

Blogs and reading: a critical analysis of research articles

Blogs y lectura. Un análisis crítico de los artículos de investigación

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Abstract

The literary blogosphere has undergone a transformation in recent years. Its most effervescent period, the first decade of the millennium, has given way to a migration towards other platforms and social networks. This article analyses research on literary blogs and their role in prescribing readings. The research included in the study was published between 2000-2020 in international journals indexed in Scopus, WOS and ERIC, as well as in Google Scholar, LISA and other databases. The objective is to analyze the literary blog as an agent that takes part in constituting the literary canon. Through the literature review, we observe the topics that have aroused the interest of international researchers with regards to literary blogs: profiling of bloggers and readers, discursive characterization of blog reviews, debate on the coexistence of or competition between amateur and professional literary criticism, and the relationship between blogging and buying books.

Keywords: Book reviews; literary review; reading promotion; reading motivation; Web 2.0 Technologies

Resumen

La blogosfera literaria se ha transformado en los últimos años. El período de mayor efervescencia durante la primera década del milenio ha dado paso a una migración hacia otras plataformas y redes sociales. Este artículo analiza las investigaciones publicadas entre 2000-2020 en revistas internacionales indexadas en Scopus, WOS, y ERIC, así como en otras como Google Scholar y LISA sobre el blog literario y su función como prescriptor de lecturas. Nuestro objetivo es analizarlo como agente que participa en la constitución del canon literario. La revisión bibliográfica permite observar los temas que han despertado el interés de la crítica internacional sobre los blogs literarios: perfil de blogueros y lectores, caracterización discursiva de las reseñas de blogs, debate sobre la convivencia o competencia entre la crítica literaria *amateur* y la profesional y relación entre los blogs y la compra de libros.



Palabras clave: Reseñas de libros; reseñas literarias; promoción lectora; motivación lectora; tecnologías Web 2.0

Introduction

Since 1997, when Jorn Brager created the term "weblog" (Escandell, 2014), blogs have evolved considerably. They have become a space for communication (with other blogs and with the virtual community) and for personal creation (Estalella, 2006) of different types depending on the authors' intention: personal, professional, etc.; or, in the words of García-Gómez (2005, p. 64), they have "mutated into a multidimensional phenomenon: formative, informative and recreational", which is especially successful in the fields of journalism, politics, education and literature. Therefore, some regard it as a new genre of digital writing, somewhere between the essay and the intimate diary, with which it shares formal characteristics and modes of reading (Esteve, 2012). One of the main attractions for the reading community is precisely the subjectivity and personalised tone that gives it its distinctive value: "blogging is a process that helps to shape subjective feelings and identity through affective connections, thus defining a sense of self in relation to others" (Van Dijck, 2007, p. 73). Many have defined it as a web page, personal or collective, edited and published on the internet with electronic tools, which is usually structured on the regular (periodic) updating of contents in the form of tables, adopts a reverse chronological order, offers hyperlinks, is interactive and allows the participation of the virtual community, in the form of comments, blogroll or content syndication (Orihuela, 2006; Bruguera, 2007; Escandell, 2014; Esteve, 2018).

This new virtual space, which is social, interactive and collaborative, has revolutionised not only the way knowledge is acquired but also reading practices. On the one hand, the way of interacting with texts and commenting on readings has therefore changed, because the individual and solitary act of reading has become public and shared: "the act of reading becomes a social conversation" (Lluch et al., 2015, p. 800) and takes place in virtual meeting spaces such as blogs, social networks, etc., as shown by different research (García-Roca, 2016, 2020; Lluch, 2014; Torrego-González & Gutiérrez-Martín, 2018). On the other hand, because readers change their role with Web 2.0, they are actors, prosumers or reader-authors, especially fans of fantasy narratives (Jenkins, 2009); and/or teenagers (Sánchez-García et al., 2013; Manresa & Margallo, 2016). They construct and are constructed by the text and problematise classic concepts such as authorship, genre or book (Martos Núñez, 2006).

