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Author/s:

Hartman, AE;Fisser, C;Venkatraman, R;Coslor, E

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The category work of custodians: Passionate publics and online reviews

Anna E. Hartman^{a,*}, Carys Fisser^{b,2}, Rohan Venkatraman^{c,3}, Erica Coslor^{d,4}

^a Research School of Management, The Australian National University, Australia

^b School of Archaeology & Anthropology, The Australian National University, Australia

^c Deakin Business School, Deakin University, Australia

^d Department of Management and Marketing, University of Melbourne, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores reviewers as a passionate public, examining their category work in the construction of online reviews within an institutionalized market category: whisky. Centering on the discursive aspects of cultural intermediation in market shaping, we examine the emotion-oriented rhetorical evaluations in online whisky reviews from a US-based alcohol retailer (BevMo.com). Using qualitative analysis of 403 user reviews spanning 99 whisky products (e.g., Scotch, bourbon), this study examines whisky reviewers as a type of passionate public and highlights how their passion for category knowledge also fuels the discursive (re)production of category meanings through its display. Reviewers draw on institutionalized category knowledge to establish credibility in their own member identity construction, while also enacting discursive category work by reproducing market category norms through their demonstrated expertise. Our primary theoretical contribution is the identification of reviewers as a passionate public, theorizing their engagement as a form of *category custodianship*, a process shaped by both positive and negative emotions. We identify four distinct *category work* practices in their reviews: (1) *authenticating*, (2) *tutoring*, (3) *valorizing* and (4) *matchmaking*. We conceptualize ‘category custodians’ as an understudied form of cultural market intermediary who perform a dual producer–consumer role as an outcome of their passionate engagement. This study contributes to the socio-cultural turn in public relations scholarship, arguing that a category lens provides a valuable framework to conduct future research on salient issues with academic and managerial implications.

1. Introduction

A persistent question for public relations scholarship has been in deepening our understanding of engagement by various publics. Beyond mere audiences, existing research argues that publics “organize specifically to act... conceptualized as individuals who recognize a problem that affects them and organize into a group to do something about it... publics mobilize to act against something” (Wakefield and Knighton, 2019, p. 2). We argue that the idea of public engagement could be enriched by further consideration of the new types of publics made possible with online technologies, and a deeper engagement with emotions.

Namely, publics may not only be motivated to act against a crisis or event to vent their negative emotions (Kim, 2018, p. 508), but may also be energized by positive emotions, such as feelings of love, devotion and care (Crawford and Dacin, 2021; Crawford et al., 2024; Guo, 2017; Kozinets et al., 2016). Speaking to the need to broaden the concept of publics in public relations, we take up the call to extend notions of passionate publics to include “the multidisciplinary study of fans, brand communities, online reviewers, influencers, and activists” (Kozinets, et al., 2023). This goes beyond an organization-centric focus on dyadic relationships (Heath, 2013; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017; Yang and Taylor, 2015; Yang and Taylor, 2021) to instead capture “technology centric connections and meaningful social, cultural, economic, institutional,

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: anna.hartman@anu.edu.au (A.E. Hartman), carys.fisser@anu.edu.au (C. Fisser), r.venkatraman@deakin.edu.au (R. Venkatraman), erica.coslor@unimelb.edu.au (E. Coslor).

¹ ORCID 0000-0002-2242-3480

² ORCID 0009-0000-0783-9683

³ ORCID 0000-0002-1161-0942

⁴ ORCID 0000-0002-7099-9361

ideological, and technical relationships” (Kozinets et al., 2016, p. 678).

Relevant research focused on publics as a phenomenon has examined the characteristics and capabilities of ‘active’, ‘engaged’ and ‘invested’ publics to explain who and why publics can coalesce around an issue of mutual interest (Sha, 2022; Wakefield and Knighton, 2019). Though helpful in expanding knowledge about how publics interact and serve organizations, more socio-cultural and critical approach to publics are called for to acknowledge the co-constitutive role of communication in the engagement within and between publics (Hou, 2021; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017; Yang and Taylor, 2021). Publics become not just the target audiences of strategic communications, but co-constitutive actors endowed with agency, embedded in networks, and driven by emotion in situations where they actively co-produce meaning.

Within this tradition, we highlight the need to better examine the many passions of publics, especially those not speaking dyadically to an individual organization. To this end, we examine important market institutions as a focus of passionate attachment by different publics, given that public relations is primarily concerned with acts that are “relationally active in creating, amending and re-constructing meanings and, thus in transforming social worlds” (Daymon and Holloway, 2010, p. 4). In particular, we direct attention to the ‘passionate identification’ that some publics have to the cultural meanings and institutionalized practices in a focal market category, publics who are then compelled to actively work as “custodians vested in their continuity” (Dacin, et al., 2019). Sustained by their desire to support, adapt, carry, perform, celebrate and sometimes police categories-as-institutions, passionate publics in their custodianship enact a type of category work, one often characterized by passionate emotions. Hence, we ask: *how do passionate publics intermediate market categories as an outcome of their affective engagement?*

To answer this question, we examined the discursive efforts of individuals we term ‘category custodians,’ reviewers who write online reviews tied to the market category of whisky. We find whisky reviewers are strangely passionate, operating as a ‘passionate public’ in their intentionality to signal their category membership, while intentionally shaping others’ perceptions and understandings through their written evaluations. Through a qualitative discursive analysis of 403 online reviews across 99 different whisky products, we examine whisky reviewers as a type of passionate public and highlight how their passion for the category fuels custodial efforts to enact a discursive type of category work. We use a communicative institutionalism approach to consider how online reviews by passionate publics consist of “symbolic interactions [that] are not just seen as expressions or reflections of inner thoughts of collective intentions but as potentially formative of institutional reality” (Cornelissen et al., 2015 p.11). From this perspective, we consider user-generated online reviews as emotive-driven evaluations by category custodians who discursively (re)produce category norms in their assessments, and therefore have the probable effect of intermediating cultural meanings of the market category.

Understanding the discursive intermediation by category custodians is important for public relations. These passionate efforts intentionally try to shape the opinions and evaluations of others in the category audience, highlighting potential outcomes within and between publics (Hou, 2021; Sha, 2022; Yang and Saffer, 2019). We identify four discursive practices of category work that passionate publics undertake in online reviews that are important in (re)constructing institutional meanings and practices associated with the market category. These entail 1) *authenticating*, 2) *tutoring*, 3) *valorizing* and 4) *matchmaking* practices across different focal category objects. We explore how these practices discursively enact the role of a custodian (Crawford and Dacin, 2021)—arising from their passion for the entire market category as opposed to a single brand or organization. Our study builds on recent work that highlights potential outcomes or forms of passionate engagement (Guo, 2017; Kozinets et al., 2016; Sha, 2022; Toubiana and Zietsma, 2017) and how communicative institutionalism (Buhmann and Schoeneborn, 2021; Hou, 2021) can be useful in understanding category

work for public relations. We next turn to the literature on market category work and custodianship as a context for theorizing intermediation efforts of passionate publics.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Publics as active institutional actors

Approaches that take more of a co-constitutive lens to publics have targeted individuals and groups as social agents driven by emotions, goals and activism. First, the roles and actions of publics are not solely defined by organizational perspectives, but are influenced by their own goals towards shaping social-symbolic objects such as identities, emotions, or practices (Ihm, 2022; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). For example, in some contexts, “cultural identity is the key to understanding the activation of publics” (Sha, 2022, p. 380). Other research notes publics who work as activists in “politicized consumer activism” are driven by their “political stances rather than morality” (Z. Chen, 2020, p. 8). Emotions may also come into play. For example, work on the microfoundations of public engagement has examined the role of negative emotions where “loss, frustration, shame, resentment, concern”, have fueled their behavior (Kim, 2018, p. 508).

While these engaged publics have been studied in their overt actions for change, such as in cases of “hot-issue” crises or activism, we identify this as an overfocus on change and argue that taking a lens of passion and other emotions can open up knowledge of new drivers. We thus see a gap in knowledge about publics motivated by custodianship to preserve cherished institutions (Crawford and Dacin, 2021; Crawford et al., 2024), rather than tearing them down.

Accordingly, while there is a great deal of work that explains why and how *negative* emotions fuel publics to participate in changing or disrupting social institutions, we lack equal attention to the way that some publics might instead be driven by their passion to maintain, protect and reproduce the cultural meanings, traditions and micro-institutions associated with particular social worlds. Taking an institutional lens, we note how emotions are integral to social processes as they are experienced, expressed and conditioned by their institutional affiliations (Crawford and Dacin, 2021; Moisander et al., 2016; Zietsma et al., 2019), a point consistent with a socio-cultural approach. Emotions can fuel behavior, especially when publics are motivated to perform roles that enable, police, valorise, or mythologize aspects of a market or category as an institutional field (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). We consider these institutionalized market categories as social-symbolic objects that are socially constructed and deeply rooted in cultural understandings and expectations further held together by the category members and other actors who use them (Glynn and Navis, 2013; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019).

