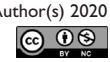
Original Manuscript

new media & society
1–17



DOI: 10.1177/1461444820939458
journals.sagepub.com/home/nms


Liking as taste making: Social media practices as generators of aesthetic valuation and distinction

Johannes Paßmann and Cornelius Schubert
Universität Siegen, Germany

Abstract
Much research has been conducted on how social media platforms are used as outlets of taste expression, displaying cultural preferences acquired outside the platforms. This research largely builds on the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu and his analysis of taste as a medium of social distinction. We propose to shift the emphasis from the study of taste expression to an analysis of taste making on social media. This shift is occasioned by broader cultural transformations since the 1990s as well as developments on social media since the late 2000s. We see that rather than merely performing a taste learned elsewhere, users cooperatively develop sensitivities on social media platforms, constituting practices of joint observation, evaluation, and distinction. We call this the triangle of taste in which subjects, objects, and media mutually co-produce each other.

Keywords
Distinction, memes, praxeology, Reddit, social media, symbolic interactionism, taste, Twitter, valuation

Introduction

Recent studies of social media revolve around issues of taste online (cf. Dhaenens and Burgess, 2019; Literat and Van Den Berg, 2019; Schonig, 2020). We think this is no coincidence and that it points to the importance of taste as a social and aesthetic phenomenon that is central for social media practices in general. We conceive taste making

Corresponding author:
Johannes Paßmann, Seminar für Medienwissenschaft, Universität Siegen, Am Herrengarten 3, 57072 Siegen, Germany.
Email: johannes.passmann@uni-siegen.de

broadly as collective practices of valuation and distinction, in which aesthetic judgments are created, negotiated, and transformed. This leads to specific taste preferences, be it for a certain kind of humor, for a mode of reading news, or for watching videos. Taste, in other words, is something one learns, refines, and transforms online.

One dominant topic in studies of taste online concerns the expression of taste preferences on social media platforms, such as crafting profile pages to present specific "taste statements" (Liu, 2007) or selecting specific news preferences (Lindell, 2018). In these cases, taste is expressed or reinforced online, while it is created elsewhere (cf. Mihelj et al., 2019) or the markers of social distinction are transferred from offline lifeworlds to digital communities (Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). We seek to extend this research in a yet understudied direction. Rather than studying how social facts, such as stratification and inequality, are expressed or reinforced through taste on social media or how taste functions as a mode of distinction and exclusion in online communities, we are interested in the ways that judgments of taste are generated on and with social media platforms.

We consider taste neither as objectively given, nor as purely socially determined but as a temporary result of a shared sensitization for specific, detectable, and nameable differences. This basic principle of sensitization has been described by Becker (1953) in his seminal article *Becoming a Marihuana User*. He differentiates three stages—in his case for a taste for dope:

> (1) learning to smoke the drug in a way which will produce real effects; (2) learning to recognize the effects and connect them with drug use (learning, in other words, to get high); and (3) learning to enjoy the sensations he perceives. (Becker, 1953: 242)

This emphasizes *first*, how the making of taste requires a shift in subjectivity: Users have to learn to detect something previously unfamiliar. *Second*, this co-produces the object as well: The object appears differently for an experienced user and this cannot be reduced to the newly acquired sensitivity. The object's materiality sets conditions for its appreciation without determining it. Whereas the same sensations could not be accomplished just with tobacco, they could neither be accomplished without a learning process. *Third*, this process is more than a dyadic relation between single users and tasty objects: It is also a social process, in which novices observe and imitate connoisseurs, thus producing and reproducing shared practices of enjoyment (Becker, 1953: 237). Following Hennion (2007), we conceive taste making as an ongoing accomplishment and a shared activity: "Tastes are not given or determined, and their objects are not either; one has to make them appear together, through repeated experiments, progressively adjusted" (p. 101). An analysis of *taste making* must, therefore, consider its specific dynamics and conditions: In different situations or historical contexts, with different participants and different media, taste is made differently.

We contend that taste making is an integral part of social media practices: Activities, such as liking, sharing, following, retweeting, tagging, bookmarking, replying, commenting, and last but not least posting and replying on social media are not only ways of taste expression, but always also practices of taste making. Social media users unavoidably participate in the creation of specific modes of shared observations, valuations, and

distinctions. On one hand, just like any other practice of taste making, this is neither fully reducible to the technologies social media offer, nor to given social structures that are expressed on social media platforms. On the other hand, taste making on social media is specific, especially due to their respective functionalities providing specific architectures for taste making. To sketch out these specifics, we first draw on previous work from interactionist and cultural sociology, demonstrating that practices of taste making constitute basic social processes of valuation and distinction that have existed before the popularization of social media platforms. In a second step, we elaborate how taste making online is articulated through specific characteristics of social media that have significantly amplified this basic social process.

Theories of taste: from taste expression to taste making

Taste has long been conceived as a central moment in the creation and reproduction of social order. Whereas Veblen (1994) demonstrated this connection for the "leisure class" in the late 19th-century United States, and Elias (1997) described the proliferation of fine taste historically as a medium of class transformation in European feudalism, it was Bourdieu (1984), who systematized taste as a central instance in the stable reproduction of social differences: "To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods, corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of 'class'" (pp. 1–2). Within fixed societal hierarchies, the hierarchies of taste objects thus figure as given frameworks of orientation, enabling individuals to locate, and express their societal status relative to others; taste expression signifies class position.

