

# Networks and Cultural Consumption

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## Abstract

Scholars of culture have been increasingly concerned with the roles played by interpersonal social networks in relational cultural processes. This article highlights the ways that social network composition and dynamics can shape individuals' cultural consumption choices and the ways that consumption can shape the structure of individuals' social networks. Attention is given to symbolic aspects of cultural consumption as well as practical aspects of consumption. While much of the research on this topic emerges from the sociology of culture, a broader focus illustrates productive links with health-based and cognitive perspectives.

## Definition and Intellectual Context

Scholars of culture have been increasingly concerned with the roles played by interpersonal social networks in relational cultural processes (for recent reviews, see [Mische, 2011](#); [Pachucki and Breiger, 2010](#)). In this article, the term 'social networks' refers to the web of human associations and interactions that constitute an individual's social group ([Breiger, 2009](#); [Scott, 2000](#)). The term 'consumption' largely refers to cultural consumption – the ways that individuals broadly enact their cultural tastes and leisure-time activities (i.e., fashion, music, art, television and film-viewing, reading, religious attendance, political engagement, and sporting activities) ([Bourdieu, 1984](#)). However, consumption can also refer to physiological ingestion (i.e., food and other substances) as a type of cultural consumption.

This article highlights the ways that social network composition and dynamics can shape individuals' cultural consumption choices, and to a lesser degree it also documents the idea that consumption choices can shape the structure of individuals' social networks. A brief discussion of the history of this topic is followed by a review of current theory and research, concluding with an identification of challenges and future directions. Because of space limitations, this article is illustrative of key works rather than exhaustive of the corpus of growing literature. Most attention is accorded to research that empirically measures some aspect of social network structure and attempts to discern the relationship between social ties between individuals and these same individuals' cultural consumption practices.

Though research in this area is centered primarily around topics of musical taste and arts participation in the sociology of culture, there have been other emergent clusters including the ingestion of food and drink as a form of cultural consumption that affects health; different forms of cultural consumption involving online and offline social media; and consumption of knowledge and the academic sphere. By bringing these conceptually related but often separate intellectual contexts into dialogue with one another, we might identify productive areas for investigation in this growing subfield.

## History

The idea that cultural consumption is shaped by forms of socialization has early roots in the work of [Thorsten Veblen \(2007\[1899\]\)](#), whose well-known work on lifestyle habits generated the phrase 'conspicuous consumption' to refer to the practice of signaling social status through one's consumption choices. Yet more formal discussion of cultural consumption and social network interaction would not follow for some time. It could be argued that some of the earliest sociologists to focus informally on networks in the context of cultural consumption were [Harrison White and Cynthia White \(1965\)](#) in their research on the contexts of artistic creation in French salon society, as well as [Howard Becker's \(1982\)](#) classic treatise on art worlds. Neither text employs formal measurement of social networks. However, the authors' discussions of how artist socialization shapes artwork and audiences clearly evince a sympathetic understanding of how network processes shape cultural consumption, and vice versa.

The oeuvres of both Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Peterson have been highly influential in sociologists' understanding of how cultural consumption is shaped by social status position. [Bourdieu \(1984\)](#) extensively investigated cultural consumption and lifestyle, and his ideas of 'field' could be considered a distant relative of the idea of 'social network' in that he envisioned a highly connected, mutually reinforcing 'field of action' where human and institutional actors and their dynamic relational circumstances constantly re-molded the contours of a domain of activity ([Bourdieu, 1993](#)). Peterson and colleagues' explorations of how high-status individuals differentiate themselves through their breadth of consumption – the concept of 'omnivorousness' – offers an alternative mechanism of cultural reproduction (e.g., [Peterson and Kern, 1996](#); [Peterson and Simkus, 1992](#)). Like the earlier relational tendencies of White & White and Becker, neither Peterson nor Bourdieu operationalize the idea of social networks beyond their theoretical frames. Regardless, the tension between Bourdieu's and Peterson's visions of how cultural inequality is reproduced has been fruitful for paving the way for scholars to investigate possible roles for network mechanisms. For example, [Lizardo \(2013\)](#) finds that individuals who engage in

a broad palette of cultural participation are more likely to make use of their network contacts to find a job.

