

# Symbolic Media Consumption

## How Genre Preferences Affect Social Identity

### Zusammenfassung

Mehr als jemals zuvor sind Konsumpraktiken Ausdruck individueller Selbstkonzepte. Das trifft in gleicher Weise auch auf Mediennutzungsgewohnheiten zu. Medien werden damit selbst zu „Zutaten“ für die eigene Identitätsarbeit, dies umso mehr als Mediennutzungspräferenzen zunehmend in sozialen Medien gezeigt werden. Das Ziel des vorliegenden Beitrags besteht darin, die symbolische Bedeutung der Mediennutzung für die soziale Identitätsarbeit zu untersuchen. Dazu wurden mit Online-Tagebüchern ( $n = 59$ ) die Mediennutzungsgewohnheiten juger Erwachsener über einen Zeitraum von vier Wochen erhoben. Basierend auf diesen Ergebnissen wurden zwölf Genres ausgewählt und deren symbolische Bedeutung erhoben. Dazu wurde ein projektives Verfahren verwendet ( $n = 225$ ). Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass lediglich sechs der zwölf untersuchten Genres dazu geeignet sind, eine bestimmte Gruppenzugehörigkeit gegenüber anderen zu signalisieren: Nachrichten als Information, Comedy als performativer Inhalt und Komödien als fiktionale Unterhaltung sind Genres, die als ‚sozialer Kleber‘ fungieren. Dem gegenüber verstärken Society-Formate, Scripted Dokus und Fantasy/ScienceFiction/Horror-Formate die Distinktion. Sie verringern einerseits die Sympathie und erhöhen die wahrgenommenen Unterschiede zur Gruppe.

### Abstract

As never before consumption practices are expressions of people's self-concepts, and this also includes practices of media consumption. People use media products as valuable ingredients for their social identity work, especially as displaying media use preferences in one's social environment has gained relevance. The aim of this paper is to explore the symbolic meanings of cross-media genre consumption for identity practices of affiliation with in-groups and distinction towards out-groups. We investigated everyday media practices of young adults using online media diaries ( $n = 59$ ) over a period of four weeks. Based on these findings we selected twelve genres to explore their symbolic impact within a social group using a projective technique ( $n = 225$ ). The results show that only six of the selected twelve genres serve as distinctive markers signalling a certain social identity towards others: News as informative content, comedy shows as performative content and comedy as fictional entertainment are genres that act as social 'glue' in our investigated group. Contrastingly, society formats, scripted

documentaries and fantasy/science fiction/horror increase distinction, as they negatively affect likability and the perceived similarity with oneself and/or with friends.

## 1 Symbolic Media Consumption

*"All voluntary consumption carries, either consciously or unconsciously, symbolic meanings; if the consumer has choices to consume, he or she will consume things that hold particular symbolic meanings."*  
(Elliott/Wattanasuwan 1998, 134).

Previous research has shown that products and brands are (also) acquired to attain or maintain a certain social status (Chernev/Hamilton/Gal 2011). As Holt (2002) states, from the 1960s onward, people increasingly viewed consumption as an autonomous space in which they could pursue identities unencumbered by tradition, social circumstances, or societal institutions. Evidently, consumers choose brands that signal a membership in desirable groups and avoid those that signal membership in undesirable groups (e.g. Berger/Heath 2007; Braun/Wicklund 1989; Escalas/Bettman, 2005). In this context, Thompson (1995) describes identity as a symbolic project, which an individual must actively construct out of the available symbolic materials.

