

Vernacular reviews as a form of co-consumption

The user-generated review videos on YouTube

Maarit Jaakkola

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Abstract

Reviews of arts and culture are typically focused on legitimate forms of art rather than popular and consumer culture. Looking beyond such institutionalized reviews, this article inquires into the online-native, bottom-up forms of reviewing. The aim is to identify user-generated reviews of popular cultural objects, defined through the user reviewers' position as cultural consumers and the size of their audiences. The objects of study are YouTube channels that include a regular output of review videos. First, the 5,000 most-subscribed channels are analysed to identify content creators who establish a relationship to cultural objects. Second, types of reviewing are identified, and the methods and boundaries of 'vernacular reviewing' are discussed. User-generated reviewing on YouTube presents a meta-practice related to cultural objects for young audiences that is marked by the use of hybrid genres, humour, irony and the idea of co-consuming, reflected in the concept of intramediation.

Keywords

reviewing, criticism, cultural mediation, cultural intermediaries, user-generated content, YouTube

Introduction

Reviewing new cultural objects in public is an integral part of the cultural realm. Re-examining a cultural product once it has been made available to the public, with the intention to judge whether it is good or bad, or to “criticize”—from the Greek verb *krinein*, “to decide”—is a central element in the formation of people’s tastes and lifestyles (Wright, 2015). In the era of “post-industrial journalism” (Anderson, 2014) or “post-industrial criticism” (Kammer, 2015), re-configurations in the media economy and culture have led to a situation in which the people formerly known as the public have been able to produce opinions and evaluations of cultural products and make them publicly available. Some digital content creators, using digital platforms (e.g. YouTube), have outgrown traditional print-era news and broadcasting outlets in terms of audience size. At the same time, the focus on content and expertise has been replaced by other ideals, such as attention seeking and presentation of the self, which manifest as the downgrading or challenging of traditional expertise (Nichols, 2017; Keen, 2007; McDonald, 2007).

This article aims to identify an emic definition of reviewing for YouTube videos. Whereas modern reviews are often conducted through audio-visual media, institutionalized reviewing is a distinctive print-era phenomenon. The basis of reviewing is derived from theories of cultural production and intermediation that build upon the linear producer-receiver model of the mass media (see e.g. Bourdieu, 2010[1979]; Hohendahl, 1982; Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2013). The understanding of user-generated reviewing, however, requires knowledge of both traditional intermediary theories and studies on prosumption and produsage. By discussing new forms of online-born reviewing with an aim to critically analyse their characteristics, we can better understand whether YouTube review videos are an extension of institutionalized reviewing and thus challenge the institutions, as is often stated in terms of journalistic reviewing, or if they should be viewed as a parallel or separate phenomenon.

Either way, when it comes to content that is generated by ordinary users, the concept of cultural intermediaries has to be reconsidered. User reviewers do not have the legitimacy of traditional media organizations behind them to aspire to critical independency towards the cultural industry; rather, user reviewers are connected to the other end of the cultural production cycle, the consumption, or even consumption in its more everyday and mundane form, ordinary consumption. As theories of cultural intermediation depart from relative proximity with the producers and user reviewers are rather positioned as prosumers at the other end of the cycle, the concept of cultural intermediaries may seem problematic. Furthermore, within the institution of criticism, reviewing of popular culture, let alone reviewing beyond the professional institution of criticism, has long been less recognised and taken less seriously than its high cultural counterpart. According to Blank (2007), since most work on reviewing “has been narrowly focused on specific high-culture genres” and “there are no studies of commercial genres” (p. 4), “a largely unexplored disjuncture in the sociology of culture is the split between arts and consumer products”

(p. 17). According to Blank, the value of the classical frequently used sociological theories of distinction and taste (e.g. Bourdieu and DiMaggio) “declines rapidly when one moves away from researching high culture” (p. 22). In this respect, examining vernacular reviewing, or reviewing as cultural produsage, helps us distance ourselves from previous frames of reviewing to envision a new social construction of reviews and reviewing.

Previously, evaluations of cultural products by ordinary people in the cultural domain have taken the form of “amateur reviews”, which refers to texts written by cultural enthusiasts in the review genre and published on digital platforms such as Rotten Tomatoes, Imdb and review blogs (Verboord, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014; Kammer, 2015; Steiner, 2010, Frey and Sayad, 2015). The contrasting of amateur and professional texts implies that reviewing is a phenomenon that has been established by expert institutions in a top-down order. User-generated reviewing is a bottom-up and online-native phenomenon occurring in a multimedia environment that seems somewhat unsettled. There is a lack of knowledge about review practices beyond the institutionalized forms and their amateur counterparts. Moreover, there is no adequate vocabulary to reflect upon the critical processes in popular culture outside the institutions—not to mention their relationship to the existing literature on institutionalised forms of reviewing. Therefore, the aim of this article is to (re-)capture the phenomenon of reviewing in a young digital environment.

The underlying assumption of the study is expressed by Gans (1999, p. XV) through what he calls “taste cultures”, which he argues “are of equal worth” and should be understood in their own right. The article seeks to relate the phenomenon of vernacular reviewing to institutionalised reviewing, which is essential and unavoidable since the term ‘reviewing’ derives from institutionalised practices and has previously been discussed in that frame in the scholarly literature. Without taking the high-cultural reviewing/criticism frame into account, we run the risk of conceptualising the review videos as part of user-generated production juxtaposed with all kinds of vlogging. This can, of course, be done, but it may lead to dismissal of the specific reviewing activity since it is carried out in vernacular (i.e. non-institutional) forms. To recognize and reinforce the distinctive characteristics of reviewing in particular, this article adopts its framework from the previous research on reviews and reviewing.

