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# WHAT MAKES A BOOK POPULAR? PREDICTING AESTHETIC SUCCESS OF BESTSELLERS FROM THEIR STYLE

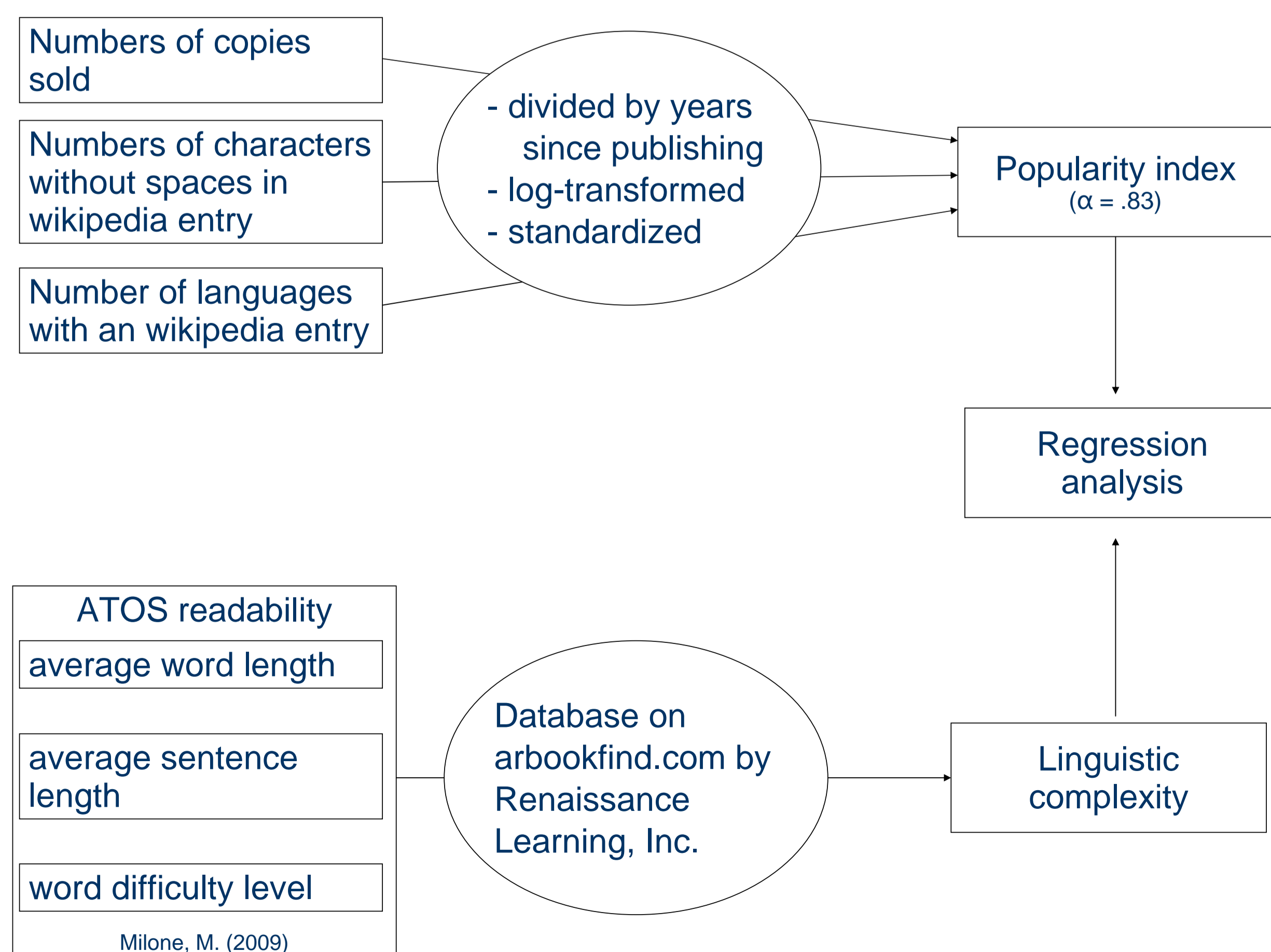
## ABSTRACT

*It is known from experimental aesthetics, that there is an inverted-U relationship between the complexity of a stimulus and its aesthetic appreciation in terms of preference or enjoyment. For books, this relationship has not been studied to our knowledge. Linguistic complexity is part of the style of a text. In the present study, the popularity and linguistic complexity of English-speaking best-selling books from the last 200 years was investigated following a historiometric approach. Scores for linguistic complexity were taken from a commercial database, which had applied the ATOS reading ease formula™ to determine linguistic complexity of books. Popularity was assessed with a composite measure including indicators like the number of sold copies or the length of a lexical entry. Regression analysis showed an inverted-U relationship between complexity and popularity suggesting there is, in terms of complexity, an optimal style for a book.*

## BACKGROUND

Some books, like "A song of ice and fire" by G.R.R. Martin, became a big successes without much recognition of critics or a large advertising campaign. But why do some make it and others fail? To date, objective text features were often ignored for the success of a book by scholars. Success of books would instead be "made" by literary critics, social conformity and other external influences. Berlyne's empirical aesthetics (1974) has however shown in laboratory experiments that objective properties of a stimulus, like complexity, influence