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Extratextual effects on the evaluation of narrative texts



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ABSTRACT

An experiment was run to determine the effect of critical reviews on readers' evaluation of literary works. We hypothesized that there are two mechanisms by which extratextual information can have an effect on evaluation: orienting, in which processing is directed to different aspects of the text by the extratextual information, and adjustment, in which the summary evaluation is changed based on how others have evaluated the work. Subjects either read a review of a work and then an excerpt from that work or first read the excerpt and then the review. In both experiments, the review had a substantial impact on reader evaluations, showing that readers combined textual and the extratextual, critical review information to form an evaluation of a literary work. However, when the review was read prior to the excerpt, this effect was mediated by the source of the review: the effect was found only for an expert source. In contrast, when the review was read after the excerpt, a larger effect was found for a peer source. Based on this differential effect, we suggest that expert pre-excerpt reviews orient readers to consider certain classes of information, while peer post-excerpt reviews lead readers to adjust their evaluation.

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1. Introduction

The practice of evaluation is at the heart of all aspects of literary life: authors, editors, literary agents, reviewers, librarians, literature instructors, booksellers, and readers of all stripes constantly engage in evaluative activity. To read is always, on some level, to assess, and conscious, deliberate evaluation is a *sine qua non* of literary response. It is therefore surprising that literary evaluation has received so little attention in literary and cultural studies and that we have little knowledge about how it functions as a cognitive and social process. In this paper, we consider how critical reviews, an instance of the more general class of extratextual information, may affect the process of evaluating fictional narratives. As discussed below, there is an appreciable body of research on the role of reviews in the evaluation of consumer products, and this evidence may be useful in approaching the question of how reviews affect literary evaluation. However, the appreciation of fictional narratives is potentially quite different than the evaluation of other kinds of products. In the first section of this paper, we begin by describing some of the seminal marketing and media studies research on the effects of reviews on the evaluation of consumer products evaluation. This research implicates two general classes of mechanisms, process orienting and evaluation adjustment, that may be responsible for the effects of reviews of literary works. Our interpretation of this research suggests two variables that are likely to affect the impact of critical reviews: source (who wrote them), and timing (when they are read). Finally, we present the results of a study in which readers evaluate texts in the context of critical reviews. These results support the view that the mechanisms engaged by extratextual information vary systematically with the source and timing.

2. Effects of review on evaluation

Abundant evidence now exists to support the claim that consumers are affected by the product assessment of other consumers (e.g., [Willemsen et al., 2011](#)). The variables mediating that effect has been the subject of numerous studies conducted by marketing researchers, economists, and communication specialists. These variables include the source of the review ([Bickart and Schindler, 2001](#); [Chakravarty et al., 2010](#)), content ([Willemsen et al., 2011](#); [Chakravarty et al., 2010](#)), whether the review has a positive or negative valence ([Ahluwalia, 2002](#); [Basuroy et al., 2003](#)), and the type of product being evaluated ([Kamphuis, 1991](#); [Ahluwalia, 2002](#)). Important results include a “negativity effect,” in which negative reviews have a stronger impact on consumer behavior than positive reviews, perhaps because negative information is more diagnostic, and a “complexity effect,” in which balanced, multifaceted reviews have a greater impact than one-sided reviews, perhaps because such reviews suggest greater reviewer expertise. Expectation is often implicated in this research because the review might set standards against which the performance or enjoyment of a product is judged.

Research in media studies has not always found comparable effects for reviews of entertainment products. For example, [Eliashberg and Shugan \(1997\)](#) found that peers’ word-of-mouth reviews outweigh those of expert critics and that the effect of critical reviews is not always obvious, as some badly reviewed films do very well, and vice versa. Although the negativity effect is sometimes found for movie reviews ([Basuroy et al., 2003](#)), [Reinstein and Snyder \(2005\)](#) found a stronger effect of positive reviews on box office revenues during the opening weekend. [Willemsen et al. \(2011\)](#) found a greater effect of negative reviews, but they argued that even bad publicity is greater than no publicity at all (cf. [Berger et al., 2010](#)).

One might assume that because both film and fictional books are members of the “experience” or “hedonic” categories of consumer products ([Ahluwalia, 2002](#); [Kamphuis, 1991](#)), critical book reviews should affect readers of fiction in the same way that film reviews affect movie-goers or that consumer product reviews affect prospective buyers. However, this assumption may not be justified. Unlike films, for example, books are not promoted with trailers and previews, and critical reviews and advertising promotions are generally not distributed as widely. Further, the evaluation of literature is potentially susceptible to a range of different factors. For example, unlike most consumer products, literature is judged primarily on esthetic rather utilitarian standards. Novels also typically require a substantial commitment in time and cognitive effort ([Leemans, 1988](#)), and this could change the manner in which reviews are used by readers.

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