From Metallica to Mozart: Mapping the Cultural Hierarchy of Lifestyle Activities

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Abstract: Theories of cultural stratification argue that a widely shared cultural hierarchy legitimizes status differences and inequality. Yet, we know little about this hierarchy empirically. To address this limitation, we collected survey data in Denmark and asked respondents to rate the implied social rank of 60 activities, genres, and objects belonging to six lifestyle domains (music, food, performing arts, leisure, sport, and literature). We use ratings of social rank to infer about the cultural hierarchy, arguing that higher ratings imply higher perceived status. First, respondents link activities often considered highbrow (e.g., opera, caviar, and golf) with higher social rank than activities often considered lowbrow (e.g., heavy metal, nuggets, and boxing), suggesting that a cultural hierarchy exists. Second, ratings of implied social rank differ little by respondents' objective and subjective socioeconomic position, suggesting that the cultural hierarchy is widely shared. Third, respondents bundle the 60 activities in a perceived highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow lifestyle, suggesting that "brows" are salient in distinguishing lifestyles. Overall, our results support the idea that a cultural hierarchy exists.

Keywords: cultural taste; status; hierarchy; distinction; inequality

Replication Package: The data set and accompanying R code can be downloaded at https://osf.io/x6ybt/

THEORIES of cultural stratification assume that a widely shared cultural hierarchy exists. This hierarchy, which confers status to cultural activities, genres, and objects (hereafter: activities), legitimizes status differences and inequality by linking status in the cultural domain to status in the economic domain. For example, Max Weber (1978) linked status groups to economic classes; Veblen (1934) linked conspicuous consumption to wealth; and Bourdieu (1984) linked cultural tastes to social classes. Although different in many regards, these theories all assume that lifestyle activities differ in terms of status, with some having higher status than others, which legitimizes status differences and inequality.

Despite the cultural hierarchy playing a key role in theories of cultural stratification, we know surprisingly little about it. This is unfortunate, as research assumes the existence of a cultural hierarchy to justify interpreting socioeconomic gradients in cultural tastes as reflecting a "social space of lifestyles" organized along the distinction between highbrow (legitimate) and lowbrow (illegitimate) culture (Bennett et al. 2009; Chan 2010; Katz-Gerro 2017; Warde 2018). This assumption has not gone unnoticed. For example, Robette and Rouff (2014:29) argue that "for most sociologists, the task of classifying cultural practices into the categories of highbrow and lowbrow (and perhaps even middlebrow) seems straightforward. It is thus taken as a given rubric, something established prior to statistical analysis

and that does not necessitate methodological examination." Similarly, Nault et al. (2021) argue that research relies on an *endogenous* measure of cultural hierarchy, which assumes—but does not demonstrate—that the tastes of individuals in high socioeconomic positions (SEPs) are more legitimate than the tastes of individuals in low SEPs (Lahire 2008; Peterson and Simkus 1992; van Eijck 2001; Warde and Gayo-Cal 2009).

In this article, we aim to provide an exogenous measure of the cultural hierarchy and ask if this hierarchy is widely shared. Establishing if a cultural hierarchy exists is important not only for the credibility of theories of cultural stratification, but also for empirical research arguing that familiarity with legitimate culture can be exchanged into economic and social assets such as education (Jæger 2011), income (Reeves and de Vries 2019), jobs (Rivera 2012), networks (Lizardo 2006), and elite status (Friedman and Reeves 2020). Our research builds on a small literature that attempts to measure the cultural hierarchy exogenously via perceptions of the prestige, respectability, or status of cultural tastes and activities. Kataoka (2017) asked respondents in Japan to rate cultural activities in terms of perceived cultural prestige and found that "visiting art galleries/museums" had the highest perceived prestige, whereas "betting on horse, bicycle, and boat racing" had the lowest prestige. Childress et al. (2021) asked respondents in the United States to rate the artistic respectability of music, movie, and television genres and found that classical music, drama, and documentary had the highest perceived respectability, whereas heavy metal, horror, and reality shows had the lowest perceived respectability. Domański (2022) asked respondents in Poland which musical genres they thought people in the highest and the lowest social positions in society preferred and found that respondents thought people in the highest social positions preferred classical music and jazz, whereas they thought people in the lowest social positions preferred rap, hip-hop, techno, and dance music. Finally, Jæger, Rasmussen, and Holm (2023) asked respondents in Denmark to rate 12 cultural activities in terms of perceived status on a 1 to 5 scale and found that opera (mean status 4.3) and ballet (4.1) had the highest perceived status, whereas flea market (1.5) and techno/rap/dance/hip-hop concert (1.7) had the lowest status. This literature shows that it is feasible to measure the cultural hierarchy exogenously. We build on this literature to make three contributions.

First, we include a much more comprehensive range of lifestyle activities and domains than existing research. Specifically, we collected representative survey data in Denmark and asked respondents to rate 60 activities belonging to six lifestyle domains: music, food, performing arts, leisure, sport, and literature (we include 10 activities in each domain). In the survey, we asked respondents to rate each activity in terms of the implied social rank of individuals who prefer this activity on a 1 to 10 scale, with higher values indicating higher social rank. Similar to Domański (2022), our design infers the cultural hierarchy from the implicit association people make between status in the economic domain (social rank) and status in the cultural domain (lifestyle activities). Our design does not address if or how the cultural hierarchy legitimizes status differences and inequality, for example if some lifestyle activities are judged as better or socially superior to others (Thomas 2022). Instead, it addresses the existence of a cultural hierarchy, which is a necessary condition

for legitimation of status differences and for cultural tastes to be exchangeable into economic and social assets.

Second, we address the assumption in theories of cultural stratification that the cultural hierarchy is widely shared. This assumption is crucial because, if it does not hold, the cultural hierarchy cannot legitimize status differences and inequality. Empirically, we analyze if the rank order of lifestyle activities within domains, as captured by their mean implied rank, differs across subgroups in the population, defined by respondents' objective SEP (education, income, and labor market status), subjective SEP (self-assessed social rank and status anxiety), and sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, immigrant status, and urban residence). We hypothesize that if the cultural hierarchy is widely shared, individuals in different SEPs and with different sociodemographic characteristics should exhibit the same relative rank order when assessing the implied social rank of lifestyle activities. For example, individuals with low education should agree with individuals with high education that opera, even if they do not appreciate or understand this musical genre, implies higher social rank than heavy metal (Jæger et al. 2023).

Third, we analyze if the cultural hierarchy creates perceptions of *lifestyles*, that is, bundles of activities that tend to go together (Katz-Gerro 2017). We motivate this analysis from the observation that individuals do not judge others based on a single activity, but on their lifestyle as a whole. For example, individuals might think of a highbrow lifestyle as the combination of high-status activities in different domains, for example a taste for classical music, performing arts such as ballet (Katz-Gerro and Jæger 2013), gourmet food such as caviar (Johnston and Baumann 2009), and "gentleman" sport such as golf (Gemar 2020). We use factor analysis to analyze if respondents' ratings of 60 activities reflect a "status-congruence" heuristic that compels them to bundle activities in lifestyles with different status. Specifically, we hypothesize that high-status activities, for example opera, caviar, and golf, bundle in a highbrow lifestyle, whereas low-status activities, for example heavy metal, nuggets, and boxing, bundle in a lowbrow lifestyle.