Bourdieu's analysis of taste and distinction has since become one of the most-applied concepts for analyzing digital cultures and observing media practices, such as the production and circulation of Internet memes as means of social distinction (Gal et al., 2016; Katz and Shifman, 2017; Literat and Van Den Berg, 2019; Milner, 2016; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Segev et al., 2015; Vickery, 2014). While some studies highlight that existing social stratifications are transferred and sometimes reinforced on social media (Lindell, 2018; Mihelj et al., 2019; Reiss and Tsvetkova, 2019), others point out that novel artifacts of distinction are created through social media platforms (Dhaenens and Burgess, 2019; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017). A third perspective shows that social media users might develop appraisals that differ substantially from given cultural hierarchies (Alexander et al., 2018). All these studies put taste, valuation, and distinction at the center of their analysis. Because Bourdieu described a more or less stable hierarchy of the arts, mirroring societal hierarchies, and materialized in cultural objects found in post-WWII French society, the *making* of these hierarchies and objects within shared practices was not his main concern.

The stable orders of taste studied by Bourdieu have subsequently been criticized within cultural sociology since at least the 1990s. For instance, Peterson (1992) outlined significant changes in cultural consumption, where social hierarchies are less and less produced by a "snobistic" restriction to the objects of "high culture," but rather by the capacity of knowledgeable actors to appreciate and justify a whole range of aesthetic artifacts in an "omnivore" manner. Similarly, Prieur and Savage (2014) have recently

argued that "choices of particular objects" within a given high/low differentiation have become far less important for practices of distinction than "their *mode* of appreciation and consumption" (our emphasis; p. 307). The shifting orders of taste do not entail that taste has lost its value for distinction, rather, they emphasize that processes of *taste making* have gained higher currency than markers of *taste expression* for signaling status positions to others. In line with Peterson and Prieur and Savage, we observe a *historical* shift concerning the importance of taste making for social distinction. However, this also entails an *epistemological* shift: Cultural goods now markedly appear as socially constructed and transformed. This means that taste making involves the production of *objects and subjects* at the same time. As such, it is a fundamental social process and not just the consequence of current consumer and media cultures. The mutual attunement of objects and subjects lies at the core of taste judgments as a form of valuation: Similar to the economic value of commodities discussed by Simmel (1978: 62–72), the aesthetic value of cultural objects does not reside either within objects or subjects, but emerges from an interactive process and stabilizes in shared systems of meaning. Indeed, we can conceive any object humans deal with to be made in social interaction, as Mead (1934) has argued by drawing on the example of food:

> [. . .] the social process in a sense constitutes the objects to which it responds, or to which it is an adjustment. That is to say, objects are constituted in terms of meanings within the social process of experience and behavior through the mutual adjustment to one another [. . .] (p. 77)

Following Mead, Blumer (1969) put forward an approach to taste that emphasizes the mutual adjustment of subjects and objects of taste. In a highly insightful study of the French fashion industry, he pointed out that fashion in current societies should not merely be understood as a way of expressing the need of "class differentiation," but as an emergent "social happening" (Blumer, 1969: 277–278). He argued that "*to be in fashion*" in the women's fashion industry of the 1960s operates in a specific manner: "It is not the prestige of the elite which makes the design fashionable but, instead, it is the suitability or potential fashionableness of the design which allows the prestige of the elite to be attached to it" (Blumer, 1969: 280). Thus, social prestige alone does not sufficiently explain how designs come to be in fashion. In addition, the design objects themselves must be accounted for.

This basic principle of mutual constitution between subjects and objects has recently gained currency—especially since the *practice turn* (Schatzki et al., 2001). From a practice perspective, taste making is especially of interest as it explains the shaping of practices in differentiating *how one does things properly*. It "socially sustains the formation of taste and the sophistication of practices [. . .] negotiating aesthetic criteria that support what constitutes 'a good practice' or 'a sloppy one' and 'a beautiful practice' or 'an ugly one' within a community of practitioners" (Gherardi, 2009: 547).

Such an epistemology of mutual constitution also falls in line with what Bourdieu (1990) formulated as "sense practique" in which he differentiates the *logos* of an ontological given grammar from the collectively performed *praxis* (p. 31): *Praxis* is often unclear, vague, and multiple; valuations and distinctions are not integrated into a permanently fixed system. *Practices* of valuation become shared realities precisely because

they are indeterminate or fuzzy without being arbitrary or random. In the words of Bourdieu (1990): "the procedures of practical logic are rarely entirely coherent and rarely entirely incoherent" (p. 12).

Subsequently, Bourdieu's sense practique does not operate with fixed and passive objects on one hand, and versatile and active subjects on the other. However, we see that in *Distinction*, Bourdieu (1984) emphasized stable orders of taste and modes of taste expression (i.e. the predisposition of "tastes to function as markers of 'class'," p. 2), rather than the processes of taste making, because the former shaped the dispositifs of distinction in post-World War II French society more prominently. What received less attention in *Distinction*, then became more important for studying the modes of distinction described by Peterson, Prieur, and Savage, and others since the 1990s. We follow this line of thinking and argue that the modes of distinction on social media since the late 2000s rely even more on practices of taste making.

