

Kingdom or fandom? YouTube and the changing role of gatekeeping in digital cultural markets

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Abstract

Research Summary: How should novelty-driven entrepreneurs best position themselves in digital cultural markets? On platforms like YouTube, cultural entrepreneurs may bypass classic gatekeepers to reach novelty-seeking audiences through algorithms that search and recommend. However, this positive view of disintermediation ignores that novelty often needs curation by and consecration from professional audiences. We explore what these potentially conflicting dynamics imply for cultural entrepreneurs in the arena of YouTubers nominated for acclaimed Streamy Awards. Merging fine-grained datasets and qualitative evidence, we find that general audiences value novelty they grasp well, that professional audiences undervalue novelty they should easily spot, and that cross-audience spillovers prove negative. We discuss the implications of our results for theories toward markets serving fragmented audiences, cultural markets going online, and digital platforms.

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Managerial Summary: How can novelty-driven cultural entrepreneurs effectively establish themselves in digital markets like YouTube? This study guides them by highlighting that while these platforms enable bypassing traditional gatekeepers and reaching consumers directly through recommendation algorithms, recognition from professional circles may remain crucial. The research focuses on YouTube creators nominated for Streamy Awards, based on detailed data from YouTube and interviews. Key findings include that general audiences prefer novel content that is easy to curate, while professionals may overlook novel content when curation is easy. Additionally, popularity in one audience group does not guarantee acceptance in another. The study's insights are vital for understanding market dynamics in fragmented audiences, the shift of cultural markets online, and the functioning of digital cultural platforms.

KEYWORDS

audience multiplicity, categorization, cultural entrepreneurship, novelty, digital platforms, YouTube

1 | INTRODUCTION

Cultural entrepreneurs in fields like art, cinema, and design are motivated by a deep-seated desire to create novel offerings and attain renown for them (Bourdieu, 1984; Dubois, 2012; Jones et al., 2015; Khaire, 2017a; Sgourev, 2013). This goal presents a positioning dilemma: while their outsider status allows them to offer novelty (Cattani et al., 2017; Cattani & Ferriani, 2008) and “surprise relevant audiences” (Godart et al., 2020, p. 500), their unconventional offerings may initially confuse audiences. To bridge this gap, they depend on intermediaries such as critics, editors, and award committees who fulfill two key tasks: curating and explaining novel cultural offerings to broader audiences, and consecrating some offerings as particularly worthy (Bourdieu, 1993; Khaire, 2017a). These intermediaries also screen out the overly avant-garde from consumer consideration in already-glutted markets or refuse to consecrate work deemed banal or too commercial (Mezias & Mezias, 2000; Sharkey et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2017).

Digitalization may significantly transform these established cultural market dynamics. Unlike traditional offline markets, digital platforms like YouTube, which encourages users to “broadcast themselves,” lower entry barriers and use a long-tail curation approach to access a global, diverse audience (Elberse, 2008; YouTube, 2022). These platforms' search engines ease the consumers' cognitive burden of curating a consideration set (Cennamo, 2021; Gouvard & Durand, 2023; Pedersen et al., 2020). They allow cultural entrepreneurs to reach



consumers directly, bypassing traditional market intermediaries (e.g., production studios) and even professional intermediaries (e.g., critics or award juries).

This potential for disintermediation in online cultural platforms may drastically impact how cultural entrepreneurs tackle their positioning dilemma (e.g., Askin & Mol, 2018; Furnari, 2020; Khaire, 2017a; Shi, 2023). Specifically, we note that the digitalization of cultural markets (1) asks how cultural entrepreneurs should position their novel offerings to a fragmented audience of professional intermediaries versus consumers (Sharkey et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2017), and (2) raises new questions about how cultural entrepreneurs will succeed in this environment (e.g., Godart et al., 2020; Pedersen et al., 2020).

Research on offline cultural markets offers limited insight into their online evolution. Digital platforms like YouTube allow cultural entrepreneurs to enhance how consumers discover novel content, potentially sidelining professional intermediaries (Bourdieu, 1993; Coslor et al., 2020; Khaire, 2017a; Maguire & Matthews, 2014; Negus, 2002; Pedersen et al., 2020; Tauscher et al., 2021). If the value derived from unique content on these platforms outweighs the effort of navigating without intermediaries, cultural entrepreneurs “gain legitimacy *because of* (and not despite) their distinctiveness” in consumers’ eyes (emphasis original: Tauscher et al., 2021, p. 150). At the same time, digital platforms still value professional endorsements to attract advertisers (Kim, 2012), and consumer audiences’ appreciation for novel and unique offerings may not align with intermediaries’ criteria for endorsing works that align with established categorical norms and standards (Abbott, 1981; Bourdieu, 1993; Durand & Haans, 2022; Lee et al., 2017).

With such potentially conflicting dynamics in a novel context hindering a priori prediction, we use a question-driven, exploratory approach (Graebner et al., 2023) to examine how consumers and professional intermediaries respond to the novelty presented by cultural entrepreneurs on YouTube, the world’s largest digital video platform. Specifically, we address two interrelated questions: (1) How can cultural entrepreneurs producing novelty successfully position themselves for distinct consumer and professional audiences on digital platforms, and (2) how does endorsement from one audience, consumer or professional, influence the success of future novel offerings with the other audience?

YouTube’s success derives from its ability to reduce *both* the entry barriers for producers (with whom it shares some of its revenue) and the search burden for novelty-seeking audiences (Burgess & Green, 2018). With 500 hours of video uploaded each minute and 2.6 billion active users, YouTube is the second most-used search engine globally, accessed by about a third of all internet users (Shepherd, 2023; Wagner, 2017). Initially reliant on advertiser interest in associating with elite professionals akin to traditional TV channels, YouTube has moved toward professionalizing its content (Morreale, 2014). This includes orchestrating closer links with influential industry professionals (Rietveld et al., 2019) by collaborating with the annual Streamy Awards. In these “Oscars of the Web” (Roth, 2010) or “Emmys of WebTV” (Tsotsis, 2009), a jury of seasoned professionals has given prestigious awards to anoint and showcase cultural producers to attract advertisers and new YouTubers. Our study involves a detailed analysis of 191,707 videos from 221 YouTubers nominated for Streamy Awards, complemented by qualitative interviews and an examination of governance changes in YouTube and the Streamy Awards. These investigations allow us to explore how both consumers and professionals react to the novelty presented by cultural entrepreneurs on YouTube and the potential spillovers between these audiences.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Entrepreneurs frequently become bearers of novelty when they experiment “without the anxiety of contrasting accepted norms of the field” (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008, p. 827). Broad literature on strategy, organization theory, and innovation suggests that, due to their initial lack of legitimacy, entrepreneurs should conform to established norms until they gain acceptance (Deephouse, 1996; Navis & Glynn, 2011; Tauscher & Rothe, 2021; Zhao et al., 2017; Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002). At the same time, initial conformance seems somewhat antithetical to entrepreneurs attracted to a market when believing they have a novel offering (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019; Navis & Glynn, 2011).

This paradox is particularly relevant in creative industries that attract mavericks and misfits (Caves, 2000; Jones et al., 2015) hoping to bring a unique, surprising aspect of themselves to the market (Godart et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016). These cultural entrepreneurs prioritize novelty not necessarily for its utility but as an expression of self (Khair, 2017a). Thus, cultural novelty often happens in an “intellectual room for useless or nonuseful creations” (Godart et al., 2020, p. 502), where cultural entrepreneurs produce “an intentional configuration of material and cultural elements that is unexpected for a given audience” (Godart et al., 2020, p. 494).

While consumers expect atypical, cutting-edge ideas from cultural entrepreneurs (Smith, 2011; Tauscher et al., 2021), such entrepreneurs still face an uphill journey to legitimacy as audiences struggle to link them with familiar templates (Cattani et al., 2017; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019; Merton, 1972; Navis & Glynn, 2011). Even audiences that regularly consume cultural goods may be slow to adopt offerings that break with the status quo (Khair, 2017a).

Overcoming this resistance typically involves market mediators like gallerists, critics, and award juries, who play crucial roles in curating and consecrating cultural innovations (Cattani et al., 2014; Durand et al., 2007; Gemser et al., 2008; Negro & Leung, 2013). These intermediaries not only foster their own importance (Bourdieu, 1993; Coslor et al., 2020; Negus, 2002) but help shape public perceptions about cultural value, often through award conferrals. Through such “public judgments and evaluations” (Favaron et al., 2022, p. 6925), intermediaries from the Oscar jury to the Guide Michelin co-create social norms for “what is sacred and what is profane” (Cattani et al., 2014, p. 259). Such consecration by intermediaries helps clarify what kind of work is deemed high-quality and sculpts lasting status hierarchies, as consecration imbues “symbolic capital that may serve as an alternative to economic capital” (Baumann, 2001, p. 406).

