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## Taste differentiation and hierarchization within popular culture: The case of salsa music



Tito Bachmayer<sup>a</sup>, Nico Wilterdink<sup>b</sup>, Alex van Venrooij<sup>b,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup>University of Amsterdam, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1018 WV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 8 November 2014

#### Keywords:

Omnivores  
Class distinction  
Musical taste  
Cultural consumption  
Salsa  
Latin American immigrants

### ABSTRACT

This article investigates taste preferences for one popular music genre: salsa. It is based on in-depth interviews with 40 Latin American immigrants in Switzerland and the Netherlands. Eight recorded pieces of salsa that represent different salsa styles were played and respondents' spontaneous appreciations were noted. The findings show a clear and fairly strong connection between taste preferences and status/class indicators, particularly education and to a lesser extent occupational status and social origins. High-status respondents prefer those pieces and styles classified as artistically worthwhile by professional experts in salsa music, whereas low-status respondents showed more appreciation for pieces and styles that experts classified as popular, commercial, and artistically inferior. Respondents also differed in their preferences for other musical genres, styles, and pieces as well as in the reasons they gave for their preferences. These results largely confirm Bourdieu's distinction theory for this specific 'popular' genre, and suggest that cultural 'omnivorousness' can coincide with status-related distinctions and exclusivity on the level of within-genre distinctions. The findings also show that respondents use salsa music as a resource to define and express their 'Latin' identity – thus illustrating both 'bounding' and 'bridging' mechanisms.

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\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 0205252465; fax: +31 0205253010.

E-mail addresses: [T.W.Bachmayer@uva.nl](mailto:T.W.Bachmayer@uva.nl) (T. Bachmayer), [N.A.Wilterdink@uva.nl](mailto:N.A.Wilterdink@uva.nl) (N. Wilterdink), [A.T.vanVenrooij@uva.nl](mailto:A.T.vanVenrooij@uva.nl) (A. van Venrooij).

## 1. Introduction

When Pierre Bourdieu published *La distinction* in 1979, changes had been going on for some time that seemed to undermine the book's very core thesis. On the basis of research in French society around 1965, the book forcefully argued that class inequalities generated differences in cultural taste that in turn served to reinforce and reproduce the class structure: the cultural hierarchy of high-low distinctions was deeply embedded in, and expressive of, the social hierarchy of class divisions, in which taste functioned as cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Yet it was in this same period that established cultural rankings together with class and power inequalities came under heavy attack in all Western societies. In the 1960s and 1970s, oppositional youth from different class origins, in paradoxical alignment with the expanding commercial media and entertainment industries, challenged cherished distinctions between high and popular culture, highbrow and lowbrow, serious art and mere entertainment, and thereby helped to undermine these distinctions. As the baby boom generation grew older, they used to maintain (at least partially) their preferences for rock music and informal clothing styles acquired in their younger years, thus contributing to the incorporation of these styles within established culture (cf. A. Bennett, 2006, 2013). Cultural products that used to be defined as 'lowbrow' or 'popular entertainment' were increasingly viewed in similar ways as serious 'art', as is indicated, for example, by the growing attention for these products in elite newspapers since the 1960s (Heilbrun, 1997; Janssen et al., 2011), the increasing academic interest in popular culture institutionalized in such new interdisciplinary fields as Cultural Studies (Barker, 2000), and the rise and growing impact of postmodernism in the 1970s and 1980s, which criticized all kinds of hierarchical distinctions (Wilterdink, 2002). When in the last two decades of the past century Bourdieu's work became world famous (Silva and Warde, 2010), cultural hierarchies seemed less clear, more contested and more variegated than they had been in the recent and not so recent past (cf. Janssen, 2005; Coulangeon, 2013).

Several theoretical viewpoints have been advanced to do justice to these changes. In the most radical, 'postmodern' or 'late modern' interpretation, class differences are no longer relevant for explaining cultural variations (Hradil, 1987; Lahire, 2004; Pakulski and Waters, 1996; Schulze, 1992). Class has become, in the words of Ulrich Beck (2002), a 'zombie category', as people no longer are subject to its conditioning force; in our highly individualized and mobile society, all individuals are able to choose freely among an endless variety of lifestyles and cultural goods to which an endless variety of meanings is attached.

Another, more nuanced critique of Bourdieu's view has much better claims to empirical validity: the thesis of omnivorousness, launched in 1992 by the late Richard Peterson (Peterson and Simkus, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996), which states that during the past few decades exclusive, 'snobbish' preferences for high-culture among higher-status groups (or, in Bourdieuan terms, the dominant class) increasingly gave way to an 'omnivorous' combination of preferences for both highbrow and popular cultural genres, such as classical music on the one hand and rock/pop music on the other. It is precisely by their wide-ranging cultural interests and appreciations that high-status groups in contemporary Western societies distinguish themselves from people with lower educational levels, incomes and occupational status, who tend to have a 'univore' preference for only popular culture. This thesis was originally based on survey research on preferences for different musical genres among the American population, and has been subsequently confirmed by a large number of similar studies in different Western countries (see Peterson, 2005, for an overview). While many later studies also focused on musical taste, some found support for the omnivorousness thesis in other cultural fields, such as the visual arts (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007) or literature (Zavisca, 2005; Purhonen et al., 2010), or in a wide range of cultural objects and disciplines taken together (Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009).

Yet not all empirical investigations supported the thesis unequivocally. Firstly, the differences in degrees of omnivorousness as measured by average number of stated preferences or reported frequency of cultural participation between different strata were often small if not insignificant; sharp contrasts between high-status omnivores and low-status univores could not be found. Thus, Van Eijck (2001) concluded in a study of social differentiation in musical taste patterns in the Netherlands that the 'difference in the degree to which status groups may be considered omnivorous is (...) only significant as far as *passing knowledge* is considered and not when only the really favourite genres are

considered', and that even the first-mentioned difference was actually 'quite small' (p. 1180, italics in the original). Secondly, and related to that, omnivorousness according to some research outcomes is not typical for higher-status groups in general but rather for the more specific category of the upwardly mobile (Van Eijck, 2001; Friedman, 2012). Thirdly, some longitudinal studies found that omnivorousness tended to decrease rather than increase in recent times, particularly among younger generations, as the ongoing expansion of popular culture marginalized the preference for traditional high culture, even if it was nonexclusive, to a minority position (Van Eijck and Knulst, 2005; Peterson, 2005, pp. 263, 266). A fourth amendment came from qualitative research that probed deeper into people's actual cultural tastes and interests, and concluded that 'the cultural omnivore' does not exist: the concept covers a vaguely delineated set of people with widely different taste patterns each of which is highly selective (Bellavance, 2008; T. Bennett et al., 2009, pp. 182–190; Ollivier, 2008; Warde et al., 2007).

A more basic problem concerns the concept of cultural omnivorousness itself. From the start, there have been unclarities and disputes about what the concept actually means and how it should be measured. There is continuing disagreement about whether research should focus on respondents' stated taste preferences (and if so, on likes or dislikes<sup>1</sup>), or on reported cultural consumption (Peterson, 2005, p. 265; Peterson, 2007, pp. 303–304). But the most important issue in this context is whether omnivorousness implies by definition the combination of preferences or activities with respect to cultural genres or forms that are differently located in a cultural hierarchy (for example, highbrow, middlebrow, lowbrow/popular), or refers to choosing a relatively large number of cultural genres or forms irrespective of the social prestige or artistic value attributed to these genres or forms.<sup>2</sup> The first definition – the original one – assumes a given cultural hierarchy, a clear rank order of cultural genres and forms, which is often regarded as fixed and stable (see e.g. Peterson and Kern, 1996). Whereas the thesis of omnivorousness was developed in order to describe and clarify changes in the relationships between class, status distinction and cultural taste, this was done on the basis of doubtful assumptions about the nature of these same relationships and their stability over time. Therefore, there was a rationale for using the second, more open definition, which can do without such assumptions. Research outcomes on the basis of this definition, however, still depend on which genres are distinguished and/or which cultural objects are selected. Moreover, by sidestepping the question of cultural ranking, this approach is not very helpful for clarifying the problems for which the thesis of omnivorousness was originally developed.

