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How the medium shapes the message: stance in two forms of book reviews

Abstract

Book reviews on academic blog sites are becoming increasingly visible and important as they give scholars a space to evaluate research and reach a wider audience. While reviews are a familiar genre in academic journals, their similarity to this more recent incarnation is unclear. While it appears to be the same genre with the same purpose to explicitly evaluate a published text and the contribution of its author, the blog book review operates in a very different interactional context. The question arises, then, whether this is the same genre. Does the channel of communication introduce particular communicative constraints and affordances which make this a different kind of text? Based on 30 book reviews in journals and 30 in a respected academic blog, we explore the similarities and differences in reviewers' use of stance in these two forms. Findings show that all stance resources were employed by both sets of writers but were more frequent in the blog book reviews. The study thus has important implications for understanding the concept of genre, for analysing rhetorical stance choices, and for novice writers embarking on reviewing in new platforms.

Keywords: book reviews; academic blogs; stance; genre features; medium

1. Introduction

English for academic purposes (EAP) text research is characterised by contrasts. A considerable amount of work has sought to compare features in different genres, languages, disciplines or modes and to show what the texts of students with different L1s and proficiencies look like. Research has also explored contrasts through chains and transformations, illustrating the interconnectedness of genres in contexts with other genres and how material is changed as it is recreated elsewhere. So we know, for example, something of how PhD theses are transformed into monographs (Brown, 2011), research articles into blogs (Zou & Hyland, 2019), scholarly articles into architectural reviews (Caballero, 2013), research papers into popular journalism (Hyland, 2010a), and dissertations into 3-minute theses (Hyland & Zou, 2021). In these cases, not only does the genre demand a different audience but the purposes are quite different.

Less studied, however, are the transformations which occur when the same genre appears in a different medium. Just to be clear, we understand genre as a type of communicative act, classified by its content, language, purpose and form while a medium is the means by which it is communicated, such as print, voice, gesture, visual and so on. Thus, work has been done on how moves in written abstracts are rendered in video ones (Plastina, 2017) or paper lab notebooks appear as electronic types (Kanza, et al., 2017). In Marshall McLuhan's (1964) famous dictum 'the medium is the message', the media used to communicate information are said to have a significant impact on the messages they deliver, introducing a change of scale or pattern which influence our interpretations. Equally however, users bring certain expectations of the medium to their engagement with the content, shaping how they should receive or create the message. The bi-directionality is a meaning-making process, so that the medium cannot be separated from users' understanding of it and their communicative practices.

In this study we are interested in unpacking something of this relationship by exploring how users understand the particular communicative constraints and opportunities a change of media have for genre use. We look at the book review genre as it appears in its traditional context of a scholarly journal and on the new medium of a blog site. We are interested to see whether the writer's stance, a key element of an academic book review, is affected by the medium in which the review is hosted. To do this we use Hyland's (2005) stance model to compare stance indicators in 30 book reviews in journals and 30 in the LSE academic blog, to address the following questions:

- (1) How do reviewers present a stance in these two forms of book reviews?
- (2) What similarities and differences are there in the use of stance in these two forms?
- (3) How can we account for these differences?

In answering these questions, we hope to shed new light on the expression of genre in different media, on the phenomenon of stance in book reviews, and how it is accomplished in very different interactional contexts.

2. The book review genre

Book reviews are written to explicitly evaluate a published text and the contribution of its author (Hyland, 2004). They are structured around a writer's opinion and assessment of another text are therefore among the most unambiguously personal genres of the academic

firmament, providing a platform for community members to engage with each other's ideas and analyses. They have therefore been seen as supporting the manufacture of knowledge and the social cohesiveness of disciplinary communities (e.g., Hyland, 2004; Tse & Hyland, 2009; Itakura, 2013; Salager-Meyer et al., 2007). The book review offers a rhetorical platform for scholars to set out views, signal allegiance to a particular group, and negotiate new disciplinary knowledge by evaluating how books published in their respective field of expertise. More positively, writing a review offers academics an alternative forum to set out their views on an issue without engaging in the long cycle of inquiry, review and revision involved in a full-length paper (Hyland, 2004).

While book reviews have not gone unnoticed by discourse analysts and EAP specialists, they have not received the attention their importance might suggest. Previous studies have focused largely on identifying rhetorical patterns (e.g., Suárez & Moreno, 2008) and how criticism is conveyed (e.g., Hyland, 2004; Itakura & Tsui, 2011; Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz Ariza, 2004; Zou & Hyland, 2020). Comparisons have been made across disciplines (Hyland, 2004; Diani, 2009), languages (Moreno & Suárez, 2009; Gianoni, 2006), and gender (Tse & Hyland, 2008). Findings show a broad four move rhetorical structure common across disciplines: introducing, outlining, highlighting, and a closing evaluation (Motta-Roth, 1996), although this may vary by language (Suárez & Moreno, 2008). In terms of criticism, the research suggests that writers of Spanish (Moreno & Suarez, 2009), French (Salager-Meyer & Alcaraz-Ariza, 2004) and Japanese (Itakura & Tsui, 2011) mitigate their criticisms far more than their Anglo-American counterparts. Giannoni (2006), however, has observed that critical evaluations in both English and Italian economics book reviews are often hedged and implicit.

