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New forms of distinction: How contemporary cultural elites understand 'good' taste

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Abstract
Taste is a subject of longstanding academic interest. The question of how cultural interests and preferences are socially stratified is at the heart of the sociology of culture. This article adds to this literature by examining the tastes of a specific social fraction, those working in cultural and creative occupations ($N = 203$). The analysis finds that, in keeping with existing quantitative research on changing cultural hierarchies, cultural workers are open and eclectic in their expressions of taste. They are reflexive, able to play with, and question, ideas of taste alongside conceptions of artistic or cultural legitimacy, connecting their understandings to broader questions of social division and distinction. At the same time, this 'emerging' form of cultural capital is a new dividing line, substantiated by modes of consumption, depth of appreciation, and willingness to articulate commitments to engagement with culture. These distinctive tastes of cultural workers matter because, as creators, commissioners and curators of what ends up on stage, page and screen, cultural workers' tastes shape the cultural hierarchies of which they are a part. In the context of cultural and creative industries, we can expect that these new forms of distinction will serve to create group identities, providing yet another way that cultural elites are socially closed, in addition to well-known exclusions based on demographics such as race, class, gender, age or disability.

Keywords
creative industries, cultural capital, cultural hierarchies, cultural taste, omnivore

Introduction

Cultural taste has been a subject of longstanding academic interest. The question of how cultural interests and preferences are socially stratified and differentiated is at the heart

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of the sociology of culture. There is a voluminous literature, which includes both the very recent (Nault et al., 2021) and the historically canonical (Bourdieu, 1984). This article adds to this literature by examining the tastes of a specific social fraction, those working in cultural and creative occupations.

Cultural and creative workers have also seen substantial levels of interest from academic researchers (see Brook et al., 2020a for a summary). Specifically, creative work, and the associated working and labour market conditions, have been central to the sociology on this subject.

This article speaks to both literatures. Using qualitative interview data ($N = 203$), the analysis finds that, in keeping with existing quantitative research on changing cultural hierarchies, cultural workers are open and eclectic in their expressions of taste. They explicitly disdain snobbery and are cautious about cultural hierarchies. They are reflexive, able to play with, and question, ideas of taste alongside conceptions of artistic or cultural legitimacy.

At the same time, this 'emerging' form of cultural capital (Prieur & Savage, 2013) becomes a new dividing line. Whilst our interviewees were either rejecting or playfully deconstructing ideas of snobbishness and hierarchy, their modes of commitment to culture underpin new forms of distinction. Most notably, the new dividing line is not in *what* is consumed, but distinction is substantiated by modes of consumption, depth of appreciation, and willingness to articulate commitments to engagement with culture.

These patterns of taste are shared by the interviewees in our dataset, irrespective of their cultural occupation or demographics. The shared orientation to culture is significant for two reasons. First, these shared patterns of taste matter because of the social function of cultural and creative workers. They have a social function as creators of what ends up on stage, page and screen, as well as curators and commissioners. Their tastes, and their reflexive understanding of the idea of judgements of taste, shape the very cultural hierarchies of which they are a part. New and subtle forms of distinction, such as the explicit rejection of snobbery and the new lines of good taste based on knowledge, detailed understandings and commitment to deep engagements with artistic and cultural forms, are expressed in the cultural products upon which other fractions of elites depend for their own new forms of distinction.

Second, existing literature suggests changes in elite tastes have been as much about group coherence and cohesion as they have been about social divisions and differentiations. Social closure is the other side of the coin of openness and rejection of hierarchy. In the context of *cultural* elites we can expect that these new forms of distinction will serve to create group identities, providing yet another way that cultural elites are socially closed, in addition to well-known exclusions based on demographics such as race, class, gender, age or disability.

This latter point is the basis for the first section of the article. It reviews the literature on changing patterns of taste, and the role of taste in social closure, particularly for elites. These two literatures are placed into dialogue with work on inequality in cultural and creative industries. This situates the article's contribution, as well as proving the basis for the choice of methods of data collection and the mode of analysis.

The article then presents analysis of data from interviews with 203 individuals working in cultural and creative occupations. The analysis first describes the shared narratives

and understandings of taste offered by cultural workers in response to questions about their cultural likes and dislikes, and their understandings of 'good' taste.

The article then connects this set of data, and the associated research on the taste patterns of elite social and economic occupational groups, to the sociological literature on cultural and creative industries. In doing so, the article highlights how the rise of open and eclectic, 'omnivorous' tastes serves to make disparate and often individualised workers into a coherent community, whilst at the same time marking them out as different and distinctive to the rest of the population at large. The article then concludes by discussing the implications for research on tastes and research on cultural and creative industries.

The changing relationship between culture and inequality

Tastes and new forms of distinction

Understanding why cultural taste matters for creative workers, and why creative workers matter for cultural tastes, can be grounded in sociology of culture research that has focused on how boundaries, both cultural and moral, are drawn.

There is a longstanding literature on the way cultural tastes have been closely associated with social boundaries. In *Distinction*, Bourdieu noted that 'good' judgements of taste went hand in hand with elite influence over cultural hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1984). These cultural hierarchies, as a result of their relationship to social hierarchies, were another means by which those in powerful positions could distinguish themselves from the rest of the population. Research since *Distinction* has developed our understanding of how boundaries are drawn, both cultural and moral, and how these boundaries then relate to broader inequalities, such as access to specific occupations (e.g. Friedman & Laurison, 2019).

