

Genre norms and variation in online reviews

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Il contesto tecnologico e socio-culturale della Rete odierna influisce in vari modi sui generi testuali che sono stati trasferiti dalla stampa in Internet. Un esempio pertinente a questo riguardo è il genere della recensione, che è presente in numerosi tipi di siti web, dove il suo uso è stato esteso a un'ampia gamma di oggetti, inclusi destinazioni turistiche, servizi e diversi prodotti di consumo. Questo contributo esamina la variazione nelle recensioni online e la manifestazione degli atteggiamenti normativi degli utenti rispetto a questo genere testuale. L'analisi linguistica e pragmatica di un corpus di recensioni di esperti pubblicate su siti tematici italiani nonché dei relativi spazi di commento illustra, da un canto, la standardizzazione delle recensioni online esplicitamente categorizzate come tali dai siti. D'altro canto l'analisi dimostra la presenza, negli spazi di commento, di contributi di utenti che si conformano al modello generico nelle sue componenti pragmatiche essenziali ma adattano tale modello al contesto specifico del forum asincrono. In questi testi, che non sono stati discussi nella ricerca esistente sulle recensioni online, appaiono con particolare chiarezza certe tendenze innovative che caratterizzano più generalmente le recensioni di utenti e consumatori (la brevità; il registro ibrido specializzato e informale; un incremento di soggettività).

Parole chiavi:

genere testuale, comunicazione web, recensione, spazio commenti, argomentazione.

1. Introduction

Genres are holistic routines of action that associate communicative purposes with linguistic means and context types. On the cognitive level, knowledge of genre patterns facilitates processing by guiding action planning in production and inferencing in comprehension. On the socio-cultural level, genres constitute relevant categories for a society's members, generate normative expectations, are culture-specific, and are subject to historical change (Miller 1984; Bhatia 1993; Fix 2008; Biber & Conrad 2009). Genres as historically and culturally situated patterns differ from text types as analysts' categories (Mortara Garavelli 1988).

One of the many forces that influence genre is the way social actors adapt communicative practices reacting to technological constraints and opportunities. This article will be concerned with recent web-based communication. In the literature on cybergenres, from the 1990s on, linguists and communication scholars have investigated how written genres are influenced by factors related to the internet context (Yates & Sumner 1997; Herring et al. 2004; Giltrow & Stein 2009; Crystal 2011; Yus 2011; Thurlow & Mroczek 2011; Tannen & Trester 2013; Herring et al. 2013; Berkenkotter & Luginbühl 2014). The question has been raised how traditional genres change when they are transferred to the web; new, "native" internet genres like

personal websites or blogs have been described. In 1997, Yates and Sumner concluded their early paper on centrifugal and centripetal forces in the development of digital genres stating that

The overall import of genres comes from the role they play in differentiating between documents, which are constructed and delivered through an otherwise undifferentiated digital medium. (Yates & Sumner 1997)

It appears clear that today, differently from the situation evoked by the cited authors, the "digital medium" is rather differentiated, including such diverse environments as websites, chatrooms, discussion boards, social networks, online shops, swap meets, auction environments, collaborative work platforms, and so forth, not to speak of mobile phone apps. The functions and the evolution of genres in the contemporary web have to be examined taking into account the technical and socio-interactional characteristics of the diverse web spaces genres are part of. Accordingly, one important trend in more recent research on genres in the digital age has been to explicitly address questions of "cyberpragmatics" (Yus 2011), discourse and context.

Bearing this requirement in mind, we will focus on one particular genre – the review – which is having large success in internet.

The review genre has been closely associated with print media in the past, from the daily press to specialized and academic periodicals (cf. Zillig 1982; Köhler 2000; Baud 2003; Römer 2010). In their traditional form, reviews treat a range of culturally relevant artifacts, in particular books, movies, musical albums, concerts, restaurants and exhibitions, and are written by authors with some specific expertise in the field in question. Their main purpose is to help readers form a judgment about the object, a purpose reviewers try to reach reporting first-hand experience with the object, providing relevant background information and evaluating the object. Information on the object is given in the form of descriptions or in the form of arguments supporting the main evaluative standpoint put forward. Reviews may, moreover, contain recommendations by the reviewer concerning further actions by the reader, for instance to read or not to read a reviewed book.

In Internet, the English term *review* and semantically similar terms in other languages are used to categorize texts published on a great variety not only of topics (the range of reviewed objects has been extended to consumer goods, services and touristic destinations), but of contexts, too. For example, Boot (2011:7-8), in his analysis of the Dutch "booksphere", distinguishes seventeen different types of websites dedicated to books, many of which publish reviews: author sites, online shops, thematic websites, book news and review sites, periodicals, summary sites targeting high school students, specialized social networking sites, fan fiction sites, blogs etc. Similar lists could probably be created with regard to other types of reviewed objects. Which linguistic and

textual properties do reviews in the various online environments have and how is variation related to technical factors and to the social context?

Online reviewing has been investigated both with regard to objects with a long reviewing tradition, such as books (e.g. Caballero 2005; Domsch 2009; Boot 2011) or films (e.g. Bieler et al. 2007; Thet et al. 2010; Taboada 2011), and with regard to more recent online variants of the genre such as that dedicated to travel destinations (De Ascaniis 2012).

