Definitely (not) belonging to culture: Europeans' evaluations of the contents and limits of culture

Semi Purhonen [a],[*], Marc Verboord [b], Ossi Sirkka [a], Nete Nørgaard Kristensen [c], Susanne Janssen [b]

[a] *Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Kalevantie 5 (Linna Building), 33014, Finland*
[b] *Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, P.O. Box 1738, Rotterdam 3000 DR, the Netherlands*
[c] *Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen, Karen Blixens Plads 8, Copenhagen S 2300, Denmark*

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ABSTRACT

Despite the long history of debating its meaning and its current unprecedented ubiquity both in scholarly and popular discourses, little is systematically known about how "culture" is conceived by ordinary people. This paper examines how evaluations of the contents and boundaries of expressive culture are patterned among people in and across present-day European societies, and to what degree these evaluations associate with sociodemographic and politico-cultural divisions. Using survey data collected in 2021 in nine European countries and applying latent class and multinomial regression methods, the analysis reconstructs Europeans' boundaries of the concept of culture – which objects, places and practices they see as belonging or not belonging to culture, and with which objects they remain ambivalent. The results show that the classical distinction between narrow (exclusive) and broad (inclusive) notions still structures Europeans' evaluations of expressive culture, but it operates in several modes and with national and sociodemographic variations. In contrast to traditional assumptions, the narrow evaluations are associated with lower-status groups, while the upper-status groups embrace broad notions of culture. Moreover, the broad evaluations are associated with factors such as cultural cosmopolitanism and liberal-progressive political attitudes, highlighting the potential of extending cultural stratification research by the "bottom-up" study of patterned evaluations and understandings of the concept of culture itself.

1. Introduction

In the past decades, sociologists have invigorated the study of culture, through empirical studies of culture as capital, symbolic resource, or lifestyle feature (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1984); analyzes of how culture can be conceptualized, categorized and measured (e.g., Lizardo, 2017); and how culture is linked to social structures through classification and evaluation practices (DiMaggio, 1987; Lamont, 2012). However, connections among these research strands are not always made explicit. Cultural participation studies, for example, are often not clear on demarcations or boundaries of specific cultural expressions, while studies emphasizing classification or categorization of culture tend to ignore more vernacular conceptions (e.g., Taylor et al., 2019). One

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* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: semi.purhonen@tuni.fi (S. Purhonen).

salient question that is still open concerns the way that lay persons – who in many empirical survey or interview studies are inquired about their cultural participation or interests – actually understand the notion of culture.

This article investigates how different ways to evaluate culture are distributed within and across present-day European societies, focusing on how ordinary people think about the contents and boundaries of expressive culture: Which objects, places, and activities do they see as belonging or not to culture, and with which objects do they remain ambivalent? How are the major ways to evaluate culture patterned and how do they vary across national contexts? Subsequently, which sociodemographic characteristics predict the likelihood of delimiting culture in a particular way? Finally, to what extent do people with different ways of evaluating culture vary in their politico-cultural attitudes? This bottom-up approach will provide us with insight into multiple, potentially contradictory, concepts of culture that are entwined with different valuations among various social groups within and across European societies.

The article brings three contributions. First, it advances the theoretical understanding of what constitutes culture. The scholarly debates about the multiple notions of culture have been dominated by theoretical a priori conceptualizations (e.g., Fornäs, 2017). This also holds for the ever-expanding field of sociology of culture. Systematic, "bottom-up" research following the principles of naturalistic inquiry on how ordinary people conceive of culture and draw boundaries around it is still largely missing. Such research appears particularly pertinent in contemporary societies where culture is more omnipresent, both as a concept and in terms of sheer volume of circulation of cultural objects (e.g., Wright, 2015). Thus, there is novelty and value in itself in studying the evaluations of culture among ordinary citizens from multiple European countries in an exploratory manner.

Second, the article will advance the empirical knowledge on cultural engagement – which within the cultural capital framework has proven an important determinant of social mobility (e.g., Jæger & Breen, 2016) – by identifying perceptions of culture typically taken for granted in research designs. In the spirit of Gans (1974), a wider spectrum of culture is addressed, thus bringing nuance to overstated conclusions of "disengaged" audiences (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009; Gayo, 2017) that to some degree are an artefact of limitations in scope of data (Heikkilä, 2021). Moreover, by identifying multiple and possibly contradictory patterns in the evaluations of culture across individuals from various social locations and national contexts, we illuminate how the major ways to evaluate culture are related to broader politico-cultural values and attitudes. This may inform future research on the role of multifaceted evaluations of culture in cultural stratification and lifestyle politics.

Third, the article contributes to current discussions on cultural policy that signal how political and societal changes have made existing policies problematic in their narrow conception of culture which fails to cater to society at large (Belfiore, 2009). The polysemous nature of "culture" gives rise to such a variety of policy understandings and practices that this "has many consequences for the policy sector, not least of which are the existence of often poorly-defined policies" (Gray, 2015:66).

To answer our questions, we utilize an original survey research conducted in 2021 in Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, The Netherlands, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Thereby, the paper reconstructs Europeans' boundaries of the concept of culture, identifies what are the major social divisions behind them, and showcases their broader politico-cultural relevance.

2. Theoretical background and research context

2.1. The polysemy, expansion, and ubiquity of the concept of culture

Culture, "one of contemporary sociology's foundational notions" (Lizardo, 2016:99), is a notoriously multifaceted concept. It has stubbornly resisted "a consensual, unitary definition" (Mohr et al., 2020:15) and thus been highly debated by scholars from multiple disciplines for centuries (e.g., Fornäs, 2017; Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Williams, 1981). A classical distinction is between the narrow meaning of culture as art and the wide and relativistic notion of culture as a way of life. While this distinction is only one manifestation of the well-known conceptual polysemy (Williams, 1976:87), it still plays a key role in theory and practice.

Originally, culture was a process concept including the connotation of human development (cf. Cicero's *cultura animi*). The static idea of culture, or cultures in plural – something characterizing a group or collectivity – is more modern and often associated with the 18th-century German romantic philosophers (Fornäs, 2017:25–7; Williams, 1976:87–9). A new emphasis on diversity of and comparisons between many *cultures* was one of the milestones towards the "anthropological," broad conceptualization of culture referring to norms, values, customs, and other social characteristics as a "whole 'way of life' of a distinct people" (Williams, 1981:11). The counterpoint is the "narrow" conception of culture, which developed and was codified in definitions and manifestoes, especially during the 19th century (e.g., Arnold, 1993). This hierarchical and universalistic notion of culture involves the ideas of cultivation, civilization, and development, and is ultimately crystallized, in its narrowest meaning, in understanding culture as the "high arts," indicating moral superiority of its practitioners and admirers (e.g., Levine, 1988; Peterson, 1997).

While the polysemy of the concept of culture is well-known, less attention has been paid to how the usage and prevalence of the concept has expanded and become increasingly ubiquitous over the past century and, especially, after the 1960s. Current (Western) societies are characterized by "cultural abundance" (Wright, 2015), meaning that an unprecedented number of cultural objects and products, material and digital, are produced, circulated, and consumed in everyday life. This has intensified the usages of the concept of culture, e.g., in media, scholarly, and everyday discourses, making the concept of culture itself more ubiquitous than ever. Research on conceptual history has highlighted that conceptual change is an elementary part of societal change, as societies and concepts evolve in tandem (Koselleck, 2004). The conceptual and "contentual" development and expansion of culture are thus two sides of the same coin.

The increased prominence of culture, both content and concept wise, especially over the last fifty years, emerges from longitudinal studies of media data. Studies on European and North American quality newspapers have identified a clear expansion of the cultural content, accompanied by an institutionalization process concerning the "culture" concept in newspapers' organization according to

thematic sections (e.g., Janssen & Verboord, 2015; Janssen et al., 2011; Kristensen 2010; Purhonen et al., 2019). A similar trend can be found, for instance, from Google Ngram data (Michel et al., 2011): until the mid-20th century, the usage of culture in English language books increased steadily yet slowly, but accelerated considerably afterwards, and, especially, since the 1980s. Culture has thus become an unforeseen, dominant keyword towards the late 20th century.

2.2. Towards broader and more inclusive ways to evaluate culture

The expansion of the usages of the concept of culture has also meant a tendency towards challenging the narrow and universalistic notions and embracing the broad and inclusive ones. Sociologists of culture have recognized and debated this from the 1980s and early 1990s onwards (DiMaggio, 1987; Lamont & Fournier, 1992). The increased cultural heterogenization and the widening of the sphere of "culture" have been tracked also empirically through a multitude of settings, institutions, and national contexts (e.g., Janssen et al., 2008, 2011; Lena, 2019; Purhonen et al., 2019). This involved showcasing the rise and legitimization of popular culture to be on par with traditionally defined "high" culture (Baumann, 2007; Janssen et al., 2011) – a process that has also altered the ways in which elites signal status (Friedman & Reeves, 2020). As emphasized already by Lamont and Lareau (1988), it is an open question what kind of culture in each context serves as "capital," or institutionalized high-status marker, potentially used for exclusion.

