

Interpreting the Reading Experience: An Introspective Analysis

Valeria Corna, Researcher

Istituto di Economia e Gestione delle Imprese "G. Pivato", Università Bocconi

Gabriele Troilo, Associate Professor of Marketing

Università Bocconi and SDA Bocconi School of Management

Valeria Corna is currently a researcher at IEGI, Istituto di Economia e Gestione delle Imprese "G. Pivato", Università Comm.le "L. Bocconi". She received a research scholarship after her graduation in Economics for Arts, Culture and Communication in February 2004 at Università Bocconi, Milano. Her main interests of research are management of cultural institutions and consumer behavior.

Gabriele Troilo currently teaches Marketing the Arts and Culture. He is also responsible of the Marketing course in the Ph.D. in Business Administration. He is Programme Director of many executive programs at SDA Bocconi about Marketing Research and Creativity Management. His main research areas are Marketing in creative industries and consumption of artistic and cultural goods.

Abstract

The literature on hedonic consumption has devoted relatively limited attention to the reading experience in and of itself. Most research on this topic has been carried out by psychologists predominantly interested in the cognitive processes involved in sense-making of a literary text. The purpose of our paper is an exploration of the role emotions play in the reading of fiction. Our field of study looks at a specific literary genre: sequels. An introspective analysis has been run, on a sample of 20 people who have read three different series of titles by Rowling, Pennac, and Camilleri. The findings appear to show that sequels may indeed shape the emotional world of readers and give life to distinctive consumption and buying rituals.

Keywords

Novels' consumption, reading experience, emotional consumption, hedonic goods.

Introduction

In recent years, consumer behavior studies have dedicated a noticeable amount of attention to the role that aesthetic and symbolic dimensions play within the processes of cultural consumption (Bourgeon-Renault, 2000). However, little attention has been devoted to the consumption of literary products. This may seem quite odd, given that novel and short story along with the theatre are hedonic goods that date from ancient origins, and notwithstanding the new forms of entertainment that have evolved, books continue to represent an evasive, informative and fun vehicle for all to enjoy.

The little research that has studied the phenomenon mostly focused on consumer purchasing processes, and only a few studies (Miesen, 2002, 2004; Ross, 1999) have investigated the role, emotions, sentiments and humor play in influencing those processes. It may well be that studies that strictly focus on the consumption process are missing.

Psychological literature includes studies that focus on the reading process in as much as it aims to define text comprehension models, but this research predominantly discusses cognitive

dimensions linked to this process and, unlike ours, avoids those components of a more emotional nature (Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994).

In reality, as Levorato (2000, p. 66) affirms, text comprehension and hence cognitive dimensions “represent only a part of the reading process; there are other processes that influence it, constitute its qualitative aspect and bestow it with aesthetic value”; these are strictly connected to its emotional dimensions.

It is only of late that even in psychological literature has the importance exercised by a reader’s emotional dimensions on text comprehension been recognized, above all by affirmations made by Rosenblatt (1982) in her *reader response theory*. In the past, the dominant paradigm considered the text as a completely independent entity from the reader, whose role was in turn passive, one that singled out the meaning by way of a rational process (Cucpchick *et al.* 1998a). Therefore, since comprehension and interpretation were considered rational processes, emotional and symbolic dimensions were given little, if any, consideration.

It was back in the 1960s when a group of theories began spreading with the aim of refocusing attention on the role of the reader and those emotional processes incurred throughout the reading. The readers became active subjects who interpreted each text based on their own background experience, knowledge, mood and sensations. Within these theories, the reader traverses through an interpretative process of extracting the meaning of the text not exclusively based on cognitive dimensions, but also and indeed predominantly on components of a more emotional nature¹.

The uniqueness of the interpretation of a narrative text process outlined in the *reader response theory* is demonstrated in certain studies (Kurtz e Schober, 2001), and its variance within different situations in which the reader is immersed, highlights the high level of individuality and subjectivity that characterizes literary consumption. In light of the relatively limited research in this field, Miall (2000) suggests the necessity to continue exploring the reading process using further studies of an empirical nature.

The objective of our work then is an attempt at contributing towards a better understanding of hedonic consumer processes by way of an analysis of emotional and symbolic components that characterize the consumption of literary products.

The study is structured as follows: the outset includes a review of the literature dealing with emotional processes inherent to reading, illustrating both consolidated results as well as those issues that are still being debated. Then the results of an empirical study done on a specific literary product, namely, the sequel, are presented with the aim of better understanding the role emotions play within the reading process. In fact the specific characteristics of the ‘sequel’ help in effectively delineating that role. Lastly, the limitations of this study as well as possible clues leading to further research are discussed within the concluding remarks.

The emotions of reading: a review of the literature

The emotions provoked by reading a given text, along with cognitive processes, determine the interpretation the reader attributes to the text as well as whatever level of appreciation it may derive.

