Theorising the Aesthetic Properties of Reading in a Digital Social Reading (DSR) Environment: Exploring DSR Practices in India

Ghosh, Sharanya

ghosh.5@iitj.ac.in

Indian Institute of Technology, Jodhpur, Indien

Digital Social Reading, a term proposed by Rebora et al. (2021), is described as "a wide variety of practices related to the activity of reading and using digital technologies and platforms... to share with other people, thoughts and impressions about texts" (Pianzola, forthcoming). This study will dive deep into the world of Indian Digital Social Reading practices, thus filling the gap in current global discourse. Aesthetic experience, central to reading as an activity , forms the basis of aesthetic judgement of a literary text. Therefore, it is essential that our understanding of how reading happens also includes some empirical analysis of its aesthetic properties - the foundational "units" of aesthetic judgement. Combining these two strands, this study aims to conceptualise a theoretical framework of aesthetic properties (AP) of reading fiction in the context of Indian Digital Social Readers by employing an embedded mixed-method approach .

Literature:

While most scholarship in DSR is global north-centric, Pianzola et al. (2020) offer a more global perspective in their study of Wattpad as a literary resource. Pianzola's upcoming book is the only textbook-like work organising the different DSR studies in a historical timeline and taxonomies; DSR's role in cognitive, aesthetic, and educational aspects of reading, and its pedagogical properties. The democratising agency of DSR (Sedo 2011; Kellner 2016); statistical interpretation of data on gender biases, gender and genre fixation, authorship and gender identity etc., (Thelwall and Kousha 2017); the impact of tweaking reviews for book sales (Nan Hu and colleagues 2012)- are some of the most prominent works. Holur et al. (2021) reflected upon the manners of reading novels that readers engage in, making a significant contribution to "infinite vocabulary networks". Koolen, Neugarten, and Boot (2022) identified impact categories in English book reviews.

The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies (2015) discusses intersections between the literary and cognitive, reflecting on imagination, brain imaging, and its neural networks; imagery as the key element of aesthetic experience; the delicate balance between internal and external cognition giving rise to an intense aesthetic response etc. The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics (2005) is a comprehensive work on philosophical ideas of aesthetics and its properties; arts and their relationship with aesthetics; notions of interpretation etc. In a self-reflexive essay, Matravers and Levinson (2005) defend Levinson's ontology of aesthetic properties while also questioning issues like aesthetic autonomy. More empirical works, such as by Larson et al. (2007), measured the aesthetics of reading based on typographic alterations and textual optimisation that affected the reader's cognitive functions and frowning while reading. DeClerq (2002) observed that existing definitions of aesthetic properties pertain mostly to visual objects, leaving enough scope for inquiry into the other forms of aesthetic expressions, such as music and literature.

Hypotheses and research questions:

Based on the hypotheses that digital space and digital technologies redefine the social reading experience and that the reading experience as a whole can be best understood through an analysis of the aesthetic properties of reading, this project attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What parameters determine the aesthetic properties that govern a reader's aesthetic judgement of fiction ? (the underlying assumption here is that aesthetic properties differ for fiction and non-fiction)
    1. How are these parameters of AP affected by the affordances created by the digital?
2. Is it possible to formulate a framework of aesthetic properties of reading fiction from DSR user data?

Parameters of AP can be explained better through their dimensions, categorised according to their epistemological qualities, such as cultural, affective, semantic, and communal.

Methodology:

Owing to the complex and abstract nature of the concepts, I propose an embedded mixed methodology. As the main crux of the study, subjective data will be gathered through semi-structured interviews of Indian digital social readers. Codes generated from the transcripts (using NVivo) will help identify the parameters of AP, which will then be used in the supplementary survey involving bilingual adult Indian readers. This data should help reinforce the proposed framework. Cluster sampling will be used for this purpose. R will be used for data collation and final analysis. The project does not concentrate on a fixed corpus given the generic nature of the questions it asks and India's multilingual readership. Data collection begins in mid-January 2023, following the completion of basic theorising.

Limitations:

- Does not consider non-fiction works
- survey method is not the most reliable of all quantitative methods
- difficulty justifying abstract concepts through empirical approach.

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