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# What does it mean to be a cultural omnivore? Conflicting visions of omnivorousness in empirical research

Robert de Vries, University of Kent ([r.devries@kent.ac.uk](mailto:r.devries@kent.ac.uk))

Aaron Reeves, University of Oxford

## **ABSTRACT:**

The 'omnivore' thesis is currently the dominant academic theory of the social patterning of taste. It argues that cultural elites no longer resemble the traditional stereotype of an elitist snob. Instead they are more likely to be 'omnivores' with broad tastes encompassing both elite and popular cultural forms. This theory has been researched and debated for more than two decades without a clear resolution.

In this paper we argue that progress in the omnivore debate has been impeded in part due to an elision of two distinct interpretations of the omnivore thesis: a *strong* interpretation, which holds that cultural elites are generally averse to class-based exclusivity; and a weak interpretation which holds that, while elites have broad tastes which encompass popular forms, they do not necessarily repudiate class-based exclusion. We demonstrate how drawing this distinction helps to clarify the existing empirical evidence concerning the omnivore hypothesis.

## **KEYWORDS**

Cultural taste, distinction, elites, exclusivity, omnivores

## Introduction

The distinction between 'elite' and 'mass' consumers dominated traditional theories of cultural consumption (Bourdieu, 1984). However, over the last quarter century the 'elite-mass' hypothesis has fallen out of favour in the sociological literature, largely supplanted by the contrasting 'omnivore' hypothesis (Lizardo and Skiles, 2015). Where the elite-mass theory sets 'snobs' with exclusive, high-brow tastes against the mass of popular consumers, the omnivore hypothesis holds that consumers rich in economic and social capital do not reject popular culture as shallow and barbaric. Instead they omnivorously embrace an eclectic mix of cultural products and practices from across the 'brow' spectrum (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). By contrast, consumers lower down the socio-economic scale are more likely to be 'univores', evincing narrow, restricted tastes; for example, confining their musical consumption to one or two popular genres.

While the omnivore hypothesis has become the dominant frame through which academics understand the social patterning of taste (Chan, 2013; Lizardo and Skiles, 2015), the theory is not without its critics. Against the host of quantitative research supporting Petersons' 'inverted pyramid' picture of cultural consumption is ranged a smaller band of qualitative and quantitative studies which continue to find evidence of snobbish exclusivity among elites (e.g. Warde et al., 2008; Prieur et al., 2008; Atkinson, 2011; Veenstra, 2015). The tussle between these two sides has now been going on for more than 20 years, with no end in sight (Veenstra, 2015).

In this paper, we argue that at least some measure of this division in the literature is based on an elision of two distinct interpretations of the omnivore hypothesis. The first – which we term the *weak* interpretation – holds simply that social elites tend to be more culturally engaged than non-elites (enjoying/consuming a larger volume of cultural forms), *and* that their tastes often cross the boundary between elite and mass culture. This broad and inclusive palette (more inclusive than that of a univore or of a classical snob) qualifies them as omnivores. An example would be an aficionado of classical music and fine art, who nevertheless loves Radiohead, is a frequent visitor to their local arthouse cinema, and regularly binges on the latest critically acclaimed HBO drama. They may systematically avoid those aspects of mass culture more commonly enjoyed by people with lower levels of education, such as reality TV and 'cattle-prod' horror; however, under the *weak* interpretation they would nevertheless qualify as culturally omnivorous. The *strong* interpretation of the omnivore hypothesis goes significantly further in casting 'omnivores' as true cultural egalitarians who do not engage in snobbish, class-based exclusion. Under this interpretation, a systematic disdain of low-brow culture would be disqualifying.

The *strong* and *weak* interpretations of the omnivore hypothesis make substantively different predictions about the patterns of cultural taste which should be observed in empirical research. A failure to clearly distinguish between these contrasting interpretations has therefore allowed researchers on both sides of the omnivore debate to talk past one another.

## **The problematic plasticity of the omnivore concept**

A number of previous researchers have noted the problematic flexibility of the omnivore concept, and the issues this creates when devising tests of the omnivore hypothesis (Warde et al., 2007; Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2015; Hanquinet, 2017). As Karademir Hazir and Warde (2016) observe in their methodological review of the literature, Peterson and Kern's original descriptions of cultural omnivorousness were "neither sufficiently precise nor necessarily consistent", leading to a "legacy of problems" for subsequent research (pp.78-79). More recently Hanquinet (2017) has argued that "an interpretive plasticity due in part to many different operationalisations" is "an underlying problem with the notion of omnivorousness" (p.168).

The core of the omnivore thesis as sketched in Peterson and Kern's original papers (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996) is the "pyramidal hierarchy [of cultural taste]... ranging from omnivore down to univore" (Peterson, 1992; p.256). Social elites are more likely to be omnivores (broad tastes which encompass both elite and non-elite cultural forms); whereas those lower down the social hierarchy are more likely to be univores (narrow, exclusive tastes focusing on one or two non-elite forms). However, as previous researchers have noted, this sketch leaves open a number of important questions about what omnivorous tastes should look like – and consequently what empirical observations (for example, patterns of survey responses) would qualify as supportive or unsupportive of the hypothesis (Warde et al., 2007; Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2015 Hanquinet, 2017).

One example of this lack of clarity concerns whether cultural omnivorousness should be measured by expressed preferences, consumption, knowledge, or some combination of the three (Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2016). As many authors note, consumption can have a very different social meaning to expressed preferences (Lahire, 2008; Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2015). Lahire (2008) for example, points out that cultural practices often arise, not from strong underlying preferences, but from social obligations, affiliations, and personal circumstances. For example, someone with a taste for classical music, and a pronounced distaste for popular genres, may nevertheless regularly attend rock music concerts because this is what their partner enjoys (Lahire, 2008).