There are two fundamental functions that emotions play while reading: a selective function that causes the reader to pay particular attention to certain elements of the text with respect to others; and a substitutive function that replaces cognitive processes that are insufficient to understand or interpret the text (Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994). However, it is also possible to retain that emotions do not play a subordinate role to cognitive processes at all, but rather are complimentary to them (Levorato, 2000).

Psychological contribution towards exploring this phenomenon can be divided into two distinct categories: theoretical investigation aimed at identifying the various types of emotions that the reading process provokes in the reader (Cupchik *et al.* 1998b; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994; Miall & Kuiken, 2002; Oatley 1994, 1999; Tan, 1994); and empirical research oriented towards understanding how those emotions are connected to specific features of the text, such as the narrator role, stylistic elements used or thematic treatment (Andringa, 1996; Dijkstra *et al.* 1994; Dixon & Bortolussi, 1996).

The more empirically based research concentrates on *literary style* and on those characteristics pertaining to the *narrative plot*. Aesthetic stimuli are in fact characterized by syntactic and semantic elements - termed *style & subject matter* (Cupchik, 1994; Cupchik *et al.* 1998a) – that can influence the emotional dimension of the reader. In differentiating stylistic and semantic components, one of the principal and most widely known theories on emotions that characterize the reading process distinguishes between *F-emotions* and *A-emotions* (Dijkstra *et al.* 1994; Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994, Tan, 1994). *F-emotions* (*Fiction based emotions*), include those emotional states that originate in the reader as a reaction to the plot, the unfolding of events and its characters; while *A-emotions* (*Artefact based emotions*) are those aesthetical textual components that stir the reader in one way or another. Along with this first classification of emotions whose point of departure is the text, others of particular relevance are free from the distinction between stylistic and semantic components for they classify reading emotions based on the *readers active* participation in the process. In other words, differences exist between “emotions of the mind”, that is, emotions felt while the reader remains outside of the literary work as a spectator of events (Hoeken & Van Vliet, 2000; Levorato, 2000; Oatley, 1994), and those emotions that are evoked when “the reader feels part of the literary text” or actively albeit mentally “participates in events” (Levorato, 2000; Oatley, 1994).

Both empathy and identification are fundamental processes in determining emotions of reader participation (Zillmann, 1994). And those processes are critical in determining appreciation for a given work (Ross, 1999).

Hence trying to thoroughly understand the ways in which a reader identifies themselves with a character or empathizes with them is extremely relevant in understanding the role emotions and sensations connected to the reading process play².

In an attempt to understand both processes of an identification and empathetic nature, it may be necessary to create a *mental scheme of the narrative text* that the readers put into effect throughout their reading; it is precisely this scheme, in fact, that permits self-identification or empathy with characters to result.

While reading, the readers construct their own mental representation of the narrative text based on their existing knowledge and resulting from inductive and deductive processes (Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994). They therefore do not only see the book before them but in their mind's eye they see an image that reflects the world of that narration (Tan, 1994). The text-reader rapport,

therefore, can be considered an immersion type experience that the reader themselves lives through (Carù & Cova, 2003) dealing with the world represented by the novel.

The effect-like experience immerses the reader, as if being thrown into one or more mental images that reflect the events of the text, almost like being thrown into a film plot.

Irrespective of the uniqueness of the mental model frame of mind that each reader creates while reading, the mental images of the places, scenes, characters and their actions permit the reader to escape into a sort of parallel reality and to create relationships with those very characters, from which both empathy and identification may result. When the reading becomes so involving to consent the reader to actually “see” the narrated story and not only “read” it, only then can they thrust themselves into the scenes and scenarios by interacting with characters as if they were alive and not only as silent, external bystanders.

The distinction amongst sympathy, empathy and identification is not a clear and simple one, for general accord on precise meaning and dimensions of the three constructs does not exist (Zilmann, 1994). At times, empathy is considered a phenomenon that encompasses different sentiments including sympathy (Tan, 1994); alternatively sympathy and empathy are considered two processes placed on a continuum where “sympathy is a process of fellow feeling in response to a state we recognize in another person” (Oatley, 1994, p.62), while “empathy is dependent on a kind of inner imitation of the mental state of others” (Oatley, 1994, p. 62).

Even in terms of reader self-identification, there lacks complete clarity on dimensions and antecedents. Indeed some scholars attribute three dimensions to this reader phenomenon: desiring to reach a temporary state of power, assuming the protagonists objectives and recognizing similarities with oneself in literary characters (Cupchik *et al.* 1998b). Instead other researchers maintain that assuming the protagonist goals along with the creation of a mental model representing the narrative world are considered antecedents (Oatley, 1994)³.

One solution to this discrepancy may be to use the “concordance” concept proposed by Zilmann (1994). Empathetic and identification processes depend on the emotional and sentimental disposition the reader has towards the character in question. If the emotional disposition towards the character is positive then empathetic and identification are more likely to manifest themselves, while if the predisposition is negative then the reader is unlikely to experience them or they may even be reversed. Therefore sympathy, empathy and identification can be considered concepts placed on a continuum or an ongoing plane that, based on the level of reader participation and involvement, defines: *sympathy* as a response that recognizes the emotional state of a character, *empathy* as a response that appropriates the reader of the specific state of the character, and *identification* as the reader’s assumption of the literary character’s objectives as his own, thereby generating “concordant” emotions based on the achievement or failure to achieve the character’s set goals.

