A Model of Romance Fiction Search Behavior

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Abstract. This poster describes a preliminary model of romance fiction search behavior based on grounded theory inspired interviews with avid romance readers. The model is composed of three elements: contextual factors, search goals, and selection strategies. The portrayed behavior characteristics and associations among contexts, goals, and strategies are based on at least one participant mention in our interview. We will continue to expand and verify the model in the following investigation with a hope to construct a theoretically and empirically sound model to analytically represent romance fiction readers' information and search behavior.

Keywords: Fiction Search, Fiction Selection, Romance Reading.

1 Introduction

Fiction search has been studied in the contexts of online catalog [1-3] or database [4] retrieval and as purposive seeking behavior occurring in naturalistic settings. In her seminal work, Ross described pleasure reading as "information finding without seeking"; it is everyday life information encounters based mainly on serendipitous browsing. Avid readers' book selection behavior may be influenced by certain related elements, including reading experiences wanted, alerting sources, elements of and clues about the book itself, and cost in time, money, cognitive energy [5]. Ooi and Liew summarized from their interviews with engaged library book club members on the influences of personal characteristics and circumstances; moods, personal values and tastes, life styles driving book selection; influences of personal networks and media [6]. Saarinen and Vakkari conceptualized book search strategies and indicators for a good read by reader types (i.e., escapists, esthetes, realists) and levels of engagement (i.e., avid readers versus occasional readers). Their study resulted in highly analytic typologies of text types sought, selection criteria, and means for access [7].

Few studies have examined fiction search behavior within a particular genre. Readers' advisory literatures, however, suggest that search behavior may vary greatly from genre to genre. Romance and suspense/adventure readers, for example, are known to look for very different appeal factors [8-10]. Further, engaged genre readers are often avid readers who know the genre and subgenres well, understand the writing traditions and genre customs, and may have further engagement in the literary community [11-13]. Each genre reading community may demonstrate distinguishing and

unique information seeking behavior. In this study, we focused on romance reading, a popular genre for women readers. The goal of the investigation was to identify the behavioral patterns in romance fiction search and contextual factors influencing such behavior. Based on in-depth interviewing with engaged romance readers, we developed a preliminary model that shows the interconnections between the contextual factors, search goals, and selection strategies. The findings may shed lights on the development of fiction retrieval systems.

2   Methodology

Grounded theory approach was used to develop the model [14]. We recruited avid romance readers from online forums and social networking sites and conducted in-depth interviews with each participant. Between January and August, 2019, the second author of this poster interviewed ten avid romance readers. We actively sought interviewees whose reading preferences spanned across diverse romance subgenres (e.g., campus, contemporary, regency and palace) and text sources (e.g., book format or Internet fiction). We asked the interviewees to describe why they read romance fiction, what pleasures they do obtain from romance reading, and how they look for romance fiction to read, including continuous monitoring and active search. We asked them to describe their typical fiction seeking strategies; we also asked them to describe particular seeking experiences out of certain contexts or for certain purposes, if any. Each interview took 1-2 hours. All interviews were transcribed verbatim for further analysis.

Open coding and axial coding [15] were used to analyze the interview transcriptions. For this poster, we focused on the differentiation of different seeking contexts, search goals, selection strategies, and associations among them. The model to be presented in the next section is based on interviewee mentions. When a particular context, search goal, selection strategy, and linkage between them was mentioned, directly by the interviewee or reasonably inferred by the authors based on that particular interview transcript, it is taken as an evidence for a particular configuration of romance fiction search behavior and is shown in our preliminary model.
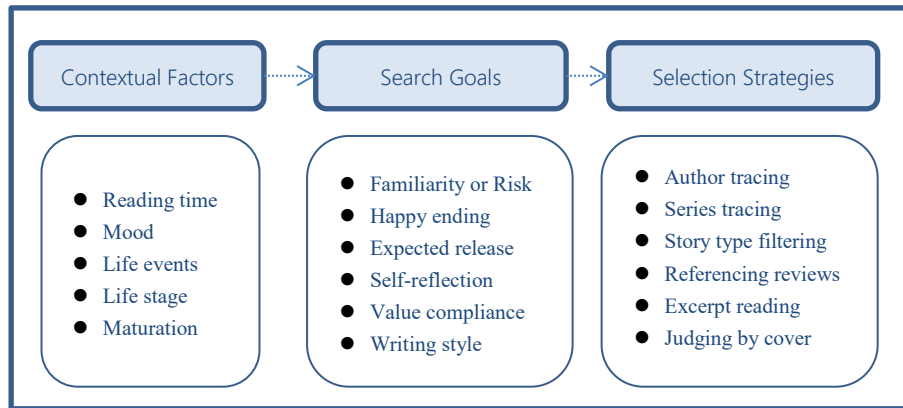
3   The Preliminary Model

Fig. 1. A model for romance fiction search behavior

3.1   Contextual Factors

We adopted a contingency approach to contexts and defined contextual factors as particular conditions actively influencing a reader' search goals and the subsequent actions [16]. Contexts can be spatiotemporal, psychological, cultural, or combinations of all. So far we have identified five contextual factors from the interviews:

- *Reading time*: the duration of time a reader expects to spend on a particular book. Reading time can be short and scattered or long and continuous. In short and scattered reading, participants tended to choose works that are comfortable to read and bring previously enjoyable experiences.
- *Mood*: the emotional status of a reader has been known to influence book selection. Book search for comforting, soothing, or mood-changing (e.g., to avoid boredom) works were often results from participants mood statuses.
- *Life events*: specific events facing a reader may also influence her book search, particularly negative ones like suffering from work or breakups. This contextual factor is usually associated with bad moods and thus is linked to searching for expected release. Meanwhile, a reader may also look for things in a book that she can identify with at that particular moment.
- *Life stage*: reading tastes and preferences often change as a reader grows up. Currently, the most reported changes occurred when a reader left the campus and started working. Some participants reported losing interest in stories about campus and young love, which was previously enjoyable to her but now no longer echoed.
- *Maturation*: growing up and constant accumulation of life experiences may also change a reader's preferences and tastes for romance fiction. It is often

about values or life philosophies portrayed in the stories. A participant reported herself as becoming more feministic and became distasteful for certain types of stories she previously enjoyed. Other participants reported value changes in the sexual element, e.g., forced sex. Gradual distastes for writings that were deemed as too simpleminded or childish were also reported.

3.2   Selection Goals

Search goals are about specific work attributes or certain expected reading effects or outcomes a reader looks for. We identified six search goals from the analysis.

- *Familiarity of risk-taking*: looking for a comfortable read or a challenging read is like the two sides of a coin. Most participants steadily went for particular types of stories they enjoy, but occasional risk-taking also happened under circumstances, e.g., longer reading time, moods, as aforementioned.
- *Stories with happy ending*: all our participants, like those found in the previous literature [8, 12], almost always looked for happy-ending stories. A few participants reported that they always avoid bad-ending stories no matter how good/reputable a work is because they read to enjoy, not suffer. Only under certain moods may this requirement be lifted for some participants.
- *Expected release of emotions*: emotion releases include the soothing of negative emotions, boredom, or the stir-ups of excitement and amusement. Participants reported variations of expected release, e.g., works that are funny and laughter-inducing or engaging, torturing stories with a happy ending.
- *Self-reflection*: something in the story that echoes the reader's current or previous experiences, e.g., the story roles, settings, events and happenings, problems and the associated emotions.
- *Value compliance*: a reader's avoidance of stories with elements that are against her current values or life philosophy, e.g., polygamous relationships, overt sexual description or kinky sex, over-dominance of the male.
- *Writing style*: usually associated with a reader's taste and preferences in aesthetics, but can also be associated with values. Both may change with a reader's age or psychological maturation.

3.3   Selection Strategies

Selection strategies are methods for discovering potentially interesting works and filtering unwanted works. We identified six strategies from our analysis.

- *Author tracing*: finding works by a previously liked author is a common strategy to obtain a potentially enjoyable read. Although some participants did mention that an author's writing style can change over time, it is a frequently employed strategy in romance reading.
- *Series tracing*: this is not necessarily about the book series as created by the publishers, but may include stories written by one or more authors that are interconnected in some ways, e.g., a created universe in which love stories of

different couples developed. When a reader enjoys one of the series stories, looking for another related story becomes a logical next move.

- *Story type filtering*: this strategy may include finding works of a particular romance subgenre or stories of particular topics/themes, e.g., time traveling, plots and conspiracy, smart and courageous females, the conversion of a previously cold and dominant male protagonist. It is usually done by browsing the bookstore catalogs, browsing the story classification in the Internet fiction sites, and by reading promotional texts provided by publishers or authors.
- *Referencing reviews*: looking for book reviews and comments is a frequently used strategy to decide if one wants to invest her time on a story. Some participants also looked for lists of recommendation shared online. Recommenders who are trusted reviewers or whose selection is consistent with the searcher's past experience are deemed more trustworthy. Some participants also distinguished noncommercial reviewers who are genuine, self-motivated readers and paid reviewers.
- *Excerpt reading*: reading the excerpts provided by publishers or online bookstores or a few paragraphs of an Internet story is usually to determine if the narrative styles and language uses meet a reader's taste.
- *Judging by cover art*: with physical books, some readers do determine if they are interested in a story by the cover art. While each reader has her aesthetic judgement in images, some participants pointed out that cover art design is usually associated with story type and audience type. As such, cover art can be an effective indicator for filtering unwanted works in some case. In contrast, a cover art design that strongly meets a reader's aesthetic preferences can often attract her to the story, which she might ignore if without the image stimuli.

4   Conclusion

This presentation reports a preliminary model of romance fiction search from an in-progress study project. At this stage, we have identified several contextual factors, search goals, selection strategies, and linkages among them based on solid empirical evidence. Our investigation will continue to employ the constant comparison methods to discover possible new factors, goals, and strategies. The behavior characteristics and associations in the current model are based on at least one participant mention. We will continue to consolidate and strengthen the model by looking for multiple mentions in the upcoming interviews so as to enhance the theoretical and empirical soundness of the proposed model.

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