



Transnational connections: The meaning of global culture in the tastes of Brazilian elites[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This manuscript integrates work on cultural taste and inequality with literature on globalization to explain how objects of global culture become markers of elite cultural taste in Brazil. A content analysis of a culture magazine oriented toward Brazilian elites shows that elite culture in Brazil integrates popular and highbrow objects from the United States and Western Europe with limited popular genres from Brazilian culture. A dominant interpretive frame asserted similarity (rather than social distance or exoticism) between Brazilian lifestyles and non-Brazilian culture by drawing on a white, wealthy disposition that relies on prior familiarity with non-Brazilian culture and places.

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1. Introduction

The cover of the May 2010 issue of *BRAVO!* – a Brazilian culture magazine marketed to Brazilians at the upper end of the socioeconomic spectrum – features a photograph of the nearly-nude Lady Gaga from the singer's *Remix* album to accompany a feature article on her.¹ Much work on globalization documents the prevalence and popularity of US consumer products and performers such as Lady Gaga around the world (Miller, 1998; Ritzer, 2004). Still, the pop star's appearance on the cover of a magazine marketed to wealthy and educated, or *elite*,² consumers is somewhat surprising.

Despite a vast literature on elite tastes and cultural capital, few studies examine the presence or meaning of global culture within elite status distinction. Past work on elite taste has focused on the US and Western European cases, relying on a predefined set of cultural practices to measure high status taste (Daloz, 2008). Meanwhile, work on global culture³ largely eschews reception among elites. However, elites – when they take an interest – play a central role in redefining foreign cultural objects through framing and gatekeeping (Dimaggio, 1982). Given the importance of a global orientation – whether

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¹ Recent covers of *BRAVO!* can be viewed at <http://bravonline.abril.com.br/revista#edicao-0169>.

² I define elites as the wealthiest segment of society. In Brazil, this refers to individuals that report a monthly income above ten times the minimum salary in Brazil, which is currently around USD\$ 326. In Brazil, wealth, status, education, and political power overlap significantly. I am aware of no studies that have empirically examined overlap between cultural and economic elites in Brazil.

³ I define global culture as any cultural object that is widely recognized beyond its nation of production. This differs from “world culture,” which often refers to a narrower set of cultural styles marketed as supra-national or hybrid.

conceived as global citizenship (Lizardo, 2005) or cosmopolitanism (Hannerz, 1990) – *global* culture should constitute an important component of repertoires of high status taste throughout the world. Indeed, recent work within consumer studies reveals that certain global objects have become elite status symbols in semi-peripheral societies, where they are deployed to demonstrate cosmopolitanism (Ustuner & Holt, 2010).

This paper further unpacks this elite valorization of global culture in the semi-periphery by asking which objects are framed as high status in Brazil and *how* they are valorized? Like the United States, Brazil has a robust domestic cultural economy of film, fashion, art, music, literature, and dance.⁴ Brazil also boasts high levels of participation in nationalized cultural practices – such as *samba* and soccer – across the socioeconomic spectrum despite extreme wealth inequality (Bailey, 2009).⁵ Despite this, Brazil's semi-peripheral location in the “cultural world system” (De Swaan, 1995) suggests that elite culture must still orient itself internationally (Janssen, Kuipers, & Verboord, 2008).⁶ I ask what role foreign culture plays in elite taste in Brazil and how popular traditions such as *samba* and carnival fit within this taste culture?

Through a content analysis of magazine and newspaper articles, I find that elite taste culture in Brazil integrates a subset of objects of global culture – popular and highbrow objects⁷ from the United States and Western European – with a subset of Brazilian cultural objects. To become valorized as elite culture, non-Brazilian objects must retain their transnational connections and non-Brazilian meanings while simultaneously becoming integrated into Brazilian lifestyles. Non-Brazilian objects are deployed to demonstrate transnational continuity between lifestyles in Brazil and the US and Western Europe. This cultural repertoire is composed of readily available, unadulterated, and obvious symbols of US and European culture – Lady Gaga, Apple, Starbucks, etc. – and aligns with Brazil's location within the cultural world system and a cultural code that valorizes wealthy, white lifestyles (Sheriff, 2001).

2. Taste for global culture

2.1. Elite taste culture and global culture

Cultural tastes vary in meaningful ways across status groups in society. Actors' locations within the social structure become internalized as cognitive structures and embodied practice – or habitus (Bourdieu, 1972). This embodiment of social position then motivates seemingly natural and fluid reproduction of the cultural knowledge and identities of that position (Bourdieu, 1984). Dominant groups thus use cultural styles and objects to solidify group boundaries, assert superiority, and maintain status hierarchies (Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1984; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Lamont, 1994). Tastes and dispositions make social exclusion appear as natural difference between social classes (Bourdieu, 1984). Elites can further reinforce their status by deploying cultural criterion to exclude others from important social and economic resources, thus transforming cultural knowledge into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984).

Historically, elite taste consolidated around the genres of opera, theater, ballet, symphony orchestra, and classical European literature (Dimaggio, 1982). However, these standard cultural markers have given way to a broader omnivorous set of cultural tastes that includes jazz and rock (Garcia-Alvarez, Katz-Gerro, & López-Sintas, 2007; Peterson & Kern, 1996). Rather than asserting distinction through genre preference, this research finds that omnivorous tastes maintain status distinctions through two main mechanisms. First, elite culture uses *within* genre distinctions – i.e. preference for rare or esoteric versions of cultural objects less accessible to broader society. For example, elite cuisine now uses the concepts of authenticity, exoticism, historically connectedness, and place-specificity to differentiate elite versions of common foods such as the hamburger from popular versions (Johnston & Baumann, 2007). Elite rap in the US is similarly framed as place-based (Cheyne & Binder, 2010). High cultural capital actors choose intellectual or ambiguous comedy over more straightforward varieties (Friedman, 2011).

The second mechanism is elite use of nuanced styles of appreciation and modes of consumption (Holt, 1998). Hanquinet, Roose, and Savage (2014) find that the highbrow disposition toward the formal properties of art (Bourdieu, 1984) may have given way appreciation of art for its social critique and postmodern qualities. However, Daenekindt and Roose (2014) find that highly educated actors prefer to experience art for its formal properties rather than functional properties or its connection to social issues and postmodern concerns. High cultural capital actors can also prefer active physical contact and experiences rather than passive viewing (Hedegard, 2013).

In the US, foreign cultural objects historically played a central role in the development of elite cultural capital, as Bostonian elites cultivated classical European art forms as a means of symbolic distinction (Dimaggio, 1982; Levine, 1988). Cricket likewise played a key role in elite cultural taste in the US (Kaufman & Patterson, 2005). More recently, taste in foreign cultural objects has shifted to those objects most geographically and socially distant from the United States, which are

⁴ In 2008, 75% of television content in Brazil was of Brazilian production and 100% of radio content was Brazilian. In 2006, Music sales were split 68% domestic to 29% international (3% were listed as classical music sales) (UNESCO, 2009).

⁵ In 2012, Brazil ranked 13th worldwide in terms of wealth inequality (Global Wealth Databook, 2012).

⁶ Brazilian cultural exports account for .11% of all cultural exports worldwide. For comparison, US exports account for 15% of cultural exports (UNESCO, 2009).

⁷ I define popular culture as any cultural element not traditionally associated with elites or defined as highbrow (i.e. classical music, theater, opera, art galleries, etc.) within existing literature on cultural capital (Lizardo, 2006). Objects from either category may be elements of global culture. See online Appendix C for coding schema.

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