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# Distinctions in the making: A theoretical discussion of youth and cultural capital

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to address the dynamics of contemporary cultural capital by interrogating what counts for young people as valuable cultural resources. Considerable support is given in later scholarship for Bourdieu's model of the social space, as the overall volume of economic and cultural capital combined is regularly found to be the most important axis of opposition, just as in Bourdieu's work *Distinction*. Yet, while Bourdieu found the second axis to be structured by an opposition between those with cultural rather than economic capital, and vice versa, many later studies instead find oppositions between the young and the old to structure the second axis. Up till now, this finding has not been adequately addressed. In this paper, we hold that considering age-related inequalities offers a powerful way of interpreting recent developments in order to understand the changing stakes of cultural capital, and also their interaction with the intensification of inequalities in economic capital. After a theoretical clarification of the relationship between cultural capital and youth, we will synthesise research on young people and explore the significance of youthful cultural consumption. We will pragmatically focus on the 15–30 years old and put a particular accent on Norwegian studies in our review, as they are the most sophisticated in this genre. Four areas are explored: the restricted role of classical culture; the appeal of popular

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culture; digital distinctions, and moral-political positions as markers of distinction.

#### KEYWORDS

Bourdieu, cultural capital, inequalities, Norway, youth

Since its original formulation in the 1960s and 1970s, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has proven as fruitful as it has been controversial. While a lot of support is given in later scholarship for his model of the social space, the secondary opposition he found opposing those who predominantly possess cultural against economic capital ('capital composition'), is often blurred by age. This is because young people differ substantially from older people with respect to cultural consumptions, lifestyles and moral-political attitudes. The aim of our paper is to address the dynamics of contemporary cultural capital by interrogating what counts for young people as valuable cultural resources. This requires us to theoretically clarify the relationship between cultural capital and youth as a preliminary to exploring the actual content of young people's cultural capital. Our overarching questions are: What is the relationship between cultural capital and youth? What does the specific content of young people's cultural capital today reveal about cultural capital in the making?

In addressing these questions, we return to Bourdieu's theorisation of cultural capital, as too often empirical studies fail to understand the sophistication of his framing. We use his vital differentiation between the *institutional*, *objectified* and *embodied* forms of cultural capital to guide our review of key literature reflecting on the cultural interests of your people. Although we refer to studies across Europe, we pay particular attention to the Norwegian case, as these are the most sophisticated and therefore most instructive and allow us to present a comprehensive view. These studies reveal how cultural capital is turning inwards, being less concerned to mark out distinction across broader society, and more concerned to act as a device to mark out one's standing amongst other privileged people.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, most fully elaborated in *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984), drew attention to how certain forms of cultural practices and tastes, notably those associated with the educated bourgeoisie, became valorised in ways that yielded advantages for those who fully mastered them. Over the years this analysis has generated intense debate within sociology. Bourdieu's argument has been elaborated and extended by numerous advocates who point to the ongoing significance of entrenched cultural divides (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009 on the UK) but also bitterly contested by those who claim elites have become more pluralistic and diverse in their cultural palate. This latter view is most famously articulated in the 'cultural omnivore' thesis (cf. Gayo, 2016; Hazir & Warde, 2016; Lizardo & Skiles, 2016).

Our aim is not to reprise these familiar discussions but to concentrate on a specific—yet vitally important—issue which has been empirically elaborated by the extensive scholarship that has tried to replicate Bourdieu's model from *Distinction* in other societies and at later moments in time. This research has used the same analytical technique (geometric data analysis, notably Bennett et al., 2009, Prieur et al., 2008, see also the papers in Coulangeon & Duval, 2015) to uncover an important development. The overall volume of capital (economic and cultural capital combined) remains the most important axis of opposition, just as in *Distinction*. Yet, while Bourdieu found the second axis to be structured by an opposition between those with cultural rather than economic capital, and vice versa, many later studies instead find oppositions between the young and the old to structure the second axis.

Up till now, this finding has not been adequately addressed. It can be interpreted in various ways. It might be a sign that the opposition between cultural and economic capital is vanishing. An alternative view would be that Bourdieu's core arguments still hold up, as specific oppositions in lifestyles according to capital composition can still be found *within* the different age groups, including among the young. In this paper, we stake out a third possibility, that the definition of cultural capital is itself changing and that there are shifts in what counts as cultural capital, with young people playing a crucial role as challengers against the established positions. This finding therefore may have major implications for understanding the changing stakes of cultural capital in general.

The most developed attempt to grasp these new tendencies, the concept of 'emerging cultural capital' (Friedman et al., 2015; Prieur & Savage, 2013; Savage et al., 2015), only addresses the significance of age in a glancing way. In this paper, we hold that considering the significance of age-related inequalities head on offers a powerful way of interpreting recent developments with great potential to understand the changing stakes of cultural capital, and also their interaction with the intensification of inequalities in economic capital (Piketty, 2014, 2020; Savage, 2021). This paper synthesises research on young people (pragmatically focussing on the 15–30 years old) to reflect on the significance of youthful cultural consumption.