Extant research primarily recommends that cultural entrepreneurs first gain legitimacy through intermediaries in traditional offline settings. However, this strategy needs to be reassessed for online platforms such as YouTube (Godart et al., 2020; Khair, 2017a; Sharkey et al., 2023), which fosters disintermediation (e.g., Pedersen et al., 2020) by enabling and encouraging direct interaction with audiences. Despite this, a cultural elite still roams the online space. In our context, the Streamys, like the Oscars, are conferred by a jury of veteran industry professionals. This potential distinction in consumers versus elite intermediaries beyond the usual expert-mediated offline cultural markets (DiMaggio, 1997, 2011; Khair, 2017a; Khair & Wadhvani, 2010; Phillips & Kim, 2009) suggests that cultural entrepreneurs on YouTube could achieve a breakthrough by *either* appealing to consumers *or* courting elite professionals—and, afterward, possibly leveraging the support of one audience to win over the other.



3 | EMPIRICAL SETTING

3.1 | YouTube: A case of disintermediation

Fully in line with larger societal trends toward a “creator economy” (Burgess & Green, 2018), YouTube is an online platform for cultural entrepreneurs hoping to express creativity and earn coin. The Oxford English Dictionary added the word “YouTuber” in 2016, legitimizing video content creators. Practically anyone with a camera can be a YouTuber (including one of the authors of this study). Still, as Bärthel (2018) has shown, YouTube is a highly skewed platform averaging 85% of all views offered by 3% of YouTubers. In 2019, YouTube earned over 15 billion USD in advertising revenue,¹ paying out nearly 8.5 billion to content creators (Alexander, 2020; Alphabet, 2020), with these numbers roughly doubling in 2022.

Digitalization and the rise of online platforms like YouTube have fundamentally shifted cultural markets by simplifying the production and distribution of creative content (see also Godart et al., 2020; Khaire, 2017a):

The Internet has reduced the barriers to cultural production enormously. Many types of cultural goods are now much easier to make and much cheaper to distribute. You don't need an investor to capitalize your production costs or a distributor to get your stuff before the public. You just need a laptop and a camera (and maybe an inspiration). And, no matter how small you are, you always open worldwide. (Louis Menand, 2022 in the *New Yorker*)

This transition to online platforms often leads to disintermediation, removing intermediaries like music labels and movie studios from parts of the cultural value chain (Pedersen et al., 2020). These trends introduce significant competition for traditional market intermediaries like music labels or movie studios, who now contend with individuals who directly create and share their own content.

Even nonmarket intermediaries such as critics or professional award juries find their roles becoming more democratized (see also Shi, 2023), given, for example, YouTube's mission to let “people—not gatekeepers—decide what's popular” (YouTube, 2022). Yet, as is evidenced by the often superficial nature of consumer engagement with cultural content as seen in star ratings and brief comments (Khaire, 2017a), digitization does not render nonmarket intermediaries obsolete. Rather, as Khaire (2017a, p. 203) remarked, their curating function may become even more important:

Because digital platforms such as YouTube, Pinterest, and Vimeo, as well as online publishing sites, have increased the number of individuals creating a large number of works that can be presented to consumers with relative ease, digitalization has exacerbated the need for intermediaries. Moreover, not all of these goods are less complex or require less explication and/or evaluation merely because they are virtual or because they are created by a larger portion of the population.

¹Advertising is, by far, the primary driver of YouTube's revenue. According to the latest available statistics, YouTube's premium program that allows ad-free viewing is subscribed to by just 0.02% of its users.

Thus, while an increase in available content benefits consumers and platforms like YouTube, it comes with challenges like oversupply and mixed content quality, issues traditionally managed by intermediaries in offline markets. Online platforms counter these challenges with technological mechanisms like keyword-based search or recommendation algorithms to support consumers' content curation. In particular, algorithms may enhance user experience by providing personalized content recommendations (Peukert et al., 2023). Ideally, learning algorithms can achieve highly individualized content curation, allowing users to discover meaningful content even within niche tastes, as seen with Netflix (Frey, 2021).

While sheer content proliferation may turn out to be manageable for YouTube, maintaining high content quality as submissions increase exponentially remains a concern. In particular, during its early efforts to attract corporate advertisers and compete with established media giants, YouTube needed to showcase itself as a legitimate, high-quality player. In addition, having and promoting quality content is crucial for attracting and retaining high-caliber cultural entrepreneurs, which would in turn make the platform more attractive to advertisers originally still uncertain whether to allocate their budgets to the fledgling medium rather than TV or newspapers. It is also as part of YouTube's elaborate mid-2010s professionalization strategy (e.g., Morreale, 2014) that the platform worked with the Streamy Awards to address this challenge.

3.2 | The Streamy Awards: Emergent re-intermediation on YouTube

As noted before, the traditional function of cultural intermediaries comprises two key tasks: curation and consecration (Cattani et al., 2014; Khaire, 2017a). While digital platforms like YouTube have adopted algorithmic curation, it remains unclear whether the quality of the content curated matches high standards as content novelty and entry increase. Consecration, in turn, is all about setting and maintaining quality standards but is challenging on platforms like YouTube where viewer feedback—comprising view counts, star ratings, and comments—often lacks expert insight and remains shallow and uninformative (Khaire, 2017a).

Industry observers noted the need for new forms of intermediation. Some commentators argued that “[t]he star-making system of the future, it turns out, needs the star-making system of the past,” signaling a need for new intermediaries to do the task of consecration. This is precisely what has happened: “The middle men and women have arrived, eroding YouTube's status as the quintessential do-it-yourself enterprise” (Barnes & Atkins, 2014).

The Streamy Awards, launched independently in 2009, are the primary intermediary for consecration within the YouTube community. Established to “honor excellence” in online video production (Streamys, 2021), the Streamys were co-founded by Dick Clark Productions, known for major events like the American Music Awards and the Golden Globe Awards. The awards follow traditional ceremonies' format, with a structured nomination process, eligibility criteria, and a professional jury voting on various categories, though the jurors' selection process is not publicly disclosed. The jury, described as an “independent judging body of creators, executives, and other experts in the online video industry” (Streamys.org), mirrors the composition of the Academy Awards and has remained stable over the years.

The Streamys quickly attracted significant media attention, with coverage in outlets like the *New York Times* and major sponsors such as Coca-Cola. Notable early winners included film and TV celebrities, like William Shatner. Initially announced as an annual event, the Streamys experienced a hiatus in 2011 and 2012 but have been held regularly since the 4th Annual Streamy Awards in 2014.

Notably, the Streamy Awards have been distinctively successful since then, while YouTube's own efforts at establishing an award failed in 2007 and 2008. In turn, YouTube became an official partner of Streamys in 2016, allowing exclusive distribution and professional presentation on its platform. Renamed YouTube Streamys in 2020, this collaboration has been strategically important for YouTube to draw quality offerings to the platform in the form of novel, high-quality content. YouTube's Chief Marketing Officer, Danielle Tiedt, noted:

YouTube has long been a supporter of the Streamy Awards, sharing its commitment to honor the innovators who are creating cutting-edge content for millions of fans around the world. (Streamys., 2016)

YouTube has followed a clear strategy toward leveraging this increase in the visibility of quality, as a YouTube official we interviewed confirmed:

YouTube is all about supporting and promoting its creators. It [the partnership with Streamys] is like a chance to shine a spotlight on some of the most talented and innovative creators out there. And it can be really valuable for driving growth and success for YouTube as a whole. (Interviewee 4, YouTube official)²

Accordingly, we argue that the Streamy Awards serve as a crucial professional, nonmarket intermediary for YouTube, enhancing the platform's appeal to both consumers and advertisers by signaling content quality and helping to orchestrate value within its ecosystem (Rietveld et al., 2019). The awards also attract content creators eager for recognition within an institutionalized prestige hierarchy, endorsed by an impartial third party (Bourdieu, 1993; Cattani et al., 2014; Gemser et al., 2008; Khaire, 2017b). Thus, despite the democratization of online platforms, we suggest that elite intermediaries are still needed "as agents of consecration with the authority to produce symbolic capital" (Cattani et al., 2014, p. 258).

4 | DATA AND METHODS

4.1 | Sample and data collection

To investigate how novelty on YouTube is perceived by consumer and professional audiences, we need to study comparable evaluations made by those two groups. We enlisted several primary data sources to build two samples for our regressions to capture the appreciation of novelty produced by YouTubers by consumers and professional audiences.

For the consumer audience, we collected data on all 191,707 videos uploaded by our 221 Streamy-nominated YouTubers between 2005 and 2019 using the YouTube application program interface (API). These video-level data gave us various details such as upload date, video title, description, tagged keywords, duration, views, likes and dislikes, and other social media statistics.

For the professional audience, despite the massive scale of YouTube, with over 38 million active channels and more than one billion videos (2023), only a small fraction of professional

²We gathered qualitative evidence to bolster knowledge of the YouTube context. We interviewed four professionals at YouTube in Business Development (interviewee 1), Product Partnership (2), User Research (3), and Content Strategy Operations (4) using our professional networks and a snowball approach.

