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Do readers agree on the genre categories of literary fiction?

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Abstract

In the Netherlands, three main genres of fiction books are distinguished by institutions of the book market: romance, mystery and literary novels. In contrast to romance and mystery novels, the genre literature is treated as one homogeneous category, while huge differences in, for example, complexity, prestige, and theme are acknowledged. Given these differences, readers of literary fiction probably distinguish subcategories within literature. Information about the subcategories of literature, and the amount of agreement about them, can be used for marketing activities by institutions of the book market.

Research about categorization suggests that categories distinguished by readers, will depend on the amount as well as the specific titles or authors read, interpersonal communication and category width. Consequently one can expect substantial differences in the number as well as the kind of literary categories distinguished by randomly selected readers. However, if we focus on a homogeneous group of consumers who have read, besides other books, the same literary books and have discussed these books with each another, one may reach agreement about the subcategories. So, members of a literary reading club were asked to divide all the literary titles they have read recently into homogeneous categories and to label these categories.

The results indicated that these readers did not agree on the number of categories to be distinguished nor on the books that should be categorized together. However, most readers used labels related to the contents of the books to describe the categories. These types of labels may be used to characterize a literary fiction novel by institutions of the book market to structure the supply. Suggestions for further research are made.

Keywords: consumer decision making, categorization, knowledge, leisure reading, literature

1. Introduction

The market of fiction books is characterized by a huge diversity and rapidly changing supply. In order to create order in the (Dutch) market, three global genres or categories of fiction books are distinguished by publishing houses, book stores, and libraries: Romantic novels, mystery and literary novels. These global genres are also utilized by consumers to structure the book supply (Piters, 2001) and are often used as decisive cue to accept or reject a book in the first phase of the decision making process (Leemans & Stokmans, 1991). However, the number of alternatives within a genre is still gigantic and large differences between books within a global genre are acknowledged. How many and which genres should be distinguished at a lower level of aggregation, remains unclear. In some libraries, for example, 38 different categories of fiction are distinguished, while publishing houses and book stores make use of 29 NUGI¹ codes. If we look at the labelling of the categories distinguished by libraries and book stores, it is clear that there is no consensus about what genres of fiction should be distinguished at a lower abstraction level. This problem is largest for the global genre literature. About 1700 items of the genre literature are published each year in the Netherlands. In libraries, literature is often viewed as one global category while book stores and publishing houses use eight different NUGI-codes to differentiate between literary novels (three different codes: original Dutch, translated or scenario), poetry (three different codes: literary, popular or religious), and literary essays (two codes: Literary essays and literary diaries, biography, or correspondence). These categories are based on differences in the style of a text whereas subcategories of romantic or mystery novels are based on differences in its theme or contents.

¹ NUGI stands for A Dutch Uniform Genre Classification. Every book that is published in the Netherlands is given a code specifying the genre to which it is assigned by the publishing house.

From the perspective of the reading process, differences in theme or contents are at least as important as differences in the style of the text (Nell, 1988).

These considerations trigger the following questions: How many subgenres of literature are distinguished by readers of literary fiction. To what extent are these categories universal. And what cues (style, theme, etc.) are used to describe these subcategories. Insight into these questions can be gained by looking more closely at categorization in general and the categorization of fiction in particular.

Categorization of fiction

Categorization is the process of understanding what something is by knowing what other things it is equivalent to and what other things it is different from (McGarty, 1999). The known objects on which categorization is based, are represented by associations that are linked in schemas. These schemas reflect the contents of prior knowledge and indicate what associations of the object are important to ascertain the perceived similarity of the object to known objects in the same category. Objects in the same category share similar associations, and the associations they share are different from associations that characterize other categories (Barsalou, 1992). Even though a category includes members that share similar associations, not all category members are equally similar. The extent to which an object is similar to other objects in the category, or in other words, the probability that the object is regarded as an element of the category, can theoretically be modelled as the overlap in association of this specific object with other members of the category. The object of a category that shares the most associations with other members and the fewest associations with members of different categories is regarded as a prototype or an exemplar. A prototype is an ideal representative of the category. It is a global image of the ideal exemplar of the category added with associations that reflect the most typical features of the category. It can be a real or imaginary object. An exemplar, on the other hand, is a real object that is regarded as a good representative of the category. A category may be characterized by more than one exemplar. For those categories a consumer has not enough knowledge to derive a prototype, his or her prior knowledge may contain one or two category exemplars.