Evaluation, and the stance that reviewers take towards the target book, is obviously a key feature of the genre. Readers want to know what the book can offer them and whether they should read it or even buy it, and so it is crucial that the writer offers a clear and informed judgement. More than this, the control of evaluative resources in book reviews is central to both effective writing and authorial identity. The ways that writers judge others' work and express these judgments not only signals what they think, but also who they are, displaying both their status as disciplinary insiders and their individual competence and values. These complex interpersonal relationships are played out between the reviewer, the audience for whom the review is intended and the book author, who is expected to 'overhear' the analysis.

It is therefore a site where the interpersonal stakes are higher than in most academic genres, where the author simply responds to a general body of more-or-less impersonal literature. Instead, there is a direct, public, and often critical, encounter with a particular text, and therefore of its author.

Book reviews are therefore interpersonally complex texts, but they play an important part in contributing to the dissemination and evaluation of research. A good review involves an insightful and critical evaluation, drawing on considerable knowledge of the field. In it, we see the workings of the peer group in its most normative role, working to establish standards, assess merit and, indirectly, evaluate reputations (Tse & Hyland, 2006). Book reviews, thus represent a carefully managed presentation of the writer's self and a familiarity with a potential readership.

3. Genre and medium

Reviewers clearly need to manage the presentation of an evaluative stance and demonstrate a collaborative orientation to certain norms of engagement. These, of course, will change with different audiences - in particular by discipline and by language, as we noted above. What is less clear, however, is how writers adapt the genre to a new medium, as this presents them with a different context of interaction, so while the purpose remains the same, the accepted form and pragmatic force of the stance writers take towards their topic is likely to change. The question arises, then, of the extent a book review posted online in a blog is the same genre as one embedded within the familiar confines of a published academic journal.

Essentially, a medium is the means by which a message is transmitted between a sender and receiver or, more formally, 'the physical realization of the rules and conventions that comprise a semiotic system' (Purchase, 1998, p. 8). So a text based on a specific linguistic code will be influenced by the particular medium in which it is created. An electronic medium, therefore, will have different affordances and characteristics than those of a paper-based one. This, in turn, adds unique properties to the genre in terms of production, function and reception (Askehave & Nielsen, 2005). Thus, moving from one medium to another involves transferring (some of) the content or presenting genre in a different way. The findings of a research paper repackaged in a blog are hard to confuse with the source genre, for example. Stripped of lengthy, sustained argument, detailed analysis, references to prior literature and most tables, graphs, equations and other paraphernalia of scholarly claim-

making, they become a different genre (Luzón, 2011; Kurteeva, 2016; Zou & Hyland, 2019). Similarly, the research article is very different from its related conference paper (Swales, 2004), as is a classroom presentation from the course textbook (Biber, 2006), an oral presentation from a Prezi (Moulton, Türkay & Kosslyn 2017) or a 3-minute thesis from the dissertation it is based on (Hyland & Zou, 2021). An academic book review, however, remains an academic book review despite its relocation to a new context.

We do, of course, recognize the difficulties of using ‘communicative purpose’ as a means of identifying a genre (Askehave & Swales, 2001) and see that a book review may have several purposes, not all of which may be present or even explicit. Clearly, reviews may not only seek to give a critical account of another text, but can also be used to promote the ideas of the reviewer, signal a community allegiance, champion a new position, enhance the visibility or prospects of the reviewer, or even to conduct a personal vendetta. These may depart from the central institutionally recognized aim of the genre as defined in its name and the heading which generally sits above it in a text. But they are nevertheless conventionalized and socially recognized goals easily associated with a book review and understood by those who read, write and otherwise make use of it. Similarly, the format and conventions which the genre constrains, remain intact. A book review situated in a blog is recognizably a book review, unlike a journal article which undergoes major surgery in making the transition to become an academic blog, recontextualized and completely reshaped as information is appropriated and manipulated to reappear in another medium. The key element seems to be the intended audience of the text.

In other words, we believe that re-naming blog-posted book reviews as another genre would be counterintuitive and undermine the socially acknowledged role of the genre. We also recognise, however, that purposes and conventions are not immutable; they can be changed and reworked. In particular, reviewing academic book reviews in the context of a new media are likely to require new ways of expressing the strength of evaluations and of relating to readers, possibly demanding interactional strategies which differ considerably from those found in journal book reviews.

4. Stance, evaluation and review contexts

Stance refers to the ways writers ‘present themselves and convey their judgments, opinions and commitments’ (Hyland, 2005: 176), thus taking a position towards their propositions and

audience. Because of this it is a key element of academic book reviews. A review is an argument for a particular opinion of a book and so it needs to strike the right evaluative tone: a balance between disputation and acclaim so that readers accept a judgement which is neither too assertive nor too insipid. Reviews involve an appropriate presentation of their writers and their arguments and convey a stance which recognises the knowledge base, likely views and the rhetorical expectations of their audiences. It is in this respect that those appearing on blog sites will differ most from those in journals.

