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Television omnivores?

Snob and slob taste for television programs in the Netherlands in 2000

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## Abstract

Bourdieu (1979/1984) argued that people demarcate societal boundaries through a lifestyle that exhibits their cultural taste. Elites consume highbrow cultural products and the social lower strata consume lowbrow cultural products. Peterson and Simkus (1992) amended Bourdieu's theory by introducing the concepts of cultural omnivores and univores. Omnivores consume a wide variety of highbrow and lowbrow cultural products, whereas the lower social strata only consume lowbrow cultural products. Our research extends the application of these ideas to the field of television program taste, using data from a survey among a stratified probability sample of the adult Dutch population (n=825). Through correspondence analysis, we showed that people from higher status groups and with larger amounts of cultural capital watch less lowbrow television genres than implied by Peterson and Simkus' (1992) amendment. Our findings support Bourdieu's (1979/1984) original theory on the distinctive force of taste expressions.

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According to Bourdieu (1979/1984), status groups in society can be discerned by their taste; “taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (p. 6). High status groups display ‘legitimate taste’; they listen to classical music, appreciate the fine arts, go to the Guggenheim museum, and watch films by foreign movie directors. They consume complex works of art that require a high amount of cultural knowledge and intellectual prowess to be understood and appreciated. In contrast, low status groups display ‘popular taste’; they attend to popular music and popularized art forms. They hardly ever set foot in a museum, dance to the bass drums of today's popular artists, and go to see Hollywood movies. They consume much less complex works of art. In between, middle status groups display ‘middlebrow taste’.

In other words, different status groups exhibit different lifestyles, which convey the social boundaries in society. According to Bourdieu (1979/1984), these differences in lifestyle are acquired through socialization by the family and at school. Here, people acquire cultural capital, that is, the codes and conventions that are required to understand and appreciate more complex works of art; “a beholder who lacks the specific code feels lost in a chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason” (p. 2). In contrast, as people acquire more cultural capital they become increasingly able to display a refined taste.

So, according to Bourdieu (1979/1984) members of elite groups usually acquire much cultural capital through their socialization, thereby becoming able to display a refined highbrow taste. Further, during the course of their life, they mingle with other members of

elite groups. In such situations they actually display an elitist refined taste to show their status group affiliation. Thus, they are not only able to display a refined highbrow taste, but are also willing to do so. The result is a distinct relationship between social status and cultural capital on the one hand, and the cultural lifestyle people exhibit on the other. Lowbrow taste is found among people with low social status and little cultural capital, whereas highbrow taste is found among the elites with much cultural capital.

However, Peterson and Simkus (1992; Peterson, 1992) have shown that, in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, Bourdieu's (1979/1984) notions had to be differentiated with respect to tastes for music. According to their research, low status groups did indeed listen to a limited set of lowbrow musical genres, but high status groups did not confine themselves to highbrow musical genres. They appropriated a wide variety of musical genres, ranging from lowbrow to highbrow music. They appeared to be cultural omnivores who derived their status from their ability to display the appropriate taste for every social situation they found themselves in, whereas members of low status groups displayed an unvarying taste in every situation. The latter appeared to be cultural univores. Thus, Peterson and Simkus amended Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theory on how social status groups distinguish themselves from each other. Simplified, Bourdieu's reasoning boils down to distinction according to the quality of the genres attended to, whereas Peterson and Simkus' amendment suggests distinction by the quantity of genres attended to.

Since then, cultural omnivores have been found in other cultures as well. López Sintas and García Álvares (2002; using data from 1994) have shown the existence of cultural omnivores in Spain, and Van Eijck (2001; using data from 1987) has shown their existence in The Netherlands. In both countries, however, the 'legitimate' taste of the high status groups

did not disappear altogether. Part of the elites still exhibited a highbrow taste, whereas another part of the elites showed themselves to be cultural omnivores. This corroborates with Peterson and Kern's (1996) conclusion that the shift from “snobbish exclusion to omnivorous appropriation” (p. 900) was still in progress in the United States in 1992, as it probably is today.

Research on cultural omnivorousness and univorousness mainly focuses on tastes in music (Bryson, 1996, 1997; Peterson, 1992; Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Van Eijck, 2001), and to a lesser extent on other cultural activities such as reading (Van Eijck & Van Rees, 2000; Van Rees, Vermunt & Verboord, 1999), media use (Van Rees & Van Eijck, 2003), and outdoor cultural activities (López Sintas & García Álvares, 2002). Since television is a strong usurper of people's free time (Huysmans, De Haan, & Van den Broek, 2004; Van Rees & Van Eijck, 2003), we deemed it relevant to extend the knowledge about the field of snobs and slobs, or omnivores and univores, to television viewing behavior. In their publications, students of cultural omnivorousness suggest – mostly implicitly – that omnivorousness is not confined to musical tastes, but should be found with respect to all vehicles of culture. Television can be considered such a vehicle, and people's taste for television programs is as much part of their cultural lifestyle as is their taste for music. Peterson and Simkus' (1992) amendment to Bourdieu's (1979/1984) theory on the distinctive force of people's lifestyles with respect to expressions of musical taste should also apply to other expressions of taste, including their watching or avoiding certain television program genres.

