

An Evaluation of Selective Foreign e-Bookshops

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ABSTRACT

Following the methodology of case comparison, five major foreign e-Bookshops have been evaluated in the present study in the light of the needs and requirements of modern academic libraries. The evaluation criteria consisting of variables like Statement of Collection, Help Menu, Shopping Procedure, Payment Modes, Special Facility provided for Online Purchase, User Search Support, Details of Product, Navigation Links and Special Discounts has been used. The e-Bookshops have been ranked based on the marks obtained for the facilities provided and offered by them.

Keywords: e-Bookshop, online bookstore, e-commerce, collection development, online acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

Books are always a rich source of information and insight on diversified subjects of life. Information technology has influenced every aspect of our life and there is no exception to books. There used to be a time when book buying was considered an arduous job. Emergence of e-Bookshops on a large scale worldwide has provided great ease to the buyers. The buyers can search for their required books on the web portal of the e-Bookshops by sitting in their houses or workplaces, order online and receive the books at their doorsteps. In any library, the acquisition process can be simplified by shopping books online. e-Bookshops being run on web servers are open 24x7. Bibliographic data of books can be easily checked and verified using the online catalogues provided on the site. Updating the online catalogue is much easier and faster than the printed catalogue. Apart from this, the price and discounts offered can be known instantly helping in optimum budget planning and utility. By just having a computer with internet connection, all information can be obtained by the user on his/her desktop. With rapid developments in e-commerce, ordering process is also hassle free thereby reducing the time delay in the procurement of books. The trend of trading books online is getting popularity with each passing day and increasing numbers of people are inclined to indulge in online trading of books. This is because of increased ease and convenience introduced through the process. Traditional ways of ordering books by libraries, institutions, and individuals are being expanded to take advantage of the internet. Mergers and acquisitions are frequent

among the online European booksellers, and as in any volatile internet market, new companies form and disappear rapidly. The European book market is comprised of three sectors: Consumer books, schoolbooks, and academic and professional books. Consumer sales account for more than two thirds of the market. Most of these books are sold by both large chain or by smaller independent stores. A small proportion of these books are sold through internet booksellers. The majority of the websites offering price comparison for books are US or UK-based and do not account for the intricacies and variety in European book pricing.

2. ADVANTAGES OF e-BOOKSHOPS

The major advantages of e-Bookshops are:

- They provide an environment of guaranteed 24x7 access to the people for searching, ordering and purchasing of the books.
- They allow viewing and comparing a lot of books at one time.
- They are repositories of a vast amount of information about books currently in the market and all internet subscribers can use them free of charges.
- They are convenient for scholars and others looking for specific books by spending very little time. People who do not live near a bookshop, or cannot get to one, can also save time and avoid trouble of traveling long distances.
- Due to information explosion in each and every field and discipline of knowledge, a huge volume

of literature is being published in each subject. The publishers' lists may not reach the library or the user in time, but these lists can be accessed through the e-Bookshops immediately. Such lists save the time of librarian in searching for the latest literature.

There are a large number of e-Bookshops where customer can find books by just key-ing in a little information about the required book or document. The advantage of e-Bookshops is that there are a lot more choices and a wide range of heavy discounts. They also offer discounts for bulk order, which makes it more appealing for book collectors and customers to shop online. The purpose of this research is to chart out the best comparative practices of e-Bookshop by following the methodology of case comparison.

3. OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This study has been undertaken with the following research objectives:

- Observe the category classification of the collections provided by the foreign e-Bookshops
- Study the help menu provided and shopping procedures adopted
- Observe the user search support system
- Study the navigation facilities provided by the foreign e-Bookshops
- Study the special facilities for online purchase
- Study the modes of payment of bills accepted by the foreign e-Bookshops
- Study the discount schemes offered by the foreign e-Bookshops
- Study the product details provided
- Rank and grade foreign e-Bookshops

Keeping in view these objectives, the proposed study seeks to critically evaluate and compare five foreign e-Bookshops (Table 1).

