Media Content Types and Their Effects on Beliefs about Inequality and Meritocracy.

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Abstract

The media are traditionally assumed to have a uniform effect on public perceptions. However, the media are often conceptualized as the "news media" and other media contents are overlooked. Although novel research shows that certain TV programs have a different effect on public perceptions than the news media, there is little research into this direction. I start by conceptualizing five media content types and hypothesize their relationship with perceptions of inequality and social mobility to test whether different media content types have different effects on different public perceptions. The perceptions analysed are beliefs about inequality and social mobility. I conduct a survey in the Netherlands (n = 218) to collect the necessary data. Linear regression analyses show that the media content types cause more pessimism about inequality and more optimism about social mobility. Overall, this research provides a useful conceptualization of media content types and points out the need for additional research into this new direction.

Keywords: inequality, media effects, meritocracy, public perceptions, social mobility

1. Introduction

Whether the media can influence people's public perceptions is widely speculated in behavioural psychology and communication sciences and there is no lack of supporting evidence (Entman, 1989; Johnson & Kaye, 2003; Hafez, 2007; Wang, 2007; Potter, 2012; Arendt & Matthes, 2017; Dhoest, 2017; Kübler & Kriesi, 2017; Wettstein & Wirth, 2017; Levendusky, 2015). For example, watching the news increases distrust in the government (Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof & Oegema, 2006; Van Aelst, 2017) and increases political efficacy (Becker & Whitney, 1980; Ceron, 2015). Or consuming talk shows can increase sympathy towards a presidential candidate (Baum, 2005) and influence public opinion formation (Glynn, et al., 2007).

This is not a new discovery. Classical scholars like Plato (1970 [380 B.C.]), Seneca (1917 [50-65 B.C.]), Tertullian (1977 [197]; [197-202]) and Ovidius (1931 [5-8]) already thought that theatre 'poisons the morality of men' and influences bad behaviour. Cicero (1913 [44 B.C.]) made a case against certain forms of entertainment because it makes serious matters into objects of laughter in the minds of men and deteriorates their character. Throughout history,

the debate on the role of spectacle and its influence on society has been extensively debated, some arguing that spectacle helps educate the uneducated, others arguing it deteriorates morality (Meeuse, 2007). In the modern age of video on demand, binge-watching and theatre-at-home, it can be expected that the role and influence of visual media is researched extensively.

Yet, this is not the case and more research into media effects on public perceptions is necessary (Bartsch, 2017). When the effects of the media on political attitudes are analysed, it mostly pertains to political participation (Mosca and Quaranta, 2015). Furthermore, research either analyses only one type of medium like the news media or a talk show, or one effect such as support for a politician or support for a policy. Such studies are almost always limited to one instance, for example, how the media influences a specific election (Yanovitzky & Cappella, 2001; Tsfati, Tukachinsky & Peri, 2009). So far, a broader study that analyses multiple *media content types* and their effects on multiple public perceptions has not been conducted. Yet, this gap in the literature is pointed to by several authors over the course of three decades (Perry, 1987; Newton, 1999; Mosca & Quaranta, 2015; Bartsch, 2017; Kim, 2019), showing the pressing need for such research.

Very little research does exist. For example, Newton (1999) conceptualized three broad categories of media types and his study did not yield significant results. However, in his study he did not conceptualize specific content types, only media types. Another, recently conducted research conceptualized a specific media content type, rags-to-riches programs, and compared its effects with the effects of the news media, another media content type (Kim, 2019). The study shows that, whereas consuming news media results in pessimism about social mobility, consuming rags-to-riches programs causes optimism about social mobility. Therefore, consuming rags-to-riches programs explains why Americans are optimistic about social mobility, even though social mobility has declined from 90% to 50% in the last decades (Chetty et al., 2017) and even though this is covered in the news media.

Aside from the aforementioned gap in the literature, whenever media effects are analysed they often result in puzzling effects. Most researches use the two mainstream theories that explain media effects; the Media Malaise Theory (MMT; Robinson, 1976) and the Virtuous Cycle Theory (VCT; Norris, 2000). The MMT and the VCT propose completely opposite effects, yet both are empirically substantiated (Becker & Whitney, 1980; Luengo & Maurer, 2009; Ceron, 2015). Where the MMT predicts a decline in political trust because the media contains mostly negative reports, the VCT predicts an increase in political trust because the information provided by the media causes an increase in political efficacy. Puzzlingly, both effects have been measured but how can empirical research find contradictory evidence that supports discriminatory theories?

I believe that this is because research into the media effects on public perceptions focuses mostly on the effects of the news media (Perry, 1987). However, there are other media content types that may influence public perceptions. Newton (1999) argues that the *content* of the media is perhaps more important than the *type* of media in affecting public perceptions. Yet, Kim's (2019) research is the only empirical research that points out this difference. Her study shows that rags-to-riches programs cause optimism about social mobility although they have no effect on perceptions of inequality, whereas the news media affect both.

In short, there is a gap in the literature because research into media effects focusses on one media content type, one effect or one instance. I aim to fill this gap by conceptualizing multiple media content types and analysing their effects on two different public perceptions, by answering the question: *"To what extent do different media content types affect perceptions of inequality and social mobility differently?"*

In chapter 2, I will introduce the two public perceptions; perceptions about inequality and perceptions about social mobility. Chapter 3 contains the theoretical framework and the

hypotheses. Chapter 4 sets out the methodological approach. The analysis is conducted in chapter 5 and chapter 6 concludes with a reflection and recommendations for future research.

2. Forming public perceptions

Consuming media influences the consumer's perception and opinion of a wide variety of things. Perception and opinion are closely related. If one, for example, perceives high economic inequality, that person may favour redistributive policies. Or, when a person perceives high inequality but also high social mobility, that person may not favour redistributive policies. The media influence perceptions and opinions via information provision. Opinions are formed through a combination of "information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it" (Zaller, 1992, p. 6). Firstly, predispositions are often formed via socialization processes into the values of the family, the culture and the political affiliation (Tverdova, 2012; Müller, et al., 2017). Secondly, predispositions are informed via receiving information and considering the information for the own beliefs. Information can be discarded if it does not confirm existing beliefs or information can update and change existing beliefs (Bolsen, 2014; De Koster, Achterberg & Ivanova, 2016). Because predispositions are informed by information and information is abundantly present in society by means of the media, it is important to know what effect this has on society.

Citizens depend greatly on information provision, either in elite discourse or social interactions (Lippmann, 1946; Moussaïd, 2013). Especially the news media play a role in raising public awareness on certain issues via agenda-setting and priming (Walgrave & De Swert, 2004) and, by doing so, the media steer the direction of public opinion about certain issues by influencing how these issues are perceived (Yung-wook, et al., 2015). Therefore, I expect that *media content types* have specific effects on the formation of public perceptions, something Newton (1999) hypothesises and Kim (2019) demonstrates. For example, Quick et al. (2014) found that watching Grey's Anatomy negatively affected openness to organ donation

among African Americans due to inaccurate depictions of organ donation, even though there were many awareness campaigns nationwide that provided accurate information about organ donation. The media caused scepticism and distrust. Similarly, the media can influence perceptions about inequality. Inequality, however, is a broad term that includes many things.

Inequality usually refers to *unfair differences between social groups*. It ranges from certain groups having access to clean water whereas others do not (Truelove, 2011), to uneven political representation (Van der Meer, Van Deth & Scheepers, 2009), to power imbalances in rights attribution (Smart, 1989), to income inequality, etc. Inequality is often explained in *attributional* terms, meaning a person's access to resources, and in *relational* terms, meaning a person's access to a strong social network (Goldthorpe, 2010). Inequality is a broad concept that cannot easily be framed, especially because different inequalities can influence each other. For example, inequality in education opportunities can result in inequality of salary outcomes. Any form of inequality must, therefore, be analysed in relation to other forms of inequality (Acker, 2006). However, I settle on a more simplistic conceptualization of inequality as the *structural advantages of the rich over the poor as perceived by the respondents*. This includes both attributional and relational advantages. However, by specifically mentioning the rich and the poor, there is an economic dimension. Therefore, inequality refers to how much the rich are better capable of getting ahead of the poor in terms of economic wealth.