Thus, the last half-century in the Western world witnessed the democratization of culture: growing tolerance, openness and omnivorousness (Peterson & Kern, 1996) and a major turn towards less codified cultural hierarchies (DiMaggio, 1987; Lizardo, 2010), the loosening of esthetic authorities in general (Wouters, 2007), and the decreased power of traditional gatekeepers and exclusive media (Lena, 2019; Purhonen et al., 2019; Verboord, 2014). However, cultural inequalities and hierarchies have not vanished. New forms of stratification have emerged while traditional ones still hold, demonstrating the persisting relevance of class and the volume and composition of different capitals possessed by individuals (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009; Flemmen et al., 2018; Mihelj et al., 2019; Savage et al., 2015). The much-debated omnivorous taste demonstrates that the trends are usually multifaceted and ambiguous, and capable of alleviating as well as intensifying inequalities. Cultural omnivorousness arguably marks a shift away from patterns of exclusive high-status snobbery but also has become a new manifestation of upper-class taste (e.g., Lizardo & Skiles, 2012).

These discussions are directly relevant for the study of evaluations of culture among ordinary people. Most importantly, the classical hypotheses regarding narrow ("culture as the arts") and broad ("culture as a way of life") conceptions do not necessarily hold in present societies. The conception of culture as the arts – which often includes ideas of moral superiority – was traditionally considered more typical for high-status groups, while broader and more "mundane" conceptions referring to everyday practices, norms, and traditions (i.e., also popular, folk, and commercial forms or culture) were mostly associated with lower-status groups and, ultimately, working classes (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Levine, 1988). However, contemporary sociological studies on the cultural omnivore and growing tolerance and openness (Chan, 2019; Hazir & Warde, 2016; Lindblom, 2022; Ollivier, 2008; Peterson & Kern, 1996) have reversed these expectations. High-status groups proved most likely to embrace the breadth and diversity of cultural practices, at least at the manifest level. Against this background – and without necessarily taking a categorical position in the omnivore debate, as there exists arguably *a rhetoric* of openness to cultural diversity, both in popular and scholarly discourses (Ollivier, 2008:122) – the high-status groups can be expected to also embrace broader and more inclusive evaluations of the contents and boundaries of culture.

2.3. Asking the public to interpret culture

Previous studies using open-ended questions have shown the variety of interpretations of culture among ordinary people. In a study from 2007 in 27 European countries, understanding culture as arts was most common (39 %), followed by traditions and literature (both 24 %) (European Commission, 2007). A French study using a structured list of items varying in legitimacy and traditionality and asking whether the respondents considered them to belong to culture (Guy, 2016) identified four notions: cultural liberalism ("everything is cultural"), critical eclecticism ("everything is potentially cultural, according to certain criteria"), the conservative view ("the cultural sphere is not extensible") and the anti-establishment view ("real culture is elsewhere") (Guy, 2016).[1] Other studies have also employed more bottom-up style approaches to studying expressive culture (Airoldi, 2021; Stuhler, 2021; Vlegels & Lievens, 2017).

Not all sociodemographic groups are equally open or inclusive. Guy (2016) found that the youngest age groups, women, urbanites, and higher educated people included a wider range of items as belonging to culture, although the influence of these traditional determinants of cultural participation, in particular social background, appeared to be fairly weak. While not directly comparable, studies on cultural openness and cosmopolitanism (e.g., Katz-Gerro et al., 2023; Olofsson & Öhman, 2007; Petzold, 2017; Pichler, 2009) point in the same direction, as does the extensive literature on cultural omnivorousness (e.g., Hazir & Warde, 2016; Lindblom, 2022; Van Eijck, 2012; Warde & Gayo-Cal, 2009), and cultural stratification (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004; Flemmen et al., 2018). These studies mostly report higher levels of interest and/or participation in a wider variety of cultural expressions and activities among younger age groups, women, urban residents, and, particularly, higher-educated people.

2.4. Evaluations of culture and politico-cultural attitudes

Knowing how people evaluate the concept of culture and its limits may open important perspectives not only to contemporary

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[1] The survey data used in the present paper included a question adapted from and inspired by this previous French study.

culture with all its polysemy and ubiquity, hierarchies, and inequalities, but also to the broader patterning of lifestyles where cultural, social, and political elements intertwine (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; DellaPosta et al., 2015; DiMaggio, 1996; Heikkilä et al., 2022). Divergent notions of culture could be associated with socio-political conflicts and tensions, as some of today's most pressing political issues, e.g., climate change or minority rights, can be seen as inherently "cultural."

Individuals with high cultural capital and active cultural participation are more likely to hold progressive-liberal, social and political attitudes than others (e.g., DellaPosta et al., 2015; DiMaggio, 1996; Harrits et al., 2010; Heikkilä et al., 2022; Jarness et al., 2019; Purhonen & Heikkilä, 2017). Moreover, omnivorous cultural consumers proved to be more cosmopolitan and progressive-liberal in their political orientations (e.g., Chan, 2019; Lindblom, 2022; Ollivier, 2008). While these associations between cultural practices and political attitudes appeared significant when "political" is understood in terms of "new" or identity politics, the results concerning "old politics," or the politics of redistribution, are more mixed. A British study, for instance, did not find omnivores to be different from other people regarding political attitudes concerning distributional issues relevant for the traditional left-right dimension, while regarding questions of identity politics, they exemplified "cosmopolitan post-materialism" (Chan, 2019; see, however, also Flemmen et al., 2022; Jarness et al., 2019).

2.5. Evaluations of culture in a comparative perspective

Research has repeatedly shown that cultural classification and symbolic production are shaped by the societal contexts in which they develop, leading to cross-national differences in how culture is perceived, practiced, and valued (Janssen et al., 2008; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000; Purhonen et al., 2019). People's evaluations of culture will therefore likely vary across national contexts. Indeed, in the Eurobarometer study inquiring general understandings of culture (without a focus on expressive culture), people in the Nordic countries associated culture with arts more often than the average, while understanding culture as education and family was more common in Southern Europe (European Commission, 2007:8).

Studying nine distinct European countries, we expect cross-national differences based on specific features of these countries, which we summarize in Table A1 in the Supplement. First, differences in people's evaluations of culture are likely associated with different cultural policy models. In the present context, we draw on Rius-Ulldemolins et al. (2019) classification: the *Liberal* model (United Kingdom), characterized by the strong role of the Arts Council, also known as the Patron model (Chartrand & McCaughey, 1989) but also quite low public expenditure on culture per capital and medium cultural participation; the *Central-Western European* model (the Netherlands and Switzerland), characterized by stable and sizable public expenditure on culture and medium cultural participation; the *Nordic* model (Denmark, Finland), characterized by high public expenditure on culture per capita with the state supporting a broad range of culture and high cultural participation (see also Sokka, 2019); the *South-Western* European model (France, Spain), with some countries with sizable expenditure on culture per capita (France) and others with lower expenditure (Spain) and lower cultural participation; and the *South-Eastern* European model (Croatia), characterized by low expenditure on culture per capita and also lower cultural participation (Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019). While the ninth country in this research, Serbia, is not covered by the above classification, it would arguably belong to the South-Eastern European model.

Second, the nine countries differ in their social structural features, which may influence taste structures in the population and the way cultural expressions are classified along the dimensions of differentiation, hierarchy, universality, and boundary strength (DiMaggio, 1987). The most pronounced structural features across our European countries include the rates of inequality and educational stratification, on the one hand, and the degrees of social heterogeneity and intergroup interaction, on the other. According to the Gini index (2020), the income inequality is the lowest in the Netherlands (26.1) and the Nordic countries (27.1 and 27.5 in Finland and Denmark, respectively), followed by Croatia (29.5),[2] while for the other countries it ranges between 31 and 35 (World Bank, 2023). Access to higher education can be evaluated in light of Eurostat data from 2021 (2019 for the United Kingdom) on the proportion of the population aged 25–64 years who have completed tertiary education. In Serbia and Croatia, the proportion is 25 %, while in all other countries, it oscillates between 41 and 45 % (Eurostat, 2022). Social heterogeneity (Wilson, 1986) tends to be smaller in countries with smaller populations (Croatia, Serbia, Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands) while large-population countries are arguably more heterogeneous (most notably, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom). Switzerland is the exception with its high proportion of immigrants, multiple official languages, and relatively evenly distributed religious groups.

Finally, countries can be characterized by their connectiveness in the global cultural field. We can compare countries on the so-called Globalization Index KOF (see Gygli et al., 2019), which is an index composed of several variables on trade, financial, interpersonal, informational, cultural, and political globalization. The nine countries' score on the KOF 2020- index shows that the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Finland are on top of the index (ranging between 91 and 92), followed by Switzerland, Spain, France, and Denmark (89–91), while only Croatia (79.9) and Serbia (84.2) are more clearly below the other countries.

Taken together, while the aforementioned structural features do not unanimously point in the same direction (cf. Table A1 in the Supplement), we expect, giving priority to the cultural policy models and the levels of inequality, that the Danish and Finnish respondents will exhibit the most inclusive evaluations of culture, and that Croatian and Serbian will have the most exclusive evaluations of culture. The other countries are likely located somewhere between the opposite poles of Nordic and South-Eastern European countries, in terms of the wideness and inclusivity of the evaluations of what belongs to culture.

