**(Title)**

*Embracing Autonomy in Personal Curation Tactics: How Young Media Users Assign Credibility to Cultural Mediators*

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**(Abstract)**

The study aims to understand how young media users value cultural mediators, ranging from traditional media actors such as cultural journalists and critics to more alternative online personalities (e.g., Social Media Influencers and peer networks) when selecting and evaluating cultural goods and activities to engage. Paradoxically, in an era of information overload where professional interpretation and curation provided by experts could prove to be beneficial, empirical studies confirm that young media users decreasingly rely on institutional sources. Whereas boundaries between producers and consumers in both journalism and cultural industries are blurring, questions arise on the changing interpretational and gatekeeping functions in the mediated cultural sphere, and how both journalistic and non-journalistic actors are intertwined in this. In order to understand these dynamics, the study builds on 31 in-depth interviews with young Belgian media users (age 18-28) revolving around individual social media use and (news) curation habits regarding their cultural interests. The study identified various reasons why young media users prefer to rely on non-journalistic mediators including their quest for *similarity*. Moreover, we found that youngsters actively push back journalistic curation to secure their own autonomy and uniqueness as cultural consumers, which is reflected in their media use by applying personal curation tactics. However, while *evaluating* cultural goods, credibility to journalistic actors is given to benchmark their opinions. The results shed light on the dynamic way in which young media users assign different levels of credibility to different gatekeepers depending on the kind of information they expect at various stages in the consumption of cultural goods. The paper concludes with a reflection on the implications of these insights for cultural journalism highlighting how these dynamics accentuate journalists’ role in interpreting rather than in setting the agenda for cultural consumption.

**(Keywords**)

Cultural Mediators, Cultural Journalism, Cultural intermediaries, Personal Curation, Youth studies

**(Introduction)**

If youngsters are flocking to the next Netflix hit show, chances are high they did not show up based on the algorithm alone, but because other people directed them toward it. Cultural industries generally rely on these ‘other people’ or legitimizing actorswho have the ability to shape audiences’ perceptions and create a sense of belief in cultural goods (Kristensen et al., 2019; Verboord, 2020, p. 3). In other words, these actors ‘mediate’ in cultural circulation processes by connecting cultural goods, such as TV shows, movies, and music, to an audience. Next to one’s personal network of family and friends, the role of cultural mediators is traditionally performed by institutionalized experts including cultural journalists and critics. These intermediaries are not only involved in cultural agenda setting (the *selection* of cultural goods) but are also concerned with assessing cultural quality (the *evaluation)* (Bourdieu, 1983; Symeou et al., 2015; Verboord, 2020).

However, over the last decade, an increasing influx of ‘new’ cultural mediatorshas complicated the long-established position of cultural journalists and critics’ role as mediators within their field. While today’s digital media also allow audiences to participate in cultural opinion forming, professional mediators are now consequently accompanied by ‘new’, non-institutionalized counterparts, such as Social Media Influencers (SMI) or other non-journalistic peers. Within this context, cultural consumers turned producers and vice versa: journalistic reviews are threatened by, amongst others, amateur ratings and peer-to-peer videos (Jaakkola, 2018; Rixon, 2017; Verboord, 2020).

The blurring of boundaries between producers and consumers not only disrupts the cultural circulation process itself but also has an impact on the consumption end. Besides solely professional and journalistic mediators, media users now have access to a variety of ‘guides’ assisting them in both choosing and evaluating cultural products (Jaakkola, 2018; Kristensen and From, 2018; Verboord, 2020). This raises questions on how users pick their cultural ‘guides’ within this high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al., 2017) when *selecting* and *evaluating* cultural goods, and which roles users ascribe to (and how these might differ between) both journalistic and non-journalistic cultural mediators.

Furthermore, journalism scholars emphasize how journalists’ solid positions are increasingly challenged in a social media sphere: Institutional journalists lost their ‘privilege’ as gatekeepers and mediators within the journalistic field (Bauman, 2007; Bruns, 2003; Deuze & Witschge, 2018; Thorson & Wells, 2016). Already in 2006, Axel Bruns proposed the term ‘gatewatcher’ as an alternative to ‘gatekeeper’ to stress that in a networked environment, journalists lost their entitled position as conduits of information.

Seen from an audience perspective on the other hand, media users are simultaneously adapting their online habits in order to cope with an overload of diverse and ‘cacophonic’ information (Cotter and Thorson, 2022; Das, 2019). Since the last decade, digital media reshaped and empowered users’ decisive actions, such as navigating through and curating information: “The greater choice opportunities there are, the more selective people have to be” (Stromback et al., 2022, p. 73). In other words, do-it-yourself expertise and personal curation become increasingly important in people’s everyday information consumption (Cotter and Thorson, 2022; Thorson and Wells, 2016).