An area where passionate publics may be engaged in custodial efforts is with a focus on a particular market or industry category in which prior studies and streams of research in organization studies have referred to as ‘category work’ (Glynn and Lounsbury, 2005; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019; Pozner et al., 2022). Category work is relevant for public relations scholarship because it pays attention to “how categories are produced and how categorization takes place in real-time interactions” (Granqvist and Siltaoja, 2020, p. 21). Joining research seeking to yield insights into how particular publics may intentionally work on shaping public opinion beyond the foci of individual organizations (Hou, 2021), we see category work relating to the ‘mechanics of the category’ (Holt, 2018, p. 81), which can be an area of action for passionate publics. This is important because understanding the relationship between how publics shape and drive social dynamics through communication is an ever-growing area for public relations researchers (Ao and Mak, 2021; Heath, 2013; Ihm, 2022; Sha, 2022; Wakefield and Knighton, 2019; Yang and Saffer, 2019; Yang and Taylor, 2015; Zhou, 2019).

2.2. Aficionados as cultural intermediaries

Our specific passionate public focus is composed of aficionados motivated to write online reviews. Derived from the Latin word, *affectio* or ‘affection’, aficionados are considered to be those who “like, know about and appreciate a usually fervently pursued interest or activity” (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Whether as an art aficionado, ham radio operator or creator of a killer paella, an individual’s impassioned desire for expertise towards a cultural object, tradition or market category can help to not only pass the hours, but also gain admission to a group, burnish one’s individual reputation, demonstrate key sensibilities, belonging, and status to others in an institutional domain (Croidieu and Kim, 2018; Kozinets et al., 2016). Moreover, this passion in obtaining a ‘claim to knowledgeability’ (Kuhn and Jens, 2016, p. 25), must also be demonstrated to others as authentic and credible. Hence we consider how passionate publics exercise their discernment to themselves and other audiences—particularly for validation, and usually in matters of taste (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). For example, in examining how lay actors become recognized as legitimate field experts, Croidieu and Kim (2018) identified how 20th century amateur radio operators demonstrate their field-expertise in public spaces to ‘openly display their familiarity with knowledge-intensive activities’ (p.18). While at a personal level they “master their activities as a labor of love”, they then are motivated to share their passion and expertise to benefit the public, and, in turn, these activities work to ‘enhance the recognition of their advanced collective competence’ (p.21).

In other words, taking a market category-as-institution approach (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019), we argue that passionate publics enact a particular type of discursive category work; namely, the intentional and unpaid efforts in learning, emulation and execution of category-specific and institutionalized knowledge and expertise, which may then also be reflected outwards, driven by passion and desire, to interactively recreate an institutionalized domain of culture, sometimes termed a ‘taste regime’ (Arsel and Bean, 2013). This amateur intermediary status is particularly seen in cultural domains (Pozner et al., 2022), in which participation spans roles not only of consumer and fan but also of producer and cultural intermediary (Diaz Ruiz and Kjellberg, 2020; Stanfill and Condis, 2014).

In terms of the specific activities of aficionados, we focus on reviews. This is because in some specialty cultural consumption fields in which we see passion for a market category, e.g., art, music, specialty food, there are implicit critical review standards (Corciolani et al., 2020; Glynn and Lounsbury, 2005). We contend that passionate publics composed of aficionados put considerable effort into constructing evaluations with the specific purpose of shaping reception towards a social object or concept, but also, as we argue, to demonstrate and legitimate themselves as a belonging member to the category in question. This can be conceptually distinguished from market mavens or internet influencers on several dimensions. Despite parallels with category custodians, the term market mavens emphasizes a type of peer-to-peer service, such as one consumer helping another consumer find information about many kinds of products and services (Feick and Price, 1987). Influencers, on the other hand, specialize in being an expert on a particular target audience (Conick, 2019), but differ from our aficionados due to current trends of being financially compensated for their work, meaning they have evolved into more of the traditional cultural intermediary with paid endorsements (Borchers and Enke, 2021).

Afficionados are also driven by personal identity goals. They often attempt to symbolically ‘signal their identities’ and flex their might in relation to the market category through discursive displays online (Grewal et al., 2019; Vasquez, 2014). For example, in a study of the ‘super-consumer’ audiences on eBay, the authors identified ‘enthusiasts’ as those ‘who display a symbolic engagement with the market’, noting it was ‘their personal identities invested in the collective identity of a market and [that they] regard market engagement as not only an

economic activity but also a social one’ (Koçak, et al., 2014, p. 777). In short, gaining expertise can be a key part of someone’s social identity, even outside a formal paid role. If linked to a particular category of cultural consumption, expertise can be an aspirational skill to acquire (Ulver, 2019), one intentionally worked on in different ways (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). Passionate publics as non-elite, informal actors both shape and are shaped by market categories, and subsequently illustrate how ‘people rely on institutions to fashion their sense of self,’ and, conversely, how institutions ‘require people to make them phenomenologically real and permanent’ (Voronov and Weber, 2020, p. 9). These textual and sometimes visual evaluations expressed by passionate publics can then also have unintended consequences for the category, such as ‘an active role in the shaping of market identity’ (Wang, et al., 2016, p. 135).

In short, aficionados can be conceived as ordinary informal publics taking on a custodian role, where they are “active and vested actors (individual or collective) who seek to maintain institutionalized practices” usually in matters of tradition (Dacin et al., 2019, p. 34), and are motivated by their deep emotional connection to and “guardianship of an institution’s integrity” (Crawford and Dacin, 2021, p. 1). Overall, we conceptualize reviewers as category custodians who are fuelled by their passion to maintain the meanings, distinctions and norms of the category. Consequently, our interest is how passionate publics—as a type of proto-intermediary drawn from a normally less active type of market participant—are implicated in discursively co-constructing institutionalized market categories.

3. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODS

In more recent years, online platforms have greatly expanded the participatory spaces for informal and non-elite publics to coalesce (Duhé, 2015; Kent and Taylor, 1998). This dimension of discursive interaction includes, but is not limited to, strategic influencers (Borchers and Enke, 2021; Davies and Hobbs, 2020), blogs and vlogs (Segev et al., 2012; Gannon and Prothero, 2016), and other user-generated content such as image sharing (Kozinets et al., 2016) and online reviews (Hochmeister et al., 2013; Macnamara et al., 2016). One area where we might see particularly passionate publics enacting category work is in the participatory spaces of online user-generated reviews given “an important feature of categories is their use as tools for the evaluation of elements of social life” (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019, p. 228). In this setting, individuals are driven by their passion to discursively (re) construct and evaluate cultural meanings tied to a focal market category. We specifically point to the role language plays, in “actors making sense of, as well as in enacting and transforming, market categories” (Granqvist and Siltaoja, 2020, p. 2). Hence, rather than emphasizing the conceptual, normative prescriptions of how organizations ought to structure their relationships with publics, we foreground the importance of institutions and culture, and the emotions that fuel the discursive category work from the perspective and power of passionate publics. To this end, online reviews are then a repository of public communication that goes beyond prior understandings as a dyadic relationship directed at a single organization, and therefore can provide insights about the wider category in which its discourse is embedded. As a result, considering how a publics’ affective engagement, their passion for a particular market category and subsequent expressions of such passion may further shape perceptions through online spaces is an important area of inquiry for public relations.

3.1. Research Context: Whisky Category-as-Institution

Food is to a ‘foodie’—as whisky is to a... ‘bourbonite’, ‘whisky geek’, ‘maltster’ or a member of the Brown Water Society.⁴ These different

⁴ Charleston Brown Water Society <http://www.brownwatersociety.com/>

identities are linked to the market category of whisky, signalling areas of focused passion and expertise within the specialty food and beverage sector. The market category of whisky is a good case to examine category work because of its deeply ingrained symbolic, historical and contemporary cultural associations (Voronov and Foster, 2018). While whisky has previously been referred to as a ‘marketplace icon’ (Holt, 2018), with particular brands having been studied (e.g. Jack Daniels in Holt, 2006), the history of whisky can be traced back to the production of ‘acqua vitae’ in Ireland and Scotland in about the 15th century, with the earliest evidence of distilling dated around 1494 (Miller, 2019). The modern whisky market is expansive and global, comprising multiple subcategories, counting Scotch whisky, Irish whiskey, bourbon, and rye whiskey. These different whisky styles are also intimately tied to the meanings of place, time and history, and are often strongly associated with the identity of a nation (Spracklen, 2011). Institutional characteristics on the production side involve historical ties to the regional and national culture of where it was made. For example, many traditional whisky-producing countries—most notably Scotland—tie to whisky other elements of their national identity such as tourism, food and jobs (Spracklen, 2014). Other nations that have more recently become known for their whisky production (such as Japan and India), will often draw from the older whisky nations and their history and production methods, to use as sources of legitimacy (Spracklen, 2011; Takeuchi, 2019).

Like standards in wine production and consumption, the market category of whisky has developed deep and longstanding institutionalized characteristics. Industry rules and classifications of producing whisky can depend on the style or varietal intended but are also often a result of the country or region where it is produced, as aspects of production are regulated by national legislation. For example, in the United States (US), regulation stipulates that American bourbon must be produced on US soil, made from at least 51 % corn and aged in charred oak barrels that are new (Eby, 2020). Similarly, in the United Kingdom (UK), the Scotch Whisky Regulations 2009 governs the market in terms of production and category definitions, but it also regulates bottling, whisky packaging (e.g., labels) and advertising (Scotch Whisky Association, 2009). In addition, there are established standards, including the variances across its product sub-categories that include rules—similar to other specialty food and beverage products protected and regulated by geographical indicators (e.g., Champagne, prosciutto de Parma, Parmigiano-Reggiano). While these points highlight features of whisky production, there are also institutionalized aspects of whisky consumption—which this paper’s findings seek to highlight.