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[2] While Croatia's Gini index suggests relatively low inequality, the welfare policies in the country have not been able to prevent poverty in the same way as in the Nordic welfare states (Esping-Andersen, 1999); rather, the poverty rate is at approximately the same level as in other Southern European countries such as Spain, being almost 50% higher than in the Nordic countries (see World Bank, 2023).

3. Research design

3.1. Data

We employ survey data from nine European countries collected to gain more insight in how Europeans evaluate culture in relation to their cultural practices, attitudes, and perceptions of societal developments. The data were collected as part of a comparative research project entitled INVENT[3] in spring 2021. The survey was fielded simultaneously in Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Serbia, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. A national survey agency in each country collected responses from a representative sample of a minimum of 1200 respondents per country (aged 18 years and older and including citizens with a migration background residing in the respective countries; see Table A2 in the Supplement for an overview of the data collection methods and descriptive statistics). Although the sample closely matches the population in terms of key demographics, it is not entirely representative of the country populations, as higher educated people, elderly people, and women are slightly overrepresented in some countries. Hence, where applicable, we will control for education, age, and gender in our analyzes.

3.2. Measurements

3.2.1. Whether the respondents see different items as belonging to culture

Our main survey question was inspired by Guy (2016) and read "For each of the following items, please indicate if it belongs to culture in your opinion." This question was followed by a list of 20 items, for which respondents were asked to evaluate whether they belong to culture or not. There were three options: "Yes, definitely," "No, definitely not," and "It depends." These categories allowed respondents to draw a symbolic boundary between the item and what the respondent considers as culture (cf. Lamont & Molnár, 2002), yet also account for ambivalence, as symbolic boundaries are rarely clear-cut and context-independent. The question thus functions as a measure of breadth or wideness versus narrowness, i.e., how many and which items are counted in and out, but also whether the respondents are certain or ambivalent about each item (translating into a measure of ambivalence or cautiousness versus determination to make such straightforward decisions). The 20-item list ranged from opera to hip-hop and from yoga to shopping malls. Thus, it was designed to cover a wide variety of cultural items, representing varying levels of legitimacy, both traditional and modern items, commercial and non-commercial items, explicitly political and non-political items, and so on. While the question did not include any specification of the concept of "culture," the list of items involved objects, practices, and places of cultural consumption, which are associated with "stylization of life" and esthetic judgement (Bourdieu, 1984), or the realm of "expressive culture" as distinguished from "instrumental culture" behind rational action (Regev, 2007) and the broader anthropological meanings of culture (Williams, 1981). Thus, our key variable measures the ways in which the respondents evaluate the contents and boundaries of lifestyle-relevant expressive culture. The full list of items is presented and discussed in the Results section (see Fig. 1 and Table A3).

3.2.2. Sociodemographic variables

Based on the wealth of previous research on cultural tastes, attitudes, and participation patterns, we anticipated that people's evaluations of culture will be structured according to similar basic social divisions and included respondent's *gender, age, education,* and *urban-rural status* among the sociodemographic variables in our analysis. *Gender* is coded as female and male. *Age* is coded in four categories (18–27; 28–44; 45–64; 65+). *Education* is measured for the highest achieved education in six categories. *Urban-rural status* is measured in ten categories (from living in the countryside to capital city of the country).

Additionally, we examined the effects of *parent's education, household size,* and *religiosity,* as these may also impact people's evaluations of culture. *Parent's education* is an established measure of cultural capital, proven to be a strong determinant of cultural participation, tastes and attitudes (e.g., Jæger & Møllegaard, 2022; Leguina et al., 2022; Willekens & Lievens, 2014); along with this research, it can be expected that, compared to respondents with lower-educated parents, respondents with higher educated parents hold broader views on culture since they have likely been exposed to a wider variety of cultural expressions and activities from childhood and onwards. *Household size* was included because living together with people of different genders, ages and generations in one household can potentially expand peoples' cultural practices beyond those most typical to one's own gender and age (e.g., DiMaggio, 1987; Upright, 2004; Willekens & Lievens, 2014). Finally, we explored the potential impact of *religiosity* – whether the respondents, independently of belonging to any religion, considered themselves as religious, not religious but having spiritual beliefs, or not religious without any spiritual beliefs – on people's evaluations of culture. Religions have been identified as key institutions producing symbolic boundaries, moral orders and classificatory cosmologies (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Thus, it could be that non-religious people have broader views on culture than religious respondents whose evaluations of culture may be "restricted" by certain religious beliefs (e.g., Aarons, 2021; Katz-Gerro et al., 2009). Table A4 in the Supplement presents detailed information about the sociodemographic variables, along all other variables in the analysis.

3.2.3. Cultural participation

We used cultural participation as a control variable to ensure that our variables measuring different ways to evaluate expressive culture would not merely reflect actual cultural participation, when examining the impact of sociodemographic characteristics on
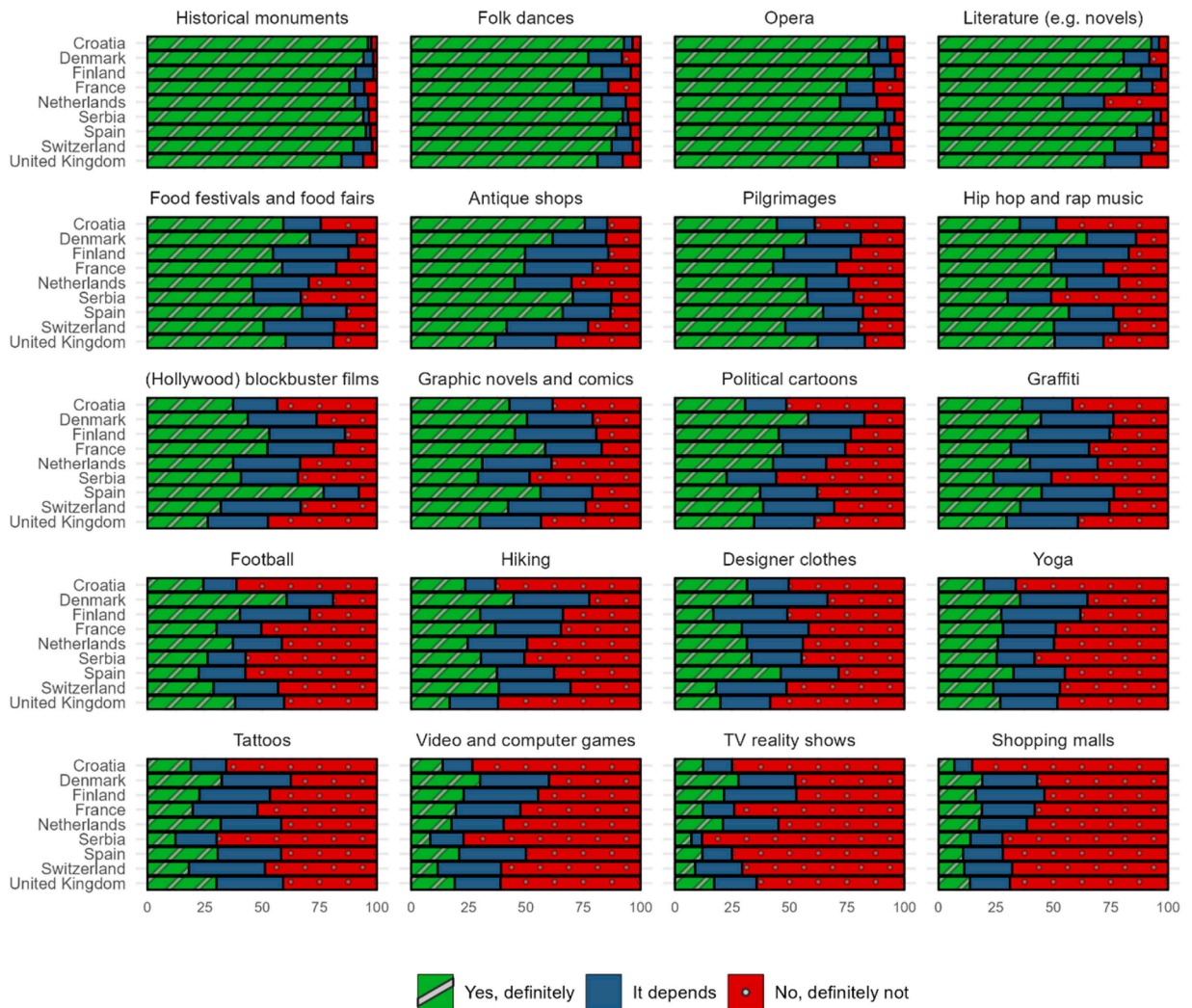

Fig. 1. Distribution of Whether the Respondents See Each of the 20 Items as Belonging to Culture by Country (Percentages; Missing values Excluded).

evaluations of culture or to what extent evaluations of culture associate with politico-cultural attitudes. This is warranted since the literature (see the section on sociodemographic variables) suggests that broad evaluations of culture are likely associated with active cultural participation and narrow evaluations with limited cultural participation. We measure cultural participation via four items indicating how often respondents visit high art performances (classical, ballet, opera, theater), popular music concerts or festivals, local fairs with food and music, and museums, monuments and historical places. Answering categories ranged between 0 (almost never) to 4 (almost every week). We calculated the average score.