Paradoxically, in this do-it-yourself era of ‘cacophonic’ information where professional journalistic ‘guidance’ could be proven beneficial, (young) media users increasingly turn away from journalistic sources. Besides news avoidance, specifically among young audiences (Edgerly, 2017; Newman et al., 2023; Vandenplas et al., 2021), also trust in news and journalism industries is in decline (Newman et al., 2023).

In addition to ‘hard news’, media users also seem to bypass journalistic ‘soft’ news such as lifestyle and cultural information. Instead, these avoiders appear to seek alternative voices and often rely on non-institutional mediators when navigating through (cultural) information (Stromback et al., 2022; Janssen & Verboord, 2015; Verboord, 2014, Verboord 2020). Specifically when valuing cultural news, Verboord (2020)’s empirical study confirms how an institutional base is decreasingly important for audiences’ attitude towards cultural mediators’s opinions. However, relying on these non-journalistic ‘guides (e.g., Social Media Influencers) raises important questions concerning both the reliability and the commercial intention of (cultural) information online (Carlson, 2017).

Therefore, the study investigates from a bottom-up perspective how and when young media users assign credibility to cultural mediators. Featuring high smartphone usage and a solid digital and social media-oriented repertoire, youngsters are constantly connected to a wide variety of cultural guides and opinions in their everyday digital life (imec, 2022) which makes them an information-rich group to study dynamics of personal curation*.* In doing so, we try to improve our understanding of the relationship of young social media users towards both journalistic and non-journalistic sources online, through the lens of their cultural interests. Therefore, we pose the following research questions: What role do young media users assign to both journalistic and non-journalistic mediators when (1) selecting and (2) evaluating cultural goods? Supported by the following two sub-research questions: How and when are young media users assigning credibility to these cultural mediators? And how does this role differ between journalistic and non-journalistic mediators?

**(Literature review)**

1) Redefining mediating roles in a transforming cultural field

***Cultural industries: a field in flux***

The cultural industries embrace industries that combine the creation, production, and commercialization of creative content (in the form of a service or good), which is historically linked with the cultural critique that Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer formulated regarding mass media (Gómez-Diago, 2016, p. 49). That criticism persists among scholars who highlight that cultural industries continue to be guided by processes of commercialization, competitiveness, and globalization changing the cultural field (Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Janssen and Verboord, 2015). For instance, neo-liberalism infiltrated the creative industries leading to commercialization and commodification of cultural products. This has resulted in market-oriented supply chains, including literary prices and film festivals, redefining both the artistic and economic value of cultural products (Hesmondhalgh, 2008; Jaakkola, 2015), also contributing to an overall merge of highbrow and lowbrow cultural content (Peterson and Kern, 1996; Weingartner & Rössel, 2019).

Such critical accounts of the power of cultural industries are countered by cultural sociologists who emphasize that people’s consumption patterns are increasingly becoming culturally omnivorous. In the last decades, cultural consumers were ever more likely to explore an eclectic range of products from highbrow art to popular culture (Bauman, 2013; Maguire, 2015; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Weingartner & Rössel, 2019). These transformations incited reflections on the relationship between digital information and the democratization of culture (see for example Henry Jenkins and colleagues’ (2015) work on Participatory Culture). In light of the current phase of socio-technological change and the re-interpretation of the role of cultural mediators it entails, rather than focus on one or the other actor as the locus of power, this article seeks to contribute to an ‘ecological account’ (Livingstone, 2015, p. 442) of mediation in society that considers the process of cultural meaning-making as a cyclical and transactional process between the various actors involved, including media organizations, journalists, so-called influencers and regular media users.

***From cultural intermediaries to cultural mediators***

In recent decades, the supply of symbolic production in both information- and cultural industries massively expanded. As a result, the act of curating a fine selection of cultural products that suit people’s limited leisure time can be quite challenging today. Consumers of culture have a tradition of assigning authority to experts who carefully handpick and evaluate a selection of cultural products by, for instance, selecting ‘must-read’ books or providing film reviews (Janssen & Verboord, 2015; Nixon, 2002). By simplifying one’s prior-consumption decision-making process, on the one hand, and helping “consumers understand and evaluate what a producer has created” (Corciolani et al., 2020, p. 479) on the other, cultural mediators in this sense add value to culture.