As yet stated, we find the Norwegian studies to be the most sophisticated in this genre (see Flemmen et al., 2018, 2019; Rosenlund, 2014; Schmitz et al., 2018), starting with the pioneering work of Lennart Rosenlund (1996). Norway is a strategically important research site also due to the persistence of cultural capital in an avowedly egalitarian and prosperous nation (Hjellbrekke & Prieur, 2018). As we explain below, Norway is an interesting case study since it has seen the intensification of economic inequality, especially with respect to wealth, with possible subtle effects on the organisation of cultural capital.

The first part of the paper theorises the relationship between age and cultural capital. After rehearsing Bourdieu's consideration of the connection between the two, we will return to Bourdieu's (1986) influential paper to reflect on how the three forms of cultural capital he identifies may be changing. We also relate cultural and economic capital together in a period of increasing economic inequality. In the second part of the article, we explore how our analytical argument helps to make sense of findings from previous studies on the cultural consumption of young people with attention to four areas: the restricted role of classical culture; the appeal of popular culture; digital distinctions, and moral-political positions as markers of distinction. The conclusion draws out wider implications of our analysis.

## 1 | THEORETICAL ISSUES

### 1.1 | Linking young age and emerging cultural capital

Difficulties in distinguishing age, period and cohort effects (e.g., Reeves, 2016) make cultural analysis highly challenging. In sociological analysis, age is often downplayed and young people's practises subordinated to forms of *epochal theorising* that highlight period effects (see Savage, 2009, 2021). This is most evident in the claim that age differentials are evidence of sweeping social and cultural transformations associated with generational replacement (notably Inglehart, 2018 on the rise of post-materialism, or Giddens, 1991 and Beck, 1992 on the rise of reflexivity).

This question of generational change was indeed central to the genesis of the concept of cultural capital. In their seminal study of class reproduction through education, Bourdieu and Passeron (1979 [1964]) questioned that educational expansion in post-war France would lead to improved mobility prospects, as the educational attainment of children still depended heavily on social origin.

In *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1984 [1979]) extended his analysis from the educational sphere to a broad analysis of lifestyles, tastes, cultural competences, and participation, as well as attitudes in cultural, moral, and political matters. In this broadening from inequalities within education, the focus on age and generation became more subdued. Nonetheless, Bourdieu's account remained pitched directly against 'epochalist' accounts of social change in French society, which assumed that the expansion of higher education would entail the opening up of prospects for new generations. In drawing out the 'Don Quixote' effect and the 'moving of goalposts' as conservative mechanisms, Bourdieu emphasised that the apparent lure of enhanced educational attainment was actually a ruse in the embedding of cultural capital as a more powerful—though opaque - axis of inheritance. Bourdieu's sensitivity is a lantern to guide us given the intensified contemporary political investment in improving access to elite institutions as some kind of 'magical tool' for social mobility, rather than recognising that it remains bound up with the reproduction of cultural privilege. At the core of his approach to age differences is his field-analytical positioning of younger people as 'challengers' to 'established' positions (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984, p. 293). This field-logic causes change while fundamental structures of domination remain, as today's challengers are on their way to become the establishment tomorrow.

Bourdieu therefore rejected very clearly static and *substantialist* readings of cultural capital, where specific practices—like golf or Chinese food—that were distinctive in the French case were expected to be replicated in other contexts (Bourdieu, 1991). In this respect, his account is far more subtle than was recognised by proponents of the ‘omnivore thesis’ who regularly took tastes for specific genres of music as somehow inherently ‘highbrow’. For Bourdieu, the *concept* of cultural capital requires that the *content* is updated and redefined so that it continues to be effective by being ‘misrecognised’. This is to say that in order *not* to be seen as conveying sectional advantages, it requires being continually reformed—as critiques of cultural elitism reveal and expose its existing forms. As lay actors become aware of the advantages accruing to specific lifestyles, they may develop a critical stance towards these, which in turn destabilises this older valorisation. We would thereby expect younger people to exhibit new modes of cultural capital due to the dynamics of the double hermeneutic.

The ‘emerging cultural capital’ hypothesis (Friedman et al., 2015; Prieur & Savage, 2011, 2013; Savage et al., 2015) avoids grand epochalist postures (see Savage, 2009, 2021) by pointing to modulations within cultural capital, rather than its wholesale replacement (as suggested by many supporters of the cultural omnivore argument). As mentioned above, researchers working in the Bourdieusian tradition now widely recognise that the ‘second axis’ of cultural consumption tends not to pitch those with cultural capital against those with economic, but is more likely to distinguish older age groups, more likely to enjoy classical high culture, against younger age groups, more enthusiastic about contemporary and more commercialised culture (see e.g., Bennett et al., 2009 on the UK). Prieur and Savage (2011, 2013) synthesise these studies to suggest that classical culture and humanities-oriented education have lost significance; ‘distinction’ is often demonstrated through a ‘knowing’ way of relating to different cultural expressions (rather than in the choice of particular items), and that a global (or ‘cosmopolitan’) orientation in opinions and practices has become especially marked amongst young people.

However, this scholarship has not considered head-on the role of younger people in driving these emerging forms and has therefore not adequately theorised the relationship between youth and cultural capital. This is the core contribution of our article together as we establish how this focus allows us to elaborate the concept of emerging cultural capital in a more sophisticated and satisfactory way.