Media also serve as such symbols. In fact, media consumption – as any other form of consumption – is laden with symbolic meanings. It is used in interpersonal communication to convey an intended image of oneself; i.e. it acts as a symbol in socio-communicative relationships (Carpentier 2012; Park 2009). This has especially gained relevance with the advent of social media which make our media consumption practices even more visible. But, what does it say about you when you 'like' *The New York Times*, or *CNN*, or the *Simpsons* on *Facebook*? Does it make a difference how you evaluate others whether they are reading a quality newspaper in public or a lifestyle magazine? As previous research has shown, audiences utilize those media symbols which allow them to signal a certain form of lifestyle to strengthen their cultural and social capital and thereby create their (social) identity. As an example, Scherer, Naab, Niemann and Adjei (2012) investigated how genre preferences affect the perceived likability of a person. Using four genres (comedy, crime, politics and soaps), they found that political information significantly raises likability, while a preference for soap operas decreases likability. In contrast, comedy and crime did not have an effect on likability. The authors conclude that information about one's media use plays a role for his or her evaluation by others. Hence, media preferences act as symbolic capital and have the potential to increase or decrease one's social capital. Based on these findings we can assume that other media genres also act as symbolic markers for social belongings and group memberships. Another study by Meyen (2007) describes how media knowledge and media menus are characteristics by which people distinguish themselves from others. Symbolic media consumption is thereby closely connected to shared interpretations of specific symbols within social groups, as the (consciously or unconsciously) selected media symbols have to be decoded by others in an appropriate or – better – in the intended way.

There are a number of empirical studies on media consumption and their relevance for identity construction (e.g., Hepp/Bozdag/Suna 2011; Lemish 2004; Mayer 2003; Meyer 2003; Mikos/Hoffmann/Winter 2009; Pape/Karnowski/Wirth, 2009; Würfel/Keilhauer 2009), but none of them refer to the *symbolic dimension* of media use. Moreover, the emphasis is on single formats or media channels. In our analysis we, instead, focus on genres as subject of interest, as (1) genres exist over a longer period of time compared to single programs and formats, and (2) they allow for an analysis of *cross-media* consumption practices. Thereby, genres are textual entities meaningful for the industry and for audiences: “A genre leads to certain expectations – whether the episode will end happily or not, whether bad characters are dangerously so, whether we can expect change or just the status quo, and so forth – and the “effects” or messages of any given text within the genre may be all the stronger through reinforcement across that genre.” (Gray/Lotz 2012, 125). These expectations apply for both the industry which thinks about creating a specific type of program and the audience that arranges their viewing, listening or other media use accordingly.

## 2 Genre Preferences as Symbols – Theoretical Considerations

The self-expressive function of media in general has been addressed from a sociological and an individual perspective. From a *sociological perspective*, Bourdieu highlighted the social struggles occurring in the *cultural field* to indicate the size, strength or cohesion of a group. The author stated that individuals manipulate the image of their position in the social space by using media (in terms of ownership, usage and knowledge) (Bourdieu 1983, 1985, 1986).<sup>1)</sup> This also finds expression in what Bourdieu calls *Habitus*, i.e. a common lifestyle of particular social groups, characterized by similar values, tastes, dispositions and expectations (Bourdieu 1993). Maffesoli (1990) speaks in this context of ‘tribes’ within consumer cultures, meaning shared lifestyles, (media) preferences, or interests. Applied to media and genres, we can hypothesize that media products help to construct a certain status and implicit distinctions from other individuals or groups. Similar media consumption practices within groups thus help to draw lines between different social groups or individuals. Based on Bourdieu, Meyen (2007) shows that media knowledge and media menus are characteristics of distinction from others and provide cultural capital. Using qualitative in-depth interviews the author identified six different types along two axes: work orientation stands for the accumulation of cultural capital, while relevance describes the use of media as characteristics of distinction and for identity management.

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1) The author distinguishes between economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital, expressing in turn the value of cultural processes or their results, the value of relationship-based resources and the value of prestige, reputation and renown (Bourdieu 1985). It has been posited that economic capital is the root of all other types of capital and that the different types of capital can be derived from economic capital, but at the cost of transformation. Symbolic capital differs from all other sorts of capital through the fact that it is superordinated, i.e. it is the sum of economic, social and cultural capital. Moreover, it always occurs in combination with social and cultural capital to be effective in social spaces.

