

Manet or Monet? Does Knowing the Difference Matter?:

An Examination of Cultural Capital in Advertising

Francine Wong

MacEwan University

Word Count: 4015

BCSC 200 (BC01)

Dr. Iain Macpherson

December 8, 2017

Abstract

In a mass-produced world, the modern shopper is motivated by anxiety to purchase goods that facilitate the ability to distinguish oneself from others. In an endless barrage of brands, all promising the potential of a “better self,” how does one know which brand to choose? Advertisers are expert in manufacturing symbolic links between products and objects that signify high cultural value. This paper’s secondary research examines Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of taste as an indicator of class and how advertisements use cultural capital to suggest social mobility. Bourdieu applied the term “capital” in three distinct forms that afforded ascendancy across social stratifications: social, economic, and cultural. Evidence supporting the theory shows that individuals must possess cultural capital, in the form of academic and social knowledge, to identify worth across different contexts. Limitations of cultural capital include the failure of the concept in “low culture” or non-academic contexts. This paper proposes that in “high culture” contexts, the culturally savvy use the concept to establish class distinctions, while individuals in “low culture” contexts, cultural capital as theorized by Bourdieu seems to do little to merit one’s worth.

Manet or Monet? Does Knowing the Difference Matter?:

An Examination of Cultural Capital in Advertising

There is a tacit agreement between advertisers and consumers pledging a boundless universe of choice in exchange for a blitzkrieg of advertisements. Shoppers willingly consume images promising alternate realities, where better and enhanced versions of ourselves exist. Successful advertisers are remarkably adept in creating visual arrangements that elevate their product above a barrage of brands in an over-saturated market. Visual juxtapositions can suggest symbolic connections between products and feelings of self-worth, particularly regarding true or subjective perceptions of mobility in social status. “High culture” indicators in advertisements attract the culturally savvy, because these spectators recognize the attainment of certain products can afford symbolic prestige and class distinction.

But what happens when a consumer fails to recognise cultural significance or reference to high culture? This paper explores French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of taste as a reflection of class status and its relationship to cultural capital offered in advertisements as a means of social mobility. Several scholars (Berger, 1972; Ewen, 1988; Maxwell, 1999; Vermehren, 1997) have demonstrated how high culture in advertisements promise symbolic capital and manufacture desire in the modern viewer. Contrasting works suggest that culture capital does not account for the “trickling up” of subculture in mainstream society (Thornton, 1997), and that cultural capital has little meaning outside of academic circles (Riley, 2017). After reviewing such debates, this paper proposes that in high culture contexts, the ability to recall culturally relevant information dictates where one stands in comparison to others, but in low culture contexts, the ability to discern a Manet from a Monet has little to no worth.

Literature Review

Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's work surveyed relationships of power in French society, focusing upon in the distinct and nuanced ways that power is passed down through social structures. He held that distinctions between social classes in France were not only a result of birth, but that demonstrations of "capital" in social interactions could provide ascendancy within social structures (Cole, 2017, para. 2). Bourdieu borrowed the economic concept of capital and applied it to culture; just as money can afford the means to move up in a social hierarchy and indicates one's status in a capitalist society, cultural knowledge can do the same (Robbins, 2000, p. 32).

Bourdieu (1986) suggested three distinct forms of capital offering mobility in social hierarchies: economic capital, which can be converted into money and recognised in property ownership; cultural capital, which can be converted into economic capital and recognized in academic credentials; and as social capital, composed of social connections, and in some situations, exchanged for economic capital in the form of a title of nobility (p. 16).

Bourdieu (1986) further divided cultural capital in three states: the embodied state, defined as one's accumulated knowledge in educational and social settings; the objectified state, measured in the ownership of material objects; and the institutionalised state, which is the way a society recognizes prestige, such as degrees or academic credentials (p. 17). The focus here will be on Bourdieu's concept in cultural terms in both the embodied and objectified states.