Karademir Hazir and Warde (2016) find that omnivorousness is most popularly operationalised through consumption, followed by expressed preference, followed distantly by cultural knowledge. Despite these varied operationalisations, results are still interpreted with reference to a singular overall omnivore hypothesis. The problem this creates is clear if we imagine a world in which the majority of cultural elites resemble the classical music aficionado described above. In a survey of cultural consumption, such elites would resemble cultural omnivores; whereas in a survey of expressed preferences they would appear more like classical snobs. As a number of authors have recognised, the solution to this problem is greater conceptual specificity (van Rees et al., 1999; Warde et al., 2007; Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009; Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2015 Hanquinet, 2017). Researchers should clearly define their interpretation of the omnivore concept with respect to the role of behaviour, knowledge, and preferences – allowing their empirical test to be interpreted accordingly.

Our intention here is not to focus on the distinction between consumption and underlying taste, which has been well explored by previous authors (Warde and Gayo-Cal, 2009; Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2015). The above discussion is instead intended to illustrate how unrecognised conceptual plasticity in the omnivore thesis can lead supporters and critics of the omnivore hypothesis to talk past one another. This same rationale lies behind our argument in favour of differentiating strong and weak versions of the omnivore thesis.

## **Strong and weak omnivorousness**

Our distinction between strong and weak omnivorousness turns on the way in which ‘cultural omnivores’ are hypothesised to relate to non-elite (in Peterson’s terminology) cultural forms. This is under-specified in the original formulation of the omnivore hypothesis (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996). Crucially, the boundaries of what constitutes an omnivorous taste pattern are not defined. Does cultural omnivorousness simply mean extending one’s cultural preferences beyond the traditional bounds of legitimate culture to encompass at least a few ‘popular’ forms (thereby failing to conform to the stereotype of an exclusive snob)? Or does it go beyond this – requiring a more thoroughgoing aversion to class-based exclusivity?

Peterson and Kern’s original commentary around the omnivore thesis suggests the latter interpretation. In Peterson’s original 1992 paper, he argues that the omnivore thesis, insofar as it is correct, means that “the image of the taste-*exclusive* highbrow, along with the ranking from ‘snob’ to ‘slob’ is obsolete [*italics in original*]” (p.252) and that “Elite taste is no longer defined simply as the expressed appreciation for high art forms and corresponding moral disdain of, or patronizing

tolerance for all other aesthetic expressions” (p.252). More succinctly, he describes cultural omnivorousness as “antithetical to snobbishness” (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p.904). He notes that the new cultural omnivores display “an *openness* to appreciating everything [italics in original]” (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p.904) regardless of its brow-level; or, put another way “the aesthetics of elite status are being redefined as the appreciation of **all** distinctive leisure activities and creative forms, along with the appreciation of the classic fine arts [our emphasis]” (Peterson, 1992, p.252). He does not argue that “the omnivore likes everything *indiscriminately* [italics in original]” (Peterson and Kern, 1996, p.904); however, he does argue that any distinctions that *are* made should not be based on “rigid rules of exclusion” (p.904).

Taken together, these comments suggest that fundamental to omnivorousness is a repudiation of snobbish, class-based exclusivity. This is the basis of *strong* omnivorousness as we define it. Snobbish exclusivity involves policing the boundaries of one’s own taste to ensure that one is not tainted by involvement in cultural forms that are too low-brow (i.e. which are too strongly associated with low status groups). Under our definition of strong omnivorousness, omnivores should reject such snobbishness. They are not required to like everything – they may dislike or even disdain some cultural forms – however, this dislike should not be rooted in a systematic, class-based avoidance of mainstream or low-brow culture (‘rigid rules of exclusion’).<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the strong interpretation, the *weak* interpretation of the omnivore thesis sets aside the notion that omnivorousness should be ‘antithetical to snobbery’. Under the weak interpretation, the sole qualifications for omnivorousness are (a) a high level of cultural engagement (consumption/enjoyment of many distinct cultural forms), and (b) consumption or enjoyment of both elite and non-elite forms.

### ***Relationship to previous conceptual distinctions***

The conceptual flexibility we describe above has led a number of previous authors to distinguish between different ‘versions’ of the omnivore thesis. Our strong/weak division is related to these taxonomies, but is nevertheless distinct.

Warde et al. (2007) demarcate omnivorousness by *volume* from omnivorousness by *composition*. People who are omnivorousness by *volume* simply “do and like more activities and things than others” (p.145); whereas omnivorousness by *composition* requires that tastes cross the boundary between elite and non-elite cultural forms. Eliding the distinction between these two forms of omnivorousness allows researchers to talk past one another in exactly the way we describe above: results supportive only of omnivorousness by volume are treated as supportive of ‘the omnivore hypothesis’ generally; and vice-versa. The distinction between omnivorousness by volume and by

composition has therefore been helpful in clarifying the empirical literature. However, we argue that it does not capture the full flexibility of the omnivore concept. Specifically, Warde et al's (2007) taxonomy does not distinguish between versions of the theory which require omnivores to abandon class-based exclusion, and those which do not.

Under our proposed taxonomy, we combine volume and composition together under the heading of *weak* omnivorousness. In order to qualify as omnivorous in the weak sense, elites must engage widely (volume) *and* inclusively (combining elite and non-elite forms). Either alone would not qualify as omnivorous consumption. As Warde et al. (2007) themselves argue, accepting volume as the sole indicator of omnivorous consumption ignores Peterson's explicit statements about omnivores' appreciation for non-elite culture. Similarly, we can find no justification in the literature for considering composition alone (unaccompanied by a generally higher level of cultural engagement) a mark of omnivorousness. Our definition of *strong* omnivorousness goes substantially further by requiring that, in addition to exhibiting wide, inclusive tastes, omnivores should avoid engaging in systematic class-based exclusion.

An additional set of conceptual distinctions offered by Veenstra (2015) make use of the strong/weak terminology. Our distinction hews closest to Veenstra's (2015) third proposed definition, which contrasts a strong version under which omnivores with broad tastes (encompassing middle- and low-brow culture) have entirely supplanted exclusive snobs among the social elite, as with a weak version which "accommodates the existence of highbrow snobs *and* omnivorous elites [*italics in original*]" (p.140). However, here Veenstra focuses on whether high-brow snobs exist in combination with omnivorous elites; whereas we focus on what *makes* one an omnivorous elite as opposed to a high-brow snob. Our definition of strong omnivorousness explicitly specifies that, in order to qualify as an omnivorous elite, one must forswear snobbish, class-based exclusion altogether. Though he hints at it, Veenstra (2015) does not make this requirement explicit.