With regard to book reviewing, Domsch (2009) has raised the issue of genre change in relation to digital environments. Particular attention is paid to the Amazon bookshop. Recalling that the traditional monological settings of print media "put the reader exclusively at the receiving end of [...] critical conversation" (Domsch 2009: 227), the author hypothesizes:

This is about to change drastically in the near future, as critical genres are migrating to the internet, and, after a period of more or less simple mirroring of print forms, new forms emerge that make a complex use of the possibilities of computer mediated communication. (Domsch 2009: 227)

Domsch underlines the innovation potential of non-expert reviewing and of feed-back on reviews by users (e.g. the "Was this review helpful to you" function in Amazon), without, however, analyzing any instances of the genre. Similarly, Boot (2011: 3), who provides a useful analysis of web contexts, as we have seen, limits himself to characterizing book reviews in social networking sites summarily as "anything between an exclamation and a traditional review". Caballero (2005) concentrates mainly on theoretical issues, adding a brief consideration about the functions of hyperlinks. The papers on film reviews cited above, on the other hand, are quantitative corpus-based studies that focus on linguistic aspects and text structure and do not consider context. A study that combines empirical text analysis with an analysis of communication contexts is the one presented, in an argumentation-theoretical perspective, by De Ascaniis (2012). This author analyzes user reviews published on the Trip Advisor platform. She interprets them as instances of "electronic word of mouth" (eWOM), defined, in the marketing literature, as "any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004: 39; cf. also Luca 2011).

All in all, research on online reviews that takes into account both context and linguistic form does not abound. More specifically, even if several authors hypothesize that the increasing participation of non experts in reviewing is likely to change the genre, only few attention has been dedicated to an empirical investigation of different modalities of user participation and their consequences on the produced texts. In our paper, we will address these questions in a synchronic, pragmatic perspective focusing on reviews in the

context of thematic websites and on user participation through the comment function of the websites' official (expert) reviews. The decision to include comment spaces in the corpus was motivated by the expectancy that forum reactions might reveal the users' interpretations of reviews and their normative attitudes with regard to them. As we will see, in addition, comment spaces turned out to host review-like texts as well, making it possible to analyze genre variation and boundaries in their relation to two different online contexts. We have chosen to consider both objects with a long critical tradition (musical albums, exhibitions and restaurants) and objects with a more recent history of reviews (consumer electronics). All data are taken from the Italian web. In what follows, we will give an overview over our data and methods (section 2), discuss the characteristics of the official reviews in our corpus (section 3), analyze the interactions in the reviews' comment spaces (section 4) and conclude (section 5).

2. Data and methods

The texts analyzed in this study have been downloaded in 2012 from four Italian thematic websites that include sections headed *recensioni* ('reviews').¹ The subject matters covered are art exhibitions (www.mostreinmostra.it), light music (www.fullsong.it), haute cuisine (www.passionegourmet.it), and consumer electronics (www.digital.it).²

Reviews are the main content of *mostreinmostra*, whereas the other three websites are more variegated. *Passionegourmet* combines restaurant reviews with recipes, descriptions of travel destinations, tasting reports and other culinary news. On *fullsong*, CD reviews are published along with interviews, musicians' biographies, event announcements, CD label portraits and hit lists. *Digital* contains various news related to consumer electronics and their producers as well as promotional video spots and images.

All reviews have a comment function. The data considered in the present study include both reviews (the most recent texts present at the time of data collection have been selected) and posts associated to these in the corresponding comment spaces (see table 1).

¹ The corpus has been compiled within the project *From perception to inference. Evidential, argumentative and textual aspects of perception predicates in Italian* (Swiss National Foundation grant n. 141350), directed by Johanna Miecznikowski and Andrea Rocci at USI Università della Svizzera italiana, Lugano. We would like to thank Martina Cameroni, Maria Chiara Pasinetti and Francesca Saltamacchia for their contribution to data collection.

² In the meantime, this website has changed its name into www.webnews.it. We will maintain the name *digital*, used at the moment of data collection.

	Mostreinmostra	Passionegourmet	Digital	Fullsong	Total
Official reviews	177	12	225	80	494
Associated posts	66	68	407	70	611

Table 1. Reviews and posts in their comment space gathered from four Italian thematic websites.

Commenting posts have been categorized paying attention to sequential and topical properties (section 4.1). In this task, the corpus annotating software UAM CorpusTool (O'Donnell 2008) has been employed. Both official reviews and posts have been analyzed as to linguistic aspects, sequential relations between texts (cf. Mondada 1999 for an early application of conversation analytical categories to computer mediated communication), and properties of the medium and the situational context (Herring 2007).

3. Official reviews

The texts named *recensioni* are generally written by collaborators of the websites. Short biographies available on the websites (except in *fullsong*) bring out the expertise of these authors, mentioning training in the field of reference, a particular passion for that field and/or journalistic experience. That the websites' official reviews are instances of specialized discourse is also underlined by the fact that, at least in three cases (*fullsong*, *passionegourmet* and *digital*) reviews sections are organized in subsections according to the kind of reviewed object (e.g. music genre in *fullsong*), i.e. systems of categorization inherent to the relevant fields of knowledge.