Before proceeding to the analysis of contents, I will briefly discuss previous understandings of reviewing, which are relevant to the study of vernacular reviewing, and describe the affordances of YouTube as a platform for self-produced review content. The aim of the analysis is to identify major types of user-generated reviewing to initiate discussion on what reviewing is and could be in the usersphere of the post-broadcast era.

Reviewing from a vernacular perspective

Adapting the term “user-generated content” (UGC) (Bruns, 2016), I will refer to the reviews produced by users as “user-generated reviewing” (UGR) to acknowledge the

fact that ordinary users create and share review content. “User reviewers” are contributors working outside of conventional professional environments (Bruns, 2016; Merlin, 2014) in the usersphere (Berger & McDougall, 2016; Merlin, 2014, p. 160). To capture the qualitative dimension of the phenomenon, I will further refer to the UGR as “vernacular reviewing” to mark it as an activity carried out by lay persons, distinct from professionally produced institutionalised forms of reviewing, which operate in the discourses of high and popular culture.

In cultural theory, “vernacular” has come to refer to non-institutional cultural forms and practices (Howard, 2010). Vernacular uses of discourses emerge “from discussions between self-identified smaller communities” within larger communities and have been conceptualised as an expression of alterity to the institutional power (Howard, 2010; Conti, 2013). Being in a dialectical relationship with the institutionalised forms of discourse, vernacular discourses emerge through the appropriation of dominant discourses in ways that are better suited to the vernacular community (Conti, 2013; Howard, 2008). Theorists of vernacularity have thus viewed the institutional and the vernacular as fundamentally inseparable, with the vernacular establishing its meaning by asserting itself against the institutional, and in this respect situating the institutional as ‘institutionally prior’ (Howard, 2010, 2008). When exploring YouTube review videos, vernacular seems to be a more appropriate than “amateur”, which is typically applied to book bloggers, or ‘professional amateurs’, who follow the institutionalised review practices fairly closely and often mimic them, albeit using a different platform. On YouTube, the division between institutional and non-institutional appears to be more relevant than the category of professionalism, which assumes a shared conception of the content on the part of journalistic writers and YouTube video creators. Vernacularity allows the development of such conceptions of normativity, which emerge from within the community and differ from the professional normativity of institutionalised reviewing.

The terms “criticism” and “reviewing” have typically been implied to mean assessments of quality, with “reviewing” subordinated to the more serious and legitimate “criticism” (Carroll, 2009; Hohendahl, 1982). Criticism is “studied evaluation” (Titchener, 1998:3) or “evaluation grounded in reasons” (Carroll, 2009) that is used to describe an expert’s evaluation of an event, while a review is “a report with opinion”, characterised by a journalistic “who–did–what–when approach” and typically written for a wider audience by a generalist who qualifies as “an entertainment writer with a host of newspaper-based obligations” (Titchener, 1998, p. 3). There are authors who use the terms interchangeably (e.g. Blank, 2007), which highlights the relativity of these concepts. To use the terms to their fullest explanatory potential, criticism and reviewing can be seen as ends of a sliding scale, where criticism represents in-depth analysis with more requirements for argumentation and reflexivity and reviewing denotes a more non-reflective, spontaneous reaction to a cultural object. Consequently, previous studies have suggested that instead of assigning “professional” and “amateur” reviewers as a dichotomous structure, there should be grad-

ual distinctions identified between different types of reviewers (Verboord, 2014). Criticism carries with it academic or theoretical undercurrents and a philosophical tradition, whereas reviewing is methodologically less organised and disciplined, even though the journalistic understanding of the genre, applied to different types of media, gives the communication a relatively clear structure. Reflections in previous literature tend to focus on journalistic reviewing, but the concept of vernacular reviewing extends the scale further.

According to Carroll (2009), criticism contains—and to some extent the same applies to reviewing—the basic elements of contextualisation, classification, elucidation, interpretation, analysis and evaluation, among which evaluation is a distinctive feature of the genre (Blank, 2007, p. 7). Orlik (2016, p. 8) defines the critical process as “knowledgeable comprehension, positive/negative ascertainment, and resulting carefully considered judgement as a means of reasonably estimating the value of the particular work under scrutiny”. Criticism seeks to “reveal the aesthetic value of an object” (“message criticism”), to “relate it to the structure that sustains it” (“medium criticism”), to ‘relate the object to the traditions to which it belongs’ (‘receiver criticism’) and to “define the intention of the artist” (“originator criticism”) (Orlik, 2016, p. 78). The functions of criticism include “guiding the audiences” (acquainting them with new cultural objects), “building bridges” (opening up lines of communication and understanding between creator and consumer), “suggesting new directions” (providing the audience with new interpretations), “proposing system-cognizant change” (providing the audience with more macro-sociological analysis), “serving as a proxy or watchdog” (discovering the concerns of citizens and cultural consumers and defining what the public needs to know) and “entertaining the audience” (expressing ideas in a manner that captures the audience’s attention) (Orlik, 2016, p. 27).

