

# Cultural Consumption

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## Abstract

Research on cultural consumption is a flourishing field across different disciplines within the social sciences. It refers to the consumption of goods and services with primarily aesthetic functions and only secondarily instrumental uses. We present the main theoretical approaches, empirical methods, and results of research on the main dimensions of cultural consumption, the explanation of correlations between these dimensions and social positions, and the impact of cultural consumption on the reproduction of structures of resource inequalities in societies, focusing in particular on Bourdieu's foundational work. Future research should move beyond this approach by developing more precise concepts and more systematic mechanism-based theoretical explanations. We suggest an approach based on rational choice theory, because we deem it capable of overcoming the severe limitations of practice theories. Furthermore, we propose more rigorous methods for theory development and the establishment of causal claims, such as agent-based modeling, longitudinal analysis, and experimental methods.

## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS CULTURAL CONSUMPTION ... AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Research on cultural consumption is a flourishing interdisciplinary field across different disciplines within the social sciences. It refers to the consumption of goods and services with primarily aesthetic functions and only secondarily instrumental uses. The relative importance of primary and secondary functions may nevertheless differ between goods and services. Cultural consumption is primarily linked with the sphere of arts, culture, and leisure, encompassing consumption behaviors as varied as visits to cultural events (theater, concerts, cinema, etc.), watching TV, reading books, clothing, furnishing, or eating out in restaurants.

At first glance, cultural consumption may look like a sociologically rather moot topic, mainly relevant only for diversion and amusement. We will demonstrate, however, its strong ties to the class structure, the unequal distribution of resources in society, and—based on the theory of cultural

reproduction—its important causal role in the reproduction of the structure of inequality in society. Our essay covers three main topics: first, the issue of empirically describing the field of cultural consumption, its main dimensions, and their social correlates; second, the question of how to explain the correlation between social position and cultural practices; and finally, the role of cultural consumption in the reproduction of social structure and the allocation of resources in society. Our suggestions for future research concern mainly the second and the third area of research. We argue for more precise, mechanism-based explanations and for more rigorous methods of establishing causal relations in these fields.

#### WHAT ARE THE MAIN DIMENSIONS OF CULTURAL CONSUMPTION?

One of the main objectives of cultural consumption research in sociology is to identify a small number of continuous dimensions along which all types of cultural consumption activities are distributed. Such dimensions represent a specific logic of sorting and differentiating consumption activities; and in order to be sociologically relevant, dimensions need to be socially meaningful, that is, they need to relate to some sort of social structuring or be able to define certain social boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

Perhaps the most influential dimension of cultural consumption in sociology—put forward prominently by Bourdieu (1984)—is the differentiation between highbrow and lowbrow kinds of cultural consumption. This is an aesthetic dimension associated with the distinction between form and substance, that is, between the formal configuration and refinement of cultural practices (e.g. classical music, art films, haute cuisine, etc.) and their function in terms of content and material significance (e.g. folk music, romantic comedies, convenience food, etc.). This highbrow–lowbrow dimension is, as argued by Bourdieu, directly related to a society’s social (class) structure and thus socially meaningful (homology thesis). As members of higher social strata are endowed with sufficient amounts of cultural and economic capital, they are able to understand, enjoy, and afford the formal standards of highbrow cultural consumption. At the same time, highbrow activities operate as a signal of superior social status and can thus be used to effect distinction from others. As a consequence, since they are related to high social status, highbrow activities are perceived as legitimate culture, meaning that they constitute—even though performed only by a minority—the dominant culture of society.

Some of Bourdieu’s original predictions are corroborated in recent empirical studies. For example, Falk and Katz-Gerro (2016), Gerhards (2008), and van Hek and Kraaykamp (2013) all find strong correlations between highbrow cultural consumption and indicators of education, income, and

occupational class. Van Eijck and Bargeman (2004) even conclude that educational attainment is nowadays more strongly related to highbrow cultural consumption than in 1980. Most of the studies did also find strong effects of other structural indicators, primarily age, gender, and urbanity of residence, suggesting that the social gradient of the highbrow–lowbrow dimension is much more complex than originally suggested. Moreover, exclusive highbrow consumption seems to be practiced only by very small segments of contemporary societies (Gerhards, 2008; van Hek & Kraaykamp, 2013).