Objectives and Research Design

The main objective of this study is to analyze those emotions activated during the reading process, namely the reading of fiction. It particularly focuses on the different types of emotions experienced during the reading process and the roles played by sympathy, empathy and identification in releasing them with respect to the different ways readers plunge themselves into the reading process.

The heightened level of subjectivity and individuality that characterizes the phenomenon in question has induced us to select an introspective analytical methodology (cfr. Whitten & Graesser, 1999), in accordance with the guided introspection method (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993)⁴. Reading is a process that is rarely shared with others, and textual interpretation is subjectively connected to a reader's personal background, as stated earlier. Since introspection is the qualitative research method that uses the highest level of subjectivity (Holbrook, 1995), its adoption was deemed the most appropriate for this investigation. Moreover, introspection is a technique that is particularly useful in highlighting those symbolic and emotional dimensions connected to a consumer experience (Bristor, 1992; Goetz & Sadoski, 1999).

The research field is specifically made up of a literary fiction category, namely sequels. Briefly defined, these works present distinct story-lines that somehow conclude in each of their episodes, but maintain a sense of continuity through the use of the same main characters and the adoption of linear temporal organization⁵.

The choice of this particular type of fiction-instead of single issue novels or short stories- is due to numerous reasons. First off, this style can be traced back to that richness of denotative or revelatory elements inherent to literary plots. Indeed sequels represent a mixture of new elements that intertwine with continuous ones or constants. By novelties we refer to the introduction of new elements inherent to the single episode or specific novel, meanwhile by constants we refer to those elements that the reader has already grasped by having read previous issues.

A further element of interest is constituted by the various ways one can read sequels each of which increases the variety of mental realities or worlds created by the reader.

Lastly, of late the market has revealed the fact that sequels have and continue to enjoy huge commercial success, becoming real global market phenomenon, also thanks to an extension of their narrative guise by being turned into films, television series and theatrical works.

The specific sequels that were used in this study are all a series of novels: the first four books of the Harry Potter saga, six novels by Andrea Camilleri that have as their protagonist the Police Commissioner Montalbano, and the five texts by Daniel Pennac dedicated to the Malaussene family.

The popularity of the Harry Potter adventures is widely diffused, given the international scope of the phenomenon; whereas the novels of both Daniel Pennac and Andrea Camilleri are less well known. The French author Pennac uses an acute sense of humor to describe the events of the Malaussene family, a boisterous clan captained by Benjamin Malaussene, a professional scapegoat. In each novel one or more homicides makes a complete mess of the Malaussene clan's life and of the Parisian neighborhood Belleville, where they resides, and where all of the clues and evidence point to Benjamin as the guilty party (a scapegoat not only professionally, but also in his daily life). In an intertwining of continuous unexpected and strange events, the family, putting up with a group of equally strange friends and acquaintances tries to get Benjamin off the hook; who in the end of each novel somehow manages to prove his own innocence all by himself. The novels by Andrea Camilleri instead tell the story of Salvo Montalbano, Police Commissioner of an imaginary town called Vigata in today's Sicily. Each novel presents a different case to be resolved. As the reading unfolds, different characters come to the Commissioner's aid, supplying clues that by using a more common sense approach instead of the "official police protocol", the case at hand is skillfully resolved. Along side the Commissioner's adventures, the author describes present-day Sicilian reality, taking advantage of events that

transpire in Vigata to highlight real “southern Italian” problems that remain unresolved as well as to criticize part of Italian society.

As the choice of sequels clearly illustrates, the study has opted for variety in its textual examples. The three series differ by way of nationality (English, French and Italian), thematic content, target audiences, writing styles and also in terms of public success (albeit all are successes, Harry Potter is the only global phenomenon). Data was collected by asking a sample of twenty readers to transcribe their reading experience⁶. Of the twenty, seven had read the Harry Potter saga, six the novels of Andrea Camilleri and seven the Daniel Pennac novels. In selecting the sample, convenience prevailed, namely, individuals who demonstrated and elevated interest in participating were chosen. To guaranty a variety of experiences, both individuals whose interest was motivated by a previous reading of the texts in question as well as those who had not read any of the sequels were chosen. Furthermore, this sampling therefore furnished a latter group who performed an introspection of the present and a former group who provided a retrospective analysis (Wallendorf & Brucks, 1993). Those who had already read the titles were asked to re-read them and to self-analyze their consumer experience considering their previous experience as well in the overall evaluation⁷. Participants were briefed on the methodological function of the study and asked to pay particular attention to those emotions evoked by the reading. Data was reduced and codified, in that different portions of the texts therefore were traced back to a coding system, which considered single words as well as paragraphs as data units able to represent vast phenomenon. Certain codes were defined before-the-fact or ex-ante on the basis of an analysis of the literature, others instead were defined after-the-fact (ex-post), that is, after having read introspective reports of participants. Codification was carried out by the two authors separately, who then compared the codification utilized. Divergent codification results were resolved between the authors, who agreed on a shared system of codification to ultimately utilize. Data interpretation took place comparing introspective participant reports as well as dimensional realignment of the data itself (Spiggle, 1994).

