More Than Money: The Relative Importance of Cultural, Social, and Economic Capital for Highbrow Cultural Experiences

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ABSTRACT What enables participation in highbrow cultural experiences such as opera, classical music, and art exhibitions? Drawing on Bourdieu's framework of economic, cultural, and social capital, this research investigates the relative roles of these three forms of capital in shaping engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. Across studies in the United Kingdom ($N = 6,935$) and the United States ($N = 400$), we find that cultural and social capital are more strongly associated with engagement in highbrow cultural experiences than economic capital. While cultural capital is the strongest correlate in the United Kingdom, social capital emerges as more predictive in the United States, suggesting contextual variation in the pathways to cultural engagement. These patterns are specific to highbrow cultural experiences; for lowbrow experiences, such as bowling or casual dining, cultural and social capital are weaker predictors. Together, the findings challenge the assumption that financial resources are the primary determinant of highbrow experiences.

The world of highbrow culture—from the grandeur of the opera to the contemplation of avant garde art—is often assumed to be the exclusive privilege of the wealthy. However, this focus on financial affluence can mask a broader array of factors governing access to highbrow cultural experiences. Building on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) conceptual framework, we examine the intersection of cultural, social, and economic capital in shaping participation in highbrow cultural experiences. In line with Bourdieu's original theorizing and growing literature showing that cultural and social resources are central to consumer behavior (Johnston and Baumann 2007; Berger and Ward 2010; Üstüner and Holt 2010; Yoganarasimhan 2017; Humphreys and Carpenter 2018), we contend that engagement in highbrow cultural experiences is primarily granted through the acquisition of extensive cultural knowledge (i.e., cultural capital) and social networks and connections (i.e., social capital), with monetary resources (i.e., economic capital) playing a more modest enabling role.

While scholars have often focused on one or two forms of capital in predicting tastes and preferences in different consumption domains (Bryson 1996; Holt 1998; Lizardo 2006; Flemmen, Jarness, and Roselund 2017), the relative importance of all three forms of capital in enabling highbrow cultural experiences remains unclear. Through two complementary studies, we address this gap and advance our understanding of what drives participation in highbrow cultural experiences. Study 1 leverages data from the British Cohort Study 1970, a longitudinal data set that tracks individuals from birth into adulthood. This rich data set allows us to measure multiple dimensions of each form of capital—from educational attainment and vocabulary to group membership and financial resources—while controlling for demographic factors. Study 2 examines a contemporary US sample, testing whether the patterns observed in the United Kingdom generalize across a different cultural context and time period.

This research makes three primary contributions. First, we quantify the relative importance of different forms of capital in enabling participation in highbrow cultural experiences, demonstrating that noneconomic factors (cultural and social capital) dominate financial means in predicting

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the frequency of engagement. This finding aligns with the theoretical argument that appreciating highbrow culture requires specific competencies and connections developed through education and social networks (DiMaggio 1982; Bourdieu 1984). Second, we show that these forms of capital can substitute for one another: individuals lacking one form of capital can, to an extent, compensate by leveraging other forms, suggesting multiple pathways to highbrow cultural participation (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Erickson 1996; Pret, Shaw, and Drakopoulou Dodd 2016). Third, we identify an important boundary condition by comparing highbrow versus lowbrow cultural experiences (Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996), showing that the influence of cultural and social capital is substantially weaker for lowbrow activities. Together, these insights extend Bourdieu's framework to a modern context and underscore the need to consider a broad range of resources, not just money, when examining access to cultural experiences.

BOURDIEU'S FRAMEWORK AND THE THREE FORMS OF CAPITAL

In his analysis of social stratification, particularly in the landmark work "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste," Pierre Bourdieu (1984) provides a powerful framework for examining the forces shaping engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. Central to Bourdieu's theory is the concept of capital, which he defines as accumulated resources that confer advantages in the social world. He distinguishes three main forms: economic capital (financial means and material wealth), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, and competencies that enable individuals to navigate and appreciate the dominant culture), and social capital (durable networks and relationships that provide access to resources and opportunities). This threefold conceptualization has been widely adopted in consumer research and sociology (Sallaz and Zavisca 2007). However, a key question remains: What is the relative weight of each form of capital in shaping consumer tastes and engagement in highbrow cultural experiences?

To date, the answer has been elusive. One reason is the difficulty of comprehensively measuring economic, cultural, and social capital in a single context. Researchers have often focused on one or two forms of capital at a time rather than examining all three together. For example, Holt (1998) investigates how differences in cultural capital influence patterns of taste in consumption. An additional difficulty in estimating the effect of the three forms of capital is obtaining rich data that captures capital accumulation over time (Reeves and De Vries 2019). Additionally, Bourdieu's original framework was based on data collected in a specific historical (1960s) and cultural context (France), which raises questions about its applicability across different eras and settings. It is therefore important to test the relative influence of cultural, social, and economic capital in more contemporary and diverse settings to see whether Bourdieu's insights hold true and how these dynamics may have evolved in modern societies.

The Role of Capital in Highbrow Cultural Experiences

This threefold conceptualization of capital is particularly relevant for understanding experiential consumption, which involves transformative, multisensory experiences that go beyond functional benefits to shape identities and life narratives (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Arnould and Price 1993; Pine and Gilmore 2013). Experiential choices signal individual tastes, values, and social affiliations (Goodman and Lim 2018; Valsesia and Diehl 2022), making Bourdieu's framework a valuable tool for examining highbrow cultural experiences, such as opera, classical music, ballet, and art galleries, which are often viewed as sophisticated and intellectual pursuits (Bryson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996).

We argue that highbrow cultural experiences draw on all three forms of capital, but to varying degrees, with economic capital playing a weaker role as compared to cultural and social capital. Cultural capital is fundamental for decoding and appreciating highbrow activities' sensory, emotional, and intellectual richness (Holt 1998). Education, linguistic competence, and familiarity with cultural codes equip individuals with the tools to engage meaningfully with art, theater, and classical music. This capacity for deeper appreciation differentiates cultural capital from economic capital, which may grant access but does not ensure a profound connection or understanding of the experience (DiMaggio 1982; Holt 1998; Kraaykamp and Van Eijck 2010).

Similarly, social capital plays a critical role by facilitating access to exclusive cultural opportunities and enhancing participation through social interactions. Social networks often act as gatekeepers to highbrow experiences, providing invitations, introductions, or companions that encourage attendance. Moreover, experiencing culture with others can amplify enjoyment and value through shared discussion and support (Erickson 1996). Together, these dynamics amplify the perceived value of highbrow culture.

By contrast, economic capital primarily serves an enabling function in highbrow pursuits. Financial resources cover the

tangible costs of participation—tickets, subscriptions, travel, time availability—but having money alone does not ensure one will seek out or enjoy highbrow culture. An individual might be able to afford an opera, but without the cultural knowledge or social context to appreciate it, they may not choose to go or find the experience rewarding. Thus, economic capital is primarily an access facilitator, whereas cultural capital provides the capacity to appreciate, and social capital can provide both access (e.g., an invitation or accompaniment) and enhanced appreciation (through shared enthusiasm and discussion). We anticipate therefore that economic capital will have a weaker association with engagement in highbrow cultural experiences compared to cultural and social capital.

Research Hypotheses

Crucially, Bourdieu (1984) argued that while the three forms of capital are interrelated, cultural and social capital tend to play a more significant role than economic capital in shaping cultural preferences and behaviors. Individuals who possess the knowledge, skills, and social connections valued by the dominant culture are better equipped to appreciate and derive pleasure from highbrow cultural experiences. Indeed, multiple studies have provided empirical support for the role of cultural and social capital in shaping cultural tastes and engagement (DiMaggio 1982; Katz-Gerro 2002; Kraaykamp and Van Eijck 2010).

> **H1:** Cultural capital and social capital will be more strongly associated with engagement in highbrow cultural experiences than economic capital.

