

Investigating Reading Appeal in User Generated Online Book Reviews: Reading as a Meaning Making Process

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Abstract:

This study will investigate the potential of user generated book reviews (UGBRs) to illustrate how readers' opinions about a book's appeal are contextualized within personal and social attitudes toward reading. It will employ an expanded concept of "appeal" from readers' advisory literature that moves from a narrow focus on "book appeal" to a focus on "reading appeal," or how a reader's personal and social contexts affect their reading processes, motives, and justifications for reading. C.S. Peirce's approach to semiotics is employed both as a means of illuminating the reading process and as an analytical framework. Preliminary results suggest that UGBRs might be useful to readers' advisory services by both providing insight into the different sorts of appeal that reading holds to readers and by demonstrating how this reading appeal is constituted within different sub-groups.

Keywords: Readers' advisory; reading appeal; semiotics; user generated content

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1 Introduction

The rise of user generated content has expanded the ways that librarians can approach readers' advisory services. Virtual spaces dedicated to readers and reading are allowing librarians to perform readers' advisory services beyond just the traditional reference desk. Through features such as user generated tagging and user generated book reviews (UGBRs) readers not only share information about what books they like, but they also convey information about how their personal experiences and social contexts influence their reading preferences, processes, and motivations. Understanding how this personal and social contextualization of individual reading processes influences book appeal could greatly benefit readers' advisory services, yet it has been largely neglected in readers' advisory research until very recently. This study will attempt to address this gap via a qualitative analysis of user generated book reviews (UGBRs) from Amazon.com.

2 From Book Appeal to Reading Appeal

Since the 1980s, readers' advisory research and practice has been greatly influenced by the concept of "appeal" (Beard & Thi-Beard, 2008; Crowley, 2014; Dali, 2013; Dali, 2014). As originally envisioned by Saricks and Brown (1989), appeal refers to the "elements of [a] book to which the reader relates" (Saricks, 2005, p. 40). Studies of book appeal within the practice of RA focus not just on identifying specific features of books that are important to reader enjoyment, but also attempting to identify how this enjoyment is constituted through the specific types of emotions that these features evoke in readers. This allows the RA librarian to make a wider variety of suggestions based on reader preferences than are allowed merely through subject or genre distinctions.

Recently this concept of book appeal has been subject to critiques influenced by socio-cultural and critical perspectives on literacy (Beard & Thi-Beard, 2008; Crowley, 2014; Dali, 2013; Dali, 2014). Dali (2014) argues that "book appeal" fails to consider how a reader's personal and social context influences their approaches to reading and reading preferences, suggesting that the concept of appeal should be expanded from a narrow focus on the affective quality of a book's features to a wider focus on "reading appeal," or "the power to invoke interest in reading and to set off an action of reading" (Dali, 2014, p. 483). A "reading appeal" approach to RA would consider how a reader's preferences for elements of a book might be influenced by such things as: individual and context specific motivations for reading (e.g. escapism, education, self-improvement), the desire for self-recognition and validation, the advice of friends or specialists, and the popularity of books, genres, or authors within specific cultural contexts (Dali, 2014, p. 486).

This study will employ this expanded concept of "appeal" to examine how UGBRs reveal information about how readers' personal and social contexts affect their reading processes, motives, and justifications. In doing so it will attempt to address 2 main questions:

1. How do UGBRs portray "reading appeal" aspects of non-fiction books in UGBR text? What types of personal and socio-cultural information is embedded in the reviews that may shed light on individual processes of reading, reading motivation, and reading tastes?

2. How might these individual reading appeal elements group readers into specific groups and sub-groups based on shared attitudes toward reading? Do readers that display similar reading appeal features express affinities for similar books?

3 Semiosis as Reading Process and Analytical Framework

Shifting the focus of readers' advisory services from book appeal to reading appeal emphasizes how reading is not a passive act of taking in a book's content but an active process of creating meaning by dialogically relating the book to the readers' lives and contexts. Charles Sanders Peirce's phenomenological approach to semiosis might provide a systematic methodology for identifying and analyzing the cognitive, semantic, emotional, and social factors that are involved in the individual processes of making meaning in online book reviews. Peirce's model of semiotics has been adapted to study meaning making processes in information retrieval (Karamüftüoğlu, 1996), knowledge organization (Thellefsen, et al, 2013), indexing (Mai, 2001), and social tagging websites (Huang & Chuang, 2009).