According to Danesi (2015, p. 33), genres are identifiable by certain conventions that audiences come to recognise through regular exposure. To apply a socio-culturally informed theory of genre, as a social action that is “an appropriate response to recurrent exigence” with “socially objectified and thus repeatable motives” to do something (Miller and Shepherd, 2009, p. 285). In this respect, genre can be understood as patternised social action. A review genre refers to a form of presentation in which an author creates, motivates and delivers an informed opinion about a cultural object to the public. Reviews are “public summaries and evaluations that assist readers to be more knowledgeable in their choice, understanding, or appreciation of products or performances”, answering two questions: “what is it? Is it any good?” (Blank, 2007, p. 7). Whereas criticism is expected to go deeper into the contexts of production, the institutionalised form of reviewing is supposed to deliver a motivated opinion in a convincing way.

When writing the sociology of reviewing, Blank (2007) distinguishes, based on the examples of restaurant and technology reviews, between “connoisseurial reviews” and “procedural reviews”. The production of connoisseurial reviews is “dependent on the ability of a person—a reviewer—who, because of unusual talents, extensive experience, or special training, has developed a refined sensitivity with respect to a certain product

genre” (p. 29). These kinds of reviews are opinionated texts representative of a taste community. Procedural reviews are based on the results of empirical tests and well-defined procedures that could be conducted even without human intervention (p. 8). Procedural reviews thus resemble consumer tests, and they present a particular method for producing reviews.

Vernacular reviewing typically deals with *ordinary* consumption (Gronow and Warde, 2011), setting the focus beyond the artistic realm—to which the institutionalised forms of reviewing are attached—and on the aesthetics of everyday life. An equivalent to and predecessor with a tradition of such ordinary consumer reviews are the consumer product reviews. They are based on user interactions between the product seller and the purchaser, and as they are a means to generate product returns, they have been of particular interest for consumer and marketing researchers (Sahoo et al., 2018; Goes et al., 2014). In the case of UGR on YouTube, it is of importance that the reviews are typically initiated by the users, who act as channel owners. The presupposed control of content in the channel makes video reviewers, at least symbolically, to more independent content creators and not customers reacting upon a request on a website controlled by the product or service provider. Nevertheless, commercial partnerships make the creators to lean upon industry more than what is acceptable in the intermediary organizations of journalism and criticism.

What is also of importance in UGR is thus that the choice of the review format is a conscious act. Adapting a reviewer’s role has always been a reciprocal act of self-proclaiming oneself to be a reviewer while gaining legitimacy in the field of expertise in question (Levina & Arriaga, 2014; Jaakkola, 2015). The reviewer is thus both a self-assigned reviewer and considered to be a reviewer by someone else at the same time. In social media, legitimisation occurs through the accumulation of subscribers and viewers as well as their feedback.

YouTube as a multi-purpose video-sharing platform

Since its launch in 2005, YouTube has become the major platform for video culture, providing ordinary users, “content creators”, to upload videos to specific channels subordinated to a username. The platform has over a billion users, and people watch hundreds of millions of hours on YouTube every day, generating billions of views, more than half coming from mobile devices (YouTube, 2017b). Depending on perspective, YouTube can be regarded as a video-sharing platform, with a focus on the act of publishing content, a broadcast medium, emphasising the dissemination of content to vast audiences, a participatory medium, highlighting the potential for engaging the audience, or an entire media economy, fostering a culture and ecology of its own (see e.g. Burgess & Green, 2009; Snickars & Vonderau, 2009).

For review videos, it is relevant that YouTube is a multi-purpose platform that does not require or suggest that a particular genre be followed. Because of the lack of a central-

ised normativity in genre, reviewing activities are carried out in conditions that are guided by platform policies, algorithms (Airoldi et al., 2016) and in social power relations constituted by the “fan scenes” in which the reviewing is performed (Levina & Arriaga, 2014; Ito, 2010).

YouTubers commenting on cultural objects are involved in the material and symbolic circulation of goods. Consumption (and prosumption) in disorganised capitalism has been described as reflexive accumulation, a condition in which aesthetic and economic processes are increasingly interwoven, or where the expressivity of social actors is interwoven with economic activity (Lash & Urry, 1994). Content creation is not professional activity in the institutionalised sense, but it can be seen as a form of work, as “playbour”, a form of digital labour that creates value for Google as the platform owner (Lindgren, 2017). YouTubers may also consciously aspire to economic profits; they get paid when their viewers see ads, and the content creators can develop revenue through partnerships with brands and creation of their own merchandise (YouTube, 2017a). In this respect, videos are commodities of the attention economy and reviewing is endorsement based on the word-of-mouth method, advanced by “social influencers”, “independent third-party endorsers who shape audiences’ attitudes through ... the use of social media” (Freberg, 2011, p. 90; Wiedmann et al., 2010). Being involved in these economic mechanisms, users themselves select their strategies in terms of commercial partnerships and transparency regarding these choices.

As for the content, the “popular culture offers a balance between serious and recreational forms of culture” (Danesi, 2015, p. 6). ‘Mashpedia culture’ and an “ever-expanding pastiche culture” are typical of online communication, where “anything can be put together” and the lines between serious and entertainment culture are blurred (Danesi, 2015, p. 269). According to Danesi (2015, p. 272) people are “increasingly more focused on video games, celebrities, sports events, and the like, without distinguishing them from philosophical, artistic, and other forms of culture”. This new mobility across taste hierarchies, the cultural omnivorousness (Peterson and Kern, 1996), does not entirely dissolve aesthetic or social hierarchies or diminish the fact that the added value of reviewing is to be found in the way that the reviewers reduce the cultural distance between the cultural consumer and the cultural object.