## 1.2 | Returning to Bourdieu's three forms of cultural capital

In his iconic article ‘Forms of Capital’, Bourdieu clarified that cultural capital took three different forms: An *institutionalised* state, which first and foremost concerns educational qualifications; an *objectified* state, as materialised cultural goods, which could be book collections or musical instruments, and an *embodied* state, based on ‘long lasting dispositions of the mind and the body’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243), acquired through an upbringing in a ‘cultivated home’ and expressed through taste, judgements, competences, preferences, opinions, emotional reactions and ways to use one’s body.

Our starting point is that these forms have changed since the period that Bourdieu wrote. Regarding the *institutional* state, the trends already identified in *Distinction* regarding the ongoing devaluation of educational titles have been pushed further as educational titles have become preconditions for entry into privileged occupational fields, more likely to bestow high incomes. This has also entailed that credentials have lost their rarity and thereby their consecrating value. In Sweden, Melldahl (2015) revealed a strongly institutionalised ‘ceiling’ to the inflation of educational expansion. While economic capital can accumulate extensively at the ‘top end’, there are limits as to how much educational capital one can accumulate. Educational capital is in many countries becoming less dependent on a certain qualification level (such as having a bachelor’s degree) and more dependent on attendance at prestigious ‘elite’ universities, which give privileged access to the most lucrative careers (see for instance, Rivera, 2016; Wakeling & Savage, 2015; Friedman & Laurison, 2019).

The *objectified* state has been most studied within consumption research, including studies from non-Bourdieuian perspectives. On the face of it, elite young people today are not strongly concerned with classical high culture,

such as an embrace of 'old master' art collections or classical music, which were central to older generations and played an important role in Bourdieu's analysis in *Distinction*. Even more trendy versions of modernist art and culture seem to be more obsolete, as an increasing array of cultural products become digitalised and cloud-based. The digitalisation of cultural consumption and the connection with social media may also change the communication of tastes—as when Spotify allows one's 'friends' to see what one is listening to. Skills to use these new devices allow younger people to mobilise new objectified modes of cultural capital. New generations of the cultural capital-rich will probably not stock up on books, records, and movies (although there are countertrends, like the revival of vinyl).

However, these studies need to be scrutinised more carefully before we leap to simple conclusions about the decline of objectified cultural capital, and a major contribution of part 2 of our paper is to offer an alternative interpretation of these headline trends in the context of a greater attention also to Bourdieu's third form of capital—the 'embodied'.

Regarding this *embodied* state, Bourdieu highlighted the alleged 'disinterestedness' as a disposition based on a rendition of freedom from necessity, which linked a certain 'asceticism' to the cultural capital-rich class fractions. While members of the rich economic elite were more likely to be perfectly manicured and immaculately dressed, since 'appearances matter', intellectuals and artists could remain shabby and dishevelled. Expressions of cultural capital that reflect the 'Kantian aesthetic' with its denial of the body are, paradoxically, thoroughly embodied, too, as they are appropriated through learning restraint and detachment, along the lines Elias elaborated in his celebrated 'Civilizing Process'. Bourdieu (1976) also highlighted inequalities in the access to resources that provide the body with the best possible appearance, as well as in the capacities to present oneself with ease and assurance, and not least to detach oneself from the judgements of others. The least privileged tend to be shyer and experience a greater distance between the body one has and the body one dreams of having.

Though an ideal of a healthy appearance seems to have replaced the shabby appearance within the French cultural elite of the sixties and seventies, bodily resources and styles are obviously still important in games of distinction. Vandebroek (2017) has shown how Body Mass Index goes down while frequency of eating disorders goes up when moving up in the social hierarchy. There are differences both between genders and between the culturally and the economically privileged regarding not only bodily styles, but also emotional styles, particularly regarding self-control. For Illouz (2007), such features relate to the most embodied part of the embodied forms of cultural capital. Prieur et al. (2016, 2020) hold that emotional competences, like self-control and the ability to put words on emotions, demonstrate a mastery of embodied cultural capital today.

Along with gender and class distinctions, there are evidently generational differences in relation to the body. These are complex intersections, which we will turn to explore in more detail in later sections of this paper.

### 1.3 | The intensification of economic capital

A vital shift since Bourdieu wrote *Distinction* has been that 'capital is back', and more specifically economic capital in the form of wealth assets have been enhanced, and thereby empowered economic elites (Piketty & Zucman, 2014). Bourdieu always insisted that cultural capital needs to be put into relation with economic capital, but the economic largely serves as a foil in his work. He deliberately casts his 'forms of capital' essay as a thought experiment of thinking through how culture—conventionally understood from within the humanities as explicitly framed against the economic domain—might nonetheless be regarded as a form of capital. The triptych of terms used to unpack cultural capital—the 'institutionalised', 'embodied', and 'objectified'—are designed to distinguish it from economic capital. Economic capital is not embodied in the way that cultural capital is, it is more easily transferrable and enjoys a more universal recognition. It therefore acts as a contrast to the mis-recognition and contestation cultural capital is subjected to.

