Are Cultural Tastes Always Socially Stratified?
Evidence from Library Borrowing for the Entire Population of Denmark

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Abstract:

Are cultural tastes always socially stratified? We approach this question via a least likely case and context: library borrowing in Denmark. Here, libraries are free, easy to access, and a core public service. We use new registry data on library borrowing for the entire population of Denmark to map the social stratification of library borrowing in unprecedented detail (e.g., overall library use and the taste for highbrow, popular, and award-winning books). We address four dimensions of stratification: wealth, education, income, and occupation. Empirical results document substantial social stratification in library borrowing and literary tastes by wealth and education, but not by income and occupation. These results suggest that the social stratification of cultural tastes is ubiquitous, even in a least likely case (library borrowing) and context (Denmark). We suggest that, while taste always seems to be stratified, the nature of that stratification is contingent on the nature of the wider inequalities within a given context. We address the theoretical implications of our findings for the sociology of taste, including the role of social stratification and contexts in shaping patterns of cultural stratification.

Introduction

The cultural lives of people are highly stratified. Rich, highly educated, professionals consume very different culture to poor, less educated, routine workers (Bennett et al 2009; Chan 2010; Katz-Gerro 2017; Warde 2018). This basic stratifying assumption has become so pervasive that it functions almost as a stylized fact. As Fishman and Lizardo (2013: 213) state: "… the most consistent finding in the sociology of taste is that social position systematically shapes cultural preferences."

In this paper, we aim to interrogate this apparent sociological truism by considering whether it might be an artefact of the kind of limited data used in research on cultural taste. In particular, we identify four limitations in existing research. First, research often derives the association between social position and cultural tastes from very general categories of cultural taste or participation (e.g., "how often do you go to the cinema?"), which mask complex hierarchies of distinction that exist within these categories ("What genres of movies do you watch at the cinema?"; Flemmen et al 2018). Second, most research relies upon self-reported patterns of cultural taste and participation that negate the fact that people do not necessarily do what they say they do, culturally (Yaish and Katz-Gerro 2012). Third, research largely relies on sample surveys that miss elites and the very wealthy, even though sociological claims often revolve around the distinctive preferences of elite groups (Friedman and Reeves 2020). Fourth, research has identified wealth as an important dimension of social stratification (Killewald et al 2017), yet only little research has addressed wealth stratification in cultural tastes (Sherman 2016).

Reflecting on these limitations in the literature, we approach the social stratification of cultural tastes from a falsificatory perspective. Specifically, we search for a least likely case that might challenge the stylized fact of ubiquitous taste stratification. We ask: if we wanted to find evidence of the *absence* of social stratification in the cultural tastes of people, both in terms of practices and places, where would we be most likely to find it? In terms of the practice itself, we would anticipate less stratification in activities that have lower barriers to participation, such as the cost of the activity itself, the availability of the activity, and whether the activity requires skills that are unevenly distributed. Moreover, we would anticipate less stratification in activities that are more private, such as reading at home, compared to activities that are more public, such as attending an opera. Finally, in terms of places, we would anticipate less stratification in places that actively reduce barriers to participation, for example by providing free access to high-quality examples of a particular cultural form.

In this paper, we argue that library use in Denmark represents a type of cultural activity in which we would expect low social stratification. Reading is a strong expression of cultural distinction (Kraaykamp and Dijkstra 1999; Kraaykamp and van Eijck 2010; Sokolov and Sokolova 2018, 2019; Sullivan 2007; Torche 2007), but also a cultural activity with comparatively low barriers to participation. Library borrowing, by providing free access to a wide range of materials, reduces these barriers even further. Moreover, by focusing on Denmark, characterized by a comprehensive welfare state, free and high-quality library services, and low economic and social inequality (Esping-Andersen 2015), we zoom in on a place in which barriers to participation are lower than in many other places. Taken together, if there was going to be a least likely case that challenges the sociological truism that cultural tastes are always socially stratified, library borrowing in Denmark may be a good place to look.

We draw on population-level registry data from Denmark to map the social stratification of library borrowing across multiple dimensions of stratification. We examine the conventional dimensions of income, education, and occupational status, but also add wealth that has received only little attention. Our registry data include all books borrowed from all public libraries in Denmark (physical and digital), thus covering the entire universe of library borrowing for the adult Danish population (about 4.7 million people) in 2020 and 2021. As we have registry data on individuals' wealth, education, income, and occupational status that we can link to the registry data on library borrowing, we can map the social stratification of library borrowing in unprecedented detail. In doing so, we address the four limitations outlined above by measuring library borrowing at a highly granular level (e.g., number of books borrowed, preferred literary genres, and the taste for highbrow, popular, or award-winning books), actual (rather than self-reported) participation, and library borrowing across the entire distribution of wealth, education, income, and occupational status.