These reviews are constructed for an audience which is less homogeneous and predictable than that the writer may be familiar with in journals (Zou & Hyland, 2019). This is no longer a disciplinary audience with specialised interests and a knowledge of the field or, perhaps even experience of its conventions of argument and criticality. The blog book review is more accessible, both rhetorically and financially, than those behind a journal paywall and likely to attract a more diverse and less certain readership. This is, moreover, a readership which can talk back and express an opinion, providing feedback and commentary on the stance taken in the review. The blog book review therefore both 'democratises' research by sharing an expert's evaluation of a book beyond scientific journals and by offering an opportunity for others to dispute that evaluation. This suggests a pressure towards a more interactive text, as the writer shapes the message in ways intended to connect with the less specialised and more immediately present audience.

Research into writers' use of stance in academic blogs shows clear differences to journal articles, as writers take a more intimate and responsive position using discursive strategies which tend to construe immediacy, affectivity, shared goals, and social support (e.g., Walker, 2006; Mauranen, 2013). Luzón (2011), for instance, found both affect and conflict construed through discursive strategies such as affectivity, in-group cohesiveness, group exclusion and confrontation. Mauranen (2016) emphasised the role of metadiscourse in academic blogs to increase readers' reflection on language and sharedness and Zou and Hyland's (2019) study shows that bloggers use stance to reconstruct writer-reader interactions in new conditions. They adopted a greater informality when recontextualising their articles as blogs through self-reference, openly evaluative and affective commentary and imagining the co-presence of heterogeneous readers. Now that book reviews are routinely published as a separate category on reputable academic blog sites, we are interested to see if these features are replicated in

posted book reviews as ways to shape their evaluations for an immediate, heterogeneous and potentially hostile readership.

Following Hyland (2005), we see stance as having three components: evidentiality, affect and relation. Evidentiality relates to the writer's expressed commitment to the truth of the propositions they present, and indicates the degree of confidence in what is said; affect concerns the writer's personal and professional viewpoint or assessment of matters in the discourse; and relation refers to a writer's discursive construction of relations with audiences and the degree of intimacy or remoteness. For Hyland (2005), four resources are available for users to convey these functions and stamp their personal authority onto arguments:

- **Hedges** withhold complete commitment to a proposition and open a discursive space allowing others to dispute interpretations.
- **Boosters** help writer/speakers present their work with assurance and shut down alternative voices.
- **Attitude markers** indicate affective, rather than epistemic, attitudes to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, frustration and so on.
- **Self-mention** is the writer/speaker's intrusion in the text through use of first-person to emphasise their contribution.

Together these features reveal how writers seek to present themselves to convey and solicit support for their judgments and display competence.

We have chosen to focus on stance as it is likely to be a key indicator of contextual variation, revealing media differences in the expression of book reviews. It is also, of course, a central component of academic discourse in a range of genres, from research articles (e.g., Hyland, 2012; McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012), undergraduate essays (e.g., Lancaster, 2016) and 3-minute theses (Hyland & Zou, 2021) to academic blogs (e.g., Zou & Hyland, 2019), conference presentations (e.g., Webber, 2005) and university lectures (e.g., Lee & Subtirelu, 2015). Stance has also been studied in journal book reviews (e.g., Hyland, 2004; Tse & Hyland, 2009), showing its importance in connecting writers with a community value system through choices which evaluate both their propositions and their audience. It is clear that the expression of stance is sensitive to context, particularly to audience, and especially whether the audience comprises experts or lay people, as when research reported in academic papers

is recontextualised as popular science articles (e.g., Hyland, 2010a), TED talks (Scotto di Carlo, 2014) or blogs (Zou & Hyland, 2019).

Effective evaluation must therefore be seen as an act socially situated in a rhetorical context and in this paper we explore the impact of resituating the book review to a new medium with a different audience and the affordance of reader-response. First, our method and corpora are discussed as follows.

5. Methods and procedures

5.1 The corpora

We compiled two corpora of 30 book reviews published in academic journals and 30 on an academic blog website. All texts were selected to ensure that they:

- 1) were in the same academic discipline: sociology;
- 2) focused on academic books;
- 3) were written by a single reviewer in English;
- 4) were published between 2013 and 2020;
- 5) had similar word lengths.

The final selection was made using a randomising formula, taking 30 reviews from 5 high impact factor international sociology journals (see Appendix).

The blog reviews were selected in the same way from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) *Impact Blog* website¹. The site was established 20 years ago and is one of the world's most influential and prestigious academic blogging hubs, providing an online forum for scholars to discuss trends and developments in research in policy, society and education. The book review section was added in 2011 and all submissions are reviewed by the editors to ensure novelty, interest and readability. The audience, according to the website, is mainly comprised of researchers, higher education professionals, policymakers, research funders, students and the interested public, with more than 70,000 unique readers each week. The corpus details are shown in Table 1.

