


## Cultural Critique and Authority in the Digital Media Era: A Rhetorical Analysis of Instagram Vernacular Film Reviewers

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Article Info	Abstract
<p>Original Article</p> <p>Main Object: Humanities &amp; Social Sciences, Media</p> <p>Received: 28 November 2024 Revised: 21 December 2024 Accepted: 27 December 2024 Published online: 01 January 2025</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> critical authority, cultural criticism, Instagram, rhetorical analysis, vernacular reviewers.</p>	<p><b>Background:</b> The emergence of amateur critics and vernacular reviewers as non-institutional cultural voices is one of the consequences of social media's development and widespread use.</p> <p><b>Aims:</b> This study aims to better understand reviewers and their types by examining how they establish critical authority in comparison to institutional critics and their potential influence on cultural valuation.</p> <p><b>Methodology:</b> This subject is explored through the rhetorical analysis of their linguistic strategies. The research draws theoretically on existing literature regarding cultural criticism and review in social media. Methodologically, it combines qualitative content analysis and rhetorical analysis, emphasizing identifying Aristotelian persuasive elements within the data, including ethos, pathos, and logos. The study sample consists of 350 Instagram posts gathered from 30 film review pages.</p> <p><b>Findings:</b> The findings indicate that most reviewers adopt a consumer-oriented perspective, distancing themselves from institutional critics. They have also emphasized using Instagram's affordances, particularly its interactive and participatory features, to construct their cultural authority. Furthermore, they have employed rational and emotional appeals in alignment with presenting "summaries and supplementary movie information" and expressing "emotional appeal and affective experience of consumption". These strategies, along with the reviewers' focus on "addressing the audience's emotional needs", "personal growth and self-improvement", and "less dependence on institutional critics", reflect their disinterest in delving into deeper levels of critical evaluation and rhetorical directness in constructing their authority. In the final section of the article, the impact of reviewers on cultural valuation is further discussed, distinguishing three types: "film-style bloggers", "cinema influencers", and "critical reviewers".</p> <p><b>Conclusions:</b> Based on the results, the first two types of reviewers demonstrate how Instagram's platform-specific features primarily shape critical authority. While diverse reviewers enhance access to information, they often marginalize critical evaluation and cultural value in favor of consumerism and commercial competition. Only "Critical Reviewers" have successfully integrated critical evaluation with Instagram's affordances through distinct rhetorical strategies, emphasizing the need to increase their numbers in the era of digital media.</p>

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## 1. Introduction

The advent of social media has significantly enhanced users' ability and capacity to produce and distribute cultural and media content. Emphasizing that traditional media audiences are no longer "passive" recipients of content but have become active agents or that the boundaries between media producers and consumers are dissolving aligns with these new conditions (e.g., Jenkins, 2006: 246). One notable result of this participatory turn, which has garnered attention in recent years, is the emergence of non-institutional cultural voices in cultural critique and the involvement of ordinary social media users in evaluating cultural products. In other words, the development of digital platforms has elevated diverse voices to positions of authority and visibility in the critique of media content in recent years (Kristensen et al., 2021: 1).

Emerging criticism and review now float in the context of word-of-mouth and oral culture, in which the gaps between a simple one-sentence phrase or commentary, an entertaining image or video, and a longer textual review are increasingly blurred in terms of their value (Marshall, 2021: 132). This shift broadens the conceptual boundaries of criticism, reshapes cultural valuation, and emphasizes the need to explore the various ways in which cultural products are introduced, evaluated, and judged.

The rise of non-institutional cultural criticism has consequently raised numerous questions and generated various related concepts and theoretical approaches (Verboord, 2014). Researchers in this field have sought to address questions such as: What characteristics do non-institutional critics possess? What impact do they have on institutional cultural criticism? How do they establish their critical authority? In what ways do they influence the cultural valuation and consumption of media products? Additionally, how do the features and values of social media platforms shape their reviews? (e.g., Kristensen & From, 2015; Verboord, 2014; Jaakkola, 2019; Hallinan, 2023; Koreman et al., 2024).