Research questions

The objective of this study is to identify the social phenomenon of *vernacular reviewing* and to discuss its main characteristics. The main research question in this study is as follows: *What types of UGR can be identified on YouTube?* Based on the sample of video channels, *how can these types be described as reviewing* and, more particularly, *what kind of reviewing is vernacular reviewing?*

The focus of UGR implies a focus on YouTubers, who, a) in a similar manner to traditional reviewers, form a relationship to a specific cultural field, attempting to address cultural objects in that particular subject area; b) use video as the primary medium to express themselves and disseminate their work; c) have reached large audiences, that is, are popular in the media culture in question and thus are in some way acknowledged and legitimised as content creators, representing a larger phenomenon that exerts influence, while also having their quality controlled by this audience.

The approach draws on contemporary understandings from the studies of institutionalised reviewing, and on approaches to vernacularity, which leans upon studies on audience and consumer culture. Conceptualizations of institutionalized reviewing and non-institutionalized user-generated content creation present different strains of research, and the objective of the study is thus to negotiate between them in order to understand reviewing as a user-generated phenomenon. The focus lies on the level of types of reviewing, looking at channels as groupings of certain types of videos, which means that individual videos will not be discussed in detail.

Data

The starting point for the data retrieval was Social Blade's list of the 5,000 most-subscribed YouTube channels in the world (<http://socialblade.com/youtube/top/5000/mostsubscribed>, retrieved 26 April 2017). Social Blade is an online service that has tracked YouTubers since 2010 and had compiled data from over 12 million YouTube channels at the time of this study. Subscriptions were chosen as the criterion rather than views because they reflect a continuous relationship with the content creator, which typically marks the relationship between reviewer and receiver (Blank, 2007). As reviewing is supposedly a relatively marginal rather than a mainstream phenomenon in the scope of the entire body of content on YouTube, a high number of channels was selected for the initial data. The procedure for selecting cases from such a large amount of data was assessed to ensure it was sufficient to allow saturation of the data for review videos.

A script for YouTube was created, which automatically retrieved the number of videos, views, likes, dislikes and the three most frequently used categories in the videos uploaded within the channel, categorised by the users themselves.¹ The data retrieval occurred from April 26-29, 2017.

One channel closed down in the period of time between the list and data retrieval. The retrieval process thus collected 4,999 channels with 6,697,639 videos, with an average of 1,340 videos per channel. There were 4.9 million views per video on average as well as 33,226 likes and 1,730 dislikes per video on average.² The average number of subscribers attributed to a channel was 2.2 million; to a video the average number was 25,579 users. Within the top 5,000 channels, the number of subscribers ranged between 0.8 and 97 million registered users; the views per video ranged between 414 and 0.3 billion.

Method

The analysis of the video channels was twofold. The first step of the analysis was to identify channels with a focus on reviewing and to exclude the non-review channels from the sample. The second step of the analysis included the identification of the main subjects of the review channels to be able to deliver information on what types of cultural objects were addressed. The different reviewing channel types were formed out of the data with the help of content analysis informed by grounded theory. While content analysis is a method for delineating patterns over large aggregates of texts, the key process in this analysis was to constitute categories from within the data by the means of constant comparison (Strauss, 1987).

To facilitate the analysis, the list of the top 5,000 YouTube channels could be sorted first by using the self-set categories for videos. YouTube allows content creators to attach one category to each video from among the 15 pre-defined categories.³ The use of categories is not compulsory, but a majority of the channels under study used categories since they help audiences find relevant content and sponsors connect to relevant partners.⁴ The script tracked all the categories used in all the videos uploaded to a single channel and listed the three most frequently used in each channel. The categories used for the channels helped to attribute the channel to a certain research category, that is, the cultural area in which the channel operated and the kind of relationship it created with cultural objects.

The first procedure involved separating review channels from non-review channels. First, review channels were automatically tracked by conducting text searches in the descriptions with relevant keywords (“review”, “test”, “critical”) in multiple languages.⁵ Second, channel descriptions were read and assessed in terms of their relationship to reviewing. While it was possible to develop a strategy for excluding the remaining channels that likely did not include reviews, the cases that remained unclear were individually checked on YouTube. Despite these strategies, some channels that include activity similar to reviewing might have been missed; in particular, as the most popular YouTubers had not necessarily provided a detailed description. For example, *PewDiePie*'s description on his About page is concise: “I make videos.” Another top YouTuber, *NiceNienke*, wrote: “Kinda don't know what I am doing. Kinda like it”. However, the less popular a channel is, the more important it becomes to have a proper channel description, and many less popular creators had provided long descriptions of the aims and intentions of their channels. As the amount of initial data is large, it seems reasonable that the structural patterns of the review genre have been captured at the channel level.

Reviewing was understood as a separate from curating, which includes the critical selection process but omits the elucidation, such as performed by *machinimarespawn*, a channel that “select[s] the best gameplay content across our network and showcase[s] it”, *Alotvines*, which shows “the best Vine compilations”, or *WatchMojo*, which compiles top lists on diverse topics. Reviewing was also separated from pure testing that occurred

for entertainment purposes, without the more serious ambition of deciding whether something is worth trying (e.g. "Testing Weird VIRAL Beauty Products & Gadgets!" by *BeautyTakenIn*). Channels with a focus on analysis and with an aim to increase understanding for learning purposes, for example, about science or cars (*Engineering Explained*) or gaming strategies (*Shoddycast*), were not included.