3.2.4. Politico-cultural variables

Finally, we explored whether major ways to evaluate culture associate with a range of politico-cultural attitudes, to test the potential reverberations in the societal realm. We focus on the following variables.

Support public funding of culture: The survey asked how important it is for the respondent that nine different items receive public funding from the government (local, regional or national) on a scale from 0 (should not get funding at all) to 4 (very important to get funding). Examples of items are "artists and artistic activity," "historical monuments and sites," "cultural initiatives by citizens" and "minority cultures (e.g., language, cuisine, traditions)." We calculated the average score. In line with research showing that individuals active in cultural participation tend to support public funding of culture (e.g., Katz-Gerro, 2012), we would expect broad and more inclusive evaluations of culture to be associated with a high score on this variable.

Cultural cosmopolitanism: We also anticipated that broad and inclusive evaluations of culture are associated with more cosmopolitan orientations, cultural cosmopolitanism being constantly found to be associated with omnivorous and broad tastes and consumption patterns, like research cited above shows. To measure cosmopolitanism, we took four items from Cleveland et al. (2014) that probe the

degree of openness towards other cultures (e.g., "I am interested in learning more about people who live in other countries"). Respondents indicated agreement or disagreement with these statements on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree).

Political attitudes: While willingness to fund culture and cosmopolitanism are more "cultural," the remaining six variables in this final step are more "political" in nature. They were all included in the same pattern of attitude statements in the survey, where the respondents indicated whether they agreed with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = strongly disagree, 4 = strongly agree). Considering the distinction between "new" and "old" politics (Chan, 2019; Harrits et al., 2010), three items clearly touch upon the former dimension (mostly between conservative and progressive-liberal values), one item combines aspects of both dimensions, and two items deal with the latter dimension (mostly between left and right-wing economic stances). The items are:

- "Same sex marriages should be allowed throughout Europe."
- "Sometimes having a strong leader who is not afraid to break some rules is better than long democratic consultations."
- "All in all, family life suffers when women have full-time job."
- "Measures against climate change should be a priority, even when this causes slower economic growth and loss of (some) jobs."
- "People who are unemployed should not get benefits if they do not try to find work."
- "Government regulation of business usually does more harm than good."

Previous research showing that cultural omnivorousness and openness are associated with progressive-liberal political attitudes (e. g., DellaPosta et al., 2015; Lindblom, 2022), but not necessarily with attitudes on a more traditional political left-right dimension (Chan, 2019), led us to expect that broad and inclusive evaluations of culture are associated with progressive-liberal attitudes while narrow and exclusive evaluations are associated with conservative attitudes (the three first items about allowing same-sex marriages, the need for strong leader and the alleged negative consequences of women having a full-time job).

3.3. Analytical strategy

We started our analysis with a descriptive analysis of the distributions of each of the items and whether the respondents see them as belonging to culture in our nine countries. Moreover, we calculated counts for each of the three response alternatives ("yes, definitely," "no, definitely not" and "it depends") and compared the means across the countries.

Secondly, we applied Latent Class Analysis (LCA) to find patterns in how individuals perceive the 20 items belonging to culture. LCA is a statistical technique that enables researchers to find underlying dimensions (classes) in a larger set of manifest variables, while at the same time attributing individual cases to one particular class (in a probabilistic way). The classes are latent: they are inferred from the multiple observed variables (Vermunt & Magidson, 2004, 2016; for a substantive use of the method in sociology, see, e.g., Bonikowski & DiMaggio, 2016). The LCA was conducted using the cluster option in LatentGold 5.1. We estimated both regular models and multilevel models, but since the latter produced instable results, we decided to use the regular model here.

Third, we used the Step 3 procedure of LatentGold to estimate how clusters are predicted by covariates (Vermunt & Magidson, 2016). While comparable to multinomial regression analysis, this technique corrects for classification errors that emerge if separate regression analyzes would be conducted for the assigned class memberships (Vermunt & Magidson, 2016). Here, we introduced a multilevel component by grouping respondents via country, to ensure an appropriate estimation of standard errors. As for the covariates predicting the cluster memberships, we used sociodemographic variables and cultural participation as control variables.

Finally, we conducted a distal outcome analysis with control variables. This specific function within a LCA is equivalent to a regression analysis, but, once again, corrects for the classification error to prevent bias. Again, respondents were grouped per country. Thus, we predicted politico-cultural variables by the cluster membership variable, controlling for sociodemographic factors and cultural participation.[4]

4. Results

4.1. What belongs to culture according to Europeans across nine countries?

Fig. 1 shows the distributions for all 20 items per country (Table A3 provides a more detailed presentation of these data). Items that were most unanimously accepted as belonging to culture include historical monuments, folk dances, opera, and literature. Shopping malls, TV reality shows, video and computer games, and tattoos were on average most rarely accepted as belonging to culture. Thus, commercial popular culture appears not to be seen as culture by many respondents, suggesting the continued relevance of the high/low distinction. On the other hand, elements related to folk, traditional or historical culture are more likely to be accepted as belonging to culture. Even if some differences between countries emerge almost by necessity at the level of individual-item distributions, the big picture was manifest in all countries. For instance, one of the most contested items was graffiti, for which the distributions of the answers were very similar in all countries.

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[4] With the last step of our analysis, we do not assume a strong causal model between the ways to evaluate culture and political attitudes, even if our distal outcome analysis of LCA technically treats the former as predictors and the latter as outcomes. We consider this analytical step merely an effective way to simultaneously examine the associations between the two with controlling for several other factors.

Fig. 2 shows the average counts of the three answering options for each country (Table A5 offers more detailed data of the same analysis), demonstrating how many of the 20 items the respondents, on average, considered unambiguously belonging or not to culture, how many times they remained ambivalent, and whether the nine countries were different in these respects. A high number of "yes" answers (and/or a low number of "no" answers) would suggest a broad conception of culture in a country, while the opposite points to narrow evaluations. Moreover, a high number of "it depends" answers indicates that respondents were more cautious or ambivalent in drawing boundaries.

Fig. 2 reveals interesting country differences. With clearly fewer "it depends" answers than in other countries, Croatian and Serbian respondents appeared to be most opinionated with their assignments of items to be included or excluded from the sphere of culture. Also the UK respondents answered often that some items do not belong to the sphere of culture. The Spanish respondents, in turn, were most inclined to accept items to be part of culture, whereas the respondents from Denmark and Finland were the least willing to delimit some items outside culture. In fact, respondents from these two countries were as often or even more often ambivalent than willing to consider some items' status as not belonging to culture.

4.2. Mapping the evaluations of culture in Europe

In the second step of the analysis, we crystallized information from the rather long pattern of 20 items by LCA. Importantly, LCA classifies individuals (and not items) into mutually exclusive clusters – or classes – characterized, in this case, by their distinctive ways to evaluate culture. The variables included in the LCA models each had three response categories, which implied that the data were relatively "sparse," and solutions tended to be less clear-cut. After testing several different models and cluster numbers, the final model was selected based on both the fit and parsimony of the estimated models (BIC, AIC; see Table A6) and the interpretability of the results (Vermunt & Magidson, 2004). The five-cluster solution proved to be the best model.[5] Fig. 3 (see also Table A7) presents the results of the LCA.

The first cluster (size 26.8 %) has relatively few items with probabilities higher than 0.55 for positive attributions to culture. Only opera, monuments, folk dance, and literature are definitely seen as culture – genres which arguably are often considered as traditional and legitimate culture in society. At the same time, the probabilities of not belonging to culture are relatively high for four items often linked with popular culture (reality TV, tattoos, games, shopping malls), while the remaining items are either less clear-cut or most often associated with the ambivalent category. Thus, while this group embraces relatively traditional notions of culture, it is also reluctant to make strong statements on other items. We therefore labelled this cluster the *Traditional Cautious*.

The second cluster (size 23.3 %) is characterized by many items considered as belonging to culture. Not only are there more items than in cluster 1 regarded as definitely belonging to culture, but the probabilities for the "traditional/legitimate" items for belonging to culture are also higher than in cluster 1. Respondents in this category also tend to consider hip-hop, blockbuster films, food festivals, pilgrimages, antiques, comics, and political cartoons as part of culture (probability > 0.55). Only shopping malls and reality TV are excluded by this group, while for six items there is not a clear verdict. In other words, this cluster is relatively broad, yet still hesitant towards certain items. We therefore label this group the *Broad Cautious*.

The third cluster (size 21.3 %) comprises nine items – including the four "traditional/legitimate" items – which according to the respondents definitely belong to culture. In that sense, this group resembles Cluster 2. Yet, Cluster 3 is more restrictive: six items have a probability of more than 0.53 to be excluded from culture. Besides items excluded by most clusters such as reality TV and shopping malls, respondents in this cluster also exclude lifestyle-related items such as yoga, football, hiking and designer clothes. Given these traits, we label this cluster the *Broad Distinct*.

