

Social Class and Consumer Choice: The Role of Cultural Capital

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ABSTRACT

Lower social class consumers tend to face more economic constraints. Reminders of these economic constraints are cognitively burdensome and can evoke a proximal focus, which can increase preferences for immediately-enjoyable hedonic products. In this research, we posit that lower class consumers lack not only economic but also *cultural* capital—i.e., internalized knowledge, tastes, and behaviors reflecting cultural competence and status within a social hierarchy. Reminders of constraints on cultural capital can instead increase utilitarian choices, which are reflective of their lower class identity. Across six studies (N = 1,359), we find that lower class consumers prefer utilitarian to hedonic products (studies 1a-1b) when lacking cultural capital is salient (studies 2-3). Only when lower class consumers are primed with self-improvement goals, and therefore wish to change rather than reinforce their class identity, do they shift to hedonic choices (study 4). Study 5 presents additional confirmatory evidence using an ecologically-valid field study. For marketers and policy makers we offer an important practical insight—reminding lower class consumers of their cultural, rather than economic, constraints can reduce hedonic consumption and increase utilitarian choices.

Keywords: social class, cultural capital, hedonic/utilitarian choice

Social class is fundamental to who consumers are and how they live their lives (Holt 1998; Veblen 1899) and can influence consumer behavior in numerous domains (Fiske and Markus 2012). Defined as one's rank in society relative to others within a resource-based hierarchy (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009), class is typically considered from the perspective of *economic capital*—i.e., financial resources. Lower class consumers tend to be economically constrained, and economic constraints are known to make consumers short-term focused (Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir 2012), increasing preferences for immediate gratification (Shah, Shafir, and Mullainathan 2015), and resulting in poor decisions, including sub-optimal food choices and high-interest debt including payday loans that sacrifice long-term utility (Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov 2009; Griskevicius et al. 2013; Hamilton et al. 2019). In contrast, economically secure consumers are more able to delay gratification, favoring pursuit of long-term goals over immediate needs (Griskevicius et al. 2011a; 2011b; Mittal et al. 2015; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014). This stream of research focusing on economic constraints suggests that lower class consumers may prefer hedonic over utilitarian products. Notably, social class also comprises a second, often neglected aspect—socio-cultural elements, including *cultural capital*, which refers to internalized knowledge, tastes, and behaviors reflective of one's class position within the social hierarchy. We posit that this socio-cultural aspect is likely to have an important influence on consumer preferences, opposite to that predicted by economic capital.

Cultural capital is a socio-cultural aspect of social class that allows consumers to display and thus retain their position within the social hierarchy (Arsel and Bean 2013; Henry 2005). This cultural aspect of social class allows class identity to express itself in consumer preferences beyond the role of economic capital. Cultural capital includes deep knowledge of what is deemed tasteful and befitting one's class. A cultural fit between products and class identities could be a

powerful driver of consumer choices because making choices that fit class identities could provide consumers a sense of stability and self-affirmation, and give consumers a sense of safety and predictability. Lower social class cultural capital identity is likely to fit with utilitarian choices; these functional options are more practical and justifiable. Higher social class cultural capital identity is likely to fit with hedonic choices, because pleasurable options may be congruent with more leisurely tastes associated with their higher social class identity. Through its ties to class identity, cultural capital is likely to be more influential on consumer choices. Thus, we posit that being lower in social class is likely to increase utilitarian over hedonic preferences.

Next, we provide a brief overview of recent research on social class. Then, we introduce the socio-cultural and economic components of social class—cultural capital and economic capital—and explain how the different social class identities represent a cultural fit with, and thus a preference for utilitarian versus hedonic consumption choices.

SOCIAL CLASS

Social class is largely viewed in terms of *economic capital*—i.e., household income, occupation, educational attainment, and dwelling area (Coleman 1983). Traditionally used by marketers to segment consumers on basis of their spending potential (Rich and Jain 1968), recent research shows scarce economic resources influence how people in different social classes think and behave. Facing economic constraints, including poverty, can increase preferences for hedonic outcomes, such as for improved life satisfaction and wellbeing (Martin and Hill 2012; 2015), self-esteem and materialism (Chaplin, Hill, and Roedder John 2014), or ethical decisions (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2015; Piff et al. 2012). Salient economic constraints also increase

a preference for immediate gratification (Shah et al., 2015), and a predisposition toward myopic behaviors (Weinberger, Zavisca, and Silva 2017) often associated with pleasurable choices, especially among consumers raised facing economic constraints throughout childhood (Chaplin et al. 2014; Griskevicius et al. 2013; Hill et al. 2016; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014; 2016; Mittal et al. 2015). For instance, economic constraints can result in consumers avoiding cognitive effort (Mittal et al. 2015). They therefore make more impulsive decisions (Mittal and Griskevicius 2014), accept greater risks, take high interest loans (Shah et al. 2012), pursue immediate gratification (Griskevicius et al. 2011b; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016), sacrifice education and careers to have children at a younger age (Griskevicius et al. 2011a), and are more likely to spend than save money (Griskevicius et al. 2013).

These findings emphasize negative outcomes related to low social class and, though they have not directly addressed the question of hedonic versus utilitarian consumption, they suggest a preference for more hedonic alternatives among the low class who typically have constrained economic resources. However, social class also comprises the socio-cultural aspect of cultural capital—i.e., consumer knowledge and prestige (Bourdieu 1987). Economic capital is only one sub-component of the broader construct of social class. Given that the multidimensional construct of social class is often a more accurate predictor of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors than economic capital alone (Adler et al. 2000), we surmise that cultural capital will be an influential dimension of class that shapes consumer preferences.

FORMS OF SOCIAL CLASS CAPITAL

In his theory of social class, Pierre Bourdieu (1987) described class hierarchies in terms of economic (i.e., financial) and socio-cultural (i.e., informational) resources. *Economic capital* represents tangible resources—such as income, accumulated wealth, property, and occupational opportunities—which afford people the ability to exchange for products or other valued resources. Thus, economic capital dictates consumers’ purchasing power. *Cultural capital* is a set of nonfinancial socio-cultural assets including knowledge, tastes, and behaviors that reflect a person’s cultural competence or expertise and fit within their place in the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1986). Cultural capital represents the capabilities, ideas, practices, and perspectives that society collectively deems valuable, such as choices considered to be of good taste, smart, or “cultured” (Stephens and Townsend 2013). Üstüner and Holt (2010, p. 52) describe cultural capital as centered on having “sophisticated tastes, emphasizing aesthetics, abstraction, improvisation, eclecticism, cosmopolitanism, and authenticity.” Acquiring these resources provides acceptance within one’s community and status maintenance (Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013).

While access to economic capital can facilitate having cultural capital, and vice versa, these components of social class may be only weakly correlated (e.g., see Study 2). Consumers can lack economic capital because of financial constraints but still have high cultural capital. For instance, an adjunct English professor may embody sophisticated tastes and educational attainment associated with high cultural capital but have lower income, barely over the US median household income (\$61,937; US Census 2019). Conversely, consumers could be high in economic capital while lacking cultural capital, such as an electrician with little formal education or taste for sophistication, but with a high income of \$80,200 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018).

Unlike economic capital, cultural capital cannot be immediately transferred from one person to another, because cultural nuances are learned and embodied by individuals over time. Cultural capital has been described as a knowledge that facilitates consumers' ability to behave in culturally acceptable ways (Dimaggio and Useem 1978), such as participation in cultural events (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985) and displaying symbols consistent with class (Lizardo 2006). It follows that accumulated cultural understanding is likely to have a more pervasive influence on consumer preferences than wealth and income—economic capital. Wealth merely provides greater access to products and is often fleeting. For example, both the Mercedes CLA sedan and the Chevy Silverado truck are priced around \$33,000, making them equally accessible (or inaccessible) to people with similar economic resources. However, as they acquire more cultural capital, consumers learn that driving a Mercedes is a more sophisticated option than the similarly priced Chevy truck, which is typically associated with being of the lower working class. As such, even holding economic capital constant across consumers, cultural capital serves to reinforce social stratification and to navigate their daily reality (Bellezza and Berger 2020).

Economic capital and consumer choice. The influence of economic capital on consumption decisions has received considerable attention. Han, Nunes, and Drèze (2010) developed a taxonomy to explain how the wealthy “haves” use conspicuous consumption to dissociate from the “have-nots.” At the other end of the spectrum, Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvis (2015) demonstrated that economic constraints lead to a preference for material over experiential consumption. Hill et al. (2016) found, regardless of their current situation, people who grew up lacking economic resources consume more calories as adults, even when not hungry. Compared to their higher-class counterparts, people experiencing poverty also perceive greater threats from ambiguous social situations (Chen and Matthews 2003) and experience greater overall stress in

life and as a result suffer from more stress-related illness (Miller, Chen, and Cole 2009).

