

Summary

Will I like this book? Genre recognition and preference formation on the basis of a book's front cover

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This research concerns the role of the front cover of fiction books in the first stage of the decision making process in which an initial preference for a book may arise. Although there are many views on how books should look, as yet no extensive research has been conducted on this subject. The only consistency in the opinions held is that the front cover of a fiction book has to be "striking" in order to create attention for a book. In any case, front covers are an important source of information in the first stage of information processing in consumers' choice behavior. During this stage, the front cover plays an essential role in categorizing a book and in deciding whether or not the book is attractive. Our central thesis is that a cover communicates to which genre a fiction book belongs (Chapter 1).

The genre indicates what may be expected from a book. We therefore assume that the genre that is communicated by the cover, and especially the perception of the cover as typical of a favorite genre, will induce an initial preference (Chapter 2). If there is an initial positive appraisal of an individual book, it may be considered as a candidate for purchase.

The supply of books is huge, and consumers are not always able or willing to spend much time on looking at every book extensively. Besides, the first stage of information processing takes place in an instant. A global impression is formed about the book. Chapter 2 presents some models of this process. Although these models pertain to processing information from advertisements, they also apply to book covers. The latter advertise the books concerned. Out of these models, we selected the information processing paradigm of Van Raaij (1984). Here, the focus is on categorization as an integral part of the PAR-stage in this model. The PAR (Primary Affective Reaction) indicates the first stage of information processing in choice behavior: we first need to know the category of the products we perceive before we can tell whether they are attractive enough to process them further.

With regard to fiction books, we first have to determine the genre to which they belong before it becomes clear whether or not we will initially like an individual book. This is what is modeled by the PAR-stage. The Primary Affective Reaction shapes the initial preference after the cognitive activity of categorizing a book as to genre.

What consumer characteristics affect the ability to categorize fiction books as to genre and the likelihood that an initial preference is generated? Three plausible candidates are reading frequency, genre preference, and a person's visual or verbal orientation. Frequent readers can be assumed to be able to identify a book's genre from a cover more successfully than infrequent readers. The former group of readers visits bookstores more often than the latter group and have gained more experience distinguishing between types of books. The same could be said of persons who have a specific genre preference. They will identify their preferred genre on the basis of the cover more efficiently than consumers without any genre preference. Specific genre category lovers might even be able to tell whether a particular cover is a typical example of their favorite category. A typicality judgment links genre identification to preference formation. Another variable that may affect preference formation is the extent to which one is visually and verbally oriented. For people with a strong verbal orientation, the title of a book may have more influence on their typicality judgment than for people who are mainly visually oriented. The latter are probably more influenced by the cover picture in their genre assessment. We do not think that any of the three consumer characteristics has an impact on the ability to successfully determine the genre to which a fiction book belongs. The communication of the genre by the cover should be effective regardless of the degree of consumers' experience with books, of their preferences for particular genres, or of their visual or verbal orientation.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology of this research. It gives an overview of the research material and of the procedures that were followed. Furthermore, the operationalizations of the dependent variables or genre categorization, typicality, and initial preference are given. The research was conducted in three separate studies. Their results are reported in Chapters 4 to 7.

Results

Genre classification

The first studies showed that the genres of literature, mystery, and romance were identified on the basis of dimensions that differed from each other. In the subsequent sessions, we focused on literature and mystery books, since only few covers were judged to belong to romance novels, and very few of our subjects preferred this genre. Reading frequency and genre preference did not influence the classification of covers as characteristic for mystery novels or literary books. Covers that were judged to belong to literary novels by subjects who preferred literature, however, were classified in a much more differentiated way. Differences in the classification of covers as typical of literature or of mystery books were more strongly accentuated by lovers of literature. An explanation for this might be that readers of literature possess greater expertise with books than mystery readers and, therefore, can make more refined distinctions between covers in terms of genre.

Hence, in the preliminary stage of information processing, the consumer of fiction is able to distinguish between major categories of the book supply, literature, mystery, and romance on the basis of the cover, irrespective of reading frequency or genre preference.

Genre categorization and communication

In order to determine whether the categorizations made by the subjects were the same as those assigned by the publisher, the NUGI-code was taken as a criterion. NUGI stands for Dutch Uniform Genre Classification, and the code is printed in every book that is published in the Netherlands. A strong agreement was found between the subjects' classification and the NUGI-code when the front cover was presented as a whole. Again, reading frequency and genre preference had no effect.

When a title and a cover picture were presented separately, however, the perceived genre was inconsistent with the NUGI-code. Again, frequency of reading and genre preference had no influence on genre classification. The stimulus material consisted of titles of books that were rated as typical of a genre by experts in literature and in consumer behavior toward works of fiction. It was expected that titles which the experts judged to be typical would communicate a book's genre better than those which were rated as atypical.

This expectation was confirmed for literature but not for mystery books. This difference could be explained by the fact that the majority of our experts were competent in literature.

The effect of (components of) the front cover on a typicality judgment

Apart from the question whether categorization by genre is correct or incorrect, a cover may be judged to be typical of a genre. When the front cover was judged as a whole, reading frequency had a significant effect on a typicality judgment. The more one reads, the more a cover is considered as typical of literature or of mysteries. When only titles were presented, it appeared that genre preference also had a direct effect on the extent to which titles were taken to be typical of literary or mystery books. A separate presentation of the front cover picture resulted in an effect of reading frequency and genre preference on the typicality judgment.

Assessing typicality on the basis of a title or a picture alone is evidently more difficult than when the whole front cover is available. The strong influence of genre preference possibly indicates that this variable serves as a device for concluding whether a title or a cover picture meets that preference. Our theoretical framework suggests that categorization of ambiguous stimuli is strongly determined by personal desires and needs: information is selected that fits in with one's wishes.

There clearly is an interaction between title and picture in determining the genre to which a book belongs. In the perception of covers as typical of a literary or mystery novel, there is a significant interaction effect between the title and the cover picture. Visual information only is therefore not sufficient in the first stage of the decision making process. This result contrasts with Krugman's thesis (1986) that visual information leads to quick processing and to a more rapid interpretation than textual information. Our research shows that text and image are both necessary during the brief moment in which consumers determine on the basis of the front cover to which genre a book belongs. Furthermore, when a cover is thought to be typical of a mystery book, there is a significant main effect of the front cover picture, and there is an influence of consumers' reading frequency and visual orientation. As far as literature is concerned, there is a significant effect of verbal orientation on a typicality judgment.

The relationship between a typicality judgment and initial preference

As to the extent to which an initial preference is generated by perceived typicality, this process is mediated by a specific genre preference. When literature is preferred, there is a positive correlation between the perception of a cover as typical of literature and an initial preference for that individual book. On the other hand, a cover that is thought to be typical of a mystery novel does not induce an initial preference for the book in question.

A preference for mysteries does not affect the process in which an initial preference for this type of books is triggered. The fact that typicality judgments do not affect consumers' initial preference, given a preference for mysteries, might be explained by the fact that lovers of mysteries probably perceive fewer differences between literature and mystery novels. They have a less definite preference for mysteries as well as a less strong aversion to literature. This implies that mysteries aficionados might need more information than the front cover alone to determine whether or not a book will meet their preference.

When both genres are preferred, the relationship between the typicality judgment and the initial preference points in the same positive direction as when literature only is preferred. Lovers of both literature and mysteries are perhaps more tolerant for differences between genres: even books that are not perceived as typical of a genre are judged to be worth reading.