

QUALITY TV AND SOCIAL DISTINCTION: AN EXPERIMENT ON HOW COMPLEX TELEVISION SERIES VALORIZE THEIR USERS

DANIELA M. SCHLÜTZ, KATHARINA EMDE-LACHMUND,
HELMUT SCHERER, AND JONAS WEDEMEYER

MAIN AUTHOR

Name Daniela M. Schlütz

Academic centre Filmuniversität Babelsberg Konrad Wolf

E-mail address d.schluetz@filmuniversitaet.de

CO-AUTHORS

Academic centre Hanover University of Music,
Drama, and Media, Department of Journalism and
Communication Research

E-mail addresses

katharina.emde-lachmund@ijk.hmtm-hannover.de

helmut.scherer@ijk.hmtm-hannover.de

jonas.wedemeyer@ijk.hmtm-hannover.de

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question as to whether serial quality TV has the potential to valorize its fans. We draw on Bourdieu's theory of distinction, assuming that the demonstrated preference for a specific cultural taste has consequences for the attribution of capital endowment overall, and especially within an adept group. These assumptions are tested via a 3 (preference for high-culture vs. conventional television vs. quality TV series) x 1 online experiment with between subject design plus control group ($N = 389$). Results showed that conspicuously favouring serial quality TV has the potential to function as a distinctive sign – at least to some extent. Significantly more cultural capital is ascribed to a quality TV fan than to a person showing a preference for conventional television. Within a certain group of connoisseurs, a quality TV taste is even worth as much as a preference for high-culture. Implications are discussed with regard to the theory of distinction and quality TV series as the object of investigation.

For more than ten years HBO featured the slogan “It’s not TV, it’s HBO”. By this, the cable channel tried to mark out its programs. HBO, this slogan signified, is more than television (see Lavery 2006, Feuer 2007, Leverette et al. 2008). Just as with other pay TV channels like Showtime (*Dexter*, *Nurse Jackie*), AMC (*Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*), or FX (*The Americans*, *Sons of Anarchy*), HBO’s original content (series like *The Sopranos* or *The Wire*) does not aim at the lowest common denominator in audience taste but aspires to be high-class television content. US-American TV critics called such programming ‘quality television’. The term was introduced into academia by Thompson (1996, see also McCabe and Akass 2007). Based on Schlütz we draw on the following definition of quality TV for our line of argument:

Serial quality TV is complex in terms of storytelling, cast, narrative ambiguity, and intertextuality. Due to realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters quality series appear authentic. Moreover, they stand out because of a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity. Quality TV addresses a special, highly autonomous audience segment. As a meta-genre it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Quality serial television offers a cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value. (Schlütz 2016a: 101)

Quality TV can be seen as both art and merchandise (Bignell 2007) because it is demanding in terms of content, aesthetically ambitious and therefore attractive for certain target groups. Beside several other gratifications, Schlütz (2016b) assumes that these programs offer the profit of distinction by valorising their users. The study at hand focuses on the symbolic value quality TV series supposedly offer by empirically addressing the question as to whether they have the potential for social distinction.

We built on the premise that while television is often frowned upon for being an inferior pastime (Neuhoff 2001, Goldbeck 2004, Mikos 2006, Levine 2008), watching quality television might be acknowledged as a cultural activity for connoisseurs. That is why the brand ‘HBO’ functions as a unique selling proposition in first-order market relations where goods (like books) are sold directly to the customer (Rogers et al. 2002, Scherer 2015, Schlütz 2015). Whereas

from a distributor’s standpoint this label works as a branding device, from an audience’s perspective it serves as a meta-genre.

1. QUALITY TV AS META-GENRE

Commonly, television genres are taxonomic categories with descriptive and organizing character (Creeber 2008) that are culturally and historically bound (Feuer 1992). They are typically deduced from textual traits and/or production standards. Quality TV series, however, “fit no discernible genre at all – except quality” (Martin 2013: 271). We might therefore understand quality TV as a meta-genre designating complex narratives, authenticity, and signature style (Schlütz 2016a). According to Mittell (2004) genres are discursively constructed in a cultural context:

[T]elevision genre is best understood as a process of categorization that is not found within media texts, but operations across the cultural realms of media industries, audiences, policy, critics, and historical contexts. ... Thus, genres can be seen as key ways that our media experiences are classified and organized into categories that have specific links to particular concepts like cultural value, assumed audience, and social function. (Mittell 2004: xii)

Thus, genres are constructed by being publicly talked and written about (Reeves et al. 2007) – be it within academia (Cardwell 2007), among television critics (Nussbaum 2009), in social media forums (Jenner 2016, 2017), or in the marketing departments of TV channels like HBO (Anderson 2009: 38). The constructing discourse usually consists of three phases: definition, interpretation, and evaluation (Mittell 2004: 16). With regard to quality TV, evaluation is paramount as this is where the meta-genre is positioned in relation to other genres: “The historical and cultural practices working to constitute genre categories are formative of notions of taste, making hierarchies salient both within and between genres” (Mittell 2004: 102).