Social mobility refers to *the ability to move from one step of the social ladder to another*. However, social mobility also consists of multiple dimensions. Social mobility can be defined in spatial terms through the concept of motion (Frisby, 2002; Maloutas, 2004), labour mobility (Roberts, 1993), intergenerational mobility (Hillmert, 2013), 'household dominance' (Goldthorpe, 1983) or simply the ability to increase one's income. These dimensions are interrelated (Hout, 1983). Social mobility is often measured along the dichotomous lines of *individual ability* (Chafel, 1997) and *structural externalities*. I am interested in the extent to

which people *perceive* social mobility. Therefore, I aim to analyse the extent to which people perceive they can move up and down the social ladder, or how well they are able to improve their socio-economic status. Three indicators of my measurement focus on individual ability whereas one indicator focuses on structural causes.

3. Conceptualizing media content types and their effects

Because scant researches inquire about the effects of the consumption of different media content types on public perceptions, there is a lack of theorizing on the topic. Consequently, I will identify existing theories and use them to postulate hypotheses for the different media content types. I use the aforementioned MMT to predict the effects of the news media. For the effects of other media content types, there are no existing theories. However, I found theories in the disciplines of psychology and the communication sciences that propose mechanisms and predict effects that I will utilize in this research. For talk shows, I use the *mobilization hypothesis*. For rags-to-riches programs and game shows, I use the cultivation theory. Finally, for sports programs I use the *BIRGing* and *CORFing* mechanisms.

3.1. Explaining the effects of news media

The news media are conceptualized as daily broadcasts of current affairs by established press companies (Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010; Schuck, 2017). The MMT stipulates that the news media cover negative aspects of society (Robinson, 1976). This dissemination of negative reports increases pessimism in public perceptions, such as political trust, perceptions of inequality, social mobility, and many others. It is well established in the literature that political and social issues are indeed mostly negatively covered in the media and that this increases distrust of the government and pessimism about multiple facets of society (Kleinnijenhuis, Van Hoof & Oegema, 2006; Van Aelst, 2017). Thus, according to the MMT, exposure to media increases pessimism in public perceptions. Therefore, I expect that:

Hypothesis 1a: *"People that consume high levels of news media will be pessimistic about inequality"*.

Hypothesis 1b: *"People that consume high levels of news media will be pessimistic about social mobility"*.

3.2. Explaining the effects of talk shows

Talks shows are programs that feature influencers like Hollywood celebrities, musicians, popular politicians or scientists. Shows like Conan, The Tonight Show, Hot Ones or Late Night often feature one guest who is asked about a variety of things.[1] A Hollywood actor could promote an upcoming movie, but could also talk about what he/she thinks about current events, such as elections, political scandals, the state of society, etc. Other talk shows feature a *panel* of people that discuss a variety of topics, such as The View, Good Morning America, The Talk or The Real. These panels often showcase heated debates about a variety of topics. These debates often regard political issues. Consumers of talk shows are therefore likely to be informed about opposing political perspectives and their arguments. Therefore, talk shows will be conceptualized as panels featuring influencers that discuss different perspectives on a variety of politically relevant issues. There is already some research into the effects of talk shows on political attitudes (Yanovitzky & Cappella, 2001; Baum, 2005; Glynn et al, 2011; Roth & Zaheer, 2014; 2016) but none that provide relevant insights to inform this study because they focus on one effect specifically.

Because the perspectives that are provided in these talk shows are often opposing, consumers of talk shows are unlikely to lean towards one side of the debate. Empirical research shows that if people are confronted with two arguments, one attitude-consistent and the other counterattitudinal, they prefer the attitude-consistent argument which reinforces their existing

[1] For the theory, I use examples of programs that are internationally recognizable. However, in the survey, mostly Dutch programs are provided as examples because it is conducted in the Netherlands.

opinion (Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2011; Bolsen, 2014; De Koster, et al., 2016; Müller, et al., 2017; Dahlgren, Shehata & Strömbäck, 2019). This is in line with the *reinforcement hypothesis* that postulates that consumer's positions are reinforced by the arguments they hear and they deem valid. Because of this, I do not expect to see a specific effect in the data. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2a: "*People that consume high levels of talk shows have similar perceptions of inequality compared to those who do not".*

Hypothesis 2b: "*People that consume high levels of talk shows have similar perceptions of social mobility compared to those who do not".*

3.3. Explaining the effects of rags-to-riches programs

Kim (2019) explains the effects of rags-to-riches programs on perceptions of social mobility with Gerbner's *cultivation theory* (Gerbner, 1970; Morgan & Shanahan, 1997; Nabi & Riddle, 2008). The cultivation theory suggests that entertainment media affect politically relevant attitudes through the *transportation* effect (Gerbner, 1970; Carlson, 1985; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010; Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli, 2017; Shrum, 2017).

The *transportation mechanism* implies that, through narratives, people are transported into 'the shoes' of the people they see on TV. To stick with the example of Kim's research, consumers of rags-to-riches programs, which are programs that show "ordinary citizens working hard to achieve considerable economic benefits" (Kim, 2019, p. 11), are transported into the persona of the successful people displayed in the rags-to-riches programs, as if they shared in their success (Green, Brock & Kaufman, 2004). The narrative in which a person is immersed is projected onto that consumer which leaves impressions on the consumer's cognition. When coming back to reality, the experience remains and may have altered the consumer's beliefs and opinions, thus cultivating the consumer's belief system (Carpenter & Green, 2012).

Kim shows that consuming rags-to-riches programs increases beliefs in the meritocracy because the successful people displayed in these programs serve as proof that everyone can make it through hard work.

Optimism about social mobility is often used to justify inequality because, if there are plenty of opportunities, you have only yourself to blame if you are disadvantaged (Piketty, 1995; Alesina, Stantcheva & Teso, 2018; Kim, 2019). This is reinforced by a poll which found that, even though Americans are discontent with how income and wealth are distributed, they are still satisfied with the state of economic opportunity (Gallup Organization, 2018). Therefore, rags-to-riches programs will not likely change people's perceptions of inequality and the following hypotheses can be formulated:

Hypothesis 3a: "*Consuming high levels of rags-to-riches programs does not affect perceptions about inequality"*.

Hypothesis 3b: "*People that consume high levels of rags-to-riches programs will be optimistic about social mobility".*

3.4. Explaining the effects of game shows

There is some literature on the effects of games on people's perceptions of inequality, but the effects are only measured among contestants, not among consumers of game shows. Molina et al. (2019) show that winners in a rigged game attribute their success to skill and believe the game is fair, even though the game is clearly rigged to their advantage. The losers always regard the game as unfair, whether it is rigged or not. Interestingly, whenever redistributive elements are added to the game, both winners and losers believe the game is less fair, even if the redistributive element favours the losers. However, these effects are not measured among non-participants or in relation to media effects

Kim (2019) argues that game shows and rags-to-riches programs are similar because they feature ordinary people that gain enormous economic benefits (Kim, 2019). Whereas rags-

to-riches programs dramatize hard work, propagating the meritocracy, game shows are based on luck and completing trivial assignments, such as answering trivia questions, spelling words, spinning a wheel, etc. After all, most contestants in a game show lose and losers generally believe the game is unfair (Molina et al., 2019). Also there is just one winner but no guarantee that the winner wins anything, because the winner will often participate in one final challenge where he/she can "double or nothing". Seeing so many contestants lose and regularly seeing the winner lose it all is likely to induce the belief that you have to be lucky to get rich. If you are not rich in real life, that is because other people are luckier and the rules of the game did not favour you. The opposite of a meritocracy is displayed in game shows. Therefore, I expect that consumers of game shows project this system of luck onto the real world via a similar transportation process as described in the cultivation theory. Consumers of game shows use the narrative displayed in game shows as evidence against the meritocracy, which leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4a: *"People that consume high levels of game shows will be pessimistic about inequality*".

Hypothesis 4b: *"People that consume high levels of game shows will be pessimistic about social mobility*".

3.5. Explaining the effects of sports programs

Sports programs are live broadcasts of matches in competition sports. Thorson and Serazio (2018) point out that sports broadcasts are consumed on a larger scale than the news and yet, we know little about how sports fandom is related to public perceptions. However, processes of sports competition can be compared to a narrative about success and failure that includes "elements of individualism, competition, gender difference, ethnic difference, work and pressure, and family, regional and national belongingness" (Laclau, 1977, 143-200 as quoted in Whannel, 1992, p. 121).

