

Exploring the Diverse Impact of Cultural Participation on Happiness: The Moderating Influence of Social Capital and Subjective Social Status

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This empirical study delves into the nuanced dynamics of the relationship between cultural participation and subjective well-being, considering the moderating influences of social capital and subjective social status. While previous research has established a positive connection between cultural engagement and life satisfaction and health, this study uniquely focuses on unraveling variations in this relationship among individuals in society. Through multilevel analysis, it demonstrates that broad cultural participation significantly contributes to subjective well-being, with variations based on individuals' social connections and subjective social status. To be specific, it is revealed that diverse cultural consumption exerts a more pronounced positive impact on socially isolated individuals, those perceiving lower social cohesion in their neighborhoods, individuals with lower social status, and residents of neighborhoods characterized by lower social status. The impact of cultural participation on subjective well-being differs among individuals, with those who are comparatively disadvantaged in terms of both social capital and socioeconomic status receiving greater benefits.

Keywords: *subjective well-being; cultural participation; cultural consumption; social capital; subjective social status*

Introduction

Over the past few decades, a growing body of evidence has substantiated the positive impact of cultural, artistic, and leisure activities on both health and life satisfaction. A wide array of activities encompassing participation in cultural, artistic, and sporting events, exploring cultural heritage sites, attending the cinema, or engaging in performing arts have been universally acknowledged as promoting well-being and fostering a sense of fulfillment within diverse societies. As Schmiedeberg and Schröder (2016) have astutely observed, leisure activities, given their voluntary and non-essential nature, intuitively appear conducive to enhancing happiness. Cultural participation holds the potential to enhance individual well-being to a considerable extent, primarily due to being largely within one's personal control, as compared to other sources of life satisfaction (Brown, MacDonald and Mitchell 2015). Furthermore, it is worth noting that satisfaction derived from experiential purchases including cultural and leisure activities, as opposed to acquiring necessities and material possessions, is particularly less susceptible to adaptation (Choung, Pak and Chatterjee 2020).

Quality of life is elevated through cultural and leisure pursuits, providing people with avenues to fulfill their essential values and needs (Brajša-Žganec et al. 2011). Cultural participation is beneficial to well-being as it provides meaningful experiences that assist individuals in developing and thriving in their lives. One of the initial studies that examined the relationship between cultural consumption and health was conducted in Sweden (Konlaan, Bygren and Johansson 2000). Subsequent research endeavors have consistently reported a substantial and positive correlation between engagement in cultural activities and both life satisfaction (Michalos and Kahlke 2010; Brajša-Žganec, Merkaš and Šverko 2011; Toepoel 2011; Grossi et al. 2012; Brown et al. 2015; Blessi et al. 2016; Schmiedeberg and Schröder 2016; Wheatley and Bickerton 2017; 2019; Hand 2018; Reyes-Martínez et al. 2020; Bertacchini et al. 2021; Nielsen et al. 2021) and health (Wilkinson et al. 2007; Nummela et al. 2008; Bygren et al. 2009a; 2009b; Cuyppers et al. 2012; Hansen et al. 2015). Individuals who actively participate in various cultural events tend to experience higher levels of life satisfaction and even exhibit increased longevity compared to those who engage in such activities infrequently.

While the earlier findings robustly support the positive relationship between cultural activities and well-being, two limitations emerge. First, there is a lack of investigation into the potential correlation between health and

happiness. Health is acknowledged as a crucial determinant of happiness (Grossi et al. 2012: 131). Nevertheless, many studies tend to overlook this aspect, neglecting it as a control variable. Second, the exact mechanisms underlying this relationship remain somewhat equivocal. One theoretical approach found in prior literature examines the positive impact of cultural participation on individuals' lives by emphasizing the cognitive stimulation and experiences facilitated through engagement with cultural products. Artistic and cultural objects offer individuals the opportunity to transcend reality, providing benefits to both individuals and society, as noted by Vuyk (2010: 177). Encountering "artistic imagination," as discussed by Totterdell and Poerio (2020), allows individuals to escape constraints, alleviate psychological distress, and derive rewarding enjoyment. The comprehensive psychological pathway through which leisure activities enhance subjective well-being encompasses five core mechanisms: detachment-recovery, autonomy, mastery, meaning, and affiliation (Newman, Tay, and Diener 2013). However, it is essential to recognize that this understanding may not universally apply to all individuals. It is highly improbable that cultural participation has a uniform effect on personal well-being across the entire population. Rather than making generalized assumptions about how cultural participation affects the human mind, we can specify its mechanisms in terms of social circumstances, such as social networks and social status, allowing us to anticipate and observe various modes of influence.

On one hand, scholars have endeavored to delineate the social dimension of cultural and leisure activities as a pivotal component that contributes to both health and happiness. Several studies have shown that specific leisure activities, such as sports participation and attendance at art events, have a positive impact on health (Konlaan et al. 2000; Wilkinson et al. 2007; Brown et al. 2015; Wheatley and Bickerton 2019; Lee, Lin and Hung 2021). However, it is worth noting that activities like reading (Brown et al. 2015), internet use, or watching TV can have negative effects on life satisfaction (Schmiedeberg and Schröder 2016). This suggests that cultural activities are not necessarily conducive to well-being when they fail to facilitate social interaction and connectedness among individuals. Nevertheless, existing research has paid scant attention to the procedures through which social capital or connectedness—unevenly distributed resources among people—influence the relationship between cultural and leisure activities and physical or psychological well-being.

On the other hand, there has been limited consideration of the intricate relationship between cultural participation and social status. From a

sociological standpoint, longstanding theories (Veblen [1899]1994; Weber 1948; Bourdieu 1984) have conceptualized culture and leisure as products of societal inequality. A central tenet of this perspective posits that the varied functions and impacts of diverse cultural practices arise from the differential endowment of resources or capitals among the population. As a result, there exists substantial skepticism regarding whether cultural participation yields uniform benefits in terms of life satisfaction and health for all members of society. It is possible that the initial findings on the association between cultural participation and health, primarily derived from Scandinavian countries with relatively egalitarian societies, may not be universally applicable to relatively unequal societies. In this context, South Korea, the focus of this study, offers an appropriate research backdrop as here cultural pursuits are seldom emphasized as primary objectives within social welfare policies (Hyun et al. 2008), and access to diverse cultural amenities and services largely depends on individual socioeconomic status and geographical proximity.