The fourth cluster (size 18.1 %) is the most exclusive. Just like Cluster 1, only four items are considered to belong to culture, but no less than 13 items are marked as certainly not belonging to culture with higher than 0.73 probability. Only this cluster explicitly disregards hip hop, blockbuster films, graffiti, antiques, comics, and political cartoons when thinking of what constitutes culture. This group most clearly follows the traditional highbrow/popular divide in drawing strong boundaries. Therefore, we label this group the *Exclusive Determinate*: not only do they exclude many items; they are also relatively decisive about their views.

Finally, Cluster 5 (size 10.6 %) is the most inclusive. Respondents in this cluster tend to consider all items as belonging to culture. The items with the relatively lowest probability are reality TV (0.71), shopping malls (0.59) and hiking (0.78). This cluster is thus labelled the *Inclusive Exhaustive*.

Fig. 4 (see also Table A8) shows the prevalence of the five the clusters in each country. Cluster 1 is relatively overrepresented in Finland and Switzerland and underrepresented in Croatia and Spain. Cluster 2 is overrepresented in Finland and Denmark, and underrepresented in Croatia, Serbia, and the UK. Cluster 3 is found least often in Finland and Denmark, and most often in Croatia, France, Serbia, and Spain. Cluster 4 produces the most extreme differences: in Croatia, Serbia, and the UK the representation is much higher than the average, while in Denmark, Finland, and Spain the cluster is about half of the average. Cluster 5 is the smallest cluster in most countries except Denmark, Finland, and Spain where Cluster 4 is smallest. Especially in Denmark, Cluster 5 is strongly represented, whereas it is the least common in Croatia, Serbia, and Switzerland.

Considering how countries score in terms of cautiousness, especially Finland, but also Switzerland and Denmark clearly stand out with most respondents falling within Clusters 1 or 2. On the other end of the spectrum, Croatia, Serbia, and the UK stand out as the most

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[5] The decrease of the BIC score slowed down after cluster five (456051, with LL = -227049, Npar = 204). The classification errors were still relatively low (.1119), while the entropy was relatively high (.8247). At the same time, adding a sixth or seventh cluster made interpretations more difficult.
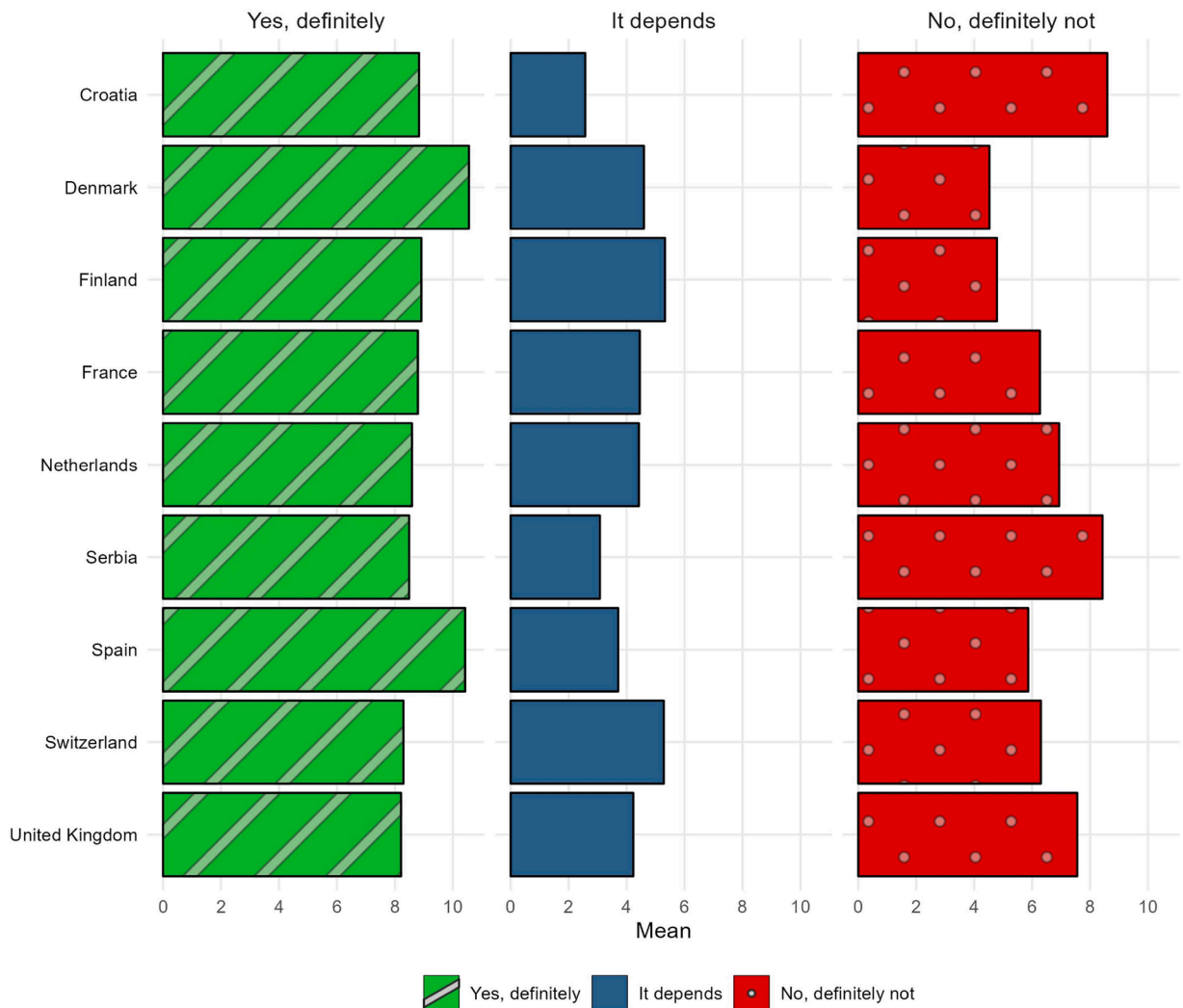
Fig. 2. Average Count of the Three Alternative Answering Options to the Question Whether the Respondents See Each of the 20 Items Belonging to Culture by Country (Means).

determinate countries with more than 50% of respondents belonging to Clusters 3–5. The other three countries – the Netherlands, France, and Spain – hold in-between positions. These results are mostly in line with the expectations formulated in Section 2.

4.3. Predicting the adherence of clusters of different evaluations of culture

Who are the members of the clusters identified in the previous step? Fig. 5 (full models to be found in Table A9) shows the parameters for predicting membership of the five clusters. The effects are reported as effect coding, implying that the category specific effects should be interpreted in terms of deviation from the average. In Table A9, the Wald-statistic provides the test whether parameters significantly differ between classes.

The Traditional Cautious cluster forms the largest, but also one of the least distinguishable groups. The only features on which they significantly differ from the other clusters are age and urban-rural status. They have a higher probability of being over 65 years old, and they are less likely to live in larger cities. The Broad Cautious cluster tends to be younger, higher educated, and more often female than average. The Broad Distinct cluster is – similar to Cluster 1 – rather difficult to characterize. We only find a clearly significant, negative effect for female respondents. In other words, this group is, on average, more likely to be formed by men.