Liking as taste making: the anatomy of social happenings

Whereas the shifting orders of taste in modern societies and contemporary theory have led to an increasing academic interest in the practices of taste making, they have yet not been systematically related to the transformative agencies of social media: Studies of social media largely operate in the classic Bourdieusian mode of taste expression, where active subjects use passive objects to display status, transform subjectivity, or group identity. However, it appears that the historical shift cultural sociologists observed since the 1990s does not only take place on social media platforms as well, rather, these platforms markedly amplify the ongoing cultural transformation by materializing and displaying the mutual construction of subject and object, especially in platform units, such as likes or retweets: They are always units *from a specific user* and *for a specific object*—that is itself again tied to a specific user (cf. Paßmann, 2018: 151–182).

On social media, the mutual construction of subject and object becomes unavoidably obvious: Liking a Facebook post alters the meaning of the original post by creating visible popularity or affixing a seal of approval, just as it attributes meaning to the account giving the like and consolidates the practice of liking as a meaningful activity itself. The ramifications are evident: Liking a Facebook post or a tweet does not only attribute meaning to the account giving the like. At the very least, it functions as a paratext to a text, transforming the meaning of the original. Liking, retweeting, following, and so on are always ascription and self-description at the same time. The recent debate on changing the display modes of likes on Instagram puts this delicate process of appreciation into the spotlight as it shows how such platform units have become quite indispensable in social media practices (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013).

Social media highlight that this process happens not only between subjects (persons or groups, e.g.) and objects (posts, references e.g.), but is also fundamentally dependent on media for enabling it in a specific manner. The triadic relations between object, subject, and medium of valuation, however, are not tightly coupled: In many instances, they appear definite and determined, whereas in other cases, "judging an image [. . .] by posting it or 'liking' is not the result of applying a set of finite criteria, but a response to an indeterminate array of feelings and intuitions" (Schonig, 2020: 32). Sometimes,

the platform units function rather as "producers and provocateurs of a productive indeterminacy," where "symbolic indefiniteness turns into a resource for situational definition" (Paßmann, 2018: 148).

Moreover, the platform units themselves are the result of a complex history of valuation and distinction: Twitter's like, for example, started as a bookmarking symbol called "fav" and its meaning progressively changed and shifted on the level of the users as well as the platform (Paßmann, 2018). As the meanings of platform units change and consolidate differently for different persons and communities across time and space, the triadic relations between subject, object, and media are negotiated and transformed and cannot be reduced to either subject, object, or media.

As a result, we advocate an understanding of all elements in the triadic relation that is neither deterministic nor voluntaristic. This goes in line with approaches that have argued for a focus on taste making rather than on taste expression in line with the practice turn. Although likes, for example, are generally vague and open for interpretation, it does make a difference, whether they are symbolized by a heart providing it with an affectionate denotation or by a star in the tradition of bookmarking (and whether they are called "favs" or "likes"), or, most importantly, whether they are prominently displayed or not: Different online cultures can attribute different meanings to a high like count, but as long as a counter is visible, there is little chance of ignoring it. Paraphrasing Blumer: "Structural features", such as likes, "set conditions for their action but do not determine their action" (1962: 189–190).

In this sense, platform units are neither radically open for social construction, nor determining their interpretation, just as taste is neither fully determined by tasted objects, nor by tasting subjects or the media used to negotiate the process. As a result, whereas it appears hard to say generally *how* taste is negotiated on these platforms, it is safe to say *that* it is negotiated. By having to choose which posts to make, which to ignore, and which to appreciate, individual and shared taste making on social media is *practically* inevitable. Still, this basic feature of social media platforms, as Schonig (2020) observes, "[. . .] is rarely discussed in relation to aesthetic evaluation even when the 'like' button quite explicitly uses the language of taste" (p. 27).

What we might call a *triangle of taste* between subjects, objects, and media is, on one hand, in a constant process of mutual adjustment, and, on the other hand, it is based on conditions that lie outside of each individual situation. The triangle provides, first of all, an *analytic heuristic* with which to approach taste making online. To illustrate and elaborate this triadic relationship, we will revisit three recent studies of taste making online. In each of these studies, we can see the triadic relations unfold, yet each study places emphasis on one particular aspect: subjects, objects, and media. This allows us to trace the subjects, objects, and media in processes of taste making online and to follow the relations that unfold between them in each case.

Becoming a meme connoisseur: subjects in the making

Literat and Van Den Berg (2019) note the difference between taste making and taste expression by stating that previous scholarship "has theorized the appraisal of memes for their aesthetic or affective qualities and deployment of cultural capital" (p. 235). They

oppose this bias toward taste expression by analyzing the "vernacular criticism of memes" on Reddit's subreddit *MemeEconomy*. The vernacular criticism happens primarily online, which means that judgments of taste are not simply transferred from offline lifeworlds to Reddit, rather, this particular taste for memes is made on and with the means of Reddit. This does not imply, however, that the reproduction of social status differences is suspended: For arguing whether or not a meme is valuable, for example, the Redditors make use of historical knowledge on details referred to in the meme's caption, which implies a certain degree of education (Literat and Van Den Berg, 2019: 242). And, it also requires a sensitivity for the making of taste on Reddit to use this knowledge meaningfully within the interactions on the platform. What we can see here is neither offline habitus simply transferred to an online realm, nor an independent online habitus suspending the reproduction of class differences. So what can we say about the taste making practices of the MemeEconomy based on Literat and Van Den Berg's work?

