An Insight into the Ascendancy of Factors Inflicting upon a Reader’s Choice in Literature

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Abstract: This is a study that aims at analyzing the factors that govern the choice of fiction by college-attendees, and thereby, draw inferences for a general trend observed in them. This study aims at developing a model based on a diverse group with different thought processes, and then use that model to predict the influences of main characteristics of fiction on an individual. We hypothesize that there are some main factors that govern the choice of fiction, college attendees make, and then we undertake a study to observe the effect of those factors. After having a general view, we undertake a case study to verify the effect of these factors on a new group. The observations recorded are discussed as under.

1. Introduction

Present day readers have many distractions in their reading sessions. Due to excessive indulgence in modern means of entertainment, the motivation to read fiction has significantly reduced in some (Palani et.al. 2012[13]). As noted by (Issa et.al 2012[6]), many students prefer to watch movies and other shows on the television, listening to audio-CDs, watching video-CDs among others. Intense lessons, busy social life, examination preparation process, spending time on the computer/internet occupy an important period of time for students and this causes students to spend less time for reading (Micheal Owusu-Acheaw et. al. 2014[11]). Due to this, there is little time for fiction-reading, and thus fiction books have to be smartly written in order to maximize the reach. This forms the basis of this study where we try to find factors that might influence a reader’s choice of a particular fiction book over the other. And we present recommendations for fiction books so as to maximize their reach to the youth.

2. Procedure

Normal undergraduate college-attendees were surveyed upon, in the age group of 18-21 years at the start of academic year of 2016-17. The participants were recruited through the snowball sampling technique (Charles D Kaplan et. al. 1987[8]). All participants voluntarily and anonymously took part in the study and provided written informed consent. Participants were administered the questionnaires and returned them in a sealed envelope to ensure confidentiality. The Evaluation and Feedback Committee of B.S.N.V.P.G. College formally approved all procedures.

The questionnaire included Likert-type questions(Patrizia Velotti et. al. 2016[14]), and on this basis, they were divided into two groups- one that read a lot of supplementary material other than course-work, and one that read only the course-work. The prime difference between the two groups was the experience in their reading, and in the instinctive urge to read fiction on their own.

In the institution, 1050 questionnaires were distributed. Out of these, 912 were returned for evaluation to the Evaluation and Feedback Committee (Review Board), having a response rate of nearly 87%. Out of 912, there were 501 students who were classified as experienced readers, while there were 411 students who were classified as inexperienced. The groups were then given another survey questionnaire (Patrizia Velotti et. al. 2016[14]) and were asked to rate their acceptance probability of a fiction, and to demonstrate how likely they were to choose a given piece of literature and what factors they considered while choosing a fiction. The readers gave their ratings on a 5-pointer scale (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree), against a number of factors- a catchy title of the story, length of story, author fame, comprehension complexity, congruent display of ideas by the author, and the presence of a back-story.

All analysis was carried out holding constant the effect of age, and using clear instructions to the participants not to consider their financial condition to buy books, to assume the books are freely available in the stores, and then to rate how likely they were to buy books and what factors they would consider in the process of the same. The participants were ensured of complete anonymity in order to prevent biases in the Likert responses.

3. Observations

The presence of a back-story was found to be less significantly affecting either group, with less than 15% members of either group being affected by it. This factor included past histories of the characters used in the fiction, as well as prequel(s) to the fiction under observation.
Comprehensive complexity was observed to have a huge effect on both groups, with more than 87% effect on the two groups. This factor included the argument whether the author had used highly hyperbolic language, with usage of metaphors, and allusions; which required readers to think beyond the scope of the literature.

The highest difference was observed in terms of the number of pages that the readers preferred to read, with about 90% readers in the inexperienced category not likely to read a work of fiction that was of more than 100,000 words. However, the experienced readers were less affected by the length of the work, with about 30% not likely to read a work that was more than 100,000 words.

The factor regarding the fame of the author was observed to be less deviant. About 60% in the experienced group were swayed to read a work of fiction of a famous author, while this number was at 98% in the inexperienced category. This factor also included past experiences with the author’s other works, including past fiction and nonfiction works that have had influences on the opinion of the reader about the author.

Congruent display of ideas was the factor that both groups equally acknowledged. Nearly all readers, both experienced and inexperienced were likely to completely read a work if it displayed a cohesive, spontaneous flow of ideas, with a linear progression in the story, without much breaks or distractions within the narration, which are the essential components of this factor- congruent display of ideas. This factor would be observed when readers read book samples while buying books on e-commerce sites; there the trend would be observed.

The factor concerning the title of the story was also a hugely deviated one. Nearly 55% of the inexperienced readers and less than 10% of the experienced readers were influenced in a positive way to go for the book that had an attractive title, which was classified to be a short phrase that depicted the theme of the story while keeping the readers in suspense.

The table below summarizes the data. Histogram 1 graphically represents this data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Experienced readers (in %) of total experienced</th>
<th>Inexperienced readers (in %) of total inexperienced</th>
<th>Influence of factor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Back-story</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive complexity</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of pages</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fame of author</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congruent display of ideas</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Influence denotes the effect the factor has on the reader.
+ denotes a positive influence on the reader.
- denotes a negative effect on the reader.

