



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Poetics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/poetic

Everybody reads: Reader engagement with literature in social media environments



Joachim Vlieghe^a, Jaël Muls^b, Kris Rutten^{a,*}

^a Ghent University, Department of Educational Studies, Henri Dunantlaan 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

^b University of Brussels, Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Elsene, Belgium

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 28 November 2014

Received in revised form 4 September 2015

Accepted 6 September 2015

Keywords:

Social media

Reader engagement

Social reading

Affinity spaces

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on how readers participate in literary culture through social media environments. The study involves an observation of the website and Facebook group of the Flemish reading initiative *Iedereenleest.be* (EverybodyReads.be), and includes in-depth interviews with highly active participants. We introduce the concept of affinity spaces to develop our understanding of how readers engage in a variety of literary practices within social media environments dedicated to literature and reading. Based on a qualitative thematic analysis of the interview data we discuss four ways in which users characterize literary and social media practices. As such, the study provides insight into readers' understanding and appreciation of the social aspects of participating in literary culture within social media environments. It also shows how they perceive and negotiate their role within these environments. The image presented by the participants confirms the characterization of social media as *affinity spaces* and stresses the crucial importance of acknowledging, supporting and encouraging people's passions and interests by allowing engagement in a variety of literary practices.

© 2015 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction: literary reading as a social practice

Reading literature is often considered to be fundamental for empowering people to lead meaningful social and cultural lives. From this perspective, literary reading is said to strengthen one's knowledge of a culture's shared values and habits (Bloom, 1994) or increase one's abilities for imagination and empathy with different cultures (Nussbaum, 1995). In order to conceptualize the social value of literature, scholars have often focused on the impact of reading on individual development, rather than on the involved social processes. This increases the risk of overlooking the prescriptive and restrictive roles and practices that are reproduced by the social system surrounding printed literature (i.e. literary culture) (Long, 1992; Schmidt, 2010). While becoming 'a reader' is frequently emphasized as an indisputable social good (see Miller & Anderson, 2009; Sanden, 2014), practices like producing, distributing or assessing texts are often considered less suitable for the general public. These practices are regarded as more exclusive, because they require levels of expertise and authority that are often associated with institutional affiliations to publishing companies, newspapers, libraries, universities or literary journals (Benedict, 1996). In order to be able to engage with the "social or institutional determinants of what's available to read, what is 'worth reading' and how to read it", Long (1992: 193) stresses the importance of studying literary reading as a social practice. From this perspective, the aim of this paper is to explore the affordances of 'social media' for engaging in and

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Joachim.Vlieghe@UGent.be (J. Vlieghe), Jael.Muls@vub.ac.be (J. Muls), Kris.Rutten@UGent.be (K. Rutten).

studying social literary practices. More specifically, we introduce the concept of *affinity spaces* to develop an understanding of how readers engage in a variety of literary practices in social media environments that focus on literature and reading.

In an overview of research on literary reading as a social practice, Allington and Swann (2009) emphasize the importance of empirically exploring the practices and positions adopted by readers in the social world. The authors specifically underscore the different ways in which ‘readers’ have been empirically investigated within cultural studies, the history of reading, and cultural sociology. The methods of these fields of study offer interesting alternatives to the experimental approach often adopted by the tradition of empirical literary studies. An example of such an alternative approach is presented in media reception studies, a subfield within Cultural Studies, with exemplary works like Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1987 [1984]) and Long’s *Women, Reading, and Authority* (1986). As Allington and Swann (2009) point out, the work of Radway and Long has inspired a range of studies that focus on participants’ ways of talking and the development of discourse analytic approaches within media reception studies (e.g. Allington, 2011; Allington & Swann, 2009; Hermes, 1995). In her ethnographic account of female book clubs, Long (1986) argues that the study of reading groups “provide[s] access to readers’ actual processes of selection within and among different categories of literature. . . [and] permits analysis of the transactions between individuals and the institutional mechanisms” (p. 594).