The differentiation and ranking of cultural activities and objects in a given field into distinct genres is neither self-evident nor stable. Genre boundaries are moving targets that evolve and change over time (DiMaggio, 1987; Lena, 2012; Roy and Dowd, 2010). Each genre exists by virtue of its definition and classification in relation to other ones, which depends on the changing supply by cultural producers (artists, performers) by which new styles, artistic schools or scenes develop, the changing interpretations and appreciations by cultural specialists who function as mediators (such as art critics, teachers and organizers of cultural events), and the changing reception by different social groups (cf. DiMaggio, 1987). When a given genre gains popularity among wider segments of the population, the hierarchical meanings attached to it will change. More in particular, it is plausible that increasing appreciation among high-status groups for a genre conventionally defined as 'popular' or 'lowbrow', will go hand in hand with its symbolic upgrading. And when a genre expands and spreads in terms of production, distribution and reception, it is likely to differentiate into distinct styles or subgenres. Under these conditions, it is to be expected that differential appreciations for different styles and forms *within* a given genre will develop, which may end up in a more or less clear hierarchy within this genre.

<sup>1</sup> Contrary to most researchers, Bryson (1996) focused on dislikes. Sonnett (2004) added a third category, that of 'mixed feelings'.

<sup>2</sup> Peterson (2005, pp. 262–264) notes a shift from the first definition to the second one, which he supports: omnivores do not necessarily have 'highbrow' taste, as he assumed in his earlier work, but may confine their preferences to a (relatively large) number of 'lowbrow' genres. By maintaining the highbrow/lowbrow distinction, however, he still presupposes in this later work a given cultural hierarchy. Warde and Gayo-Cal (2009) take the two definitions as the basis for distinguishing 'omnivorousness by volume' (the second definition) and 'omnivorousness by composition' (the first definition).

It is this possibility that will be investigated here. This will be done by focusing on one musical genre conventionally defined as popular that has become widely appreciated in different parts of the world and by different social groups: salsa music.<sup>3</sup>

We will investigate on the basis of in-depth interviews to what extent and how people make distinctions between different styles and musical pieces in this genre, to what extent and how they differ in their appreciations for these different styles and pieces, and to what extent and how these differences in appreciation are related to class position as defined by education, occupation, income and social origins. Such a detailed and systematic research of the differential appreciation of different styles and specific pieces among consumers of a specific cultural genre is lacking until now. Recent qualitative research on omnivorousness has given us more detailed information on taste variations among typical ‘omnivores’, but did not deal systematically with the question how different styles and works within a given genre are differentially liked or disliked, and how variations in such likings and dislikings are connected to class characteristics. Although ethnographic research on music scenes has studied how audiences construct symbolic boundaries between underground/mainstream (Thornton, 1995) or authentic/inauthentic (Grazian, 2005), within-genre differentiation has mainly been investigated by focusing on the supply-side of professional specialists: musicians, producers, and critics (Frith, 1996; Peterson and Beal, 2001; Regev, 1994; Van Venrooij, 2009, 2011). Close analyses of the perception and construction of cultural hierarchies by receivers are less common, which is the focus of this research.

Salsa music has been chosen for this research because it is generally recognized as a distinct genre, which at the same time has differentiated into a variety of styles or subgenres since its origins in the 1960s (Manuel, 2006; Ospina, 1995; Waxer, 2002). Whereas salsa music in general is conventionally labelled as ‘popular’, professional specialists in the field make distinctions in terms of high and low within the genre, as will be illustrated below. The question is how these distinctions are related to differential taste appreciations among nonspecialist listeners.

The listeners who are the respondents in this research are forty Latin American, Spanish-speaking first-generation immigrants living in two Western European countries, Switzerland and the Netherlands. This research group has been chosen for several reasons. The first reason is that – without assuming some necessary or exclusive relationship between salsa music and Latin-Americans (Negus and Román-Velazquez, 2002) – people from these countries could at least be expected to have some minimum knowledge of, interest in, and affinity with salsa music, which enabled them to give differentiated responses; this expectation was confirmed in the subsequent research. Secondly, Latin American immigrants in Western Europe vary widely in class origins and actual class position; therefore, it was not difficult to select respondents with different characteristics in these respects. A third reason for focusing on this group was that it enabled us to deal with an additional question – to what extent and how musical preferences are related to definitions of group identity and belonging beyond class and status distinctions; in this case, to what extent and how appreciations for salsa music are related to self-definitions and group belonging among Latin Americans in Europe.

We are thus not only interested in how music can be used for ‘bounding’ but also for ‘bridging’ social categories. As Roy and Dowd (2010) have argued, music can play a double role: it can be used to demarcate and uphold boundaries between, for example, social classes by invoking hierarchies between musical genres or styles, but it can also work to undermine the alignment between social and musical categories when music works as a ‘technology of the collective’ and integrates people with widely different positions and orientations. ‘Bounding’ and ‘bridging’, of course, can operate simultaneously or even reinforce one another: when bridges between social categories within a given group define and strengthen the boundaries with outgroups and in turn are sustained by them (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). For our respondents, both mechanisms at different levels seem to be salient for their experience with salsa music, as will be explicated below. Instead of focusing exclusively on the Bourdieuan interest in culture as a tool for demarcating social classes, we thus also integrate a line of research that emphasizes the relation between music and collective (ethnic, national, regional)

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<sup>3</sup> The field work for this research was conducted by the first author for his Master’s thesis under the supervision of the second author (Bachmayer, 2006; Bachmayer and Wilterdink, 2009). The interviews were mainly conducted in Spanish and coded by the first author.

identity; in this case, the role of salsa music in the construction of 'Latinness' among a heterogeneous group of migrants (Román-Velazquez, 1999a; cf. Aparicio, 1999).<sup>4</sup> Our interest in 'ethnicity' in this paper does not lie with comparing cultural preferences between ethnicities (cf. DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990) but to understand some ways in which music is important in the construction of ethnic identity.

The interview sessions did not only involve verbal communication, but also playing pieces of salsa music to which the respondents were asked to listen and give comments. The use of specific cultural artefacts in order to evoke responses within interview settings is quite rare in studies of cultural taste (for exceptions see Berghman, 2009; Gebesmair, 2001) – even though several authors have pointed out the limitations of focusing exclusively on questions concerning preferences for musical genres (Karbusicky, 1975; Bryson, 1996; Holt, 1998; Savage, 2006; Savage and Gayo, 2011). In our 'sounding questionnaire' (Gebesmair, 2001) we noted our respondents' spontaneous remarks, their likes and dislikes, their familiarity or nonfamiliarity with the music pieces, and the reasons they gave for their appreciations. In this way, much more detailed and 'realistic' information (nearer to everyday life situations) about the respondents' musical tastes could be acquired than would have been possible on the basis of only verbal interviews. Besides open-ended questions, some questions with fixed answer categories were posed. The answers to the latter questions as well as the coded answers to some open-ended questions formed the material for statistical analysis in order to assess significant differences and correlations.

On the basis of these considerations, we present the central research question as follows: How do Latin American immigrants living in Western Europe who have different status positions and social origins like or dislike various kinds of salsa music; what are the significant differences and similarities in their taste preferences; and what wider sociological implications can be drawn from these findings?

To answer this question, we present our research findings in five sections (Sections 3.1–3.5). First, we discuss to what extent and how differences in taste preferences are connected with class position as indicated by education, occupational status, income, and social origin (parents' education and occupation). Here, we show a clear and fairly strong connection between taste preferences and status/class indicators, particularly education and to a lesser extent occupational status and social origins. More specifically, high-status respondents are found to prefer those pieces and styles classified as artistically worthwhile by professional specialists in salsa music, whereas low-status respondents showed more appreciation for pieces and styles that experts classified as popular, commercial, and artistically inferior. In Section 3.2, we elaborate on this by comparing respondents who can be regarded as 'experts' in salsa music with the respondents who are just 'consumers'. We find that the preferences of the experts are similar to those of highly educated consumers in their distinctive appreciation of salsa pieces regarded as artistically superior. Third, we describe the reasons respondents give for their appreciations, their use of evaluative criteria, and the extent to which, and how, they make hierarchical distinctions when expressing taste judgements. The evaluative repertoires of high and low status respondents strongly resemble Bourdieu's distinction between the 'aesthetic disposition' and the 'popular aesthetic', while also showing the importance of 'textual content' for high-status respondents. Fourth, we focus on homologies between respondents' differential appreciations of various kinds of salsa music and their appreciations for other musical genres and subgenres. Together, these results demonstrate a clear cultural hierarchy within this specific 'popular' genre, suggesting that cultural 'omnivorousness' can coincide with status-related distinctions and exclusivity on the level of within-genre distinctions. Finally, we analyze the meanings that respondents attach to their appreciations of salsa music as a distinct musical genre showing how it connects to ideas and feelings of we-identity as Latin Americans – thereby illustrating the importance of music for both 'bounding' and 'bridging' mechanisms.

