THE COLLECTIVE INDIVIDUALISM OF YOUTUBE MAKEUP REVIEWS

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Beauty is one of the most popular and lucrative segments on YouTube given its desirability to advertisers and the possibility for creators to launch product lines (Hou, 2019). While social media entertainment takes on local specifications (e.g., Arriagada & Siles, 2023; Bagdogan, 2023; Mohan & Punathambekar, 2019), there have been few direct cross-cultural investigations of such content, leaving the relationship between platform culture and local culture ambiguous. In this study, we thus set out to investigate the cultural repertoires of evaluation in beauty reviews on YouTube across multiple languages, asking: 1) How do YouTube creators communicate the value of products? 2) How do YouTube creators communicate their value as reviewers? And 3) How do these practices vary across languages?

We collected popular makeup reviews using keyword searches with YouTube Data Tools (Rieder, 2015) in five languages: English, German, Italian, Japanese, and Korean. We selected English given its popularity on the platform (McGrady et al., 2023). The remaining languages

are affiliated with geographic regions representing divergent cultures (Hofstede, 2003): Germany and Italy are associated with individualism while Japan and Korea are associated with collectivism. We employed content analysis on the top 20 videos in each language (n=100) to compare the videos' evaluative criteria using a codebook of ten values we adapted from Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006) typology of justifications for a prior study of YouTube reviews (Hallinan, 2023). A multi-national team of native speakers of the study's languages went through each transcript to identify and code moments of evaluation.

Creators across languages employ a shared cultural repertoire to evaluate beauty products, concerned with aesthetics, functionality, pleasure, and, to a lesser extent, distinctiveness, and economy. Basically, makeup products should look beautiful, work well, feel good, stand out, and deliver on their cost, aligning with prior work on English-language reviews (Hallinan, 2023. While beauty creators appeal to a consistent set of values, they rarely elaborate on their meaning. Reviews also overwhelmingly present positive evaluations, identifying the best products in a particular category or for a particular audience (e.g., mature skin). Even videos that promise more critical evaluations, such as the "Full Face Of WORST RATED Makeup Products," distance the creator from negative evaluations by using online rankings and stipulating that any criticism comes from other people's opinions.

The approach to evaluation in YouTube makeup reviews blends elements of collectivist and individualist communication styles. Most creators make indirect recommendations, placing more emphasis on showing rather than telling (Jaakkola, 2022). If a review answers the questions of what a product is and whether is it any good (Blank, 2006), YouTube beauty reviews spend most of their time on the former. Even when they engage with the latter, they emphasize positivity. While not every reviewer uses the language of emotionality, they consistently framed their evaluations as subjective "personal" opinions. Yet makeup reviewers on YouTube also engaged in individualistic approaches to reviewing, using reviews as an opportunity to express their personality and build a distinctive personal brand.

If the platform culture of YouTube is changing the function of reviewing (Hallinan, 2024; Jaakkola, 2022), our research suggests that change may be more pronounced in Western contexts. The precarity of creators on the platform incentivizes risk management strategies (Duffy et al., 2021). As Lawson observes, "influencers are careful, and even if they dislike a product, many will emphasize they love the brand and recommend other products they like in an attempt to maintain that relationship" (2021, p. 604). In so doing, they adopt more collectively-oriented styles of communication that "soften" evaluations. Although further research is necessary to investigate the reach of this practice, our analysis of multi-lingual makeup reviews demonstrates how the homogenization of social media entertainment need not be synonymous with Westernization.

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