Additionally, extreme levels of poverty affect consumers' self-esteem and increase materialism, even among children (Chaplin et al. 2014). Furthermore, under extreme poverty, any money can improve subjective wellbeing (Martin and Hill 2015). While important, these findings are centered on economic capital, and do not discuss the role played by cultural capital.

Cultural capital and consumer choice. Research examining how cultural capital influences specific product choice is limited. Recent exceptions include findings that subtle cues of cultural capital allow consumers to display their identity as experts in specific domains to fellow in-group members (Bellezza and Berger 2020; Berger and Ward 2010). Thus, there is a gap in the understanding of social class in consumer behavior, as cultural capital acquired through family upbringing, formative peer groups, and formal education is likely an influential explanatory element of a person's social class. Preferences are likely to be a function of a consumers' cultural, not economic, capital, as discussed.

CULTURAL FIT AND IDENTITY-AFFIRMING CHOICES

Cultural capital is important for establishing people's social and cultural identity, which includes their class rank (Bellezza and Berger 2020; Berger and Ward 2010; Erickson 1996). At an organizational level, cultural fit—i.e., holding similar values, expectations, and implicit rules—is critical to organizational harmony and success (Weber, Shenkar, and Raveh 1996) and has even been linked to positive downstream effects on customer satisfaction (Yarbrough, Morgan, and Vorhies 2011). At a societal level, Ward and Chang's (1997) *cultural fit hypothesis* proposes that, to the extent people perceive a fit between their own cultural beliefs and values

and those of their sociocultural environment, they will experience greater subjective wellbeing. Consumers are thus motivated to adhere to the norms of the social class culture they identify with. A cultural fit reduces the uncertainty and anxiety associated with social encounters (Gudykunst and Hammer 1988), improving the quality of these interactions to facilitate social support. As people are generally motivated to maintain consistency to avoid uncertainty (Mischel 1984), rather than compensating for perceived personal flaws, they may make identity-affirming product choices to reduce uncertainty—providing a sense of safety and predictability. Furthermore, cultural capital signals are likely to be pervasive and habitual (Erickson 1996) instead of being intentional signals of status. Thus, culturally fitting choices that reflect a consumers' class identities are likely to be based on their cultural, rather than economic, capital.

This reasoning implies that low class consumers may prefer practical behaviors over pleasurable ones, as they represent a cultural fit with their class identity. Thus, low class consumers will prefer utilitarian over hedonic options because utilitarian choices reflect their low cultural capital. While wealth merely provides access to desired products, these socio-cultural aspects of social class—i.e., cultural capital—play a greater role in consumer preferences.

HEDONIC AND UTILITARIAN CONSUMPTION

Hedonic products are those that are experiential, fun, pleasurable, and consumption of the product itself is the desired end state. Examples of these include enjoyable foods, designer clothes, sports cars, and luxury watches. *Utilitarian* products are primarily instrumental, functional, and serve as a means to attain a desired end state (Dhar and Wertenbroch 2000). Healthier foods, microwaves, minivans, and personal computers are examples of products

generally viewed as utilitarian. Though most products can be imbued with both hedonic and utilitarian qualities, ultimately the motive of consumption makes a product more hedonic or utilitarian in nature. In hedonic consumption, the pleasure derived from consumption itself is the motive, whereas in utilitarian choices achieving some other function or desired end goal is the motive (Khan, Dhar, and Wertenbroch 2004). Utilitarian purchases therefore are typically more easily justified than hedonic ones (Okada 2005). Consumers sometimes justify making hedonic choices when purchasing for others, but when choosing for themselves they anticipate guilt for making a less responsible choice (Lu, Liu, and Fang 2016).

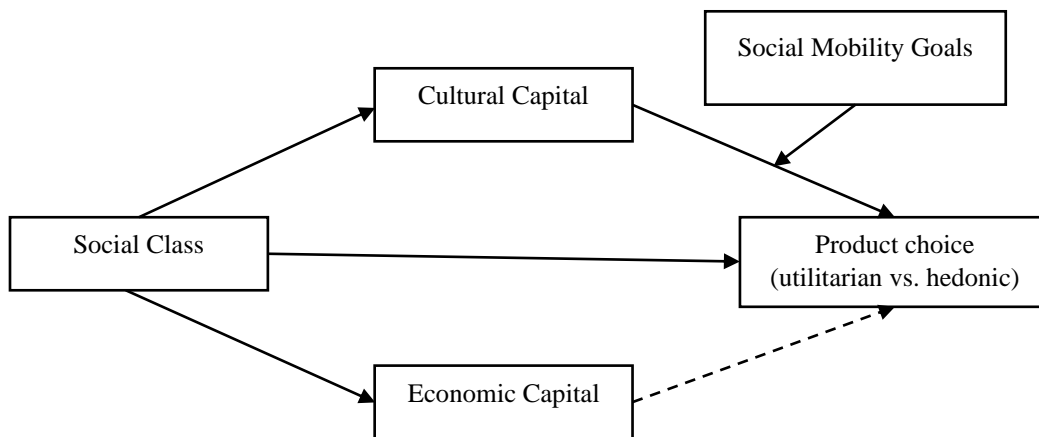
Perceived economic constraints could increase motivation to compensate by signaling status through conspicuous, frivolous, or hedonic displays (Han et al. 2010; Mazzocco et al. 2012; Nunes, Drèze, and Han 2011; Rucker and Galinsky 2008) to improve relative status (Shah et al. 2012, 2015). However, we posit the effects of cultural capital constraints are likely to be the opposite. Low cultural capital consumers learn to value utility in practical choices over time (Üstüner and Holt 2010), which is consistent with a sensible low class identity. Thus, utilitarian preferences may be more justifiable to lower class consumers. When making choices, lower class consumers may thus prefer identity-consistent utilitarian products as these are class-appropriate while hedonic products may be viewed as befitting for high cultural capital consumers who value pleasure. We therefore predict that low class consumers will be more likely to make utilitarian over hedonic choices, while high class is associated with hedonic choices, and perceived fit with a lower cultural capital identity underlies this effect (see figure 1). Formally:

- H1: Low social class consumers will prefer utilitarian over hedonic options.
- H2: Salience of low cultural capital will underlie the relationship between low social class and utilitarian preferences, beyond the influence of economic capital.

While making choices that are a cultural fit provide consumers with affirmation of their class identity, making salient a discrepancy between their perceived and desired identity leads to compensatory behaviors (Kim and Gal 2014). These compensatory behaviors allow consumers to bridge the gap between their perceived cultural capital and their ideal class identity by using consumption to signal higher cultural capital. Thus, we propose that when lower class consumers wish to signal higher cultural capital, they will increase hedonic choices, which reflect a cultural fit with a higher class identity and possessing an abundance of cultural capital.

H3: A goal to fit with their lower class identity will underlie utilitarian over hedonic preferences of low social class consumers, as utilitarian choices represent cultural fit with having low cultural capital. Cueing social mobility goals will reverse this effect, such that lower class consumers with less cultural capital will prefer hedonic to utilitarian consumption.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



OVERVIEW OF STUDIES

We conducted six studies to examine the impact of social class on product preference and choice. Studies 1a and 1b test for our basic effect—the link between social class, our key independent variable, and relative preference and choice of utilitarian over hedonic products, our dependent variable—by measuring or manipulating social class, respectively. Studies 2 and 3 then establish the underlying role of the salience of constrained cultural capital in the effects of social class on utilitarian preferences, through mediation and moderation, respectively. In Study 4, we test why salience of cultural capital constraints increase utilitarian preferences among lower class consumers. Lower class consumers prefer utilitarian products because these choices fit better with a low cultural capital identity; this preference reverses in favor of hedonic products when lower class consumers are cued to pursue social mobility goals because hedonic choices are consistent with a higher cultural capital identity. Finally, in Study 5, we test the ecological validity of our effects through a field intervention employing real choices by shoppers at a store.

STUDY 1A: THE BASIC EFFECT

Study 1a tested whether lower social class corresponds with higher utilitarian over hedonic choices, after controlling for any influences of economic capital. We measured social class with the MacArthur scale (Adler et al. 2000): a 10-rung ladder measure designed to gauge a person's subjective sense of place in society relative to others. This scale encompasses both economic and cultural capital, so we also measured economic capital specifically (i.e., household income) to factor out this influence on choice.

Method

Participants. Undergraduate students ($N = 293$; 63.10% female, $M_{age} = 24.41$, $SD = 6.20$) at a large U.S. university participated for credit in a study investigating consumer choices.

