



# No judgment: value optimization and the reinvention of reviewing on YouTube

Blake Hallinan <sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Communication and Journalism, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem, Israel

\*Corresponding author: Blake Hallinan. Email: blake.hallinan@mail.huji.ac.il

## Abstract

Social media platforms employ algorithmic recommendations to optimize the user's experience and incentivize particular forms of cultural production. While prior research shows that creators respond to these incentives and seek to optimize their content in return, the normative implications of this process are ambiguous and contentious. To examine the values promoted by platforms, this study focuses on YouTube reviews, a popular genre that crosses communities and foregrounds values. Employing content and thematic analyses of 200 videos, I find that creators communicate value consistently: good products are aesthetic, functional, distinctive, and either pleasurable or resonant, while good reviewers are relatable above all else. I develop the concept of *value optimization* to refer to communicative strategies that appeal to the perceived values of a platform and show how creators' tendency to qualify their evaluations and avoid strong judgments transforms the historical function of reviewing. Finally, I discuss implications for future research on the platformization of cultural production.

## Lay Summary

YouTube review videos tell us if a product is any good. They also teach us how to determine if something is good or not. In this study, I compare the values the reviewers mention in four popular types of review videos. Almost all reviewers say that a good product should be beautiful, functional, and stand out from the crowd. They downplay the seriousness of the review by saying things like "That's just my opinion" and inviting the audience to share their opinions in the comments. Because creators do not want to alienate the audience or potential advertisers, they avoid making strong judgments. This presents a new way of thinking about the purpose of reviews, where product recommendations are less important than feeling connected to the reviewer. I argue that this new approach is a response to the challenges of making content for YouTube and discuss what this means for creating other types of content on digital platforms.

**Keywords:** creators, evaluation, platforms, platformized cultural production, optimization, reviews, values, YouTube

"Welcome to the Moist Meter," announces Charles White, YouTuber and streamer better known as MoistCr1TiKaL. The Moist Meter is the name of the 100-point scale Cr1TiKaL uses to assess movies and videogames—the moister the better. The catchphrase also indexes the successful professionalization of reviewing on the platform. Identified as one of the most prominent genres of user-generated content back in 2007 (Burgess & Green, 2018; see also Jeffries, 2011), the significance of reviews has only grown since. Although the diffuse nature of user-generated content and the proprietary design of commercial social media make measurement difficult, a combination of corporate disclosures, industry reports, and journalistic profiles gives us a sense of scale. Google, for instance, announced that users watched more than 50,000 years of product review videos on mobile devices alone between 2015 and 2017 (Think With Google, 2018), while a 2022 industry report found that nearly 28% of respondents watched product reviews weekly (Kemp, 2022). And this accumulation of attention has made some reviewers seriously Internet famous, as a *Wired* magazine profile on Marques Brownlee, tech reviewer and "YouTube sensation," attests (Pandell, 2014). At the time, Brownlee had 1.8 million subscribers; his channel now boasts more than 16 million, surpassing Cr1TiKaL's 12 million. All of this to say, YouTube reviews (and reviewers) are a big deal.

As a commercially successful genre, YouTube reviews exemplify the growing professionalization of content formerly

known as "user-generated" (Burgess & Green, 2018; see also Jaakkola, 2022), reflecting how digital platforms like YouTube are "profoundly reconfiguring cultural production around the globe" (Poell et al., 2022, p. vi). Digital platforms facilitate new business models and techniques of governance (van Dijck et al., 2018), modulating the visibility of people and messages through ubiquitous search, recommendation, and moderation systems. Platforms design these systems to optimize the user's experience, although what counts as "optimal" is contested (McKelvey & Neves, 2021)—a claim that YouTube's long history of controversies supports (Burgess & Green, 2018; Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). Furthermore, the impact of optimization extends beyond individual experiences by creating structural incentives. Creators seek to optimize in return, engaging in the "strategic preparation and readying of cultural goods to orient them toward and ready them for circulation, discovery, and use on particular platforms" (Morris, 2020, p. 4; see also, Bishop, 2019; Siciliano, 2023). While scholars have identified diverse strategies of "cultural optimization" (Morris, 2020), this work largely focuses on formal elements like keywords and production schedules, leaving the normative implications of platformization underexplored.

To examine the values promoted by platforms, this study focuses on YouTube review videos. Reviews are well suited to investigate how optimization affects normative aspects of cultural production because they make values explicit. Value, as

sociologist [Heinich \(2020\)](#) contends, can be conceptualized as worth, object, or principle, and review videos engage with all three formulations. Basically, a review assesses a product or performance (e.g., *this videogame is moist*), positive assessments over time help establish a class of products or performances as valuable (e.g., *videogames are categorically moist*), and each assessment draws upon principled justifications (e.g., *this is how you tell if a videogame is moist*). Finally, because reviewing predates and proliferates beyond social media, existing research on reviews can provide a frame of reference to contextualize claims about the relative influence of genre and platform.

In what follows, I introduce research on platformization and cultural production, focusing on creator optimization strategies, before arguing that review videos offer an ideal case study to comparatively test and extend this body of work. Next, I detail the methodology of the study, outlining the collection of 200 popular videos in four genres of reviewing (makeup, videogames, tech, and movies) and the application of content and thematic analyses. I provide an account of what makes a good object of review and what makes a good reviewer and compare these ideals across different types of reviews. In the “Discussion” section, I conceptualize communicative strategies that appeal to the perceived values of a platform as value optimization and show how creators’ tendency to qualify their evaluations and avoid strong judgments transforms the historical function of reviewing. Finally, I conclude with implications for future research on the platformization of cultural production.

## Literature review

### Platforms and the optimization of cultural production

Platformization refers to “the penetration of digital platforms’ economic, infrastructural, and governmental extensions into the cultural industries, as well as the organization of cultural practices of labor, creativity, and democracy around these platforms” ([Poell et al., 2022](#), p. 5). Although the factors driving the significance of platforms are manifold, the platform’s technological architecture is central ([Poell et al., 2022](#)). Social media platforms simultaneously lower the barriers to participating in cultural production and manage the resulting mass of content with algorithmic solutions, deploying automated systems to determine what gets seen and thus valued ([Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021](#)). In so doing, platforms bring engineers into the process of cultural production, “suffusing culture with assumptions, agendas, and understandings” of engineering ([Hallinan & Striphos, 2016](#), 119), crystalized in the concept of optimization as “a form of calculative decision-making... that seeks to actualize optimal social and technical practices in real time” ([McKelvey & Neves, 2021](#)). However, while optimization is a normative ideal, putting optimization into practice requires complex decisions, or what [Ziewitz \(2019\)](#) calls “ethical work,” about what counts as optimal. These decisions have ripple effects, making it important to attend to “new value constructions enabled by complex technical systems” ([Rieder et al., 2023](#)), a reminder especially relevant for cultural production where platforms set the conditions but do not fully determine creative practices.