Historical studies (e.g. Altick, 1957) provide another important approach to reading as a social practice. Currently, studies of the history – or present – of reading are characterized by what it implies to read in the digital age. The increasing popularity of digital devices has indeed inspired a multitude of studies on readers and reading in the digital age. Many of these studies focus on the materiality of reading or the nature of literary products in digital environments and people’s interaction with them. The focus on materiality is often the result of a pragmatic necessity that arises while studying reading from a historical perspective. Thus, like historical studies of reading, research on the materiality of reading has a long tradition that precedes the popularization of new media (e.g. Chartier, 1995; Chartier & Friedman, 1997; Dillon, 1992). Several of the recent studies on the materiality of reading claim that digital reading is more fragmented, shallow and less engaged than paper-based reading (see Baron, 2013; Hillesund, 2010; Jabr, 2013; Lui, 2005). However, while some declare the end of printed literature and lament the loss of deep reading, others point out that there is little evidence to sustain these claims. These studies suggest, on the other hand, that people are reading more (European Commission, 2013; Iyengar & Ball, 2007), that printed books are far from becoming obsolete (Striphas, 2011) and that readers are more engaged when accessing today’s digital narratives (Jenkins, 2006; Jenkins et al., 2013).

Also cultural sociology has had an important influence on the study of literary reading as a social practice, not in the least Bourdieu’s investigations into the *production, circulation and consumption* of cultural commodities (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]). Indeed, as Tampubolon (2008) argues, the relationship between culture and stratification requires our continuous attention. However, while emphasizing the undeniable importance of Bourdieu for sociology in general and the sociology of culture in particular, Vander Stichele and Laermans (2006) state that we need to consider whether Bourdieu’s theoretical framework still corresponds with contemporary social reality. In what has been referred to as the post-Bourdieu debate, the thesis of an overall homology between so-called high culture and high social status has been confronted with – among other – the research by Richard Peterson (e.g. Peterson, 1993; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992). Peterson states that groups with a high social status tend to display broad or ‘omnivorous’ cultural taste pattern rather than a high degree of esthetic exclusivity, whereas lower status groups are oriented toward a more limited or ‘univorous’ number of popular esthetic traditions (for an extended discussion, see Allington, 2011; Tampubolon, 2008; Vander Stichele & Laermans, 2006). Allington (2011) argues that literary reception, and participation in literary culture in general, presents a particularly good case study for exploring the mechanisms by which distinction is accomplished in actual social interactions of cultural consumption.

Verboord (2014) points out that the decline and shift of cultural hierarchies in audiences’ taste patterns over the past few decades have been thoroughly mapped within cultural sociology. However, he also argues that very little attention has been paid to “the role of the Internet as a mediator of taste, despite the essential role of cultural authority in constructing cultural capital and the social inequalities this causes” (2014, p. 922). The rise, expansion and ubiquity of the Internet have indeed drastically increased the opportunities for sharing and discussing cultural commodities (Anderson, 2006; Tepper & Hargittai, 2009; Verboord, 2011, 2014). These opportunities have become very much a part of our current social reality, especially the increasingly popular digital spaces known as social media environments.

2. Reading in social media environments

In the past decade, we have witnessed the introduction and rapidly growing ubiquity of social media (see Turkle, 2012; Van Dijck, 2013). However, despite the increasing popularity of social media, there is still an ongoing debate about what the term ‘social media’ refers to exactly and how these new media differ from other forms of digital media (for an extended discussion, see Vanwynsberghe, 2014; Vlieghe, 2014). In this paper, we conceive social media environments as a broad set of Internet-based digital media that allow users to visualize, manage, share and discuss social connections and personal information such as – in the case of literature – reading experiences or one’s taste in books (see Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Grosbeck & Holotescu, 2012). In order to maximize user engagement, most social media environments provide little content or top-down control. Instead, they provide a framework that strongly relies on contributions in the form of user-generated content (see Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As such, social media environments offer opportunities for users to autonomously produce and publish artistic, critical and informative content (Gauntlett, 2011; Shirky, 2008). Without user-generated

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1128247>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1128247>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)