In their most non-institutionalized form, cultural critics are often referred to in the literature as vernacular reviewers (Jaakkola, 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022) or everyday amateur experts (Kristensen & From, 2015). "User-generated evaluations" are usually produced by non-experts who do not have professional or organizational affiliations and have challenged the balance of power between cultural elites and audiences in evaluating cultural content with a bottom-up approach (Verboord, 2014; Kristensen & From, 2015). This heterogeneous group gains critical authority through emotional and experience-based responses to cultural products and attempts to create their numerical persona in the algorithmic space of social networks (Kristensen et al., 2021: 2; Marshall, 2021: 115). While some have seen these developments in cultural criticism as the death of the true critic, a catalyst for consumerism, and a cause for concern (e.g., Gillespie,

2012), others considered them as examples of the ongoing uncertainty in cultural criticism and have highlighted their innovative and democratic potential (Kristensen et al., 2021: 3).

Building on previous efforts, this article will provide a more detailed understanding of these emerging critics and their potential impact on cultural consumption and valuation. For this purpose, the main focus is understanding how reviewers construct critical authority compared to institutional critics through linguistic strategies and identifying their similarities and distinctions. This is because, in addition to the reviewer's expertise, the linguistic aspect of the review is also considered an essential variable in the effectiveness of online reviews (de Jong & Burgers, 2013). This issue has been pursued theoretically by drawing on the existing literature on cultural criticism and review in social media (e.g., Jaakkola, 2021; Verboord, 2014; Kristensen et al., 2021; Marshall, 2021) and methodologically by combining qualitative content analysis methods and rhetorical analysis, specifically by applying Aristotle's persuasive tools, namely logos, ethos, and pathos, to data extracted from film review pages in Instagram.

## 2. Discussion

### 2.1. Cultural criticism and review on social media

Cultural criticism encompasses two main concepts: criticism and culture, both of which can be challenging to define. However, in cultural criticism, culture is understood as one of the three levels of Raymond Williams' definition of culture, including (1) intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic movements that originated in the eighteenth century; (2) the specific lifestyle of a group; and (3) artistic activities and productions (Kristensen et al., 2021: 4). In this study, the third meaning is intended. Thus, culture includes music, literature, painting, film, and other forms of artistic expression; of course, in the case of cultural criticism on social networks, this definition is expanded to include all cultural and artistic content produced for public sharing (Kristensen et al., 2021: 4).

Criticism, the other key concept in this phrase, is characterized by its broad analytical and interpretive approach to cultural phenomena, encompassing the analysis of social and political issues (Kristensen et al., 2021: 5). It is conducted by a third party, distinct from the consumer or producer of the object. Essentially, criticism is not primarily about warning consumers or audiences regarding the quality of a product. Instead, it focuses on using specific vocabulary or developing grammar and terminology to help the audience perceive the subject in a new way, contextualize it within a larger historical framework, and understand its relationship to the social context (Gillespie, 2012).

Orlik (2016: 26-34) outlines five key roles for the critic: acting as a bridge between the creator and the audience, opening new paths in understanding and assigning meaning to the work, influencing the

audience's practices and preferences, protecting the audience, and engaging their attention through entertainment. Media critics, as intermediaries between supply and demand, play a crucial role in legitimizing cultural products, a process that has apparent symbolic, economic, and political aspects (Debenedetti, 2006).

The rise of social networks has led to the differentiation of this concept into various types. Alongside criticism, the literature identifies at least two related concepts: feedback (comments) and review. Feedback is how consumers share their opinions about a(n) art/ artifact/ product with its producer (Gillespie, 2012). While criticism and review are often used interchangeably and share the goal of evaluating products, services, and cultural trends (From, 2019), they are distinct concepts. These distinctions are based on varying types of authority and expertise. They are also shaped by different historical contexts, genres, media platforms, and organizational settings (Kristensen et al., 2021: 4). Reviews are, in fact, general summaries and evaluations that help readers select, understand, and praise cultural products or performances. They answer two questions: what an artistic product is and how good it is (Blank, 2007: 7).

The literature has described the rise of non-institutional critics or reviewers using various terms, including "amateur reviewers" (Steiner, 2010), "private critics" (Steiner, 2008), "everyday amateur experts" (Kammer, 2015; Kristensen & From, 2015), "fan-critics" (Jenkins, 2012: 86-119), "professional vernacular" and "amateur vernacular" (Jaakkola, 2018; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022). To more precisely understand the characteristics of review as a non-institutional cultural practice that relies on ordinary citizens and to clarify its distinctions from institutional criticism, some researchers have proposed a continuum (e.g., Verboord, 2010; Jaakkola, 2022; Kristensen & From, 2015).