The fourth cluster, the Exclusive Determinate, consists of the individuals who most straightforwardly and exclusively delimit the sphere of culture by viewing only very few items as part of it. Members of this clusters are relatively often low educated, religious, and somewhat older (age 45–64). We also find slightly more women in this cluster than average. These effects hold also when controlled for cultural participation (which has a very strong negative effect on the membership in this cluster). The Inclusive Exhaustive cluster is to some extent the mirror image of Cluster 4. Members are relatively high educated and have highly educated parents. They are less likely
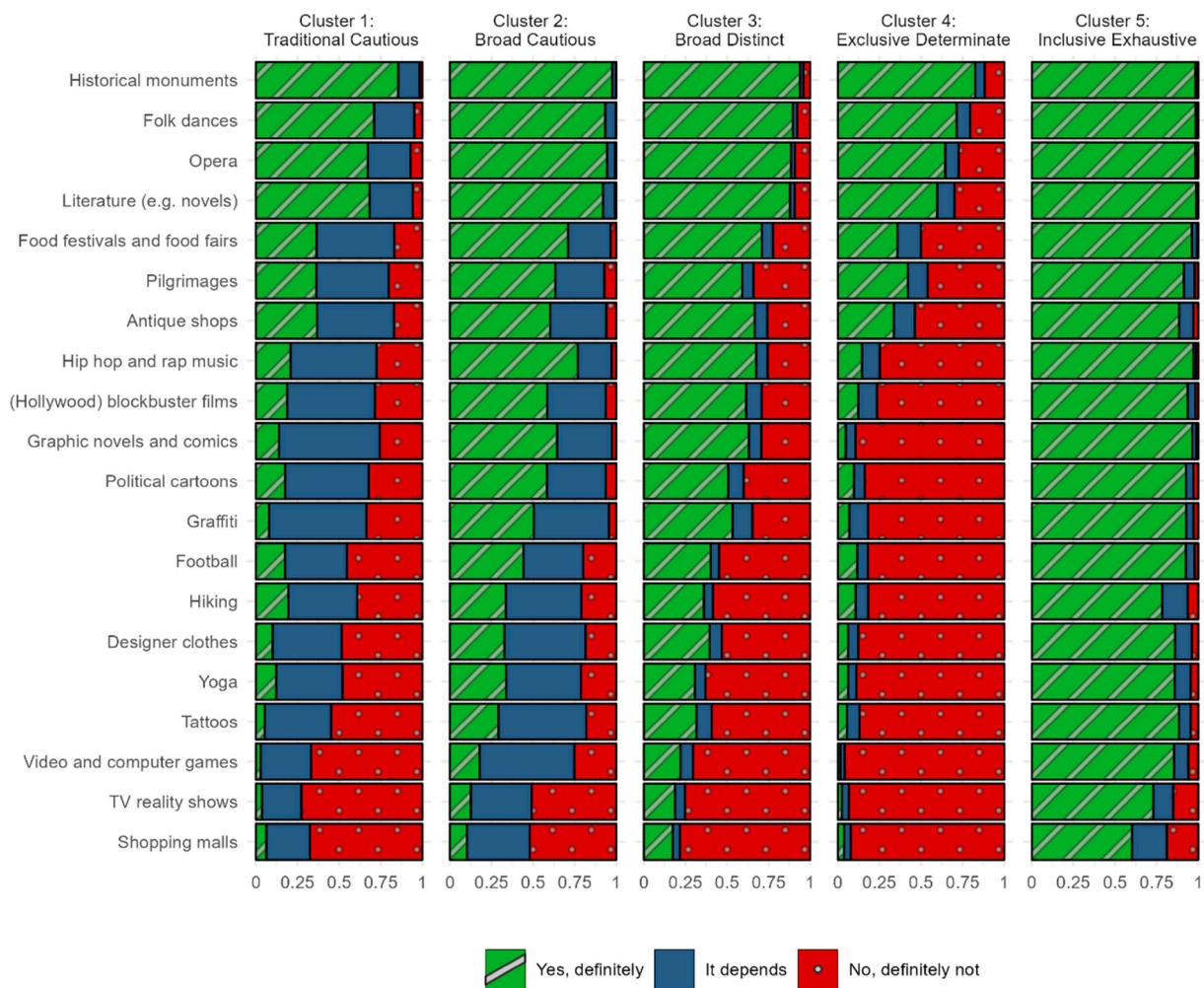
Fig. 3. The Composition of all the Five Clusters Obtained from the LCA: Probability of Belonging to the Cluster for Each Category in Each 20 Items.

to be religious, and they participate actively in culture. While we find no differences in terms of gender or age, this group relatively often lives in more urban areas.

Controlling for cultural participation – which proved a significant predictor of cluster membership for the inclusive (Clusters 2 and 5) and exclusive (Cluster 4) understandings (see Table A9) – did not considerably impact the associations between clusters and sociodemographic variables. For instance, the positive associations between high education and inclusive clusters (Clusters 2 and 5), and the negative association between high education and the exclusive cluster (Cluster 4) were only slightly stronger when cultural participation was excluded from the model. Moreover, while the regression results are overall relatively similar across countries, the most inclusive way to evaluate culture – the Inclusive Exhaustive (Cluster 5) – is not associated with high education of the respondent nor high parental education in Croatia and Serbia. This, combined with the fact that the inclusive Cluster 5 was the smallest in these two countries (4.9 % and 5.6 %, respectively), underlines that Croatia and Serbia are different from the other countries, particularly regarding the prevalence and social profile of the most inclusive way to evaluate culture.[6]

4.4. Associations between politico-cultural attitudes and evaluations of culture

Our last research question asked whether evaluations of culture are also associated with attitudes in the domains of culture and politics. Fig. 6 (full models in Table A10) reports findings from distal outcome analyzes that employ the cluster memberships as predictors of a range of politico-cultural attitudes. Based upon the significance levels of the Wald-statistics and controlling for all variables included in the previous analyzes, we found significant differences between the clusters.

First, both the Traditional Cautious and the Exclusive Determinate clusters are relatively conservative in their orientations. Both are

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[6] Country-specific regression models and the models without cultural participation as a control variable are available on request from the authors.
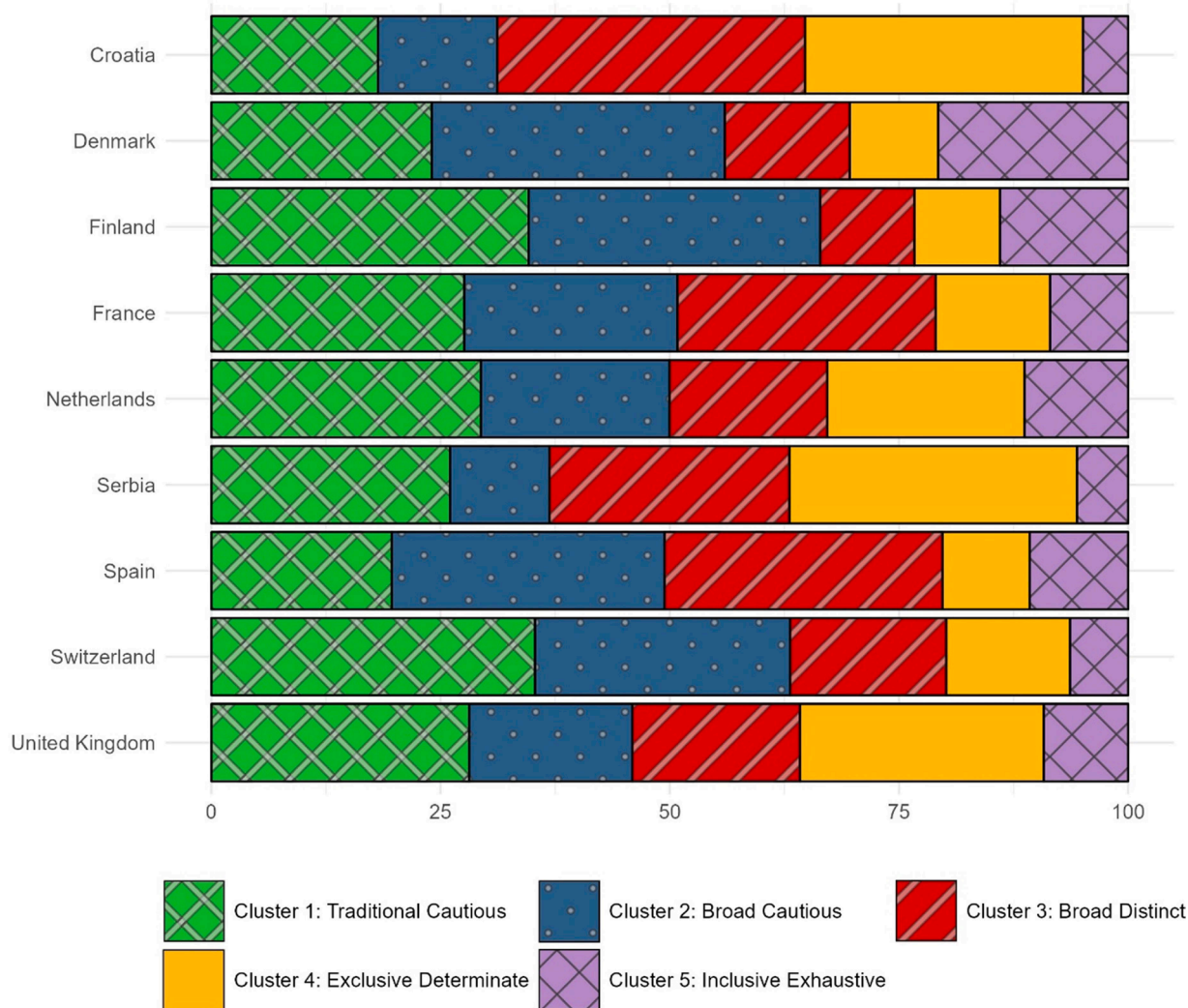
Fig. 4. Distribution of the Five Cluster in Nine Countries (Percentages).

less likely to support public funding of culture, and their cosmopolitan scores are also lower than average. They tend to disagree with climate change measures and allowing same sex marriages, and they are against benefits for the unemployed. Members of the Exclusive Determinate cluster are also in support of strong leaders not afraid of breaking the rules and have a negative perception of full-time working women, while for the Traditional Cautious cluster these effects are not significant. In general, the Exclusive Determinate – the group that only considers a very small number of items as belonging to culture – has the most conservative scores of all.

In contrast to their exclusive counterparts, the Broad Cautious and the Inclusive Exhaustive clusters have the most liberal-progressive politico-cultural attitudes. Members of these clusters are likely to support public funding of culture and are more cosmopolitan than average. They also resemble one another in their support for climate change measures and same-sex marriages, their rejection of strong leaders breaking rules, and heir disagreement with the statements on withholding benefits from the unemployment and the negative effects of full-time working women. The Broad Distinct cluster is positioned somewhere between the other four clusters. For certain topics, they do not significantly differ from the average. They are more cosmopolitan than the Traditional Cautious and the Exclusive Determinate, but hold similar viewpoints on same-sex marriages, strong leaders, and working women.

