

Cultural Omnivores' Consumption: Strategic and Inclusively Exclusive

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Abstract

This study explores cultural dispositions and consumption practices of cultural omnivores whose tastes align with those of high-status people in the U.S. Peterson and colleagues first identified the shift in status markers from snobbish and highbrow tastes to eclectic and omnivorous ones. Our findings suggest that cultural omnivores are characterized by two traits: superior self-perception in taste and cultural tolerance. These traits indicate that their prestige is sustained by their cultural styles, which are simultaneously broad and exclusive. Cultural omnivores also tend to engage in multifaceted experiences in food consumption and appearance-related goods (i.e., clothing), as well as Internet usage. We believe that the multiplicity observed in the current study reflects the highly strategic nature of the everyday consumption practices of cultural omnivores. We conclude that the qualities of elite consumers (i.e., cultural capital) are translated into omnivorous cultural consumption and a strategic and practical type of everyday consumption. The findings of this study have implications for marketing to high-status consumer segments characterized by a strong buying power and opinion leadership.

Keywords: omnivorous taste, cultural consumption, consumer

1. Introduction

Research on cultural omnivorousness has adopted the Weberian notion of stratification, particularly of status (Note 1). Status is based on the principles of their consumption of goods as represented by “special styles of life” (Weber, 1946, p. 193). Weber (1946) argues that there is only a loose fit between social class and status, and that the criteria of status honor have varied from society to society and over time within a society. Status consumption involves a tendency to value status and to consume goods and services that provide status to the individual (O’Cass & McEwen, 2004, p. 34). In other words, status consumption is grounded on two premises: consumption objects signal status and people strive for status through consumption practices. Ever since Veblen’s (1899) pioneering work, research on status consumption has examined two aspects: 1) consumers’ emotions and behaviors are perpetuated by a stratified social system by investigating how consumption process denotes one’s position in the social space; and 2) consumption reproduces social arrangements by demonstrating consumption as part of the construction of social reality (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Status consumption should not be confused with materialism or conspicuous consumption. Material value puts emphasis on the importance of material possessions (Richins, 2004) and conspicuous consumption underlines display of wealth through consumption of luxurious products and services (Trigg, 2001). Status-seeking has been understood as materialistic because of status signaling power of particular product categories. These product categories are easily noticeable and the products are prohibitively expensive for all but a small group of people. Therefore, conspicuity is understood as a characteristic of status consumption, reflecting the legacy of Veblen (1899). However, recent literature suggests the conspicuity is not always a characteristic of status consumption. Recent cultural sociology literature reveals that in cultural consumption domain the conspicuity has decreased; exclusive affinity for so-called highbrow cultural genres by high-status individuals declined and pursuit of cultural variety emerges as new status marker (Peterson, 1997b). In product consumption domain, consumers in higher income bracket prefer luxury products of which the brand is not so prominent and products with less prominent brand marking are, in fact, found to be more expensive (Han, Nunes, & Drèze, 2010).

In his historical review of status markers in America, Peterson (1997b) discusses three phases in the evolution of rules of status honor (i.e., status marker). Until the mid-nineteenth century, social status in America was signaled by kin, community, and personal honor-based indicators. The emphasis moved on to associational and formal behavior-based status marker such as affiliation (e.g., *Social Register*) and rules of etiquette in mid 1850s. Up to this point, status in the U.S. was based on social, moral, and economic capital (Peterson, 1997a). In the final quarter of the nineteenth century, however, status began to be marked by taste in culture. Taste, at that time, refers to dispositions based on esoteric knowledge and skills (Peterson, 1997a). The appropriation of art (e.g., classical music, poetry, literature, paintings, and plays) as a status marker is a result of a class-based social movement (Harris, 1966). Classifying cultural taste as high-, mid-, and lowbrow began at that time. Peterson (1997b) maintains that notion of the *highbrow* was created as a moral force for good in the sense that the highbrow arts embody the highest value such as the good or beauty. At the same time, popular culture was stigmatized as lowbrow, and middlebrow people were conceptualized as those in the middle, those who follow the guidance of professionals or experts. The classifying project indicates that culture and consumption serve as leverage in reflecting and sustaining the social system. Taste, expression of consumption preferences and lifestyle began to draw symbolic boundaries, leading both to social and cultural inclusion and exclusion (Elchardus & Siongers, 2007). Peterson's (1997b) review emphasizes that since then, this symbolic boundary has been drawn in terms of tastes and practices. Taste for highbrow culture was the beginning of cultural value-based status markers to come.