In illustrating the continuum discussed above and introducing the concept of "heterogeneous cultural criticism", Kristensen and From (2015) have depicted the diversity of actors involved in cultural criticism in the contemporary context. They have categorized cultural critics in the digital media age into four groups: intellectual cultural critics, professional cultural journalists, media-made arbiters of taste, and everyday amateur experts. These groups are distinguished by their connections to established media organizations, evaluation methods and formal knowledge, and their respective arenas of critical authority and legitimacy (Kammer, 2015; Kristensen & From, 2015).

The fourth category in this typology is more closely related to the digital turn and its impact on contemporary cultural criticism. Everyday amateur expert is a cultural critic characterized by a lack of legitimacy and institutional authority due to their affiliation with a media organization. Their evaluations are based on subjective opinions and user experiences. The reliance of this criticism on personal experience

does not contradict the evaluator's profound engagement with criticism and the effort to construct and maintain their public persona. Another characteristic of this type of critic is the limited financial gain and sometimes the predominance of the recreational aspect of their work (Kammer, 2015; Verboord, 2014). Everyday amateur experts may also emulate some of the characteristics of the media-made arbiters of taste, having acquired their critical authority through practical experience of cultural production and repeated media performance, and operate somewhere between the lines of financial/free, professional/amateur, and authorized/informal (Kristensen & From, 2015). Thus, it can be said that the amateur is an inevitable figure in contemporary cultural criticism in the media, especially media platforms, which have challenged the work between professionals and ordinary people (Kammer, 2015).

Jaakkola (2018), with a greater emphasis on institutional and non-institutional concepts rather than professional and amateur, prefers "vernacular" to amateur and has used this concept in drawing his continuum. Therefore, by emphasizing varying degrees of institutionalization, he categorizes four types of reviewers, including (1) institutionalized professional reviewers, (2) institutionalized amateur reviewers, (3) vernacular professional reviewers, and (4) vernacular amateur reviewers. As is apparent, vernacular reviewers are divided into two types: vernacular professionals (VP) and vernacular amateurs (VA) (Jaakkola, 2022: 126):

- What makes vernacular reviewers "professional", even if they do not call themselves "professional", is their relatively serious intention for autonomy or integrity in production, giving users a more intermediary position in the cultural production chain. VPs are self-made critics who establish their identity by regularly reviewing a specific cultural domain and identifying themselves as reviewers. Their acceptance, approval, or rejection depends largely on audience perception and engagement. VPs must employ sophisticated audience interaction and dialogue strategies to gain credibility and sustain their role (Jaakkola, 2022: 136-137).
- Unlike professional vernacular reviewers, amateur vernacular reviewers do not pursue critical autonomy. Their attitudes toward professional enforcement range from being entirely ignorant to conscious anti-professionalism. Instead, many of the most successful vernacular amateur reviewers—in terms of their audience size and financial success—base their operating principles on commercial partnerships with mainstream or industrial producers of the products and services they review. The context of the VA reviewer is mundane, placing the reception of a cultural product within the everyday settings of consumption (Jaakkola, 2022: 143–144).

Vernacular reviewing constitutes a subtype of user-generated content, often referred to as “cultural produsage” (Bruns, 2008, 2016) or “prosumption” (Toffler, 1980), as noted by Jaakkola (2021: 188). This approach emphasizes collaboration and deep engagement with digital industries rather than traditional critical theories (Jaakkola, 2021: 188). According to Kammer (2015), this type of cultural criticism reflects the power of consumers in evaluating cultural products and content and the openness of post-industrial cultural criticism to public participation (Jaakkola, 2019).

The definition of vernacular reviewers is closely linked to “vernacular creativity” and “platform vernacular”. The strategies that vernacular reviewers develop by simultaneously applying and modifying institutionalized review strategies align with Burgess’s definition of “vernacular creativity”. Burgess (2006: 205-206) defines creativity as the process by which existing cultural resources are combined in new ways so that they are both recognizable for their familiar elements and produce emotional impact through the innovative process of this recombination. Vernacular, in this context, refers to a particular form of “speech, thought, or expression, usually applied to the ‘native’ speech of a populace as against the official language [...] but is now used to identify ‘everyday’ language from institutional or official modes of expression”. Burgess (2006: 206) effectively utilizes the term “Vernacular creativity” to describe consumer practices and knowledge related to older popular traditions and communication methods.

As Gibbs et al. (2015: 257) argue, each social media platform has a unique combination of styles, grammar, and logic that constitutes a “platform vernacular” or a popular communication genre. These communication genres emerge from the affordances of specific social media platforms and how users appropriate and perform them in practice.

