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Was this analysis helpful? A genre analysis of the Amazon.com discourse community and its "most helpful" product reviews

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a descriptive analysis of Amazon.com product reviews that have been rated as "most helpful" by the Amazon.com discourse community in an attempt to discover if the shared values of the community are reflected in this specific genre. Drawing on genre theory and corpus-based discourse analysis, I detail the rhetorical patterns that exist in these reviews by analyzing a corpus of 142 "most helpful positive" and "most helpful critical" product reviews. A comparison of the results indicates that differences exist in the rhetorical patterning of positive and critical reviews. To reconcile this difference, I put forward a general argument that these differences still work towards the same overall communicative purpose of the genre, which is in turn a reflection of the shared values and goals of the Amazon.com discourse community. Product reviews that contain new or "experience" type information, as opposed to old or "search" (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010) type information are preferred by the Amazon.com discourse community. Concurrently, reviews that are similar to the "soft selling" form of advertisements (Cook, 1992), or reviews that are reminiscent of elements of "synthetic personalization" (Fairclough, 1989), are considered less helpful than reviews that focus on the author or product of the review.

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1. Introduction

The online product reviews found on Amazon.com (and other online retailers) have been characterized as containing a personal style of writing (Racine, 2002) and sharing similar rhetorical strategies (Pollach, 2008). While the apparent purpose of this genre (i.e., online product reviews) is to provide information to prospective consumers, not all reviews perform this function equally. Indeed, "helpful" reviews – those reviews that aid potential consumers in making a purchasing decision – have been the focus of previous studies (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010), yet none has analyzed the rhetorical features of this specific subset of reviews from the perspective of genre theory. By framing this genre as a form of communication used by a discourse community, a genre analysis can work to suggest some of the shared goals and values of that discourse community, which are reflected in the particular ways that the discourse community uses the genre.

Furthermore, an analysis of the rhetorical focus (i.e., intended audience) may help glean information regarding the review authors' purposes and assumptions in terms of the intended audience. Explicit or implicit assumptions of audience that appear in the reviews can be gauged against the level of approval that the readers of the reviews provide (measured in helpful votes), supplying another factor by which community-preferred examples can be identified. The resulting answer(s) to what makes a review "helpful" thus takes into consideration both the social and rhetorical processes that are valued by the discourse community.

1.1. Amazon.com "most helpful" product reviews

Amazon.com is a large online retailer that has enjoyed growing success in providing many people from different countries with an online marketplace that sells a variety of items. Additionally, Amazon.com allows users to write and publish reviews of the products sold on its site, ostensibly for the purpose of aiding other consumers in making a purchasing decision (see Fig. 1). An "internet genre," (Fortanet, 1999, p. 95), Amazon.com reviews enjoy affordances from the online medium that help contribute to their uniqueness as a genre. Fortanet (1999) attempted to catalog these affordances, including the inclusion of new roles for audiences of these genres; roles that edged audiences into being less passive receivers of information and more active participants (p. 98). Amazon.com product reviews are a genre where the line between audience and author becomes blurry, as participants are able to produce, rate, and read product reviews.

Racine (2002) argued that digital catalogs such as Amazon.com and other online retailers represent subgenres of the overall "catalog" genre that has existed for decades (p. 144). Within her

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results, Racine argued that Amazon.com relies heavily on customer reviews to separate itself from other online catalogs. Racine's study is a decade old at the time of this analysis, and since then a shift has occurred in the spread of the online customer review genre to other websites and services, which points to its success and effectiveness as its own distinct genre. Regardless, what is important for this analysis is her claim that the use of customer reviews gives Amazon.com a characteristic register, or tone, that Racine dubbed "e-style," (p. 146)—a style that is much more personal, informal, and fluid than the typical professional product descriptions found in other online catalogs.

Mudambi and Schuff (2010) analyzed over 1500 Amazon.com customer reviews for the purpose of determining what makes a review "helpful." They defined two main types of products: experience goods and search goods. Search goods are those types of products that consumers can find existing information about without needing to interact with them (e.g., cameras), whereas experience goods are those that customers must actually use before being able to confidently make a decision about (e.g., video games and movies) (p. 187). In other words, their analysis attempted to discern if reviews of products that required subjective evaluations (experience goods) were any more helpful than reviews of products that did not require these subjective evaluations (search goods).

Their analysis found that product type (experience or search) did have an impact on whether or not a review was deemed helpful. Both types of product reviews could be perceived as helpful, but reviews of experience goods that were also "extreme," (i.e., very low or very high rating) were deemed less helpful than other reviews (p. 196). It appears that, based on this study, obvious bias in a product review results in the Amazon.com community perceiving that review as unhelpful, and bias is more likely to occur in reviews of "experience" products.

Other analyses of the textual, linguistic, and social features of online product reviews (both on Amazon.com and other websites) have all revealed distinct features of the online review genre. Namely online product reviews tend to have a more personal register (Racine 2002; Pollach, 2008), contain a large amount of evaluative and explanatory content (Mudambi and Schuff, 2010; Taboada, 2011; Pollach, 2008), and follow similar rhetorical strategies (Pollach, 2008; Mackiewicz, 2009). Thus, specific characteristics that comprise the "online review" genre have already been identified through previous studies.

However, Amazon.com product reviews are able to distinguish themselves from other online reviews. The reviews are branded with an explicit measure of each review's value and level of acceptability through a built in voting system that is used by the community. Users of the site are able to answer the question in Fig. 1 for each review they come across.