In the past, researchers have hardly paid attention to omnivorousness regarding television program types. One of the few exceptions is a study carried out by Van Eijck and

Van Rees (2000). In their study, however, they studied omnivorous (and univorous) readers' tastes in television genres using fairly crude categories of television program types, and they did not study television genre omnivorousness in itself. They studied the relationship of television genre preferences with reading omnivorousness. In the present study, we attempted to assess the difference, or absence of difference in television omnivorousness between different status groups more directly. We wanted to investigate whether or not the higher social strata appropriated a wider range of television program types for their television use than the lower social strata. In case the higher social strata proved not to be omnivores, we also wanted to find out whether or not the higher social strata watch more complex, highbrow genres than the lower strata. In short, we made Peterson and Simkus compete with Bourdieu.

## Method

### *Data*

For our study we used data from a national Dutch survey on *Media use in the Netherlands 2000* (Konig, Jacobs, Hendriks Vettehen, Renckstorf & Beentjes, 2005). In the winter and early spring of 2000, a stratified probability sample of the Dutch population aged between 18 and 75 years old ( $n = 825$ ; cooperation rate 43.2%) was interviewed face-to-face, using a computer assisted standardized questionnaire (CAPI). Comparisons with census data (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2000) revealed that our sample is representative of the Dutch population regarding gender. Married and middle-aged people were somewhat over-represented given their proportions in the population, but since we are investigating

relationships and will not try to estimate population frequencies, we deem this deviation from representativeness unproblematic. For more details on sample, questionnaire, and other aspects of the survey please see König et al. (2005).

### *Measures*

To be able to distinguish people who appropriated a wide variety of program types for their television use from people who appropriated a less wide a variety of genres, we measured how often respondents watched thirteen different genres. Respondents were asked how often they watched sports programs; quiz and game shows; soap operas and other daily serials; current affairs programs; political programs; talkshows about everyday problems; talkshows about societal problems; health and medical programs; cultural programs, such as arts and cabaret programs; music programs; movies; news; and documentaries. If respondents indicated they did not know what certain program types entailed, they were supplied with a standard list of examples of that program type. We asked respondents to choose between the following answers: never, sometimes, regularly, often, and almost always. Since the difference between omnivorousness and univorousness boils down to how many programs people avoid when watching television (cf. Bryson, 1996; Van Eijck, 2001), we dichotomized these answers into never, and sometimes to almost always.

To be able to let Peterson and Simkus compete with Bourdieu we also had to be able to judge the complexity of the television program types in our analysis. Therefore, independent from our survey data, we assessed the complexity of the above-mentioned genres using a panel of thirteen experts from the Department of Communication at the Radboud University Nijmegen. These experts were provided with the following definition of

complexity; the cultural knowledge and intellectual powers that are needed to understand and appreciate a television program genre. Thereupon, the experts were asked to rank the program types according to their complexity, with the most complex program type at rank 1 and the least complex at rank 13. Results are presented in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

In our survey, social status was measured as the status of respondent's present or former occupation. An open-ended question was used to establish the respondent's present occupation, and if they did not have a job at that moment, they were asked what their former occupation had been. The answers of the respondents were coded using Ganzeboom, De Graaf, and Treiman's (1992) International Socio-Economic Index of occupational status (ISEI), which scores occupations according to their social prestige. We recoded these scores into four categories: low status (ISEI < 40), lower middle status (40 - 49), upper middle status (50-61), and high status (> 61).

Cultural capital was measured as the highest formal education (completed or attending at that moment). The categories were: elementary school or less, lower vocational school, lower secondary school, secondary vocational school, O levels, A levels, college, and university.



### *Analysis*

We used correspondence analysis (Gifi, 1990; Greenacre, 1981, 1984, 1993; Israëls, 1987) to assess what television programs were watched or avoided by people with different levels of occupational status and education. Using composite correspondence analysis, one can create an overview of many bivariate crosstables in one graphical representation.