## Current Theory and Research

### Social Networks, Cultural Participation, and Tastes

Investigating possible links between network diversity (or heterogeneity) and symbolic cultural consumption has been a fruitful line of inquiry for scholars. One of the earliest studies to empirically analyze network affiliation and cultural consumption in a rigorous fashion is Erickson's (1996) study of genre knowledge of security workers in Toronto. To assess genre knowledge, Erickson probed sports, art, books, restaurant, and magazine consumption; for network variety, the author asked respondents if they knew someone working in 19 occupation categories, and whether that person was kin or a friend. Greater network diversity – defined as having contact with people in different occupation class locations – was linked with greater variety in forms of cultural consumption. In a similar vein, Relish (1997) studies music genre preferences using the 1993 US General Social Survey (GSS). He measures network complexity by counting the number of associations to which a respondent belongs, geographic mobility since youth, and community type. He finds that a strong association between education and breadth of genre preference is diminished with the introduction of network information, suggesting that networks play a significant role in the development of musical preferences.

In their research on general cultural participation, Warde and Tampubolon (2002) describe trends in association membership and frequency of leisure-time activities using two waves of the British Household Panel Survey spanning 1997–99. Using association membership as a proxy for social capital, they report on cross-tabulations and find group membership to be associated with greater frequency of leisure-time activities. The authors also construct a measure of social distance between best friends using similarity in sex, age, and location and observe that having a highly similar best friend increases the likelihood of recreational activity of various types. By enumerating personal networks of university students, Kane (2004) discovers a gendered dimension to cultural participation in a range of activities. In contrast to earlier studies, Kane's questions to respondents were designed to elicit information about specific network alters, following a more sophisticated network design. By calculating respondents' network density and heterogeneity measures of race, religion, and gender in one's set of reported alters, she reveals that network density is positively associated with attending sports events and negatively associated with museum and gallery attendance. Greater network heterogeneity increased the likelihood of high culture participation, and network effects were greater for women than men. In contrast to the prior research that seeks to understand how networks shape cultural consumption, Lizardo (2006) employs indicators of cultural participation to explore the opposite possibility: that cultural tastes also shape network structure. Using the 2002 module of the GSS, he examines personal network size and tie strength to show that highbrow forms of consumption lead to larger networks of strong ties, while popular consumption leads to larger networks of weak ties.

The analysis of music tastes as a proxy for consumption habits has been productive for many network scholars. Like Relish (1997), Schultz and Breiger (2010) use the 1993 GSS to examine musical genres liked by respondents. However, their starting point is the idea that theories involving the strength of social ties, and sociability more generally, should take into account cultural objects and relations. The authors posit that strong ties emerge from 'weak culture' – from venues of small talk, from tentative efforts to engage common ground with others, and from the efforts required to maintain a relationship. They find that the more music genres a respondent 'likes rather than loves' (their measure of weak culture), the less likely are they to perceive Americans as generally fragmented in their values, compared with those respondents who like fewer genres. In an innovative examination of how network social influence shapes musical tastes, Salganik et al. (2006) developed an online experiment in which participants downloaded and rated music while in some cases aware of others' online expressed preferences. The authors find that knowledge of others' preferences increased inequality in song ratings: knowledge of others' preferences translated into popular songs becoming more popular while unpopular songs would be even more unpopular. Finally, Crossley (2009) merges historical accounts of the Manchester punk music scene between 1976 and 1980 with network mapping techniques to trace connections between key social actors, among them musicians, industry figures, record labels, and fan clubs. Using qualitative historical data to give depth to purely structural accounts of network dynamics, Crossley identifies shared interests, the propensity for redundant information among those with strong ties, and the diffusion of reputation as relevant mechanisms.

Longitudinal research on networks and cultural consumption has been rare due to intense data and analytic demands, though this is quickly changing. A promising line of research involves a class of actor-oriented statistical models that seek to discern mechanisms responsible for observed network structures and consumption patterns using simulation techniques. One example is the adolescent preference research of Steglich et al. (2006), who use data on friendship ties, substance use, and music genre preferences collected from a cohort of Scottish secondary school students. They find that certain types of consumption behaviors shape friendship patterns. More specifically, listening to rock music increases one's popularity in the network, classical music listeners tend to affiliate with one another, and those who drink alcohol cluster together in the network. In a study of the preferences of college Facebook users at an American university, Lewis et al. (2012) examine the relationship between Facebook friendships and music, movie, and literature consumption preferences. In contrast to prior research that examines genre preferences in culture consumption, the authors were able to analyze respondent similarity in the much more precise level of performer preferences (in the case of music), specific movie titles (in the case of film), and specific authors (in the case of literature). They model network and behavioral coevolution using an actor-based approach in order to separate social selection and network influence. For music taste selection effects, they find that 'lite/classic rock' and 'classical/jazz' fans form and maintain friendships with one another more than their peers. For film selection effects, they

observe that 'dark satire' and 'raunchy comedy/gore' viewers are more likely to be friends. Yet of all the possible consumption behaviors, only classical/jazz listeners are likely to influence others to adopt that taste. An overview of the authors' broader study design, scope, and data-gathering approach is described elsewhere (Lewis et al., 2008).