¹ LSE Impact Blog: <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/>

Table 1. Corpus size and composition

	Number of texts	Total number of words
Book reviews in academic journals	30	29,561
Book reviews on LSE website	30	30,498
Total	60	60,059

5.2 Procedures

The two corpora were searched for Hyland’s (2005) stance features using AntConc (Anthony, 2018). This inventory comprised a general list of common stance features and additional items were added after a thorough reading of the data. All the examples retrieved by this method were then concordanced and manually checked to ensure that they performed the stance function assigned to them. Both authors were involved in the coding process and both inter-coder and intra-coder reliability measures implemented. A 30% sample was independently coded by each author, with an inter-rater agreement of 95%. Intra-reliability tests were also conducted by each author re-categorising 25% of the cases two weeks after the initial coding with full agreement between the first and second categorisations. Finally, the frequencies of each feature were calculated after normalising the results to 1,000 words to allow for cross-corpora comparison. Statistical significance of the results was determined using a Student’s t-test in SPSS (version: IBM SPSS Statistics 24).

6. Overall results

Overall, we found 730 devices in the book reviews published in academic journals and 988 in the LSE texts. This is 24.69 stance items per 1,000 words in the journal book reviews compared with 32.40 in the blog book reviews. The details are presented in Table 2. We can see that reviewers are clearly aware that they need to convey a stance towards their topic and audience in both forms of the genre.

Table 2. Stance in two forms of book reviews (per 1,000 words and %)

	Journal Book reviews		Blog Book reviews	
	per 1,000 words	%	per 1,000 words	%
Hedges	3.48	14.11	6.20	19.13
Boosters	3.21	13.01	6.46	19.94
Attitude markers	17.49	70.82	17.97	55.47

Self-mention	0.51	2.05	1.77	5.47
Total	24.69	100.00	32.40	100.00

As we can see, there were significantly more stance features in the blog book reviews (BBR) than in the journal book reviews (JBR) (log Likelihood = 11.41, $p < 0.005$), with hedges occurring nearly twice as often in the former. This corresponds with Zou and Hyland's (2019) finding that academic blog discourses are more heavily stance laden. It is clear that blog reviewers draw on all stance devices and use each type more than the journal book reviewers. In the following sub-sections we discuss each feature in turn.

7. Hedges

Hedges are central to academic communication as they downplay a writer's commitment to a proposition, modifying its scope, relevance or certainty (Hyland, 2005) and Table 2 shows they are heavily used in both forms of the genre. This is because they indicate appropriate caution by signalling an awareness of potential opposition, but at the same time mark the judgement as the writer's own:

- (1) Here, it *would* have been desirable to include also other dimensions connected with processes of recognition of human worth and dignity, such as class, sexual orientation and identity, ... (JBR 9)
- (2) ... it *seems* unlikely that new mandates or rights will be formalized in national policy in the near term. (BBR 29)

It is not surprisingly to see hedges used more significantly in blog book reviews (log Likelihood = 9.62, $p < 0.01$), replicating Zou and Hyland's (2019) findings regarding academic blogs and journal articles. Not only is the text addressing a diverse and potentially less informed audience, but also a possibly more critical one with the added opportunity to respond publicly, immediately and anonymously below the line. In these LSE book reviews, writers need to construe relations of solidarity with an audience whose views are difficult to predict:

- (3) In light of this, *perhaps* a more incisive project *would* have been to consider what Mills' notions of imagination and craftsmanship add to the distinctions between methods and methodology. (BBR 23)
- (4) *Perhaps* what this collection offers more than anything is the opportunity to adopt Mills' thought as a spur to action ... (BBR 10)

In journal book reviews, in contrast, writers have somewhat more assurance who their readers are: individuals who are sufficiently interested to get past the paywall of a specialist academic journal and who, presumably, have an interest in, and knowledge of, the topic the book addresses. These are likely to be members of the same, or neighbouring, disciplinary community as the writer and without the ability to vent their disagreement so easily. As a result, hedges are mainly used to express speculative judgements, claiming a suitably restrained and polite attitude when evaluating the book:

- (5) I do have *some* concerns about the book. *Perhaps* the most notable is the lack of a strong theoretical lens through which to understand this particular campaign.
(BBR 20)
- (6) This *may* result in misleadingly high estimations of the level of truly independent voters. (BBR 14)

The two forms of the genre can also be contrasted through differences in the targets of hedged comments (Table 3). There are predominantly two areas addressed by hedged remarks: those used to mitigate evaluations of the book and those weakening the reviewer’s assertions of his own position on an issue. In blog book reviews, hedging the evaluations of a book (log Likelihood = 9.84, $p < 0.01$) and the book reviewer’s position were both more frequent than in the journals, although the difference was not significant in the latter (log Likelihood = 0.40, $p < 0.45$).