The average length of official reviews varies between roughly 860 words (*digital*) and 435 words (*fullsong*), *mostreinmostra* and *passionegourmet*³ occupying an intermediate position (645 and 620 words, respectively). The overall average length in our corpus is 794 words. In most cases, pictures are added to the text. The texts themselves generally respect the main genre conventions of reviews described in the literature on non-academic reviews, containing descriptions based on the reviewer's own experience with the reviewed artifact as well as evaluations and recommendations to the reader, justified by largely field-specific arguments (cf. also Miecznikowski 2015).

We will illustrate the mentioned properties discussing the following excerpt of an official review of a tablet:

- (1) 1 **Subito una buona impressione**
 2 DITTA X dimostra di aver finalmente compreso le molteplici esigenze degli utenti, con il
 3 nuovo Tab X1, un tablet dotato finalmente della nuovissima versione Android 4 X e
 4 dell'interfaccia utente TouchWiz UX leggermente modificata per l'occasione.
 5 Nel Tab X1 ritroviamo un validissimo display capacitivo PLS TFT da 10,1 pollici con Gorilla
 6 Glass e una risoluzione pari a 800x1280 pixel per 16 milioni di colori e un ppi (pixel
 7 density) pari a 149, che gli consentono buonissimi risultati nella resa della leggibilità sia in
 8 quella dei colori e dei neri (con i primi decisamente meglio rispetto alla profondità dei neri).

³ In the case of *passionegourmet*, the average length has been calculated on the basis of a larger sample of 80 reviews.

9 Stranamente, la sensibilità dello schermo è buona, ma non eccelsa, visto che abbiamo
 10 riscontrato qualche breve impuntamento, comunque nulla di preoccupante.
 11 Il processore Dual-core Cortex-A9 da 1 GHz con 1GB di RAM gli consentono una buona
 12 stabilità e delle buone prestazioni, seppure non eccellenti: abbiamo notato degli
 13 occasionali, piccoli ritardi nell'utilizzo rapido del dispositivo, ma ancora una volta nulla di
 14 particolarmente fastidioso o preoccupante.
 15 Di positivo va evidenziato la scomparsa dell'eccessivo e rapido surriscaldamento che
 16 affliggeva altri tablet DITTA X, e l'accresciuta sensazione di solidità, forse più dovuta alle
 17 dimensioni (meno sottile del Tab Y, coi suoi 9,7 mm) e al peso (587 grammi) accresciuti
 18 che non ai materiali, che restano sostanzialmente plastiche di sufficiente qualità.
 19 **Completo e veloce**
 20 [...]
 21 **Versatile ed equilibrato**
 22 [...]

(www.digital.it, review published on the 23rd of April, 2012)

The author explicitly refers to testing manipulations of the tablet by agents including himself ("abbiamo riscontrato" 'we have found', l. 9-10; "abbiamo notato" 'we have noticed', l. 12) as well as to perception ("sensazione di solidità" 'sensation of solidity', l. 16).

He repeatedly uses evaluative lexemes, the most explicit of which are *buono/buonissimo* 'good'/'very good', l. 1, 7, 9, 11, 12, *validissimo* 'very useful', l. 5, *meglio* 'better', l. 8, *eccelso* 'excellent', l. 9, *eccellente* 'excellent', l. 12, *fastidioso* 'disturbing', l. 14, *preoccupante* 'worrying', l. 14, *positivo* 'positive', l. 15. He justifies his evaluations with arguments regarding the performance of the tablet in the activities in which the potential buyer presumably wishes to use it (e.g. the display is judged excellent in l. 5 because it ensures good readability, l. 7; processor performance is judged less than excellent in lines 11 to 14 because it does not allow a rapid use of the device). Other arguments concern properties that might be relevant to estimate the life expectancy of the device ("stabilità" 'stability', l. 16). The various section headings in the text (lines 1, 19, 21) can, in fact, be interpreted as a summary of the main arguments in favor of an overall positive assessment. Linguistic elements such as concessive and contrastive discourse markers (*ma* 'but', l. 9, 13, *comunque* 'anyway', l. 10 or *seppure* 'even if', l. 12) or negation (9, 10, 12, 13), which are recurrent throughout the text, confirm the review's argumentative nature.

Along with the above-mentioned subjective descriptions, evaluations, and arguments, the author provides a considerable amount of factual information about technical features and some information about the context (e.g. pointing out improvements in comparison with previous products released by the same company).

In the specific medium context of the four websites examined, some of the defining features of reviews are underlined by adding paratextual elements. The most important such element is the rating expressed numerically or by a number of icons. A rating by the reviewer (*digital*), an average rating by users (*mostreinmostra*) or the indication of both (*fullsong*, *passionegourmet*) highlight the central act of evaluation and, indirectly, the implicit act of recommendation

based on it. On the *digital* website, moreover, further paratextual elements draw attention to the argumentative underpinning of evaluations (cf. fig. 1). On one hand, the final grade ("voto webnews") is calculated on the basis of four partial grades ("giudizi") regarding the technical features, the design, the performance and the quality/price ratio, standardizing topoi that are relevant in buyers' decision making. On the other hand, specific arguments are spelled out in a pros and cons section ("pro" and "contro" in fig. 1).

