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The Instability of Omnivorous Cultural Taste Over Time

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Abstract

The omnivore is a form of cultural consumer characterized by conspicuous diversity rather than refinement and exclusion. This study updates previous research comparing breadth of musical taste in 1982 to 1992 and finds that, contrary to expectations, the high levels seen in 1992 had declined by 2002 and 2008. We find that this reversion cannot be explained by demographic trends like cohort replacement. Rather it is either the case that omnivorousness was a fad peaking some time around 1992 or we simply cannot know the changing popularity of omnivorousness over time as changes in survey methodology render direct comparisons unreliable.

Keywords

music; omnivore; Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

1. The Discovery of Omnivorous Consumption

From the middle of the nineteenth century, Americans signaled their high status by patronizing the fine arts and, equally as important, shunning all forms of popular culture, a pattern known as highbrow snobbery (DiMaggio, 1982; Levine, 1988), and while there was informal evidence that this formation of high status was on the wane, it remained the accepted view of elite status consumption in academic circles through the 1980s (Peterson, 1997). In the 1990s however a series of studies showed that the highbrow snob was being replaced by a consumption pattern termed omnivorousness. Two highly cited pieces established this literature: an edited volume chapter that described omnivorousness based on 1982 data (Peterson & Simkus, 1992) and an *American Sociological Review* article that compared 1982 to 1992 data to establish that omnivorousness was increasingly common (Peterson & Kern, 1996). The rising omnivore shows familiarity not only with the fine arts but with a wide range of popular culture and activities as well. Subsequent studies have shown that this pattern of omnivorous consumption exists in many countries, including Canada, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, and Spain (e.g., Bellavance, Valex, & Ratté, 2004; Coulangeon, 2003; Emmison, 2003; Fisher & Preece, 2003; Holbrook, Weiss, & Habich, 2002; López-Sintas & García-Álvarez, 2004; van Eijck, 2001; Warde, Martens, & Olsen, 1999).

The consumption practices of low status taste was reconceptualized at the same time. The view of popular culture as brutalizing entertainment and those who consumed it as lowbrow couch-potatoes willing to take any entertainment on offer (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972), was replaced by a new empirically based finding that low status people tend to choose one form of entertainment and shun others. Thus, low status people tend to be, for example, country music univores, gospel music univores, or rock univores, but they consume neither eclectically as individuals nor homogeneously in the aggregate (Abramson & Inglehart, 1992; Bryson, 1997; Peterson & Simkus, 1992).

Over the past two decades, there has been a great deal of debate about the meaning of omnivorousness, as well as its causes, correlates, and consequences. (For a review see Peterson (2005)). Much of this research has been characterized by the argument presented in Peterson and Kern's 1996 article to the effect that omnivorousness is an increasingly dominant aesthetic. Peterson and Kern (1996) has proven to be highly influential, having over 1200 citations in Google Scholar by 2015. In this article we take the opportunity provided by more recent data to replicate and update their finding and ask if the prevalence of omnivorousness is continuing to increase or was it just a passing fad? Moreover, can the observed trends be explained by demographic trends (e.g., if younger, more omnivorous, birth cohorts are replacing older, more univorous, birth cohorts) or are they irreducible period effects?

2. METHODS AND FINDINGS

To replicate Peterson and Kern (1996), we use their same dataset: the National

Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA). Their analysis compared the initial 1982 wave to the 1992 replication. Since then, the NEA has repeated the SPPA in 2002 and 2008.¹ These multiple replications make the SPPA suitable for longitudinal analysis of changes over time (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004; López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005). Moreover, this survey is both seminal to the omnivore literature and remains the standard dataset for studying the omnivore hypothesis in the American context (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; Peterson, 2005). Befitting its primary purpose as a tool for identifying consumers for the nonprofit arts sector, most of the data consists of to what extent respondents consume the arts, either through live performances or through the media.

2.1 Dependent Variable: Number of Genres Liked

We follow Peterson and Kern (1996) in defining omnivorousness operationally simply as number of genres of music liked.² With music, one can count genres liked as a measure of the breadth of the respondent's taste, unlike most other media in which data are collected only about the medium itself and not genres within the medium. (For example, the SPPA asks how much television you watch, but not whether you specifically watch crime dramas, reality competition, sitcoms, soap operas, etc.). Moreover, many music genres are easily coded as being traditionally low-, middle-, or highbrow (Bourdieu, 1984; Peterson & Simkus, 1992). These two properties have made music genres, both in SPPA and replicated elsewhere, a favorite measure of taste since it allows one to readily measure the dimensions of hierarchy and breadth.

Unfortunately, comparing over the course of 27 years requires making allowances for the changing survey instrument. (Please see Appendix A for a summary of the genre part of the survey instrument in each year). For the most part these changes to the SPPA were driven by underlying trends in musical taste. Most notably, rap music was an obscure type of music in 1982 and thus not present on the survey in that year, but has been included as an increasingly popular option since the 1992 wave. Perhaps more troubling for our purposes than the fact that the specific enumerated genres change is that they differ in number, with fourteen options in 1982, twenty in 1992, twenty-one in 2002, and fourteen in 2008. Using the full set for each year would thus bias the breadth of taste upwards in 1992 and 2002 (although not as much as one might expect since the marginal genres are relatively unpopular). There is a stable set of ten genres that are asked about in all waves (classical, opera, musicals, jazz, blues, country, bluegrass, rock, folk, and gospel/hymns).³ Except where specifically noted, we follow Peterson and Kern (1996) in focusing on a stable common set and ignoring genres that were eventually dropped (e.g., barbershop) or that were eventually added (e.g., rap).⁴ Also note that because "musicals" is the only one of the "middlebrow" genres to be consistently asked from 1982 through 2008, we do not distinguish between lowbrow and middlebrow genres liked. Moreover, for simplicity in our main presentation we also include highbrow genres (classical and opera) in the count, although in a supplemental analysis we more closely follow Peterson and Kern (1996) by splitting the sample based on responses to these items and then regressing

number of other options chosen.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of taste breadth by survey wave. The first thing to note is that in all waves, number of genres liked is right-skewed.⁵ Most people like only a few genres but a few people like many. Thus while omnivorousness is a continuous variable, fairly few people occupy its upper range. That is to say, omnivorousness behaves as a count variable and so is best understood with Poisson-like analyses (Long & Freese, 2006).⁶