its aesthetic appreciation across different sensual modalities. In those studies, a medium level of complexity was most preferred by participants for a given kind of stimulus. Whether the same applies to different degrees of complexity of a book has not been investigated. Historiometric studies offer an alternative to examine this question in a real-world environment. In this kind of research, archival data are used to determine the popularity and thus preferences. For example, Simonton (1980, 1994) had examined popularity of themes of classical music. Similarly, the past success of historic bestsellers can be analyzed to examine the impact of varying levels of complexity on people's preference for books in a natural experiment. The goal of the present study is to investigate the influence of an objective text features of a bestseller on its success. More specifically, it is determined whether there is inverted-U relationship between linguistic complexity of the prose of a book and its popularity.

## METHODS



## RESULTS

To determine whether different features of style influence a book's popularity, two regression analyses were performed. For the first regression analysis, the ATOS score was the independent and popularity the dependent variable representing the linear regression. Then, ATOS scores were squared and added to the regression equation to test for curvilinearity. In the first model, ATOS could not predict popularity ( $p > .05$ ). For the second model ( $R^2 = .21$ , corrected  $R^2 = .18$ ) both the linear term (ATOS:  $p = .001$ ,  $\beta = 1.77$ ) and the quadratic term were significant predictors (ATOS<sup>2</sup>:  $p = .001$ ,  $\beta = -1.64$ ).