Our empirical results support the existence of a widely shared cultural hierarchy. Within each of the six lifestyle domains we consider, respondents consistently rate some lifestyle activities higher than others in terms of implied social rank. For example, opera and classical music have the highest implied rank in the domain of music, whereas heavy metal and schlager have the lowest implied rank. Moreover, the cultural hierarchy is widely shared: when breaking down ratings by objective/subjective SEP and sociodemographic characteristics, we find little evidence that the rank order of lifestyle activities, in terms of mean implied rank, differs across subgroups. These results suggest that the cultural hierarchy is widely shared. Finally, factor analysis based on ratings of 60 activities shows that respondents bundle activities in three modal lifestyles whose status maps onto the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. For example, activities with high implied rank load on a highbrow lifestyle (e.g., classical music, caviar, philosophy, and golf), whereas activities in the middle (e.g., rock/pop, salmon, crime novel, and handball) and activities with low implied rank (e.g., heavy metal, chicken nuggets, cartoons, and boxing) load on a middlebrow and lowbrow lifestyle, respectively. These results are consistent with the idea that a "status-congruence" heuristic compels

individuals to bundle activities in lifestyles. We end by discussing the implications of our results for research on cultural stratification, including ways in which the cultural hierarchy might legitimize status differences and inequality.

Theoretical Framework

This section presents our theoretical framework in which we make three arguments. First, we argue that a cultural hierarchy exists that organizes lifestyle activities in terms of status, thereby linking status in the cultural domain to status in the economic domain. Second, the cultural hierarchy is widely shared, meaning that individuals in different SEPs and belonging to different sociodemographic groups rank lifestyle activities in the same way in terms of perceived status. Third, the cultural hierarchy instills a status-congruence heuristic that individuals use to bundle activities in lifestyles.

The Cultural Hierarchy

The concept of a cultural hierarchy, that is, a macro-level "object-sorting system" (Mohr et al. 2020:64) that orders cultural activities within a hierarchy that gives them shared social meaning, is a key ingredient in theories of cultural stratification (DiMaggio 1992; Lizardo 2018a). For example, Weber's (1978) model of social stratification includes status groups whose lifestyles signal honor, respectability, and prestige. Veblen's (1934) theory of conspicuous consumption contends that luxury spending is a public display of economic prowess. Tarde (1962) and Simmel (1957) argue that low-status individuals imitate the lifestyles of high-status individuals to appear more socially exclusive. These theories all link status in the cultural domain, as captured by lifestyles, to status in the economic domain, as captured by economic and social classes. Moreover, they argue that, by virtue of being a widely shared "object-sorting" system, the cultural hierarchy legitimizes status differences and enables lifestyles to be exchanged into economic and social assets.

Bourdieu (1984) presents the most influential, modern theory of cultural stratification. In his theory, high-SEP groups dominate the cultural hierarchy, which means that their tastes become the de facto standard for legitimate tastes, whereas low-SEP tastes become the de facto standard for illegitimate tastes. Moreover, as high-SEP groups dominate societal institutions, for example the educational system and mass media, these institutions propagate the belief that high-SEP tastes are legitimate and socially superior to low-SEP tastes (Bourdieu 1993; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Consequently, the cultural hierarchy, invisible to most, is omnipresent and shapes day-to-day interactions.

In Bourdieu's theory, the cultural hierarchy is organized principally along the distinction between highbrow (legitimate, high status) and lowbrow (illegitimate, low status) culture (Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 1993). Highbrow culture is among the oldest and most general forms of prestigious culture in Western societies (DiMaggio and Mukhtar 2004), and it is perceived as cultivated, sophisticated, exclusive, and intellectually demanding, thus requiring a particular aesthetic disposition for proper understanding and appreciation (Bourdieu 1984). Lowbrow culture, by

contrast, is perceived as rustic, unsophisticated, cheap, and primitive, thus not requiring a similarly sophisticated aesthetic disposition (Levine 1988). The cultural hierarchy projects qualities of highbrow (e.g., sophisticated and exclusive) and lowbrow (e.g., unsophisticated and cheap) culture onto lifestyle activities, thereby creating a status order. For example, the cultural hierarchy makes individuals associate classical music with higher social rank than heavy metal because, unlike heavy metal, classical music is imbued with qualities of highbrow culture (e.g., sophisticated, demanding, and supported by legitimate institutions).

Theories of cultural stratification assume that the cultural hierarchy is widely shared, that is, it is a "totality" (DiMaggio 1987). The reason why is that the cultural hierarchy reproduces via two agents of socialization. First, parents transmit cultural tastes and behaviors to their children, thereby reproducing the cultural hierarchy across generations (Jæger and Breen 2016; Kraaykamp and Eijck 2011). Second, the educational system, institutionally biased in favor of high-SEP tastes, legitimizes high-SEP tastes via canonical curricula and academic modes of instruction (Daenekindt and Roose 2015). The consequences of these modes of reproduction are two-fold. First, because everyone is raised in a family and exposed to the educational system, the cultural hierarchy creates a widely shared belief system that defines high-SEP tastes as legitimate and low-SEP tastes as illegitimate. This means that, even if low-SEP individuals do not prefer, understand, or engage in high-SEP activities, they still recognize these activities as more legitimate than other activities, including activities that they prefer. Second, because everyone has a shared understanding of cultural hierarchy, mastery of legitimate activities acts as cultural capital, that is, as forms of culture exchangeable into economic and social assets (Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 1993).

Lifestyle Domains as Distinction Devices

Theories of cultural stratification provide a general framework for conceptualizing the cultural hierarchy (Lamont and Molnár 2002; Wuthnow 1987). Yet, these theories do not address if some lifestyle domains are more important than others in terms of acting as "distinction devices" (Domański 2022:102), that is, as signals linking status in the cultural domain to status in the economic domain. We now address each of the six lifestyle domains we include in our empirical analysis and motivate why they act as distinction devices.

Bourdieu (1984) highlighted *music* as a key distinction device. Some music genres, for example classical music, are imbued with qualities of highbrow culture (e.g., sophisticated and complex; Accominotti, Khan, and Storer 2018), whereas other genres, for example heavy metal, are imbued with qualities of lowbrow culture (e.g., unsophisticated and primitive; Bryson 1996). Moreover, music is cheap and readily available (via streaming services), and almost everyone listens to music and has opinions on what is good and bad music. This means that music tastes are a ubiquitous and inherently social means of signaling status and group membership (Lizardo 2006). Moreover, as empirical research shows that music genres vary in terms of perceived prestige and artistic respectability (Childress et al.

2021; Domański 2022; Kataoka 2017), we expect music genres to act as distinction devices.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that *food* is a distinction device. Due to a "choice of necessity" (Bourdieu 1984:171f), low-SEP groups prefer cheap, nutritious, and fatty food, whereas high-SEP groups prefer expensive, healthy, and sophisticated food. SEP gradients in food choices are widely documented (Darmon and Drewnowski 2008), also in Denmark (Ditlevsen, Halkier, and Holm 2023), and research shows that the taste for diverse, exotic, and authentic food is a status marker (Hahl, Zuckerman, and Kim 2017; Johnston and Baumann 2009; Oleschuk 2017). Unlike music tastes, which do not depend critically on material circumstances (music is cheap), the taste for exotic or exclusive food can be expensive. This means that although both music and food are imbued with qualities of highbrow and lowbrow culture, they need not be imbued with the same qualities. For example, classical music might signal nonpecuniary qualities of highbrow culture, such as sophistication and intellect, whereas caviar might signal pecuniary qualities, such as wealth and exclusivity.

Bourdieu (1984) argued that some *performing arts* (e.g., ballet and classical concert) are imbued with qualities of highbrow culture, whereas others are imbued with qualities of lowbrow culture (e.g., standup comedy and circus). For example, ballet and classical concerts derive legitimacy from historical pedigree and state-sponsored institutions (e.g., concert halls, education, and media; Accominotti et al. 2018; Feder and Katz-Gerro 2015; Levine 1988). Research documents strong SEP gradients in participation in different performing arts (e.g., classical concert, theater, and standup comedy; Bennett et al. 2009; Chan 2010; van Hek and Kraaykamp 2013) and variation in the perceived prestige of different types of performing arts (Jæger et al. 2023; Kataoka 2017). For these reasons, we expect performing arts to act as distinction devices.