Results

Emotions Evoked by the Text: Similarities and Differences

Amongst the so-called *emotions evoked by the text*, those common to all sequels distinguish themselves from those relating to each of the three specific ones considered in this study.

The emotions common to all participants are associated to the reading process itself. The most relevant included *joy*, *content*, *good mood* or even *happiness* that are often justified by readers as the optimism that pervades the texts in question, demonstrated by the fact that events ‘in the end’ are resolved for the better and problems are solved. Similarly, all of the texts considered here evoke *memories* to which positive or negative emotions are tied, in line with the nature or the kind of memory (*whether fond or not*) in the first place.

These emotions are fed by the serial structure of the sequel, which renders the reader susceptible to strong *curiosity* with respect to each novel (one wants to find out how it ends) as well as the entire series (one desires knowing in advance what happens in successive novels). To these feelings a sense of *impatience* seems to manifest itself when one novel is finished and its sequel still needs to be bought.

Reading each successive text after the sequel's first one concludes with a sense of *satisfaction* of having read yet another volume and a sense of *sadness* of having to separate oneself from a volume to the next.

As far as the emotions/sensations that prevail in each of the specific series considered here, each has its own characteristic emotion: *a sense of fun tied to the comedy* Pennac's novels, *wonder or shock* tied to *Harry Potter* and *suspense* tied to the texts dedicated to Police Commissioner Montalbano. In describing the Malaussene family, the majority of participants use expressions like "it's fun", "they crack me up", "make me smile" or "they're a hoot" and this is tied to the author's ironic style and the strangeness of the characters.

In the books dedicated to Harry Potter, one of the predominant emotions felt is *amazement* which is generally produced by representing a given reality where magic or magical events dominate the scene. This literary style has as its basis a strong fantastical component that to be effective calls upon a reader's ability to break from reality thereby entering a wondrous world.

Lastly in the novels by Camilleri one finds numerous references to *suspense*, due to their familiar format as police mysteries, where clues begin to accumulate and in the end are orderly pieced together by the hero Police Commissioner who, undoubtedly, solves the case.

It may be worthwhile to point out two other types of emotions participants felt during the reading of Harry Potter: *nostalgia* and *embarrassment*. The first arises in readers when positive sentiments related to their past are evoked by the reading, the second instead emerges when in the company of others, readers admit their allure to a children's novel and hence feel some degree of embarrassment⁸. Both of these feelings are tied to the fact that this sequel was targeted towards children and not adults.

Empathy and Identification: Emotional Affinities

Other emotions derive from the empathy we feel for the emotional state of *the characters* of the stories we read or the events they may partake in.

Within this realm we can feel or share positive emotions like happiness or contentment with our characters when their desires are realized or yet sadness, anger and fear as our protagonists find themselves in difficult situations. What seems to be of particular relevance here is the absence of emotional ambivalence in readers: there is perfect accord between the situation in which characters find themselves in and the emotions or sensations felt by readers. When protagonists are challenged by antagonists or faces difficulty or danger, reader emotion is at once negative, similarly as mentioned earlier, positive reader sensations are evoked by positive events.

It may be opportune to analyze how those emotions change as the reading progresses: the very same readers maintain that agreement between their emotions and those of characters are reinforced as the sequel progresses.

The emotions evoked by characters seem to originate from an intense reader participation in the plot that causes empathy and identification processes to result. These processes are caused, as we saw earlier, when the reader assumes the objectives set out by the protagonist, a condition that is retained fundamental if reader-character identification is to take place. Furthermore, that accord or symbiosis between character and reader emotions completes the second element at the basis of both the empathy and identification processes.

Part of these processes can be traced back to the narrative plot, the style and the connotation that the novel's authors developed in their respective texts. However, another part remains to be identified and some indication may lie in the fact that in comparison to the character's emotions, the reader's are increasingly influenced throughout the reading and reference to empathetic or identification processes do not suffice in explaining this phenomenon. It is the peculiarity of these processes within the literary form 'the sequel' that causes the crescendo in reader emotion. To accomplish this, one must discuss the role of reader 'imagination' within the literary genre in its ability to enlarge and facilitate the empathetic and identification processes during the reading of sequels. In short, the sequel allows a reader's imagination to continuously develop throughout different volumes and intensify the two processes discussed above.

The Imaginary World: Belleville, Hogwarts and Vigata

During the reading process, the reader creates a mental image of the world represented in the narrative fiction (Kneepkens & Zwaan, 1994). This "parallel world" is created based on the description offered by the text and the connection between it and the experience and background of the reader at hand.