Lastly, it should also be implied that these three forms of capital can be exchanged for one another. For instance, economic capital can finance an education at an esteemed institution, where social connections would produce social capital, and socialization could beget an accumulation of exclusive cultural capital (Cole, 2017, para. 7).

In Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984/1996), the concept of taste is examined as the construction of social identity through one's aesthetic dispositions that indicate class status. Bourdieu (1984/1996) states:

Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed. (p. 6)

Having "good taste" means that an individual understands and partakes in middle- and upper-class opinions of the aesthetically pleasing and this comprehension, regardless of social status, offers distinction and social mobility through the symbolic representation of knowledge.

Habitus

Grenfell (2004) describes Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as reflecting "a set of generative structures defined in ... phenomenological, social and psychological terms. Such structures must be understood as fluid ... dispositional knowledge: a tendency towards certain responses when faced with external stimuli" (p. 27). Habitus is reflected in every choice an individual makes, it is the set of subjective thoughts, interpretations, and dispositions an individual has as a direct manifestation of one's class. These dispositions are partially results of "pre-existent social hierarchies....and acted as points of reference from and against which behaviour is oriented in practical contexts" (Grenfell, 2004, p. 97).

Grenfell (2004) observed that in aristocratic times, the French elite engaged in cultural customs and employed art as symbols legitimizing wealth; however, the rise of modern capitalism brought the emergence of a middle-class, motivated to distinguish themselves from nobility and lower classes (p. 97). These individuals, lacking economic and social privileges

“exist in a state of chronic cultural insecurity,” and “the economic production of their social ancestors is replaced by cultural consumption designed to gain sufficient capital to hold and improve social position” (Grenfell, 2004, p. 98). Thus, it is implied that cultural capital gains the prospect of status elevation and differentiation from other classes.

Middle-Class Anxiety

In the *Ways of Seeing* (1972), art critic John Berger recognized that “all publicity works upon anxiety. The sum of everything is money, to get money is to overcome anxiety...publicity plays [on] the fear that having nothing you will be nothing” (p. 143). Ewen (1988) saw modern industrialization as a primary cause of middle-class anxiety, and pointed out the irony of a middle class toiling away to produce and consume the very products they make (p. 62-63). Furthermore, Ewen (1988) declared middle-class “pretension was more a social mask, claiming power that was not there a cultural wage, which permitted its recipients to identify with the interests of the upper class” (p. 64). The middle class found significance in “a ‘pure gaze’¹ which analogously offered detachment, refinement and exclusivity the individuals involved were in touch with a world unknown to the common man ... ‘gross taste’ and sensation is abhorred, while ‘pure’ taste and the pleasure of the experience is celebrated” (Grenfell, 2004, p. 97). Anxiety and the need for distinction appears to be a shared concept between Bourdieu, Berger and Ewen.

The Commodity Self

Ewen (1988) presented the concept of the “commodity self” to refer to one’s subjective identity constructed through the procurement of goods (p. 71). For Ewen (1988) “the emergence of a consumer society, filled with mass-produced symbols, in which judgement about a person is not based on what one does...but rather what one has” (p. 68). Therefore, Ewen (1988) concludes that status is “based on one’s ability to purchase, construct and present a viable social

self” (p. 68). Berger (1972) contended that historically, oil paintings were commissioned by the affluent and reflected “a celebration of private property. As an art-form it derived from the principle that you are what you have” (p. 139). Both Ewen and Berger identify the exhibition of material goods as an indicator of rank.