## **Strong and weak omnivorousness in the empirical literature**

Table 1 summarises the methods, results, and conclusions of 19 empirical studies relating to the omnivore thesis. These studies were selected on the basis that their authors explicitly connect their results to the veracity of the omnivore thesis. The studies summarised in this table were selected for illustrative purposes and are not intended to form an exhaustive or systematic examination of the relevant literature. However, they do represent a diversity of methodological approaches and conclusions.

-----TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE-----

Peterson's original formulation of the omnivore hypothesis was based on statistical regularities observed in US survey data (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern; 1996). Some critics of the thesis, such as Atkinson (2011), therefore argue that apparent omnivorousness is an artefact of quantitative methods which is "debunked" (p.169) by detailed qualitative investigation. Of the studies summarised in Table 1, qualitative analyses are indeed more likely to find evidence of snobbish exclusion, and therefore to reach negative or mixed conclusions regarding the omnivore thesis (Atkinson, 2011; Warde et al., 2008; Friedman, 2011; Friedman and Kuipers, 2013). However, Table 1 suggests the story is more complex than a simple quant/qual opposition.

The most common approach taken by quantitative studies of omnivorousness is data reduction – usually either latent class analysis (LCA) or multiple correspondence analysis (MCA). Latent class models attempt to identify clusters of respondents who share similar preferences or patterns of consumption. For example, Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) apply a latent class model to data on musical consumption in England. Their models distinguish two primary categories of respondent: those who are more likely than others to consume all types of music and to attend all types of live music performance ('omnivores') and those who listen to pop music on the radio but are unlikely to consume other genres or to attend live events ('univores'). They found little evidence of a class of elitist consumers who restricted themselves to high-brow genres and avoided mainstream popular genres. Latent class analyses in other contexts have found similar results (Sintas and Alvarez, 2002; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2005; Alderson et al., 2007; Kats-Gerro and Jaeger, 2013). In general, latent class models have therefore produced results which have been interpreted as supportive of the omnivore thesis.

As Table 1 shows, multiple correspondence models tend to paint a more mixed picture. Rather than identifying clusters of respondents, MCA attempts to identify key dimensions (axes) along which responses vary. Consistent with the omnivore thesis, many of these studies find that the space of cultural taste/practice is strongly organised by level of engagement, with the primary axis distinguishing respondents by breadth of consumption (e.g. Roose et al., 2012; Coulangeon, 2005). However, these studies also tend to find persistent evidence of an opposition between high and low-brow consumption, which is taken by authors to be contrary to the expectations of the omnivore hypothesis. For example, Coulangeon (2005) finds that, although cultural diversity does play an important role in structuring the space of musical tastes in France, there is also a role for cultural



exclusivity centred on an opposition between legitimate and illegitimate genres. Similar results are found by Prieur et al., (2008) and Roose et al. (2012).

Other quantitative studies have adopted a more straightforward approach (either as an alternative or as a complement to data reduction): contrasting the cultural preferences of practices of particular social groups. This includes: comparing cultural 'highbrows' with non-highbrows (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996; Prieur et al, 2008), comparing omnivores with non-omnivores (Warde et al., 2008), and comparing different socio-economic groups (defined by education, occupational class, or social status) (e.g. Bryson, 1996; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2005; 2007; Sintas and Alvarez, 2002). The results of these studies are also mixed. Cultural and socio-economic elites are typically found to have broader tastes than non-elites. However, a number of studies have found these tastes to be strongly bounded, with low-brow cultural forms still falling outside the otherwise expansive sphere of elite taste. In a highly influential study, Bryson (1996) found that educated and otherwise musically tolerant elites had a strong tendency to dislike genres popular among low-educated groups (such as country, rap, and heavy-metal). Warde et al. (2008) similarly found that their omnivorous consumers 'drew the line' at certain forms of popular culture, particularly reality TV, fast-food, and electronic dance music. Finally, Prieur et al. (2008) found that the majority (60%) of their high-brow consumers exhibited a strong rejection of low-brow cultural forms, compared with only a minority who exhibited no, or only a weak avoidance of these forms.

These results are a good representation of the seemingly intractable conflict between the pro- and anti-omnivore positions. We argue that the strong/weak distinction we have articulated helps to clarify this conflict.

What unites those studies which do not clearly support the omnivore thesis is an observation of class-based exclusion which the authors interpret as being in some way contrary to the expectations of omnivorousness. For example:

- Warde et al., (2008) argue that the "persistent forms of discrimination and disavowal of forms of popular culture" (p.164) displayed by his 'omnivorous' respondents "betrays the image of pure tolerance" associated with omnivorousness (p.164).
- Atkinson (2011) argues that his research, which found that certain mainstream musical genres were 'beyond the pale' for cultural elites, is sufficient to consider "omnivorousness debunked" (p.169).

- Tampubolon (2008) suggests, based on his results, that the concept of omnivorousness should be disengaged from inclusivity in order to deal with the “manifest exclusiveness displayed by cultural omnivores” (p.243).

These and similar findings are inextricably intertwined with methodology: specifically, the extent to which a study examines cultural forms from a wide spectrum of legitimacy. Many of the studies listed in Table 1 employ extremely broad measures of cultural practice. For example, Alderson et al. (2007) utilise data on whether respondents had engaged in any of the following seven types of cultural practice: gone to a live performance of classical music or opera; ballet or dance; popular music like rock, country, or rap; or of a non-musical stage play; visited an art museum or gallery; read novels, short stories, poems, or plays; or seen a movie in a theatre.

Broad categorisations such as these, however, “obscure patent hierarchies of legitimacy *within...categories* [italics in original]” (Atkinson, 2011: 171). Analyses based on such measures are therefore unlikely to detect evidence of class-based rejection of low-brow forms. For example, consider a respondent who regularly attends the opera, films at the cinema, and also pop/rock concerts, but who disdains popcorn blockbusters and commercial pop music. This cultural exclusivity would be invisible to the general measures employed by Alderson et al., (2007) and others (e.g. Peterson, 1992; Chan and Goldthorpe, 2005; 2007; Katz-Gerro and Jaeger, 2013). By contrast, both qualitative studies (such as Atkinson, 2011) and quantitative studies which employ more detailed and comprehensive measures of cultural practice (such as Warde et al., 2008 and Prieur et al., 2008) are more likely to encounter evidence of elitist exclusion.