The reviews with the highest number of "yes" votes are then labeled with the "most helpful" review title and take a prominent place in the overall structure of the customer reviews section for each product. This review system then channels "most helpful" reviews into two types: "most helpful positive" and "most helpful critical" reviews, depending upon what the overall star rating the author of the review has assigned to the product being reviewed (1–3 stars are considered critical reviews, whereas 4–5 stars are considered positive reviews). Because of this, I consider Amazon.com reviews to be a distinct sub-genre of the overall "online review" genre. A major reason for this is that the reviews are managed within the Amazon.com ecosystem and contain an additional measure of community approval, which I argue results in a distinct discourse community.

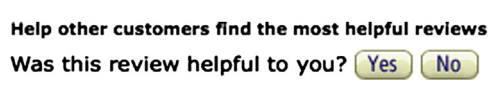

Fig. 1. Helpful review question.

1.2. *Amazon.com as a discourse community*

Swales (1990) defined discourse communities as "sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals" and that expert members of discourse communities "possess…familiarity with the particular genres that are used in the communicative furtherance of those…goals" (p. 9). In other words, discourse communities are groups of people who share common social interests, goals, and values and, whether implicitly or explicitly, have historically decided on preferred methods of communication that share, protect, and promote those values *among* the discourse community. These forms of communication also differentiate *members* of a discourse community from non-members.

Based on this definition of discourse community, it is clear that the authors and readers of Amazon.com customer reviews have formed a discourse community, whether knowingly or not. Through product reviews, the members of the Amazon.com discourse community share a set of common goals (aiding each other in making purchasing decisions; purchasing products; sharing information about products) and works towards these goals by using language in specific and identifiable ways (i.e., authoring and voting on product reviews; commenting on each other's reviews), or, genres. Furthermore, additional community activity can be witnessed through conversations that occur via comments on the reviews and separate discussion boards on Amazon.com.

The voting system that Amazon.com uses for its product reviews makes it relatively easy to select reviews that have high approval ratings from the discourse community, which allows for an analysis of the rhetorical and linguistic elements of the genre that members of discourse community appear to favor. My assumption is that the reviews marked as *most helpful* (i.e., the positive and critical reviews that receive the highest amount of "helpful" votes from Amazon.com users) will contain features that the Amazon.com discourse community favors. As these shared goals and values are sometimes implicit or hard to discover (Gee, 2001), the rating system for Amazon.com customer reviews offers a direct route into the implicit and explicit shared values of the Amazon.com discourse community.

2. Research methodology

I chose genre analysis, as developed by Swales (1990) and Bhatia (1993), for this study because of its specific focus on examining text-based discourse. As Vijay Bhatia argues, "One of the main objectives of genre analysis…is to understand and account for the realities of the world of texts" (Bhatia, 2002, p. 7). The "realities" of the Amazon.com product reviews (i.e., the shared goals and value of the discourse community) are the goals of this descriptive analysis.

Swales (1990) introduced move analysis as a methodology for examining the rhetorical structuring of genres. A move analysis breaks genres down into different rhetorical units, or "moves." A move defined is "a discoursal or rhetorical unit that performs a coherent communicative function in a written or spoken discourse" (Swales, 2004, p. 228). In other words, a move is a recognizable section of spoken or written discourse that performs a certain task. Moves may also have "steps" (Bhatia, 1993), which are essentially different strategies for completing a move. Just as each step's function works towards fulfilling the larger purpose of a move, each move's function works towards fulfilling the larger communicative purpose of the genre. Since an initial overview of

the reviews suggested that the moves and steps patterned in a much more irregular manner than the genre structures traditionally analyzed through move-step analysis, I did not attempt to identify a regular move-step pattern in the reviews but instead focused on the identification of moves and steps and the purposes they fulfill. This means that the steps identified in this study are possible instantiations of the moves, rather than suggestive of a typical patterning.

I also drew from work with corpus-based discourse analysis, namely from a framework developed by Upton and Cohen (2009). Essentially, in a corpus-based discourse analysis, a few representative examples of a genre are examined for rhetorical moves, just as in an ESP-based genre analysis. Then, the moves and steps are assigned a coding scheme, which is applied to the entire corpus. As the analysis continues, the rhetorical moves are constantly updated and refined pending new findings. Eventually, a fully coded corpus can then be transcribed into a computer program that is able to read the coded moves and provide the analyst with various results (p. 20).

By identifying not only the moves of the genre, but also *how those moves are typically employed across a corpus of examples*, a corpus-based approach to genre analysis allows for a researcher to engage in a somewhat more quantitative discussion about how the genre typically appears and functions in the real world. Even though my study did not use computer software to analyze discrete linguistic features, a corpus-based genre approach enabled me to apply a coding scheme and more efficiently analyze rhetorical moves across a large corpus of samples.

2.1. Research questions

The following research questions guided my analysis:

- What are the typical rhetorical strategies uses by authors of "most helpful" reviews on Amazon.com?
- Do these strategies differ among "most helpful" positive and "most helpful" critical reviews?
- What does this analysis suggest about the shared goals and values of the Amazon.com discourse community?

3. Method

The preliminary data set for this study was obtained by browsing through a sample of convenience: the author's purchasing history on Amazon.com over a period of several years. While this reflects the purchasing biases of the author at the time (a male in his late-20s from the United States), it also benefits from a level of authenticity in regards to a user's actual search patterns. In order to further expand the data set, other products located in the "bestsellers" sections from various Amazon.com departments at the time of this study were included (see Appendix A for complete list).