This process of constructing meaning is dominated by power; the power to interpret and, later, to naturalize concepts such as the meta-genre quality TV. The term ‘naturalizing’ refers to the process by which formerly subjective judgments become facts, and assessments are framed as legitimate hierarchies (Newman and Levine 2012: 6). Thus,

symbolic production is the “power to *name* and to make-exist by virtue of naming” (Bourdieu 1985: 729). The product of these power struggles is a logo (Bourdieu 1985: 739) like, for instance, ‘Quality TV’. In other words: a certain quality TV series is produced directly (physically) by its creator who is the showrunner or executive producer. Indirectly (symbolically), it comes into being by the “producers of the meaning and the value of the work” (Bourdieu 1983a: 318). As value (like beauty) always lies in the eye of the beholder, other agents like critics, scientists, and bloggers are necessary agents in order to “produce consumers capable of knowing and recognizing the work of art as such” (Bourdieu 1983a: 319). The aim of symbolic production is not only to classify a text but also to position it and, thereby, distinguish it from others; to consecrate certain producers and products (Bourdieu 1983a: 323) and to devalue others. This process has factual consequences on both social and individual levels: To label a text as quality TV raises its symbolic value and builds reputation (Sewell 2010). Moreover, by constructing such a consensus groups are formed (Bourdieu 1985: 729).

Quality TV signifies a specific cultural status of television content (Newman and Levine 2012: 21) as opposed to conventional programming, understood here as content with mass audience appeal (often) indicated by high ratings. This cultural status is equipped with surplus value as regards the audience (Santo 2008: 33) because watching HBO (or other channels offering quality TV series, for that matter) may help to accumulate cultural capital (Schlütz and Schneider 2014, Schlütz et al. 2017) and by this reputation – reputation embodied by the meta-genre quality TV. These processes may be better understood based on Bourdieu’s (1987) theory of distinction.

2. THE THEORY OF DISTINCTION

Bourdieu (1983a, 1983b, 1985, 1987) describes society as a multi-dimensional social space. This space is constructed on the basis of differentiation based on properties. As a symbolic system, social space is organized according to the logic of distinction (Bourdieu 1985: 730). The distinctive position one acquires within this space of social relationships is paid for in work, effort, and time (Bourdieu 1985: 725). The social differentiation generates groups. Thus, the system functions as a set of groups characterized by different life styles. Individuals and groups are defined by their relative position within this space as a “set of power relations” (Bourdieu 1985:

724). Groups share similar dispositions, interests, practices, and tastes including media repertoires (Lindell 2018, Lindell and Hovden 2018, Ohlsson et al. 2017). These similarities, in turn, reinforce the social affiliation: “position helps to shape dispositions” (Bourdieu 1983a: 341).

2.1 Forms of Capital

In his theory of distinction, Bourdieu argues that taste is related to social position. Social position, in turn, is dependent on capital resources (Bourdieu 1983b). Agents are distributed within the social topology to the overall volume of the capital they possess on the one dimension and to the composition of their capital assets on the other (Bourdieu 1985: 724). According to Bourdieu (1983b, 1987) the economy of cultural goods consists of three forms of capital that are convertible into each other: economic capital (i.e., financial means), social capital (i.e., relations), and cultural capital (skills and knowledge). Each form can be accumulated. Variations in taste can be traced back to different capital resources: “Select groups feel themselves to be distinctive in culture and thus choose cultural goods (of all kinds) to affirm their status” (Nelson 2007: 44). Media choice and evaluation, for instance, is influenced by cultural capital and mass media use is related to social capital (Straubhaar 2007: 202-3). Symbolic capital is a superordinate concept. Symbolic capital can be any other form of capital that is recognized by another knowledgeable agent as important and, therefore, valuable. Thus, distinction is a symbolic transfiguration of de facto differences that are perceived and assessed as significant (Bourdieu 1985: 731). Symbolic capital is “another name for distinction” (Bourdieu 1985: 731).

Agents construct the representation of the social world by managing impressions of themselves. They constantly produce classifications in their ordinary existence through which they seek to modify their position (Bourdieu 1985: 727), for instance by managing the social media impressions of themselves. Thus, the visible consumption of specific cultural goods helps to mark the individual’s social position: “Social groups mobilize taste to include and exclude, to identify members and keep boundaries. You are what you like ... Social identity is produced through differences not only in economic or social circumstances, but in aesthetic preferences” (Newman and Levine 2012: 7). Visibility of a specific aesthetic taste is created, for instance, by follow-up communication on a quality TV series (i.e., in online forums) or self-characterization as a quality series aficionado (i.e., in a social media profile). Studies show that certain public ut-

terances (such as Facebook profiles) are suitable for identity building and distinction (Zhao et al. 2008). Apparently, not only the act of consumption is apt for distinction but also the communication of this act to other agents. In Bourdieu's terms, to demonstrate a set of specific interests on a social media thus functions as a *distinctive sign*. When the sign is recognized, acknowledged, and approved of, then (and only then) it also functions as a *sign of distinction* (Bourdieu 1985: 730). The accumulation of symbolic capital and the associated prestige offers the profit of distinction only if the symbolic value is acknowledged by relevant others: "[W]orks of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognized" (Bourdieu 1983a: 318). Objects of the social world and their meanings are not determinate. Rather, they are variable in time and open to interpretation. Thus, the symbolic value of utterances such as the preference for quality TV series varies between groups (Bourdieu 1985: 728). This is because the perception of the social world always implies an act of construction. This act depends on the social position or, more precisely, on field-specific capital:

[S]ocially known and recognized differences only exist for a subject capable not only of perceiving differences but of recognizing them as significant, interesting, i.e., only for a subject endowed with the capacity and inclination to *make* the distinctions that are regarded as significant in the social universe in question (Bourdieu 1985: 730).

Thus, only agents familiar with the concept of serial quality TV would acknowledge and value such a taste as a sign of distinction.