Social media and its algorithmic structure have not only given rise to new types of non-institutional cultural critics but have also affected the acquisition of critical authority in an unprecedented way (Koreman et al., 2024). According to Marshall (2021: 114-115), critics must consciously negotiate between two strategic personas to gain authority. First, reviewers invest considerable effort in building their personas for their audiences, understanding that their identity is intricately linked to their followers’ choice of online personas within this complex world of shared curation. Second, these reviewers are acutely aware of their transformation into a numerically aggregated, data-fied, and ultimately algorithmic persona. They recognize how this algorithmic construction and online identity aggregation can alter the reviewer and the reviewed.

As Jaakkola (2022: 132) argues, studying the dual persona of online critics and reviewers helps understand the instability of values in contemporary culture and elucidates how these values are recalibrated for often conflicting purposes. These values are actively constructed by individuals and ultimately intersect with the algorithmic formation of a

successful online persona. This process highlights that constructing critical authority and personas in the new media space has significant implications for shaping cultural values.

### 3. Method and Sample

This study utilizes qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015) and rhetorical analysis to examine the language strategies employed by vernacular reviewers, highlighting their similarities and differences. Qualitative content analysis, also referred to as latent content analysis, is a method used for data reduction and making sense of it (Ameli, 2013: 155). The key characteristics of this method include an emphasis on the communicative context of the text, adherence to a systematic procedure, the development of categories and themes, and the flexibility and adaptability of the process based on the research topic and questions. It also relies on established theoretical foundations (ibid: 369-372). In this approach, categories and themes are derived both inductively (through open coding and data summarization) and deductively (based on predefined research questions and theoretical frameworks) (ibid: 374-376). This study adopts a combined approach to systematically identify and categorize data using both inductive and deductive category extraction.

Traditional rhetoric studies how individuals utilize argumentation and language (both written and spoken) to persuade or engage their audience's attention (Pang & Law, 2017). In the rhetorical approach, communication is seen as a tool for achieving people's strategic goals, as individual agency and normative goals are key issues in this process (Bekerman, 2009, as cited in Zhang & Ding, 2014). Selzer (2004: 281 as cited in Zhang & Ding, 2014) emphasizes that the goal of rhetorical analysis is to critically evaluate how symbols shape various dimensions of reality and influence people's understanding of values, beliefs, and attitudes. Therefore, rhetorical analysis is an effective way to examine how reviewers use linguistic tools to construct their online critical persona, which, as mentioned, relies heavily on other users' involvement and conviction.

Although the expansion of digital media and virtual spaces has led to theorization "digital rhetoric" (Lanham, 1993) or "networked rhetoric" (Aczél, 2016), this research—similar to many related studies (e.g., van Belle et al., 2013; Ge & Gretzel, 2018; Chen et al., 2021; Panigyrakis et al., 2019)—focuses specifically on the application of rhetorical strategies in the production and analysis of digital texts. This focus aligns with one of the four domains of digital rhetoric proposed by Zappen (2005) (Eyman, 2015: 29). While acknowledging the notable differences between virtual texts and printed or analog texts (Ameli, 2009: 3), this study does not aim to identify the characteristics, affordances, and constraints of new media—such as speed, accessibility, anonymity, interactivity, and computational or

algorithmic features—within the context of rhetorical analysis (Gurak, 2001, as cited in Zappen, 2005). Instead, the study focuses only on the features and affordances of this environment that users have employed to construct their cultural authority, or, in other words, those integrated into the reviewers' rhetorical strategies.

Aristotle identified three key elements of rhetorical practice: ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (reason). Holt and McPherson (2010) note that these elements reveal a good argument's characteristics and define its persuasive appeal dimensions. In this framework, ethos refers to the speaker's character, authority, knowledge, credibility, and trustworthiness in persuading the audience (Higgins & Walker, 2012; Hartelius & Browning, 2008). According to Aho (1985 as cited in Higgins & Walker, 2012), pathos is an emotional appeal that evokes the audience's responses, such as joy, sadness, satisfaction, pity, or fear. Logos, on the other hand, relies on reasoning, intellectual thinking (Iraqzad et al., 2017), and the use of data and evidence (e.g., historical) to support the argument (Higgins & Walker, 2012).