Procedure. The first task measured perceived social class of students relative to others. Participants completed the MacArthur scale comprised of a 10-rung ladder representing a person's sense of place in society (Adler et al. 2000). We instructed them that the ladder represented social hierarchy in terms of their education, occupation, neighborhood and dwelling area, and income, and they should indicate where they fall in this social hierarchy. In the next task, we asked participants to imagine vividly that they were looking for an apartment and had narrowed their search to two options. Both apartments were similarly priced and in similar neighborhoods with similar amenities. Apartment A was close to work and transportation but did not have pleasant views or layout and therefore offered few hedonic but many utilitarian benefits. Apartment B had a beautiful layout with a pleasant view but was not close to work and therefore less utilitarian but more hedonic. Participants indicated which apartment they would choose, then provided household income—representing economic capital.

Results and Discussion

One-hundred thirty participants (44.47%) chose the utilitarian apartment, and 163 (55.63%) chose the hedonic one. An independent t-test revealed that the social class of those who selected the utilitarian option ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 2.12$) was lower than the social class of those who selected the hedonic option ($M = 6.31$, $SD = 2.05$; $t(291) = -2.57$, $p = .011$, $d = .30$).

Additional analysis showed that lower social class, expectedly, was correlated with having less economic capital ($r = .17$, $p = .003$). Thus, to ensure that lower social class predicts increased utilitarian choices beyond the effects of economic capital, we conducted a hierarchical

logistic regression predicting apartment choice (1 = utilitarian, 0 = hedonic) from social class, after controlling for economic capital (income).¹ A predicted effect of social class emerged ($\beta = -.13$, $SE = .06$, $Wald \chi^2 = 4.76$, $p = .029$); social class corresponded negatively with utilitarian choice, indicating that this was preferred by lower class participants. Economic capital, as depicted by income, did not significantly influence utilitarian (vs. hedonic) choice ($\beta = -.10$, $SE = .06$, $Wald \chi^2 = 2.65$, $p = .104$).

Thus, we measured social class and found that lower class consumers are more likely to make utilitarian over hedonic choices, supporting hypothesis 1. These choices are independent of their economic capital, partially supporting hypothesis 2. Social class is typically considered in terms of economic capital and existing research suggests an association between low social class and hedonic choices instead. Consumers who lack economic capital tend to undervalue the future because they have less to look forward to (Griskevicius et al. 2011a; 2011b; Mittal et al. 2015; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014). Therefore, they might increase myopic choices, including hedonic choices that are frivolous and less justifiable than utilitarian ones (Okada 2005). Lower class consumers might also compensate for their lack of resources by mimicking purchases, including those of hedonic products, made by consumers with higher economic capital (Charles, Hurst, and Roussanov 2009). We did not find support for either of these perspectives in our data. Instead, we found support that social class is a broader construct that incorporates, and more strongly reflects, influences of cultural capital. As we theorized, we found that lower class consumers make utilitarian over hedonic choices, consistent with their perceived cultural capital identity.

STUDY 1B: MANIPULATING PERCEIVED SOCIAL CLASS

In study 1b, we further investigate the relationship between social class and preferences for utilitarian over hedonic products. We manipulate perception of being lower in social class (vs. a baseline). Manipulating social class allows us to establish the causality of this factor in increasing utilitarian preferences. We used chocolate as the target product, randomly assigning half the participants to read an article describing chocolate framed as having utilitarian benefits and the other half to read about chocolate framed as having hedonic benefits. The study thus utilized a 2 (social class: baseline vs. low) \times 2 (product framing: utilitarian vs. hedonic) between-subjects design. We predicted that participants experiencing lower (vs. baseline) social class would display higher preferences for the utilitarian-framed (vs. hedonic) product.

Method

We recruited 124 adults (72.9% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 42.22$, $SD = 13.14$) to participate in a study on consumer decision making. We randomly assigned participants to a condition in which they experienced lower social class or to a baseline condition. Following procedures from Dubois et al. (2015), participants assigned to the low social class condition compared themselves to those highest in social class—with the most education, income, and highest occupational status. Participants assigned to the baseline social class condition considered their social class without making any social comparisons. As a manipulation check, they indicated their social class on the 10-rung MacArthur scale used in Study 1a.

We thanked participants for completing this part of the study, then presented them with an article about dark chocolate. Half the participants read an article describing chocolate as having utilitarian benefits (e.g., healthy—associated with improved cardiovascular health). The remaining read an article describing chocolate in hedonic terms (e.g., having mood-altering

properties and feeling pleasure). They then completed manipulation check items indicating how hedonic they perceived the chocolate to be (pleasurable, gratifying, delightful; 1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; $\alpha = .92$), and indicated preferences for the chocolate (I like chocolate, I would like to eat chocolate often, I would like some chocolate right now; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = .75$). Finally, as a measure of economic capital, participants reported household income.

Results

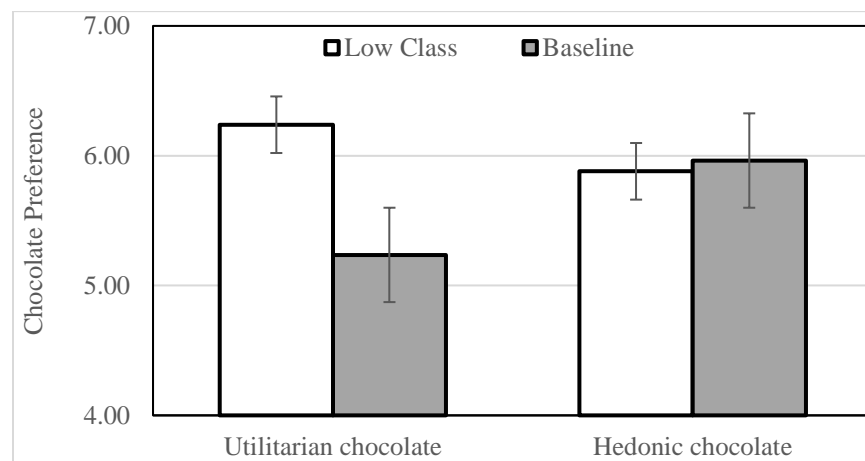
Manipulation checks. A manipulation check using the ladder item measuring social class revealed our social class manipulation was successful ($t(122) = 3.04, p = .003, d = .54$).

Participants indicated lower class when assigned to the low social class condition ($M = 4.47, SD = 2.18$) than the baseline condition ($M = 5.61, SD = 2.02$). Next, a 2 (social class) \times 2 (product frame) ANOVA on an index of how hedonic the chocolate was perceived revealed only a main effect of framing ($F(1, 120) = 6.80, p = .010, \eta^2 = .05$; all other $ps > .129$), indicating our framing manipulation was successful. The chocolate was perceived as more hedonic when we framed it as hedonic ($M = 6.48, SD = .73$) than as utilitarian ($M = 6.05, SD = .99$).

Hypothesis testing. A 2 (social class) \times 2 (product frame) ANCOVA on chocolate preferences, controlling for economic capital (income, $p = .765$), revealed a main effect of social class ($F(1, 119) = 5.21, p = .024, \eta^2 = .04$), and a significant interaction ($F(1, 119) = 7.35, p = .008, \eta^2 = .06$; main effect of frame: $p = .359$). As we predicted, planned contrasts showed that lowering social class (vs. baseline) increased preferences for the utilitarian-framed chocolate ($M_{low} = 6.24, SE = .22$ vs. $M_{baseline} = 5.24, SE = .20$; $F(1, 119) = 12.15, p = .001$); it did not impact preferences for hedonic-framed chocolate ($M_{low} = 5.88, SE = .18$ vs. $M_{baseline} = 5.96, SE = .20$; $p = .817$).

As may be expected for a more hedonic product category like chocolate, among those in the baseline condition, the hedonic chocolate was generally preferred to the more utilitarian chocolate ($F(1, 119) = 6.98, p = .009$), but this preference reversed non-significantly among people in the low class condition ($p = .322$). Thus, feeling lower in social class increases preferences for utilitarian products that are consistent with an identity lacking in cultural capital.

Figure 2: Preferences as Function of Social Class and Chocolate Framing (Study 1b)



Note: Error bar denotes ± 1 SE.

Discussion

In Study 1b, we manipulated, rather than measured, social class and replicated the results of Study 1a. By doing so, we provide further support for hypothesis 1, that low social class predicts utilitarian preference. We also provide partial support for hypothesis 2 by showing that this effect of social class on preference is beyond the influence of economic capital.

Our findings in studies 1a and 1b differ from past research that found that consumers compensate by consuming products that signal status when they lack power, as they might if they are of a low class (Dubois et al. 2015). Instead, we show that consumers low in social class

prefer utilitarian options. These choices are more consistent with their low cultural capital identity, as opposed to hedonic choices that are more frivolous. Such choices could be more justifiable because they are consistent with how they see themselves. Our objective in Study 2 was to replicate these findings while demonstrating the role of cultural capital as an underlying mechanism. We also employ a different target product for generalizability.