This act of distinguishing oneself works because the visible preference of valuable cultural goods, and the judgment of taste that goes along with it, allows for other people to infer the capital resources someone has at his or her disposal. This has been shown empirically for the audience of repertory cinemas (Scherer et al. 2009). Moreover, genre preferences are used as proxies to assess other people. As the perception of the social world is structured according to language-based schemes that are the product of previous symbolic struggles (Bourdieu 1985: 727) – such as the construction of the meta-genre quality TV – the derived symbols may function as heuristics to judge other people: the more valuable the taste, it follows, the higher the esteem (indicated by the amount of attributed symbolic capital) for the person or group in question.

2.2 Distinction via Quality TV

As argued, quality TV can be understood as a culturally bound, discursive construct that functions as a meta-genre with concrete implications for selection, experience, and possible effects of entertaining quality TV (Schlütz 2016a). Like a traditional genre, it supports selection, frames comprehension, and channels interpretation. Moreover, quality TV's claim to artistic status by an awareness of connoisseurship adds value to the viewing experience. Therefore, watching serial quality television can be perceived as being more valuable than watching conventional TV because of its quality designation that carries cultural status (Newman and Levine 2012: 32). Thus, we argue that quality TV comes with symbolic value. Its use and appreciation marks the self-proclaimed connoisseur – in his or her own view and at best in the view of relevant others as well – as distinct from the 'ordinary viewer'. In this vein, quality TV consumption and follow-up communication build reputation (i.e., symbolic capital) if this action is acknowledged by relevant others. If in former times TV was only suitable for distinction if one did *not* watch it, with the advent of quality TV this has changed: "one *could*, in fact, be a snob and still admit to watching [quality TV series]" (Thompson 1996: 17). This 'not-TV' discourse helps to market quality content as something special and suitable for distinction:

HBO must continuously promote discourses of 'quality' and 'exclusivity' as central to the subscription experience. These discourses aim to not only brand HBO, but its audiences as well. In this manner, pay cable sells cultural capital to its subscribers, who are elevated above the riffraff that merely consume television. (Santo 2008: 20)

According to Bourdieu, the field of cultural (or artistic) production is the "arena par excellence of struggles" (1983a: 342). Due to its lack of institutionalization, the field offers several positions open to symbolic challenge (Bourdieu 1983a: 341-2). Consequently, the cultural field is extremely permeable, dispersed, and full of conflicts between rival principles of legitimacy (Bourdieu 1983a: 324). It is one of the indeterminate sites in the social structures as opposed to, say, the economic field. Furthermore, the artistic field is the site of a double hierarchy (Bourdieu 1983a: 319). This hierarchy is differentiated by two principles with varying degrees of public success (Bourdieu 1983a: 320): On the one

hand, the heteronomous principle is to do with success and economic profit; on the other hand, the autonomous principle is to do with consecration and artistic prestige. Lack of success, however, is not automatically a sign of election, as some “box-office successes may be recognized, at least in some sectors of the field, as genuine art” (Bourdieu 1983a: 320). Within the artistic field, heteronomous arts that appeal to the masses (like conventional television) are – more often than not – symbolically devalued, whereas autonomous arts are high in esteem. Distinct cultural activities are spread along this continuum between autonomy and heteronomy. High-culture appealing to an elite audience is placed closer to the autonomous principle (pure art or “art for art’s sake”, Bourdieu, 1983a: 321), and conventional television (“popular art for ordinary consumers”, Bourdieu, 1983a: 332) is positioned closer to the heteronomous principle. We argue that quality TV (comparable to “bourgeois art”, Bourdieu 1983a: 321) should lie somewhere between the opposing poles as it is comparable to artistic artefacts in terms of structure and the surrounding quality discourse (Schlütz 2016a, 2016b).

As discussed above, the meta-genre of quality TV serves as a discursively constructed heuristic for framing and assessing entertainment experiences. In this manner, quality entertainment offers a rewarding experience – rewarding in the sense that it offers both direct effects and indirect outcomes. The direct impact is an entertainment experience. Indirectly, quality TV provides symbolic value and thus offers the profit of distinction. This is possible because the discourse by which quality TV as a meta-genre is constructed is to do with hierarchization and consecration. When talking about their cultural tastes, viewers draw on characteristics of the texts in question with respect to certain cultural values. By demonstrating their judgment of taste, they position themselves within the social system (Mittell 2004). Thus, the communicated preference of quality TV serves as a distinctive sign. It only works as a sign of distinction, though, when other agents know how to decode it and to judge its value. The cultural value of quality TV has to be acknowledged and accepted in order for it to be distinctive. The characteristics of quality TV as an aesthetic artefact, as well as its construction as a meta-genre, are – if accepted – ideal for this.

The overall question thus guiding our research is whether the visible consumption of specific cultural goods marks an individual’s social position (H1) in the eye of relevant others (H2). More precisely, we ask whether the display of a specific taste is recognized by others as distinctive. Based on the discussion above we propose the following hypotheses:

- *H1.1*: A demonstrated cultural taste (distinctive sign) functions as a sign of distinction that affects the ascription of capital endowment. More precisely, a demonstrated preference for high-culture leads to higher amounts of ascribed a) economic, b) social, and c) cultural capital than does a demonstrated preference for conventional television.
- *H1.2*: A demonstrated preference for serial quality TV (distinctive sign) leads to an amount of ascribed capital endowment located between the opposing poles of high-culture and conventional TV.
- *H2*: A demonstrated preference for serial quality TV (distinctive sign) functions as a sign of distinction within an adept group only, i.e., it leads to a higher amount of ascribed symbolic capital within a group high on field-specific capital.