American research has been especially important to this area. Lamont (1992), Lamont and Lareau (1988) and Lamont and Molnar (2002) all offer overviews of the relationship between cultural and moral boundary drawing, with particular attention drawn to the way elites are skilled at using boundary drawing practices to preserve social positions. Since this research, elite studies scholars have devoted attention to understanding how practices of moral boundary drawing are intertwined with changing patterns of cultural tastes, with Sherman (2017, 2018) a recent, prominent, example.

Focusing on wealthy American elites, Sherman found that specific fractions of the very wealthy in New York City sought to distance themselves from other elites. At the same time, they claimed status as 'normal' hardworking citizens, with struggles akin to the rest of the city's, and the country's, population. Here, as Sherman (2018, p. 422) notes, 'the cultural boundary is also a moral boundary'. The narrative of working hard, not displaying wealth (and associated greed), and being explicitly against snobbery, were all modes of deflecting attention away from elites' status at the very peak of unequal American society. These narratives were also ways of justifying the inequalities that elites' positions perpetuated.

Sherman's (2017, 2018) work was not specifically analysing cultural consumption and cultural tastes. Yet the insights as to elites' attitudes towards snobbery and judgements, alongside the function of these attitudes for elite reproduction, are central to recent research on the sociology of taste.

A powerful example comes from research by Jarness (2015). This found distinctive orientations towards art and culture within seemingly similar social positions and, seemingly, similar sets of tastes. Partially this illustrates the importance of understanding how people use art and culture, rather than just looking at cultural attendance or cultural preferences. More generally, the crucial insight is in how different fractions of the middle class (analysed by Güveli et al., 2012) understand the meaning and role of art and culture in their lives, and how that meaning relates to boundary drawing.

The central tension in Jarness's (2017) work was between a cultural elite and an economic elite. Each used cultural tastes, and the associated cultural hierarchies, to define themselves and to make themselves distinct from other social groups. For cultural elites, as with Sherman's work in New York, avoiding displays of wealth and avoiding explicit moral judgements sat alongside preferences for authentic and 'deep' cultural engagements. These cultural preferences were replicated in comparative work on elite tastes by Jarness and Friedman (2017), preferences that sat alongside a drive by interviewees to downplay antagonisms and differences, and to avoid explicit cultural distinctions.

Although the use of cultural tastes for social distinctions has not disappeared, it has taken new forms and emerges in new, more subtle, discourses. Boundary drawing and distinction are, in turn, impossible to separate from changes in the hierarchy of culture itself.

What is 'good' taste anyway?

Many of the individuals and communities highlighted by recent work on elite tastes and boundary drawing might be characterised as cultural 'omnivores'. The figure of the 'omnivore', a cultural consumer who is not attached to particular cultural hierarchies in the context of a dislocation of cultural value from social position, is now a longstanding, and much debated, idea in the sociology of culture (see Hanquinet, 2017; and Lena, 2019 for an overview).

The most recent summary of debates over the omnivore (De Vries & Reeves, 2022) proposes a twofold framework for understanding both the literature and the phenomenon-in-practice. In the 'strong' version, the omnivore heralds the democratisation of culture and the end of hierarchies, as cultural elites break the link between class position and cultural value. In the 'weak' version, social elites express preferences for a range of cultural forms irrespective of cultural hierarchies, but continue to draw boundaries with other social groups and reproduce social snobbery.

De Vries and Reeves (2022) conclude that understanding new taste patterns and new hierarchies requires detailed research interventions that often go beyond what is possible with existing survey research. This point reinforces Jarness's (2015) insight that the *use* of art and culture matters. It also reflects, for example, Pedersen et al.'s (2018) and Yalvac and Hazir's (2021) work on understanding the meaning of cultural practices and objects beyond the quantitative survey. In doing so, these authors demonstrate the continued command of hierarchies by cultural elites: knowing the 'rules' of cultural hierarchy allows those rules to be transgressed or broken.

As Lena (2019) and Friedman and Reeves (2020) demonstrate, cultural hierarchies are still very much a part of social life, even where the most culturally engaged elites

distance themselves from, or even disown, snobbishness and moral judgements of personal or social worth in relation to cultural consumption. Rather than a democratisation of cultural hierarchies, we have, as Lena (2019) shows, continuing social distinctions driven by elite tastes and consecration practices (Purhonen et al., 2018). These social distinctions sit alongside the role of tastes in maintaining the exclusiveness of those same elite communities.

Shared tastes, shared communities

Alongside studies of cultural hierarchy and the social patterning of tastes, sociological research has foregrounded the importance of tastes in the creation of a sense of community and group identity. This can be true of any general social group (Lizardo, 2016) as knowledge, or at least the ease of deployment of artistic and cultural references, has been demonstrated as important to social group bonding and coherence (Lizardo, 2006, 2016; McAndrew et al., 2020; Meghji, 2019; Michael, 2017; Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010; Warde & Bennett, 2008; Wohl, 2015). To give one prominent example, 'culture talk' builds bridges, develops friendships and reinforces identities shared by communities. Yet 'culture talk', as Lizardo (2016) demonstrates, is just as socially stratified as other modes of cultural engagement, with those with more cultural and economic capital engaging in more 'culture talk'.