MemeEconomy is a forum where users playfully pretend to bet on popularity cycles of memes by mocking stock trade vocabulary. More than 250,000 users try to predict which memes will probably become popular very quickly, which memes will not become extremely popular but will instead remain quite popular for a longer time, and so on. Many participants differentiate themselves into three subgroups: "meme insiders," "newcomers," and "normies." In their valuation practices, they do not only develop a shared vocabulary and a sensitivity for these memes as they "are," but also evaluate new aesthetic categories based on the very process of social distinction. One of these categories is the "normie meme," a meme that is so easily understandable that it is instantly devalued by the group. Another category concerns strategies to "scare off normies": The fact that a meme is not understandable for normies serves as a criterion for valuation.

In other words, MemeEconomy members do not only analyze shared negotiations of value, merely predicting popularity dynamics. They also establish shared categories by which value is detected and produced. They develop a keen sensitivity for the aesthetics of memes, bring them into circulation, and negotiate a vocabulary for bringing the specific aesthetics of a meme to the fore in the first place: In criticizing, they develop a taste for not easily popularizable memes, differentiating memes into their own emic hierarchies of "high" and "low" meme culture. A focus on taste expression would make this development less visible: It would highlight a more or less given order of taste and possibly the reproduction of social differences, rather than the practices on and with Reddit's MemeEconomy create enjoyment from the collective production of those objects.

Of course, this does not suspend social differences or the accumulation of cultural capital outside the forum. It *first* of all demonstrates, how fine distinctions are produced differently in contemporary online cultures. *Second*, the analysis refrains from reducing cultural practice to *one* aspect (the reproduction of social difference): Taste making is, as Gherardi (2009) argued, at the same time an epistemic practice, explaining why certain groups understand certain information in a certain way. *Third*, we see that the pleasure of participation lies not necessarily in a display of high social status, looking down on those lower in cultural hierarchies but also in the practice of shared observation, facilitated by communally created taste, or, in other words, in the mutual production of tasteful objects. Thus, taste making is not only a means to an end for stratification; but also it becomes a meaningful activity in itself.

Literat and Van Den Berg, however, analyze their case differently. They conclude in a classical Bourdieusian sense, rendering the objects of taste as instruments of social distinction: "[. . .] the acquired taste in memes and knowledge in how to argue regarding their value functions as cultural capital in securing one's position within the MemeEconomy community" (p. 244). While they identify manifold instances of controversial online valuation, the objects in circulation are mainly regarded as exchangeable media of distinction, whose value is reduced to the capacity of objects to serve as markers for distinction. Within the triadic relation of subject, object, and medium, their analysis places an emphasis on the creation of knowledgeable subjects and their position in a social hierarchy: normies, newcomers, and insiders.

The emphasis on social factors, however, understates the epistemic qualities of social media themselves. After some years of Twitter usage, for example, one might read the news in a different way, or observe standard situations in a train or the supermarket checkout differently, as one has developed a taste of the "tweetable strangeness" of everyday situations or for the scandalization potential of a certain kind of news (Paßmann, 2018: 48–50).

This is anything but trivial from an epistemological perspective. If we consider taste making more broadly a process of joint observation and valuation, social media, and other communities of taste constitute a "thought collective" (Fleck, 1979: 38–51), that is, a "community of persons mutually exchanging ideas or maintaining intellectual interaction" (p. 39). In a social process, one learns to see the same phenomena, rendering a specific perception and constituting a shared object. This raises the question, in how far social media platforms constitute such practices of joint observation specifically. And it connects this question to the recent discussion of taste as shared epistemic as well as aesthetic practices: "Tastemaking crafts identities and epistemic communities at the same time, and sharing an aesthetics provides the feeling of belonging to a specific community within a community" (Gherardi, 2009: 547). This in turn relates to the issue of "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" in the sense of communities with a preference for a certain style of interpretation or worldview. Even though we cannot follow this line of thought in more detail, it shows how practices of taste making are deeply ingrained in social media phenomena. We would like to follow a different lead here: That social media platforms foster specific amplifications of established taste making practices, rather than "inventing" entirely new practices of taste making.

To map out the continuities and differences of taste making offline and online, we draw a comparison to taste making practices in a different case. As Benzecry (2009) emphasizes in *Becoming a fan*, an ethnographic study of the development of taste for operas in Argentina, the settings in which the enjoyment is learned and the practices by which enjoyment is shared are of pivotal importance. As he demonstrates, seemingly secondary settings, such as discussions in the entrance hall, in the bus from one opera house to another or in opera classes are central to becoming a fan. The settings of the MemeEconomy seem to be equally important: In the latter case, it is not the architecture of an opera house, but the platform Reddit itself. As Miller (2019) pointed out most recently, both, buildings and platforms "[. . .] facilitate specific forms of sociality" (p. 795). In that sense, platforms and opera houses can both be considered as architectures of taste making, but these architectures differ fundamentally.

First, in a subreddit, people can upvote, post images, or write comments. It is—and this appears to be typical for taste making online—a setting where *quantified measures of popularity are ubiquitous*. Whether many upvotes on Reddit are considered measures of success or rather measures of a low-valued "normie meme"—these counts are constantly present as elements of taste making: The popularity of normie memes poses the question why they are so popular. Users can either affirm this or demonstrate indifference toward such measures, whereas the latter functions as a marker of superior taste: "In positioning 'normies' as meme outsiders devaluing their 'stock', members of this subreddit implicitly position themselves as meme connoisseurs and, therefore, culturally superior" (Literat and Van Den Berg, 2019: 244). Here, the measures of popularity figure as far more than *ex posteriori* assessments (e.g. of an opera house justifying public subsidies), but active agents of taste making.