### Social Networks, Media Usage, and Knowledge Consumption

Comparative studies of different types of media usage are key themes for a range of scholars across different national contexts. Cardon and Granjon (2005) examine personal networks of middle-class students in France, motivated by the paradox that while studies of cultural practices often involve measurement of collective activities, these same studies rarely explore relational context, instead treating actors as autonomous individuals. They begin with ego-network enumeration of a small sample of young men and women, followed by interrogation of their media consumption as well as whom they engage in these activities with. Their descriptive network analysis – and importantly, reports of discussions of the resulting sociograms with the original respondents – gives a rich sense of different types of cultural consumers. They find three general types of young adult media users: those who engage in cultural activities and keep their groups of alters separate, those who engage with different sets of alters and spread their tastes across these various groups, and those who maintain a core network based on cultural activities and who draw other alters into that core. In contrast, Kraaykamp et al. (2007) focus on the dyad as a precursor to network processes and examine how a person's social status and their significant other's social status affect media consumption – specifically, book reading and television watching. Relying upon multivariate analysis of a large longitudinal survey of Dutch adults, they discover a significant relationship between the partner's status and ego's media consumption. Those with partners of higher status tend to consume more literature, while those with partners of lower status consume more television.

A growing number of scholars are also beginning to investigate the roles that the Internet plays in our cultural consumption habits. Kayahara and Wellman (2007) conducted a study of information search behavior in order to compare the online and offline ways in which individuals learn about cultural activities. Using in-home interview data from Toronto residents, the authors find that interpersonal relationships are the primary source for learning about activities but that the Internet functions to enhance and confirm their understandings. Information search across different modes of interaction is also a concern for Tepper and Hargittai (2009), who study methods of discovery about new music by college students. Through fielding surveys to students at three different universities, they compare the relative efficacy of interpersonal social networks, mainstream media, and digital media in informing new music consumption. The authors find that music listeners with omnivorous tastes are nearly four times more likely to learn about new music from people in their social network as opposed to the other pathways, and that Internet methods of discovery tend not to be disproportionately influential in shaping music discovery.

Another emerging area of research concerns the university as a site for cultural consumption. Research in this area investigates the ways that academic socialization processes shape students' experiences. For example, Kane (2011) seeks to understand how the transition from high school to college affects students' personal network composition. Using a combination of surveys and interviews of incoming students at an elite university at arrival and 1 year later, she examines the density of personal networks, as well as various types of network heterogeneity (ethnic, gender, regional, and religious). Over time, Kane finds network density decreased and network heterogeneity of all types increased. For the young men in her sample, group-based affiliations (such as sports teams) formed the primary basis for social tie development, while women were more likely to spend time cultivating relationships outside a formal group structure. Diversity is also a central interest of Benediktsson (2012), who uses the National Longitudinal Study of Freshmen to study how cultural consumption is related to the racial heterogeneity of incoming college students' social networks at 27 universities. Through the analysis of prior and current arts, religious, political, and sports participation, he finds that cross-racial contact appears to vary by the type of cultural activity. More specifically, religious group participation is associated with higher levels of racial homophily than the other cultural activities, though students are more likely to encounter students of different races (heterophily) through affiliating with arts groups. In a very different type of investigation concerning both the consumption and production of knowledge in academia, Rawlings and Bourgeois (2004) use the network concept of structural equivalence to measure how categories of specialization emerged in the field of agriculture. By combining a historical approach to tracing the development of academic credentialing processes with network tools, they show how symbolic boundary processes and organizational dynamics shaped agriculture as an academic field.

### Social Networks and Physiological Consumption (Ingestion)

A much more literal definition of consumption that has rarely been integrated with discussions of symbolic forms of cultural consumption is the voluminous health literature on food consumption and substance use. Here, reported ingestion of certain food items or beverages and miscellaneous drug-related behaviors are often analyzed as risky behaviors associated with poor health status. Scholars researching these topics are beginning to productively identify how certain of these forms of consumption are patterned in social networks.

