

A Theoretical Discussion of Changes in Youth Cultural Consumption

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the transformations observed in the cultural consumption patterns of the younger demographic, highlighting the substantial influence of age in the development of cultural capital. Prieur and other scholars stated that Bourdieu's model of social space of 'capital composition', which the secondary axis he identified between individuals primarily possessing cultural capital and those primarily possessing economic capital is frequently complicated by age. The paper first provides a brief review of cultural capital established by Bourdieu. It then applies a theoretical discussion method to demonstrate how age is reforming cultural capital, accompanied by significant empirical research. Furthermore, due to the emerging distinctiveness, the paper discusses the changes in cultural consumption among youth. Finally, the paper concludes that: 1) Age forms distinctive preferences for cultural consumption among youth, with the influence of highbrow culture decreasing as the younger generation tends to embrace commercially oriented products; 2) The cultural consumption patterns of the younger generation are less conspicuous and less elitism.

Keywords: cultural capital, cultural consumption, age, distinction

1. Introduction

In the realm of social sciences, cultural consumption has emerged as a prominent and debated field for several decades. Early research, as exemplified by Weber [1], viewed cultural consumption as a defining characteristic of various social groups. Its characteristics are defined as individuality, self-expression, and stylistic self-consciousness [2]. However, it was Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work, 'Distinctive' [3], that eventually took center stage and became a significant milestone in this area, despite its contentious nature. Bourdieu posited that cultural consumption, which was defined as the utilization of products and services primarily for aesthetic purposes and secondarily for instrumental purposes [4] was governed by a specific logic within the economy of cultural goods [3], which was defined as the utilization of products and services primarily for aesthetic purposes and secondarily for instrumental purposes [4]. Bourdieu's argument revolved around the acquisition of dominance through legitimate taste command, wherein cultural competency (cultural capital), social connections (social capital), and social reputation (symbolic capital) held equal importance to economic resources [5]. Among these, cultural capital emerged as a particularly crucial concept as it

intertwined with education, cultural industries, stratification, and class exposure [5]. Consequently, cultural capital became a primary indicator of cultural consumption, alongside other indicators such as status groups and consumption clusters [6]. As argued by Bourdieu [3], cultural consumption is an embodied form of cultural capital, therefore a change in cultural capital would ultimately change the patterns of cultural consumption.

While most studies focus on tastes and preferences connected with highbrow culture, this approach fails to adapt and adjust the meaning of highbrow tastes based on specific time contexts [7]. However, some researches have put this aspect into consideration recently. Notably, Prieur and others [8] argued that Bourdieu's model of social space, which is the secondary antagonism he identified between individuals primarily possessing cultural capital and those primarily possessing economic capital (referred to as 'capital composition') is frequently complicated by age. Empirical evidence could be found in the studies of Bennett and his colleagues [9], or by Savage and his colleagues. [10] who stated that highbrow cultural shows more attraction to older groups while the younger groups were oriented by commercial forms of culture more often. This underscores the distinctive role of age in shaping cultural capital. Therefore, this article's interest lies on the role of age in cultural consumption. To address this issue, this article is going first to explain how cultural capital serves as an essential indicator of cultural consumption. It will then investigate the role of age in the formation of cultural capital and finally the subsequent impact of age in the ongoing debate surrounding cultural consumption.

2. Review Bourdieu's Theory of Cultural Capital

As previously discussed, cultural capital plays a central role as a key determinant of cultural consumption. In order to comprehend its significance, it is essential to delve into the foundations laid by Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Synthesizing Weberian, Marxist, Durkheimian, and phenomenological traditions, Bourdieu developed a comprehensive model of social organization, characterized by a generative mechanism driven by competition for different forms of capital within specific social domains or fields and the ultimate objective of this competition is to attain symbolic capital, which translates into social status [11]. These capitals encompass economic capital, representing financial resources; social capital, comprising relationships, organizational affiliations, and networks; and finally, cultural capital, which encompasses a collection of socially esteemed and distinct tastes, skills, knowledge, and practice [3]. However, there is no formal definition of the term cultural capital in the text. Instead, the idea encompasses a wide range of phenomena such as formal education, knowledge of classical music, tastes in modern art, well-stocked bookcases, and so on [12]. The reason for this may be that the concept of culture itself poses a challenge in terms of its precise definition, owing to its multifaceted usage across various contexts with diverse connotations. Hannerz [13] highlights this complexity, emphasizing that while we recognize cultures to be placed differently in the world's social structure, we also recognize that the boundaries we create around them are frequently arbitrary.