Because the voting system for these reviews showcases the review that receives the highest amount of "helpful" votes, this could cause a product review with a small amount of overall votes to still be chosen as "most helpful." Keeping in line with my desire to study community-preferred examples of the genre, I also set a minimum threshold of at least 20 overall votes for each product. This brought the final data set to a total of 71 products. Since only the "most helpful positive" and "most helpful critical" reviews were taken from each of these products, this resulted in a final corpus of 142 product reviews. These reviews were copied into word-processing software where I began the process of identifying and coding separate rhetorical moves.

3.1. Move analysis

Identification of individual moves was based on determining the communicative function of units of text. While this was simple in some cases due to explicit organizational features of the text, there were also times when moves were closely intertwined and difficult to unravel. In order to manage this complexity, the definition of a rhetorical move was combined with Gee's (2011) "idea units" or "speech splurts" (p. 22). Gee's "idea units" are sections of text or speech, typically one or more clauses (or sentences) long that work towards expressing a single idea or topic. Gee explains that the content (subjects, verbs) and the function (grammar) of an utterance form an overall context that must be considered in order to determine what constitutes separate "idea units" (Gee, 2011, p. 22).

For the purposes of this analysis, idea units and the author's purpose are roughly analogous. Thus, in situations where the purpose of the move was unclear, the larger context of the review was studied in order to determine the overall purpose or idea behind a stretch of text. The result was that in some situations, a single paragraph contained a large number of moves, as an author fired off idea after idea without separating these ideas with organizational and linguistic devices. On the other hand, I sometimes counted a very large chunk of text as a single move because it was working towards a single communicative purpose. In short, during situations where the counting of a particular move was uncertain, the communicative purpose, context, linguistic and organizational markers, and interruptions were all considered in order to split moves apart. Finally, I tended to be conservative when marking moves, shying away from marking multiple units of text in close proximity as multiple instances of the same move.

In keeping with Upton and Cohen's (2009) framework, "multiple readings and reflections" (p. 9) of the corpus were made in order to establish a preliminary list of rhetorical moves, which were then used to code the data. Once the coding was complete, additional reviews of the corpus were made in order to ensure that the codes were accurate and accounted for in the entirety of the corpus. The codes were then tallied using the count feature in Microsoft Word and then exported into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. Several more passes of the data were made before results were finalized. Throughout this entire process, the move and step categories were refined, changed, consolidated, or removed as the functions of each move and step category became more concrete. (One deviation from this framework was that corpus software was not used. Rather, all coding and analysis was done by hand.)

3.2. Rhetorical focus

In step with Pollach's (2008) focus on "audience appeal," which examined the ways that review writers considered the audience of their reviews, I also analyzed what I will refer to as the rhetorical focus of the reviews. Three categories emerged: author-based reviews, reader-based reviews, and product-based reviews. Author-based reviews are reviews that include a high number of first person pronouns (e.g. I, my) and center around the author of the review. Audience-based reviews are reviews that include a high number of second person pronouns (e.g. you, your, you're) and center around the reader of the review. Product-based reviews are those that center around the product and include lots of demonstrative pronouns (i.e. this product, it) or the actual naming of the product.

It is important to note that in this analysis the mere presence of a pronoun did not determine how a review was categorized, rather, I considered the actual use of the pronouns in order to determine an overall first or second person focus of each review.

Indeed, most reviews contained instances of first person, second person, and third person or demonstrative pronouns. For example, an author-based review may include a second person pronoun as a rhetorical question, as the following excerpt shows (emphasis added in each example).

> Review 2B: "*You* would think that for over 200 dollars the machine would have some sort of solid state speed control." [Kitchen and Dining]

Many author-based reviews were easily identifiable through their explicit reference to, and focus on, the author of the review as the main topic of the review.

> Review 11A: "I've had this mouse for a couple of weeks and am very satisfied with it." [Electronics]

While the previous author-based review example contained a demonstrative pronoun ("*this* mouse"), the overall focus of the example is on the author's ownership and experience with the product.

Reader-based reviews typically included specific references that framed the review as for the reader's benefit. For example:

> Review 40A: "As a Mother who owns both models, I *will tell you* the major differences between these two seats from my point of view." [Baby]
> Review 28A: "As a high-tech product, *you need to know* how to use it." [Automotive]

The use of the second person pronoun "you" in these cases recognizes the reader explicitly (as opposed to abstractly, as in rhetorical questions).

Finally, product-based reviews placed the product at the center of the review. For example:

> Example 17A: "*It* requires far less effort than the long-travel typewriter-style keyboards that are so ubiquitous today. *It's* scissor-mechanism keys do produce a mechanical tickity-tackety sound when you're typing, but it's hardly obnoxious." [Electronics]

Note how "it" and "it's" [sic] frame the product as the primary agent of the review. Other examples of product-based examples relied on demonstrative pronouns such as "this," (e.g. *this* product).

The previous example also highlights some of the overlap with this system of categorization. Although I would code the above example as product-based, there is a second person pronoun "when *you're* typing." This indicates that simply counting pronouns would provide unreliable results as to the *primary focus* of the review. Without sophisticated software, like that used in Pollach (2008), a deep analysis of pronoun distribution must be combined with subjective interpretation of each review on a case-by-case basis. In fact, most reviews contained instances of first person, second person, and third person or demonstrative pronouns. However, I considered both the overall pronoun use *and* the main focus of the review (author, reader, product) when assigning reviews to one of the three categories.

4. Results: move analysis

Based on the corpus-based move analysis, I identified 943 moves that fell into 9 overall categories. Each move that I identified performed a distinct function, or communicative purpose, with different steps possible within each move. The following table summarizes the function of each move.

As Table 1 indicates, there are a variety of rhetorical strategies available to the authors of Amazon.com product reviews. Table 1 does not include the number of steps possible *within* each move—that will occur during the detailed analysis to follow. Table 2 displays the instances of these moves across the corpus.