When looking at the self-expressive function of media from an *individual* perspective, *impression management* plays a central role. Impression management has been defined by Leary and Kowalski (1990) as “the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them” (1990, 34). Impression management theory understands publicity as an important situational element that increases one’s motivation to ‘manage’ how others see us (Goffman 1959; Leary/Kowalski 1990). Accordingly, in a public setting – like on *Facebook* – people use various self-impression tactics in order to convey desirable images to others. One of these techniques is to underline one’s own significance through the use of clothes, taste in music, preference for certain dishes or other symbols (Mummendey 1995, 2006). Scherer, Naab, Niemann and Adjei (2012) used an impression management approach in their study and found that genre preferences act as means to increase or decrease one’s likability and in turn one’s social capital. However, a dominant assumption for this process of identity work is the notion of identity *construction* implying a well-planned and organized process following certain rules. Contrastingly, more and more authors depict the human practice as *improvisation* shaped by a ludic search for appropriate concepts of lifestyle (e.g. Levi-Strauss 1966; Hitzler 1994; Rogers 2012). The metaphor of a ‘bricolage’ thus sees the ‘modern’ human being as a tinker of meanings, which is closely related to popular culture and its process of meaning production, negotiation and circulation.

But what are appropriate symbols to communicate the different memberships in social groups a person belongs to (or wants to belong to)? According to *symbolic self-completion theory*, individuals use indicators of attainment in a self-defining area (e.g. as guitarists, journalists and so forth), and they display these indicators to communicate their accomplishments to others (Wicklund/Gollwitzer 1981). Based on the symbolic interactionist school of thought (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934), the theory assumes that a person needs the acknowledgment of others to achieve a desired self-definition. Hence, Gollwitzer and Wicklund defined a symbol of self-completeness as “a verbal statement, behavior, or physical entity that potentially signals to others one’s self-definitional attainment.” (1985, 73) Moreover, the theory proposes that the bigger the person perceives the discrepancies between the actual self and the ideal self, the more prevalent becomes the need to ‘close’ this gap by displaying respective symbols. The *actual self* thereby refers to how an individual perceives her/himself (i.e., who and what I think I am now); the *ideal self* is shaped by imagination of ideals and goals related to what a person believes he or she would like to be or aspire to become (Sirgy 1982).

Symbolic consumption has also been subject of a number of theoretical discourses and empirical studies in branding literature. As the findings show, consumers choose the product they perceive as having a desirable brand personality (Aaker 1999; Ahuvia 2005; Belk 1988) to validate and express their identity (Aaker 1997; Berger/Heath 2007). This *self-expressive* function of brands is closely related to the notion of conspicuous consumption, a term describing the acquisition of products mainly to attain or maintain a certain social status (Chernev/Hamilton/Gal 2011; Veblen 1899). Evi-

dently, recipients choose brands that signal a membership in desirable groups and avoid those that signal membership in undesirable groups (e.g. Berger/Heath 2007; Braun/Wicklund 1989; Escalas/Bettman 2005).

Moreover, Elliott and Wattanasuwan (1998, 139) highlight: „In order for the meaning of brands to become fully concrete, the mediated meaning derived from advertising and promotion must be negotiated with the lived experience of purchase and usage; and particularly for brands with social-symbolic positioning strategies these meanings must be validated through discursive elaboration in a social context.“ But, as Ferraro, Kirmani and Matherly (2013) convincingly show, symbolic brand usage can lead to less favorable brand attitudes when observers have low self-brand connection. The authors examined changes in observer’s attitudes toward a brand after seeing a brand user engaged in conspicuous use of the brand.

However, only little research has been done on the use of media genres as symbols in one’s social environment. When we take into consideration the nature of genres, this lack of research has good reasons. *Firstly*, genres are a dynamic construct that is subject to constant change. According to Livingstone (1994) genres can be understood as ‘contracts’ constantly negotiated between the text and the reader; they set up expectations for the form of communication and its functions and thereby guide media selection. Hence, genres are not a fixed entity, but part of everyday and cultural practices changing over time. Also Mittell (2001) argues that genres are cultural categories characterized by creation, circulation and reception in cultural contexts. He further distinguishes between “historical genres – those that are found in cultural practice – and theoretical genres – those that form ideal categories for scholars” (2001, 18). This shows a *second* peculiarity of genres, i.e. their different functions and thus categorization depends on who is using genres in which context: audiences, producers, or researchers. At the same time, genres act as a connection between all these different stakeholders. As an example, McQuail (1987, 200) emphasizes the genres’ function to connect mass media and their audiences:

*“The genre may be considered as a practical device for helping any mass medium to produce consistently and efficiently and to relate its production to the expectations of its customers. Since it is also a practical device for enabling individual media users to plan their choices, it can be considered as a mechanism for ordering the relations between the two main parties to mass communication.”*

This underlines the outstanding role of genres as unit of analysis: genres not only reflect everyday, cultural practices of media consumption, they also guide media selection processes to a high extent. It is therefore our opinion that only by looking at cross-media *genres* we can draw conclusions on the role of media consumptions for social identity, which allow any form of generalization beyond single formats and media outlets.

Bringing together these considerations and empirical findings some important aspects can be highlighted: *First*, impression management theory and symbolic self-

completion theory suggest that publicity increases one's motivation to use symbols. Thus, given the higher publicity and mediatization through digital and social media the need to use media content in general and media genres in specific as symbol has escalated. *Second*, the meanings of media use behaviors are socially constructed and they depend on the specific lifestyle group (Bourdieu 1983; 1995; 1986; 1989; Maffesoli 1990). Hence, the symbolic function of genre preferences has to be reflected and interpreted in relation to specific (sub-)cultures, as genres can have different meanings for different groups. *Third*, the 'lived experience' has to be considered (Elliott/Wattanasuwan 1998) and a media brand's image is affected (and might be diluted) by the conspicuous use of its users (Ferraro et al. 2013). Applied to media genres we can assume that their image and symbolic meanings are affected to a high extent by the question: who else is a 'member of the club'?

Research has not considered the impact of (cross-)media genre preferences as symbols in much detail yet, although its relevance – as shown above – is undeniable. We thus ask: What role do genre preferences play as symbols for social identity work, i.e. for affiliation with in-groups and for distinction towards other (out-)groups.

### 3 Methodology

To address our research question, we conducted an explorative study consisting of a pre-study and an experiment. In the pre-study we examined media consumption practices typical for a selected group and we identified the most frequently used formats which we grouped into genres. In the main study we investigated the symbolic meanings of these genres.

#### 3.1 Pre-study: Media Consumption

##### 3.1.1 Methodology

In the pre-study we investigated media repertoires of students using semi-structured media diaries. According to Bolger, Davis and Rafaeli (2003, 579) in "diary studies, people provide frequent reports on the events and experiences of their daily lives. These reports capture the particulars of experience in a way that is not possible using traditional designs." Hence, in order to investigate everyday media practices and genre preferences of young adults, media diaries enable researchers to draw on personal experiences and authentic views.

We asked 59 communication students at an Austrian University to maintain time-based online-diaries for four weeks (October 17 to November 14, 2012), recording their media use in the morning, during daytime and in the evening. The students indicated the media type and content they used, the duration of these activities and the attention they paid to it. We did not provide a fixed taxonomy of media or content types to better use the advantages of narrative methods, such as overcoming subordination of people's lives to the quest for generalization of researchers (Booth, 1999). The fact that

the diarists are students in the age group of 20- to 30-olds limits the validity of our results to this specific group. Further studies should focus on different audience segments not only in terms of age, but also in respect to gender, ethnicity and geography.

The respondents reported 15,000 instances of media use. Based on a preliminary analysis of six exemplary media diaries we developed a codebook (for more details see Förster/Kleinen-von Königslöw 2014) and generated genres out of the documented media usage practices: we distinguished between 32 types of genres, both informational as well as entertainment themes. The two-stage coding procedure included (1) semi-automatic coding based on dictionaries generated in our preliminary analysis, and (2) manual coding. The latter served for the validation of the semi-automatic coding process and the complementation of the codebook. The manual coding was conducted by two student coders, a reliability test based on two media diaries yielded satisfactory results (with the mean Krippendorff's *alpha* for genres (information) at .82, genres (entertainment) at .77, and for medium at .95).