Other studies argue that the highbrow–lowbrow dimension is not the only and, more specifically, not the principal logic for differentiating cultural consumption. Roose (2015, p. 568) reports that “for people born after 1980: legitimate art is less central as a distinctive force”, indicating that other forms of cultural consumption are now serving this purpose. The most prominent alternative to the highbrow–lowbrow distinction has been proposed by Richard Peterson under the name of omnivorousness (Peterson & Kern, 1996). He found that people who like traditional highbrow kinds of cultural consumption also like middle- and low-brow ones. Therefore he suggested a new dimension of cultural consumption, differentiating individuals by the breadth (instead of the “brow-level”) of their tastes. Although there are several conceptions of cultural omnivorousness (Ollivier, 2008; Robette & Roueff, 2014; Warde & Gayo-Cal, 2009), the main idea is to contrast those engaging in a wide variety of cultural activities from diverse brow-levels—thus taking up an open-minded stance toward arts and culture—with those engaging only in a limited number of activities, thus exhibiting a rather narrow-minded and inactive conduct.

Omnivorousness, in Peterson’s original sense, essentially refers to the breadth of people’s cultural tastes and preferences (i.e., likes and dislikes) and not necessarily to the breadth of their actual cultural consumption behavior. To refer to the latter, the terms *broad engagement* or *eclecticism* are more appropriate (Robette & Roueff, 2014). In accordance with this, most international studies on cultural consumption behavior identify an *engagement–disengagement* dimension. They differentiate between engagement in various cultural activities and disengagement in most activities besides watching TV or listening to the radio as the predominant logic of differentiation (Coulangeon, 2013; Katz-Gerro & Jæger, 2013; Roose, van Eijck, & Lievens, 2012; Weingartner & Rössel, forthcoming). Nevertheless, these studies also show that the distinction between highbrow (established, traditional) and lowbrow (popular, emergent) activities is still the second most important factor in differentiating cultural consumption. Notions of omnivorousness/eclecticism should therefore not be conceived as a substitute for, but rather as a complement to the highbrow–lowbrow dimension.

Still, cultural omnivorousness/eclecticism seems to have replaced highbrow exclusiveness as a signifier of superior social status, as it is related, in many instances, to high levels of education, income, and/or occupational class. The highbrow–lowbrow dimension itself is now mainly structured by age and—to a lesser extent—by education and gender, with the elderly, the higher educated, and women being more on the highbrow side. This finding is in contrast to Bourdieu’s classical theory and points again to the fact that the social structuring of cultural consumption is rather complex.

In fact, this complexity even increases, as research in connection with the omnivore thesis has shown. First, there are additional dimensions of cultural differentiation. Argued from a global perspective, breadth of engagement should not only refer to the combination of different aesthetic kinds but also include different regional cultures. Accordingly, many recent studies identify different dimensions of cosmopolitanism, discriminating between open, cosmopolitan and more locally orientated, less open cultural consumption (Meuleman & Savage, 2013; Rössel & Schroedter, 2015). In a similar vein, Sullivan and Katz-Gerro (2007) suggest that, besides breadth of cultural engagement, frequency of consumption plays an independent role and should thus be considered as an additional dimension of voraciousness. Second—and already observed by Bourdieu—Holt (1997) emphasizes that the kinds of activities consumed (the “what”) is less relevant for drawing social boundaries by cultural means than the way in which they are consumed (the “how”). Hence, dimensions of cultural differentiation should rather refer to the mode of consumption and, analogously, omnivorousness should refer to the breadth of modes (Daenekindt & Roose, 2017; Hanquinet, Roose, & Savage, 2014; Jarness, 2015). Third, identifying relations between dimensions of cultural consumption and social indicators depends on a multitude of methodological decisions. For example, empirical results may differ according to what kinds of cultural activities are considered as dependent variables (e.g., only highbrow activities or activities from various brow-levels; see above), whether public or private cultural consumption is studied (Daenekindt & Roose, 2013; Roose & Vander Stichele, 2010), whether actual behavior or cultural preferences are under observation (Yaish & Katz-Gerro, 2012), or which statistical methods are applied (Leguina, 2015).