Contrary to what we expected, we do not find clear differences between the attitudes measuring "new" or identity politics and the attitudes measuring "old" politics or the politics of redistribution – the clusters of major ways to evaluate culture seem to be equally capable of significantly predicting the attitudes along both political dimensions. Most of all, the inclusive understandings (Clusters 2 and 5) are equally leaning towards left-wing economic stances as they are towards liberal political attitudes, while the exclusive understandings (Cluster 4 and, to a lesser degree, Cluster 1) are leaning both towards right-wing and conservative attitudes. Controlling for cultural participation does not considerably impact the results; the associations between different ways to evaluate culture and politico-cultural attitudes are only slightly stronger when cultural participation is left out.
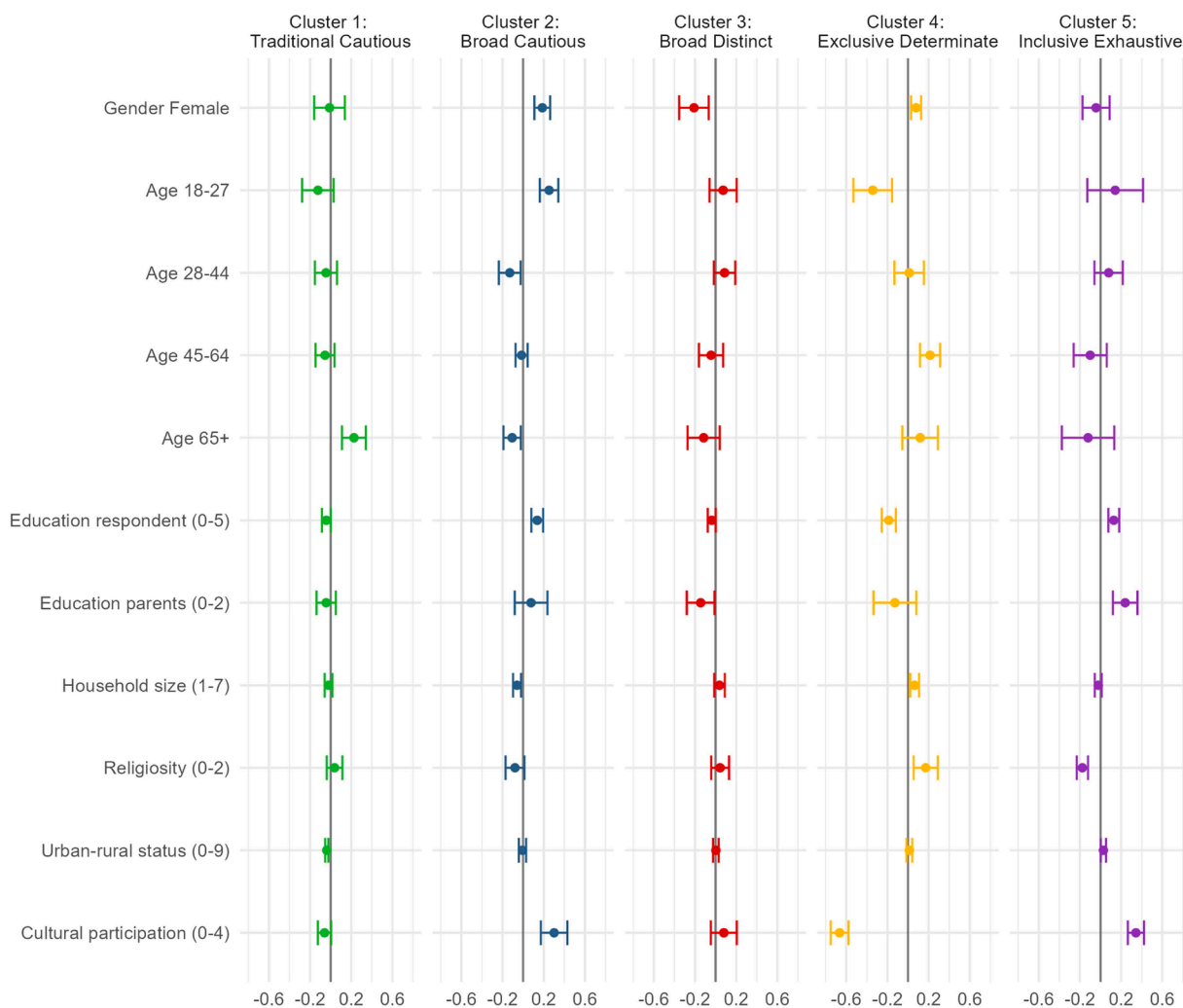
Fig. 5. Cluster Memberships Predicted by Sociodemographic Variables, Controlling for Cultural Participation. Estimates Obtained by Step3 Procedure Model. Beta Coefficients with 95 % Confidence Intervals ($N = 12{,}927$; 9 groups).

5. Conclusion and discussion

This paper has provided an empirical, "bottom-up" perspective on the different ways to evaluate the contents and boundaries of culture among people in present-day Europe, based on wide-ranging survey data collected in 2021 in nine countries. Taking stock of the literature on the polysemy and ubiquity of the concept of culture, the paper shows how Europeans differ in terms of the objects, places and practices – contexts of cultural consumption and lifestyles – they believe belong or do not belong to "culture" and the ambivalence they display in drawing such boundaries.

Using Latent Class Analysis, we find a clear persistence of the classical distinction between the narrow and the broad notions of culture (Fornäs, 2017; Williams, 1981), which in this analysis meant the difference between evaluating culture to involve only established arts and cultural institutions versus evaluating culture to involve also popular, commercial and contested elements. However, this distinction does not fully capture how people in today's Europe evaluate the concept of culture. Five major ways to evaluate culture were found: the Traditional Cautious, Broad Cautious, Broad Distinct, Exclusive Determinate, and Inclusive Exhaustive evaluations of culture. Importantly, besides the narrow/wide dimension, the analysis was sensitive to the varying modalities of cautiousness versus determination behind the willingness to make judgements and boundary-drawings when constructing the contents and limits of culture.

Overall, traditional and conventionally understood "highbrow" items are most often considered as belonging to culture, whereas popular and commercial items are most often considered as not belonging to culture. Yet, countries differ both along the dimension of the wideness of the evaluations of culture and the ambivalence of the judgement. Finnish and Danish respondents appeared most inclusive and ambivalent, whereas Croatian and Serbian respondents were most determinate and narrow in their evaluations. Among the other countries, the ambivalent evaluations proved most common in Switzerland, while the determinate evaluations were most
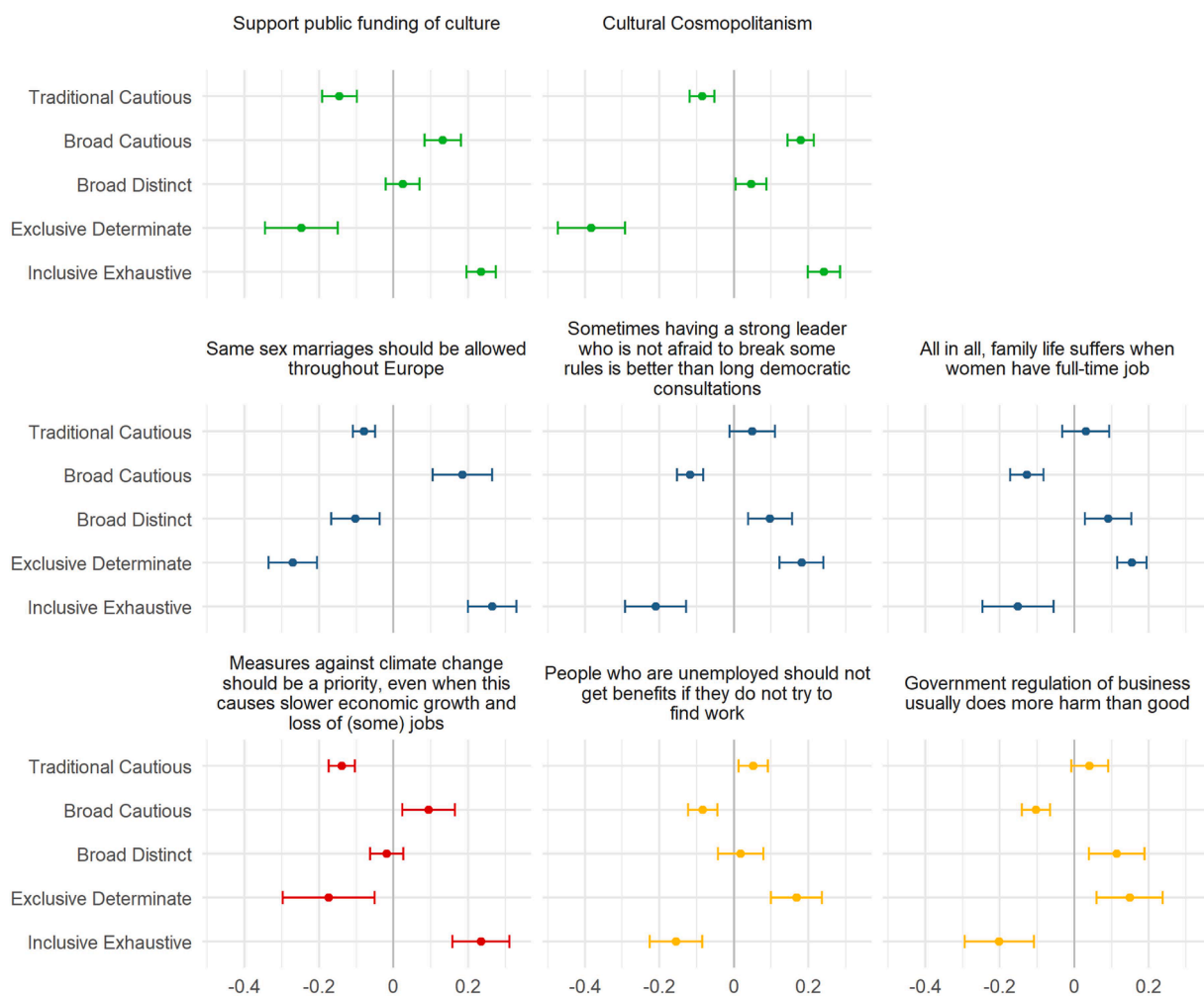
Fig. 6. Cultural and Political Attitudes Predicted by Cluster Memberships, Controlling for Cultural Participation and Sociodemographic Variables. Estimates Obtained by Distal Outcome analyzes. Beta Coefficients with 95 % Confidence Intervals ($N = 12,489$; 9 groups).