To manifest, cultural capital exists in three distinct forms. First, cultural capital can exist in an embodied state, representing enduring dispositions and inclinations deeply ingrained in an individual's mind and body. Second, it can manifest in an objectified state, where cultural capital is materialized in cultural goods like 'pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.'. Finally, cultural capital can take on an institutionalized state, wherein the embodied cultural capital receives recognition in the form of, for instance, an academic credential [14]. Further on, cultural elites who share the same appreciations and hates of particular objects interact with each other and reinforce their cultural capital, which finally fosters what Bourdieu called 'habitus, and cultural capital becomes an essential part of it. He emphasizes that habitus owns the capability of structuring, which result in distinct consumption patterns and lifestyle that ultimately reproduce habitus. Fields are the specific

institutional areas where cultural capital can exist [11]. There are various fields in our societies that possess the characteristics of distinctive, relatively autonomous, and similarly structured. Thus, according to Bourdieu and many other theorists, fields are the primary arenas in which players compete for social hierarchy placement by acquiring field-specific statuses.

Focusing on the consumption field, habitus organizes how one classifies the universe of consuming objects to which one is exposed, constructing desire for consecrated objects and aversion for unvalued objects in the field, and cultural capital earns the respect of others through consuming goods that are ideationally complex and hence accessible only to those few who have gained the ability to consume them [11]. Meanwhile, by observing that the majority of the qualities of cultural capital may be drawn from the fact that it is fundamentally tied to the body and assumes embodiment [14] which indicates the important status of the embodied form, Bourdieu argued that cultural capital is also objectified in consumer goods. Focusing on its embodiment characteristic, Throsby [6] suggested that an item of cultural capital is defined as an asset embodying cultural value. In other words, cultural capital is the stock of cultural value embodied in an asset which may give rise to a flow of commodities and services. Therefore, with objectified cultural capital, the stratificatory potential of cultural items is determined not by collective consensus or economic scarcity but by the assumed cultural aptitude of the object's consumers [11]. Thus, cultural capital becomes an indicator of the taste and products of cultural consumption. Recently, it has been argued by Rössel [4] that except tastes and products, cultural capital also forms the modes of cultural consumption by showing the empirical evidence of the opera audience. Therefore, cultural capital would ultimately be embodied in the preference and patterns of cultural consumption.

3. Decreasing the Influence of Highbrow Culture

The theory of cultural capital has been developed in the history canon. Bourdieu asserts that the notion of cultural capital necessitates the continual revision and redefinition of its constituents to ensure its continued efficacy despite instances of 'misrecognition' [8]. It is argued that the existence of cultural capital is always associated with a field [15] in which agents compete relationally for strategic advantage and position. And Bourdieu's field-analytical positioning of younger individuals as 'challengers' to established norms forms a central tenet in his treatment of age-based disparities [3]. Therefore, instructed by this opinion, it can be deduced that the potential avenues presented by age could give rise to novel manifestations of cultural capital. Consequently, several scholars have introduced the concept of 'emerging cultural capital,' encapsulating the thematic exploration of the relationship between age and the formation of cultural capital. Nevertheless, the discourse surrounding the interplay of age and generation within cultural analysis has been rendered intricate due to the inherent complexities associated with distinguishing age, period, and cohort effects [16]. To link age with emerging cultural capital, it is substantial to go back to Bourdieu's social space theory. In presenting the social world as 'accumulated history', Bourdieu draws to the Marxist premise that capital is accumulated work [14]. He saw the space of social positions and the space of lifestyles with capital volume (economic + cultural capital) as the most robust structuring dimension and capital composition (the relative weight of the two) as the second strongest. And the third dimension is a time dimension referring to trajectories: the social agents' history of stability or mobility in relation to the system of social positions. However, recent empirical studies have changed this view. Despite research from Denmark provides some justification for considering that economic and cultural capital still both function as structuring forces [17], it is shown by the British example [9] that while total capital volume still serves as the most essential differentiating principle, the capital composition found to be less critical. Instead, the composition principle was only visible in a weak fourth axis, and the second axis was primarily structured by age.

It is empirically evident in research that the role of highbrow culture among the young generation is decreasing, and the influence of commercial culture among youth is increasing. Tampubolon [18], who used the data from the United States, asserts that a division has existed as early as the late 1990s between more “traditional” omnivores (who exploit expansions within designated areas) and those more open to commercial arts that the distinction is mainly defined by age within the educated layer. Bennett and others [9] use the data from the United Kingdom, asserting that older groups are more interested in highbrow culture, while the younger groups are more interested in commercial forms of culture, particularly popular music, sports, and information technology. Moreover, Lizardo and Skiles [19] found that younger high-status Americans’ taste patterns are now noticeably different from their older generation’s same-status counterparts in the General Social Survey of 1993 and again in 2012. Commercial products like rap and rock are more accepted among the educated class, and they began to serve as the principal source of generational distinction for immigrants to the highly educated class.