This research contributes to the current body of knowledge by exploring underexamined mechanisms in the discourse surrounding the diverse effects of cultural participation. While cultural and artistic consumption serve as avenues for self-expression and experiences transcending reality within individuals, two key factors—social networks and social status—play crucial roles in either enhancing or constraining the positive impacts of cultural participation. The underlying assumption is that a more diverse engagement in cultural activities should lead to increased well-being, but these effects are contingent on an individual's social capital and social status. This research reveals that the favorable influence of cultural participation may be attenuated among individuals who are socially well-embedded and content with their socioeconomic status. In other words, cultural participation seems to exert a stronger positive influence on life satisfaction among individuals with constricted social capital in their networks and residential areas—those experiencing relative social distress when comparing themselves and their neighborhoods to the broader society.

Cultural participation and social capital

The discourse concerning the social advantages of cultural participation finds its foundation in the concept of social capital and its potential ramifications for both individuals and society (Hampshire and Matthijsse 2010; Toepoel 2011; Brown et al. 2015; Kwon and Park 2017; Hand 2018; Reyes-Martínez et

al. 2020; Zhou and Cao 2020; Lee et al. 2021; Nielsen et al. 2021). Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of the term “social capital” within academic literature, as it encompasses a range of specific meanings and measurement approaches. Despite ongoing debates concerning its precise definition, social capital comprises valuable assets, including information, emotional support, instrumental assistance, and more. These resources are embedded within interpersonal connections, group affiliations, and community memberships, making them accessible and employable (Fujiwara and Kawachi 2008). Hence, when scholars posit that leisure or cultural participation may contribute to the cultivation of social capital, with potential positive implications for life satisfaction, they may be indicating this spectrum of possible outcomes.

Previous studies have highlighted cultural participation as a potential facilitator of the relationship between social capital and life satisfaction (Zhong and Mitchell 2010; Hand 2018). For instance, research conducted in Taiwan indicates that attending museums and galleries can lead to higher life satisfaction among adults, primarily through enhanced interpersonal relationships and social interactions (Lee et al. 2021). Cultural participation fulfills the need for social inclusion and integration, which is known to be relevant to higher life satisfaction (Toepoel 2011; Kwon and Park 2017). Additionally, it has been shown to strengthen the impact of social trust on health among older adults (Zhou and Cao 2020). Engaging in out-of-school leisure activities has been found to foster social connections and social integration, increase opportunities for identity-related exploration, and positively influence health behaviors among youths (Borraccino et al. 2020). Further evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that visiting art events, museums, or historical sites consistently has a positive effect on life satisfaction, regardless of the frequency of these activities (Wheatley and Bickerton 2017, 2019). While there may be variation in the beneficial impact of different cultural and leisure activities, diverse forms of cultural participation have been associated with subjective well-being (Wilkinson et al. 2007; Toepoel 2011; Brown et al. 2015; Kwon and Park 2017; Bertacchini et al. 2021). This implies that a broader range of cultural participation opportunities provides individuals with more chances for meaningful social interactions.

However, a limitation prevalent in the extant literature is the tendency to assume the role of social capital in mediating the relationship between cultural activities and happiness or health, rather than elucidating specific underlying patterns. While there is a scarcity of empirical evidence

convincingly establishing the substantial impact of cultural participation on well-being, independent of social capital, a consistent positive link between cultural participation and subjective well-being is observed, even after controlling for social network and participation measures (Reyes-Martínez et al. 2020). Furthermore, it has been noted that the positive impact of leisure activities is more pronounced among individuals experiencing relative deficits in social connectedness at work or school (Nielsen et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the attention devoted to unraveling the exact mechanisms underpinning the relationships among cultural participation, social capital, and life satisfaction remains somewhat constrained.

Although voluminous evidence has been amassed across diverse societies, there persists a substantial need to address the somewhat unexplored question of whether social capital plays a role in shaping the connection between cultural participation and psychological well-being. For instance, can cultural participation yield distinct benefits beyond those associated with social capital? Is cultural participation still salubrious to psychological well-being when individual health is controlled? Does cultural participation offer support to individuals lacking in social networks? The existing literature has not adequately addressed these issues, emphasizing the necessity of further research to develop a more comprehensive understanding of these intricate relationships.

Cultural participation and social status

In academic discourse, exploring the potential benefits of cultural and recreational activities for overall well-being often reveals the challenge that cultural participation is predominantly linked to societal inequalities. Scholars have recognized the presence of social differentiation in the health benefits of cultural participation, especially among specific population subgroups defined by age and gender (Nummela et al. 2008; Cuypers et al. 2012; Hansen et al. 2015). However, it is important to note that certain forms of art activities, often referred to as “highbrow culture,” which encompass visual and performing arts, may not uniformly resonate with all segments of society (Bygren et al. 2009a). Participation in such art forms may yield greater benefits for specific demographic groups, including females, individuals of white ethnicity, and those with higher levels of education within societies (Hampshire and Matthijsse 2010; Weziak-Bialowolska and Bialowolski 2016; Daykin et al. 2018).

Crucially, we can invoke a comprehensive sociological framework that

construes cultural tastes and choices as systematically shaped by social structures (Veblen [1899]1994; Weber 1948; Bourdieu 1984). In essence, cultural consumption often becomes entwined with status-based practices or distinctions among individuals. While the presence of class or status-related markers associated with certain “highbrow” cultural activities may have diminished in contemporary societies, they have not disappeared entirely (Gerhards, Hans and Mutz 2013). Rather, the extent to which social status is intertwined with cultural inequality depends on the societal context. For example, egalitarian and democratic social norms often encourage cultural tolerance within societies, rather than fostering explicit and elitist distinctions based on tastes or lifestyles among upper-middle-class members (Jarness and Friedman 2017). While such circumstances may not entirely prevent the emergence of new forms of distinction (Prieur and Savage 2013), they can contribute to the decoupling of certain traditional highbrow genres from status-based strategies. The role of cultural dislikes and symbolic exclusion has become less popular among racially diverse and younger generations in the American population (Lizardo and Skiles 2016). This trend, which multiplies the axes of cultural stratification from predominant class to subgroups based on age, ethnicity, or gender within societies, can weaken the correspondence between cultural engagement and social structure.