The current, flexible definition of omnivorousness makes it difficult to synthesise the results of both these latter studies and the results of, for example, Chan and Goldthorpe (2005) or Alderson et al. (2007). This difficulty is reflected in the diversity of interpretations offered by various authors: from Atkinson (2011) and Prieur et al. (2008), who see their results as directly opposing the omnivore thesis, to Coulangeoun (2005) and Tampubolon (2008), who interpret their results as consistent with the broad framework of the theory.

Clearly distinguishing the predictions of the strong and weak versions of the omnivore thesis helps resolve this difficulty. More precisely:

- If the *weak* omnivore hypothesis is true, empirical studies should find (a) that cultural elites tend to appreciate a larger variety of cultural forms than non-elites, and (b) that said elites tend to appreciate both elite and non-elite cultural forms.

- If the *strong* omnivore hypothesis is true, studies should *additionally* find that elites do not tend systematically to reject cultural forms along class lines.<sup>2</sup>

Clarifying these distinct predictions allows us to synthesise the results of existing studies in a way that a single, flexible definition of omnivorousness does not. On the basis of this distinction it is clear that findings such as those of Atkinson (2011), Prieur et al. (2008), Warde et al., (2008), Bryson (1996), Coulangeoun (2005), and Tampubolon (2008) run contrary to the predictions of the strong hypothesis, but are generally consistent with those of the weak hypothesis. Similarly, it is clear that studies such as those of Chan and Goldthorpe (2005) and Alderson et al. (2007) are supportive of the weak hypothesis but, due to the generality of their measures, do not represent a sufficient test of the strong hypothesis.

Under a flexible interpretation of the omnivore thesis, the studies summarised in Table 1 represent a chaotic tangle of competing results and interpretations. Applying the lens of the strong/weak distinction allows these studies to be sorted into clear categories based on their support for each version of the theory. If we apply this exercise to Table 1, we see that support for the weak omnivore hypothesis appears overwhelming: the vast majority of studies find that elites have broader tastes than non-elites, and that these tastes encompass both legitimate and popular cultural forms. However, support for the strong omnivore hypothesis is considerably weaker – with most studies equipped to test its predictions finding evidence of persistent elitist exclusion.

## Empirical illustration

Having demonstrated how distinguishing between strong and weak versions of the omnivore thesis can help to resolve confusion in the existing literature, we now illustrate this in practice using data from a survey of cultural practice in Britain.

For the purpose of this analysis, we use data from the Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion project (CCSE, Bennett et al., 2008).<sup>3</sup> The CCSE comprised a national random sample survey of cultural participation and preferences (N=1,564), and a smaller number of follow-up qualitative interviews. Our analyses here are based on the national survey element. We chose the CCSE because the survey measures cover a much wider spectrum of cultural preferences than any other nationally representative British survey of which we are aware.

Following Peterson and Kern's (1996) original study, we use data from the CCSE survey to examine the cultural preferences of high-brow consumers (henceforth 'highbrows'). We defined respondents as highbrow if they participated in at least two of the following activities at least several times per

year: attending an orchestral concert, attending the opera, attending a play at the theatre, visiting an art gallery. According to this definition, 13.9% of the CCSE survey sample were highbrows.

For the purposes of our analysis, we focus specifically on what highbrows *dislike*. Reporting that one actively dislikes a particular cultural form is a manifestation of cultural rejection in a way that merely failing to like it is not. As Bryson (1996) argues, dislikes are therefore a more appropriate measure of snobbish exclusion (and cultural tolerance) than likes.

The CCSE survey includes measures tapping cultural dislikes in the following domains: literature (genres and specific books), music (genres and specific works), film (genres and directors), and television (genres). The survey measures used vary across items. Details of our operationalisations are given in Table 2, below:

-----TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE-----

Figure 1 shows how much more or less likely highbrows were than non-highbrows to dislike each item (after adjusting for age and gender).<sup>4</sup>

As noted above, the CCSE survey is unusually detailed. Surveys employed by the majority of previous studies are typically much more limited in scope, covering a much narrower range of cultural preferences or practices. Consider a hypothetical survey which contains the following subset of items: Classical music; Rock music; Modern literature; Thrillers, Who-dunnits, and detective fiction; Alternative/art cinema, Sci-fi or Fantasy movies; Current affairs television; Comedy/Sitcom television. This list includes recognisably high-brow items (Classical music and Modern literature), items from the more legitimate end of 'mass' domains (Alternative/art cinema, Current affairs television), and clearly 'mass' items (Rock music, genre fiction, Sci-Fi/Fantasy movies, Comedy/Sitcom television). From inspection of Figure 1, it is clear that highbrows are less likely than non-highbrows to dislike most of these items, and are no more likely to dislike any of them. If we sum numbers of dislikes, highbrows dislike significantly fewer items than non-highbrows do ( $\beta=0.68$ ,  $p<0.001$ )<sup>5</sup> (note that, because of how they are measured, film and TV genres cannot be summed). These results clearly show cultural highbrows as having broader, more inclusive tastes than non-highbrows. They also show that these tastes incorporate both elite and mass cultural forms.

-----FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE-----

If we expand our hypothetical survey to include a sample of items from lower down the spectrum of legitimacy, the results look quite different. For example, our survey could additionally measure dislike of: Urban and Electronic dance music; Romance novels, Action, Romance, and Horror films; Game shows, Soap operas, and Reality TV. We could also add specific works representing particularly maligned genres, such as mass-produced ‘bubblegum’ pop (Oops I Did It Again), and ‘airport’ romance novels (Solace of Sin). Inspection of Figure 1 shows that highbrows are more likely than non-highbrows to dislike many of these items. Summing dislikes shows that highbrows dislike significantly more items from this list than non-highbrows do ( $\beta=0.35$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Adding these less legitimate items to our analysis suggests that, while highbrows do indeed have broad tastes, these tastes retain an element of apparently class-based exclusivity.