Table 1. List of foreign e-bookshops

S. No.	Name	URL
1.	Amazon	http://www.amazon.com
2.	Barnes & Noble	http://www.barnesand-noble.com
3.	The Book Depository	http://www.bookdepository.co.uk
4.	Blackwell	http://bookshop.blackwell.co.uk/jsp/welcome.jsp
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	http://www.tsoshop.co.uk

4. METHODOLOGY

The present study broadly applies the methodology of content analysis wherein primary data is drawn from filtering of information provided on the relevant websites. Besides this, published literatures are also being extensively consulted for critical synthesis of knowledge. By following the methodology of system theory, the variables selected for examination and evaluations include 'Statement of Collection', 'Help Menu', 'Shopping Procedure', 'Payment Modes', 'Special Facility provided for Online Purchase', 'User Search Support', 'Details of Product', 'Navigation Links', and 'Special Discounts'. The study has adopted a 50 marks scoring system to assign the scores to each e-Bookshop. Based on the marks obtained, the bookshops have been graded and ranked. During research process, it appeared that out of the large number of e-bookshops, these five e-bookshops are more preferably being used by a large number of users and are more famous than others.

In the present study, the evaluation and comparison of e-Bookshops is limited to five therefore, standard overview cannot be made. Only broad trends can be marked out, and structures, design, organisation of information, content, and searching facilities of e-Bookshops are frequently updating. Hence, it will be difficult to reach on a conclusion about the organisation and content of an e-Bookshop.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Kotha¹ carried out an in-depth case study on Amazon and highlighted in his paper how this firm is exploiting the emerging technology-driven media and the growth of the internet to rewrite the rules of competition in the book retailing industry. Kruse & Holtzman² described the historical background of the library acquisitions when the libraries used to purchase most of their books from wholesalers catering to the library market. They also discussed about the new concept of web booksellers entering in the marketing business offering deep discounts and rapid delivery to the general public. The authors opined that purchasing from web vendors tends to increase library administrative costs because of institutional credit card and auditing policies, double data entry on the web vendor's interface and local library system, and other factors. They reached at the conclusion that depending on local administrative costs, libraries may find web vendors the best choice for purchasing out of print, foreign and rush titles. Yang & Varnadoe³ carried out a case study about the internet application in service industry—online bookstores (Barnes & Noble.com and Amazon.com) and related operational issues with the research objective to investigate the trends and level of prevalence of on-line book selling business (i.e., e-bookstore) focusing on some emerging issues

and challenges. The authors found that both the online bookstores were very compatible with their strategy for competing in the e-bookstore industry. Managerial implications are discussed with suggestions for future research. Hirwade⁴, *et al.* evaluated ten major internet bookshops and graded them into five categories, viz., Excellent, Very Good, Good, Average and Poor. They found that Amazon.com, USA and Amazon, UK fall under excellent category while the internet bookshops from India viz., D.K. Agencies and Khemraj fall under good and average category, respectively. Chmielarz⁵ evaluated and selected websites in Polish book sector with regard to quality measured by their usefulness for an individual client. He presented the characteristics of the sector and basic methodological assumptions and conducted evaluations by means of a simple scoring method with preferences and relational research. The findings have been analysed and the results of the study were compared. Khan⁶ carried out evaluation of five Indian e-Bookshops in comparative settings using various important variables and finally ranked the e-Bookshops on the basis of the facilities provided and offered by them. He concluded with Indiaplaza to be the best among the five selected cases.

6. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

6.1 e-Bookshops Websites Information

On an analysis, it was observed that two out of the five selected cases of foreign e-bookshops

viz., Blackwell and TSO, do not have any mention of 'authority' and 'copyright' on their website while the websites of Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and The Book Depository do not provide 'postal address' under their contact details (Table 2).

6.2 Collection Statement

A collection is the set of items that a bookshop possesses. A good e-Bookshop is one, which possesses an excellent collection of books and other related products and documents. Each of the e-Bookshops has a variety of collection. Table 3 presents the details about the collection available on the respective websites of the e-Bookshops.