The aim of the study presented in this article is to critically review the research published between 2000 and 2020 on blogs that refer to reading or literary blogs and that become prescribers for the virtual community, meaning a reading blog or literary blog as a virtual space for the publication, dissemination and criticism of literary creations (by the blog's administrator or by other people). Araújo and Araújo (2015) extend the subject matter to reading, books and literature in general (news, events, etc.). They are generally aimed at promoting reading and fostering dialogue around books "que vão dos famosos clássicos aos lançamentos modernos" (Santos et al., 2014, p. 104), and define reviews as an "elemento importante na categorização dos blogs literários, pois são as representações das experiências de leitura do

blogueiro, transmitidas aos leitores da página” (Silva de Sá & Ávila Araújo 2020, p. 1331). This review will be the starting point that will allow us to situate our subject of study: reading blogs as agents that participate in the constitution of the non-academic literary canon.

We start from the need to decentralise the idea of canon and to speak thereof in plural, since new agents distinguish and value works and authors: traditional prizes, critics, academies, education... are now joined by blogs, slams or booktubers (Achugar, 2019). We analyse the reflections of Francés (2021) on the configuration of the canon proposed by Ohmann (1983), and especially Fishelov (2010), to integrate blogs as agents of reading recommendations, generators of echoes and dialogues around literary works.

Methodology

In order to know the current status of research on blogs and reading promotion, outside the educational and academic sphere, a review of articles published between 2000 and 2020 in scientific journals indexed in the international reference databases, i.e., Web of Science (WOS), owned by Clarivate Analytics, Scopus, owned by Elsevier, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), funded by the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) of the US Department of Education, was carried out. Additionally, this search has been completed with a bibliographic review in Google Scholar and Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), in the same period specified above.

In addition to the chronological criterion and the source of publication (we have ruled out monographic books and doctoral theses), we have used the following search terminology: *blog*, *reading*, *canon*, *literary criticism* and *promotion reading*, in the fields of title, summary and keywords.

The procedure consisted of an initial search using the descriptors “blog” and “reading”. This combination retrieved a high average number of results. Therefore, after filtering (from reading the abstract or the full text), the number of related articles was reduced to forty. In order to obtain results more in line with the interests of this research, we have increased the number of search terms by adding *readers*, *canon*, *literary criticism*, *reading promotion*, *social reading*, *literary mediation*, but the results have been very poor and often irrelevant (below 4).

Thus, from the first search, we ruled out articles on the use of blogs in the educational and/or academic sphere, for example, aimed at second language learning or the development of reading skills, which have been analysed in a series of studies (Lluch et al., 2017; Esteve & Calvo, 2019), and we chose research focused on analysing:

- a) blogs dedicated to reading
- b) the link between blogs and literary criticism (*amateur* and/or professional)
- c) the link between blogs and reading promotion
- d) the link between blogs and the canon
- e) the link between blogs and book purchases

Articles analysing other virtual platforms for promoting reading, such as YouTube channels, or the social networks Instagram or Twitter, were also ruled out for our bibliographic review,

although they are referred to in this article as they are linked with the object of study. In short, there are 15 articles that directly fall within the subject of our research.