3.2. Data Collection

To explore how passionate publics discursively enact category work in relation to the market category of whisky, we analyzed the textual content in user-generated product reviews from the entire whisky category listed on the website BevMo! (bevm.com). BevMo! (formerly Beverages and More) is a big-box retailer with a full-service online commerce platform that includes consumer reviews on each product’s page. According to its website, BevMo! has received numerous industry awards with its 166 retail outlets and is ‘the number one specialty beverage retailer on the west coast’ (Bevmo.com, 2020) accounting for 5 % of all alcohol sales in the US in 2018 (TABS Analytics 2018).

Instead of a specialty and niche whisky review website such as the online reviews section of the media platform Whisky Advocate (https://whiskyadvocate.com/ratings-reviews), we chose Bevmo! as a dataset encompassing reviews from a spectrum of consumers given its prominence in the marketplace and vast range of product categories. By collecting the entirety of the reviews for a particular category, and its sub-categories and styles, as a body of text, we could then analyze this in relation to the larger market category to which it belongs. In addition, while some platforms direct consumers to include certain structured points in their reviews or offer other reviewing tips, the Bevmo! platform

does not direct or guide consumers in any manner, giving us a corpus of data indicative of the naturally occurring choices in how and what consumers attempt to communicate in their reviews. In other words, unstructured online reviews make a good case to uncover salient dimensions of discourse because we can view them as happening naturally in intention.

Each product page on BevMo!’s website includes the product description, product imagery and price information with a link to reviews above the fold⁵ and the expanded reviews listed below the fold (see image in Appendix A). Using Outwit Hub software for data collection, we captured data from 383 listed products in BevMo!’s online ‘whiskey’ category that included ‘bourbons’, ‘single malt scotch’, ‘Japanese whiskey’, ‘American whiskey’, ‘blended’, ‘Canadian whisky’, ‘flavored’ and ‘rye whiskey’. For the purposes of our study, we then discarded listings without reviews, leaving a set of 155 individual product pages and 500 associated user-generated reviews. From here we decided to remove subcategory product ‘stock keeping unit’ numbers (SKUs) that were odd sized (e.g., 50-ml or 1.75-l) or unusual (e.g., moonshine). Then, to focus on products that were indicative of receiving attention and engagement, we culled the listings further to only include products that had at least two or more user-generated reviews. This resulted in a final dataset consisting of 99 individual product SKUs across eight sub-categories and 403 corresponding user-generated reviews (see Table I—data overview).

In addition to the textual data from user-generated reviews and the associated product descriptions, we immersed ourselves in the context of whisky through various archival sources including author 1 doing field visits to distilleries and tastings rooms in addition to her cultural knowledge and work experience as a public relations practitioner in the specialty food and beverage sector. Archival sources included social media pages, books, magazines, media articles, trade associations, YouTube videos and a handful of documentaries on the history and current marketplace of whisky (see Table II).

3.3. Applying discursive analysis to user-generated reviews

We argue that a discursive approach is an excellent strategy with which to analyze user-generated reviews to illuminate particular aspects of market category dynamics—specifically, the relationship between the micro-level analysis of evaluations and an institutionalized market category (Coslor et al., 2020; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Granqvist and Siltaoja, 2020). Unlike professional intermediaries who often go through editing and approval processes, in the genre of online reviews by passionate publics, ‘online authors write for each other’; are spontaneous; and the reviews are ‘likely produced without revisions, and posted without mediation’ (Taboada, 2011, p. 251). Thus, we consider

Table I
Overview of Data.

Style Category	SKUs	Reviews
Single Malt Scotch (750)	32	135
Bourbons (750)	24	110
Blended (750)	23	73
Irish Whiskey (750)	7	34
Canadian Whisky (750)	4	23
Rye Whiskey (750)	6	14
Japanese Whiskey (750)	1	7
American Whiskey (750)	2	7
TOTAL	99	403

*Total SKUs with two or more reviews on bevm.com

⁵ Above the fold refers to the portion of the website that is visible without scrolling down.

Table II
Summary of Data Sources.

Data Source	Type of Data
Bevmo.com	User-generated product reviews
Bevmo.com	Product Descriptions
Producer Descriptions	Physical branded product packaging
Ethnographic Field notes	In depth distillery visits in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Dalwhinnie, Scotland (July 2019) – Copenhagen Distillery, Denmark (July 2019) – Mackmyra, Sweden (July 2019) – Sullivans Cove, Tasmania (Mar 2020)
Archives	<p>Books:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Whisky: Technology, Production and Marketing (Stewart et al., 2021) <p>Documentaries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – On the Whisky Trail: The History of Scotland's Famous Drink (Dale, 2003) – Scotch! The Story of Whisky (Coutts, 2016) – Scotch: A Golden Dream (Peat, 2018) <p>YouTube channels:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Whisky Vault (425k subscribers) (@WhiskeyVault, 2014) <p>Specialty media:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Whisky Advocate – Whisky Enthusiast – The Whiskylist – The Whisk(e)y Marketing School
Trade Associations	<p>Wine and Spirit Education Trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – WSET Level 4 Systematic Approach to Tasting Spirits – WSET Level 4 Spirits-Lexicon <p>Scotch Whisky Association (SWA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Scotch Whisky Regulations of 2009 (Scotch Whisky Association, 2009)
Social media observations	<p>Whisky Advocate Facebook page</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 28,724 total likes

this genre of discursive text as a system of cultural meanings that are created, produced, and expressed to negotiate and shape social reality (Daymon and Holloway, 2010). Discourse analysis is designed to examine and identify the multiple meanings ascribed to texts within the context that they exist because “every institution has a body of transmitted recipe knowledge, that is, knowledge that supplies the institutionally appropriate rules of conduct” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 83). Reviews from across a market category offer a dataset that allows exploration into the discourses that are embedded within the wider institutional context (Fairclough, 2003). This makes online reviews a good case to analyze the micro-discursive efforts of publics as discourse producers, given language is “a strategy which people use purposefully to try to create a particular effect” (Daymon and Holloway, 2010, p. 167). A focus on the text itself is also a useful strategy when focusing on the role of emotions in discourses.

To address the role of passionate publics in market category work, we use a discursive perspective to see how category member identity and category objects are situated, (re)constructed and deployed (Ybema, et al., 2009). Different identities and hierarchies of identities within a particular category are socialized in skills and vocabulary that enables individuals to perform their category membership meaningfully to others through communicating in their ‘role-specific language’ (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 159).

Our approach to data analysis followed a hermeneutic tradition (Belk, et al., 2013) and a discourse analysis in conjunction with institutional analysis specifically (Daymon and Holloway, 2010; Fairclough, 2003; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019). As language holds a fundamental role in the (re)construction of market categorization (Granqvist and Siltaoja, 2020), we began the first step in the textual analysis by examining the texts in the online reviews to obtain an understanding of what the bulk of the content contained—identifying content

subcategories in terms their discursive nature and purpose. For example, consistent with prior work on the discursive construction of reviewer identities (Vasquez, 2014), we noted reviews that reflected different linguistic choices in how the writer talked about themselves or whether they wrote to the potential reader such as those with more narrative elements or those with more evaluative language. However, since it is important to analyze discursive work in relation to the context of its ‘production, dissemination and communication, and consumption’ (Fitchett and Caruana, 2015, p. 14), via discussions between co-authors we came to identify the dataset of reviews as purposeful texts comprising both evaluative language and rhetorical elements—hence we refer to online reviews as a text genre of rhetorical evaluations, situating these as a type of discourse. While reviews can vary in length and quality, we proceeded with a rhetorical analysis approach in examining the intent of these texts to illuminate the discursive choices made to convey evaluations relative to the category.

Second, in analyzing these data as rhetorical evaluations, we began with open coding the reviews starting with one subcategory at a time from the data set, e.g., scotch, bourbon, Japanese whisky, blended whiskies, etc. This provided an overarching understanding of the subcategory and what differences, if any, might exist within it and across styles. We then moved forward with recoding seeking a more granular level of understanding how ‘discourse and rhetoric are used, created, and transformed by interactants, rather than simply transmitted or channeled through them’ (Cornelissen et al., 2015, p. 21). During this stage, we considered the connection of emotions as microfoundations of institutions, and identified that the discursive choices are intended to achieve several purposes—such as being helpful or useful (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Moore, 2015), but concurrently using language choices as cues that “inscribed or invoked” (Vasquez, 2014, p. 61) focal category objects, to signal credibility, status and legitimacy of their reviews and opinions in relation to the category. Moreover, the first author contributed their own insights into analysis from their professional experience as a public relations practitioner in the specialty food and beverage sector. The first, third and fourth authors also immersed themselves in additional elements of the category by visiting distilleries and examining whisky labelling and packaging, producer descriptions and other secondary sources of category information (see Table II).