<sup>4</sup> See also the special issue in *Popular Music* (2011) on 'Crossing Borders: Music of Latin America'. In her introductory article, Román-Velazquez mentions that migration and diaspora had their influences on the definition of 'Latin America'. This development challenges the idea of 'geographically bounded music' (2011, p. 171). One should look instead on 'transformation, movement and hybridity' which 'stresses that the relationship between music and place is multiple – music does not belong to any one single place but to multiple locations simultaneously and as such is therefore claimed by different groups' (2011, p. 172). This is, at least partly, in line with our findings on different forms of 'Latin American identity' feelings among the respondents (see Section 3.5).

The next section provides information about the research methods and respondents' characteristics. This is followed by the presentation of the most salient findings and interpretation in terms of the sociological questions that were the starting point of this research. The concluding section discusses wider theoretical implications.

## 2. Research design and data set

### 2.1. The respondents

The respondents in this research were forty first-generation Latin American immigrants (from Cuba, Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Panama, Puerto Rico and Venezuela)<sup>5</sup>, 18 of them living in the Netherlands (the majority in or near Amsterdam) and 22 in Switzerland (most of them in Zurich or Lucerne). Respondents were selected with the help of four intermediaries with a Latin American background, two persons per country. They recruited most of the participants at places and occasions where Latinos came together: cultural and entertainment centres, dance studios, concerts and cultural events. One of the two intermediaries in each country had a lower educational level and a technical or routine administrative job; the other was a higher-educated professional. In this way, it was possible to guarantee sufficient variation in respondents' education and occupation as well as variations in age, sex and country of origin. Ten of the forty respondents were strongly involved in salsa music, due to their occupation (DJ, dancing master, musician), additional paid work, or intensive recreational activities. They could be distinguished as 'experts' from the other respondents. However, virtually all respondents considered themselves salsa music lovers. Preferences of 'experts' and 'consumers' of salsa music could therefore be compared.

By including two countries, it was possible to investigate whether the specific national context influenced respondents' preferences. This was not the case: no systematic and significant differences were found between immigrants living in the Netherlands and Switzerland. Consequently, the research results are presented without specifying the country of residence. Apparently, the findings of this research are not bound to a particular national context. Moreover, no significant differences were found in terms of age and gender.

In order to make systematic comparisons, respondents with different levels of education, occupational status, income and social origin (measured by parents' education and occupation) were selected.<sup>6</sup>

As is evident from [Table 1](#), highly educated persons are overrepresented in the sample (compared to the ideal distribution).<sup>7</sup> In contrast, persons in the highest income category (4th and 5th quintiles) are underrepresented, whereas the distribution among the three different occupational status categories is fairly equal. There are several reasons for these discrepancies in our sample, which are

<sup>5</sup> Each of these six countries contributed to the development of salsa and has a lively salsa scene (Waxer, 2002, p. 4; Manuel, 2006, pp. 94–95).

<sup>6</sup> In this research, social status is defined more broadly than prestige or esteem and social class as more comprehensive than economic position and material life chances (conform with Bourdieu, 1984). Hence, status characteristics are conceived as aspects of social class position. We depart from the Weberian distinction between 'class' and 'estate' or 'status group' (Weber, 1922, pp. 177–180, 631–641) and the Anglo-Saxon translation of these concepts in the dimensions of 'class position' and 'social status' (e.g., Chan and Goldthorpe, 2004). By stressing this distinction, one might easily neglect the empirical relationship and the conceptual overlap between socio-economic characteristics and power resources on the one hand, and prestige, status symbols and characteristics of lifestyle on the other.

<sup>7</sup> The tripartition in educational level according to low, medium and high corresponds to following classifications in Latin American countries: 1) *educación primaria* (primary education, 5–6 years) and *educación secundaria* (general secondary education, 2–4 years), 2) *educación media* (higher secondary education, 2–4 years) and 3) *educación superior* (college education). Some respondents within the category 'low' accomplished only primary education, some others also general secondary education. The latter type of education is now compulsory in all six countries ([http://ibe.unesco.org/latin\\_america.htm](http://ibe.unesco.org/latin_america.htm)).

To determine occupational status, we used the classifications of *Standaard Beroepenclassificatie 1992* of CBS (2001) and the *International Standard Classification of Occupations ISCO-08* (ILO, 2008). The most important criterion for occupational classification is the level of required professional skills, primary defined by the 'most appropriate education' (CBS, 2001, p. 7). Besides that, the criterion of leadership plays a role in defining occupational status.

To encode income, we distinguished quintiles of gross household income according to the definition of national statistical agencies in the Netherlands and Switzerland (BFS, 2005, 23; <http://statline.cbs.nl>).

**Table 1**

Respondents distribution on positional characteristics.

Educational level						
High		Middle		Low		
20		12		8		
Occupational status						
High		Middle		Low		Student
12		10		13		5
Income						
1st quintile		2nd and 3rd quintile		4th and 5th quintile		
18		15		7		
Social background: educational level of parents						
High		Middle		Low		
13		11		14		
Social background: occupational status of parents						
High		Middle		Low		
16		11		11		
Country of origin						
Columbia	Cuba	Dominic. Rep.	Venezuela	Panama	Puerto Rico	
17	13	4	4	1	1	
Gender						
Female					Male	
12					28	
Age						
20–29 years		30–39 years		40–49 years		50–59 years
13		15		10		2

- *Educational level*: highest accomplished education, classified as high (college education), middle (secondary education that gives access to college, higher and middle-level vocational education) and low (elementary education, lower secondary and vocational education).

- *Occupational status*: High occupational status (high occupational qualifications and/or executive/managerial position), middle occupational status (middle occupational qualifications, low or middle executive/managerial position), low occupational status (low occupational qualifications); in accordance with CBS (2001) and ILO (2008).

- *Income*: 1st quintile: 0–17.100 Euro (NL), 0–56.400 CHF (CH); 2nd and 3rd quintile: 17.101–39.700 Euro, 56.401–108.000 CHF; 4th and 5th quintile: >39.701 Euro, >108.001 CHF (in addition see footnote 2).

- *Social background*: educational level and occupational status of parent with the highest achieved formal education and occupational status, respectively. In the case of two respondents, educational level and occupational status of their parents are unknown.

indicative of status inconsistencies among many immigrants in Western Europe. First, the education acquired in respondents' country of origin did not always correspond to their relatively low occupational status in the country of residence. Second, their income was often low in comparison with their occupational status; especially for professions in the creative, educational or 'social' sphere, like musician, social worker, drama teacher, or jewel designer. Third, some highly educated respondents in our sample had received their degree recently and just started their occupational career. Fourth, several respondents worked part-time and had an income-earning partner, which meant that their reported individual income was much lower than total household income. Finally, it is possible that some respondents reported a lower income than they actually had.

The data regarding social origin show fairly equal distributions among the categories of parents' education and occupational status. The respondents were on average more highly educated than their

**Table 2**  
Pieces of salsa music of the 'sounding' questionnaire.

No./interpreter/band	Title	Album/year	Origin	Style <sup>a</sup>
<b>Highbrow</b>				
1. Sonora Ponceña	Ahora Yo me rio	La Orchesta de mi tierra (1978)	Puerto Rico	SC
2. T. Puente, E. Palmieri	La Ultima Copa	Obra Maestra (2000/1926)	Puerto Rico/USA	SC
<b>Middle brow</b>				
3. Los Van Van	La Havana Si	La Havana Si/De Cuba (1985/96)	Cuba	SC/SCU
4. Oscar d'Leon	Lloraras	Dimension Latina (1975)	Venezuela	SC
5. J. Alberto El Canario	La critica	Llego La Hora (1992)	Dom. Rep./P. Rico	SR
6. Grupo Niche	Cielo de Tambores	Cara a Cara (1997)	Colombia	SP
<b>Popular</b>				
7. Marc Anthony	Valio La Pena	Valio La Pena (2004)	Puerto Rico/USA	SR/SP
8. L. Enrique/E. Santiago	Que Locura	Los Principes de la Salsa (1990)	Nicaragua/P. Rico	SR/SE

<sup>a</sup> SC, salsa clásica; SCU, salsa cubana; SR, salsa romántica; SE, salsa erótica; SP, salsa pop.

parents. There is little difference, however, between respondents' and parents' occupational status. Among those who were socially (and vertically) mobile, the upwardly and downwardly mobile were of equal numbers.