According to Peirce, a sign must contain three elements: (1) the physical or conceptual form that the sign takes (representamen), (2) the concepts, ideas, or physical things to which the sign refers (object) and (3) the meaning that one derives from the sign via a process of interpretation (interpretant) (Peirce, 1998). The process by which people negotiate between these elements to create meaning is dynamic, ongoing, and generative of further signs and semiosis in a way that implicates both the readers who create UGBRs and our own roles as analysts of said UGBRs. Applied to the process of writing UGBRs, readers¹ will read the book's text (representamen) and create meaningful interpretations/reviews (interpretants) from it within the context of the multitude of things to which that text refers (objects). At the analytical level, the reader's interpretant (i.e the UGBR) becomes the analyst's representamen, the ideas and things referred to in the review become the object, and the text of the analysis becomes a new interpretant. In this way, Peircean semiotics acknowledges how both the readers' acts of writing UGBRs and our own acts of analyzing them as researchers are bound up within the same processes of meaning making, providing a systematic framework through which these different meaning making processes can be distinguished and analyzed.

The meaning around a book can be diverse for different user groups and may suggest sub groups. In order to account for the multiplicity of forms a sign can take, relationships to their referents they can employ, and meaningful interpretations individuals can derive from them, Peirce outlined a typology of the possible variations of the three elements a particular sign might embody. He grounded these distinctions within a hierarchical phenomenology outlining the varying ways in which a sign's triadic elements are manifested through human perception, sensation, and cognition (Peirce, 1965). This study will draw from Peirce's triadic model of the sign along with a selected set of typological elements—argument, rHEME, and dicent signs (Peirce, 1965)—in order to provide a framework for coding and analysis.

4 Study Design

A corpus of 300 reviews was purposively gathered from Amazon (amazon.com) by selecting the top 30 "most helpful" user reviews for 10 popular science books. Books were selected based on whether they had over 30 reviews that were rated as "helpful" by at least 10 other Amazon users. The body of the reviews along with relevant metadata (i.e. usernames, star ratings, helpfulness ratings, and date written) were archived and coded in QDA Miner.

Data analysis consisted of three phases. The initial phase of coding focused on categorizing reviews at the object level of Peirce's triadic sign. Units of text (representamen) were assigned codes describing the concept, feature, or thing (object) that the unit was referring to. For example, units referring to the book's thesis were coded as "Thesis," those referring to the book as a physical entity "Book," those referring to the reader "Personal," and so on. As coding continued, a hierarchical schema of referents/objects was developed organizing units of text according to category and sub-categories. Textual units that referred to more than one object at once were double coded.

The second phase moved beyond mere classification by "object" to analyze how the reviews constituted interpretants (or the meaningful interpretations framed within the context of the book and the readers' lives) for the readers. Units of text referring to the reviewer's reading processes, motivations,

¹ We use the term readers to refer the writers of the reviews to emphasize the interpretive nature of writing books reviews.

and general attitudes toward reading were analyzed within the context of what information could be gleaned about their lives and socio-cultural contexts.

The final phase involved grouping these reading appeal features into types in order to see if they corresponded with different preferences for books, genres, or book features in a way that would suggest the presence of different groups and sub-groups of similar readers.

5 Discussion

Analysis and coding are ongoing. However, initial results reveal that the UGBRs embedded personal experiences and socio-cultural information that shed light on the reviewers' reading processes, motivation, and attitudes. Statements about reading process tended to focus on ease of reading and the reviewer's experience of reading the book. For example, one reviewer describes reading the book while eating due to being so captivated. While another suggested that reading was difficult because the book provided too many examples in lieu of synthesis and explication. The reviews expressed many different motivations for reading beyond just enjoyment. Among the most common: professional development, an established interest in a topic, personal betterment or development, or curiosity sparked by encountering the book within the media or the reader's social group.

Initial analysis also suggests that reading appeal features have value in identifying communities of similar types of readers who share certain affinities toward different types of books and book features. For example, reviewers often indicated information about their educational or professional backgrounds in order to bolster their authority in making critiques. Reviews that featured such background statements tended to be longer, focusing more in depth on the book's argument and methodology. Such reviews also were more likely to refer to the text of other reviews to support their own arguments or for critique, suggesting that the reading appeal elements displayed in the reviews are grounded not just within the reviewer's socio-cultural context but also within the immediate community in which the review is written. This poster will identify some of the most common reading appeal features displayed in the reviews, tracing the boundaries of the communities of readers that these features establish.

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