How Taste Is Expressed: A Study of Social Media Content Production by Specialty Store Operators

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Abstract. Liking the style of a social media post does not mean understanding the judgments behind it. This study draws on the cultural intermediaries perspective, participant observation, interviews with five specialty store operators, and examples of their content to explore how operators explain taste. Operators use cultural knowledge and practical experience to decide what to show and explain, taking into account how familiar they think users are with the culture. Users' questions prompt them to add information about use or explain why they value particular features, often without changing their preferences. These explanations take time to film and edit and must share resources with everyday store operations. Business needs encourage operators to keep posting but also limit the work they can put into explanations. Cultural standpoints guide what operators explain; business responsibilities and available labour shape how fully and consistently they can explain it.

Keywords: Social media; cultural intermediaries; taste; content production; specialty stores.

1. Introduction

On social media, people share everyday experiences, discuss lifestyles, and recommend those they like. Lifestyle-sharing social media connect consumption with media use, group ties, and everyday aesthetics. Through posts and interactions, users help shape what consumption means.[1] Yet liking a post's style does not necessarily mean understanding the criteria behind its recommendations. To understand how taste is communicated, we need to look at both what producers recommend and how they explain their choices.

This study focuses on specialty store operators who independently run small physical stores and produce social media content. They express cultural interests and aesthetic preferences through the goods they select or make and the way they arrange their stores. Their posts promote goods and services, but they also seek to develop potential customers' interest by explaining the culture behind them. The business value of this work therefore goes beyond follower numbers. Cultural interests and expected business returns encourage operators to keep posting, while content production competes with routine store work for time and money. Their experience offers a way to study how the desire to communicate cultural knowledge meets the practical limits of doing so.

Taste refers to socially and culturally grounded dispositions to appreciate, distinguish, and evaluate, shaped by accumulated knowledge and experience.[2] Cultural intermediaries help shape the meanings and values of goods and lifestyles by selecting, evaluating, and recommending them. They use professional knowledge and personal experience to explain their choices and give others reasons to take their judgments seriously.[3] Specialty store operators do some of this work. Through selection, production, and display, they express preferences; through social media, they explain goods' cultural origins and value. They connect goods with lifestyles and aesthetic ideas, helping to shape their cultural meanings. Users, however, may not know the criteria behind these judgments. Drawing on the cultural intermediaries perspective, this study asks how operators explain taste judgments and how user responses and business conditions affect those explanations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Social Foundations of Taste Judgments

Differences in taste involve both what people prefer and how they judge it. Family, education, and life experience shape the cultures people encounter. Comparison, interaction, and training help them

learn which features to notice and how to evaluate them.[2,4] Cultural intermediaries build knowledge through practice, develop standpoints from which to recommend, and explain why their experience deserves attention.[3] For example, comparing sensory experiences under expert guidance helps people learn methods of evaluation.[4] Young fashion buyers establish their authority through spatial arrangements, explanations of clothing choices, and displays of professional identity. Community interaction allows them to share knowledge and strengthen shared tastes.[5] Knowledge sharing thus helps people learn how to judge, while also supporting recommenders' professional standing and the tastes they share with others.

Recognising a recommender's credentials does not mean understanding a particular recommendation. Studies of cultural intermediaries explain how they seek recognition, [3,5] but knowing how someone establishes professional standing does not tell us how that person arrives at a judgment. Presenting an identity or credentials gives users reasons to trust an operator's expertise. Comparing items and showing how they are used explains why the operator values particular features. The first helps explain why the recommender deserves attention; the second helps explain why the recommended item deserves appreciation. These practices answer different questions. We therefore need to look more closely at how operators use practical knowledge to explain their recommendations and the criteria behind them.

