

Self-Help Books and the Quest for Self-Control in the United States 1950-2000

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Abstract (i)

The increasing popularity of self-help books is an indicator of the modern American quest to maximize personal happiness through a process of self-discovery. Self-help books – non-fiction books that offer advice for behavior modification and make explicit promises for positive change – have doubled as a percentage of all book titles since the 1970s. This dissertation explores the demographic profile of self-help readers, the marketing and advertising strategies of the self-help industry and the formula of a self-help bestseller. In addition, this research uses original time-series data to track changes in the production of self-help titles, and compares fluctuations in title output with general social attitudes of the population.

Self-help books are a response to a real and genuine hunger for psychological understanding and self-improvement, and are part of the larger market of advice media. Readers buy self-help books seeking self-control – both as a good-faith attempt to increase their self-control and to elicit a temporary sensation that, in fact, the first step toward self-control has already been taken. Combining the findings of original econometric research with previous cultural critiques, this dissertation argues that the

boom in self-help book publishing since the 1970s may be attributed to an increased desire for control as a response to feelings of alienation and anomia. Because a crucial aspect of alienation and anomia is lack of control, and since self-help books are manuals of self-control, the boom in self-help book publishing may be seen as a manifestation of the weakening sense of self-control in America and the quest by some to regain it.