The differences in the distribution of the moves across the corpus proved to be significant (chi-square $=22.979$, df$=8$, $p=0.003$). The "user information" and "personal experience" moves display the largest amount of variation (possible reasons for this are discussed in Section 4.1), which accounted for ~19% of the total moves in positive reviews and ~12% of the total moves in critical reviews, resulting in a difference of ~7%. On the other hand, the critical reviews contained more instances of "personal experience," accounting for ~12% of the total moves, whereas "personal experience" only accounted for ~7% in the positive reviews, resulting in a difference of ~5%.

Critical reviews also contained a higher percentage of "evaluation," containing ~4% more instances of "evaluation" as compared to positive reviews. The "title" and "comparison" moves both display a difference of ~3% between review types. However, the "title" move is obligatory and only occurred once in each review, and thus the higher total number of moves in positive reviews explains the difference in frequency. The remaining four moves all contain ~1% difference in frequency among review types, suggesting that these moves may not contribute to the variance between the review types.

Table 1
List of moves identified in Amazon.com "most helpful" product reviews, from highest to lowest frequency of occurrence in the corpus.

Name of move	*Definition*	*Example*
Evaluation move	Author provides an evaluation of the product	53A: "The real problem with these weights is the length"
User information move	Author provides information about the product gleaned through using the product	53A: "…you turn to select the desired weight. If you select 10 lbs, it will then lock in the two weight plates to make 10 lbs…"
Title move	Each product review was required to have a title, which was bolded and located at the top of each review	36B: "Not really for children."
External information move	Author provides information about the structure of the review itself (e.g., metacommentary) or provide reasoning for writing or updating a review	37B: "Leaving a review because I wish I'd known before buying"
Overall statement move	Author provides a comprehensive statement about the product, either summarizing the review or explicitly recommending for or against purchase	Review 18B: "…go for the more expensive brand."
Personal experience move	Author provides personal experience, typically through narrative, with the product being reviewed	27A: "…package showed me how to remove my old blades and how to install the new ones. It was a piece of cake."
Comparison move	Author compares product with other products	42A: "…this one is far and away the best."
Background information move	Author provides background information about themselves or about the products	Review 2B: "Having had a lot of experience taking things apart and being very curious I had to take a look at what made the thing tick."
Refer to other reviews move	Author refers to other reviews written about the same product	23A: "Please ignore the other two users that gave this gauge only one star because…"

In sum, the main differences between the two types of reviews are seen in the "personal experience," "user information," and "comparison" moves. The "evaluation" move appears to also hold some importance due to the percentage seen between the two review types, even though the token count is identical. Little variation is seen in the remaining moves, and the difference in the "title" move is accounted for by the disparate amount of total moves for both review types. It appears then, that based on the frequency and distribution of rhetorical move types among these reviews and the results of the chi-square test, that there does appear to exist a difference between the rhetorical strategies employed by positive and critical "most helpful" review. A detailed examination of the moves themselves illuminates these differences.

4.1. Detailed analysis of moves

This section provides a detailed look at some of the rhetorical moves that I identified in order to account for the perceived differences between the positive and critical reviews. In this section I focus on the "personal experience," "user information," "comparison," and "evaluation" moves, as they appear to account for the bulk of the variance between the two types of reviews (see Table 2). It is important to remember that the steps listed in Tables 4–7 are meant to describe different methods of *performing* the move, rather than describe a structured order *within* the moves.

4.1.1. Personal experience move

In the "personal experience" move, the author will typically provide a narrative about an experience she or he had while using, obtaining, or returning the product being reviewed. The purpose of this move is to detail actual experiences that a consumer has had based on owning the product. Because this move was typically constructed as a narrative, these moves could be very long (several paragraphs). However, some were also as short as a sentence.

Table 2
Instances of rhetorical moves across corpus and type of review.

Move Name	*Positive*	*Critical*	
User information	98	52	
	19%	12%	
Personal experience	35	52	
	7%	12%	
Evaluation	99	99	
	19%	23%	
Title	71	71	
	14%	17%	
Comparison	54	30	
	10%	7%	
External information	55	51	
	11%	12%	
Overall statement	54	40	
	10%	9%	
Background information	22	19	
	6%	5%	
Refer to other reviews	22	12	
	4%	3%	
Totals	517	426	943

Chi-square = 22.979, degrees of freedom = 8, probability = 0.003.

The patterning of steps in Table 3 proved to be significantly variable (chi-square = 36.475, df = 2, $p = 0$) and also simply makes sense: a higher percentage of negative experiences were found in critical reviews, while more positive experiences were found in positive reviews. Neutral experiences were rare in both types of reviews and were identified when an author did not overtly state if he or she had a positive or negative reaction to the experience. For example:

> 9B: "Several books I purchased read 'Kindle 2' in the title, but were Kindle 1 books with a new title page. OOPS!" [Electronics]

Although the "OOPS!" suggests that the author has some regrets about the experience, it appears to be framed as a mistake committed by the author of the review and not the fault of the product being reviewed.