STUDY 2: PROCESS DEMONSTRATION: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL

In Study 2, we presented participants with a car ad framing the vehicle as having either utilitarian or hedonic benefits, manipulated between subjects. We also measured social class and perceived cultural capital. As predicted in hypothesis 2, we expected social class would have an indirect effect on preferences for the car, as a function of respondents' cultural capital and the framing of the car. Lower class participants identifying with a low cultural capital identity were expected to prefer cars described as utilitarian (vs. hedonic).

Method

We recruited 171 workers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; 44.4% female; $M_{age} = 36.23$, $SD = 11.28$) for a study on consumer decision making. Half of the participants were randomly assigned to review a car ad highlighting utilitarian benefits (e.g., reliable, dependable, and well-built), while the other half reviewed an ad highlighting the car's hedonic benefits (e.g., exhilarating, pleasurable, and a fun drive). A pretest confirmed that the framing of the car indeed manipulated how participants viewed the car as primarily utilitarian (useful, practical, functional—reverse coded) or hedonic (enjoyable, pleasant, fun; 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 =

Strongly agree; $N = 101$; $M_{hedonic} = .55$, $SD = 1.98$; $M_{utilitarian} = -.70$, $SD = 1.87$; $t(99) = 3.26$, $p = .002$, $d = .65$). After reading the car ad, participants indicated their preferences for the car (e.g., I would like to buy it this car, 1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree; How interested would you be in driving this car? 1 = not at all, 7 = very much; $\alpha = .95$).

Next, participants indicated their social class on the 10-rung ladder used in studies 1a and 1b, and responded to a measure of subjective cultural capital. Cultural capital is a knowledge-based resource that reflects a person's understanding of "high culture" (Dimaggio and Uusem 1978), aesthetic taste (Bourdieu 1986, 1987), and participation in behaviors consistent with class identity (Lizardo 2006). We operationalized the construct by adopting a measure of subjective knowledge (Moorman et al. 2003) with regard to cultural understandings that allow people to display expertise and fit within their place in society (Bellezza and Berger 2020). Items included: I am knowledgeable about culture in general, I have gathered a great deal of cultural knowledge, I have a wealth of cultural experience, and I have more cultural experience than others (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; $\alpha = .93$).

Finally, participants responded to a subjective measure of economic capital comparable to our measure of cultural capital (e.g., I don't think I'll have to worry about money too much in the future; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016). This measure was collected to include as a competing mediator to rule out economic capital as an alternative explanation for the effects found in studies 1a and 1b, and thus show that cultural capital underlies the relationship between social class and consumer preferences beyond the influence of economic capital.

Results and Discussion

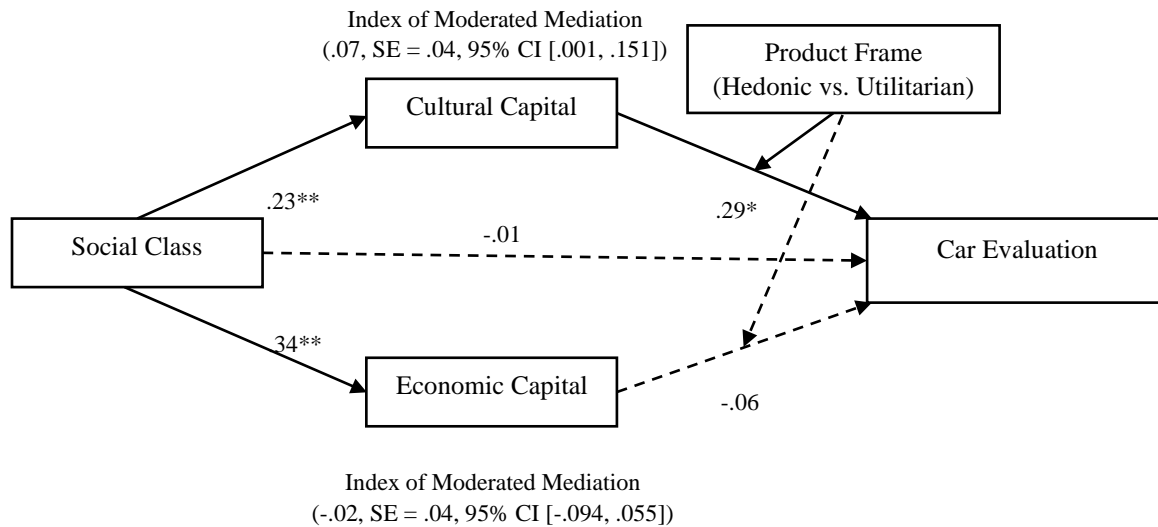
As we expected, cultural capital was moderately correlated to economic capital ($r = .29, p < .001$) and social class ($r = .36, p < .001$). Additionally, economic capital and social class were moderately correlated ($r = .46, p = .001$). Thus, the three items are related to one another, but are still distinct constructs.

To test hypothesis 2—that cultural capital underlies the relationship between social class and consumer preferences beyond the influence of economic capital—we conducted a mediated moderation analysis (model 14, Hayes 2013). The model tested the indirect effect of social class on car preference through cultural capital, when the ad described the car as having utilitarian (vs. hedonic) benefits. Additionally, this model simultaneously tested economic capital as a competing mediator to cultural capital, rather than using it as a control variable as we did in Studies 1a and 1b.

As we expected, social class was positively related to both cultural capital ($b = .23, SE = .05, t(169) = 4.98, p < .001$) and economic capital ($b = .34, SE = .05, t(169) = 6.68, p < .001$) in the first path of the mediation model. In the second path, after controlling for social class ($p = .817$) and the framing of the ad as either utilitarian or hedonic ($b = -1.32, SE = .66, t(164) = -1.99, p = .049$), neither cultural capital ($p = .973$) nor economic capital ($p = .274$) had a significant direct effect on preferences for the car. However, as predicted, the interaction of cultural capital and the ad framing was significant ($b = .29, SE = .12, t(164) = 2.37, p = .019$), while the interaction of economic capital with ad frame was not significant ($p = .601$). Importantly, the significant index of moderated mediation ($.07, SE = .04, 95\% CI [.001, .151]$) indicates that social class had an indirect effect on car preferences through cultural capital, depending on the framing of the ad as utilitarian or hedonic. The same cannot be said for

economic capital as an underlying mechanism, as the confidence interval for the index of moderated mediation crossed zero (95% CI [-.094, .055]), indicating non-significance.

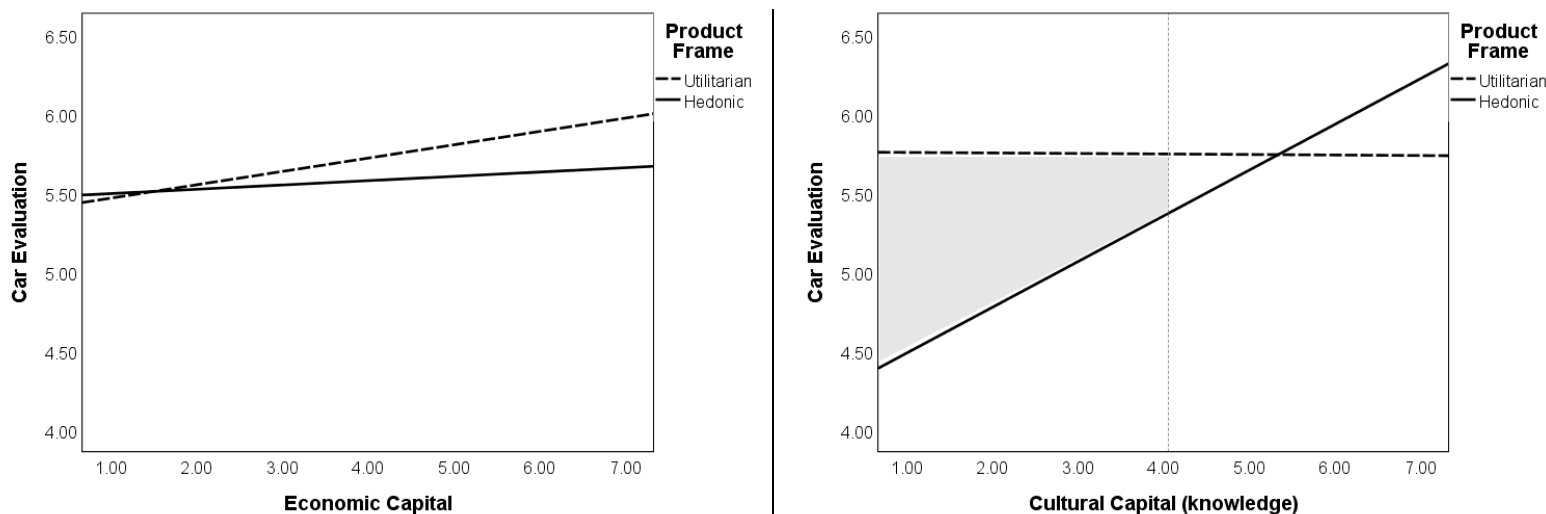
Figure 3: Indirect Effect of Social Class on Preferences as Function of Car Framing, Through Cultural (vs. Economic) Capital (Study 2)



Note: Values reported denote unstandardized beta coefficients; * $p < .05$, ** $p \leq .001$

Using a floodlight analysis, we found that participants with lower cultural capital (values ≤ 4.06) liked the car more when it highlighted utilitarian rather than hedonic benefits. The effect of social class through economic capital on preferences based on framing was not significant. In support of hypothesis 2, these results imply that cultural capital, but not economic capital, underlies the effect of low social class on preferences for utilitarian consumption.