A distinct feature is that sports teams and athletes have extremely dedicated fans (Yeager, 1977; Frosdick & Marsh, 2013; Spaaij, 2007; 2008). Another characteristic is that sports teams and athletes are not featured once, but many times during a sports season and they return to try their best again in the next season. This allows for deep engagement and bonding which, arguably, deeply immerses consumers of sports programs and causes stronger effects.

Success is often linked to performance by the winners whereas failure is explained by unfairness and bad luck by the losers (Fisher & Wakefield, 1998). These mechanisms are named *basking-in-reflected-glory* (BIRGing) and *cutting-off-reflected-failure* (CORFing) and can even be observed physiologically by measuring the changes in hormones after winning or losing a game (Wann & Branscombe, 1990; Bernhardt et al., 1998; Kerr et al., 2005). During BIRGing, the success of the team is reflected on the self; the fan believes that "we did it", that it was due to the group effort that victory was secured, whereas during CORFing, failure is explained by externalities so that it was not due to any mistake "we" made (Cialdini et al, 1976; Burger, 1985; Bernache-Asollant, Lacassagne & Braddock, 2007; Spinda, 2011). It is assumed that consumers of sports programs frequently experience winning and losing and, thus, all consumers of sports programs 'BIRG' and 'CORF' frequently. If CORFing increases pessimism about inequality and BIRGing increases optimism about social mobility, then I hypothesize that:

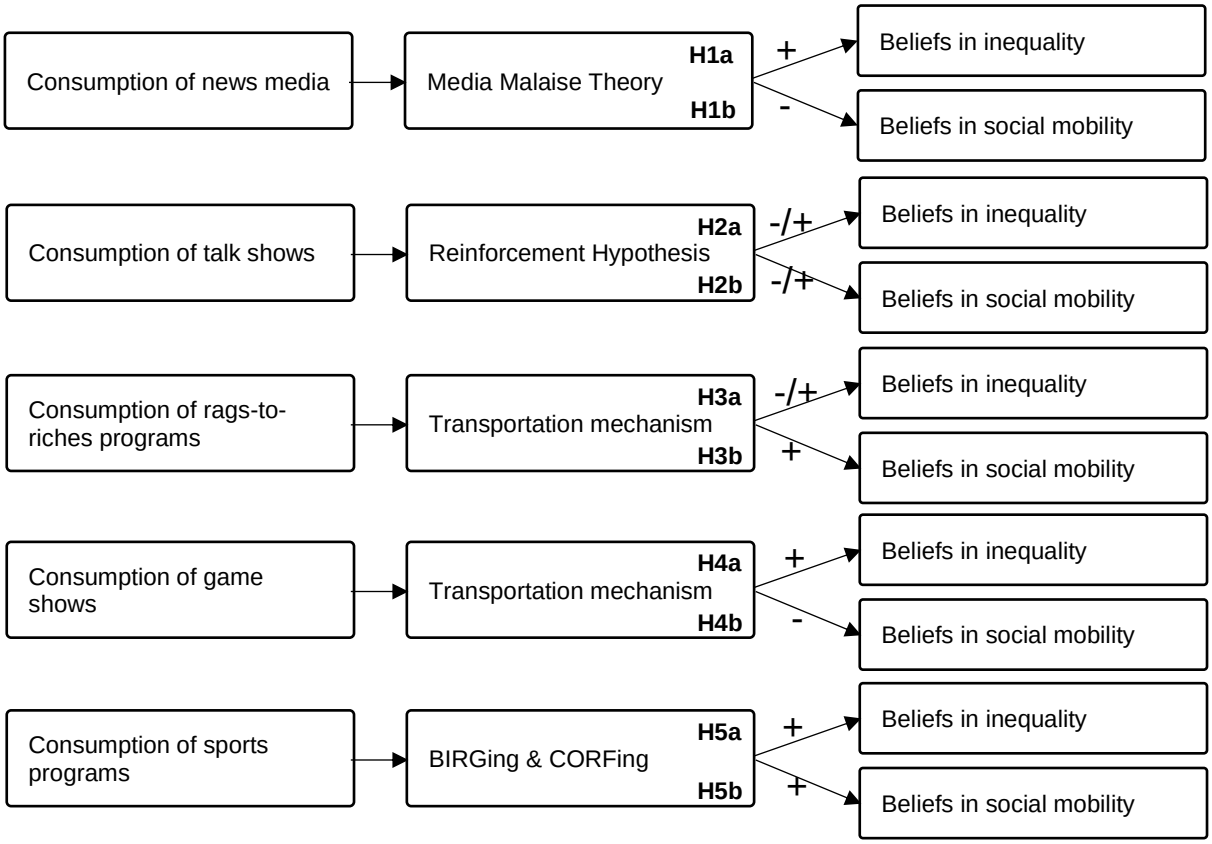
Hypothesis 5a: *"People that consume high levels of sports programs will be pessimistic about inequality*".

Hypothesis 5b: *"People that consume high levels of sports programs will be optimistic about social mobility*".

The theoretical framework and hypotheses are visualized in figure 1. In brief, the news media should increase pessimism about inequality and decrease optimism about social mobility. Consumption of talk shows should further polarize public perceptions and thus the data should

not show a noticeable effect. Rags-to-riches programs should increase optimism about social mobility and have no meaningful effect on perceptions of inequality. Game show consumption should increase pessimism about inequality and social mobility. Lastly, sports programs should increase pessimism about inequality and increase optimism about social mobility.

Figure 1
Summary of theories and hypotheses



4. Data and methodology

4.1. Data & control variables

I conducted a cross-sectional survey (n = 218) throughout the Netherlands. The survey was conducted via Qualtrics software and disseminated into my personal network via Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram and email. Although I have a vast network, most of the people I approached are conservative Christians that do not own a television. Therefore, very few were interested in participating in the survey. Those that participated are under 40 years old and are either Christians that do not own a television or non-Christians that do own a television. This

is helpful as I also aim to analyse a person's public perception when there is no consumption of any media content type. At the same time, this may have caused a bias towards people with a Christian normative framework among non-consumers. To make the sample more diverse and to improve the trustworthiness of the results, I bought respondents from a commercial respondent database, in accordance with the ISO 26362 method (Appendix A). They recruit their respondents from various sources: social media, a network of media partners, street recruitment, recruitment from surveys, targeted banners, other panels and via the tell-a-friend principle. I targeted every Dutch speaking person of 18 years and older in the Netherlands, which resulted in a diverse sample in terms of education, income, age, gender, etc., except for ethnicity. To maximize the response-rate, the survey is set up in the Dutch language and was kept short. This resulted in an N of 218.

The survey includes data on gender, age, ethnicity, education level and income (Table 1). The sample is heavily biased towards people with Dutch ethnicity (93,1%). The income of respondents was measured on an interval scale. In total, 35.4% of respondents earn a low income less than 20k. The middle class[2] makes up 64.6% of the respondents, resulting in a bias towards the middle class. There is no bias with regards to the other variables. Important to note is that in some instances, researchers classify secondary higher education as a higher achievement than lower trade education. Because lower trade education is a tertiary education in the Netherlands, and generally indicates a longer education trajectory, I classified it as a higher achievement than secondary higher education.

[2] The PEW Research Institute (2015) classifies the middle class as those that earn two-thirds to double the median income. The median income in the Netherlands is €36.500 in 2021 (Centraal Planbureau, 2020). Because the low end of the middle class is €24.333,34 and the high end €73.000, I take the categories between 20k-80k as the middle class.