Beyond their individual effects, an intriguing question is how these forms of capital interact. Different forms of capital may function as substitutes or complements in enabling engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. Notably, Bourdieu (1986) observed that forms of capital are often convertible into one another. For example, educational credentials (cultural capital) can be translated into a lucrative job (economic capital); conversely, financial resources can be used to acquire cultural capital (e.g., paying for education or cultural enrichment); and knowledge can help generate social capital by facilitating networking in elite circles (Lizardo 2006; Pret et al. 2016). Building on this notion of convertibility, we expect that multiple forms of capital can serve as alternative pathways to accessing and appreciating highbrow culture. An individual with limited cultural knowledge might still participate in highbrow experiences by leveraging economic capital (e.g., purchasing memberships or premium experiences that lower other barriers) or by tapping into social capital (e.g., being invited or guided by culturally knowledgeable friends or family). In this sense, economic and social resources may compensate for a lack of cultural capital, and similarly, each form might offset deficits in the others (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Pret et al. 2016).

> **H2:** The three forms of capital serve as substitutes in enabling engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. Specifically, each form of capital will have a diminished effect when the other is high (a negative interaction), consistent with a compensatory relationship.

In contrast to highbrow cultural activities, lowbrow experiences—such as movie-going, casual dining, or theme park visits—are designed for immediate accessibility and enjoyment without specialized knowledge or extensive social networks. Although economic factors may influence participation, cultural and social capital play a significantly diminished role in predicting engagement with lowbrow activities. This fundamental distinction in accessibility aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) framework, which posits that taste hierarchies are maintained precisely through differential requirements for cultural and social capital across consumption domains.

> **H3:** Social capital and cultural capital will be more strongly associated with engagement in highbrow cultural experiences than with engagement in lowbrow cultural experiences.

To investigate these relationships, we conduct two complementary studies using data from the United Kingdom and the United States, allowing us to test the generalizability of our findings across different cultural contexts and time periods. While our analyses reveal robust associations between various forms of capital and engagement in highbrow cultural experiences, we acknowledge the correlational nature of our data. We cannot definitively determine causal direction—whether greater cultural and social capital leads to increased cultural engagement, whether engagement builds cultural and social capital, or whether other underlying factors influence all the variables. Nevertheless, by examining these relationships across two distinct contexts and controlling for various demographic factors, we provide valuable

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Engagement in Highbrow and Lowbrow Cultural Experiences

Type	Variable	Observation	*M*	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Highbrow	Theater: play/drama	8,441	2.19	1.19	1	6
	Theater: pantomime/musical	8,556	2.23	1.08	1	6
	Opera, classical music, ballet	8,539	1.47	.84	1	6
	Concert	8,514	2.29	1.11	1	6
	Art exhibition/gallery	8,564	2.14	1.14	1	6
	Museum	8,577	2.46	1.11	1	6
	Historical site/stately home	8,577	2.47	1.14	1	6
Lowbrow	Cinema	8,572	3.37	1.13	1	6
	Theme park	8,578	2.33	1.02	1	6
	Meal in restaurant/café	8,560	4.60	.96	1	6
	Drink in pub/club	8,586	4.18	1.38	1	6

NOTE.— Frequency was measured on a 6-point scale (1 = *never*, 6 = *at least once a week*). Higher mean values indicate more frequent engagement in the activity over the past year.

insights into how different forms of capital relate to patterns of experiential consumption.

STUDY 1

Method

Participants and Data Set. Study 1 examines the nationally representative survey data from the British Cohort Study (BCS70). The BCS70 is a longitudinal study of more than 17,000 individuals born in England, Scotland, and Wales during a single week in April 1970. The study follows participants from birth until death or permanent emigration from Great Britain, and it gathers extensive information on various facets of participants' lives, including their educational attainment, employment history, social relationships, and, crucially, their participation in a wide range of cultural activities and experiences (Elliott and Shepherd 2006). The primary data collection methods included questionnaires, cognitive assessments, clinical assessments, and nurse measurements.

The BCS70 has been widely used to study social stratification, mobility, and the influence of various forms of capital on life outcomes in British society. For example, Bridger and Daly (2020) found that upward intergenerational mobility is positively associated with midlife life satisfaction, mediated by better health and fewer financial difficulties. Similarly, Bukodi and Goldthorpe (2011) demonstrated that parental social class, education, and status significantly shape children's educational attainment, underscoring their role in intergenerational mobility. Building on this foundation, our study examines how cultural, social, and economic capitals relate to engagement with highbrow cultural experiences in adulthood.

For the purposes of our study, we included data from three survey waves during childhood (birth, age 10, and age 16) and one wave during adulthood from 2012 (when respondents were 42 years old). Our analyses include all cohort members with available data on the variables of interest at the 2012 wave ($N \approx 4,800$–$6,900$, depending on analysis). The data set is publicly accessible through the UK Data Archive (https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-Series-200001). The code to recreate our analyses is provided on OSF (https://osf.io/uvhts/?view_only=22e4aee1e5f44b158b8e9fae37c433c5).

Measures. *Highbrow and Lowbrow Cultural Experiences*. The primary dependent variables are measures of engagement in 11 leisure activities (listed in table 1) and reported at age 42. Specifically, participants reported their frequency of participation in each activity on a 6-point scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *less often*, 3 = *at least once a year*, 4 = *several times a year*, 5 = *at least once a month,* 6 = *at least once a week*). We combined the seven highbrow items by averaging their frequency ratings to create a composite measure of engagement in highbrow cultural experiences, and similarly averaged the four lowbrow items to derive a measure of engagement in lowbrow cultural experiences.[1] Higher values on each measure

1. We treat this measure as continuous, though the underlying frequency items are ordinal. Aggregating multiple ordinal items into a composite measure approximates a continuous scale by smoothing out discreteness

indicate more frequent engagement over the past year. The highbrow items showed good internal consistency (α = .83), whereas the lowbrow items showed lower consistency (α = .58), likely reflecting the broader diversity and a smaller number of lowbrow items. In study 2, we include a more extensive set of lowbrow items to improve reliability and comparability.

Pretest. To classify the activities as highbrow or lowbrow, we conducted a pre-test with 501 British adults (M_{age} = 44.6; 49.3% female) recruited on Prolific Academic. We provided brief definitions of *highbrow*, *mainstream*, and *lowbrow* cultural experiences (see online appendix A for wording) and then asked respondents to rate the 11 activities on a 7-point scale (1 = *definitely lowbrow*, 4 = *mainstream*, 7 = *definitely highbrow*). For half of the pretest respondents, the scale was reverse-scored (1 = *definitely highbrow*, 7 = *definitely lowbrow*) to control for any response bias, and ratings were recoded so that higher numbers indicate more highbrow perception. We coded ratings so that higher numbers represent more highbrow experiences. From the results, we classified the following seven experiences as highbrow, all rated above the scale midpoint: (1) Going to the theatre to watch a play/drama; (2) going to the theatre to watch a pantomime or musical; (3) going to an opera, classical music concert, or ballet; (4) going to a concert; (5) visiting an art exhibition/gallery; (6) visiting a museum; and (7) visiting a historical site/stately home (M = 5.11, SD = .68; $t(500)$ = 36.37, $p < .001$). These cultural activities represent quintessential experiential consumption, as they involve immersive and multisensory encounters that engage the senses, emotions, and intellect (Pine and Gilmore 2013) and are widely recognized in the literature as reflecting traditional highbrow tastes and cultural dispositions (Friedman and Reeves 2020; Peterson and Kern 1996). We created an alternative measure for the following four cultural experiences, all rated below the scale midpoint and thus deemed as more lowbrow: (1) Visiting a theme park; (2) going for a drink at a pub or club; (3) having a meal in a restaurant, cafe, or pub; and (4) going to the cinema (M = 3.26, SD = .81, $t(500)$ = 20.38, $p < .001$).

Three Forms of Capital. We operationalized the three forms of capital using multiple indicators from the BCS70.