Figure 4: Preferences as Function of Economic Capital and Car Framing (left) and Cultural Capital and Car Framing (right; Study 2)



Note: The grey line and shaded area indicate the JN point at values ≤ 4.06 on the x-axis (right). The utilitarian and hedonic groups are significantly different at all values of cultural capital below this point.

STUDY 3: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL CAPITAL: PROCESS BY MODERATION

In Study 3, we replicate the findings of Study 2 and test process through moderation to provide causal support for our position that cultural capital underlies the effect of social class on utilitarian preferences. To do so we measure social class and manipulate cultural capital. Our premise is that low class consumers prefer utilitarian products because functional products are more justifiable and fit better with having a low cultural capital identity. Thus, making high class consumers feel situationally low in cultural capital should increase their utilitarian choices. In a social class (measured) \times 2 (cue: control vs. low cultural capital) design, participants indicated preferences for utilitarian over hedonic products. We expect, in the control condition, higher relative utilitarian preferences among lower class participants, replicating Studies 1a, 1b, and 2. Cueing participants with a lack of cultural capital will increase utilitarian preferences among high class participants, rendering their preferences for utilitarian products similar to low class participants, whose chronic lack of cultural capital drives utilitarian choices.

Method

We recruited 241 MTurk workers (61.40% female, $M_{\text{age}} = 36.35$, $SD = 12.04$) for a small compensation. Participants first indicated their social class on the MacArthur scale. Next, we randomly assigned participants to a control condition or one in which we cued them with a lack of cultural capital. The cover story was that participants would take part in a portrait identification task to demonstrate their cultural and institutional knowledge. Their task was to identify the title and painter of the portrait. Participants randomly assigned in the control condition were shown an image of the Mona Lisa—an extremely well known painting. Being able to identify this painting and the artist does not provide diagnostic information that a person has cultural capital because the answer is obvious to most people. Participants cued to low cultural capital were shown a portrait of a similar, but unknown renaissance-style portrait. We indicated that people knowledgeable about culture should be able to identify this portrait. In reality, almost no one should be able to identify the portrait but, based on the cover story, the inability to identify this portrait should result in a person perceiving that they lack cultural capital. As manipulation check, participants indicated their cultural capital on the measure from Study 2.

Next, a product evaluation task adapted from Lu et al. (2016) contained our key dependent variable. To increase generalizability of Studies 1-2 results, participants made five product choices. Each choice comprised a pair of products—one described as utilitarian and the other as hedonic (a durable vs. stylish laptop, warm vs. fashionable coat, comfortable vs. trendy sofa, supportive vs. stylish workout gear, and a fuel-efficient vs. fast car). Product categories used in this study represented a mix of items at different price points entailing varying levels of purchase involvement. Importantly, within each product category, we indicated that the hedonic

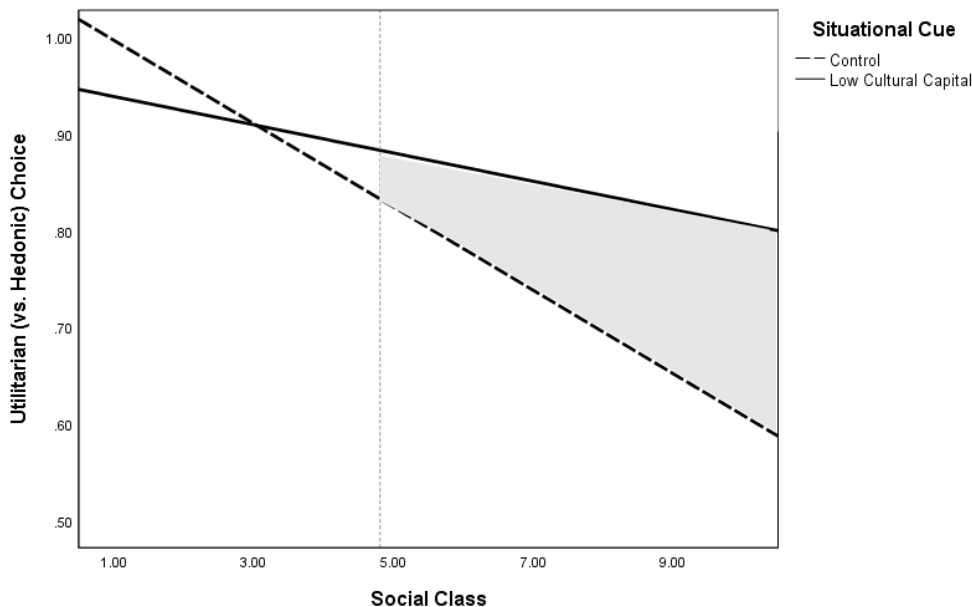
and utilitarian options were of equal price. In each pair, we coded a choice of the hedonic option as 0 and the utilitarian option as 1. We averaged across all five choices to create a utilitarian choice index (zero indicates exclusively hedonic choices; one indicates exclusively utilitarian choices). Finally, participants provided household income as a measure of economic capital.

Results

Manipulation check. Participants indicated having lower cultural capital when cued to having low cultural capital ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.57$) than not ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 1.41$; $t(239) = -3.53$, $p < .001$, $d = .46$). Thus, our cultural capital manipulation was successful.

Hypothesis testing. Regression analyses predicting utilitarian choice from social class, situational cue (control = 0, low cultural capital = 1), and their interaction, while controlling for economic capital (model 1, Hayes 2013) revealed that lower class is associated with more utilitarian choices ($b = -.04$, $SE = .01$, $t(236) = -4.79$, $p < .001$). The main effect of economic capital ($b = .01$, $SE = .01$, $t(236) = 1.55$, $p = .124$) was directional and consistent with past research, suggesting that lower economic capital is associated with more hedonic choices, however this effect failed to reach conventional levels of significance. The main effect of the cultural capital cue was also directional ($b = -.09$, $SE = .07$, $t(236) = -1.31$, $p = .192$) as expected, since low class utilitarian choices are chronically high and priming a lack of cultural capital should only increase utilitarian choices among high class participants. Importantly, as predicted, we observed a significant interaction between social class and the cultural capital cue ($b = .03$, $SE = .01$, $t(236) = 2.29$, $p = .023$). Floodlight analysis confirmed that cueing low cultural capital increased utilitarian choices among the high class (≥ 4.81), but not among low class participants chronically low in cultural capital.

Figure 5: Utilitarian Choices as a Function of Social Class and Cue of Low Cultural Capital (Study 3)



Note: The grey line and shaded area indicate the JN point at values ≥ 4.81 on the x-axis. The control and low cultural capital cued groups are significantly different at all values of social class above this point.

Discussion

In Study 3, replicating Studies 1-2, we found that low class consumers preferred utilitarian options to hedonic ones. While in prior studies we used a choice for a single product, in study 3 we used five different product categories each with a utilitarian versus hedonic option. Thus, we generalized results from Studies 1-2 to additional product categories, including outerwear, apparel, electronics, furniture, and cars. More importantly, we provided evidence of process by moderation that supports our theorizing—cuing participants to a lack of cultural capital increased utilitarian choices among high class people, making their choices similar to those of lower class consumers. This finding provides process evidence that a perceived lack of cultural capital increases preferences for utilitarian products (hypothesis 2) and this shift is especially notable among people who do not chronically feel they lack cultural capital. Also

consistent with our theorizing, people who report being lower class prefer utilitarian products (hypothesis 1) with or without reminders of their low cultural capital. This demonstrates that being low in social class is inherently related to a lack of cultural capital, as shown in Study 2. Again, these effects exist beyond the influence of economic capital (hypothesis 2).²

STUDY 4: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND IDENTITY FIT

Study 4 was designed to test our third hypothesis, which posits that cultural capital underlies low class preferences for utilitarian products because these choices are consistent with a low cultural capital identity. We seek to demonstrate that there is a fit between utilitarian consumption and low cultural capital identity. Thus, when social mobility goals are cued, we expect the effect will be reversed. Rather than make utilitarian choices that represent a cultural fit, we expect they will prefer hedonic consumption. To test hypothesis 3, Study 4 used a 2 (social class: low vs. high) \times 2 (identity: fit vs. growth) between subjects design.