3. METHOD

The aim of the study is to test whether serial quality TV is apt for social distinction. More precisely, we want to find out whether a demonstration of a specific cultural taste as a distinctive sign impacts on the assessment of an individual in terms of his or her capital endowment and, thus, functions as a sign of distinction.

3.1 Experimental Design

To test our causal hypotheses we designed a 3 (preference for high-culture vs. conventional television vs. quality TV series) x 1 online experiment with between subject design plus control group, manipulating the cultural preferences presented in a (fake) Facebook profile. The study was conducted online in June/July 2015. The sample of $N = 389$ (63.2 % women, $M_{age} = 33.6$ years) was realized with the help of a (non-student) scientific access panel with participants from all over Germany, Switzerland, and Austria. As compensation, the respondents could win one out of three retail vouchers worth 20 Euros each.

The respondents were assigned randomly to one of the groups resulting in an evenly distributed sample. A randomization check showed no significant differences between the groups with two exceptions: The perceived authenticity of the Facebook profile that was used as a stimulus (see below) differed significantly between groups ($F(3/375) = 3.092$; $p = .027$). The quality TV profile was perceived as slightly more

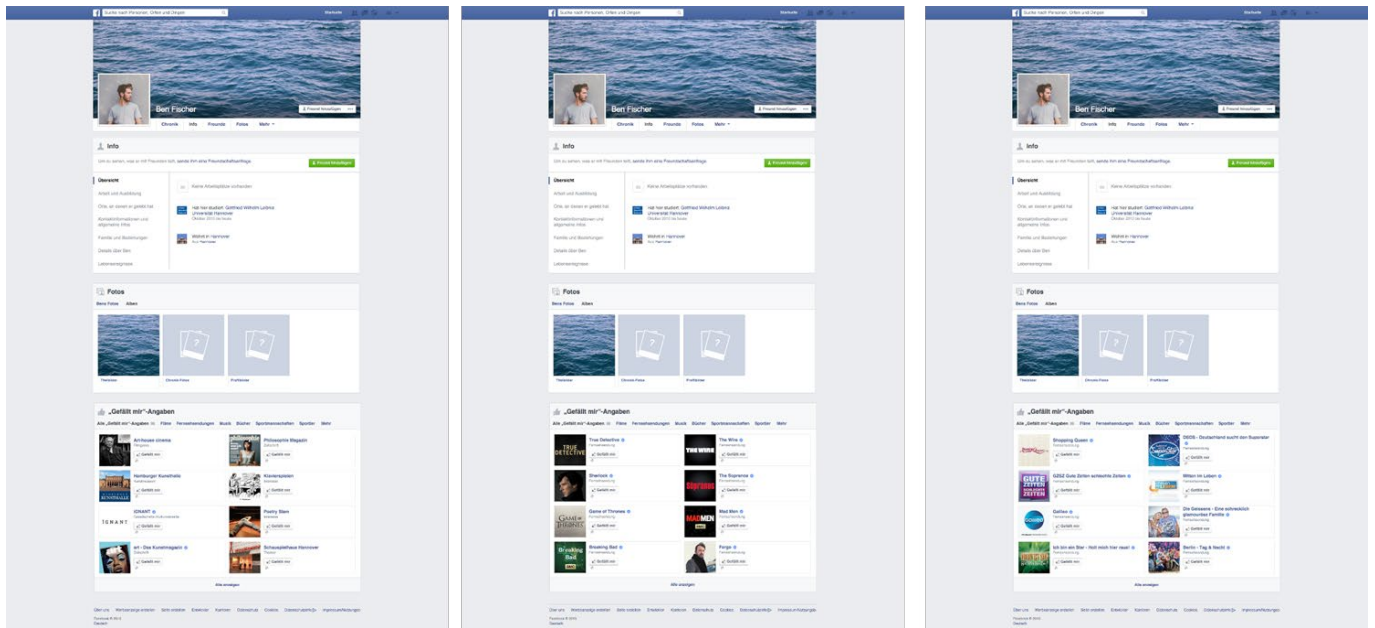


FIGURE 1. DEPICTED STIMULUS' VERSIONS. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: HIGH CULTURE, QUALITY TELEVISION, AND CONVENTIONAL TELEVISION PLUS CONTROL GROUP WITHOUT PREFERENCES (NOT DEPICTED)

authentic ($M = 3.7, SD = 0.84$) than the other profiles ($M_{highcult} = 3.44, SD = 0.86; M_{conventTV} = 3.32, SD = 1.01; M_{control} = 3.58, SD = 0.87$). When additionally considering the field specific capital, age also produced significant group differences ($F(7/374) = 5.584; p = .001$). These variables will be used as covariates in further analyses in order to account for a possible influence.

3.2 Stimulus and Procedure

For the experiment, we designed a fake Facebook profile for a young man named Ben Fischer¹. The profile was created in four different versions that featured varying cultural activities such as watching television and visiting cultural events. For each alternative activities were chosen as to demonstrate a specific cultural taste. We designed three different cultural profiles for the experimental groups: high-culture, quality TV series, and conventional television as well as a control group without preferences. With Bourdieu (1983a: 312) we assumed that the positions of these activities were relatively situated to each other within the cultural field. More precisely,

ly, we presumed that the positions formed a hierarchy with high cultural activities being perceived as more prestigious than watching conventional television. Serial quality TV as a new quasi-artistic utterance should, according to theory, be positioned between these opposing poles. Thus, the stimulus was created according to these three competing principles of legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1983a: 331; see Figure 1).