### 3.1.2 Results

As the results show, about 41 percent of all media uses occurred in relation to informative media content such as news<sup>2)</sup> (18%), study information (5%) or politics (3%). In another 29 percent, the content belonged to entertainment genres such as music (12%), fictional comedy (4%) or drama (2%) (Table 1). For the remaining 30 percent, diarists reported media use for personal communication purposes.

Table 1: Frequency of genres reported in media diaries

<i>Information</i>	<i>Frequency (in %)</i>	<i>Entertainment</i>	<i>Frequency (in %)</i>
News	17.9	Music	11.6
Studying	5.3	Comedy (fictional)	3.5
Politics	3.0	Drama	2.2
Services	2.6	Fantasy/SciFi/Horror	1.4
Sports	2.0	Crime	1.3
Job	1.4	Literature	1.1
Society	1.1	Sports	1.1
Media	1.0	Action	1.0
Lifestyle	0.9	Comedy Shows	0.8
Culture	0.9	Scripted Docu	0.7
Public Affairs	0.7	Casting Shows	0.5
Economy	0.6	Romance	0.5
Cooking	0.4	Morning Shows	0.3
Music	0.4	Games	0.3
Traveling	0.4	Entertainment Shows	0.3
Technical	0.3	Other	2.5
Science	0.3		
Other	1.5		

*Basis.* 15,000 instances of media use

*Note.* Bolded genres are those selected for the projective study.

2) The news genre here includes all kinds of news content, independent from a quality level. For the subsequent projective study we selected those formats, like in all other genre categories, that were named most frequently by the media diarists.

## 3.2 Experiment: Media Genres as Symbol

### 3.2.1 Methodology

To address the symbolic meanings associated with the different media genres, an explorative study was conducted using a projective technique. According to Donoghue (2000) projective techniques are one way to transcend communication barriers, as in some circumstances it is impossible to obtain accurate information about people's thoughts and feelings with direct questioning (Haire 1950). Sometimes the subjects are unaware of their underlying motives, attitudes or values in choosing a brand while avoiding others (Berkman/Gilson 1986). Assuming that people are not always and fully aware of the symbolic functions their own media use habits have, projective techniques are ideally suited for our research interest. Projective techniques are not undisputed among scholars. Especially their lack of validity and reliability has been criticized (e.g. Boddy 2005; Donoghue 2000; Lilienfeld/Wood/Garb 2000), but, employing projective techniques does have a number of advantages making a significant contribution if research is concerned with beliefs, values, motivation, cognitions and behavior (Webb 1992).

Linzey (1959) distinguished five categories of projective techniques: Associative techniques, construction techniques, completion techniques, choice or ordering techniques and expressive techniques. These types reflect structured (clear and definite) stimuli at one extreme, to very ambiguous (unstructured) at the other extreme. It is assumed that projective techniques should contain relatively unstructured stimuli to allow the respondents to interpret the stimulus in their own words and with their own perception (Donoghue, 2000). Other authors argue (e.g. Churchill 1991; Gordon/Langmaid 1988) the stimuli should offer enough direction to evoke associations with the concept of interest. We thus applied a construction technique in our study asking the respondents to describe a person having specific genre preferences by showing them fictive media diaries of this "person" (personification). We thereby closely follow Haire's (1950) classic 'shopping list' study, the first published study on projective techniques in consumer literature.

Stimulus material Based on our prestudy, we selected the twelve most frequent genres. To describe and operationalize these genres, we used the respective, most common formats reported by the media diarists within these genre categories. The formats selected for each genre are not limited to one media channel, but are across different platforms. For example, the genre 'news' is described by ZIB20 [the Austrian public service broadcasting news format at 8 p.m.] and two news websites, namely *standard.at* [the online outlet of the leading Austrian quality newspaper] and *orf.at* [the website of the Austrian public service media]. By taking those formats and media outlets most often named by media diarists, we were able to base our study on typical modes of media use in this age group. One restriction in this context is the limitation on three formats/outlets per genre that does not reflect much diversity within a genre. As an



example, within the news genre only quality news formats are included. Hence, results only allow assertions about the differences between the different genre preferences, not within single genres (and thus between single formats or outlets).