Cultural producers offer an entry point to investigate the emergent values of technical systems ([Gillespie, 2017](#); [Rieder et al., 2023](#)). The precarious status of creators ([Caplan & Gillespie, 2020](#); [Duffy et al., 2021](#)), intensified by their dependency on digital platforms, has led to the rise of cultural optimization, or the “process of measuring, engineering, altering, and designing elements” of cultural goods “to make them more searchable, discoverable, usable, and valuable in both economic and cultural senses” ([Morris et al., 2021](#), pp. 162–163). Optimization is incentivized through design and reinforced through “algorithmic gossip” ([Bishop, 2019](#)) and “algorithmic lore” ([MacDonald, 2021](#)) that popularize ideas about how the platform works, as well as intermediaries that provide optimization consulting services ([Siciliano, 2023](#)). As the informal language of gossip and lore suggests, cultural producers do not stand on even footing with engineers when it comes to the ability to analyze and test optimization strategies. Yet, many creators remain committed to the ideal of optimization, perhaps due to a lack of other strategies for navigating the precarity generated by near-constant changes to digital platforms.

Cultural optimization affects all stages of cultural production and shapes how creators comply with platform policies ([Ma & Kou, 2021](#)), engage with third-party intermediaries ([Siciliano, 2020](#)), and implement diverse monetization strategies ([Johnson & Woodcock, 2019](#)). Broadly, advice on optimization focuses on formal elements including catchphrases, audience nicknames, titles, descriptions, thumbnails, and engagement prompts ([Siciliano, 2023](#)). Diverse creators from beauty bloggers ([Bishop, 2018](#)) to children making toy review videos ([Nicoll & Nansen, 2018](#)) employ these strategies, demonstrating that formal optimization strategies are not exclusive to particular communities. The impact of optimization on substantive aspects of content production, such as the notion of sonic optimization in music production ([Morris, 2020](#)), are few and far between, and notably more difficult to compare across genres and formats. Furthermore, platforms like YouTube refrain from speaking about substantive elements of content such as subject, genre, or message, leaving creators “free to create whatever they wish” ([Siciliano, 2020](#), p. 147). However, research showing stark demographic differences associated with different communities on the platform calls into question the limits of this freedom ([Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018](#); see also [Bishop, 2018](#)). Additionally, the platform’s choice to avoid issuing direct guidance about content is strategically motivated by accusations of bias ([Gillespie, 2010](#)), especially when it comes to political views, and cannot tell us whether the pressures of platformization affect substantive content choices.

While there is rich evidence about optimization practices on YouTube, important questions remain. How community or genre specific are these developments? Furthermore, the normative implications of optimization are typically inferred rather than studied directly. For example, [Bishop’s \(2018\)](#) work on self-optimization discusses how the beauty community incentivizes “hegemonic and normative performances of femininity,” at least from women creators ([Bishop, 2018](#), p. 81). Investigations of other platforms reveal that optimization can extend to ideological messages, such as the infrastructural promotion of “positive value” on the Chinese short-video platform Kuaishou to appeal to state regulatory interests ([Lin & de Kloet, 2019](#)). Although YouTube operates in regulatory contexts that lack a comparable consensus about the values that should be promoted through algorithms, the interaction between the

interests of the platform, audiences, and creators produces emergent patterns of value expression all the same (Rieder et al., 2023). To investigate these emergent patterns, I turn to a genre of content that foregrounds values and crosses communities.

### The value(s) of reviews

YouTube emphasizes the economic implications of product reviews, pitching them to marketers as a way for viewers to “virtually try before they buy” (Think With Google, 2018). However, reviews are not exclusively a source of shopping advice. Blending information and entertainment, reviewers act as cultural intermediaries (Maguire & Matthews, 2012). That is because a review, as Blank explains, answers “two questions: What is it? Is it any good?” (2006, p. 7). In so doing, reviewers communicate value, simultaneously evaluating a particular product and invoking broader principles. As intermediaries, reviewers offer insight into what Lamont and Thévenot (2000) call “cultural repertoires of evaluations,” the shared criteria people use to determine what’s worthwhile, even as they also participate in shaping said repertoires. Consequently, sociologists have analyzed the values invoked in reviews to study a range of phenomena including cultural hierarchies (Alexander et al., 2018), ideological legitimation (Baumann, 2001), and racial and ethnic identities (Chong, 2011).

Media technologies profoundly shape the practice of reviewing. Mass media formats like newspapers and magazines facilitated the rise of public critics (Blank, 2006), while the web hails everyone as a potential reviewer (Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021). With the juxtaposition of amateur and expert evaluations endemic to the web, reviews provide a way to study “the role of the internet as a mediator of taste” (Verboord, 2014, p. 922). Analyses of aggregate review sites like IMDb and Yelp find that amateur reviews tend to feature more subjective evaluations (Kammer, 2015, p. 874), polarized emotional responses (Santos et al., 2019), and emphasize the consumer experience (Alexander et al., 2018). Such findings largely support the idea that amateur reviewers hold autonomous standards and “do not engage consistently, or normally at all, with cultural classification” (Alexander et al., 2018 p. 4232). Yet, the distinction between amateur and expert is neither definitive nor clear-cut. An extensive analysis of movie reviews found that experts and amateurs invoked both high art and popular art criteria, even as experts were more likely to invoke the former and amateurs the latter (Verboord, 2014). Furthermore, it is unclear where prominent social media creators fall on the amateur–expert spectrum. This new form of professionalization shares the importance of personality with older types of cultural critics (Blank, 2006) while lacking their institutional positioning (Jaakkola, 2022).

On YouTube, reviewing is a popular genre that crosses conventional categories of production. In a study of the biggest channels on the platform, Jaakkola (2018) found that reviews focus on videogames, toys, tech, cultural products, and consumer products. Such reviews emphasize discourse (speaking about the object of review) or action (demonstrating aspects of the object of review), and can be distinguished by their primary intent to inform or entertain. While the popularity of the genre sets it up well for comparative analysis, Jaakkola’s work stands out in this regard. Researchers typically study specific types of reviewing such as toy unboxing videos (e.g., Nicoll & Nansen, 2018), makeup products (e.g., García-Rapp, 2017; Hou, 2019), or movie reviews (e.g., Marshall, 2021). Researchers also gravitate toward analyzing subversive rather than mainstream iterations of the genre, including how

members of the beauty community employ product review videos to call out racism (Lawson, 2021) and anti-haul videos act as a form of culture jamming (Wood, 2021). While this work offers important insights into strategies of political subversion on the platform, it only teaches us about the typical practices and values of reviewing by implication.

Collectively, these case studies reveal an assortment of strategies that creators employ to optimize their reviews for circulation on YouTube. For example, García-Rapp (2017) found that beauty creators establish credibility with their audiences by disclosing sponsorships, demonstrating how products work, and not “overselling” them. Nicoll and Nansen (2018) found that both amateur and professional toy reviewers regularly include formal optimization tactics such as engagement prompts but only occasionally include explicit evaluations of the products. Similarly, Marshall’s in-depth analysis of movie reviewers found that successful creators lack the “ethos of distance” typical to newspaper reviewers and instead employ humor, exaggerated expressions, seemingly extemporaneous delivery, and profanity to form a “closer parasocial connection to their audience” (2021, p. 128). These creators exemplify an approach to criticism that Marshall terms the persona reviewer, or someone who strives for ordinariness or everydayness in line with the open structure of sharing on YouTube (see also Hou, 2019, p. 51). This is done in “an appeal to authenticity in their style of presentation that is both more folksy and interpersonal than the old broadcast structures of distance and reach” (Marshall, 2021, p. 119). The persona of successful reviewers on the platform is not restricted to the “folksy and interpersonal” style and can also include a “short-tempered, rageous reviewer figure who preferably delivers commentary on cultural products of low or ‘worst’ quality” (Jaakkola, 2022, p. 196).