(Figure 1 About Here)

The next thing to note from this figure is just how distinctive the 1992 survey wave was. The median number of genres liked from the stable set is two in all years, except for 1992 when it is three. Likewise, the 75th percentile is three in all years, except for 1992 when it is four. Similar results obtain if one looks at all genres asked per wave (i.e., including both dropped genres like big band and new genres like rap) in part b of the figure.

This temporal pattern directly addresses our research question. Peterson and Kern (1996) saw omnivorousness rise between 1982 and 1992 and they interpreted this as a trend that would continue to rise, or at the very least plateau and persist. However, by 2002 omnivorousness had receded back to the same level as in 1982 and it remained low in 2008. Thus on the face of it, omnivorousness seems to have been more a fad than a robust shift, although it remains popular with a non-trivial part of the population. While the temporal trend is an inverted U-shape rather than the expected linear or logarithmic trend, the question remains whether the trend is ultimately caused by compositional shifts, is a substantive period effect, or perhaps never existed in the first place except as a survey artifact.

2.2 Demographic Analysis

We begin our demographic analysis with Figure 2, which breaks out mean number of genres liked by birth cohort, with each wave as a separate curve. The curves are plotted with a local polynomial smooth by using the `lpoly` command in Stata 12. The first thing to note is that there is a clear period effect. With the exception of the very oldest cohorts (those who were already about 65 or older by 1982), every birth cohort shows its broadest taste in 1992, with the other periods falling close together. Second, there seems to be a cohort effect with omnivorousness peaking among cohorts born in the late 1940s. However this may be an artifact of the particular genres rather than a fact about omnivorousness in the abstract since when one instead uses the full set of genres (not shown) the central cohort of each period is usually the most omnivorous.

(Figure 2 About Here)

Regression analysis is the standard technique for parsing the effects of multiple

causes on a single outcome. Because breadth of taste follows an over-dispersed count distribution in every period, we use negative-binomial regression (Long & Freese, 2006).⁷ Since the object of the analysis is to explain changes over time, we use a nested model strategy of first including only period effects and then adding controls. Unless specifically noted, all effects are highly statistically significant. The results are presented in Table 1.

(Table 1 About Here)

Model 1 uses only period dummies. Relative to the baseline period of 1982, there is a large positive coefficient for 1992, and small negative coefficients for 2002 and 2008. That is, respondents in 1992 reported liking the highest number of music genres.

Model 2 adds demographic controls: birth cohort, gender (male), family income, race (non-Hispanic white), years of education, and urban residency. Following Peterson and Kern (1996), we specify birth cohort but not age. However we use a quadratic specification to allow for the possibility of a nonlinear effect. The linear specification of birth cohort in Peterson and Kern (1996) is essentially a special case of our quadratic specification where the square effect is constrained to be zero. Note that age, period, and cohort are all of interest but including them all in the model is problematic due to a notorious specification problem. Since age plus cohort equals period, knowing any two of the variables defines the remaining one and this prevents the analysis from identifying a single solution to the regression equation. There are no completely satisfactory solutions to the problem, but one common approach is to specify the variables with different transformations. In our analysis we specify period as a dummy set and cohort as a quadratic. We also experimented with specifying cohort as a dummy set by decade. All results are robust to this specification.

The SPPA reports family income in bins but for the sake of simplicity we recode the bins as a continuous variable at each bin's mid-point. We then applied a CPI deflator to restate income in 1983 dollars. We also experimented with a dummy variable for top quartile family income (or as near to a quartile as the bins allow) and all results are robust. We recoded education to years of education given expected time to degree so a high school diploma is twelve years, a bachelor's is sixteen years, etc. We also experimented with a dummy variable for BA or higher and all results are robust. We define urban residency based on "central city" in the SMSA variables present in all waves of the SPPA. An MSA is a metropolitan area so this essentially means the respondent lives in the urban core of a mid to large size urban area. About a quarter of the respondents in each wave live in the core of an MSA.

Overall, the demographic effects are as expected and consistent with Peterson and Kern (1996). As before, men like fewer genres than women, but high (inflation-adjusted) family income, being non-Hispanic white, years of education, and residency in the core of an MSA all increase number of genres liked. The only real difference with Peterson and Kern (1996) is that our quadratic specification for cohort reveals that breadth in taste peaks in the middle cohorts.

For our purposes, the most important thing about model 2 is not the set of

demographic effects, but what happens to the period effects that are of central interest to this article. With the introduction of the controls, the significance and rough magnitude of the period effects are unchanged. Notably, 1992 still has appreciably higher omnivorousness than the other periods, suggesting that this is a distinctive period. Although the nonlinear nature of a negative-binomial regression can be hard to interpret, the fact that the period effect coefficients are essentially the same in model 1 (period effects only) as model 2 (period effects plus controls) means that the raw effects shown in Figure 1A can be taken as essentially the same as those net of controls. That is to say, the models show that 1992 is a distinctive wave with respondents in that survey year tending to report about one more genre liked than did respondents in other waves. As will be discussed in the conclusion, the 1992 period effect is distinctive compared not only to the preceding 1982 wave, but also to the following 2002 and 2008 waves. This up and down again temporal pattern requires us to reconceive Peterson and Kern's (1996) finding of an ascendant omnivore as either fleeting or illusory.