However, we need to understand better how changing dynamics of economic capital may impact on the organisation of cultural capital (see in general, Savage, 2021). While several economists have explored the changing

### Top 10% national income share

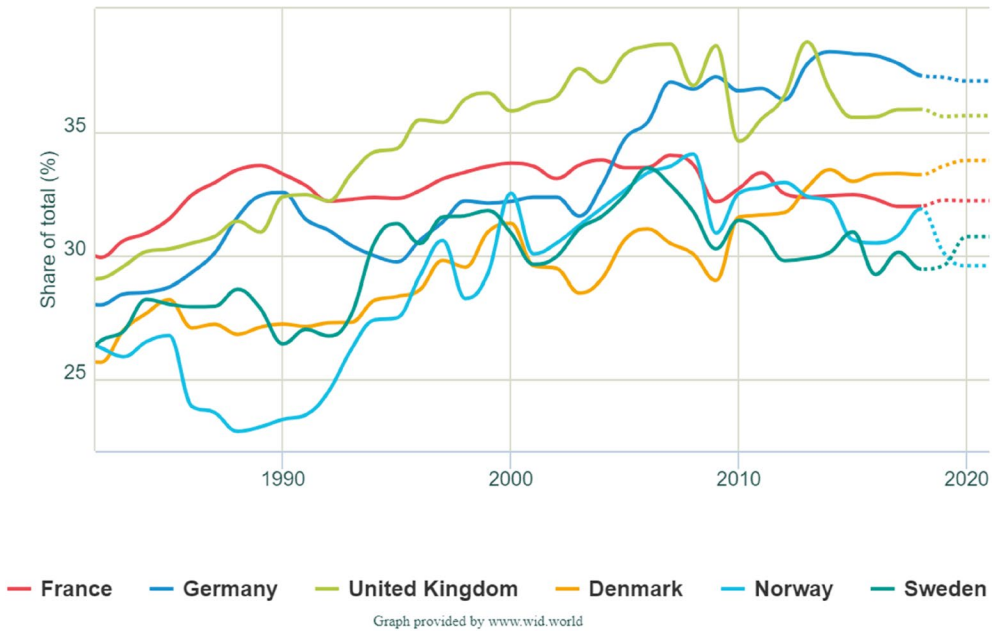


FIGURE 1 Top 10% national income share in 6 countries. [Colour figure can be viewed at [wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)]

distributions of income and wealth over recent decades, the crucial intervention came when Piketty (2014, 2020) pointed to the increasing ratio of capital—defined as tradeable assets such as property, savings, and financial instruments—to income across many nations, including those without striking rises in income inequality. This is important even in the Norwegian case, which on the face of it is still relatively egalitarian in income distribution terms. Figure 1 reports the share of national income taken by the top earning 10%, in which Norway is compared against other nations more briefly referred to in this paper. Even in egalitarian Norway, income inequality has risen since the 1990s, though less markedly than in comparator nations. However, wealth inequality deriving from ownership of assets such as property, savings and investments is actually very high in Norway. Pfeffer and Waitkus (2021) show that Norway’s Gini coefficient for wealth is remarkably high (0.813), indeed higher than for every nation included in the Luxemburg Income Study apart from US and Sweden. Toft and Hansen (2022, see also Hansen, 2014) have shown how this high level of wealth inequality follows strong dynastic elite reproduction.

This growing inequality has significant implications in relation to age. Toft and Hansen’s (2022) analysis leads us to ask whether family wealth may be associated with an intensified age divide, opposing younger people to wealthy older generations. At the same time, another divide is possibly accentuated among the young, pitching those from wealthy backgrounds who may hope to be inheritors of wealth against those who are unlikely to be recipients of such unearned largesse.

These changing economic parameters may have implications for the organisation and distribution of cultural capital. Sociologists of economic elites have increasingly emphasised how wealthy elites are becoming invested in ‘modesty’ (Schimpfossil, 2014; Sherman, 2019), in displaying ordinariness (Friedman et al., 2021; Friedman & Reeves, 2020), and generally in downplaying their privileges. As we will discuss later, we might hypothesise that intensifying economic capital may generate forms of cultural capital which are less overtly ‘elitist’ and more predisposed to take an ‘inconspicuous’ form, since those who are economically secure may not want to highlight their privilege.

There is also an age dimension here. Flemmen, Jarness and Rosenlund note (2018:132) that the 'capital composition' principle in which cultural and economic capital stand in tension to each other takes an aged and generational form, as the volume of economic capital increases with age. We might expect younger people, even those who are positioned to become 'inheritors' later in life, to be at the vanguard of this shift towards less conspicuous modes of cultural display. We will pursue this line of inquiry in now turning to review studies of cultural consumptions among younger people.

## 2 | KEY DIMENSIONS OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S CULTURAL CAPITAL

Having outlined in general terms how the relationships between age, cultural capital and economic capital may be shifting, we now turn to consider what light empirical studies of cultural consumption can shed on the changing parameters of cultural capital. We concentrate on the embodied forms of cultural capital, that is, habitus or dispositions, as especially revealing in the context of how they also bear on the consecration of objectified cultural capital. We turn initially to consider the most established area of study, the taste and competences linked to classical 'high-brow' culture. The three authors of this paper have for many years been engaged in studies of cultural consumptions and the working of cultural capital in Denmark, Norway and the UK. Our review below is a purposeful reading of recent studies from these and neighbouring countries to uncover trends among young people, and in particular in which respects the young from culturally privileged families distinguish themselves from young people of other origins, as this may be telling of changes in the role and content of cultural capital.

