

Emerging Elitism on Facebook

—

An Ethnographic Field-Study on Social Distinction among the Young

Abstract:

The research paper at hand presents a web-ethnographic field-study on mechanisms of social distinction among young individuals on Facebook. This includes an investigation of Pierre Bourdieu's main thesis outlined in *La distinction* and its applicability for contemporary times. In this, Bourdieu describes a conception of social class to be intrinsically linked to cultural practices of legitimacy and domination. Recent research in the field of *cultural class analysis* revolves around a debate of the applicability of Bourdieu's thesis. The main challenge consist in the question of how to address diversified taste preferences at times when access to higher education has increased drastically and digital technologies have simplified the distribution of cultural goods. In attending this challenge, this paper presents the argument that mechanisms of social distinction can be found among Facebook profiles from individuals with high levels of education to be at play.

The development of the welfare state since the end of WWII has silenced debates about social classes and inequality in Western societies. In particular the expansion of the educational system has contributed to this circumstance. Western countries all depicted an increase of expenditure for education from 1-2% of the national income at the end of the 19th century to an average of 10-15% of the national income at the end of the 20th century (Piketty 633;636). With education being identified as the major contributor for socially converging dynamics, the radical increase of access to education is seen as a victory over structural social inequality (Piketty 41).

In the early seventies French scholar Pierre Bourdieu (1979) disrupted the narrative of social equality with his book *Distinction*. Bourdieu introduced a cultural dimension into conceptions of social hierarchization, which diverted from a traditional materialistic conception (Savage, "Class Analysis" 8). He argues that inherited *cultural capital* is decisive for an individual's social position in society. Cultural capital thereby describes taste practices which are considered as 'legitimate' and as indicators for high 'personality'. According to Bourdieu, these legitimate taste preferences are promoted by educational institutions of the state, where cultural capital perpetuates discriminatory mechanisms of social hierarchization, privileging those who acquired 'legitimate' taste through their socioeconomic background. Bourdieu's thesis of cultural privileges promoted questions about elitism and equality of opportunities to return into public debates at the time.

Towards the end of the 20th century, however, *Distinction* has increasingly been "criticised for being historically outdated" (Hjellbrekke et al. 187). The function of taste was seen as too exclusively linked to mechanisms of social elitism and challenged for portraying a "sociological reductionism" (Goblot and Halbwachs qtd. in Coulangeon and Duval 3). Thereby, it is argued that the book is unable to sufficiently address influences from recent social changes in the sphere of education, globalization and digitization on culture. Consequently, the "crux of the postmodern condition is the breakdown of the hierarchy distinguishing legitimate 'high' culture from mass 'low' culture', as well as the breakdown of the direct relationship between such classification and class." (Holt 103 qtd. in Prieur and Savage 308). Culture, is the overarching argument, has emancipated itself from its functionalist role for creating social

classes and has increasingly come to reflect diversified individual lifestyles. This notion of culture is often argued to reflect particularly the lifestyles of younger generations, who grew up with culturally egalitarian technologies of the internet. At times when economic inequalities in Western societies have regained proportions of the late 19th century (Piketty, 418), the question appears whether culture in the form of taste practices has indeed emancipated itself sufficiently from its elitist character, to justifiably be discarded from playing a role in mechanisms of social hierarchization.

The goal of this paper is to attend to this question. Therefore, my research questions is to which extent can performances of social classes be identified in contemporary times on the basis of Bourdieu's concept of *social distinction*. Such an investigation ideally incorporates aspects which challenge its applicability. As mentioned, these aspects revolve around characteristics of age and digitization, so that my research question is further narrowed on how taste preferences of young adults on Facebook can be understood to perpetuate mechanisms of social distinction in a Bourdieusian sense. Accordingly, I will analyze compositions of Facebook-profiles from individuals with different degrees of education in order to make statements about an interconnection between education, taste preferences and cultural capital as described by Bourdieu.

The proposed method of research depicts a web-ethnographic field-observation, as it involves an unmediated contact with cultural practices on Facebook. This approach has rarely been applied in cultural studies and never with the focus of my research.

As I will present in this paper, the compositions of Facebook-profiles from presumed higher educated individuals differ significantly from profiles from presumed lower educated individuals. Such differentiation of taste practices correlate with existing research on taste practices of young adults. The scholars Prieur and Savage identified a division between *cosmopolitan* vs. *local* taste preferences with regards to levels of education. They argue for local taste practices to serve as negative reference point for cosmopolitan taste practices and thereby to have identified mechanisms of distinction similar to those described by Bourdieu.

Further, I argue that displays of cosmopolitan *taste preferences* from highly educated individuals stand in conformity with a *Kantian aesthetic* which is described by Bourdieu as a guiding principle for social distinction. Accordingly, this principle affects the display of informational content on Facebook profiles, as well as the sharing of information related to an individual's work-life, leisure and traveling activities. I will conclude that my observations support understanding taste practices on Facebook as mechanisms of social distinction, by conforming to characteristics of legitimacy and convertibility.

As a consequence, the structure of my paper will be to (1) provide the theoretical framework for my empirical research, constituted by Bourdieu's thesis of social distinction; (2) outline the academic debate of Bourdieu's applicability into contemporary times, which revolves around the issue of diversified taste preferences in a digitizing age; (3) describe the resulting focus of interest of my research on taste practices of the younger generations on Facebook; (4) explain the methodological approach adopted in this paper and the challenges that come with it; (5) present and analyze my field-observations in relation to existing research in the field and according to a Kantian aesthetic, followed by a reflection about the limitation and validity of my findings; (6) conclude and offer an outlook for further research.