2.2. Expressions of Taste in Social Media Content

Social media expose users to different lifestyles, but wider circulation does not necessarily help them understand why those lifestyles are valued. Lifestyle-sharing social media combine aesthetic display with exchanges of experience, giving producers ways to explain lifestyles' cultural meanings.[1] Commercial competition on platforms and the immediacy of digitally mediated experience may also strengthen taste distinctions and leave less room to negotiate them. [6,7] To understand these difficulties, we need to look at the details producers choose to show. What attracts attention may not be what helps users understand a recommendation. A distinctive style can even make an item's features, and the reasons for valuing them, harder to see. Studying cultural expression alone therefore cannot tell us which evaluative criteria users can understand.

Producers also need to consider the circumstances in which people encounter content online. Research on mobile communication uses context to describe spatial surroundings, users' states, everyday habits, and social atmospheres, and argues that content formats should fit these circumstances.[8] In person, an instructor can refer to what participants are sensing at that moment and explain which differences to notice and compare.[4] The explanation can be connected directly to what participants taste, touch, or try. Online, users may be unable to have these experiences while viewing the content. Producers therefore need to combine visual detail with words that explain procedures and sensations that images alone cannot convey.

Filming and editing affect how this practical experience is presented. Aesthetic labour refers to work in which workers shape and uses their bodily capacities and sensory expression to meet commercial aesthetic requirements. Digital media allow producers to alter bodily performance through editing and reuse the resulting content.[9] Operators use framing, changes in movement, and editing to decide which parts of a practical process viewers can see. These decisions affect both how the content looks and which details are available to support an explanation. To understand how style and explanation work together, we therefore need to consider users' cultural experience, what they can perceive online, and the labour needed to produce the content.

2.3. User Responses and Content Adjustments

Producers use feedback to revise later posts, but what they change depends on how they read that feedback. Research on the platformization of cultural production describes how producers revise and repackage content in response to datafied feedback.[10] They may also copy popular topics and formats to gain attention and recognition.[1] Cultural intermediaries use market data selectively: it can prompt changes to recommendations or support aesthetic choices they have already made.[3]

Exchanges between buyers and core customers can also strengthen shared tastes.[5] These studies raise a further question: how do producers decide what a user's comment is about and whether it calls for a change?

Feedback may lead operators to reconsider a cultural judgment or to explain the same judgment differently. Reassessing a cultural feature can change the basis of a recommendation and what the operator considers worth appreciating. Explaining an existing judgment more fully can instead help users understand the operator's established preferences. To distinguish these responses, we need to trace what users asked, how operators understood their questions, and what operators changed in later posts. This also means identifying which questions led to additional explanations and what filming or editing those explanations required. This study therefore asks how operators explain taste judgments, respond to questions, and continue this work with limited time and budgets.

3. Research Methods and Research Questions

The study asks three questions:

RQ1: What taste judgments do operators express in their content, and how do these judgments relate to their cultural knowledge and practical experience?

RQ2: How do operators combine style with explanations of cultural knowledge, taking into account how familiar they think users are with the culture?

RQ3: How do operators interpret user responses, and how do these interpretations shape later content?

I used participant observation to understand operators' actions and circumstances by taking part in their activities.[11] In April 2024, I opened a community specialty store of approximately six square metres, specialising in light Japanese-style desserts. The store was on a popular street in an area of Guiyang, Guizhou Province, where specialty stores cluster. Over the following ten months, I spent six months taking part daily in all aspects of the store's online and offline operations, planning, and promotion, followed by four months of involvement in online promotional planning. I repeatedly discussed store operations, online promotion, user retention, and self-image management with nearby operators. I also took part in content preparation, filming, and publication scheduling.

I also conducted semi-structured interviews with five operators, using prepared topics and follow-up questions based on their responses.[11] We discussed why they opened their stores, how they promoted them online, the image and performance they wanted to present on camera, and how they understood positive and negative platform reviews and their effects. Each interview lasted 30–50 minutes, was audio-recorded in full, and was transcribed for analysis. The participants are identified anonymously as S1–S5. They operated, respectively, a vintage clothing and tattoo store, a coffee shop, an American-style burger restaurant, a tea beverage store specialising in local products, and a second-hand furniture and homeware store. Details in quotations that could identify participants were generalised to protect their anonymity.