## 2.2. Selection and classification of pieces of music

Eight musical pieces were selected for the interviews in the following manner. Four professional specialists in the field of salsa music (others than the interviewees) were first asked to freely name salsa artists and bands and secondly to rank these artists and bands in a hierarchical order of three levels: artistically superior; artistically middlebrow; and artistically inferior. The specialists' suggestions resulted in a list of in total 51 artists and music groups, 30 of whom were mentioned by two or more specialists (14 artists and bands were named by two, 9 by three and 7 by all specialists). The specialists showed a high degree of consensus in their ranking: for 20 of 30 artists/bands, the rankings were completely consistent and the average correlation between the four specialists was 0.8. Eight artists and bands were selected that had been mentioned by 3 or more specialists and for which the classification was highly consensual. On this basis, eight compositions that – according to the professional specialists – were representative of the work of these artists and music groups were chosen for the interviews: two compositions qualified as 'artistically superior' (highbrow); two pieces qualified as artistically inferior (lowbrow); and four arrangements ranked on the middle level (middlebrow). As expected, the specialists' judgements were related to different salsa styles: the two compositions qualified as artistically superior belong to the subgenre of *salsa clásica*, whereas the pieces qualified as popular and artistically inferior could be classified as *salsa romántica*, *salsa erótica* or *salsa pop*. Table 2 lists the eight selected pieces of music.

*Salsa clásica* – also referred to as *salsa caliente* (hot salsa), *salsa dura* (hard, fast salsa) or *salsa gorda* (heavy, fat salsa)<sup>8</sup> – is commonly used to designate the 'original' salsa music that evolved in different places in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was successfully distributed by the Fania Label (Flores, 2002; Negus, 1999). During the 1980s, however, Fania Records lost much of its market dominance, and the often politically and socially inspired lyrics of salsa compositions of the 'classical' period were, in an attempt to reclaim the success on the international market, replaced by the love ballads and romantic lyrics of *salsa romántica* (or *salsa monga*, flaccid salsa). *Salsa erotica* (or *salsa sensual*) is very closely related to this smooth style of salsa but is characterized by its sexual lyrics and eroticism. In the recent two decades, several trends can be identified (Moore, 2002). *Salsa romántica* integrated elements of Top-40 pop and soul music arrangements which led to *salsa pop* or *salsa's new wave* (Manuel, 2006; Negus, 1999; Morales, 2003). Also, new hybridized compositions emerged from the

<sup>8</sup> In the literature, salsa music is sometimes characterized as being formed in five distinct 'schools': those of New York, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia and Cuba (Waxer, 2002). However, the distinction in historical periods because of stylistic and musical congruences between the different national peculiarities is more common (Negus, 1999).



fusion of salsa music with a wide array of Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean genres such as *salsaton* and *reggaeton*. Furthermore, in the late 1980s and early 1990s *timba* or *salsa cubana* (the Cuban variant of salsa music) entered the international music market successfully.

### 2.3. The interviews

The interview questions aimed to acquire data on the positional characteristics and the cultural taste (specifically in salsa music) of the respondents. The core of the interviews consisted of questions about their appreciation and knowledge of the eight musical pieces and, more generally, their appreciation and knowledge of various styles of salsa music. Some questions had closed response categories, for example, questions concerning the preference for the eight compositions (measured on a Likert scale). The majority of questions, however, were open-ended and examined respondents' criteria of evaluation, the meanings they attached to salsa and the role it played in their lives. The interviews lasted about ninety minutes on average and in most cases were conducted in the respondent's home.

### 2.4. Data analysis

The quantitative data obtained from the closed response categories were analyzed using chi-square tests to assess the significance of the differences in taste appreciations. These were also used for the quantifiable data from the responses to some of the (semi)open questions.

The data from the open-ended questions were analyzed for a number of topics, indicated by the research questions. A qualitative content analysis aimed at the construction of meaningful conceptual categories as the basis for interpretation and comparison (cf. Mayring, 2000, 2007). Each respondent's remarks with respect to a topic (answers to one or more open-ended questions as well as spontaneous remarks) were coded by attaching them to preliminary conceptual labels; in the next step, these concepts and codings were reviewed and, if necessary, modified through systematic comparison of all respondents' statements with respect to the topic. This method was systematically applied, in particular, to find the criteria with which respondents explain and legitimate their taste preferences (research question 3). The resulting categorization of distinct criteria of judgement was the basis for a quantitative assessment of how these criteria were related to respondents' educational status (see Section 3.3). Finally, the qualitative material has also been used for providing nuances, specifications, and illustrations.

## 3. Research results

### 3.1. Relations between taste preferences and status characteristics

This section presents the main quantitative findings regarding the relationships between respondents' taste preferences and their status characteristics. These relationships are clarified and interpreted with the help of qualitative statements from the interviews.

Table 3 shows a clear and statistically significant relation between the appreciations of the pieces of salsa music and education. Highly educated respondents prefer the two compositions that are classified as artistically superior; consumers with lower educational levels tend to prefer the two pieces of salsa music that are defined as artistically inferior. Respondents with medium educational level fall in between the two. Strikingly, a large majority appreciate the musical piece 'Lloraras' by the Venezuelan singer Oscar d'Leon, a classical icon of the salsa genre. Regardless of their education, occupational status or level of income, most respondents appreciate this work. The following quotations by respondents with very different professions and educational level demonstrate the preference for this artist among a wide audience:

*'Yes, Oscar d'Leon is simply very good. In musical terms, he makes very good music. Besides this he is a very good composer/arranger, director and dancer. D'Leon is very popular in Cuba and throughout Latin America (. . .). To put it simply, he is a God in the field of salsa music; beloved and admired by broad sections of the population' (respondent from Cuba, man, 42 years old).*

**Table 3**

Taste judgements of eight salsa pieces in relation to respondents' educational level, occupational status, income and social background (educational level and occupational status of parents).<sup>a</sup>

Classification	Highbrow		Middle brow				Popular	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Educational level</b>								
High (20)	15/75%*	14/70%*	13/65%*	18/90%	14/70%	9/45%	4/20%†	6/30%†
Middle (12)	7/58%*	7/58%*	8/67%*	11/92%	8/67%	7/58%	8/67%†	8/67%†
Low (8)	1/13%	1/13%	1/13%	7/88%	2/25%	3/38%	6/75%†	7/88%†
<b>Occupational status</b>								
High (12)	9/75%*	9/75%*	9/75%	12/100%	8/67%	5/42%	2/17%†	3/25%
Middle (10)	5/50%*	7/70%*	5/50%	9/90%	5/50%	6/60%	5/50%†	6/60%
Low (13)	4/31%*	2/15%†	5/38%	10/77%	4/31%	4/31%	8/62%†	9/69%
<b>Income</b>								
4th+5th quintile (7)	4/57%	5/71%	4/57%	7/100%	4/57%	2/29%	2/29%	3/43%
2nd+3rd quintile (15)	9/60%	10/67%	10/67%	12/80%	9/60%	6/40%	6/40%	7/47%
1st quintile (18)	10/56%	8/44%	7/39%	16/89%	9/50%	10/56%	10/56%	11/61%
<b>Social background (educational level)</b>								
High (13)	9/69%	9/69%	10/77%	13/100%	10/77%	9/69%	4/31%	5/38%
Middle (11)	6/55%	7/64%	6/55%	8/73%	5/45%	4/36%	5/45%	5/45%
Low (14)	7/50%	6/43%	6/43%	14/100%	9/64%	9/64%	7/50%	4/29%
<b>Social background (occupational status)</b>								
High (16)	11/69%	11/69%	10/63%	15/94%	13/81%*	7/44%	3/19%†	4/25%
Middle (11)	5/45%	7/64%	7/64%	10/91%	3/27%*	5/45%	7/64%†	7/64%
Low (11)	5/45%	4/36%	5/45%	10/91%	6/55%*	6/55%	6/55%†	7/64%

<sup>a</sup> The numbers of the pieces of music in the first row correspond with those of Table 2. The figures in the cells are the numbers of respondents with a taste judgement "like" or "like very much", followed by the corresponding percentages.

\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$ ; according to  $\chi^2$  tests (df=2).