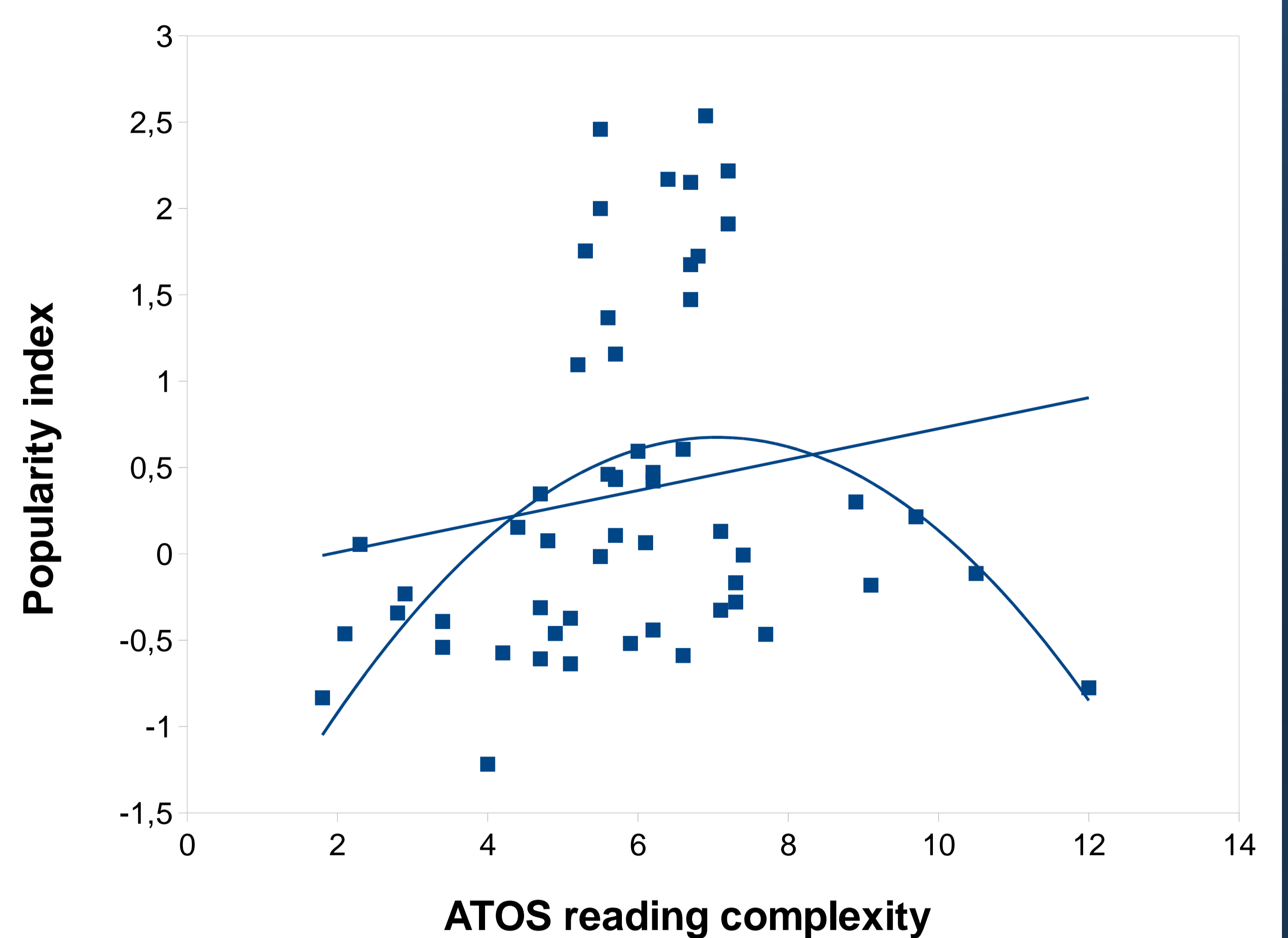


Figure 1. Note: Visual comparison linear and curvilinear model,  $N = 55$

## DISCUSSION

The result indicate an inverted-U relationship between a certain feature of style, reading complexity, and the popularity of books. Thus, text properties do have an influence on the success of bestsellers. More specifically, books with a middling level of reading complexity had the most success.

The curvilinear relationship found is reminiscent to studies from experimental aesthetics. In experimental aesthetics, those stimuli with a medium level along a continuum of complexity resulted in the highest ratings of preference, liking or enjoyment. Combining those results with the present one suggests, that, first, enjoyment is major factor influencing leisure reading, and, second, that ordinary readers enjoy books the most with a middling level of complexity.

How is it possible that an intrinsic feature of a book has any influence on its popularity, when so many researcher emphasized the role of literary critics and other external influences? The truth lies probably in between. Martindale (1995) argued that critics amplify existing differences between writers, so that "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer". Actually, it is striking that the effect of reading complexity is detectable *at all*, given that so many other factors influence the success of a book. An ongoing study in a larger sample with a different measure for reading complexity supports the present finding.

## LITERATURE

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