Meanwhile, cultural participation may even emerge as a pivotal component of social stratification, particularly in contexts where societal inequality fuels status competitions within the population. If cultural participation exhibits a strong correlation with social class or status and is readily utilized as a means of cultural distinction, its potential positive influence on the wider population might be restricted. Empirical evidence has suggested that societal inequality can hinder cultural participation among European citizens (Szlendak and Karwacki 2012). In highly unequal societies, individuals often associate upward social mobility and success primarily with the acquisition of material wealth rather than cultural enrichment. Expanding upon the concept of cultural participation and its relationship to social status, this raises questions about the consistency of cultural engagement’s impact on well-being across societies characterized by varying degrees of societal inequality.

Nevertheless, there is limited discussion about whether social status plays a role in explaining variations in the connection between cultural consumption and life satisfaction. An insightful study reveals that while overall cultural consumption yields greater benefits for the low-income group, specific activities such as attending performing arts events and

cinemas tend to provide higher benefits to the high-income group in comparison to their low-income counterparts (Lee and Heo 2020). It has been also reported that the impact of arts attendance on happiness is more pronounced among individuals in relatively unhappy circumstances, suggesting that the inherent benefits of arts attendance may be more robust among those already experiencing distress (Hand 2018). In sum, if cultural participation is instrumental in enhancing psychological well-being by alleviating social burdens and distress, it is imperative to acknowledge that the salubrious impact of such participation is likely to be differentiated among individuals occupying various social positions within the societal hierarchy.

Research hypotheses and mechanism

To illustrate the positive impacts of cultural participation, researchers have commonly employed different life outcome variables, typically focusing on health or subjective well-being. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the frequent interconnection between these two variables. Additionally, engaging in cultural participation at public facilities or events often necessitates a level of health where individuals can move around without inconvenience for such leisure activities. Expanding on the literature review provided earlier and acknowledging the often-overlooked role of health as a control variable in studies examining the relationship between cultural participation and subjective well-being, I posit an independent positive influence of extensive cultural consumption on happiness, controlling for all confounders, including health (**H1**).

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Net of confounders, including health, there is a positive association between diverse cultural participation and subjective well-being.

Next, it is hypothesized that both social connectedness within personal social networks and perceptions of social cohesion within neighborhoods will play a differentiating role in the relationship between diverse cultural participation and subjective well-being. The central research question revolves around whether diverse cultural consumption yields varying outcomes in well-being among individuals with differing levels of perceived social capital in their network or community. Despite sparse attention in prior studies to the heterogeneous impact of cultural participation on happiness in alignment with individual social embeddedness, it would be

inaccurate to assume that extensive cultural engagement uniformly provides positive influences on subjective well-being, considering the diverse social embeddings of individuals within their networks and communities. While social connectedness is often considered a primary source of happiness, it is expected that cultural participation will be more strongly associated with life satisfaction among individuals lacking social embeddedness within their social networks (**H2a**) and their neighborhoods (**H2b**). These two measures represent common approaches to defining social capital, with one focusing on social networks at the individual level and the other on social cohesion at the collective level (Kawachi 2010).

Hypothesis 2a (H2a): The positive association between diverse cultural participation and subjective well-being is stronger among individuals who have smaller social networks.

Hypothesis 2b (H2b): The positive association between diverse cultural participation and subjective well-being is stronger among individuals who perceive lower social cohesion within their neighborhood.

Third, individuals who perceive themselves as having higher social status tend to experience greater happiness in general. However, socioeconomic circumstances not only significantly influence life satisfaction but also moderate the relationship between cultural participation and well-being. In other words, the contribution of social status to subjective well-being will invade the distinct and positive association between cultural participation and well-being. Those who already derive happiness from their social status may experience smaller additional benefits from increased cultural participation for their subjective well-being, as they might have relatively lower psychological distress, which can be alleviated by diverse cultural engagement (**H3a**).

Conversely, it is also propounded that, *ceteris paribus*, one's neighbors' social status significantly influences individual happiness (Kim 2022). This influence arises from the comparison of one's neighbors' status to the average in a broader region or the entire population, fostering relative gratification or satisfaction, irrespective of individual social status variations (Firebaugh and Schroeder 2009). Therefore, individuals in neighborhoods with higher social status neighbors would be less likely to experience additional benefits to overall well-being from their cultural engagement. The positive effect of broad cultural participation on subjective well-being will be more pronounced among individuals with relatively lower social status neighbors

compared to those with higher social status neighbors (**H3b**).

Hypothesis 3a (H3a): The positive association between diverse cultural participation and subjective well-being is stronger among individuals who perceive themselves as having a lower social status.

Hypothesis 3b (H3b): The positive association between diverse cultural participation and subjective well-being is stronger among individuals who reside in neighborhoods with lower subjective social status neighbors.

Data and Method

Study population

The data used in this study were derived from the Seoul Survey, conducted by the Seoul Institute affiliated with the Seoul metropolitan government in 2018.¹ The survey employed a face-to-face interview method and targeted individuals aged 15 years and older. Stratified cluster sampling was employed, resulting in a sample of 20,000 household respondents and other members of their households. A total of 42,991 individuals responded to the survey. The questionnaire collected information on demographics, financial circumstances, housing, residential quality, and other variables such as health, security, governance, welfare, values, leisure, and education.

Despite the sample not being nationally representative, the selected dataset remains valuable for evaluating the influence of varied cultural participation on overall well-being. Unlike measuring cultural tastes, assessing cultural participation requires access to a variety of cultural facilities like concert halls, cinemas, museums, and galleries. Seoul, as South Korea's largest city, boasts an abundance of such facilities strategically placed for residents across the city. Consequently, the data offers comprehensive insights into cultural participation in public facilities, along with indicators of life satisfaction.

1 One reason for selecting this data is the absence of a comprehensive set of questions in nationally representative surveys, such as the Korean General Social Survey (KGSS), that specifically inquire about respondents' frequency or manner of engagement in various cultural and artistic activities within their standard questionnaires.

Outcome: Subjective well-being

The scale of subjective well-being here is the average of three items, asking respondents: “Do you think you are happy nowadays? Please tell me how happy you are.” Each item is related to a specific area, such as “relationship with friends and acquaintances,” “family life,” and “social life (in work, school, religious gathering, club, meeting, etc.)”² All three items are coded on an 11-point scale (e.g., 0 = very unhappy, 10 = very happy) (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .79$).