Social Capital. We operationalized social capital using four indicators grounded in the literature (Erickson 1996; Lin, Fu, and Hsung 2001): membership in social groups, occupational ranking, and social support from both parents and friends/relatives. For group membership, respondents indicated membership in any of 15 different types of social, civic, or community organizations (e.g., political party, religious group, sports club, etc.). We counted the number of groups each person reported belonging to. Although not all groups involve close personal ties, participation in organizations provides opportunities to develop and leverage social networks (Coleman 1988). On average, respondents belonged to .44 social groups (SD = .96).

Occupational status was coded on the BCS70's 6-point scale (1 = *unskilled*, 6 = *professional/managerial*) using each participant's 2012 job. The sample mean of 4.10 (SD = 1.22) places the average respondent in a skilled or semi-professional role. Higher-status positions deliver broader, better-resourced networks—the weak-tie connections central to social capital (Granovetter 1973; Erickson 1996). Consistent with prior work (Lin et al. 2001), we use occupational rank as an indicator of social capital.

Finally, social support was measured by asking whether the respondent had received any job-related help (such as advice, references, or direct assistance finding employment) from (*a*) their parents and (*b*) friends or relatives. Each was rated on a 0–3 scale (0 = *no help*, 3 = *helped significantly in career advancement*). Mean support scores were .97 (SD = 1.12) from parents and 1.01 (SD = 1.19) from friends/relatives, suggesting moderate levels of career-related social support.

Cultural Capital. We assessed cultural capital using four indicators: educational attainment, parental education, and verbal reasoning ability. Educational attainment was measured by the respondent's age at which they completed their formal education (left full-time schooling). This proxy for education (M = 18.08 years, SD = 3.02) is commonly used in sociological analyses of the BCS70 (Sullivan 2001; Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2011) and correlates strongly with the highest qualification achieved—individuals who stayed in school longer generally obtained higher degrees, reflecting greater accumulated knowledge.

Parental education was recorded at the time of the respondent's birth (in 1970), measured as the age each parent left full-time education (mother's M = 15.62, SD = 2.04; father's M = 15.91, SD = 2.43). Parental education is a well-established indicator of intergenerational transmission of cultural capital: parents with more education are more

(MacCallum et al. 2002). For robustness, we also conducted ordinal logistic regressions, which yielded substantively identical conclusions on predictor significance and importance (these results are in online appendix B).

Table 2. Correlations Between Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Income	1										
2. Savings	.140***	1									
3. Debt	.006	.028*	1								
4. Subjective wealth	.094***	.223***	−.075***	1							
5. No. of groups	.134***	.066***	.019	.105***	1						
6. Occupation	.092***	.138***	.066Z***	.186***	.164***	1					
7. Parents' help	.021*	.026*	.038***	.066***	.067***	.025*	1				
8. Friends'/relatives' help	−.005	−.023*	.021*	−.011	.044***	−.051***	.242***	1			
9. Education	.076***	.154***	.010	.142***	.215***	.343***	.028**	.030**	1		
10. Mother's education	.047***	.098***	.029**	.101***	.102***	.179***	.093***	.029**	.311***	1	
11. Father's education	.038***	.119***	.028*	.095***	.105***	.198***	.078***	.032**	.345***	.589***	1
12. Vocabulary score	.071***	.115***	.031**	.146***	.195***	.337***	.029**	.048***	.392***	.271***	.257***

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

likely to expose their children to cultural knowledge and stimuli from an early age (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Bellezza and Berger 2020).

Finally, verbal ability was assessed in the 2012 survey with a brief vocabulary test, a classic indicator of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Sullivan 2001). Respondents were shown 20 target words (one at a time), each accompanied by a set of five possible definitions, and asked to select the word or phrase closest in meaning to the target word. The number of correct answers out of 20 served as the score ($M = 12.60$, SD $= 3.70$), reflecting each individual's linguistic proficiency and familiarity with the language and concepts of the dominant culture.

Economic Capital. We measured economic capital with four indicators capturing the respondent's financial resources and well-being: household income, savings, debt, and subjective financial well-being. Respondents reported their household income ($M = £19,209.72$, SD $= 101,317.30$), savings ($M = £24,227.39$, SD $= 85,987.43$), and debts ($M = £4,823.93$, SD $= 14,049.29$) in pounds sterling at age 42. To facilitate interpretation, we report amounts in units of £1,000. In addition to objective finances, respondents rated their subjective financial well-being by answering how well they were "managing financially" at that time (1 = *finding it very difficult*, 5 = *living comfortably*). The mean subjective financial well-being was 3.84 (SD $= .98$).

We also included several demographic control variables in our analyses: a binary indicator for gender (1 = *female*), a binary indicator for whether the respondent had any children, and a binary indicator for marital status (1 = *married or in a civil partnership*). These controls (measured at age 42) account for basic life circumstances that might influence cultural participation (e.g., childcare responsibilities or spousal influence on leisure activities). Table 2 presents the correlations among the economic, social, and cultural capital variables.

For our analyses requiring aggregate measures, we created standardized composite indices of each capital form by averaging *z*-standardized individual indicators within each domain. These composite measures enabled direct comparisons across capital types, particularly in our interaction analyses testing hypothesis 2. Full details on item wording and composite measure construction are provided in online appendix A.

Results

Model-Free Exploration of Capital-Experience Relationships. Before turning to hypothesis testing, we first examined the raw, model-free relationships between each form of capital and highbrow cultural participation. Figure 1 presents binned scatterplot regressions of engagement in highbrow cultural experiences on each capital variable, which offer a nonparametric visualization of the associations without imposing linear assumptions. In these plots, the sample is divided into bins based on the capital measure, and we plot the mean level of engagement in highbrow cultural experiences within each bin against the capital level (with locally smoothed regression lines and 95% confidence

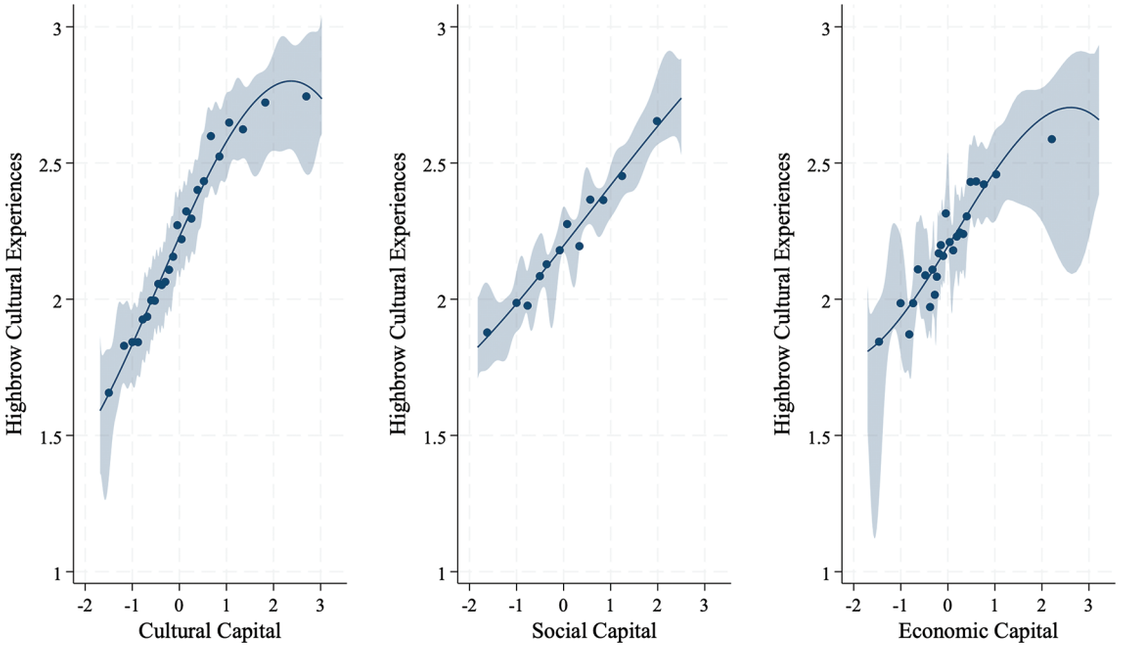

Figure 1. Relationship between forms of capital and engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. Binned scatterplots of engagement in highbrow cultural experiences as a function of each form of capital, with 95% confidence intervals. Capital measures are Winsorized at the first and 99th percentiles. Each point represents the individuals' average engagement in highbrow experiences in a given bin of the capital measure.

bands). The relationships are generally positive for cultural and social capital: higher levels of cultural knowledge and social resources are associated with greater engagement in highbrow experiences, and these effects appear monotonic. For economic capital, the relationship with highbrow engagement is positive but flatter, suggesting diminishing returns at higher levels of income and wealth. Together, the plots indicate that cultural and social capital have stronger bivariate relationships with engagement than economic capital, foreshadowing our regression results.