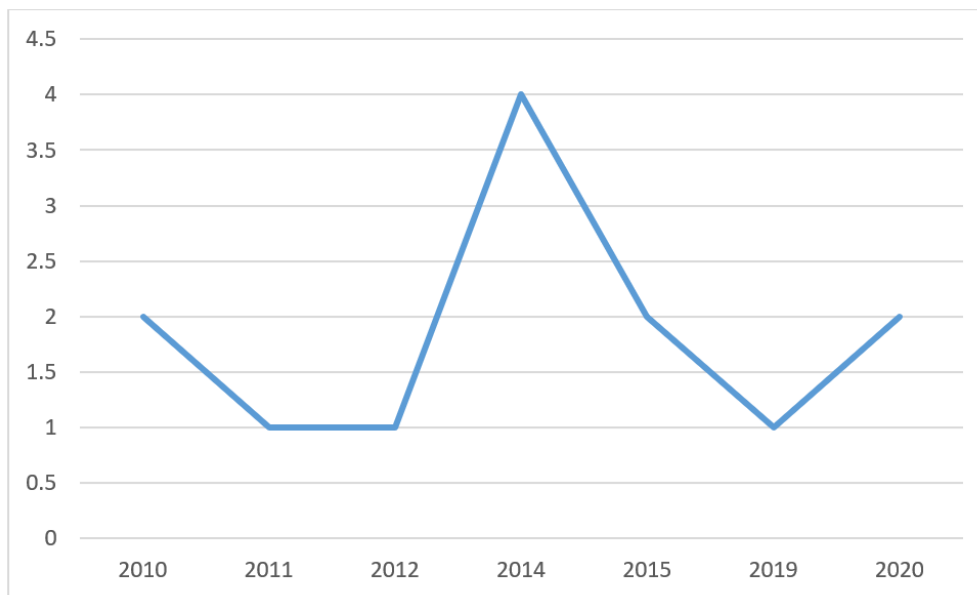
Results

Quantitative analysis

Specific bibliography on literary blogs, or blogs that talk about reading, related to reading prescription, the canon, purchasing and/or the practice of literary criticism (professional or amateur) is still an emerging and little-frequented field of research, especially at the national and international level, as Savolainen (2020) notes: there are few studies focused on reading or literary blogs. Thus, the outcome of the bibliographic search (figure 1) is 15 articles, 67% of which were published between 2008 and 2014 - no earlier studies were found with the search criteria described - and from 2016 onwards, they drop to 20%. However, this percentage contrasts with the years of publication and the number of studies on booktubers in relation to literary criticism and reading promotion: five between 2016 and 2020, taking into account only those that have appeared applying our search criteria and, therefore, in a non-systematic approach (Rovira-Collado, 2016, 2017; Lluch, 2017; Álvarez & Romero, 2018 or Paladines-Tabicas & Margallo, 2020).

Figure 1.

Year of publication of the articles in the analysis corpus



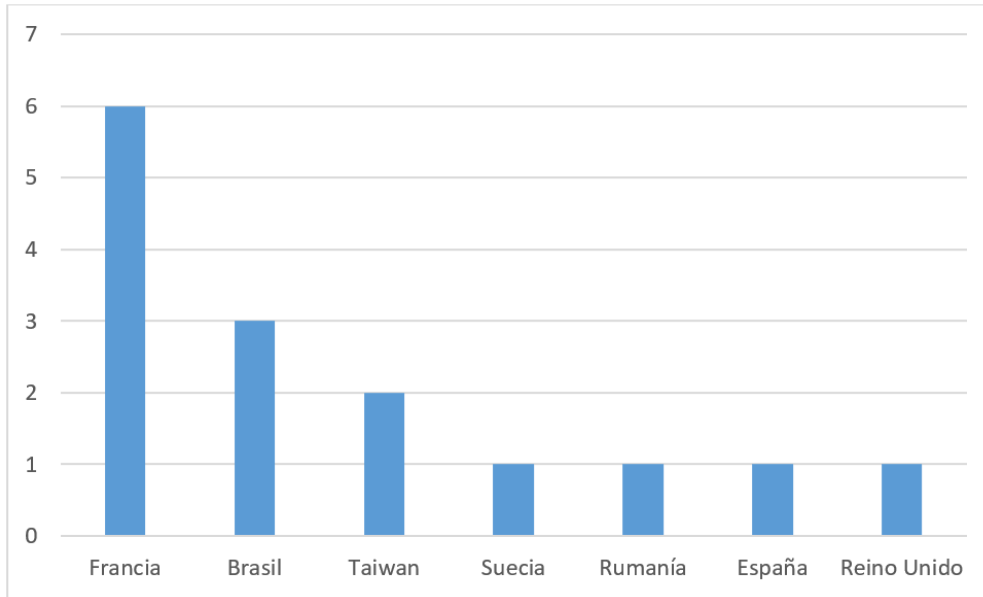
Nevertheless, this evolution in the studies confirms or falls within the chronology and transformation of the blogosphere that has been described by blogosphere critics. It should be recalled that it was at its height between 2000 and 2010, with a peak between 2004 and 2008. In fact, Tecnorati records more than 133 million indexed blogs in 2008, and in the Spanish-speaking world, Bitácoras Puntocom indexed 576,681 blogs in 2011 (Escandell, 2014). Numerous studies mention how the number of blogs created on the Internet is growing

