

# Myth of a cultural elite -- education, social status determine what we attend, listen to and watch

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There have been a number of theories put forward to explain how our tastes in cinema, theatre, music and the fine arts relate to our position in society. New research funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, has concluded that there is little evidence of a 'cultural elite' that aspires to 'high culture', while turning its back on popular culture.

The research, carried out at the University of Oxford, aimed to determine which theory fits most closely with reality. To ensure the findings applied internationally, survey data was studied from the UK and also from six other countries in Europe and elsewhere in the world. Findings confirmed that a cultural-elite, linked to social class, does not exist in society.

Researchers sought to refine the differences in the hierarchical arrangement, known as social stratification, of people in society. To achieve this, their work took into account the backgrounds of the people surveyed, including education, income and social class. Previous research in this field had used such factors interchangeably, but this project sought to draw a clear distinction between social class and social status.

Doctor Tak Wing Chan, who conducted the research with his colleague Doctor John Goldthorpe. commented: "Our work has shown that it's education and social status, not social class that predict cultural

consumption in the UK, and broadly comparable results were obtained from other countries in our project too.”

Using terms more familiar to those studying the animal kingdom and, in particular, the eating habits of animals, the researchers identified several different types of groups in society that ‘consume’ culture.

These included:

- Univores: people who have an interest in popular culture only
- Omnivores: people who consume the full variety of different types of culture
- Paucivores: people who consume a limited range of cultural activities
- Inactives: people who access nothing at all.

In the UK, it turned out that the consumption of culture is very clearly patterned:

- For theatre, dance and cinema, two types of consumer were identified – univores (62.5% of the sample) and omnivores (37.5%).
- For music, three types were identified – univores (65.7% of the sample), omnivore listeners only (24%) and omnivores (10.3%).
- For the visual arts for example, art galleries, festivals, video art presentations, again three types were identified – inactives (58.6% of the sample), paucivores (34.4%) and omnivores (7%).

“There’s little evidence for the existence of a cultural elite who would consume ‘high’ culture while shunning more ‘popular’ cultural forms,” said Doctor Tak Wing Chan, “Furthermore, at least a substantial minority of members of the most advantaged social groups are univores or inactives.”

Source: Economic & Social Research Council

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