### 2.1 | The restricted—but persistent - role of classical high culture

It has become almost commonplace to note that what is stereotypically considered as 'high-brow' culture (an American term which does not do justice to the subtlety of Bourdieu's account) has become less central to contemporary cultural distinctions. The 'ageing out' of interest in classical music, the 'Old Masters' in the visual arts, and in canonical literature has been amply evidenced by studies from UK (Bennett et al., 2009; Savage et al., 2015), Denmark (Prieur et al., 2008) and Norway (Flemmen et al., 2018, 2019). In Norway, even amongst those who are rich in capital, predominantly of the cultural form, those aged under 40 are much less interested in classical music, modern jazz, 'serious/quality drama movies', and contemporary literature than their older counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, even in the heartland of *Distinction*, France, where Lamont (1992) showed that strong intellectual boundaries were maintained (in comparison to the US), similar trends are clear: The French read less, attend classical concerts and visit museums more seldom (Lombardo & Wolff, 2020, cf. Lahire, 2004).

However, there are important nuances in the Norwegian case which demonstrate that the shift is more subtle than a simple eclipse of highbrow culture. Survey analysis shows that several classical items remain quite distinct among the fractions richest in cultural capital (like classical music, contemporary literature, poetry, books on art and philosophy, most clearly in the Norwegian study). Scandinavian schools downplay classical culture, providing only superficial knowledge of art, music and literature. Even so, those with higher education are disproportionately often able to refer to a significant canon of works from classical music, literature and the visual arts. Further, and across different studies, when those rich in cultural capital enjoy tastes frequently *thought of* as popular—as in pop culture—their taste is quite starkly removed from the (often symbolically denigrated) taste most prominent in the lowest regions of social space (like the easiest pop music, or Norwegian-Swedish *dansband* music).

To be sure, there are signs of a preference for modest displays of cultural capital among the privileged. Based on qualitative interviews in Norway, Jarness (2018, cf. Jarness & Flemmen, 2019) showed that those rich in capital—cultural or economic—systematically downplayed their dominant positions and associated lifestyles in cross-class encounters. They avoided behaviour that would be perceived as bragging about their own cultural competences or



as making explicit judgements of other people's cultural preferences. This 'down-to-earthness' appeared to be a quite deliberate strategy that was strikingly effective for legitimating their positions, as members of the dominated classes were more favourably disposed towards 'non-elitist' elites (see also Miles et al., 2011 and Friedman et al., 2021 on the UK). This downplaying was also found in Ljunggren's (2017) study of the Norwegian cultural elite, who would frequently and consciously under-communicate their own position (e.g., university professors who referred to themselves as teachers). Vassenden and Jonvik (2020) showed that holders of a certain amount of cultural capital oriented themselves towards people like themselves, all while discretely downplaying their differences in contact with non-holders of cultural capital. This modesty softened the symbolic violence experienced by non-holders, but also meant the latter never got the chance to understand the reasons for their de facto exclusion from certain groups. The importance of cultural capital remained a well-kept secret among the culturally privileged.

These findings should not just be seen as due to Norway's strong egalitarian values as they are consistent with other comparative findings pointing to a wider trend. Although high culture seems to not be closely aligned with symbolic dominance and legitimacy, it still plays an important role in allowing elites to internally recognise those with the appropriate 'code'—what might be seen as the sociological equivalent of the Freemason's handshake. This explains, in an American context, why there are signs of a turning inward of 'highbrow' culture, away from the 'Veblensque' display of conspicuous consumption towards a more modest orientation, as Sherman (2019) discusses amongst wealthy Manhattanites. A recent study of British cultural and creative workers (O'Brien & Ianni, 2022) also finds that a disdain for snobbery comes along with a social closure within the elites around their own shared cultural taste.

Thus, knowing the reference points of classical culture may serve as a filter even without acting as a conspicuous marker of cultural capital. At an elite high school in Paris, Pasquier (2005) encountered pupils with a strong affinity with fine arts and classical music, who marked their difference from other young people through a rejection of commercialised culture. In a more recent study from a high school in Oslo with a high representation of pupils from culturally privileged families, Pedersen et al. (2018) likewise found that the young acclaimed classical culture (and academic values) and used this to mark their difference from pupils from less selective high schools. Importantly, more 'cosmopolitan' tastes were fused with an enthusiasm for traditional high culture—the importance of Latin, classical theatre, complex fiction, ancient Greek literature and philosophy. While students shunned explicit symbolic boundaries and 'snobbishness', those who did not master the particular combination of exclusive cultural codes and academic merits, were more often from more modest social origins and felt judgements and boundaries emanating from their more successful peers (Pedersen et al., 2018, pp. 60–62).

For Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the currency of certain tastes or styles in the 'school market' did not depend on the awe of the dominated classes, but on the (mis)recognition of actors powerful in that context. So even if the extent of deference towards high culture from those dispossessed of it may have fallen from the time of *Distinction*, this culture may still be important for elite inheritors. If it remains recognised in socially consequential spheres, it might confer an advantage, influencing not only success at school but possibly also hiring or promotion decisions (Reeves and de Vries, 2019), allocations of stipends, informal access to powerful circles, etc.