Table 3. Targets of hedges in two forms of book reviews (per 1,000 words and %)

Hedging target	Journal Book reviews		Blog Book reviews	
	per 1,000 words	%	per 1,000 words	%
Book evaluations	2.91	83.50	5.34	86.24
Reviewer’s views	0.58	16.50	0.85	13.76
Total	3.48	100.00	6.20	100.00

In the blog reviews, hedges were mostly used to soften criticisms of the book, revealing a strong similarity to blog posts compared with journal articles, damping down the possibility of escalating disagreements and abusive responses (Zou & Hyland, 2019). The use of hedges thus reduces the possible consequences of bald criticism:

(7) *Perhaps* a weakness of Schick's work is its failure to grapple with Rose's Judaism and Protestantism and its impact on her political thought. *Perhaps* her section on speculative politics fails to fully articulate.... (BBR 28)

(8) The book *would* have benefitted from sharing more ideas of what 'good' queer methodologies might look like in sociology.... (BBR 14)

Interestingly, however, hedges were also more frequent in praising the book in the blog reviews. Again, this might be for similar reasons in avoid inflaming disagreement, or perhaps is simply due to a desire to present a reasonable and undogmatic persona:

(9) Johnston's prose is nonetheless clear enough that the book *could* be of interest to a more general reader seeking to better understand the ways in which... (BBR 6)

(10) The text ... *perhaps* most importantly draws our attention to the need to be critically aware in the process of conducting feminist research. (BBR 26)

The blog book reviewers also hedged the ways they presented their own positions, damping down the assertions on issues which extended discussion beyond, but prompted by, the book itself. The hedges presumably sought to anticipate the views of a wider and less predictable audience and guide them to the writer's views:

(11) Google search results are racist and sexist. *Perhaps* you know this already or *maybe* it comes as a surprise. (BBR 13)

(12) Higher education *may* be so transformed by technology and disaggregation that we will need to ask fundamentally different questions. (BBR 29)

In the journal book reviews, reviewers were less likely to take off into discussions of their own pet theories to the same extent and predominantly focused on the book and the ideas within it. This means that hedges are predominantly (83.5%) used to tone down evaluations of what the reviewer found in them. This hedging may reflect the professional respect shown to colleagues in academic journals as the reviewer carefully exemplifies and reinterprets the arguments of the book ideas for the disciplinary readership of the journal. Here the reviewer, author and audience are from the same community and a certain degree of respect is expected:

(13) ... the book *would* have benefited from a more detailed discussion of the operationalisation of this key variable and a justification of its validity. (JBR 15)

(14) Whether there is anything especially progressive about the approach of Cameron's Conservative Party to welfare and social justice is *perhaps* a question this volume could have interrogated rather more critically. (JBR 18)

8. Boosters

In contrast to hedges, boosters help remove any doubts about claims and upgrade propositions to emphasise their significance, uniqueness or originality (Hyland, 2005). In book reviews, the use of boosters is a rhetorical strategy to underpin writers' confidence in their evaluation, show their involvement with the reviewed book and hook the audience:

(15) Specifically, they were *very* effective at linking domestic labor to other issues that enjoyed broad international support, ... (BR 20)

(16) I *certainly* anticipate returning to it in the weeks, months, and years to come, and many colleagues will *undoubtedly* be doing the same. (BR 19)

Boosters are significantly more frequent in blog book reviews (log Likelihood = 17.33, $p < 0.001$) supporting Fahnestock (1986) and Hyland's (2010b) suggestion that authors tend to intervene more frequently and with less reluctance to comment epistemically on material in more popular versions of academic texts. While hedges are also more common, writers also often employ a more firm and confident tone. In blog book reviews, the use of boosters helps convince the heterogeneous and possibly uninformed audience that the writer's judgements of the book can be relied upon. These higher frequencies is also likely to be influenced by the less restrained nature of online platforms which support a more direct and unmuted tone.

In this environment reviewers prefer what Vassileva (2001) calls 'belief boosters' such as *I think*, *undoubtedly* and *in my view* to carry the assurance of their conviction. While the entire review is obviously considered to be from the perspective of the reviewer, these belief boosters underline this individual stance by providing a stamp of personal authority to help arouse reader involvement:

(17) In essence, this book is *particularly* suited to activists who appreciate the dedication towards social movements and ... (BBR 18)

(18) Overall, though, *I think* that *Research Justice: Methodologies for Social Change* is a really important book. (BBR 4)

In journal book reviews, in contrast, we find greater caution, as writers are more likely to boost assertions by attributing such beliefs to a like-minded audience, selecting forms which suggest shared assumptions:

- (19) Chapter 1 explores how the everyday commute, considered to be repetitive, boring and habitual, is *of course*, much more than that. (BR 16)
- (20) ... fact-checking *obviously* provides an innovative institutional presence within contemporary journalism practice. (BR 28)

Intriguingly, boosters not only differ in frequency across the two forms of book reviews, they are also used differently in the functions they play. We found they mainly perform one of three functions:

- Intensity boosters - amplify the emotive strength of a statement (e.g., extremely, amazing)
- Extremity boosters - emphasise the outer edge of a continuum (e.g., highest, greatest, most)
- Certainty boosters - indicate the writer or speaker’s epistemic conviction (e.g., definite, prove).

Table 4 shows that intensity and extremity boosters were more commonly used by the blog book reviewers (log Likelihood = 20.05, $p < 0.0001$ for intensity boosters, log Likelihood = 0.10, $p < 0.49$ for extremity boosters), while certainty types were slightly more frequent in journal book reviews (log Likelihood = -5.49, $p < 0.94$).