Alcohol consumption has been a recurrent theme of investigation for network scholars. Among the earliest pieces on this topic is a demographic study of Norwegians' drinking during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Skog (1986) tests a hypothesis that long waves of cyclical alcohol consumption may be recurrent throughout history using time-series analyses of trends. Finding some evidence of this cyclical pattern in the time period evaluated, he formally models network interactions to evaluate how microlevel interactions shape chains of indirect influence and changes in drinking culture. In a study of the social contexts of adults' risky health behaviors, Latkin et al. (1996) examined the influence of peers'

alcohol consumption on egos' drug-related risky behaviors (injectable cocaine, injectable heroin, crack cocaine, alcohol, having multiple sexual partners, and having casual sexual partners). Peer alcohol consumption was observed to be associated with egos' drinking behaviors, as well as egos' sexual behaviors.

In a large-scale alcohol consumption study using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), [Gaughan \(2006\)](#) argues that gender effects are not well understood in peer influence models of adolescent health behavior. The author examines social influence in alcohol consumption of seventh to twelfth graders between two waves of the study, evaluating several types of possible influence – general 'friend to friend' influence, and more specific 'female to female,' 'male to male,' 'female to male,' and 'male to female' directions. While Gaughan finds mutual influence among same-sex friends, in mixed-gender friendship there is evidence of only boy to girl influence, not the reverse. In another notable study based on the Add Health cohort, [Kreager and Haynie \(2011\)](#) specify actor-partner interdependence models in a longitudinal setting to help disentangle selection from influence. While the authors primarily focus on the effect of romantic partners' drinking on an ego's drinking, they also consider the role played by ego's friends, and that of the friends of romantic partners as well. Their findings suggest that partners' drinking is associated with ego's future binge drinking, and that the drinking behaviors of the friend group of a partner is independently associated with ego drinking. While couples tend to become similar in their drinking behaviors over time, there is little evidence of assortative mating with respect to drinking among adolescents. In a large network study of alcohol consumption among adults, [Rosenquist et al. \(2010\)](#) explore how alcohol consumption spreads through relationships over time in a social network. Using data from the Framingham Heart Study, a well-known prospective cohort study designed to study cardiovascular risk, the researchers discover evidence of spread that extended to three degrees of separation from ego. Additionally, they find that female alters are more likely than male alters to influence alcohol consumption, and that while being surrounded by heavy drinkers increases an ego's likelihood of being a heavy drinker, being tied to abstainers also increases an ego's likelihood of abstaining.

Research on food consumption and networks across the social sciences illustrates how eating is patterned among socially connected individuals. Psychological research on dyadic similarity in eating preferences has shed important light on networks considered as chains of dyadic interactions. In one example, [Rozin et al. \(2004\)](#) examined dyadic similarity in food preferences among peers in two different age groups – elementary school children and freshman college roommates – in order to assess the likelihood of peer influence. In order to discount the role of shared culture, the authors compare food preferences of actual pairs of friends with randomly assigned friends. Across both age tiers, the authors find little evidence of mutual influence beyond what would be expected in same-gender randomly assigned peers. In a longitudinal study of several thousand adults from the Framingham Heart Study, [Pachucki et al. \(2011\)](#) examined similarity in self-reported food consumption among peers of different relationship types – spouses, siblings, and friends – while controlling for network

position in the greater social network. The authors find seven different eating patterns in the population, and substantial concordance in spouse eating patterns, some concordance in sibling eating patterns, and little concordance in friend eating. By specifying lagged regression models in which the relationship between an alter's prior food consumption and ego's current consumption is assessed, the results provide evidence of a social influence process. Finally, in a recent study of several thousand Minneapolis adolescents across multiple schools, [Bruening et al. \(2012\)](#) calculated measures of healthy eating behaviors in one's peer group (i.e., ego network). Specifically, the investigators examined the separate contributions of ego's friend group and best friends' behaviors on the frequency of breakfast, servings per day of fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and dairy foods. While the propensity to eat breakfast and consume whole grains and dairy were each significantly associated within friend groups and best friend pairs, there was less evidence that adolescents share similarities in levels of fruit and vegetable consumption. In terms of unhealthy foods, a rigorous sociocentric investigation using a stochastic actor-based framework reveals that adolescent intake of low-nutrient, energy-dense foods is predicted by the intake of socially connected friends ([De la Haye et al., 2013](#)).

