Chapter 43
Slacktivism, Supervision, and #Selfies:
Illuminating Social Media Composition through Reception Theory

Elisabeth H. Buck
University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, USA

ABSTRACT

Since its original development for use in literary studies by German scholar Hans Robert Jauss in the late 1960s, reception theory has been successfully applied to fields as diverse as media studies, communications, and art history; its efficacy within rhetoric and composition pedagogy, however, has been less fully explored. I argue in this essay that reception theory can provide a meaningful way to understand and discuss social media composing practices, especially as a lens for thinking about why and how we participate in social media as both readers and writers in the 21st century. This essay thus examines the three "aesthetic experiences" of Jauss's reception theory—catharsis, aisthesis, and poiesis— which describe the ways that audiences derive satisfaction from engaging with texts. I apply each aesthetic concept to a corresponding mode of social media composition: practices of social media-based activism, regulation of content on social media, as well as the act of creating "selfies." These applications stand as potential entry points for classroom discussion about how social media draws its users into producing a response. The "aesthetic experiences" represent ways to look at composing practices on social media cohesively, but they also give language to how individual social media users gain enjoyment from participating with these sites. I offer specific strategies for incorporating reception theory in a classroom context, and conclude that this approach helps students think more specifically about the intricacies and limitations of audience(s)—important recognitions for anyone who produces content in social media environments.

INTRODUCTION

On March 2nd, 2014—the night of the 86th annual Academy Awards—host Ellen DeGeneres broke Twitter. During an interlude in the awards ceremony, DeGeneres asked actress Meryl Streep to pose with her for a selfie and commemorate her record-breaking eighteenth Oscar nomination by "[trying] to break another record right now, with the most retweets of a photo." In a moment of ostensible spontaneity, DeGeneres solicited several other celebrities—including Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lawrence, Julia Roberts, and Kevin Spacey—to join her and Streep for a picture that ultimately showcased a coterie of Hollywood A-listers. Within forty minutes of DeGeneres's uploading the photo to her Twitter account, the "Oscar selfie" became the most retweeted item ever posted on the social media site, causing Twitter to crash momentarily. DeGeneres's photo broke the record previously held by Barack Obama's picture celebrating his 2012 reelection to the presidency. This picture has since been retweeted over three-and-a-half million times, a number that continues to grow despite claims that the epic selfie was actually a planned product placement for awards sponsor Samsung (Guynn, 2014). Whatever the true intent behind the post was, the fact remains that in this instance, DeGeneres directly solicited a response from the over forty million individuals tuned into the ceremony, and respond they did—in a number roughly equivalent to the combined populations of South Dakota, Alaska, North Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming.

There are many ways that individuals can compose on and through social media, yet retweeting a post requires a comparatively high level of investment. In contrast to "favoriting" another user's tweet—an act that implies mere tacit approval of that content—retweeting publically announces to followers a desire for the content to be shared. Perhaps more significantly, because the retweeted post appears on the user's profile page, it becomes a part of that person's collective Twitter identity, helping to form the narrative that will shape how individuals read a user's profile. Retweeting DeGeneres's selfie implies a desire to perpetuate and engage in the act of collective reading—it is an acknowledgement that one receives pleasure from participating in this historical moment, and, in consequence, marks the user as inevitably cognizant of the post's significance.

This Oscars anecdote stands as emblematic of the kind of meaningful discourses that can emerge when considering how audiences function collectively as composers and recipients of social media content—key to understanding reception theory's applications. At its most essential level, reception theory is a lens often applied to literature, communication, and art history that views the interpretation of texts "as dependent on the reading public's horizon of expectations in a given period" (Chandler & Munday, 2011). This concept of "horizon of expectations" is a key principle within reception theory, and it can be understood as a "shared 'mental set' or framework within which those of a particular generation in a culture understand, interpret, and evaluate a text or an artwork." These shared qualities—which reinforce an ideology of a collective audience—include "knowledge of conventions and expectations (e.g. regarding genre and style), and social knowledge (e.g. of moral codes)" (Chandler & Munday, 2011). In the case then of the Oscar selfie, the three-and-a-half million individuals who retweeted the post demonstrated the "shared mental set" of the social media-saturated generation, in which the act of retweeting signifies a collective understanding of how to read and participate with that text. This chapter consequently explores the use of reception theory to discuss social media, and also includes practical, accessible activities for classroom application. For 21st century teachers of writing, this model can provide a helpful framework for theorizing social media and understanding its broader implications, especially because it places emphasis on the importance of audience and context.

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