Having limited the sample through manual coding from the most popular channels in general to the most popular review channels, the further analysis was focused on identifying the group of cultural objects the channel was mainly covering, such as toys, cosmetics, or games. The self-set categories could only deliver a very general idea of cultural domains, and the data were manually coded with the help of channel descriptions on the "About" pages and section titles on the channel pages by picking up channels out the material that followed the features of a review as described above. To be able to capture some prevalent characteristics of the channel subject types, at least two of the most recent videos uploaded to the channel first page were watched. If there was a channel introduction video, it was included. Some of the channels also included subsections with the title "Reviews". The analysis thus covers at least 400 videos, which can be assessed to be sufficient to get a 'saturated' idea of their content and style.

Analysis

Types of user-generated reviewing

The most used categories, presented in Table 1, indicate that entertainment, games and music videos occupy the most space among the most popular videos. The most frequently used self-set primary categories in the videos were Entertainment (1,038 channels employed it as the most frequently used category, 21 pct. of all channels on the top 5,000 list), Gaming (966, 19 pct.) and Music (862, 17 pct.). The most used secondary categories were Entertainment and People & Blogs.

Within the sample, there were 200 reviewing channels altogether, which constitutes 4 percent of the top 5,000 channels list. Reviewing on YouTube is thus, as expected, a marginal phenomenon. The total number of videos on these reviewing channels was 257,137, again, about four percent of the top 5,000 list (N=6.7 million videos). The most used categories for the reviewing channels were Entertainment (N=50), Gaming (N=44), Science & Technology (N=33), How to & Style (N=31) and films (Film & Animation, Movies, N=12).

As listed in Table 2 (see page 20), the biggest groups of reviewing were *consumer product reviewing*, *game reviewing*, *toy reviewing*, *tech reviewing*, *cultural product reviewing* and *parody reviewing*. Other reviewing was grouped into a residual category that encompassed channels addressing sports (mainly football play(er) reviews) and theme parks (roller coasters).

The characteristics of the different types of reviewing indicate that some of these groups of review channels are more identifiable as a distinct form of community-based

	All channels		Review channels	
	N	%	N	%
Entertainment	1038	21%	50	25%
Gaming	966	19%	44	22%
Music	862	17%	5	3%
How to & Style	458	9%	31	16%
Comedy	428	9%	4	2%
People & Blogs	381	8%	9	5%
Film & Animation, Movies	176	4%	12	6%
Education	147	3%	2	1%
Science & Technology	106	2%	33	17%
Other	237	5%	8	4%
No category	200	4%	2	1%
	4999	100%	200	100%

Table 1. The most frequently used self-set categories in the videos among the 5,000 most subscribed YouTube channels.

communication than others. Gamers' audiences seem to be the most committed, as the highest number of both subscriptions and average likes were to be found on game reviewing channels. Gamers are probably more conscious about each other as a community, aligning themselves to the identity of a "gamer" and following and interacting with each other, whereas consumer product reviewers consist of a highly varied group of content creators. Toy reviewing channels seem to have wide visibility, with the highest number of views per video on average, while their number of subscriptions remains lower. Cultural product reviewers seem to be the most industrious producers of content, with their channels having the highest number of videos on average.

In the following, I will take a look at each type of reviewing in terms of its typical characteristics to gain an overview of the different groups. Subsequently, I will examine the identified types at a more general level by grouping the review channel types according to their typical approaches and give some examples of the different approaches to reviewing. To conclude, I will identify a common trait of all types of UGR, which is the dimension of co-consumption, and discuss how the concept helps us in examining UGR as a vernacular form of reviewing.

Typical features of the types of user-generated reviewing

Game reviewing finds its base among users who play videogames and comment on them, with an intention to share their knowledge and playing hints to help other gamers. Since the world's most well-known YouTuber *PewDiePie* is a gamer and gaming presents the biggest group of UGRs, this group may be the most clearly identifiable among the types

Reviewing type	N of channels (%)	Average N of subscr. per channel (millions)	N of videos / average in channel	The most used category in the channel	Average views per video (millions)	Average likes / dislikes per video
Game reviewing	45 (23%)	3.0	74318 / 1292	Gaming	1.6	11.5K / 0.5K
Toy reviewing	35 (18%)	1.9	35176 / 1005	Entertainment	3.7	4593 / 1282
Tech reviewing	33 (17%)	1.7	33928 / 1028	Science & Technology	0.5	7073 / 431
Cultural product reviewing	31 (16%)	2.1	76548 / 2469	Entertainment	2.2	22121 / 920
Consumer product reviewing	47 (24%)	2.0	30340 / 7021	How to & Style ¹	0.91	12070 / 4711
Parody reviewing	5 (3%)	3.0	2439 / 488	Comedy	1.9	32565 / 1545
Other	4 (2%)	2.4	4388 / 1097	N/A ²	0.8	9127 / 275
Total/average	200 (100%)	2.3	257137/1154	Entertainment	1.7	11.7K/72132

Table 2. Types of user-generated reviewing.

