

Unravelling the omnivore: A field analysis of contemporary musical taste in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper offers a comprehensive field analysis of the structure of British musical taste, drawing on the unusually detailed survey questions and qualitative interviews carried out as part of the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project in 2003–04. We argue that concepts of the cultural omnivore, whilst recognising the importance of fluid and hybrid musical taste, can better be conceptualised as forms of ‘expert’ taste by those occupying dominant positions in the musical field. Using multiple correspondence, and cluster, analysis the paper demonstrates subtle differences between ‘classic fans’ and ‘classic omnivores’ and between ‘pop-oriented’ and ‘pop-voracious’ clusters. We thus provide a way of understanding musical taste in ways that go beyond genre labels. The paper concludes by emphasising the need to recognise the continued importance of powerful, contested musical enthusiasms in contemporary cultural life.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, the concept of the cultural omnivore – who is deemed to enjoy a pluralistic range of cultural activities drawn from both elite and popular culture – has come to play a central role in cultural sociology. The reasons for this are clear. Firstly, the idea that contemporary cultural taste and practice are organised on a pluralistic basis in which increasing numbers of people range across cultural genres allows sociologists to recognise more fluid relationships between social structure and cultural life than those embedded in traditional paradigms. The omnivore thus marks the demise, or transformation, of the exclusive ‘snob’ cultures, which were held to define the contours of status based culture in earlier periods and which were central to foundational sociological

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analysis of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu.¹ Some commentators thereby see the omnivore as a marker of the middle classes becoming more tolerant and of liberalising conditions.² Other sociologists, however, see omnivores as the new embodiment of contemporary middle class domination, through their capacity to reflect and absorb previously opposed elements of cultural taste.³ Through these intellectual contests, Bourdieusian and more ‘mainstream’ cultural sociology has effectively locked horns and refined their modes of analysis.

Secondly, and relatedly, the omnivore concept leads itself to clear and definite forms of empirical measurement from survey sources, through its ability to make an analytical virtue out of the existence of hybrid cultural activity that might otherwise appear to unsettle sociological accounts of culture. The omnivore debate therefore has been central to the rapidly emerging quantitative analysis of cultural taste and lifestyle – a field that had previously been dominated by qualitative research (e.g., Chaney, 1996; DeNora, 2000; Lury, 1996) – and has placed these concerns on a stronger empirical footing.

These two virtues have come to allow unusual, productive, cross fertilisation of theoretical reflection and empirical measurement. Yet, although this debate has been important in opening up new avenues for research on cultural taste and participation, we argue for the need to place the phenomenon of the omnivore within a ‘field analytical’ perspective. Building on important recent theoretical contributions, we show that rather than the omnivore straddling different cultural domains as some kind of hybrid figure, it can best be seen as positioned squarely within dominant, expert positions within cultural hierarchies. We argue that the concept of the musical expert is more discriminating than that of the omnivore conceptually underscore this point.

We draw on the sophisticated and extensive quantitative and qualitative data collected by the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion team, which have demonstrated the class-based inequalities in cultural taste and participation in contemporary Britain (e.g., Bennett et al., 2009; Gayo-Cal, 2006; Warde et al., 2007, 2008; Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009). The research reported in this paper is entirely new and offers a different (though compatible) angle to previous interpretations of musical taste derived from this project (see Bennett et al., 2009, chapter 5; Savage et al., 2005). Rather than focusing on the age specific tensions between musical clusters that are emphasised there, we demonstrate here the salience of distinctive kinds of ‘expert’ taste communities.

After discussing how we can best elaborate a field analytical perspective on the cultural omnivore in the first section, we turn, in the second section, to introducing the broad patterns of musical taste revealed by a multiple correspondence analysis of CCSE data. Here we show how there is no straightforward ‘omnivore’ cluster, but rather that we can identify two variants of omnivorousness, one each linked to fans of classical and popular music. Thirdly, we examine the structure of the British social space of music, in which we unravel dominant and subordinate positions related to different levels of expertise and knowledge. We finally use the ‘cloud of individuals’ within multiple correspondence analysis as a means of further demonstrating the limited power of the omnivore model. In the conclusion, we restate the need to recognize cultural cleavages and oppositions in musical taste.

¹ This argument is evident in Peterson and Kern’s (1996) influential account of the cultural omnivore that pitches itself against Bourdieu’s account of exclusive snob culture.

² The most clearly developed account of this kind is Lahire’s emphasis on cultural dissonance, which he has recently sought to relate to the omnivore debate (see Lahire, 2008).

³ The most important statements to this effect are Peterson and Simkus (1992), Bryson (1996), Warde et al. (2008), Tampubolon (2008) and Warde and Gayo-Cal (2009). More generally, on the idea that specifically middle class taste is seen as the unacknowledged norm of contemporary life, see Savage (2000) and Skeggs (2004).

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