or those in niche markets. Another common issue is that authors fund their book publishing only by themselves; they would appreciate more financial involvement from the publishers. Improved communication throughout the book publishing process and ongoing information and support would increase author satisfaction with the services they receive. From the authors' perspective, ensuring that their rights are respected and that they receive appropriate royalties for their work is critical.
- **Marketing and distribution** seem to be among the areas that require the most improvement in the publishing process. Authors suggest that it would be beneficial for publishers to create their distribution networks and be more involved in the selling process. Additionally, they feel that more support is needed for marketing activities. Examples frequently provided in the recommendations section are for publishers to become more involved in book launches, actively organize book-related events, and support authors in their marketing efforts through social media.
- **Publishing quality** is another crucial factor for authors when recommending publishing houses. They believe publishers should be selective in choosing the manuscripts they publish to maintain specific quality standards, even if it means sacrificing some short-term profits. Authors also stress that publishers should be socially responsible by promoting quality literature and educating their readers. They should prioritize the quality of books over maximizing profits, maintaining a balance between financial success and book quality. Additionally, authors would prefer publishers to use higher-quality materials and employ professional book designers and

editors. However, achieving these goals can be difficult as costs increase, which may translate to higher-end consumer prices. One possible solution for publishers is to specialize and limit their focus to fewer domains. This approach enables them to provide more expertise and tailored services to authors. Additionally, they can establish long-term contracts with service providers that cater specifically to their niche. Furthermore, forming partnerships with authors specializing in the same domains can help create a mutually beneficial relationship.

- ***Embracing change*** is, last but not least, a key element in the modernization of the publishing sector, which shall lead to more satisfaction for the authors. They recommend that Romanian publishing houses consider adopting Western business models, offering professional and counseling services for authors, showing more trust in debut authors, and delivering variety in book formats. As society evolves, it is equally important that cultural industries, such as book publishing, adapt and expand their service portfolio.

Conclusions

The publishing industry in general, but especially in Romania, where it hasn't had a smooth development over the years, raises multiple challenges, from lack of funds and systemic support to distribution chain issues. These aspects influence and affect their relationship with the authors, often negatively. However, a pivotal element to ameliorating many existing problems stays exactly in such good and long-lasting collaborations that benefit from trust, each other network of connections, and synergic effects in the creative process.

The present investigation adds to the corpus of knowledge on the Romanian book market. Most previous studies have focused on the evolution of the market (Fătu-Tutoveanu, 2010; Scarlat & Stănciulescu, 2021), the profile of readers (Chirlesan & Chirlesan, 2017; Saniuta, Zbuchea, & Hrib, 2022), we also recommend the Cultural Consumption Barometers developed annually by INCFC, and the management and marketing aspects of publishing houses (Zbuchea & Hrib, 2019; Zbuchea, Saniuta, & Hrib, 2020) or booksellers (Saniuta, Hrib, & Zbuchea, 2021; Zbuchea, Saniuta, & Hrib, 2020). To our knowledge, this is the first academic study concentrating on authors.

Although there may be some differences in authors' opinions, the consensus on the various aspects investigated and their impact on authors' satisfaction is quite consistent. Some areas, such as meeting deadlines and effective communication and collaboration, are perceived as more satisfactory and worth promoting by the authors. However, other areas, such as selling and distribution, payment, and compensation, have an overall negative perception, indicating that there is still much room for improvement. Nonetheless, authors still report that they would collaborate with the respective publishing houses for future projects and would tend to recommend their publishers. This suggests that the authors' recent experiences align with their general perception of the publishing industry and that there is a tendency towards longer-term author-publisher partnerships despite their challenges.

The authors' recommendations for publishing houses are valuable and worth considering for publishers who want to adapt their services according to the needs of their primary clients. This would create stronger partnerships with authors and achieve synergistic effects. It would be beneficial for publishers to be more transparent

in the manuscript selection process by offering consistent feedback to authors, even in cases of manuscript rejection. A legally binding contract should be the basis for further activity upon accepting a manuscript. This contract should offer authors a fair share of benefits and financial compensation while maintaining a balance between both parties' rights and obligations. Enforcement and respect for the contractual clauses would improve the publisher's reputation and benefit the entire sector if it becomes common practice.

Publishers' specialization and their ability to offer counseling and professional services to authors are areas for improvement. By providing support for authors and working together as a team, long-term partnerships can be nurtured, achieving synergistic effects for the final product quality and selling potential. Together, the author and the publisher can come closer to the final consumer, the reader, and improve their experience. Book launches, meetings with the authors (both online and physical), and marketing efforts can contribute to both the authors' and the publishers' visibility. Additionally, professional services and involvement with the post-production activities would promote customer delight among authors. This would make them recommend the publisher to other authors, who would, in turn, become new clients for the publisher.

As the publishing sector in Romania underwent many challenges in tandem with social unrest and economic struggles that characterized the last half of the century, the publishers, authors, and policymakers should embrace change and modernize the common practices in the publishing sector. Fortunately, this is already starting to happen. Adopting business models with different revenue streams, accessing funds through innovative means, digitalizing processes, expanding the portfolio of services and products, and getting closer to the consumer are ways publishers can improve their relationships with authors and overcome systemic challenges. However, the most critical key to success in the publishing industry lies in the publisher-author relationship. This working in synergy can lead to valuable cultural products in the form of books, promote great ideas, and benefit the culture and economy.

Further research on author-publisher business relationships is required to understand this phenomenon's dynamics better. It would be beneficial to investigate areas that can create synergy, such as the involvement of publishers in the creative process and whether they work transactionally or co-create value. Exploring marketing practices that result from collaboration between authors and publishers and their impact on end-consumers' buying decisions can help assess the collaborative potential between these two parties. Additionally, it can help us understand the long-term benefits in terms of readers' perception and loyalty. Further, more insight into the financial aspect of the publishing process could provide potential solutions to authors' dissatisfaction with this aspect. Qualitative research may offer more clarity and detail on common practices throughout each stage of the publishing process.

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