The sampling process began with hashtags such as #FilmReview and #FilmCritic on the social media platform Instagram, which featured approximately 27,000 posts by the end of November 2024. According to the *DataReportal* report (2023), Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms in Iran, based on web traffic. It has recently emerged as a significant platform for many young people looking to develop their public personas and earn income across various artistic and social fields. In the next step, vernacular reviewers' pages were identified among the posts associated with these hashtags. Additional vernacular and amateur reviewers were selected by examining the followers of these pages. These reviewers, who may use their real names, pseudonyms, or branded identities, do not possess the characteristics of institutional or professional critics associated with official media outlets.

Ultimately, 180 pages were identified and narrowed down to 30 through purposive sampling. This selection was based on criteria such as engaging in activities beyond just editing sequences, variations in follower counts, content of posts, gender of the account owner, commercial success, and other distinguishing characteristics. This sampling method aims to provide analyses based on the most diverse available data and facilitate the identification of sub-types of vernacular reviewers. The main focus of these 30 pages is on film, but they may also include other cultural products such as books, podcasts, and animations. Information about some of the selected pages is presented in Table 1. The selection of posts for content and rhetorical analysis was based on the most recent posts from each page, with a minimum of 10 posts coded from each page. These posts represent the latest efforts by page owners to achieve cultural authority. Overall, the results of this study are derived from the selection and analysis of the similarities and



differences in the use of the three appeals of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—across 350 posts focused on film critique shared by amateur critics or vernacular reviewers.

**Table 1.** Twenty film review Accounts on Instagram

Users	Followers	All posts by reviewers
tasteofberry1	8491	121
cinemahyde	1686	78
ehsan_mansoori	516000	347
nilufardolatkhah	12600	67
shahsavar_review	79100	162
petroskhaan	22400	262
amilliondollarscene	26900	96
bluesymphony26	931	43
Manya.film	245000	35
yasmin_dailybook	141000	136
madbaxs	81100	59
coolmoviz	43600	186
hosseinzarbatie	99900	219
shokofilm	93200	28
ariya_bagher	4710	50
sepehrfilmer	53200	1327
raadism_	750	33
cinema_geram	1300	176
erfesh	201000	720
sognarre	14900	84

## 4. Findings

### 4.1. Rhetorical elements in vernacular reviewer pages

This section examines the rhetorical appeals of logos, ethos, and pathos to analyze the linguistic strategies and rhetorical tools employed by reviewers to engage users and establish critical authority. Logos, which encompasses logical appeals, reasoning, and numerical data, is predominantly used by reviewers to present "summaries and supplementary movie information". It is further applied in "narrative and technical analysis", "explaining content values", "interpreting the implicit meanings of films", and offering "ethical recommendations".

Summarizing the plot and main story, along with providing additional information about the films—such as details about the director and cast, the film genre, audience and critic scores from platforms like IMDb, Rotten Tomatoes, and Metacritic, as well as supplementary trivia and news—forms the basis of vernacular reviews. Their creativity in narrating the film's main story distinguishes users who employ this strategy. For instance, their ability to simultaneously integrate emotional appeals, explain their content value, and connect these aspects to the audience's needs and emotional states significantly enhances the effectiveness of their reviews. For example;

One of the best movies released this year, and I highly recommend it to anyone overly immersed in fashion, beauty trends, and excessive cosmetic procedures!

🧠 The Substance (2024)

★ IMDb Rating: 7.8/10

🎬 A fading celebrity, desperate to stay in the spotlight, buys a drug from the black market. This drug uses body cell cloning to create a younger individual version. However, will it all go as planned? (@amilliondollarscene)

In their "narrative and technical analysis", reviewers utilize logos to demonstrate their expertise in film critique, highlighting their cinematic literacy. This method involves examining various technical production elements, such as cinematography, framing, sound design, editing, and special effects. Additionally, it includes evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the screenplay, character development, narrative closure, and the identification of thematic elements within the film. For example:

First, let me mention that I had previously seen a film by Behtash Sanaeaha titled *Risk of Acid Rain*, which I thoroughly enjoyed. As a result, I decided to provide a review and analysis of *My Favorite Cake* for you. The lighting, framing, and overall direction were incredibly striking and impressive (@nilufardolatkhah).

Films have been praised for their ability to inform, impart lessons, and deliver ethical messages. Reviewers prominently employ logos to describe these lessons and moral takeaways. For example, one reviewer describes the series' main message and content value as follows: "Time does not solve problems, time does not change anything; it only makes you stronger and more mature" (@seal\_movie).