The role of shared tastes is not exclusive to community formation; shared tastes can have important effects on things like employment prospects and career development (De Keere, 2022; Rivera, 2012). Here shared tastes, and broader shared cultural aspects of elite socialisation (Lareau, 2015), facilitate the process of what Rivera calls 'hiring as cultural matching'.

In the cultural and creative industries, Koppman (2015) has most powerfully demonstrated the importance of shared tastes. Her research shows how hiring as cultural matching plays out as a way of sorting those who are 'different' in the eyes of decision makers in creative occupations, and thus fit those same decision makers' self-perceptions. We see echoes of this in other parts of the cultural industries, such as television commissioning (Friedman & Laurision, 2019), artistic communities (Wohl, 2015) and cultural professions more generally (De Keere, 2022).

The role of shared tastes, just as with the idea of cultural or artistic hierarchies, has changed over time. For Koppman (2015), what drove the cultural match between hirer and applicant was not an explicitly stated list of art forms or cultural practices with a close correspondence between both parties' likes or dislikes. Rather, as with the observations about general trends in taste in society, the benefits of shared tastes were as much to do with the orientation and attitudes towards arts and culture as they were about specific likes or dislikes.

This point connects directly to the literature on changes in cultural hierarchies, as driven by elites (Friedman & Reeves, 2020; Lena, 2019). In Friedman and Reeves' analysis of the changing patterns of elites tastes in the UK, as evidenced by over 150 years of entries in *Who's Who*, contemporary social elites are not only able to display an open and eclectic interest in a range of cultural forms. They are also 'knowing' in their orientation to culture and how they express that orientation, 'to distance oneself

from highbrow modes of distinction-signaling, yet still conducted to showcase a certain aesthetic ease' (Friedman & Reeves, 2020, p. 327). This new form of distinction is clearly important to the coherence and closure of elite social groups. As Koppman (2015) and De Keere (2022) demonstrate, it is especially crucial in the cultural and creative industries.

New forms of distinction and inequality in the cultural and creative industries

Sociological concern with cultural and creative industries has sought to demonstrate the widespread inequalities in the workforce, organisations and institutions central to the production of culture (Casey & O'Brien, 2020). This contrasts with celebratory research on the 'creative class' (Florida, 2002) and the rhetoric of policy makers across the world. Inequalities associated with race and ethnicity (Nwonka & Malik, 2018; Saha, 2018), age (Brodmerkel & Barker, 2019), gender (Brook et al., 2021; Conor et al., 2015) and more broadly social class (Brook et al., 2020a) are all well established as problems, with an associated literature exploring the mechanisms driving the absences of people of colour, women and those from working-class origins from key parts of the creative economy (Brook et al., 2020a; Hesmondhalgh, 2018; O'Brien, 2018; Saha, 2018).

Research on inequality has been especially important because creative work has an association with being open and meritocratic. In this narrative, talent and hard work, along with luck, are given their just rewards (Taylor & O'Brien, 2017). Moreover, with the advent of technologies that have collapsed the costs of production in key industries such as music and publishing and transformed film and TV, barriers to entry are seen to be lower than professions with commensurate social status, such as law, accountancy or medicine.

These attitudes and values, along with tastes, have not seen as much research interest as other mechanisms of exclusion, for example labour market structures (Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013), revenue models (Schlesinger & Waelde, 2012), explicit and implicit forms of discrimination (Brook et al., 2020a) or the role of social networks (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). One recent exception is Campbell et al. (2019), who suggested that the patterns of tastes that differentiated cultural and creative workers from the rest of the population in England also served as barriers to entry for those without those orientations towards culture.

This point connects back to the literature on the role of culture in forming and sustaining communities and social networks. In some ways we could read what follows as an example of research in that tradition. However, studying cultural and creative workers has an added dimension of sociological significance. These sets of occupations are important because of their position within the production of culture. Taste here is not only something that gives this group coherence or a sense of shared community and identity. New forms of 'good' taste are also the product of the actions of this subset of economy and society. A vast range of recent research, from book reviews and the publishing industry (Childress, 2017; Chong, 2019), through theatre, music, performing arts and media (DeBenedictis et al., 2017; Hesmondhalgh, 2018; Smith Maguire &

Matthews, 2014), to the art world itself (Gerber, 2017; Lena, 2019), shows the continued importance of cultural workers in shaping what is, and what is not, consecrated within contemporary cultural hierarchies.

These three sets of literature – on boundary drawing, on changing cultural hierarchies and on inequality in cultural professions – provide the starting point for this article's analysis. In what follows, we ask how cultural workers think about their tastes; how they seem to share the anti-snobbish commitments found in existing work on elites; and how they continue to draw boundaries even within these seemingly open orientations towards culture. In doing so, the article reflects on the implications for inequality in cultural and creative occupations, where attitudes and orientations towards art and culture are important elements of the hiring process.

Data and methods

As yet, the three literatures previously surveyed have not answered the core question of how cultural and creative workers discuss their cultural tastes. To address that core question, we draw on key studies that have addressed the question of taste via qualitative methods. In particular, we are building on work that has focused on social and cultural elites.