2.1 Analysis of Lowbrow and Middlebrow Genres Only, by Highbrow and Others

In the main analyses, we pool together all respondents and analyze how many of the stable set of genres they like. This approach follows the operationalization of omnivorousness used in Peterson and Rossman (2008), which makes explicit that which “should have been clear all along, that the cross tabulation of two dichotomous variables results in four, not two or three, cells” (Peterson, 2005). Nonetheless, in this section we more closely replicate Peterson and Kern (1996) by first splitting the sample by orientation to traditionally prestigious genres and then regressing how many genres of less prestigious music they like. In this replication, we follow their definition of “highbrows” as those who like both classical and opera and consider one of these two to be their favorite. About 2 or 3% of respondents in each wave match this definition (3.1% in 1982 and 1992, 2.1% in 2002, and 2.5% in 2008). Then, as seen in Table 2, for each group we regress the number of middlebrow and lowbrow genres that they like. Note that whereas Peterson and Kern (1996) distinguished between middlebrow and lowbrow, easy-listening and big band were dropped from recent waves. As such we aggregate the remaining middlebrow genre, musicals, with the lowbrow genres. Another way to describe it is that Table 2 is similar to Table 1 except that we split the sample by attitudes towards classical and opera and then omit these genres (as well as jazz) from the construction of the dependent variable.

Splitting the sample in Table 2 reveals that declining omnivorousness from 1992 to 2002 and 2008 is found among the non-highbrow majority but *not* the highbrow minority. The highbrow minority (n=762) shows both a different pattern of period effects and greater mediation of those effects by the controls than do the non-highbrow majority. Among highbrows, unadjusted levels of taste for low and middlebrow genres are at about the same level in 1992, 2002, and 2008 with highbrows in all three periods preferring more low and middlebrow genres than did highbrows in 1982. The similarities of highbrows in 1992 and 2008 are fairly clear but more dubious in 2002. Specifically, in 2002

the raw period effect (against a 1982 baseline) is not statistically significant, but neither is there a statistically significant difference between 2002 and 1992. Introducing demographic controls pushes all of the highbrow effects out of significance. Again, the pattern of raw and net period effects for the non-highbrow majority (n=29493) is very similar to that of Table 1, which is not surprising as non-highbrows are 97.5% of the sample (a share that does not vary much between waves).

The tables and figures clearly show that measured breadth of taste peaked in 1992, both overall and for the non-highbrow majority. Any finding of continued growth in omnivorousness is limited to highbrows and very fragile, neither applying to the 2002 wave nor being robust to the inclusion of controls. Thus Peterson and Kern's finding of a transition "from snob to omnivore" seems to have been either transitory or illusory. However the ambiguous pattern of results for the highbrow minority leaves open the question of whether there has been a persistent shift towards omnivorousness among highbrows. That is, reading Tables 1 and 2 together, strongly suggests that omnivorousness saw only an ephemeral rise overall but allows that there *may* have been a sustained shift towards omnivorousness becoming more closely associated with traditional highbrow preferences.

3. CONCLUSION

The primary finding of this paper is that omnivorousness peaked in the 1992 wave of the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts and receded by the 2002 wave and remained low in the 2008 wave. Notably this period effect is robust to controlling for various demographic trends (cohort replacement, the aging of the population, increased education). We have therefore replicated Peterson and Kern's (1996) finding that there was a substantial jump in omnivorousness from 1982 to 1992, but can now add that by 2002 omnivorousness had fallen back to 1982 levels and remained low through 2008. Thus there seems to be something distinctive about 1992, the question is why. This conclusion notes several possible explanations: a general shift in attitudes, changes in the music industry, secular trends in omnivorousness, or artifacts of survey methodology.

One conceivable, but ultimately implausible, explanation is that American society has shifted in a direction that is more conservative and less open to diversity. This model would be premised on contrasting the "end of history" euphoria at seemingly eternal peace and prosperity at the end of the Cold War circa 1992 with the post-9/11 period of 2002 and 2008, with the expectation that terror and war would push the culture away from an orientation that is open to new experience. While such shocks to the culture may provide interesting conversation, they are not supported by the data. The General Social Survey tracks opinions on a wide variety of issues, many of which could *prima facie* be expected to mesh well with the sort of open orientation and taste for diversity that is implied by omnivorous taste. However none of these issues follow the temporal pattern of omnivorous taste. Most attitudes either become more open at a fairly linear rate or stay around a

general mean. Notably, as seen in Appendix B, there is no 9/11 effect visible in the GSS data as attitudes in the 2000 and 2002 waves are essentially identical on such questions as the free speech module (SPKATH ... LIBHOMO). Of course this ideological pattern of increasing, or at least steady, openness contrasts with our finding that omnivorousness rose from 1982 to 1992, then fell from 1992 to 2002 and through 2008.

A more structural possibility is that changes in the music industry were responsible for the shift. This hypothesis can take several forms. First, 1992 was approximately the height of the compact disc windfall as record labels were flush with cash from reissuing catalogues in compact disc format. In 1982 the compact disc player was an obscure gadget and by 2002 most people who were interested in replacing their LPs had already done so. When labels were flush with cash they might have been more willing and able to promote diverse genres of music. Another set of major changes to the recorded music industry were centered around the rise of music on the internet, especially the switch from CDs to digital singles as a response to piracy (Elberse, 2010; Kernfeld, 2011). Such a major change in the business model (and decline in the price point) of the music industry could be expected to have big effects on musical taste, but the iTunes store only opened in 2003 and so the timing is wrong to explain the 1992–2002 decline in omnivorousness. Moreover, even among the youngest birth cohorts in 2003–2005 (i.e., the iTunes era), the use of digital media for music discovery appears to be relatively limited, falling behind terrestrial radio or personal recommendations (Tepper & Hargittai, 2009). Likewise in 2008, younger cohorts were disproportionate consumers of online arts media (Novak-Leonard & Brown, 2011), but as seen in Figure 2 the decline since 1992 is actually more pronounced for older cohorts that had less exposure to online media. While it is reasonable to expect that the internet's profound effects on the recorded music industry will have some effect on musical taste *going forward*, the internet does *not* explain the period effects described in this article since the iTunes shock occurs too late and in any case the effect occurs across all cohorts and not just those most exposed to the shock.