More interestingly, however, is that "personal experience" moves occurred more frequently (~5%) in critical reviews. As explained above, personal experience was most typically realized through a narration of experience with a product. A conclusion that may be drawn from this is that readers of reviews find it more helpful to hear about negative experiences with products than positive experiences with products. For example, one product review related a story of a small child being injured while using a product:

> Review 41B: "I am so sad to say that my five month old daughter was injured on this product. Her finger was pinched between the elephant and the support bar on the main activity area." [Baby]

This type of information is far more valuable for potential consumers than a narrative that involves someone happily using a product. For example:

> Review 49A: "The first thing that I cooked was a no–no in the eyes of Cuisinart—a bone-in, skin-on leg and thigh chicken quarter. Too thick, they say. HA! says I, because I am a bit of an anarchist. I marinated the chicken in olive oil and rosemary, heated the Griddler to Medium. I cooked it on the panini plates because I love those little fake barbeque stripes across my food. It worked just fine. (I should have taken a picture, it came out looking beautiful. But I was hungry." [Kitchen and Dining]

Knowing the dangers or faults of a product can prove to be more informative for a prospective consumer. This helps to provide an explanation as to why the critical reviews tended to include more personal experiences than the positive reviews.

4.1.2. User information move

"User information" was the second most frequent move in both types of reviews. Based on owning or using the product being

Table 3
Steps of the "personal experience" move.

Steps	*Example*	*Positive %* ($n=35$)	*Critical %* ($n=52$)
Positive experience	21 A: "Never have to guess whether it's done. I've used it on ribs, roasts, steaks, salmon, chicken, turkey all with the same great results."	28 (80%)	10 (19%)
Negative experience	8B: "Well, sadly, the 'clip' on my new player has broken. I've only used the actual clip one time…"	3 (9%)	38 (73%)
Neutral experience	57B: "I'm an inch or so over 6 feet and my head is almost at the edge of the bench when doing lying-down chest dumbbell workouts…"	4 (11%)	4 (8%)

Chi-square = 36.475, degrees of freedom = 2, probability = 0.

Table 4
Steps of the "user information" move.

Steps	*Example*	*Positive %* (*n*=*98*)	*Critical %* (*n*=*52*)
Tips & tricks	28B: "Two tips: (1) It's important to use a high-quality, triple-filtered butane…"	30 (31%)	10 (19%)
Unclear information	56B: "So, here are the elusive measurements that I could not find anywhere…"	2 (2%)	6 (12%)
Solve problem	13B: "If anyone has the "offline" problem on Vista, the fix was very easy once I figured it out…"	2 (2%)	1 (2%)
Explain or confirm functions	25B: "The MaxiScan…Functionally, it works"	37 (38%)	10 (19%)
Additional capabilities	43B: "This year, I found that the filter serves another purpose which is…"	3 (3%)	2 (4%)
Description	33A: "There is a red mouthpiece, clear tube, blue filter and clear…"	10 (10%)	6 (12%)
Suggest improvement	53B: "For me I would rather they make the spindles out of a metal and pay $50 more"	1 (1%)	10 (19%)
Target audience	36A: "So if you're looking for something that will go well with the decor in your living room, don't bother with this"	13 (13%)	7 (13%)

Chi-square=26.603, degrees of freedom=7, probability=0.0004.

reviews, some authors provided explanations of various aspects of the product. The purpose of this move is to provide consumers with more contextual information that may not be freely available or is only available through interacting with the product. The steps in this move are all ways of doing the same thing (i.e., providing information), whether through giving advice or describing features and functions of the products. Some steps were labeled based on a user's own words (e.g., when a user says "here's a tip"), while others were determined based on what a user was doing (e.g., description). Truncated examples of each step are included in Table 4.

The "user information" move contains the largest difference (~7%) between positive and critical reviews and proved to be significantly variable (chi-square=26.603, df=7, p=0.0004). The largest difference *within* the "user information" move is seen in the "explain or confirm functions" step. This step typically confirms or disconfirms the function of a product. For example, a review of automotive windshield wipers describes the function of the product in a positive way:

> Review 27A: "Back to the blades: How do they function? Beautifully!" [Automotive]

Here is an example of a critical review disconfirming the function of a product that advertised itself as a remote home security system:

> Review 4B: "Translation: You CANNOT remotely lock the door." [Tools and Home Improvement]

It is clear from Table 3 that the "confirm function" step appeared relatively frequently in both types of reviews, suggesting that the Amazon.com community values that type of information. Confirming that a product works or responds as advertised is perhaps the most essential and basic piece of information a potential consumer would like to know before purchasing a product. However, critical reviews typically employed this step roughly 17% less than positive reviews. So, if this is a valuable piece of information that Amazon.com community members find helpful, it is not a piece of information that critical reviews need in order to be deemed helpful. One explanation for this is that the function of the negative narrative (from the "personal experience" move) may sometimes serve the role of critiquing the product function. For example:

> Review 47B: "Very disappointing, good reviews but this did not work for us. The Auto-off was broken and it just kept boiling." [Kitchen and Dining]

This information helps to reconcile one of the major differences between positive and critical reviews—negative reviews dispute a product's function through narratives (personal experience move), whereas positive reviews overtly declare that a product works as advertised through the "user information" move.

"Suggest improvement" was seen more in critical reviews, and typically involved the review author explaining what could be changed to the product in order to change the review from critical to positive, which explains why more were located in the critical reviews. For example:

> 40B: "If there was one additional slot for the strap, an inch or so farther out, this seat would be PERFECT, in my opinion." [Baby]

Another step with a large difference I named "tips & tricks" because of the way authors provided helpful tips on how to use a product; this is a type of information that can only be gleaned by using the product. For example:

> Review 50B: "I had them fix the unit and will just have to treat it very gently. Listen to the motor for a change in speed." [Kitchen and Dining]
>
> Review 64A: "Another trick I came up with is for all of you that have trouble loading this flashlight up with batteries. Next time, try this…" [Power and Hand Tools]

This helps to explain why the "user information" move was determined to be helpful by the users of Amazon.com, and it also explains why critical reviews contained fewer instances of this step. Many critical review authors indicated in their reviews that they would not continue using the product, whether through product failure, return, or disappointment. Therefore, those review authors would not have as much experience with those products, resulting in discovering less helpful tips or tricks when using the product.