Logos is subsequently employed to "interpret the film's implicit meaning". In this regard, reviewers, as part of their ongoing efforts to compete with institutional critics, help viewers understand the film's meaning and explain how each scene contributes to that meaning and its relationship to the social context. For instance, one reviewer explains, "The film is called *Killers of the Flower Moon* because on the Blackjack Hills, small flowers grow, which the Osage people call 'Flower Moon'. These flowers are very beautiful and abundant, serving as a symbol of Native Americans who are brutally killed..." (@ehsan\_mansoori).

"Ethical recommendations" represent the final prominent application of logos in establishing the reviewers' critical authority. For instance, one reviewer addressed this aspect after introducing the film: "Friends, this film, due to its explicit sexual content and high levels of violence, is not suitable for everyone!" (@manya\_film).

Moving from the appeal and applications of logos, we now examine

the role of pathos, the persuasive tool for evoking emotions, in shaping reviewers' cultural authority. The "emotional appeal and affective experience of consumption", "addressing the audience's emotional needs and psychological states", and promoting "personal growth and self-improvement" is among the most significant reasons users employ pathos in shaping their critical persona.

"Emotional appeal and the affective experience of consumption" serve as key techniques for engaging other users and are divided into two codes: "the use of adjectives" and "affective experience of consumption". Reviewers have primarily used emphatic adjectives and expressed their affective experiences to evoke emotions in users. Adjectives are often employed to spark curiosity, aiming to make reviews and posts more engaging. Reviewers also incorporate a wide range of emotions—such as sadness, grief, joy, fear, excitement, pleasure, hatred, regret, surprise, wonder, nostalgia, longing, and love—into their linguistic strategies when describing their emotional experiences. For instance, "It was one of the most unique and unusual horror films of recent years" (@cinemahyde) and "While the effects of this eight-part miniseries were still lingering in my body, I came in front of the camera to introduce it to you—a series that left me speechless when it ended and I was still staring at the manitou..." (@Ehsan Mansoori).

In some cases, pathos has been employed to foster a closer connection with users by "addressing their emotional needs and conditions", demonstrating the reviewers' understanding of their feelings and concerns. For example, "If you are not feeling great emotionally, watch the series *Shrinking*" (@nilufardolatkah); "10 movies with a fall vibe, selected by IMDb" (@shahsavar\_review).

The latest use of pathos, as discussed with another interpretation of logos, is associated with persuading other users by appealing to "personal growth and self-improvement". In this context, the decision to watch or not watch a film or television product becomes tied to a sense of inner emptiness or a feeling of inadequacy in competition with friends or peers. The emotional appeal here aims to connect with users by appealing to their desire to avoid such feelings, encouraging them to engage with content that promises personal development or social validation. This tactic, therefore, leverages emotions to influence choices, framing viewing as a means of fulfilling deeper emotional and social needs. For example, "It's hard to believe anyone hasn't seen these films, which are truly must-sees for everyone" (@yasmin\_dailybook).

As mentioned, Aristotle's third rhetorical appeal is ethos—the speaker's character and credibility. Reviewers have built their credibility and authority among other users in various ways, which can be categorized into three groups: "Instagram film enthusiasts and Bloggers", "reviewers with film criticism knowledge", and "reviewers relying on institutional critics". At least one of these strategies

contributes to shaping the critical persona of vernacular reviewers, regardless of whether they reveal their true identity or engage in personal branding on their page.

The first group includes the main personas of reviewers on Instagram. Reviewers in this group often refer to themselves with titles such as "audience", "film enthusiast", or "cinema lover", aiming to create a sense of closeness and intimacy with their followers. The second category, "reviewers with film criticism knowledge", includes individuals who, while adhering to Instagram's rules like the first group, often engage in activities beyond film criticism. These activities include "movie dialogues", "movie rankings", "cinema news", "creative digital content creation", "achieving financial goals", and a strong focus on follower engagement. However, they also make a more deliberate effort to understand the principles of film criticism and use specialized terminology from that field. The final category of reviewers relies on borrowed credibility, referencing quotes from established critics in other media outlets to establish their authority. For example, "In this post, I have also selected a few quotes from different critics and tried to ensure that there are no significant spoilers included" (@tasteofberry1).

#### **4.2. Types of vernacular reviewers based on rhetorical elements**

This section analyzes the similarities and differences among reviewers' rhetorical strategies and identifies their sub-types. In general, reviewers have used a balanced and simultaneous combination of rational and emotional persuasion strategies to establish their critical authority and engage their peers and other users. More specifically, the integration of emotional appeal in the textual, auditory, and visual aspects of Instagram content is prominently observed in the activities of many reviewers.