The analysis brought together interviews, descriptions of content examples, and participant observation materials to study how operators expressed taste judgments. It focused on social media posts containing images and text, as well as videos. E-commerce pages provided related material on explanations added in later communication with users. Feedback came from comments, private messages, and offline exchanges, with offline exchanges making up the largest share. The materials served different purposes in the analysis. Interviews and content examples helped me identify what operators valued, the reasons they gave for their judgments, and how they explained those reasons to users. Observation materials helped me trace how people adjusted movements and scene arrangements during filming, and how operators divided their resources between content production and other work.

I analysed each case and compared cases.[11] For each case, I first identified the cultural features operators chose to show and the reasons they gave for valuing them. I then studied how the style of a post worked alongside explanations of cultural knowledge, before tracing changes made after user

feedback. The comparisons focused on two situations. In the first, users liked a post's style but still had questions about an item's features or how it could be used. In the second, operators changed what they explained or how they explained it while continuing to express their original cultural preferences.

4. Findings

4.1. Content Selection Informed by Knowledge and Experience

Operators' cultural judgments guide what they show and how they explain it. They select details they value in everyday practice, then use their knowledge and experience to explain why those details matter. S1 linked wear in vintage clothing to cultural provenance and rarity. S5 used old objects to express a preference for natural materials and for keeping things in use over the long term. Both kept visible signs of use but gave users different reasons to appreciate them. The same material feature can thus support different cultural judgments. These judgments also guide what operators retain when trying a new format. S4 presented local specialty products in fashion-style posters but stressed, “We can’t photograph it so that it becomes something completely unrecognisable. It is an agricultural product, after all” (S4). Content about the products' place of origin also showed producers and their labour. S4 made the products visually appealing while keeping their connection to ingredients and local life visible, using that connection to explain their cultural value.

Explaining a taste judgment can also teach users how to make one. Showing recommended items tells users what an operator likes; comparisons and practical demonstrations explain which differences to notice and why they matter. S2 put it this way: “Just talking about origin isn’t really much use. What matters more is explaining how the coffee beans were grown and how we make our selections” (S2). S2's comparison videos combined brewing demonstrations with explanations of flavour differences, connecting information about origin with practical experience. S1 explained how to identify a vintage garment's period and judge its condition, using concrete details to show how the judgment was made. Cultural intermediaries help construct cultural value through selection and evaluation. [3,5] Here, operators did so by choosing which differences deserved comparison and explaining how to understand them. Teaching a method of evaluation also meant recommending the cultural values behind it.

4.2. Combining Content Style with Explanations of Cultural Knowledge

Operators consider both whom they hope to connect with through their content and what those users still need to know. S1 explained, “People who like it will understand. If they don’t like it, that’s fine. We need to show the stuff to people who can appreciate it” (S1). S1's distinctive style was intended to reach users who could appreciate the clothing's cultural features. Operators expected clothing combinations and scene arrangements to signal shared tastes to users familiar with the culture. Less familiar users needed explanations of why those features deserved attention. S1 combined clothing combinations with guidance on identifying historical periods in a single image-and-text post and answered questions about period and design features. Style and explanation thus appeared together in the same content. The purpose of additional information varied. S5 showed dimensions and demonstrated sitting on and leaning against furniture so users could judge how it would work for them. S1's explanations of period and design addressed why vintage clothing deserved appreciation. Both gave users information on which to base a judgment, but S1 also explained the cultural reasons for valuing the item's features.

Knowing a culture does not remove the limits of viewing it online. Even users who already know what to look for may be unable to taste, touch, or try the items on screen. S2's coffee comparison videos and S3's videos of American-style burger preparation combined demonstrations with commentary. Images showed the steps in preparation, while commentary explained flavour differences and how the process produced them. Operators therefore faced two related questions. What did users already know, and which reasons behind a judgment still needed explanation? What could users perceive through the screen, and how could an experience be presented to someone who

could not take part in it directly? Operators' views of users' cultural familiarity guided the first decision. The conditions of online viewing guided how they turned practical experience into a demonstration.