Main Predictor: Cultural consumption

Respondents were surveyed on their cultural attendance habits over the past year, covering a range of activities, including (1) exhibitions (art, photo, architectural, design, etc.), (2) museums/galleries, (3) musical or dance performances (classic, opera, ballet, etc.), (4) traditional Korean (folk or musical) performances, (5) theater productions, (6) movies, (7) concerts and other stage performances, and (8) professional sporting events. Cultural participation was quantified by summing the responses to these eight activities, with individuals who never participated in any of these activities coded as 0. The resulting values were then recoded on a five-point scale (e.g., 0 = never participated in any activities, 4 = four kinds and above). Given that the proportion of each point in the sample is notably small for values of five and above (under 1%), the variable is truncated with a maximum value set to 4. Thus, cultural participation was assessed in terms of the breadth or diversity of cultural activities that respondents engaged with, rather than focusing solely on frequency. This measurement approach aligns with prior research findings, which have suggested that cultural events can yield satisfactory experiences even with infrequent attendance (Choung et al. 2020), and that diverse cultural repertoires are significantly associated with improved health (Wilkinson et al. 2007; Bertacchini et al. 2020).

2 As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the dataset’s definition of subjective well-being introduces an inevitable issue of endogeneity between the dependent variable and the moderator, social capital. Given the constraints of the available data, completely eliminating this issue is unfeasible. To mitigate potential biases, I have adopted a comprehensive approach at three levels throughout the estimation process to address confounding factors. Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that greater social capital does not inherently elevate the level of life satisfaction pertain to social relationships. This is because social embeddedness entails both benefits and responsibilities (Kim 2016).

Moderators: Social capital and social status

In accordance with the social capital hypothesis, I posit that the relationship between cultural consumption and subjective well-being is contingent upon an individual's social connections within their personal network and residential area. Two key moderators are considered: (1) network size and (2) perceived social cohesion within the neighborhood. Network size represents the number of social gatherings or clubs in which respondents have participated at least once in the past year. A larger network size suggests greater social engagement. Perceived social cohesion within the neighborhood is assessed on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), averaging responses to four items: (1) "There are good places to take a walk in my community," (2) "There are enough public facilities such as a community center, library, and park," (3) "I feel safe in my community," and (4) "My neighbors are willing to help me when I need it." These variables capture respondents' assessments of how their neighborhoods are perceived to be secure and cohesive. Individuals with a wider social network and a heightened perception of social cohesion within the neighborhood are inclined to possess stronger social connections to others and their communities, in contrast to those who experience greater social or geographic isolation.

Next, cultural participation is believed to offer psychological relief to individuals; however, this relief is not evenly experienced across all socioeconomic positions in contemporary society from the perspective of the social status hypothesis. To be specific, it is important to note that dissatisfaction with personal social status and subjective social status are distinct concepts. In other words, while there is often an assumption of a strong correlation between the two indicators, it can be problematic to interpret that all individuals with similar subjective social status represent an identical level of satisfaction with their social status. Negative emotions such as frustration, envy, or depression arising from individual low social status are termed as relative deprivation, requiring a condition where individuals perceive their social position as unfair (Smith et al. 2012). Discrepancies between subjective social status and the level of satisfaction stemming from them hinge upon individual perceptions of external conditions that impede their progress toward their ideal social status. Drawing upon this conception, I have introduced "perceived societal unfairness" as an important control variable to capture the level of satisfaction more precisely through the subjective social status indicator.

In the research design, I anticipate that the potentially positive impact of cultural participation will be more pronounced among individuals who perceive themselves to occupy a socially disadvantaged position and, consequently, are less satisfied with their social standing. This is rooted in the understanding that those who enjoy relatively affluent positions within society would likely experience smaller marginal benefits from additional cultural participation. Furthermore, the social comparison process yields varying levels of relative deprivation or heightened satisfaction depending on different reference groups, including friends, colleagues, or neighbors (Firebaugh and Schroeder 2009; Alderson and Katz-Gerro 2016). It is important to note that residential districts in Seoul are emblematic of social segregation, where affluence is often concentrated and even polarized (Koo 2022). In this context, the social status of neighborhoods serves as a critical indicator of social success and individual social position.

In my analysis, I will consider both individual subjective social status (respondents' self-rated social status on a scale from 1 to 10) and neighbors' social status (average subjective social status of respondents in a district) as moderators. I will examine how individual subjective social status and neighborhood subjective social status differentiate the association between cultural participation and subjective well-being. Since the latter relationship involves different levels of variables, I will also explore cross-level interactions.

Individual-level controls

To control for potential confounding factors, the analysis includes several demographic variables, including age (categorized as 1 = teenagers, 2 = twenties, 3 = thirties, 4 = forties, 5 = fifties, 6 = sixties and above), gender (1 = female), and marital status (1 = married, 0 = other). Socioeconomic variables encompass occupation (represented by three dummy variables for professional jobs, non-professional jobs, and others), employment status (1 = permanently employed, 0 = other), and education (1 = no formal education, 8 = post-secondary degree). Furthermore, perceived unfairness is derived from the average of scores in five areas: gender, education, employment, law, and taxes (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$). It is assessed on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 ("very unfair") to 5 ("very fair") in each area. This measure should be controlled for, as it has the potential to negatively impact subjective well-being and accounts for variances among individuals who perceive themselves as having similar social statuses. Finally, self-rated health is included as a

control variable, given its significance as one of the major determinants of subjective well-being.

Contextual-level controls

There are also the following controls: first, at the family level (L2), household income, house ownership, and family size. Household income gauges the total amount of monthly income that all family members earn (1 = under 500,000 won, 2 = between 500,000 won and 1 million won, ..., 19 = 9 million won and above). House ownership was assigned 1 when the householder is the owner of the house the household members live in, or 0 to other all cases. Family size shows the number of household members including the householder.

Second, to better estimate the effect of the moderator at the residential level (the neighbors' subjective social status), it is important to consider the objective social status of neighbors. Two indicators representing the objective social status among residents are taken into account: the average earned income among residents and the change in real estate prices over the most recent six years. While earned income is one of the common indicators for gauging objective social status, it has been reported that property assets, alongside earned income, play a critical role in accumulating economic wealth among the upper-middle class (Koo 2022). The data pertaining to personal income among employees in different districts were retrieved from the Korea Statistical Information Service.³ The data on the change in apartment prices per square meter between 2012 and 2018 is obtained from the Korea Real Estate Board.⁴ The selected time frame effectively captures the upsurge in apartment prices, aligning with the significant shift in real estate policy from the Park Geun-Hye administration to Moon Jae-In's presidency (Hong and Lee 2020; Jung 2022). The variable which is analyzed is the standardized scores of the raw data. Descriptive statistics are as follows (Table 1).