In addition to its audio and video functionalities, reviewers have utilized various Instagram features to construct their cultural and critical personas, including film review hashtags, sharing their account links on other social media platforms, and using Instagram's interactive and participatory tools. Reviewers value interaction and participation so highly that they rarely publish a post without fostering a sense of familiarity and intimacy with their followers, often soliciting feedback and encouraging engagement (likes and comments) on their page. They also collaborate with their peers to develop their critical persona, such as tagging each other's pages, participating in their peers' accounts, and co-creating content.

At the outset, distinguishing between different pages—although not a simple task—is addressed here metaphorically to facilitate and expand the discussion of the implications of emerging criticism on social media. Consequently, three types of reviewers can be identified based on the nature and extent of their rhetorical appeals.

In the first category, "product" and "media critique" merge to form a

predominantly non-critical blogger persona. In this state, the nature of the page only partially introduces the product or establishes the reviewer's identity. Instead, it primarily functions as a tool for showcasing the lifestyle, interests, and identity of the page owner, who is identified here as a "film-style blogger". This type of reviewer, often operating under their real identity, pays particular attention to film and cinema within the broader scope of their daily life, generally aiming to attract attention and obtain financial benefits. In most cases, introducing cinematic products does not involve in-depth critique or evaluation; it remains limited to merely listing the movies' names and general comments. Regarding pathos, this group belongs to cinema bloggers, often identifying as enthusiasts of films and series. "Emotional appeal and affective experience of consumption", and "personal growth and self-improvement" are two identity-building strategies for this group. This does not mean that other reviewers do not employ these strategies; rather, it highlights the greater significance of these two categories in distinguishing and characterizing this group.

Although the second type of reviewers, or "cinema influencers", take film reviews more seriously and dedicate their pages more specifically to this area, they, like the first type, rarely engage in critical and cinematic analysis of films. Compared to other reviews, while actively involved in this field, economic incentives often strongly motivate cinema influencers. As a result, much of their content functions more as advertising aimed at influencing the cinematic choices of their followers. In other words, rather than offering genuine critiques, they typically introduce and praise films without clear criteria, often doing so to gain precedence over their peers and attract more attention from their audience. This group, much like "film-style bloggers" in terms of building authority, presents itself as cinema enthusiasts and, in some cases, relies on borrowed personas. Compared to other reviewers, this group's primary and most significant use of logos is the provision of "summaries and supplementary film information". Most film reviewers on Instagram, according to the findings of this study, are categorized into this group.

The final type consists of those who, according to the findings of this study, have emerged as the most successful group in aligning film critique knowledge and terminology with the dynamics of new media. This group also employs both rational and emotional appeals simultaneously. However, compared to other reviewers, this group leads in applying logos for the "narrative and technical analysis" and "interpreting the implicit meanings of films". This group, which is conceptually close to the so-called "professional vernacular reviewers" (Jaakkola, 2021; 2022), often uses Instagram to introduce itself as a reviewer while publishing more detailed reviews on other social media platforms. To emphasize their efforts in blending institutional critique principles with Instagram's platform-specific features, this study refers to them as "critical reviewers".

### 5. Conclusion: The rise of vernacular critics in digital media

The emergence of amateur critics and vernacular reviewers as non-institutional cultural voices in cultural criticism is among the consequences of social media's development and widespread use. This study aims to better understand these reviewers and their various types by examining how they establish critical authority compared to Institutional critics. Additionally, it analyzes the potential implications of their activities on cultural valuation through a rhetorical analysis of their linguistic strategies.

Although this study's findings are limited to reviewers of films and cinematic products on Persian Instagram, they align with the theoretical literature and other research results. The reviewers in this study distinguish themselves from institutional critics by emphasizing the consumer's perspective, adopting a bottom-up approach, relying on subjective and experience-based judgments, and rejecting hierarchical or elitist views in their evaluations of cultural products (e.g., Jaakkola, 2018; Kristensen & From, 2015). The reviewers often identified themselves as enthusiasts of cinematic productions, striving to establish their critical persona among followers and peers by fostering friendly relationships and emphasizing interaction and engagement. The distinction between these personas is not based on content differences but is mostly shaped by visual creativity. These reviewers predominantly employed logos—rational and logical appeal—with a significant numerical emphasis to provide "summaries and supplementary movie information" about films. Moreover, they employed pathos—persuasion through emotional stimulation—to convey the "emotional appeal and affective experience of consumption". Both strategies reflect the reviewers' disinterest in delving into more critical layers of product evaluation. Additionally, the adoption of strategies such as "responding to the audience's emotional needs and psychological states" and "personal growth and self-improvement", alongside a reduced reliance on institutional critics, further underscores the reviewers' emphasis on adopting a consumer-oriented perspective in providing evaluations.