The high-culture profile featured interests in art house cinema, philosophy, art, theatre, and poetry (see Bourdieu 1983a). Following Bourdieu (1987: 416-462) the choice was attuned to the preferred cultural activities of people high on cultural but low on economic capital – such as profound movies or challenging art exhibitions – in order to match a (German) student’s interests.

The list of quality TV series in the second version of the profile contained *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-), *True Detective I* (HBO, 2014-), *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999-2007), *Sherlock* (BBC, 2010-), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), and *Fargo* (FX, 2014-)² The list was based on six different rankings from

1 We used a fictitious male profile as most of the chosen quality series had a higher share of male viewers. We did not add another stimulus version with a female protagonist in order to avoid complicating the factorial design further. Randomization ensured that the respondent’s gender did not influence the analyses.

2 We used US American or British series only for two reasons: First, they are considered quality television and second, they are much more popular among aficionados than German productions (Schlütz and Schneider 2014) regardless of their different cultural origin (Schlütz et al. 2017).

critics (Metacritic), experts (Writers Guild of America) and lay people (like IMDb, Moviepilot) alike. Thus, the selection mirrors different perspectives: critics, producers and national as well as international audiences. From each ranking, the top ten titles were chosen and assigned 10 to 1 points in descending order (with 0 for titles that did not make the top ten of the ranking in questions). After summing up the values a new ranking was calculated from which the above named top eight series were chosen.

For the third category of conventional TV we chose popular exemplars from scripted reality TV, casting shows, daily talk shows, and the like, that were held to be low on quality in Germany (Mikos 2006: 33). Finally, the control group was presented with the same profile without preferences.

The intended effect of the stimulus material was ensured by a treatment check at the end of the questionnaire: Participants were asked which interests they remembered from Ben's profile. Only respondents who identified the stimulus version they were presented with correctly remained in the sample.

After presenting the stimulus profile, respondents were asked to look at it thoroughly in order to form a personal impression about Ben Fischer. Subsequently, Ben's perceived capital endowment was measured as dependent variable (see below).

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were thanked and debriefed as to the true nature of the experiment.

3.3 Measures

All concepts specified below were measured by multi-item Likert-type scales ranging from 1 'do not agree' to 5 'agree completely'. After testing for reliability and reversing items with negative polarity mean scores were calculated for subsequent analyses (for a comprehensive list of items, mean scores, and values see appendix, table A1).

Capital endowment. The three basic forms of capital (economic, social, and cultural capital) as dependent variables were operationalized by individually phrased items with regard to Bourdieu (1983b). The concept of economic capital was captured by four items that unfortunately failed to yield sufficient reliability ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.58$, $\alpha = .547$). Results have thus to be treated with caution. Social capital was measured with four items. To enhance reliability one item was omitted from the final mean score ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.73$, $\alpha = .727$). For the same reason, only five out of seven items of

the cultural capital scale were used for the mean score ($M = 3.37$, $SD = 0.92$, $\alpha = .889$).

Distinction. To grasp the concept of distinction, we measured symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 731) according to Wojciszke et al.'s respect scale (2009) ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 0.84$, $\alpha = .712$). We renounced the slight improvement of the alpha score by omitting one of the items in favour of the original three-item scale.

Field-specific capital. To identify respondents adept in the concept of quality TV we measured field-specific capital, that is knowledge about and appreciation of quality TV series in the style of Rössel and Bromberger (2009). Three out of five items were used for a reliable mean score ($M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.14$, $\alpha = .729$). For further analysis, the score was dichotomized into low (1.0 to 2.9) versus high (3.0 to 5.0) within-field knowledge and used as a quasi-experimental factor.

Further measures. Additionally, we recorded sociodemographics such as age, gender, and educational background.

4. RESULTS

H1 assumed that the demonstrated preference for a specific cultural taste functions as a distinctive sign with respect to the attribution of capital endowment. More precisely, we presumed that a preference for high-culture leads to higher amounts of ascribed social and cultural capital than a preference for conventional television (H1.1). The assessment resulting from a preference for quality TV, we predicted, is located between the two opposing poles (H1.2). In response to that, we performed several ANCOVAs with cultural preference as independent factor and the different forms of capital as dependent variables (table 1).

All analyses yielded significant results with the presentation of cultural preferences being more influential for the attribution of cultural capital ($\eta^2 = .490$) than social capital ($\eta^2 = .088$). A closer look at the group means revealed that the presentation of high culture preferences generally lead to the highest amount of ascribed capital, while network TV accounted for the lowest assessment of economic, social, and cultural capital. Figure 2 shows considerable differences of the cultural preferences in terms of ascribed forms of capital (i.e., the capital profiles). High culture as the outmost profile enclosed the others with network TV at the center of the web.

TABLE 1. ATTRIBUTION OF FORMS OF CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE (ANCOVA)

Dependent Variables	Cultural Preference			
	High Culture (n=95)	Quality TV (n=96)	Conventional TV (n=96)	Control (n=102)
Economic Capital ^{**1}	3.31 (0.57) ^a	3.23 (0.61) ^{ab}	3.04 (0.65) ^b	3.32 (0.44) ^a
Social Capital ^{***2}	3.45 (0.67) ^a	3.25 (0.75) ^a	2.88 (0.75) ^b	3.32 (0.60) ^a
Cultural Capital ^{***3}	4.18 (0.54) ^a	3.43 (0.63) ^b	2.40 (0.85) ^c	3.50 (0.52) ^b

Note. N = 338 – 375.