Cultural mediators derive from ‘cultural intermediaries’, a term borrowed from Bourdieu (1983) and picked up in both marketing and cultural studies. A cultural intermediary relates to an agent with specific expertise (field-specific cultural capital) connecting an audience to the consumptionof cultural products and services (Nixon, 2002). Traditionally, cultural intermediaries are linked to a variety of societal fields such as creative, advertising, and news industries (Corciolani et al., 2020).

However, stepping away from sociological terms such as ‘intermediary’ or ‘tastemakers’ that originated from the fields of culture and arts, we build on Janssen and Verboord (2015) ’s more media-oriented understanding of intermediaries, defined as *cultural* *mediators*: “Those involved in the mediation between the production of cultural goods and the production of consumer tastes” (Bourdieu, 1984 in Janssen and Verboord, 2015, p. X), and investigate in how (‘new’) cultural mediators are operating within a complex digital media landscape. This media-oriented understanding of cultural mediator is also designated as “the heterogeneous cultural critic” by Kristensen and From (2015), consists of on the one hand institutionalized critics, derived from the artistic and journalistic field, and on the other ‘everyday’ or ‘media made’ arbiters of taste.

In talking about cultural mediators, we take the notion of cultural intermediaries as a starting point and add a layer of mediatization theory on top of it in order to account for “the transformative potential of media tools that help us to construct our social and cultural worlds” (Nowak-Teter, 2018, p. 5). In light of this study, the transformative potential of digital media lies in how it opens up the space previously held by cultural journalists to new entrants such as social media influencers and peers.

2) How cultural journalists lose their privilege as cultural mediators (and the simultaneous rise of ‘new’ mediators)

***Cultural mediators: new entrants soliciting for the job of cultural guide***

Cultural journalists and critics traditionally perform the gatekeeping and meaning-making role of cultural mediators, which transcends a long-established professional identity as aesthetic ‘tastemakers’ helping to develop an appreciation of the arts (Harries and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007; Jaakkola et al., 2015; Janssen and Verboord, 2015; Kristensen, 2019). Cultural journalists, in this sense, can be seen as institutionalized cultural mediators who are gatekeeping in relation to the media agenda (Kersten and Janssen, 2017; Kristensen, 2019). The conception of cultural journalists as important mediators has long formed the institutional framework for the processes of cultural legitimation and critical work attributed to cultural journalism (Kristensen, 2019).

In that framework, cultural journalism is attributed to a central position between the journalistic and the artistic field. The long-established authorityof journalists has been challenged as both journalists and amateurs share the same digital platform to spread information (Carlson, 2017). While the role of cultural mediators was traditionally taken up by institutional actors, such as cultural journalists and critics, it is now also performed by more ‘alternative’ types of mediators such as the *everyday amateur expert* or the media-made‘arbiter’offering experience-based advice on cultural products (Kristensen and From, 2015; Rixon, 2017). Jaakkola (2018), for instance, argues for a distinction between intermediaries (the institutional actor) and intra-mediators (amateurs), referring to the co-consuming (or *prosuming*) position of the experience-based *everyday amateur expert.*

In practice, these amateur experts include other peers such as Social Media Influencers (SMI), for instance. As Wunderlich et al. (2022) pointed out recently: while SMIs are often criticized by their audience, they paradoxically remain people’s main source of information, which is especially the case for younger media users.

***Cultural journalism: an industry under pressure***

If the central position of cultural journalists as intermediaries between culture and its audience is now no longer secured, we can certainly look at the role of new entrants in the field enabled by digital technologies – as this article sets out to do – but in doing so, we should not ignore broader evolutions in the field of (cultural) journalism itself. There are more dynamics at play that challenge the institutional framework for cultural legitimation processes and critical work associated with cultural journalism.

One is certain that in the context of today’s Information Society, any kind of institutionalized knowledge seems to lose its monopoly as a frame of reference (Bauman, 2007, Deuze, 2008b). In the field of cultural journalism, this evolution seems to be reinforced by processes of ‘journalistification’ both on the level of content and structure (Jaakkola, 2015; Jaakkola et al., 2015; Kristensen and Riegert, 2021). Due to media convergence and platformization, however, different newsrooms and sections are forced to merge. Hereby the cultural journalism section seems to lose its authority in the newsroom (Hellman and Jaakkola, 2012). Moreover, at the level of content, empirical studies confirm how this commercial and global trend in cultural industries the last decades translates into an international and omnivorous orientation of cultural media coverage (Janssen et al., 2008; Kersten & Janssen, 2017).