Bourdieu's seminal work, *Distinction* (1984), provided a point of departure for later researchers, unraveling the relationship between taste and social stratification (Peterson, 2005). Bourdieu's cultural capital provides conceptual ground for explaining how one's taste in culture can be socially conditioned. Cultural capital consists of the cultural resources that are acquired through socialization, existing in particularized forms such as cultural knowledge and skills, linguistic competence, mode of thought, or world view (Allen & Anderson, 1994; Bourdieu, 1984). He emphasized the unreflective acquisition of cultural capital and taste by formulating the concept of *habitus*. *Habitus* is a set of dispositions that generate individual practices and perceptions in a specific situation in which the individual is positioned. He believes that patterns and dispositions of cultural consumption are internalized and direct individual choices that correspond to their socioeconomic conditions (Bourdieu, 1989). Bourdieu's theory explains the probability of having similar behaviors and lifestyles among people with similar life experiences. Taste is thus cultivated through socialization but is taken for granted as innate.

Recent studies find what constitutes status honor continually changes over time as Weber predicted. Taste for highbrow culture consolidated status distinction, at least until the first half of the twentieth century in America (DiMaggio & Useem, 1978). Peterson and colleagues' discovery of omnivorous taste made a breakthrough in the cultural consumption literature and provided the most persuasive concept for postmodern society. They found that the musical tastes of high-status people were trending steadily toward the omnivorous. They interpreted this trend as shift in status markers from snobbish and highbrow tastes to eclectic and omnivorous ones (Peterson and Kern 1996; Peterson and Simkus 1992).

Omnivorous taste consists of the appreciation of cultural genres across conventional hierarchical distinctions, low-brow as well as high-brow. The recent literature has embraced omnivorous taste as the currency of the elitist consumption style (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005; Coulangeon & Lemel, 2007; Warde, Martens, & Olsen, 1999; Warde, Wright, & Gayo-Cal, 2007). Research efforts in cultural sociology have generally been devoted to the confirmation of omnivorous consumption patterns (López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005; van Rees, Vermunt, & Verboord, 1999). Since the first proposal, researchers have made efforts to reveal omnivorous cultural tastes in the U.S. (Alderson, Junisbai, & Heacock, 2007; see Eijck, 2000), and cultural omnivores have also been confirmed by studies in France, England, Spain, Israel, and Russia (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005; Coulangeon & Lemel, 2007; Katz-Gerro, Raz, & Yaish, 2009; Zavisca, 2005).

Although these studies illustrate that the emergence of omnivorous taste has taken places across all status levels, this trend is most pronounced in the high status segment. Our study explains how this disposition is manifested outside the context of cultural consumption. To date, only a limited amount of research has examined characteristics of this consumer segment (e.g., Warde et al., 2007). Our study investigates cultural omnivores, analyzing data from a sample representative of the U.S. population, in order to understand characteristics of this consumer group. The first purpose of our study is to investigate the social orientations of cultural omnivores by the integration of a sociological frame into consumer behavior research. The secondary purpose of this study is to investigate how everyday consumption manifests the nature of cultural omnivores. We believe cultural omnivores exercise multi-functional and multifaceted consumption and that this orientation relates to strategic and competent practices in other consumption field. As previously stated by Belk (2005), the insights of

consumer sociology have been applied to consumer behavior research only to a limited degree. By adopting a sociological perspective, we identify the implications of the cultural omnivores for other consumption practices and to go beyond mere profiling cultural omnivores.

