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Cosmopolitan cultural consumption: Preferences and practices in a heterogenous, urban population in Switzerland



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ABSTRACT

Several authors in contemporary cultural consumption research have argued that the traditional axis of distinction between highbrow culture and popular culture is in the process of being replaced by a new axis of distinction between an open cosmopolitan cultural capital and a more local less open, cultural capital. We take up this issue and study cosmopolitan cultural consumption, which is defined by its openness for and engagement with cultural products and services from foreign cultures. We have exploratively developed new measures of cosmopolitan cultural consumption, which focus on the geographic breadth of consumption beyond western countries and on knowledge, tastes and modes of consumption, thus taking the esthetic disposition in consumption into account. Furthermore, the data enable us to study the relationship between consumption and other measures of transnational experiences and identification. Our results indicate that cosmopolitan consumption is not rampant in the population. Furthermore, it is part of a broader pattern of cosmopolitanism that is characterized by supranational identifications, transnational relations, and experiences. They show furthermore that cosmopolitan cultural consumption is strongly determined by different forms of cultural capital, thus being a form of class-based practice.

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1. Introduction

Processes of globalization, transnationalization and Europeanization have been discussed in the social sciences at least since the 1970s, often with a focus on economic and structural developments (Ley, 2004; Held et al., 1999; Gerhards and Rössel, 1999). Under the heading “cosmopolitanism,” the “subjective” side of these processes, like transnational identifications, cosmopolitan consumption and transnational practices, is increasingly taken into account (Szszynksi and Urry, 2002; Hannerz, 1990: 238; Pichler, 2012: 22).¹ The main focus of our paper are the measurement and actual prevalence of such cosmopolitan consumption practices as well as their social and cultural determinants.

However, the label cosmopolitanism subsumes a variety of different meanings, which should be carefully differentiated, as especially Vertovec and Cohen (2002) as well as Szszynksi and Urry (2002) have shown. They distinguish a philosophical cosmopolitanism focusing on universal norms from a cultural cosmopolitanism which is based on the consumption of culturally diverse goods and services. Practical cosmopolitanism, the next form, goes partially beyond this consumption-based cosmopolitanism in targeting behavior and skills, which enable people to actively understand and participate in other cultures. A further aspect is the political dimension of cosmopolitanism, which includes issues like global governance and global civil society. Finally, the term cosmopolitanism furthermore means a specific form of identifying as a world citizen and having cosmopolitan attitudinal orientations toward different aspects of life.

In this paper we focus especially on cosmopolitan cultural consumption as dependent variable, though we take cosmopolitan identification and other transnational practices, as determinants of cultural consumption, into account. Several authors agree that cosmopolitan orientations, consumption and practices are characterized by a strong openness to learn about, participate in and reflect on new and culturally foreign practices and experiences (Cleveland et al., 2009: 119; Hannerz, 1990: 239; Woodward et al., 2008: 209; Skrbis and Woodward, 2007: 730; Ley, 2004: 159; Szszynksi and Urry, 2002: 468). Therefore, we define cosmopolitan cultural consumption by its openness for and engagement with cultural products and services from foreign cultures.²

This relates to the classic distinction between locals and cosmopolitans drawn by Robert Merton. In Merton's (1968) study, locals were strongly focused on the social and cultural life of their town, whereas cosmopolitans were intellectually and culturally open to other parts of the country and to the nation. With the increasing transnationalization of some social fields, cosmopolitanism is no longer focused on the national but on the transnational and even global level, whereas the locals are mainly interested in the local and national arena (Hannerz, 1990; Fligstein, 2008; Meuleman and Savage, 2013). Thus, the terms locals and globals have to be understood in relation to the existing social fields and their geographical spread (Gerhards, 2012). In lifestyle and consumer research the issue of cosmopolitanism dates at least back to the 1990s, when Holt (1997) contrasted a largely local orientation among working-class respondents in a central Pennsylvanian rural county with the more national and international focus of certain segments of the upper-middle-class. In contemporary cultural consumption studies, several authors have argued that the traditional axis of distinction between highbrow culture and popular culture is in the process of being replaced by a new axis of distinction between an open cosmopolitan cultural capital and a more local, less open, cultural capital (Priour and Savage, 2013; Roose et al., 2012; Meuleman and Savage, 2013). However, based on existing research it is not clear, if the second axis is indeed replacing the first, or if they form independent dimensions of the social space or as another possibility, the two axes are linked to each other (Cappeliez and Johnston, 2013; Johnston and Baumann, 2007; Ollivier, 2008; Rössel and Schroedter, 2013).

In this paper, we take up this discussion and focus on three issues. First, in our view, the measurement of cosmopolitan cultural consumption is still mainly focused on Western Culture (cf. Meuleman and Savage, 2013). This neglects the range of cultures from which goods and services

¹ A simple word count with the stem “cosmopol” shows only 15 articles in 1980 in the Web of Science, which contained this stem. This rose only to 34 in 1990, but then to 224 in 2000 and 747 in 2010.

² The means and distribution of all dependent and independent variables are available from the authors.

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