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Short communication

The instability of omnivorous cultural taste over time

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ABSTRACT

The omnivore is a form of cultural consumer characterized by conspicuous diversity rather than refinement and exclusion. This study updates previous research comparing breadth of musical taste in 1982–1992 and finds that, contrary to expectations, the high levels of omnivorousness seen in 1992 had declined by 2002 and 2008. We find that this reversion cannot be explained by demographic trends like cohort replacement. Rather it is either the case that omnivorousness was a fad peaking some time around 1992 or we simply cannot know the changing popularity of omnivorousness over time as changes in survey methodology render direct comparisons unreliable.

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1. The discovery of omnivorous consumption

From the middle of the nineteenth century, Americans signaled their high status by patronizing the fine arts and, equally as important, shunning all forms of popular culture, a pattern known as highbrow snobbery (DiMaggio, 1982; Levine, 1988), and while there was informal evidence that this formation of high status was on the wane, it remained the accepted view of elite status consumption in academic circles through the 1980s (Peterson, 1997). In the 1990s however a series of studies showed

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¹ As was noted earlier in the pages of *Poetics*, Professor Peterson died in 2010. This paper represents work that Professors Rossman and Peterson worked on together, and that Professor Rossman continued to work on after Professor Peterson's passing.

that the highbrow snob was being replaced by a consumption pattern termed omnivorousness. Two highly cited pieces established this literature: an edited volume chapter that described omnivorousness based on 1982 data (Peterson & Simkus, 1992) and an *American Sociological Review* article that compared 1982–1992 data to establish that omnivorousness was increasingly common (Peterson & Kern, 1996). The rising omnivore shows familiarity not only with the fine arts but with a wide range of popular culture and activities as well. Subsequent studies have shown that this pattern of omnivorous consumption exists in many countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, and Spain (e.g., Bellavance, Valex, & Ratté, 2004; Coulangeon, 2003; Emmison, 2003; Fisher & Preece, 2003; Holbrook, Weiss, & Habich, 2002; López-Sintas & García-Álvarez, 2004; Van Eijck, 2001; Warde, Martens, & Olsen, 1999).

The consumption practices of low status taste were reconceptualized at the same time. The view of popular culture as brutalizing entertainment and those who consumed it as lowbrow couch-potatoes willing to take any entertainment on offer (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972), was replaced by a new empirically based finding that low status people tend to choose one form of entertainment and shun others. Thus, low status people tend to be, for example, country music univores, gospel music univores, or rock univores, but they consume neither eclectically as individuals nor homogeneously in the aggregate (Abramson & Inglehart, 1992; Bryson, 1997; Peterson & Simkus, 1992).

Over the past two decades, there has been a great deal of debate about the meaning of omnivorousness, as well as its causes, correlates, and consequences. (For a review see Peterson (2005)). Much of this research has been characterized by the argument presented in Peterson and Kern's (1996) article to the effect that omnivorousness is an increasingly dominant aesthetic. Peterson and Kern (1996) have proven to be highly influential, having over 1200 citations in Google Scholar by 2015. In this article we take the opportunity provided by more recent data to replicate and update their finding and ask if the prevalence of omnivorousness is continuing to increase or was it, at least in the American case, just a passing fad? Moreover, can the observed trends be explained by demographic trends (e.g., if younger, more omnivorous, birth cohorts are replacing older, more univorous, birth cohorts) or are they irreducible period effects?

2. Methods and findings

To replicate Peterson and Kern (1996), we use their same dataset: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA). Their analysis compared the initial 1982 wave to the 1992 replication. Since then, the NEA has repeated the SPPA in 2002 and 2008.² These multiple replications make the SPPA suitable for longitudinal analysis of changes over time (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004; López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005). Moreover, this survey is both seminal to the omnivore literature and remains the standard dataset for studying the omnivore hypothesis in the American context (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson, 2005). Befitting its primary purpose as a tool for identifying consumers for the nonprofit arts sector, most of the data consists of to what extent respondents consume the arts, either through live performances or through the media.

2.1. Dependent variable: number of genres liked

We follow Peterson and Kern (1996) in defining omnivorousness operationally simply as number of genres of music liked.³ With music, one can count genres liked as a measure of the breadth of the respondent's taste, unlike most other media in which data are collected only about the medium itself

² Although the survey was also repeated in 1985 and 1997, we omit these waves due to concern about data quality. These waves were subcontracted to private firms rather than to the Census bureau and some variables exhibit disconcerting distributions. Nonetheless, including these waves does not appreciably change the pattern of results.

³ Our aim in this paper is to replicate Peterson and Kern (1996) and this drives our context (United States), dataset (SPPA), and specification (count of genres). However it is worth noting that the literature also includes many international datasets and much of the literature is based on multi-dimensional scaling and related techniques rather than regressions of counts. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

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