Oil Painting and Photography

When modern photography succeeded the oil painting as the preferred medium of visual representation, advertisements still had to rely on “the visual language of oil painting” (Berger, 1972, p. 138). By comparing several advertisements with paintings, Berger (1972) demonstrated several similarities between the poses and gestures of models, stereotypes of men and women, uses of nature, uses of materials signifying luxury, and uses of space in the visual images (pp. 134-138). He held that photography enabled advertisers to transform the language of oil paintings into popular culture, and he noticed both mediums use “highly tactile means to play upon the spectator’s sense of acquiring the real thing” (1972, p. 141). Berger observed, “photography can reproduce the colour and texture and tangibility of objects as only oil paint had been able to do before” (1972, p. 140). Both mediums serve to capture an existence in time, a depiction, and evidence of the truth for the modern spectator. The popularization of photography confers that Modern episteme accepts the notion of photographic truth; this serves as a reason to interpret advertisements as equivalents of reality.

Art in Advertisements

On the use of art in advertisements, Berger (1972) stated:

Publicity images often use sculptures or paintings to lend allure or authority to their own message art is a sign of affluence; it belongs to the good life....art also suggests a cultural authority, a form of dignity, even of wisdom, which is superior to any vulgar

material interest; an oil painting belongs to the cultural heritage; it is a reminder of what it means to be a cultivated European. (p. 135)

Berger (1972) said oil paintings preserved the existence of the subject, encapsulating the subject in a “present” tense image for future generations, whereas images in advertisements are set in the future (p. 144). Ewen (1988) contends that the young urban professionals in modern America “scramble to surround themselves with the ever-changing ‘latest’ in designer clothing, consumer electronics, and other commodified symbols of the *good life*. As they frenetically pursue this semiotic world of objects, they perform a role written for them” (p. 70). Since industrialized times, anxiety-ridden consumers buy into the representation of a “better life” that advertisements so realistically portray. The desire to classify one’s self is still very prevalent modern society, as is plainly evident in functioning capitalistic consumer economies. Ads symbolically invent relationships between their products and high culture references, such as art, by simply making the product blend in with the visual elements of high culture. These illusory relationships encourage the belief that the separation from a homologous middle class is possible with the purchase of recognized commodities and their supposed semblance of upper class tastes.

High Culture in Advertisements—A Perpetuation of Social Stratification

A study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania looked at the effects of art presented in two different scenarios: the first, a serious advert depicting the art in its original configuration, and the second was a humorous take of the art work that changed the message of the piece (Maxwell, 1999, p. 1). The ads were presented to two separate groups, one deemed high in cultural capital (in relation to social, educational, and economic status) and the second, low in cultural capital. The findings showed noticeable differences between how each group reacted to the images: the high culture group enjoyed both the serious and humorous ads because

they understood the cultural significance of the artworks, whereas the low culture group frequently expressed confusion about the ad's intricacies and cultural significance, and found parodies of art to be disrespectful. For both groups, positive interpretations of the product's quality directly correlated to ads with art references. The study reported that high culture group to be more critical of the message of ads, perhaps as result of advanced education, while the low culture students often accepted the ad at face-value (Maxwell, 1991, p. 118). The study posits, "that the knowledge of fine arts may be a crucial precursor for understanding an art ad's context and message" (Maxwell, 1999, p. 117).

Similarly, Vermehren's (1997) study found that advertisements further perpetuate social stratification in U.S. society, by purposely dividing their markets in accordance with class distinctions. The study compared the adverts from "high" discourse and "low" discourse magazines, and suggested that ads specifically target these audiences with visual imagery that designate and reinforce class status. He posited that magazines for people with higher education "confirm, stimulate, and perhaps even develop the already acquired cultural capital," while marketers seemingly have the propensity to exclude "other social groups from these discourses...these people are encouraged to consume and appropriate products which the educated bourgeoisie classify as 'low brow'" (Vermehren, 1997, p. 204). The study claims that the upper class is continually given cultural capital by confirming their appreciation for fine art, and disregard for other classes. This further propagates the unequal balance of power through educational organisations (1997, p. 221-222).