Engagement in Highbrow Cultural Experiences Predicted by Different Forms of Capital (Hypothesis 1). To formally test hypothesis 1, we estimated a series of OLS regression models assessing each capital type's relative contribution to engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. Table 3 presents four specifications: Model 1 (economic capital variables only), model 2 (social capital variables only), model 3 (cultural capital variables only), and model 4 (all three capital forms plus demographic controls). In terms of explained variance, model 1 (economic capital only) accounted for the least variance in highbrow cultural engagement (R^2 = .041, ~4.1%). Model 2 (social capital only) explained a moderate amount (R^2 = .117, ~11.7%), and model 3 (cultural capital only) explained the most (R^2 = .159, ~15.9%). Model 4, which included all forms of capital and controls, explained about 20.8% of the variance (R^2 = .208). Variance inflation factors (VIFs) for model 4 ranged from 1.03 to 1.64, well below conventional thresholds (e.g., 5 or 10) for multicollinearity, indicating that collinearity is not a significant concern.

Examining the regression coefficients in table 3, model 4 reveals that cultural and social capital variables have substantially stronger effects on highbrow cultural engagement than economic capital variables. Specifically, educational attainment (b = .041, β = .17, $p < .001$), vocabulary score (b = .034, β = .16, $p < .001$), number of group memberships (b = .087, β = .14, $p < .001$), and occupational status (b = .073, β = .12, $p < .001$) emerge as the strongest predictors. By contrast, economic capital indicators show more modest effects, with subjective financial well-being (b = .049, β = .059, $p < .001$) having the largest effect among economic measures. Figure 2 visualizes these comparative effects, further highlighting the stronger influence of cultural and social capital relative to economic capital on highbrow cultural engagement, consistent with hypothesis 1.

Incremental Contributions of Social and Cultural Capital (Hypothesis 1). Another way to assess hypothesis 1 is to examine how much predictive power is gained by adding

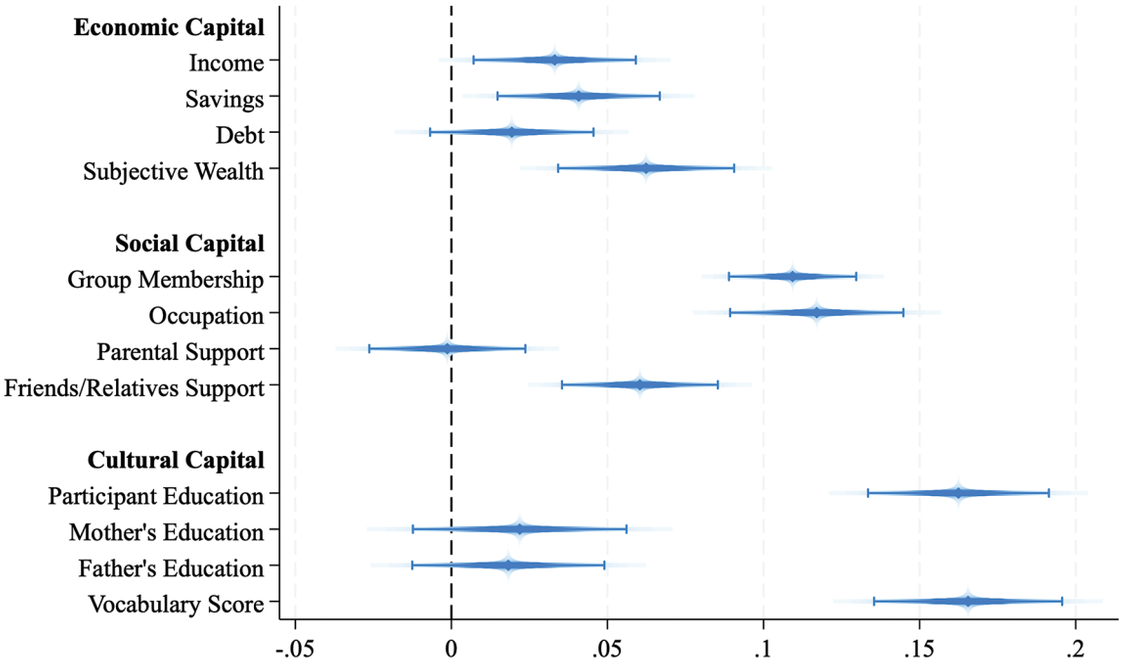

Figure 2. Standardized coefficients of variables predicting engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. The figure uses fully standardized coefficients, where both predictor and outcome variables are standardized, to aid direct comparison. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, while the shaded areas depict the 99% confidence intervals for each coefficient estimate.

social and cultural capital to a baseline model with only economic capital. We conducted hierarchical regressions entering economic capital first, then adding social capital, and then cultural capital. Adding the social capital block to an economic-capital-only model led to a highly significant increase in R^2 ($\Delta R^2 = .076$, F change $= 194.2$, $p < .001$). Similarly, adding the cultural capital block to an economic-capital-only model led to an even stronger increase ($\Delta R^2 = .099$, F change $= 270.9$, $p < .001$). These R^2 gains confirm that each of the noneconomic capital forms provides unique explanatory power beyond economic capital.

Relative Importance of Different Forms of Capital (Hypothesis 1). We next formally compared the relative importance of all predictors using a dominance analysis (Budescu 1993). Dominance analysis is an ensemble method that considers every possible combination of predictors to determine each variable's average contribution to model fit. This approach mitigates distortions in standard regression coefficients that can arise from multicollinearity or suppression (Pedhazur 1997; Capraro and Capraro 2001). In essence, for each predictor it computes a "general dominance" statistic, which is the predictor's incremental R^2 contribution averaged across all models in which it appears.

Dominance analysis is implemented by fitting a series of nested models representing all possible combinations of the independent variables. For p independent variables, the number of models required is $2^p - 1$ (–1 is the baseline model with no independent variables). Given that our full model (model 4 in table 3) has 15 independent variables in total, we ran 32,767 models ($N = 4,810$, $R^2 = .208$). Table 4 presents the results from these analyses, with the variables listed in rank order by their contribution to the overall model fit statistic (R^2). The dominance statistics represent the weighted average marginal contributions to the R^2 statistic that each independent variable makes across all models in which the independent variable is included. For example, respondent education is .051, indicating that this variable increments the R^2 by 5 percentage points on average when included in the model.