Moving beyond the boundaries of specific types of reviews, survey research suggests the broader relevance of factors like relatability and authenticity. For example, a survey of people who watch product reviews on YouTube found that the (perceived) communication style of reviewers correlates with channel loyalty (Fitriani et al., 2020). An online experiment about beauty product reviews makes the importance of persona even more evident, as respondents “expressed feelings of knowing the speaker and feeling as though the speaker was their friend” (Rasmussen, 2018, p. 289). Although the resonance between these findings suggests a shared communicative style and approach to evaluation among YouTube reviewers, supporting the idea of a shared optimization strategy, empirical research on review videos remains limited by the focus on particular types of reviews (e.g., toy unboxing, movies). Furthermore, unlike the sociological examinations of aggregate review sites discussed above, research on YouTube rarely analyzes values directly, making it difficult to determine if or how the practices of optimization extend to cultural repertoires of evaluation. Bringing the methodological toolbox for comparatively analyzing values from sociology to bear on theoretical issues of optimization strategies and platformization, this study asks: How do creators communicate the value of products on YouTube? How do they communicate their value as reviewers? And how do these practices compare across different types of reviews?

### Method

To compare the consistency of evaluative criteria and optimization strategies across the platform, I selected four popular

categories of reviews associated with different communities on the platform (Jaakkola, 2018): beauty, tech, movies, and videogames. I began by identifying prominent channels in each category using targeted keyword searches with YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015), mimicking the process through which a casual user would find reviews. For each category, I conducted four searches, pairing “review” with the name of major brands for consumer products (beauty and tech) and popular recent releases for cultural products (movies and videogames). To identify gaming review channels, for example, I searched “videogame review,” “*Call of Duty Black Ops Cold War* review,” “*Resident Evil Village* review,” and “*New Pokémon Snap* review.” I added the first 20 unique YouTube channels per search to a spreadsheet. Then, to prioritize popularity while minimizing the bias of different search terms, a research assistant and I sorted the lists by the number of channel subscribers and selected the two most recent review videos from each channel. If we could not find two review videos within the last 20 videos uploaded, we discarded the channel and added the next most popular one to the list until we reached a total of 50 videos from 25 channels per category (200 videos total). Finally, we downloaded automated transcripts for each video, manually checking them for readability.

This process resulted in the selection of a group of large, successful channels (see Table 1), where even the smallest more than doubled the minimum threshold of 100,000 subscribers to be considered one of the “elite” channels that account for the majority of views on the platform (Rieder et al., 2020). The channels are incredibly well established, having been on the platform for an average of more than 11 years, supporting the claim that these creators have successfully optimized their content for YouTube. Despite the prominence of the channels, the popularity of the videos varies significantly, although they still average more than 400,000 views (see Table 2).

To analyze the data, I employed both content analysis and thematic analysis. As sociological examinations of reviews demonstrate (e.g., Verboord, 2014), content analysis facilitates direct comparisons of values across different types of reviewing. I began by identifying every instance where the reviewer offered an evaluation of the product or performance using opinion cues such as “I think” and comparative words like “better” or “worse.” Next, I developed a codebook of evaluative criteria (see Table 3). Although previous studies have compared evaluative schemes like high art versus popular art (e.g., Alexander et al., 2018; Verboord, 2014), these are oriented toward cultural products and do not readily apply to the evaluation of consumer products (Blank, 2006). Given the mix of consumer and cultural products in the dataset, as well as the possibility that YouTube reviews do not adhere to traditional conventions (Jaakkola, 2018), I turned to Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) comprehensive typology of justifications, inductively identified from the political discourse of persuasive texts. Following Baden and Springer’s

(2017) example, I adapted the typology to fit with a particular discourse based on my initial reading of 12 video transcripts.

For each evaluation, the reviewer can praise the object for meeting the criteria (e.g., “I love how long the battery on this smartphone lasts”) or condemn it for failing to meet the criteria (e.g., “I am disappointed that the battery only lasts four hours”). I also identified whether each video included formal ratings, rankings, or recommendations (Jaakkola, 2022), as well as direct calls to action (Nicoll and Nansen, 2018; Siciliano, 2023). Given differences in video length, I tabulated the presence of each code in a binary format (present/absent). This has the downside of flattening distinctions in frequency but helps normalize differences in the length of video and style of talk. I refined the codebook through several rounds of pilot coding and conducted an inter-coder reliability test with a research assistant on a sample of 40 transcripts evenly divided between the four types of reviews. Krippendorff’s Alpha scores for value codes were: aesthetics (0.85), authenticity (0.88), distinctiveness (0.55), economy (1), functionality (0.94), morality (1), pleasure (0.89), resonance (0.90), and tradition (0.72). The scores for the formal evaluation codes were: rating (1), ranking (0.69), recommendation (0.82), and call-to-action (0.83).

I also conducted a grounded qualitative analysis of *how* creators communicated value, focusing on the review transcripts as well as their video descriptions and channel bios (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). This process involved reading through each transcript, identifying moments when reviewers qualified their evaluations (i.e., described who should be interested) and themselves (i.e., described why people should listen). I then read through all of the moments of qualification and inductively identified patterns.

## Findings

### What’s worthwhile?

What makes a good smartphone, eyeshadow palette, videogame, or movie? While there is no singular answer to these questions (see Figure 1), creators draw upon a surprisingly consistent set of values that cross categories of reviewing: *aesthetics*, *functionality*, and *distinctiveness*. Among these, *aesthetics* stands out, invoked in 98% of review videos. Although reviewers agree on the importance of *aesthetics*, they do not necessarily have the same taste. A makeup reviewer, for example, might care about the shade of a bronzer while a movie reviewer might be concerned with character development. *Functionality* is the next most frequent, invoked

**Table 2.** Summary statistics for YouTube videos

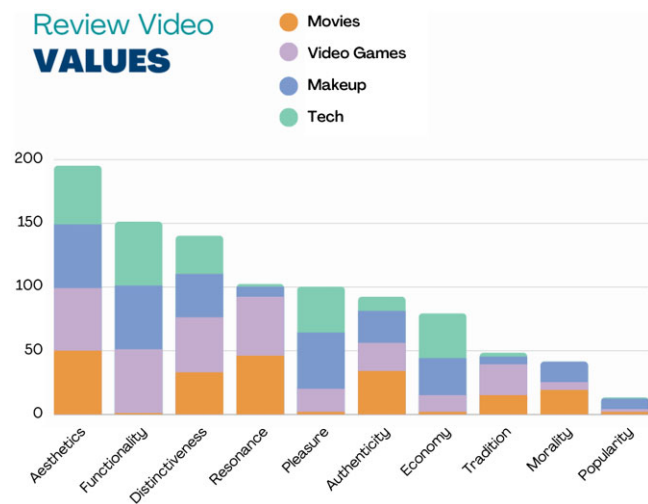
Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Median	Maximum
Views	409,791	718,772.90	706	177,723	4,683,700
Likes	19,584	37,297.55	45	6,791	277,739
Dislikes	722	2,149.83	0	156	13,862
Comments	1,680	2,484.51	2	753	15,781