exponentially over the years. Subsequently, the use of blogs has been changing; Head et al. (2017) report that by 2010 many young bloggers had migrated to Facebook or Twitter. Also, the Pew Research Center (2010) and Lenhart et al. (2010) noted the decline of blogging among the 18–33-year-old millennial generation and found that Internet users are moving what they do on blogs to other spaces such as social networks and microblogs like Twitter. More recent studies (Perrin and Anderson, 2019) show that Instagram has a very strong following among adults under 30 years old and has been growing steadily in recent years. The fact that new social media platforms attract more social traffic, require less time and effort to create posts, and organise posts from a thousand sources in one place is one of the reasons for this migration. For these reasons, some began to predict the death of the blog or to predict its uncertain future, but studies such as those of Escandell (2014) or Head et al. (2017), at the very least, qualify this prediction, while acknowledging the decline: “the focus of what is new has shifted from the blogosphere to the social network” (Escandell, 2014, p. 151) and, consequently, the blog has repositioned itself in the media ecology, taking on other functions. This is also confirmed by the latest “Study on the use and consumption attitudes of digital content” published in 2017 by the National Observatory of Telecommunications and Information Society (ONTSI) of Spain, which reports consumption data for 2016. One could see that reading of websites, blogs, forums represents 55%, always behind, among others, the use of social networks: 60% websites, blogs and forums (excluding social networks and digital press) are consulted or read by 27.4% of the population on a daily basis, while 40% uses a social network with the same frequency.

This shows the migration of blogs - and, consequently, of reading prescriptions - from their expansion in the traditional or macro-blogging format (Blogger, Blogster, WordPress) to micro-blogging via social networks such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, which have embedded blog functions and can be considered a type of blog (Chen & Behm-Morawitz, 2018, p. 1494), or also to the YouTube platform. In any case, social networks act as facilitators for access to other content and they are disseminators in this sense.

As for the cultures or territories that show the greatest interest in this field of study, France, Brazil and Taiwan stand out (Figure 2). We did not find any research of similar characteristics in the field of Catalan culture, a fact that justifies this study and further studies in the future we are looking into.

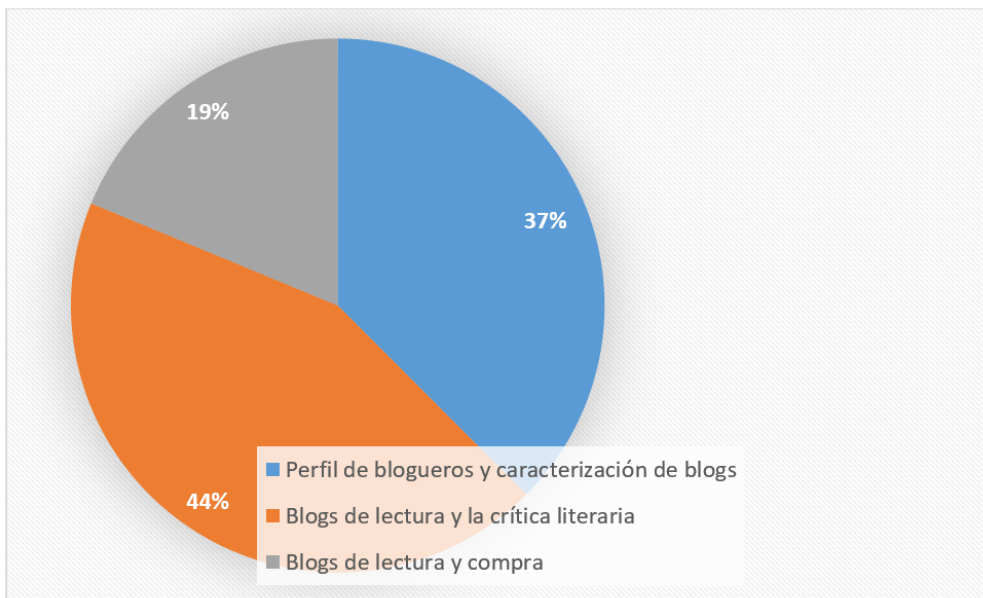
Figure 2.
Countries of origin of the articles in the analysis corpus



Thematic analysis

Although the selected critical literature has been relatively limited, it made it possible to identify some recurring themes of interest on this issue, as well as to infer some of the current deficits to guide future research.