Another key issue addressed in this study was the impact of the emergence of these reviewers on the cultural valuation process. All types of reviewers have paid special attention to adopting Instagram's platform-specific features and principles to build critical authority. As a result, auditory and visual creativity, content appeal, emphasis on interaction and engagement with peers, provision of supplementary and entertaining news, soliciting opinions, and fostering friendly and intimate relationships with the users have been pursued in various forms.

As Hallinan (2023) also notes, through the concept of "value optimization", platform values influence the fundamental elements of cultural production. These platform values are what drive most

reviewers to adopt a consumer-oriented perspective, positioning the reviewer as a subject of interest rather than necessarily an evaluator of a product's value and steering them away from providing strong judgments. Presenting opinions as an ordinary individual, in his view, diminishes the direct persuasive appeal in the interactive and participatory space of social networks, to the detriment of fostering long-distance dependency. This reflects the tension between the review genre as an act of persuasive execution and the communicative norms of the platform in which persuasion often occurs subtly. In this context, the cultural valuation of products is often a secondary concern for most reviewers. As previously mentioned, the way participants in this study use rhetorical expressions further supports this idea.

Current discussions regarding the impact of platform features on cultural production, particularly cultural criticism, as noted in the introduction, are not uniform and have both proponents and opponents. This research aimed to empirically address this issue by identifying potential types of reviewers. As discussed, three subcategories within amateur critics or vernacular reviewers can be defined based on the use of rhetorical elements. In the two identified types, we observed the elimination of the critique in favor of forming "film-style bloggers" and "Cinema Influencers", which ultimately aim to achieve authority and popularize one's persona by attracting others' attention. According to some, the lack of deep engagement in cinematic and critical evaluation of products is not inherently a negative phenomenon. It may signify the emergence of innovative and democratic potentials in institutional criticism (Kristensen et al., 2021: 3).

The results of this study, however, suggest the potential negative consequences of these types of reviews for cultural product valuation and consumption. In other words, while the presence and diversity of reviewers may expand the space for introducing more products, increasing information, and meeting the needs of varied audiences, it could also intensify commercial competition, resulting in unsubstantiated recommendations and the misdirection of consumer tastes and preferences. To clarify, the excessive reliance on emotional appeal—evident in the titles and post covers across all reviewers' pages—along with the limited use of logos to provide critical and analytical evaluations on Instagram can lead to negative cultural consequences, such as encouraging other users to engage with superficial and low-value products. This is particularly evident among leading Instagram reviewers, labeled as cinema influencers, due to the extensive number of their reviews and their significant financial incentives. Gillespie (2012) expresses this concern, viewing the prevalence of reviews over critiques in the current context as a catalyst for consumerism.

The final type identified in this study refers to reviewers who, more prominently than others, utilize rational appeal (logos) to engage in

"narrative and technical analysis", "explain content values of the films", and "interpret the implicit meanings of films". This group, termed "Critical Reviewers" in this study, has made more significant efforts than other reviewers to use knowledge and film critique terminology in their evaluations. They have employed rhetorical tools to align their critical evaluations with Instagram's platform-specific features. Due to their unique rhetorical strategies, this group has focused more on the cultural value of the works they review. Consequently, the likelihood of negative or unethical consequences arising from their reviews seems to have considerably decreased compared to other reviewers. Although this type was not numerous in quantity, it is considered one of Instagram's most popular review forms. These reviewers have adopted a consumer stance and simultaneously achieved critical authority as cultural intermediaries among other institutional critics, producers, and distributors. Therefore, the growth and development of this type of reviewer are felt in both the production and consumption sides of cultural products. However, due to Instagram's platform-specific features, achieving this kind of authority is not easily attainable.

In the end, a point needs to be addressed. This study conducted a rhetorical analysis of only 350 Instagram posts related to film review pages. To generalize the findings, it is essential to conduct studies with larger sample sizes and expand the scope to include other cultural and non-cultural products and platforms. Furthermore, additional research focusing on users is needed to anticipate the effects of the emergence of various types of vernacular reviewers.

#### **Conflict of interest**

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

#### **Authors' contributions**

All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

#### **Ethical considerations**

The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

#### **Data availability**

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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