10 pollici sopra il cielo

è un tablet da 10 pollici con Android 4, completo in ogni aspetto e adatto tanto al lavoro quanto al divertimento.



Recensione
Immagini
Notizie

TABLET HANDS ON

VOTO WEBNEWS
8,3

PREZZO
€ 399

GIUDIZI

- Caratteristiche 9,2
- Dimensioni 8
- Prestazioni 8
- Qualità prezzo 8

PRO
 Ottimo display e HSDPA fino a 21 Mbps

CONTRO
 Mancanza di Flash e autofocus per la fotocamera

Hai domande su ? Scrivi sul Forum!

Di *Stefano Lorenzini*, 23 aprile 2012

Subito una buona impressione



... dimostra di aver finalmente compreso le molteplici esigenze degli utenti, con il nuovo **...**, un **tablet** dotato finalmente della nuovissima versione **...** e

Fig. 1: Visual and paratextual elements of the review reported as example (1).

4. Comment spaces associated to official reviews

4.1 Classification of posts

In three of the four considered websites (*mostreinmostra*, *passionegourmet* and *fullsong*), any user can leave a comment to a review after having indicated his or her name and e-mail address. In *digital*, access is mediated by a registration process and users have to wait for acceptance before becoming active participants. The public, open character of the comment spaces favors occasional participation rather than community building. An exception is *passionegourmet*, where a small group of users participates regularly.

The comment spaces in question are text-only, asynchronous forums that do not impose any space limits on single messages. Three websites allow for one thread only. One website, *passionegourmet*, allows for directly responding also to posts (via a "rispondi" button), making hierarchical thread structures possible. The average length of contributions is 39 words in *digital*, 42 words in *passionegourmet*, 54 words in *fullsong*, and 39 words in *mostreinmostra*.

As any other asynchronous written message board, comment spaces make quasi-conversational exchanges possible, but (differently from chat rooms)⁴ are also compatible with less interactive message sequences.⁵ Consequently, a certain degree of variation can be observed regarding the modes of interaction as well as genre characteristics of single texts.

Variation is favored, moreover, by the fact that in some cases the comment function appears to be the main or only channel chosen by users to participate actively in the website's communicative space and therefore tends to be used to fulfill various purposes. This is the case in *passionegourmet* and *mostreinmostra*, where no other forums are offered. De facto, the situation is analogous in *fullsong*: this website offers registered users the possibility to publish an anonymous review in a section headed *Community*, but hardly any user had grasped this opportunity at the moment of data collection. In *digital*, separate well attended forums are offered in a section headed *Discussioni* 'discussions', suggesting a functional division between the reviews section and the discussions section. The website administrators' intention to attribute different functions to the two sections is confirmed by the fact that they explicitly address readers of official reviews, by a link placed in the header of these reviews (cf. fig. 1), to post eventual questions on the discussion forum

⁴ Cf. Zitzen & Stein (2004), Pistolesi (2004), Maroccia (2004).

⁵ Cf. An analysis of asynchronous forums and e-mail interaction in a conversation analytical (CA) perspective has been conducted by Mondada (1999), who focuses on adjacency pairs and on citing practices and collaborative formulations. Miecznikowski & Pepin (2003) analyze the degree of interactiveness of a small corpus of asynchronous forums in academic teaching. A recent relevant study is Bolander's (2012) paper dedicated to comment forums associated with personal blog posts, which examines forum interaction with particular attention to the way writers identify the posts they react to (*responsiveness*).

("Hai domande su [reviewed object]? Scrivi sul forum!"). In practice, as we will see (and as the mere presence of redirecting links suggests), not all users comply with this recommendation, but do use the comment function to post questions as well.

In order to have a clearer picture of the use of comment spaces in our corpus, we have categorized single posts according to their sequential relation with the official review, distinguishing (a) user posts that form an adjacency pair with the official review starting the discussion thread; (b) posts that primarily react to preceding forum posts (third⁺ posts).

Within second pair parts, we have distinguished comments with a dominant metacommunicative purpose (Franceschini 1998; Weder 2008), which assess the official review positively or negatively, from other types of posts that directly topicalize aspects of the reviewed object. The questions mentioned above, which are frequent in *digital*, belong to this category. The most important type of contribution in this category, however, is what we will call *user review* (cf. also Miecznikowski 2015): this type of post, which we will discuss in more detail in section 4.3., shares some features with official reviews and is present in all four websites. On *fullsong*, finally, we found what might be termed *fan letters*, i.e. contributions directly addressing the artist of a reviewed album.

Within third⁺ posts, no further content-based distinctions have been made. The distribution of the various categories in the four websites is shown in table 2. 37 posts (about 6% of all posts) do not fit any of these categories.

	Mostre- inmostra	Passione- gourmet	Digi- tal	Full- song	Total	medium length
Second pair parts (by users)						
- Comments assessing the official review	8	13	34	23	79	42 w.
- Posts topicalizing the reviewed object						
- Questions	0	7	144	0	151	25 w.
- User reviews	55	10	118	34	216	56 w.
- Fan letters	0	0	0	3	3	30 w.
Third ⁺ posts						
- by users	2	27	81	7	117	27 w.
- by official reviewers	0	3	3	2	8	150 w.
Other	1	8	27	1	37	18 w.
Total	66	68	407	70	611	40 w.

