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How Can I Express My Opinion? An Analysis of Book Reviewing Systems

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# Introduction

User evaluations, such as online reviews and ratings, represent subjective opinions that have a great impact on book selection. Therefore, some book-related platforms, such as online bookstores, social catalogs and next-generation catalogs, have already integrated various reviewing systems to their website. Many researchers have indirectly examined the presence of book reviews on such platforms, however, there is a lack of studies that would focus on the attributes and functions of existing reviewing tools. Since reviews and various ways in which they are collected, sorted and presented may crucially influence user book acquisition behaviour, we wanted to provide an overview of the current online book-evaluating features.

**Theoretical framework**

User reviews influence book purchasing behaviour (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006) as well as borrowing intention (Huang and Yang 2010), since people frequently rely on recommendations provided by other readers (Nielsen 2016; 2017; Leitão et al. 2018). Compared to professional descriptions, reviews can reach a greater range of products, can help to sell niche titles (Freedman 2008) and are especially important for less-known books (Chen, Dhanasobhon, and Smith 2008). In online library catalogues user generated content represents an important supplement to the professional book description (Kakali 2014; Pecoskie, Spiteri, and Tarulli 2014) and serves as an additional promotional channel for the collection (Huang and Yang 2010; Kakali 2014).

Studies suggest that a greater number of (positive) online opinions increases the perceived popularity of a product (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Huang and Yang 2010; Park and Lee 2008; Park, Lee, and Han 2007), however, too many reviews may cause an information overload (Park and Lee 2008). On the other hand, it is known that for forming their decision, users usually select and read only a limited subset of the available information (Anderson 2012; Kwon et al. 2015). Online reviews can have many attributes that help readers to control information display and to determine their relevance. Since reviews that evaluate a product with high numeric rating are more common (Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Fowler and Avila 2009), some users might want to filter and read only negative opinions (Kwon et al. 2015) that can greatly influence purchasing decision (Hennig-Thurau and Walsh 2003; Chevalier and Mayzlin 2006; Ren et al. 2018). Furthermore, most recent information seems to be more helpful (Liu et al., 2008), therefore users might want to sort reviews by the date they were posted. Consumers also tend to look for reviews that describe individual product features (Kwan et al. 2015), therefore some retailers allow their users to separately evaluate predetermined product categories (Lee 2012), which are the basis for displaying summaries of product attributes with average star rating scores (Park and Lee 2008). Sometimes, also review readers can contribute and respond to posted reviews in form of quantitative or qualitative feedback or by reporting inappropriate content (Lee 2012; Willemsen et al. 2011), which can have a significant impact on perceived helpfulness of a review (Chen, Dhanasobhon and Smith 2008).

Some researchers have indirectly examined the presence of reviews exclusively on the book-related platforms (Adkins and Bossaller 2007; Chickering and Yang 2014; Jug and Žumer 2017; Yang and Hofmann 2010; Yang and Wagner 2010; Webb and Nero 2009), however, we did not come across any research that would examine functions and attributes of the existing book reviewing systems in depth.

**Research Questions**

Reviewers can contribute their book opinions in various ways. They can post overall numerical ratings, textual reviews or even evaluate individual book attributes. Meanwhile review readers can organize and filter specific reviews and determine their helpfulness by voting, flagging, commenting and sharing. In our research we were interested in:

*Which book-evaluating features are provided by different platforms for reviewers and for review readers?*

While all book-related platforms want to engage users with social activity, they could have different aims and objectives for offering this option, such as increase of book sales or loan, collection promotion and expending the number of new users. Therefore, we also wanted to obtain answers to our second research question:

*Do reviewing systems differ between platforms with different purposes?*

**Methodology**

Prior to our study, we examined reviewing systems on various book-related websites and created a coding scheme, which was designed to determine the presence or absence of different features available for reviewers and review readers. In the main part of the research, we conducted an expert review and analyzed these features on six book-related platforms. Our sample was purposive, as we selected two online bookstores (Amazon and Alibris), two social catalogs (Goodreads and LibraryThing), and two next-generation library catalog systems (BiblioCommons and Axiell). For each platform, we examined a form of numerical and textual evaluations and other options, provided for the reviewers. Furthermore, we investigated all features offered to readers for managing, sorting and filtering the reviews.

**Research Results**

Results show that examined systems provide various features for managing online reviews, however we did not identify any characteristics that would be specific to different types of platforms. While Amazon, Alibris and Goodreads provide five-star rating systems, Axiel is using a 10-point scale. Meanwhile LibraryThing and BiblioCommons also allow users to assign only half of a star and therefore seemingly offer more options. Amazon, Goodreads and BiblioCommons support textual as well as multimedia reviews and offer categorization of reviewer’s opinion. For example, on BiblioCommons reviewers can comment under various categories, e.g. comment, summary, age suitability etc., and therefore separately express their opinion about different aspects of a book.

Review readers can usually mark reviews by voting for helpful comments and flagging inappropriate ones. Amazon and Goodreads users can also comment and reply to posted reviews while Alibris allows external sharing of the review content. On most platforms, readers are able to organize reviews by different criteria, most frequently by date and helpfulness. Alibris is the only platform that also offers sorting by rating, reviewer and length of the review. Meanwhile, filtering options are not well represented on the examined platforms. Amazon users can filter reviews by rating, presence of multimedia, format and reviewer type and browse by reviews that contain specific word or phrase. Amazon and Goodreads are the only platforms that offer search engines for searching reviews by keyword.

Overall, Amazon, Alibris and Goodreads provide the most features for reviewers as well as for review readers, however, that does not mean that all functions are necessary useful and used.

**Discussion and conclusion**

Although we have found that book-related platforms provide various features for writing and organizing reviews, only quantitative data is not enough to determine their usefulness. For example, while it seems that allowing people to assign only half of a star offers more options, this type of grading actually complicates the filtering of the reviews by rating. Furthermore, while organizing reviews by rating, reviewer type and length on Alibris looks interesting, this option is not implemented in a useful way.

In our opinion, more platforms should provide option for rating and organizing reviews by specific attributes, as readers can have diverse opinion about various aspects of a book. Audible, Amazon’s website for audiobooks, allow users to separately evaluate the story, performance and overall satisfaction, however Amazon did not yet implement this option in its online bookstore. In our opinion It is also interesting that examined reviewing systems are so diverse and are not more standardized, since Amazon owns Goodreads and LibraryThing.

We can conclude that owners of some book-related platforms should rethink the purpose of each element in their reviewing system and should determine how can these elements better serve users to find the most relevant information.

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