The associations on which the categorization is based, can be described along several dimensions. Firstly, the associations can reflect the attributes of an object. Attributes are features of the object itself. They can be physical, directly observable aspects of the object or abstract, not directly observable, inferred characteristics of the object (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). In the case of fiction books, the directly observable, physical attributes of books, such as the number of pages, the font of the characters used, are not decisive for categorization since they barely affect the reading process nor the decision making process regarding fiction books (Stokmans, 1992). Abstract attributes, such as the theme, complexity of the book, and style of writing, are experience attributes (Nelson, 1970), they can only be ascertained when the book or part of the book is read. These attributes affect the reading process and are probably determinants of the perceived similarity.

Secondly, the associations can reflect consequences or benefits. Consequences result from product-usage by the reader and are not part of the product. Consequences can be functional or psycho-social (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). Functional consequences relate to the problem a product can solve. A book can be read to resolve the lack of knowledge about a topic. However, most fiction books are not read to solve a problem but to experience pleasure. This experience of pleasure is related to the psycho-social consequences of the product. Psycho-social consequences reflect how one feels when using the product or how using the product

expresses the identity of a person. Psycho-social consequences are important outcomes of the reading process and probably determine the perceived similarity.

Thirdly, the associations can reflect use related phenomenon, such as: What kind of people read this kind of books. When a specific type of book should be read (on a trip or quietly at home). Where to buy this kind of books, etc.. These associations probably only discriminate between the global categories of fiction, literature, mystery, and romance novels, but barely between different subcategories within these global genres.

Thus far it has been shown that prior knowledge is represented by associations that are linked in schemas. These schemas represent the contents of the knowledge and indicate why an object is in a specific category. In the case of fiction, the object to be categorized is described by abstract, not directly observable features (abstract attributes and psycho-social consequences). Since assigning a category to a fiction book comes very close to ascribing an unobservable characteristic to an object, attribution processes may affect categorization (van Raaij, 1986). According to Kelley's theory of covariation (1967) three key dimensions are crucial in attribution processes. Firstly, distinctiveness: Has the object distinct associations compared to objects in other categories. Secondly, consistency: Can the object be assigned to this category on the bases of more than one association. In other words: Is the objects more to objects in this category compared to objects in other categories. These two dimensions were elaborated on in the preceding paragraphs. And thirdly, consensus: One is more assured that the categorization is correct, if different people agree about the categorization. This agreement can be reassured or reached by interpersonal communication. According to attribution theory, one has confidence in the categorization if an object is perceived as scoring high on all three key dimensions (van Raaij & Antonides, 1997). This suggests that agreement about the contents of the subcategories of literature is largest for a group of people who communicate with one another about the fiction books read.

The last topic we want to address to in this introduction, regards the individual differences in the categories used by readers of literature. From the above it can be deduced that differences in familiarity with reading literature is an important factor that affects the number and contents of the categories of literature an individual will distinguish. The more familiar a person is, the more knowledge the individual has about the category, the more likely that small differences between literature will be noticed and interpreted as meaningful. So it is hypothesized that the more familiar an individual is with literature, the more subcategories will be distinguished.

The number of categories distinguished by a consumer is also affected by category width (Pettigrew, 1982). Category width is a characteristic of the individual that indicates how tolerant an individual is regarding differences between objects. Individuals that have a small category width are less tolerant for differences between objects (Foxall & Bhate, 1993); relative small differences between the object and the prototype or exemplar are sufficient to create a new category.

2. Method

The theoretical considerations given in the introduction indicate that large differences between the number and type of subcategories in literature can be expected, if a random sample of readers of fiction is investigated. Agreement on the subcategories, in terms of number and/or type of categories distinguished, is largest for a group of readers who have read, besides other books, the same literary books (overlap in the literary novels read) and have discussed these books with each other (the opportunity to communicate about the reading experiences in order

to reach agreement about the kind of book it is). Therefore, members of a literary reading club were asked to participate in the study. However, such a literary reading club is a very small group of people (N= 8), consequently, this study should be regarded as an exploratory research.

2.1. Subjects

Seven out of eight members of the literary reading club agreed to participate in the study. The respondent who didn't participate, joined the reading club recently and had only read a few of the books that were discussed the last twelve months. All respondents who participated in the study were women, and had a university degree. About half of the sample was aged 40-54 and most respondents (5 out of 7) had a full time job.