Different studies have signaled the role that fantasy and imagination play in consumption processes (Belk & Costa, 1998; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Martin, 2004). One could sustain that during the reading process, these dimensions play a relevant role since they constitute a large part of the process. Moreover, thoughts, emotions and sensations provoked by the reading appear strictly connected to the level of reader involvement and retention of the story's imaginary world.

Creating an imaginary world of the narrative fiction also permits readers to pursue one of the desires or goals that individuals try to satisfy by the reading process, namely, *evasion or* escaping one's daily reality by entering the newly created world. Indeed, one could maintain that the decision to consume a book (like other hedonic products) stems from its capacities to transport the reader into a more pleasant reality (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

In the case of participants for this study, they often referred to this imaginative immersion process in their summaries. Phrases like "immersing yourself into the reading", "diving into the book", or yet "being totally absorbed by the reading" recur in participant reports frequently.

The creation of an imaginary world that represents the narrative one are connected to the advancement or point of the book the reader is at (Larsen & Seilman, 1999). At the reading's outset, imagining the scenery and characters requires greater effort as the information available to the reader are limited; therefore they must rely more on personal events and experience to create a sort of parallel reality. As the reading progresses, the reader acquires greater information: imagining the fictional world becomes increasingly easy, and that universe is continuously enriched by detail thereby becoming evermore defined. From this point onwards in the reading, the goal to get away from or evade is more easily achieved in that the effort in imagining the continuation of the story is low and thus easier for the reader to 'dive' into the narration.

Hence one of the peculiar characteristics of the sequel emerges starting with the reading of the second volume onwards, that is, an *ease and amplification of escape*.

As previously stated the sequel novel maintains certain elements (main characters, places etc.) in proceeding from one novel to the next. This makes the reading of the first volume (which is

identical to the reading of any single volume novel) the most taxing from an imaginative viewpoint, but makes subsequent volumes easier to follow thus facilitates escaping and immersing oneself into the parallel world created by both reader and author.

In terms of escape, one could sustain that facilitation grows in terms of intensity. The readers who participated in our study have highlighted how each time they read a sequel novel, the former knowledge of places in which the plot transpires, the main characters and the enriching of specific elements with new particulars, not only allows them to escape, but also permits them to do so with increased intensity in that this evasion seems all too familiar to the reader (it is with special reference to familiarity that the study's readers make reference to).

The role played by the imagination within the reading of sequels, as stated earlier, magnifies and facilitates evasion as well as exercises a parallel effect (facilitates and intensifies) on those processes referred to earlier, that is, reader empathy and identification. The imaginary, indeed, includes aspects of the story's main characters, that as the reading continues, may take on even greater detail and a strengthening of the reader/character relationship. These newly imagined details may or may not find confirmation in the text itself, but the reader believes in them as they are produced vis-à-vis their parallel reality.

Even these newly imagined elements become easier and easier to confirm, for readers feel like they know the characters both personally and profoundly, referring to them as friends, or even more astonishing, as relatives or family.

What emerges then is how the imagination contributes to enlarge the processes of empathy and identification, rendering them more frequent and intense as the series proceeds and contributes therefore to the enjoyment of the series, from the moment those processes have an impact on the text's level of appreciation (Ross, 1999).

Considering the identification process apart for a moment, two aspects of interest relative only to it emerge. First of all, introspective self-analysis highlights those readers that identify with characters not only because they share their objectives, but because there is a *motivational aspiration* at the basis of that sharing, that is, those characters represent precisely what the reader would like to be. The readers, therefore, do not identify with the character that most resembles them in real life, but with the character they *would like to resemble*.

The second aspect highlights, as the reading progresses, how the *objective of the identification process widens*.

While indeed in the first book, readers tend to identify themselves with the protagonist(s), as the reading progresses, they get to know other characters that are staples in the series quite well, appreciating their qualities and feeling an increased sense of kinship or liking towards them, until they identify with them as well, or at least begin to empathize with them.

The Purchasing and Consumption Rituals and the Desire to Possess

The choice of reading context influences the way the very same reading takes place.

Diverse studies have focused on "inner" processes that characterize reading and therefore the elaboration of information, comprehension and interpretation of the text, but (to our knowledge) no study has ever investigated those "exterior" processes of the readers and the context

(physical scenario or setting) in which they read: the time of day and places when reading takes place, the intervals between a reading session and the next, the level of isolation, etc.