3 <http://kosis.kr/index/index.do/>

4 <https://www.reb.or.kr/r-one/main.do/>

TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
<i>(Individual level: N = 42,991)</i>				
<i>Subjective well-being</i>	7.05	1.25	0	10
<i>Cultural participation</i>	1.23	1.11	0	4
<i>Network size</i>	1.27	0.9	0	4
<i>Perceived social cohesion</i>	3.52	0.58	1	5
<i>Subjective social status</i>	6.2	1.58	1	10
<i>Age</i>	4.16	1.53	1	6
<i>Female</i>	0.53	.5	0	1
<i>Education</i>	4.69	1.18	1	6
<i>Marital status</i>	0.67	0.47	0	1
<i>Occupation (Reference group=Other)</i>				
<i>Professional</i>	0.06	0.23	0	1
<i>Non-professional</i>	0.55	0.5	0	1
<i>Other</i>	0.39	0.49	0	1
<i>Employed</i>	0.43	0.5	0	1
<i>Perceived unfairness</i>	2.95	0.64	1	5
<i>Self-rated health</i>	7.17	1.50	0	10
<i>(Family level: N = 20,000)</i>				
<i>Household income</i>	8.82	4.01	1	19
<i>House ownership</i>	0.55	0.5	0	1
<i>Family size</i>	2.57	1.1	1	8
<i>(Residential level: N = 25)</i>				
<i>Avg. personal income</i>	0	1	-1.33	2.62
<i>Real estate price change</i>	0	1	-1.59	2.67
<i>Avg. SSS</i>	6.19	0.27	5.69	6.66

Statistical analysis

Given the hierarchical structure of the data with three levels (individual, household, and dwelling), multilevel modeling is the appropriate statistical approach to analyze the data (Raudenbush and Bryk 2002; Snijders and Bosker 2012). Specifically, a three-level random slope and coefficient model is employed, and full maximum likelihood estimation is used to estimate the

model parameters. This approach allows for the examination of both fixed effects (coefficients) and random effects (random slopes) at each level of the data. The multilevel modeling analysis is conducted using the R software package version 4.2.1 (lme4 library). To minimize bias and facilitate interpretation, all variables including binary variables are grand mean-centered, involving the subtraction of the mean of each variable from individual observations.⁵ This centering approach is commonly applied in multilevel modeling (Enders and Tofighi 2007; Brincks et al. 2017). Furthermore, to estimate cross-level interactions between cultural participation and neighborhood social status, the random slope of the lower-level is allowed to vary across higher units, as recommended (Heisig and Schaeffer 2019). This permits an examination of how the relationship between cultural participation and well-being varies across different levels of neighbors' social status. All variables are standardized to facilitate comparisons of their effects on the dependent variable. The visualization of interaction terms is performed in Stata 13 (StataCorp 2013).

Results

Isolating the Effect of Cultural Participation

First, Table 2 presents the coefficients of all independent and control variables obtained from multilevel modeling on subjective well-being. This analysis aims to isolate the independent effect of cultural participation on the outcome. Since all variables are standardized, we can observe that broad cultural participation not only exhibits a significant effect but also a relatively robust one in alleviating individual happiness ($b = 0.074, p < 0.001$, in Model 1).

However, as indicated in Model 2, this impact somewhat decreases while still maintaining statistical significance ($b = 0.044, p < 0.001$) when the effect of self-rated health is introduced into the model. Nevertheless, cultural participation emerges as a meaningful determinant compared to other socioeconomic factors such as education, occupational status, and employment status concerning subjective well-being. These results lend

5 While there is nothing inherently incorrect about utilizing binary variables, such as gender, in their original form, it is noteworthy that the interpretation of grand-mean centered binary variables aligns with the interpretation of continuous variables that are also grand-mean centered (Enders and Tofighi 2007; Yaremch, Preacher and Hedeker 2023).

TABLE 2
ESTIMATES FROM MULTILEVEL MODELS PREDICTING SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coef.	(SE)	Coef.	(SE)
Intercept	7.047***	(0.045)	7.046***	(0.037)
(Individual level)				
<i>Cultural participation</i>	0.074***	(0.006)	0.044***	(0.005)
<i>Network size</i>	0.065***	(0.006)	0.063***	(0.005)
<i>Perceived social cohesion</i>	0.173***	(0.006)	0.143***	(0.005)
<i>Subjective social status</i>	0.127***	(0.006)	0.069***	(0.005)
<i>Perceived unfairness</i>	-0.082***	(0.006)	-0.059***	(0.005)
<i>Self-rated health</i>			0.623***	(0.005)
<i>Age</i>	-0.196***	(0.008)	0.002	(0.007)
<i>Female</i>	-0.030***	(0.005)	-0.008+	(0.004)
<i>Married</i>	0.099***	(0.007)	0.062***	(0.006)
<i>Education</i>	0.067***	(0.007)	0.014*	(0.006)
<i>Professional</i>	0.016**	(0.006)	0.000	(0.005)
<i>Non-professional</i>	0.026***	(0.007)	-0.012+	(0.007)
<i>Employed</i>	-0.002	(0.007)	0.002	(0.006)
(Family level)				
<i>Household income</i>	0.146***	(0.009)	0.095***	(0.007)
<i>Family size</i>	-0.053***	(0.009)	-0.044***	(0.007)
<i>Homeownership</i>	0.016*	(0.007)	0.011+	(0.006)
(Regional level)				
<i>Avg. personal income</i>	-0.102	(0.063)	-0.078	(0.051)
<i>Real estate price change</i>	0.000	(0.062)	0.018	(0.050)
<i>Avg. SSS</i>	0.092*	(0.047)	0.021	(0.038)
Random effects				
L1 ICC	0.504		0.611	
L2 ICC	0.46		0.354	
L3 ICC	0.037		0.034	
Deviance	125500.7		113810.8	

Notes: $p+ < 0.1$, $p^* < 0.05$, $p^{**} < 0.01$, $p^{***} < 0.001$

support to the notion that diverse cultural participation plays a pertinent role in enhancing the quality of social life (Bertacchini et al. 2020). The first hypothesis (**H1**) is supported by the results.