There is a rich history of this work, set alongside a recent set of examples. In his ethnographic studies on an elite American school, Shamus Khan demonstrated the changing mentality of the American upper class. Here students and teachers valorised openness and curiosity about various cultural forms (Khan, 2010). Bull and Scharff (2017, 2021), looking at classical musicians, have shown the subtleties of this new form of openness and curiosity. They used interview data to demonstrate how boundaries are still drawn, albeit in ways that are self-consciously rejecting snobbishness. And Wohl (2015) has used ethnographic and interview data to show how an art group used expressions of judgement as 'indicators of belonging', again with subtle forms of boundary drawing associated with specific forms of sexualised images.

Our analysis follows part of the approaches in these studies, in particular Bull and Scharff's (2017, 2021) use of interviews. The analysis draws on qualitative interviews conducted as part of a more general research project on cultural and creative industries and inequality. The fieldwork took place in the summer of 2016, using a four-section schedule focused primarily on the interviewees' careers. The final section concluded the interview by asking participants to discuss their cultural likes and dislikes, along with the final question, 'do you think people would say you have good taste?' This question was used to further probe specific questions about interviewees' likes and dislikes, as well as their views about taste in contemporary society.

As the question came at the end of the interview schedule, some interviewees within the overall sample were not asked the question, almost all as a result of running over the hour time limit for the discussion. As a result, the analysis here uses data from 203 interviewees from the total project sample of 239 interviews.

The sample, in keeping with what we know about the workforce demographics of the cultural sector in the UK, was dominated by those from professional and managerial social origins (NS-SEC 1 and 2). Seventy-two per cent of the sample (147/203) were

from these more privileged social starting points, with just over a quarter (27%, 55/202) from working-class origins (parents or carers in NS-SEC 3-7 occupations when our interviewees were children). One interviewee refused to offer this information (1/203). Self-described class identity was more complex in the fieldwork, with just over half (51%, 118/203) self-describing their class identity as 'middle-class', 17% 'working-class' (34/203), and the remainder either refusing the question, refusing the category, or the question was not asked during the interview (for more information on the distinction between class identification and social class origin see Brook et al., 2020a; Friedman et al., 2021).

Also reflecting broader trends in the arts, the sample is overwhelmingly women (71% 145/203), although men are represented in specific occupations, such as directing for film and television. Our sample is drawn from across the creative industries, with a focus on artistic and cultural occupations (full details available in Brook et al., 2020a). Finally, the sample is overwhelmingly white (again, reflecting more general demographics of the various occupations constituting our 'cultural' elite) and well educated, with only a small minority not educated to degree level or above.[1]

The interviews were transcribed, then coded according to a framework synthesised from the broader project (Brook et al., 2020a) and the existing literature. The interviewees were divided up according to their initial answer to the questions about tastes and cultural consumption at the end of the interview, as to whether they were positive or negative about the idea of having 'good' taste. Subsequent coding and grouping were based on coding of sentiments towards forms of art and culture that were listed as liked or disliked; the discourses associated with those likes and dislikes; sentiments towards the idea of having 'good' taste in art and culture and whether this matters in contemporary society; and the discourses associated with those answers.

What are the tastes of cultural and creative workers?

'Ordinary' cultural elites

First, the analysis suggested a broadly shared, perhaps even unified, orientation towards culture was present, irrespective of the demographics of the interviewee. This shared position is illustrated by comments from Claire. She was typical of our respondents in three ways. A white, working-class origin, theatre practitioner and educator in her forties, Claire was eclectic and omnivorous in her tastes:

> Yes, quite a diverse range, less creating because I create at work, so I tend to do less creating when I'm not at work. Still love going to the theatre, that would be high on my list of things definitely. I'd also, I guess, an interest in drama and theatre comes from an interest in story, so film and TV. I watch some TV, a fair amount of TV. I watch quite a lot of films. Listen to quite a wide range of music, from pop to semi-classical stuff. I play computer games from time to time . . . We go to the pub, we have a group of friends that we see in the pub quite often. The odd pub quiz night. Cooking, I count that as a cultural activity probably. That's probably the way that I relax most in the house is by either cooking or watching TV. What else do I do? Reading, reading, lots of reading . . . my guilty pleasure is probably detective fiction and horror fiction. So quite a lot of that.

With considered and well thought out likes and dislikes:

> I hate stage musicals (*Laughter*). What else do I not like? I'm not a huge fan of opera, which I guess is attached to the stage musical. Although again I've seen some quite good opera that I could quite enjoy . . . (*Laughter*) I think it's too, this makes me sound like a terrible cultural snob, it's too, it doesn't engage my brain. It doesn't make me think, it's over-sentimentalised and it's all about the spectacle and being wowed by spectacle, not what's actually going on.

And reflexive understandings of the hierarchies im- and ex-plicit in both judgements about likes and dislikes *and* the boundaries of what is, and what is not, a cultural practice.

Claire offers an example of precisely the sort of 'ordinary elite distinction' identified by Friedman and Reeves (2020) as characteristic of contemporary British elites, irrespective of their occupation. On first glance, cultural workers' tastes would seem to represent a trend in keeping with the rest of elites. Claire's interview is also revealing of a further trend, the refusal to be seen as snobbish or invested in hierarchies that are forms of moral, rather than solely, aesthetic judgement. She continued this theme in response to the idea of good and bad taste itself:

> I don't know. Oh god, what a horrible question. I think my friends would say that I have. Yes, I think they would say that. **Put it this way when they want to go to the theatre they ask me what they should see** . . . I think that's a concept that I don't like. I don't think there is. I don't think there should be. I think all cultural forms are equally valid whether that's rap music or video games or opera or whatever it might be. And I think taste is a very individual thing and so it should be. I would like people to have the opportunity to be exposed to as many different cultural forms as possible, but then to make their own choices about what they watch and what they do.