*'This musician is the ultimate artist; he is endowed with a special feeling for salsa music. D'Leon has revolutionized salsa music and everybody is listening to his music' (respondent from Colombia, man, 39 years old).*

A similar, though less strong relationship is found between taste preference and occupational status; high occupational status increases the probability of liking the artistically superior compositions. The relation with income is much less clear, perhaps because of the aforementioned status inconsistencies. There are also weak relations between taste preferences and social background. Here, the largest differences are found in the appreciation of the two popular pieces of music, between people with high parental occupational status on the one hand and respondents with parents who had a medium or low occupational status on the other. However, these differences are only significant with respect to one composition. The relations with parents' education are even weaker, and in no case significant. Intergenerational social mobility provides a possible explanation for this weak or even absent connection with social background; nearly 40 percent of all interviewees have a higher educational level than their parents and 20 percent have a higher occupational status. Part of the explanation may also be sought in the history of salsa music: salsa is a relatively new genre, which after its origins in the 1960s only gradually developed into different styles with varying artistic status. For many respondents this process had hardly begun when they were young and received the influence of their parents' cultural likings. Yet, as will be illustrated below, social origin does play a role in the actual musical preferences, in ways that cannot be captured by numbers only.

These results thus show that variation in musical taste appears to correlate most strongly with education, a finding that corresponds with the outcomes of several large-scale empirical studies on the relations between cultural taste and consumption patterns on the one hand and status and class characteristics on the other in various countries (Van Eijck, 2001; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007; Purhonen et al., 2011). It is confirmed by the interviewees' answers to the question which *three*

**Table 4**

Educational level and taste judgement: the three most preferred salsa compositions.

Classification	Highbrow	Middle brow	Popular	Total
No. piece of music	1 and 2	3, 4, 5 and 6	7 and 8	
<b>Educational level</b>				
High (20)	22 (37%)	34 (57%)	4 (7%)	60 (100%)
Middle (12)	9 (25%)	15 (42%)	12 (33%)	36 (100%)
Low (8)	2 (8%)	10 (42%)	12 (50%)	24 (100%)

Significant at  $p < 0.01$ ; according to  $\chi^2$  tests (df=4).

musical pieces they preferred the most of the eight pieces they had just heard. The results, shown in Table 4, demonstrate once again that musical taste and educational level clearly and significantly correlate. Thus, the proportion of low-educated respondents who prefer compositions classified as artistically valuable is just as small as the proportion of highly educated persons who like popular pieces.

Respondents were also asked which salsa style they preferred most. The answers were consistent with their preferences for the musical pieces: respondents who liked a certain composition, also preferred the particular style that it represented. More specifically, interviewees who liked the compositions in the style of *salsa clásica* also preferred that style in general. In contrast, persons with a preference for popular pieces of salsa music appreciated styles like *salsa romántica*, *salsa erótica* and *salsa pop*. This indicates that the preferences of the selected compositions were not dependent on the particularities of the musical pieces. Again, there is a correlation between education and occupation on the one hand, and taste on the other; with higher educational level and occupational status, there is more appreciation for *salsa clásica*.

Slightly more than half of the respondents like the newer, hybrid forms of salsa music such as *salsaton* and *reggaeton*. In this case, no clear relationship with education or other status characteristics was found. However, among the ten highly educated respondents with a preference for the new hybrid styles, four respondents explicitly distinguished between good and bad music in these styles, whereas none of the low-educated respondents made such a distinction. The following quotation illustrates this attitude and is representative of all four respondents:

*'Let me put it this way: the modern currents in salsa music have their good and bad sides. There is good and bad new music. The lyrics often do not refer to social issues; it is about women and their big asses – without poetry. I do not like that at all. It is a different case if the music is done well. [...] On the one hand, musicality, that is to say musical patterns and rhythm, and on the other hand poetry, the message, is very important to me' (respondent from Colombia, man, 46 years old).*

Besides educational level and occupational status, the kind of education and the type of profession play an important role in explaining taste preferences for different types of salsa music.<sup>9</sup> Respondents educated in the humanities or social sciences display a stronger preference for salsa compositions defined by specialists as artistically valuable than respondents with a degree in the natural sciences or technology. Furthermore, all the twelve interviewees with 'creative' jobs (musician, visual artist, graphic designer, DJ, journalist, dancer, art critic, jewellery designer) prefer without exception *salsa clásica*, whereas only minorities in other occupational groups share this preference.

In addition, familiarity with the arts since early childhood is of major importance in the development of an 'artistic' taste; in particular playing a musical instrument. 18 of the 25 people with a taste preference for *salsa clásica* had learned to play a musical instrument in their youth. While their class origins widely diverged, this was an element in their childhood socialization they had in common. The majority of them were born and raised in a family where at least one family member was able to play an instrument.

<sup>9</sup> Correlations between appreciations for certain styles of salsa music and type of education, type of profession and cultural practices learned at home, are all significant according to chi-square tests ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 5**

Salsa styles preferred by 'experts' and 'consumers' (more than one reply possible).

	Salsa styles					
	Salsa clásica	Salsa cubana	Newer/recent styles <sup>a</sup>	Salsa romántica	Salsa erótica	Salsa pop
Experts (10)	9 (90%)*	4 (40%)	6 (4) (60%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)
Consumers (30)	16 (53%)*	13 (43%)	17 (2) (56%)	13 (43%)	6 (20%)	10 (33%)

<sup>a</sup> In parentheses: as far as considered artistically high-valued.\* Significant at  $p < 0.05$ ; according to  $\chi^2$  tests (df=1).

### 3.2. Taste preferences of 'experts' and 'consumers'

We also compared the preferences for different genres of salsa between ten 'experts' (people who are engaged in professions like musician, dance instructor, or DJ on a full-time or part-time basis) and thirty 'consumers' of salsa music. Table 5 shows that experts have a strong preference for *salsa clásica*, and much less appreciation for popular salsa styles like *salsa romántica*, *salsa erótica* and *salsa pop*. Their appreciation is not dependent on their educational capital, which varies strongly; four of them completed college education, five obtained a medium level degree and one had only elementary education. There is similar variation in social background. Regardless of education and social origin, these connoisseurs have a pronounced preference for 'better' salsa. Their preferences correspond with those of the highly educated 'consumers', for whom educational level and the related occupational status do have an important differential impact.

Experts of salsa music are clearly aware of their distinctiveness of taste. They are inclined to distinguish themselves explicitly from ordinary consumers of salsa music, as the following statements illustrate:

*'In contrast to the other people [in the disco] I am interested in instrumentation and composition. I think that one must be capable of listening to music actively, whatever that music is. [ . . . ]. You have to take part in the music, to be involved in it. Not to consider it from the outside, no, no. I want to have a feeling for the music, to understand it. I listen to jazz in this way, too' (respondent from Cuba, man, 41 years old).*

*'Salsa music has quickly become a means to earn money; it is a lucrative business. It is a rave, a trend. People who take part in this fashionable trend are unable to distinguish, to differentiate. They simply have no appreciation for the past [ . . . ]. The ordinary audience is enthusiastic about Marc Anthony. Well, this singer is quite superficial, although his voice is not bad. But his music is only for the moment. His music is easily forgotten. You cannot compare it with the music of Puente, Palmieri or Sonora Ponceña' (respondent from Colombia, man, 43 years old).*

Like most experts in this study, these two people make a clear distinction between themselves – people with good taste – and the ordinary public with their bad taste. Their comments are quite explicit; there is no doubt about the line they draw. Thus, the first respondent speaks about his special regard for instrumentation and composition, which is 'in contrast to the other people'. The second respondent is even more outspoken when he speaks about 'the ordinary audience', people who are 'not able to distinguish, to differentiate' and 'have no appreciation for the past'.

Similar expressions of distinction can be found among highly educated consumers of salsa music. However, experts differ from highly educated consumers in that they make an explicit distinction between a professional vision and a consumer perspective. The following statement illustrates this:

*'I make a distinction between my taste and my profession. [ . . . ]. Yes, in my private life I sometimes listen to salsa music, in particular salsa music that I like and for which I am in the mood. I also listen to salsa in a record shop when I am looking for particular new music. I then go to a record shop and listen in a very concentrated way. With certain music I immediately know: this is not the music I want to listen to. I try to distinguish between my role as a dance master or DJ and my private life. [ . . . ].*

*As a DJ, I know exactly which music is appealing to the crowd, what kind of music incites them to dance. However, particular salsa compositions like pieces by Marvin Santiago for example [...] are wonderful music [...] but it is just too complicated. [...]. Such a composition can be a flop when everyone is leaving the dance floor, or it can be a stimulus, depending on the kind of audience and the event. When certain compositions are played, people are leaving. Then I know that those people do not listen to this music; they are not into the music and they don't know anything about it' (respondent from Colombia, man, 31 years).*

This respondent distinguishes not only between private life and work, but also between diverse kinds of consumers and public events. In this way, he suggests the existence of a hierarchy of artistic levels in the salsa scene. Most consumers in his view are at the low levels of this hierarchy; 'wonderful' salsa music is 'too complicated' for them and 'they don't know anything about it'. As a professional, he seemingly upholds a hierarchy that differentiates between the tastes of insiders from outsiders, or what Bourdieu (1983) would describe as 'autonomous' and 'heteronomous' tastes, thus protecting his field specific 'cultural capital'. However, because of his job as a DJ and dancing master he has to meet the taste of 'the crowd'. Fifty years ago, Howard Becker (1963, p. 85ff) described a similar attitude among American dance musicians, who wanted to play real 'jazz', but for their breadwinning had to conform to the inferior wishes of the 'square' audience.