2.2. Material and procedure

In the introduction it is suggested that the subcategories used by readers of literature, are based on the literary books they have read. Consequently, this research started with a sample of literary novels that were read recently (the last twelve months), since it can be assumed that the contents of these books were remembered very well. These books could be read by virtue of the literary reading club or by own choice.

The procedure regarding subcategories of literature consisted of four small tasks: Firstly, the respondent was asked to cluster the books that were perceived as most similar. Secondly, the respondent was asked to name additional literary novels that were read more than twelve months ago, and belonged to the subcategories of literature just created. Thirdly, the respondent had to indicate the most typical book for each subcategory distinguished. And fourthly, the respondent was asked to give a description of each subcategory or name some characteristics of the subcategory.

The data-gathering was concluded by a small questionnaire regarding reading frequency of literature, category width and demographic variables. Reading frequency was asked for by four questions (Stokmans, 1999), category width was operationalized by a Dutch translation of the Category Width Scale of Pettigrew (1958).

3. Results

Table 1 shows the results of the categorization task. These results indicate that all but one respondent regard literature as a heterogeneous category in which several subcategories can be distinguished. However, the number of subcategories distinguished, varies largely between respondents.

Table 1: The number of literary novels in the categories distinguished.

	cat 1	cat 2	cat 3	cat 4	cat 5	cat 6	cat 7	cat 8	cat 9	cat 10	cat 11
pp 1	1	9	5	1	1	4	8	2			
pp 2	4	1	3	2	1	1	4	1	1	2	1
pp 3	3	6	4	6	1						
pp 4	4	4	1	5	4						
pp 5	13										
pp 6	5	2	2	4	2	2	5	3	3		
pp 7	10	2	2	2							

In the introduction it was suggested that the number of subcategories distinguished

correlates positively with reading experience and negatively with category width. Since the sample size is less than 20, the Spearman rank correlation has a slight edge over Kendall's tau (Neave & Worthington, 1988:180). The Spearman rank correlation between reading experience and number of categories distinguished was 0.685, which is significant at 10% (one-tailed). The Spearman rank correlation between category width and number of categories distinguished was -0.627 which is also significant at 10% (one-tailed). Consequently, it can be concluded that the number of subcategories distinguished in the genre literature varies a lot between readers and is positively related to reading experience and negatively to category width.

The next question to be asked regards the contents of the subcategories. Firstly, we will go into the question about the extent to which two literary novels were assigned to the same subcategory. This analysis was only conducted for the literary novels that were read by at least 4 respondents. This restriction resulted in a set of ten literary novels, which were all read by virtue of the literary reading club (Nine the preceding 12 months and the tenth book more than 12 months ago). The concordance regarding the assignment of two literary novels into the same category indicated that there was no pair of literary novels about which the respondents totally agreed. Regarding two of the 45 pairs of novels, the respondents did agree that those pairs of novels are dissimilar and should not be placed in the same category. So, even if respondents talked about the novels, there is no agreement about the books that should be assigned to the same category.

The last issue addressed to in this paper is the labelling of the categories used. Most respondents used idiosyncratic labels to characterize the subcategories in literature distinguished. Labels named by more than one respondent, are: Humour, historic, science fiction, psychological and human affaires. Most of these labels regard abstract attributes of a novel, such as the style of writing or the theme of a book. Only the label 'humour' may refer to consequence when reading the text, however it can also refer to a humorous style of writing (Both connotations were used by the respondents). Only two respondents characterized one subcategory of literature by means of a consequence of reading namely 'exciting' and 'recalling memories from youth'. No 'use related' labels were utilized by respondents to characterize a subcategory.

4. Conclusion

The present study examines that number as well as the contents of the subcategories of literature by readers. The results of the study indicate that the number of subgenres distinguished, is positively affected by reading experience and negatively affected by category width.

Regarding the contents of the subcategories, we expected to find some unanimity, since all respondents were members of a reading club, and discussed the books they have read as a group. However, the results indicated that the respondents did not agree on any pair of books that should be in one category. Furthermore, the respondents did not agree on the labels that could describe a subcategory of literature. Although, abstract attributes (referring to for example, style of writing or theme) are used as a label in most of the cases by most of the respondents. These types of labels may be used to characterize a literary fiction novel by institutions of the book market to structure the supply.

In consequence of the very small and selected sample, one should be cautious to generalize the results. However, this study suggests that readers of literature use idiosyncratic subcategories of literature, even if these readers discuss the contents of literary novels with

each other. For a random sample of readers, one can expect even larger differences in contents of the subcategories, since randomly selected readers have fewer shared reading experiences.

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