Figure 2 reveals the nature of this exclusivity by plotting the relative probability that highbrows (versus non-highbrows) dislike an item (the relative probabilities reported in Figure 1) against the educational composition of each item’s ‘fanbase’. The latter is computed by using linear models to estimate the relative probability that respondents who liked the item would have a low (no educational qualifications) versus high (degree or above) level of education, adjusting for age and gender. Values above one on the horizontal axis therefore indicate items which are more likely to be liked by respondents with no educational qualifications than by university graduates. Values above one on the vertical axis indicate items which highbrows are more likely than non-highbrows to dislike. Figure 2 shows a clear positive relationship: the greater the extent to which an item’s fanbase is dominated by respondents with a low level of education, the more likely cultural highbrows are to dislike it.

-----FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE-----

As we argue in the previous section, maintaining a flexible definition of the omnivore hypothesis allows conflicting defensible interpretations of these results. Clear evidence that highbrows have more inclusive tastes than non-highbrows may be interpreted as supportive of the omnivore hypothesis. Similarly clear evidence that these tastes are marked by class-based exclusivity may be interpreted as contrary to it. This provides ample scope for supporters and critics of the omnivore thesis to talk past one another.

Distinguishing between strong and weak versions of the omnivore thesis removes this ambiguity. Under the weak interpretation, the first set of results is manifestly supportive, and the expanded analysis is not contradictory (the fact that highbrows tend to dislike low-brow items is not problematic for the weak version of the omnivore thesis).

Under the strong version of the thesis, our results are also straightforwardly interpretable. Our first, narrower, analysis does not cover a wide enough spectrum of cultural legitimacy to be considered a sufficient test of the hypothesis; whereas, our expanded analysis reveals results which are clearly unsupportive. In this analysis, cultural highbrows appear to be engaging in systematic class-based exclusion – flatly contradicting the egalitarian expectations of strong omnivorousness.

## Summary and Conclusions

The omnivore hypothesis (Peterson, 1992; Peterson and Kern, 1996) has become an incredibly influential frame for understanding cultural practices. This frame shatters the traditional distinction between elitist snobs and popular consumers and replaces it with an ‘inverted pyramid’; contrasting elites possessing broad, omnivorous tastes, with non-elites holding narrow, exclusive tastes focused on a few popular cultural forms. At the heart of the omnivore hypothesis, however, there is a conceptual flexibility concerning what it means to have ‘omnivorous’ tastes. This flexibility has made it very difficult to generate conclusive evidence supporting or opposing the theory (Warde et al., 2007; Veenstra, 2015; Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2015). Progress toward answering an empirical question can only be achieved when later studies can build upon those that came before. When any two studies may be operating under radically different interpretations of the hypothesis in question, such progress will prove elusive.

Like others, we have argued that the solution to this issue is greater conceptual clarity. Alternative interpretations of the omnivore hypothesis must be clearly specified and differentiated to allow the results of empirical tests to be compared. Previous authors have made considerable strides towards this goal; for example, distinguishing between omnivorousness defined by composition as opposed to volume (Warde et al., 2007), and between omnivorousness by defined by preferences as opposed to consumption or knowledge (Karademir Hazir and Warde, 2015). In this paper we have proposed a further fundamental distinction: between what we label the *strong* and *weak* interpretations of the omnivore thesis. Under the weak interpretation, elite omnivores are envisioned as highly engaged consumers whose taste for high-brow culture is combined with an appreciation for what would traditionally be considered ‘popular’ cultural forms. Under the strong interpretation, this breadth of taste is combined with a thoroughgoing repudiation of cultural snobbery.

By reviewing a sample of existing empirical work, and through a practical illustration, we have demonstrated that drawing a conceptual distinction between strong and weak versions of the omnivore thesis is a necessary step to clarifying the existing literature. Under a flexible definition of the thesis, supporters and critics are permitted to talk past one another – each using empirical results (sometimes from the same data) to justify their position. Greater conceptual clarity reduces opportunities for such cross-talk and allows for more constructive debate and evidence synthesis.

Recognising the strong/weak distinction has other important implications for future omnivorousness research – particularly concerning conceptualisations of snobbery. One potential criticism of our argument is that the class-based exclusion demonstrated by elites in a number of studies – which we argue violates the predictions of strong omnivorousness – is not in fact motivated by snobbery. Elites may simply be averse to (for example) reality television and mainstream pop because some quality of these forms renders them genuinely unenjoyable. For example, these forms may be too simplistic or repetitive for educated elites, who enjoy high levels of informational complexity (Ganzeboom, 1982); or they may be “so obviously routinized and mass produced” that they are “resistant to aestheticizing” (Lizardo and Skiles, 2012, p.270), even by those with highly developed aesthetic dispositions. If apparently class-based exclusivity is not motivated by snobbish status preservation, then perhaps elites can be counted as omnivores in the strong sense after all. In order for research to adequately investigate strong omnivorousness, it must therefore consider underlying motivations for exclusion. Because non-snobbish motivations appear to require reference to objective characteristics of low-brow cultural forms, such considerations are also inextricably linked with the thorny issue of objective hierarchies of cultural quality.

The distinction between strong and weak omnivorousness also raises significant methodological implications, particularly for quantitative research. As we note above, qualitative research lends itself both to capturing the nuanced distinctions people make between broadly similar cultural forms (for example between art-rock and more mainstream pop-rock), and to investigating potential motivations for exclusion. Capturing this nuance, and thereby adequately addressing the predictions of strong omnivorousness, is substantially more challenging for quantitative research – particularly when using existing large-scale survey data. To meet this challenge, new data sources and methods are needed. This includes new representative sample surveys, incorporating more detailed measures of cultural taste. It will likely also involve utilising ‘Big Data’ from digital media providers. The nature of the data recorded by such providers allows researchers to distinguish between private consumption (e.g. whether a user has listened to a particular track on Amazon Music), public consumption (whether the user has allowed this ‘listen’ to be reported publicly), and expressed preferences (user ratings). Contrasting these forms of engagement offers a potential window into

motivations for avoiding certain cultural goods. Finally, experimental approaches are also likely to be fruitful, as they allow for the manipulation of characteristics of cultural forms such as complexity or association with low status groups (Lizardo and Skiles, 2016). It is our hope that such conceptual and methodological advances will contribute to leading omnivorousness research beyond its current impasse.