**Table 1.** Summary statistics for YouTube channels

Statistic	Mean	SD	Minimum	Median	Maximum
Subscribers	2,718,210	4,295,318.47	263,000	1,085,000	24,700,000
Total views	858,528,615.29	1,977,852,833	16,723,173	246,080,574	12,915,377,935
Years on platform	11.27	3.73	3	11	16

**Table 3.** Value codebook definitions

Criteria	Definition
Aesthetics	Good is that which is beautiful or artistic.
Authenticity	Good is that which is real or true.
Distinctiveness	Good is that which stands out.
Economy	Good is that which uses resources carefully.
Functionality	Good is that which fulfills its intended purpose.
Morality	Good is that which follows standards of right behavior or character.
Pleasure	Good is that which feels pleasant or satisfying.
Popularity	Good is that which is liked or supported by many people.
Resonance	Good is that which is emotionally moving.
Tradition	Good is that which is classic or connected to the past.

**Figure 1.** The values invoked in review videos.

in 76% of videos. With the exception of movies, reviewers were consistently concerned with how something works. Finally, *distinctiveness* was invoked in 70% of review videos and balanced across categories of reviewing. Unlike the previous two values, determinations of distinctiveness are always comparative, placing the object of evaluation alongside competitor products or generic expectations.

There are also values associated with specific categories of reviews: *resonance*, *pleasure*, *authenticity*, and *economy*. Each of these is profoundly relational, with *resonance* and *pleasure* linked to the relationship between the reviewer and the object of evaluation, while *authenticity* and *economy* describe the relationship between the object of evaluation and the world. For movies and videogames, reviewers cared about whether the object of evaluation *resonates*—that is, whether it is emotionally moving. For makeup and tech products, reviewers care about whether the object is *pleasurable*—that is, whether it feels nice or comfortable. This reflects the larger division between cultural products and commercial products, with satisfaction for the former primarily determined by emotional response and the latter by physical sensation. Regarding the relationship between the object of evaluation and the world, *authenticity* was invoked by reviewers in 46% of the videos and referred either to the accuracy of advertisements or the fidelity of media adaptations. Considerations of *economy* appeared in 40% of videos, especially makeup and

tech reviews. The relatively low prevalence of economic considerations for cultural products may be due to more standardized prices.

Although reviewers only occasionally considered matters of *tradition*, *morality*, and *popularity*, there are some patterns in their invocation. Appearing in 24% of review videos, *tradition* is most commonly a consideration for videogames and movies, tied to the importance of media franchises. The thoroughly commercial emphasis is a far cry from more conventional associations of *tradition* with religious practices or generational respect. *Morality* only appears as an evaluative criterion in 21% of reviews, typically regarding the politics of representation in movies or environmentalism and animal welfare in makeup manufacturing. In both cases, moral concerns are ancillary, providing additional value rather than a core criterion. Finally, and least frequently, *popularity* is invoked in only 7% of videos—primarily makeup reviews where creators evaluate viral products from TikTok, framing popularity as something that needs to be put to the test.

Overall, the significant consistency in values reveals a cultural repertoire of evaluation for YouTube review videos that prioritizes *aesthetics*, *functionality*, and *distinctiveness*, and is often accompanied by either *pleasure* or *resonance* depending on the object of evaluation. The high degree of typification suggests that neither specific objects of evaluation nor specific reviewers have much impact on the evaluative repertoire. In other words, the genre is, at least somewhat, product and reviewer agnostic. Despite these consistencies, it is worth noting that the invocation of values is often shallow, with reviewers rarely elaborating on their meaning or significance. Exemplifying this approach is yreview066, where the reviewer comments that a videogame “obviously looks great” without specifying how or why. YouTube reviewers largely take the meaning of the values they invoke for granted, assuming that their audience understands rather than attempting to educate or persuade.

Given the ubiquity of quantified evaluations on social media (Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021), you might expect review videos to feature formalized assessments such as assigning the object of review a score (*rating*), placing it within a hierarchical list (*ranking*), or directing the behavior of the audience (*recommendation*). You would be wrong. Only 54.5% of videos include at least one formal evaluation. *Ratings* are the least frequent but most conventional, appearing in 11% of videos. Most reviewers employ 5- or 10-point scales, but there are a few branded varieties such as the Moist Meter (100-point scale) or Woos (5-point scale). *Rankings* appear in 13% of videos and are most prominent in tech; YouTube reviewers often make rankings less definitive by assigning a fuzzy position like “one of” or by narrowing the category. *Recommendations* are simultaneously the most popular and variable type of formal evaluation, appearing in 40% of reviews. As with rankings, reviewers make both broad and narrow recommendations. Broad recommendations include clear statements of merit such as “fully recommend” (yreview118), while narrower recommendations often employ conditional statements about the kind of people that might be interested in the object (e.g., “Aliens fans should definitely pick up the game,” yreview060).

The variability in formal evaluations even extends to speculation over the purpose of making review videos. As one tech reviewer observed, “If there’s anything I’ve learned after all these years making tech videos it’s that many of you had

already decided you were going to buy this product before clicking the video anyway and only a small handful of you were even going to make it this far into the point where I make a product recommendation” (ytreview103). A video-game reviewer expressed similar reservations about the purpose of formal evaluations, explaining that “I don’t really give games a rating out of 10 because I think it’s meaningless. Instead, I just show you the gameplay and let you make up your own mind whether you think this game is for you or not” (ytreview061). Although these reviewers are exceptionally reflexive, their comments suggest possible explanations for the absence of formal evaluations in other videos—explanations that become more credible when we compare practices of evaluation surrounding the object of review with those surrounding the creator.

### Who’s worthwhile?

What makes a good reviewer? Because they are published on social media, YouTube reviews are not subject to the same gatekeeping practices of traditional mass media. In an environment where seemingly anyone can review, popular creators by and large eschew conventional markers of expertise and position themselves as ordinary yet passionate individuals (Hou, 2019; Marshall, 2021). This positioning is evident in how creators describe their channels, such as the makeup reviewer who admits that “I’M TOTALLY ADDICTED TO MAKEUP” and a tech reviewer who explains “I’m a 25-year-old Economics student whose life’s passion is Technology.” Although there is a mix of YouTubers and media corporations creating review videos, YouTube review videos largely reflect the style of the persona reviewer (Jaakkola, 2022; Marshall, 2021), emphasizing the ordinariness of the reviewer through an informal and conversational approach. Following YouTube’s endorsed “best practices” (Siciliano, 2023), reviewers regularly refer to their audience as “you,” “y’all,” “you guys,” or “everyone.” Some take the conversational affectation further, employing affectionate names for their audiences, referring to them as “little turds” (ytreview178), “us gamers” (ytreview064), and “we ladies in our prime” (ytreview020). Creators also perform a semblance of conversation by calling upon the audience to share what they think and directly referencing comments from previous videos, demonstrating to their audience that they do—at least selectively—read the comments.