We've highlighted in bold a line from Claire's discussion that will be important later in the analysis. Alongside her refusal to be snobbish, Claire had a role as a tastemaker for her friends, trusted to make judgements about what they should see at the theatre and, as a result, to make judgements about aesthetic worth. This role draws on Claire's status as a cultural worker and is an initial illustration of the specific or unique position of cultural workers in the context of judgements about culture. We return to this point towards the end of the analysis.

We've used data from Claire's interview to represent the typical set of answers, common across our dataset. Being eclectic and omnivorous; having well considered and well thought out likes and dislikes; and reflexive understanding of hierarchies were the dominant characteristics of interviewees' responses. These approaches to discussing taste were present irrespective of the interviewees' demographic characteristics – for example their race, class, gender, age and education – and irrespective of their specific cultural industry. The examples we provide in the rest of the article reflect this, and we provide examples from a range of creative occupations and demographic categories drawn from our dataset. It is striking that there was no clear pattern in differences in orientation, for example by gender or by class origin, suggesting a shared orientation common to cultural

and creative workers. What the article is describing are the tastes of cultural and creative workers, rather than just the tastes of the middle, or elite, classes more generally.

'Playing with the form': self-awareness and reflexivity

Part of the new mode of elite distinction identified by Friedman and Reeves (2020) was the ability to 'play with the form' of questions about hobbies, pastimes and cultural interests. We can see evidence of that in Claire's reflexivity about the questions of cultural forms and cultural hierarchies. This sense of self-awareness of cultural hierarchies, and one's own position within those hierarchies, is part of cultural workers' occupational identities. This was shared across the interviewees, with John a typical example. A white middle-class origin male in his thirties, working in film and new media, John positioned his tastes with considerable self-awareness of both broader patterns, as well as drawing on open and omnivorous elements to draw a boundary with possible others like himself:

> Have I got American, East and West coast sensibilities? Yeah. Have I got Metropolitan English sensibilities yeah? Have I got the idea of effectively the sensibilities of a 35-year-old white person? Broadly speaking yeah. Have I got the, I am very open on gender. Which is probably why I am slightly different in terms of sort of, I very much like what would be generally deemed to be any form of arts skewed towards women.

This sort of boundary drawing, which was also gestured towards in Claire's comments, is going to be crucial as we consider the new forms of distinction evidenced in our cultural workers' interviews. This boundary drawing is another aspect of the way cultural workers' tastes are of special significance, as discussed at the end of this analysis. Before that, we can develop the sense of 'playing with the form' that was important to many of our interviewees' narratives. This ranged from joking reflexivity, such as this comment from Joanna, a 40 something Black woman from a middle-class background, who was working as an actor:

> I think I've got rotten taste . . . I'm hopeless I don't know what anyone else would think . . . I've got good taste in men, I'm good at that, I've always been good at that . . . So, no taste in clothes and what goes together. I'm I choose great men, I always choose great men, I have great taste in men. I've been out with some phenomenal men.

Through to a more critical sense of one's own tastes within broader cultural, and social, hierarchies. Jessica's discussion of cultural policy is a useful example here. A white, working-class origin woman in her fifties, Jessica had a successful career as a writer and arts administrator. Her 'playing with the form' was not humorous, but rather a reflection of the persistence of established art forms as markers of good or legitimate taste:

> Because we still talk about excellence, and by excellence in Britain at the moment we still mean high art. So no the people who define what arts are would not think I had great taste. I have tried opera genuinely and I have opera friends, performers, directors, I think I came to it too late. I

> have tried classical music. There is some I like; I probably came to it too late. I like pop music and pop music isn't considered good taste. Bowie maybe, but you know there are exceptions, but no of course not. I like populist arts. I really do, and I wish populist art was considered good taste, but it is not at the moment.

Joanna and Jessica both show reflexivity in their discussion of their own tastes, distancing themselves from cultural hierarchies whilst at the same time stressing the almost 'bad' tastes that they hold. Again though, we can see subtle distinctions emerging in a narrative that seeks to disavow hierarchy and position her individual tastes as normal or ordinary (as we see with other forms of social identities, e.g. Irwin, 2015).

It is important to recognise the different modes of self-awareness and reflexivity displayed by John, Joanna and Jessica, and the different modes of delivery, particularly Joanna's use of humour. Yet at the same time they, and the majority of our interviewees, displayed the sense of awareness of hierarchy and the 'form' of being asked about their likes and tastes, characteristic of contemporary social elites (Friedman & Reeves, 2020).

Rejecting snobbishness . . .

Jessica's narrative was explicit in both the affirmation of the persistence of hierarchy and in positioning herself in opposition to those same, unequal, structures. Here our interviewees displayed a commitment common throughout research on contemporary cultural tastes: the avowed rejection of snobbery and moral judgements in relation to aesthetic *choices*, along with a suspicion of hierarchies (Hanquinet, 2017). These trends sit alongside the sorts of open, eclectic and omnivorous approaches to culture seen in both the literature reviewed earlier in this article and seen in the first section of our analysis.