Making these demonstrations requires filming and editing that keep the steps clear and the movements natural. In everyday work, people organise their movements around completing a task. On camera, they must also make the steps relevant to an explanation visible to users. The practical process therefore has to be arranged for viewing as well as for doing. S2 noted, “The way a person comes across really matters. If the movements are too deliberate, the footage looks like an advertisement straight away” (S2). During filming, I observed people reshooting movements that did not flow and using post-production editing to connect shots. They organised filming and editing around the sequence of the explanation, while referring to ordinary working behaviour to judge whether movements looked natural. This is aesthetic labour: bodily performance and its presentation are adjusted for the content.[9] What looks like an ordinary working moment on screen is supported by these production decisions. Adding cultural explanations also means more work to organise movements, adjust the framing, and join shots into a clear sequence.

4.3. Content Adjustments and the Continued Expression of Cultural Preferences

Operators bring together questions from several channels to decide whether their content explains enough. Everyday exchanges in the store can become material for later online posts, extending the conversation beyond the original encounter. Platform comments were relatively sparse during this fieldwork. Most feedback came from offline exchanges, supplemented by private messages and e-commerce reviews. S2 said, “We look at Xiaohongshu comments, feedback from customers in the store, and Taobao reviews together” (S2), and added explanations in response to questions about coffee selection and brewing methods. S5 filmed further demonstrations after users asked about dimensions and what items were like to use. Performance metrics and specific questions supplied different kinds of information. Metrics showed which posts attracted attention, while questions about selection, preparation, or use helped operators identify what the posts had left unclear. Questions raised in everyday offline exchanges thus helped operators decide what to explain in later online content.

Operators use their cultural standpoints to decide which explanations need to change, and which features are worth retaining. S1 wanted to reach users who appreciated the culture and used a distinctive style to express endorsed values and maintain those connections. This commitment also shaped how S1 understood questions from users. Questions about an item's features or use could prompt a review of the explanation without changing the underlying cultural judgment. Reflecting on elaborate styling, S1 said, “The photos looked cool. But the clothes got lost” (S1). S1 then added simpler clothing combinations. S5 filmed further demonstrations of use within the existing home setting. Both changed how they presented or explained items while keeping their preferences, but for different reasons: simpler combinations made the clothes easier to see, while demonstrations helped users decide whether furniture suited them. S1's explanations of period and design, discussed above, answered another question: why was the vintage clothing worth appreciating? These changes should not be treated as interchangeable. Making an item visible, explaining its use, and explaining its cultural value meet different needs. Through such adjustments, operators can answer questions while continuing to explain and recommend the qualities they value.

4.4. Business Responsibilities and Resources for Content Production

Additional explanations take time to film and edit, and operators must fit this work around new stock, events, and routine store tasks. S1 recalled, “We used to make complete content for every item. It was too slow. We couldn’t even post many sets in a week, and new stock was piling up without many people knowing about it” (S1). S1 then reserved fuller clothing presentations and cultural explanations for themes with distinctive cultural features. S4 said that, for posters, “shooting a set of content costs quite a bit” (S4), and reduced the frequency of updates while using each set for longer:

“We no longer replace the posters with a new set every week. We might make a set once a quarter but keep using it” (S4). These changes addressed different costs. S1 narrowed the range of themes receiving full explanations; S4 updated visual content less often. While participating in store operations, I also observed operators prioritising posts about new stock and events with fixed deadlines. Some content intended to build attention over time was postponed. Cultural explanation, visual production, and store promotion all draw on the same time and budgets. Operators therefore balance how fully they explain an item against other work that needs to be finished. Valuing a culture and wanting to explain it does not guarantee that the explanation will be completed. Available production resources also determine which knowledge operators can explain and in how much detail.