The self-analysis carried out by participants is testimony to how subjective or highly personal the choice of the reading context actually is (i.e. time, place, duration etc.). Each participant, for whatever reason, has a specific time, place and recurrence that they prefer to set aside for reading. What emerges as particularly interesting in the study is that the reading context of the first novel of the series tends to be different than the one for subsequent volumes. While the first volume falls into the person's ordinary reading context, the second volume's reading takes on a context on its own. The reading of the series becomes so important to warrant its own time, place and context within what may be termed *an exclusive process*. This contextual process is not reserved for the reading of other texts. In more detail, the second volume brings with it the preference for more isolated reading places where the reader is more relaxed and undisturbed. Timing intervals also take on a different scheme in that each novel is read during sessions that go for at least an hour (often several at a time), and the interval between reading sessions is relatively brief. Conversely, the interval between the completion of one novel and the start of the subsequent book in the series may be protracted because the reader prefers to not continue reading than to continue under conditions that are less than appropriate.

Analogous behavior takes place during *purchasing processes*. Even the way the subsequent books are bought takes on *an exclusive nature not accorded to the purchase of other texts* and often is repeated (almost ritual like) exactly the same way. While repetition does not only characterize the preceding purchase, it also remains congruent for the emotions felt during the purchase are the same.

What emerges is therefore that purchasing processes and consumption of sequel novels, as well as the choice of reading times and places are characterized by the presence of *ritualistic components*. The term ritual is used with different nuances in consumer behavior literature, McCracken (1986, p. 78) defines it as "a social action devoted to the manipulation of cultural meaning for purposes of collective and individual communication and categorization". Other authors (Gainer, 1995, Holt, 1992, Rook, 1984) instead identify those elements that constitute: both the participants of the ritual as well as its public (Rook, 1984), behavioral *scripts* (Gainer, 1995; Rook, 1984), and an intense atmosphere of sharing (Gainer, 1995).

With reference to sequel novels, ritual emerges both in the purchase of the book itself (conferring a sort of sacred element to the purchase by choosing time, place or shop etc.) as well as to its actual reading phase. This rituality manifests itself in two principal ways: by way of a behavioral script and through a sacredness associated as much to the book as to its reading.

The behavioral script emerges particularly within the reading context: as stated earlier one tries to read each subsequent volume in the same condition of the previous one, privileging place, time frequency in the developing of an exclusive reading habit applicable only to sequel books. The sacred element manifests itself in the fact that readers express by way of designated place, time and reading context, a strong sentimental respect towards the books and their reading by seeking tranquility, isolation and peaceful surrounding for their consumption.

The majority of consumer behavior studies that have analyzed consumption rituals of certain products or services have focused on an analysis of rituals associated to consumer tribes (Schouten & MacAlexander, 1995), and to festivities and tradition (Belk, 1990; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991). They have hence placed particular emphasis on sharing and social participation

inherent to the ritual. However, in the case of reading sequels, the symbolic dimension that emerges is directed to the reader themselves, instead of a sharing of the ritual with others.

Thus the element of sharing or co-participation that Gainer (1995) retains an essential reason for the existence of all rituals in the first place, is clearly lacking. Therefore, just as the reading experience is characterized by a heightened level of individuality and subjectivity, so the behavioral ritual associated to it (reading, in our case, sequels novels) is an entirely private ritual, an event in and of itself⁹.

The ritual however is not the only way through which the reader of sequels manifests their emotional involvement with a book. Participants in fact expressed a strong *desire to possess* the series books. Many readers, who for instance were loaned the first book, go out and buy it along with the second volume, in as much as the “interior” possession (having already read Vol. 1) is not enough and they prefer “having the books on their shelves, to escape into the world of fiction anytime they so desire”.

To start with, readers expressed their desire to own the novels in question. To this regard Belk (1988) highlighted how individuals tend to, by way of the objects they possess, express their personal identity. Possession, thus, is necessary to the reader in order to communicate to others as well as to themselves, their personality and values. More specifically, regarding novels, possession can be exercised in two of the ways theorized by Belk (1988): through appropriation and control, which is the more common way, but also through knowledge of the object. Possessing a book is as much an “interior” (knowledge of the characters, stories, places, events, etc.) sensation as it is exterior or material. Since “interior” possession is, inherent to or characteristic of any reading process, this study aims to focus on the possession of a book as an object per se. It is worthy of mention that it is perhaps a particularly gratifying interior possession of a book that explains the reader’s burning desire to own a copy of it. For it is only through knowledge of the content of a given book that it becomes an extension of the individual, provoking the desire to demonstrate the rapport between reader and book by way of its exterior possession. Purchasing the novels that constitute a series is also very closely related to the practice of collecting: certain participants expressed that the sequel novels were indeed to be considered a collection. Collecting is one of the ways through which individuals express themselves (Belk, 1988), and possession, according to Troilo (2002), can be considered the most fundamental aspect of any collection. Along side the purchasing process of these novels, one of the aspects that, together with possession, constitutes a peculiarity is that related to collecting: the strong desire for completion. Between one purchase and the next, the readers feel a strong sense of impatience to buy the “new piece of the collection”, and are gratified by just as strong a sense of satisfaction the moment the purchase is made. Impatience, thus, represents that missing sensation, that need for completion described by Belk (1988) that is typical of the collector that is appeased by the new purchase¹⁰.

