Reading Others' Texts: Marginalia and the Inscription of Meaning in Collectible Books

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The popular value of used books reveals insights into the material pleasures of reading and collecting books. Focusing on a collectible book genre, we explore how material practices such as collecting, reading, and inscribing create meaning for consumers. We analyze the materiality of these used texts, including “inscriptions” and previous owner’s marginalia – written annotations, marks, and notes left in the pages. We explore the aesthetic and temporal dimensions of books via three key aspects of their appeal: 1) marginalia; 2) collectability; and 3) material pleasures.

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SESSION OVERVIEW

Surprisingly little attention has been paid in consumer research to the consumption of “everyday” hobbies and pastimes. A search for this topic in the Journal of Consumer Research reveals that hobbies have typically been understood as a dependent variable associated with issues such as materialism (e.g., Chaplin and Roedder-John; 2005, 2007), or have been mentioned but not really unpacked in studies of very specific consumer segments, such as people trying to be cosmopolitan (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999) or pursuing a particular masculine identity (Holt and Thompson, 2004). However, from a consumer welfare perspective, people are often encouraged to pursue hobbies and interests in order to relieve stress, engage in pleasurable activities, help them pursue self-identity and self-actualization, and escape from the mundane world. One activity that has implications not only for these outcomes, but also is linked to a more literate and skilled populace that possesses higher cultural capital, is the reading of books. Benefits of reading extend beyond merely potentially enhancing social mobility; one study finds adults who read books are likely to be more involved in cultural activities, volunteer or charity work, and sports (charityguide.org). And while U.S. sales of trade nonfiction and fiction trade publications (which excludes religious and text books) are projected to top $27 billion in 2009 (Book Industry Study Group, 2006), in fact reading books is a hobby that faces increased competition from other diversions (e.g., computers, in-home movies, portable music) and cultural challenges (e.g., that reading is a somewhat elitist enterprise for “eggheads.”). It is explicitly because book reading is an activity that either inspires great enthusiasm (Fineberg 2007) or increasing apathy (e.g., one in four adults read no books in 2006; Fram 2007) that the presenters in this session believed it important to turn our attention to the reasons people read (or do not), and the ways the marketplace enables them to pursue reading as a pastime in contemporary consumer culture. Clearly, understanding the consumption of books is important for scholars interested in public policy and education, but it also has implications for consumers of new technology, such as Amazon’s new “Kindle,” which encourages consumers to eschew traditional books in favor of downloadable, electronic versions.

Sprinboarding off of the recent Consuming Books (ed. Stephen Brown), this session features new or expanded work on how consumers pursue the pastime of reading in contemporary consumer culture. In “Never Tickle a Sleeping Booklover: How Readers Devour Harry Potter,” Anthony Patterson and Stephen Brown unpack the reading styles of consumers enraptured with the Harry Potter series. Pauline Maclaran and Rosalind Masterson, in “BookCrossed Lovers: Consumers and Their Relationships with Books” explore how consumers find new meanings in reading communities as they circulate books around the world through a book-sharing technology. “Reading Others’ Texts; Marginalia and the Inscription of Meaning in Collectible Books” by Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder explore the benefits of marginalia (notes made by the owners/authors) in books purchased in used or vintage outlets. Finally, in “Curling Up and Reaching Out: Meanings and Motivations for Passionate Readers,” Cele Otnes and Behice Ece Ilhan hone in on what passionate readers regard as the benefits and joys of reading, and unpack many active components to this “passive” hobby. All of the authors approach their topics from the interpretive research tradition, and employ a variety of methods (e.g., netnography, depth interviews, observation) to explore their topic of interest.

This symposium was designed to appeal to a broad cross-section of ACR attendees, including scholars interested in issues pertaining to 1) consumer lifestyles and consumer identity, as reading is a hobby that is intertwined with these constructs; 2) consumer entrepreneurship and co-creation, as consumers create new ways of reading and new reading communities; and 3) “consumer culture theory”—particularly those interested in everyday consumption activities. And while public policy organizations such as Reading is Fundamental (www.rif.org) no doubt have a stake in understanding what makes various forms of reading attractive and engaging to consumers, the pervasiveness and evolution of reading make it a fascinating form of consumer behavior to study in its own right.

ABSTRACTS

“Never Tickle a Sleeping Booklover: How Readers Devour Harry Potter”
Anthony Patterson, University of Liverpool, UK
Stephen Brown, University of Ulster, UK

With 400 million copies of her books in print, J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series has turned an entire iGeneration on to the old-fashioned pleasures of reading “proper” novels. But how do her readers read the holy writ? Detailed analysis of a Harry Potter database, consisting of several hundred qualitative interviews, suggests that there are four Rowling reading styles: Gryffindor (enthusiastically competitive); Slytherin (unhealthily compulsive); Ravenclaw (forensically critical); and Hufflepuff (comfortably numb). After considering these magical reading modes, the paper compares them to G.P. Stone’s classic typology of consumer behavior.

“Curling Up and Reaching Out: Meanings and Motivations for Passionate Readers”
Cele Otnes, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
Rosalind Masterson, DeMontfort University, UK

Although reading increasingly competes and is complemented by other entertainment activities, many consumers regard reading as one of their most cherished everyday activities. Our study, based on depth interviews with 15 self-identified adult passionate readers, explores the benefits these consumers derive from their hobby, and the ways they co-create and incorporate reading activities into their lives. We find that for passionate readers, this “passive” hobby contains many more active components than the passive nature of reading implies (e.g., by fostering book clubs, reading lists, actively becoming market mavens in the area of reading).

“BookCrossed Lovers: Consumers and Their Relationships with Books”
Pauline Maclaran, Keele University, UK
Rosalind Masterson, DeMontfort University, UK

Very few studies explore how readers feel about their books and how their involvement with books affects their lives. Following Fournier’s (1998) study on the relationships between consumers
and brands, this paper explores the diverse relationships between readers and their books. This study draws on book lovers’ experiences of BookCrossing.com; a website that encourages and facilities the circulation of secondhand books on a global basis. The research is based on a netnographic investigation which includes six months of observation and participant observation in the BookCrossing community.

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References available upon request.