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<sup>1</sup> Some readers may disagree with this interpretation of Peterson's comments, and a case could be made that Peterson did not intend to argue that cultural elites now avoid snobbish exclusion entirely. However, Peterson's original intent is not a necessary component of our argument. As we will later show, *regardless of Peterson's original intentions*, subsequent researchers have adopted a variety of interpretations of the omnivore thesis, some of which clearly align with our definition of 'strong omnivorousness'.

<sup>2</sup> Note that the strong version of the omnivore thesis does not predict that no member of the cultural elite will exhibit any trace of snobbery. Even the most ardent advocate of cultural omnivorousness would not contend that high-brow snobs are entirely extinct. However, if the strong omnivore hypothesis is to be meaningful, it must at least predict that (strong) omnivores substantially outnumber high-brow snobs (defined as those still engaging in significant class-based exclusivity) in the population of cultural elites.

<sup>3</sup> This is the same dataset employed by Warde et al. (2008) and Gayo-Cal et al. (2006)

<sup>4</sup> Because the majority of respondents had not heard of them, we excluded the following items from our analysis: I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Madame Bovary, Pedro Almodovar, Jane Campion, Mani Rathnam, Symphony #5, Kind of Blue, Einstein on the Beach. We further excluded the following film genres, which very few respondents listed as their least favourite: Comedy, Film noir, Bollywood.

<sup>5</sup> From an OLS regression model adjusting for age and gender



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## TABLES AND FIGURES

**Table 1.** A summary of selected empirical work relevant to the omnivore hypothesis

Study	Data	Methodology	Results	Author's conclusions
<b>Peterson (1992)</b>	US Survey of Public Participation in the Arts. Liking of musical genres and attendance at cultural events (e.g. opera, art museums)	Simultaneous log-multiplicative ranking of favourite musical genre and occupation. Comparison of rates of participation in cultural events and liking of musical genres by occupation.	Respondents in high-status professions (as determined by elite musical taste) more likely than respondents in low-status groups to like all genres	Supportive
<b>Peterson and Kern (1996)</b>	US Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (1982 and 1992). Musical genres liked	Comparison of average liking of musical genres between highbrows (defined as respondents who liked classical music and opera and chose one of these as their favourite genre) and non-highbrows.	In 1992, highbrows liked more genres than non-highbrows. Highbrows in 1992 liked more genres than highbrows in 1982	Supportive
<b>Katz-Gerro and Jaeger (2013)</b>	Danish national survey, 1975-2004. Participation in cultural activities e.g. classical music concert, film at cinema	LCA	LCA principally divides along omnivore/univore lines. Two additional clusters identified: 1) low-brow consumers, and 2) middle-brow consumers	Supportive
<b>Alderson et al. (2007)</b>	US General Social Survey. Participation in cultural activities e.g. classical music concert, film at cinema	LCA	LCA principally divides along omnivore/univore lines. Consumers in higher occupational classes more likely to be omnivores	Supportive
<b>Chan and Goldthorpe (2005)</b>	Arts in England Survey. Participation in cultural activities e.g. attending ballet, film at cinema	LCA	LCA principally divides along omnivore/univore lines. Consumers in higher occupational class and status positions more likely to be omnivores	Supportive

<b>Chan and Goldthorpe (2007)</b>	Arts in England Survey. Attendance at music events	LCA	LCA principally divides along omnivore/univore lines. Consumers in higher occupational status positions more likely to be omnivores	Supportive
<b>Sintas and Alvarez (2002)</b>	Spanish Culture as Consumption survey. Participation in cultural activities e.g. visiting museums, art galleries, book fairs, music festivals	LCA	LCA distinguishes four classes: 1) non-participators, 2) popular consumers (high probability of participation in popular activities but not in high-brow activities), 3) high-brow consumers (high-probability of participation in high-brow activities but not in popular activities), 4) omnivores (high probability of participation in all activities). Omnivores are highest educated group.	Supportive
<b>Roose et al. (2012)</b>	Cultural Participation in Flanders Survey. Cultural consumption in multiple domains (e.g. television, cinema, reading poetry), and cultural dispositions (e.g. what features people look for in film)	MCA	MCA distinguishes three axes: 1) cultural engagement versus disengagement, 2) preference for contemplative forms versus preference for active, adventurous practices and dispositions, 3) openness to new things versus neutrality with respect to novelty.  Highly culturally engaged reject the most popular television station.	Mixed. Most important structuring principle is engagement. However, contrast remains between high and low-brow tastes
<b>Coulangeon (2005)</b>	Survey of French Cultural Practices. Genres of music most frequently listened to	MCA	MCA distinguishes four axes: 1) number of genres liked ('eclecticism'), 2) age, 3) mainstream versus extreme tastes, 4) cultural legitimacy.	Mixed. Most important structuring factor is breadth. However, contrast remains between legitimate and illegitimate tastes

<b>Coulangeon (2017)</b>	Survey of French Cultural Practices. Objectified and embodied highbrow capital (e.g. number of books owned, visits to museums, attendance at cultural events), TV watching and TV genre preferences, foreign related cultural assets and practices (e.g. English language books read)	MCA	MCA distinguishes two axes: 1) extent of high-brow participation versus preference for low-brow television channels, 2) extent of foreign-language related consumption	Mixed. Some indications of hierarchical exclusion. However, increasing importance of emergent cultural forms not adhering to traditional hierarchies of legitimacy
<b>Warde et al. (2008)</b>	UK Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion survey and follow-up qualitative interviews. Participation in cultural activities (e.g. watching television, attending opera), cultural knowledge (e.g. awareness of specific film directors), cultural likes and dislikes (e.g. films and film genres, TV shows, books and book genres), and attitudes towards cultural exclusion	Comparison of preferences between omnivores (defined by high volume of participation and high levels of knowledge) and non-omnivores.  Analysis of interviews with cultural omnivores.	Omnivores like a larger number of items than non-omnivores, combining high-brow and popular and low-brow items.  Omnivores dislike fewer items than non-omnivores. However, dislike few legitimate items and dislike more low-brow items than non-omnivores.  Omnivores disavow snobbery.  Qualitative interviews suggest rejection of low-brow forms.	Mixed. Omnivores have broad tastes and disavow snobbery. However, reject some low-brow forms, suggesting exercise of distinction
<b>Tampubolon (2008)</b>	US General Social Survey. Liking of musical genres	LCA	LCA distinguishes omnivores from univores. However, omnivores divided into two groups: popular omnivores (like classical and popular music, dislike country music), and traditional omnivores (like classical music, folk, and country, dislike popular music). Univores also characterised by a large number of dislikes.	Mixed. High status people dislike low-brow forms but also other high-brow forms. Multiple simultaneous axes of stratification (and exclusion), of which status is only one