Reader involvement and attachment to this specific type of novel, therefore is principally expressed in two ways. From the reader-novel viewpoint, a strong desire on behalf of the former to possess the latter, and from the reading process viewpoint, the emergence of a behavioral of a *ritual* nature. These two aspects seem to constitute consumption specificities that characterize sequels but not other forms of reading.

Extending the Experience: Storytelling, Films and Pilgrimages

To further our analysis of the reading process defined as exterior, one notices that not only reader behavior while actually reading is relevant, but also the ways in which the reader interacts

with the text (post-reading or in between volumes) express a certain reader-text rapport worthy of consideration. We are referring to the phenomenon that *extends the reading experience* or tends to prolong the rapport with the books between a consumption of a volume and the next phase or at the end of the consumption processes altogether. This extension can take place in two ways: by interacting with others or by consuming other products tied to the novel in question. By way of interaction, the reading experience is extended under a sort of recounting or story telling form, or yet, by sharing the tale's impressions with others. The tendency to discuss one's own reading experience with other individuals has dual interlocutors: other readers who have undergone the same experience and those who have never read the book in question. It is with this last scenario in mind that we have chosen the term *storytelling* in that readers are likely to recount or tell their version of the story or their reading experience, especially to those (relatives or close friends) who have never read the novel(s) in question, thereby rendering them participants in the reader's own experience and perhaps convincing them to undertake the same reading so they can, in turn, share their experience with others.

In the above testimony we partly confirm the book as an extension of the reader as previously described. Once a novel is completely read, it becomes part of the reader who then tries to convince only those dearest to them to undertake the same reading, thus letting this restricted group get to know a part of what the reader considers an extension of themselves.

In other cases readers report their consumption experience to those who have already read the book(s) in question, and therefore one cannot speak of recounting the story but rather of *sharing or subdivision* that can take place at various levels: from the simple chat among friends to signing up for fan club membership. In the reader self-analyses, they often describe themselves as fans. Since the world of '*fandom*' is a social phenomenon, we sustain that the reader becomes a fan only when they are aware of belonging to a group: social interaction with other readers is thus necessary. Connected to the '*fandom*' phenomenon, one could also identify a certain sense of ambivalence that often characterizes readers: on the one hand an elevated involvement level in the phenomenon and their belonging to a group renders them proud of their emotional involvement with the books in question; alternatively, due to the association between *fandom* and immaturity or superficiality, readers tend to be embarrassed and hide the fact, especially in the presence of people they fear might judge them negatively.

The second way one can extend the reading experience of the books in question is by *consuming correlated products*, including both media products and other related ones. All the sequels considered here share the fact they have broken free from the realm of being simply a book. Their content has been extended to other media: television for Police Commissioner Montalbano, film in the case of Harry Potter, and theatre for the Malaussenes (today available also on DVD). Amongst the readers who carried out the introspective analysis, many had lived this extension of their experience, even though in different ways for each the three novel categories. Even in this case, the experience's extension is accompanied by *ambivalent sentiments*. This is because both films and television seem to be experienced positively, in that they are evaluated as products in and of themselves, quite independent from their ties to the original book. They represent a valid transposition of the reality described in the texts and permit a more concrete representation of what, until the viewing, they had been able to imagine. Lastly, TV and films are yet another way to experience a reality that was already perceived as positive via the novel. These viewer/readers undoubtedly know how things will end and how events will unfold, however this is not viewed as a limit, but rather as a sense of superiority and pride over those viewers who are not in the same condition.

Then there are those who did not appreciate the transformation into other media of the literary texts in question, even though in these cases curiosity won out and they, for the most part, attended viewings. This behavior can be explained in two ways. They retain that the film or TV series “ruins” the reader experience (above all when the series is not yet complete), because these representations take place using a means of communication that is visually defined, and does not pertain to the realm of books where that very definition is the reader’s prerogative, hence imagining people and places in future novels in the series autonomously is difficult if not impossible. Secondly, knowing ‘what happens’ takes away the suspense and curiosity that accompanied the reading, hence the viewing is lessened.

It is interesting to note how both appreciation and antipathy for extending the experience to other media forms is strictly connected to the evasive and identification processes that transpires during the reading experience. From what is reported above, viewing films connected to novels is particularly appreciated when they can reproduce those immersion and involvement mechanisms that take place during the reading, or at least to facilitate them. They are less appreciated when, instead they are an obstacle to that escape that the reading of a novel provides.

In the Harry Potter case, extension of the experience goes beyond the film experience and includes various marketing initiatives (stationary products, sportswear, confectionery products etc.) but even in the Pennac and Camilleri sequels another form of extension emerges, namely, the “pilgrimage” of readers in the places described by the stories¹¹.

Even in these cases, extending the reader experience, when sought out by the reader, can be viewed as a tentative to prolong that extension of themselves in the rapport that was attained with the book.