4.1.3. Comparison move

The "comparison" move contained a ~3% difference in frequency between positive and critical reviews (see Table 2). While not as great as the difference seen in the previous two moves, this difference may still contribute to the significant differences between the two types of reviews and help to provide answers about variation between review types. In this move, many authors chose to compare the product being reviewed against other similar products. The purpose of this move was to provide consumers with a frame of reference regarding other products that consumers would most likely be also researching. Comparisons were used in two main ways. Some authors built their entire review around comparing products against each other, while other authors would add in short comparisons during their review as supplementary information. Either way, the bulk of comparisons were typically used in a way that cast the product in a positive light:

Table 5
Steps of the "comparison" move.

Steps	*Example*	*Positive % (n=54)*	*Critical % (n=30)*
Positive comparison	23A: "…With that old model, it was much harder to get a reading without air leaking out."	41 (76%)	3 (10%)
Negative comparison	53A: "…unlike traditional dumbbells, you can't drop these on the ground after a set."	8 (15%)	21 (70%)
Neutral comparison	25B: "Please note that these issues also apply to the MS500 as they share the same CD."	4 (7%)	4 (13%)
Suggest alternative product	34B: "Stick with the Munchkin brand or whatever you can find at Target…"	1 (2%)	2 (7%)

Chi-square=34.977, degrees of freedom=3, probability=0.

> Review 37A: "We have the Skip Hop drying rack also, but prefer this drying rack hands down!" [Baby]

Or negative light:

> Review 50B: "Note: I've had a less powerful Champion Juicer for over 25 years with no overload problem because it has a mechanical overload switch in it that protects the motor." [Kitchen and Dining]

The patterning of the steps in Table 5 proved to be significantly variable (chi-square =34.977, df=3, p=0). Both types of reviews relied heavily on the positive or negative comparison steps, suggesting that readers of product reviews prefer knowing why a product is better than other products. Critical reviews did not compare products as often (~3% less). One possible reason for this is the way that positive and critical reviews went about comparing products. In positive reviews, the tone of the comparison was typically upbeat and endorsed the product. For example:

> Review 69A: "Overall I have been very impressed with the output of this lantern as well. This is a very bright lantern for it's compact size; outshining normal 4D fluorescent U-tubed lanterns and a Coleman pack-away LED lantern." [Power and Hand Tools]

Critical reviews, however, often conveyed a tone that showed disapproval and disappointment, reading more like complaints than comparisons. For example:

> Review 9B: "15. PRICE! NO INCLUDED COVER! NO DISCOUNT FOR EARLY ADOPTERS. See SonyStyle.com for details. They allow a trade-in and $100 discount to buy their newest reader if you have the previous version. Too bad they don't have Amazon's content!" [Electronics]

A possible reason for the difference in distribution may then be drawn from the hypothesis that the Amazon.com discourse community finds writing that comes off as complaining less helpful than writing that reads as a more unbiased comparison between two products.

4.1.4. Evaluation move

I identified the same total number of instances of the "evaluation" move in both types of reviews (99), but due to the disparate overall totals of review types, the frequency of this move was different between the reviews (~4%, see Table 2). Much like the "comparison" move, it is unclear if the "evaluation" move accounts for the significance in variation between review types, yet examining the ways that "evaluation" is used between the two types of reviews may still help to provide answers regarding the variation between review types.

Most of the reviews provided evaluations of the product based on various factors. The purpose of providing an evaluation is to give potential consumers the author's opinion of the product. Overall, evaluations possessed two distinct tones: positive or negative. While some authors made explicit "pro" and "con" categories in their reviews, it was much more common for authors to insert critiques or compliments throughout the reviews. Here is a typical example of an author (from a negative review) who created a "pro" and "con" list in the product review.

> Review 62B: "Positives: small size, carbide cutters are very effective at removing metal, ease of use (no special techniques" "Negatives: small contact point on the blade (see below, not very stable if much pressure is applied." [Power and Hand Tools]

Even though Amazon.com does not constrain users in the way that the sites studied by Pollach (2008) did, which contained "pro" and "con" boxes for authors to fill out, some authors still employed this strategy, hinting at the existence of either mixing or perhaps appropriation of generic resources (Bhatia, 2004), namely the genre of "pro" and "con" lists. Making explicit "pro" and "con" lists about products or decisions may be a strategy certain people use on a regular basis when making purchasing decisions, and thus is an additional strategy available when writing any sort of review, not just Amazon.com reviews. However, the lack of these "pro" and "con" lists suggests that they are not a community-preferred strategy in "most helpful" reviews.

Authors also sometimes provided hedged or conditional evaluations. For example:

> Review 52B: "The quality is what you expect. They are your basic set of dumbbells. The carrying case will likely get damaged in shipment. Mine had a dented corner and broken latch." [Strength Training]

In this example, the author implies that the quality is not the best (hinted at with "what you expect"), as the product in question (a set of cheap dumbbells) is priced relatively low in relation to similar products and made out of lower quality material. Thus, while the author is making an evaluation of the quality, he does not necessarily frame it in a negative way. At the same time, the author assumes that readers will share his assumptions that cheaper products will possess an inherently lower quality than more expensive ones. This is further supported in his second sentence with the use of the adjective "basic" to describe the weights, giving the critique an overall mood that suggests consumers should not be expecting anything special from this "basic" product, and that any faults with the product should be considered tolerable based on the relatively cheap price.