Claire's comment that we highlighted earlier in the article is an instructive starting point for how there was an explicit rejection of cultural snobbery. She was playing with form, by framing her rejection of musical theatre as something to be laughed at in a knowing and ironic way, as well as being clear that *'this makes me sound like a terrible cultural snob'* when admitting she didn't find that art form intellectually engaging. This division was one of the ways interviewees rejected snobbery, whilst finding new forms of distinction. Here we will introduce those rejections of snobbery and the new forms of distinction in the section that follows.

Brief excerpts from Simon, Carla and Siobhan all illustrate the contours of both new patterns of taste and the associated forms of judgement. Carla, a white middle-class origin woman in her twenties, working in visual arts, hated *'the phrase, "good taste" . . . It's just the things that I like.'* Simon, a white, middle-class origin musician in his fifties, felt *'We should all be able to express ourselves in whatever way we like and if someone is starting to tell people that they don't have a sense of taste or whatever, then they're cutting across someone's personal freedom.'* And Siobhan, a white working-class origin woman in her thirties, working in visual arts, was clear in the need to disconnect aesthetic or cultural value from moral judgements about individuals or communities worth: *'The term "good taste". It sounds like a way of looking down on other people.'*

Even those who embraced ideas of snobbishness and hierarchy did it in ironic, knowing, ways which made it clear they distanced themselves from *moral* judgements even as they embraced that side of their cultural tastes. Kate, a white middle-class origin woman in her forties, working in visual arts, provided us with a case in point, embracing a knowledge of the issue of snobbishness, the role of taste in creating groups and senses of community, as well as being self-critical about potential negative impacts of judging good tastes:

> Well this is my dirty little secret okay it is that I am a dreadful snob. My flat if you want, not a kind of an amazing flat by any means but it is such like my snobbery is allowed in . . . in terms of the books I read. In terms of the cutlery I might have. In terms of the furniture I might have. In terms of the things I surround myself, you know not necessarily just about labels in that sense but it is a sense of recognisable kind of codes. These are codes that you know when I go and stay with my friends . . . we all are kind of talking to each other with those things kind of affirming something.
>
> I suppose it is curious. It is one of the things that is not to say that I would judge somebody . . . Here comes the but; but I would . . . I would judge somebody who did what I did.

Even within Kate's example, which was an outlier in the overall dataset, we see the relationship to a critique of snobbery. Kate's snobbery is not something she is proud of, as well as being something she is aware of as a problem. She would *'judge somebody who did what I did'* in terms of being snobbish about culture. She also shows community building as she and her friends use a shared sense of tastes to *'affirm something'* even if they will not be openly judgemental or snobbish about others' aesthetic choices. Even though Kate's admission of even hidden snobbery was unusual in the dataset, she still illustrates how tastes bind communities of cultural workers together, along with the importance of not using culture to judge others.

More common in the data was the idea put forward by Sophie, a working-class origin white woman in her twenties, working in visual arts. Sophie mentioned that very idea of what it means to have 'good' taste is *'to be non-judgemental, open minded and liberal in your thinking and ideas'*. Kate's sense of judging herself for her own potential snobbery, even as her dirty little secret, offers an example of how hierarchies persist, even as older forms of distinction are rejected.

. . . But creating new forms of distinction and new hierarchies

As we know from the existing literature reviewed earlier in this article, hierarchies are not static, and indeed one of the key contributions in the recent sociology of culture has been to track how elites' tastes have changed over time. These changes, as Friedman and Reeves (2020) have demonstrated quantitatively, and Khan (2010) qualitatively, have given rise to new forms of distinction (Friedman et al., 2015). How do these play out for cultural workers?

Over half (117) of our interviewees responded affirmatively to the question 'do you think people would say you have good taste?' At the same time, their playfulness and rejection of snobbery complicated this seemingly straightforward assertion of cultural

hierarchy. Even examples such as Kate, a self-proclaimed snob, were offering complex views on the distinctions associated with taste.

The explanation lies in the embrace of new forms of distinction. Think back to Carla's comment in the previous section. As well as hating the phrase 'good taste' she elaborated on what seemed to be a non-judgemental and relativist position: *'I think it's just about liking something and not being afraid to like it. At least that's what I think it should be.'*

We can also see the contours and boundaries of good taste along with the potential foundations of community building via shared cultural interests identified by Wohl (2015). Again, three short excerpts from Karen, Mark and Marianne illustrate the general trends within the interviews.

For Karen, a middle-class origin white woman in her twenties, working in visual arts, what counted as culturally valuable was, as for many others, a sense of an authentic point of view (echoing the findings of Halh et al., 2017 on American elites): *'it's really important that it's your point of view that you're putting across and not something that everybody else wants to know about, or you're saying something to please somebody else'.* Mark, a working-class origin Black man in his thirties working in museums, found value in having detailed knowledge or understanding of an art form or cultural practice, even whilst affirming the idea that taste is individualised and subjective: *'I always think obviously taste is subjective, but it's subjective on the basis of your understanding and your level of knowledge within a certain sector. I think it's easy to shoot somebody's taste down who you believe is not very well-educated in that field.'*

This individualised and subjective conception of taste was common throughout the interview dataset, here elaborated by Marianne, a white middle-class origin woman in her forties, working in publishing:

> So conversations about taste are just so related to your understanding about what it means to live your life on your own terms. I like what I like, other people can like what they like, I don't really mind, I'm not going to come to fisticuffs over it . . . I want things that either make me think or just stagger me with their beauty or their conflict or their complicatedness. I'm looking for an intellectual and an aesthetic response that is high up the scale every time otherwise I feel like I've wasted myself.