As *informative, non-fictional* genres we chose news, sports, politics and society topics (see *Appendix* for a list of genres, formats and media outlets used in the study). Topics related to studying/job and services were not considered for further analysis, as they do not represent media content in the narrower sense. The most common genres for *entertaining, fictional* content are comedy, drama, crime and fantasy/science fiction/horror. Between these two categories a third form can be localized, which has been described by Keppler (1994) as *performative* content. We assigned comedy shows, scripted documentaries, casting shows and music to performative content. Although in the realm of entertainment, they have specific characteristics, such as a close relationship to reality in showing 'real life'. At the same time, these social acts are staged, they follow a script and characters are often exaggerated to rouse attention and to create suspense among audiences.

The selected genres were systematically combined in a 4x4x4 experimental design resulting in 16 different settings. These settings are each reflected by single, fictive media diaries, which contained the different genres. In face-to-face interviews, every respondent received two different media diaries and was asked to describe the persons to whom they think these diaries belonged. After starting with open associations, a number of variables were measured in a standardized manner. First, we asked if the person is perceived as being male or female, as gender is one of the first associations respondents usually have in personification techniques. Second, we explored how the presented genre preferences affect likability and perceived similarity (affiliation). To measure likability respondents were asked to rate the item "The person seems likable to me." on a five-point Likert scale. Moreover, we asked them to judge the person according to the perceived similarity to oneself ("The person is like me.") and according to the perceived similarity to one's closest friends ("The person is very much like my closest friends.").

In sum, we had 225 respondents (50% male and 50% female) resulting in 450 evaluations of media diaries, respectively of the persons 'behind' these diaries. The persons in the sample were aged between 19 and 29 ( $M = 23.3$ ;  $SD = 2.44$ ) and are a distinct sample to the one in the prestudy, but resemble the previous sample closely in many other aspects such as age.

### 3.2.2 Results

By looking at the open associations, we find indications for the concrete characteristics respondents associate with a preference for the single genres. The attributes listed in *Table 2* are those mostly mentioned in association with the genres paraphrased in the media diaries.

As chi-square tests indicate, news, society, casting shows, drama and fantasy/science fiction/horror are significantly more associated with women, while sports, comedy shows and crime are seen as male. However, these evaluations generally differ by gender,  $\chi^2(1, N = 450) = 8.68; p = .003$ . Male participants evenly spread their gender attributions (47% male and 53% female). Contrastingly, female respondents tend to assign their own gender to the media diaries more often (67% female versus 33% male).

Table 2. Genres and their associations

Genre	Open associations	Gender
News	well educated, wears glasses	female *
Sports	in a relationship, athletic	male **
Politics	cool, well educated, intellectual	
Society	superficial, lazy, uneducated	female **
Comedy shows	witty, humorous, active, friendly, hard-working, smart	male **
Scripted documentaries	superficial, simple	
Casting shows	uneducated	female **
Music	young, modern	
Comedy (fictional)	casual, funny, fashion-conscious, sociable, multi-talented	
Drama	interested in lifestyle and fashion, open-minded	female **
Crime	hard-working, has a job	male **
FantasySciFiHorror	unremarkable, shy, smart	female **

Note. Chi-Square. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Analyses of variance further indicate that news, comedy shows and fictional comedy have a positive effect on the *likability* of a person. In contrast, if society, soap documentaries or fantasy/science fiction/horror were included, the persons were perceived as less likable. In terms of a perceived personal *similarity* only popular entertainment genres play a role: Here, comedy shows and fictional comedy have a positive effect on the perceived similarity with oneself, whereas scripted documentaries and fantasy/science fiction/horror have a negative effect. The perceived similarity to the respondents' closest circle of friends is positively affected by sports and comedy, both fictional comedy as well as comedy shows. A negative relationship is revealed by society formats, casting shows and fantasy/science fiction/horror (Table 3).

Evidently, likability as well as perceived similarity with friends is most strongly affected by fictional comedy ( $\eta = .17$  resp.  $\eta = .20$ ), while personal similarity is most increased by comedy shows ( $\eta = .25$ ). Contrastingly, society formats, soap documentaries and fantasy/science fiction/horror are the genres that taint one's positive image. Interestingly, the associated gender has an effect on the overall likability and the perceived similarity: People are perceived as more likable if they are associated as being male ( $F(1,428) = 7.87; p = .005$ ), and they are also perceived as more similar to oneself, if they are presumed to be male ( $F(1,428) = 4.36; p = .037$ ).

Table 3. Effects on likability and perceived similarity

Genre	Likability		Personal similarity		Similarity with friends		Factor	
	$\eta$	F (1,448)	$\eta$	F (1,448)	$\eta$	F (1,448)	$\eta$	F (1,428)
News	.15*	9.64					.13**	6.83
Sports					.10*	2.32		
Politics								
Society	-.19**	16.26			-.13**	7.72	-.13**	7.68
Comedy shows	.12*	6.71	.25**	28.90	.18**	14.88	.22**	21.10
Scripted document.	-.15**	9.75	-.13**	7.13			-.14**	8.77
Casting shows					-.10*	4.22		
Music								
Comedy (fictional)	.17**	13.53	.20**	18.32	.20**	19.38	.21**	20.54
Drama								
Crime								
FantasySciFiHorror	-.14**	8.50	-.12**	6.84	-.16**	11.51	-.17**	12.35

Note. Analyses of variance. Eta ( $\eta$ ). \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . Factor analysis.  $KMO = .711$ . 75 percent variance explained.

Moreover, the perceived likability, the personal similarity and the similarity with friends are positively correlated among each other. Thus, the more similar a person is perceived with oneself, the more likable he/she is ( $r = .629$ ;  $n = 430$ ;  $p = .00$ ) and the more he/she is assessed as similar with one's closest friends ( $r = .667$ ;  $n = 430$ ;  $p = .00$ ). An examination of the Kaiser-Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy suggested that the sample was factorable ( $KMO = .711$ ). We thus aggregated these variables in one factor, explaining 75 percent of variance. The influence of genres on this factor reflects their symbolic power to signal (dis)likability and (dis)similarity towards others. Here the results show that the most valuable genres in these communicative processes for impression management are news, comedy shows and fictional comedy. Society, scripted documentaries and fantasy/science fiction/horror also have a strong symbolic power, but in a negative manner as they decrease the likability and the perceived similarity of a person.

#### 4 Discussion and Implications

As the results in the prestudy indicate, everyday media use practices are shaped by a wide range of genres. For our group they are clearly dominated by informative content, followed by fictional entertainment and performative content, such as comedy shows, scripted documentaries or casting shows. News (18%), music (12%), study-related content (5%), comedy (4%), and politics (3%) are the most relevant cross-medial genres. Of course, these findings mirror media use patterns typical for students, or even for people in this age group.

However, what symbolic meanings do certain genre preferences have for the social identity work of affiliation and distinction? In our explorative, projective study participants revealed that only six of the selected twelve genres can serve as *distinctive features* (Hume-O'Haire/Winters 2003) in impression management or as symbols for self-completion. The results show that news, society, comedy shows, scripted documentaries, (fictional) comedy and fantasy/science fiction/horror act as such distinctive features, as respondents associate these themes with a significantly higher or lower likability and perceived similarity with oneself or their closest friends. Genre preferences are thus means for people who benefit from using industrial products as a cultural space where they can produce their own social identity (Fiske 1989a, 1989b, 1992). In the view of Bourdieu's conception of capitals, genre preferences are part of cultural capital work (as shown in Meyen 2007) and social capital work when used in social relationships. In order to become effective as symbolic capital these media usage preferences are dependent upon recognition and acceptance by the members of the social group these practices are shared with. In the case of our study valuable genres for symbolic capital are *news* as informative content, *comedy shows* as performative content and *comedy* as fictional entertainment as these are genres that act as social 'glue' in our investigated group. While news only raises the perceived likability, comedy shows and fictional comedy increase all three aspects, i.e. likability, perceived similarity with oneself and with friends. Persons 'behind' the media diaries containing either comedy shows or fictional comedy are described as being witty, humorous, friendly, casual, funny, sociable. Obviously, humor has an outstanding role for the signaling power of media practices. Contrastingly, society formats, scripted documentaries and fantasy/science fiction/horror increase distinction, as they negatively affect likability and the perceived similarity with oneself and/or with friends. Persons presumed to perform these media practices are described as superficial, lazy, uneducated, unremarkable and shy. The resulting distinctions between groups are therefore – at least partially – based on shared media consumption practices, genre preferences and commonly valued media brands.

The size and scope of our sample is the main limitation of our study. With its exploratory nature the results do not allow for generalizations beyond this particular social group. It is likely that with a different sample the results deviate from our findings, as genres have differing meanings for different groups, for example people watching comedy shows will probably be not perceived as likable or similar among pensioners. Future studies should thus focus on milieu- and (sub)culture-specific research, as different audience segments (e.g. of different geography/ethnicity, milieu, gender, age) vary not only in their everyday media practices, but especially in their interpretations of the symbolic meanings of these practices. This – in turn – opens up methodological issues. To investigate everyday media consumption and its function for social identity work a stronger use of qualitative and narrative methodologies as well as implicit measurements (e.g. with projective techniques) are suggested. In our study, we used

media diaries as they allow fresh perspectives, an open space for 'original voices' of the audience, and a sounding board for research on a wide range of interests connected with media or theme repertoires. Although the methodology requires a lot of effort not only for maintaining the dairies but also for the coding, analysis and interpretation of the data, it largely overcomes the methodological difficulties (e.g. projection, use of traditional media categories) connected to traditional, standardized studies on young people's media use (e.g. Lenhart/Madden/Macgill/Smith 2007; Mackay 2005; Pascoe 2012). Certainly, media diaries need a deeper methodological debate in this context. The same applies to projective techniques; a methodology with a long tradition in psychology/psychoanalysis and a growing popularity in market research (e.g. Boddy 2005). Further research is needed to investigate the reliability and validity of the use of projective techniques in specific media contexts. But also other methodologies are conceivable in order to capture the symbolic meanings of media consumption in single audience tribes, such as in-depth interviews, observations, ethnography.

Another limitation is the emphasis on genre preferences and their symbolic meanings. Although it allowed us to aggregate different media formats and to integrate various outlets (and thus have a cross-media look at genre preferences and their symbolic effect), interdependencies between these different levels of associations can be assumed. As an example, individuals might have certain associations with *Tatort*-viewers, less with crime formats in specific. This effect can occur for all the genres investigated.

Nevertheless, in our opinion, an analysis of cross-media genres is the only solution to investigate the symbolic meaning of media consumption for our target group: For young adults, traditional media categories such as 'television' or 'internet' have lost their meaning as their media experience has converged across all platforms. The succession of different 'favorite' media formats has also accelerated for them to a point where any academic analysis of single formats would have lost its meaning before it was written.

The presumption that media act as means to signal membership in desirable groups or to distinguish from other groups has stimulated a lot of research in various disciplines. Our study is a further step to better understand media selection and also reception processes against the background of symbolic media consumption. With its exploratory nature and focus on cross-media genres the present study has provided (1) a theoretical framework for research on symbolic media consumption, (2) initial insights into symbolic meanings of genre preferences, and (3) a discussion of how to investigate this topic in future.

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Appendix: Table. Stimulus material projective study

Category	Genre	Formats and media outlets
A: Non fictional/ informative content	News	ZIB20, standard.at, orf.at
	Sports	sportnet.at, sportonline.de
	Politics	Der Standard: domestic policy, ORF2 "Im Zentrum"
	Society	Exklusiv, Pink, seitenblicke.at
B: Performative content	Comedy	The Daily show, Willkommen Österreich, Wir sind Kaiser
	Soap documentaries	Katzenberger, Pfuscher am Bau, Teenager werden Mütter
	Casting shows	Die große Chance, Voice of Germany, DSDS
	Music	Ö3, spotify, itunes
C: Fictional/ entertainment content	Comedy (fictional)	Big Bang Theory, HIMYM, Two and a half men
	Drama	Mad Men, Gossip Girl, Dr. House
	Crime	CSI, Castle, Tatort
	FantasySciFiHorror	Twilight, Dune, Spider Man