Method

We recruited 436 adults on the CloudResearch participant-sourcing platform to complete a short study (67.2% female; $M_{age} = 45.39$, $SD = 17.98$). First, they completed a social class manipulation similar to the one used in study 1b. Participants assigned to the low social class condition compared and contrasted themselves to those highest in social class. Those assigned to the high social class condition compared themselves to those lowest in social class. As a manipulation check, they responded to measures of social class and economic capital from prior studies. Next, they were told that they would view one of two short YouTube food videos. One

was a video about useful cooking hacks (a utilitarian option), and the other about enjoyable meals (a hedonic option). In the fit condition, participants were asked which video someone like them would prefer to watch (1 = enjoyable meals, 7 = useful cooking hacks). In the growth condition, they were asked which video someone like them—who is seeking to move up the social ladder—would prefer to watch. Then, they chose a video to actually watch (0 = enjoyable meals, 1 = useful cooking hacks). After watching the video of their choice, they rated it in terms of “Useful, practical, or functional” and “Enjoyable, pleasant, or fun” (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). “Enjoyable, pleasant, or fun” was reverse scored and combined with “Useful, practical, or functional” for a utilitarian (vs. hedonic) index. Finally, they provided household income—representing economic capital.

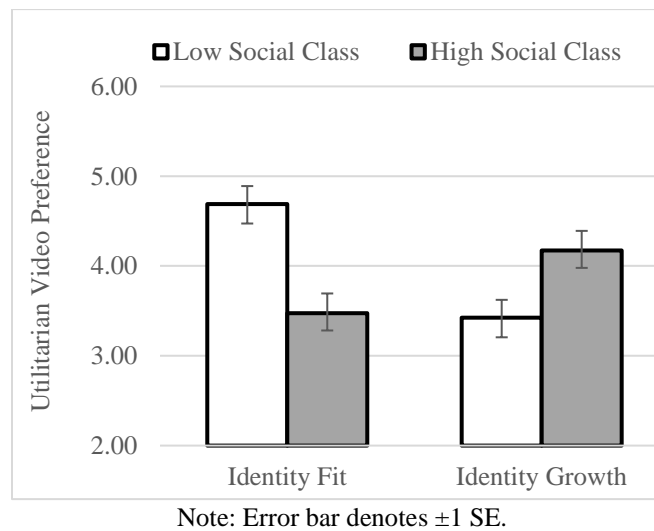
Results

Manipulation checks. Participants assigned to the low class condition indicated having lower class on the 10-rung ladder ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 2.22$) than those in the high class group ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 2.22$; $t(434) = 2.77$, $p = .028$, $d = .21$), confirming our successful manipulation of social class. Confirming the positioning of the videos, the 47.71 percent (208/436) of participants who viewed the utilitarian video rated their choice more utilitarian and less hedonic ($M = -.04$, $SD = .38$) compared to the 52.29 percent (228/436) of participants who viewed the hedonic video ($M = -.37$, $SD = .74$; $t(434) = 5.87$, $p < .001$, $d = .56$).

Video preference. A 2 (social class: low vs. high) \times 2 (identity: fit vs. growth) ANCOVA was run with preference for the utilitarian video as the dependent variable and household income included as a control variable. The main effects of economic capital and the identity manipulation were non-significant (both $ps > .442$), but the main effect of the social class

manipulation approached significance at the conventional .05-level ($F(1, 431) = 3.02, p = .083, \eta^2 = .01$). Importantly, the interaction of the social class and identity manipulations was significant ($F(1, 431) = 7.43, p = .007, \eta^2 = .02$). Planned contrasts showed that among the low class group, cueing identity fit increased preference for the utilitarian choice ($M = 4.67, SE = .20$) compared to cueing identity growth ($M = 3.95, SE = .22; F(1, 431) = 6.57, p = .011$). Within the high class group, this difference was not significant ($M_{fit} = 3.75, SE = .22$ vs. $M_{mobility} = 4.15, SE = .19; p = .217$). Furthermore, when making identity fit choices, participants in the low social class group ($M = 4.67, SE = .20$) preferred the utilitarian video more than those in the high class group ($M = .75, SE = .22; F(1, 431) = 10.18, p = .002$). Conversely, when participants aimed for identity growth, there was no difference in video preference between those in the low class group ($M = 3.95, SE = .22$) compared to the high class group ($M = 4.15, SE = .19; p = .532$). Results on the choice measure revealed similar effects (see Web Appendix).

Figure 6: Utilitarian (vs. Hedonic) Video Preference as a Function of Social Class and Identity Goals (Study 4)



Discussion

Results from Study 4 replicate our findings in support of hypothesis 1—that low class consumers prefer utilitarian to hedonic consumption choices. Additionally, by manipulating the consumption motive underlying participants' choices, we demonstrate that low social class preferences for utilitarian consumption emerge because these choices represent a fit between the low cultural capital identity and utilitarian consumption. The effect was reversed when participants were cued with identity improvement goals, such that lower class consumers with less cultural capital preferred hedonic consumption. This reversal of the effect under conditions of identity improvement goals suggest that low class consumers use hedonic consumption as a means to achieve upward social mobility by mimicking the behaviors of high class consumers.

Study 4 has an additional benefit of employing real consumption (online video views) as the dependent measure. Watching online videos represents real-world choice. Our findings in this study thus contribute to the ecological validity of our stance that lower class consumers prefer utilitarian over hedonic consumption. Study 5 was designed to further validate this position with a field study using real consumers in an actual shopping setting.

STUDY 5: FIELD EXPERIMENT

Having demonstrated that lower class consumers prefer utilitarian over hedonic product choices (Studies 1a and 1b) due to a perceived lack of cultural (vs. economic) capital (Studies 2 and 3), because these choices fit with their identity (Study 4); the present study was designed to provide an ecologically valid demonstration of our theorizing. A field experiment tests our theorizing in a context where we have little control over environmental factors, with actual consumer choices, in a realistic setting highly relevant to marketing practitioners and policy

makers alike. We utilized a single factor, between-subjects design with three levels (lacking cultural capital vs. lacking economic capital vs. control), in which shoppers were asked to make real choices between a hedonic and utilitarian product. We predict that those primed with a lack of cultural capital will have an increased preference for utilitarian over hedonic products, in line with the findings from Studies 1-4.

Method

Sample and Procedure. We approached 100 adult shoppers at a grocery store. Data of five participants were removed from our analysis because they participated as a group and were disruptive of one another. One additional data point was removed because of an apparent learning disability that impaired ability to easily process the information presented. Thus, we had a final sample of 94 participants (41.5% female).

Data were collected in front of a grocery store in a low-income (i.e., low economic capital) neighborhood in Nashville, TN. Shoppers were approached as they walked towards the entrance of the grocery store and given the choice of either a functional black-ink pen or a fun purple-ink pen. The experimenter greeted the participant and said “Today we were giving every shopper a free gift.” In the control condition, the experimenter continued, “You can choose either this useful black pen or this fun purple pen.” In the condition where participants were cued with a lack of cultural capital, the experimenter said, “The reason for the free gift is we understand that these days being classy can be difficult,” before offering the two options. In the condition where participants were cued with a lack of economic capital, the experimenter instead noted that “The reason for the free gift is that we understand that money can be tight these days,” before offering the two options.

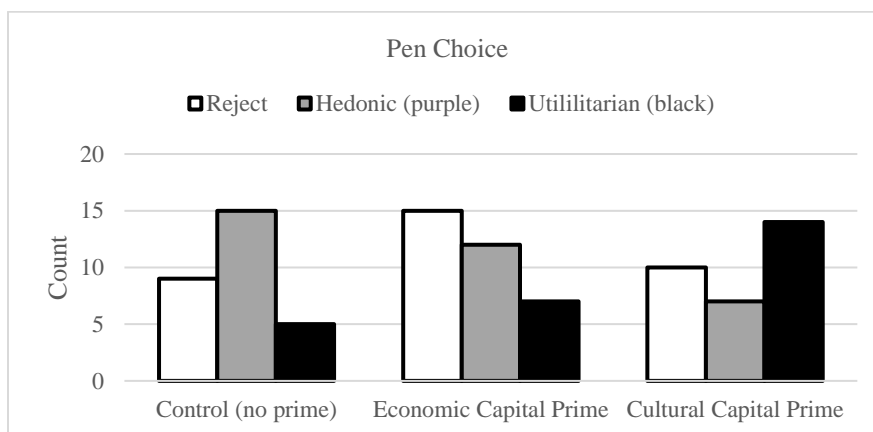
Results and Discussion

Overall, 27.66% (26/94) of the consumers chose the utilitarian pen, 36.17% (34/94) chose the hedonic pen, and 36.17% (34/94) declined a pen. First, with respect to utilitarian choices and crucial to our theorizing, we found that priming a lack of cultural capital increased the proportion of consumers making a utilitarian choice (14/31) compared to the no-cue control condition (5/29; $z = 2.32, p = .023$). Equally crucial to our theorizing, priming a lack of cultural capital also increased proportion of consumers making a utilitarian choice compared to priming a lack of economic capital (7/34; $z = 2.12, p = .034$). The proportion of consumers making a utilitarian choice did not differ when comparing the control condition and the condition cueing a lack of economic capital ($z = 0.34, p = .736$). These results thus show that the control and economic constraint conditions are similar in their preferences for the utilitarian pen and cueing cultural capital constraints increases choice of the utilitarian pen. Furthermore, with respect to hedonic choices, we also found that proportion of consumers making a hedonic choice did not differ when comparing the control condition (15/29) and the condition cueing a lack of economic capital (12/34; $z = 1.31, p = .189$). Priming a lack of cultural capital reduced proportion of consumers making a hedonic choice (7/31) compared to the control condition (15/29; $z = 2.34, p = .019$) and the lack of economic capital condition, though this latter difference was not significant (12/34; $z = 1.13, p = .260$).