Table 2. Types of contributions posted in reviews' comment spaces and their average length in words.

In what follows, we briefly illustrate each category.

Example 2 shows a positive metacommunicative comment praising the official review, followed by a series of congratulations and a greeting:

- (2) Recensione indubbiamente esaustiva. Foto accattivanti e invitanti. Complimenti ai gestori del ristorante e agli autori del blog. Un saluto a tutti i lettori.

Undoubtedly a comprehensive review. Appealing and inviting pictures. Congratulations to the restaurant managers and to the authors of the blog. Greetings to all readers.
(www.passionegourmet.it, 04.06.2012)

Almost half of the messages in *digital* and a few posts on *passionegourmet* are questions aimed at obtaining further information on the reviewed object from the reviewer or (more frequently) from other users. The topic is the reviewed object rather than the review. In example 3, the author refers to the reviewed mobile phone by means of a demonstrative pronoun ("questo telefono"), establishing it as the main topic of her message while underlining its givenness in the situational context. The question is addressed to other users ("Ragazzi", "per chi lo possiede"):

- (3) Ragazzi mi interessa questo telefono, ma per chi lo possiede che mi può dire della parte del marketplace? io ho un MODELLO X e sul fatto delle applicazioni sono pienamente soddisfatta, e vorrei sapere com è quello della DITTA Y!

Hey guys, I'm interested in this phone, but what can those of you who own it tell me about the marketplace part? I have a model X and as far as applications are concerned I'm fully satisfied and I would like to know about this aspect in the model Y!

(www.digital.it, 22.06.2012)

In (4), we provide a first example of a user review. The artist whose album is being discussed is referred to anaphorically by a personal pronoun ("io", "il suo disco"). Apart from this cohesive link to the official review, the text is characterized by a high degree of autonomy and, in fact, resembles to some extent official reviews rather than commenting on one: one finds references to first-hand experience ("Dopo averlo visto cantare ad Amici"), evaluation supported by argumentation, an act of recommendation ("Consiglio assolutamente l'acquisto di questo disco"), and even a final numerical rating:

- (4) Finalmente...un po' di cuore nella musica!

Dopo averlo visto cantare ad *Amici* non ho esitato a comprare il suo disco! Si può tranquillamente affermare che la musica italiana ha guadagnato un nuovo, particolare e sensibilissimo cantautore. Direi che la caratteristica fondamentale e rara di questo disco è un intimismo totale, che parla al cuore senza intermediazioni e orpelli vocali. E' questo il motivo per cui preferisco la sua musica a quella dell'altra finalista, Annalisa. Consiglio assolutamente l'acquisto del disco, per me è un 10 stelle!

At last... a bit of heart in music!

After having seen him sing at Amici I bought his album immediately! It is safe to say that Italian music has gained a new, special and sensitive songwriter. I would say that the main, and rare, characteristic of this album is that it is totally intimate, speaking to the heart without intermediaries and vocal tinsels. And this is the reason why I prefer his music to that of the other finalist, Annalisa. I absolutely recommend to buy this album, for me it's 10 stars!

(www.fullsong.it, 14.03.2011)

Fan letters, which directly address and praise the artist of a reviewed album, are a form of forum participation in which public self-expression prevails over information exchange and argumentation. Nevertheless, they share some features with reviews, in particular evaluation and, in two of the three cases found, reference to personal experience. In example 5, "traspare" 'shines

through' presupposes direct observation of the singer's acts, most probably of her music:

- (5) Lorj sei unica, sei un'artista del calibro di Mina oltre alle doti artistiche sei una ragazza senza borie, e falsità questo è quello che traspare.
Lorj you are unique, you are an artist of the caliber of Mina, besides your artistic gifts, you are unpretentious and sincere: this is what shines through.
 (www.fullsong.it, 11.03.2011)

Third⁺ posts respond to authors of preceding posts. The placement in a three turn sequence is construed narratively in the following example, for the author chronologically reports his or her reading of the review and, subsequently, of the particular user post he or she is reacting to:

- (6) Beh, passo per caso e leggo una recensione (che approvo al 99%) ed il parere di XY, e rimango stupito. [...] Oggi, X, si distingue chi varia: ascolta (scarica, acquista, vedi tu) "I Am...Sasha Fierce", se non l'hai già fatto. Poi ascolta "4", e noterai una variazione del sound, dei ritmi, il tutto in un modo notevole [...].
Very well, I drop in by chance and read a review (with which I agree at 99%) and the opinion of XY and I'm really surprised. [...] Today, X, what makes the difference is variation: listen (download, buy, whatever you want) "I Am...Sasha Fierce", if you haven't yet. Then listen to "4", and you will notice a change in sound, in rhythms, which is quite remarkable [...].
 (www.fullsong.it, 11.07.2011)