One-way ANCOVAs with demonstrated cultural preference as independent variable, forms of capital as dependent variable, and perceived authenticity as covariate.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

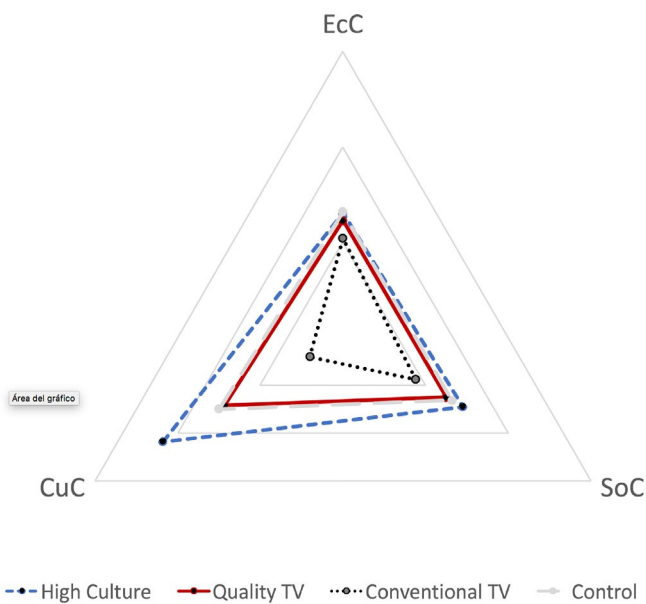
Scales from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'.

Groups with different letters differ significantly according to post-hoc comparisons using Bonferroni (p < .05).

¹F (3/364) = 4.475; p = .004; η² = .036

²F (3/343) = 10.935; p < .001; η² = .088

³F (3/370) = 118.072; p < .001; η² = .490



Note. N = 338 – 375.

Scales from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'.

EcC = economic capital, SoC = social capital, CuC = cultural capital.

For mean values see Table 1.

FIGURE 2. CAPITAL PROFILES AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCES

The profiles of quality TV and the control group (no preferences) were almost congruent. As expected, quality TV was ranging in between.

Post-hoc analyses indicated, however, that not all groups differed significantly from each other (see table 1). In general, both forms of capital were rated significantly lower when participants were presented with preference for conventional television compared to the high-culture Facebook profile. Thus, hypothesis 1.1 was supported. Quality TV, on the other hand, only differed significantly from both high-culture and conventional TV preferences with regard to cultural capital. Thus, hypothesis 1.2 was only partly supported.

H2 presumed that the demonstrated preference for quality TV functions as a sign of distinction only within a specific group of aficionados high on field-specific capital, that is knowledge about the meta-genre quality TV and its exemplars. To account for this we performed a two-way ANCOVA with cultural preference and field-specific capital as independent variables and symbolic capital as dependent (see table 2). The results show a significant main effect of cultural preference on symbolic capital and, more importantly, a significant but small interaction effect with regard to symbolic capital ($F(3/323) = 3.081; p = .028; \eta^2 = .028$). Accordingly, the attribution of symbolic capital as a function of demonstrated cultural preferences seems to differ with regard to field-specific capital.

TABLE 2. ATTRIBUTION OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE AND FIELD-SPECIFIC CULTURAL CAPITAL (ANCOVA)

Symbolic Capital	df	F	η^2	p
(A) Cultural Preference	3	7.148	.063	<.001***
(B) Field-Specific Capital	1	0.027	.000	.870
(A) x (B)	3	3.081	.028	.028*

Note. N = 331.

Two-way ANCOVA with cultural preference and field-specific cultural capital as independent variable, symbolic capital as dependent variable and perceived authenticity and age as covariates.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

TABLE 3. ATTRIBUTION OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE AND FIELD-SPECIFIC CULTURAL CAPITAL (DESCRIPTIVE VALUES)

Field-Specific Cultural Capital	Cultural Preference			
	High Culture (n=95)	Quality TV (n=96)	Conventional TV (n=96)	Control (n=102)
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
Low	3.32 (0.87)a	2.85 (0.73)b	2.81 (0.89)b	3.34 (0.79)a
High	3.35 (0.72)a	3.26 (0.85)a	2.65 (0.60)b	3.05 (0.80)ab

Note. N = 338. Scale symbolic capital from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'.

Groups with different letters differ significantly according to simple effects post-hoc comparisons for low and high field-specific cultural capital using Bonferroni (p < .05).

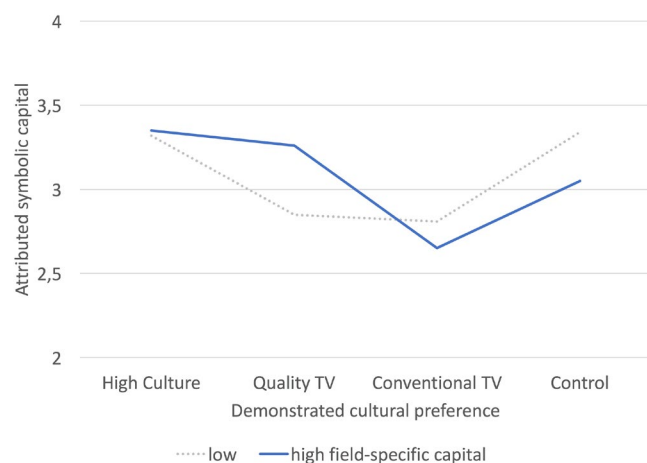


FIGURE 3. ATTRIBUTION OF SYMBOLIC CAPITAL AS A FUNCTION OF DEMONSTRATED CULTURAL PREFERENCE AND FIELD-SPECIFIC CULTURAL CAPITAL

Subsequent simple effects analysis showed that respondents with low field-specific capital (i.e., non quality TV aficionados) attributed significantly lower levels of symbolic capital to Ben when presented with a quality TV profile compared to his high-culture profile ($p = .015$; see table 3 and figure 3). Instead, the amount of ascribed social capital was comparable to the conventional TV profile. However, within the adept group of participants in possession of high field-specific capital (i.e., quality TV fans), respect for Ben the 'quality TV viewer' was almost as high as if he favoured high-culture activities, and significantly higher than as a response to the conventional TV profile ($p = .037$). In sum, the more field-specific capital a respondent had at his or her disposal the higher his or her regard for a person pursuing this kind of cultural activity. Therefore, H2 was supported.