Finally, consumers in the control group were more likely to make a hedonic (15/29) compared to utilitarian choice (5/29; $z = 2.76, p = .006$), as were participants primed with economic constraints ($z = 1.35, p = .177$), though this latter effect did not reach significance. Thus, in general, the hedonic pen was preferred by our shoppers. Notably, this preference

reversed among shoppers cued with a lack of cultural capital who were more likely to make a utilitarian (14/31) compared to hedonic choice (7/31; $z = 1.88, p = .061$). These results are consistent with the findings from studies 1-4, showing that when consumers' low cultural capital is made salient, they make more utilitarian choices consistent with that low class identity. Thus, in an ecologically valid field environment, economically constrained shoppers generally preferred the immediate gratification of hedonic products, which is consistent with past research (Cannon, Goldsmith, and Roux 2018; Griskevicius et al. 2011b; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016; Shah et al. 2012). However, cueing a lack of cultural capital increased utilitarian over hedonic choices. Notably, reminding shoppers they are economically constrained reduced their willingness to choose a gift at all, suggesting such reminders reduce willingness of consumers to accept help from others.

Figure 7: Product Choice as Function of Prime (Study 5)



GENERAL DISCUSSION

Social class is an important determinant of the choices consumers make. Low class consumers have fewer economic resources, and economic constraints are known to increase a

proximal focus and attention to immediate over future concerns. As a result, consumers facing economic constraints become more likely to seek immediate rewards (Cannon, Goldsmith, and Roux 2018; Griskevicius et al. 2011b; Mittal and Griskevicius 2016; Shah et al. 2012). Facing economic constraints can also feel cognitively burdensome (Shah et al. 2015), and the resulting cognitive depletion can additionally reduce the tendency to engage in responsible choices that benefit a person long-term (Griskevicius et al. 2011a/b, 2013; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014; Weinberger et al. 2017). These views suggest that people facing economic constraints, and are thus low social class consumers, may be more likely to make hedonic over utilitarian choices, as the former are immediately rewarding. Making hedonic choices could also help people facing economic constraints to signal status to others and facilitate social mobility (Dubois, Rucker, and Galinsky 2012; Mazzocco et al. 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2008). Thus, because of the link between economic constraints and social class, and between economic constraints and hedonic choice, it would be reasonable to associate lower class consumers with more hedonic choices.

However, social class encompasses not only the economic status of a consumer but also socio-cultural aspects. The socio-cultural aspect of class refers to where consumers fit in the social hierarchy based on intangibles, such as their social connections and cultural capital—internalized knowledge, tastes, behaviors, and competence signaling their place within the social hierarchy (Bourdieu 1987; Stephens and Townsend 2013; Saatcioglu and Ozanne 2013; Üstüner and Holt 2010). We theorized that this duality could result in effects on consumer choice that differ from those that might be predicted from the purely economic perspective of social class. When consumers infer that they lack cultural capital, they are more likely to engage in self-confirming behaviors befitting of their low class identity as such choices are more justifiable

(Berger and Ward, 2010). Thus, low class consumers are more likely to make utilitarian rather than hedonic choices because they are consistent with their constrained cultural capital.

We tested our theorizing across six studies. In study 1a, we measured social class and economic capital. We showed that, controlling for economic capital, lower class consumers prefer utilitarian to hedonic products. Study 1b replicated this effect and established causality with a manipulation of social class. In Study 2, we established the underlying role of perceived cultural capital in the relationship between low social class and preferences for utilitarian products via mediation. We showed low social class results in increased utilitarian preferences to the extent consumers perceive they are constrained in cultural capital, but not economic capital. In Study 3, we provided further evidence for the underlying role of perceived cultural capital in the relationship between low social class and preferences for utilitarian products via moderation. We found higher class participants made to feel low in cultural capital match the behaviors of low class consumers that feel chronically low in cultural capital. In Study 4, we additionally demonstrated that cultural capital underlies the relationship between low social class and utilitarian consumption because utilitarian choices are more practical and thus fit with consumers' lower class identity. When participants were asked to make choices that would constitute identity improvement goals, those who were low in class and thus low in cultural capital instead made more hedonic choices consistent with a high class identity. We observed this effect using real choices. Finally, Study 5 used a simple field experiment to demonstrate ecological validity of our theory by cueing shoppers with a lack of cultural capital (vs. economic capital vs. control) in a realistic consumption setting—a grocery store. Importantly, this study also showed the practical use of cultural capital primes in shifting consumers' choices.

Overall, across these six studies, we employed 1,359 participants and measured and manipulated both social class and cultural capital. We also employed nine different dependent variables representing a variety of consumption contexts and price points (apartment choice, chocolate, coat, laptop, sofa, workout gear, car, online videos, and pens) and across studies we held products constant while framing them as either hedonic or utilitarian. We demonstrated process by mediating the effects of social class through cultural capital. We also demonstrated process by moderating the effects of social class with a manipulation of cultural capital. Also, by manipulating consumption goals, we demonstrated that utilitarian choices as self-affirming for a low cultural capital identity. Finally, we showed that these effects are robust and ecologically valid through multiple replications, including a real choice study and a field experiment.

Theoretical Implications

The findings reported in this research are of theoretical importance for several reasons. Most importantly, we disentangle two aspects of social class—the economic from the socio-cultural—and show effects that diverge from assumptions based on previously reported effects of economic deprivation on consumer choice. Past research focused on the economic constraints associated with low social class would suggest that lacking economic capital might make consumer choices more hedonic. For example, some studies showed that financial constraints increase myopia because financially constrained people have less to look forward to in the future and more to worry about in the present (Griskevicius et al. 2011a/b, 2013; Mittal and Griskevicius 2014). Since hedonic choices align more with immediate enjoyment, people experiencing financial constraints may be more likely to engage in hedonic choices (Shah et al. 2015; Weinberger et al. 2017). A second stream of research showed that financially constrained

consumers have many worries that cause cognitive burdens (Hamilton et al. 2019). The inability to think clearly about their future interests can result in more hedonic choices (Shah et al. 2012). A third stream of research proposed that financial constraints highlight scarcity of resources and prompt consumers to focus on garnering financial resources and gains (Cannon, Goldsmith, and Roux 2018; Roux, Goldsmith, and Bonezzi 2015). Since hedonic products are associated with gains and reward, consumers seeking gains may seek hedonic products. A fourth set of studies investigated how feeling powerless (i.e., perceived lack of control over resources, similar to what low class consumers feel) impacts choice and found such consumers seek status-signaling products (Dubois et al. 2012; Mazzocco et al. 2012; Rucker and Galinsky 2008), which can include hedonic purchases. All of these factors associated with economic constraints and low power are associated with having low social class, and therefore one prediction could be that lower class consumers are likely to make more hedonic choices.

In contrast to these findings, we proposed and found that low class consumers experience a lack of cultural capital. Because low cultural capital is associated with more pragmatic tastes and behaviors, utilitarian preference and choices are self-affirming for these consumers. We thus broadened the understanding of the effects of social class on consumption choices in novel directions and showed that low class does not increase hedonic choice, as might be suggested by past research. The effects of class on choice are reflective of consumers' perceived cultural capital. Making lower class consumers aware of their economic constraints could potentially increase their hedonic choices, though we find limited support of this. However, beyond their economic constraints, lower class consumers face a chronic salience of cultural capital constraints and utilitarian choices are more justifiable choices that fit with their lower class identity. We also aligned our findings with existing research by showing that when low class

consumers seek social mobility, they engage in more hedonic choices as a means to attain upward social mobility—presumably because they view these choices consistent with a high cultural capital. Ultimately, the effects of social class on choice will depend on whether economic or socio-cultural aspects of class are more salient, and on the identity goals of the consumer.