Second, posts always appear as single entities in a pace largely determined by users: Whereas, opera fans described by Benzecry (2009) wait together in the entrance hall, sit in their boxes, or stand in the cheaper floors watching the same performance, social media users are confronted with their objects of taste in a different manner. They can scroll an image away quickly or scrutinize it in deepest details. This *scalability of social and aesthetic pace* is specific for other social media platforms, too: Whereas, on one hand, social media are seen to support superficiality and speed, at the same time, they can develop measures of extreme sophistication, opening the slightest visual detail or the like of a certain user for meticulous interpretation, fostering sociality, and aesthetic experience in a slow-motion, decompositional, and comparative manner (cf. Paßmann, 2018).

Third, not only architecture makes a difference. Whereas, the opera has developed institutionalized standards, categorizing voices, or instrumental performances, social media often have to invent standards in the first place and often they are kept open for constant transformation. The ironic stock market vocabulary of the MemeEconomy provides and stabilizes such standards, for example, in valorizing memes that function as "long term investments." Insofar, as these standards and the tastes resulting from them are produced on and with the platform, social media platforms have an affinity to *emic high/low differences*, producing their own regimes of valuation. The relation to extant forms of cultural capital outside the platform, however, remains unclear: On one hand, it appears safe to say that distinction on the platform is hardly independent from distinction offline (or any other online realm), on the other hand, it is an open question how and where these emic high/low differences transform, substitute, or supersede given forms of cultural capital.

We contend that the practices of taste making on Reddit go in line with the larger transformations that have been described since the 1990s, explaining the destabilization of given standards for distinction: "[. . .] the objectified form of cultural capital has in large part been supplanted by the embodied form" (Holt, 1997: 103). The "contents" taste is "applied to" becomes less important and a sensitivity, independent from given objects becomes more central (Holt, 1997: 104). In this sense, forums such as the MemeEconomy and the centrality of taste making in general cannot be simply reduced to the rise of social media platforms. Rather, social media platforms amplify—and their success has been amplified by—a longer cultural and social transformation, that puts taste making, rather than taste expression at the center.

Post-Bourdieusian studies from Holt, Peterson, or Prieur and Savage, analyze this as a shift in how distinctions are enacted. However, what we can observe is not only a shift toward a "knowing mode of appropriation of culture" and "cosmopolitan taste" (Prieur and Savage, 2014: 316) that is accomplished by distinguishing subjects, but these practices also change their objects. A competent "second order reading" of trash TV (Prieur and Savage, 2014: 308), for example, renders trash TV as something capable of offering a heightened cultural potential. This constructional character of seemingly neutral reading is even more true for the attributions through stock market vocabulary of the MemeEconomy and media practices, such as upvoting or liking. This becomes evident in the valorization regime of yet another meme culture described by Schonig (2020). Especially, he demonstrates that this constructional character of *doing objects* by taste making is not simply a means to an end of distinction, but also central for the aesthetic experience and enjoyability of these practices.

Becoming oddly satisfied: objects in the making

In a recent study on "aesthetic category memes," Schonig (2020) analyzes the development of somewhat "unsettled" objects. Other than the MemeEconomy memes, the process of valuation and distinction is not so much centered around their perceived popularity and definite classification, but rather around the question of their belonging into vague categories, such as "mildly interesting," "oddly satisfying," or "mildly infuriating" that users on Reddit, Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter attribute to images and short videos. Schonig (2020) argues that "the contributors to these categories are devoted to maintaining the absurd specificity of their minute distinctions, demonstrating an extraordinary sensitivity to what makes something 'oddly satisfying' rather than 'mildly interesting' [. . .]" (p. 27). This functions as a shared activity by means of platform units such as upvotes and likes (Schonig, 2020). A sensitivity is thus also developed using platform units: Liking and upvoting essentially participate in the process of making the objects of taste.

Schonig (2020) emphasizes that what makes the production of these memes so relevant is the "reflexive exercise" (p. 27) upon the "nebulous criteria of such strange categories" (p. 28), which does not only generate the pleasure of "[. . .] sharing an obscure way of seeing and judging images with others" (p. 29), but involves a "contemplation of the precise oddness of its satisfaction" (p. 33).

The aesthetic pleasure thus lies not so much in a precise congruence of category and object, but rather in the negotiation of this very relationship. It is the specificity, the vagueness, and indeterminateness that render this contemplation an ongoing exercise, surfacing the act of categorization as a "[. . .] perceptual adventure, that searches not for strange and exotic objects of perception, but strange and exotic *ways* of perceiving familiar and mundane objects in the world" (Schonig, 2020: 36). This means, first, that the pleasure of this practice lies in the improbable, yet realized effect of *joint observation*, rather than differentiating between outsiders and insiders. Second, by categorizing, discussing, liking, or upvoting, mundane objects are transformed into specific, collectively produced objects, precisely because the categories are considerably vague.