#### WHAT ARE THE MAIN DETERMINANTS OF CULTURAL CONSUMPTION?

Bourdieu (1984) explains the correspondence between social class structure and cultural consumption by reference to the concept of habitus (homology thesis). Habitus denotes a system of dispositions that structures an actor’s thoughts, perceptions, and evaluations. Essentially, habitus entails a specific

taste and an ability to decode the meaning of, and therefore enjoy, cultural products. Individuals in the same social position possess a common habitus as a consequence of the specific class conditions under which they live and grow up. They, therefore, pursue the same cultural practices.

Labeled as practice theory, Bourdieu's approach has become very influential in consumption research. We think, however, that the mechanisms that render the connection between social position and cultural consumption intelligible should be explicated more precisely and developed in a direction that makes them applicable in systematic explanatory endeavors (Hedström, 2005; Jæger & Breen, 2016). First, the concept of habitus does not clearly distinguish between taste, values, perceptions, and capabilities (Yaish & Katz-Gerro, 2012). Second, the theory does not specify how these constructs determine behavior, especially in conjunction with restrictions such as the available supply of cultural products and services. We believe that it is important to differentiate these explanatory variables and specify how they function. Third, Bourdieu does not give a clear account of how social position influences the habitus. For example, are educational effects based on cognitive capacities, mimetic learning, or intentional instructions by parents during primary socialization? A more systematic discussion of these processes is needed. This implies, of course, the necessity of testing the mechanisms empirically. We will now outline an explanatory theory of cultural consumption that retains Bourdieu's key insights while avoiding these theoretical deficiencies.

Fundamentally, such a theory needs to include an explicit behavioral model and situational mechanisms (Hedström, 2005). The behavioral model should refer to taste as well as restrictions. It should also be able to make clear predictions. We have, therefore, based our approach on rational choice theory, which—in a nutshell—explains behavior by preferences (taste) and opportunities (resources and restrictions). In addition, it includes the explicit decision rule that an actor “chooses those actions that satisfy their preferences to the greatest extent, taking into account the constraints” (Opp, 1999, p. 173; Rössel, 2008). Actors choose between cultural products in light of their cultural preferences and the opportunities for cultural consumption. The model implies an array of testable predictions. It follows, for example, that cultural preferences have an effect only if there are sufficient opportunities for cultural consumption (i.e., low costs). This has been largely confirmed in empirical research. While we advocate rational choice theory as a reasonable point of departure for explaining cultural consumption, other more complex models—which take, for example, routines into account—are also viable if they allow more precise predictions (Weingartner, 2013).

In a second analytical step, the origin of preferences and opportunities needs to be explained. Such an explanation should clarify the situational

mechanisms in order to minimize the “black box” between structural and behavioral variables (Hedström, 2005). Furthermore, in light of prior empirical research, the model should be more pluralistic in terms of antecedents. Thus, apart from the position in social space (economic and cultural capital), research may also take into account other social categories (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, lifestyle groups) or features of the social environment (e.g., supply, or state involvement). For lack of space, we will focus on education and the supply of cultural goods.

Education has been shown to be one of the most robust influences on cultural consumption. Yaish and Katz-Gerro (2012) demonstrated that the respondent’s education primarily determines preferences for cultural goods and only indirectly actual participation. Consequently, taste seems to be an important mediating factor in the educational effect. One important explanation of how education shapes taste is the theory of information processing (Ganzeboom, 1982), which states that better educated individuals possess the cognitive skills to enjoy more complex cultural goods. This argument is akin to Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of art reception, stressing the ability to decode cultural products as part of the habitus. However, research by Reeves and de Vries (2016) revealed that it is not higher education per se that fosters a taste for highbrow culture (or omnivorousness), but rather education in the humanities. Thus, information processing does not seem to explain education-based taste differentials. These differences seem to stem from diverging processes of educational socialization.

Since educational attainment partially depends on social origin, differences between educational groups may be traced back to the primary socialization in the family context. In a study by van Hek and Kraaykamp (2015), active cultural guidance by parents (e.g. going to the theater together) promoted educational attainment as well as cultural consumption, while the influence of mere parental cultural participation was negligible. This contradicts Bourdieu’s (1984) claim that cultural socialization takes place unconsciously through mimetic learning, but indicates that the transfer of cultural capital may be based on active parental investment (Jæger & Breen, 2016), as also discussed in the following section. Research on educational effects, therefore, makes clear that future research needs to test Bourdieu’s original ideas more rigorously, which is possible only on the basis of explicit theoretical mechanisms.