The timing is a bit better for changes in radio. Congress greatly relaxed antitrust law for radio with the Telecommunications Act of 1996. This deregulation had the effect that an oligopolistic market has more types of radio than a fully competitive market (Berry & Waldfogel, 2001). While in principle this could lead to more diverse airwaves, in practice radio companies have used “narrow-casting,” a programming strategy in which radio stations specialize in narrow genres of music so that listeners with particular taste can avoid all other forms of music. Similarly, around 1990 the “Top 40” radio format (i.e., an eclectic combination of hits from across several genres) was replaced by “Contemporary Hits Radio” (i.e., dance-pop) (Rossman, 2012). Together, these changes in the music industry might have affected the formation of taste.

More likely is that the popularity of omnivorousness follows a secular trend, unrelated to other phenomena. If so, we can attempt to explain shifts in omnivorousness following the star-bellied sneech internal logic of fashions, but not relate it to other trends (Leibenstein, 1950; Simmel, 1957). In this logic, the interest in omnivorousness stems precisely from the fact that it is a high status phenomenon that is displacing a previous mode of high status expression. However, a shibboleth's value is diluted to the extent that it

diffuses and so under a fashion cycle model the rise from 1982 to 1992 would explain the drop from 1992 to 2002. However we are skeptical that such attenuation of distinction explains the rise then decline of omnivorousness since there is little evidence to support a “meltdown” understanding of cultural capital generally (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004) and education continues to strongly predict omnivorous taste when (in analyses not shown) we estimate the demographic effects separately for each period.⁸

A related interpretation would be that omnivorousness was a transitional style of consumption as high cultural capital consumption was first redefined to include lowbrow genres and later to drop highbrow genres. In this interpretation, the fleeting nature of growth in genres liked would be something like the second derivative of human population first rising then falling during a demographic transition as first mortality rates decline and only later do fertility rates follow (Morgan & Taylor, 2006). However for this interpretation to explain the results requires that taste for traditional highbrow genres would be steady from 1982 to 1992 then fall below 1982 levels in 2002 and 2008. However, as seen in Appendix A, taste for classical, opera, and jazz was actually slightly *higher* in 2008 than in 1982. The rise in preference for genres in 1992 versus 1982 is general to both highbrow and lowbrow (rather than limited to lowbrow as the transition hypothesis predicts) and then goes down especially for lowbrow genres. The genre seeing the biggest decline (in raw percentage points) from 1982 to 2008 is actually country, which dropped 15.6 percentage points over that period. Thus we can decisively reject the transition hypothesis as an explanation for the pattern of SPPA period effects.

Perhaps the most disturbing possibility is that the apparent rise in omnivorousness between 1982 and 1992 (Peterson & Kern, 1996) and/or the apparent reversion from 1992 to 2002 and 2008 are not real trends but methodological artifact of methodology. The administration of the SPPA has changed appreciably over time. As noted above, the instrument has changed, for instance to accommodate new music genres like rap and drop old ones like barbershop. Perhaps just as importantly, in 1982 and 1992, the survey was a module on the Department of Justice's National Crime Survey and in 2002 and 2008 it was a part of the Current Population Survey. This entails numerous small shifts, among them the fact that NCS has a more interesting subject matter than CPS and therefore respondents to NCS may have been more attentive by the time they reached the arts module than were respondents to CPS. Such an interpretation would not only explain the apparent decline in omnivorousness, but also the much lamented apparent decline in the reading of fiction (Bradshaw & Nicols, 2004) and the decline in most forms of arts participation (DiMaggio & Mukhtar, 2004). The possibility of survey administration effects suggests the troubling possibility that we cannot really compare trends over time and those trend findings we thought we had must be called into question.

In this paper we demonstrate that Peterson and Kern's (1996) finding of rising omnivorousness from 1982 to 1992 fails to replicate with data from 2002 and 2008. We demonstrated that the period effects are robust to the inclusion of demographic controls and are implausible as reflections of decline in attitudinal “openness” but leave open the possibility that apparent rise and fall of omnivorousness was either a real trend (perhaps related to changes in broadcasting) or a methodological artifact of survey administration.

Further replications in different contexts and using different methods may elucidate the dynamics and generalizability of this issue. Notably, although both Peterson and Kern (1996) and this replication rely on regressions of a count of genres liked in the United States, much of the omnivorousness literature is based on arts attendance (as compared to taste) (e.g., López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005), allows dislikes (as compared to only indifference) (e.g., Bryson, 1996), uses some variation of multidimensional scaling or latent class analysis (as compared to simply counting genres) (Goldberg, 2011; e.g., Savage & Gayo, 2011), and/or analyzes data from countries other than the United States (e.g., van Eijck, 2001). Since both substantive issues (e.g., national context or attendance/taste) and methodological issues (e.g., likes/dislikes or counts/MDS) can have nontrivial effects on findings, it is important that we look to see whether they show a rise and then decline in omnivorousness (as we have shown), a flat rate of omnivorousness (as wouldn't surprise us), or a sustained rise in omnivorousness (as was the consensus in the literature but which we have shown to be dubious, at least using the seminal study's data and methods). Going forward, we hope that analyses will be modeled in such a way as to allow the measurement of period effects so that we can see whether our pattern of ephemeral omnivorousness is particular to the Peterson and Kern (1996) approach to analyzing SPPA or if it also occurs for other surveys, specifications, and national contexts. Note that such repeated cross-section specifications involve compromises like ignoring non-replicated questions or constraining factor weights to be equal across periods, but we think the payoff of evaluating temporal trends is a payoff that well justifies such constraints. In the meantime, this paper suggests considerable caution about "rise of the omnivore" triumphalism since the key citation for this trend describes a rather short-lived phenomenon, limited only to 1992 and not replicating beyond then.