Figure 3.
Main themes of the articles in the corpus under analysis



a) Profile of bloggers and characterisation of reading or literary blogs

As for the characterisation of reading or literary blogs, Steiner (2010) establishes the following classification: a) professional commercial book blogs, written by authors, bookshops, newspapers, magazines, etc.; b) professional non-profit book blogs, which are usually managed by one or more librarians and whose main objective is to inform users about reading and literature in general; c) non-professional individual book blogs, which are the most common and of regular readers. Bloggers show an intimate view of reading and often relate it to personal experiences. And d) non-professional collective book blogs, which are the least common and tend to specialise in genres: crime fiction, juvenile fiction, etc.

Subsequently, Silva de Sá and Ávila Araújo (2020) analyse the textual, visual and hypertextual content of blogs, using a template made up of four categories with their relevant subcategories: 1) Literature (initial interest in reading; frequency of reading; reading supports; need to share readings; search for information about books; appropriation of reading); 2) Identity (motivations; representations of the blog; changes after the blog); 3) Informative actions (content production; review writing; sweepstakes and launches; photo production; updating; transmedia); and 4) Interaction (readers; bloggers; publishing market). Savolainen (2020) also provides a series of criteria for analysing book reviews by bloggers, based on Rosenblatt's classic theory of reader response.

Similarly, Santos et al. (2014) focus on readers of literary blogs to study the motivations that lead them to inform themselves in the literary blogosphere, the way they interact and the impact on consumption (through interviews with a sample of 20 readers of literary blogs, during two months in 2014). The main contributions confirm the hypothesis that readers search these blogs for opinions about books they are interested in, and also for general information about literature, even though these opinions do not always result in consumption (a relationship they consider very difficult to analyse). They follow few blogs they trust and they give a remarkable degree of relevance thereto. The effectiveness of these blogs is measured by the interest of publishers in signing up bloggers. Subsequently, Araujo and Araujo (2015), follow the same line, but extend the questionnaire to bloggers as well (in total: 17 bloggers and 265 readers of these blogs), and obtain very similar results. Blogs serve the dual function of informing about literature-related topics and stimulating reading. She establishes a profile of Brazilian women bloggers (women between 16 and 24 years old from the Southeast who did not complete their higher education) and blog readers, also active on other platforms that talk about reading.

Finally, most of them highlight the relationship between bloggers and the world of publishing. According to Steiner (2010, p. 472), "blog culture has become an important and integrated part of book trade, and has influenced the publishing, marketing and distribution of literature in North America and many European countries". Some others, such as Chapelian (2014), believe the importance of bloggers is comparable to that of influencers in the United States. They are gaining ground and authority on the Internet and are able to capture the attention of the market and publishers who recognise its "potential for the dissemination of literary content" (Santos et al., 2014, p. 102). Silva de Sá and Ávila Araújo (2020) also analyse the link between bloggers and the publishing market.

b) Reading blogs and literary criticism

Literary criticism has also found sanctuary on the web, under the form of blogs run either by anonymous authors or readers, or by well-known critics. In fact, some believe that the Internet has served as a space of rescue or salvation for literary criticism - in crisis during the new millennium - which has been revived and also transformed in recent years. This new ecosystem has also led to tensions, as we will see hereinafter, since this virtual community can challenge the paradigm of traditional criticism, the monopoly of intellectual authority over the criteria for the quality of literary works - book reviews are no longer the exclusive sphere of experts or professionals, since anyone with an interest can actively share their opinions on books (Huang and Yang, 2014).