Limitations of Cultural Capital

Contrastingly, a study of cultural capital conducted by the University of Toronto found that knowledge of the arts produced very little cultural capital in the privatized business sector

and that “while this may be true for centralized France, it is not true for segmented Canada. The field of private enterprise has one dominant culture, business culture, which is cultural capital in that setting” (Erickson, 1991, p. 277). The study suggests that Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital is limited to taste for aesthetics as a determiner of status, rather than a broader application of social capital in other contexts. This implies that having cultural or academic knowledge in certain settings does not necessarily guarantee distinction or superiority over others.

Critiques of Bourdieu’s habitus say that the deterministic model does not account for the “trickle up” of countercultural values. Thornton (1997) dubbed the term “subcultural capital” to account for one’s knowledge of values in subcultures, and is explained by Thornton as a measure of one’s “hipness” (p. 202). Just as cultural capital can be demonstrated in art or books that a person owns, subcultural capital in its embodied form can be measured through style, up-to-the-minute slang usage, or a fastidiously curated record collection—anything that tells others you “are in the know” (p. 202).

Thornton points out a missing element in Bourdieu’s findings: she cites the media as “a primary factor governing the circulation of [subcultural capital]. Several writers have remarked upon the absence of television and radio from Bourdieu’s theories of cultural hierarchy” (1997, p. 203). Thornton (1997) argues that it’s “impossible to understand the distinction of youth subcultures without some systematic investigation of their media consumption” (p. 203).

Subcultural capital can be a youth-centred, counter-cultural resistance to society’s classification of people, and exposes “popular culture as a multi-dimensional social space rather than...the bottom rung on some linear social ladder” (p. 208). Thornton concludes that this youthful resistance of “classlessness is a strategy for transcending being classed” (p. 209).

Riley (2017) takes issue with Bourdieu's claim of habitus, and that class is empirically demonstrable in one's taste. He states, "Bourdieu fails to specify either an empirically tractable meaning of the term 'class,' or to show any compelling evidence for the existence of 'habitus'... that can be applied to numerous domains" (Capital and Habitus section, para. 2). Riley points out the irony of *La Distinction*, a book about distinction and taste, vaguely defines the dominant class "as consisting of those high in cultural and economic capital, has a 'taste for freedom'... while the dominated class, consisting of those low in total capital, has a 'taste for necessity'" (Capital and Habitus section, para. 2).

Riley (2017) also identifies that cultural capital fails to account for "the world of labor... involves a collective effort at transformation and is therefore oriented toward a project not toward "stance-taking" or "distinction"" (Misrecognition and the School System section, para. 3). This is analogous with Erikson's (1991) argument that cultural capital is restricted in settings where high culture has no value, such as non-academic contexts, or labour-oriented workplaces.

Lastly, Riley offers an alternative look at Bourdieu's popularity, specifically among academics. He states, "Bourdieu's sociology simultaneously resonates with the lived experience of elite academics, offers a form of ersatz radicalism focused on self-transformation, and provides the sociologist with a sense of having an elevated social role" (Conclusion, para. 1). Riley concludes that academics tend to agree with Bourdieu, because his work echoes the ontological experiences and goals of the educational elite; this is doubly reinforced because the highly educated are also the main readers of his work (Content section, para. 9).

Discussion

This paper has so far explored the relationship between cultural capital, the use of art in advertising, and the effects on individuals from different social classes. The findings suggest that

individuals with high cultural capital tend to respond to high culture symbols, such as art, and are more likely to comprehend and pursue it, than are individuals with low cultural capital.

In capitalist society, money dictates culture. Cultural hegemony says that the dominant “powers that be” are the purveyors of economic and social capital. Powerful mass-mediated advertisers stay in control by reinforcing the world-views of the ruling classes, sustaining the indexical implications of exclusivity and art as symbols of wealth. Art serves not only as a reminder of wealth, but as a semiotic conduit of high class taste; if you purchase the product, you most likely have upper-class sophistications.