YouTubers have been nominated for the Streamy Awards,³ making the linkage of these two datasets both conceptually and empirically challenging. We adopted a focused approach by analyzing the Streamy Awards nominees from 2013 to 2018 across 12 jury-decided “subject” or “programming” categories, totaling 221 nominees. This selection, while not encompassing the entire YouTube population, is appropriate for our research, as it targets those most engaged with the platform as cultural entrepreneurs. This group, with an average tenure of 4.7 years on YouTube and 80% nominated only once, provides meaningful insights into professional practices and positioning on YouTube. Moreover, these nominees are a valid sample for studying interactions with both public and professional audiences due to their visibility and professional standing. Considering the vast amount of content on YouTube, it is impractical for professionals to curate from the entire platform, further justifying our focus on this group of nominees.⁴

We exploit the year-to-year structure of Streamys after 2013, focusing on the subsample of videos by YouTubers nominated for an award within the prior year. We chose August as the cut-off with nominations announced in September. As a robustness test for juries that may have looked further into the historical work of the nominees, we also considered *all* prior videos by a nominee to predict Streamy wins (see Supplementary Appendix I).

4.2 | Dependent variables

Both YouTube's platform audiences and elite professionals have their own, clear evaluation metric. For the regular audience, this consists of liking or disliking a video on YouTube; for the professional audience, it is the Streamy. Accordingly, we measured the regular audience's *like sentiment* as a ratio of likes to the total number of likes and dislikes YouTubers received on their videos. We also used log-transformed likes and video views (Bärtl, 2018) as alternate measures (Supplementary Appendix II). Next, we calculated the *likelihood of winning* a Streamy Award for nominated YouTubers. We assigned a binary (1/0) variable to reflect whether a video by a nominated YouTuber was awarded or not.

4.3 | Independent variable

Novelty is closely linked to the element of surprise and occurs when an audience encounters something unexpected, “whether or not it is better than existing alternatives” (Godart et al., 2020, p. 495). Captured as Bayesian surprise (Itti & Baldi, 2009; Sreenivasan, 2013), which quantifies “violations of expectations” (Bavato, 2022, p. 42) across artistic and scientific fields, we calculate novelty as the unexpectedness of tags in a video based on their probability of occurrence, with an average surprise score computed for each video. Formally,

$$Novelty_i = \frac{1}{N_t} \sum_1^{N_t} (-\text{Log}P_t)$$

³Accordingly, despite what the family and friends of the co-author believe, he is sticking with his day job.

⁴As a simple comparison, members of the Oscar jury are supposed to screen about 300–350 movies per year, which would tally nearly 1000 hours of movie content to watch (and one may argue how unlikely they are to do that). On an average day in 2022, 3.7 million videos, or a total of over 270,000 hours, were uploaded to YouTube.

where P_t is a probability computed by taking the ratio of how often a tag t appears in the set of videos released before the focal video i to the total number of earlier videos published by the nominees (see Supplementary Appendix III for our further explanation of this measure).⁵ As a robustness check, we also measured the novelty from the title and video description text and found qualitatively similar results.

4.4 | Control variables

Since YouTube API data are tracked at the video level, we controlled for video *duration*, number of *views* (log-transformed), *Facebook shares* (log-transformed), *tweets* (shares via Twitter, log-transformed), *Reddit posts* (number of posts on the Reddit platform for a video), and *Reddit upvotes* (number of upvotes on the Reddit platform per video). At the YouTuber level, we tallied the *cumulative number of videos* posted by YouTubers up to the current video on their content timeline. Year-dummy variables were included in all models to control for time-fixed effects.

4.5 | Estimation method

We utilized the “xtivreg” command in Stata, employing a *Bartik shift-share instrumental variable* (IV) to address potential endogeneity in measuring likes sentiment, possibly arising from unobserved factors like costly gear or advanced SEO (search engine optimization) techniques (detailed in Supplementary Appendix IV). For models measuring the likelihood of winning an award, we used probit models for binomial distribution (“ivprobit” to incorporate the instrument). Our analyses targeted the YouTuber-video level with robust standard errors clustered at the YouTuber level. We applied YouTuber fixed effects in our “likes sentiment” models to account for time-invariant, latent traits of YouTubers. Since all the videos of a nominated YouTuber either won a Streamy or not, we enlisted between-effects models for the *likelihood of winning* analysis.

5 | RESULTS

We reported descriptive statistics and correlations for the consumer audience sample in Table 1, where the average novelty score was 6.59, showing an upward trend over time as illustrated in Figure 1. The average video received approximately 57,000 likes, with 96% of consumer reactions being positive. For the professional audience, Table 2 shows that about 18% of nominated videos won a Streamy, with each category typically having five to six nominees per

⁵One limitation of this novelty measure is that if a video is visually novel but goes undescribed in its keywords, the measure will fail to capture it. For instance, if the video uses a drone to capture an event and does not tag it in its keywords, the novelty measure will not capture it. However, since all search engines use text to find videos, YouTubers (especially the professional ones that compose our sample) have incentives to draw on keywords heavily to highlight their video features. Furthermore, if YouTubers misuse keywords to climb in search results, their videos can be reported to the platform by audiences or competitors. For face validity, Supplementary Appendix V shows two video screenshots of famed YouTuber Lilly Singh—one with the lowest novelty measure and the other with the highest novelty measure in her videos.

TABLE 1 Summary and correlations of the likes sentiment sample.

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Likes sentiment	0.96	0.09	0.01	1.00	1.00						
(2) Videos	874.76	766.68	1	2996	0.02	1.00					
(3) Views	2287273.00	9853724.00	12	1,900,000,000	-0.03	-0.03	1.00				
(4) Duration	629.85	735.64	2	86,459	0.10	0.22	0.02	1.00			
(5) FB likes	513.39	64090.66	0	28,000,000	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	1.00		
(6) Tweets	3.38	4.93	0	20	0.14	0.01	0.06	0.04	0.01	1.00	
(7) Red. Upvotes	59.82	1278.65	0	245,082	0.01	0.02	0.06	0.00	0.02	0.07	1.00
(8) Red. Posts	0.68	1.92	0	25	0.06	0.07	0.14	0.03	0.01	0.27	0.26
(9) Video age	1569.36	913.71	59	5096	0.00	-0.50	-0.03	-0.19	0.00	-0.16	-0.04
(10) Category fuzziness	4.31	0.18	2.44	4.64	-0.07	0.16	0.00	0.07	0.00	-0.04	-0.03
(11) Previous Streamy	0.06	0.24	0	1	0.04	0.19	0.00	0.02	0.00	0.03	0.01
(12) Bartik IV	0.02	0.07	0	1	-0.10	0.20	-0.02	-0.04	0.00	0.00	0.01
(13) Novelty	6.59	1.62	0	12.42	-0.12	0.08	0.00	-0.02	0.00	0.14	0.03
Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	
(8) Red. Posts	0.68	1.92	0	25	1.00						
(9) Video age	1569.36	913.71	59	5096	-0.12	1.00					
(10) Category fuzziness	4.31	0.18	2.44	4.64	0.00	0.02	1.00				
(11) Previous Streamy	0.06	0.24	0	1	0.06	-0.21	-0.06	1.00			
(12) Bartik IV	0.02	0.07	0	1	0.00	-0.26	0.07	0.00	1.00		
(13) Novelty	6.59	1.62	0	12.42	0.11	-0.35	-0.05	0.08	0.14	1.00	

Note: 1. The sample consists of all 191,707 videos used for the likes regressions. 2. Correlation coefficients with an absolute value larger than 0.03 are significant at the .05 level. 3. Video duration is measured in seconds and video age in days.

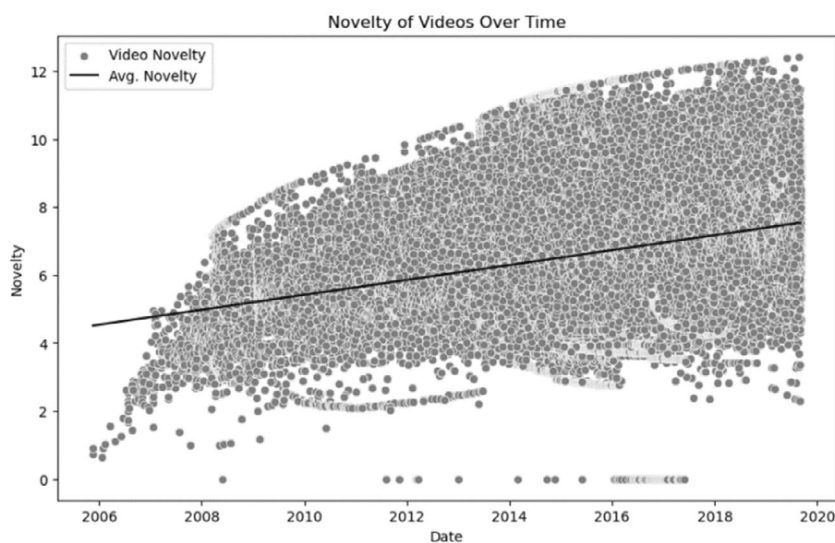


FIGURE 1 Video novelty over time.

winner. Tables 3 and 4 present the multivariate estimations of the effects of novelty on audience-specific evaluations.

Table 3 details regressions on the impact of novelty on *like sentiment*, with a significant first-stage F -statistic ($F = 2088.7$, $p < .01$ using Bartik shift-share IV). Table 4 analyzes the novelty's effect on the *likelihood of winning* a Streamy, also showing a significant first-stage F -statistic ($F = 530.4$, $p < .01$ using Bartik shift-share IV) and a significant Wald test of exogeneity.⁶ Year-dummy variables were included in the analysis but not reported for brevity.