The studies of French researchers on the coexistence between professional (traditional) literary criticism and literary blogs as amateur literary criticism in the literary ecosystem are particularly outstanding (figure 4). They do not refer to a canon of readings, but they do talk about the discursive features of the posts on these blogs, the relationship with publishers and the influence on young adult readers. Since 2008, blogs have been investigated as a new form of literary criticism, increasing the presence of literary criticism on the web while offering an alternative to traditional textual models (Soumagnac, 2008). This coexistence is also described by Ducas and Prouchet (2014), who emphasise the horizontal and diverse process by which the “socially recognised (in the Bourdieusian sense of the term)” cultural agent continues to influence, but is complementary to, re-evaluated by, and even competes with, other prescribers who are amateur readers. Others, such as Brigitte Chapelain (2014), analyse the content of literary blogs and come to an important conclusion about the effect of the prescription of these blogs: readers of specialised (genre) literature take these blogs into account because they consider their function irreplaceable, since they do not find it in professional or academic criticism (the type of blog that Steiner classifies as “collective and non-professional”).

Bois et al. (2015) describe the mechanisms of the new online reading promotion and profile amateur critics. On the one hand, there are some who do not consider themselves critics, nor do they believe that their opinion is more important or valid than that of other readers. They are not intended to replace traditional criticism and often reference books published by major publishers and relate the reading experience to their lives. On the other hand, there are others who consider themselves critics and assign themselves the function of discovering unknown authors and talking about titles from small publishers, which are marginalised by the traditional media and professional critics. Their style avoids personal life and they delve into the stylistic or discursive analysis of the works.

Positions are often antagonistic in this debate on literary criticism. Paraphrasing Umberto Eco, we distinguish two positions: that of the apocalyptic, who believe blogs represent the death of criticism and, therefore, augur dire consequences for the future of literature in terms of vitality, quality, etc.; and that of the integrated, who believe - like Steiner (2010) - there is no evident and clear division between professional and amateur criticism at present and, in any case, one and the other can coexist. He recognises the influence these bloggers can exert (the noise or echo they generate), to whom he assigns a number of roles as prosumers: “marketing, displaying, recommending, reviewing, gossiping, and consuming” (p. 483). The

study by Valentina Maniescu (2011) is in this line too, based on the analysis of Romanian blogs (specifically, a qualitative sample of ten literary blogs to which she applies a methodology based on discourse analysis and virtual ethnography); it also concludes that popular literary “criticism” blogs are not a continuation of official literary criticism, but an “alternative” with expressive differences above all: subjectivity, colloquial tone and a style far from academia, in order to gain the trust of the audience and build loyalty in the virtual community.

This debate has also taken place - to a lesser extent and intensity - in the field of Spanish culture, as Pulido Tirado (2012) demonstrates in an article in which he echoes the debate on literary criticism that took place in the supplement called “Babelia” of the newspaper *El País* in 2011, and specifies some of the possible causes: a) the shrinking space for criticism in the traditional media; b) the lack of independence and rigour; and c) the loss of its influence and the irruption of the blogging phenomenon. It also proposes a list of the 15 best blogs in Spanish, but warns of the uneven quality of their literary criticism in general.

None of this research analyses the proposed canon or the works recommended by these blogs. Only Steiner (2010) offers a piecemeal but indicative review of the readings discussed in the most common blogs, which are those of an individual and amateur nature. Normally, these bloggers read a lot, mostly popular literature published in paperback by the big publishers, with a few bloggers talking about lesser-known literature or poetry. In general, though, many different types of literature are mentioned in these blogs. This objective can be identified in articles such as García-Roca’s (2020), but studied through the Goodreads platform or booktubers (Lluch, 2017; Hugues, 2017; García-Roca, 2021).

The reflection on the coexistence versus competition between professional and amateur criticism we read in the international sphere (referring to the French, Taiwanese and Brazilian cultures, fundamentally) has not been studied (or has not been produced) in the Catalan sphere, nor hardly in the Spanish one. It is therefore a relevant line of study at this stage. Nor do we find any websites, portals or rankings in the Catalan sphere that select the best book blogs and websites for readers and authors of books, or the best non-fiction blogs and websites for writers and readers of books (Savolainen, 2020). These portals make it easier to find the blogs that could be studied.