Cigarette smoking as a consumption practice has also been the topic of a great deal of social network research. In one of the first studies to link smoking with peer group structure, [Ennett and Bauman \(1993\)](#) studied the smoking habits of a cross-sectional panel of ninth graders in North Carolina. By analyzing clique membership, liaison positions, and social isolates, they find that smoking is most strongly linked with social isolation. In a longitudinal study, [Alexander et al. \(2001\)](#) examined two waves of the Add Health study to examine the role of peer influence on smoking behavior among seventh to twelfth graders. Through measurement of peer smoking exposure, the authors discovered that students with a peer network in which more than half of one's alters smoked tobacco were almost twice as likely to be current smokers. The ego was also twice as likely to be a current smoker if ego's best friend had been a smoker. Additionally, ego popularity contributed to a small but notable risk of being a current smoker. [Valente et al. \(2005\)](#) seek to extend this last finding concerning popularity, and ask if popularity predicts subsequent smoking initiation among middle-school students at several schools. For the students in the study, popularity was strongly predictive of increased susceptibility to start smoking and also having ever smoked; the authors also found that different measures of network centrality were associated with smoking initiation.

More methodologically sophisticated treatments of peer influence and smoking over time involve the analysis of multiple panels of adult data in an observational setting ([Christakis and Fowler, 2008](#)) and actor-based modeling approaches of adolescents ([Mercken et al., 2009](#)). In a study of more than 30 years of smoking behavior among more than 12 000 Framingham adult cohort members, Christakis and Fowler discover that while smoking behavior clusters among interconnected actors in the study, entire subgroups tend to quit at nearly the same time, and the relative centrality of smokers in the network declines over time. In contrast, Mercken and collaborators employ a series of stochastic actor-based models in order to distinguish the roles of peer selection

from influence in the smoking behavior of adolescents across multiple high schools in six European countries during more than 2 years. The authors found strong evidence for selection in all six countries, but evidence for influence in only two.

### Challenges and Future Directions

Studies of consumption that span topical domains have potential to inform more incisive theory by extending their scope beyond a narrow focus on only one type of consumption. For instance, in an unusual population-based health study, Bygren et al. (1996) examined links between Swedish lifestyle habits and health while controlling for the presence of a strong social network. They discovered that greater cultural consumption in performing arts attendance, reading, and making music is associated with reduced risk of mortality. Though by today's standards a very rough social network indicator was used (a binary measure indicating frequent versus sparse friend group contact), the researchers found that among men the presence of one's social network elevated one's mortality risk, while among women the absence of a social network elevated risk. Another example illustrates how the conceptual distinction between cultural consumption and production can be illusory (Giuffre, 2001). To wit, while art critics function as bridges between artists and the consuming public and are thus neither producers nor consumers of art, it can be reasonably argued that as a group of highly interested cultural consumers equipped with professional expertise, art critics constitute a peculiar audience class unto themselves. This nuance is pertinent to a study of fine art photographers and reviews of their gallery exhibitions in which network ties between artists and galleries classify structurally equivalent groups of relationships (Giuffre, 2001). In examining the links between these artist-gallery groups and the artists' critical reviews, Giuffre discovers that the type of artist discerned through analysis of artist-gallery relations corresponds to the frequency and content of reviews by critics. Research such as these two examples enriches our knowledge by illustrating the links between consumption across ostensibly separate life domains, as well as the shrinking distance between producer and consumer in modern life.

One of the challenges for consumption research is to integrate how we theorize the intersection of the symbolic and pragmatic aspects of cultural consumption. Research on arts participation, for instance, has largely concerned itself with how taste preferences (a symbolic dimension) shape or reflect participation, and issues surrounding access to and constraints on participation (a more pragmatic dimension) have been more peripheral. Networks can affect the development of taste as well as enhance or constrain access. Certainly in research on food consumption, issues of taste have been more interesting for sociologists of culture, while practical issues surrounding food as nutritive fuel have been the domain of health research. A closer integration stands to help us better theorize how biological processes are related with social processes. Growth in this area will benefit from an interdisciplinary focus on cognition and decision-making processes, areas of scholarship that have traditionally been the purview of social psychology.

Another key challenge for future scholars in this field is to integrate study of online and offline cultural consumption and social networks. With several exceptions, this article has largely been concerned with understanding social networks as built from face-to-face human relationships, even though online social media are beginning to transform the very notion of how we understand a social network. Questions surrounding how online social networks shape cultural consumption are increasingly of interest to scholars and change how we think about the nature of relationships. In a contemporary society where individuals have multiple and overlapping online and offline identities, this is not a trivial concern.

**See also:** Cultural Participation, Trends In; Cultural Production in Networks; Culture and Networks; Leisure and Cultural Consumption: US Perspective; Networks and Meaning; Symbolic Boundaries.

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