Even as taste and aesthetic judgements are seen as individualised (as are many other forms of personal expression and identity in contemporary society, e.g. Irwin, 2015), there are still ways of asserting what does, and what does not, matter in culture.

The new form of distinction, as identified by Bennett et al. (2009) and discussed by Friedman et al. (2015), Lena (2019) and Bull and Scharff (2017), is best elaborated by a long point made by Heather, a middle-class origin white woman in her twenties, working in museums. This comment synthesises much of the previous discussion, but also brings out the boundaries drawn around engagement with culture in our anti-snobbish, playing with form, ordinary cultural elites:

> I think it's almost like being informed to the extent that you've made a decision. If someone likes a piece of music that I hate, they can have good taste in music because they've almost assessed and worked out what they like. The people who have bad taste are those people who

> just listen to Kiss FM or some mainstream Radio 1 show, **but don't develop their interest more**. You can totally like pop music and everyone can like some of that music at times. But if that's all you've ever looked at, then your taste isn't good, because it's really **uninformed**. People can have totally different taste to me that's also really good, if they've explored other options.
>
> **I think there's a value in good taste of almost a commitment** to it, as well. If you repeatedly invest in that thing. You might only like a really . . . I don't like a lot of really contemporary art. I don't like a decent amount of stuff in the Tate because it doesn't mean anything to me. I find it really difficult, conceptual art and stuff like that. But actually, if you're totally committed to that as a longer-term thing and you go and see art like that in those different places, then I respect that you have good taste . . . I guess it's like a) the knowledge to look into it and b) the commitment to whatever it is.

We've added emphasis to three points in Heather's discussion of good taste and cultural interests. The boundary drawn here is between commitment, willingness to be open and explore, and being informed. At the same time, Heather embraces the idea of differences in cultural interests, valorising this as a positive and giving an example of her lack of engagement with contemporary art to reinforce this point. Ultimately, distinction re-emerges along the lines of being informed enough to make a decision and to feel confident enough to declare a lack of interest from a position of having reflected on one's tastes and the value of particular art forms. This is significant in several ways, reinforcing what we know from the literature, but also opening up a concluding question as to the impact of these new, or perhaps we might say now *contemporary* forms of cultural distinction. It is here we turn to the specific role of taste for cultural and creative workers.

Why taste matters for cultural workers

To conclude the analysis, we now turn to the specific importance of the taste patterns of cultural workers. Our review of the literature that framed this study highlighted the importance of cultural workers as decision makers, gatekeepers and cultural 'intermediaries' (Bourdieu, 1984; Smith Maguire & Matthews, 2014).

We saw this reflected in our interviews, with a recognition of the importance of 'good' taste to cultural workers. As Tamsyn, a middle-class origin Asian woman in her thirties, working in the film industry, told us, *'it's an easy question for me. I work in an industry where people have to trust my taste.'*

Trusting the quality or validity of judgements of taste is important for cultural workers' standing in the field. Their work reflects their tastes, and their tastes can be assessed or judged by others through their work. Hannah, a middle-class origin white woman in her thirties, also working in film, illustrated this point:

> I think based on the work I've done I think people think I do have good taste. I think I'm also quite over the detail of things like costumes and makeup and the design. I think they would say I've got good taste. I'm quite wary that I'm sounding quite arrogant at the moment.

> But then it's also what is good taste? Do you know what I mean? I don't know. I suppose I'm talking about something being well put together and really good. I don't know whether that's the same as good taste, because that's so subjective, isn't it? Everyone has got different taste. But good taste for me is about something, a whole thing, working brilliantly together I suppose.

As did Jemma, a middle-class origin British Asian woman in her thirties, working in performing arts:

> The practice I've been devising over the last 10 years that I've been at [a theatre] is a non-curatorial practice because we work with anyone that wants to be part of the theatre community that selects into it. No one has to qualify for it so I've really learnt to talk with artists, give creative feedback, give business feedback to audiences whose work I really am not personally interested in or makes no immediate connection with me . . . I think because of having the ability to talk quite objectively in a critical way around art, I can talk with a real passion about what I love and what I really don't love in a personal way. The people that know me, I'm quite careful how and where I talk about my taste because I've got a responsibility to the sector more broadly. The people who know me know what my taste is.

Hannah and Jemma's comments demonstrate the individualisation of taste, the rejection of snobbery, and the new forms of distinction we have seen in previous sections of this article. At the same time, we see an insight into the added importance or consequence for these patterns of taste for this fraction of social and economic elites, which is the importance for how cultural representations, artefacts, objects and products are produced.