Rather than appeal to institutionalized markers like educational background or industry experience, creators often emphasize social or cultural characteristics as a source of distinction and relatability—at least to particular audiences. This could be a matter of age, such as an older woman who evaluates how well beauty products work on mature skin, or gender, such as a makeup reviewer whose channel description reads “BOY BEAUTY VLOGGER!!! Whatttt theres such a thing?! Yes there iss mamma yas there iss [sic],” irrespective of the demographics of successful beauty vloggers. Relatability is also a matter of social roles, such as a channel that reviews videogames from the perspective of the girlfriend of a serious gamer (Yodovich & Kim, 2022). Each example represents a strategy of distinction where personal experience provides the audience with points of identification and affiliation.

Reviewers also typically frame their reviews as personal opinions. Some downplay the seriousness of their reviews by describing them as “first impressions,” which is such a

common practice that it has morphed into a distinct subgenre of reviewing, characterized by a particularly informal tone and casual structure. The notion of first impressions sets the audience up to expect less developed opinions and frames the video as a shared act of consumption much closer to unboxing (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018), haul (Jeffries, 2011), or let’s play videos (Postigo, 2016) than a conventional review.

As personal opinions, reviews represent one position among many. Creators largely move away from presumed divisions between highbrow and lowbrow culture (Alexander et al., 2018) and instead operate within a space of flattened hierarchies, a network of opinions that people gather toward or pull back from according to their personal preferences. Even with products that would seem to have trans-subjective consensus about quality, reviewers tend to position opinions as highly subjective. Demonstrating this point, a makeup review concludes with the following caveat and call to action: “I would love to hear from you guys if you’ve tried this how you feel about it because mascaras are very personal, so leave a comment down below if you’ve tried this mascara and what you think” (ytreview047). What makes mascara just so personal remains unspecified. Other reviewers openly acknowledge that the audience may not share their values. For example, another makeup reviewer concludes by saying that “You know people have different motivations for getting things and no judgment from me about how you think of things” (ytreview027). That the YouTuber promises “no judgment” in the midst of a genre conventionally defined as an act of judgment indicates a notably different orientation toward the purpose of reviews. In this context, evaluations offer a topic of conversation for social interaction and a way to learn about others.

Another common way that creators qualify their evaluations is through conditional statements which can get so elaborate as to be almost tautological, stipulating a type of person who is exclusively defined by their interest in a particular product. For example, one tech review concludes with the following conditional statement: if you are a person who is (a) interested in classic games, (b) likes the idea of a conversation piece you can play classic games on that (c) can facilitate up to six players, and you exist in a world where (d) there are very few interactive boardgame coffee tables; and (e) the few that exist are expensive, then the reviewer concludes, as you may be shocked to discover, that “this is about as interesting an option as I can think of” (ytreview111). Less convoluted but equally narrow conditional statements abound, with a makeup review offering a typical example: “Let me know how you feel because I think you’re going to love them if we have similar tastes in makeup” (ytreview012). Defined as such, it is hard to imagine how an audience member could disagree with the recommendation.

Taking the tendency to qualify to the extreme, some reviewers qualify the very expectation that people should share their opinions. For example, a movie reviewer ranked *Black Widow* as a “good mid-level Marvel movie” and then invited the audience to share their rankings in the comments. Despite the conventionality of the request, the YouTuber further remarked that the decision to rank Marvel movies is also a matter of personal preference. As they casually discuss, “So, what did you think about *Black Widow*? Did you see it? Did you like it? Where is it on your Marvel ranking list, if you have such a thing? But you don’t have to have such a thing, you don’t have to rank every Marvel movie” (ytreview186). It is unclear why the audience might think that they have to

rank every Marvel movie. Still, the example helpfully illustrates how the logic of personal opinions and preferences can permeate review videos far beyond conventional conversational qualifications like “it’s just my opinion.”

Not all reviews are so extreme in their qualifications. Furthermore, some frame their evaluations as objective or, at the very least, as persuasive. Creators signal objectivity through technical performance tests, mirroring the more scientific style of evaluation associated with magazine-based tech reviews (Blank, 2006). Humor and provocations also provide a way to signal the merit of one’s opinion. A clear example of this is found in the following statement from a videogame review: “If you’re making a list of the greatest games of all time and *Resident Evil 4* isn’t on there, I will choke you out” (ytreview071). Here, the conditional statement amplifies and strengthens the speaker’s claim. Finally, some reviewers adopt a moral or pedagogical frame, situating reviewing as something that contributes to the creation of better work. As one movie reviewer explains, “Now I know that this video came off as harsh but that’s because I genuinely care. Teen movies can be good hell... But in today’s era of *Kissing Booths* and *Afters*, it almost feels like people have given up hope and have settled for mediocrity, something I simply refuse to do” (ytreview198). Still, that the scientific objectivity of some tech reviews, the bravado of some videogame reviews, or the moral motivations of some movie reviews stand out indicates a shift away from an expert approach to criticism, even in instances where these new gatekeepers have huge audiences of their own.

As social media content, review videos are also subject to evaluation. Direct calls to engage with the video, channel, or creator are ubiquitous, appearing in 86.5% of videos, further confirming the conventionality of the practice (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018; Siciliano, 2023). Despite being the most labor intensive, requests to comment are the most frequent (55.5%), followed by requests to subscribe (46.5%), like (31%), and click a link in the video’s description (18%). Other engagement prompts include turning on the notification bell (11%), following other social media accounts (9.5%), supporting the creator on Patreon (5%), sharing the video (4%), joining a live stream (3%), and buying merch (1.5%). Creators regularly bracket off comments from the idea of self-promotion by framing the comment section as a space of conversation and community. For more obvious promotional activities, such as liking and subscribing, YouTubers typically make the call-to-action conditional, asking their audiences to evaluate the video or couching engagement prompts within the language of support. Acts of self-promotion can be further disavowed through sarcasm. For example, one videogame reviewer threatened to “cut an arm off or something” if they did not engage with the video (ytreview068). Pairing the threat of amputation with a request for engagement highlights the absurdity of platformization and lets the audience know the creator isn’t taking anything, including themselves, too seriously. In YouTube reviews, everything including the reviewer is subject to evaluation, but there is significant ambiguity surrounding whether any of the evaluations matter.