### 3.3. *Reasons for appreciations and criteria of assessment*

Why do people like or dislike particular kinds of music, *in casu* particular styles and pieces of salsa music? Which aspects do they find important and which criteria do they apply in their judgements of taste? And how do these criteria vary in connection with their preferences and positional characteristics? We attempted to explore this subject area more precisely and thoroughly than is usual in social research. In open-ended questions respondents were asked to stipulate why they liked or disliked the music pieces they just had listened to, and which characteristics of the music they found important as the basis for their appreciations. Their answers were coded and categorized in order to find similarities, systematic differences and recurring patterns. This qualitative, inductive content analysis brought to light ten assessment criteria. Table 6 lists these criteria, and sums up how often they were mentioned by respondents distinguished by level of education.

Higher and lower educated respondents draw upon different evaluative repertoires and find different aspects of music important. The highly educated respondents pay much more attention to the song's textual content or message, the quality of the composition, the instrumentation, the complexity of the rhythm, and the musicality of the performance. These characteristics are hardly mentioned by low-educated people; they prefer a piece of salsa music because the melody is pleasant or catchy, the music incites to dance, appeals to emotions, and/or because the singer has a beautiful voice. The three quotations below are from highly educated respondents:

*'Why do I like this piece of music? Yes, because of the rhythm, the musicality and the lyrics. Especially these lyrics have a deeper meaning. This music has a particular poetry that originates from the streets but is not vulgar. And then, there is this excellent composition that I like very much; just as all his [Oscar d'Leon's] music pieces are good compositions. [...]. For me, he is a representative of the old times, at the end of the classical period' (respondent from Puerto Rico, woman, 25 years).*

*'I prefer music with a message; and this is true for all kinds of music. [...]. I make a distinction between two types of salsa: the one with a textual message, profound salsa music that wants to tell something, or has a deeper meaning. However, a lot of people don't listen to this type of salsa. And then, there is salsa music that is simply for dancing. For me, classical salseros like Hector Lavoe or Tito Puente are examples of salsa with a message, often socially critical. Whereas the romantic salsa is much more for amusement, pleasure, for the heart' (respondent from Venezuela, man, 44 years).*

**Table 6**  
Educational level and expressed assessment criteria.

Assessment criteria										
Educational level	Melody	Danceable	Emotionality	Beautiful voice	Complexity/rhythm	Lyrics/message/sociocritical	Dynamic	Composition/arrangement	Instrumentation	Musicality/musical sense
High (20)	1/5 <sup>*</sup>	2/10 <sup>*</sup>	3/15 <sup>*</sup>	2/10 <sup>*</sup>	7/35%	12/60 <sup>*</sup>	2/10%	8/40%	9/45%	8/40%
Middle (12)	4/33 <sup>*</sup>	3/25 <sup>*</sup>	6/50 <sup>*</sup>	4/33 <sup>*</sup>	5/42%	7/58 <sup>*</sup>	0/0%	3/25%	3/25%	3/25%
Low (8)	6/75 <sup>*</sup>	8/100 <sup>*</sup>	7/88 <sup>*</sup>	6/75 <sup>*</sup>	1/13%	0/0%	0/0%	1/13%	1/13%	1/13%

<sup>\*</sup> Significant at  $p < 0.05$ ; according to  $\chi^2$  tests (df=2).

*'There is salsa music that I listen to because of the lyrics, but there is also salsa music that I listen to with less attention. For me, the lyrics as well as the music are important. Therefore, I like this composition [Sonora Ponceña]. I prefer songs with a critical content. [...]. Certain Latin American music has a lot of improvisation. [...]. That's what I like: autonomous, independent, and authentic music' (respondent from Cuba, man, 36 years).*

Criteria like 'good to dance on', 'pleasing' or 'emotional' are not mentioned. Respondents with low educational and occupational levels, however, mention these criteria frequently. These respondents appreciate salsa music mostly because of the pleasure it brings. The following quotations illustrate this attitude:

*'Yes, this piece [by José Alberto] is good for dancing. I make a distinction between salsa music you can dance on and salsa music that is more for listening. I prefer the dance music: modern, lively salsa or salsa romántica. I do not like salsa clásica; that's music that makes you fall asleep. For me, salsa music means pleasure, amusement, and dancing. I listen with my legs and my heart, not with my head' (respondent from Dominican Republic, woman, 55 years).*

*'Well, I prefer sentimental music; that's why I like this piece [by Santiago/Enrique]. I like, for example, romantic music. When I listen to music it is music with emotions. [...]. I don't like difficult and abstract texts' (respondent from Dominican Republic, woman, 35 years).*

These differences in evaluation correspond in important ways with Bourdieu's (1984) description of the contrast between the 'aesthetic disposition' characteristic of the dominant bourgeoisie and the 'popular aesthetics' of the working class. The aesthetic disposition 'asserts the absolute primacy of form over function, of the mode of representation over the object represented (...)' (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 30); claiming 'pure' aesthetics, it distantiates itself from considerations of utility, morality, and immediate emotional satisfaction. In contrast, popular aesthetics prioritizes art or entertainment that is easily understandable, that contains a clear message or evokes pleasant feelings. The findings of this research confirm this idea of an opposition between two types of aesthetics. The opposition is however different from Bourdieu's description in one important respect: It is not simply the 'form' that is given 'absolute primacy' by the highly educated respondents. On the contrary, most of them attach much importance to textual content, the message, whereas none of the low-educated respondents mention this aspect. More specifically, the higher-educated value lyrics for their social-critical message, authenticity, or ambiguity. This resonates with Holt's (1998, p. 15) findings that the higher-educated among his American respondents who liked country music preferred the 'traditional' forms in this genre, whose lyrical themes were however too remote for lower educated respondents to enjoy. They therefore preferred contemporary country music that spoke more immediately to their everyday life. If we regard the taste orientation of the higher-educated within salsa music as indicative of an 'aesthetic disposition', this concept has to be redefined: it does not mean that 'content' is unimportant, that pure 'form' abstracted from 'content' is the only basis for taste appreciation. Strikingly, the low-educated attach much less significance to textual content. And if they mention it at all, they show a preference for light, cheerful, or sensual lyrics.

Taste differences do not yet imply a hierarchy (DiMaggio, 1987); people may have certain taste preferences without declaring their own taste as superior, or different people may construct different, even contradictory hierarchical rankings. However, there are several reasons to conclude that the observed taste differences are linked to, and expressive of, hierarchical relationships. Firstly, the differences in taste are not randomly distributed among social classes, but connected with aspects of class position, in particular educational level and occupational status. Secondly, the taste differences are also, and in similar ways, related to the artistic hierarchy of salsa music as defined by professional specialists within the field. The professional artistic hierarchy within this cultural subfield and the wider social hierarchy support one another. Thirdly, a taste hierarchy is expressed by the ways in which different respondents define their own taste in relation to other people: the highly educated are more inclined to define their own taste as superior and to deem other preferences distasteful. We have already discussed examples of how salsa 'experts' among the respondents express their aversion

towards the inferior taste of ‘the ordinary audience’. The same attitudes can be found in the following quotations of highly educated respondents:

*‘Personally, I make [...] a difference between folk music and music for the crowd. [...]. It is a totally different manner of artistic production. Music for the crowd is created deliberately and with a deliberate strategy. Marc Anthony, for example, makes music for the crowd. [...]. You have to distinguish between the founders and the imitators. [...]. When I listen to traditional music from Venezuela, it costs me considerable labour and effort to understand it. And when you listen to Venezuelan music for the crowd you have to say that this music is much, much simpler and easier to understand. And that is precisely the big difference’ (respondent from Cuba, woman, 32 years).*

*‘Fania All Stars and Hector Lavoe are representatives of the classical salsa. I put it this way: intellectually educated people don’t like to dance on the music of Marc Anthony. They like to dance on the music of D’Leon and Palmieri. [...]. If you are sitting in a bar, two or three pieces of music are good; the rest is commerce, for simple ordinary people, only for sale. [Laughingly]. We have a small musical elite and I am part of it’ (respondent from Colombia, woman, 38 years).*

The musical taste of ‘simple ordinary people’ functions here as an opposite pole, a negative contrast. Such an opposition of good and bad taste is rarely found among Latinos with a preference for the more popular salsa styles. Despite their pronounced preference for the more commercial salsa styles, most of them also express appreciation for the classical salsa style:

*‘I like salsa romántica most. In songs of this style, it’s about real life and love. Not so abstract and experimental. A lot of the classics are very good. [...]. But it is simply not my taste’ (respondent from the Dominican Republic, woman, 26 years).*

This respondent makes a difference between ‘good taste’ and ‘my taste’. Like most respondents with a popular taste and in contrast to people who show a taste defined as artistically superior, she does not pretend that her own taste is inherently better. We may conclude that people with a popular taste tend to accept, or at least not explicitly challenge, the established artistic hierarchy in which they have a low position.