For the opera fans described by Benzecry (2009), it is important that experiences can be categorized as *examples of*: The Colón Opera House and other institutions organize lectures, classes, and other "music didactical" events following the operatic season, where members of the interested public may refine their taste together with the help of "maestros," becoming sensitized for voice's registers, style, and peculiarities, such as range (pp. 142–145). The opera fans' taste is also constantly worked upon, but by drawing on relatively stable registers of aesthetic experience. Even after 25 years of opera house experience, opera fans present themselves as apprentices, eager to cultivate their sensitivity (Benzecry, 2009: 138). In both cases, the meme connoisseurs and opera fans develop an epistemic and affective sensitivity that is constantly worked upon. The aesthetic categories in the meme culture described by Schonig, however, are considerably and constitutively more in flux than in the case of the opera fans.

We argue that this is the case because on social media, seemingly stable categories are ubiquitous. Although—or rather, precisely because—objects, subjects, and media are always translated into fixed numbers and units, they are constantly negotiated. In line with Callon's (1998) notion of framing and overflowing, one might say: *Precisely because* social and aesthetic relations appear to be framed so strictly by platform units, they occasion continuous overflowing and negotiation. Translating an (imagined) aesthetic category into calculative categories or a perception into established vocabulary often triggers the negotiation of their value. This has to do with the role that exact numbers play in aesthetic practice: Their fixedness functions not so much as an endpoint of valuation, but rather as a provocation for joint interpretation, rendering the whole enterprise a collective activity, that is, a *practice* of observing together.

This is an important parallel between the MemeEconomy and the "aesthetic category memes" described by Schonig: Both make social and aesthetic categories reflexive and as a result become socially and aesthetically productive. A sensitivity for the mildly interesting, for example, is created in light of the ubiquitous possibility of the intensively interesting (or infuriating) and its categorization. And a sensitivity for the not easily popularizable insider memes is produced in light of ubiquitous, highly popular normie memes. Whereas in a classical Bourdieusian sense, subjects and objects are largely determined by social structures, the meme users make reflexive what they are determined by, and make this part of the aesthetic experience and social distinction. The ubiquitous and countable platform units as well as the vocabulary provide the precondition for this reflexivity: They make evident which memes are most popular and can thus easily raise the question, what determines their popularity. Again, this of course follows from a longer cultural development that has not been caused but is amplified through the popularization of the Internet and its social media platforms.[1]

For Hennion (2007), this is the central difference between a Bourdieusian and a reflexive approach to taste and taste making: Participants "[. . .] do not deny social determinisms, they rather rely on them [. . .] to 'determine' their own tastes" (p. 103). This connection between *reflexive determinisms and taste making* seems especially clear for social media counters: The fact that a Tweet has 10,000 likes, for example, immediately raises the question which "properties" of this object led to this result and how this determination reflects back on oneself. This reflexivity is central for a third social media study

concerned with taste making in a German-speaking Twitter community conducted by Paßmann (2018).

Becoming a Twitter user: media in the making

Learning to become a skilled and successful tweeter entails an affective, perceptual transformation resulting in novel forms of observing one's everyday experiences and becoming sensitive to their "tweetability," and also to learn social skills, such as deciding whom to follow back or whom to support to build a retweet network. From 2011 to 2015, Paßmann participated in the rise and fall of a German-speaking Twitter community that was concerned with producing tweets considered aesthetically valuable: The German "Favstar Sphere," which evolved around the satellite platform *Favstar.fm*. The platform ranked the most faved, retweeted, and liked tweets, according to different metrics and for different languages with vivid English, Spanish, Japanese, and German communities. With Favstar, the users were able to cultivate a distinct Twitter humor.

The related practices were to a large part concerned with what Bourdieu-inspired studies emphasize: Who is part of the "Twitter elite," how can one become a member of the established and esteemed groups, and so on. But what users did most of the time was: (1) Writing, reading and reading again the tweets they wrote, watching them grow popular as they received more and more likes, favs, and retweets, thinking about why one's own tweet became so successful. (2) Reading other people's successful tweets. Thinking about their style. Are they genius? Are they using cheap tricks to get many retweets? (3) Thinking about the meaning of the platform units: Are they meant seriously? Do they imply "real" recognition? Does somebody want to manipulate me by liking everything I write?

On one hand, a specific social order developed on the basis of the Favstar quantifications, which some users took quite seriously. This had to do with the fact that if one wants tweets to go viral, one needs accounts with 10,000 followers more than accounts with 100 followers, which means the value of retweets or likes is frequently bound to their "givers" metrics. On the other hand, this order became reflexive as a cheap determinism: Other users developed a devaluation discourse and ridiculed the so called "Twitter elite," which was allegedly driven merely by high, but meaningless follower and retweet numbers. From that point of view, good tweeters had to be indifferent toward these platform units.

As a result, the units became central media of taste making. Several subpages of Favstar showed the most successful tweets of each account or the most successful accounts (in a board called "popular people"). Favstar established a variety of measures, inviting to develop tastes for both, the style of popular tweets in general and the style of a certain user. In conversations with Paßmann, some users said they were able to differentiate the styles of other users so precisely, that they would immediately "smell" when certain users "stole" a tweet from somebody else.

Here, we can observe again how social media platforms provide very highly developed architectures of taste making that set conditions for their action, but do not determine them. The counters' quantifications were utilized for valuation and devaluation practices, for the observation of regularities and specificities, for the sensitization for

one's own style in relation to other people's styles, or differentiations of recognition and manipulation. Important were not only the platform units' quantities and their comparability, but also their distinctness and scalable pace. The distinctness of platform units, tweets, and accounts motivated to scrutinize all of them, determine and observing oneself being determined by them. All these countable elements were used to develop taste together. Taste for how successful tweets work, for how one's own tweets work and how value and recognition are ascribed—be it due to their aesthetic qualities or rather their social prestige.