Veblen (1934) argued that high-SEP groups use *leisure consumption* to signal high status and economic prowess. High-SEP groups create "pecuniary canons of taste" that low-SEP groups emulate to "snob up" to signal high status. In Bourdieu's (1984) theory, leisure activities are imbued with qualities of highbrow or lowbrow culture. Some leisure activities are particular to elites due to high cost and low availability (e.g., hunting and sailing; Daloz 2009; Friedman and Reeves 2020), whereas others are cheap and readily available (e.g., going to the cinema or an amusement park). Consequently, leisure activities, like music and food, need not reflect the same qualities of highbrow and lowbrow culture (e.g., sophisticated vs. expensive). Moreover, the taste for many (Sullivan and Katz-Gerro 2007) or diverse (Stalker 2011) leisure activities might signal high status. Finally, empirical research shows that leisure activities, for example DIY projects, baking, and going to a flea market, vary in terms of perceived prestige (Jæger et al. 2023; Kataoka 2017). Based on these arguments, we expect leisure activities to act as distinction devices.

Bourdieu considered *sport* a special form of embodied cultural capital and a marker of class and status (Bourdieu 1978). Sport reflects qualities of highbrow and lowbrow culture, for example via differences in physical demand (e.g., marathon running vs. dart), intellectual complexity (e.g., chess vs. weightlifting), intensity (e.g., cricket vs. boxing), and cost (e.g., sailing vs. soccer; Gemar 2020). For example, sport characterized by physical strength, high intensity, and "instinct

rather than intellect" (e.g., boxing) reflects qualities of lowbrow culture, whereas sport characterized by little physical interaction, high intellectual complexity, and low intensity (e.g., chess) reflects qualities of highbrow culture. Empirical research documents clear SEP gradients in sport participation (Scheerder et al. 2002) and, in addition, differences in the perceived prestige of different types of sport, for example tennis, golf, and arcade games (Kataoka 2017). For these reasons, we expect sport to act as a distinction device.

Finally, Bourdieu (1984) showed that in 1960s France *literary genres* such as poetry and modern literature were popular among high-SEP individuals, whereas love stories and thrillers were popular among low-SEP individuals. Research documents similar SEP gradients in literary tastes in other contexts and times (Kraaykamp and Eijck 2011; Sokolov and Sokolova 2019; Torche 2007) and that people generally perceive genres preferred by high-SEP individuals to have higher literary quality than genres preferred by low-SEP individuals (Koolen et al. 2020). Like other activities, literary genres are imbued with qualities of highbrow and lowbrow culture, which might lead to differences in their perceived status. For example, some literary genres (e.g., poetry and philosophy) have a high level of abstraction and assume knowledge of specific historical contexts, both qualities of highbrow culture (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra 1999). Moreover, some literary genres enjoy institutionalized legitimacy, for example canonization via institutions (e.g., poetry societies and curricula) and prizes (Verboord 2003). In sum, we expect literary genres to act as distinction devices.

Lifestyles as Bundles of Activities

The main takeaway from our theoretical framework is that the cultural hierarchy is a widely shared "totality" that legitimizes status differences and inequality. Moreover, the status implied by lifestyle activities might differ across lifestyle domains and need not reflect the same qualities of highbrow and lowbrow culture (e.g., sophisticated and demanding vs. expensive and exclusive).

In this last part of the theoretical framework, we link lifestyle activities to lifestyles. We argue that individuals do not think of lifestyles as single activities, but as bundles of activities with similar status (Bennett et al. 2009; Bourdieu 1984; Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund 2019). Thus, a lifestyle is a set of activities with similar status within their respective domains (e.g., music, food, and sport) that can be organized along the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. For example, individuals might think of a highbrow lifestyle as the combination of a taste for classical music, caviar, golf, and philosophy: all high-status activities within their respective domains (the same logic applies to a lowbrow lifestyle and low-status activities). Theoretically, we think of the bundling of activities in lifestyles as reflecting a *status-congruence heuristic* that individuals rely on to establish a "subjective homology" between status in the cultural and economic domain that matches the "objective homology" they observe in the world (Ridgeway 2001; Thomas 2022). Empirically, the status-congruence heuristic means that, when rating the implied social rank of lifestyle activities, individuals bundle activities into

lifestyles that map onto the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. Below, we test this idea empirically.

Hypotheses

Based on our theoretical framework, we now present three empirical hypotheses.

Our first hypothesis (*H1*) is that lifestyle activities differ in terms of implied social rank. *H1* follows from the assumption that the cultural hierarchy imbues lifestyle activities with qualities of highbrow or lowbrow culture. As argued above, we expect all six lifestyle domains to act as distinction devices, meaning that the 10 activities within each domain should differ in terms of implied social rank. Moreover, we expect the rank order of lifestyle activities within each domain, as captured by their mean implied rank, to reflect the degree to which activities are imbued with qualities of highbrow or lowbrow culture. We test *H1* by calculating the mean implied rank of the 60 lifestyle activities and by testing if these means are statistically significantly different from each other.

Our second hypothesis (*H2*) is that the cultural hierarchy is widely shared. *H2* follows from the theoretical argument that the cultural hierarchy is a "totality." We test *H2* by comparing the rank order of lifestyle activities, as captured by mean implied rank, across subgroups defined by objective SEP (education, income, and labor market status), subjective SEP (self-assessed social rank and status anxiety), and sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, immigrant status, and urban residence). If, as assumed, the cultural hierarchy is widely shared, the relative order of lifestyle activities (within domains) should be the same across subgroups.

Our third hypothesis (*H3*) is that the status-congruence heuristic compels individuals to bundle activities with similar status in lifestyles that map onto the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. We use factor analysis to test *H3*, that is, we analyze if we can summarize individuals' ratings of the 60 lifestyle activities via a small number of latent variables that capture highbrow and lowbrow lifestyles. According to the status-congruence heuristic, lifestyle activities in *different* domains, but with the *same* (relative) social rank, should load on the same latent variable. For example, we would expect activities such as opera, caviar, ballet, and golf to load on a latent variable capturing a highbrow lifestyle, and activities such as heavy metal, nuggets, circus, and boxing to load on a latent variable capturing a lowbrow lifestyle.

Data and Methods

Data

We commissioned a large survey company to conduct a survey with a representative sample of the adult (age 18+) Danish population. The survey included batteries in which respondents rated the implied social rank of 60 activities within six lifestyle domains, as well as questions on respondents' objective and subjective SEPs and their sociodemographic characteristics. The survey company used its own panel to recruit respondents. The sample is a random probability sample stratified by

age, gender, education, occupational status, and the five regions of Denmark. The sample size was N = 3,024. The data collection period began on September 30, 2022 and ended on October 31, 2022. The response rate was 87 percent, and the survey agency provided weights to correct for sample selection. Including these weights in the analyses makes no practical difference for our empirical results. After listwise deletion based on all variables, we end up with an analytical sample of 2,697 individuals. Online Supplement A provides summary statistics for the analytical sample.

Variables

We now present the variables we use in the empirical analysis. We use respondents' ratings of the implied social rank of lifestyle activities to test *H1* and *H3*, and variables capturing respondents' objective/subjective SEP and sociodemographic characteristics to test *H2*.

Implied Social Rank of Lifestyle Activities. We asked respondent to rate the implied social rank of 60 lifestyle activities belonging to six lifestyle domains (music, food, performing arts, leisure, sport, and literature). We provided the following introductory text in the questionnaire: "We now present different types of music, food, performing arts etc. and ask you to state the degree to which you associate each activity/genre with people placed at the top or at the bottom of society. Please respond on a scale from 1-10, where 1 means that you associate this activity/genre with people placed at the bottom of society, and 10 means that you associate it with people placed at the top."[1] This question is similar to other questions that ask respondents to rate the perceived prestige, respectability, or implied social rank of lifestyle activities (Childress et al. 2021; Domański 2022; Jæger et al. 2023; Kataoka 2017).