Conclusions

This investigation has highlighted the importance that emotions, evoked during the reading experience, play in determining consumer appetite for books. Creating an imaginary world and self-identification processes emerged as fundamental in rendering the experience more captivating. In considering literary sequels, the study showed how they facilitated and amplified a reader’s immersion into a hyper-reality of narrative fiction, facilitating as a consequence their evasion or escape as well as their interaction with characters. Aspects of interest emerged regarding reader behavior: starting with the reading of successive or second volumes, consumers demonstrated an increasing emotional attachment to the books. This attachment manifests itself in three main ways: by expressing the desire to own or ‘collect’ the books themselves presenting ritualistic behavior in choosing the time, place and context of both the purchase and subsequently the reading, by trying to extend the narrative experience recounting or ‘storytelling’ personal impressions, and by joining fan clubs or making pilgrimages.

Qualitative research presents limits or difficulties in generalizing or replicating results. This study is no exception and presents two principal limits. The first is connected to the freedom allotted to the reports as a technique for collecting data on the reading process. The fact that these reports or summaries are generated at the reading’s end, indeed, may be cause for distortions tied to the reader’s memory of their own experience (i.e. they may not recall what was the origin of a specific sensation, place more emphasis on final aspects, or yet interpret emotions felt at the outset in light of those felt successively)¹². The second limitation refers to the incongruous reading period covered by the study: certain participants carried out a retrospective investigation having already read the books in question, and others an introspective investigation during their

present reading; this study therefore attempted to explore two different elements. In the retrospective group, an analysis of the success factors of the consumption experience, and in the introspective one, a closer look at the reading experience predicting that some participants could possibly have not appreciated the reading. Since this last hypothesis did not effectively manifest itself in the results, the study has no descriptions of unsatisfactory consumption experiences. One possibility in coming to terms with this limit and a possibility for future study may be one that foresees the inclusion of *negative or unsatisfactory reading experience responses*.

Notes

- ¹ Subsequently, neuropsychological discoveries (Miall, 1995) confirmed the relevance of the role played by sentiments and in more general terms by emotional dimensions in determining the interpretation of a narrative text.
- ² The few empirical studies with this aim in mind are predominantly dedicated to analyzing the relationships between identification processes and certain stylistic textual characteristics, typically the position of the narrator or the type of discourse used (Andringa, 1996; Dixon & Bortolussi, 1996).
- ³ Furthermore, some scholars maintain (cfr. Oatley, 1994) that the emotions that originate via the identification process do not have to necessarily coincide with the character's with whom the reader identifies, whereas others (cfr. Tan, 1994) maintain the coincidence is necessary if one is to speak of identification.
- ⁴ The adoption of this approach has a proven track-record in several empirical studies on the reading process. In fact, studies that investigate the reading phenomenon using a qualitative methodology often utilize guided introspection. This approach foresees different data collection methods ranging from questionnaires to in-depth interviews, diaries, etc. (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993).
- ⁵ Literary sequels are thus comprehensive of the following characteristics: a) the novels are connected to each other by a time-line sequence; except the first issue, each subsequent piece is a continuation of the preceding one; b) each volume of the series constitutes a novel in and of itself that is easily understood irrespective of having read the other volumes of the series; c) certain elements of the plot and story-line (protagonist, key characters and certain places or sceneries) are constant throughout the series; d) other elements (antagonists, new characters etc.) vary from one volume to the next.
- ⁶ This technique has its roots in the free summary or thinking aloud approaches (Whitten e Graesser, 1999). For applications on consumer experiences see Brown (1998a) and Reid & Brown (1996).
- ⁷ This permits us to explore, on those retrospective subjects, a successful consumer experience, while present introspective subjects provide insight into consumer experience without prior knowledge of a satisfactory (or lack thereof) result.
- ⁸ We use embarrassment and not shame because it arises in readers only when in the presence of others, whereas shame can be felt also when alone.
- ⁹ It however remains a possible hypothesis that even reading contains the presence of shared rituals. It would have to involve rituals that do not consider the reading process per se, but ones that successively consist of meetings, behavioral codes that pertain to communities and fans of particular types of books or authors, i.e. The Sherlock Holmes Society where readers not only own Conan Doyle's stories, but are often pipe smokers and dress very Victorian at conventions etc.
- ¹⁰ It must be specified that in the case of sequel novels, some of the typical collecting characteristics are however missing, such as an accurate and attentive selection of the object in question and the rarity of the elements that make it up. Furthermore, in the majority of cases, what results may be termed a 'fake' collection, made up of a limited number of elements, often established beforehand.
- ¹¹ In the cases examined, we found that specific pilgrimages were not planned by readers, instead while vacationing in Sicily or in Paris, readers took advantage of the opportunity to visit the places mentioned in the novels.
- ¹² To this regard certain scholars propose collecting data using retrospective self-testing (Larsen & Seilman, 1999) that may alleviate this problem since excessive reading interruption, which would alter the experience, is not required. This study has not opted for this approach in that it appears more useful for a strictly circumscribed investigation (i.e. analysis of one specific emotion within the reading process), but less attune to a wide range of dimensions in an explorative paper, as was the case here.

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