These studies thus suggest that young people rich in cultural capital today fuse the more emergent manifestations of cultural capital with its more established versions, in a way which is 'known' amongst insiders. Cultural capital today revolves around the capacity for demonstrating deference to old canons along with the capacity to appropriate less canonised forms, sometimes playfully and ironic, and integrate the latter with more traditional forms. Let us now move on to make this argument more explicitly.

## 2.2 | The usage of popular culture as a condescending strategy

Bourdieu was fully aware that classic high culture was losing ground to a commercialised popular culture. Pointing to tattoos and baggy pants originating from American prisons, he described a phenomenon he labelled 'inverted

snobbery' (Bourdieu, 2003, p. 71): 'Indeed, it is the first time in history that the cheapest products of popular culture (...) are imposing themselves as chic.' Holt (1997) pointed to more subtle ways of showing distinction than in the choice of particular objects or preferences, for instance by having conversational competences about them. The appropriation of popular items in fashionable trends is not a new phenomenon. Recent studies have shown how this appropriation of popular culture has intensified 'knowing' dispositions amongst the culturally privileged (cf. Prieur & Savage, 2013). Bennett et al. (2009 p. 194) identified a 'reflexive appropriation' of culture 'in a spirit of openness' as a new middle-class ideal in their British study. In Denmark, Prieur and Rosenlund (2010) found signs of appreciation of a distanced and ironic attitude among the culturally privileged, especially the young.

This point was amplified when Jarness (2015) in his Norwegian study argued for a veritable change from 'what' to 'how' in cultural stratification research. Distinction accrues less to cultural objects as such and more to the way in which they are appropriated. Those rich in cultural capital could relate to so-called lowbrow cultural expressions such as rap music or reality TV in distanced, ironic and intellectualising ways, putting pride in 'recognizing quality' anywhere. This echoes Friedman's (2011) work on British comedy and distinction. Where those high in cultural capital may claim to see a 'whole other level' in a comedy (e.g., Eddie Izzard), those low in cultural capital may only see 'silliness'.

In France, Legon (2010) observed that dependent on background, the young varied in how they related to their cultural preferences, so that to 'enjoy rap music' could mean very different things. The young from educated homes typically avoided the most popular artists and wanted to find more rare pieces, listen attentively (and not just use it as background) etc. Thereby they could show knowledge of 'the code' and ability to display 'mastery' by recognising the stakes associated with differing genres. British young professionals who were able to say 'I love crap TV' (Savage et al., 2005), were humorously authorising the watching of it whilst also displaying awareness of the cultural codes and hence that they were discerning and not in the thrall of the consumer industries.

This recalls what Bourdieu (1991) termed 'condescending strategies': a way to gain a double profit, both from having a status and from one's willingness to transgress this status, while also knowing the limits of this transgression. Laughing about the cavorting of bodies on Love Island whilst critiquing the cynical nature of commercial TV is perfectly consistent with this kind of cultural capital: thinking that romance is actually being played out on your screen would not. These 'knowing' modes of consumption thus mark you out amongst your peers as having the appropriate cultured dispositions whilst also avoiding overt elitism to wider audiences. It is thus consistent with our argument that cultural capital is turning 'inwards'.

### 2.3 | Digital distinctions

Prieur and Savage (2013) argued that Bourdieu's original understanding of cultural capital was dependent on a perspective based in the humanities, focussing on literature, music, art, film and TV, and neglected scientific and technical orientations. Actually, Bourdieu (1996: 368) suggested replacing the concept of cultural capital with the broader concept of *informational capital*, which encompasses scientific and technical orientations (see also Halford & Savage, 2010). Savage (2010) has emphasised the significance of technical expertise as central to British inflections of cultural capital, and this theme has also been elaborated by Friedman and Laurison (2019) related to social mobility.

The Internet may have provided a certain democratisation of access to knowledge and competences within a nearly unlimited range of areas—knowledge about health, law, politics, history, geography, art, music etc. just to name a few (see the overview in Helsper, 2021). This means, however, that the ability to sort out and evaluate the information found becomes relatively more significant. Further, access does not in itself guarantee equality, as algorithms based on localisation, search history etc. will provide for instance students with other hits than their teachers get. Analyses of cultural consumption online indicate that algorithms tend to preserve and reenforce cultural hierarchies, rather than transform them (Airoldi, 2021).

Pasquier (2018) revealed huge social differences in the number and quality of devices as well as the quality of connexions based on geography and socioeconomic resources in France. In their seminal analysis of social class

divisions in Europe, Huguée et al. (2020) add that knowing how to do things like word processing, web searching and changing software parameters is starkly differentiated by social class. This *digital divide* adds up unequal competence with the forementioned inequalities in possession of devices and quality of connection. As Purhonen et al. (2021) state, while quite a few studies emphasise that digital media consumption constitutes a new source of inequality, it is less clear whether digital media implies something genuinely new or only accentuate old hierarchies. Their comparison of Finnish data from 2007 to 2018 finds the most marked differences to be that the non-users of digital media had become fewer and that the younger cohorts had largely abandoned the traditional media.