In turn, this decreased relevance within the field of journalism incited cultural journalism to expand its spheres of activities into new domains such as public relations and marketing (Kristensen & Riegert, 2021). Cultural journalism scholars emphasize a shift in attitude and coverage within the discipline shifting from highbrow, ivory tower, and national to lowbrow, the everyday and international (teacher to storekeeper) (Janssen et al., 2008; Kersten and Janssen, 2017). While this might be an adequate response to shifts in cultural consumption, these practices further erode the position of professional critics and institutionalized experts as cultural mediators in the cultural public sphere, and leave the door open ‘new’ arbiters of taste for consumers of culture to assign credibility to (Kristensen et al., 2021).

3) Bridging the gap between cultural production and consumption in the digital age: the role of the empowered media user

**The curation of cultural mediators: the role of empowered media users**

The high-choice media ecology has become a battleground where various content producers compete for authority, credibility, and attention from their audiences (Carlson, 2017; Jenkins and Deuze, 2008). Social media specifically disrupted and reshaped how people receive, select, and value information in their online media space. Media users today appear to be more empowered (and yet more overwhelmed) when navigating across various media platforms dealing with an abundance of information (Jenkins, 2004; Picone, 2017; Stromback et al., 2022). The empowered media user has mastered personal curation tactics in order to select and evaluate relevant and personally useful information online.

Following Thorson and Wells (2016, p. 316)’s concept of personal curation which “emphasizes active, intentional customization of one’s media environment in pursuit of individual goals, following uses and gratifications.” Along with algorithmic curation, individual content selection- or personal curation- also seem to challenge the long-established journalistic gatekeeping functions (Stromback et al., 2022).

While cultural journalism scholars have acknowledged the role of these ‘new’ tastemakers, they admittedly “know relatively little about how these changes have influenced the role of cultural news media in audiences' consumption of news and information about culture, nor about the status and authority of cultural journalism (...)” Kristensen (2019, p.8). It is on the backdrop of these evolutions that the study presented in this article takes an inductive, bottom-up audience perspective (Bengtsson and Johansson, 2021; Deuze, 2007) to investigate how youngsters value, trust, and engage with ‘new’ cultural mediators and to gain an understanding in their everyday information-seeking behaviour, which is an important component of youngsters’ worldview and identity-forming (Turcotte et al., 2015).

This study zooms in on cultural mediators’ long-established modi operandi including both cultural agenda-setting and meaning-making processes of cultural goods (Janssen and Verboord, 2015; Kersten and Janssen, 2017). From an audience perspective, these modi operandi translate in how (and guided by whom) media users *select* (prior consumption) and *evaluate* (post consumption) cultural products and services. Within these processes, the cultural mediator takes up a key position as a legitimated agent connecting the cultural industries with its audiences by adding an overall value to symbolic goods (Janssen & Verboord, 2015; (Verboord, 2020).

Therefore, we pose the following research questions: What role do young media users assign to both journalistic and non-journalistic mediators when (1) selecting and (2) evaluating cultural products? Supported by the following two sub-research questions: How and when are young media users assigning credibility to these cultural mediators? And how does this role differ between journalistic and non-journalistic mediators?

**(Methodology)**

Data collection and analysis: practicalities

31 in-depth interviews were conducted with young media users (age: 18-33 years old) following a grounded theory approach as described by Mortelmans (2007). The participants were selected using nonprobability sampling in two steps, using a theoretical sampling protocol to identify relevant characteristics to obtain various relevant profiles first, and then applying snowball sampling to actually recruit the participants. Theoretical sampling is the method of data collection most closely related to grounded theory and is based on the identification of important concepts or units, not necessarily people (Humphreys, 2021, p. 82) with a maximum variety based on age, gender, media use (broad to small media repertoire/ diet), and cultural interests (broad to small: popular to niche). The interviews are fully audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using Maxqda 2022.

By using the Grounded Theory approach, the study inductively analyzed the results of the interviews aiming to construct a transferable and abstract answer to the research questions (Mortelmans, 2007, pp. 41-42). In order to extract the underlying media practices from their social context, an in-depth interview with a semi-structured topic list was needed, i.e., a standardized open interview. The advantages of semi-structured interviews are on the one hand the standardization of the topic list which structures the answers of the participants and hence facilitates the coding process (Mortelmans, 2007, p. 225), and on the other hand, there is still space to deviate from the question protocol and inductively conduct ‘extern’ interesting data (p. 226). “Thinking not only *about* one’s data, but also *with* *and through* the data, in order to produce fruitful ideas” (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007, p. 168). During the interviews elicitation tools were used, such as social media posts and news articles, in order to illustrate differences between journalistic and non-journalistic mediators.