Table 4. Types of boosters across two forms of book reviews (per 1,000 words and %)

	Journal Book reviews		Blog Book reviews	
	per 1,000 words	%	per 1,000 words	%
Intensity boosters	2.57	80.00	5.80	89.85
Extremity boosters	0.10	3.16	0.16	2.54
Certainty boosters	0.54	16.84	0.49	7.61
Total	3.21	100.00	6.46	100.00

Intensity and extremity boosters enable writers to reinforce the strength of a statement, rather than stress its certitude. Both are more common in the blog book reviews where reviewers seem to be more willing to draw on a less formally academic register to ensure their point

gets across to a relatively undetermined readership. Instead of pushing certainty, then, they dial up affect to increase the intensity of their arguments and convey a sense of proximity and dialogue:

(21) First, that think tanks, precisely because they aim to inform public policy, are *extremely* sensitive to the economic and political contexts in which they operate. (BBR 20)

(22) It is *most* interesting that even the *most* critical voices in the recent debates over innovative forms of doing sociology have used media that go beyond the academic article and book. (BBR 22)

In contrast, the journal book reviewers opted more for slightly more certainty boosters. Unlike the more affective appeal of intensity boosters, these seek to strengthen statements by project a credible image of the author’s authority and decisiveness (Hyland, 1998). This is often enhanced by framing the evaluation with a personal pronoun:

(23) I *certainly* anticipate returning to it in the weeks, months, and years to come, and many colleagues will undoubtedly be doing the same. (JBR 19)

(24) I *believe* that the book is primarily meant for feminists who are trying to learn about feminism in the digital age, ... (JBR 30)

We also analysed the preference reviewers had for the targets of boosted comments in the two forms of review (Table 5). We found boosting evaluations of the book was significantly more frequent in the blog reviews (log Likelihood = 20.15, $p < 0.0001$), while boosting the reviewer’s own position was slightly more common in journal book reviews (log Likelihood = -3.18, $p < 0.83$).

Table 5. Targets of boosters across two forms of book reviews (per 1,000 words and %)

Boosting targets	Journal Book reviews		Blog Book reviews	
	per 1,000 words	%	per 1,000 words	%
Book evaluations	2.64	82.11	5.93	91.88
Reviewer’s own views	0.58	17.89	0.52	8.12
Total	3.21	100.00	6.46	100.00

It is interesting to see the blog reviewers taking a more uncompromising tone when stating their opinions of the book, whether this is criticism or praise. The more frequent uses of boosters to discuss the book help emphasise the kind of strong personal judgements which characterise online debate, and this is especially true as much of it accompanies positive comments, although this also helps to prepare readers for the reservations in a positive-negative pair (26):

(25) This book remains *very* informative when it comes to qualitative research. (BBR 8)

(26) This collection *certainly* affords the reader a chance to consider the various legacies of C. Wright Mills - but from very particular and established perspectives. (BBR 23)

But boosters were also used in blog reviews when conveying criticism, although often with the same praise-criticism pairing. This allows the reviewer to both mitigate the criticism on the one hand, while highlighting shortcomings (27 and 28). Once again, this reflects the need to dilute criticism in a potentially inflammatory medium, offering a balanced strategy to be politely assertive.

(27) These are significant and worthwhile books, but it concerns me that they contain *very* little critique of the methodologies they describe. (BBR 4)

(28) However, although the book offers a practical course of action for collaborative research with communities, it is *highly* ambitious in its attempt to introduce concepts and theoretical ideas along with the results of the research project. (BBR 5)

In journal book reviews, in contrast, boosters were more frequently used to show the reviewers' own position as issues raised in the book are taken up and explored from the reviewer's perspective. Reviewers are more likely to exploit the review space in journals than in blogs to express their own views at length, and to use boosters to support their assertions. Boosters here allow reviewers to explicitly refer to assumed shared understandings with their disciplinary specialised audience and to possibly gain credit for these views without the bother of compiling supporting evidence in a research paper:

(29) Beardstown, Illinois, is *exactly* one of these cities. (JBR 19)

(30) Although secular has *always* been a dirty word in Muslim Southeast Asia, many journalists ... (JBR 25)

9. Attitude markers

Attitude markers express the writer's indicate the writer's affective, rather than epistemic, attitude to propositions, conveying surprise, agreement, importance, frustration, and so on, rather than commitment (Hyland, 2010b). In book reviews, reviewers convey their personal response to material by stepping into the discussion to assert their presence and viewpoint, expressing an opinion which marks a clear stance (Hyland & Zou, 2021). Both forms of the genre are littered with attitude markers and they accounted for the highest proportion of stance features in both (70.82% and 55.47%). Reviewers, then generally seek to point out what is important or valuable using affective means, simultaneously strengthening the judgement while seeking to construct a relationship with readers and the book author:

- (31) Overall, this book is a *timely* and *important* contribution to scholarship on gender within the neoliberal academy. (BBR 3)
- (32) It is, therefore, *valuable* for researchers, students, policy makers and care workers in under- standing the strengths and the weaknesses of related practices in this region. (JBR 4)

Table 2 indicates that reviewers convey an affective judgement of the reviewed book slightly more often in blog book reviews (log Likelihood = -2.3, $p < 0.8$). The result is consistent with a study by Zou and Hyland (2019) which found attitude markers are more frequent in blogs when recontextualised from journal articles. We attribute this to the more intimate and responsive nature of the blog in which reviewers demonstrate subjective evaluation and interpersonal negotiation. So in journal book reviews, reviewers often tend to use attitude markers which imply a disciplinary affiliation and shared assumptions about the evaluations being made:

- (33) Particularly *helpful* in this project are the data-driven arguments, the focus on intersecting social and economic factors in different wage gaps, ... (JBR 1)
- (34) It is written and structured in a *readable* way with *insightful* analysis of the intersection between care, migration and policy. (JBR 4)

But by deploying an attitudinal stance feature with self-mention, blog book reviewers are able to sidestep such assumptions of agreement to create a sense of personal involvement and perhaps a more individual engagement with readers:

(35) But I was *disappointed* to discover that, instead of the considered conclusions I was expecting, these are transcribed keynote speeches from a conference held by Data Center in 2014. (BBR 4)

(36) I found the second chapter particularly *useful*, offering a *perspicuous* overview of this expansive literature. (BBR 6)

We also found the two forms of book reviews conveyed attitudes in different ways across the three categories suggested by Dueñas' (2010):

- assessment (i.e. acuity, novelty, interestingness, validity, quality)
- significance (i.e. relevance, importance)
- emotion (i.e. emotional judgements).

We can see from Table 6 that assessment is overwhelmingly the most frequent and accounts for the largest proportion of attitude markers in both forms of book reviews, with a slight, but not significant, frequency favouring the blog review texts (log Likelihood = -4.49, $p < 0.9$).

Table 6. Attitude functions across two forms of book reviews (per 1,000 words and %)

	Journal book reviews		Blog book reviews	
	per 1,000 words	%	per 1,000 words	%
assessment	15.49	88.59	15.64	87.04
significance	1.29	7.35	0.98	5.47
emotion	0.71	4.06	1.34	7.48
Total	17.49	100.00	17.97	100.00

The preference for assessment reflects the evaluative nature of the genre as reviewers seek to present a judgement relating to a range of features of the book which readers may see as relevant. It also gives a clear view of the reviewer's personal stance and reinforce the writer-reader bond, especially linking the evaluation of an academic text and the general experience of non-specialist readers:

(37) I could all too *easily* imagine students and possibly even some *advanced* colleagues unfamiliar with ethnography and/or digital culture struggling to make sense (BBR 19)

(38) *Ironically* it was this strand of economics which believed in exactly the technocratic, rationalist, one-size fits all thinking that Pixley scorns (BBR 27)

Emotion markers are less frequent, but occur significantly more often in the blog book reviews (log Likelihood = 4.995, $p < 0.08$) as writers incorporate practices from both public and personal discourses (Luzón, 2013; Zou & Hyland, 2019). These express a judgement through an affective reaction. This is both a powerful means of conveying an evaluation and a means of arousing a similar feeling in the audience:

- (39) *Unfortunately*, a significant percentage of the modern professoriate could use such an exercise for personal and professional elevation. (BBR 17)
- (40) *Surprisingly*, sociologists have paid very little attention to the political influence behind social movements. (BBR 25)

Significance markers are more frequent in journal book reviews, although the difference is not significant (log Likelihood = 2.06, $p < 0.3$). The overt marking of importance is a central feature of academic writing and in book reviews is an unequivocal indication of an overall, and usually positive, evaluation of the reviewed book. They are particularly forceful when combined with boosters:

- (41) This book makes a *highly* original and *significant* contribution to the literature on party politics and representation in contemporary Europe. (JBR 15)
- (42) Overall, however, this is an *extremely important* book that sets new standards for qualitative research on the internal workings of newsrooms. (JBR 25)

10. Self-mention

How writers chose to portray their authorial presence is a key aspect of a reviewer's stance. The extent to which they intrude into their text using first person can not only reinforce the strength of their judgements, but also display this as individual, and perhaps uniquely interesting, perspective (e.g., Hyland, 2001). Table 2 shows that self-mention is statistically more frequent in the blog book reviews (log Likelihood = 5.59, $p < 0.06$), again reflecting practices in the ways writers present material in blogs and journal articles (Author 1 & Author 2, 2019). Here we see the reviewer stepping into the text to stamp a personal authority on to the evaluation:

- (43) *I* found Hsu's questions illuminating and it led *me* to ask: what are the cultural assumptions underlying other concepts such as 'financial inclusion' and 'women's empowerment'? (JBR 7)

(44) *I* found this immensely useful, almost equivalent to having a jovial senior academic volunteer to sit down and talk you through a literature you're unfamiliar with. (BBR 6)

In these examples, the combination of self-mention with the use of booster, attitude marker, reader-mention and question, the writers are able to inject a reflective and conversational tone to the appraisals.