Marketing, Societal, and Policy Implications

Our studies are important for strategic marketing decisions. First, they highlight how to target different types of consumers for different products. Of course, inherently hedonic products may be more suited for high class consumers who have the financial means to make purchases merely for the sake of pleasure, and firms targeting these consumers would benefit more from more hedonic positioning—fun, pleasurable, exciting. Firms targeting low class consumers would benefit more from describing products in utilitarian terms—practical, useful, efficient, and responsible. Firms could frame the same product as more hedonic or more utilitarian based on social class of targeted consumers. When targeting low class consumers with hedonic products, firms could also highlight status-signaling (a form of identity improvement) through displays of cultural capital over economic capital needs (e.g., price discounts). Thus, firms can adjust their messaging for greater impact on target consumers by making salient the need for cultural capital or economic capital, and the utilitarian or hedonic product benefits.

That firms may be able to persuade vulnerable lower class consumers to buy their products through simple framing also raises concerns from a policy and societal perspective. Our results provide policy makers with insight into how to monitor against predatory practices. For instance, predatory lenders could position themselves as a means for low class consumers to

meet their utilitarian goals. Policy makers charged with protecting consumers should be wary of actions that unjustly and unnecessarily appeal to low class consumers. Additionally, making consumers aware of their susceptibility to such messaging might also enhance their ability to reject persuasive appeals related to product offerings that are not in their best interests. Likewise, making high class consumers aware of their susceptibility to messaging framed in hedonic terms may reduce unnecessary hedonic purchases, helping to reduce overconsumption and waste.

Future Research

On their own, economic constraints are insufficient to explain consumer choice, while considering the effects of cultural capital can offer rich insights into consumer choice. However, social capital—a person’s connections and group memberships—is yet another form of capital that results from social class (Bourdieu 1986), and its role within the context of class and decision-making is not yet fully understood. One possible extension of this research is an exploration of the explanatory power of social capital on choice. For example, research might seek to understand how dyadic interactions between consumers from the same versus other levels of social class lead to divergent choice outcomes.

While this and other important investigations await future research, the present research provides a deeper understanding of the influence of an understudied aspect of social class—cultural capital—on consumer choice. Income and accumulated wealth (i.e., economic capital) indeed play an important role in dictating what consumers can afford to buy, however, a consumer’s cultural capital has a strong influence on the development of their product preferences. Holding prices constant, lower class consumers still prefer utilitarian products because these fit with their cultural identity. The effects of cultural capital on choice appear to be

stronger than the effects of economic capital, though this premise deserves further investigation and specification of additional boundary conditions. Importantly, that the influence of cultural capital can be invariant over economic capital does suggest that even if a consumer's financial situation were to change in the short term, their preference in the long term will not change if cultural capital does not change as well.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ In this study and all other reported studies, not controlling for economic capital results in near identical results to those reported after controlling for a possible influence of economic capital. We control for economic capital in all studies for greater confidence that perceived cultural rather than economic capital accounts for our results.

² See web appendix further data that the effect of cultural capital on choice is invariant to economic capital.

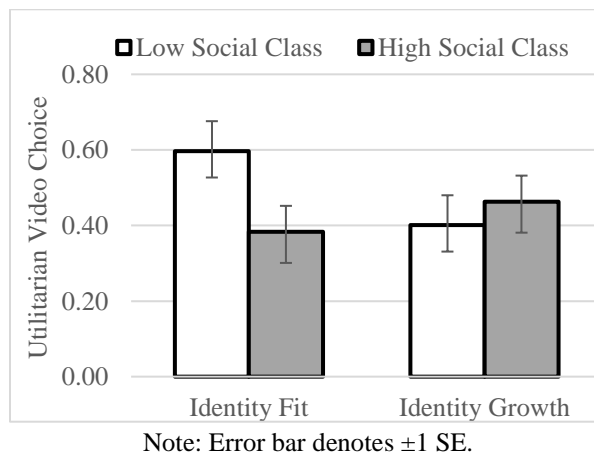
WEB APPENDIX

Supplemental Analysis for Study 4: *Cultural Capital and Identity Fit*

In study 4, after the social class and identity fit (vs. growth) manipulations, then rating their preferences, participants chose a video to watch (0 = enjoyable meals, 1 = useful cooking hacks). This supplemental analysis uses binary choice the dependent variable.

A binary logistic regression was run to test the video choice that participants made as the outcome, a more realistic dependent measure. This choice is representative of real behavior, given that participants actually selected a video to watch as they would in a real-world online consumption setting. After controlling for economic capital (income: $p = .549$), neither the direct effect of social class nor the identity condition was significant (both $ps > .451$). The interaction of social class and identity on video choice was marginally significant ($b = 1.12$, $SE = .62$, $Wald = 3.34$, $p = .068$). These results on are similar to the effects on preferences reported in study 4 within the main document.

Utilitarian (vs. Hedonic) Video Choice as a Function of Social Class and Identity Goals (Study 4)



Supplemental Study: Levels of Economic Capital

Our objective in this study was two-fold: 1) to replicate the finding from study 3 that lowering cultural capital increases utilitarian preferences for high class consumers; and 2) to show this effect is invariant to economic capital—lower economic capital alone does not also increase utilitarian preferences. Notably, we found our effects in studies 1a, 1b, and 3 after controlling for economic capital (income). Still, varying the level of economic capital by collecting data from a low and a high-income sample allows us to further demonstrate the independence of the effects of cultural capital from those of economic capital.

We used a 2 (economic capital: high vs. low) \times 2 (cultural capital: low vs. control) between-subjects design in which participants made choices between hedonic and utilitarian products. We predict only a main effect such that lowering cultural capital will increase utilitarian preferences, regardless of levels of economic capital. This prediction is different from study 3 where we measured social class—a broader construct than economic capital alone because it includes cultural and economic capital—and observed an interaction such that lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices only among those of high class. Low class identities are inherently low in cultural capital and thus priming low cultural capital does not further increase their utilitarian choices. In the present study, if the effects of economic capital on choice are independent of cultural capital, then regardless of level of economic capital, lowering cultural capital will increase utilitarian choices among consumers.

Method

We recruited 241 adults on Amazon MTurk to complete a short online study (63.5% female, $M_{age} = 42.15$, $SD = 13.81$). We simultaneously recruited two samples based on their self-

reported household incomes: a high economic capital group with income greater than \$80,000 and a low economic capital group with income less than \$40,000. These income levels are well over or under the 2017 median household income of \$61,937 in the U.S. respectively (U.S. Census 2019). Using a premium filter in MTurk allowed us to specifically target workers who had previously responded to a set of screener questions, including household income. Workers whose incomes did not fall within these pre-selected ranges did not qualify for the study and were not able to view the recruitment ad we posted for the study.

Participants who qualified for the study completed a situational cue of cultural capital task identical to the one we employed in study 3. As a manipulation check, participants completed questions reflecting their cultural capital used in study 2 and 3. We then asked them to complete the same product selection task from study 3.

Results and Discussion

Manipulation check. A 2 (cultural capital) \times 2 (economic capital) ANOVA on the cultural capital manipulation check items revealed only a significant main effect of cultural capital ($F(1, 236) = 14.79, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .06$; other $ps > .476$). This demonstrates that our cultural capital manipulation was successful. Participants assigned to the cue of low cultural capital indicated having lower cultural capital ($M = 3.79, SD = 1.48$) than those assigned to the baseline cultural capital condition ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.37$) regardless of their economic capital.

Hypothesis testing. A 2 (cultural capital) \times 2 (economic capital) ANOVA on utilitarian preferences revealed that, as we expected, economic capital did not influence choice ($p = .745$), nor did an interaction emerge between economic and cultural capital ($p = .811$). Only the expected main effect of cultural capital emerged ($F(1, 236) = 8.53, p = .004, \eta^2 = .04$), indicating

that a perceived lack of cultural capital increased choice of utilitarian over hedonic products.

Planned contrasts showed that within the low economic capital group, lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices ($M = .91$, $SD = .16$) compared to baseline ($M = .84$, $SD = .21$; $F(1, 237) = 4.54$, $p = .034$). A similar pattern of results was found in the high economic capital group—lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices among them as well ($M = .92$, $SD = .15$) compared to baseline ($M = .84$, $SD = .20$; $F(1, 237) = 4.65$, $p = .032$).

Thus, regardless of economic capital, we found that lowering cultural capital increased utilitarian choices. These results replicate our findings from study 3, showing that situationally lowering cultural capital increases utilitarian choices among populations not chronically considered low in cultural capital. While high class consumers do not feel chronically low in cultural capital in study 3 and are thus impacted by the situational cue, the results of present study showed that economic capital, high or low, also does not determine chronic accessibility of thoughts related to cultural capital. In further support of hypotheses 2, we find that it is not a consumer's economic capital, but rather their cultural capital that increases their preferences for utilitarian over hedonic choices.