Self-rated health emerges as the most influential factor, displaying a robust association with subjective well-being ($b = 0.623, p < 0.001$). When self-rated health is controlled for, several other determinants tend to diminish in their explanatory power. Particularly, neighborhood social status ($b = 0.092, p < 0.05$) loses its statistical significance when health is included in the model. Additionally, household income, individual social status, and age are particularly affected by the inclusion of health as a factor. These findings suggest that the relationship between cultural participation and life satisfaction can be overestimated in regression models that do not appropriately account for health or physical well-being. Notably, the effects of network size ($b = 0.063, p < 0.001$ in Model 2) and perceived social cohesion within the neighborhoods ($b = 0.143, p < 0.001$ in Model 2) remain significant and substantial across the various models.

Variance of the link between cultural participation and subjective well-being

To investigate the change in the positive relationship between cultural participation and subjective well-being, interaction terms of cultural participation with four moderators were generated. The results are presented in Table 3. The favorable effects of extensive cultural engagement tend to decrease as individuals have larger social networks ($b = -0.028, p < 0.001$ in Model 1) and for those who perceive their neighborhoods to be highly socially cohesive ($b = -0.015, p < 0.001$ in Model 2). These moderation effects are visually depicted in Figure 1, illustrating that individuals who experience isolation within their networks and perceive lower social cohesion within the neighborhood (depicted by the blue line with circle markers) derive greater psychological satisfaction from diverse cultural participation compared to their counterparts (depicted by the red dashed line with triangle markers). In summary, these findings provide empirical support for the social capital hypotheses (H2a, H2b). Broad cultural participation has a more distinctly positive impact on individuals who are relatively less connected. Moreover, extensive cultural participation can have negative impacts on the subjective well-being of individuals with broad social networks, as shown on the left side of Figure 1.

Next, the social status hypotheses receive support from the remaining models presented in Table 3. The positive association between cultural

engagement and subjective well-being is less pronounced among individuals who perceive a higher social status for themselves ($b = -0.016$, $p < 0.001$ in Model 3). Furthermore, the cross-level interaction of cultural participation with the averaged social status of neighbors is significant ($b = -0.024$, $p < 0.01$ in Model 4), suggesting a contextual effect of neighborhood characteristics on individual happiness. These results support the rest of the hypotheses regarding social status (H3a, H3b). These moderation effects are visualized in Figure 2, which illustrates that diverse cultural participation provides more psychological relief for individuals who are relatively more distressed by their social position (represented by the blue line with circle markers on the left of Figure 2) compared to others. Similar trends are observed when the moderator shifts from individual social status to the social status of neighbors. The positive impact of extensive cultural participation escalates more significantly among individuals residing with lower social status neighbors (represented by the blue line with circle markers on the right side of Figure 2). On the contrary, individuals with the highest social status at either the individual or residential levels either experience somewhat negative influences or fail to derive additional benefits from broad cultural participation on their well-being, as depicted in Figure 2.

However, this result should be approached with caution, as the two lines representing each group—individuals in higher social status versus those in lower on the left side, and individuals who live with higher social status neighbors versus those who live with lower social status neighbors on the right side in Figure 2—overlap due to greater variability in their cultural participation. The graph displays the 95% confidence intervals. The significant differences or gaps between comparable groups in both individual and collective levels of subjective social status are more apparent, particularly among individuals with relatively lower levels of cultural participation.

In summary, the positive relationship between cultural participation and subjective well-being is shown to be contingent on subjective social status at both the individual and regional levels. Controlling for confounders, individuals who perceive themselves as having lower social status or live in neighborhoods with lower social status neighbors are likely to experience more significant improvements in well-being through extensive cultural participation. Nevertheless, this tendency is more pronounced among those who engage relatively less in diverse cultural participation.

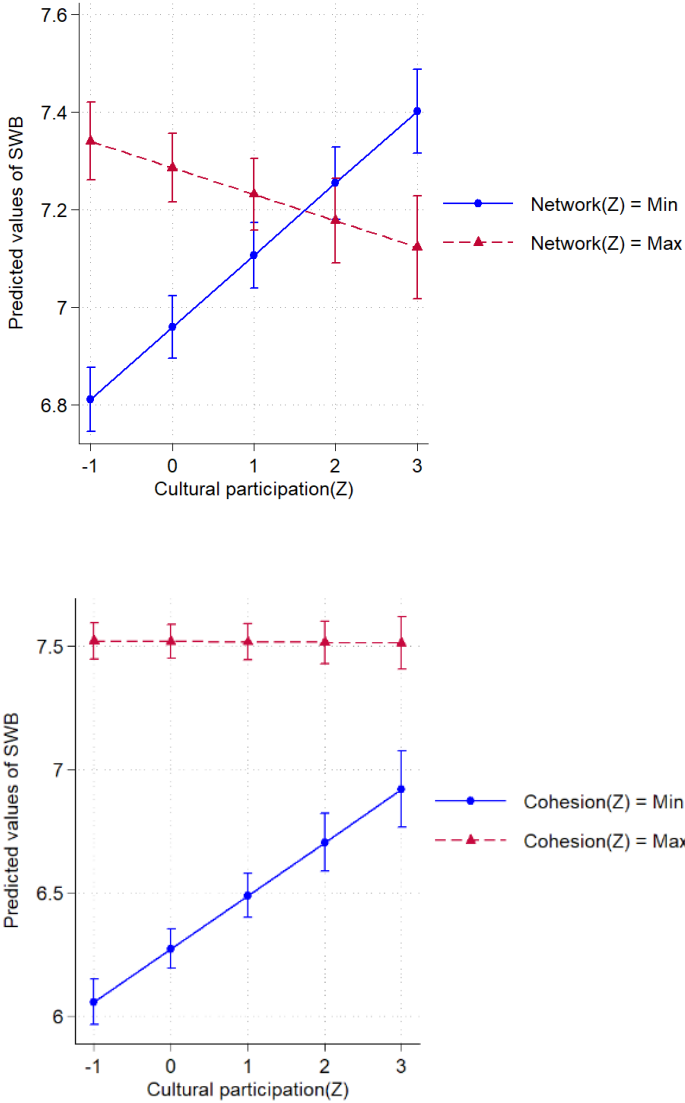


FIG. 1.—INTERACTION EFFECTS BETWEEN CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AND NETWORK SIZE (LEFT), PERCEIVED SOCIAL COHESION WITHIN THE NEIGHBORHOOD (RIGHT), ON SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING. NETWORK SIZE IS REPRESENTED BY THE COUNT OF SOCIAL GATHERINGS OR CLUBS IN WHICH RESPONDENTS ENGAGED IN THE PAST YEAR. PERCEIVED SOCIAL COHESION REFLECTS RESPONDENTS' EVALUATIONS OF THE SECURITY AND COHESION WITHIN THEIR NEIGHBORHOODS. VERTICAL BARS DENOTE 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS.