5. DISCUSSION

This paper drew on Bourdieu's theory of distinction with regard to a contemporary media phenomenon – serial quality television. To deal with our research question – quality TV's aptitude for distinction – we applied a sociological theory to individual agents and their behaviour. By empirically testing the theoretical claims we contributed to knowledge about the eligibility of media use to add to the forming of groups in social space. Furthermore, the study shed light on the effects of a discursively constructed quality logo like the meta-genre quality TV.

Our paper was based on the presumption that serial quality TV can be understood as a meta-genre that influences production, distribution, and, most importantly, reception of media artefacts by adding symbolic value to the entertainment experience. Quality TV series were chosen as new quasi-artistic utterances suitable to open up the space of possibilities of the cultural field (Bourdieu 1983a: 314). And indeed, the experiment showed that conspicuously favouring quality TV has the potential to function as a distinctive sign – at least to some extent. Significantly more cultural capital (almost one scale point) was ascribed to a quality TV fan than to a person who showed a preference for conventional TV. The quality TV fan was not granted more cultural capital, though, than the control group and less in comparison to a high-culture devotee (H1). Within a certain group of connoisseurs, however, a quality TV taste is worth nearly as much as a preference for high-culture. This is shown by an almost even attribution of symbolic capital by respondents who themselves were quality television aficionados (H2). Respondents low on field-specific capital, on the other hand, ascribed more symbolic capital to Ben when he showed an interest in high-culture activities. Thus, to cherish quality television is perceived and assessed as a significant *de facto* difference that is symbolically transfigured into a distinctive cultural status. Consequently, this status can be used to modify an individual's social position.

These results suggest that distinction can be understood as a symbolic transfiguration of differences in cultural taste that are assessed as significant (Bourdieu 1985: 731). More precisely, they indicate that a certain 'bourgeois' taste can be perceived as equally distinctive as a preference for pure art whereas popular art is lower in esteem. With regard to the theory, these results insinuate that changes of the structure of the field of cultural production are perceivable but not, at least not as of now, of society as a whole. On an individual level, quality TV apparently adds symbolic value to the enter-

tainment experience – at least in the eyes of relevant others. By conspicuously consuming quality TV, symbolic capital is earned. Consequently, the aficionado is re-positioned within the social field.

It is worthwhile to consider the implications on the macro level in the light of our results as the rise of quality TV might be understood as a "re-ordering of the hierarchy of genres" (Bourdieu 1983a: 335-6). The establishment of quality TV as a meta-genre is a consequence of the transformation that the US-American television market went through during the last half century (Jenkins 2008, Lotz 2007). These changes influenced financing, production, distribution, marketing, as well as media use and content reception. Especially the rise of premium cable channels fostered the development of quality TV as a meta-genre (Schlütz 2016a). At present, we have reached a phase that Martin (2013: 9) termed the "third golden age of television". This era is characterized by high quality television content and highly competent users, participants, fans, consumers, co-creators, etc. who successfully compete with other stakeholders in the cultural struggle. Within this struggle, symbolic capital is a means of power (Bourdieu 1983a: 731).

The era is also the age of cultural convergence (Jenkins 2008: 2) where television use has changed "from flow to files" (Mittell 2010: 422, Schlütz 2015). By purchasing (digital) quality TV content directly (on DVD or by subscribing to a premium pay-TV channel) the audience's taste is fed back into the market. This feedback is much more reliable than audience shares and ratings. The demand is met with a fitting supply by new market players like streaming platforms that are able to customize shows to a specific niche audience and still make money by catering for the 'longer long tail' (Anderson 2009) with distinctive programming. The new players are equally competent and powerful – not only with regard to producing and distributing high quality content but also with respect to constructing quality TV as a meta-genre. Thus, what we witness might be understood as a change of power relations in the cultural field (Bourdieu 1983a: 338) with the audience becoming more influential in a market dominated by first-order-relations. Other stakeholders high on symbolic capital may profit from the development as well. As Bourdieu himself puts it:

Every field is the site of a more or less overt struggle over the definition of the legitimate principles of division of the field. ... the symbolic strength of the participants in this struggle is never completely independent of their position in the game, even if

the specifically symbolic power to nominate constitutes a strength relatively independent of the other forms of social power. (Bourdieu 1983a: 734)

Thus, non-professional media agents like bloggers, fans, online community members, and the like may become more influential in nominating and naming. The power to impose one's own view of the social world on others is less dependent on social capital (and maybe also economic capital) because the field has become more accessible. Symbolic capital, on the other hand, might substantiate formative claims to valorisation. Referring back to the individual plane, though, our results suggest that this process is still under way.