The functions of third⁺ posts by users are extremely varied: answering questions, agreement or disagreement on a specific issue and/or formulation of more general standpoints (of the type "si distingue chi varia" in ex. 6), adding hearsay reports, anecdote telling, gossip, joking, etc. When third⁺ posts are authored by the official reviewer (only 8 cases in total), the purpose is mostly to answer a criticism:

- (7) Rispondo cordialmente a chi si trova in disaccordo sulla categoria dove ho posto l'album di Adele: il jazz racchiude in sè molti generi e sottogeneri tra i quali: Blues Gospel Musica classica Ragtime "Soul jazz" Nu jazz e tanti altri. Approfitto per porgere un Buon Anno a tutti i nostri lettori.
I'd like to give a cordial answer to those who disagree about the category I put Adele's album in: jazz includes many genres and sub-genres, among which: Blues Gospel Classical Music Ragtime "Soul Jazz" Nu jazz and many others. I take this opportunity to wish Happy New Year to all our readers.
 (www.fullsong.it, 03.01.2012)

4.2 A closer look on comments assessing official reviews

Users' pragmatic choices reveal a great deal about their interpretation of the thread-initial review. For example, part of the posts mention or imply the fact that authors are actually considering a purchase or a visit, interpreting official reviews as potential contributions to this process of decision making. In other cases, agreement or disagreement is expressed with regard to the content of the official review, which displays users' particular attention to evaluations and the defense of standpoints in official reviews.

More specific information about the users' interpretation of online reviews and, above all, about their normative expectancies with regard to them can be

found in metacommunicative comments. Positive metacommunicative assessments, often accompanied by compliments (cf. example 2) or thanks, praise properties such as exhaustiveness, persuasiveness, esthetic quality and the reviewer's expertise. Negative assessments can be formulated explicitly (see example 8) or take the more implicit form of hetero-repairs pointing to problems in the official review which, from the user's point of view, should be solved before interaction can be pursued (example 9):

- (8) L' articolo in questione è tutto una somma di errori e quantomeno di affermazioni azzardate: Qualità costruttiva: OTTIMA....DA PRIMA DELLA CLASSE, forse l' aggettivo giusto sarebbe stato "Decente" , forse chi ha scritto l'articolo non conosce la XX pro e altri apparecchi fotografici ai quali il suddetto aggettivo calza a misura. [...]
L' autore menziona un fantomatico "sensore in formato reflex", cosa sia non mi è dato ad intendere, se non vado errato esistono reflex con almeno 8 diverse dimensioni di sensore. [...]
The whole article in question is an accumulation of mistakes or at least unfounded statements: Build quality: EXCELLENT...FIRST CLASS, perhaps the right word would have been "Decent", perhaps who has written the article does not know XX pro and other photographic equipment which the above-mentioned adjective fits perfectly. The author mentions some mysterious "sensor in reflex format", I don't understand what this is, if I'm not mistaken there are reflex cameras with at least 8 different sensor sizes.
(www.digital.it, comment space of a review published on the 12th of April, 2012)
- (9) Non ho capito se il televisore l'avete provato o no
I don't understand if you have tried that television set out or not
(www.digital.it, comment space of a review published on the 15th of May, 2012)

In negative assessments, users complain about inaccuracy (cf. the first two lines of ex. 8) and lack of expertise in the field (ex. 8: "forse chi ha scritto l'articolo non conosce [...]" 'perhaps who has written the article does not know [...]'). In addition, users suspect reviewers of not possessing any first-hand information (cf. ex. 9) or of not being disinterested judges. Users' vigilance with regard to the latter dimension of the reviewers' ethos is probably to be interpreted in the light of the various scandals about fraudulent internet reviewing discussed in recent years.⁶

Given the potential interactional costs of negative assessments, the above-mentioned complaints are likely to correspond to minimal standards official reviews should fulfill according to users. Praise, on the other hand, is likely to regard properties that are desirable, but that users do not take for granted, i.e. properties that exceed normal or "political" behavior (Watts 2003). On these

⁶ A much-discussed case was that of an investigation conducted in 2011 by the US Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), which examined the way user-generated content is presented by Trip Advisor on its reviewing sites. ASA obliged Trip Advisor to remove claims to the trustworthiness of user reviews, arguing that they were not based on procedures able to effectively prevent fraudulent reviewing. More recently, more radical legal actions were undertaken against Trip Advisor, such as the € 500'000 fine imposed in December 2014 by Italy's antitrust authority for not having prevented false reviews. Other investigations concerned fraudulent reputation-enhancement companies. A case that became known after the period of data collection, in Fall 2013, was that of the sting operation "Clean Turf" conducted by New York's attorney general. As a result of this operation, companies that had published false reviews on sites such as Yelp, Google Local, and CitySearch were fined for a total of \$ 350'000.

grounds, accuracy, first-hand experience, disinterestedness and a certain degree of specialized knowledge can be interpreted as corresponding to minimal normative requirements. In contrast, users seem to consider exhaustiveness, persuasiveness, esthetic quality and a particularly high degree of specialized knowledge as not strictly required, but nice-to-have properties of official reviews.