Table 1
Frequency table of the variables

Gender		
	Frequency	%
Male	109	50.0%
Female	106	48.5%
Other	3	1.5%
Total	218	100%

Age		
	Frequency	%
18-20	5	2.3%
21-30	59	27.1%
31-40	52	23.9%
41-50	42	19.3%
51-60	24	11.0%
61-70	29	13.3%
71-80	7	3.2%
Total	218	100%

Income		
	Frequency	%
€0-€10k	30	13.8%
€10k-€20k	47	21.6%
€20k-€40k	91	41.7%
€40k-€60k	24	11.0%
€60k-€80k	16	7.3%
€80k-€100k	10	4.6%
Total	218	100%

Education		
	Frequency	%
None	1	0.5%
Primary	1	0.5%
Secundary lower	15	6.9%
Secundary higher	17	7.8%
Lower trade	7	3.2%
Middle trade	55	25.2%
Applied sciences	81	37.2%
Bachelor	15	6.9%
Master	20	9.2%
Specialized	6	2.8%
Total	218	100%

Ethnicity		
	Frequency	%
Barbados	1	0.5%
Belgium	3	1.4%
Bosnia-Herzegovina	1	0.5%
Denmark	1	0.5%
Philipines	1	0.5%
Italy	1	0.5%
Morocco	4	1.8%
Netherlands	203	93.1%
Surinam	1	0.5%
Turkey	2	0.9%
Total	218	100%

4.2. Operationalization of the main variables

The analysis consists of 7 variables. The two dependent variables consist each of four items that are measured on a Likert-scale of 1 to 7, which should provide greater reliability than single item scales (Gliem & Gliem, 2003). The first dependent variable (Y_1) is the *perception of inequality* (mean = 4.48). The Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .776$ shows an acceptable internal reliability (George & Mallery, 2003). Easterbrook (2021) shows that perceptions of inequality specifically relate to concerns about economic resources and status. Therefore, in this research, inequality is conceptualized in a way that stresses the differences between the rich and the poor in terms of power imbalances, status and resources using a relative measure. Respondents are asked to

indicate to which extent they agree with four statements, based on a scale of 0 to 7. Zero is "totally disagree" and seven indicates "totally agree". The four statements are (1) "In the Netherlands, the rich decide everything," (2) "In the Netherlands, there is an enormous difference in income between the rich and the poor," (3) "The tax system in the Netherlands is designed to benefit the rich," and (4) "The welfare programs in the Netherlands do not help the poor."

One could imagine that people that are pessimistic about inequality may still perceive that redistributive policies work. Therefore, one may agree strongly with the three first statements and disagree with the last statement. The data does provide some observations where this is the case. However, leaving out the responses to this last statement did not result in any significant changes. The mean perception of inequality ranges from 0 to 7, with 0 representing high optimism about inequality and 7 representing high pessimism about inequality.

The second dependent variable (Y_2) is the *perception of social mobility* (mean = 4.59). The Cronbach's alpha $\alpha = .816$ shows a good internal reliability (George & Mallery, 2003). Social mobility can be ascribed to individual ability and structural causes. My measurement focuses mostly on individual ability, although the first indicator can be seen as a structural cause. Respondents are asked to what extent they agree with four statements: (1) "The Netherlands is a land of opportunities," (2) "Anyone who works hard has a fair chance to succeed and live a comfortable life," (3) "It is possible to start out poor in this country, work hard, and become well-off," and (4) "Most people who want to get ahead can make it if they are willing to work hard." Respondents indicate to what extent they agree on a scale of 0-7, zero being "totally disagree" and seven being "totally agree". The mean perception of social

mobility ranges from 0 to 7, with 0 representing high pessimism about social mobility and 7 representing high optimism about social mobility.[3]

Consumption of media content types is also measured on a Likert-scale. Each media content type is a single item. I ask respondents how often they watch each type on a scale of 0-7. Zero indicates never watching a content type and seven indicates always watching a content type. This method results in an indication that allows a comparison of the consumption of different media content types, which may be helpful for future research. X_1 is the *news media,* X_2 is the *talk shows,* X_3 is the *rags-to-riches programs,* X_4 is the *game shows,* and X_5 is the *sports programs*.

4.3. Outline of the Analysis

Because existing theories are used and empirically tested, this research has a deductive theoretical approach (Bryman, 2016). I aim to find associations between media content consumption and perceptions of inequality and social mobility. I use a *linear regression analysis* to measure the relationship between the dependent and independent variables using Pearson's r. This analysis will be used to accept or reject the hypotheses. An effect is small at .1, medium at .3, and large at .5 or higher (Cohen, 1988). Therefore, I only accept or reject a hypothesis based on an effect of .1 or higher, unless no effect is expected. For each analysis, I also perform a linear regression analysis that includes the control variables. This may yield additional insights about the strength of the relationships and possible moderating effects.

The sample size may have effects on the data. For example, if the sample size is too small to establish that the correlation coefficient is not zero, then I cannot trust the significance of the effects that are reported. Furthermore, a larger than required sample size often results in smaller effects (Khalilzadeh & Tasci, 2017). Some scholars even use effect size measures at a

[3] High perceptions of inequality equals pessimism, because inequality is regarded as undesirable whereas high perceptions of social mobility equals optimism, because social mobility is regarded as desirable.

sample size of 300 (Khalilzadeh & Tasci, 2017). I use the formula $N = [(Z_\alpha+Z_\beta)/C]^2 + 3$ to calculate the required minimal sample size (Hulley, 2007). I use $\alpha = .05$ and $\beta = 0.8$. In all cases, the sample size is sufficient.

The data contains no outliers. Also, with this methodological approach, I cannot establish causality. However, in this research I assume that the consumption of certain media content types have an effect on public perceptions.

4.4. Ethics and Privacy Considerations

In Appendix B, the ethics and privacy considerations are represented. The setup of the survey is such that no respondent is at any time personally identifiable. Each respondent consented (Appendix C) to participating and, at the start of the survey, they were informed about their rights, what type of data would be collected and how that data would be handled. The dataset will be handled carefully and will be saved offline under double encryption. This research is according to the ethics and privacy requirements set out in the guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology of the Erasmus University of Rotterdam.

5. Results

5.1. Analysing the effects of news media

The media malaise theory stipulates that the news media disseminate negative reports which causes pessimism. Therefore, hypothesis 1a states that consumers of news media will be more pessimistic about inequality than non-consumers. Table 2 shows the regression analysis for the consumption of news media without the control variables. It shows a significant increase in pessimism ($p = .006$; $r = .187$; $R^2 = .035$). The effect is higher than .1 and enough to accept hypothesis 1a.

Table 3 shows the regression analysis with the control variables. In table 3, the effect of news media consumption is not significant ($p = .078$). The non-significance is likely caused by the complexity of the relation of the control variables with perceptions of inequality. All

independent variables explain 14.5% of the variance of which news media consumption explains 1.4% (R^2 = .014). Interestingly, age (p = .003; r = .220; R^2 = .05) and level of income (p = .000; r = -.244; R^2 = .06) show quite strong significant effects. Whereas higher age seems to increase pessimism, higher income seems to decrease pessimism. Although hypothesis 2a can be accepted, table 3 shows that confounding factors have a stronger effect and they may also have a moderating effect on news media consumption.

Table 2

Effects of news media consumption on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3,991	,197		20,291	,000	3,603	4,378
	Consumption of News Media	,120	,043	,187	2,798	,006**	,035	,204

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 3

Effects of news media consumption and the control variables on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	5,144	,785		6,551	,000	3,596	6,692
	Consumption of News Media	,076	,043	,119	1,771	,078	-,009	,161
	Gender	,135	,167	,051	,806	,421	-,195	,464
	Age	,201	,066	,220	3,045	,003***	,071	,331
	Ethnicity	-,006	,005	-,076	-1,181	,239	-,015	,004
	Education level	-,071	,057	-,087	-1,242	,216	-,184	,042
	Level of income	-,270	,072	-,244	-3,744	,000***	-,412	-,128

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Similar observations and conclusions can be drawn for the relationship between news media consumption and perceptions of social mobility. Hypothesis 1b states that higher consumption of news media should equal higher pessimism about social mobility. Table 4 shows the effect of news media consumption in isolation whereas table 5 includes the control variables. Table 4 shows a significant effect ($p = .034$; $r = .144$; $R^2 = .02$). The effect of .144 is enough to reject hypothesis 1b because it indicates that consuming the news media causes optimism about social mobility. When the control variables are included, none of the effects are significant and almost all variables show an effect below .1 or above (-).1, except for level of income. The variables account for only 4.8% ($R^2 = .048$). The control variables do not seem to be important, although in this model, consuming news media does account for less variance ($R^2 = .014$). Interestingly, the acceptance of hypothesis 1a seems to support the MMT whereas the rejection of hypothesis 1b seems to support the VCT, which was discussed briefly in the introduction. This is highly puzzling and confirms the contradictory empirical data that is found in the literature.