Hannah's comment, that 'based on the work I've done I think people think I do have good taste', is an illustration of how creative workers' tastes have particular significance. Jemma notes how she has to have the ability to talk passionately about culture, even if she personally dislikes it, because of her work. These comments, along with Tamsyn's which opened this section, show how creative practice and taste are intertwined and hard to separate in the case of the creative industries. Taste is a matter of production as well as consumption. We saw this point throughout the analysis, whether in Claire's role in recommending what friends should see at the theatre, through how Kate furnishes her flat, to Hannah drawing connections between her taste and her work.

Throughout this article we have noted that the interviewees had a shared orientation towards cultural hierarchies and sought to downplay, and even reject, the connection between cultural tastes and moral judgements. The unified nature of this set of orientations builds a sense of community, allowing these cultural elites to draw the sorts of subtle boundaries (as seen in Jarness, 2017; Sherman, 2017, 2018) discussed throughout the analysis.

This sense of community is important in a labour market characterised by networked and project-based forms of employment, and in the context of cultural production being associated with 'scenes' or 'worlds' (Alacovska, 2022; Becker, 1982; Crossley, 2019; McAndrew & Widdop, 2021). In a precarious and highly uncertain labour market, associated with harsh competition for resources and status (Brook et al., 2020a), the bonds of a shared orientation towards arts and culture (and their importance) are crucial in *positively* sustaining the vocational sense of self for creative workers (Gerber, 2017). Having

a shared orientation means Hannah is trusted by her peers over the 'details' of working in film; it is how Jemma is trusted to give creative and business feedback.

At the same time there are potentially *negative* consequences of the use of shared orientations towards culture to build or reinforce a sense of occupational and community identity. As Alacovska (2022) has noted, in a study of communities of cultural workers that do not rely on marketised or financialised forms of value and exchange, barriers to entry can render cultural production highly exclusive. As much as shared tastes can welcome and include, they are also ways of drawing boundaries. This is especially complex when the expressions of taste have subtle and nuanced dynamics that may be hard to follow or interpret for new entrants to a community, organisation or art form (see also Brook et al., 2020a).

As a final point we can broaden out the discussion of taste and community formation, to think about entrance into cultural professions more generally. As Hannah mentions, she is wary of sounding arrogant about her cultural interests, whilst also noting how closely professional quality is connected to taste. This connection returns to Koppman's (2015) and De Keere's (2022) work on hiring in cultural professions. De Keere (2022) suggested that hiring as a form of cultural matching, via expressions of cultural tastes, is especially pronounced in the case of cultural organisations.

Crucially, the expressions of taste that provide the best match for those making decisions are tastes that are seen to be 'fun', anti-hierarchical and anti-snobbish. These are precisely the orientations we have seen throughout the data discussed in this article. The risk posed by these new, more subtle, forms of distinction displayed by the cultural workers interviewed for this study goes beyond the sorts of elite self-justification found in Sherman's (2017, 2018) work on new fractions within the American upper classes. It connects directly to the other barriers to entry into cultural jobs that existing research has demonstrated (Brook et al., 2020a, 2020b).

Conclusion

The anti-hierarchical and anti-snobbish attitude may be something to celebrate as it seeks to break the link between cultural value and social position. Cultural workers' commitment to this may mean art and culture get made that, as a result, also reflect this orientation. Yet when read in the context of existing research on how occupational, and aesthetic or cultural, community identity is formed, and how taste is used in the hiring and commissioning process, the paradox of cultural workers' openness may be a new form of closure. This new form of closure opens our conclusion to the article, as exploring the exact mechanisms underpinning this phenomenon will be an important point for future research.

For now, our analysis offers points of further reflection for the literature on tastes and inequalities in the cultural industries (Campbell et al., 2019) and more general research on inequality in professions that demonstrates the connection between the characteristics of cultural consumption and access to elite social destinations (De Keere, 2022; Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Koppman, 2015; Rivera, 2012).

These possible contributions sit alongside the article's more substantive insights: it has provided data and analysis on cultural workers' tastes; shown how those tastes

correspond to a ‘strong’ version of omnivorousness, rejecting hierarchies and snobbery; and shown how this set of orientations, as they are shared across the dataset irrespective of key demographic or occupational characteristics, presents a way of building and binding occupational and community identity.

Future research can do much more to understand the cultural *products* of the tastes we have analysed. How does openness, on the one hand, and subtle drawing of boundaries, on the other, manifest in the art and culture that creative workers produce? These sorts of relationships are still yet to be fully understood, both empirically and theoretically, so there is rich potential in this area.

Second, how are creative workers’ shared orientations towards art and culture *formed* and *sustained*? Are they pre-existing to the entry into cultural professions, with hiring and commissioning screening out those who, as per Koppman’s (2015) work on hiring, do not share this approach to art and culture? The more general social basis for creative workers’ shared orientation to culture is an obvious next question for future research (although Brook et al., 2020a have done some ground clearing on access to culture in creative workers’ childhoods).

Finally, as the opening to this conclusion highlighted, the exact *mechanisms* by which the patterns we have analysed underpin broader inequalities are still in need of more detailed elaboration. We are hopeful this work will, along with recent contributions from, for example, Koppman (2015), Childress and Nault (2019), Bull and Scharff (2017) and De Keere (2022), form the basis of a research agenda to investigate exactly how the new forms of distinction associated with creative workers give us the same, or at least similar, patterns of workforce inequality over time.

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Note

1. A full list of interviewees, including demographic and occupational details is available in Brook et al. (2020a).

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