The patterning of steps within the "evaluation" move proved to be significantly variable (chi-square=37.294, df=3, p=0). This makes sense when considered in light of the general assumption that critiques of products will occur more frequently in critical reviews, and that positive evaluations of products occur more frequently in positive reviews. However, positive reviews appeared to focus mostly on providing a positive evaluation of the product, whereas critical reviews included relatively high percentages of both types of praise. In other words, critical reviews employed a more varied set of steps to perform the evaluation move, as compared to positive reviews.

One possible reason for this difference may be found in the adage that consumers who are disappointed in a product will tend

Table 6
Steps of the "evaluation" move.

Steps	*Example*	*Positive % (n=99)*	*Critical % (n=99)*
Compliment or praise product	7B: "Overall the product is well built and can easily handle the advertised 250 lbs.	60 (61%)	22 (22%)
Hedged compliment or praise	7B: "…this reclining model is much easier on your back and wrists. The padding on the seat does leave a little to desire, but it's easily bearable for 1 h rides."	9 (9%)	20 (20%)
Critique product or manufacturer	46B: "The biggest downside is that you must keep a firm grip on the mixing vessel…"	17 (17%)	48 (49%)
Hedged critique	39B: "…so I assume it must have been a bad batch. Just be aware!"	13 (13%)	9 (9%)

Chi-square = 37.294, degrees of freedom = 3, probability = 0.

to be more vocal about that product than consumers who are satisfied, and evaluation of a product is essentially the primary way to express dissatisfaction with a product. Regardless, evaluation appeared in both types of reviews at roughly a 20% rate, suggesting that Amazon.com users will vote for reviews that provide evaluations of products, thus valuing that sort of information.

4.2. Discussion: move analysis

The thread that ties together all the differences between the two review types is that the more frequent moves all provided information that was new or hard to glean without interacting with the product, providing an initial interpretation that suggests the Amazon.com discourse community desires this new information. Mudambi and Schuff's (2010) designation of search and experience type goods is a useful framework for this discussion. The moves themselves can be categorized the same way: some moves provide search information, while others provide experience information. A product, regardless of type, can have a review written about it that contains both search and experience information.

The four moves explained in the previous sections are all moves that provide new or experience-based information. Among those moves were also the two most frequently used moves in the corpus ("evaluation" and "user information"). Since any evaluation of a product was dependent on a consumers' experience with that product, evaluations were formed from experience-based information. The "user information" move is essentially an objective version of the evaluation move. Confirmation of a product's function, as well as any special tips needed to use the product, dominated the "user information" move, both of which are types of information that can only be gleaned through experience with the product.

Other moves also worked towards providing experience-based information. The "personal experience" move is inherently based on interaction with the product, while the "comparison" move provides experience-based information of multiple products. In fact, only two moves *did not* primarily contain experience-based information: "refer to other reviews" and "overall statement." In the "refer to other reviews" move, authors commented on things said by other product review writers, which is old or search information available to anyone deciding to read through the reviews. The "overall statement" move contained information already presented in the review, and could thus be considered search information.

Finally, the "background information" move *does* contain experience-based information, but information that was not immediately relevant to the product being reviewed and was more often used as credibility building measure. The low frequency of this move (5% across corpus) suggests that only experience-based information that is immediately relevant to the product is desired.

Thus, the move analysis suggests that experience-based information is desired and preferred over search-based information by the Amazon.com discourse community. While positive and critical reviews appear to differ significantly in rhetorical strategies (see Table 2), both types of reviews are deemed to be "helpful" by the Amazon.com community because they both provide experience-based information, albeit through different patterns of rhetorical strategies. For positive reviews, providing explicit information about the product appears to be a dominant strategy, while critical reviews tend to provide more negative narratives. Both types of reviews provide roughly equal amounts of evaluative information. The result is that both types of reviews provide a potential consumer with a wealth of experience-based knowledge that cannot be gleaned through typical search-based information, indicating that experience-based information is the preferred content of a product review on Amazon.com.

5. Results: rhetorical focus

Because the previous literature surrounding online reviews shared a common theme of identifying an "e-style" (Racine, 2002; Pollach, 2008) or personal register, which influenced the audience awareness of online reviews, I also analyzed the reviews for pronoun usage and rhetorical focus in order to see if awareness of a particular audience helps create a more "helpful" review. I categorized the reviews as author-, audience-, or product-based in order to see if this form of "personalized" register existed among Amazon.com product reviews. Table 7 summarizes the results.

The distribution of rhetorical focus categories did not prove to be statistically significant (chi-square = 5.473, df = 2, $p = 0.065$), but does suggest a trend toward author-based reviews. The results show that reader-based reviews were the least common in both positive and critical reviews, although more total instances occurred in positive reviews. Comparing Table 7 with a direct count of the overall first and second person pronoun distribution appears to support the results that indicate more author-based reviews than reader-based (Table 8).

Table 7
Distribution of rhetorical focus across corpus.

Category	*Positive reviews (n=71)*	*Critical reviews (n=71)*
Author-based	32 (45%)	36 (51%)
Reader-based	16 (23%)	6 (8%)
Product-based	23 (32%)	29 (41%)

Chi-square = 5.473, degrees of freedom = 2, probability = 0.065.

Table 8
Distribution of pronouns across corpus.

Pronoun	*Distribution (% of total words in corpus)*
First person	2.64
Second person	1.27

The findings from other studies that associate online review genres with a personal register (Racine, 2002; Pollach, 2008) lend support for the existence of a bias toward author-based reviews. However, the amount of product-based reviews appears to complicate the idea that reviews have an overall personal tone, further disturbed by the relatively small reliance on reader-based reviews.