<b>van Eijck (2001)</b>	Cultural Participation of the Dutch Population survey. How often listen to musical genres	Comparison of number of genres listened to by education level and occupational class.  Factor analysis.	More educated respondents, and respondents in higher occupational classes, listen to more genres.  Factor analysis distinguishes four factors: 1) Folk 2) High-brow 3) Pop 4) New omnivore (high loadings for diversity of genres)	Mixed. Elite omnivores are present as class; drive finding that higher SEP respondents have broader tastes. However, high-brow consumers draw boundaries based on legitimacy
<b>Bryson (1996)</b>	US General Social Survey. Musical genres disliked	Linear regression of number of musical dislikes on measures of socio-economic status.  Visualisation of relationship between musical tolerance and dislike of specific genres	More educated respondents are more musically tolerant (dislike fewer genres). However, musically tolerant elites tend to dislike genres enjoyed by lowest educated	Mixed. Cultural elites have broad tastes. However, this breadth consistent with crossing race rather than class boundaries. Elites still exhibit class-based exclusion
<b>Friedman (2011)</b>	Combination of quantitative survey and qualitative interviews with attendees at Edinburgh Fringe Festival concerning stand-up-comedy preferences	Mixed methods: MCA of survey data and analysis of interview data	MCA distinguishes two axes: 1) liking high-brow comedians and disliking low-brow comedians versus liking low-brow comedians, 2) liking low-brow comedians versus lack of knowledge about comedy.  Qualitative interviews suggest cultural elites strongly reject low-brow comedy	Mixed. Cultural elites have broad tastes but dislike low-brow comedy and way in which people from 'low-cultural capital' backgrounds appreciate comedy
<b>Gayo-Cal et al. (2006)</b>	UK Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion survey. See Warde et al. (2008) above.	MCA	MCA distinguishes two axes: 1) appreciation of high-brow culture and few dislikes (excepting reality TV and fast-food) versus few likes and a dislike of high-brow culture, 2) appreciation of popular culture versus dislike of popular and low-brow culture	Mixed. Among younger people, primary distinction between consumers with many versus few likes. However, among older people clearer distinction between popular and high-brow consumers

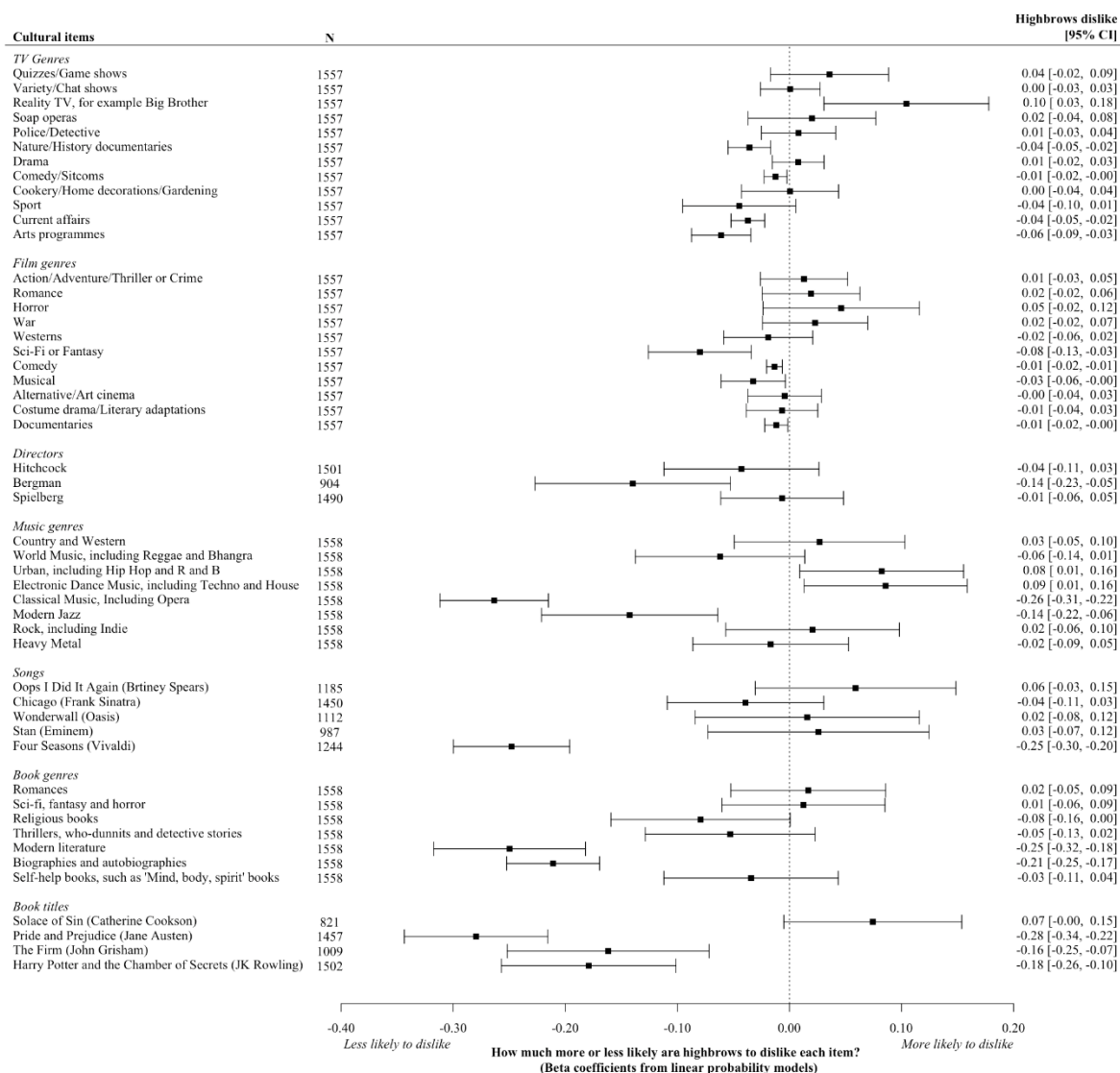
<b>Prieur et al. (2008)</b>	Survey of cultural preferences in Aalborg, Denmark. Cultural preferences, knowledge, and consumption in multiple domains; including newspapers and magazines read, knowledge and preferences in books, preferences for TV programmes and genres, and type of food served to guests.	MCA	MCA distinguishes two axes: 1) High-brow versus low-brow consumption, 2) high versus low economic capital.  60% of high-brow consumers rejected low-brow cultural forms; <8% exhibited no or only weak avoidance of low-brow forms	Unsupportive
<b>Atkinson (2011)</b>	Semi-structured interviews concerning musical life histories in Bristol, England.	Analysis of interview data	Elite respondents describe tastes as eclectic; however, emphasise high-brow forms while explicitly rejecting low-brow (mass-market) forms	Unsupportive
<b>Friedman and Kuipers (2013)</b>	Edinburgh fringe interview data (as in Friedman, 2011) combined with similar interviews in Netherlands	Analysis of interview data	Cultural elites make strong negative judgements about low-brow comedy taste	Unsupportive