5. Discussion

5.1. Cultural Explanation and Professional Judgment

Operators teach methods of evaluation while expressing their own standpoints through the objects and comparisons they choose. Research on cultural intermediaries links knowledge exchange with professional standing and describes how recommenders shape cultural value. [3,5] The cases here show how this happens in the details of content production. Operators select features, compare items, and demonstrate processes to explain how they reached a judgment. At the same time, they decide which differences deserve comparison and which practical experiences users need to know about. Users gain access to reasons for recommendations, while operators show their ability to distinguish and evaluate. Making a judgment's basis public does not remove the choices behind it: the explanation still depends on which criteria the operator considers worth using. To understand this work, we need to study both the methods of evaluation operators share and the cultural standpoints those methods express.

Responding to questions or changing a format does not necessarily mean changing a cultural standpoint. Research on the platformization of cultural production links feedback to content revision,[10] while studies of cultural intermediaries show how recommenders use external evaluations selectively. [3,5] The distinction here is between changing how a judgment is explained and changing the judgment itself. Information about use can make an explanation more helpful while leaving its style intact. Explaining why a feature is valued can make an existing cultural preference more explicit. A change in format alone is therefore not enough to show that an operator is catering to users. Users' questions help identify what needs explanation; operators' cultural commitments guide what they continue to recommend.

5.2. Operators’ Dual Roles and the Conditions of Cultural Explanation

Operators take part in cultural practices and produce content about them. Selecting, making, and using goods gives them experience to draw on when judging those goods. Exchanges with users help them see what needs explanation. Existing goods and services provide material for posts, and expected business returns encourage continued updates. Yet filming and editing compete with store operations for time and money, and promotional deadlines affect whether explanations get finished. Running a store thus gives operators reasons and resources for cultural explanation, while also limiting when and how they can do it.

The benefits and work of cultural explanation are shared unevenly. Operators show their professional judgment and maintain cultural connections; users gain access to reasons for recommendations and ways to evaluate goods. The aesthetic labour of filming, editing, and demonstrations [9] falls mainly on operators and other content producers. Shorter explanations or delayed posts reduce production pressure but also leave users with less material on which to base a judgment. Those already familiar with the culture may recognise shared tastes through style. Others may need the criteria explained. Decisions about production resources therefore affect what users with different backgrounds have the opportunity to understand. A commitment to cultural values cannot replace the work needed to explain them.

Cultural standpoints guide what operators explain, while business responsibilities and production resources affect how fully and regularly, they explain it. User responses point to gaps without necessarily changing operators' preferences. Operators fit this work around store tasks by limiting which themes receive complex treatment, reusing content for longer, and adjusting publication schedules. These cases connect cultural intermediaries' values with the everyday conditions of production. Exchanges with users can lead operators to explain their professional judgments more fully, but continuing that work depends on the labour available.

6. Summary and Conclusion

The study finds that specialty store operators draw on cultural knowledge and practical experience to choose what to post. They express their preferences through style and explain the reasons behind taste judgments through demonstrations and commentary. When users ask questions, operators interpret them through their own cultural standpoints and decide what further explanation is needed. They may add information about how an item is used or explain why they value its cultural features. How they explain a judgment can change while their original preferences remain. Additional explanations require further work on filming and editing. Operators have to decide how much time and funding they can devote to that work while keeping up with everyday store tasks. Limited production resources also affect how much of the explanation can be completed.

In everyday business operations, operators gain practical knowledge from selecting, making, and using goods, learn what users need explained through direct contact, and find reasons to keep posting. Store operations also compete with explanatory work for time and funding. Understanding operators as cultural intermediaries therefore requires attention to both what they value and the conditions under which they produce content. These jointly shape which cultural knowledge they can continue to explain and in how much detail. Future research could include user interviews to study how people with different cultural experiences understand, compare, or question these explanations.

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