Consequently, they suggest that a ‘symbolic exclusion’ phenomenon can be found in the realm of music taste among ‘high-status Americans’ [19]. They make an indication based on Bourdieu’s theory of field competence that younger omnivores discover methods to extend their aesthetic vision to products that preceding generations may have considered off-limits. Meanwhile, they explain that the expansion of aesthetic admiration to encompass cultural items that deviate from the established prototypes, which are delineated by prevailing institutional norms, emerges from the endeavors of younger individuals, who seek to leverage their adeptness in aesthetic sensibilities, aiming to both reaffirm their mastery of this disposition and to conspicuously distinguish themselves from the senior constituents within the same stratum, entering the socially esteemed cultural sphere. What is particularly noteworthy about this research is its contention that the building of cultural capital is influenced by an age-specific dynamic [20]. Nevertheless, all empirical research holds the opinion to promote the conclusion to all realms, which expanding methodology and theory should be applied in future studies.

4. Less Conspicuous and Elitism

Although economics serves primarily as a foil in Bourdieu’s work, he has consistently argued that cultural capital must be understood in relation to economic capital [8]. Savage [21] also suggests that we need to understand better how shifting economic capital dynamics affect the organization of cultural capital. The most significant economic capital dynamic was observed by Piketty et al. (2014) that there is an increasing ratio of capital—defined as tradeable assets such as property, savings, and financial instruments—to income in many countries. Moreover, the ratio has risen more rapidly nowadays, and the ratio appears to be returning to the high levels seen in Europe throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (600-700%), including those with no significant increases in income inequality, such as Norway [22].

The rapid growth of inequalities in the economy is argued to have ramifications for cultural capital organization and distribution [8]. With the growing inequalities in the economy, recent research has put consideration on if family wealth may be related to a widened generation gap, pitting younger individuals against wealthy elder generations [8]. At the same time, another split among the young may be exacerbated, pitting those from wealthy homes who aspire to inherit wealth against those who are unlikely to be recipients of such unearned luxury [8]. This conclusion can be evident by the findings in Toft & Hansen [23] that the building of huge fortunes is driven by the accumulation of benefits, which flows from beneficial economic and social ties. This indicates the importance of the accumulation of economic capital. Therefore, it is asserted that as the volume of economic capital increases with age, the ‘capital composition’ principle, which holds cultural and economic capital in tension, takes on an aged and generational shape [24]. Thus, the younger generation who lacks

economic capital may try to distinguish themselves by rejecting the classic form of cultural capital to gain their own position in the competition of social space as ‘challengers.’

A new phenomenon of transformation between economic capital and cultural capital has then been discovered. Empirical research shows that elites tend to transfer the abundant economic capital they possess into cultural and symbolic capital in the Russian context [25]. This is further explained by the ‘class dominant’ theory established by Bourdieu, that a social class that rules not just the economic and governmental spheres but also culture and society. Based on the assumption that individuals want to believe that they are deserving of their positions in society, and they want to believe that they are deserving of their positions because of who they are and what they have to offer [25], legitimacy is the primary thing they pursue. A more refined preference, “good manners,” and civilized spending in its bearers which serves as a link between economic and cultural capital, is the thing elites want to pass on to their children.

Because of the redistribution and the growing gap of inequality in the economic, the consumption patterns in the elite class are changed as well. Thus it is argued by Prieur and others [8] that cultural capital has changed into an inter indicator among the youth, which makes cultural consumption less elitism and conspicuous. Empirical evidence can be found in the research of economic elite sociologists. Schimpfoss [25] use the example of Russia’s upper class to argue in his research that they attempted to achieve legitimacy for their social status by developing more refined and individualized preferences and manners, as well as resurrecting a more cultured image and self-image, rather than forcefully showing their money. Sherman [26] also increasingly stressed how affluent elites in New York are investing in ‘modesty’, instead of on themselves and their children. It is also argued that a highbrow mode dominated by the fine arts, which peaked in the early twentieth century, are gradually declining in the most recent birth cohorts, indicating the new modes of showing ordinariness in elites [27] and overall downplaying their privileges.

5. Conclusions

By following Bourdieu’s established theory of distinction, this paper highlighted the significance of considering cultural capital as a dynamic field, especially affected by age. This argument is supported by the existing findings of the second axis of Bourdieu’s model of social space he identified between individuals primarily possessing cultural capital and those primarily possessing economic capital (referred to as ‘capital composition’) is frequently complicated by age [8]. This finding has great significance in developing the theory of cultural capital, making it more suitable and fitted to contemporary society.

After understanding the age-specific dynamic of cultural capital, it is worth finding out the cultural consumption patterns among youth due to the embodied function of cultural capital. Addressing this issue may help in the field of consumption of sociology as well as the commercial side by acknowledging the new trend in elite consumption. This paper, therefore, applied a theoretical discussion, listing some of the outstanding empirical research to evidence the result. It is concluded that: 1) the formation of cultural consumption is more open to commercial products instead of the classical highbrow culture; 2) cultural consumption among youth is less elitism and more conspicuous due to the growing inequality of economic. However, the composition of economic capital and cultural capital still domains. Further studies still need to expand the conclusion to a more general level since all empirical researches hold the opinion of implementing the conclusion to all cultural realms.

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