Summing the standardized dominance statistics by capital type provides another perspective on hypothesis 1. In study 1, cultural capital variables collectively accounted for about 52.4% of the explained variance in engagement in highbrow cultural experiences, social capital accounted for 33.6%, economic capital accounted for 7.9%, and the three demographic controls together for 4.2%. If we exclude demographics and reallocate their share, cultural capital accounts

Table 3. Regression Models Predicting Engagement in Highbrow Cultural Experiences from Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
Variable	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*
Economic capital:												
Income	.0007***	.0001	.079	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.0003*	.0001	.033
Savings	.0007***	.0001	.082	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.0004**	.0001	.041
Debt	.0016*	.0007	.030	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.0011	.0007	.019
Subjective wealth	.11***	.01	.13	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.049***	.011	.059
Social capital:												
No. of groups	. . .	. . .	. . .	.126***	.0073	.20	. . .	. . .	. . .	.087***	.0083	.14
Occupation	. . .	. . .	. . .	.146***	.0072	.24	. . .	. . .	. . .	.073***	.0088	.12
Parents' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.0067	.0078	−.01	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.0009	.0086	−.001
Friends'/relatives' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	.035***	.0073	.056	. . .	. . .	. . .	.039***	.0082	.063
Cultural capital:												
Education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.057***	.0032	.22	.041***	.0037	.17
Mother's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.012*	.0057	.030	.0082	.0065	.021
Father's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.013**	.0044	.042	.0057	.0049	.019
Vocabulary score	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.046***	.0026	.22	.034***	.0032	.16
Controls:												
Female	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.14***	.02	.095
Has children	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.011	.023	.007
Married	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.024	.022	−.016
Intercept	1.72***	.04	. . .	1.46***	.032	. . .	.16*	.077	. . .	−.049	.1	. . .
R^2		.041			.117			.159			.208	
N		6,364			6,731			6,935			4,810	

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

for about 56.7% of explained variance, social capital 35.5%, and economic capital 7.9%. Thus, regardless of method, cultural and social capital clearly emerge as the primary drivers of participation in highbrow cultural activities, far outweighing economic capital.

Substitutability of Capital Forms (Hypothesis 2). Hypothesis 2 predicted that the three forms of capital can compensate for one another, implying negative interaction effects (i.e., if one form of capital is high, the marginal effect of another form is reduced). To test hypothesis 2, we estimated regression models that included the three two-way interaction terms between economic, social, and cultural capital (using standardized composite indices to reduce multicollinearity; full results in online appendix C).

In these models, we found all three interactions to be negative and statistically significant (economic × cultural: $b = -.027$, SE = .01, $t(4, 806) = -2.69$, $p = .007$, $\beta = -.023$; economic × social: $b = -.023$, SE = .011, $t(5, 468) = -2.12$, $p = .034$, $\beta = -.03$; social × cultural: $b = -.02$, SE = .01, $t(5, 875) = -2.6$, $p = .009$, $\beta = -.033$). These negative coefficients indicate that the effect of any one form of capital on participation in highbrow cultural activities is *weaker* at higher levels of the other forms of capital. In other words, a deficit in one area can be partly offset by strength in another, consistent with a substitutive or compensatory relationship among the forms of capital (hypothesis 2).

Figure 3 illustrates these interaction effects on highbrow cultural engagement. For instance, the panel for Economic × Social Capital shows that economic capital has a positive association with highbrow participation when social capital is low. However, this association diminishes (flattens) when social capital is high (the lines converge). In other words, social connections can substitute for financial resources.

Table 4. Relative Contribution of Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital in Predicting Engagement in Highbrow Cultural Experiences in Study 1

Type	Variable	Dominance statistic	SDS (% R^2)	Ranking
Cultural	Education	.0509	.2454	1
Cultural	Vocabulary score	.0452	.2176	2
Social	Occupation	.0338	.1628	3
Social	Group memberships	.0321	.1545	4
Cultural	Mother's education	.0084	.0406	5
Demographics	Female	.0083	.0399	6
Cultural	Father's education	.008	.0386	7
Economic	Subjective wealth	.0079	.0379	8
Economic	Savings	.0051	.0245	9
Social	Friends'/relatives' support	.0037	.0179	10
Economic	Income	.0031	.0149	11
Economic	Debt	.0004	.0021	12
Demographics	Marital status	.0004	.0017	13
Social	Parents support	.0002	.0007	14
Demographics	Parental status	.0001	.0007	15

NOTE.— SDS (standardized dominance statistic) represents the relative importance of each variable in predicting engagement in highbrow cultural experiences, expressed as a percentage of the total model R^2.

Likewise, the Economic × Cultural Capital panel shows financial resources matter more for those low in knowledge, but provide little added benefit for those already high in cultural capital (who attend cultural events regardless of finances). The Social × Cultural Capital panel shows the strongest substitution: the advantage of high social capital is greatest for those low in cultural capital, but shrinks for those already high in cultural capital (and vice versa). These

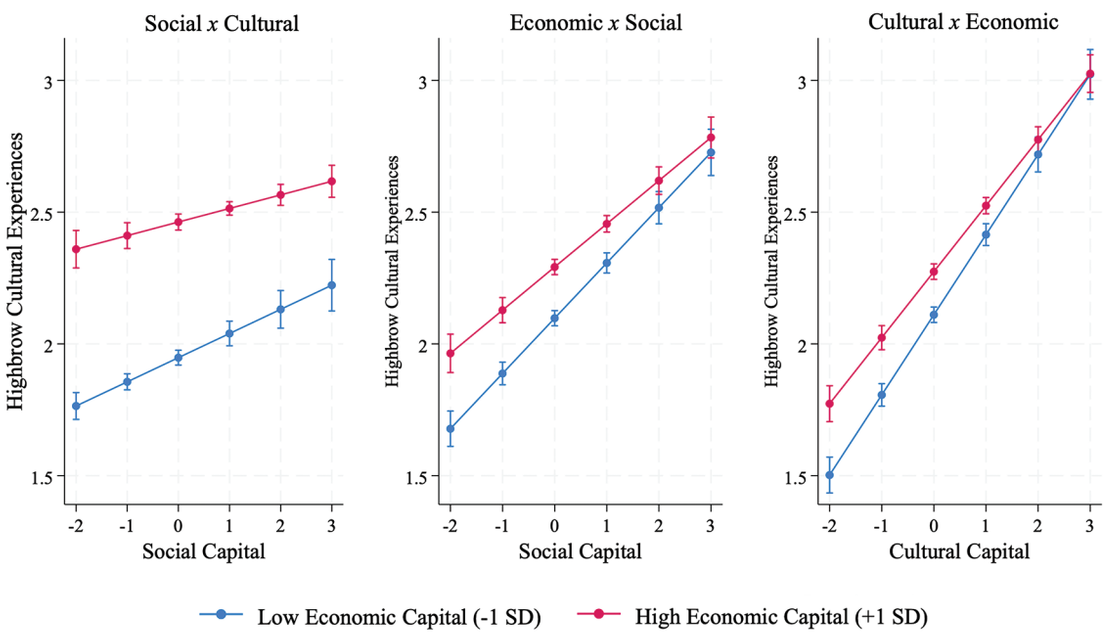

Figure 3. Substitutive effects between the three forms of capital on engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. Each panel shows the interaction between two forms of capital (social × cultural, economic × social, cultural × economic). Error bars denote 95% confidence intervals.

Table 5. Regression Models Predicting Engagement in Lowbrow Cultural Experiences from Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
Variable	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*
Economic capital:												
Income	.0006***	.0001	.073	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.0003**	.0001	.0039
Savings	.00014	.0001	.017	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.0001	.0001	−.0049
Debt	.0016**	.00057	.033	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.0006	.0006	.014
Subjective wealth	.13***	.0094	.18	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.099***	.011	.13
Social capital:												
No. of groups	. . .	. . .	. . .	.040***	.0067	.072	. . .	. . .	. . .	.040***	.0079	.072
Occupation	. . .	. . .	. . .	.069***	.0066	.12	. . .	. . .	. . .	.063***	.0085	.12
Parents' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	.015*	.0072	.025	. . .	. . .	. . .	.010	.0083	.018
Friends'/relatives' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	.024***	.0068	.042	. . .	. . .	. . .	.036***	.0078	.066
Cultural capital:												
Education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.011**	.0033	.043	−.0028	.0036	−.013
Mother's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.00056	.0058	−.0015	−.011+	.0063	−.031
Father's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.0026	.0045	.0088	.0069	.0048	.026
Vocabulary score	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.015***	.0026	.071	−.0065*	.0030	−.034
Control:												
Female	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.066***	.019	−.050
Has children	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.16***	.022	.11
Married	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.063**	.021	−.045
Intercept	3.08***	.037	. . .	3.33***	.030	. . .	3.22***	.079	. . .	3.17***	.098	. . .
R^2		.043			.027			.010			.058	
N		6,621			6,994			7,213			5,008	

NOTE.— VIF values in model 4 ranged from 1.03 to 1.65.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

patterns support hypothesis 2 by demonstrating that the three forms of capital can substitute for one another, albeit to varying extents, in enabling engagement in highbrow cultural experiences, as each contributes less when the others are more abundant.