- 1 2 channels missing information. Users are able to hide all information about the channel statistics other than the number of subscribers.
- 2 Categories used: Sports, Gaming, Music, Travel & Events.

of reviewing, even if not all gaming videos count as reviews. Reviewers of this type are often individual (male) celebrities such as *Markiplier* (Mark Edward Fischbach), *DanDTM* (Dan Middleton), *jacksepticeye* (Seán William McLoughlin) and *TotalBiscuit* (John Bain).

Toy reviewing is a popular genre in which children's toys are used parodically or demonstrated to test them in authentic settings. According to the channel descriptions, toy reviews are typically made for a young audience, including infants, toddlers and pre-school children. Some channels feature children as reviewers, while others included a child-adapted adult voice-over reporting on the uses of a toy. On some channels, the reviews are played out by the toys. The most popular channels are American and include *Fun Toys Collector*, *Ryan ToysReview*, *Blu Toys Club Surprise*, *DisneyCarToys*, *Toys AndMe* and *CookieSwirlC*.

Tech reviewing encompasses technology product reviews by YouTubers who typically refer to themselves as geeks. These types of review videos are typically found through searches for 'the coolest gadgets' and address product novelties or seek to determine the best consumer product in comparison to its competitors. The most subscribed examples include *Unbox Therapy*, *Linus Tech Tips*, *EverythingApplePro*, *GizmoSlip*, *Android Authority* and *Austin Evans*. This type of review is similar to a consumer test and is typically con-

ducted comparatively (e.g. comparing similar Bluetooth speakers) or through testing (e.g. an electric skateboard).

Cultural product reviewing includes videos that are often explicitly labelled as reviews, situated in the fields of film, music or comics. Prominent examples include the film reviewers *Jeremy Jahns* and *The Nostalgia Critic* (Doug Walker), the music reviewer, or 'The Internet's busiest music nerd', *The Needle Drop* (Anthony Fantano) and *Comicstorian* (Benny Potter). These channels judge cultural products on a connoisseurial basis, which is adapted to the style of the intended audience. The overall style is similar to that of vlogs, featuring a person speaking to the camera, and the videos typically include loudly spoken words at a high pace, special voice effects and call-outs as well as other visual add-ons.

Consumer product reviewing encompasses reviews of everyday consumer products other than technological gadgets and toys, featuring a rather heterogeneous conglomerate grouping of diverse products such as cosmetics, food and candies, cars, shoes and musical instruments. Beauty products are the most prominent topic among such reviews and are often connected to other genres of vlogging, such as makeup tutorials. The most subscribed channels within this reviewing type are *Jaclyn Hill*, *MamaMiaMakeup*, *Wayne Goss*, *Tati* and *itsjudyttime*.

Parody reviewing utilises the genre and concept of a review to explicitly make fun of certain aspects of reviewing. This is a mixed category when it comes to the relationship to the cultural product; instead, the focus lies on mocking the features of the genre. Examples include *CinemaSins*, a channel dedicated to pointing out errors in films. *Coldmirror* presents "art historical analyses", over-interpreting popular cultural products such as Justin Bieber's and One Direction's album covers with a squeaky-voiced art theorist lecturer's narration. Another example is *Wisecrack*, "a collective of comedians, academics, artists and filmmakers", who chase "the deeper meanings" and "philosophies" of diverse popular cultural products and imagery, taking their "analyses" to an absurd level.

Vernacular reviewing formats

Different types of UGR together form a very heterogeneous group of content creation, and, regarding this wide spectrum, the videos within one reviewing type may have more common characteristics with other videos in their subject area than with other types of reviews. Indeed, YouTube reviews are typically intermingled with formats characteristic of the specific subject area. For example, in toy reviewing, the children's entertainment genre includes giant egg surprises, the unboxing of toy packages, the opening of blind bags, doll parodies and experiments. In consumer product reviewing, the characteristic ways of presentation include life hacks, pranks, skits, spoofs, hauls, ramblings, tricks, experiments, mash-ups and tutorials. Tech reviewing involves tests (e.g. drop tests), comparisons, recommendations, unboxing, rants, jailbreaks, demos and how-to's. In gaming, reviews are often conducted in the form of commentaries, play-throughs, walkthroughs, let's-plays, highlights, guides, challenges and live-streams.

Although review seems to be a flexible genre category, that is assumes distinctive features of the subject area in question, different categories of videos can still be distinguished according to two central approaches. In the first, the videos have generally adopted modes of address based on either *discourse* or *action*. Discursively based review videos lean upon the connoisseurial activity of argumentation through a speaking figure or a narrator's voice. Typical examples include *The Needle Drop's* music review videos or *The Nostalgia Critic's* film review videos. Videos that lean upon discourse are the closest to more institutionalised forms of (connoisseurial) reviewing, although they sometimes make use of video affordances, such as animated book reviews (e.g. *Practical Psychology*), in which the contents are presented using visual means.

Action-based review videos, in contrast, are descriptive and demonstrative; for example, a great majority of toy reviews feature showcasing of consumer products designed for children. A recurring act in reviewing a product is opening a brand-new package or showing something that is perhaps not yet widely accessible to the general audience. The show-value of previewing products fits especially well with the nature of the video medium to display and demonstrate things. The critical effect, if there is any, includes showing how things work, how they can be put to work in a smart or creative way or putting them to the test to see if they really work as they should. For example, when trying out a brand of modelling clay and a playset included in the package, the adult voice-over declared, "Look, these scissors don't work at all!" (*Fun Toys Collector*). In the action-based style, the critical intent and analysis is often overshadowed by more or less neomaniac hype, involving unbridled enthusiasm for new products, children's reactions to new toys or some other entertaining dimensions of show and play.

