

Opera, Nuggets, or Yoga? Cultural Tastes Shape Status Attribution

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Abstract

Theories of cultural stratification posit that highbrow cultural tastes are misrecognized as signals of high social rank and favorable personal traits. Misrecognition is a necessary condition for cultural tastes to act as *cultural capital*, i.e., generalized currency exchangeable into economic and social assets. Yet, we know little about whether a person's cultural taste shapes misrecognition, measured via others' perceptions of social rank and personal traits, and which taste domains (e.g., music, food, or performing arts) are particularly effective status signals. To address these limitations, we [pre-registered](#) and conducted a conjoint experiment in which a representative sample of the Danish adult population ($N = 4,180$) rated pairs of fictional individuals with different cultural tastes (in music, food, performing arts, leisure, sport, and literature) in terms of perceived social rank, competence, sociability, respectability and "polish." Crucially, our experimental design makes it possible to isolate the effect of each dimension of taste (e.g., music vs. food) and to identify which dimension has the strongest impact on misrecognition. Because we also vary other status signals (gender, ethnicity, occupational status, and family background), our experiment provides a conservative test of whether cultural tastes act as signals of social rank and personal traits. Our main results are summarized in Figure 1. The figure shows that, all else being equal, highbrow tastes have a positive effect on perceptions of social rank, competence, respectability, and polish, but a negative effect on perceptions of sociability. In further analyses, we find that tastes in music and food are the clearest signals, while tastes in sports and literature are less important. Yet, highbrow cultural tastes within all taste domains positively influence perceptions of polish, measured by being more or less "cultured." Overall, our results suggest that cultural tastes operate as signals of social rank and personal traits and that music and food tastes are the clearest status signals.

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Figure 1. Effect of cultural taste on perceptions of social rank and personal traits