Our findings suggest that while novelty increased likes sentiment, it decreased the likelihood of winning a Streamy. For the consumer audience, the novelty coefficient was positive and significant (Model 2: $b = .096$, $p < .001$), where a one-standard-deviation increase in the novelty score (6.59) raises the likes ratio from 0.805 to 0.957, as depicted in Figure 2. Conversely, for the professional audience, the novelty coefficient was significantly negative (Model 7: $b = -.684$, $p < .001$), indicating that professionals tend to discount novelty. This results in a decreased probability of winning a Streamy from 0.432 to 0.114 with a one-standard-deviation increase in the novelty score (6.73), illustrated in Figure 3. Similar results were obtained using a linear probability model (see Model 8).

What could explain this result? In the following section, we abductively develop a framework of evaluation in the YouTube landscape. In turn, we try to buttress this framework by analyzing key *within-audience* and *across-audience* factors that may moderate how novelty is evaluated by each audience and assess to what degree they are in line with our baseline expectation.

5.1 | Audience-specific reactions to novelty

Why would consumer audiences react positively to novelty but not professional audiences? Novelty per se incurs a cost for audiences trying to evaluate which cultural offerings to consume

⁶The null hypothesis of Wald's test is "no endogeneity" (STATA, p. 6). Thus, a significant Wald's test indicates that the two-stage model is appropriate. For more information, we point to Wooldridge (2010), pp. 472–477.

TABLE 2 Summary and correlations of the likelihood of winning sample.

Variables	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Likelihood of win	0.18	0.38	0	1	1.00						
(2) Videos	851.69	634.56	1	2694	-0.02	1.00					
(3) Views	2805502.00	7413595.00	33	615,000,000	0.00	-0.10	1.00				
(4) Duration	606.77	717.52	5	42,956	-0.04	0.13	0.03	1.00			
(5) FB likes	1425.11	0	0	28,000,000	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	1.00		
(6) Tweets	3.59	0	0	20	-0.01	-0.12	0.06	0.03	0.00	1.00	
(7) Red. Upvotes	66.58	998.86	0	53,382	-0.02	-0.04	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.06	1.00
(8) Red. Posts	0.63	1.79	0	25	0.01	-0.05	0.13	0.05	0.01	0.23	0.36
(9) Video age	1415.63	533.10	459.00	2253	0.03	-0.03	-0.09	-0.14	0.00	-0.05	-0.05
(10) Category fuzziness	4.34	0.13	3.98	4.58	0.01	0.31	-0.01	0.20	0.01	0.01	-0.03
(11) Previous likes S.	0.94	0.12	0.01	1	0.13	-0.03	0.02	0.14	0.00	0.19	0.02
(12) Bartik IV	0.01	0.06	0	1	-0.05	0.01	-0.01	-0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00
(13) Novelty	6.73	1.66	0	12.14	-0.14	0.01	-0.02	-0.11	0.00	0.02	0.06
Variables	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)	
(8) Red. Posts	0.63	1.79	0	25	1.00						
(9) Video age	1415.63	533.10	459.00	2253	-0.10	1.00					
(10) Category fuzziness	4.34	0.13	3.98	4.58	0.03	-0.06	1.00				
(11) Previous likes S.	0.94	0.12	0.01	1	0.09	0.02	-0.03	1.00			
(12) Bartik IV	0.01	0.06	0	1	-0.02	-0.24	0.07	-0.08	1.00		
(13) Novelty	6.73	1.66	0	12.14	0.09	-0.20	-0.12	-0.17	0.12	1.00	

Note: 1. The sample consists of all 31, 993 nominated-year videos used for the likelihood of winning regressions. 2. Correlation coefficients with an absolute value larger than 0.03 are significant at the .05 level. 3. Video duration is measured in seconds and video age in days.



TABLE 3 Consumer audience likes regressions.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	First stage				
Videos (Std)	−0.045 (.000)	0.017 (.101)	0.019 (.052)	0.016 (.125)	0.018 (.063)
Duration (Std)	0.029 (.000)	−0.003 (.014)	−0.003 (.025)	−0.004 (.008)	−0.003 (.016)
Views (log)	0.000 (.858)	0.004 (.089)	0.003 (.140)	0.004 (.075)	0.003 (.121)
FB likes (log)	0.027 (.000)	−0.003 (.002)	−0.003 (.003)	−0.003 (.002)	−0.003 (.002)
Tweets (Log)	0.164 (.000)	−0.014 (.017)	−0.012 (.030)	−0.014 (.018)	−0.012 (.033)
Reddit posts (Std)	0.028 (.000)	−0.004 (.021)	−0.003 (.045)	−0.004 (.040)	−0.003 (.073)
Reddit Upvotes (Std)	0.008 (.002)	−0.001 (.050)	−0.001 (.088)	−0.001 (.025)	−0.001 (.049)
Video age (days)	−0.000 (.000)	0.000 (.037)	0.000 (.029)	0.000 (.029)	0.000 (.025)
Category fuzziness	0.271 (.000)	0.016 (.394)	0.022 (.225)	0.016 (.417)	0.021 (.237)
Previous Streamy win	0.411 (.000)	−0.047 (.019)	−0.042 (.022)	−0.017 (.462)	−0.014 (.493)
Bartik IV	0.904 (.000)				
Novelty		0.096 (.000)	0.092 (.000)	0.099 (.000)	0.096 (.000)
Novelty × fuzziness			−0.147 (.112)		−0.148 (.107)
Novelty × previous win				−0.080 (.000)	−0.075 (.001)
Constant	−0.075 (.925)	0.693 (.000)	0.751 (.000)	0.682 (.000)	0.741 (.000)
Observations	191,707	191,707	191,707	191,707	191,707
YouTubers	221	221	221	221	221
R square	.22	.09	.08	.10	.08
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
YouTuber FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Robust SE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Robust *p* values in parentheses. Two-tailed tests.

TABLE 4 Likelihood of winning regressions.

	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)
	First stage					
Videos (Std)	0.151 (.000)	0.035 (.776)	0.014 (.020)	0.046 (.707)	-0.010 (.929)	0.003 (.976)
Duration (Std)	0.006 (.480)	-0.106 (.056)	-0.073 (.000)	-0.073 (.123)	-0.079 (.052)	-0.057 (.097)
Views (log)	-0.116 (.000)	-0.149 (.006)	-0.077 (.000)	-0.131 (.032)	-0.168 (.000)	-0.153 (.001)
FB likes (log)	0.058 (.000)	0.070 (.000)	0.035 (.000)	0.060 (.002)	0.068 (.000)	0.061 (.001)
Tweets (Log)	-0.027 (.051)	0.009 (.891)	-0.008 (.115)	0.129 (.132)	0.032 (.664)	0.122 (.162)
Reddit Posts (Std)	0.113 (.000)	0.128 (.000)	0.079 (.000)	0.098 (.006)	0.130 (.000)	0.108 (.001)
Reddit Upvotes (Std)	0.047 (.000)	0.020 (.381)	0.008 (.152)	0.023 (.362)	0.030 (.175)	0.032 (.100)
Video age (days)	-0.001 (.000)	-0.000 (.225)	-0.000 (.001)	-0.000 (.278)	-0.000 (.197)	-0.000 (.228)
Category fuzziness	0.871 (.000)	-0.738 (.220)	-0.325 (.000)	-0.224 (.726)	-0.874 (.152)	-0.479 (.430)
Previous likes sentiment	0.236 (.005)	0.826 (.683)	0.395 (.000)	1.413 (.519)	0.558 (.660)	0.986 (.366)
Bartik IV	0.024 (.861)					
Novelty		-0.684 (.000)	-0.394 (.000)	-0.694 (.000)	-0.697 (.000)	-0.708 (.000)
Novelty × fuzziness				0.062 (.035)		0.047 (.077)
Novelty × previous likes					-0.968 (.017)	-0.798 (.028)
Constant	6.041 (.000)	9.215 (.017)	5.181 (.000)	6.133 (.185)	10.276 (.001)	7.963 (.009)
Observations	31,866	31,866	31,866	31,866	31,866	31,866
YouTubers	221	221	221	221	221	221
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Robust SE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R-squared/Wald Chi Sq.	.318	1096.81	.256	958.09	1153.19	1173.86

Note: Robust *p* values in parentheses. Two-tailed tests.

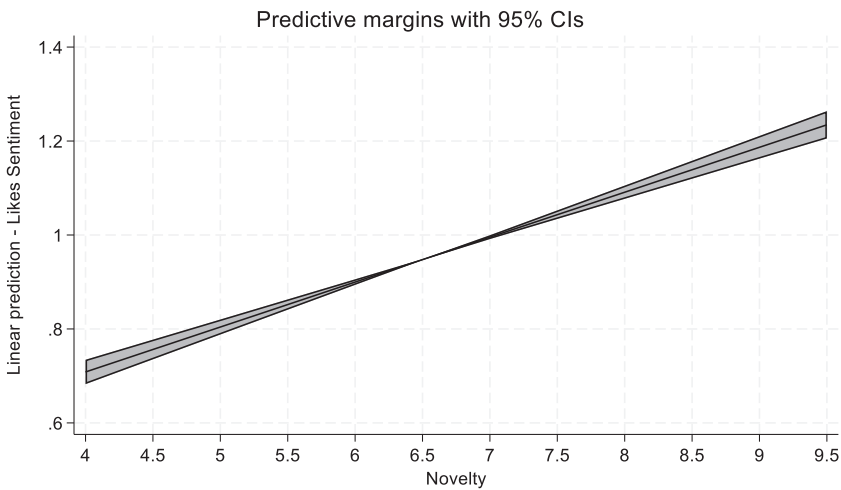


FIGURE 2 Main effect consumer evaluation.

