

Press release

International book markets with mixed annual results in 2020

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Baden-Baden, April 7, 2021 – After the considerable downturn suffered during the first lockdown, retailers managed to reduce their losses significantly. Even a higher average price helped them.

The international book markets ended the coronavirus year 2020 with mixed results. This was revealed by a special survey covering nine countries carried out by GfK Entertainment on the basis of the physical sales reported by the individual trade panels and, in the case of Germany, by the GfK Consumer Panel. After the considerable downturn suffered during the first lockdown, retailers managed to reduce their losses significantly in the following months, although some faced new shop closures in the important Christmas trading period. Nonetheless, the annual sales data show on the whole that readers' interest in buying books has held up during the current crisis.

Turnover between minus 16.6% and plus 10.2%

There was a very positive increase in sales revenues in 2020 in the Belgian region of Flanders (+10.2%) and the Netherlands (+7.2%). Italy (+3.3%) and Spain (+0.8%), which were particularly hard hit by the pandemic in the spring, also posted rises when taking the year as a whole. Brazil, the only non-European country in the survey, recorded 2.4% growth whereas Switzerland ended the year with flat sales. On the other hand, sales in Germany and France, both affected by two lockdowns in twelve months, were down 2.5% and 2.1% respectively. Losses were also suffered in the Belgian region of Wallonia (-1.8%) and Portugal (-16.6%). A review of the first six months in Portugal had already revealed a sharp drop in sales and losses could not be recouped in the second half of the year.

Average price rising in eight out of nine countries

Although sales took a nosedive in many countries, such as the Netherlands (-4.4%), the average price in some cases in all the European markets analysed rose considerably. For example, the three fastest-

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growing regions Flanders (+5.1%), the Netherlands (+2.6%) and Italy (+3.7%) also reported the biggest price rises on a country-by-country comparison. Books also cost more in Germany (+1.8%), Switzerland (+2.2%) and France (+1.3%), with only Brazil recording a drop in prices (-1.8%).

Dr Mathias Giloth, Managing Director GfK Entertainment, says: “In the crisis year 2020, the printed book proved its important function as a key commodity that provides not only cultural enrichment and entertainment but also economic benefits. Extended services provided by physical retailers, such as the contactless pickup of books ordered, deliveries by bicycle or the expansion of companies’ own online operations, show the creative nature of the book trade and have succeeded in strengthening customer loyalty in spite of the physical distance and at least taken a step towards countering the fall in sales. The intensive use of sales periods between the lockdowns, higher average prices and increases in e-commerce and the digital formats were other positive trends in an extremely difficult market environment”.

Fiction posts growth rates in excess of five percent

Fiction was one of the most popular genres in 2020 and sales tracked above average in most of the countries surveyed, exceeding five percent in Brazil, Flanders, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. In France (+1.8%) and Germany (-0.8%) too, they were above the national figure. Among the Top 5 of the annual fiction charts were Joël Dicker’s triangular novel *The Enigma of Room 622* (France, Italy, Spain), and Valérie Perrin’s *Changer l’eau des fleurs* (Italy, France, Wallonia), both of which were on sale in three countries.

Non-fiction sales on the decline in many places

A Promised Land, former US President Barack Obama’s memoirs, was not only the top-seller in Switzerland and Wallonia and the most successful non-fiction book in Germany and France, but also reached the Top 5 in the non-fiction segment in Portugal. Overall, this segment did not do so well as fiction and ended the year on a downward trajectory, for example in Germany (-2.5%) and France (-8.4%). A glance at the other segments reveals a mixed picture: whereas sales of children’s and juvenile books were up, with the exception of Portugal, there was a decline in the severely impacted travel book segment, ranging from -22.8% in Germany to -73.2% in Portugal.

Positive development in the case of e-books

The e-book distribution channel, which was considered separately, developed on a positive note in 2020. In Spain, where VAT on digital books and e-publications was reduced from 21 to 4%, sales of e-books rose by 78.2%. The digital book market in France grew by 26% and e-books also generated more revenues in Germany (+16.2%), Flanders (+16.5%) and the Netherlands (+12.7%).

About the study

The study is based on the physical book market sales in 2020 using data from the trade panels in Belgium (Flanders/Wallonia), Brazil, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Switzerland as well as the GfK Consumer Panel for Germany, in each case excluding subscriptions and downloads. If you would like further information or are interested in receiving the complete survey, please contact senta.wolf@gfk.com.

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GfK Entertainment

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