As the non-users become fewer, the concept of the digital divide seems less relevant for the Nordic countries, which are the world's most digitalised societies. Except for the very oldest and the most marginalised, almost everybody has access to and uses the Internet. Therefore, mere access becomes less significant than *how* they use the Internet. This is pointed out by Ragnedda and Muschert (2013), who find the main dividing line to run between the information 'haves' and 'havenots'. *Digital distinctions* (Bengtsson, 2015) may thus become a more relevant term. The ubiquity of digital fluency amongst younger generations whose habitus formation has taken place parallel to the development of the technologies allows them to pick up an ease of use that is more demanding for older generations and which is consistent with the 'knowing' orientation we discuss above.

Studying the changing nature of Norwegians' political engagement, Hovden (2022) found that while the principal divide regarded the volume of public attention and engagement, a secondary divide separated traditional and emerging forms of public engagement. The emerging forms are more issue oriented and more digital, and more associated with younger people. But there are internal differences among the young. Using online news sites rather than the social media exclusively is more frequent among privileged young people.

In a Danish study, Sivertsen and Thomsen (2023) add further nuance, showing that the use of social media allows for civic engagement and deliberation. Thereby they show how the new generation, through the uses of digital media, disrupt the established opposition between the private and the public spheres. While the elite may follow national political actors or international ones (such as Greta Thunberg) and debate political and cultural matters, the lower classes are more likely to follow influencers and show an interest in entertainment and domestic matters. Some national or local political personalities and questions attract the latter's attention, however, like the national handling of COVID19 or the local urban planning. Even mundane matters such as pets or work/life balance may get politicised when they are turned into shared concerns (for instance legal matters related to the regulation of certain dog breeds).

Bengtsson (2015) found that uses of the Internet differed between Swedish university students in the same way as other cultural consumptions do, so that for instance philosophy students claimed to have quite highbrow cultural interests and use Internet more for their studies than for leisure, compared to business students, and they also more often read foreign newspapers. The students in media and communication, however, who also typically have well-educated parents, to a considerable degree used social media to pursue their interests for high culture. These nuanced studies therefore demonstrate that the rise of digital fluency does not have uniform effects and that there are variations—often subtle—which testify to the ongoing significance of cultural capital divides.

## 2.4 | From cosmopolitanism to a radicalised politics of life choices

Recent years have seen intensified controversies over the politics of life choice. From the school strikes for the climate to the outcries over supposed 'cancel culture' at US college campuses, there is a striking age dimension at play. As younger people push for climate action and stronger reactions against racism and misogyny, (particularly) middle-aged white men react against this activism of 'social justice warriors'. Multiple dimensions of power are at play here, as age-related struggles play out over issues of identity-sensitive forms of domination (Sayer, 2005, pp. 85–93). Our contention is that these struggles need to be understood multidimensionally within the broader cultural class dynamics of political conflicts: what these 'young people' instantiate, might fruitfully be regarded as an intensified rendition of the sort of left-liberal, 'cosmopolitan' politics of those endowed with cultural capital.

Previous commentators have pointed out how 'cosmopolitan' views connect with cultural capital. However, one should distinguish between the quite evidently expensive mode of 'cosmopolitanism' that demands high amounts of economic capital (i.e., Calhoun's (2003) 'frequent flyers'), and a mode based on taste and opinions. Skeggs (2004) has advanced that a cosmopolitan orientation serves as a middle-class marker of distinction, while Fridman and Ollivier (2004) argued that *conspicuous openness to diversity*—both in culture and politics—was replacing scarcity as the main mode of legitimate culture in contemporary societies. One of the most important oppositions in a Danish study was drawn between an international orientation and a local or national orientation in areas as diverse as TV-preferences, musical likes, food consumption and political attitudes. This opposition was clearly related to levels of cultural capital (Harrits et al., 2010; Prieur et al., 2008; Skjott-Larsen, 2012).

An international orientation stands out as a central element in how elites, particularly the highly educated, draw boundaries towards those in lower positions, thus serving as a form of cultural capital (Prieur & Savage, 2013). But it is also a very selective internationalism, which tends to represent an orientation to anglophone cultures, reflecting the status of English language as the dominant mode of global scientific and business communication. Those with high volumes of capital, and especially cultural, more often seek out international sources of news, such as CNN, *The Guardian* and *Huffington Post* (even in Norway - Hovden & Rosenlund, 2021, p. 134). Savage et al. (2019) have demonstrated how, for Britons, many international ties tend to be with nations where old imperial connections have been strong, and they are being revived.

An emerging wave of research from different countries applying the insights of cultural class analysis to the realm of politics have unearthed a reconfiguration of class politics, in which the kind of liberal leftism associated with 'cosmopolitanism' is associated with high volumes of capital, predominantly cultural. In contrast, those with high volumes of predominantly economic capital still cling to conventional free market ideology, with a special flair of anti-egalitarian sentiment. In the lower regions of the social space, those with even less cultural than economic capital tend to oppose liberal views and instead opt for more 'traditionalist' views with regards to religion, gender roles and immigration. In contrast, those with even less economic than cultural capital tend to support politics of redistribution and welfare (Harrits et al., 2010; Flemmen & Haakestad, 2017; to Jarness, Flemmen, & Rosenlund, 2019; De Keere, 2018, and with respect to the politics of Brexit in the UK; Flemmen & Savage, 2017).