In Twitter's Favstar sphere, there were quantified metrics everywhere, but—similar to the meme economy—these metrics where made reflexive in practice. The platform units were not simply the cause of this taste making, but also a tool of refinement. In their everyday practice, in their valuation, their writing, scrutinizing, and liking of tweets, the users created what Hennion (2007) calls "attachments": intimate relations between amateurs and their objects, that mutually produce subjects, objects (and their media). In case of Twitter, you cannot simply find any tweet elegant, funny, witty, or stylish, but you can make yourself sensitive for what an elegant tweet might look like. And you can make yourself sensitive for what *your* elegant tweets might look like. This does not render the triadic relations of subjects, objects, and media obsolete, quite the contrary, it takes their social construction equally seriously as their objective specificities and highlights the *attachments* produced within these relations, as Hennion (2007) underscores: "beautiful things only offer themselves to those who offer themselves to beautiful things" (p. 106).

In case of Twitter, but also of the MemeEconomy and aesthetic category memes, the counters of likes, shares, or upvotes function not only as means to the end of "boundary policing" of what is popular or valuable but as a common ground from where a refined observation becomes a shared activity. This is also the reason why Reddit's MemeEconomy develops its economic vocabulary: They translate their valuations into an *ironic* stock market vocabulary not simply because the "normie" taste can be devalued thereby, but rather because it is precisely this vocabulary that makes the calculated metrics accountable, allowing for a reflection of one's own taste. The "low" and easily popularizable memes function independently from a refined sensitivity, whereas the "high" memes produce a different kind of pleasure, and this pleasure wants to be shared and thus produced as an aesthetic experience in itself.

Conclusion

The main aim of this article was to elaborate a concept of taste making on social media platforms. We argued that platforms are not only instances for expressing taste (of course they are), but also inherently tied in with practices of taste making that unfold within a triadic relation of subjects, objects, and media. Whereas the relations of subjects and objects have been studied in processes of taste making, the role of media and especially of social media have not been addressed in detail. As we have shown, platform units such as likes, shares, retweets, up-, or downvotes do not simply function as formats of taste expression but as transformative means of taste making which are themselves created in the process. This shift from taste expression to taste making is not confined to social

media, rather, we can see this as general changes in cultural modes of valuation and distinction that have been described by cultural sociology since the 1990s. Even though these changes did not originate on social media, they are amplified through the ways that social media specifically afford and even necessitate taste making in two respects.

1. The objects and media of taste online invite and initiate *constant and collective reflections*. The case of dedicated meme forums emphasizes this openness of aesthetic categories and the pleasures of playfully engaging with vague classifications, where the obviousness of platform units is called into question. Liking as taste making thus functions as a twofold process: On one hand, it creates seemingly objective measures of popularity and valuation, on the other hand, it occasions critical appraisals of the like and its significance—on both, an individual and a collective level. These valuations and distinctions are not simply *preformed on* social media platforms, but *performed through* the platform units. As a result, these units function as media of taste-making, fostering shared observation and the constitution of shared objects. This is inscribed into likes, retweets, and so on as units from a specific user for a specific object, which is itself tied to a specific user.
2. Developing a taste for social media objects is largely based on the *scalable paces* of *small-scale scrutiny and large-scale comparisons*. Social media platforms afford to study a post in great detail, often without temporal restrictions, just as they provide a near infinite reservoir of comparative cases. Liking as taste making thus entails an awareness of subtle nuances. The necessary deceleration, decomposition, and comparability are openly observable in case of the meme forums, whereas the individual strategies can be drawn from the Twitter case. The possibility to scrutinize every post, tweet, or image, to observe meticulously which person liked what and who follows whom is an essential part of becoming a competent member through processes of taste making.

Whereas the minute differentiations of the *mildly interesting* or *infuriating* develop a considerable refinement—just like the *MemeEconomy* insiders and parts of the *Favstar Sphere*—these fine modes of social media practices differentiate those users from the ridiculed "Twitter elite," *normies* and other groups taking the platform units at face value or appearing in any other way too unapologetic about their popularity and its measures. In resonance with the broader cultural changes since the 1990s, distinctions on social media do not simply run along differences between popular or high culture but along the question how these very differences are made aesthetically productive through the reflection of possible determinisms. In a milieu where popularity is ubiquitous, popularity may instantaneously neither be affirmed, nor rejected.

Since the reflexive negotiation of platform units and their meanings in processes of online taste making resonates with and enhances the increasing importance of taste making in cultural valuation and distinction per se, social media and society enter into a productive relationship. If the shifting orders of taste are specifically amplified through platform metrics, social media figure as transformative agents in processes of taste making and, therefore, as transformative agents in the basic processes of contemporary valuation and distinction.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD


Johannes Paßmann https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2822-6082

Note

1. This argument goes in line with Whitney Phillips' (2015) troll ethnography *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*: The trolling practices of the early *Anonymous* movement were never a pure Internet phenomenon, as they gained their shape especially by mirroring the sensationalism of Fox News covering their spectacular activities. As a result, the trolling practices functioned as an amplified translation of older TV practices into a new environment. In another media historical strand, Coleman (2012) demonstrates that trolling practices in the 2000s have predecessors in the phreaker culture of the late 1950s. All these seemingly new media practices of digital culture are translations of old media practices into a new media milieu.