4.3 User reviews in comment spaces

Even if comment spaces are technically designed in such a way as to allow considerable variation as to text and interaction types, most interactions they host can be seen to share a common goal, which is, ultimately, to contribute in some way to help participants judge the reviewed object and make decisions about it. This common goal becomes evident, for instance, in the way participants treat questions in *digital*: requests for experience based opinions such as example 3 or requests for hearsay information often receive answers, while purely technical questions about how a device works tend to be ignored. Moreover, some of the norms that users occasionally refer to with regard to official reviews are related to this overarching goal and are therefore really valid for all types of associated posts, too, especially the expectancy that writers will not post ads or invent/distort facts.

The posts in comment spaces we have categorized as user reviews are not explicitly categorized as *recensioni* by websites, nor do users employ that term to refer to them, nor have they graphical characteristics that make them recognizable as reviews. Nevertheless, we claim that these posts should be considered to be a form of online reviewing. They serve the before-mentioned overall goal in a specific manner, differing quite neatly from the other main types of posts and sharing, as we have anticipated in section 4.1., important properties with official reviews. Here are some more examples, which all contain evaluations supported by one or more arguments. In one case (ex. 11) a recommendation is given:

- (10) Ciao. Io sono solitamente molto selettivo e esigente per quanto riguarda i contenuti delle mostre. Devo ammettere che questa mostra mi ha colpito e stupito per complessità di interessi e di spunti su cui riflettere, specialmente per quanto riguarda il rapporto fra il giovane Raffaello e Giovanni Santi. Approvo le scelte dei curatori.
Hi there. I am usually very selective and demanding as to the content of exhibitions. I have to admit that I've been impressed and astonished by this exhibition because of the complexity of viewpoints and of thought provoking impulses, especially with regard to the relationship between the young Raphael and Giovanni Santi. I agree with the curators' choices.
(www.mostreinmostra.it, 14th of May, 2009)
- (11) Stupendo il confronto fra le due 'Cene'...così sì che si colgono facilmente gli aspetti di continuità e di cesura all'interno della poetica di un artista. Da vedere!!!
The comparison between the two 'Dinners' is superb... it really allows to you to understand at a glance the continuity and the breaks in the poetry of an artist. Must see it!!!
(www.mostreinmostra.it, 22nd of March, 2009)

- (12) io l'ho comprato ieri da DITTA X 400 euro lo trovo valido, ottimo il modulo telefonico per ora no problem unico neo forse per l'utilizzo "umano" che ne faccio, è un leggero ritardo dello scorrimento schermo
I bought it yesterday from COMPANY X 400 euro I find it works well, the telephone module is very good up to now no problem the only blemish, perhaps, for the "human" use I make of it, is a slight lag in screen swiping
 (www.digital.it, comment to a tablet review published on April 23rd, 2012)

Besides the formulation of evaluations and recommendations, one of the most characteristic features of these texts is explicit or implicit reference to personal experience with the object. In 62 of the 216 user reviews, we found explicit reports of direct interactions with the reviewed object (purchase, ownership, manipulation, visit, perception), like in example 4 ("dopo averlo visto cantare" 'after having seen him sing') or in example 12 above. In other cases, direct experience is evoked more indirectly. In ex. 10, for example, even if the writer does not mention that he has visited the exhibition, having been impressed by it presupposes direct experience. Similarly, in ex. 11, reporting an emotional reaction to the juxtaposition of the two paintings strongly suggests that the writer has actually seen it.

Within the environment of comment spaces, the combination of evaluation and/or recommendation, argumentation and reference to direct experience as well as the absence of questions and of metacommunicative assessments concerning the official review form recognizable patterns that justify the treatment of these forum posts as a kind of user review. It is particularly interesting to note that, as far as direct experience is concerned, authors tend to make explicit what has appeared to be a minimal normative requirement for official reviews.

We will now sum up the main differences with regard to official reviews and discuss the relevance of the review genre as a normative model for the user reviews in our corpus.

User reviews differ from official reviews in the following respects:

- Authors are not categorized as expert reviewers by websites. Self-categorizations (of which we found ten instances) tend to be formulated in terms of personal preferences or character traits, not in terms of professional expertise. An example can be found in excerpt 10 ("io sono solitamente molto selettivo e esigente [...] "I am usually very selective and demanding [...]).
- Even if user reviews are the longest type of user post (see table 2), they are considerably shorter and less elaborated than official reviews. Any single writer highlights only few aspects of the object and background information is given very rarely.
- Writers often combine specialized vocabulary and lexical/grammatical elements belonging to a formal register with informal elements. In ex.

12, for instance, field-specific nouns like "modulo telefonico" or "scorrimento schermo" are integrated into a rather informal discourse characterized by non-standard punctuation, coordinating syntax, nominal sentences and a discourse marker in English ("no problem").

- The texts are more subjective than official reviews. Authors frequently make use of the first person singular, eventually alternating it with the impersonal and objectifying constructions that are typical of official reviews and of other specialized genres (so we find, in ex. 4, "non ho esitato" / "direi" / "preferisco" / "consiglio" / "per me" along with the impersonal formula "Si può [...] affermare"). Emphatic language (cf. the exclamations in ex. 4 and in ex. 11 or the use of reinforcing "assolutamente" and "totale" in ex. 4) is quite common.
- As pointed out by Miecznikowski (2015), argumentation schemes are partly different from those in official reviews. Authors adduce field-specific arguments in both types of text; but in user reviews, further schemes are added, in particular recommendations (as standpoints) supported by a subjective appreciation by the reviewer (as an argument). We find this scheme in ex. 4, where "per me è un 10 stelle" seems to justify the recommendation "Consiglio assolutamente l'acquisto del disco". This kind of argumentation can be interpreted as resting on a prediction warranted by an analogical scheme and the assumption that the reader's preferences and habits are similar to those of the writer ('what I like you will like, too').