c) Read and buy blogs

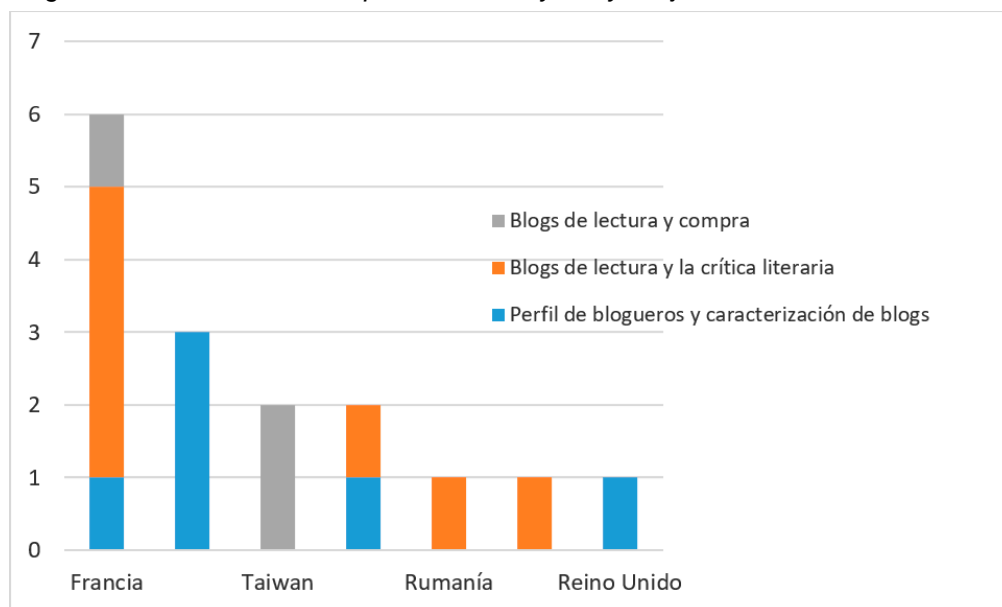
Studies from a series of territories propose the analysis of the discourse of literary reviews published in blogs in order to improve communication between reader and blogger, and thus obtain a direct impact on the increase in literary consumption (purchase or loan). Huang and Yang (2008) analyse book reviews on the Internet that can be published on blogs, but not only (also on bookstore or company websites), and how they influence book purchases and meet consumers’ information needs. The study aims at providing relevant information to improve publishers’ book purchasing and library lending. Later, the same authors (2014) conduct a study in Taiwan in which they analyse the form of reviews and the type of interaction between bloggers and readers (comments) - during six months in 2011 and based on a selection of blogs - to propose response models that improve the community communication effect, and propose to

apply these results to increase the sale of other products and condition consumers' purchasing decisions.

Pourbaix and Guintcheva (2019) set out to answer the question of how literary blogs have become a new source of information in the decision-making and purchasing process of young adults in France. The main results include, on the one hand, the concept of reading as an experiential experience and the blogger-publisher association, since they are considered as “ambassadors”, as distinct from professional critics. Despite this link, bloggers and readers value their independence to say what they really think about what they read. On the other hand, the influence of amateur literary criticism on the young adult in the decision-making process that triggers the desire to read and buy. There are several reasons for this, but identification with the source of the message (blogger) prevails, since communication is more subjective, emotional and experiential than that of literary critics in the traditional media. The outcome is that amateur readers and the media coexist in the literary sphere and are the new echoes for book promotion.

Figure 4.

Origin of the articles in the corpus under analysis by subject matter



Conclusions

Thus, the review of the critical bibliography allows us to draw the following conclusions about blogs referring to reading or literary blogs and their relationship with reading prescription:

1. This study (figure 1) shows that the bibliography published in high-impact journals on literary blogs, or blogs that refer to reading, in relation to reading prescription, the canon, purchasing and/or the practice of literary criticism (professional or amateur) is limited and, therefore, a field of research that is little frequented, especially at a national level.
2. The proportion of research also confirms the migration of blogs to other platforms; they move from macroblogging to microblogging, through social networks that have embedded blogging functions (Chen & Behm-Morawitz, 2018, p. 1494).