Consumerism feeds on the insecurities of people who agree with notions of inequality supplied by the ruling class. Cultural capital offers the anxious middle class a manoeuvre to surpass superficial “limits” of ordinary life as established by the visual domination of advertisements. But to concede to the ideology of cultural capital and agree to the interpellation of irresistible images is to preserve social stratification, and thus the disparity between classes continues.

Habitus is a convincing explanation for inherited dispositions—we are the sum of our experiences. Bourdieu said cultural capital could be exchanged for a monetary value. An elite understanding of culture then, is like having the monetary means to distinguish yourself from others. In our society, money affords power. The greater the command of cultural capital, the more power one can exercise. Thus, cultural capital is power.

If Ewen (1988) is correct, a portion of the human identity is constructed from products we buy. The modern shopper is constantly looking to fulfill needs, and willingly consumes visual images manufactured by advertisers who insist their product is the solution to being complete.

Advertisers who are well-versed at visual rhetoric, employ devices that dig deep into the roots of our beliefs about desire and belonging.

Bourdieu (1984/1996) states, “of all the objects offered for consumers' choice, there are none more classifying than legitimate works of art” (p. 16). Entrenched in the Western cultural belief system is the value of the authentic art. Museums are the ultimate authorities of cultural capital; they carefully collect and display the most authentic examples of art in a culture. Having the knowledge to discern true works of art, places an individual at the pinnacle of our culture. As cultural capital dictates, you have symbolic admittance to cultural spheres and objects restricted to others. If you have any say in what art goes in a museum, you are a tastemaker—a determiner of cultural value—a direct influence on society. A comprehension of art, beyond popular culture, articulates the level of cultural capital an individual has.

There is also something to be said about circulation of fake renditions of art and perhaps, for people who insist their forgeries are true. Forgeries can fool experts, replicating the exact details of the originals, and are sometimes even authenticated as true. When exposed as fake, these works of art are emptied of any worth since they are not warranted as a genuine display of artistic intent.

The Art Institute of Chicago has housed Renoir’s “Two Sisters (On the Terrace)” in its establishment since 1933 (Eustachewich, 2017). Recently disputed, President Trump claims he has the real version displayed in his Manhattan Trump Tower penthouse. Although both are regarded as leaders of capital on different fronts, I would deduce, since we culturally acknowledge museums to be authorities, it seems highly unlikely that they have a forgery. Cultural capital is an intangible demonstration accumulated in one’s dispositions over time. Claiming you have cultural capital seems to do the opposite; it drains one’s credibility and

authority. Trump's display of cultural capital does not appear to be accumulated through cultural authority, but is most likely a trying assertion of symbolic capital, one backed by an economic means.

The two studies demonstrated by Maxwell (1999) and Vermehren (1997) establishes that high culture symbols do not translate equally. Both comment on the exclusion of certain groups as the result of audience-specific marketing. If the desire for distinction is continually reinforced in advertising, then advertising can be identified as an cultural economy that uses goods to perpetuate the distribution of disparity between classes.

Thornton's (1997) research offers a fascinating look at the counter-hegemonic reactions of subcultures and illuminates the fact that cultural capital does not apply in the same way to every situation. Indeed, the push for an egalitarian society is virtuous and her research demonstrates alternatives to the structural determinism of traditional sociology and offers a re-interpretation of hierarchies on a micro-social level. However, the need for distinction is still a concept that is echoed in Thornton's research. In the same way that cultural capital only works in certain contexts, the same would apply to subcultural capital. A fashionable haircut or meticulously assembled record collection would buy you little cultural capital in a labour-intensive industry. Also, as Thornton points out, Bourdieu's theory did not account for the media's influence on the youth culture. Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan said that technology can be viewed as "any extension of ourselves" (1964, p. 7) and "it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" (1964, p. 8). It is indeed difficult to define the Net generation without some investigation into the influence of technology and media.