1.1 Who Are the Cultural Omnivores?

Most researchers have conducted statistical analysis such as latent class analysis, detecting cultural consumption groups on the basis of their behaviors or preferences (i.e., frequency of consumption and breadth of genre). These studies conclude that omnivorous consumption is a high-status consumption style, because members of this cluster are likely to be statistically different in variables that are known to determine status including education, occupation, ethnicity, or gender (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Peterson & Simkus, 1992; López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005). Many studies in this research stream employed secondary analysis of data with representative samples (e.g., General Social Survey). Clusters identified to date vary by number and range of genres measured (e.g., musical genres, performance arts, or a wide range of leisure genres), measurements (i.e., frequency, whether to participate, or likes and dislikes), data collection method, time frame, or countries. Studies have identified from three to six clusters: inactive, those who minimally participate, lowbrow univore, highbrow univore, true omnivore, lowbrow or quasi omnivore. Despite the variance in results, omnivores who indisputably emerge in most studies consume both highbrow (e.g., art museum, classic music or opera) and lowbrow genres (e.g., pop music performance or art fair).

Peterson and Kern (1996) view omnivorous taste as antithetical to snobbishness, signifying the new elitism as “openness to appreciating everything” (p. 904). Holt (1997) also maintains that broad-ranging taste is a potent form of embodied cultural capital, because parochial attitudes and disdain for the tastes of others are considered vulgar in the current society. This leads to a question as to whether the openness of omnivores corresponds to a postmodern viewpoint of the erosion of class- or status-based consumption (Featherstone, 1991). That is, can the openness to genres associated with lower societal strata be understood as an effacement of taste judgments? Can cultural omnivores then be truly said to have egalitarian tastes? Or do cultural omnivores still appraise taste in a hierarchical manner?

To answer the aforementioned questions, we examine the self-assessment of taste of cultural omnivores. We do not agree that the trend toward omnivorous taste reflects the erosion of status consumption. Bryson (1996) find that even culturally tolerant people tend to dislike specific music genres that are enjoyed by people with less education. Bryson’s finding suggests that cultural omnivores do not indiscriminately embrace all genres, although breadth and tolerance in cultural consumption may be the new basis of social exclusion. We contend that a cultural omnivore’s assessment of his or her own taste will reflect his or her social standing. Cultural omnivores will tend to feel confident of their own judgments, and will maintain a cultured and sophisticated self-image.

Cosmopolitanism is appreciated as an intellectual characteristic, particularly in the postcolonial discourse of the global marketplace (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Cosmopolitan orientation and omnivorous taste could be considered synonymous, in that they both signify cultural tolerance. In fact, these two terms denote two conceptually distinct types of openness. Holt (1998) theorizes cosmopolitanism as an openness to exotic consumption experiences, reporting that people with high levels of cultural capital construct their specific reference groups on a national or international basis, whereas people with less cultural capital like to find comfort in objects with which they are familiar or with local culture. Cosmopolitan orientation and omnivorous taste are similar in that both include a stance in favor of the coexistence of plural cultures in the individual experience and value the maintenance of diverse aesthetic frames; however, cosmopolitanism is an orientation toward engaging with *the other* that exists outside the culture of *the self*. Cosmopolitanism refers to a skillful participation in other cultures without becoming a part of those cultures; omnivorous taste refers to openness to lower socioeconomic bracket cultures that are not necessarily viewed as exotic within the social system (Hannerz, 1990). Therefore, we hypothesize that cultural omnivores will hold those two orientations as distinct features of status culture. The following hypotheses include orientations of cultural omnivores—namely, a hierarchical notion of taste and horizontal thinking of cosmopolitan orientation; thus:

H1: Cultural omnivores (i.e., those whose tastes are more omnivorous) have a greater self-perception of superiority in taste than those whose tastes are less omnivorous.

H2: Cultural omnivores have more cosmopolitan orientation than those whose tastes are less omnivorous.

1.2 How Do Omnivores Consume? Beyond Cultural Repertoire

The trend of cultural omnivorousness suggests that social boundaries that were once dependent on the cultural

genre consumed are now determined by the consumer's disposition. Omnivores' dispositions are different from traditional highbrow univorous taste in two regards: (1) a broad cultural repertoire; and (2) the ability to transform and elevate consumption experience. These two aspects correspond to the notions of scale and synthesis, according to Douglas and Isherwood (1979). Firstly, *the scale of genres* that omnivores enjoy has increased significantly. Highbrow taste was pursued due to its scarcity; the scarcity of non-material resources (i.e., ability to consume properly) replaced the scarcity of material resources (i.e., material wealth). The traditional classification of highbrow and lowbrow genres was based on the idea that highbrow genres required the possession of proper aesthetic aptitude and reflective judgment, whereas lowbrow genres were characterized by their sensuous qualities and entertainment value. Lately the non-materialistic conspicuity of highbrow taste has been replaced by a class of taste that is even more difficult to acquire. Omnivorous taste demands the mastery of a range of rules and the ability to enjoy a broad range of characteristics. For example, an omnivore may not only reflect favorably on Picasso's style and significance in the Cubist movement, but also simultaneously hold a high regard for the distinctive style and progressive themes of Miyazaki's anime. Studies suggest that high-status omnivores continue to patronize so-called highbrow genres (Holbrook, Weiss, & Habich, 2002; Peterson & Kern, 1996), which means that cultural omnivores have essentially expanded the breadth of valued genres.

Secondly, cultural omnivores are capable of *synthesizing* cultural experiences and deriving profound meanings from sources that were once held to be mundane, such as (again) Miyazaki's anime or Norman Rockwell's illustrations. This synthesis refers to the ability to assemble pieces of information and to integrate them into a coherent whole. In other words, synthesis is a capacity of integration and interrelation of cultural symbols in order to construct meanings and identities (López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005). The consumption experiences of cultural omnivores are not only diverse but also multi-dimensional, regardless of genre, as a result of this synthesis and integration.

In the current study, we shift the field of interest to everyday consumption practices. Particularly in the field of everyday consumption, the nature of experience depends on the skills and knowledge of individual consumers (Caldwell & Woodside, 2003; Holt, 1998). Holt (1997), therefore, emphasized the importance of investigating embodied forms of taste (i.e., meaning and value embodied by an individual through his or her choices). We argue that these two characteristics of cultural omnivores—scale and synthesis—are manifested as multiplicity in the experiences of everyday consumption practices in two ways: (1) a range of utility and (2) diverse experiential values, respectively. A consumption object can be multi-functional to cultural omnivores. As they quickly adapt to the differing rules and merits of a variety of cultural genres, they adapt to a multiplicity of utilities and merits of commodities. While the value of food was once found in nutrition or taste, cultural omnivores regard food as an object of self-control in relation to body image, cultural repertoire, or expressions of environmental consciousness. A competent consumer maximizes the satisfaction gained from the experiences by the multi-functional use of a commodity. Like food or clothing, the Internet has become a modern necessity which requires training and skill. Proficient users use the Internet effectively, not simply for emailing or reading newspapers but also for self-publishing, investments, smart shopping practice, and health care. This proficiency derives from a broad experiential base and adaptability to changes.

In addition, this multiplicity expands to qualitative differences by synthesizing experiences: diversifying meanings and values. As cultural elites discover significant meanings as well as entertainment value in popular culture, we hypothesize that cultural omnivores make aesthetic judgments, find hedonic values and develop diverse meanings out of commodity consumption in addition to utilitarian values. For example, clothing can protect against external conditions such as temperature, but it is also a means of self-expression, a tool for social advancement, or a signifier of conformity to social norms. Therefore, we hypothesize the relationship between omnivorousness and multiplicity in everyday consumption as follows:

H3a: Cultural omnivores (i.e., those whose tastes are more omnivorous) display greater multiplicity in food consumption than those whose tastes are less omnivorous.

H3b: Cultural omnivores have a more multifaceted appearance management tendency than those whose tastes are less omnivorous.

H3c: Cultural omnivores use the Internet for a greater range of activities than those whose tastes are less omnivorous.

2. Method

2.1 Data

The DDB Needham Life Style Study data collected by DDB, an international marketing communication firm, was used in this study. Several previous studies in a variety of research disciplines have used the DDB Life Style Survey data: Shrum, McCarty, and Lowrey (1995) in advertising, Kwon and Kwon (2007) and Lastovicka, Bettencourt, Hughner, and Kuntze (1999) in consumer behavior, Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2004) in communication, and Shah, Friedman, and Kruglanski (2002) in psychology. The survey was mailed to adult male and female members of the Market Facts' Consumer Mail Panel. The members were selected using an annual standing-panel quota sample similar to the U.S. adult population in terms of age, gender, income, geography, and other appropriate demographics. The response rate was 65%, with 3,345 responses. The dataset included a wide range of questions addressing attitudes, interests, opinions, activities, consumption, and media use.

2.2 Analysis

Multivariate analysis of covariate (MANCOVA) was used to test the hypotheses and research questions proposed herein.

2.2.1 Independent Variable

Two cultural groups were identified, omnivores and univores, based on their participations in eight cultural activities, which included a variety of activities as in the previous study of Peterson and Kern (1996). Going to "an art gallery or museum" and "a classical concert" were considered highbrow cultural activities; going to "a pop or rock concert," "a country music concert," "the movies," "a zoo," "a theme park," "a fair or festival," and "a college or professional sporting event" were considered lowbrow activities. Those who participated in four to six activities, two of which were highbrow were classified as omnivores. In contrast, univores were those who participated in four to six activities, all of which were lowbrow. This classification allows us to contrast the two groups: the number of activities in which each group participates was similar but the composition of the activities varied by brow level. Among the 3,345 respondents, 379 were identified as either omnivore or univore. After excluding missing responses, we analyzed 274 responses from 167 omnivores and 107 univores.

2.2.2 Dependent Variable

Self-perception of superiority in taste was measured by three items assessed on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from "I definitely disagree" to "I definitely agree": "I have much better taste than most people," "I have more stylish clothes than most of my friends," and "people recognize that I buy only the best." The Cronbach's coefficient alpha for the three items was 0.7. A Cronbach's alpha score of 0.6 was utilized as a guideline to assess satisfactory reliability for exploratory purposes of the research, such as the use of secondary data as suggested by Bagozzi and Yi (1988) and Hair (1998). The global score for self-perception of taste was calculated by summing the scores of responses to the three questions.

Cosmopolitan orientation was measured by four items: "I like to visit places that are totally different from my home," "I am interested in the cultures of other countries," "I love to eat different foods with interesting flavors," and "I enjoy being able to shop for food, fashion, and home decoration designs that are influenced by different cultures." The scores for the four items were assessed on a six-point Likert scale, ranging from "I definitely disagree" to "I definitely agree," were then summed. The Cronbach's coefficient alpha of the four items was .687.

Multiplicity in food consumption was examined for three tendencies: connoisseurship, weight watching, and monitoring nutritional value. Items used to measure connoisseurship included, "I am interested in spices and seasonings," "I love to eat different foods with interesting flavors," and "I enjoy learning about wines," all of which yielded a Cronbach's coefficient alpha of .615. Watching weight was assessed by the sum of three items: "I try to avoid foods that are high in fat," "I am careful about what I eat in order to keep my weight under control," and "I use a lot of low calorie or calorie-reduced products" (Cronbach's coefficient alpha = .733). Scores for monitoring nutritional values were measured by the following items: "I try to avoid foods that are high in cholesterol," "I try to avoid foods with a high salt content," "I make a special effort to get enough fiber (bran) in my diet," "I am concerned about getting enough calcium in my diet," "nutritional information on food labels determines which products and brands I buy," "I try to select foods that are fortified with vitamins and minerals" (Cronbach's alpha = .808). All of the food consumption items were anchored at a 6-point scale, ranging from "I definitely disagree" to "I definitely agree".

A tendency toward multifaceted appearance management was measured by six items. Appearance management is a self-identification process of creating, maintaining, or enhancing one's appearance in order to express the

self and communicate (Kaiser, 1997); multifaceted appearance management is the development of multidimensional meanings of appearance consumption. The six items included “I work at trying to maintain a youthful appearance,” “the clothes I wear reflect who I am as a person,” “I want to look a little different from others,” “I enjoy getting dressed up,” “dressing well is an important part of my life,” and “an attractive appearance is crucial for career success.” Each of the six items represents purposeful aspects of dressing practices, including exhibiting a youthful look, expressing oneself, pursuing uniqueness, experiencing enjoyment, indicating involvement, and serving instrumental purposes. The global score was calculated by summing scores of responses to the six questions assessed on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from “I definitely disagree” to “I definitely agree” (Cronbach’s coefficient alpha = .698).

Multiplicity in Internet use was assessed in four ways: communication, information seeking, purchase, and entertainment. The following items were summed for each type of usage. Use for communication included “sent e-mail on the internet,” “shared photos with friends and family on the Internet,” and “sent an on-line greeting card on the Internet.” Use for information seeking included “searched for information about companies or products on the Internet,” “searched for health or medical information on the Internet,” “checked local or national news on the Internet,” “subscribed to an on-line newsletter on the Internet,” “searched for a job on the Internet,” “used an Internet yellow pages on the Internet,” and “searched for investment information on the Internet.” Use for purchase included “made travel reservations on the Internet,” “purchased home furnishings on the Internet,” and “purchased groceries on the Internet.” Use for entertainment included “explored an interest or hobby on the Internet,” “played a game with other users on the Internet,” “listened to music on the Internet,” and “downloaded music on the Internet.” Respondents were asked to indicate on a 7-point scale how often they have engaged in each cultural activity over the past 12 months (e.g., 1-4 times, 5-8 times). The responses were re-coded as: 0 for “None in past year”; 2.5 for “1-4 times”; 6.5 for “5-8 times”; 10 for “9-11 times”; 18 for “12-24 times”; 38 for “25-51 times”; 52 for “52+ times.” The re-coded scores were summed for each type of Internet use.

3. Results

A MANCOVA was conducted to test Hypothesis 1 through Hypothesis 3 with one independent variable, cultural omnivorousness with omnivores and univores and six dependent variables. The dependent variables included the self-perception of superiority in taste, cosmopolitan taste, food consumption (connoisseurship, watching weight, nutrition monitoring), appearance management, and Internet usage (communication, information-seeking, purchase, and entertainment). Two additional covariates, including income and age, were included to control for their potential effects. The analysis revealed a significant multivariate effect for omnivorousness ($F(10, 261) = 8.263, p < .001$) and significant covariate effects for income and age ($F(10, 261) = 6.519, 13.337, p < .001$ for both). We subsequently examined the univariate effects for each dependent variable for hypothesis testing.

Hypothesis 1 was supported, indicating a difference between omnivores and univores in the self-perception of superiority in taste. Cultural omnivores appear to have a higher self-perception of superiority in taste ($M_{\text{univores}} = 8.159, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 10.479$) ($F(1, 270) = 35.460, p < .001$).

Supporting results were also found for Hypothesis 2. It was revealed that cultural omnivores have a more cosmopolitan orientation ($M_{\text{univores}} = 15.455, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 18.672$) ($F(1, 270) = 43.126, p < .001$).

Overall, supporting evidence was found for Hypotheses 3a, 3b, and 3c. Positive relationships between cultural omnivorousness and multiplicity in food consumption, appearance management, and Internet usage were revealed. Omnivores deemed to be higher on the tendencies of connoisseurship ($M_{\text{univores}} = 11.006, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 13.301$) ($F(1, 270) = 28.911, p < .001$), watching weight ($M_{\text{univores}} = 10.204, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 11.923$) ($F(1, 270) = 16.997, p < .001$), and monitoring nutritional value ($M_{\text{univores}} = 21.230, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 23.230$) ($F(1, 270) = 7.794, p = .006$) in food consumption; the tendency of multifaceted appearance management ($M_{\text{univores}} = 22.504, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 24.791$) ($F(1, 270) = 12.016, p = .001$); and the use of the Internet as a information source ($M_{\text{univores}} = 53.518, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 71.665$) ($F(1, 270) = 6.501, p = .011$), for purchase ($M_{\text{univores}} = 4.527, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 12.057$) ($F(1, 270) = 12.076, p = .001$), and for entertainment ($M_{\text{univores}} = 23.353, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 35.268$) ($F(1, 270) = 6.323, p = .013$). Omnivores appear to use the Internet for communication more than univores ($M_{\text{univores}} = 47.147, M_{\text{omnivores}} = 52.636$), but the mean difference was not statistically significant ($F(1, 270) = 2.446, p = .119$).

4. Discussion

4.1 Cultivated Ambivalence of Cultural Omnivores

Previously, we addressed the question of whether the emergence of cultural omnivores suggests the dissolution of class-based distinctions in cultural tastes, or whether omnivorous taste was a new status marker that replaced

the old one—namely, the cultural elites' exclusive taste for highbrow culture. Interestingly, cultural omnivores appear to be characterized by two traits, which we view as ambivalent: superior self-perception in taste and a heightened tolerance of differences. They are open to exotic cultures, which reflect egalitarian recognition of cultural differences. Nonetheless, cultural omnivores also harbor the self-perception that their tastes are superior to the tastes of others, which reflects hierarchical understanding of consumption styles. Theoretically, those who truly embrace different aesthetic frameworks or ideas may well treat all tastes equally, but cultural omnivores both put strong stock in individual differences and assigned hierarchical judgments to individual choices; this is, in fact, the very nature of the newly emerging cultural elite group.

This ambivalence is the hallmark of the high-status consumer segment—"a carefully cultivated symbol." The "carefully cultivated symbol" is the phrase Bryson uses to describe the selective cultural variety of high-status groups who evidence disdain for low-status genres (1996, p. 887). A similar irony was outlined in the study of Jackman and Muha (1984). They find that the abstract beliefs of highly educated people concerning racial equality are not accompanied by attitudes regarding concrete actions. This inconsistency, which has been reported in many empirical studies (including ours), is grounded in the social nature of status symbols. Essentially, cultural elites separate the cultures of the lower brackets from the people who embody those cultures, recognizing only the cultures—in this way, cultural omnivores may appropriate and enjoy a variety of cultural genres without actually becoming part of those cultures. DiMaggio (1996) explains that cultural capital (i.e., a resource for social advancement) and cosmopolitan/liberal worldviews are mutually supportive at the individual level, but that at the societal level, tensions may exist between the strategic aspects (i.e., creating and maintaining social distinction) and expressive aspects (i.e., integrating different cultures and classes). We believe that the findings of our study reflect the ambivalence embedded in Euro-American high culture: people are encouraged to be inclusive, tolerant and open-minded, and simultaneously be a member of an exclusive society, with the attendant superior self-image.

4.2 Practical Sense in Everyday Consumption Practices

The results of our study demonstrate that cultural omnivores tend to engage in multifaceted experiences in food consumption and appearance-related goods, as well as Internet usage. We believe that the multiplicity observed in the current study reflects the highly strategic nature of the everyday consumption practices of cultural omnivores. This multifaceted tendency in everyday consumption, as described in our study, is also consistent with Bourdieu's analogy of a good player. Using the metaphor of an athlete, Bourdieu explains that what governs actual behaviors is strategy, not rules (quoted in Lamaison, 1986, p.112-115). Strategy is the product of a practical sense of a game, and aims for optimal outcomes. Bourdieu implies that every player in a social game develops a personal feel for the game. A good player takes into account the entire set of relevant properties, and has a sense of the necessity and the logic of the game. Culturally competent consumers develop a practical sense of utilizing versatile functions and diversifying experiential values, carefully weighing the consequences of their choice, and attempting to maximize satisfaction with the available opportunities and resources. This strategic thinking has also been noted in cultural elites, in their use of credit cards as facilitators of personal financial management (Bernthal, Crockett, & Rose, 2005).