The supply of cultural goods was largely neglected in Bourdieu’s early work on cultural consumption, whereas his field-theoretical studies impressively analyze the dynamics of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1996). One important implication we can derive from this research is that the existence of partially autonomous cultural fields (e.g., the field of haute couture) is a precondition for cultural consumption. Such fields provide cultural goods

with sufficient formal complexity—a necessary condition for the aesthetic appreciation described above. Research by Lizardo and Skiles (2009) on the television industry supports this argument. In mass-culture regimes with a high profit orientation, television programs are standardized and marketed toward a general audience. The resulting lack of formal complexity deters cultural highbrows from consuming a broad range of genres. By contrast, in more autonomous markets, a wide range of programs is attractive for consumers with an aesthetic disposition. Consequently, more autonomous cultural fields provide products that allow an omnivorous taste pattern, whereas mass-culture regimes give rise to a highbrow-lowbrow cultural pattern.

One basic problem in research on supply effects, however, concerns endogeneity. For example, Gerhards (2008) presents evidence that the supply of cultural goods correlates with high culture consumption (operas, concerts, etc.) in 27 European countries. Yet, this does not clarify whether supply fosters demand or demand fosters supply. In contrast, Rössel and Weingartner (2016) conducted a quasi-experimental study. They established that the inauguration of a new theater increased the share of theater visitors in the region, thus providing strong evidence for a causal effect of the cultural opportunity structure. These results demonstrate the relevance of the supply of cultural goods for cultural consumption and the necessity of using more rigorous causal-analytic methods.

#### WHAT IS CULTURAL CONSUMPTION GOOD FOR?

Cultural consumption has important social consequences apart from individual pleasure, distraction, or enjoyment. It is causally involved in vital social processes such as status attainment or network formation. The most important theoretical starting point for the study of such effects is again Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and cultural reproduction, which attempts to explain the intergenerational reproduction of classes and social positions. Following Lamont and Lareau (1988, p. 156), we may define cultural capital as "widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preference, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion". More generally, we may define it as familiarity with the dominant (legitimate) culture of a society, which in Bourdieu's work and in most empirical studies is usually defined as classical highbrow culture. Cultural consumption, the respective tastes, and the necessary knowledge and behavior therefore form a major part of cultural capital. In empirical research on cultural capital, it is often operationalized as reading, visits to cultural institutions, or the presence of cultural objects such as books and works of art in the household. According to Jæger and Breen (2016), who recently systematized the theory of cultural

reproduction and provided—to some extent—a review of its empirical support, the theory contains the following core theorems: parents are endowed with a certain level of cultural capital; they decide, based on a cost–benefit calculation, to actively invest part of it in their children; and they furthermore transmit it through children’s exposure to cultural capital in the home. Children are able to convert cultural capital into high educational performance, even controlled for actual ability, because teachers misperceive this familiarity with dominant culture as a signal of academic excellence and thus concentrate their support and attention on those children. The same process takes place in the labor market, where educational credentials and cultural capital lead to higher occupational and class positions. There is a lot of (not always completely) conclusive empirical evidence for the relevance of cultural capital to educational outcomes (Jæger & Breen, 2016; Lareau & Weininger, 2003). However, there is much less evidence for the conversion of educational credentials and cultural capital to occupational success and class destinations. A few field-experimental studies show that signals of high class origin and highbrow cultural consumption (Jackson, 2009; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016) are relevant in hiring decisions, even controlled for education, whereas Georg (2016) comes to the conclusion that cultural capital only has an impact on educational achievement, not on occupational positioning. There is therefore an urgent need for further empirical studies on the role of cultural capital in labor market outcomes.