References

Alexander VD, Blank G and Hale SA (2018) Digital traces of distinction? Popular orientation and user-engagement with status hierarchies in TripAdvisor reviews of cultural organizations. *New Media & Society* 20(11): 4218–4236.

Becker HS (1953) Becoming a marihuana user. *American Journal of Sociology* 59(3): 235–242.

Benzecry CE (2009) Becoming a fan: on the seductions of opera. *Qualitative Sociology* 32(2): 131–151.

Blumer H (1962) Society as symbolic interaction. In: Rose AM (ed.) *Human Behavior and Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, pp. 179–192.

Blumer H (1969) Fashion: from class differentiation to collective selection. *The Sociological Quarterly* 10(3): 275–291.

Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu P (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Callon M (1998) An essay on framing and overflowing: economic externalities revisited by sociology. *The Sociological Review* 46(1): 244–269.

Coleman EG (2012) Phreaks, hackers and trolls: the politics of transgression and spectacle. In: Mandiberg M (ed.) *The Social Media Reader*. New York: New York University Press, pp. 99–119.

Dhaenens F and Burgess J (2019) "Press play for pride": the cultural logics of LGBTQ-themed playlists on spotify. *New Media & Society* 21(6): 1192–1211.

Elias N (1997) *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen. Erster Band: Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Fleck L (1979) *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Gal N, Shifman L and Kampf Z (2016) "It gets better": internet memes and the construction of collective identity. *New Media & Society* 18(8): 1698–1714.

Gerlitz C and Helmond A (2013) The like economy: social buttons and the data-intensive web. *New Media & Society* 15(8): 1348–1365.

Gherardi S (2009) Practice? It's a matter of taste! *Management Learning* 40(5): 535–550.
Hennion A (2007) Those things that hold us together: taste and sociology. *Cultural Sociology* 1(1): 97–114.
Holt DB (1997) Distinction in America? Recovering Bourdieu's theory of tastes from its critics. *Poetics* 25(2–3): 93–120.
Katz Y and Shifman L (2017) Making sense? The structure and meanings of digital memetic nonsense. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(6): 825–842.
Lindell J (2018) Distinction recapped: digital news repertoires in the class structure. *New Media & Society* 20(8): 3029–3049.
Literat I and Van Den Berg S (2019) Buy memes low, sell memes high: vernacular criticism and collective negotiations of value on Reddit's MemeEconomy. *Information, Communication & Society* 22(2): 232–249.
Liu H (2007) Social network profiles as taste performances. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13(1): 252–275.
Mead GH (1934) *Mind, Self and Society: From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
Mihelj S, Leguina A and Downey J (2019) Culture is digital: cultural participation, diversity and the digital divide. *New Media & Society* 21(7): 1465–1485.
Miller D (2019) Of pubs and platforms. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 25(4): 793–809.
Milner RM (2016) *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Nissenbaum A and Shifman L (2017) Internet memes as contested cultural capital: the case of 4chan's /b/ board. *New Media & Society* 19(4): 483–501.
Paßmann J (2018) *Die soziale Logik des Likes. Eine Twitter-Ethnografie*. Frankfurt; New York: Campus.
Peterson RA (1992) Understanding audience segmentation: from elite and mass to omnivore and univore. *Poetics* 21(4): 243–258.
Phillips W (2015) *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
Prieur A and Savage M (2014) On "knowingness," cosmopolitanism and busyness as emerging forms of cultural capital. In: Coulangeon P and Duval J (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Bourdieu's "Distinction*." London: Routledge, pp. 307–318.
Reiss MV and Tsvetkova M (2019) Perceiving education from Facebook profile pictures. *New Media & Society* 22(3): 550–570.
Schatzki T, Knorr Cetina K and Von Savigny E (eds) (2001) *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge.
Schonig J (2020) "Liking" as creating: on aesthetic category memes. *New Media & Society* 22(1): 26–48.
Segev E, Nissenbaum A, Stolero N, et al. (2015) Families and networks of internet memes: the relationship between cohesiveness, uniqueness, and quiddity concreteness. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 20(4): 417–433.
Simmel G (1978) *The Philosophy of Money*. London: Routledge.
Veblen T (1994) *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Mineola, NY: Dover.
Vickery JR (2014) The curious case of Confession Bear: the reappropriation of online macro-image memes. *Information, Communication & Society* 17(3): 301–325.

Author biographies

Johannes Paßmann is a research associate of the Digital Media and Methods team at Siegen University. He obtained his doctorate in 2016 with a thesis on Twitter in Germany. He was a

research fellow at Locating Media, a postgraduate program funded by the German Research Foundation, worked as a lecturer in the Department of Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University (NL), a visiting researcher at the Nordic Centre for Internet and Society (Oslo, NO), and also as a guest lecturer at the University of Basel (CH). His research focuses primarily on the sociology, history, and aesthetics of social media.

Cornelius Schubert is a senior lecturer on innovation studies at the University of Siegen. He specializes in science and technology studies and qualitative empirical methods. He has conducted research on human–technology interactions in medicine and global innovation networks in the semiconductor industry. He is a principal investigator in the interdisciplinary project "Visually integrated clinical cooperation" at the Collaborative Research Centre "Media of Cooperation" at the University of Siegen.