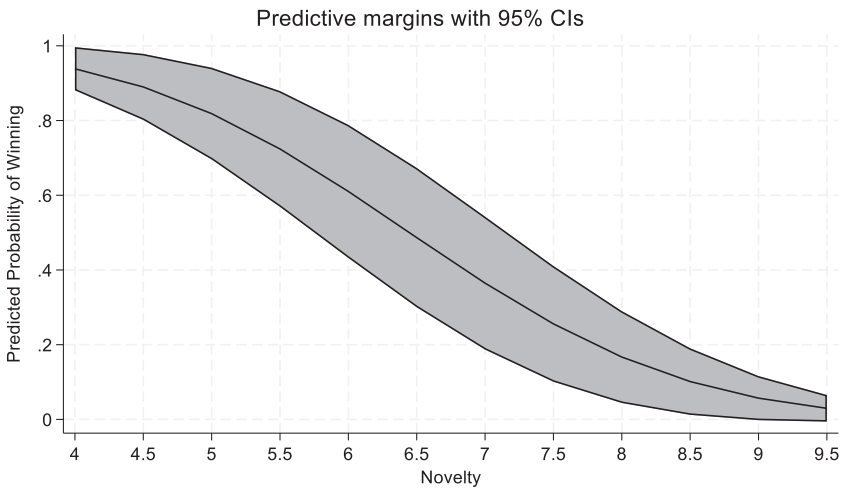


FIGURE 3 Main effect professional evaluation.

(Cattani et al., 2022). Evaluation “consists of the overall cognitive process through which individual audience members categorize and subsequently value organizations” (Gouvard & Durand, 2023, p. 659). Historically, professional intermediaries like critics have facilitated this process by using their expertise to categorize new offerings against known standards, simplifying the selection for consumers by preselecting based on prototype analysis (Durand & Paoletta, 2013; Hannan et al., 2007). This approach is particularly effective for high-culture offerings, reducing the cognitive burden on consumers who otherwise would need to screen, understand, and categorize a large array of new content themselves (Zuckerman, 2017). Yet this approach may also result in skepticism of novelty, which we suggest has remained in the professional audience.

Looking at the consumer audience first, recent studies suggest that the two-step, prototype-based evaluation traditionally used for new cultural offerings may not be the only method;

goal-based categorization, where “audiences have a particular need and categorize product offerings based on the goal they pursue” (Boulongne & Durand, 2021, p. 257), is also present.

Our results suggest that YouTube's general audience applies goal-based categorization as active *novelty-seekers*, seeking unique, engaging content (see also Tauscher et al., 2022). In their comprehensive survey of popular YouTube videos, Burgess and Green (2018) note, “there was a surprisingly small number of amateur, mundane, ‘slice of life’ videos in the sample” (p. 43), and “regardless of the techniques used, the sample points clearly to a logic of cultural value centered for the most part around novelty and humor” (p. 53).

YouTube audiences seek diverse types of (quality) content—from entertainment to specific instructional videos—often after exploring traditional media like TV and books (Khaire, 2017a). This is supported by insights from YouTube officials.

I work in (the video category) shopping, so we see one type of user of the platform is a researcher. So you want to buy a washing machine; you've read a lot of blogs; you've done this, and now you are like, “I need to see it in action.” You know, (you) are coming for something different. And so there is that precedent that maybe it is where you come and, how do I say this? The intent is already to find novel content among the viewers. (Interviewee 3, YouTube official)

Such novelty-seeking behavior extends beyond YouTube to platforms like self-publishing sites (Khaire, 2017a), so that cultural entrepreneurs' “distinctiveness will increase new ventures' legitimacy” (Tauscher et al., 2021, p. 150).

Successful YouTubers similarly emphasize the importance of uniqueness in attracting viewers:

I can't stress how important it is to be unique and original. You need to find something you enjoy that is filling a gap which no-one else is, otherwise you will struggle to get the traction on any platform. (<https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Wikitubia:Interviews/Jawsh>)

Overall, our results suggest that YouTube consumers respond positively to offerings that are not only new but also surprising, following their tendency for novelty-seeking and goal-based categorization.

By contrast, our results suggest that the professionals judging the Streamy Awards evaluate work based on predefined categories and using a prototype-based comparison model, as in the offline world (e.g., Bowers, 2015). Professionals remained *novelty-scrutinizing*, assessing whether offerings align with established norms and values (Cattani et al., 2014, 2017). Although professionals have the cognitive capacity to appreciate highly novel and atypical offerings (e.g., Boulongne et al., 2019; Hannan et al., 2019), a professional audience using a prototype-based evaluation logic will likely reject such.

Professionals focus on categorical purity (Abbott, 1981, 1988; Zuckerman, 1999) and thus usually favor offerings “whose features do not stray beyond the conventional range of differentiation encompassed by that category, as commonly understood by a particular set of evaluators” (Zuckerman, 2017, p. 34). Cultural entrepreneurs may not always tailor their unique expressions to fit these criteria—if they are even aware of them (Khaire, 2017a). Yet if a new offering “violates the categories and classifications of a given cultural system” (Abbott, 1981, p. 824), this also challenges the very foundations of *professional* identity associated with a category

(Boulongne et al., 2019). Professionals tasked with consecrating works within an existing category aim to uphold and legitimize current social norms and evaluation standards (Rosch & Mervis, 1975), resisting novel offerings that disrupt these norms (Cattani & Ferriani, 2008). This results in a “continued reproduction of the legitimacy of those who produce or defend the canon” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 20), favoring where “[c]ultural intermediaries reproduce rather than bridge the distance between production and consumption” (Negus, 2002, p. 509).

Historically, novel ideas that challenge prevailing norms, such as impressionism and hip-hop, have often been rejected by professional intermediaries (Khaira, 2017a). This pattern extends to contemporary discussions on whether computer games are art (Deardorff, 2015; Ebert, 2010) and the use of AI in artistic fields (Grierson, 2023; Helmore, 2023). Studies show that jurors, like those at the Academy Awards, typically prefer works from cultural insiders over outsiders (Cattani et al., 2014).⁷ Such rejections stem from the threat novel ideas pose to established categories; accepting them potentially reconfigures the status hierarchy and undermines the legitimacy of existing high-status actors (Bowers & Prato, 2017). We suggest that it should be similar dynamics that explain the baseline negative reaction of Streamy Award jurors to novelty.

5.2 | Within-audience heterogeneity: Novelty and category fuzziness

To elaborate on whether different evaluation modes across audiences explain our baseline result, we explore the relative effect of novelty per audience across different categories. Here, we suggest that looking at the impact of category fuzziness may allow buttressing and elaborating our logic.

Looking first at the consumer audience, we noted that goal-based categorization is highly cognitively demanding (Boulongne & Durand, 2021). On YouTube, it is facilitated by algorithms that help users manage their cognitive load by efficiently building and sorting consideration sets (Fisher et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2015; Sharkey et al., 2023; Tauscher et al., 2021). This makes goal-based categorization practical for YouTube users (see also, Tauscher et al., 2022).

However, the effectiveness of this process decreases as content categories become fuzzier—less clearly definable and more ambiguous—with multiple overlapping logics and interpretations (Hannan, 2010), complicating algorithmic curation (Khaira, 2017a). Specifically, as topics get fuzzier (i.e., less crisp), consumer preferences are more complex to express and assess where the relationship between past and future consumption and their esteem of novel content befuddles. Officials at YouTube have confirmed this huge variance in genres:

One thing we've learned from doing research is that it's really nuanced, especially when it comes to the genre of content we're discussing. For example, gaming content has a very different audience in terms of demographics compared to someone who's watching a vlog. This means that the intent of viewers for various genres like travel, food, and so on is also different. (Interviewee 3, YouTube official)

⁷Even in science, examples abound where advancement could only be achieved when prominent gatekeepers representing an existing approach no longer held key positions in the field (Azoulay et al., 2019). A famous historical example is when prominent astronomers like Sir Isaac Newton rejected ideas to address the famous Longitude problem largely because they could not fathom how a solution expected from astronomy could arise from mere clockmaking (Cattani et al., 2017).

But even if algorithms were to effectively curate content within fuzzy categories, novelty-seeking consumers may still be confused when forced to process novelty in a more complex setting (Khaire, 2017a). Research indicates that consumers who typically enjoy variety are less tolerant of novelty in such fuzzy categories (Goldberg et al., 2016). Therefore, if our basic explanation of novelty-seeking audiences applying goal-based categorization holds, their evaluation of novelty should diminish in less clearly defined (i.e., fuzzier) topic areas.