Apart from educational and occupational attainment, the theory of cultural reproduction has been broadened and applied to several topics such as prosocial behavior, trust, attitudes toward homosexuality, housing choices, and life satisfaction. However, the most important field of application is the role of cultural capital in the formation of social relations and networks. There is comprehensive empirical evidence demonstrating that acquaintances, friends, and spouses exhibit substantial similarities with regard to cultural tastes, preferences, and consumption. The most serious methodological issue for this line of research is, however, the need to disentangle the role of homophilous selection and retention of friendship relations and intimate partnerships on one hand, and of mutual influence on the other (Arranz Becker & Lois, 2010; Della Posta, Shi, & Macy, 2015; Lizardo, 2006). Existing research based on panel data and experimental approaches shows that both processes are at work and that the impact of social networks shaping cultural capital is not one-way; there is also evidence of the reverse mechanism of cultural capital structuring social networks. In an important study, Lizardo (2006) has shown that highbrow tastes further the establishment of strong network ties, whereas popular tastes increase the likelihood of weak network ties. This means that persons

with omnivorous tastes are in the best position to create networks made up of a balanced mixture of weak and strong ties, and therefore have a higher endowment of social capital.

The research on the social consequences of cultural consumption we have presented is by no means conceptually precise in every sense, and by no means empirically fully conclusive. We have therefore identified four main areas of potential improvement for this line of research:

The first issue is conceptual: the concept of cultural capital in particular has a certain opaque quality (Jæger & Breen, 2016). Going beyond the definition mentioned above, some authors have argued that diverse competencies and skills (e.g., IT skills) should be included in the concept of cultural capital. Our position is to follow the definition by Lamont and Lareau (1988), because it is not productive to conflate the notion of cultural capital with other concepts such as competencies, skills, or human capital. However, future research has to take into account that the dominant culture may change over time and vary between different countries and societal fields. There is empirical evidence showing that the type of cultural capital successful in prestigious law firms is different from the cultural capital leading to a job in advertising agencies (Koppman, 2015; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). There is also some empirical evidence that the cultural and human capital of migrants is to a certain degree country-specific: cultural capital linked to the country of origin does not further educational and occupational advancement in the country of residence (Leopold & Shavit, 2013). Empirical research on cultural capital thus needs to be context-sensitive in its operationalization. This leads us to the second issue: the urgency of comparative and longitudinal studies in this field. To clarify the theoretical mechanism underlying the statistical relationship—for example, between highbrow cultural capital and educational as well as labor market outcomes—it is necessary to study this phenomenon in different countries, labor market fields, and over time. The degree to which highbrow cultural capital is important may depend on the degree to which highbrow culture is in fact institutionally dominant in a certain country or a specific field in a certain historical era. The theory of cultural reproduction thus needs to be linked to Bourdieu's field theory (section titled "What are the Main Determinants of Cultural Consumption?"). However—and this brings us to the third issue—despite the importance of Bourdieu's work in this area, there is an urgent necessity to theoretically systematize his approach and to go beyond his work to specify the underlying mechanisms. Jæger and Breen (2016), for example, connected the theory of cultural reproduction to rational choice theory to account for the specific mechanism of decision making involved in parental investment of cultural capital. Another fruitful avenue of theoretical innovation would be the introduction of signaling and game theory into the explanation of the

role of cultural capital as a signal of important underlying qualities such as high status, earning power, sociability (Gambetta, 2009). Agent-based modeling could be a very productive tool in advancing systematic theoretical explanations in this field (Della Posta *et al.*, 2015). Finally, empirical research on the impact of cultural capital would profit greatly from the broadening of empirical research methods, especially when it comes to establishing causal relations. Longitudinal studies based on survey panel data (Arranz Becker & Lois, 2010; Georg, 2016) or experimental studies (Jackson, 2009; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016) would be an important step beyond the current norm of mainly cross-sectional survey and qualitative interview designs, especially in order to establish causal explanations.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have presented the main theoretical approaches, empirical methods, and results of research on the main dimensions of cultural consumption, the explanation of correlations between these dimensions and social positions, and the impact of cultural consumption on the reproduction of structures of resource inequalities in societies, focusing in particular on Bourdieu's foundational work in this field. Future research should move beyond this approach by developing more precise concepts and more systematic mechanism-based theoretical explanations. Concordant with other authors in the field (Jæger & Breen, 2016), we suggest an approach based on rational choice theory, because we deem it capable of overcoming the severe limitations of practice theories. Furthermore, we propose more rigorous methods for theory development and the establishment of causal claims, such as agent-based modeling, longitudinal analysis, and experimental methods, which move beyond the current norm of analyzing cross-sectional surveys or cross-sectional qualitative interviews.

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