The specific features of user reviews listed above are related to the context of the comment space in various ways. Informality and shortness is common on discussion boards and social media. Non exhaustiveness and subjectivity is related to the fact that user evaluation in comment spaces is a collective argumentative task. Given the presence of the official review and of eventual further opinions, it is not necessary to describe and evaluate the object in all its aspects. Moreover, the participation of several writers with equivalent roles relativizes the single points of view. Writers construe their point of view as subjective and leave it to readers to arrive at a synthesis between different points of view expressed on the same forum or elsewhere. This strategy has interactional advantages for writers: on one hand, they diminish their own responsibility for evaluative acts and the corresponding risks; on the other hand, it allows them to stress authenticity, agency and first-hand experience.

Collective reviewing characterizes user reviewing in general. To some extent, the texts analyzed here are similar to short variants of user reviews published on consumer platforms, fan fiction sites etc. (cf. section 1). It has to be stressed, though, that normative pressure on writers is higher on those platforms, given that all texts are explicitly declared to be reviews. In addition, more information on reviewing expertise is normally available to readers, since

authors have profiles and platforms categorize them on the basis of the number of reviews published, the assessments by other users or even the presumed broadness of knowledge (Trip Advisor, for example, calculates the percentage of the world a traveler has visited on the basis of the reviews he or she has published).

In a genre perspective, we hypothesize that the users of our corpus exploit a participation space available to them that is technically weakly constrained and whose unifying goal is to help form judgments on objects in order to publish their own reviews, shaping them in a forum-compatible way. We think that the genre model of the online written review – be it that of declared experts or that on user platforms – is relevant for these authors. Examples of that genre are present in the local context and the relative norms are focused on in more or less direct ways in metacommunicative comments. User reviewing is a common practice in the wider internet context. Reduced to its essential elements and interpreted in more subjective terms, the genre model of the review helps participants in comment spaces express their opinion as an art lover or consumer in a recognizable and legitimate way.

The eWOM metaphor proposed in the literature on consumer decision making (cf. section 1) suggests that oral practices of information transmission and argumentation may constitute relevant models for the expression of opinions on products and cultural objects in comment spaces or forums. The general influence of orality on style and register in chat, SMS, forums and a number of other situations in the web is indeed uncontroversial (cf. Pistoletti 2004 on Italian). Moreover, specific dialogic or multi-party oral activity types related to product evaluation and decision making may be relevant for the more conversational exchanges in comment spaces attested in our corpus. However, such activity types can hardly be considered to be the dominant genre models for user reviews, which often are not part of conversational exchanges, have a high degree of autonomy and cohesion, integrate elements of specialized and formal discourse and adopt the specifically written practice of rating. These characteristics suggest that, when it comes to genre models (rather than register or style), online writing practices are probably more relevant for our writers than are patterns of spoken interaction.

5. Conclusions

The approach chosen in this paper, sensitive to local and global aspects of context (Akman & Bazzanella 2003), has made it possible to investigate reviewing in different fields, in the Italian web, taking into account not only linguistic form, but also the technical constraints imposed by the medium environment, writers' opportunities for participation, the sequential relation between texts and metacommunicative clues to the writers' orientation towards language and communication norms. In particular, the qualitative analysis of

comment spaces has given access to reviewing practices that lie beyond the scope of most existing research on reviews, which concentrates on texts explicitly categorized as reviews. It has shown both central features of the review genre (among which the presence of evaluative and argumentative acts and the preconditions of direct experience and some degree of specialized knowledge) and a considerable amount of genre variation.

The case discussed in this article shows at least three more general effects of the contemporary web on genre categories:

- standardization underlining the genre's "fixity" (Yates & Sumner 1997) through choices of the website operators such as genre categorization, the addition of predefined paratextual and graphical elements to texts and instructions for forum use;
- the broadening of the range of authors who produce texts belonging the genre, which in user reviews results in a decrease of length and formality and an increase of subjectivity;
- fuzzy edges due to the creation of multifunctional, written modality based spaces of interaction that make situated interpretations and adaptations of written genres possible.

Technologically fostered user participation emerges as an important innovative force in genre development, especially in comment spaces. It is closely related to standardization, which facilitates the website owners' task to exercise control over what is published in their webspaces and provides appropriate and easily accessible genre models for text production also to novice or occasional writers.

Independently of how the tendencies discussed above interplay in detail, it is evident that, in the contemporary web 2.0, the phase of simple genre transfer from print to internet is concluded and new evaluative and argumentative practices have developed that are transforming the review genre. Further research in a diachronic and in an intercultural perspective is needed to better understand the categorial differentiations that are arising within and around reviews and the permeability of asynchronous forums and comment spaces to different genres present in the web.

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