To code the analysis, we followed Bryman (2021)’s and Mortelmans (2007)’s approach of coding (from open to selective coding), although the process itself went rather iteratively, going back and forth between analyzing initial interview data and collecting additional data by setting up another interview round, which is key in theoretical sampling (Humphreys, 2021, p. 82).

**(Findings)**

*Operationalization*

In order to understand how and when young media users assign credibility to cultural mediators, we first inductively identified the main roles of these online intermediaries, which are (1) cultural agenda-setting (Symeou et al., 2015) and (2) the assessment of cultural quality (Janssen & Verboord, 2015). Seen from an audience perspective, the study, therefore, is interested in how the participants (1) select (*prior* consumption) and (2) evaluate (*post* consumption) cultural goods online, (whether or not) based on cultural ‘guides’. To inductively understand the role assigned to cultural mediators, we probed for each individual participant’s personal cultural interests during the interviews, which ranges from music, books, theatre, and concerts, to games, reality shows, and fashion. Taking each participant’s personal interests as a starting point, we then examined their media behaviour. In doing so, the underlying factors were scrutinized on whether and how these youngsters assign credibility to cultural mediators, and how these differ between journalistic and non-journalistic guides.

*General*

In line with the rest of their generation, these young participants heavily rely on social media, not only to engage with (hard) news and information (Newman et al., 2023) but also with ‘soft’ and cultural news, when discovering and evaluating cultural interest. All participants are actively using popular social media platforms Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok to encounter cultural information. In general, these young participants are more likely to allow non-journalistic cultural mediators in their media diet, including Social Media Influencers (SMI) and other peers taking up the role of cultural ‘guides’. Yet, the participants assign different roles to both journalistic and non-journalistic mediators, while both *selecting* and *evaluating* cultural goods, which will be further scrutinized in the analysis. To understand whether and how youngsters assign credibility to these mediators, 4 underlying dynamics were identified:

1. **Seeking Similarity**

In line with Bourdieu’s Distinction Theory, the participants actively seek cultural mediators who they believe share a similar taste pattern. The interviews show that the sense of ‘similarity’ plays a crucial role in determining whether participants assign credibility to a cultural mediator when selecting- rather than evaluating- cultural goods.

Some of these youngsters, on the one hand, are actively looking for ‘same-minded’ mediators, e.g., in closed Facebook- or even WhatsApp groups on ‘niche’ cultural interests. Others rather passively and unconsciously assign more credibility to similar tastemakers who ‘accidently’ seeped into their personal curated feed. However, in both groups, seeking for ‘similarity’ in a cultural mediator plays a more crucial role while the participants are selecting (prior consumption) cultural interests. The feeling of being close and similar to online peers fuels a sense of credibility in mediators’ taste. Consequently, given the participants’ age and lifestyle, more credibility is given to non-journalistic mediators: “If it is someone I know or someone I look up to, I’d rather listen to the song they share” (Lauryn, 21 years old).

Moving away from the pre-selected cultural canon of journalists, critics, and experts, these youngsters rather rely on other (young) social media users than on “a forty-year-old established critic who writes an article in De Morgen (traditional Belgian newspaper)” (Nasir, 26 years old.). Some of the interviewees even perceive journalistic actors as “pretentious” (Leila, 20 years old) and hereby refer to their ‘eloquent’ writing, for instance. These participants not only feel different in age, but rather in taste, lifestyle, and “aesthetics” (Lisa, 22 years old), which turns out as an important incentive in a visual-based social media context.

Moreover, the widely consumed audiovisual video content on social media (e.g.: TikTok videos and Instagram stories) appear to be more suitable to create a sense of ‘similarity’ fed by the feeling of proximity (being close to the mediator): “Those people show so much of themselves that you have a feeling of knowing and trusting them.. in a way” (Leila, 20 years old). Also, Nasir (26 y/o), for instance, reflects on how such a relationship grows: “It is kind of intimacy in a way” (Nasir, 26 y/o). Since this type of (video)content allows the user to easily and frequently integrate into someone’s personal life, the perception of having a similar taste pattern seems to be constructed more easily.