By contrast, we expect that professional intermediaries applying prototype-based categorization will become more tolerant of novelty in fuzzier categories. There, being atypical aligns with expected behavior (Cudennec & Durand, 2023; Haans, 2019; Sgourev & Althuizen, 2014). For instance, categories like “independent” games and movies or “fusion” cuisine, though not explicitly labeled as fuzzy, allow more room for novel recombinations than more clearly defined categories like “documentary” versus “drama.” The fuzzier the category, the more likely commonly cultural entrepreneurs will attempt to reshape cultural norms (Cattani et al., 2020) and intermediaries will use analogies to make sense of these innovations (Boulongne et al., 2019). When initially innovative outliers increasingly become accepted in fuzzy categories (Hannan et al., 2019; Reschke & Leung, 2022), then even highly novel subsequent cultural offerings may be perceived as less confusing by a professional audience.

In sum, Streamy jurors applying prototype-based categorization should exhibit greater tolerance and a deeper appreciation for complexity in less clearly defined categories. This adaptability allows them to recognize multiple prototypes or to explore new ideas more openly, and to evaluate more positively compared to when it is presented in well-defined ones.

To measure category fuzziness, we downloaded data on YouTube's publicly available 8 M dataset (<https://research.google.com/youtube8m/>), which includes eight million videos categorized into 24 “verticals” or categories with 4716 subcategories. These verticals, established through machine learning and verified by human raters, served as a lexicon to compute our fuzziness measure (see below) by studying how *diffused* these were across the 12 Streamy Award categories.

In turn, we capture *category fuzziness* via Shannon's (1948) entropy measure. We began by calculating text similarity between nominated categories and YouTube's 24 verticals to determine the distribution of each vertical within a nominated category. We then computed the entropy of a nominated category across these verticals, with higher entropy indicating greater category fuzziness.⁸ On average, categories like “Gaming” and “News, Culture, and Cultural Events” showed the highest fuzziness, whereas “Lifestyle” and “Food” had the crispest boundaries.

Each YouTuber in our study was assigned a yearly fuzziness score based on the Streamy Awards category they were nominated for. Our qualitative evidence suggests that channel pivoting on YouTube is uncommon, typically remaining within a genre (i.e., different kinds of gaming videos, but not a switch from gaming to food). In our sample, no YouTuber had nominations across different content categories.

We add the category fuzziness and novelty interaction in Models 3 and 9.

Looking at the role of fuzziness in novelty evaluation by consumers, as expected, we see a negative coefficient in Model 3, but reaching standard levels of significance ($b = -.147$, $p = .112$). As we had argued above, a potential explanation is that customers primarily consume content recommended by the algorithm; indeed, the 2017 share of algorithmically curated

⁸As a robustness check, we also used the 1-Herfindahl Index (since Herfindahl measures the concentration of verticals) for award categories to measure the fuzziness, and found qualitatively identical results.

videos watched was 70% (Solsman, 2018). Assuming the algorithm is able to factor in the right degree of novelty for a video to be enjoyable across various categories, we need some shock-like event to detect any moderating effect from category fuzziness. In Section 5.4, we report on one of these, the introduction of the YouTube Kids app, and find some indication of the expected effect.

For the professional audience, the interaction between fuzziness and novelty is positive and significant (Model 9: $b = .062$, $p = .035$). To further illustrate this effect, we plotted the interaction effects of novelty within fuzzy versus well-defined categories (top and bottom tenth percentiles of the fuzziness score, respectively) in Figure 4. The results show a flatter slope for fuzzier categories, indicating that professionals exhibit greater tolerance for novelty in these categories when evaluating Streamy nominees.

In sum, we note that our findings on within-audience heterogeneity are in line with consumers and professionals on YouTube applying different modes of categorization.

5.3 | Across-audience influence in novelty evaluations

Having scrutinized within-audience heterogeneity in novelty evaluations, we now look at the dynamics of being embraced by one audience on YouTube on the reception by another as cultural entrepreneurs *continue to produce novelty*, in line with our second research question.

As we had noted above, this question allows us to shed light on one of the key differences between online and offline cultural markets: there seems to be a positive spillover effect in offline markets for novel artists, in particular as they follow the standard route of consecration by professionals preceding their entry into the consumer market. Given the idiosyncratic story of the Streamy Awards on the YouTube platform, the effect of being embraced by the professional audience on subsequent consumer audience performance particularly merits a closer look. First, as noted above, existing literature has cast expert evaluation as the standard mode for the diffusion of cultural entrepreneurship, given the curation and consecration functions intermediaries play. Second, as Khaire (2017a) has noted, the literature expects positive effects of

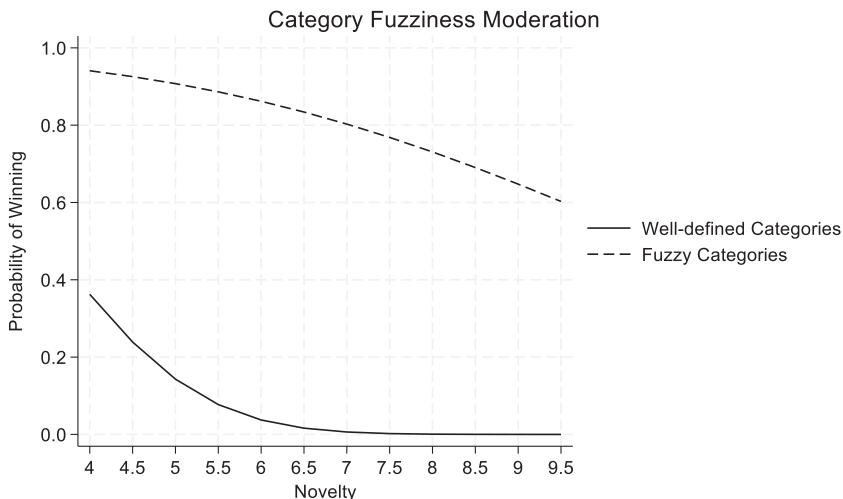


FIGURE 4 Category fuzziness interaction on professional evaluation.

consecration by a professional audience on audience consumption when we compare (as we do) the winners of professional awards versus those nominated (see Anand and Watson (2004) for this effect in the offline world with the Grammy Awards).⁹ At the same time, our results so far point to differences in how consumers versus professionals assess novelty and suggest that positive spillovers across the two audiences in how much each would appreciate new offerings from someone the other audience holds in high regard may be unlikely (see also Bourdieu, 1993; Bowers, 2015; Kovács & Sharkey, 2014; Shi, 2023).¹⁰

Of course, a first core tenet is that cultural entrepreneurs on YouTube actually want to offer novelty and do so continuously—an assumption we found confirmed by several YouTubers:

I would like to continue streaming for as long as people care to watch me experiment with what I do. I do foresee myself wanting to do different things in the future because, as I always say, variety is the spice of life! I have an appetite to try new things, but being able to do so reliably and remain financially stable are things I have to keep in consideration, of course, so it all depends! (<https://youtube.fandom.com/wiki/Wikitubia:Interviews/Cielwave>)

In turn, to capture how support by one audience affects such continuous production of novelty, we measure *previous other-audience evaluations* as (1) a past Streamy win by the same YouTuber for a regular audience, and (2) a prior video's "like" sentiment for professionals. We include this variable as an interaction term with novelty in Models 4 and 10.

Our results suggest that audience groups react adversely to each other's favorable valuations when assessing cultural entrepreneurs' subsequent novelty. As illustrated in Model 4 and Figure 5, videos by YouTubers who had previously won a Streamy are less favored by consumers, with a sharp drop in like sentiment ($b = -.080$, $p < .001$). Model 10 indicates that YouTubers highly favored by consumers face a decreased chance of winning a Streamy when they continue to produce novel content ($b = -.968$, $p = .017$). Figure 6 visualizes this relationship across different levels of novelty for the top and bottom tenth percentiles of like sentiment.

What could most likely explain these effects?

Looking first at the consumer audience's negative reaction, we believe that a strong explanation for this result, in line with our argument of customers as novelty-seekers, is that YouTube's distinctive environment gives rise to a "paradox of publicity" (Kovács & Sharkey, 2014), where awardees who continue to innovate risk negative reactions. Applied to YouTube with its broad and idiosyncratic audience base, this paradox suggests that if a Streamy Award piques broader consumer interest (relative to a nomination, which should, e.g., receive less [social] media attention), which may lead consumers to look beyond the recommendations they algorithmically received, discrepancies in the expectations between consumers and the award jury of what

⁹That said, with such a specific statement, Khaire alluded to a broader point that simply being embraced by professional award juries has not always been found to linearly increase consumption by consumers. Specifically, some awards may simply be seen as "too artsy" by regular consumers, meaning that nominees, on average, may sell worse than non-nominees. But among nominees, Khaire (2017a) has expected that winning the award should exert a strictly positive effect on sales (see also Kackovic & Wijnberg, 2022; Khaire & Wadhvani, 2010).

¹⁰In essence, our arguments relate to the percentage of an audience that would "like" a novel cultural offering. As we elaborate below, we accept that having the support of one audience type may increase the size of the other audience (i.e., that more people of the other audience pay attention to YouTubers, watch their videos, etc.). Such an outcome may be defined as success in studies looking purely at diffusion rather than whether the increased audience actually likes the cultural offering, as we do.