Second, the videos can be grouped according to being either *informative* or *recreational* in their primary intention. Like their institutionalised counterparts, the informatively oriented review videos seek to provide viewers with something new, which might be, for example, facts or experiences relating to a product. Informative review videos could include, for example, "first impression reviews", such as the first impressions of new beauty products or game releases, or live reviews (e.g. *woodytalk*), which involve testing something such as a new cosmetic product or a gameplay and reporting on it immediately, without the conventional waiting time before determining its value.

For recreationally oriented review videos, the characteristic feature is the mashpedia culture: humour and laughter (Danesi, 2015, p. 32). In these videos, both good and bad are imbued with postmodern irony and un-seriousness, which can make it difficult to decipher the reviewer's statements. Rather than focusing on the product itself, the attention is on the presenter or a story, joke or curiosity. Recreational reviews could perhaps more appropriately be called "revues"—which, in fact, in some cases might be a productive misinterpretation of the original word "revue", meaning a theatrical production consisting of brief, loosely connected, often satirical skits, songs and dances. As humorous or satirical pieces with the purpose to provide an overview or an entertainingly packaged look

at a cultural object, they use reviewing as a way of providing viewers with emotions and experiences rather than trying to persuade them by delivering an informed opinion.

Reviewing as co-consumption

The term “review”, even though it is explicitly used and spread within the YouTube community, refers to a genre with less clear boundaries and identity than, for example, unboxings or let’s-plays. Resonating with Ito’s (2010) observations of anime music videos, it is more appropriate to talk about the ongoing process of review video creation that is a form of participation in the social life of fan communities than video reviews as works to be regarded as works similar to the professional ones. Ito (ibid.) remarks that the goal of much of the anime music video creation is “participation in this fan scene, not creating a media work that is going to stand on its own, apart from this social and cultural context.” The incorporation of reviewing in the fan scene can also be seen in the fact that many cultural product reviewers do not emphasise the act of reviewing by positioning themselves explicitly as “reviewers”. Rather, they view themselves as commentators, nerds, geeks, fans, collectors or simply vloggers or (you)tubers, and reviewing simply occurs within the videos they create or as a function of those videos. In his Twitter account, Jeremy Jahns describes himself in this way: “I never claimed to be a critic or a role model.”

The reviewer’s position in UGR is characterised by Merrin’s (2014, p. 161) view of the usersphere: the user differs from the audience by “being personally responsible”. This “personal responsibility” is more generally connected to the characteristic of UGR whereby it dismisses the representativeness of the field of culture that traditional reviewing claims to have. Institutionalised reviewing exerts, or at least declares to exert, a gatekeeping function and includes a selection procedure that is, at least in theory, performed as representative of an entire field of arts or culture. Conversely, UGR presents a more disconnected and individualised activity in which review users dedicate attention to products they have happened to get, and they do not feel a moral duty to be informed about the entire supply on the market, even if they often aspire to be topical by catching the latest releases. The selection is typically based on an aficionado relationship, with principles such as “I choose what I like” or “I choose what my audience needs”. The selection principles might even be structurally biased according to certain features of the cultural product. For example, *PewDiePie*’s channel focuses on ‘the really terrible games’ that have the most entertainment value (Lindholm, 2014).

A central function of all review videos is not taking distance to the cultural production by the primary producers (the producers of the product), as the centrality of the evaluative function in institutionalised criticism and reviewing implies; rather, vernacular review videos function as shared moments of consuming cultural objects. It is precisely this *co-consumption* that seems to be more a prevalent feature of UGR than articulating an opinion, let alone an aesthetic or a moral judgement. Since UGR is very much connected to the moment of making the product a common object of interest through

co-consumption, a cultural product's value is short-lived. The act of co-consuming may be completely ignorant of the primary production contexts, or the elements that Carroll calls contextualisation and Orlik originator criticism. The elements of elucidation and analysis (explaining how a product works), interpretation (delivering a user experience about the product) and evaluation (judging whether the product has a value of some kind) are typically included, but attached to the act of consumption, in which a central question is how a product looks like, works, and feels like, instead of related to the originator or production contexts, which would imply questions such as where the product comes from, how it has been produced and how it can be compared to similar previous or contemporary products.

In the models of cultural mediation, intermediation refers to the existence of cultural intermediaries and equivalent institutional structures between the primary production and reception of cultural goods, while disintermediation means the removal of intermediaries in the supply chain and thus refers to a condition where the cultural consumer is in direct contact with the primary producer of cultural products, without other intermediary agents. UGR, as shown in YouTube videos, is based on mechanics where both the cultural mediator and the cultural consumer to a high degree originate from and arrive at the same community. As reflected in the hybrid characterisations of prosumption (Toffler, 1980) and produsage (Bruns, 2008; 2016), which youtubing involves, user reviewers include the consumer and the mediator in the same role, using the hypothetically democratic device of a video platform, which allows any cultural consumer to become a producer. The condition that best describes the case of UGR under study would be *intramediatio*. Intramediatio refers to peer-to-peer cultural (inter)mediation that takes the individual consumption choices to the starting point and leans heavily upon the media or me-casting paradigm (Merrin, 2014, p. 71) instead of attempting to relate to the entire process and phenomenon of cultural production. Rather than relating the cultural object to its production context, in which the aesthetic value and producer's intentions as well as structures and traditions sustaining the object play a significant role, the ambitions of mediating in UGR are more often directed toward experiencing individualised co-consumption and thus relating the object to the shared experience of consumership, or, more specifically, of prosumership, in the "experience" or "attention" economy. This makes UGR a special case in the general cultural production frame, which will be discussed in the next section by returning to the concept of vernacularity.