There is a connection between author and product based reviews, however, in that both types of reviews carry more of a narrative than reviews that are designed specifically for a certain audience. By extrapolating from the experiences of review writers, or by reading how a product functioned "in the wild," potential consumers can make judgments about purchases based on information provided in a perhaps more objective way than if reviews are targeted directly at the consumer. Regardless of whether or not the review authors are intentionally designing their reviews to be this way, the preference among the audience appears to be for these types of reviews.

5.1. Discussion: rhetorical focus

Based on the three categories (author, reader, or product based), a trend may exist in that "most helpful" reviews are focused around the experiences of the authors of the reviews or the products themselves. First person pronouns were used more than second-person pronouns throughout the corpus. This suggests that, in addition to desiring experience-based information, the Amazon.com discourse community is relatively uninterested in reviews that are directly targeted at consumers.

When a review is directly targeted at the consumer, with the intention of selling the product, the consumer may perceive the review as a form of *advertising*. Cook (1992) discussed the different judgments that readers of advertisements make when engaging with an advertisement (p. 202). In short, the language choices employed by senders/narrators of ads (in this case, the Amazon.com product review author) influence the ways recipients/observers of ads (in this case, potential consumers reading Amazon.com product reviews) interpret the advertisement.

Cook (1992) discussed how the use of the pronoun "you" in English can work to conflate intimate and formal relationships (p. 183). Unlike languages that have specific second-person pronouns for levels of formality, such as Spanish or French, the English language only has one version (i.e. "you"). Therefore, when product reviews directly target the consumer with the pronoun "you," it may cause dissonance as to how "you" should be interpreted. Does the product review conceptualize "you" as a prospective consumer, looking for the facts about a product? If so, this would frame the entire review as more of an advertisement—especially when the review is positive and recommends purchase. Or does the product review conceptualize "you" as a peer—someone with whom you know well and look to for advice. While this may place the product review a few steps away from the genre of advertisement, the false intimacy implied in the use of "you" may still cause a negative reaction from the reader.

The intimate interpretation of the use of "you" in Amazon.com product reviews is representative of what Fairclough (1989) termed "*synthetic personalization*, a compensatory tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people 'handled' en masse as an individual" (p. 52, emphasis original). In other words, synthetic personalization is a strategy used by advertising on mass audiences (i.e., consumers) to create a false sense of intimacy—which suggests that even when consumers interpret the use of "you" in Amazon.com product reviews as intimate, they may implicitly recognize synthetic personalization in the review and associate it with a form of advertising. This false sense of intimacy appears to match with the "trust building" purpose of Amazon.com product reviews that Racine (2002) identified. Even though Amazon.com reviews are not purposely tailored advertisements designed for a mass audience, the very suggestion of synthetic personalization may cause an unconscious discomfort among the readers of the reviews.

As Cook (1992) pointed out, "there are undoubtedly many reasons to dislike ads, whether individually or as a genre. Many people do so, either consistently, or from time to time" (p. 203). Any association with an Amazon.com product review as an advertisement may then invoke a negative interpretation on the part of the reader. This further helps to explain why any rhetorical focus on the reader of the review appears to be a strategy not deemed as "helpful" by the Amazon.com discourse community.

6. Conclusion

To summarize, three conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, a difference does exist in the rhetorical patterning of moves between positive and critical "most helpful" Amazon.com product reviews, as evidenced by the results of the corpus-based move analysis. These differences are reconciled by the second conclusion: the Amazon.com discourse community prefers experience-based, or new information about a product to search-based, or old information. While the rhetorical patterning of the two product review types differed, *overall* the specific functions of their rhetorical resources worked towards providing experience-based information. Thus, a primary feature of *all* "most helpful" product reviews is that they contain experience-based information. Finally, product reviews that take on elements of advertising, either explicitly or through characteristics reminiscent of synthetic personalization, were not as common as the reviews that focused on providing a story about the review author or the product itself, essentially providing or strengthening the experience-based information being provided. These conclusions complement each other and provide strong evidence that "helpful" product reviews on Amazon.com are those reviews that provide experience-based information.

The results of this analysis may help to inform other analyses of online reviews. One of the biggest distinctions would be whether or not other review sites being studied allow users the freedom to control the structure of the review. This would affect not only the rate of the rhetorical patterning of moves, but possibly the content of the moves. Depending on the questions asked by the review site, review authors may be limited in how much experience-based information they are able to provide.

There are also review sites similar to Amazon.com that are not in the business of selling consumer products. Netflix.com, for example, employs a review system where members can vote on the quality of movie and television reviews. Each review has a small note underneath displaying the total number of members that have deemed the review helpful (e.g., "X of X members found this review helpful"). Movies and television shows are the epitome of experience-type goods and it would be interesting to analyze the use of experience-based vs. search-based information employed in those reviews.

Additional features of the Amazon.com reviews that could be analyzed in future studies are the comments that users are able to leave for authors of product reviews, which can *also* be rated for community approval (e.g., "did this post add to the discussion?"). Analyzing comments for explicit measures of approval may provide another avenue to finding community-preferred reviews, even among the reviews deemed "most helpful" through votes. Moreover, comparing the rhetorical patterning and strategies of the reviews *not* voted as "most helpful" would provide another

check for these results. It would be interesting to discover whether or not "unhelpful" reviews do or do not provide experience-based information. If all Amazon.com product reviews contain experience-based information, there may be yet other features of the reviews that could be studied in order to determine exactly what it is that makes an Amazon.com product review "helpful."

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Appendix A

Electronics
Strength training & exercise
Automotive
Kitchen and dining
Baby
Power and hand tools
Beauty products
Patio, lawn & garden
Health and personal care
Kitchen and dining
Home & office

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