#### 3.4. Connections between taste preferences

How are preferences for particular salsa styles related to appreciations for other musical styles and genres? Respondents were asked to tell how often they listened to music and what kinds of music they liked to listen to. They were also invited to specify this by mentioning particular genres and styles as well as individual composers, musicians and singers. This provided more detailed information about specific preferences. The answers to these open-ended questions were ordered in music categories (23 in total) and compared with the preferences for a particular salsa style.

The results summarized in Table 7 show a clear pattern. On the one hand, there is broad consensus: Almost all respondents show a preference for pop or rock music, while fewer respondents prefer jazz and classical music. Most respondents also like traditional Latin American music genres, regardless of level of education and preference for particular salsa styles. On the other hand, there are clear differences in musical preferences related to preferences for certain salsa styles. Persons with a preference for salsa that specialists regard as artistically superior show much interest in and high appreciation for classical music and/or jazz, whereas respondents who like salsa classified as artistically inferior hardly have such interests and appreciations.

There also seems to be a homology between a preference for *salsa clásica* and classical musical styles such as baroque music, music from the classical period, romanticism, expressionism or contemporary classical music, and this same preference often goes together with a rejection of waltz or operetta. The latter are preferred, by contrast, by some lovers of popular salsa.

With respect to rock/pop music, aficionados of classical salsa reveal a preference for world music, reggae, classical rock or symphonic rock (Jimmy Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Deep Purple); styles that those



**Table 7**  
Musical homologies.

Educational level	Salsa clásica	Salsa pop/romántic/erótica	Free Jazz/Improvisational jazz	Classic jazz	Instrumental jazz	Latin jazz	Blues	Baroque/Classical & Romantic period	Impressionism	Opera	Church/sacred music	Chamber music	Expressionism/Contemporary classical	Easy listening/popular classic music	Operetta
High (20)	18	1 2	10	9	2 1	11 1	4	14	1	4	1	6	9	1 1	
Middle (12)	6	2 6	1	2		4 3	1 1	2 1		1			1	1 3	1
Low (8)	1	7				1								2	2
Educational level	Classic/symphonic rock	World music/reggae	Alternative	Hardrock/metal	Latin rock	Hip-hop/R&B	Drum & bass/triphop/techno	Pop/Latin pop/Latin dance	Chanson/Cantautori	Schlager	Traditional Latin music genres/styles	Broad musical tastes (min. 1 style in 4 genres)			
High (20)	9	7			3	2 1	3	1	8	1	13 1	14			
Middle (12)	1 1	2	1	2	1	1 3	1	1 3	1		6 4	2 2			
Low (8)					2	1 3	1	5			1 6				

The six rows in this table are distinguished by educational level and preference or nonpreference for salsa clásica. All numbers refer to the number of people in each category who prefer a given genre or style.

who like popular salsa value much less often. Instead, they show a much stronger preference for light, easy-listening music (for example Justin Timberlake, or Julio Iglesias).

These relationships between preferences for music styles from different genres are not arbitrary, as they are all related to cultural orientations that are expressed in how respondents describe and justify their own musical likes and dislikes. Whereas the highly educated and the salsa experts value music across all genres because of aspects like complexity and originality, the contrasting category of low-educated non-experts appreciates music mainly on the basis of its capacity to provide enjoyment. The following statement illustrates the first group's orientation:

*'If you see the music on my iPod, you know immediately what kind of music I listen to: Drum'n'Bass, Lounge, Goa, Sidetrance, heavy jazz, classical jazz, interesting classical music, symphonic rock. [. . .]. Generally, I dislike predictable music. I think the essence is for me: surprise, continuing dynamics, the interplay, innovation and improvisation' (respondent from Colombia, man, age 25).*

Finally, an interesting finding concerns the *number* of preferred music styles. Highly educated aficionados of *salsa clásica* appreciate on average more styles of more different music genres than low-educated lovers of popular salsa. One could say then that the highly educated respondents display a broader range of taste preferences, thus confirming the thesis of omnivorousness. However, this relative 'omnivorousness' is not the same as musical 'tolerance'; on the contrary, it is linked to a high degree of *exclusiveness*, which draws sharp boundaries between good and bad taste (cf. Ollivier et al., 2008; Tampubolon, 2008; Warde et al., 2007).

### 3.5. Sentiments and group identifications

Almost all respondents indicated that they had a special affinity with salsa music because of their Latin American origins. Salsa music plays an important role in their lives. They attach much value to sharing musical experiences with other people. A large majority of the interviewees associate salsa music with sociability, communication and contact, irrespective of their education, occupation, social origin and nationality. The music is usually played at parties and family reunions. Most of the respondents listen to this music predominantly or even exclusively in the company of others. Several persons emphasize that salsa music is a facilitator of social contact par excellence:

*'Salsa music is a language of contact, of social contact, especially in the form of dancing [. . .]. In Cuba you have to be able to express yourself [by means of body language] in addition to spoken language. You meet someone at a party, you talk for a while and then you dance with her or him a little. Dancing is part of the communication system. Here in the Netherlands, people are much more distant' (respondent from Cuba, man, age 36).*

*'I listen mostly to salsa music at places where people meet or where people dance, or at concerts in the summer. [. . .]. Salsa music is part of my culture. I believe I could not live without this music. For example, when we had a family reunion or a birthday party we listened to salsa music and danced to it until the early morning hours, until five or six o'clock' (respondent from Venezuela, woman, 39 years).*

Thus, salsa music fulfils an integrative function; it is part of interaction rituals that arouse sentiments of solidarity (cf. Collins, 2004). The music reinforces we-feelings, which are usually connected with the awareness of a shared ethnic or national identity. These solidarity-enhancing and identity-reinforcing effects of the music at the same time imply demarcation and difference (cf. Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The music, in other words, also functions as a means of *distinction* along the boundaries of ethnicity and nationality. The respondents associate salsa music with their Latin American or, more specifically, national (Cuban, Colombian, etc.) identity, by which they distinguish themselves as immigrants from the surrounding Dutch or Swiss population. Music functions here as expression and reinforcement of group identity as the following quotes illustrate (cf. Román-Velazquez, 1999b; Manuel, 1994):

*'I listen to salsa music preferably together with Cubans. [...] Dutch people have a different culture. We [...] know what salsa music is and what it means for us. A Dutchman may dance and listen to salsa music, but without feeling for the rhythm. Some Dutch are able to dance very well to salsa music, sometimes even better than a Cuban. But they don't feel really touched by the music. [...] The feeling comes from inside the person; the feeling for salsa is innate' (respondent from Cuba, man, 31 years).*

*'How shall I say this? When I listen to salsa music I consider myself Cuban [...]. I don't know where this feeling comes from. This was very different when I still lived in Cuba. There, I was not so aware of my roots. You know, at that time, I didn't like salsa music so much. Of course, I thought it was cool but I listened to American music. Since I live here in the Netherlands I feel more connected with salsa music and with Cuba. This is actually very strange' (respondent from Cuba, man, 23 years).*

The first respondent distances himself clearly from the Dutch, while emphasizing positive traits of his own group: the Cubans with their natural, innate feeling for the rhythms of salsa music. Apparently, he considers salsa music as an expression of a particular Cuban identity, embodied through the practice of dancing and a subsequent feeling for this genre (cf. Román-Velazquez, 1999b). The man in the second citation observes with some astonishment that he only became aware of his 'roots', his enduring bonds with Cuba, after he migrated to the Netherlands. Since then, salsa music became meaningful to him as the expression and reinforcement of this awareness.

The consciousness of a shared identity and we-feelings are apparent in these statements, but it is difficult for the respondents to describe who exactly belongs to this 'we'.