1. **Personal curation as a counter dynamic towards journalistic curation**

Besides ‘Similarity’ as an important driver to rely on non-journalistic mediators, participants genuinely and simultaneously push back journalists when selecting (cultural) information. This counter dynamic can be found at the level of personal curating tactics. Personal curation, as defined by Thorson and Wells (2016, p. 316), “emphasizes active, intentional customization of one’s media environment in pursuit of individual goals, following uses and gratifications”. Within this context, the interviews show that participants curate their cultural information flows by actively pushing back journalistic actors. In other words, these youngsters use their ‘empowered’ media use to carefully choose which content to pay attention to, as Nasir (26 y/o) emphasizes “It’s a bit like pick and choose.. what interests me and what doesn’t? (..) But it can also be that I accidentally miss out on information that interests me because it is also fast.. like swipe, swipe through it”. To illustrate, when asking Lila (22 y/o) if she consumes cultural information from journalistic sources, she emphasizes how her personal curation tactics (based on non-journalistic sources) already cover her cultural interests and replies: “Nothing, I have the feeling there is already so much on the internet.. I make selections of selections, so I think.. there is nothing I really miss, or I wouldn’t find on the internet if I want to”.

According to the interviews, we identified 2 motives, which are however mostly combined with each other, but are both lying at the root of personal curation as a counter dynamic. Participants use personal curation as (1) an act of ‘rebellion’ against journalistic and institutional sources, and, simultaneously, to (2) secure their autonomy as a form of their cultural expression.

**2A) as an act of ‘rebellion’ against journalistic actors**

“What the newspaper does is proposing a hype we already know, like slam poetry or Kendrick Lamer, so that’s not really new “(Nadia, 23 y/o). As the quote illustrates, many respondents associate traditional journalistic media to ‘mainstream’ cultural interests. Moreover, when a journalistic source reports on certain cultural products such as music or films, the participants easily perceive it as ‘old fashioned’. As a result, some of the interviewees associate traditional media with popular culture with which they do not identify themselves, and therefore even actively avoid it.

For instance, according to one of the participants, traditional news media only report on well-known films and "absolutely nothing about the films that you can find through other sources on social media." (Gavin, 23 y/o). These young media users do not feel appealed to the cultural selection picked by journalists or critics.

So, I go to concerts more often now (…). I notice that, for example, three or four years ago, when I was barely active on Instagram, I often went to very logical mainstream concerts. But now.. I go to niche concerts more often where there are only fifty people attending the concert (…). Yes, I am more into music now... and social media does give me that opportunity. (Nasir, 26 y/o)

Not only prevails the perception that journalistic mediators can be pretentious (as mentioned in the previous section), but some of the participants even actively avoid journalistic reviews because they do not feel understood when it comes to consuming cultural goods: “I don’t believe journalists when it comes to fictional tv series or movies.. I have the feeling they’re patronizingabout certain things (..) they destroy it. People who watch it, they know it is not that good, but that’s the whole point, we watch it because it’s not good.” (Nina, 24 y/o)

**2B) Securing their autonomy as a form of identity expression**

According to the interviews, participants see their social media use as an extension of their identity: the cultural information they curate and allow in their feed, is a representation of their cultural interests, and, by means, a representation of themselves. Moreover, some participants see the act of curating their cultural information flow as part of the prior-consumption experience: “I actually make my own selection by choosing which pages and accounts I follow” (Lilia, 22 y/o) An intrinsic factor lying at the roots of curating one’s own cultural information flow is the concept of *autonomy*. Autonomy refers to the feeling of being unique and free in choosing a fine selection of cultural goods as a way of self-expression. In other words, these youngsters seem to secure their ‘uniqueness’ by expressing it through their personal curation of cultural interests.

The feeling of ‘authonomy’ is reflected in young media users’ media habits: when actively avoiding cultural experts, youngsters secure their own uniqueness and taste in their cultural consumption process. Participants refer to the process of actively finding information that suits their cultural interests as ‘digging’, ‘discovering’, ‘clicking-through’, or ‘navigating’. The process simultaneously crosses different platforms such as Instagram, Spotify, YouTube, or Facebook(groups). “Digging into Spotify playlists and looking for cultural information on Instagram makes me feel free (..).I don’t listen to the radio because.. the fact that I do not have control over what I am listening.. I don’t like it” (Gavin, 23 y/o). Abraham (24 y/o) for instance, witnesses how he is constantly in search of information on new music and artists jumping from one platform to the other to find his own unique and specific type of music distributed and reviewed by same-minded peers. This search process of seeking cultural information is perceived as an experience on its own. By doing so, some of these youngsters seem to actively push away traditional media organizations in their cultural selection process.

1. **Institutional Trust as benchmark in personal opinion-forming**

Amongst the participants, ‘institutional trust’ is perceived as a double-edged sword: on the one hand, as ascribed above, these youngsters avoid journalistic actors when selecting their cultural interests, but on the other hand, after watching a movie or reading a book (post-consumption), yet some participants remarkably still specifically rely on journalists and professional experts when evaluating cultural goods. They do so in order to form an opinion on a certain cultural topic, such as a new movie or book, and to talk about it afterward in a social context with friends, family, or colleagues, for instance.

Moreover, many participants prefer to consume cultural goods ‘Tabula Rasa’: they consume first (and simultaneously avoid information about it), and actively look for reviews and opinionated content afterward. This process of opinion seeking is described by the participants as something that happens ‘automatically’ after e.g., watching a movie or theatre play. Remarkably, within this evaluation process, some participants specifically do rely on journalistic ‘guides’ to evaluate their consumed cultural goods. As Lauryn witnesses “The review of the professional critic here is decisive” (Lauryn, 21 y/o).

In here, participants rely on journalists, on the one hand, (1) **form** or **confirm** their opinion, as Jack (28 y/o) describes how journalistic mediators “can be a benchmark to see if something is really good”. On the other hand, some participants describe how journalists often provide more context to their already opinionated views. “After forming an opinion on your own, it is interesting to add some facts to your own interpretation, I think”. (George, 23 y/o). In a sense, journalists connect the consumed cultural products within a societal context. Whereas journalistic benchmarks are repellent when selecting cultural goods, we see how the participants still value institutional trust when it comes to evaluations.

**Using Personal curation to look for opinion confirmation**

Not only does ‘institutional trust’ assist in participants’ opinion-forming process, but the multitude of rather non-institutional opinions found on Twitter or in comment sections, for instance, seems to feed their opinions as well. After watching a movie or listening to a music album, participants actively search for opinions on their consumed cultural goods to find a feeling of ‘connectivity’ and ‘togetherness’. Some participants describe it as an extension of the cultural sphere and as a part of the cultural experience itself: “Especially after watching a movie, or yeah, a book.. After reading or watching it, I stay in the sphere of that product and then I start looking for things on Google and Twitter” (Leila, 20 y/o). Here, we clearly observe how participants are not just ‘accidentally’ bumping into those opinions, but they are actively looking for them over different social media platforms. Nasir (26 y/o) for instance, describes how he always investigates how the ‘public opinion’ is represented on Twitter by actively searching for hashtags related to a movie he watched.

Remarkably, when it comes to evaluating cultural goods, and the opinion formation coming along, some participants actively seek opinions which are **confirming** their own views on a cultural topic: “So. After watching a movie I look for reviews on YouTube about that movie.. just to hear from other people who share the same opinion as me. It is nice to feel confirmation from people online, from people who are equally excited about a movie as me.” (Lauryn, 23 y/o). Also, Jeanne (21 y/o) argues how she actively seeks confirmation online: “I find it fun to search for people who have the same opinion as me. I look through the comment section of videos to see if someone has the same opinion as I do. I find that fun” (Jeanne, 21 y/o)

According to the interviews, these opinions are used in both offline and online conversations with friends or family about movies or books in order to connect their opinion to a societal topic (such as feminism or climate change for instance). “I rather read something (information on a movie) after I saw it (a movie) than when I haven’t seen it. So, actually, it is rather to see how much people are agreeing with me, with my opinion and my thoughts” (Leila, 20 y/o)

However, some participants also argue how encountering too many similar opinions might have the opposite effect: “On Instagram some stuff and opinions get really hyped up and sometimes everyone post the same” (Nina 24 y/o), which can lead to the formation of an opposite opinion towards the cultural good.

These opinion-forming processes reflected in youngster’s media use seem to be an important component in their identity construction, including how they represent themselves to the social world they live in based through the curation of their cultural interests.

**Empirical Conclusion**

In this study, we sought to uncover what role young media users assign to both journalistic and non-journalistic mediators when selecting and evaluating cultural products*.* We found that when *selecting* cultural goods (prior consumption) young media users often ascribe a curating role to non-journalistic mediators. When youngsters assign credibility to these ‘curators’, it is fuelled by a feeling of ‘similarity’: participants seek cultural mediators who they believe share a similar taste pattern. Not only do participants base their selection on ‘same-minded’ mediators, but they also actively bypass professional journalists and critics when choosing cultural goods. This act of ‘rebellion’ against journalistic and institutional content is fed by their association of journalism as being ‘mainstream’. Since their cultural interests represent their identity in a way, they consciously push back journalistic ‘curators’ when picking movies, books, or music. Within this context, youngsters use personal curation tactics to secure their autonomy and uniqueness, which is reflected in their personally selected variety of cultural interests.

However, while *evaluating*cultural products, media users still seem to trust journalistic actors as ‘reviewers’ (post-consumption). Here, ‘institutional trust’ plays an important role in assigning credibility to professional journalists as benchmarks. Yet, media users are simultaneously searching for a bunch of (peer) opinions online that confirm their own views on a cultural topic.

More broadly, we aimed to understand the relationship of youngsters towards both journalistic and non-journalistic sources through the lens of cultural interest. While these youngsters actively push back journalistic curation, by autonomously using personal curation tactics, they still seem to rely on journalism and institutions when benchmarking their own opinion. Our results suggest that indeed cultural journalists, as other institutional cultural mediators, do not take central stage in young media users’ decisions on which cultural products to consume. But they have not left the stage either. Rather, cultural journalists act alongside other, non-institutional cultural mediators. While this could be expected based on existing accounts of the more omnivorous landscape in cultural consumption and the more horizontal structure of networked media, what our study unravels are the dynamics that lead media users to turn to one or the other depending on their expectations. Cultural journalists share the stage of cultural information provision with others, but they still play a key role, namely the one of validator.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Journalistic mediator | Non-journalistic mediator |
| Selecting | A) Personal curation as an act of ‘rebellion’  B) Securing their autonomy as a form of identity expression | Seeking similarity in non-journalistic mediators |
| Evaluating | Institutional Trust as benchmark in opinion-forming | Using personal curation to seek opinion confirmation |

**(Discussion and limitations)**

Our study suggests that youngsters still attribute significant credibility to cultural journalists when evaluating their cultural consumption, less so when looking for what to consume. These insights could recalibrate the normative framework in which scholars and journalists alike try to make sense of the role of journalism as a cultural mediator. Maybe cultural journalists and critics should not try to play a crucial role in providing a selection of cultural goods to connect with youngsters, since these young media users prefer to autonomously and individually curate cultural interests as a form of self-expression. Even watching the gates, to paraphrase Axel Bruns (2006), might not be that relevant anymore, as media users prefer to follow like-minded peers or even their own gut feeling.

Leaving media users in charge of their cultural production holds the promise of empowerment and participation. Lamenting the demise of journalists as cultural mediators might come across as cultural pessimism: there is no harm in leaving people to make their own decisions when it comes to cultural participation. Still, when autonomous personal curation becomes an act of ‘rebellion’ against journalistic curation, one could wonder at what point users considering themselves as experts equal to professional journalists goes from being a form of user empowerment to becoming unsubstantiated audacity?

The question is relevant as its ramifications might go beyond the realm of the cultural. As Andrew Breitbart famously summarised the political analysis on which he built his ‘alternative’ news site of the same name, politics is downstream from culture. Navigating the online world with nothing but gut feeling and a set of like-minded peers as guides might end up in dark parts of the web where influencers perpetuate cultural tropes of toxic masculinity, xenophobia and even fascism under the guise of cultural participation. At worst, without broader cultural and historical reference points, consumption of cultural goods like these can lead to tribalism and polarisation before it is weaponized and gets co-opted by political movements. As danah boyd (2017, p. 88) concludes, a “culture of doubt and critique, experience over expertise, and personal responsibility is pushing us further down this path”.

It's hence promising to see our results suggest that young media users still turn to (cultural) journalists precisely in search of this broader validation of their cultural choices. Cultural journalists could double down on that role, by linking youngsters’ own selection of cultural goods to relevant societal topics and raising awareness around societal topics e.g., climate change or feminism. In doing so, journalists could rely on youngsters’ cultural selection (and not the other way around). Cultural journalist then capitalizes on the role as a credible benchmark that they still hold in youngsters’ opinion-forming processes by helping them interpreting the popular music albums, books, or movies they chose to consume based on social media influencers, peers or their own gut feeling.

Building on Verboord (2014)’s notion of cultural mediators, we therefore argue that not only production, mediation and consumption but also the individual counter dynamic of personal media curation is part of the cultural consumption process: Both the quest to cultural information and the confirmation-seeking afterward seems to be part of an individual cultural experience. By adding a qualitative media user perspective to the linear process of cultural production, we show how long-established roles of cultural mediators such as gatekeeping, selecting, and evaluating culture are shifting towards a circular process of cultural ‘tastemaking’ in a social media environment in which everyday cultural media users co-shape the cultural discourse.

Finally, we are aware of the limitations of our study. To apply a qualitative media user perspective, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand youngsters’ media use. However, whereas interviews are solely based on human memory, we argue that individual media use habits (and personal curation tactics in specific) are often too complex to capture in one-hour conversations. We suggest in future research to conduct a combination of digital methods to represent individual media use more accurately and use it as elicitation tools during in-depth interviews to gain a more holistic understanding of these personal curation tactics.

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