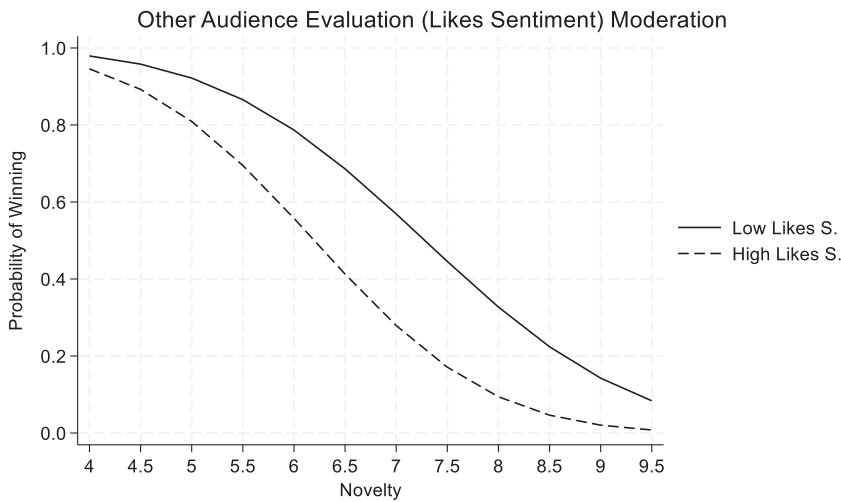


FIGURE 5 Previous likes interaction on professional evaluation.

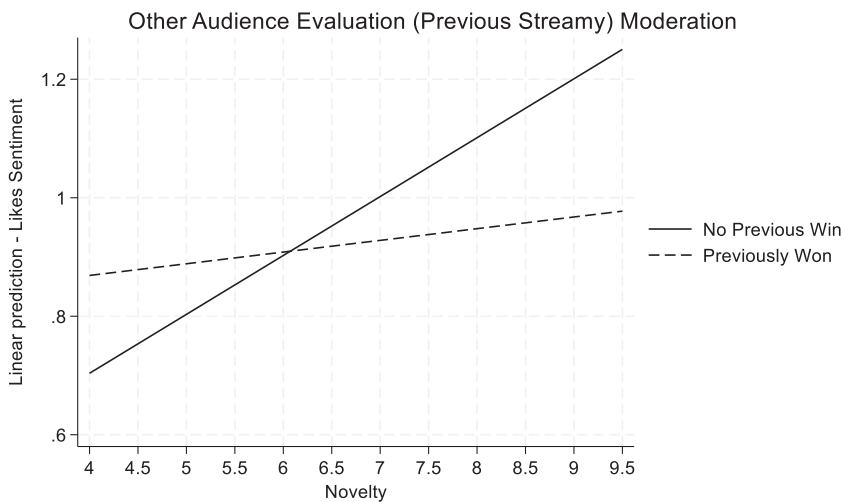


FIGURE 6 Previous Streamy interaction on consumer evaluation.

“good” novelty is (as per our prior arguments) could lead to disappointment. Second, as awards reflect past achievements, consumers will likely watch novel content different from what was awarded a Streamy and be put off or confused by the “new novel” content (Zuckerman et al., 2003). Moreover, any perceived shift toward mainstream appeal might be criticized as inauthentic to gain additional popularity (Berger & Heath, 2007; Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014) or as “selling out” to appease elite audiences’ benevolence (Hahl et al., 2017).

Lilly Singh’s journey from a YouTube start in 2010 to mainstream media is a case in point. She gained over 14 million subscribers and won a Streamy Award for the best first-person series in 2017, later embarking on diverse media ventures including a late-night show on NBC, becoming the first YouTuber to make such a transition and the first woman in 30 years to host a late-night TV show (BBC, 2019; Carras, 2021). Despite these achievements, her transition has

been bumpy. She faced criticism from her YouTube audience for being a sellout, particularly after dropping “Superwoman” from her channel name in advance of her NBC debut (Yam, 2019). Moreover, her show got a cold reception from critics and viewers, with a dismal IMDB rating of 1.5,¹¹ prompting NBC to pull the plug after the second season (Parasuraman, 2021).

In turn, the negative reaction of the professional award jury is in line with our explanation of prototype-based categorization. Professionals see less artisanal value in popular content, (Bourdieu, 1993). Even if popular content is of high quality, professionals prioritize maintaining status hierarchies and resist consecrating works that seem tailored to mass appeal (Coslor et al., 2020). Novel efforts by popular YouTubers might be viewed as pandering to the whims of novelty-seeking masses, which could deflate the meaning of current categories, professional norms, and, possibly, a professional's own status (Abbott, 1981; Boulongne et al., 2019; Cattani et al., 2017; Khaire, 2017a). In other words, our results are explained by professionals refusing to award novelty that aligns too closely with popular tastes, to prevent awards from devolving into mere popularity contests.

5.4 | Robustness checks and additional analysis

To validate that our results were driven by the explanations we present, we delve into our main methodological shortcomings and identify additional evidence.

5.4.1 | Additional sources of data

We gathered *qualitative* evidence to bolster our arguments. Beyond extensive searches across blogs, social media, and YouTube itself, we interviewed four professionals at YouTube in Business Development (interviewee 1), Product Partnership (2), User Research (3), and Content Strategy Operations (4) using professional networks and a snowball approach. Interviews transpired online for transcription after obtaining interviewee permission. We also interviewed a professional YouTuber, and we extensively read and used publicly available interviews of professional YouTubers conducted by the [fandom.com](https://www.fandom.com) staff adhering to a consistent template.

5.4.2 | Sampling bias

Our sampling strategy focused on nominees, raising a concern about whether these YouTubers, who conform to professional category expectations, are representative of commercially successful ones. To address this, we compared nominees with top YouTubers in high-fuzzy (gaming) and low-fuzzy (comedy) categories from Socialblade.com. *T*-tests showed no significant difference in mean novelty scores between nominated and non-nominated YouTubers (mean difference = 0.05, $t = 0.18$), suggesting that novelty does not adversely affect the odds of nomination.

Note that while a higher novelty at first glance may lessen the *likelihood of winning* a Streamy for a *nominated* YouTuber, novelty per se does not seem to worsen the odds of the

¹¹<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10023178/>.

nomination itself. That said, deeper analysis revealed significant differences in novelty scores between top YouTubers in high- versus low-fuzzy categories (mean difference = 1.09, $t = 4.80$), with a two-way analysis of variance indicating a fairly significant interaction between category fuzziness and nomination status ($F = 2.96$). Non-nominated YouTubers in fuzzy categories had the lowest novelty scores, whereas those nominated in such categories scored the highest. These findings, detailed in Supplementary Appendix VI, imply that professional audiences may appreciate novelty more in fuzzy categories and that appropriate novelty could influence both nominations and award wins.

5.4.3 | Drivers of within-consumer-audience heterogeneity

Given the non-significance of our novelty-fuzziness interaction term in predicting consumer audience evaluations, we sought to identify drivers of heterogeneity more precisely within this audience. We considered the launch of the YouTube Kids app in February 2015 as a pivotal event outside consumer control that improved curation within the “kids” category. If our above arguments hold, such locally enhanced crispness should have yielded a higher tolerance for novelty in the “kids” category, but not in any other.

Category-level regressions examining the impact of novelty before and after the app's debut (see also Negro et al., 2022) revealed a positive effect of novelty post-February 2015 *only* in the “kids” category (Supplementary Appendix VII). This finding lends some credence to our notion that consumers appreciate novelty more when they see more precisely what it is about, especially when it is curated for them more accurately.

5.4.4 | Streamy Award jurors as cultural gatekeepers

A significant caveat in our analysis of the professional audience's appreciation of novelty concerns the commitment of the Streamy Award juries to the categories they evaluate. Despite the blue-ribbon composition of these juries, we sought additional evidence of their dedication to their intermediary roles. The 2016 official partnership with YouTube provided a context to test whether these juries maintain their independence and uphold professional standards, particularly when these standards are perceived to be under threat (Khaire, 2017b). Accordingly, we tested whether Streamy Award juries reacted more negatively to novel videos *after* the partnership was announced. As shown in Supplementary Appendix VIII, this was indeed detected.

5.4.5 | Other explanations

To ensure that other explanations do not drive our results, we explicitly tested whether our results could be better explained through nonlinear positioning effects and authenticity. Related to the first, we included a squared novelty term in our regressions to investigate potential curvilinear effects, but found no significant inverted-U relationship for either the professional or consumer audiences, with the squared novelty coefficient p -value at 0.07 for consumers and a formal u -test showing no significant effect (Lind & Mehlum, 2010). At best, this signals some slope flattening for the consumer audience that seems in line with our arguments regarding information overload.

We also considered authenticity, which could influence perceptions of YouTubers either through consistent innovation or adherence to category norms (Askin & Mol, 2018; Smith, 2011). We introduced a Bayesian surprise variable at the YouTuber level to capture this (i.e., how much do YouTubers deviate in creating new content from their produced content), with the correlation between within-YouTuber and across-YouTuber surprise at 64%. Our analyses, detailed in Supplementary Appendix IX and X, revealed that the authenticity measure did not substantially alter our findings. It showed a marginally negative effect on novelty evaluation by consumers ($b = -.29$; $p = .09$) and a positive one by professionals ($b = .17$; $p < .001$), which opposed the effect of our original across-YouTuber novelty measure ($b = -.232$; $p < .001$). These findings lend support to two conjectures: (a) our original across-YouTuber novelty measure shows strong effects after accounting for within-YouTuber novelty, and (b) authenticity-as-YouTuber consistency not only conflicts with novelty per Bu et al. (2022) but is also distinctly valued by both audiences.