## Discussion: Value optimization

Whether assessing Bollywood movies or mascara, first-person shooters or smartphones, YouTube creators draw upon a

shared cultural repertoire of evaluation. Values such as *aesthetics*, *functionality*, and *distinctiveness* appear in almost every video, along with either *pleasure* or *resonance*. While review videos are rife with moments of informal evaluation describing the positive and negative aspects of a product, only 54% of videos include an overall *rating*, *ranking*, or *recommendation*. This contrasts with the near-ubiquitous prompts for social media engagement that appear in 86.5% of videos. A closer examination of reviews shows that creators frame their everydayness as a source of credibility and downplay the applicability of their assessments to others, an approach to qualification that connects with the “warm style of expertise” of tech unboxing (Neville, 2021), the “folksy and interpersonal” style of movie reviewing (Marshall, 2021), and the importance of not “overselling” products in beauty reviews (García-Rapp, 2017). The repeated refrain of “no judgment” exemplifies this orientation, offered as an assurance to audiences that differing opinions are welcome, especially in the comment section. In a genre long associated with cultural hierarchies (Blank, 2006) and persuasive appeals (Trillò et al., 2022), creators’ reluctance to make formal evaluations and their heavy use of argument qualifiers suggest something else is going on.

Responding to changing conditions of cultural production (Poell et al., 2022), creators are fundamentally reworking what it means to review in order for the genre to better circulate on digital platforms (Jaakkola, 2022; Marshall, 2021), flipping the communication of value on its metaphorical head. Conventionally, a reviewer assesses the value of a particular product or performance (Blank, 2006). However, as Jaakkola observes, “answering the question of a product’s worth—determining whether the product is good or bad—seems not to be the ultimate objective of the vernacular or amateur review” (Jaakkola, 2022, p. 217). Although creators offer evaluations of the objects involved, however qualified or ambiguous, they also, and more consistently, present the review itself as an object for the audience to evaluate, expressing opinions through likes, comments, and shares. By enrolling the audience this way, creators frame themselves as approachable (Rasmussen, 2018) and promote metricized social media engagement that will see the video positively valued by the platform’s recommendation system and ad revenue sharing program. For highly professionalized channels, reviews simultaneously function as a magnet for attention (similar to the function of parody—see Boxman-Shabtai, 2019) and a vehicle for performing persona. Thus, creators use the question of *what’s worthwhile* to provide an answer to the question of *who’s worthwhile*.

Through reviews, creators perform personas like the boy beauty vlogger or the girlfriend of a serious gamer, aligning themselves with particular product categories and sharing personal values through the criteria they invoke, all while inviting the audience to do the same. Just as reviewers demonstrate how a product works by applying makeup or playing a video game, their discussion of said product invokes a set of principles that convey what the creator cares about. This, in turn, offers the audience a chance to align with or push back against the creator and, in so doing, reveal what they care about. Rather than trying to directly persuade their audiences, creators share who they are and invite their viewers to do the same. To facilitate this process, creators engage in repeated forms of simulated direct audience address (Hou, 2019; Siciliano, 2023). Each question of “what do you think about that?” promises to move beyond the realm of rhetoric with the possibility that the creator will read and respond. Of

course, the scale differentials between the creator and audience make such interactions unlikely. Still, audience research attests to its effectiveness (Fitriani et al., 2020; Rasmussen, 2018). Furthermore, this practice places reviewers in the same position as social media platforms, inviting people to express and share their opinions ad infinitum (Hallinan & Brubaker, 2021), with no sense that anyone ever changes their minds. The resulting situation is predicated on a profoundly static view of opinion formation where persuasion plays little to no role.

Despite the emphasis on persona construction and the repeated valorization of *distinctiveness*, there is minimal variation in the normative commitments of successful reviewers. Indeed, although creators typically presume a lack of shared values with their audiences, claiming that taste is personalized and values are personal, they largely draw on the same cultural repertoire of evaluation. In this imagined world, values become a way to define what kind of person you are and how you align with others outside of conventional cultural hierarchies. These determinations of value mimic the flattened world of recommendation engines and computational measures of affinity (Hallinan & Striphos, 2016). Such systems model individuals as bundles of taste preferences (including values) that should be known and accommodated by others, both human and machinic. While YouTube's recommendation system offers one answer to the question of what is valuable through the selection and promotion of content, YouTube creators offer another through their reviews of particular products. However, the logics between the two are connected, part of the emergent "value constructions enabled by complex technical systems" (Rieder et al., 2023). In the "ranking culture" of YouTube (Rieder et al., 2018), expressing yourself is less about changing others and more about finding and affiliating with like-minded types, at least when it comes to reviews.

The substantive transformation of reviewing lends credence to the claim that platforms not only shape formal elements of content production such as keyword selection and upload schedules but also normative elements through a process that I term *value optimization*. Building on Morris's (2020) typology of optimization strategies, value optimization refers to communication strategies that appeal to the perceived values of the platform. While the logic of optimization implies a singular "most optimal" solution, my analysis of highly successful review videos reveals that the situation is not quite so simple. This is perhaps unsurprising given that creators have limited access to information about the platform's operations and rely instead on rumors, experimentation, and economically interested intermediaries (Bishop, 2019; MacDonald, 2021; Siciliano, 2020). Furthermore, creativity endemic to cultural production means that platforms do not and cannot fully determine creator practices. Given these considerations and the fact that no professional organizations or formal gatekeepers establish "definitions for what reviewing is and should be" on YouTube (Jaakkola, 2022, p. 92), it is all the more striking that a majority of successful creators from distinct communities like beauty and gaming (Bishop, 2018; Rieder et al., 2020; Schwemmer & Ziewiecki, 2018) adopt the doubly qualified strategy of communicating value, establishing their credibility by downplaying any points of contention.

Value optimization encompasses the criteria by which particular objects are assessed, as well as the qualities of a worthwhile

creator. Regarding the former, creators emphasize values that are compatible with the ideals of personalization and "aestheticized consumption" (Trillò et al., 2021), rarely invoking cultural hierarchies in favor of the autonomous standards of evaluation associated with amateur reviewers (Alexander et al., 2018), despite their large audiences and other indicators of successful professionalization (Cunningham & Craig, 2019). Both of these ideals constitute a commercial-friendly strategy. By avoiding strong judgments and downplaying the significance of their evaluations, creators avoid alienating potential audience members and commercial partners. Beyond the mainstream orientation that approaches values as the least common denominator, creators also adopt alternative strategies that treat values as a site of moral pedagogy (recalling an older cultural model—see Hallinan & Striphos, 2016) or a source of provocation (associated with the "rageous" reviewers that Jaakkola (2022) describes). While the latter strategy is less likely to maintain broad appeal, it offers an alternative route toward monetization through direct support from a highly partisan audience, illustrating how diverse monetization strategies (Ørmen & Gregersen, 2023) can result in different content strategies that nevertheless seek to optimize signals valued by the platform.

Of course, value optimization strategies involve more than the relatively explicit expression of values that I focus on in review videos, including visual elements like the normative beauty standards Bishop (2018) discusses. However, the relative explicitness of discourse facilitates comparison across creators, communities, and platforms (Hallinan et al., 2022) and, as a particularly tangible site in which values are "materialized" (Rieder et al., 2023), offers an entry point to examine the broader networks of value associated with digital platforms. Whether and how value optimization manifests in other genres of communication remains an open question, yet this article's demonstration of how creators reinvent the genre of reviewing to succeed on YouTube suggests the promise of such investigations. As Rieder et al. argue, "Only a perspective that situates the technical deeply in the social will be able to account for the effects of platform politics" (2018, p. 65). Thus, this study's methodological innovations and empirical findings make a case for how social media content can contribute to the study of platform values and the politics of algorithms.