Appendix A: Wording of the Genre Battery Across Waves

In this appendix we present the question wording for each wave of the SPPA. We italicize genres that are part of the “stable set.”

1982

Classical or chamber music (28.7%)
Opera (10.0%)
Broadway musicals or show tunes (24.0%)
Jazz (27.0%)
Soul, rhythm and blues (27.4%)
Big band (34.0%)
Country-western (61.0%)
Bluegrass (25.5%)
Rock (36.5%)
Mood, easy listening (50.2%)
Folk (26.0%)
Barbershop (15.2%)
Hymns, gospel (37.6%)
Ethnic (1.6%)

1992

Classical/chamber music (35.0%)
Opera (12.8%)
Operettas/Broadway musicals/show tunes (29.4%)
Jazz (33.9%)
Reggae (18.6%)
Rap music (10.9%)
Soul (23.8%)*
Blues/rhythm and blues (40.6%)*
Latin/Spanish/salsa (19.8%)
Big band (37.2%)
Parade/marching band (19.8%)
Country-western (53.9%)
Bluegrass (31.0%)
Rock (43.0%)
Music of a particular ethnic/national tradition (22.1%)
Contemporary folk music (24.0%)
Mood/easy listening (51.3%)
New age music (15.1%)
Choral/glee club (15.4%)
Hymns/gospel (40.9%)

* 44.4% of respondents reporting liking “soul” and/or “blues/rhythm and blues.” We use

this either/or version for calculating stable set omnivorousness.

2002

Classical or chamber music (26.9%)

Opera (7.5%)

Operetta, Broadway musicals, or show tunes (15.0%)

Jazz (25.8%)

Reggae (12.8%)

Rap or hip-hop (13.2%)

Dance music or Electronica (14.8%)

Blues or rhythm and blues (28.6%)

Latin, Spanish, or salsa (16.8%)

Big band or swing (23.1%)

Parade or marching band (23.1%)

Country and western (44.2%)

Bluegrass (20.0%)

Classic rock or oldies (50.6%)*

Music of a particular ethnic or national tradition (14.7%)

Contemporary folk (13.1%)

Mood or easy listening (29.7%)

New age or world music (9.8%)

Choral or glee club (6.9%)

Hymns or gospel (26.8%)

Rock or heavy/metal (21.1%)*

* 57.2% reported liking “classic rock or oldies” and/or “rock or heavy/metal.” We use this either/or version for calculating stable set omnivorousness.

2008

Classical or chamber music (31.9%)

Opera (10.7%)

Broadway musicals or show tunes (25.0%)

Jazz (29.7%)

Classic rock or oldies (57.7%)*

Contemporary rock (35.2%)*

Rap or hip-hop (18.5%)

Blues or rhythm and blues (33.5%)

Latin, Spanish, or Salsa (19.5%)

Country (45.4%)

Bluegrass (21.2%)

Folk (20.8%)

Hymns or gospel music (29.9%)

* 64.7% reported liking “classic rock or oldies” and/or “contemporary rock.” We use this either/or version for calculating stable set omnivorousness.

Appendix B: Trends in the GSS Free Speech Tolerance Module

As seen in the main text of this paper, the observed trend in omnivorousness musical taste is a rise in 1992 relative to periods both before (1982) and after (2002, 2008). In the conclusion we reject the possibility that this is driven by a zeitgeist of rising and then falling tolerance or openness. In this appendix we present results for the GSS free speech module as indicative of there *not* having been a pattern of rising and then falling tolerance.

The free speech module asks about tolerance for three types of expression by five types of controversial people, for a total of fifteen combinations of people-expressions. (In a few years the GSS also asked about socialists and anti-American imams, but because our interest is in temporal trends we restrict our analysis to questions asked across many years). The five types of controversial people are:

- “somebody who is against churches and religion” (*ATH)
- “a person who believes that Blacks are genetically inferior” (*RAC)
- “a man who admits he is a Communist” (*COM)
- “a person who advocates doing away with elections and letting the military run the country” (*MIL)
- “a man who admits that he is a homosexual” (*HOMO)

Note that while this module is based on the work of Stouffer (1955), he asked only about tolerance of atheists, Communists, and homosexuals. The GSS added the additional racism and militarism questions to avoid conflating substantive preference for left-wing ideas with principled support for free expression (Sullivan, Piereson, & Marcus, 1979; Wilson, 1994).

The three types of expression are:⁹

- “If such a person wanted to make a speech in your community [about opinion], should he be allowed to speak, or not?” (SPK*)
- “Should such a person be allowed to teach in a college, or university, or not?” (COL*)
- “Suppose he wrote a book [advocating opinion]. Somebody in your community suggests that the book should be removed from the library. Would you favor removing it, or not?” (LIB*)

Overall, the least tolerated opinion is racism (*RAC) and the least tolerated form of expression is being a college teacher (COL*).