Table 4

Effects of news media consumption on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,269	,172		24,860	,000	3,931	4,608
	Consumption of News Media	,080	,037	,144	2,135	,034*	,006	,154

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 5

Effects of news media consumption and control variables on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3,901	,727		5,363	,000	2,467	5,335
	Consumption of News Media	,066	,040	,119	1,655	,099	-,013	,144
	Gender	-,072	,155	-,032	-,464	,643	-,377	,233
	Age	,046	,061	,059	,757	,450	-,074	,167
	Ethnicity	-,003	,004	-,040	-,583	,561	-,011	,006
	Education level	,045	,053	,063	,839	,402	-,060	,149
	Level of income	,131	,067	,137	1,964	,051	-,001	,263

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

5.2. Analysing the effects of talk shows

Consuming talk shows should reinforce existing attitudes or, in some cases, convince of opposing attitudes. However, consuming talk shows should not result in all consumers leaning to one opinion. Therefore, the data should not reflect an effect. Hypothesis 2a predicts no effect of talk show consumption on perceptions of inequality. Table 6 shows the regression analysis for the effect of talk show consumption on perceptions of inequality and table 7 includes the control variables. Table 6 shows a significant effect ($p = .014$; $r = .167$; $R^2 = .028$). This contradicts the hypothesis and therefore, hypothesis 2a must be rejected.

Table 7 shows similar effects as table 3. Age ($p = .001$; $r = .235$; $R^2 = .055$) and level of income ($p = .000$; $r = -.242$; $R^2 = .059$) show an almost identical significant effect when compared to the analysis in table 3. Talk shows consumption is not a significant effect when the control variables are included.

Table 6

Effects of talk show consumption on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,180	,151		27,656	,000	3,882	4,478
	Consumption of Talk Shows	,104	,042	,167	2,483	,014*	,021	,186

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 7

Effects of talk show consumption and control variables on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	5,241	,782		6,705	,000	3,700	6,782
	Consumption of Talk Shows	,060	,041	,096	1,452	,148	-,021	,141
	Gender	,126	,168	,048	,750	,454	-,205	,456
	Age	,214	,065	,235	3,294	,001***	,086	,341
	Ethnicity	-,006	,005	-,079	-1,217	,225	-,015	,004
	Education level	-,068	,057	-,083	-1,183	,238	-,181	,045
	Level of income	-,267	,072	-,242	-3,692	,000***	-,410	-,125

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Hypothesis 2b also predicts that consuming talk shows does not have any effect on perceptions of social mobility. Table 8 shows the regression analysis for the effect of talk show consumption on perceptions of social mobility and table 9 includes the control variables. Interestingly, although no effect was predicted, consuming talk shows has a significant effect ($p = .002$; $r = .212$; $R^2 = .045$) that is stronger than expected. Consuming talk shows seems to increase optimism about social mobility and, therefore, hypothesis 2b must be rejected.

Interestingly, table 9 shows only a little difference with regards to the effect of talk show consumption. There is a strong, significant effect (p = .004; r = .202; R^2 = .041). Other control variables are not significant, except for the level of income, which has a minor effect. Both analyses show that hypothesis 2b must be rejected.

Table 8
Effects of talk show consumption and control variables on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,266	,130		32,855	,000	4,010	4,522
	Consumption of Talk Shows	,115	,036	,212	3,190	,002***	,044	,185

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 9
Effects of talk show consumption on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3,861	,713		5,415	,000	2,455	5,266
	Consumption of Talk Shows	,109	,038	,202	2,905	,004***	,035	,183
	Gender	-,082	,153	-,036	-,539	,591	-,383	,219
	Age	,032	,059	,040	,535	,593	-,085	,148
	Ethnicity	-,002	,004	-,029	-,432	,666	-,011	,007
	Education level	,039	,052	,055	,745	,457	-,064	,142
	Level of income	,138	,066	,144	2,094	,037*	,008	,268

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

5.3. Analysing the effects of rags-to-riches programs

Hypothesis 3a was based on the premise that rags-to-riches programs have no clear influence on perceptions of inequality and that, therefore, no effect is expected. Table 10 shows the

regression analysis for the effect of rags-to-riches program consumption on perceptions of inequality and table 11 shows the regression analysis including the control variables. Although no effect was expected, table 10 shows an almost medium effect ($p = .000$; $r = .242$; $R^2 = .059$).

When the control variables are included, the variables explain 19.7% of variance ($R^2 = .197$). Consuming rags-to-riches programs still has a significant effect ($p = .001$; $r = .221$; $R^2 = .049$). Also, age and level of income have a similar significant effect as shown in table 3, which may moderate the effect of rag-to-riches program consumption. This unexpected increase in pessimism about inequality shows that hypothesis 3a must be rejected.

Table 10

Effects of rags-to-riches programs on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,207	,117		35,862	,000	3,976	4,439
	Consumption of Rags-to-riches programs	,171	,047	,242	3,659	,000***	,079	,263

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 11

Effects of rags-to-riches programs and control variables on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,532	,796		5,695	,000	2,963	6,101
	Consumption of Rags-to-riches programs	,156	,045	,221	3,498	,001***	,068	,244
	Gender	,161	,164	,061	,983	,327	-,162	,484
	Age	,247	,061	,271	4,061	,000***	,127	,366
	Ethnicity	-,004	,005	-,051	-,801	,424	-,013	,006
	Education level	-,030	,056	-,037	-,535	,593	-,141	,081
	Level of income	-,276	,071	-,249	-3,902	,000***	-,415	-,136

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Hypothesis 3b postulates that people that consume high levels of rags-to-riches programs will be optimistic about social mobility. Consumers of rags-to-riches programs reflect what they see on the real world, which should increase perceptions of social mobility. Table 12 shows the regression analysis for the effect of rags-to-riches program consumption on perceptions of social mobility and table 13 includes the control variables. However, both analyses do not provide any significant effects. Based on this data, I can neither confirm nor reject the hypothesis. Further research is required.

Table 12
Effects of rags-to-riches programs on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,496	,104		43,118	,000	4,291	4,702
	Consumption of Rags-to-riches programs	,062	,041	,100	1,484	,139	-,020	,143

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 13
Effects of rags-to-riches programs and control variables on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3,735	,753		4,960	,000	2,251	5,220
	Consumption of Rags-to-riches programs	,068	,042	,110	1,597	,112	-,016	,151
	Gender	-,063	,155	-,028	-,408	,684	-,369	,243
	Age	,083	,057	,106	1,450	,149	-,030	,197
	Ethnicity	-,002	,005	-,035	-,502	,616	-,011	,007
	Education level	,068	,053	,095	1,267	,206	-,038	,173
	Level of income	,128	,067	,134	1,915	,057	-,004	,260

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

5.4. Analysing the effects of game shows

The effects of game shows are also predicted by the transportation mechanism. Hypothesis 4a stipulates that consumers of game shows will be pessimistic about inequality because they reflect what they see in game shows onto the real world. Table 13 shows the linear regression analysis for the effect of game show consumption on perceptions of inequality. Table 14 includes the control variables. Table 13 shows a significant effect ($p = .009$; $r = .178$; $R^2 =$

.032). The analysis shows that, in line with the hypothesis, consuming game shows increases pessimism about inequality and, therefore, hypothesis 4a can be accepted.

Including the control variables weakens the effect (p = .05; r = .130; R^2 = .017). The effect remains strong enough to accept the hypothesis. Furthermore, again age and level of income have a positive and negative effect on pessimism about inequality respectively and they explain most of the variance.

Table 14
Effects of game shows on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Mode		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,188	,143		29,338	,000	3,907	4,470
	Consumption of Game Shows	,126	,048	,178	2,652	,009**	,032	,220

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 15
Effects of game shows and control variables on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,925	,806		6,111	,000	3,337	6,514
	Consumption of Game Shows	,093	,047	,130	1,968	,050*	,000	,185
	Gender	,059	,171	,022	,346	,730	-,277	,395
	Age	,248	,062	,272	3,998	,000***	,126	,370
	Ethnicity	-,005	,005	-,072	-1,111	,268	-,015	,004
	Education level	-,042	,058	-,052	-,737	,462	-,156	,071
	Level of income	-,258	,072	-,233	-3,566	,000***	-,401	-,115

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

With regards to the relationship between game shows and perceptions of social mobility, hypothesis 4b predicts that consumers of game shows will be pessimistic about social mobility. Table 16 shows an increase in optimism about social mobility ($p = .126$; $r = .104$; $R^2 = .011$). This effect is insignificant and therefore, I cannot accept or reject the hypothesis.