*Note:* LCA=Latent Class Analysis; MCA=Multiple Correspondence Analysis

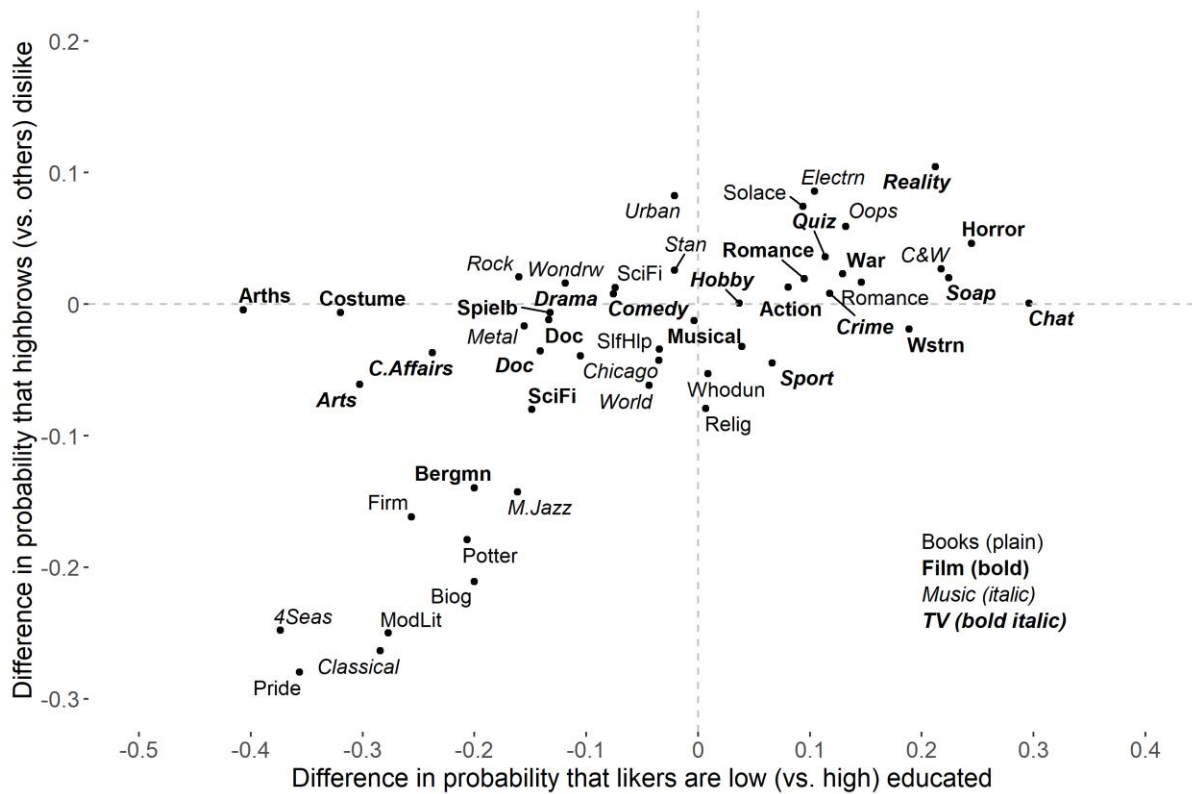


**Table 2.** Details of survey items and operationalisation of dislike

	<b>Survey question format</b>	<b>Operationalisation of dislike</b>
<b>Book and music genres</b>	1-7 score (1=like it very much, 7=don't like it at all)	Score of 6-7
<b>Specific books</b>	1) have read, 2) thinking of reading), 3) heard of but not likely to read, or 4) not heard of	Heard of but not likely to read (not heard of coded as missing)
<b>Specific pieces of music</b>	1) listened to and liked, 2) listened to and not liked, 3) heard of but not listened to), 4) not heard of	Listened to and not liked OR heard of but not listened to (not heard of coded as missing)
<b>Film and television genres</b>	Choose favourite, second favourite, and least favourite from list of genres	Chosen as least favourite
<b>Film directors</b>	1) Would make a point of watching film they directed, 2) might watch, 3) would probably not watch, 4) not heard of	Would probably not watch (not heard of coded as missing)



**Figure 1.** Forest plot indicating how much more or less likely highbrows are than non-highbrows to dislike each item. From individual linear probability models adjusting for age and gender.



**Figure 2.** Relative probability that highbrows (vs. non-highbrows) dislike each item plotted against the relative probability that a respondent liking the item will have a low (vs. high) level of education