Comparing Highbrow to Lowbrow Cultural Experiences (Hypothesis 3). To directly test hypothesis 3, we examined how predictors of cultural engagement differ between highbrow and lowbrow experiences. Using identical predictor sets across parallel regression models, we revealed clear differences in how capital forms operate across these cultural contexts. As shown in table 5, cultural and social capital explained substantially less variance for engagement in lowbrow experiences than for engagement in highbrow experiences. Specifically, cultural capital accounted for about 15.9% of the variance in engagement with highbrow experiences but only 1.0% in engagement with lowbrow activities; social capital accounted for 11.7% in the case of highbrow activities versus 2.7% for lowbrow experiences. In contrast, economic capital had similar, modest explanatory power for engagement in both highbrow (4.1%) and lowbrow (4.3%) activities. This pattern suggests that lowbrow activities, due to their lower cultural barriers and broader accessibility, are much less dependent on accumulated cultural and social resources.

To test for differences in capital effects across cultural domains, we employed seemingly unrelated regression analysis, which allows for direct statistical comparison of coefficient magnitudes between separate regression models.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Highbrow (Left) and Lowbrow (Right) Cultural Experience Items Measured

Highbrow experiences	*M*	SD	Lowbrow experiences	*M*	SD
Theatre: play/drama	2.18	1.22	Theme park	2.45	1.18
Theatre: pantomime/musical	1.99	1.19	Drink at a bar or club	2.9	1.72
Opera, classical music, ballet	1.9	1.14	Meal in a restaurant, cafe, or pub	4.68	1.17
Concert	2.68	1.24	Cinema	3.25	1.28
Art exhibition/gallery	2.48	1.21	Beer festivals or country fairs	2.14	1.19
Museum	2.76	1.2	Movies or reality TV shows	4.92	1.32
Historical site/stately home	2.43	1.15	Soap operas or daytime television	2.34	1.8
Culinary experiences	2.15	1.27	Video games or casual gaming	4.53	1.84
Skiing	1.46	.94	Playing or watching bowling, darts, or billiards	2.37	1.38
Playing golf	1.71	1.26	Casinos or gambling	2.16	1.44

NOTE.— Frequency was measured on a 6-point scale in study 2 (1 = *never*, 6 = *at least once a week*). Higher means indicate more frequent engagement in the activity over the past year.

Consistent with hypothesis 3, social capital's effect was significantly stronger for engagement in highbrow than lowbrow cultural experiences ($\chi^2(1) = 9.11, p = .003$), as measured using our combined social capital index (i.e., aggregating group memberships, occupational status, and social support indicators). The disparity was even more pronounced for cultural capital ($\chi^2(1) = 296.43$, $p < .001$). By contrast, economic capital's effect was slightly *stronger* for engagement in lowbrow than highbrow experiences (4.3% vs. 4.1% variance explained; $\chi^2(1) = .78$, $p = .375$), though this difference was not statistically significant. Thus, as hypothesized, cultural and social capital disproportionately facilitate engagement in highbrow cultural experiences, while participation in lowbrow activities operates through different mechanisms, relying considerably less on these noneconomic resources.

STUDY 2: REPLICATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Method

Participants and Data Set. To evaluate the generalizability of our findings, we conducted a study with 400 US participants recruited on Prolific Academic for a paid online study in 2024. Each participant reported the frequency of engaging in 10 highbrow cultural experiences (e.g., visiting art museums, attending classical music concerts, attending live theater; 10 items $\alpha = .89$) and 10 lowbrow cultural experiences (e.g., going to movie theaters, dining at casual restaurants, visiting theme parks; 10 items $\alpha = .75$) over the past year; the two sets of activities appeared in random order. Table 6 provides the complete list of activities and descriptive statistics. The response scale for frequency was the same 6-point format as in study 1 (1 = *never*, 6 = *at least once a week*).

Participants also answered questions measuring the three forms of capital using the same questions as in study 1, slightly adapted to the US context: they reported their economic capital (i.e., income, savings, debt, financial well-being), social capital (i.e., social groups, occupation status, social support), and cultural capital (i.e., education levels, self-assessed vocabulary/verbal ability). Finally, respondents provided basic demographics (age, gender, etc.). The detailed questions for the experiences are in online appendix D, and all study materials, including the survey, are available on OSF https://osf.io/uvhts/?view_only=22e4aee1e5f44b158b8e9fae37c433c5. Given the modest sample size in study 2, our analysis focuses on main effects and linear relationships rather than probing nonlinearities or interactions requiring greater power.

Results

Engagement in Highbrow Cultural Experiences Predicted by Different Forms of Capital (Hypothesis 1). The US results corroborate our key findings from study 1 while revealing interesting cross-cultural differences. In the full regression model (table 7), social capital emerged as the dominant predictor of engagement in highbrow experiences in the US context, with group memberships ($\beta = .32$, $p < .001$) and occupational status ($\beta = .19$, $p < .001$) showing the strongest effects. Cultural capital remained significant but less influential than in the UK sample, with education level and verbal ability each contributing modestly (both $\beta = .14$, $p < .01$). Regarding economic capital, the only significant

Table 7. Regression Models Predicting Engagement in Highbrow Cultural Experiences from Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
Variable	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*
Economic capital:												
Income	.00004	.00007	.036	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.00004	.00006	−.036
Savings	.00012	.00017	.041	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.00018	.00014	.064
Debt	.00021	.00045	.023	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.00008	.0004	−.0084
Subjective wealth	.23***	.040	.32	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.084*	.033	.12
Social capital:												
No. of groups	. . .	. . .	. . .	.11***	.013	.38	. . .	. . .	. . .	.093***	.013	.32
Occupation	. . .	. . .	. . .	.15***	.021	.30	. . .	. . .	. . .	.093***	.025	.19
Parents' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	.12**	.037	.14	. . .	. . .	. . .	.076*	.037	.093
Friends'/relatives' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	.073	.076	.044	. . .	. . .	. . .	.038	.073	.023
Cultural capital:												
Education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.22***	.030	.34	.092**	.032	.14
Mother's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.018	.031	.034	−.0078	.028	−.014
Father's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.08**	.030	.16	.044+	.026	.086
Vocabulary score	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.18***	.038	.22	.12***	.035	.14
Controls:												
Female	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.061	.068	−.036
Age	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.0095***	.0025	−.16
Intercept	1.41***	.12	. . .	1.0***	.12	. . .	−.16	.25	. . .	.17	.25	. . .
R^2		.132			.378			.242			.471	
N		380			400			381			362	

NOTE.— Income, savings, and debt are reported in units of $1,000. VIF values in model 4 ranged from 1.07 to 1.75.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

predictor in the full model was subjective financial well-being ($\beta = .12, p < .05$); neither income, savings, nor debt had significant independent effects on engagement in highbrow experiences once other factors were controlled. This pattern reinforces our core finding that noneconomic resources appear to primarily drive cultural engagement in highbrow activities, though the relative importance of cultural versus social capital appears culturally contingent. Figure 4 illustrates these standardized coefficients, facilitating a direct comparison of predictor strengths.