Table 16
Effects of game shows on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,447	,125		35,557	,000	4,201	4,694
	Consumption of Game Shows	,064	,042	,104	1,535	,126	-,018	,146

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 17, which includes the control variables, however, shows that consuming game shows has a significant and positive effect ($p = .033$; $r = .152$; $R^2 = .023$). Where in the previous models the control variables weakened the effect of media consumption, in the case of game shows the effect on perceptions of social mobility is strengthened. This indicates that the control variables do have a moderating effect on consuming certain media content types. Although table 16 does not show a significant effect, the data in table 17 prompts me to reject hypothesis 4b. Consumers of game shows are more optimistic about social mobility.

Table 17
Effects of game shows and control variables on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3,647	,745		4,899	,000	2,180	5,115
	Consumption of Game Shows	,093	,043	,152	2,151	,033*	,008	,179
	Gender	-,147	,158	-,065	-,936	,350	-,458	,163
	Age	,088	,057	,112	1,539	,125	-,025	,201
	Ethnicity	-,002	,004	-,033	-,474	,636	-,011	,007
	Education level	,072	,053	,101	1,356	,177	-,033	,177
	Level of income	,144	,067	,150	2,149	,033*	,012	,275

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

5.5. Analysing the effects of sports programs

Hypothesis 5a predicts that consuming sports programs causes pessimism about inequality through CORFing. CORFing is the mechanism where the blame of losing is shifted from 'us' to external factors. The linear regression model in table 18 shows the effect of consuming sports programs on perceptions of inequality. Table 19 includes the control variables. Table 18 shows a strong significant effect (p = .002; r = .207; R^2 = .043). Table 19 shows a similar albeit slightly weaker effect (p = 011; r = .168; R^2 = .028). Again, age and level of income have a the biggest (positive and negative) effect on pessimism about inequality, which may moderate the effect of sports program consumption. The positive effect of sports programs consumption supports hypothesis 5a that consumers of sports programs are more pessimistic about inequality. Therefore, hypothesis 5a can be accepted.

Table 18
Effects of sports programs on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,210	,126		33,435	,000	3,962	4,458
	Consumption of Sports Programs	,131	,042	,207	3,108	,002***	,048	,214

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 19
Effects of sports programs and control variables on perceptions of inequality

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,784	,802		5,965	,000	3,203	6,365
	Consumption of Sports Programs	,106	,041	,168	2,566	,011*	,025	,188
	Gender	,221	,170	,084	1,302	,194	-,114	,555
	Age	,218	,062	,239	3,511	,001***	,096	,341
	Ethnicity	-,005	,005	-,060	-,932	,353	-,014	,005
	Education level	-,053	,057	-,064	-,930	,354	-,164	,059
	Level of income	-,270	,072	-,245	-3,779	,000***	-,412	-,129

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfInequality
Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Hypothesis 5b predicts optimism about social mobility because of BIRGing. BIRGing occurs when consumers of sports programs reflect success on their own efforts. Table 20 shows the effect of sports programs consumption on perceptions of social mobility and table 21 includes the control variables. Table 20 shows a significant effect ($p = .021$; $r = .157$; $R^2 = .025$). The positive effect supports the hypothesis and based on the data in table 20, hypothesis

5b can be accepted. The control variables in table 21 do not have any significant effects nor does the effect of sports program consumption change in a significant manner.

Table 19

Effect of sports programs consumption on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	4,418	,110		40,100	,000	4,201	4,635
	Consumption of Sports Programs	,086	,037	,157	2,330	,021*	,013	,158

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

Table 20

Effects of sports programs consumption and control variables on perceptions of social mobility

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95,0% Confidence Interval for B	
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	3,638	,745		4,880	,000	2,168	5,107
	Consumption of Sports Programs	,083	,039	,152	2,162	,032*	,007	,159
	Gender	-,005	,158	-,002	-,031	,975	-,316	,306
	Age	,063	,058	,080	1,093	,276	-,051	,177
	Ethnicity	-,002	,004	-,027	-,391	,696	-,011	,007
	Education level	,060	,053	,085	1,145	,253	-,043	,164
	Level of income	,131	,067	,137	1,966	,051	,000	,262

a. Dependent Variable: PerceptionOfSocialMobility

Note: *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.005

5.6. Additional analyses

Multiple linear regression models show that age has a statistically significant relationship with perceptions of inequality of at least r = 0.200 whereas income often has a relationship of at most r = -0.200. This is interesting because it is likely that with higher age, a person's income also

increases. Therefore, one would expect that these two variables show a similar, not the opposite, relationship with perceptions of inequality. Yet, the two do not seem related ($r = .070$; $p = .304$; $R^2 = .005$), although some authors classify an effect of .05 as a small effect as well (Funder & Ozer, 2019).

This does not mean that age and income are not related. The use of a respondent database may have some effects. It can be assumed that older people that participate in filling in surveys do this for additional income which logically puts them in a lower income category. The sample substantiates this since only 22.9% of respondents earn more than €40.000 annually. Still, future research may inquire about this discrepancy; if age and income are related, how can they have the opposite relationship with perceptions of inequality?

With regards to social mobility, the linear regression models show consistently that income has the strongest relationship with social mobility, even though it was only statistically significant in one model. When insignificance is found, this may be due to the effect of the consumption variables. A linear regression analysis with just the income variable shows a relationship of $r = .152$ ($p = .025$; $R^2 = .023$). When the other control variables are included, the relationship remains significant ($r = .137$; $p = .05$; $R^2 = .035$). However, if the use of a respondent database did indeed distort the data on income levels of the respondents, additional research may provide different results.

5.7. Summary of the results

Almost all hypotheses are rejected, except for hypothesis 4a. In Table 2, an overview of the results is provided. Even though some hypotheses were rejected, the results did provide support for some of the theories.

Table 2
Overview of the results

Explanation	Hypothesis	Accepted	Supports the theory
Media Malaise Theory	**H1a:** News media equals pessimism about inequality	Yes	Yes
Media Malaise Theory	**H1b:** News media equals pessimism about social mobility	No	No
Reinforcement Hypothesis	**H2a:** Talk shows equals pessimism or optimism about inequality	No	No
Reinforcement Hypothesis	**H2b:** Talk shows equals pessimism or optimism about social mobility	No	No
Transportation mechanism	**H3a:** Rags-to-riches programs have no effect on perceptions of inequality	No	No
Transportation mechanism	**H3b:** Rags-to-riches programs equals optimism about social mobility	-	-
Transportation mechanism	**H4a:** Game shows equals pessimism about inequality	Yes	Yes
Transportation mechanism	**H4b:** Game shows equals pessimism about social mobility	No	No
CORFing	**H5a:** Sports programs equals pessimism about inequality	Yes	Yes
BIRGing	**H5b:** Sports programs equals optimism about social mobility	Yes	Yes

This research started by asking: *"To what extent do different media content types affect perceptions of inequality and social mobility differently?"* I predicted that consuming some media content types would equal increasing pessimism about inequality whereas others would increase optimism about inequality. Also, some would equal increasing pessimism about social mobility and others increasing optimism about social mobility. If this was true and most of the hypotheses were confirmed, this would indicate that different media content types affect different public perceptions differently. An indication, because a causal relationship cannot be confirmed using the chosen methodology. If the media do not have a uniform effect, this could

explain why empirical evidence for contradictory theories is found. Instead, when looking at the data, another conclusion can be drawn that still provides an interesting answer to the research question, although the exact answer to the research question is still open.

All media content types equal an increase of pessimism about inequality whereas they also equal an increase of optimism about social mobility. Thus, different media content types seem to affect *individual* public perceptions *similarly*. This is puzzling because, in the literature, it is widely argued that as people become pessimistic about inequality, they should also become more pessimistic about social mobility. An explanation could be that people use meritocratic beliefs to justify perceived inequality (Mijs, 2019). However, this research does not provide any clarificatory explanations but rather provides additional empirical evidence for this phenomenon.

Overall, this is a different answer than the one that was predicted. There are two possible explanations. Either different media content types have a similar relationship with individual public perceptions, or a confounding factor causes the phenomenon I observe in the data. The latter explanation seems likely. The literature provides myriad possible confounding factors. For example, many researchers found that the effect of information provision depends on factors internal to the recipient (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1943; St. George & Robinson-Weber, 1983; Bolsen et al. 2014; De Koster et al, 2016; Müller et al, 2017; Trump, 2018). Others find that external factors are more important (Walgrave & De Swert, 2004; Mijs & Hoy, forthcoming). Thus, how consumers of media content process new information may depend on factors within or outside the consumer and may not have to do with the information itself. In that case, it may not matter if a distinction between media content types is made because the explanatory mechanism is a confounding one. For example, what could matter most is a person's predisposition. That predisposition could also influence which content type a person

consumes or what effect a content type has. The latter option seems plausible based on the aforementioned research.