We use social rank as our empirical indicator because, unlike prestige or respectability, social rank is an omnibus measure of social position closely tied to perceptions of economic and social hierarchy. For this reason, we expect it to capture the implicit association respondents make between a lifestyle activity and the relative social position of people (within a hierarchy) that engage in this activity. We do not argue that implied social rank fully captures the status of an activity. Rather, implied rank is a status signal whose strength might vary across groups, contexts, and over time (we return to this issue in the final discussion). Moreover, we deliberately asked respondents about their *own* perceptions of the social rank of lifestyle activities, not what they think *most people* think (Correll et al. 2017). We did this in order not to conflate individual and social beliefs. Finally, we do not argue that implied social rank captures cultural *legitimacy*, that is, whether respondents consider some activities to be socially superior to others. Rather, implied social rank captures the implicit association between status in the cultural and the economic domain. In the questionnaire, we randomized the order of the 10 cultural activities within each lifestyle domain and the order of the six lifestyle domains. This approach reduced bias from fatigue when respondents answered questions earlier rather than later in the questionnaire.

Table 1: Cultural activities by lifestyle domain

Music	Food	Performing arts	Leisure	Sports	Literature
Classical music	Almond milk	Ballet	Amusement Park	Athletics	Biography
Electronic music	Almonds	Circus	Art museum	Bowling	Cartoon
Heavy metal	Avocado	Classical music concert	Camping	Boxing	Comedy
Jazz	Caviar	Folk dance	Cinema	Fencing	Crime
Opera	Cheeseburgers	Magician show	Flea market	Football	History
Rap and hip-hop	Chicken nuggets	Musical	Gardening	Golf	Philosophy
RnB	Meatballs	Play	Horseback riding	Handball	Play
Rock and pop	Oysters	Puppet theater	Live sports	Swimming	Poetry
Schlager	Salmon	Rock and pop concert	Wine tasting	Tennis	Romance
Singer-songwriter	Sourdough bread	Standup comedy	Yoga	Weightlifting	Science fiction

Table 1 lists the 60 lifestyle activities we included in the survey. We selected activities based on three criteria. First, we selected activities often included in research on cultural stratification (e.g., music, performing arts, and literature; Bourdieu 1984; Bryson 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992). Second, we selected activities that we would expect most people to recognize as socially stratified, for example music and literature (Bennett et al. 2009; Katz-Gerro 2017; Robette and Roueff 2014). Third, we selected activities that we would expect to be socially salient in the Danish context, for example different types of food and leisure activities (Ditlevsen et al. 2023; Jæger et al. 2023). Although we have a large set of activities, our activities have two limitations. The first limitation is that the activities only capture parts of the cultural hierarchy: including more activities (and dimensions) would provide an even more fine-grained picture. The second limitation is that some activities are quite coarse (e.g., "cinema" and "rock and pop") and do not take into account that respondents might associate activities with different subactivities or genres with different perceived status (e.g., one individual might associate "cinema" with going to a blockbuster movie, whereas another individual might associate it with going to an arthouse movie; Childress et al. 2021; Savage and Gayo 2011). We discuss these limitations in the final discussion.

We now present variables capturing respondents' objective/subjective SEP and sociodemographic characteristics. As stated above, we include a broad range of characteristics to address whether the cultural hierarchy is widely shared. The limited sample size means that, in most cases, we use binary variables to ensure sufficient statistical power to compare subgroups. Although this approach means that our variables capturing SEP and sociodemographic characteristics are coarse, we counteract this limitation by considering many different characteristics.

Objective Socioeconomic Position. We use three dummy variables to capture respondents' objective SEP. First, we include a dummy variable for having completed (vs. not) a university degree. Second, we include a dummy variable for having a monthly gross income above (vs. below) the median in the sample (DKK 27,500; app. $3,900).[2] Third, we include a variable for currently being employed (vs. not) in the labor market.

Subjective Socioeconomic Position. We use two variables to capture respondents' subjective SEP. First, we include a dummy variable indicating if respondents rate

their own social rank to be above (vs. below) the median in the sample. This variable is based on a question from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) that asks respondents to state, on a 10-point scale, whether they see themselves as belonging to the top (10) or bottom (1) of society (ISSP Research Group 2022). Second, we include a dummy variable indicating if respondents express above-median status anxiety, with status anxiety defined as fear of being unsuccessful and "not keeping up with the Joneses." We measure status anxiety using Day and Fiske's five-item scale (Keshabyan and Day 2020; Cronbach's Alpha is 0.89 in our sample).

Sociodemographic Characteristics. We include four variables to capture sociodemographic characteristics. First, we include a dummy variable for identifying as female (vs. male). Second, we include a dummy variable for being older (vs. younger) than the sample median (52 years). Third, we include a dummy variable for being native-born (vs. being of immigrant origin).[3] Finally, we include a dummy variable for urban residence, measured by living (vs. not) in the capital (Copenhagen) region of Denmark.

Methodological Design

We use descriptive designs to test *H1* through *H3*. We present key results in figures rather than in tables (and provide tables and results from supplementary analyses in the Online Supplement).

To test *H1*, we calculate the mean implied rank of each of the 60 lifestyle activities. For the 10 activities within each lifestyle domain, we conduct pairwise *t*-tests to assess if the mean implied ranks of activities are statistically different from each other. Based on *H1*, we expect mean implied rank to differ across activities within domains and that activities imbued with qualities of highbrow culture have higher implied rank than activities imbued with qualities of lowbrow culture. We correct for multiple comparisons when conducting pairwise *t*-tests (results reported in Online Supplement B).[4]

To test *H2*, we estimate the mean implied rank of each lifestyle activity separately by subgroup, with subgroups defined by objective/subjective SEP and sociodemographic characteristics. We plot subgroup means (cf. Figure 2 below) and estimate post-stratification weighted ordinary least squares regression models in which we regress the rating of each activity on each variable capturing either objective SEP, subjective SEP, or sociodemographic characteristic. This approach enables us to test directly if the mean implied rank of each activity differs across subgroups. Based on *H2*, we expect the rank order of activities within domains to be the same across subgroups. Because we run many (i.e., 540) regressions, we mainly discuss overall patterns of results and illustrate a few of these results graphically (we present detailed results in Online Supplements C and F).

To test *H3*, we conduct factor analysis (FA) of respondents' ratings of the 60 lifestyle activities. FA uses a set of observed variables to identify a smaller number of latent variables that account for the covariance between the observed variables (Gorsuch 2014). Based on *H3* and the status-congruence heuristic, we expect activities with the same implied rank (e.g., classical music, caviar, and golf) to load on

the same latent factor, for example a factor capturing a highbrow (or a lowbrow) lifestyle. Online Supplement D presents detailed results from the FA.

Results

We now present the main results from the empirical analysis. We begin by addressing *H1*, stating that lifestyle activities differ in terms of implied social rank. We then address *H2*, stating that that the rank order of lifestyle activities, in terms of mean implied rank, is the same across groups with different objective/subjective SEP and sociodemographic characteristics. Finally, we address *H3*, stating that ratings of implied social rank reflect a status-congruence heuristic in which respondents bundle activities in lifestyles that map onto the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture.

A Cultural Hierarchy of Lifestyle Activities?