*'I feel connected with my roots, my country. Traditional symbols of my native land, like cigarros, salsa music and rum, arouse these feelings in me. I feel then a cultural identity, which has to do primarily with my feelings for Cuba. No [corrects himself], it has to do in the first place with my feelings for Latin America. And in the second place with my roots, with Cuba, which created salsa music and the Bolero' (respondent from Cuba, man, 26 years).*

This respondent hesitates between defining himself as Cuban or Latin American. Several other respondents show similar hesitations and ambivalences. This may be related to the hybrid and transnational character of salsa music as it originated in different regions in Latin America as well as among Latin American immigrant groups in the United States (Morales, 2003; Ospina, 1995; Pacini Hernández, 2003). But apart from this, such unclarity or ambiguities are typical for how people in general define group identities and group belonging. Group identities are defined at different levels, depending on the situation (cf. Hall, 1990). Thus, people may focus on their nation of origin as the primary unit of identification, or the larger region to which the nation belongs to (e.g. Latin America, which in itself has no clear boundaries). They may also refer to the area of origin within the nation, the village in which they grew up, or the family. More than half of the interviewees associated salsa music with personal memories connected with a specific place, a 'home'.

*'... Salsa music in daily life gives me a sentiment for my native soil. When I listen to salsa music that I already heard in Colombia, I go back to my roots, my origins so to speak. I remember then my childhood, my family and friends who are still there. Salsa music often gives me a certain sadness, a feeling of homesickness, but it also gives me joy and lightness' (respondent from Colombia, man, 43 years).*

However diffuse these feelings are, they are important for the people involved. And although the boundaries around the ingroup are vague and shifting, it is clear who are excluded: the Europeans around them, who may follow the fashion of salsa music but will never be able, according to these respondents, to really understand this music. In emphasizing their special affinity with salsa, these Latin American migrants present and legitimate their otherness.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study examined whether the tastes of Latin American migrants for different styles of salsa music follows a social logic of distinction. It investigated whether consumers of salsa from different

social backgrounds vary in terms of which styles of salsa music they prefer, how they distinguish between these forms of salsa music and whether they thereby reproduce a Bourdieuan logic of distinction at the level of within-genre distinctions.

The results show that taste differences *within* a popular and well-known music genre such as salsa do indeed correspond closely, although not absolutely, to differences in social class positions. It finds that within the microcosm of one particular group of salsa consumers social inequality is expressed, articulated and reinforced by cultural differences in taste. Taste in salsa music shows a strong internal, hierarchical order between ‘artistic’ versus ‘popular’ styles that is not only acknowledged and defined as such by experts and professionals within the field, but also structures the taste patterns of different social classes. Highly educated respondents prefer ‘artistic’ forms of salsa music while low-educated persons show a preference for popular styles that specialists define as artistically inferior. The hierarchical distinction of taste for salsa styles also seems to rely upon a consensus among different social groups. Whereas highly educated salsa lovers strongly reject the taste of low-educated respondents, the low-educated respondents do not reject the taste of the highly educated respondents and therefore seem to accept the ‘hierarchy’ of taste demonstrated by the highly educated respondents.

Moreover, the criteria used by respondents to motivate their different taste preferences strongly resemble Bourdieu’s description of the ‘aesthetic disposition’ of the dominant class and the ‘popular aesthetic’ of the working class. On the one hand, highly educated aficionados of salsa assess salsa music with criteria such as originality, musicality and complexity. On the other hand, low-educated consumers of salsa highlight criteria such as emotional appeal (danceability, beautiful melody and fine voice), pleasure and amusement – reminiscent of the ‘popular aesthetic’ (direct participation, focus on emotionality). However, contrary to Bourdieu’s theory, highly educated respondents assess compositions not solely on its ‘form’ but also show an appreciation for textual content, i.e. the message – more often and more emphatically than lower educated respondents do.

The hierarchy of taste in salsa also closely resembles hierarchical structures in other musical fields. Taste preferences for ‘artistic’ styles of salsa often go together with preferences for other, legitimate forms of music – classical music, jazz, etc. – and in particular styles and compositions within these other genres defined as original and innovative. This homology therefore also supports the notion of a hierarchical taste pattern in salsa music.

These findings on a hierarchical taste pattern *within* the genre of salsa that closely mirror the Bourdieuan theory of distinction, could shed new light on the literature on cultural ‘omnivorousness’. Large-scale survey studies have found that high-status groups have moved from a ‘snobbish’ exclusionary taste for high culture towards a more inclusive taste structure that combines both highbrow and popular genres. This omnivorousness is therefore argued to question the relevance of Bourdieu’s findings in *Distinction*. However, we argue that omnivorousness does not contradict the social logic of distinction. On the contrary, ‘omnivorousness’ could go hand in hand with exclusivity by re-drawing the line between good and bad taste from between genres to within genres. Studies on ‘omnivorousness’ which use data on survey questions on tastes for broad categories such as ‘country’, ‘pop’, ‘rock’ often tend to obscure the more finely grained distinctions made within genres that might indeed still follow a social class logic of distinction (cf. Holt, 1997, 1998; Atkinson, 2011). Genres such as country, rock or pop are not monolithic categories and distinctions within these genres can have ritual potency, i.e. used for marking social divisions (DiMaggio, 1987). Our research provides systematic evidence that within-genre distinctions between styles of salsa indeed map onto social divisions. It thereby suggests that although the ritual potency of broad genre categories such as ‘pop’, ‘rock’ or ‘country’ as status markers might have waned, the more finely grained distinctions *within* categories do indeed remain symbolically potent markers of social divisions (Holt, 1997, 1998; Lamont and Molnár, 2002; cf. Wilterdink, 2005; Van den Haak, 2014). High-status ‘omnivores’ include popular genres in their repertoire, but as they do so, they are likely to become more sensitive to within-genre distinctions – legitimated by the growing body of experts such as critics within those popular fields (Cheyne and Binder, 2010; Van Venrooij and Schmutz, 2010) – that mirror high/low distinctions and show preference for the artistic, ‘authentic’ rather than ‘commercial’ variants of popular culture. Even though our highly educated respondents tend to combine a preference for high-art musical forms with a taste for the ‘popular’ genre of salsa – and could therefore be considered as

'omnivores' – these respondents are also sure to draw distinctions between the 'quality' kind of salsa they enjoy and the 'inferior' salsa that lower educated prefer.

Although our results suggest that taste for different styles of salsa music is used as a marker of class divisions, the respondents however also point to the role of salsa in 'boundary drawing' that might trump class logics. The interviewed Latinos emphasize the inseparable link between salsa music and Latin America. They advocate their peculiar affinity with this music and associate therewith group identity and belonging, i.e. an awareness of a shared identity. In this sense, salsa serves to bridge class divisions defined by education, occupation, income and social origin (Roy and Dowd, 2010). At the same time, this 'we-identity' implicates distinction and boundary drawing against those who are not part of the we-group. Salsa music serves in support of a *non-hierarchical distinction* between 'we' (Latin Americans) and 'them' (Europeans). We can therefore differentiate between two forms of distinction: one is connected to social class and status and emphasises differences within their own group (which can be defined nationally or ethnic-culturally) and the other accentuates the similarities within the own group and marks boundaries with other social groups. The two distinctive forms apparently go well together. Salsa is classy, but it is more than just that.

This research could be extended in at least two directions. On the one hand, more research could systematically analyze if and how the perceptions and constructions of cultural boundaries within genres map onto social distinctions. We conclude from our research that 'omnivores' invoke class based status distinctions when appropriating a 'popular' genre: this thesis could be investigated systematically for other social groups and other cultural genres within not only the field of popular music, but also other cultural domains. On the other hand, this research could also be extended to include other migrant groups and investigate how their 'migratory' experiences translate into their cultural preferences and how cultural consumption is implicated in processes of 'bounding and bridging' under conditions of increased transnationalism.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank the respondents for participating in this research and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

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**Tito Bachmayer** is a Ph.D. candidate at the Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research of the University of Amsterdam. His dissertation research investigates cosmopolitan attitudes and cultural practices among transnational professional groups. In addition to his dissertation research he works as a lecturer at the School of Social Work and Law of the Amsterdam University for Applied Sciences (HvA).

**Nico Wilterdink** is emeritus professor in cultural sociology at the University of Amsterdam. Much of his research was, and is, focused on changing class and status relations. At present he is also engaged in research on the export and reception of Dutch art and literature abroad.

**Alex van Venrooij** is assistant professor in cultural sociology at the University of Amsterdam. His research is primarily concerned with the emergence, institutionalization and consequences of cultural classifications. He is currently involved in a research project studying the development of the electronic dance music field in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands.