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Abstract (238 words)

The “omnivores” thesis, developed by Peterson and Kern, suggests that people who have higher socioeconomic status would have more variety of tastes; however, this thesis does not take cultural background in determining one’s taste into account. Don Slater claims that one’s needs and taste differ from culture to culture and that his or her consumption propagates this culture. The purpose of this research paper is to determine whether socioeconomic class or ethnic background plays a bigger role in female college students’ tastes.

This research provides some support for both the omnivores thesis and Slater’s views. The research is conducted with a sample of 30 female students of the University of California, Berkeley with 10 students in each ethnicity groups: Asian, Caucasian and Chicano/Hispanic. In each ethnicity group, the students are separated into lower household income students and higher household income students with the median income acting as the separation point. They are all surveyed with five closed-ended questions via online survey on their different tastes on music and food. It is found that Caucasian students have a similar range of tastes disregard their socioeconomic status. The data proves that cultural background plays a more important role in determining female Caucasian student’s taste. However, in the Asian and Chicano/Latino groups, omnivore thesis is proven to be true that higher household income students in total have more varieties of tastes. As a result, depending on the ethnicities, taste is manipulated by either socioeconomic status or cultural background.

Key Words: taste, consumption taste, socioeconomic status, ethnicities (Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic/Latino), women, female undergraduate, United States

I. Introduction/ Context

According to the fact that “globally, women drive 70-80% of all consumer spending with their purchasing power and influence” (Brennan Bridget, 2011), there is an enormous amount of studies about women’s consumption behavior and taste. Researchers look for the major factors which drive people’s consumption taste based on their status, class, and cultural background. However, there is a lack of clear distinction on whether female college student’s socioeconomic status or ethnicity plays a more important role on determining their preference on taste in the United States.

Pierre Bourdieu’s book, “Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste”, suggested that one’s socioeconomic status, social position, and cultural upbringing play important roles on determining one’s taste (Pierre Bourdieu, 2011). Taste is defined as an appreciation of art, ways of dressing, and preferences for food. Taste varies by individuals as well as class. Bourdieu separated the domains of taste into categories of “legitimate” and the “personal”. The legitimate domains are related with art and music, and the “personal” domain is related with food, furnishings, and clothing. He found out that one’s “legitimate” domains of culture are closely tied with one’s education, and one’s “personal” choices are linked with one’s social origin (father’s occupation) (Bourdieu, 1984). Because Bourdieu’s research is based on the

surveys and interviews that he conducted in France in 1963 and 1967-68, his findings can only represent the general French population but not other ethnicities.

Don Slater suggested “all consumption is cultural because it always involves meaning”. Through “culturally specific forms of consumption”, we produce and reproduce culture (Slater, 1997). He mentioned that people’s basic needs vary from culture to culture and that our consumption propagates this culture with our taste. However, one of the critiques about Slater’s idea is that, in his study of “*Consumer Culture and Modernity*”, he did not put enough emphasis on people’s socioeconomic status. Therefore, it leads to another criticism of his idea that people’s basic needs would be different. “Once the satisfaction of basic needs has been materially secured...people ‘want’ more than they ‘need’” (Salter, 2007). Through this quote, Slater essentially explains that people who have higher socioeconomic status would have a larger variety of taste since they would “want” more.

According to the “omnivores” hypothesis suggested by Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern’s article, “Changing highbrow taste: From Snob to Omnivore”, high socioeconomic status people are “omnivores” that are open to appreciate all brows of activities (Peterson and Kern, 2009). They also mentioned that, it is no longer true that among highbrows, people are like snobs who do not participate in any lowbrow or middlebrow activity (Peterson and Kern, 2009). Peterson and Kern have great contribution coining the idea of “omnivore” thesis, but they did not take one’s ethnic background into serious account in this research .

Overall, it is not neglectable to consider one’s gender role, socioeconomic background and culture background related to one’s consumption taste. As a result, the purpose of this research study is to fill this gap on discovering to what extent does socioeconomic status or ethnic background play a bigger role in female college student’s consumer tastes, and why is it the case?

II. Literature review

The research that Pierre Bourdieu conducted in France suggested that the dominated fraction of the class should have stronger tastes for the legitimate musical genres. They are classical music, opera, and to a lesser extent, jazz. France and the United States would present a major difference with regards to these dimensions. Paul DiMaggio claims that, the artistic classification systems, including cultural hierarchies, differs greatly according to structural elements like the role of the state and the heterogeneity of society (DiMaggio 1987). Bourdieu emphasizes that one’s taste on music is most influenced by one’s education in France (Bourdieu, 1984). In fact, it is found that the role of the state, both in the educational system and the production of culture, is more visible and centralized in France than in the United States (Christin, 2011). According to the findings of major differences between France and the United States, it would suggest what Bourdieu’s theory on one’s tastes on music might not be the same case as it is in the United States.

In the article, “Highbrow Cultural Consumption and Class Distinction in Italy, Israel, West Germany, Sweden and the United States”, researchers analyzed five separate data sets which include 1606 respondents collected in 1993 (Gerro Katz, Tally, 2002). The data sets includes questions about leisure activities and tastes in music and reading. Researchers analyzed the effects of class position rather than their ethnicity, gender, and religious belief on highbrow cultural consumption- using both leisure activities and cultural tastes in these five different countries. They found out that there is a great influence of people’s socioeconomic status on their

highbrow consumption. However, the biggest shortcoming of this research is that the data would not be accurate because different ethnicities would have a different interpretation of tastes. They gave out an example that the indicators are considered highbrow in one place (U.S, Israel, Sweden) and play a part in class distinction are perhaps popular culture in other national contexts (West Germany, Italy) (Gerro Katz, Tally, 2002). Their research suggested that the participants with different ethnicities in their research would not be able to generalize all populations within these countries because of the diversity of the cultural background would influence one's taste.

In the study of "How Do Class, Status, Ethnicity, and Religiosity Shape Cultural Omnivorousness in Israel", researchers analyzed data based on two sets of telephone surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007 of a random sample of 177,593 Jewish households population in Israel (Katz-Gerro, Raz, and Yaish, 2007). The researchers suggested that, "class (socioeconomic status) is the measure based on occupational groupings, and status is operationalized as a rank of occupations based on social distance". They provided the definition of "socioeconomic" to include the economic dimensions of one's occupation, prestige, and income. Contrary to the authors' prediction, they found out that class is more important than status in shaping cultural consumption. In addition, they also discovered that the individuals from more advantaged social positions are more likely to adopt omnivorous consumption practices. It is consistent with Peterson and Kern's "omnivore thesis". However, their findings on Israel might not be able to apply the situation in the U.S. because the influence of ethnicity and religiosity heavily shapes Israeli people's consumption. In addition to their limitation in the research, gender is another factor that was not taken into account in determining one's taste.

To further the point of the "omnivore thesis", the result of the study of "Social status and cultural consumption in the United States" based on data analysis from 2002 *General Social Survey* is found to be consistent with Peterson and Kern (Alderson, Junisbai and Heacock, 2007). In the 2002 *General Social Survey*, researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with a sample of 2756 English-speaking persons living in the U.S. with an age 20 to 62. Researcher analyzed the data based on three recognizable groups: Omnivores, Paucivorans, and Inactives. According to the research,

"Omnivores, who are distinct for their comparatively high probabilities of having engaged in all activities considered, from the unpopular to the popular. The people who are in the Paucivorans groups are distinct from their middling level of engagement, displaying neither radically eclectic nor particularisms tastes, but as bias toward the most popular activities; and Inactives, who are distinct for their comparatively low probabilities of engaging in any of the activities considered, including the most popular"

According to what the researchers have found, it could be true that social status is rather more important than the social class but they do not provide enough data to support their argument that gender is not found to be significant factor.

IV. Method

According to Salter, one's cultural background is an important factor in influencing one's consumption taste (Slater, 1997). Therefore, race should not be taken into account since race only refers to a person's physical appearance, such as skin color, eye color, hair color, bon/jaw structure (Oxford dictionary, 2012) whereas ethnicity is related with one's social, cultural or national experience. According to the data from OECD (Organization for economic co-operation and development) from 2001- 2013, the U.S. ranks the highest with around a million immigrants

moving to the State each year (OECD, 2013). Under the immigrant population, Latin American immigrants in the United States are part of the single largest origin group over the past five decades (Stoney and Batalove, 2013). The Mexican-born share of the U.S. immigrant population has steadily increased since 1960, topping out at 30 percent by 2000. Asian-born immigrants would be the second-largest immigrant population after Latin Americans. (Batalova, 2011). As a result, these ethnicity groups of Asian and Latin American would take into measurement other than the Caucasian ethnic group in this research.

In the statistic data conducted by the “University of California, Berkeley Undergraduate Census by Race/ Ethnicity on 2012”, 39% are Asian, 29% are White and 13% are Chicano/Latino. (Undergraduate Students: Current Census, 2012:1). These three groups are three of the largest ethnic groups in the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) Undergraduate department. Under each ethnic groups, Asian female students stands for 20% of the total population of all undergraduates in UC Berkeley, which is higher than Asian male students of 1%. White female students stands for 15%, whereas white male students stands for 14%; Chicano/ Latino female student stands for 7%, whereas Chicano/ Latino male student stands for 6% (2012:1). Overall, female undergraduate students are more than the male undergraduate in University of California, Berkeley.

This research is conducted on female Asian, Caucasian and Chicano/Latino undergraduate in UC Berkeley. The students who have household income in the range of \$0-\$49,999 are considered lower and lower middle socioeconomic class, and household income in the range of \$50,000 and above are considered as higher socioeconomic class based on the median income of correspondents.

All surveys were conducted online. Surveys were posted on Facebook’s UC Berkeley ethnicities group pages, and sociology major undergraduate group page. Students were required to be of U.S citizenship, because international students were not considered in this research. Survey content includes seven close-ended questions on their tastes with different types of food and music. In order to reduce the bias on the influence of their cultural background, participants who may have two ethnicities were asked to identify themselves to one ethnicity that they consider themselves to be. Participants were asked for their approximate average household income in a detailed range. They were asked to answer the questions of the types of food that they would eat depend on a weekly basis. The choices are included the majority of the mainstream food choices, which includes: Indian, French, African, Chinese, Japan, Korean, Thai, Italian, American, Mexican food. In addition, participants were asked to choose all types of the music that they prefer. The choices includes: Classical Music, Country Music, Dance Music, Easy Listening, Electronic music, European Music, Hip Hop/Rap, indie Pop, Inspirational(Includes Gospel), Asian Pop (J-Pop, K-pop), Jazz, Latin Music, New Age, Opera, Popular music, R&B/ Soul, Reggae, Rock, Singer/ Songwriter (includes, Folk) and World Music. Participants are able to choose as many choices as they want.

At the beginning of the research, participants were asked for their preference of their choice on the top 10 most searched handbag brands, and the top 10 most popular shoes in the world. However, the data couldn’t be applied to this study because the answer could be biased. However, regardless the fact that the brands are considered as the top popular brands, there are brands that are more expensive than the one way or the other. Moreover, the possibility of participants would pick one brand over the other could due to the brand loyalty reason. As a result, questions about brands are eliminated in this research.

Limitations

This research has only a limited amount of participants with only 30 female undergraduate in total. Therefore, this small number of population would not be able to represent all the female undergraduate or females in the United States. In addition, the survey is conducted online, therefore it is hard to confirm the credential of the information that participants provided on either their household income or gender. Since the study only focuses on the female college American students with different ethnicities, it does not include international students whose taste might have a stronger influence of their ethnicity. The study might not have accuracy when respondents have at least two ethnicities. Even though they consider themselves as one ethnicity over the other, it could be subjective and lead to a biased result.

V. Findings

Caucasian group

It is found that the lower household income Caucasian group have a total in 8 preferences on different types of food, and the higher household income Caucasian group have a total in 7 preferences on different types of food. On the aspect of choices on music, the lower class Caucasian have 16 preferences on music, and the higher household income group have a total of 14 preferences. Interestingly, both lower household income and higher household income Caucasian group have the highest number on American food, and Mexican food. Indie pop music, Popular music and Rock music have the highest vote both in lower and higher household income rather than types of music.

Overall, for the female Caucasian group, even though on the number of preferences on food and music, lower household income participants have more preferences than the higher household income participants. Even though the differences on the total preferences are not too different, it still would not support the “omnivore thesis” as correct.

Asian group

Under Asian group, higher household income students have more preferences on taste than the lower household income students in both of the survey on food and music. According to the finding, the lower household income Asian participants have a total of 6 preferences of different types food, and the higher household income participants have a total of 10 preferences of food. The higher household income student’s preference on taste is 40% higher than the lower household income students. Under the higher household income group, all the choices on food have been selected. However, under the lower household income group, none of the participants have chosen their preferences on French, African, Thai, and Mexican food. The higher household income group have two times more preferences on music than the lower household income group. Lower household income group have a total of 7 preferences on different types of music, whereas the higher household income group have a total of 16 preferences on different types of music. There is no selections of the classical music, European music, Hip Hop/Rap music, Indie pop music, Inspirational music, Jazz music, Latin Music, New Age music, R&B music, Reggae, Singer/ Songwriter music and World/ Beats Music under the lower household income Asian group. There is a high number of preferences in the higher household income Asian group on electronic music, Asian Pop(J-Pop, K-Pop), and Popular music. The higher

household income Asian students and the lower household income Asian students all have the most preferences of Chinese food, Japanese food and Korean food other than other types of food.

In sum, from the number under the selection of music and food, Asian female students would prove that the “omnivore thesis” is correct where higher socioeconomic status students have more variety of preferences on taste.

Hispanic/Chicano Group

In the Hispanic/Chicano participants group, higher household income students have more preferences on tastes on food than the lower household income students. The lower household income participants have a total of only 4 preferences on food, and the higher household income participants have preferences on 10 preferences on food in total. Which means higher household income participants have 2.5 times more preferences on food than the lower household income participants. However, on the aspect of music, lower household income students have 13 preferences on different types of food, and higher household income students have 12 preferences on different types of food. Moreover, it is found that, within the Hispanic/Chicano group, American and Mexican food have the highest votes in both higher and lower household income student's choices. Moreover, Latin music and Popular music both selected the most in both higher and lower household income groups.

The data about the Hispanic/Chicano female college students on their preferences on different varieties of food supports the “omnivore thesis”. However, the thesis would have to be rejected since it is found that lower household income participants have more preferences on the varieties of music.

VI. Discussion

It is found out that Peterson and Kern’s theory of the “omnivore thesis” is supported only by the data of Asian’s preferences on food and music and Hispanic/ Chicano’s preferences on food. In other words, the people who are in a higher socioeconomic status have more preferences than people who are in a lower socioeconomic status under the ethnicity of Asian’s preferences on food and music and Hispanic/Chicano on food. In contrast, Peterson and Kern’s “omnivore thesis” which is suppose to be generalized to all population in the United States does not apply under this study on Hispanic/Chicanos’ preferences on music, and Caucasians preference on food and music. Regardless of the fact that the difference of the preferences on different types of tastes is small, the data in this research has shown that socioeconomic status do not play a significant role on taste of Asian women’s preferences on different types of food and music, and Hispanic/Chicano’s preferences on different types of food.

The data in the research also shows that, Chinese food, Japanese food and Korean food are the most preferable both in the lower and higher household income of Asians. Interestingly, in Caucasian and Hispanic/Chicano’s preferences on the types of food, American and Mexican food are both selected as the highest preferences out of all the other types of food. According to this data, one’s ethnicity would be able to influence one’s taste on their preferences on the types of food. On the aspect of music, the Asian ethnicity group have mostly prefers electronic music, Asian Pop music and (American) popular music regardless of whether their household income is high or low. Hispanic/Chicano participants in both lower and higher household income mostly prefers Latin music and (American) popular music. Caucasian group have their most preferences on the types of music are Indie pop, (American) popular music and Rock music. According to

this data, one's ethnicity would be able to influence one's taste on their preferences on the types of music.

The result of this research is found to be consistent with Bourdieu's theory that taste is influenced by one's socioeconomic background and cultural background. In addition, the findings in this research can fill the gap of Bourdieu's theory by applying it within the context of the U.S and gender differences that he does not take emphasis on. However, Slater's "omnivore thesis" would not necessarily apply to all population in the United States due to the fact that the data from this research shows that certain ethnicities with a higher socioeconomic status do not have more varieties of preferences than those with lower socioeconomic status.

According to my data, it confirms with the reason why Bourdieu separate tastes into categories as "legitimacy" and "personal" domain (Bourdieu, 1984). All different ethnicities all have a higher preferences on the food that they are culturally related with. The result on their preferences on food may not only related with where they originated come from which influenced by their ethnicity parents, but also their exposure to a new culture, for example, American culture. In the same case, my data shows that not all ethnicities with different socioeconomic status support the "omnivore thesis", their tastes on music could be more related with what Bourdieu suggested, "one's educational background plays a more important role on one's taste on music (Bourdieu, 1984). There is a huge possibilities on looking for potential factors on determining one's taste other than my research on gender, ethnicities and socioeconomic status.

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