What is of interest for our purposes is the time trend. Recall that observed omnivorousness in the SPPA rose from 1982 to 1992 and then fell from 1992 to 2002 and 2008. If this trend in omnivorousness were just a special case of a general trend towards and then away from attitudinal “openness” then the free speech module should follow this inverted-U temporal pattern. To test this we plotted trends in the tolerance questions over time in Figure A1. To make them comparable we recoded all questions such that tolerance is scored positively. Since we are interested in the overall trend for tolerance rather than tolerance for specific forms of expression or for specific ideas, our plot does not distinguish each question. (Interested readers should visit sda.berkeley.edu to query the free speech

module or see Schafer and Shaw (2009)).

(Figure A1 about here)

In fact, tolerance for unpopular expression increases monotonically. The most recent periods are the most tolerant for all forms of unpopular opinion. There is arguably some leveling off in the 2000-2010 decade, but tolerance in this period is still as high or higher than it was in the early 1990s. Thus it is untenable to explain the observed pattern of omnivorousness as a special case of an alleged trend away from “open” attitudes.

Endnotes

1. Although the survey was also repeated in 1985 and 1997, we omit these waves due to concern about data quality. These waves were subcontracted to private firms rather than to the Census bureau and some variables exhibit disconcerting distributions. Nonetheless, including these waves does not appreciably change the pattern of results.

2. Our aim in this paper is to replicate Peterson and Kern (1996) and this drives our context (United States), dataset (SPPA), and specification (count of genres). However it is worth noting that the literature also includes many international datasets and much of the literature is based on multi-dimensional scaling and related techniques rather than regressions of counts. We return to this issue in the conclusion.

3. We assume that minor wording differences like “country” vs. “country and western” have no meaningful effect on responses.

The 1982 wave asks about “soul, rhythm and blues” but this is split into two questions for the 1992 wave. Likewise, the 2002 and 2008 waves do not ask simply about “rock music,” but distinguish between oldies and hard/metal. For purposes of drawing a stable set over time, we first recode responses in the disaggregated instruments to be “any blues” or “any rock.” However, in Figure 1B and additional analyses (available on request), we use the full set of genres (including those that do appear in only one or a few waves) and treat hard rock, oldies, blues, and soul as four separate genres. In these supplementary analyses the 1992 period effect remains distinctive so our findings are not driven by recoding to achieve commensurability.

4. We also experimented with using the full set of genres and the results are comparable to what we present here (in large part because the core genres tend to be more popular than those with a merely transitory presence in the questionnaire). These alternate results are available on request.

5. The 2002 wave presents a special case in that in that year a fair number of respondents appear to have checked that they like “all” genres of music in a way that breaks from an otherwise smooth Poisson-like distribution for number of genres liked. This inflation at the maximum seems to reflect a process where the respondent says “just check all of them.” Analyses of survey data have shown that such blanket statements are rarely as inclusive as they appear, with people who affirm a theoretically universal principle still denying specific scenarios (Smith, 1981). We include these respondents in the analysis but also experimented with dropping them and the results are robust. In fact, keeping only the stable set of genres and keeping in the “all genre” people is a conservative assumption for our main finding that omnivorousness declined from 1992 to 2002.

6. Interestingly, if one recodes the 1993 General Social Survey to count the number of genres described as “like it very much” or “like it,” the result does not look Poisson-like but rather closely approximates a normal distribution with a mean of 7.5 and standard deviation of 3.4. The difference in distributions for SPPA92 and GSS93 occurs despite the fact that both ask about a very similar list of genres. The only major difference between SPPA92 and GSS93 is that the former treats musical taste as a binary variable whereas the

latter uses a five point Likert scale. Something about allowing both dislike and indifference seems to elicit more positive responses. This sensitivity to question wording suggests that musical taste is sensitive to measurement effects.

7. Peterson and Kern (1996) used OLS but this was a (common) specification error necessitated by the relatively weak computers of the time. Since the mid-1990s it has become common to use maximum-likelihood estimators to regress count variables. Nonetheless, this is not the source of the difference between our results and theirs. Our negative-binomial analysis essentially replicates their results of rising omnivorousness from 1982 to 1992. Moreover, we experimented with OLS (not presented) and the results are nearly identical, including the key finding of declining omnivorousness after 1992 even net of the demographic controls.

⁸ Note that another theory with similar implications to what DiMaggio and Mukhtar (2004) call “meltdown” is the “individualization” hypothesis, which predicts a declining association of social status and cultural consumption. However this hypothesis has tended to be a poor explanation (Alderson, Junisbai, & Heacock, 2007; van Eijck & Bargeman, 2004). Likewise in our own supplementary analyses of SPPA in which we model each period separately (not shown), education strongly predicts both omnivorousness and traditional highbrow in all periods.

⁹ There are a few minor wording variations. For instance, the question about a Communist college professor is worded as “Suppose he is teaching in a college. Should he be fired, or not?”