6 | DISCUSSION

How should cultural entrepreneurs position themselves in digital cultural markets? Godart et al. (2020, p. 503) have highlighted that “the question of how technological developments impact creativity is increasingly unavoidable” for scholars studying creative and cultural markets. Shi (2023, p. 320) notes that “consumers’ rising power and influence have fueled democratization trends on the production side of markets and have facilitated the creation of unconventional ideas.” We suggested that such dynamics should give rise to two important and interrelated questions: how this potential proliferation of unconventional ideas is evaluated within and across relevant audiences (Bu et al., 2022; Goldberg et al., 2016; Zhao, 2022), and what this may say about the difference between offline cultural markets and online platforms (e.g., Godart et al., 2020; Khaire, 2017a; Pedersen et al., 2020; Sharkey et al., 2023).

Focusing on YouTube and the Streamy Awards, we examined how cultural entrepreneurs striving for novelty encounter paradoxical evaluations from both consumer and professional audiences. Based on our question-led, empirically focused inquiry, we highlight how consumer and professional audiences consistently apply different evaluation modes that lead them to appreciate novelty in a consistently contradictory fashion. Table 5 summarizes our insights. Based on this, we advance three contributions to research on positioning strategies, the digitalization of cultural markets, and online platforms.

6.1 | Theoretical implications

Our first contribution is to recent discussions about markets with multiple fragmented audiences (e.g., Paoletta & Durand, 2016; Zhao, 2022; Zhao et al., 2017). This literature has pointed out that it is not just the degree of novelty entrepreneurs offer that should be considered, but that “[w]hich audience(s) one focuses on represents another crucial element to the distinctiveness mix and captures *for whom the organization is optimally distinctive*” (emphasis original) (Durand & Haans, 2022, p. 6). Research in this area has shown that (a) audience preferences for novelty vary significantly (Cattani et al., 2014; Goldberg et al., 2016; Haans, 2019; Tauscher et al., 2021), (b) there is considerable within-audience variation in appreciation for novelty (Cancellieri et al., 2022; Pontikes, 2012), and (c) the stage of market category development

TABLE 5 Theorizing YouTubers' audiences' different reactions to novelty.

	Consumer audience	Professional audience
<i>Evaluation mode</i>	<i>Goal-based novelty-seeking</i>	<i>Prototype-based novelty-scrutinizing</i>
Categorization mechanism	Build personal consideration set through search and algorithmic support	Categorize based on preexisting categories
Evaluation logic	Value personal utility	Promote professional appropriateness
<i>Normative expectations</i>	<i>Entrepreneurs should offer novelty (i.e., more novelty will be appreciated)</i>	<i>Entrepreneurs should follow professional norms (i.e., less novelty will be appreciated)</i>
Within-audience heterogeneity across in different categories	More novelty becomes less acceptable in fuzzy categories	More novelty becomes more acceptable in fuzzy categories
<i>Reaction to support by other audience type</i>	<i>Paradox of publicity: future novelty is discounted</i>	<i>Cultural elite tries to separate itself from pop culture: future novelty is discounted</i>

influences audience evaluations (Granqvist & Ritvala, 2016; Zhao et al., 2018). Our empirically validated account of why this is the case—previously theorized differences in evaluation modes and their contextual applicability (Gouvard & Durand, 2023) that make one audience more novelty-seeking and the other novelty-scrutinizing—suggests that a traditional strategy to attain optimal distinctiveness across audiences seems near-futile in fragmented, heterogeneous markets. However, there is usually an audience segment more receptive to specific novelty (also see Parker & Corte, 2017; Zhao et al., 2018). Therefore, cultural entrepreneurs may be better advised employing framing strategies to tailor novelty to a specific target audience rather than trying to win over different audience (segments) with different theories of value (Cattani et al., 2020). Also, our results indicate that algorithms, like those used by YouTube, might significantly aid in making novelty more accessible, suggesting a future where optimal distinctiveness is algorithmically matched to each user's preferences, despite potential criticisms from sectors valuing high culture (Khaire, 2017a).

Our second contribution is to research on the effects of cultural markets going online, including questions on the role of nonmarket intermediaries in such settings (e.g., Godart et al., 2020; Pedersen et al., 2020). Despite the democratization of cultural evaluations (e.g., Khaire, 2017a; Sharkey et al., 2023; Shi, 2023), one of our most interesting empirical results is not only that nonmarket intermediaries matter per the Streamys—it is that they exist at all! Our findings underscore the continued relevance of professional intermediaries. Notably, we observed the emergence of a specialized cultural consecrator, the Streamys, in a market otherwise dominated by a single platform, challenging the notion that online and offline markets are distinctly separate in terms of intermediary influence. Furthermore, the Streamys demonstrate integration with the community by allowing public nominations and votes in major categories, such as “Creator of the Year” and “Show of the Year,” similar to audience participation in the Academy Awards. This approach suggests a blending rather than a decoupling of cultural elites from their audiences. These dynamics support calls for more nuanced research into the operational roles of online intermediaries, their differentiation from traditional ones, and the implications for cultural markets (e.g., Khaire, 2017a; Orlikowski & Scott, 2014; Sharkey et al., 2023).

Our third contribution extends to the literature on online platforms like YouTube, Netflix, and Kickstarter, particularly within cultural industries (e.g., Cennamo, 2021; Rietveld et al., 2019). Despite these platforms having various quality and status filters, none have established themselves as credible consecrators of cultural offerings (Khaire, 2017a; Sharkey et al., 2023). Rather, we observe even these players, participated as partners (YouTube: Streamys) or content producers (Netflix: Oscars), engaging in status competitions held by *others* and playing by *their* rules. As noted by Khaire (2017a), independent expert evaluations enhance the perceived quality of these platforms, which otherwise rely on simplistic and easily manipulated rating systems. This suggests that not only online cultural entrepreneurs but also *the platforms* themselves are navigating a landscape dominated by classic gatekeepers as known from offline markets.

6.2 | Practical implications

Our findings offer practical implications for cultural entrepreneurs and platform providers. Cultural entrepreneurs who are indifferent about which audience type to tackle may find simple, pure-play strategies to achieve either fandom (i.e., acceptance by the public) or stardom (i.e., the professional audience). Similarly, cultural entrepreneurs who are uncompromising about what kind of content to distribute to which audience may be inspired by our findings to adjust the level of novelty they offer—for example, YouTubers offering highly novel content in a fuzzy category could tone down their novelty by citing classics of said genre (Cancellieri et al., 2022) or by providing other cues likely familiar to their audiences (Cattani et al., 2020). Given that new YouTubers typically focus on regular audiences, our results support YouTube's approach of enabling personal broadcasting, enhanced by algorithms that likely increase platform profitability and promote highly novel content.

For platform providers, our research underscores the enduring importance of nonmarket intermediaries in cultural consecration. Despite their proficiency in content curation, online platforms should consider external partnerships with professional bodies or recognition systems to maintain quality perceptions and manage the growing content volume, thereby safeguarding their reputation.

6.3 | Limitations, suggestions for future research, and conclusion

No research is perfect, including ours. First, our findings of the platform audience being novelty-seeking can be extrapolated to settings where the audience does not face the cognitive burden of curating novel offerings. Second, we assume the accuracy of search terms used by YouTubers to describe their videos and that any misinformation would be reported. Third, while we incorporate shock-like events and qualitative data to add causal depth, we cannot fully capture the processes that lead to video popularity or Streamy nominations, such as the specific content delivered by YouTube's algorithm or the criteria used by Streamy jurors in their selections. Understanding these mechanisms at an individual level could enrich our insights (see, e.g., Goldberg et al., 2016).

Fourth, our analysis does not encompass the entire universe of YouTube videos, potentially overlooking certain selection effects. For instance, a video might need to reach a certain level of consumer recognition before being considered by professionals, similar to how movies must be



shown in Los Angeles County cinemas to qualify for the Oscars. This selection could reflect consumer or professional norms that warrant further investigation with a broader sample of videos.

Future work may scrutinize the role of varied platforms in the evolution of cultural markets. For instance, platforms may attract specialized content, from short-form videos on TikTok to livestream videos on Twitch. How would these distinct platforms limit or favor creative entrepreneurs and novelty evaluation by audience type? The dynamic interplay between novelty, legitimacy, and consumption in the age of AI offers a rich area for future study: Are algorithms situating decision-makers into or isolating them from particular social structures, and how would the consequences of these placements impact the functioning of cultural markets?

Despite these limitations, our research underscores the profound shifts in cultural markets as they transition to digital platforms. Cultural entrepreneurs use these platforms to access global and diverse audiences by capitalizing on novelty and breaking traditional norms. However, our findings also emphasize the enduring importance of professional intermediaries in legitimizing cultural productions. This interaction between novelty and legitimacy poses a complex challenge for entrepreneurs aiming for success in increasingly digitized markets, underscoring the urgent need for effective navigation strategies.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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