Discussion

The starting point of this study was in institutionalised reviewing, and the objective was to describe vernacular reviewing. The aim was thus to make an overview of the UGR output across different "fan scenes", instead of looking at each of these scenes to discuss what kind of an internal role reviewing occupies in them. This "mediatic" and "cross-

scene” perspective poses some restrictions for the analysis, to be briefly discussed in this section. Also, it has to be asked what the consequences are for the research of reviews and reviewing.

The results underscore the fact that vernacular reviewing resides in the realm of cultural consumption or, to be more exact, prosumption or produsage. Vernacular reviewing skirts the boundaries between high and popular, or between production and consumption, that have been prevalent in the discussions on professional reviewing. Once conceived of as intramediation, UGR shows considerable ambivalence towards the very definition of (institutionalised) reviewing, above all by advancing individual objectives rather than subscribing to larger aesthetic–societal obligations.

Being a non-institutionalised phenomenon, vernacular reviewing gains its strength from not being centrally defined (see e.g. Shirky, 2008). UGR provides users with opportunities for vernacular agency as opposed to institutional agency, that is for lay persons very limited (Howard, 2010). The extent to which vernacular agency is subversive, or constitute an alternative to the institutional power, is not easy to determine simply by looking at the products—videos. The lack of unified professional standards in terms of product and video process quality or the heterogeneity and incompatibility of these different sets of standards makes the assessment of the social functions of the videos difficult. However, it is clear that vernacular reviewing operates in close proximity with the audiences and in areas that are not necessarily covered by other media, at least not the same used by UGR; for example, in game video reviews, where the gamer concretely shows how the product functions and educates the viewer in how it can best be used, or in cosmetic reviews, where the product is likewise concretely applied and assessed in function. At the same time, UGR operates in close and direct proximity with the cultural industries that release the products. To the extent that UGR is based on a condition where the cultural consumer (reviewer) is directly in contact with the primary producers of cultural products (e.g. the industry), UGR is disintermediation, which means the removal of intermediaries in the supply chain. Nevertheless, the reviewers are also new cultural intermediaries, because they cannot be considered fully part of the original fan community. As there are significant differences between the institutionalised and vernacular cultural intermediaries, as discussed above, there is a need to make a distinction between inter- and intramediation, and that is why the concept of intramediaries has been mobilised in this study to highlight the co-consuming position of vernacular reviewers, in contrast to the ‘classical’ reviewers who are more clearly positioned between primary production and reception.

Conclusion

The analysis of the most subscribed video channels identified forms of vernacular reviewing for young audiences that represent metacommentary on cultural products in today’s media culture. These commentaries constitute moments of co-consumption that are part

of mediated prosumption. UGR opens up and encourages us to find ways to address user-driven online metacommentary within frames that are independent from the previous scholarly discussion on cultural reviewing as an institutionalized form of discourse and practice. This initial study adopted a general focus to identify actors and point out the range of the phenomenon, but more detailed qualitative studies are needed across different online platforms to understand how UGR and its critical aspects related to judgement and taste emerge bottom up, and how evaluative prosumer relationships to cultural products are formed. Exploring the ethical, genre and ethnic dimensions of UGR increases our understanding on what counts as reviewing in the continuum between in-depth criticism and reaction, and between critical reflection and recreation, and cultural production and consumption.

To obtain a better understanding of UGR, further attention should be paid to the integrated media practices of reception and production and how they are connected to the traditional, new and emerging forms of reviewing. Likely, also the *uses* of UGR differ from those of institutionalised reviews. For example, according to the Consumer Barometer by Google (2016), 4 in 10 Internet users between 16 and 34 years of age had watched videos with friends or family in the past week, a sharp contrast from the highly individual nature of institutionalised (print) review consumption. Studying users' interactions with review videos would complement the picture of intramediation, placing vernacular reviewing more closely and appropriately within the communities where the contents are produced, circulated and reproduced. Moreover, products and brands are culturally (intra- and inter-)mediated at an ever earlier age, as people often begin to use the Internet in pre-school (Livingstone et al., 2017). Cultural commentary, both private and public, thus constitutes a specific media literacy skill of the digital era that concerns larger groups of (cultural) consumers than institutionalised reviews have ever been able to reach.

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Notes

- 1 The script was written by Pasi Luostarinen (BeTek) and released at GitHub, <https://github.com/BeTeK/> YoutubeStats (2018).
- 2 N=4,807, as all channels did not conceal their information.
- 3 The geographical origin of the content creator could not be traced because the country category had been depreciated.
- 4 200 channels had no categories at all. 1,118 channels (22%) had used only one category, and 1,909 (38%) could not report a third popular category.

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- 5 The languages included German (*Rezension, Kritik, Test*), French (*recension*), Spanish (*reseña*), Portuguese (*resenha*) and Russian (*рецензия, обзор, смотр, критика*).

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Maarit Jaakkola
Lecturer in Journalism, PhD
Faculty of Communication Sciences
University of Tampere, Finland
maarit.jaakkola@uta.fi