## Conclusion

This article set out to explore the values and practices of evaluation in YouTube review videos across different product categories. Bringing together content and thematic analyses of 200 popular videos, I identified a set of values common to YouTube reviews, with slight differences in the values associated with commercial versus cultural products. I also compared overall statements about the object of evaluation with overall statements about the evaluator, finding that statements about the latter, especially social media engagement prompts, were significantly more common than the former. Reviewers typically framed themselves as ordinary yet passionate people and qualified their evaluations as personal opinions. This approach downplays direct persuasive appeals in favor of promoting affiliation with the reviewer, reflecting the tension between the genre of reviewing as a performative act of persuasion and the communicative norms of the platform where persuasion is often performed softly.



Theoretically, this article introduces the concept of value optimization, which foregrounds how the perceived values of the platform shape substantive elements of cultural production. Not only is content increasingly “contingent” on digital platforms (Poell et al., 2022), but it is also subject to normative, even ideological, incentives made evident through the format of reviews (Baumann, 2001). These incentives lead a majority of reviewers to adopt a consumer orientation and avoid strong judgments to appeal to the broadest possible audience. However, it also motivates an alternative strategy of provocation, where creators adopt extreme positions to polarize audiences and generate engagement through notoriety. As such, the study contributes to our understanding of the platformization of cultural production on YouTube, using the crosscutting genre of reviews to demonstrate how practices of cultural optimization go beyond particular communities on the platform. Empirically, it identifies *aesthetics*, *functionality*, *distinctiveness*, and *pleasure* or *resonance* as core values for reviews. Finally, methodologically, I develop and present a practical codebook for analyzing evaluative criteria in other genres of social media content.

Although this represents the first comparative study of the communication of values in YouTube review videos, the broader salience of these criteria and communicative strategies requires further research. A study of toy unboxing videos indicates that smaller channels mimic the production strategies of bigger, more successful channels (Nicoll & Nansen, 2018), but more work is needed to see if they also mimic evaluative criteria. Similarly, do other categories of reviewing on the platform, such as food or car reviews, align with the patterns identified? Another direction for future research is cross-cultural comparison. Although the channels included in the study are from multiple countries and continents, the focus on mainstream English-language content does not speak for the whole of the platform. Additionally, while the textual focus of the analysis helped facilitate comparison across videos, future research could identify visual or aural techniques for establishing credibility and justifying evaluations given the importance of multimodality in vernacular reviews (Jaakkola, 2022, p. 19). Finally, researchers could investigate the circulation and reception of videos both on the platform in terms of engagement metrics and comments, and off through surveys, interviews, or focus group studies.

Limitations notwithstanding, this article comparatively investigates YouTube review videos, one of the most popular genres on one of the most popular social media platforms. Creators respond to the infrastructural incentives of the platform with strategies of value optimization that promote particular normative or ideological commitments. Returning to the threefold conceptualization of value, we can now say that review videos on YouTube are, perhaps counterintuitively, less interested in assessing the *worth* of a particular product or performance and more interested in establishing the persona of the reviewer as an *object* worthy of attention and engagement, relying on the invocation of widely shared values like *aesthetics*, *functionality*, and *distinctiveness*, as well as tending to highly qualify or avoid strong judgments. Communicating the value of a makeup palette or Marvel movie thus provides a way to perform membership in the culture of the platform and communicate the value of the channel itself. On a scale of 1–100, how moist is this? Feel free to let me know what you think in the citations.

## Data availability

The data underlying this article will be shared on reasonable request to the author.

## Funding

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program [Grant Agreement No. 819004].

*Conflicts of interest:* None declared.

## Acknowledgments

This article would not exist without an incredibly moist group of intellectual interlocutors including CJ Reynolds, Lilly Boxman-Shabtai, Sharon Ringel, the *DigitalValues* team led by the ineffable Limor Shifman, my co-participants from the “Highly Recommended” roundtable at AoIR, the reviewers from the Philosophy, Theory, and Critique division of ICA, and the anonymous reviewers from the journal. I would also like to thank the editorial team for their expert management and Noah Abramowitz for his research assistance.

## References

- Alexander, V. D., Blank, G., & Hale, S. A. (2018). Digital traces of distinction? Popular orientation and user-engagement with status hierarchies in TripAdvisor reviews of cultural organizations. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4218–4236. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614444818769448>
- Baden, C., & Springer, N. (2017). Conceptualizing viewpoint diversity in news discourse. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 18(2), 176–194. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884915605028>
- Baumann, S. (2001). Intellectualization and art world development: Film in the United States. *American Sociological Review*, 66(3), 404–426. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3088886>
- Bishop, S. (2018). Anxiety, panic and self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube algorithm. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24(1), 69–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736978>
- Bishop, S. (2019). Managing visibility on YouTube through algorithmic gossip. *New Media & Society*, 21(11–12), 2589–2606. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819854731>
- Blank, G. (2006). *Critics, ratings, and society: The sociology of reviews*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Boltanski, L., & Thévenot, L. (2006). *On justification: Economies of worth*. Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827145>
- Boxman-Shabtai, L. (2019). The practice of parodying: YouTube as a hybrid field of cultural production. *Media, Culture & Society*, 41(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443718772180>
- Burgess, J., & Green, J. (2018). *Youtube: Online video and participatory culture* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Caplan, R., & Gillespie, T. (2020). Tiered governance and demonetization: The shifting terms of labor and compensation in the platform economy. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120936636>
- Chong, P. (2011). Reading difference: How race and ethnicity function as tools for critical appraisal. *Poetics*, 39(1), 64–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2010.11.003>
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. R. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479838554.001.0001>