Despite the cohesive findings of our study, we have to address some limitations. First, we applied experimental logic to test Bourdieu's theory of distinction. This may seem somewhat unorthodox. Wanting to test the causal effects implied within the theoretical framework we nevertheless found this to be appropriate (cf. Scherer 2013). Second, for the empirical study we worked with an access panel where the panelists could decide for themselves whether to take part in our experiment or not. Because of self-selection bias and small sample size, we cannot make representative claims about society as a whole. We are confident, however, that the experimental design offers insights into significant correlations of the variables in question. Further research should address this shortcoming, though. Another limitation is that the study was conducted in Germany, a country where high-culture is traditionally regarded as prestigious whereas television usually is not (originally Horkheimer and Adorno 1971; cf. Gans, 1999, Goldbeck 2004, Kausch 1988, Mikos 2006). Peterson's (1992, 1997) thesis of the US American "cultural omnivore", i.e. the notion that an exclusive taste for high culture has lost its social function, does not hold true for Germany (Neuhoff 2001, Rössel 2006) or Great Britain (Friedman 2012). Thus, the results may not be applicable to other countries where television is ascribed a different cultural status. Cultural differences should be investigated in replication studies. Finally, there is another aspect that warrants future investigation: One important premise of our argument was the existence of a meta-genre quality TV, although we cannot provide empirical proof for this claim. Thus, we need to design studies to capture "the work of producing and imposing meaning" (Bourdieu 1983a: 730), for instance by systematically analysing media content dealing with the meta-genre quality television (like, for instance, reviews). Harlap, for instance, shows this for the critical discourse with regard to *BeTipul* (HOT3, 2005-2008;

English: *In Treatment*, HBO, 2008-2010) that "transformed BeTipul from an 'industrial television product' (targeting mass audiences) into an 'work of art'" (2017: 59). Levine (2008: 406) showed a similar effect for live TV broadcasts that were articulated with "not TV" discourses. Hence, we should try to systematically identify 'the professional producers of objectified representations of the social world or, more precisely, of methods of objectification' (Bourdieu 1983a: 730). By doing so, we could further observe cultural operations linking media products to cultural value and assumed audiences and gain insight into the formation of social groups by the power struggles of competing principles of legitimacy and the valorisation of audiences due to their media use.

Despite these limitations, our research adds to the existing literature in several ways: From a methodological point of view, we successfully applied an experimental design to Bourdieu's theory of distinction. We thus extended existing empirical approaches by testing the distinctive potential of a specific media repertoire representing a certain cultural taste. From a theoretical point of view, our study showed that while TV in general has a rather low cultural status, the quality TV genre has the potential to function as a distinctive sign. Hence, we would argue that a more nuanced look at "television's cultural capital in the age of media convergence" (Levine 2008: 405) is a promising pathway for scholarly engagement.

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Breaking Bad (AMC, 2008-2013)
Dexter (Showtime, 2006-2013)
Fargo (FX, 2014-)
Game of Thrones (HBO, 2011-)
In Treatment (HBO, 2008-2010)
Mad Men (AMC, 2007-2015)
Nurse Jackie (Showtime, 2009-2015)
Sherlock (BBC, 2010-)
Sons of Anarchy (FX, 2008-2014)
The Americans (FX, 2013-2018)
The Sopranos (HBO, 1999-2007)
The Wire (HBO, 2002-2008)
True Detective I (HBO, 2014-)

APPENDIX

TABLE A1. PERCEIVED FORMS OF CAPITAL

	M	SD	n
Economic Capital			
Ben is presumably from a wealthy family.	3.50	0.84	365
I think that Ben is going to have a well-paid job in the future.	3.49	0.81	368
Ben has to spent his money economically.	2.75	0.82	351
I think Ben has an expensive lifestyle.	2.65	0.89	356
Index	3.22	0.58	378
Cronbach's Alpha		.547	
Social Capital			
I think Ben has a large circle of friends.*	3.53	0.95	363
If Ben was in need of help he could count on his family and friends.	3.46	0.84	329
Ben's social environment presumably consists of many highly appreciated people.	2.92	0.93	338
If Ben was in financial trouble he would be supported by his social environment.	3.25	0.85	339
Index (without flagged item)	3.21	0.73	355
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged item)		.727	
Cultural Capital			
I think that Ben is interested in cultural affairs.	3.44	1.27	377
Ben is aware of cultural events (like theatre plays and readings).	3.06	1.23	370
Ben is well-informed about world affairs.	3.20	0.93	370
I think Ben is well-educated.	3.78	0.92	378
Ben seems to be intellectual.	3.35	1.08	373
Ben couldn't join in a conversation about current issues. [r]*	2.40	0.93	365
I don't think that Ben is literate. [r]*	2.59	1.15	369
Index (without flagged items)	3.37	0.92	384
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged items)		.889	
Symbolic Capital			
I respect Ben.	3.76	0.99	329
Ben deserves admiration.	2.49	0.92	299
He could serve as an example to others.	2.74	0.93	304
Index	3.08	0.84	304
Cronbach's Alpha		.712	
Field-Specific Capital			
I keep informed via websites relevant to series (like serienjunkies.de or serieslyawesome.TV).	1.79	1.18	389
It can happen that I read up on content and characters from a certain TV series after watching it.	2.64	1.53	388
I prefer to watch US-American TV series in my leisure time.	2.81	1.49	388
I prefer to watch US-American TV series in the original version.*	2.62	1.62	379
I prefer US-American TV series in the dubbed German version. [r]*	2.92	1.50	370
Index (without flagged items)	2.41	1.14	389
Cronbach's Alpha (without flagged items)		.729	

Note. Scale from 1 'do not agree at all' to 5 'agree completely'