4. Findings: impassioned category custodianship

4.1. Constructing category credibility

In order to understand the findings, we highlight how reviewers establish their own credibility to the market category. In an overt form of ‘selfing’ where writers construct their own ‘particular identity for the authorial self’ (Cutcher, et al., 2020, p. 4), reviewers self-identify their category membership relating to their own perceived status and expertise. They thus establish whether they are an expert or novice of whisky, with these discursive claims to credibility as key to enacting the role of a category custodian. Without the ability to convince readers of their authority to dictate and espouse category norms, reviewers cannot enact custodianship activities, as these activities are predicated on a deep familiarity with and knowledge of the specified category.

Credibility claims by reviewers may manifest as an elaboration of the breadth of their whisky consumption experience, such as ‘I have sampled and enjoyed close to 120 whiskies, this does not make a top ten’ [22:7] or introducing their review with ‘I’ve had a lot of whiskey, bourbon whiskey and scotch whiskey’ [28:2]. Both instances seek to provide validity prior to an evaluation of the product at hand, as they demonstrate their passion for depth of knowledge and expertise of the whisky category. Reviewers in this context accordingly position themselves as legitimately able to engage in subsequent custodianship activities, as they, through the accumulation of knowledge of the category and an impassioned focus on institutionalized practices and traditions (Dacin et al., 2019), aim to occupy a position of authority on the matter of all things whisky.

4.2. Intermediation by category custodians

Our examination of how reviewers intermediate and shape market category meanings as an outcome of their affective engagement resulted in a theorization of four key types of category work. We conceptualize these efforts as a form of category custodianship that encompass microinstitutional discursive practices, with definitions, features and emotional components elaborated in Table III.

4.2.1. Authenticating

Once credibility of category membership is established, we find reviewers acting as category custodians zealously attempt to authenticate category objects, in this context, the focal object for authentication practices is the whisky product and associated taste expectations of where the product sits within the category. Defined as “idealized expectations by which audience members judge an organizations or object’s character, genuineness and credibility or appropriateness”, authenticity is central to the construction of market categories (Pozner et al., 2022). As illustrated by extant literature, consumers make sense of markets via culturally bound and socially constructed category “prototypes”, idealised constructs of an object, organization or institution; the closer an object is judged as matching the prototype, the more ‘authentic’ it is considered. Hence, one outcome of whisky products’ adherence or transgression of category expectations is in the expression of emotions felt by category members. While love and affection for whisky was clearly apparent in the data, we find reviewers are especially energized when product evaluations do not meet category expectations. Negative feelings of anger and disappointment were particularly apparent pertaining to whether the taste was aligned within category boundaries. The maintenance and reproduction of norms that determine whether products are ‘authentic’ to category or not is then integral to category’s very existence. Therefore, expressing such heated assessments in reviews function as a form of category custodianship, where norms of taste, and its relation to production practices in the category are reproduced.

The practice of authenticating whisky products is evident throughout discursive claims in the data via repetitive descriptors of ‘complex’,

‘smooth’, ‘rich’ and ‘clean’ to denote a good quality whisky. We find the consistent reinforcement of ‘good’ taste via traditional tasting scripts, works to construct a prototype of what a legitimate whisky in its sub-category should taste like, and thus authenticates certain products in their conformity to these ideals. Although these discursive claims provide more implicit evidence of authentication, direct claims to authenticity via norms of taste in addition to imagined identities were also evident, as in the following review:

Old Grand Dad BOB has brawny, mouth filling flavors and huge oak infused aromas. It is an unapologetic and unabashed throwback to an earlier era when whisky drinkers demanded more from their bourbons than a fancy label. There is definitely nothing timid about this finely crafted offering. It is what bourbon is supposed to be [31:2 emphasis added]

Via the linking of certain taste to a ‘supposed’ ideal type of bourbon as a whisky sub-category, the reviewer posits a particular prototype of bourbon whisky, through which other bourbon products may be compared as to evaluate their comparative authenticity and adherence to taste norms. When category objects align with expectations, positive emotions like love, giddiness, and enthusiasm are often expressed as an outcome of these experiences. When describing the consumption experience of a particular whisky, one reviewer felt these emotions in response to the particular whisky’s adherence to norms like “complexity”.

Best I’ve had!!!!!!!!!!!!!!;I am not going to lie, the price was a little high, but you get what you pay for, it is soooo complex, and has a beautiful oak aftertaste.... I love it. Try with a large ice cube and a splash of Peligrino. WOW good stuff!! [42:2]

Aside from descriptors like ‘love’, the emphatic use of exclamation points and capitalisation also further reinforce the excitement felt when whisky products align with presumed category norms. As such, emotion, especially positive affective states like excitement, enthusiasm, and love, are constructed as outcomes of experiences with whisky products that adhere to the normative conventions of the category.

Table III
Discursive Practices of Category Custodianship.

Type of Category work	Category Object	Definition	Emotions aroused	Empirical examples
Authenticating	<i>Taste, production</i>	The normative evaluation of whether a category object adheres to idealized expectations of category prototypes, thus rendering it either authentic or inauthentic. When custodians engage in authenticating practices, and focal category objects misalign with expectations, negative emotions are often an outcome.	Disgust, disappointment, anger, love happiness	Consistent use of normative descriptors to connote ‘good’ whisky – i.e., ‘Complex’, ‘smooth’, ‘rich’, ‘clean’, contrasted with consistent normative descriptors to connote ‘bad’ whisky – i.e., ‘Syrupy’, ‘unrefined’, ‘not complex’. Explicit claims to what constitute a ‘real’ whisky, how whisky is ‘supposed’ to taste.
Tutoring	<i>Rituals, consumption</i>	When custodians guide category members toward idealized or traditional category rites and rituals, particularly to consumption practices, motivated by the love and pleasure they wish to share.	Pleasure, enjoyment	Specific instructions on how to drink certain whiskies, and also the environment in which whisky should be consumed – i.e. ‘A few drops of water to open up flavours’. Certain whiskies should only be served neat or with a particular mixer, how many ice cubes to drink a specific whisky with, or when, and where to drink it, i.e. With friends, at home or on a Friday evening
Valorizing	<i>Value (taste vs. price)</i>	Explicating to other category members how to ascribe and evaluate value amongst features for particular category objects; reproducing cultural understandings of how to identify a “good deal”.	Enthusiasm, excitement	Discursive instructions that point toward how to value certain whisky in accordance with price – i.e. What a good deal is, whether a flavour profile aligns correctly with the cost of the product, delineating different ‘leagues’ of whisky and their correct prices [3:1]
Matchmaking	<i>Category member identities</i>	Directs attention to the linking between category objects and identities of imagined category members. Enthusiastic about the ushering in of new category members.	Love, enthusiasm	Discursive claims that outline the appropriate level of category knowledge required to consume certain types of whisky. For examples, X whiskey is great for “beginners” or is a good “introduction”, before one graduates to more complex flavour profiles. Alternatively, “I would recommend to anyone from novice to expert” for whiskies considered appropriate for all skill levels.

Conversely, products that transgress custodians' conceptions of authenticity or 'real' whisky taste are penalised for their diversion from category norms. Negative tasting scripts manifest in descriptors such 'syrupy', 'unrefined' and 'not complex' and are accompanied by passionate evaluations of supposedly inauthentic whisky, as in the following:

It is certainly not the poor man's JW Blue. I would even refrain from calling it scotch. [50:3]

Great, if you like rubbing alcohol.; Not worth anything close to this price point, unless you love drinking rubbing alcohol, and you can get that for \$1.89 at Target. [9:7]

It tasted like warm water, sweaty socks, and cigarette butts... I can only imagine that this is what hobo's drink while begging for change on the sidewalk. Disgusting dram. [51:1]

Such reviews serve to enforce hard boundaries around what does and what does not constitute authentic whisky via taste. This type of language construction functions as a discursive mechanism in the reproduction and perpetuation of the 'taste evaluation system' (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017) that in this instance, is unique to the market category of whisky. Here we see how rhetorical evaluations reinforce the category logics and expectations of what authentic whisky is, and how it should be culturally valued from its taste.

Similar to the way in which adherence to norms produces broadly positive affect, product transgressions also produced particular emotive reviews. Disgust, disappointment, and aversion in response to whisky evaluations are evident throughout the data, particularly when reviewers consider the product at hand to violate a particular category expectation. For instance, the following highlights certain boundaries around expectations of the whisky category, namely that the intensity of flavour should align with the length of the ageing process.

Decent, But There are Better for Less \$\$\$;There have been a few reviewers who have hit the nail on the head: Knob Creek doesn't have much flavor. Nine years in a barrel and we're left wondering where the flavor is? That's just depressing. And don't try to tell me that the flavors are muted because of the high proof. Four Roses Single Barrel and Booker's are PACKED with flavor. Knob Creek used to be my favorite. But I'm with the other guys in my dissent: for the price, you're better off with Buffalo Trace or Four Roses Small Batch. [30:3]

When experiences of whisky products misalign with category expectations, such as intensity of flavour increasing with age, and flavour that *should* correlate with price, reviewers as category custodians express emotions, such as 'depression', in response to what they conceive of as violations of the proper whisky category. This whisky is not 'depressing' merely because it lacks flavor, but because there is an implicit expectation within the evaluations of its flavor profile; it was aged for nine years; therefore it *should* have an intense flavor. Emotions are thereby constructed by certain feeling rules around what constitutes a 'proper' kind of whisky, and when these implicit expectations are violated, custodians experience heightened emotions as an outcome, and we argue are motivated to construct these written reviews for others to read. This affective disposition is also not an individualized experience; "I'm with the other guys in my dissent" proposes shared feelings of sadness at the perceived failure of this product to meet category rules, which is especially notable giving the typical stance of reviewers focusing on their individual taste preferences.

Experiences of misalignment between the 'correct' flavor of a particular whisky in relation to the category drives reviewers to evaluate the product and sometimes warn others off purchasing (i.e. "You're better off with Buffalo Trace or Four Roses Small Batch." [30:3]). This

collective disappointment may bind online reviewers across dematerialized online spaces and might reinforce whether a product is authentic when they experience shared feelings.

The aforementioned heightened feelings of love or sadness and disappointment, while an outcome of actual consumption experiences, can therefore be seen as an antecedent for the formation of online reviewers as passionate publics, as they discursively police and authenticate expectations of category boundaries. Driven by this emotion, in their role as custodians they maintain, and reproduce the boundaries around "authentic whisky", and reinforce to an audience what counts as "authenticity" in the category.

4.2.2. Tutoring

In addition to the authenticating practices that revolve around taste evaluations, our analysis illustrates how reviewers acting as category custodians are also motivated by their passion for the rites and rituals attached to whisky consumption and tend to *tutor* readers on how to correctly consume whisky as a type of category work. Whereas the previous section notes the foci on taste in connection to *production* practices, in the *tutoring* practices, reviewers focus on associated cultural *consumption* practices. In this type of category work, custodians express their fondness for the correct, appropriate and therefore most pleasurable ways to consume in-practice. This is determined by a passionate attachment to the category's cultural norms in rituals and tradition that custodians affectionally espouse (Dacin, et al., 2010).

Explicit regard for these rituals as institutionalized practices pertain to, amongst other things, whether a whisky fits into the consumption ritual as a 'mixer' [57:1], or whether it should exclusively be drunk neat, how long certain whisky should 'breathe' [6:1], the temperature the whisky should be served at [59:7], and whether the whisky is a 'sipper' [23:1]. Although these suggestions might sound helpful at first (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004), they also work to reinforce the norms and category logics for consumption and evaluation, where 'real' whisky aficionados only find pleasure in consuming it this way, such as in this review: 'It would be almost disrespectful to do anything but drink this straight or on the rocks' [33:2] or "Perfect at room temp or slightly above, where aromas of pineapple and other fruits dominate. Adding ice or cool water just makes it medicinal, loses the great flavor." [58:2]. Through tutoring on the proper consumption rituals, reviewers act as category custodians in providing normative consumption frameworks that socialize others to maintain category consumption rituals.

Evidence of tutoring practices to reinforce norms of whisky rituals also intersects with affective states achieved through ritual practice. Here, discursive constructions of rituals, which outline the proper or ideal context in which whisky should be drunk, help to reinforce emotional connection to the category. We consider the primary emotion desired from tutoring practices to be pleasure, and positive secondary affects related to this state, like relaxation. Whisky consumption tutoring practices by reviewers are often discussed in relation to relaxation, relieving a "hard day" [30:1], or as was the case in reviews that detail communal blind tastings, pleasure and play with other enthusiasts [59:7 58:4, 11:7, 59:7]. Within these exemplars, imagined audiences are not only tutored on how to engage in whisky practices, but also the appropriate emotional registers that ought to be felt in rituals around consumption, as in the following:

Pour two fingers worth in a cocktail glass, add a single splash of good water and swirl to mix. Then sit down in your favorite chair, hold it in your hand, take one breath of its aroma, and sip. It will be gone in a short while, begging replacement. [3:5]

This review in particular places emphasis on the pleasurable, almost meditative emotions produced by whisky consumption, in addition to directing where, how and in what mood, whisky ought to be drunk. References to the time taken to drink whiskies similarly replicates the idea of pleasurable meditation as appropriate to certain products, as

when reviewers described certain whiskies as “sippers” that ought to be savoured, rather than “pounders” [5:3], products which did not deserve the same mood or space for consumption, as in the following:

4 Stars For Taste, 5 For Taste vs. Price.;Smooth, sweet, refreshing, and very tasty. Hard to place the flavor of the sweet body, but is a great post meal sipper over hard rocks. Not being a "pounder", this is an enjoyable sipper any old time. For this price, I'd nudge it to a 4.5 rating without question. It will be a staple on my shelf. [5:3]

Both instances display particular pleasurable affects that are not only an outcome of the consumption of whisky itself, but the ritualistic processes around whisky, especially how whisky is drunk and in what context (i.e., “Great post meal sipper”, “sit down in your favourite chair”. [3:5]. The passionate attachment to these ritualized experiences and for enacting and sharing them energize reviewers to include tutoring practices; without the initial pleasurable experience, they possibly would have no impetus to write a positive review in the first place. Further, through the writing of these reviews, and the cognitive instructions outlined in such emotional displays, it is evident that reviewers as custodians also wish to share these practices, and invite others to experience them. Therefore, emotions may not only motivate practices of tutoring, but may also be the outcome of these kinds of instructions; by showing other whisky drinkers how to achieve certain emotional registers, imagined audiences may also achieve similar affective states.

4.2.3. Valorizing

Beyond reinforcing meanings behind consumption rituals and their related emotions, our analysis finds that reviewers also engage in valorizing practices “by providing for public consumption especially positive and especially negative examples that illustrate the normative foundations” of the category (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 232). In this setting, reviewers as custodians of the category are passionate about valuation practices specific to purchasing. As “evaluators often valorize the entity they are to assess as they justify to others their assessment”, in these types of reviews, valuation practices (giving worth or value) (Lamont, 2012) were salient especially concerning price against taste. Practices valorize specific products by guiding readers on how to appreciate various products against dimensions of price, possibly as part of a the wider discursive strategy that helps to position reviewers as a credible source of category expertise to their imagined audience (Vasquez, 2014).

While ‘market mavens’ may focus more on delivering general shopping and marketplace information...about many kinds of products (Feick and Price, 1987), reviewers acting as category custodians intermediate cultural meanings through assessing and being able to recognize and make sense of value specific to the market category, with a feeling of imparting ‘insider knowledge’ to be helpful to their imagined audience.

You're thinking “Ok, I love this Woodford Reserve with the white label on it, but I want to take the next step in this relationship.” If this is you, you should definitely try this. For an extra \$15–20, you get another robust bottle of bourbon with a strong wood-y profile. Even if you prefer the sweeter vanilla overtones of the white label WR, this bottle is a must-try for any bourbon fans simply because of the price. I honestly think they could probably get away with selling it for \$69–74 if they put that in a fancy case like some of the Scotch whiskeys. Also, this is PERFECT for gifts. Don't spend a fortune on \$300 bottles that come inside a coffin full of raffia and tissue and glitter and whatever they put in there now. If you get this, you're going to look like you know your whiskeys, and you are going to appeal to a LOT of whiskey drinkers, including some of the Scotch drinkers. [27:2]

This reviewer's enthusiastic tone and clear passion for finding ‘a

deal’ in the category, helps bring price to the foreground of interest for bourbon drinkers working to tip off to this product as an example of good value. For instance, the review's dismissive tone regarding a \$300, heavily decorated whisky, contrasted to a thrifty extra spend of “\$15–20” more for a “robust bottle”, values certain taste profiles (“strong wood-y”) over superfluous gimmicks (“... that come inside a coffin full of raffia and tissue and glitter and whatever they put in there now.”). This type of language incorporates emotional displays attached to implicit valuations, combined with explicit instructing words (“don't”, “must try”), which enables reviewers acting as category custodians to impart to audiences what qualifies as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ whisky in relation to price.

The tying of value to whether the flavour of a product exceeded its expectations associated with its price was similarly replicated in other reviews. For instance, rather than highlighting particular tasting notes, the following instead emphasized the overall “complexity” of the whisky, despite its relatively cheap price.

Best value and most complex for the money; This is the most exciting bourbon under \$40. This one has character, spice and quality. I like most bourbons I have tried, buffalo trace is and wild turkey 101 are smoother and good bourbons but the EC [Elijah Craig] is a notch above. Wood ford reserve while more expensive isn't as deep as this one. For reference I am an avid scotch drinker.” [39:8]

Via emotional displays of passion and enthusiasm for the category (“most exciting bourbon under \$40”), reviewers express cognitive rules for how to valorize and correctly assess a specific whisky product. While the reviewer outlines alternate whiskies with superior flavour profiles (“buffalo trace is and wild turkey 101 are smoother”), when evaluated with the price in mind, the reviewer claims Elijah Craig as the “best value”, and subsequently, displays a cognitive valuation process that serves as a model for other whisky enthusiasts when they engage in purchasing decisions. Given the review-enabled platform, Bevm!, is a retail website, the purpose of these reviews can be considered to not only allow reviewers to engage in emotional displays, but also through this expression, guide readers as to the correctly valued products to buy. Thus, through emotional displays (both negative and positive) that express particular affective registers in response to certain product attributes (i.e. price), reviewers' valorizing practices enact a type of category work.

4.2.4. Matchmaking

Our analysis indicates reviewers also engage in a fourth discursive practice we refer to as *matchmaking*. *Matchmaking* is a type of category work done by reviewers that directs attention to the linking between category objects and specific identities of other category members. Prior research has identified the assessment and sorting of category members as a form of gatekeeping, i.e. deciding who is “in or out” (Coslor et al., 2020), however in this context, identities of imagined category members are instead matched to the category object (i.e. specific whisky products) to ensure a positive experience. Reviews are often structured such that claims to category credibility preface evaluations of the product and are concluded with a direct invitation to a particular kind of imagined audience in a way that primes a potential shared passion (i.e. “If you're new to whisky this is an excellent choice” [2:1], “I recommend this to any whiskey enthusiast” [8: 3], “I would recommend to anyone from novice to expert” [14:1], an “easy intro to Bourbon for a non-bourbon drinker” [33:2], “Not a whiskey for those new to scotch, nor for the faint of heart.” [74:4]).

As was evidenced in the data, reviewers construct category identities according to expertise and classify certain groups as “novices” or “beginners”, as compared to experts. Distinct from the *authenticating*, *tutoring* or *valorizing* practices, in which category objects move across taste and production, rituals and consumption, or value, *matchmaking* takes a more audience-centric approach, ensuring those engaging with

the whisky category are consuming in a way suitable to their category identity and therefore increasing the likelihood that experience is pleasurable.

In our data, matchmaking practices are primarily directed at those new to whisky, and function as a way of giving novices an “easy entry” [51:2] into the category. For example, more ‘expert’ flavours are distinguished by reviewers where they warn against beginners starting with a particular type of product. Often, the “softness” of entry level aspects of the category, are compared to more “advanced” flavour profiles such as those described as “complex” and bold, are something for those who have trained not to be “faint of heart”. Such recommendations often refer to particular whisky tasting profiles that could present too high of a barrier to entry and characterise strong flavour profiles as too much of a “huge scotch smack in the face” for newcomers, who may be put off by certain products. To prevent the occurrence of new category members abandoning their interest, reviewers acting as category custodians engage in matchmaking by communicating stories that include recommending the right match for expertise level, as in the following:

One of the best easy drinking scotches on the market...;Make no mistake this is not a in your face scotch it is like a familiar partner that you can trust and enjoy....JB is really just a easy entry...soft middle and mild ending scotch...it never hits you in the face but it is a enjoyable scotch...this is the perfect scotch for somebody new to scotch or anybody who just doesn't like a huge scotch smack in the face....you might call it scotch lite compared to a peaty single malt but it is really better than that...you can sip it if you like a very easy drinking scotch...or mix it and it will never ever bite you... [51:2]

This excerpt acknowledges that beyond being an acquired taste, whisky is also about an expertise that beginners may lack; the “bite” experienced drinkers learn to love may push beginners away, rather than draw them in to enjoy. As such, it is appropriate to ensure those “new” to the category are matched to products with flavour profiles that are “soft”, “mild” and “non offensive” as to allow them to become slowly become familiar with whisky as a category and develop their own passion for the category. Affective dispositions also overlapped with authenticating practices when feelings of passion fueled recommendations targeted at a particular beginner audience:

Highly Recommended for Peat Beginners; the reviews on the site here were so unacceptable that i [sic] made a new bevmo account for the sole purpose of writing a review for this malt. i realize that admitting my absolute love of this whiskey may mark me as a novice in maltland, but this wonderful, balanced whiskey is perfect for beginners looking for a peaty experience without having to take on the challenge of an Islay peat-bomb. and frankly, I get giddy thinking about my next dram. [78:3]

This review establishes emotions like giddiness and “absolute love” as contrasted with alternative reviews of this whisky. Other evaluations were deemed “unacceptable”, as they evaluated the product as “enjoyable but one dimensional”, a claim which clearly misalign with the reviewers’ own ecstasy during consumption.

While reviewers acting as category custodians attempt to match beginners with a specific category object so that the experience is positive, advanced offerings are also included in *matchmaking* practices. Here, newbies are acclimated to the flavors characteristic of whisky, so they can then advance to other, more complex flavours, once they are able to “trust” and “enjoy” entry level products. The following excerpt illustrates how starter products are not a level of expertise that category members should remain at; rather, once they have become accustomed to certain flavour profiles, they must advance to more complex flavour profiles:

This was my first Glenmorangie and it was a great introduction to their line. It's a smooth, sweet scotch with a descent finish, especially for the price. I now have 7 bottles of different Glenmorangie's in my scotch rotation.;This one is a good starter for people who are new to scotch because it has some of the traits that make scotch drinking so much fun without committing to a \$150 dollar bottle. Once you get a feel for the subtle flavors and differences you will want to step up to a more advanced offering, but should always keep one of these on hand. I have not tiered of the nectar in over 15 years” [84:1, emphasis added]

It appears that reviewers acting as category custodians take great joy in exercising their expertise in these discursive matchmaking practices. *Matchmaking* as a practice thus not only functions as a way to illustrate how to enter into the category, but also stratifies certain identities within it. Reviewers acting as category custodians therefore implicitly (re)create the hierarchy seen in some taste regimes by characterising how other category members might appreciate and enjoy whisky according to their expertise. While helpfulness has been identified in prior research as a motivator for providing reviews, in our context, the platform does not have a helpfulness rating to drive status motivations (Hochmeister et al., 2013; Vasquez, 2014). Therefore, we argue that matchmaking practices arise from the passionate desire of category custodians to not only assist their imagined audiences in a positive experience but also derive joy from the art of assessment, in conferring their own category knowledge and expertise.

In sum our analysis indicates that the aforementioned discursive practices throughout the data position reviewers not only as passionate custodians who enact category work via *authenticating, tutoring, valorizing and matchmaking* practices, but on the whole, partake in advocating for the passionate attachment of the category itself. Further it might be the ecstasy and passionate love for the category that drove the reviewer to engage in discursive practices via review (i.e. “i made a new Bevmo account for the sole purpose of writing a review for this malt”). We thus see affective states prompted by whisky consumption, and (dis) agreement about different products’ quality, and therefore emotional valence, as the probable driving force behind the writing of reviews.

In animating category work, reviewers in this context primarily demonstrate feelings of pleasure, anger or intense love for a particular category object. With the products themselves, this was evident in product descriptions ranging from extremes such as “When the gods take human form, Whistlepig is their chosen nectar” [93:5], to “Like a long-lost love...” [8:4], and even going so far as to compare some whiskeys to “Mother’s Milk” [3:0]. Common across these discursive constructions of particular category objects is an intensity of feeling, a passionate love for both the taste, rituals, value and other category members, and the whisky category more broadly. Therefore, in enacting custodianship of the whisky category, practices of category work emerge from a particular emotional context; without a passion for the market category, reviewers acting as custodians would not be compelled to engage in often time-intensive, laborious review writing. Emotions, as part of the passionate attachment to the rules and norms of the whisky category, are hence a critical part of what triggers the discursive practices we see in category work.

5. Discussion

Speaking to the need to broaden the concept of publics in public relations, we take up the call by considering online reviewers, highlighting the way that publics may not only be motivated to act against a crisis or negative event, but may also be motivated by positive passions, such as feelings of love and enthusiasm. In answering our research question of how passionate publics intermediate and shape market category meanings as an outcome of their affective engagement, we conceptualize their efforts as a form of category custodianship that encompass microinstitutional discursive practices as four distinct types

of category work (authenticating, tutoring, valorizing and matchmaking).

Our focus on online reviewers in the whisky category as a particular type of passionate public also answers the call for more research on publics that highlight the “processes by which individuals come to feel a sense of belonging to the collective” (Sha, 2022, p. 381). We next elaborate our three key insights, focusing on 1) emotions in the discursive strategies of online reviewers, 2) category work and custodianship by passionate publics and 3) reviewers as cultural intermediaries.

5.1. Discursive strategies of online reviewers as an impassioned public

By identifying several discursive practices in online reviews, namely efforts in *authenticating*, *tutoring*, *valorizing* and *matchmaking*, we extend some of the prior work on professional critics to answer the call to examine “the potential influence of the standards that are important to consumers” (Corciolani et al., 2020, p. 503). Adding to the rich work on passionate publics, we suggest that whisky aficionados writing reviews are an *impassioned public*, by which we mean those actors who are energized through their passionate engagement with an institution which then fuels purposeful efforts in social-symbolic work. That is, their passion motivates them to engage in category work that “impose structures of interest” (Kozinets et al., 2016). This extends our understanding of passionate publics beyond those coalescing around negative issues (Z. Chen, 2020; Kim, 2018; Wakefield and Knighton, 2019) and instead contributes to research on publics who are driven by more positive emotions such as love, happiness, care and desire (Guo, 2017; Kozinets et al., 2016; Sha, 2022). We operationalize this passion through an emotional discursive lens (see Crawford et al., 2024; Moisaner et al., 2016), highlighting the emotions of reviewers and their imagined audiences in the rhetorical discourses of reviews.

All four discursive practices speak to cultural traditions and expertise in a market category and demonstrates how passion undergirds and likely fuels the efforts to write often elaborate online reviews directed towards a focal category object. These entail 1) *authenticating* whisky based on whether it conforms to taken-for-granted category expectations of taste, 2) *tutoring* imagined audiences to the rituals and traditions in serving and imbibing practices, 3) *valorizing* products against price to what is culturally considered a ‘good deal’, and 4) *matchmaking* focal category objects to appropriate category identities. These findings complement prior work on understandings market representations within a category, in which “observable consumption templates [and] patterns” (Diaz Ruiz and Kjellberg, 2020, p. 22) are evidenced in our data by the discursive enactments of category custodianship by passionate publics.

Importantly, much of these discursive practices tend to be associated with positive emotions, whether their love of how a whisky tastes or should be served, or satisfaction at a good purchase or a good matching of potential products for an imagined audience. This is because emotions, “both negative and positive, trigger sensemaking and can thus be mobilized to fuel, enable, and constrain action [acting as a] cultural-cognitive resource for discursive institutional work” (Moisaner et al., 2016, pp. 967–968). While we certainly saw that passion can involve strong negative feelings, as was evident in authenticating practices, we argue that a theory of passionate publics must also encompass the use of positive emotions, and discourses focused on positive emotions appear to be an excellent avenue for future research in public relations, given the typical focus on crisis, activism and the related negative emotions that motivate passionate publics to act (Z. Chen, 2020; Guo, 2017; Kim, 2018; Wakefield and Knighton, 2019).

5.2. Category work and custodianship

Aligned with our interest in reviewers as a public worthy of additional study, we have highlighted market categories as focal area of

interest for passionate publics, identifying the important theoretical concepts of category work and custodianship. This point goes beyond the typical dyadic focus in public relations, particularly work that focuses on organization-centric approaches (Heath, 2013; Yang and Taylor, 2015; Yang and Taylor, 2021), given that a focus on market categories can span well beyond one or more organizations. As such, we recognize socio-cultural frameworks that acknowledge the co-constitutive role of communication in the interactions within and between publics (Hou, 2021; Jelen-Sanchez, 2017; Yang and Taylor, 2021). We thus consider reviewers acting as category custodians as publics who are actors with agency, within networks, and driven by emotions in situations where they can co-produce meanings, here of the category (see Fig. 1).

Going beyond findings like those about consumer activism or reaction to crises online (Z. Chen, 2020; Guo, 2017; Kim, 2018), we find that online platforms enable passionate publics to discursively express and demonstrate their lay-expertise in different ways. We identify these efforts as enacting a custodianship role (Crawford and Dacin, 2021; Dacin et al., 2019) of the market category which also acts as a pathway for reviewer credibility and authenticity for these reviews. We contend that since an aficionado is an aspirational identity to acquire and enact for non-elite informal publics (Ulver, 2019), the display of category knowledge and expertise is therefore performed as a form of custodianship (Dacin et al., 2019). Further to this, the claims to expertise must be recognizable to others within a given domain (Croidieu and Kim, 2018), therefore we see their enactment of category custodianship as a tool to support their efforts to signal status, expertise and credibility. We identify key ways in which passionate publics organize their content to enact this role, even if they may be amateurs (e.g., how to taste, how to buy etc). Similar to the eBay super-consumers identified by Koçak et al. (2014), category custodians are on a journey of discovery into the nuances of their focus and attempt to build a sense of shared category membership with potential readers. For some, reviews may signal a collective identity with the imagined audience, as they share a mutual appreciation of the same category distinctions. This is reflected in the findings through technical knowledge about taste and processing, rituals in serving, or through helping others find the ‘best deal’ etc. In doing so, reviewers reaffirm their category-linked individual identities.

In considering the market category, we reflect on the work embedded in the expression of passion in relation to market categories and institutions (Granqvist and Siltaoja, 2020), which is different than the love, devotion and religiosity directed towards a specific brand or single organization (Holt, 2018). Our work thus expands research in public relations by going beyond the “rationalist-managerialism” organization-centric approaches to understanding how publics are embedded of institutional reality.

Similar to Maciel and Wallendorf (2017), who highlighted how consumers of craft beer become aficionados through taste engineering, our findings extend knowledge about taste evaluation systems by showing how passionate publics put in considerable discursive efforts that have the probable effects of maintaining the category’s institutionalized understandings and boundaries within the ‘taste evaluation system’ (Maciel and Wallendorf, 2017). Furthermore, this type of discursive category work shows how reviewers are also a type of online influencer in the sense that their efforts work as “communication facilitators or meaning/identity co-creators between and organization and its publics” (Y.-R. R. Chen, et al., 2023, p. 8)—extending our understanding of how meanings are (re)produced by impassioned reviewers who work to reinforce category boundaries.

A category lens perspective offers a different way to conduct research into salient issues and offers both academic and managerial implications. Our findings indicate that category custodians draw from market category norms to establish their own expertise and aficionado identity, and to explain what aspects of the category are considered valuable. This holds potential insights for those working in the field of whisky and may inform other market actors more clearly on what content (e.g., taste,

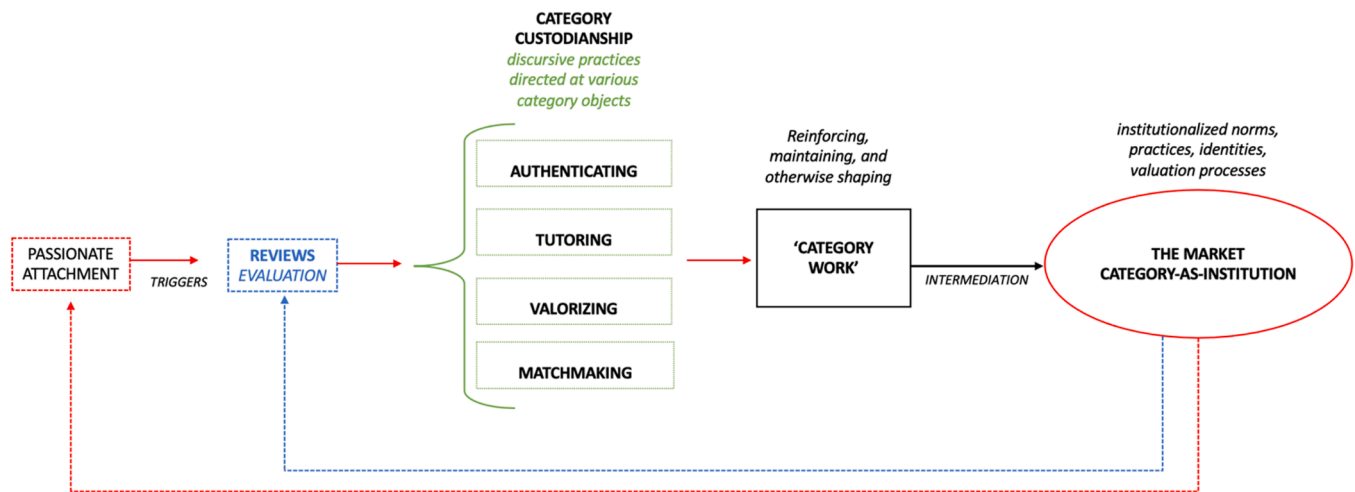


Fig. 1. Findings Overview of the Category Work of Passionate Publics.

production, rituals, valuation, provenance) may help to stimulate and sustain further engagement.

5.3. Reviewers as cultural intermediaries

Traditionally, cultural intermediaries have included those in professional occupations in charge of product and content creation, e.g., research & development, design, public relations and marketing communication practitioners (Benecke, et al., 2017), as well as those further in the distribution chain, such as media, specialty retailers, and critics, such as art critics (Coslor et al., 2020). Hence the role of the critic as a cultural intermediary constructs a particular identity of status and specialized expertise that deems them eligible to evaluate cultural products and shape others' orientations towards those goods as legitimate (Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2012). For example, the role of a professional music reviewer plays an important part in influencing product perception but is also dependent on the reviewer's field-specific cultural capital (Corciolani et al., 2020).

Through our interest in discursive activities that shape and are shaped by dynamics within a market category, we are able to see how category custodians are implicated in how category perceptions persist and re-circulate over time (Granqvist and Siltaja, 2020). While the wider whisky industry is made up of many different types of texts, a clear consensus for meanings within the consumption side of the field emerged over time in which the discursive relationships became well defined and understood. For example, the established rules, traditions and norms for the practices of production and processing, but also taste—e.g., the more barrel-aged a whisky is, the more interesting the flavour becomes, helps to provide key points of difference as advocated for in the whisky category—and thus helps to maintain the premium price point producers seek to maintain and take advantage of. This then also contributes to the paradigm of public relations scholarship interested in the different research practices and mechanisms for “organizational listening and learning [around] communication programmes that cultivate relationships with publics” (Grunig, 2009, p. 4).

These findings support and extend what (Benecke et al., 2017) calls a ‘culture-centred approach’ to examine how meanings in the market can be intermediated by publics themselves, in this case our conceptualization of passionate publics as category custodians. Prior public relations research has highlighted the importance of studying cultural market intermediation by different sets of market actors (Benecke et al., 2017; Macnamara and Crawford, 2013). In this view, cultural perspectives further our understanding of market dynamics in fields where highly engaged consumers “acting without the intention of changing a market nonetheless profoundly affect it” (Dolbec and Fischer, 2015, p.

1465).

5.4. Limitations and future research

This data was a snapshot of online reviews from a US mainstream online retailer of various types and subcategories of alcohol products. Future research could examine platforms that are specific to a particular type of cultural consumption or production, for example, online reviews from specific member platforms that could examine other forms of category work in such as specialized audience community, e.g., specialty tea, cheese, dance, art, music. Or platforms that offer more interactions between users (e.g. Reddit) and can therefore see how other types of emotion-oriented practices may arise, similar to the policing work efforts of ordinary citizens who volunteer as fly fishing guides (Crawford and Dacin, 2021). Further, while this paper highlights the links between the category custodianship work in fostering institutional reproduction in the category's discourse, future research could examine how a particular public's material practices at the individual level may have a more transformative impact on the market and individual organizations within the category.

BevMo! may also not be the most representative data. While the site was open for reviewers to enroll and comment with a simple “Are you 21?” button, it is unlikely to have been used by a public uninterested in alcohol products. Further, the Bevmo! platform is not set up like a social network that requires authentic user IDs, nor does it enable nested comments or likes. Future research could examine those who have created a user ID to index all the reviews of one reviewer versus another. Furthermore, what might we learn about the readers of reviews and how reviews ultimately shape perceptions within and across a public might be interesting to explore. Finally, when it comes to fake reviews, we acknowledge the potential but did not see a clear way to identify fake reviews nor did we see this as an issue in our analysis of how category custodianship is discursively enacted – we contend that even pseudo reviewers are engaging in a form of discursive category (re)construction.

Declaration of Competing Interest

none

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Appendix A. . Webpage Data Example

Shipping Included on Orders \$150+. No code needed, discount applied in Checkout.
Orders placed today for Shipping will take 5 – 7 business days.

Reorder
Shipping
Log In
Create an Account

BevMo!

Low Prices.
1,000's of Beverages!

Products

What are you shopping for today

Cart (0) \$0.00

Wine
Spirits
Beer & Hard Seltzer
Snacks, Mixers & More
Home Essentials
Gifts
Recipes

Parties & Weddings

◀ Back | Home > Shop > Spirits > Whiskey > Scotch

Glenfiddich 12 Year Old Scotch (750 ML) sku:2213

\$32.99 CLUBBEV!
~~\$42.99~~ | 750 ml

BUY 2 SAVE MORE

★★★★★ 3.9 | 13 Review(s) | [Write a Review](#)

GOLD MEDAL INTERNATIONAL WINE AND SPIRITS COMPETITION. Touch of pear in the nose, followed by a distinctive, well balanced flavor of rich fruit, subtle pine and a hint of peatiness. This item is available for Gift Wrap.

SKU: 2213
Brand/Company: Glenfiddich
Region: Speyside
Style: Single Malt
Size: 750 ML
Country: Scotland
Type/Varietal: Scotch
Offer Tags: Buy 2 Save More

8 In Stock

ADD TO CART

Gift Wrapping

None
▼

Product Reviews

★★★★★ 3.8 | 13 Review(s)

WRITE A REVIEW

★★★★★ About 1 Year Ago

LACKS THE JOURNEY OF SPIRIT

Gregory 1 Review(s)

https://www.bevmo.com/my-account#/create...on or Irish Whiskey. I have had very little Scotch. I am about half way through the bottle and I am finding it to be lacking. I taste alcohol

screenshot example of BevMo! product page with reviews below

Appendix B. : Additional Data Exemplars

Type of Category work	Emotions aroused	Empirical examples
Authenticating	Disgust, disappointment, anger, happiness, love	“If you never had an islay malt this might be a good entry. For me I can definitely live without another bottle of this. At a higher ABV this might be pretty decent if not good stuff but at the bare bones 40 % it’s underwhelming and bland to my taste.” [67:2]“Disappointed; Disappointing for a 21yo. The aroma before drinking is quite nice, but it has no depth and is fairly astringent. Absolutely no svweet note on the tongue - a must for me. In fact it doesn’t develop at all through-out the palate. One dimensional. There are 12yo I like better. Old Pulteny comes to mind.” [68:2]“Profoundly disappointed.;I drink the 12 all the time and love it. I decided to splurge & try this offering, but was profoundly disappointed. The taste/aroma of alcohol was so strong that it completely overpowered all other tastes/aromas in the scotch. No amount of ‘breathing’, water or ice could cut taste. I toured The Macallan distillery over Thanksgiving & brought this up @ the tasting...they said this offering is best used in [obviously expensive] cocktails. The 12, 18 & the Ruby are all magnificent...this, not so much.” [88:6]
Tutoring	Pleasure, enjoyment	“Hands down- THE Irish whisky.;This is it kids- the king, the cream of the crop in Irish whiskies. Life is too short to NOT pony up the extra 10-spot for this delectable Irish treat. It only lasts 3 nights whenever I grab a bottle. I don,t think you could do better at twice the price. I like mine 3 fingers over one cube of ice, allowing the ice to melt- diluting and cooling the whisky just perfectly. Just incredibly good and more complex than any of the other more popular selections.” [3:1]“A beautiful mix of wild and tame;I have really grown to love this! After Buffalo Trace, I am eyeballing OF. It’s got a nice stout pop with a red fruity/nutmeg middle and a decent finish that reminds you once more of a slightly untamed nature. A splash of water enhances that middle- and it’s nice. On Friday nights, I like it 50/50 with Simply Limeade, especially on those warm Phoenix nights. But you could enjoy it anyway you like. It’s affordable enough as a mixer. Like

(continued on next page)

(continued)

Type of Category work	Emotions aroused	Empirical examples
Valorizing	Passion, enthusiasm	I said, the only thing I buy more of is good ol' BT but it's been hard to find lately- this is my chosen #2 at present. It won't overtake my Four Roses Single Barrel either, but it's a lot cheaper to put down." [24:1] "I loved it!;I had to write this review after tasting Seagram's 7, just by chance, because I remembered that my Dad always had that in his bar and I was surprised by its low price... when at BevMo. I picked up a bottle and some 7-Up and went home and forgot that I had it, while I enjoyed some of my more costly bourbons and sipping whiskey. One day I was about to open a new bottle of my favorite Rye and I saw the Seagram's 7 in the cabinet. To shorten this diatribe, I mixed it with 2 oz. Seagram's 7, ice tubes and some 7-up (maybe 2-3 oz.?). ... and it was heavenly smooth and deliciously satisfying. That was it, classic "7&7" and it was wonderful! Don't skip the classics when imbibing, but give our good old father's choices a chance... Price is an illusion! Rely on your tastes and screw anybody that says that you're wrong! I loved it!" [43:1]"A very good scotch mixed with anything for a budget price!;Ok lets take a step back here my star rating is based on price versus taste in a certain scotch category...so Red is in the mixing category of scotch's to me...but to read the reviews below me you would think this is a bad scotch...thats not the case at all...its just not as good of the rest of the wonderful Johnnie Walker scotchs and I believe thats why this scotch suffers in reviews here on BevMo...lets 1st notice this is a 85 point scotch so we know its pretty decent scotch...that said this is one of my favorite budget scotchs on rocks or with a splash...I believe thats what they designed it to be...a great bar scotch for bars or casual drinkers...this scotch really holds its flavor in water or ice...its not really a sipping scotch but it sure holds its scotch flavor mixed with anything...if you like a good scotch flavor when softened by any kind of liquid you just might have found your new favorite scotch at a very reasonable price...if your a sipper try JW Black or Gold or some of the good single malts but for a scotch good enough to stand up to any mixer Red has no apologies and lots of fans as evidenced by its one of the best selling scotchs made anywhere..." [57:6]"Dear Whiskey Advocate...Dear Whiskey Advocate you owe me \$39.99 plus mileage.;With a label such as "Craft Whiskey of the Year" I was expecting a lot more. This rye is incredibly simple that leads and finishes with a big burn. This might be ok in a Manhattan to punch through the vermouth but as a sipper In this price range they are out of their league. I would go High West Double or Lot 40 any day...far more complex and satisfying." [46:2]
Matchmaking	Passion, love	"Great price for a good sipping whisky;if your new to sipping whisky this is an excellent choice. Smooth on the front and on the finish." [2:1]"Ron Swanson would drink this.;Best whiskey i've ever had. And i've had my fair share of whiskey's in this world. The smoothness of this whiskey is amazing. The first sip of this I had was completely not what I expected. I expected something harsh and flavorful. Instead I got something smooth and tasty. I recommend this to any whiskey enthusiast." [8: 3]"Fantastic Whiskey;Huge carmel and vanilla with a very creamy vanilla finish. This whiskey is excellent and I would recommend it to anyone from novice to expert." [14:1]"Mixer for the Masses;Jim Beam is an easy intro in bourbon for the non-bourbon drinker. It's a low 80 proof and an ideal cheap bourbon for mixing, def not neat or on the rocks." [33:2]Not a whiskey for those new to scotch, nor for the faint of heart. [74:4]

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