- Duffy, B. E., Pinch, A., Sannon, S., & Sawey, M. (2021). The nested precarities of creative labor on social media. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021368>
- Fitriani, W. R., Mulyono, A. B., Hidayanto, A. N., & Munajat, Q. (2020). Reviewer's communication style in YouTube product-review videos: Does it affect channel loyalty? *Heliyon*, 6(9), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2020.e04880>
- García-Rapp, F. (2017). 'Come join and let's BOND': Authenticity and legitimacy building on YouTube's beauty community. *Journal of Media Practice*, 18(2–3), 120–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2017.1374693>
- Gillespie, T. (2010). The politics of 'platforms.' *New Media & Society*, 12(3), 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>
- Gillespie, T. (2017). Algorithmically recognizable: Santorum's Google problem, and Google's Santorum problem. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(1), 63–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2016.1199721>
- Hallinan, B., & Striphas, T. (2016). Recommended for you: The Netflix Prize and the production of algorithmic culture. *New Media & Society*, 18(1), 117–137. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814538646>
- Hallinan, B., & Brubaker, J. R. (2021). Living with everyday evaluations on social media platforms. *International Journal of Communication*, 15, 1551–1569.
- Hallinan, B., Scharlach, R., & Shifman, L. (2022). Beyond neutrality: Conceptualizing platform values. *Communication Theory*, 32(2), 201–222. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtac008>
- Heinich, N. (2020). A pragmatic redefinition of value(s): Toward a general model of valuation. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 37(5), 75–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420915993>
- Hou, M. (2019). Social media celebrity and the institutionalization of YouTube. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 25(3), 534–553. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517750368>
- Jaakkola, M. (2018). Vernacular reviews as a form of co-consumption: The user-generated review videos on YouTube. *MedieKultur: Journal of Media and Communication Research*, 34(65), 10–30. <https://doi.org/10.7146/mediekultur.v34i65.104485>
- Jaakkola, M. (2022). *Reviewing culture online: Post-institutional cultural critique across platforms*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-84848-4>
- Jeffries, L. (2011). The revolution will be soooo cute: YouTube “hails” and the voice of young female consumers. *Studies in Popular Culture*, 33(2), 59–75.
- Johnson, M. R., & Woodcock, J. (2019). “And today’s top donator is”: How live streamers on Twitch.tv monetize and gamify their broadcasts. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881694>
- Kammer, A. (2015). Post-industrial cultural criticism: The everyday amateur expert and the online cultural public sphere. *Journalism Practice*, 9(6), 872–889. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2015.1051371>
- Kemp, S. (2022). *Digital 2022: Global overview report*. Datareportal. Retrieved June 1, 2023, from <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report>
- Lamont, M., & Thévenot, L. (Eds.). (2000). *Rethinking comparative cultural sociology: Repertoires of evaluation in France and the United States*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9780511628108>
- Lawson, C. E. (2021). Skin deep: Callout strategies, influencers, and racism in the online beauty community. *New Media & Society*, 23(3), 596–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820904697>
- Lin, J., & de Kloet, J. (2019). Platformization of the unlikely creative class: *Kuaishou* and Chinese digital cultural production. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883430>
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2019). *Qualitative communication research methods* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Ma, R., & Kou, Y. (2021). “How advertiser-friendly is my video?”: YouTuber’s socioeconomic interactions with algorithmic content moderation. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5(CSCW2), 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479573>
- MacDonald, T. W. (2021). “How it actually works”: Algorithmic lore videos as market devices. *New Media & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146144482111021404>
- Maguire, J. S., & Matthews, J. (2012). Are we all cultural intermediaries now? An introduction to cultural intermediaries in context. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 15(5), 551–562. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549412445762>
- Marshall, P. D. (2021). The dual strategic persona: Emotional connection, algorithms and the transformation of contemporary online reviewers. In N. N. Kristensen, U. From, & H. K. Haastrup (Eds.), *Rethinking cultural criticism* (pp. 113–135). Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-7474-0\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-7474-0_6)
- McKelvey, F., & Neves, J. (2021). Introduction: Optimization and its discontents. *Review of Communication*, 21(2), 95–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.1936143>
- Morris, J. W. (2020). Music platforms and the optimization of culture. *Social Media + Society*, 6(3), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120940690>
- Morris, J. W., Prey, R., & Nieborg, D. B. (2021). Engineering culture: Logics of optimization in music, games, and apps. *Review of Communication*, 21(2), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.1934522>
- Neville, S. J. (2021). The domestication of privacy-invasive technology on YouTube: Unboxing the Amazon Echo with the online warm expert. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(5), 1288–1307. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856520970729>
- Nicoll, B., & Nansen, B. (2018). Mimetic production in YouTube toy unboxing videos. *Social Media + Society*, 4(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118790761>
- Ørmen, J., & Gregersen, A. (2023). Institutional polymorphism: Diversification of content and monetization strategies on YouTube. *Television & New Media*, 24(4), 432–4. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764221110198>
- Pandell, L. (2014, November 13). Meet the 20-year-old who built a YouTube product review empire. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/2014/11/marques-brownlee/>
- Poell, T., Nieborg, D. B., & Duffy, B. E. (2022). *Platforms and cultural production*. Polity Press.
- Postigo, H. (2016). The socio-technical architecture of digital labor: Converting play into YouTube money. *New Media & Society*, 18(2), 332–349. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814541527>
- Rasmussen, L. (2018). Parasocial interaction in the digital age: An examination of relationship building and the effectiveness of YouTube celebrities. *Journal of Social Media in Society*, 7(1), 280–294.
- Rieder, B. (2015). *YouTube data tools (Version 1.30) [Software]*. <https://tools.digitalmethods.net/netvizz/youtube/>
- Rieder, B., Gordon, G., & Sileno, G. (2023). Mapping value(s) in AI: Methodological directions for examining normativity in complex technical systems. *Sociologica*, 16(3), 51–83. <https://doi.org/10.6092/ISSN.1971-8853/15910>
- Rieder, B., Matamoros-Fernández, A., & Coromina, Ò. (2018). From ranking algorithms to ‘ranking cultures’: Investigating the modulation of visibility in YouTube search results. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 24(1), 50–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856517736982>
- Rieder, B., Coromina, Ò., & Matamoros-Fernández, A. (2020). Mapping YouTube: A quantitative exploration of a platformed media system. *First Monday*, 25(8). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v25i8.10667>
- Santos, T., Lemmerich, F., Strohmaier, M., & Helic, D. (2019). What’s in a review: Discrepancies between expert and amateur reviews of video games on Metacritic. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 3(CSCW), 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359242>
- Schwemmer, C., & Ziewiecki, S. (2018). Social media sellout: The increasing role of product promotion on YouTube. *Social Media + Society*, 4(3), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118786720>

- Siciliano, M. L. (2020). *Creative control: The ambivalence of work in the culture industries*. Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/sici19380>
- Siciliano, M. L. (2023). Intermediaries in the age of platformized gatekeeping: The case of YouTube “creators” and MCNs in the U.S. *Poetics*, 97, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2022.101748>
- Think With Google. (2018, July). *3 ways digital video has upended shopping as we know it*. <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/market-ing-strategies/video/online-video-shopping/>
- Trillò, T., Hallinan, B., & Shifman, L. (2022). A typology of social media rituals. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 27(4), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcmc/zmac011>
- Trillò, T., Scharlach, R., Hallinan, B., Kim, B., Mizoroki, S., Frosh, P., & Shifman, L. (2021). What does #freedom look like? Instagram and the visual imagination of values. *Journal of Communication*, 71(6), 875–897. <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqab021>
- van Dijck, J., Poell, T., & de Waal, M. (2018). *The platform society*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190889760.001.0001>
- Verboord, M. (2014). The impact of peer-produced criticism on cultural evaluation: A multilevel analysis of discourse employment in online and offline film reviews. *New Media & Society*, 16(6), 921–940. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813495164>
- Wood, R. (2021). ‘What I’m not gonna buy’: Algorithmic culture jamming and anti-consumer politics on YouTube. *New Media & Society*, 23(9), 2754–2772. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820939446>
- Yodovich, N., & Kim, J. (2022). Exploring the feminization of backseat gaming through *Girlfriend Reviews* YouTube channel. *Games and Culture*, 17(5), 795–815. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211056124>
- Ziewitz, M. (2019). Rethinking gaming: The ethical work of optimization in web search engines. *Social Studies of Science*, 49(5), 707–731. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306312719865607>