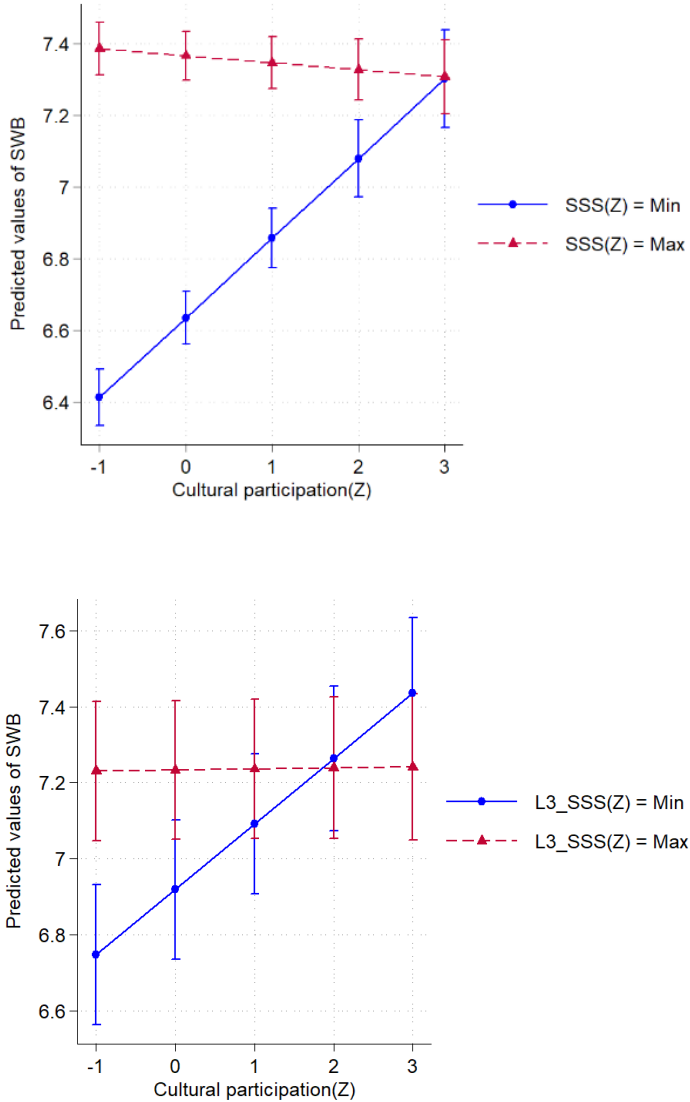


FIG. 2.—INTERACTION EFFECTS BETWEEN CULTURAL PARTICIPATION AND INDIVIDUAL SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL STATUS (LEFT), AVERAGE OF SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL STATUS WITHIN DISTRICTS (RIGHT) ON SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING. SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL STATUS MEASURES AN INDIVIDUAL’S SELF-RATED SOCIAL STANDING. AVERAGE SOCIAL STATUS IS DERIVED FROM THE MEAN OF RESIDENTS’ SUBJECTIVE SOCIAL STATUS WITHIN THE DISTRICT. VERTICAL BARS REPRESENT 95% CONFIDENCE INTERVALS.

Discussion and conclusions

The primary objective of this study was to explore the relationship between cultural participation and subjective well-being, recognizing that this relationship is not monotonous but varies across different segments of the population. Specifically, the study aimed to investigate to what extent individuals' social capital and subjective social status contribute to the variance in the connection between cultural participation and subjective well-being. The analysis commenced by establishing that cultural participation significantly influences life satisfaction, even after controlling for all relevant variables, including self-rated health. Furthermore, in line with the findings of several prior studies, I found that social capital, as represented by social network and perceived social cohesion within one's neighborhood, emerged as notably stable and potent determinants of life satisfaction. The analytical process employed in this study strongly supports hypotheses grounded in social capital theory. Specifically, the findings reveal that the relationship between the breadth or diversity of cultural participation and subjective well-being is notably more pronounced among individuals with smaller social networks and lower levels of residential embeddedness.

Next, empirical evidence substantiates the hypotheses regarding social status. Cultural participation is widely regarded as a contributor to both health and life satisfaction, offering psychological relief and meaningful experiences. However, its distribution across the population is not even. The findings indicate that cultural participation offers more significant psychological solace and enhances well-being among individuals who tend to experience relatively higher levels of distress due to their perceived socioeconomic conditions. Individuals residing in neighborhoods characterized by relatively lower social status also experience a more striking positive effect of cultural participation on subjective well-being when compared to those in areas with higher social status neighbors.

Why are these variations observed? As discussed earlier, social networks, perceived social cohesion within the neighborhood, and subjective social status significantly influence subjective well-being, among other factors. On one hand, widespread cultural engagement uniquely benefits individuals who are relatively disconnected and less embedded. This study considers social capital as a precedent to cultural participation, thus serving as a moderator, not a mediator, in the relationship between cultural participation and well-being. Therefore, what the results indicate is that individuals less integrated into their networks and residential areas are more likely to derive happiness

benefits from cultural participation. On the contrary, individuals who are already well-connected and possess sufficient social capital tend to derive fewer benefits from their cultural engagement. This could be attributed to their lower psychological needs and enhanced ability to address distress beyond the scope of cultural activities. It appears that those with less social capital are more likely to be motivated to seek broad cultural engagement to improve their relatively unsatisfactory social lives. However, this result does not necessarily imply that cultural participation ensures an increase in their social capital or fosters greater social connections and bonds within their neighborhoods.

On the other hand, a more nuanced approach is needed to explain the differential effects of various cultural participation on subjective well-being in terms of perceived social status. One possible interpretation is that individuals who perceive themselves as having a relatively lower social status have a greater potential for improving life satisfaction compared to those who are already content with their socioeconomic circumstances. Moreover, if cultural participation were democratized and accessible to all segments of the population, its impact on life satisfaction would likely be more evenly distributed throughout society. However, the findings veered far from this expectation, suggesting evidence of cultural stratification in South Korea. The relationship between cultural participation and subjective well-being is contingent on both individual and residential-level social status. Specifically, the positive impact of widespread cultural participation is diminished among individuals who are more satisfied with both their own social status and the social status of their neighbors compared to the general population.