On the basis of Table 3, it can be observed that the selected foreign e-bookshops are rich in collection but The Book Depository and Blackwell do not have journals as part of their collections on offer.

6.3 Help Menu

Help menu on Home page provides various types of help in searching the desired products, signing in, placing the order and checking out. FAQ provides the answers to questions generally in the minds of the customers. E-mail help provides direct communication with the e-Bookshop's staff. The various facilities under Help Menu provided to the customers by the e-Bookshops under the present study have been summed up in Table 4. Almost all the e-bookshops contains all the option under their 'Help Menu' except TSO, which lacks 'Site Map' to be a part of its 'Help Menu'.

Table 2. Information about websites of e-Bookshops

E-bookshop name	Authority statement	Copyright statement	Contact details
Amazon	Amazon.com Inc.	1996-2014	No address provided, contact only through e-mail, telephone & chat
Barnes & Noble	Barnesandnoble.com	1997-2014	No address provided, local customer service center Tel.: 1-800-843-26651-877-886-5022; International customers can call at 201-559-3882201-438-1475, and E-mail
The Book Depository	The Book Depository Ltd.	2014	No address provided, online contact form E-mail: help@bookdepository.co.uk
Blackwell	Not Given	Not given	Blackwell Mail Order, 50 Broad Street, Oxford OX1 3BQ, UK; Online query form; Tel: +44 (0) 1865 333536, 1865 333000, 1865 333690; E-mail: mail.ox@blackwell.co.uk
TSO Online Book Shop	Not Given	Not given	TSO customer services, PO Box 29, Norwich, NR3 1GN; Customer Service; Tel.: +44 (0)870 600 5522

Table 3. Collections

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	Books	e-Books	Magazines	Journals
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	The Book Depository	✓	✓	✓	×
4.	Blackwell	✓	✓	✓	×
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓

6.4 Shopping Procedure

Each e-Bookshop follows a specific shopping procedure. For the convenience of a new customer, these websites are expected to include links describing procedure of ordering, obtaining membership, checking out, cart facility, help, special discounts offered and delivery system. Detailed findings of the shopping procedure as available on the respective websites of the e-Bookshops under the present study are presented in Table 5.

Shopping process begins from becoming a member of e-Bookshop to receiving of the items. During the analysis of shopping procedure, it has been observed that all the e-Bookshops under the present study provide the procedures of ordering, checking out, delivery systems, etc. TSO was not found offering Special Discount.

6.5 Payment Acceptance

Some of the most prominent modes of payment acceptance by the e-Bookshops are Permanent Accounts with the e-Bookshops, Credit Cards, Master Cards, Digital Cash, Electronic Cheque and Demand Drafts. Table 6 represents the detailed findings regarding the various modes of payment acceptance by the e-Bookshops. It was observed that acceptance of

DD as mode of payment is not prominent in the selected cases of foreign e-bookshops and only TSO accepts this mode of payment. The Book Depository was found to be not offering the facility of having a Permanent Account on its website while Blackwell was found to be not accepting Digital Cash and Electronic Cheque.

6.6 Special Facilities for Online Purchase

Online purchasing not only helps the customers to view all the items available on the e-Bookshops at one place sitting at home or at any convenient place but also shows the items that will be added soon. It also shows the items that are recently being added along with their abstracts. It further shows the special discount that will be provided by the e-Bookshops on the purchase of a particular item. The details about these special facilities for online purchase have been reported in Table 7.

It can be observed that almost all the selected e-bookshops offer special facilities for online purchase except Blackwell which does not provide information about 'Coming Soon' titles, while TSO does not provide Review Services about the books/ documents and also does not have any mention of 'Special Discount'.