Another strategic facet of omnivores relates to identity development. Everyday consumption is a major field wherein identity construction and the integration of multiple selves can occur. Commodities are indispensable in the construction and presentation of the self. Cultural elites actively construct their identities and meanings through the consumption of commodities (Holt 1998). Consumption skills are indisputably important life skills in modern society, where meanings are fluid and consumers are bombarded with commodities. We view meaning construction as a component of the consumption skill set. Therefore, cultural omnivores, who are capable of using a variety of experiences and making sense of the experiences, become adept at identity construction and self-presentation. DiMaggio (1996) attributes openness to variety to a modernist idea of context-specific self-presentation. Individuals develop multiple selves that contextually reflect their roles, social positions, interpersonal relationships, and more.

4.3 Conclusions and Implications

Our study revealed an interesting aspect of the social consciousness of omnivores: culturally tolerant people do, in fact, perceive taste hierarchically. We conclude this orientation as *exclusively inclusive nature* of educated tolerance in cultural issues. Omnivores' consumption styles and their self-perception of superior taste indicate that their prestige is sustained by their cultural styles, which are simultaneously broad and exclusive.

High-status individuals operate strategically in everyday consumption domains. The relationship between variety in cultural consumption and multiplicity in everyday consumption relates to what Holt (1997) referred to as an

abstracted form of cultural capital. Such cultural capital consists of a set of generic transposable qualities that shape the thoughts, behaviors, and habits of consumers. Holt (1997) maintains that these universal and abstracted qualities are manifested in many types of field-specific cultural capital. We conclude that the universal qualities of elite consumers are transposed to taste for many different genres and a strategic and practical sense in everyday consumption. This strategic and practical sense includes the ability to utilize commodities efficiently, to maximize the value derived from consumption, and to thereby enrich everyday consumption experiences. Omnivores do not engage in diverse cultural genres simply in accordance with their status, but they actively consume diverse objects and skillfully enjoy multifaceted values of the objects.

The findings of this study have implications for marketing to high-status consumer segments characterized by a strong buying power and opinion leadership in various consumption domains. Marketing communication should be tuned to both appreciation for cultural diversity and confidence in taste (i.e., superior self-perception). Our results show that conventional marketing messages emphasizing snobbish elitism or exclusive distinction is unlikely to appeal to these high-status individuals. Because the content of consumption is becoming less overt and less exclusionary (Holt, 1998), we believe that the analysis of a high-status consumer segment through the lens of their cultural disposition can provide insights critical to effective market research. In addition, American consumer culture now values adaptability to different cultural contexts and proficiency in the consumption of diverse values of commodities. Consumer product marketing should also be consistent with complicated consumption patterns: appealing to their diverse goals in consumption and accompanying the construction of contextual meanings and identities.

One limitation of our study is its use of secondary data, which restricted the development of ideal measures. It should be noted that the exhaustiveness of our conceptions of cultural activities, and everyday consumption practices was limited. Notwithstanding these limitations, we believe that the nature of the data collected from a sample of more than 3000 participants who are representative of the U.S. population did, ultimately, provide external validity for our findings. Despite the different types of omnivores (Warde et al., 2007) or disagreements regarding the assortments of highbrow or omnivorous genres in recent sociology literature (López-Sintas & Katz-Gerro, 2005), our principal focus was, rather, to provide new insights into the culturally elite consumer segment by applying the thesis of omnivorous taste, which unarguably is the most definite cultural consumption trend to emerge since the late twentieth century.

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Note

Note 1. As one of the factors that form Weber's theory of stratification, *status* is the stratification of social groups according to honor or prestige accorded by others (Weber, 1946). Although class and status are mutually exclusive alternative stratification systems in the theoretical debate, the terms are often used without much attention to conceptual differences (Alderson et al., 2007). Alderson et al. (2007) discusses various facets of the current uses of status and class: for example, many U.S sociologists pass over the distinction as reflected in the use of the term *socioeconomic status*, treats status as the symbolic dimension of the system, or reformulate class in terms of status. Or studies on cultural consumption have used occupation, education, or income as proxies for social status due to the difficulty of measuring status (i.e., prestige or honor).