The significantly greater frequency of self-mention in the blog book reviews is an explicit reference to the medium in which it occurs and the association blogs have with the informality of conversational sharing. The use of *I* infuses the text with a greater sense of proximity and an appeal to an audience which may be unfamiliar with, and unimpressed by, the impersonal conventions of academic writing. Often we find self-mention explicitly referring to the reviewer's own experience, presenting evaluations in a way which might resonate with the experiences of readers:

(45) While *I* distinctly remember the point at which *I* realised Google's search algorithm appeared to be producing better and more comprehensive results than *my* prior favorite AltaVista, ... (BBR 19)

(46) As a young woman who recently took a break from academia, this book felt cathartic to read, and *I* saw many of *my* own experiences laid out in the case studies. (BBR 3)

There is also greater use of self-mention with hedging in this variety of the genre, especially when conveying criticism. In combination, the use of *I* downplay their role of threatening the book author's face and evoke reader's experiences:

(47) *I* am unsurprised that Mills is a sociologist honoured more in the breach than the observance, but *I* would question why ... (BBR 10)

(48) They were interesting to read, but *I* would have valued a conclusion which spoke to the book as a whole, whether instead of, or as well as, these contributions. (BBR 4)

In journal book reviews, in contrast, the use of self-mention is considerably less noticeable and comprises the smallest proportion of stance features, a result also found by Tse and Hyland (2008) in their studies of book reviews in journals. The reason for this is perhaps related to the expectations journal readers have when they read a review. While they want the reviewer's candid opinion and assessment, they are also looking for this to be expressed in

ways which correspond to the even-handed, open-minded and fact-backed observations they are familiar with in conventional academic discourses. Self-mention therefore seeks less to promote a personal self but one embedded in the values and practices of the discipline:

(49) As *I* alluded to above, Blau tacitly assumes the mutual compatibility of economic growth and environmental sustainability. (JBR 23)

(50) At times, *I* found Steele's conceptualizations and terminologies incompletely persuasive. (JBR 25)

11. Conclusions

This study has sought to discover the extent to which book reviews in blogs differ from those found in academic journals in terms of authorial stance, with attention given to the particular communicative constraints and affordances of the different media. We see stance as a key element of this highly evaluative genre as it represents how writers construct personal credibility and a persuasive position as they comment on a target book. The results show that posting a review on a prestigious academic blog site requires writers to consider different stance choices to those made by writers of reviews published within the envelope of a scholarly journal, but that writers are using the same resources to achieve the same goals. These rhetorical adjustments are motivated by the change in the nature of the audience, which is less homogeneous in terms of its likely specialised knowledge and expectations, and more immediately interactive, given the response channel available to readers below the post. So while writers, like their journal counterparts, are creating a text which reviews an academic text in order to interest and persuade an audience of a particular judgement, they do so in a way which takes account of this changed interpersonal context.

In particular, we have shown that the ways book reviewers convey their epistemic assessments, personal attitudes, and presence reflects the same desire to offer an opinion of a work and to do this by creating an appropriate persona and relationship with readers. The fact that reviewers in blog book reviews used all four stance resources more frequently and took stronger positions reflects the fact that the different circumstances mean they have to work harder to do this. Instead of relying on disciplinary-savvy readers to recognise the stance being taken, they have to create solidarity with a wider audience and convey their judgements through more explicit personal intervention. At the same time as they convey conviction through boosters and self-mention, they are also aware that online formats are unforgiving when it comes to the expression of criticism and disagreement, and anonymous blog

responses can be harsh (Zou & Hyland, 2019). This meant there are over twice as many hedges in the blog book reviews as writers sought to offer their judgements more cautiously.

In sum, the authors of these blog book reviews recognise, through their rhetorical choices, that they are engaged in constructing a plausible and convincing depiction of an academic book and the contribution of its author. They are not selecting different features to achieve a different purpose to the authors of journal reviews but participating in an identifiable and familiar activity. They are doing this, moreover, in a way which is sensitive to the local affordances and constraints of a different medium while acknowledging the standards of interactional decorum which are closer to academic review practices than to the sometimes scathing judgements found on literary review sites such as *Bookmarks* and *Goodreads*. The debates surrounding literary censorship, criticism and the behaviour of reviewers, authors, agents and readers in handling criticism (Matthews, 2016) has not been seen on the LSE site, for example.

This is, of course, a relatively small-scale study of only 60 texts, and further work would help fill-out the picture in fields other than sociology. Future work might also turn to whether blog book reviews exhibit similar disciplinary differences as those observed by Tse and Hyland (2006) in journal book reviews, or whether other interpersonal features, such as those which promote reader engagement, show similar variations in the two media forms. Comparisons of stance strategies might also be studied in other review genres, such as literary reviews, online film reviews or student review writing, to explore the strategies employed. Equally, changes across different time periods may be instructive to see if patterns change – perhaps evolving from a more journal-based format to better utilise the medium. In addition, it would be also interesting to touch upon other academic blog platforms in which academic authors, and their institutional affiliation or experience may vary.

We anticipate that our findings will be particularly useful in supporting novice writers embarking on reviewing or seasoned ones stepping into the Brave New World of public engagement. Book reviews are often a genre eagerly taken up by junior scholars who might welcome explicit insights into the ways writers project an authoritative and credible self in expressing their opinions of a book. Beyond this, of course, we believe our results may inform considerations of genre and of context, contributing to discussions concerning the

particular interactive and rhetorical resources which writers use to achieve a common purpose in two different media.

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Appendix. Source of journals for the book reviews

Journal of Sociology

British Journal of Sociology

Party Politics

Social Forces

The International Journal of Press/Politics