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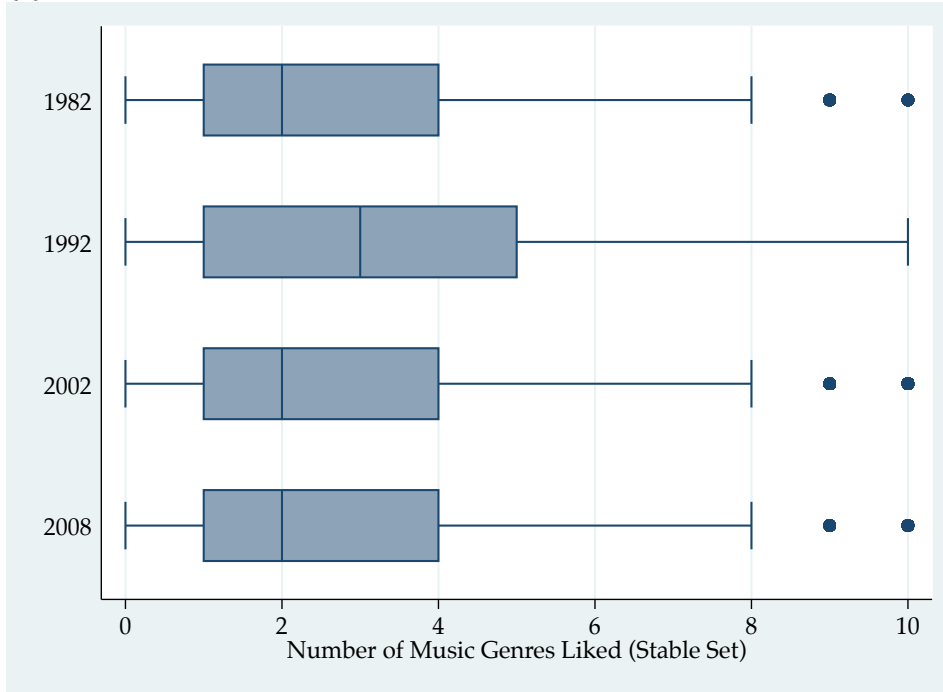
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Figure 1: Distribution of Genres Liked Over Time