Riley (2017) raises several important points regarding some flaws in Bourdieu's theory, namely the failure to empirically define class, and the disregard of cultural capital in non-academic contexts. Erickson (1991) reproduces this argument and backs the notion that cultural capital is limited in spheres where high-culture distinctions have no value. In non-academic, labour-intensive fields of work, a collective accomplishment is the desired effect, and is not necessarily dependent on one's educational qualifications or knowledge of culture. It appears that cultural capital is only applicable in certain contexts, namely one where its function is understood and deemed valuable to the people in the context. Riley's claim about the educational elite is very much in line with the theory of cultural capital. The academically privileged buy into Bourdieu's concept of capital, because they themselves are living out the theory, and thus have more reason to agree with the concept than someone with lower cultural capital.

Conclusion

In an infinite sea of choice, the job of the advertiser is to lead consumers to believe that securing an object of desire grants a means to transcend the confines of pedestrian life. The visually savvy are those who can afford social mobility through the acquisition of products that signify cultural capital. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital claims that the ability to show cultural or educational knowledge is a direct reflection of an individual's social position. This give one social advantages that wouldn't necessarily be available because of economic considerations. Several scholars maintain that modern adverts utilize art as an indicator of high culture, and semiotically impose links between their products and high-brow distinctions. The need to consume is fueled by the constant desire to construct an identity based on possessions. This propels the anxieties of a frantic middle class, eager to distinguish themselves from others, and further encourages the separation that social stratification implements.

Critics of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory point out that the concept is restricted to fields where cultural capital already exists, especially among the academically or economically privileged, and does little to afford one capital outside of these contexts. Further research would suggest a comparative look at marginalized youth cultures that use cultural capital as a means of gaining social position, against groups that use subcultural capital. The research also prompts an inquiry into the beliefs of the "nouveau riche," those who have afforded cultural capital, but previously belonged to a lower class. Finally, the presentation proposes an investigation of cultural capital in capitalist collectivist cultures, such as those in Asia or South America. The research began as an exploration of the role of cultural capital in advertisements, but it is quite apparent that Bourdieu's theory extends beyond the spreads of magazines and into the very existence of our realities.

References

Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London, UK: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books.

Bourdieu, P. (1996). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (8th ed.). (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. (Original work published 1984). Retrieved from https://monoskop.org/images/e/e0/Pierre_Bourdieu_Distinction_A_Social_Critique_of_the_Judgement_of_Taste_1984.pdf

Bourdieu, P. (1986). *The forms of capital*. Retrieved from http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/sites/socialcapitalgateway.org/files/data/paper/2016/10/18/rbasicsbourdieu1986theforms_ofcapital.pdf

Cole, N. (2017, March 2). *What is cultural capital? Do I have it?: An overview of the concept*. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-cultural-capital-do-i-have-it-3026374>

Erickson, B. H. (1991). What is good taste good for?. *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology*, 28(2), 255-278. doi:10.1111/j.1755-618X.1991.tb00154.x

Eustachewich, L. (2017, October 20). Trump's 'Renoir' painting is a fake: Museum. *New York Post*. Retrieved from <https://nypost.com/2017/10/20/trumps-renoir-painting-is-a-fake-museum/>

Ewen, S. (1988). *All consuming images: The politics of style in contemporary culture*. New York, US: Basic Books

Grenfell, M. (2004). *Agent provocateur*. London, UK: Continuum.

Maxwell, K. (1999). Is that the Mona Lisa? Art in advertising and its effect on viewer perceptions. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 19(2), 99-124.

doi:10.1080/23796529.1999.11674547

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Robbins, D. (2000). *Bourdieu & culture*. London, UK: Sage.

Thornton, S. (1997). The social logic of subcultural capital. In K. Gelder & S. Thornton (Eds.), *The subcultures reader* (pp. 200-209). London, UK: Routledge.

Vermehren, C. (1997). Chapter 10: Cultural capital: The cultural economy of U.S. advertising.

Counterpoints, 54, 197-224. Retrieved from

<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.macewan.ca/stable/pdf/42975210.pdf>