An important reason for this research was to see whether the media have a uniform effect on public perceptions. The data seem to indicate that there is a uniform relation between media consumption and individual perceptions, but different relations with different perceptions. This is a confusing conclusion because it is possible to argue both ways. Assuming that the effect is from consumption on perception, some can argue that the media have a uniform effect because they affect one perception similarly, e.g. they all cause pessimism about inequality. Others, however, can use this same data and argue that the media do not have a uniform effect because they affect multiple perceptions differently; either an increase in pessimism about inequality or in optimism about social mobility. The question that must be asked, however, is: "An effect on what?" The news media, for example, have a different relationship with perceptions of inequality than with perceptions of social mobility, providing evidence for both the MMT and the VCT. Therefore, it is useful to clarify beforehand whether an effect is measured on a specific public perception or on a collection of public perceptions.

Lastly, this research finds that consuming rags-to-riches programs equals strong pessimism about inequality. It is actually the strongest effect that is measured in this research. This is different from the expectations based on Kim's (2019) research. Further research may confirm or negate my conclusions.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this research, I aim to discover whether different media content types have different effects on perceptions of inequality and social mobility. I conceptualized five different media content types and designed and conducted a survey that gave insights into the consumption levels of these different media content types. I also measured the perceptions of inequality and social mobility.

I formulated hypotheses based on interdisciplinary literature and distilled theories to predict the effects of the different media content types. After the data was collected, I performed linear regression analyses to establish relationships between the consumption of media content types and the respondents' perceptions. Hypotheses 1a, 4a, 5a and 5b were confirmed, hypothesis 3b could not be confirmed and the other hypotheses were rejected. The data provided support for the Media Malaise Theory and its counterpart the Virtuous Cycle Theory, the Transportation Mechanism, and CORFing and BIRGing.

Overall, the data shows that consuming any media content types equals an increase in pessimism about inequality and an increase in optimism about social mobility. Thus, there are different relationships with different public perceptions, but similar relationships with specific public perceptions. This complicates the discussion on whether the media have a uniform effect on public perceptions because the results can be interpreted in a way that supports different arguments. It is most fruitful to ask on what the media have an effect; one specific public perception or multiple perceptions? Because of this discursive ambiguity, a definitive answer to the research question can, unfortunately, not be given.

This research confirms the strange phenomenon that higher perceptions of inequality somehow equal higher perceptions of social mobility. Alternative factors may explain how this is possible, although it cannot be ruled out that the media have an influence on this as well. This shows the necessity for additional research.

First, additional research into confounding factors and their influence on public perceptions in relation to the effects of media consumption is needed. I included some control variables but there are many political, social and economic factors that influence public perceptions and more testing is required. Furthermore, the type of research design I utilized rarely results in strong *internal validity* as causal inferences are seldomly unambiguous (Bryman, 2016). As a result, it is unclear to what *extent* different media content types affect

public perceptions and what direction these relationships have. Based on the data in this research, the different media content types explain some 1% to 6% of the effects. However, the effects of different media content types measured in this research are likely not sui generis.

Second, the conceptualization of the media content types in this research is useful but not tested. Future research could use a different categorization which may provide different results. This would also provide more insight into how the media can best be categorized.

In conclusion, the research question cannot be conclusively answered and the findings complicate the debate on whether the media have a uniform effect. The research is, however, in some aspects a success. Some of the findings may be of interest for policy makers or media outlets. For example, the media can be utilized to create awareness for inequality, or to influence perceptions of social mobility which may alter attitudes towards redistributive policies. It provides a categorization of the media into different media content types and it confirms the puzzling phenomenon that more pessimism about inequality is accompanied with more optimism about social mobility. It also stresses the necessity for additional research into this direction.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Information about the selection and recruitment of respondents

PANELSHEET 2020

About us

Respondenten.nl has been active in the field of respondent recruitment for more than 15 years.

Traditionally focused on recruitment for qualitative research, but has also been active in online research since 2017. The Respondenten.nl panel consists of more than 50,000 respondents, of which more than 30,000 have actively participated in research in the past year. Respondenten.nl is in possession of the ISO 20252: 2019 certificate and the Fair Data quality mark and is a member of the MOA and ESOMAR.

Recruitment

The Respondenten.nl panel was recruited from various sources: including via social media and a network of media partners, street recruitment, recruitment from surveys, targeted banners, other panels and via the tell-a-friend principle.

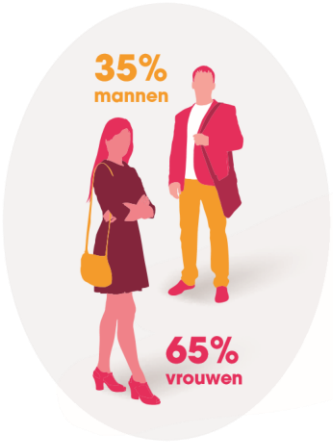
Quality

The quality of the panel is very important to us. To ensure that our customers get the right respondents at the table or behind the PC, we have taken the following measures:

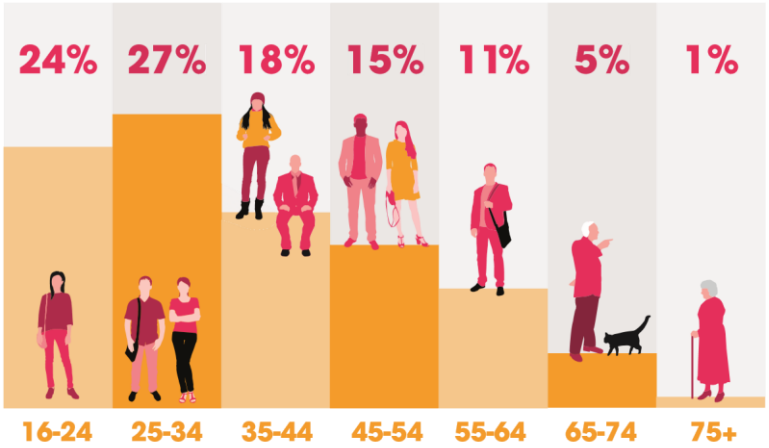
- Double opt-in when registering
- Respondents who do not try their best in one way or another (also based on customer feedback) or even commit fraud are excluded from further participation (blacklist)
- Much qualitative research is screened by telephone
- In online research, checks are carried out, among other things on the speed with which a questionnaire is completed and the quality of the data (including straightliners and open answers)
- IP check by means of cookies
- Check for duplicates via e-mail address and IBAN number

Core-statistics

Geslacht



Leeftijd



Opleiding

Basis	3%
LBO/VMBO (kader- of beroepsgericht)	2%
VMBO (theoretisch gemengd)/MAVO	7%
MBO	27%
HAVO/VWO	11%
HBO	33%
WO/HBO doctoraal/master	17%

We also know this data from respondents: gross family income, Nielsen region, living situation, number of children, home ownership, work situation, industry, position, profession, number of colleagues and much more

Need more information?

Mail info@respondenten.nl or call +31 (0)20 489 76 80

Appendix B - Checklist Ethical and Privacy Aspects of Research

ERASMUS UNIVERSITEIT ROTTERDAM

CHECKLIST ETHICAL AND PRIVACY ASPECTS OF RESEARCH

INSTRUCTION

This checklist should be completed for every research study that is conducted at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology (DPAS). This checklist should be completed *before* commencing with data collection or approaching participants. Students can complete this checklist with help of their supervisor.

This checklist is a mandatory part of the empirical master's thesis and has to be uploaded along with the research proposal.

The guideline for ethical aspects of research of the Dutch Sociological Association (NSV) can be found on their website (http://www.nsv-sociologie.nl/?page_id=17). If you have doubts about ethical or privacy aspects of your research study, discuss and resolve the matter with your EUR supervisor. If needed and if advised to do so by your supervisor, you can also consult Dr. Jennifer A. Holland, coordinator of the Sociology Master's Thesis program.

PART I: GENERAL INFORMATION

Project title: Master Thesis: "The uniform effect of the media: fact or fiction? The different effects of media content types on beliefs in inequality and the meritocracy."