(a) Stable Set



(b) Full Set for Each Wave

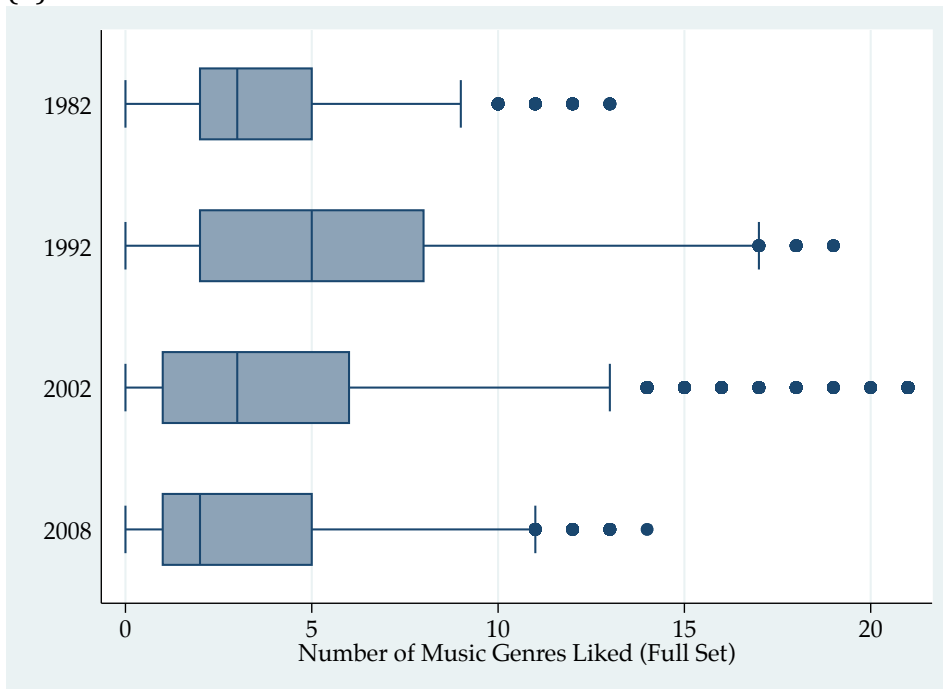


Figure 2: Polynomial Spline of Mean Genres Liked by Cohort and Wave

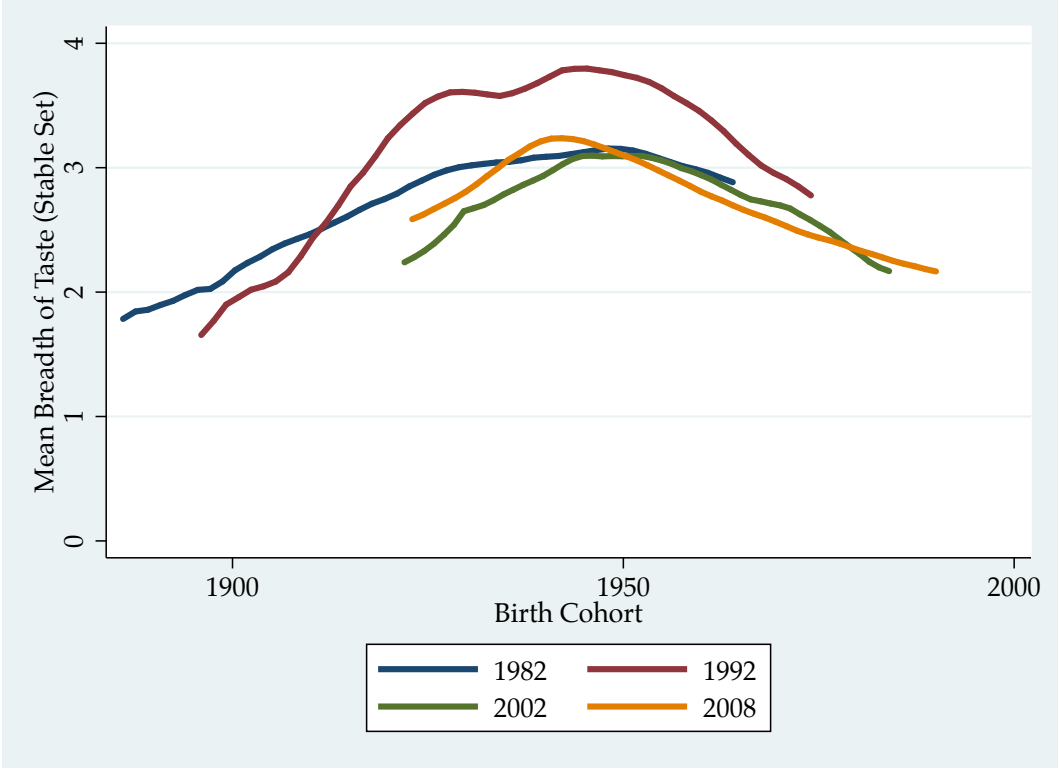


Figure A1: Trends in the GSS Free Speech Module

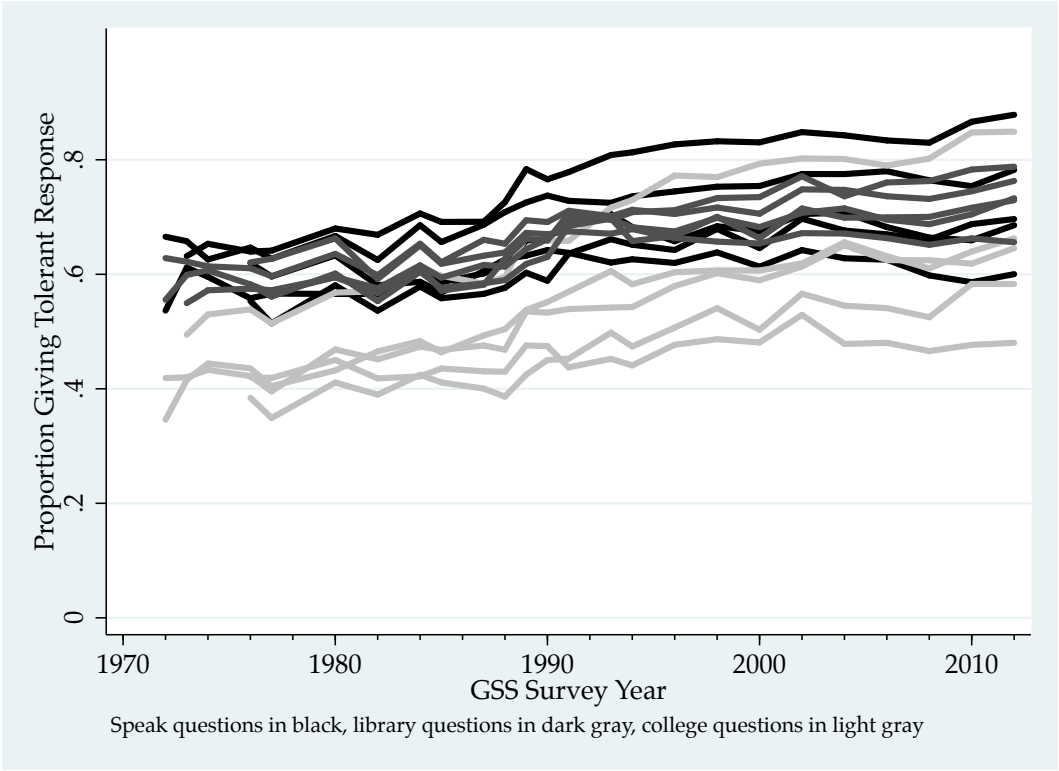


TABLE 1: NEGATIVE BINOMIAL REGRESSION OF GENRES LIKED

	1	2
Period (Omitted: 1982)		
1992	0.159 *** (0.016)	0.118 *** (0.016)
2002	-0.046 *** (0.014)	-0.077 *** (0.014)
2008	-0.054 ** (0.017)	-0.060 *** (0.017)
Birth Cohort		0.018 *** (0.002)
Birth Cohort Squared		-0.000 *** (0.000)
Male		-0.102 *** (0.009)
Income (Real 1983 Dollars)		0.000 * (0.000)
White (Non-Hispanic)		0.274 *** (0.013)
Educations (Years)		0.068 *** (0.002)
Urban		0.050 *** (0.011)
Constant	1.074 *** (0.012)	-34.977 *** (2.913)
Log(Alpha)	-1.010 *** (0.017)	-1.233 *** (0.019)
Log-Likelihood	-64907.395	-63372

Standard errors in parentheses

N=30,255; * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

TABLE 2: NEGATIVE BINOMIAL REGRESSION OF GENRES LIKED

	Highbrows		Others	
Period (Omitted: 1982)				
1992	0.170 *	0.105	0.137 ***	0.103 ***
	(0.071)	(0.072)	(0.016)	(0.016)
2002	0.111	-0.006	-0.072 ***	-0.110 ***
	(0.062)	(0.067)	(0.014)	(0.014)
2008	0.217 **	0.108	-0.083 ***	-0.089 ***
	(0.075)	(0.079)	(0.017)	(0.017)
Birth Cohort		0.018 **		0.025 ***
		(0.007)		(0.002)
Birth Cohort Squared		-0.000 *		-0.000 ***
		(0.000)		(0.000)
Male		-0.017		-0.092 ***
		(0.047)		(0.009)
Income (Thousands of Real 1983 Dollars)		-0.003 *		-0.000
		(0.000)		(0.000)
White (Non-Hispanic)		-0.043		0.368 ***
		(0.070)		(0.013)
Educations (Years)		0.002		0.044 ***
		(0.009)		(0.002)
Urban		0.049		-0.016
		(0.048)		(0.011)
Constant	1.115 ***	-34.211 *	0.820 ***	-48.631 ***
	(0.052)	(13.322)	(0.012)	(3.008)
Log(Alpha)	-2.289 ***	-2.436 ***	-1.452 ***	-1.720 ***
	(0.223)	(0.249)	(0.026)	(0.031)
N	762	762	29493	29493
Log-Likelihood	-1631.782	-1620	-55775	-54603

Standard errors in parentheses

N=30,255; * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001