% are in total number of that particular group.
4. Case study

In order to verify the results of the table and histogram 1, a case study was conducted on a separate group of readers, of the age group 18-21, 5 weeks after the first study was conducted, because research demonstrates that a time lag of at least four weeks can reduce common method variance (C. Ostroff et al. 2002[12]). The same number of 912 students were surveyed upon, and were asked to accept or reject (with proper reasoning based on the above factors), where they would agree to read all the three installments of the famous fantasy series - Lord of the Rings (T. F. Nicolay et. al. 2014[11]).

Lord of the Rings was specifically chosen as it equally caters to all factors stated above. It is a world famous novel series, that is spread across three books and is thus of considerable length and of moderate to difficult complexity (G. Kainer et.al. 2010[7]). However, its length is contrasted with the fame of the author, the escapist descriptions that increase its complexity (Jane Chance et. al. 2001[2]), a back-story of the dimension of a myth, and a catchy title. A short summary of the back-story (prequels) was given to all readers.

501 experienced readers and 411 inexperienced readers were chosen, and the Evaluation and Feedback Committee rectified that none of these readers was on the database of the sample tested 5 weeks before. The observations were recorded as under.

Only 173 readers were positively influenced by the presence of the back-story, and were persuaded to read the three novels to find an extension to the prequels. Out of these, 95 were experienced, (which amounted to 19% of the total experienced), and rest 78 were inexperienced (which amounted to 9% of the total). All remaining were neutral about the presence or absence of a back-story.

There were 793 readers who were negatively influenced by the great complexity of the novels. Out of these, 415 were of the experienced category (which amounted to 83% of the experienced readers), and 378 were of the inexperienced category (which amounted to 92% of the inexperienced readers). Rest were reported as neutral on the Likert-scale.

There were 484 readers who were negatively influenced by the number of pages that the novel carried. Out of these, 135 were of the experienced category (which amounted to 27% of the experienced readers), and 349 were of the inexperienced category (which amounted to 85% of the inexperienced readers). Rest were reported as neutral on the Likert-scale.

There were 700 readers who were positively influenced by the prominence of the author. Out of these, 310 were of the experienced category (which is 62% of the total experienced readers), and 390
were of the inexperienced category (which is 95% of the total inexperienced readers). Rest were reported as neutral on the Likert-scale.

There were 897 readers who were positively influenced by the congruent display of ideas. Out of these, 495 were of the experienced category (which is 99% of the total experienced readers), and 402 were of the inexperienced category (which is 98% of the total inexperienced readers). Rest were reported as neutral on the Likert-scale.

There were 307 readers who were positively influenced by a catchy title of the novel. Out of these, 65 were of the experienced category (which is 13% of the total experienced readers), and 242 were of the inexperienced category (which is 59% of the total inexperienced readers). Rest were reported as neutral on the Likert-scale.

5. Results and discussion

Since histogram 2 (case study) conforms to the observations of Histogram 1 (first survey), we note our observations by concluding that if a teenager in the above mentioned age group is to choose a work of fiction, and is an inexperienced reader (as denoted by the above criteria), it is hypothesized that she/he will choose the work that is of less complexity, of short length, of a famous author who has an excellent and congruent display of ideas. The presence of a back-story is very less likely to influence the reader. The presence of a catchy title can be considered as of varying influence, and may or may not have the influence that is depicted in the above observations.

We also conclude that if a teenager in the above mentioned age group is to choose a work of fiction, and is in the experienced category (as denoted by the above criteria), it is hypothesized that she/he will choose a work that is of little to moderate complexity, and having a congruent display of ideas. The reader would not be persuaded much by the presence of a back-story or the large number of pages or by a catchy title. The factor involving the fame of the author is of varying influence, and may or may not influence a reader as depicted in the above observations.

Although, every effort has been made to eliminate any sort of bias in the reporting participants, reliance on self-report questionnaires may have inflated correlations due to spurious effect of common method variance (Patrizia Velotti et. al. 2016[14]), and erroneous reporting might have crept in. But it is predicted that the number of such errors (if any) would be low, especially after briefing.
the participants as described in the procedure, and the effect (if any) would be negligible in view of the large sample size. Also, it must be noted that generalization of the predictions of this study is limited due to a convenient sample of undergraduate students from a city of India.

6. Recommendations

Authors:

Based on the observations, we recommend certain tips for the authors to follow. The relative percentage of the inexperienced readers is higher than that of experienced readers in the whole of reading population, which might make the sale of the books tough.

To counter this, the authors must focus on writing fiction that is of moderate complexity, without having too deep a comprehension.

Authors must focus on spontaneously developing the plot, ensuring a logical progression of ideas in the plot.

There must be every little effort to keep the length of one book on a moderate level. Authors must consider breaking books of long length into smaller sub-parts.

There must be every single effort on the author’s part to receive reviews from the followers of her/his book, and to stand up to the expectations in every installment.

Authors must also make efforts to include a back-story to the characters of the fiction. Low but significant percentage of readers is attracted to a characterization that extends beyond the book.

Researchers:

While outside the scope of this article, future research should explore the effect of the given factors on different data-samples, and thus modify this model to remove its limitations. We hypothesize that the influence of these factors might change with age coupled with gender, geographical conditions, generation, and exposure to the world of fiction (which might be related to financial conditions). The variation in observations related to this model would yield optimal results and will then be helpful in more accurate and more precise predictions. Further research should also endeavor to analyze more factors than the above stated. This will also convey the readers’ expectations from an author, and will help authors know the mind of the reader.

7. Acknowledgements

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8. References