Turning to the young Norwegians, left-liberal positions played an important part in symbolic boundary work in the aforementioned study of cultural capital-rich students at an Oslo high school (Pedersen et al., 2018). These students engaged in a very literal rendition of Giddensian 'politics of life choices', in that they actively politicised everyday choices, for instance through vegetarianism and avoiding leather. They erected strong symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002) around these choices, with those failing to comply being judged quite harshly. Granted, earlier work on adults showed that those rich in cultural capital would indeed mix political-moral considerations with aesthetical ones when drawing boundaries, dismissing those lower in the social space for being both tacky and racist homophobes (Jarness, 2013). However, for the high school students it seemed to go deeper and wider: they emphasised these moral-political boundaries more strongly, and applied them to a wider range of issues, perhaps especially associated with environmentalism and anti-racism.

Moral judgements are also expressed over bodily appearance and comportment. When Pedersen et al. (2018) compared culturally privileged high school students to economically privileged students from a different high school in Oslo (Jarness, Pedersen, & Flemmen, 2019), the former had a rather relaxed bodily ideal, while the latter held that one should be physically fit, look healthy and follow the fashion. Gender distinctions among the latter were also sharper: The boys should be muscular, strong and perform well in sports, while they also were allowed to drink hard and put up fights. The girls were subjected to a strong discipline, should keep slim and always have a perfect make-up.

This mode of politicised distinction and boundary drawing operates an interplay between cultural capital and age, as the complex manoeuvring requires both symbolic mastery of cultural capital and alertness to new issues. Young people's 'politics of life choices' draw boundaries both in terms of class and age/generation. The politics of life choices are closely aligned with dominant liberal values and present themselves as a radicalisation of forms of moral-political orientation that already enjoy a strong position among the culturally dominant. That these views enjoy

a more general legitimacy is testified by how they are frequently sarcastically referred to as 'politically correct', which suggests a connection to prevailing norms and power. The critical edge of the 'politically correct' term testifies to the important, if often neglected, point that cultural legitimacy is not an all or nothing phenomenon, as legitimate culture may be, and often is, challenged by groups who do not master or profit from it.

### 3 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

We have here followed through Bourdieu's emphasis that what counts as capital will always be contested. According to his logic of fields, the established will always have an interest in maintaining the reigning definitions with its current distribution of value. Newcomers either aim for recognition from the established on their premises, or contest the reigning definitions and seek recognition of their own strengths and particularities (or some combination of these strategies). This creates potential tensions between generations but is also a source of renewal. This dynamic can explain both the reproduction of some established definitions of valuable cultural competences and dispositions, as well as changes when some definitions are positioned as obsolete and new attributes are hailed.

Above, we have reviewed research surrounding the transformations of distinctions, and the possible changes they may entail for cultural capital. Our overarching argument is that cultural capital remains important for social differentiation, but its form is undergoing subtle changes as it turns inwards. Linked to increasing economic inequalities, younger privileged people are drawn to modes of cultural consumption which downplay overt elitism and conspicuous consumption. Yet this is not to be taken at face value as they also mark, covertly, certain modes of privilege. These tendencies thus suggest that cultural capital is becoming more of an internal marker, in which privileged young people mark out to peers as well as to parents and authorities that they know how to 'play the game' even whilst seeking to downplay their privileges to wider audiences. They are thus loath to display cultural capital conspicuously. We have traced this tendency across the restricted, but still significant role of classical high culture; the role of popular culture in condescending strategies among the culturally privileged; the making of digital distinctions and in the taking of moral-political positionings. These sources of distinction in many cases claim to be criticising privilege and identify with those excluded, and they are not overtly displayed against those who are in 'dominated' positions, but they nonetheless mark out internal codes which allow those with cultural capital to identify with like-minded people.

This argument requires the analysis of cultural capital to be related to tendencies concerning economic capital. This is partly because increasing economic inequality can encourage the privileged not to display their advantages so as not to draw wider critical attention to them. But there is also a specific age-related dynamic associated with the escalation of wealth inequality, which is a major feature of contemporary social change, even in the egalitarian Norwegian context. The accumulation of economic capital, associated with rising levels of wealth and capital in many Western societies, tilts economic privilege towards older people and places younger people in a more subordinate place with respect to them. It is therefore an understandable response for younger people to position themselves efficiently against older generations through emphasising those aspects of embodied cultural capital which are more dependent on symbolic mastery and less on raw purchase power. They can adeptly and expertly move between cultural genres and digital devices, thanks to familiarity from their early years. They can care for health, environment and certain political issues and show reflexive skills in making ethical and moral judgements that allow them to demonstrate reflexivity, expertise and cultural 'mastery'. In this respect, they can show a certain kind of cultural mastery over older generations.

In all these ways, the young generation challenge the older generation. Still, in the way the young from culturally privileged families display their preferences and their mastery of 'insider codes' when marking differences both towards the less privileged and towards those who are from particularly economically privileged families, we should not forget that these young people position themselves as well prepared inheritors. The inequities of cultural capital continue, though perhaps in a less overt and visible form. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Calculations by the authors using the data and model of social space presented in Flemmen et al., 2019, and the mentioned differences are all significant the 0.05 level.

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