Incremental Contributions of Social and Cultural Capital (Hypothesis 1). As in study 1, hierarchical linear regressions showed that adding social and cultural capital variables improves the prediction of cultural engagement frequency beyond economic capital alone (Social $\Delta R^2 = .273$, $F = 42.50$, $p < .001$; Cultural $\Delta R^2 = .162$, $F = 20.25$, $p < .001$). These increments are larger in absolute terms than those observed in the British data, underscoring that in the US sample, financial resources by themselves were less important once other factors were considered.

Relative Importance of Different Forms of Capital (Hypothesis 1). Dominance analysis in study 2 revealed a distinct capital hierarchy compared to study 1, while confirming our core hypothesis. Social capital dominated in the United States (60.2% of explained variance), followed by cultural capital (26.7%) and economic capital (13.2%). This inverts the UK pattern, where cultural capital led (56.7%) over social capital (35.5%). The results highlight important cross-cultural variation—Americans seem to rely more on social networks while British participants depend more on cultural capital such as educational credentials—while consistently demonstrating that noneconomic resources are the

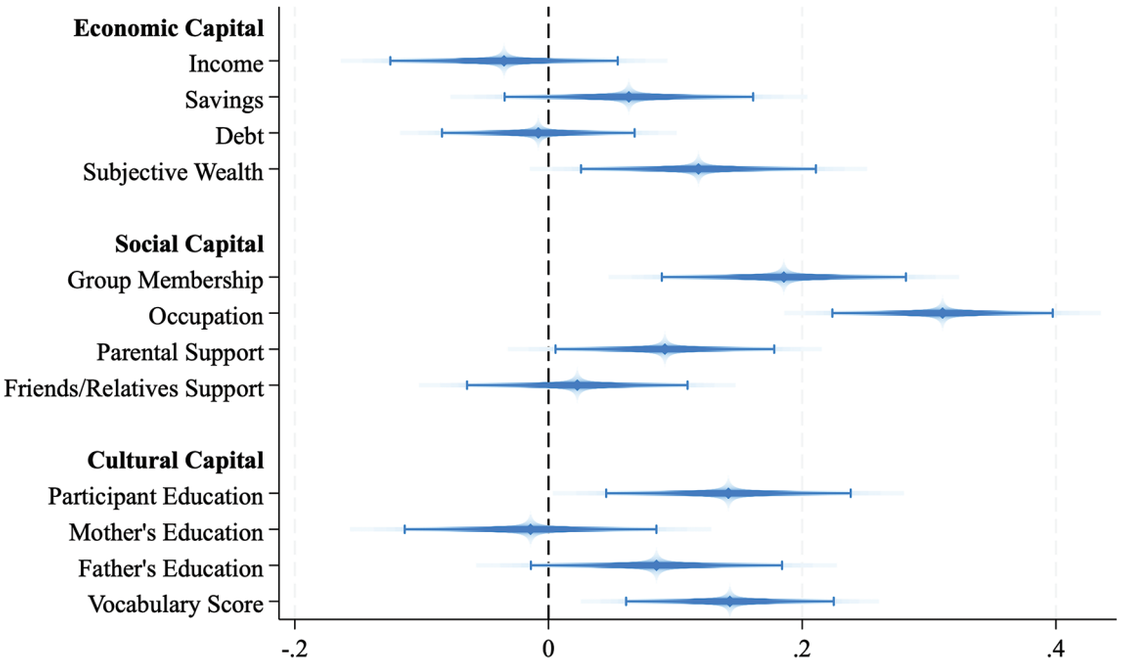

Figure 4. Standardized coefficients of variables predicting engagement in highbrow cultural experiences. The figure uses fully standardized coefficients, where both predictor and outcome variables are standardized, to aid direct comparison. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals, while the shaded areas depict the 99% confidence intervals for each coefficient estimate.

strongest predictors of engagement in highbrow cultural experiences in both contexts. Table 8 presents the full results.

Comparing Highbrow to Lowbrow Cultural Experiences (Hypothesis 3). To provide evidence for hypothesis 3, we compared the explanatory power of each capital form across cultural domains. Consistent with our hypothesis, both social and cultural capital showed substantially weaker associations with engagement in lowbrow activities compared to highbrow cultural experiences. Social capital's explanatory power decreased from 37.8% for highbrow to 23.1% for lowbrow experiences, while cultural capital showed an even

Table 8. Relative Contribution of Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital in Predicting Engagement in Highbrow Cultural Experiences

Type	Variable	Dominance statistic	SDS (% R^2)	Ranking
Social	Group memberships	.1444	.3243	1
Social	Occupation	.068	.1527	2
Cultural	Education	.0595	.1337	3
Economic	Subjective wealth	.0427	.0958	4
Social	Parents support	.0313	.0704	5
Cultural	Vocabulary score	.0292	.0655	6
Social	Friends'/relatives' support	.0242	.0544	7
Cultural	Father's education	.0202	.0453	8
Cultural	Mother's education	.01	.0224	9
Economic	Savings	.0091	.0204	10
Economic	Income	.0061	.0137	11
Economic	Debt	.0007	.0016	12

Table 9. Regression Models Predicting Engagement in Lowbrow Cultural Experiences from Economic, Social, and Cultural Capital

	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	b	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*	*b*	SE	*β*
Economic capital:												
Income	.00012+	.00007	.101	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.00003	.0001	.026
Savings	.00030+	.00017	−.106	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.00029+	.0002	−.107
Debt	−.0001	.00046	−.011	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.00021	.00042	−.023
Subjective wealth	.168***	.041	.239	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.063	.039	.091
Social capital:												
No. of Groups	. . .	. . .	. . .	.093***	.015	.320	. . .	. . .	. . .	.085***	.015	.295
Occupation	. . .	. . .	. . .	.110***	.022	.223	. . .	. . .	. . .	.119***	.029	.243
Parents' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	.093*	.040	.114	. . .	. . .	. . .	.076+	.042	.094
Friends' help	. . .	. . .	. . .	.017	.082	.011	. . .	. . .	. . .	−.019	.085	−.012
Cultural capital:												
Education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.079*	.032	.126	−.046	.037	−.073
Mother's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.032	.033	.061	.028	.032	.053
Father's education	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.042	.031	.084	.004	.030	.007
Vocabulary score	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	.161***	.041	.197	.109**	.039	.132
Controls:												
Female	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .
Age	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .	. . .
Intercept	2.673***	.121	. . .	2.336***	.132	. . .	1.654***	.268	. . .	1.721***	.277	. . .
R^2	.064			.231			.088			.258		
N	380			400			381			362		

NOTE.— Income, savings, and debt are reported in units of $1000. VIF values in model 4 ranged from 1.07 to 1.75.
+ $p < .01$.
* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.
*** $p < .001$.

larger difference, explaining 24.2% of highbrow variance but only 8.8% of lowbrow variance. Interestingly, economic capital also showed differences, explaining 13.2% of variance in engagement in highbrow activities versus 6.4% for lowbrow activities, although this pattern was not part of our hypothesized relationship. These results confirm that social and cultural resources operate differently across cultural domains, with highbrow activities drawing much more heavily on these noneconomic forms of capital (see table 9).

To directly test hypothesis 3, we conducted formal comparisons using seemingly unrelated regression with Wald tests. As hypothesized, both social capital ($\chi^2(1) = 11.78$, $p < .001$) and cultural capital ($\chi^2(1) = 19.02$, $p < .001$) demonstrated significantly stronger effects on engagement in highbrow than lowbrow cultural experiences, providing robust statistical support for hypothesis 3. While economic capital showed a slightly stronger association with engagement in lowbrow activities in study 1, it exhibited a stronger relationship with participation in highbrow experiences in study 2 ($\chi^2(1) = 10.72$, $p = .001$). Despite this variation, the central finding remains consistent across both studies: cultural and social capital exert substantially stronger effects on engagement in highbrow than lowbrow cultural experiences.

DISCUSSION

This research contributes to the consumer behavior literature by extending Bourdieu's (1984) framework to the domain of experiential consumption. We demonstrate that cultural and social capital–the knowledge, skills, and social connections that shape tastes– show stronger associations with highbrow cultural engagement than economic capital.