In contemporary societies, a diverse or “omnivorous” cultural lifestyle is often seen as a notable indicator of social status (Peterson 2005), and South Korea may not deviate from this pattern. Therefore, the significant effect of broad cultural participation on subjective well-being among individuals with relatively lower social status may be partially attributed to upper-middle-class members in South Korea viewing such a lifestyle as an optional component of their status culture, rather than as a crucial source of life satisfaction. Just as an elevated individual social status is known to significantly enhance life satisfaction, I hypothesized that residing among neighbors with higher social status could similarly exert a positive influence on individual happiness. In essence, for both hypotheses **H3a** and **H3b**, I posited that the perceived social status of individuals and their neighbors would serve as a marker of social standing, potentially reducing the positive impact of diverse cultural participation on well-being. Upon examination of moderation effects,

findings support the idea that neighborhood social status acts as a marker for higher social status, benefiting individual happiness. This, in turn, weakens the link between cultural participation and subjective well-being for those individuals who have relatively higher life satisfaction.

This study provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between cultural participation, social capital, social status, and subjective well-being. However, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations. Firstly, while the study benefits from a large-scale dataset, the absence of a nationally representative sample in South Korea restricts the generalizability of the findings, particularly to rural areas. Given the concentration of certain cultural facilities in urban regions, future research should investigate the moderating role of social networks and neighborhood characteristics across diverse geographic scales. This exploration should encompass both urban and rural contexts, incorporating more extensive indicators of cultural amenities. Additionally, it is important to recognize that the relationship between cultural participation and subjective well-being may not be causal. Cultural engagement serves as a proxy variable for multiple factors contributing to enhanced well-being. Additional investigations could strengthen the evidence for causality through longitudinal analysis.

Despite these limitations, this study advances our understanding by providing empirical evidence of how social capital and the social status significantly influence the link between cultural participation and subjective well-being. These findings highlight the heterogeneous impact of cultural participation across individuals who vary in social embeddedness and experience different levels of relative deprivation in their perceived social status or their neighbors' social status. This study introduces a new approach to enhancing subjective well-being among individuals who are less socially embedded and more isolated. While happiness is often seen as a virtue of social capital, and loneliness as a significant obstacle to well-being, the study suggests that individuals lacking social embeddedness may find consolation through extensive cultural participation, instead of grappling with the effort to enhance what they may already lack (i.e., social capital) for various reasons. While somewhat challenging existing literature on social capital and well-being, this perspective contributes a novel understanding of the benefits of cultural participation.

Meanwhile, addressing the question of how cultural participation is promoted to enhance individual well-being, even though cultural practices are not entirely independent from societal hierarchy, is a more complex task. This study supports the notion that individuals who are relatively less

TABLE 3
INTERACTION ESTIMATES FROM MULTILEVEL MODELS PREDICTING SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

	Model 1 Coef. (SE)	Model 2 Coef. (SE)	Model 3 Coef. (SE)	Model 4 Coef. (SE)
Intercept (Individual level)	7.051*** (0.037)	7.047*** (0.037)	7.049*** (0.037)	7.052*** (0.037)
<i>Cultural participation (CP)</i>				
<i>Network size</i>	0.047*** (0.005)	0.044*** (0.005)	0.045*** (0.005)	0.049*** (0.010)
<i>Perceived social cohesion</i>	0.067*** (0.005)	0.063*** (0.005)	0.062*** (0.005)	0.063*** (0.005)
<i>Subjective social status (SSS)</i>	0.143*** (0.005)	0.143*** (0.005)	0.143*** (0.005)	0.143*** (0.005)
<i>CP x Network size</i>	0.068*** (0.005)	0.069*** (0.005)	0.067*** (0.005)	0.069*** (0.005)
<i>CP x Perceived cohesion</i>	-0.028*** (0.004)	-0.015*** (0.004)	-0.016*** (0.005)	
<i>CP x SSS</i>				
(Family level)				
<i>Household income</i>	0.094*** (0.007)	0.095*** (0.007)	0.095*** (0.007)	0.094*** (0.007)
<i>Family size</i>	-0.043*** (0.007)	-0.044*** (0.007)	-0.044*** (0.007)	-0.043*** (0.007)
<i>Homeownership</i>	0.010+ (0.006)	0.011+ (0.006)	0.011+ (0.006)	0.011+ (0.006)
(Regional level)				
<i>Avg. personal income</i>	-0.078 (0.051)	-0.078 (0.051)	-0.078 (0.051)	-0.069 (0.051)
<i>Real estate price change</i>	0.018 (0.050)	0.018 (0.050)	0.018 (0.050)	0.025 (0.050)
<i>Avg. SSS (L3SSS)</i>	0.021 (0.038)	0.021 (0.038)	0.02 (0.038)	0.015 (0.038)
(Cross-level interaction)				
<i>CP x L3SSS</i>				-0.024** (0.009)
Random effects				
L1 ICC	0.611	0.612	0.611	0.611
L2 ICC	0.355	0.354	0.355	0.353
L3 ICC	0.034	0.034	0.034	0.034
Variance component (CP)				0.002
Deviance	113765.3	113799	113798	113744.3

Notes: All models control individual level covariates including age, sex, marital status, education, occupation, employment status, perceived unfairness, and self-rated health. $p+ < 0.1$, $p^* < 0.05$, $p^{**} < 0.01$, $p^{***} < 0.001$

advantaged, both in terms of their subjective social status and that of their neighbors, are likely to benefit the most from cultural participation. On the flip side, individuals who already enjoy satisfactory social status and reside in areas with neighbors of higher social status are less likely to experience significant improvements in their well-being through cultural participation compared to their counterparts, as they are already content.

One of the central objectives of cultural policy is to equalize opportunities for cultural engagement by implementing interventions, which may include subsidies for individuals facing relative disadvantages (Hylland et al. 2022). However, it is worthwhile to consider a dilemma noted by Chan and Goldthorpe (2007), which involves leveraging social status to attract individuals towards wider participation. While cultural policy can encourage diverse cultural activities to alleviate subjective well-being, a more comprehensive and long-term goal of social policy should aim to ameliorate societal inequality within society. This may involve the leveling of benefits derived from cultural participation, including a relative reduction in its marginal impact on the relatively disadvantaged group. Future research endeavors should build upon this foundation to illuminate the nuanced dynamics of cultural participation in diverse contexts and contribute to the development of policies aimed at enhancing the quality of life for all members of society.

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