We organize the discussion of *H1* based on Figure 1, which plots the mean implied rank (and associated 95 percent confidence intervals) of each lifestyle activity (pairwise *t*-tests within domains validate the findings presented in Figure 1, see Figure B1 in Online Supplement B). Consistent with *H1*, Figure 1 shows that, within each lifestyle domain, there are clear and statistically significant differences in the implied social rank of activities belonging to this domain. Moreover, the ordering of activities, in terms of mean implied rank, is consistent with the extent to which activities are often seen as imbued with qualities of highbrow and lowbrow culture. We use the often-studied domain of music to illustrate key findings; however, our findings are similar across all six domains.

In the domain of music, Figure 1 shows that the rank order of musical genres is like what we would expect based on theories of cultural stratification. Opera and classical music have the highest implied rank (mean rank is around or above 7 on the 1 to 10 scale), whereas heavy metal, schlager, and rap and hip-hop have the lowest implied rank (mean rank is below 4.5). In between, we find jazz (6.2), rock and pop (5.4), RnB (5.2), and, located towards the bottom, singer-songwriter (4.9) and electronic music (i.e., EDM) (4.8). The difference in implied rank is consistent with the idea that people perceive musical genres such as opera and classical music as imbued with qualities of highbrow culture, that is, requiring a particular aesthetic disposition and preferred by high-status individuals (Bourdieu 1984; Lizardo 2018b). By contrast, genres such as heavy metal and hip-hop are perceived as imbued with qualities of lowbrow culture (e.g., unsophisticated and primitive; Bryson 1996) and preferred by low-status individuals. Differences in the implied social rank of musical genres match results from research on cultural legitimacy (Lahire 2008; Robette and Roueff 2014) and research showing that opera, classical music, and jazz signal high status and artistic respectability, whereas heavy metal, hip-hop, and electronic music signal low status and respectability (Childress et al. 2021; Domański 2022; Jæger et al. 2023). Overall, our empirical results for musical genres are consistent with *H1*.
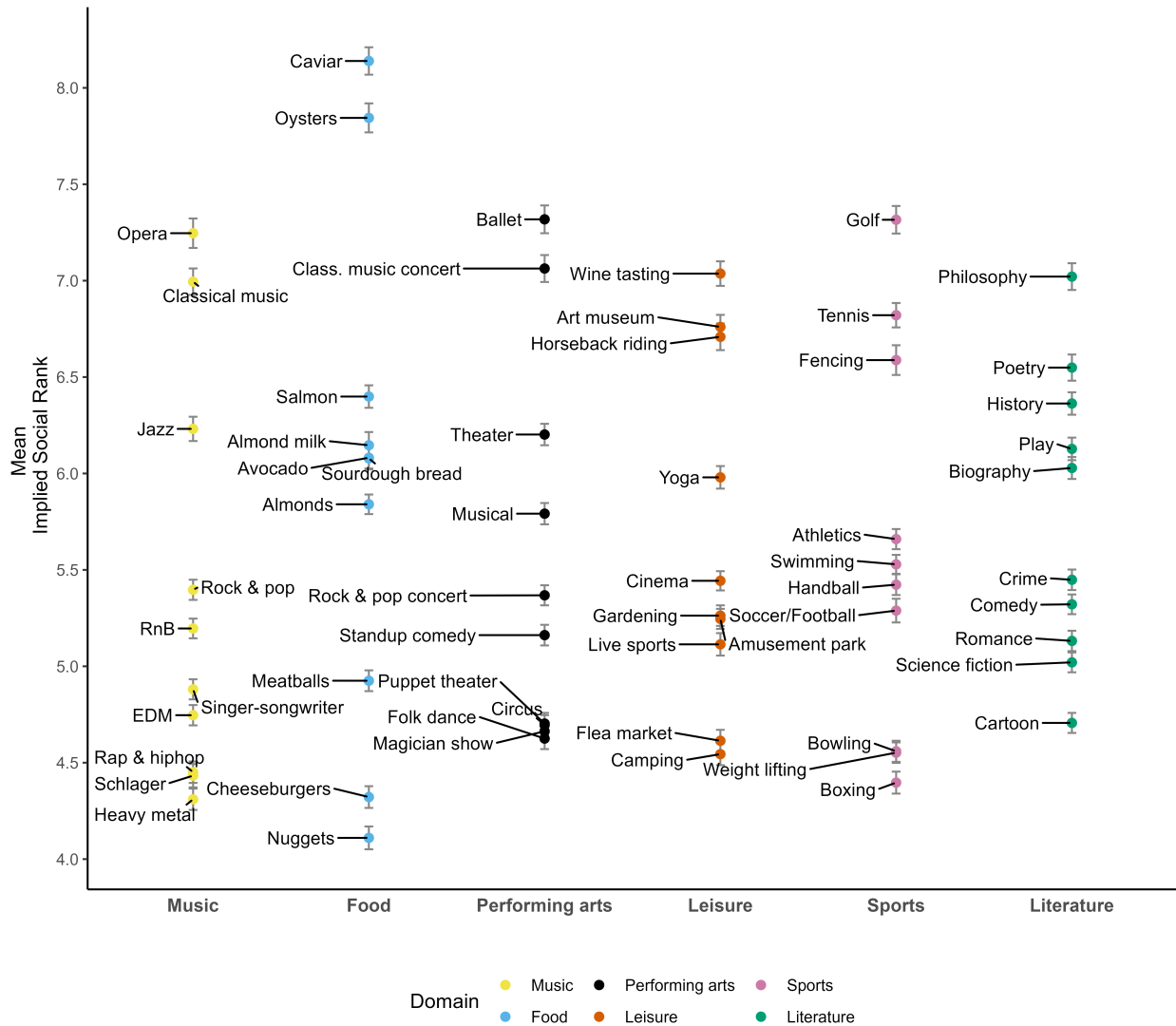
Figure 1: Mean implied rank of lifestyle activities. *Note:* Online Supplement B provides results from pairwise *t*-tests.

Results for the five other lifestyle domains yield similar conclusions, also consistent with *H1*. We now discuss select results to illustrate key points of theoretical interest. In the domain of food, caviar and oysters have the highest implied rank, whereas nuggets and cheeseburgers have the lowest implied rank. In the middle, we find traditionally middle-class food in Denmark such as salmon, avocados, and sourdough bread. Differences in implied rank might reflect differences in sophistication, but also differences in cost. For example, caviar and oysters are expensive and difficult to purchase outside large metropolitan areas, thus requiring a certain level of income and access to transportation. This might explain why respondents associate these types of food with high social rank.

In our theoretical framework, we argue that the rank order of music and food might originate in different associations with highbrow and lowbrow culture, such as sophisticated and demanding versus expensive and exclusive. Empirical differences in the ratings of musical genres and literature, which arguably do not reflect differences in monetary cost (because music and books are cheaply and readily available via streaming services and libraries), are examples of associations with nonpecuniary aspects of highbrow culture (e.g., sophistication and intellect). We think food is the domain in which differences in implied rank most clearly reflect cost and exclusivity. Similarly, differences in the implied rank of leisure activities (e.g., wine tasting vs. flea market), sports (e.g., golf vs. boxing), and performing arts (e.g., ballet vs. folk dance) likely combine pecuniary and nonpecuniary associations with respectively highbrow and lowbrow culture. Yet, these differences, whose possible origins we address in the final discussion, are as expected and consistent with *H1*.[5]

A Shared Cultural Hierarchy?

H2 states that the cultural hierarchy is widely shared. As we argue theoretically, a shared cultural hierarchy is a necessary condition for lifestyle activities to legitimize status differences and for cultural tastes to be exchangeable into economic and social assets. The empirical implication of *H2* is that the ranking of lifestyle activities we observe in Figure 1, in terms of mean implied rank, is the same across subgroups in the population. We test *H2* by calculating the mean implied rank of lifestyle activities across subgroups defined by objective/subjective SEP and sociodemographic characteristics. As in the previous section, we organize the discussion of *H2* around a graphic illustration of a few subgroups. Yet, our overall conclusions are similar across all the subgroups we consider (Online Supplement F provides detailed results).