We created a composite table using occupational status and education as row variables, and with television program types as column variables. Due to listwise deletion of missing data, this composite table contained the data of 734 (89%) respondents. A correspondence analysis solution was computed using the procedure ANACOR (SPSS, 1990). Canonical normalization – option A3 as discussed by Israëls (1987, pp. 72-75) – was used to compute the scores of the row and column categories on the dimensions.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

To determine the number of informative dimensions, we plotted the proportion of explained inertia by each dimension against the number of that dimension in a scree plot. This resulted in Figure 1, which shows a clear bend in the line between the second and third dimension. Therefore, we chose to use two dimensions. These two dimensions reproduce 83.7 per cent of the total inertia.

The two-dimensional solution of our correspondence analysis is depicted in Figure 2. In this figure, television programs types are depicted as small diamonds. Watching a television program type is indicated with a plus-sign (+), and avoiding a program type is

indicated using a minus-sign (-). Categories of occupational class and education are depicted as relatively large squares. The labels of all categories are explained in the legend that accompanies the figure.

There are no statistics in correspondence analysis that can indicate statistical significance of results. Therefore, we performed  $\chi^2$  contingency tests ( $p \leq 0.05$ ) to test whether or not occupational status and education are statistically independent of watching some television program types. This appeared to be the case for program types that have light gray labels in Figure 2 (sports and music programs, news, and talkshows about societal problems). Programs with dark gray labels (movies and documentaries) are only statistically independent of occupational status, and not of education.

Angles are the key to the interpretation of Figure 2. To find out if respondents in a category of occupational status or education are either over- or under-represented in the audience of a specific television program category, or vice versa, one must imagine a line from both categories to the origin (depicted as a gray cross). If these lines constitute an acute angle, the respondents are over-represented in the combination of the two categories. More acute angles are depictions of stronger over-representations. If lines constitute an obtuse angle, respondents are under-represented in the combination of the two categories. More obtuse angles are depictions of stronger under-representations. Right angles indicate absence of over- and under-representations.

The lengths of lines from the origin to the categories also indicate the strength of the over- and under-representations; longer lines represent stronger over- and under-representations. Therefore, categories close to the origin are much less interesting than categories further away. Exceptions to this rule are program types with strongly skewed

frequency distributions. Categories with relatively low cell counts tend to be located relatively close to the perimeter of the figure. With strongly skewed distributions, however, this does not necessarily imply a strong relationship. For example, there are only 6 people in our sample who avoid news. Their over-representation among lower and lower middle status groups and among people with lower secondary school, secondary vocational school, and O levels, however, is not significant. The possible existence of such exceptions is the reason why we performed the  $\chi^2$  contingency tests discussed above.

To facilitate discussion about over- and under-representations of respondents in combinations of categories, we drew areas in the shape of rounded wedges. Since the program types in these wedges are plotted roughly in the same direction from the origin, we will simultaneously discuss their relationships with respondents' occupational class and education.

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

## Results

The first thing that catches the eye in Figure 2, is that the categories of both occupational status and education are located in a typical horse shoe formation. People with low status and lower middle status are at the left end of the status horse shoe, while the upper middle status group is in the middle of the horse shoe, and the high status people are at other end. A similar pattern can be observed for education. People with elementary school or less and lower vocational school are at the left end of the education horse shoe. Conversely, people who have completed lower secondary school, secondary vocational school, and O

levels are at the middle of the horse shoe, and on the right end, A level, college, and university can be found. The education horse shoe is somewhat wider than the status horse shoe. This indicates that, on average, the relationship between education and what people watch and avoid is somewhat stronger than the relationship of occupational status with their television lifestyle.

The second conspicuous aspect of Figure 2 is that there are a number of program genres that are watched by such a varied audience that these genres do not distinguish the status and educational strata from each other (gray labels). Watching talkshows about societal problems, music, sports, and news programs appears not to be over-, nor under-represented in any of the social categories under scrutiny. For example, everybody reports watching news and two thirds of all social categories watch sports. Watching movies and documentaries is only related to educational achievement and not to occupational status.

Below we will first discuss what different status groups watch and avoid on television. After that, we will turn to television lifestyles of different educational levels.

Television programs in the upper left and lower left rounded wedges in Figure 2 are at acute angles with low and lower middle status. This means that people with a low or lower middle occupational status tend to avoid current affairs programs, cultural programs, and political programs. It also indicates that they tend to watch talkshows about everyday problems, soap operas and other daily serials, quiz and game shows, as well as health and medical programs.

Upper middle status people are inclined to watch political and cultural programs (lower right wedge) and not to avoid current affairs programs (obtuse angle with upper left

wedge). They tend, however, to avoid talkshows about everyday problems (lower half of upper right wedge).

People with a high status are likely to avoid health and medical programs, quiz and game shows, soap operas and other daily serials, and talkshows about everyday problems (upper right wedge). They are somewhat inclined to watch political and cultural programs (lower right wedge).

Regarding education, people with elementary school or less (e1), and people with lower vocational school (e2), are prone to avoid documentaries, current affairs programs, cultural programs, political programs (upper left wedge), and movies (upper middle wedge). They are likely to watch talkshows about everyday problems (upper half of lower left wedge).

The people who have completed lower secondary school (e3), secondary vocational school (e4), or O levels (e5) are apt to watch soap operas and other daily serials, quiz and game shows, and health and medical programs (lower half of lower left wedge). They are not disposed to avoid movies (upper middle wedge).

People with A levels (e6), college (e7), or university degrees (e8) are inclined to avoid health and medical programs, quiz and game shows, soap operas and other daily serials, and talkshows about everyday problems (upper right wedge). They are given to watch political and cultural programs (lower right wedge), and they have a slight tendency not to avoid current affairs programs and documentaries (upper left wedge).

Finally, when combining results from the estimation of the programs' complexity (see Table 1) with the correspondence analysis shown in Figure 2, one can see that people with a relatively low occupational status or education are prone to avoid programs with relatively high complexity (political programs to documentaries in Table 1). People with a relatively

high occupational class or education are likely to avoid programs with relatively low complexity (health and medical programs to music programs in Table 1).

### Discussion

We conclude that all status groups as well as all educational layers in Dutch society watch limited sets of program types – sets that are of roughly comparable size. Thus, they all show a similar degree of television omnivorousness or – depending on where you draw the line – television univorousness. Some program types are popular among all, but that does not make some status groups or educational layers more omnivorous than others. The difference between lifestyles of the social strata is not a difference in the quantity of program types they watch, but rather a difference in the quality of the programs that they watch. Elites are prone to watch more complex program types and lower strata tend to watch less complex programs. In this respect, elites can still be said to have snob taste, as opposed to the slob taste of people with lower status and less cultural capital – which is a conclusion that fits well with Bourdieu's (1979/1984) original theory.

Thus, with respect to television in the Netherlands, there seems to be no reason yet to amend Bourdieu's seminal work on *Distinction*. Peterson and Simkus' (1992) amendment of Bourdieu's theory does not seem to apply to the Dutch situation concerning television lifestyles. Although their amendment may apply to musical and other cultural tastes, it does not imply cultural omnivorousness in general

Some might object to our study and its theoretical framework because of the private character of watching television. Indeed, Western people usually watch television within the confines of their nuclear family (Lull, 1988). Therefore watching or avoiding particular

television programs could be regarded as a private activity that does not exhibit one's societal status. However, this would also hold true for reading, for which omnivorousness, and consequently a lifestyle, has been shown by Van Rees et al. (1999). After all, people talk about what they read and did not read (Kraaykamp & Dijkstra, 1999), and people talk about what they saw and did not see on television (Lull, 1980). In other words, people make sure that others can infer their status from their reading and from their television viewing. So, the activity of watching television itself may be private and hardly visible outside the family home, but through conversation people can get a fairly accurate idea of what other people watch and avoid.

Closely related is a possible critique that our results might have been influenced by social desirability. After all, our data stem from face-to-face interviews. However, if respondents were indeed prone to give answers that they thought were socially desirable, they would have done exactly what they do on a daily basis when they exhibit their societal status through their lifestyle. Thus, social desirability seems to be no impediment for research on social distinction.

Thus far, the results from Dutch research on omnivorousness (e.g. Van Eijck, 2001) are comparable to results from other Western societies such as the United States and Spain (e.g., Peterson & Simkus, 1992; López Sintas & García Álvares, 2002). Therefore, we deem it probable that our results apply to more societies than the Netherlands alone. It would be interesting to investigate through future research whether this is true.

Our present study has at least two different implications for the field of communication. First, we deem that typologies of gratifications sought and obtained (e.g., Lull, 1980; McQuail, Blumler & Brown, 1972) may be extended with the concept of

distinction. Watching certain television programs may function as a token of one's (aspired) social position. Second, higher amounts of cultural capital unlatch more complex television genres. In other words, both a need to behave in accordance with one's social status, and deployment of one's cultural capital may be considered to be contingent conditions for media attendance.



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## Tables

Table 1

*Mean ranks that were assigned to the program types regarding their complexity*

political programs	1.5
cultural programs	3.2
talkshows about societal problems	3.9
current affairs programs	4.3
news	5.2
documentaries	5.2
health and medical programs	5.9
movies	8.5
talkshows about everyday problems	8.6
quiz and game shows	10.5
soap operas and other daily serials	10.9
sports programs	11.4
music programs	11.9

Figure Captions

*Figure 1.* Proportions of explained inertia by ten dimensions

*Figure 2.* Correspondence analysis (n = 734)

Figure 1