often found in the United Kingdom. These findings support our expectation regarding differences across the nine countries, based on differences in cultural policy models (Rius-Ulldemolins et al., 2019) and the structural features behind different cultural classification systems (DiMaggio, 1987). High expenditure on a broad range of culture and high participation rates, overall low levels of inequality and relatively low social heterogeneity, and high scores on the globalization index are associated with the broadest and most cautious ways to evaluate culture. The most determinate and exclusive evaluations of culture are associated with countries with opposing features. The number of countries is too low to test these explanatory mechanisms in follow-up analyzes, however. Our analyzes show that the traditional hypothesis associating narrow and exclusive evaluations of culture with the upper-status groups does not hold anymore. On the contrary, the narrow ways to evaluate culture are clearly associated with lower-status groups, while the upper-status groups executed broad evaluations of culture. The most inclusive way to evaluate culture can be found among respondents with high levels of education and parental education, while the most exclusive way to evaluate culture resides mostly among the lower educated. Further analyzes must determine whether this inclusive/exclusive opposition is attributable to other constituents of social status besides educational differences. Nevertheless, the finding that high-status groups seem to embrace broad and inclusive evaluations of culture accords with the abundant research arguing that cultural omnivorousness and tolerance have become valued high-status signals among upper- and middle-classes (e.g., Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Hazir & Warde, 2016; Ollivier, 2008; Peterson & Kern, 1996).

As for other key sociodemographic differences, evaluating culture inclusively rather than exclusively proved to be associated with young age, living in urban environments, and not being religious, whereas having either a "traditional cautious" or an "exclusive determinate" view of the boundaries of culture was associated with old(er) age, living in smaller-sized communities, and being religious. The greater inclusivity of younger cohorts may indicate a more general trend towards inclusive evaluations – or even that the distinction between inclusive and exclusive ways to evaluate culture may become overall a less central division in the future. Successive cohorts of Europeans are increasingly higher educated (Eurostat, 2022) and socialized under conditions of cultural

heterogenization, globalization, and digitalization, making it increasingly less likely that they will have an exclusive view of culture as "high arts" only (as was still to some extent the case in the 2007 Eurobarometer; see European Commission, 2007).

Finally, we show that these evaluations of culture are associated with politico-cultural attitudes. Broad and inclusive ways to evaluate culture are positively associated with supporting public funding of culture, cosmopolitan attitudes, and having liberal-progressive political attitudes, while the opposite holds for narrow and exclusive evaluations. Importantly, different ways to evaluate culture associate with political attitudes not only along the liberal or progressive versus conservative dimension but also along the left-right dimension, which is not in line with Chan's (2019) findings of omnivores' social and political attitudes in Britain. Thus, there may be a crucial difference between participation in culture and evaluations of culture in this regard. In fact, our result resembles more closely findings from studies on the structural overlap between more holistically defined lifestyles and political stances, locating both to the context of class structure and finding not much difference between "old" and "new" politics (Flemmen et al., 2022).

Where does this leave us? Similar to the "measuring culture and meanings" tradition by John Mohr and colleagues, we started from the basic assumption "that interpretation is patterned, and that these patterns can be analytically captured and translated into a measurable form – albeit to varying degrees, and always at some cost" (Mohr et al., 2020:4). So, what do those "varying degrees" and, especially, "at some cost" mean in our case? We opted for a broad, multi-country quantitative analysis to identify and systematically compare major ways to evaluate the contents and boundaries of culture and their associations with a wide range of sociodemographic and politico-cultural variables. While the multi-item survey question that we used to measure evaluations of culture proved highly efficient and effective, it obviously has its limitations.

First, evaluations of culture could have been measured in other ways, such as using open-ended questions in a survey setting, conducting qualitative interviews to let people define meanings of culture in their own words or utilizing social media analysis to find out how and in which contexts "culture" is being discussed online independently of researchers' interventions (cf. David et al., 2021). Second, our measurement of evaluations of lifestyle-relevant expressive culture focused on items situated along the high versus low/popular/commercial dimension. This made sense given the longstanding central role of this dimension – and proved productive – but future research could elaborate by further capturing the complexity and multiple dimensions that may characterize the ways to evaluate instrumental or anthropological culture of various social groups. Recent work by Childress et al. (2021) shows, for example, that different levels of culture (genres and objects) have different affordances for how inclusive or exclusive taste is expressed. Third, while our study covers nine European countries, which is more than most studies in cultural sociology, it did not allow us to include country-level predictors into the analysis and gain more insight into the impact of country-level versus individual-level factors on people's evaluations of culture.

These limitations notwithstanding, our study has provided novel and empirically grounded insights on how ordinary people evaluate the contents and boundaries of the concept of culture. While boundaries between the narrow and the broad notions of culture persist, also among ordinary people, they differ considerably in where they draw these boundaries. This bottom-up approach breaks with the centuries-old tradition of armchair theorizing about the meanings of culture. By doing so, it adds to the cultural stratification literature by showing how peoples' views about the defining concept of the field, culture itself, are stratified, and associate with peoples' wider politico-cultural attitudes. The power of cultural stratification proves to be already present at the (understudied) conceptual level of how individuals differ in their assessments and understandings of the social world. Symbolic boundaries appear to be drawn already in the processes of defining and evaluating the elementary concepts of contemporary, culturally abundant societies. Similarly, our analysis indicates that questions of cultural openness and tolerance can be addressed already at the level of how such elementary concepts are understood and, ultimately, acted upon. Our results also have implications for cultural policy makers in line with Gray (2015): they emphasize the need to reshape culture policy based on more bottom-up consultations with Europeans to prevent that traditional ideas of cultural funding collide with more inclusive evaluations of culture at the citizen level. This becomes more urgent as younger social cohorts with more inclusive conceptions gain the upper hand and older generations with more exclusive evaluation of culture are disappearing. In reshaping such cultural policies for the long-term future, our study also indicates that national contexts have to be taken into account, as Europeans differ considerably in how they evaluate the boundaries of culture.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Supplementary materials

Supplementary material associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:10.1016/j.poetic.2023.101840.

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Semi Purhonen is Professor of Sociology at Tampere University, where he leads the Tampere Group for Sociology of Culture (https://research.tuni.fi/dynamics/). He is the first author of *Enter Culture, Exit Arts? The Transformation of Cultural Hierarchies in European Newspaper Culture Sections, 1960–2010* (Routledge 2019, with Riie Heikkilä, Irmak Karademir Hazir, Tina Lauronen, Carlos Fernández Rodríguez, and Jukka Gronow).

Marc Verboord is Professor of Media and Society and Head of the Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam. His research is situated at the cross-roads of cultural sociology, media studies and communication science and addresses cultural consumption, cultural globalization, and the impact of new media on cultural evaluation.

Ossi Sirkka is a PhD student of sociology at Tampere University working on his doctoral thesis on cultural hierarchies and stratification, and meanings and understandings of culture. He is also interested in computational methods in social sciences.

Nete Nørgaard Kristensen is Professor of Media Studies at Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen, where she is Head of Section of Media Studies. She specializes in research about digital media and popular culture. She has most recently co-edited the book *Rethinking Cultural Criticism: New Voices in the Digital Age* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2021, co-editors: Unni From and Helle Haastrup) and *Power, Communication and Politics in the Nordic Countries* (Nordicom, 2021, co-editors: Eli Skogerbø, Øyvind Ihlen and Lars Nord).

Susanne Janssen is Professor of Sociology of Media and Culture and Research director in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her current research projects focus on the consequences of increased diversity, social inequality, digitalization and globalization on structures, processes and practices in the fields of media, culture, education, and politics.