Table 4. Help menu

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	FAQ	E-mail help	Help menu on Home page	Search tips	Site map
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	The Book Depository	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Blackwell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓	x

Table 5. Shopping procedure

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	How to order	How to become member	How to check out	Cart facility	Help	Special discount	Delivery system
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	The Book Depository	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Blackwell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x	✓

Table 6. Payment acceptance modes

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	Permanent account	Credit card	Master card	Digital cash	Electronic cheque	Visa	DD
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
3.	The Book Depository	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
4.	Blackwell	✓	✓	✓	x	x	✓	x
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 7. Special facilities for online purchase

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	New arrivals	Coming soon	Abstract services	Review services	Special discount
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	The Book Depository	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Blackwell	✓	×	✓	✓	✓
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	×	×

6.7 User Search Support

e-Bookshops are expected to provide strong search facilities to help the customers in the retrieval of the most relevant results in shortest time period. The customers use different search terms for the required document. e-Bookshops provide searches by Subject, Author, Keyword, Boolean Operators, Publishers, Title, ISBN and the Year of Publication to facilitate the customers to find the document. The findings of the user search support systems adopted by the e-Bookshops have been reported in Table 8.

Almost all the selected cases were found to allow searching of the required documents through all the prominent options except Barnes & Noble which does not provide searching facility by year of publication and The Book Depository does not provide searching of the documents using Boolean operators besides year of publication.

6.8 Product Details

e-Bookshops usually provide all the details regarding their products that a customer may require like, 'Category of the Product', 'Name of the Author', 'Publisher/Manufacturer', 'ISBN', 'Title', 'Edition', 'Price', 'Contents', 'First page image' and 'Abstract'. Table 9 shows the findings about the product details available on the respective websites of the e-Bookshops. and, it was observed that all these e-Bookshops show the Category of the Product (book, journal, magazine, etc.), Author, Publisher, Title, Price, etc., except Barnes & Noble and TSO which does not provide detail about the edition and contents.

6.9 Navigation Facilities

Navigation links help the customers to browse the website and the web documents. Such links provided by the e-Bookshops were observed and reported in Table 10. It can be observed that all the selected

Table 8. User search support

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	Subject	Author	Keyword	Boolean	Publisher	Title	ISBN	Publication year
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×
3.	The Book Depository	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	✓	✓	×
4.	Blackwell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Table 9. Product details available on the websites

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	Category	Author	Publisher	ISBN	Title	Edition	Price	Contents	Ist page	Abstract
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	×	✓	✓
3.	The Book Depository	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Blackwell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	×	✓	×	✓	✓

Table 10. Navigation facilities provided by the websites

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	Home link on each page	Major links repeated on each page	Forward/backward link	Images/animation	Images/animation support downloading
1.	Amazon	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2.	Barnes & Noble	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3.	The Book Depository	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4.	Blackwell	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

cases provide all the prominent options for navigating through the pages of their websites.

6.10 Discounts on the Products

The discount system on different categories of the products available on the e-Bookshops were also examined (Table 11). It can be observed that four among the five selected cases offer attractive discounts on their various products/documents. TSO was found to be not offering any discount on any of the documents.

6.11 Assigning of Scores to e-Bookshops

Analytical findings of the five major foreign e-Bookshops and assigning of scores

for each parameter have been summarised in Table 12.

6.12 Ranking and Grading of e-Bookshops

On the overall comparative analysis of the various facilities offered by the five foreign e-Bookshops and based on the marks obtained with respect to the parameters selected, Amazon has attained 1st rank scoring 49 out of 50 marks (98 %) while Barnes & Noble attained 2nd rank scoring 46 marks out of 50 (92 %). On the other hand The Book Depository and Blackwell attained 3rd rank scoring 45 marks (90 %) each, and TSO Online attained 4th rank scoring 44 marks (88 %).