Figure 2 reproduces Figure 1 separately for respondents with and without university education (Figure 2a) and for respondents who rate their own social rank above (vs. below) the median in the sample (Figure 2b). These two variables capture examples of objective and subjective SEP. Figure 2a shows that although absolute ratings of social rank differ between respondents with and without university education, the relative ordering of activities, in terms of mean implied rank, is very similar. The same result applies when we compare respondents above versus below the median on the scale measuring subjective social rank. Online Supplement F summarizes results from analyses in which we carry out the same comparison across all remaining SEP and sociodemographic characteristics. The overall picture is unmistakable: the rank order of lifestyle activities is very similar across domains and subgroups. These results support *H2* and the assumption that the cultural hierarchy is widely shared.[6]

Do Lifestyles Map onto the Cultural Hierarchy?

H3 states that respondents' ratings of social rank reflect a status-congruence heuristic that compels them to bundle activities in lifestyles that map onto the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. To test *H1*, we run a factor analysis (FA)
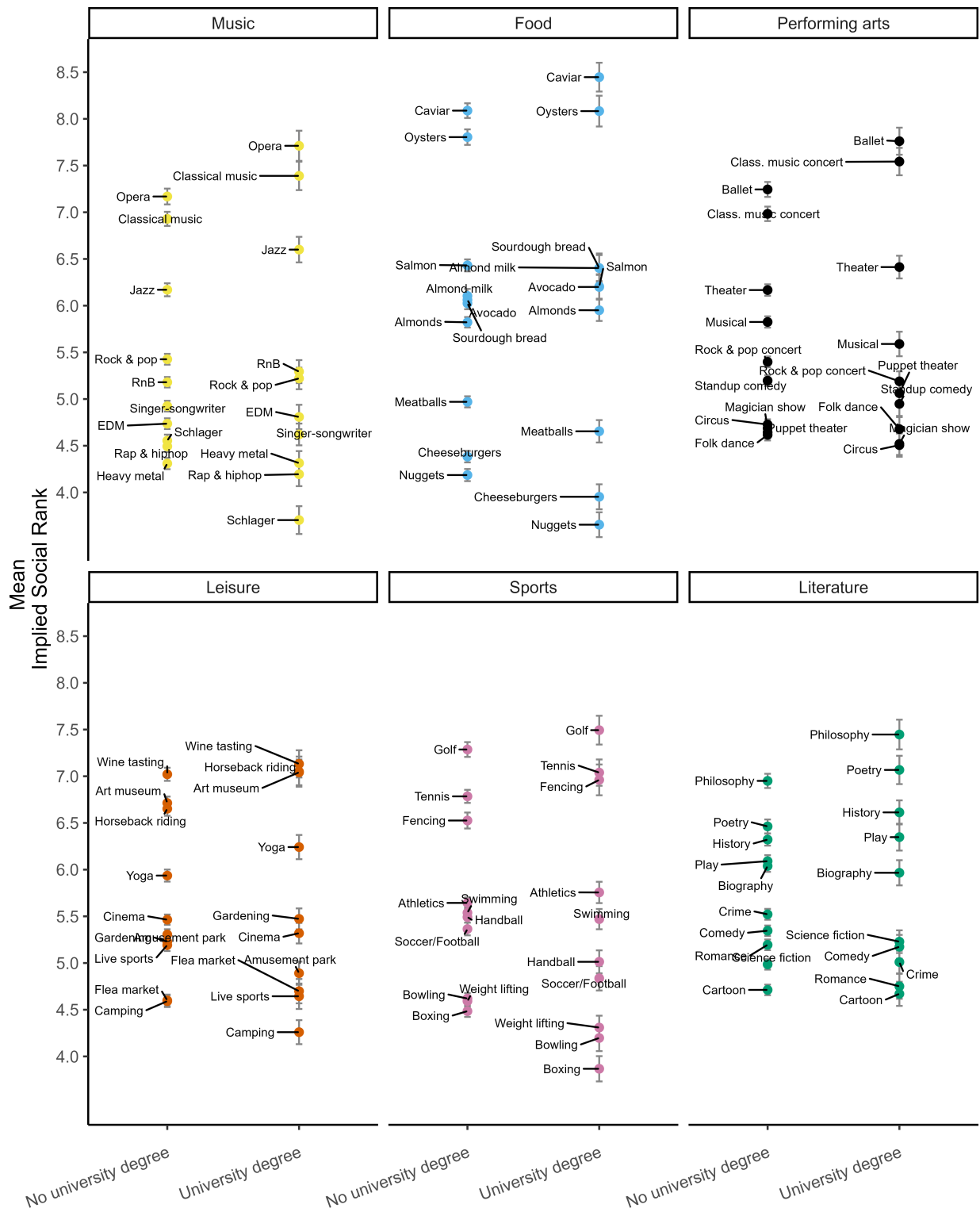
(a) Mean implied rank, by education.
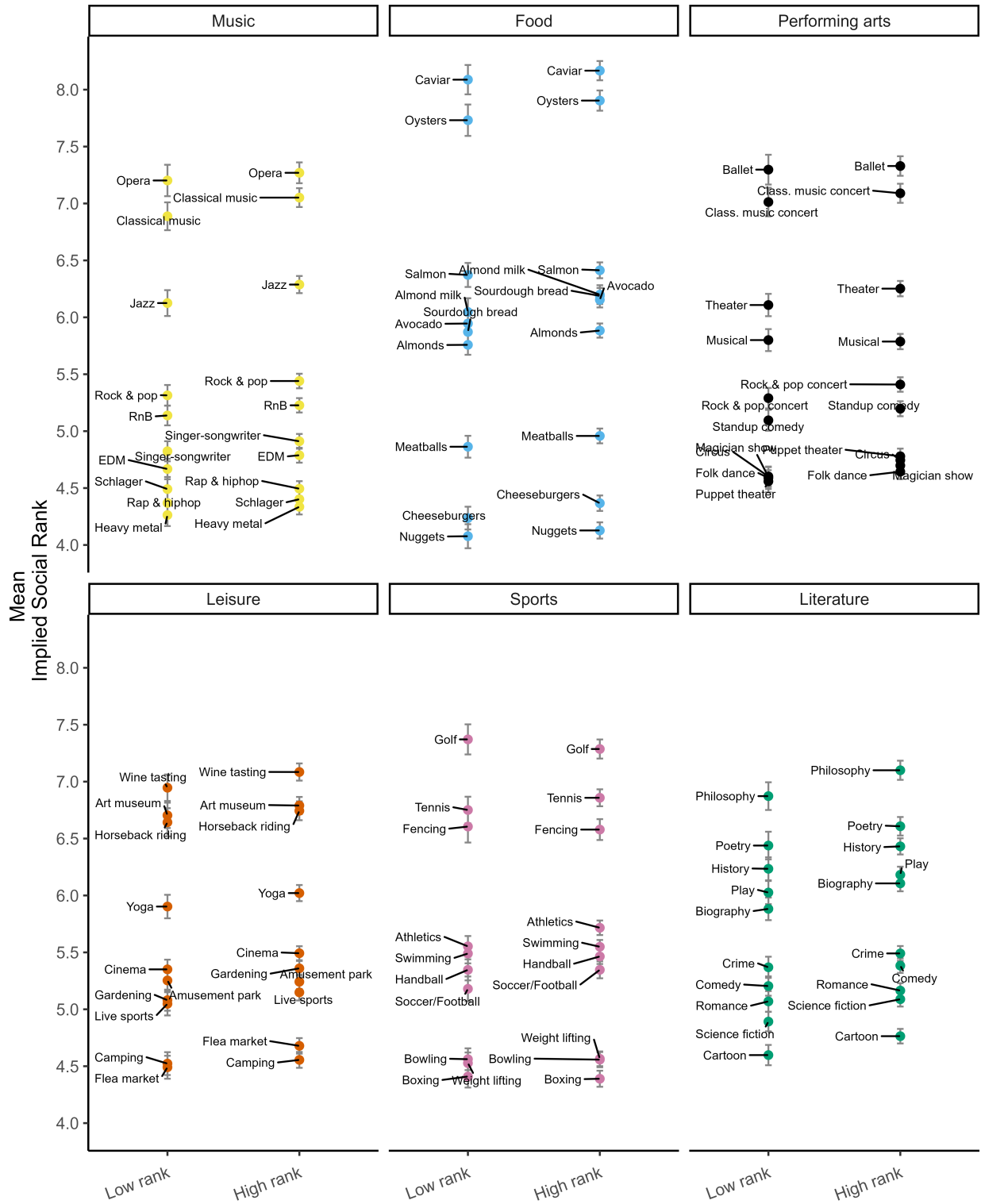
(b) Mean implied rank, by subjective social rank.

Figure 2: Mean implied rank of lifestyle activities, by education and subjective social rank.

of respondents' ratings of the 60 activities to identify latent variables that capture lifestyles with different implied rank. The FA shows that three latent variables capture most of the covariance between the 60 ratings (Online Supplement D presents details). Figure 3 summarizes (rotated) factor loadings for the 60 activities for each of the three latent variables.

The three latent variables capture a highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow lifestyle, respectively. Each lifestyle combines activities with the same implied (relative) rank but belonging to different domains. The first latent variable, which we label *Highbrow*, exhibits high factor loadings on traditionally highbrow activities (with high implied social rank), such as opera, classical music, caviar, ballet, theater, wine tasting, golf, fencing, philosophy, and poetry. Moreover, several types of food—meatballs, cheeseburgers, and nuggets—exhibit a *negative* loading on this factor, implying that they are negatively associated with this lifestyle. The second latent variable, which we label *Middlebrow*, exhibits high factor loadings on traditionally middlebrow activities (with medium implied rank): rock and pop music (and concert), salmon and avocado (food), yoga and cinema (leisure activities), handball and soccer (sport), and biography and crime (literature). The third latent variable, which we label *Lowbrow*, exhibits high factor loadings on traditionally lowbrow activities (with low implied rank): heavy metal and electronic music, cheeseburgers and nuggets (food), magician show and standup comedy (performing arts), flea market and live sports (leisure), bowling and weightlifting (sports), and science fiction and cartoon (literature). Overall, the three latent variables are consistent with *H3*: they capture perceived lifestyles comprised of activities with the same (relative) rank but belonging to different domains. Moreover, the three lifestyles map onto the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture in an ordinal manner, with the highbrow lifestyle associated with the highest social rank and the lowbrow lifestyle associated with the lowest social rank. This way, our results suggest that "brows" still exist in that, at least in Denmark, the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture organizes people's perceptions of lifestyles and their implied social rank. We return to this point in the discussion.

Discussion

We began this article from the observation that theories of cultural stratification, and empirical research that builds on these theories, assume rather than demonstrate that a widely shared cultural hierarchy exists. A widely shared cultural hierarchy is a necessary condition for lifestyles to legitimize status differences and inequality and, furthermore, for lifestyles to be exchangeable into economic and social assets. To shed light on the cultural hierarchy, we collected representative survey data in Denmark and asked respondents to rate the implied social rank of 60 activities belonging to six lifestyle domains. This design enables us to provide an *exogenous* measure of cultural hierarchy. Our empirical results support the assumption that a widely shared cultural hierarchy exists, as ratings of the implied social rank of lifestyle activities (a) map onto traditional perceptions of highbrow (high-rated) and lowbrow (low-rated) culture; (b) are similar across subgroups in the population; and (c) reflect a "status-congruence" heuristic in which lifestyles map onto the
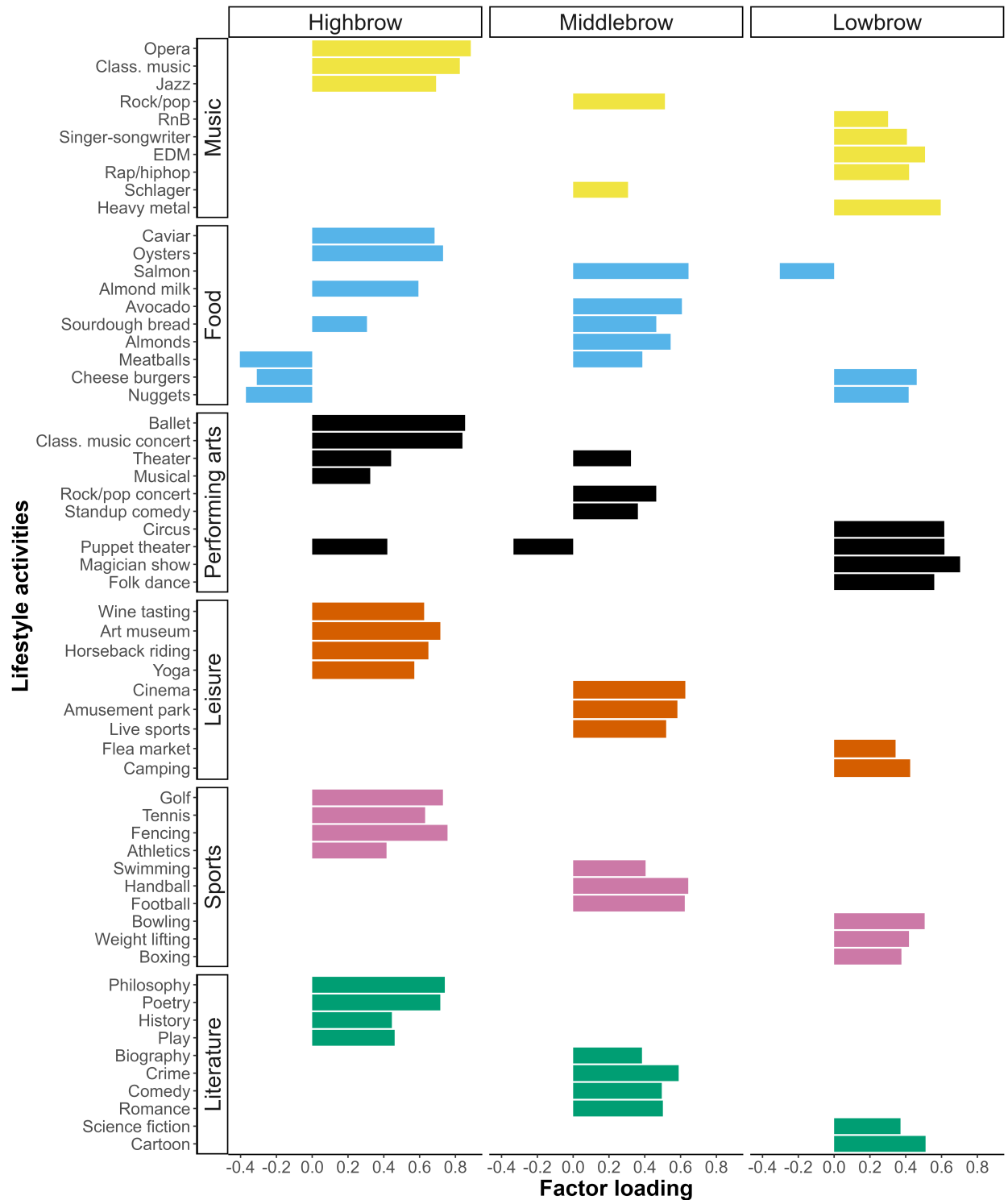
Figure 3: Results from factor analysis of 60 lifestyle activities.

distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. Our key contribution is to demonstrate that people link status in the cultural and the economic domain, that is, a "subjective homology" exists between cultural and economic status that matches the "objective homology" individuals observe in the world. Yet, although our research sheds light on the cultural hierarchy, it comes with limitations and gives rise to new questions.

First, although our research supports the existence of a widely shared cultural hierarchy, it is uninformative about *how* this hierarchy operates. Theories of cultural stratification argue that the cultural hierarchy legitimizes status differences and inequality, for example by creating beliefs that some lifestyle activities are superior to others and that certain tastes display talent, sociability, or respectability (Bourdieu 1984). We cannot address these issues directly, only document a link between implied social rank and the position of lifestyle activities along the distinction between highbrow and lowbrow culture. In doing so, our research supports other research addressing how lifestyles legitimize inequality, for example research showing that lifestyles affect *perceptions* of social rank (Thomas, 2022), *outcomes* such as education and income (Jæger 2011; Reeves and de Vries 2019), and *behaviors* such as self-presentation and downplaying of status differences in social interaction (Jarness and Friedman 2017; Lamont 1992).

Second, although all the lifestyle domains we consider operate as distinction devices (in the sense that activities within each domain can be hierarchically ordered in terms of implied social rank), our empirical analysis is uninformative about *status attribution*, that is, the mechanisms that explain why some activities imply high social rank and others imply low rank. We argue that domains differ in terms of which qualities of highbrow and lowbrow culture drive status attribution. For example, in the domains of music and literature, perceived complexity and sophistication (e.g., opera vs. heavy metal; philosophy vs. cartoon), rather than perceived cost and exclusivity, might explain observed differences in implied social rank. By contrast, in the domains of food and leisure activities, cost and exclusivity might play a larger role (e.g., caviar vs. nuggets; wine tasting vs. flea market). To understand status attribution, we need research that identifies the specific heuristics people draw on when inferring about the social rank of lifestyle activities.

Third, although our survey includes a larger set of lifestyle activities and domains than existing research (Childress et al. 2021; Domański 2022; Jæger et al. 2023), it is limited in terms of the granularity with which we measure activities and domains. We distinguish lifestyle activities at the level of *categories*, but do not distinguish *subgenres* of the same activity within each category. This means that respondents might associate an activity with subgenres that signal different social rank, for example associating "cinema" with a blockbuster movie or an arthouse movie. As our research mainly aims to capture the *breadth* of lifestyle activities and domains, we cannot address this possibility empirically. Accordingly, we encourage research on the *depth* of lifestyle activities, for example by addressing the potential polysemy of activities (Savage and Gayo 2011), by examining how the implied status of an activity is contingent on the mode of consumption (e.g., camp or irony; McCoy and Scarborough 2014), or by distinguishing cultural objects within genres (Childress et al. 2021).

Fourth, although we find little evidence that the rank order of activities within lifestyle domains differs across subgroups (defined by SEP and sociodemographic characteristics), we cannot rule out that some subgroups have different cultural hierarchies than the majority. Moreover, limitations on sample size mean that we were unable to sample sub-*culture* (e.g., social, ethnic, and sexual) as opposed to sub-*socioeconomic* groups in the population. In the survey, we did ask respondents about their own participation in highbrow (e.g., opera and classical concert) and lowbrow (e.g., hip-hop/rap concert and amusement park) activities. In supplementary analyses not reported here, we analyzed if respondents who engage in highbrow activities rate the implied social rank of lifestyle activities differently than respondents who engage in lowbrow activities. We found no evidence that this is the case, which suggests that a person's own cultural tastes do not correlate with their perception of the implied rank of lifestyle activities (results available upon request). Yet, future research should sample subculture groups to test in detail if the cultural hierarchy is different across groups.

Fifth, although our results provide a richer picture of the cultural hierarchy than existing research, this picture is a snapshot of the cultural hierarchy in a particular context at one point in time. The signal of social rank implied by lifestyle activities might be different across contexts such as countries. Countries have different historical legacies and cultural policy models (Chartrand and McCaughey 1989), which could arguably lead to different cultural hierarchies. Notwithstanding, our results, especially in the (often-studied) domain of music, are like those found for the United States (Childress et al. 2021), Poland (Domański 2022), and Japan (Kataoka 2017) as well as another study from Denmark (Jæger et al. 2023). Although this consistency is reassuring, the fact remains that we know little about cultural hierarchies beyond the OECD area, for example in the Global South. Moreover, the perceived social rank of "old" lifestyles activities can change over time and, likewise, emerging forms of cultural capital can alter the cultural hierarchy (Accominotti et al. 2018; Friedman et al. 2015; Friedman and Reeves 2020; Prieur and Savage 2013; Roose 2015). Because our data are cross-sectional, we cannot address cross-time change (or stability) in the implied social rank of lifestyle activities. That said, we find little evidence of age-related differences in perceptions of social rank (cf. Figure C1e in the Online Supplement).

Finally, although we include a broad set of lifestyle dimensions highlighted in existing research, we do not claim to measure *all* relevant aspects of the cultural hierarchy. Including more activities within each domain would obviously lead to a richer picture of the cultural hierarchy, as would adding lifestyle domains such as health, television, holidays, and modes of social interaction. Yet, we would argue that the activities we include are internally consistent for two reasons. The first reason is that practically all activities within each lifestyle domain differ in terms of implied social rank (cf. Figure 1). This means that each activity helps us characterize the cultural hierarchy in the context of Denmark. The second reason is that, in the factor analysis, all 60 activities load on one of the three lifestyles capturing a highbrow, middlebrow, and lowbrow lifestyle. Specifically, Figure 3 shows that all 60 variables have factor loadings that are at least 0.3 on one latent variable, which is the conventional threshold for relevance. This means that all

60 activities are empirically relevant in terms of identifying lifestyles on the basis of activities. Consequently, despite the empirical limitations we face, we believe our results have important implications for the credibility of theories of cultural stratification and for empirical research that draws on these theories.

Notes

1 We did not include a "don't know" response because perceptions of the implied social rank of lifestyle activities are neither cognitively taxing nor prone to social desirability bias (unlike question about topics such as xenophobia or racism). Moreover, Jæger et al. (2023) included a "don't know" category in a similar survey question that only around two percent of the sample used. Thus, any measurement error arising from not including a "don't know" category is likely to be small.

2 Because only a few respondents report very high monthly gross incomes, we truncate the income variable at DKK 1 million per month (ca. $153,000).

3 We adopt Statistics Denmark's definition of immigrant origin, defined as having at least one parent born outside Denmark (Statistics Denmark 2023).

4 We use the false discovery rate (FDR) to correct for multiple hypotheses testing. FDR is the expected proportion of false discoveries (or type-I-errors) to the total number of rejections of the null hypothesis. $FDR = E\left[\frac{V}{R}\middle|R > 0\right] \; pr(R > 0)$, in which v is the number of false discoveries and R is the total number of statistically significant hypotheses (Benjamini and Hochberg 1995; Storey 2011).

5 Some of the differences in Figure 1 might reflect that "baseline" perceptions of social rank, at least with the set of activities we include, differ across domains (for example, it might be that respondents generally rate performing arts higher than food). Figure E1 in Online Supplement E reproduces Figure 1, but controls for domain-fixed effects, that is, the tendency for some domains to have higher mean ratings than others. Figure E1 shows the same general pattern *within* domains as we see in Figure 1, but also (as expected) smaller differences *between* domains.

6 We note that individual characteristics such as education correlate with ratings of implied social rank. For example, respondents with a university degree rate traditionally highbrow (lowbrow) activities higher (lower) than respondents without a university degree (see Online Supplement F). The greater variance of means among the university educated might suggest that, compared to those without university education, they better understand the status signal implied by a lifestyle activity (Jæger et al. 2023; Nichols 2023).

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