Across both the UK cohort and US samples, noneconomic resources consistently appear more strongly linked to the frequency of participation in highbrow cultural experiences than financial means. This pattern aligns with foundational theories suggesting that meaningful engagement with high culture requires specialized competencies and social reinforcement (DiMaggio 1982; Bourdieu 1984).

Our work distinguishes between mere access to highbrow culture and sustained engagement with it. While economic capital relates to the ability to purchase tickets to the opera or art museum, our data suggest that cultural knowledge and social networks show stronger associations with regular participation and genuine appreciation. This insight extends research on taste formation by revealing that experiential consumption connects more strongly with accumulated sociocultural resources than with purchasing power. By quantifying the relative contributions of Bourdieu's three forms of capital across different cultural contexts, we provide robust evidence that the pathways to highbrow cultural experiences are primarily noneconomic.

We identify important substitutive relationships between different forms of capital, indicating that individuals can partially compensate for weaknesses in one area by leveraging strengths in others. This compensatory dynamic creates multiple viable pathways to cultural engagement based on an individual's unique resource configuration. Study 1's large-scale data set most clearly demonstrated this substitutability. Future research could further explore these compensatory mechanisms through larger samples or experimental manipulations to establish the specific conditions under which one form of capital can effectively offset deficiencies in another.

Our analysis further highlights fundamental differences between highbrow and lowbrow cultural consumption. Lowbrow experiences, including movie-going, casual dining, and theme park visits, present fewer barriers to participation as they are designed for broad accessibility and immediate enjoyment, requiring no specialized knowledge or extensive social connections. While economic factors influence engagement across both domains, cultural and social capital play a significantly diminished role in predicting engagement with lowbrow cultural experiences.

Cross-Study Differences and Their Implications

The divergent patterns observed across our two studies—where cultural capital was the strongest predictor of highbrow engagement in the United Kingdom, while social capital led in the United States—likely reflect both methodological and sociocultural differences between the samples.

From a methodological standpoint, the samples differed in meaningful ways. Study 1 drew from a single birth cohort (age 42 in 2012), providing a demographically uniform population with relatively broad educational variance. In contrast, study 2 included a wider age range ($M = 37.6$, $SD = 12.3$) and a more highly educated sample—64.5% of participants had completed college, compared to 32.3% in the UK cohort. This compression of educational variance in the US sample (a known feature of online panels like Prolific; Goodman, Cryder, and Cheema 2013) may have reduced the predictive power of education, a key component of cultural capital. Additionally, measurement approaches varied across studies: Study 1 used an objective vocabulary test, whereas study 2 relied on self-reported verbal ability, which may have introduced noise or conflated cultural with social self-perceptions, potentially inflating the role of social capital.

Beyond these design differences, cultural context likely shaped the results. The UK's historically stratified class system places a strong emphasis on cultural knowledge and educational credentials as markers of status and belonging (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). This context reinforces the salience of cultural capital in shaping highbrow engagement. By contrast, American culture places greater value on social mobility and relational networks (Erickson 1996; Putnam 2001), making social capital—such as occupational status and group memberships—a more powerful determinant of participation in highbrow cultural domains. Future work should continue to explore how societal norms and measurement choices influence the observed structure of capital effects across different populations.

Societal and Managerial Implications

Our work offers several insights that can inform efforts to promote greater participation in cultural experiences, with important implications for cultural policy, arts management, and targeted interventions. First, our findings suggest that efforts to broaden cultural engagement should move beyond a narrow focus on economic resources and pay greater attention to the cultural and social factors that shape individuals' preferences and practices. Policymakers and arts managers should develop initiatives that build cultural capital from an early age (e.g., incorporating fine arts education in schools and community centers) and leverage social networks to encourage participation (Jeannotte 2003). By recognizing the importance of cultural knowledge and social connections in shaping engagement, such efforts can better address the nonfinancial barriers to participation and foster more inclusive cultural environments. In addition to increasing attendance,

these initiatives may enrich individuals' lives in a broader sense, consistent with prior work suggesting that engaging with the arts can imbue life with greater meaning and psychological richness (Oishi et al. 2019). In other words, supporting people in developing cultural and social capital not only opens doors to highbrow experiences but can also contribute to personal well-being by making life more intellectually and emotionally rewarding.

Furthermore, our work has important implications for segmentation and targeting purposes in arts marketing (Huntington 2007). When segmenting consumers for highbrow cultural experiences, marketers should focus more on cultural and social factors and less on economic background. Specifically, knowing that variables such as education, vocabulary, occupation, and group membership are fundamental helps inform and calibrate segmentation and targeting models. This approach can help arts organizations identify and target potential patrons who may have traditionally been overlooked, given a narrow focus on economic resources, thereby broadening their audience and promoting greater inclusion (Kolb 2001).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While this research highlights the central role of cultural and social capital in shaping highbrow cultural engagement, several limitations point to fruitful avenues for future work. One limitation concerns the focus on highbrow cultural experiences, which may not fully capture the breadth of cultural participation. While we included lowbrow activities in our analysis, future research could explore the phenomenon of cultural *omnivorousness*, wherein individuals with high cultural capital engage in a diverse range of cultural experiences, spanning both highbrow and lowbrow genres (Peterson and Kern 1996; Johnston and Baumann 2007). Similarly, research in consumer behavior shows that high-status consumers often mix and match highbrow and lowbrow signals (Bellezza and Berger 2020; Bellezza 2023). Examining how 2omnivorousness manifests across different societies and its implications for cultural hierarchies could provide a richer understanding of cultural capital's role.

Our study examines engagement in highbrow cultural experiences primarily through frequency measures, yet this captures just one dimension of experiential consumption. Future research should investigate how different forms of capital shape not only attendance but also experiential quality and enjoyment. Key questions include whether cultural capital enhances aesthetic pleasure and meaning-making, how social capital enriches emotional engagement through shared appreciation, and whether economic resources influence subjective value beyond access. Measuring aesthetic pleasure, emotional resonance, and perceived meaning could reveal cultural capital's dual function—initially enabling participation through knowledge, then deepening enjoyment through sophisticated understanding. This expanded investigation would complement our current findings while potentially revealing new mechanisms through which different forms of capital influence both the frequency and enjoyment of cultural experiences.

It is also important to recognize that our indicators for cultural, social, and economic capital, while grounded in prior research, are not perfectly orthogonal. For instance, occupational status was used as part of social capital due to its reflection of one's social reach, but it also aligns with educational attainment (cultural capital) and income (economic capital). We took care in our design to use multiple indicators and a second study to validate that our core findings are not driven by a particular measure. We also found no concerning multicollinearity (all VIF < 2). The replication of results in study 2 suggests that our conclusions about the roles of the different forms of capital are robust. Nonetheless, future work could explore alternative measures (such as direct network mapping for social capital or breadth of cultural knowledge for cultural capital) to further disentangle these constructs.

Finally, while our data offer significant advantages, our findings remain correlational, limiting our ability to draw causal inferences. It is unclear whether cultural capital drives engagement in highbrow cultural experiences, whether a third variable influences both, or whether the causal direction could even be reversed in some cases. Although individuals engaging in highbrow cultural activities cannot alter their parents' level of education, such participation may inspire them to pursue higher education themselves, thereby enhancing their cultural capital. Future research could address these issues by employing experimental designs to manipulate the three forms of capital directly or using within-subject longitudinal methods to track how changes in capital influence cultural engagement over time.

Conclusion

Our research provides empirical support for the enduring relevance of Bourdieu's framework in contemporary highbrow cultural experiences. By demonstrating the stronger associations of cultural and social capital over economic resources, revealing substitutive relationships between capital forms, and identifying boundary conditions in lowbrow

cultural activities, we advance understanding of how different resources shape experiential consumption patterns. These findings challenge purely economic explanations of cultural participation and highlight the persistent role of knowledge and social connections in structuring access to valued cultural experiences.

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