3. Therefore, the blogger's link with the publishing world (as an influencer or ambassador) described in studies published between 2010 and 2014, has been replaced by the figure of booktubers or bookstagrammers, as shown by the studies referred to in this article. Based on the thorough analysis of the Swedish bloggers analysed during 2009, Steiner concludes that they have few readers; getting prestige (which translates into number of visits, being on other bloggers' blogrolls, nominations for book blog of the month or awards, review copies from publishers or readers' comments) is difficult. This is also recognised by the Brazilian bloggers analysed in Silva de Sá and Ávila Araújo (2020) during 2018. In fact, the dissemination of blog content through social networks increases connectivity with the virtual reading community, an interaction that has been found to be lacking or not very fluid by these same researchers.
4. This research shows that France, Brazil and Taiwan are the countries where coexistence in the literary sphere between professional (traditional) literary criticism and literary blogs as amateur literary criticism has aroused most interest (figure 4), while it is practically non-existent in the Spanish and Catalan spheres. The main contributions place the debate between those (apocalyptic) who consider blogs (and derivatives: booktubers, bookgramers) intruders, competitors and - in short - a sign of the crisis of literary criticism, and those (integrated) who understand that one and the other format can coexist. They complement each other, as they often deal with different literary manifestations (specialising in genre literature, or paying attention to little-known authors linked to small publishers, etc.), and often confuse each other. In fact, some understand the emergence of virtual amateur criticism as a catalyst for traditional criticism (which should renew itself, open up to other genres, reinvent itself...) and a sign of cultural, literary and reading vitality. In any case, these non-professional readers generate new echoes for the promotion and prescription of reading.
5. According to the studies described in this article, the main attractions and the reasons for loyalty within the virtual reading community of an amateur blog that talks about reading or literature are related to trust, complicity and the feeling of community (tribe) that they manage to create through:
 - a) identification with the blogger (personality, etc.);
 - b) shared literary tastes (generally genre literature on which they find no opinions among professional critics);
 - c) the freedom of the blogger, which can be understood as greater sincerity, as they are not linked to the large communication and power groups that condition the press and/or literary magazines;
 - d) and tailored, subjective (intimate) discourse, based on the expression of emotions and experiences linked to reading and expressed in an informal, colloquial, direct register. It is therefore far removed from the academic or formal discourse related to the school (textbooks, teachers) or academic sphere (reviews, studies, etc.).
6. None of the research that make up the corpus under analysis in this study addresses the issue of the canon of readings proposed by blogs; they do not study which specific readings are recommended: titles, authors, genre, etc. This reading canon, however, is being dealt with on other virtual platforms such as Goodreads, YouTube or social networks like Instagram. This is evidenced by recent studies such as that of Sánchez

and Aparicio (2020), who propose an interesting reflection on the need to reformulate the canon and study, without any prejudice whatsoever, the production of the new mass phenomenon of poetry for young people that is taking place on Instagram in the Spanish context; that of García-Roca (2020), who concludes that many of the influencers manage “a literary blog (35. 7%) or a thematic website (56%) dedicated exclusively to their passion: reading” (p. 171), a trend we also find among bookstagrammers who refer to their blog (cf. Alesdepaper, lavidaentrelibres, jamaisansunlibre, laprestratgeria, libros_señor_malo); or the one outside the period of our study by Sánchez-García et al. (2021). In recent years, online prescription, whether on literary websites, through social networks, forums or blogs, has become a constant. According to the Spanish Federation of Booksellers Guilds (FGEE, as per its Spanish acronym) (2020), 60.2% read websites, forums and blogs, and although most purchases are made in bookshops, the Internet is in second place (31.9%).

To conclude, the bibliographical review of blogs that refer to reading or literary blogs is the necessary starting point to undertake future research with guarantees, focusing on: a) drawing the map of active reading blogs in the Catalan and Spanish sphere and distinguishing between professionals and amateurs (and checking whether Steiner’s classification works to describe the Catalan blogosphere and study the profile and identity of bloggers); b) to form a corpus of reading blogs with relevant prescriptive capacity in the Catalan sphere (and to analyse the discursive and stylistic characteristics of the reviews of reading blogs in Catalan); and c) to record and analyse the titles that are recommended to establish the literary canon proposed in these public virtual epitexts (Lluch et al. , 2015).

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