Name, email of student: Gerben M. Veenema, 481206gv@student.eur.nl

Name, email of supervisor: Jonathan J. B. Mijs, mijs@essb.eur.nl

Start date and duration: March 22nd, 2021 – June 20th, 2021

Is the research study conducted within DPAS YES

If 'NO': at or for what institute or organization will the study be conducted?

(e.g. internship organization)

PART II: HUMAN SUBJECTS

1. Does your research involve human participants. YES

   If 'NO': skip to part V.

   If 'YES': does the study involve medical or physical research? NO

   Research that falls under the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act (WMO) must first be submitted to an accredited medical research ethics committee or the Central Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (CCMO).

2. Does your research involve field observations without manipulations that will not involve identification of participants. NO

   If 'YES': skip to part IV.

3. Research involving completely anonymous data files (secondary data that has been anonymized by someone else). NO

   If 'YES': skip to part IV.

PART III: PARTICIPANTS

1. Will information about the nature of the study and about what participants can expect during the study be withheld from them? NO

2. Will any of the participants not be asked for verbal or written 'informed consent,' whereby they agree to participate in the study? NO

3. Will information about the possibility to discontinue the participation at any time be withheld from participants? NO

4. Will the study involve actively deceiving the participants? NO
Note: almost all research studies involve some kind of deception of participants. Try to think about what types of deception are ethical or non-ethical (e.g. purpose of the study is not told, coercion is exerted on participants, giving participants the feeling that they harm other people by making certain decisions, etc.).

5. Does the study involve the risk of causing psychological stress or negative emotions beyond those normally encountered by participants? NO

6. Will information be collected about special categories of data, as defined by the GDPR (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, trade union membership, genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a person, data concerning mental or physical health, data concerning a person's sex life or sexual orientation)? YES

7. Will the study involve the participation of minors (<18 years old) or other groups that cannot give consent? NO

8. Is the health and/or safety of participants at risk during the study? NO

9. Can participants be identified by the study results or can the confidentiality of the participants' identity not be ensured? NO

10. Are there any other possible ethical issues with regard to this study? NO

If you have answered 'YES' to any of the previous questions, please indicate below why this issue is unavoidable in this study.

The survey will ask respondents about their ethnicity, gender, education level and income. This is important to test confounding explanations of their perceptions of social mobility and inequality. Such explanations may have consequences for the validity of this research. However, at no point will respondents be identifiable as their names and other personal data will not be asked.

What safeguards are taken to relieve possible adverse consequences of these issues (e.g., informing participants about the study afterwards, extra safety regulations, etc.).

There are no possible adverse consequences of this issue as the participants or not identifiable.

Are there any unintended circumstances in the study that can cause harm or have negative (emotional) consequences to the participants? Indicate what possible circumstances this could be.

No.

Please attach your informed consent form in Appendix I, if applicable.

Continue to part IV.

PART IV: SAMPLE

Where will you collect or obtain your data?

Online via RespondentenDatabase.nl, via WhatsApp and offline by dissemination through my personal network,

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the (anticipated) size of your sample?

The size should be between 200 and 300 respondents.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

What is the size of the population from which you will sample?

17.481.475 as of Tuesday March, 16th, 2021 according to the website of the Central Bureau of Statistics.

Note: indicate for separate data sources.

Continue to part V.

Part V: Data storage and backup

Where and when will you store your data in the short term, after acquisition?

Offline, on an external hard drive with a backup on a different external hard drive.

Note: indicate for separate data sources, for instance for paper-and pencil test data, and for digital data files.

Who is responsible for the immediate day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data arising from your research?

I, Gerben Veenema, am responsible for the day-to-day management, storage and backup of the data.

How (frequently) will you back-up your research data for short-term data security?

Weekly for as long as changes to the dataset are made. After the last changes are made to the dataset, one final back-up will be made which will be stored on a separate hard drive.

In case of collecting personal data how will you anonymize the data?

N/A

Note: It is advisable to keep directly identifying personal details separated from the rest of the data. Personal details are then replaced by a key/ code. Only the code is part of the database with data and the list of respondents/research subjects is kept separate.

PART VI: SIGNATURE

Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the ethical guidelines in the conduct of your study. This includes providing information to participants about the study and ensuring confidentiality in storage and use of personal data. Treat participants respectfully, be on time at appointments, call participants when they have signed up for your study and fulfil promises made to participants.

Furthermore, it is your responsibility that data are authentic, of high quality and properly stored. The principle is always that the supervisor (or strictly speaking the Erasmus University Rotterdam) remains owner of the data, and that the student should therefore hand over all data to the supervisor.

Hereby I declare that the study will be conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. I have answered the questions truthfully.

Name student:	Name (EUR) supervisor:
Gerben M. Veenema	Jonathan J. B. Mijs
	
Date: March 20th, 2021	Date: April 20th, 2021

Appendix C – Informed Consent Form

TOESTEMMING VOOR HET GEBRUIKEN VAN UW INZENDING

In het kader van de AVG is uw toestemming vereist om de resultaten van de door u ingevulde enquête te gebruiken voor het onderzoek. Ik verzoek u daarom om het volgende goed door te nemen en daarna aan te geven of u akkoord gaat. Als u niet akkoord wenst te gaan kunt u niet deelnemen aan de enquête.

BENT U TE IDENTIFICEREN?

Deze enquête is volledig anoniem. U bent op geen enkele wijze door de onderzoeker of door derde partijen identificeerbaar.

U kunt op ieder gewenst ogenblik deze enquête afsluiten. Zolang u de enquête niet voltooid zullen de resultaten ook niet worden verzameld.

WIE NEEMT DE ENQUÊTE AF EN WAAROM?

Mijn naam is Gerben Veenema en ik studeer sociologie aan de faculteit "Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences" (ESSB) van de Erasmus Universiteit. Als u vragen heeft kunt u mij benaderen via mijn mailadres: 481206gv@student.eur.nl.

Ik kan helaas niet teveel prijsgeven over het doel van het onderzoek om uw antwoorden niet te beïnvloeden. De enquête dient als empirische onderbouwing voor mijn scriptie-onderzoek.

WELKE GEGEVENS WORDEN VERZAMELD?

Tijdens de enquête worden u enkele persoonlijke vragen gesteld die op geen enkele wijze uw identiteit prijsgeven. De vragen betreffen:

- Uw geslacht;
- Uw leeftijd

- Uw etniciteit;
- Uw opleidings- / inkomensniveau;
- Uw gebruik van bepaalde media;
- Uw mening over bepaalde maatschappelijke thema's.

HOE LANG WORDEN DE GEGEVENS BEWAARD?

Gezien de wetenschappelijke relevantie van de gegevens worden de anonieme gegevens voor altijd bewaard. Het is technisch niet mogelijk om identificeerbare gegevens te verzamelen. Mocht er toch een identificeerbaar gegeven worden verzameld, bijvoorbeeld doordat u contact opneemt met de onderzoeker of het toeziend orgaan, dan worden deze gegevens onverwijld verwijderd nadat de correspondentie is afgewikkeld.

WIE HEEFT TOEGANG TOT DEZE GEGEVENS?

- De onderzoeker: Gerben Veenema;
- De Erasmus Universiteit (met name de faculteit ESSB).

WELKE RECHTEN HEEFT U?

U heeft verschillende rechten die u kunt uitoefenen ook nadat u de enquête heeft ingevuld en ingestuurd. Deze rechten zijn:

- Uw gegevens in te zien;
- Uw gegevens aan te passen, te verwijderen of de verwerking van uw gegevens te beperken;
- Uw toestemming in te trekken;
- Een klacht in te dienen bij een toeziend orgaan.

U kunt uw rechten uitoefenen door een email te sturen naar 481206gv@student.eur.nl.

WILT U EEN KLACHT INDIENEN?

Mocht u niet tevreden zijn over de afhandeling van uw vraag, dan kunt u een klacht indienen bij de Functionaris Gegevensbescherming van de Erasmus Universiteit middels het emailadres privacy@eur.nl. Vermeld daarbij:

1. De persoon tegen wie u een klacht wilt indienen: Gerben Veenema;
2. De enquête waarover het gaat: MCTE-21;
3. De aard van uw klacht;
4. Gegevens over de correspondentie die u met mij heeft gevoerd.

Als u akkoord gaat dient u dat hieronder aan te geven. Als u niet akkoord gaat dient u de enquête af te sluiten.