Table 11. Discounts offered on the products

S. No.	Name of e-Bookshop	Books	e-Books	Magazines	Journals	Children's collection
1.	Amazon	40	45	75	30	45
2.	Barnes & Noble	35	20	65	25	25
3.	The Book Depository	10	25	10	×	10
4.	Blackwell	20	20	60	×	20
5.	TSO Online Book Shop	--	--	--	--	--

Table 12. Scores assigned to e-bookshops

S. No.	Parameters	Maximum marks assigned	Amazon	Barnes & Noble	The book depository	Blackwell	TSO online
1.	Collection						
	Books	1	1	1	1	1	1
	E-Books	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Magazines	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Journals	1	1	1	0	0	1
	Children's Collection	1	1	1	1	1	1
2.	Help Menu						
	FAQ	1	1	1	1	1	1
	E-mail Help	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Help Menu on Home Page	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Search Tips	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Site Map	1	1	1	1	1	0
3.	Shopping Procedure						
	How to order	1	1	1	1	1	1
	How to become a member	1	1	1	1	1	1
	How to check out	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Cart Facility	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Help	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Special Discount	1	1	1	1	1	0
	Delivery System	1	1	1	1	1	1
4.	Modes of Payment						
	Permanent Account	1	1	1	0	1	1
	Credit Card	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Master Card	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Digital Cash	1	1	1	1	0	1

	Electronic Cheque	1	1	1	1	0	1
	Visa	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Demand Draft	1	0	0	0	0	1
5.	Special Facility for Online Purchase						
	New Arrivals	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Coming Soon	1	1	1	1	0	1
	Abstract Service	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Review Service	1	1	1	1	1	0
	Special Discount	1	1	1	1	1	0
6.	User Search Support						
	Subject Search	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Author Search	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Keyword Search	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Boolean Search	1	1	1	0	1	1
	Publisher Search	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Title Search	1	1	1	1	1	1
	ISBN Search	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Year of Publication	1	1	0	0	1	1
7.	Details of Product						
	Category of Product	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Author	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Publisher	1	1	1	1	1	1
	ISBN	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Title	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Edition	1	1	0	1	1	0
	Price	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Content	1	1	0	1	1	0
	First Page Image	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Abstract	1	1	1	1	1	1
8.	Navigation Links						
	Home Link on Each Page	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Major Links Repeated on Each Page	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Forward/Backward Link	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Total	50	49	46	45	45	44

7. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Foreign e-Bookshops in the present study contain good collection. Amazon, Barnes & Noble and TSO Online Bookshop were the richest in collection among the selected cases while The Book Depository and Blackwell lack journals as part of their collections. Help Menu of the selected e-Bookshops are found to provide good information to the customers. Only TSO Online Bookshop does not provide Site Map on its web portal. Almost all the selected cases provide clear statement of shopping procedure to the customers except TSO Online Bookshop, which does not offer special discounts. All the five e-Bookshops accept almost all the prominent

modes of payment but majority of them do not accept Demand Drafts except TSO Online Bookshop. The Book Depository does not provide facility of Permanent Account while Blackwell does not accept Digital Cash and Electronic Cheque. Majority of the selected cases were found to provide almost all the special facilities and information for online purchase to their customers except Blackwell, which does not provide information regarding Coming Soon titles. TSO Online Bookshop does not provide Review Service and Special Discounts.

The foreign e-Bookshops in the present study also provide good searching facilities except Barnes & Noble, which does not support searching by

Year of Publication and The Book Depository does not support searching using Boolean Operators in addition to Year of Publication. The selected cases are very rich in providing details about the various products but Barnes & Noble and TSO Bookshop both do not provide information about the contents and edition of the books. The web portals of all the selected cases provide excellent navigation facilities to their customers for ease of access and navigation across their web pages. On an average, the selected foreign e-Bookshops take around 2-3 days time for delivery inside their country and in case the book or any other product is required to be imported from outside the country, the delivery time usually taken is around 5-10 days. Majority of the e-Bookshops provides one-day express delivery and offer attractive discounts on their various products. Among them, Amazon offers maximum discounts followed by Barnes & Noble, Blackwell and The Book Depository.

The outcome of the present study brings forth the strength and weaknesses of e-Bookshops in the domain of e-Commerce and e-Business world over. Out of the five important foreign e-Bookshops, which have been taken into consideration to find out their suitability in satisfying all possible requirements of consumers in less possible time and also to provide them all inherent maximum financial rebates in terms of price compatibility, discount, and delivery charges from supply to recipient ends, the present study finds Amazon as the best.

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