Two sets of key results emerge from our analysis. First, even in the egalitarian context of Denmark, in which access to libraries is pervasive, we still find social stratification in who uses libraries. In particular, the propensity to use libraries and the number of books borrowed increase with wealth and education, but not with income and occupational status. These results likely reflect the moderate level of wealth inequality in Denmark and the low level of income inequality (Skopek et al 2014), and thus show that taste stratification, even within the same country, varies across dimensions of social stratification. Crucially, even those with the least need to make use of free libraries (e.g., those at the very top of the wealth and income distributions) still use libraries almost as frequently as do those in the middle of

the wealth and income distribution. Second, when we examine literary tastes *among* library users, we find that, for income and occupational status, there is little stratification in the genres of books people borrow from the library. For example, individuals with high income and high occupational status do not systematically borrow more popular (e.g., crime and biographical novels) or highbrow (e.g., Bildungsroman and experimental literature) books than do less advantaged individuals. Moreover, they do not exhibit more omnivorous tastes either, as measured by a preference for diverse genres or authors. Finally, they do not borrow more "consecrated" books (or prefer authors) that have won awards. In terms of levels of education, we do see substantial stratification both in terms of higher overall number of books borrowed, a lower preference for more popular genres and a higher preference for highbrow and consecrated books. Notably however, stratification by levels of education occurs broadly across the educational distribution and is not something particularly related to elite tastes. Finally, we find that wealth stands out as a dimension of cultural stratification in that only for wealth, we see a tendency for the very wealthy (around $80^{th}+$ percentile) to have a particular preference for highbrow genres and consecrated books. Although our results suggest that little social stratification by income and occupational status exists in terms of *what* people consume, they do not necessarily mean that literary taste stratification does not exist among borrowers in terms of *how* people consume books (Flemmen et al 2018; Jarness 2015).

We think our falsificatory posture towards the stylized fact of the social stratification of taste, in combination with our empirical results based on population-level data, have important implications for the sociology of taste. In addition to reaffirming the ubiquity of taste stratification, we also uncover spaces or settings in which this stratification is more limited (or at least diminished in a particular way). We end the paper by considering how pursuing these deviant cases may help us move forward debates regarding the social stratification of taste by forcing sociologists to confront anomalies or indeed to reaffirm widely held assumptions.

Theoretical Framework

In this section, we present the theoretical framework that we use to link cultural tastes to social stratification. We argue that the social stratification of cultural tastes likely varies across dimensions of social stratification (e.g., wealth, education, income, and occupational status) because each dimension captures a different type of inequality. For example, while income provides financial means needed to purchase cultural objects and experiences,

education provides knowledge and skills needed to appreciate intellectually demanding or highbrow cultural genres. Moreover, the relative importance of each dimension of stratification likely differs across societal contexts. In the case of Denmark, where stratification by wealth and education is stronger than stratification by income and occupation, we hypothesize stronger social stratification of library borrowing and literary tastes along these two dimensions.

Social Stratification of Cultural Tastes

A rich literature in sociology argues that cultural tastes are a means for the privileged to signal wealth (Veblen 1934), sociability (Tarde 1962), and status (Weber 1978). Moreover, cultural tastes map onto social hierarchies in a distinct "social space of lifestyles" (Bourdieu 1984) in which cultural tastes serve two functions. First, they signal where individuals and groups belong in the social hierarchy, with highbrow tastes (e.g., opera and poetry) signaling a higher position and popular tastes (e.g., heavy metal and reality television) signaling a lower position. Second, they delineate symbolic boundaries between groups (Childress et al 2021; Lamont and Molnár 2002) and, by being consumed in different ways (Jarness 2015), act to enforce boundary policing.

We argue that the costs of cultural tastes and activities differ along three dimensions (money, time, and knowledge) and that these dimensions intersect in different ways with the four dimensions of social stratification we consider (wealth, education, income, and occupation). First, cultural tastes and activities differ in terms of *monetary cost*. Some activities, such as art collecting or horseback riding, are more expensive than others, which means that lack of financial means prevent their use. Second, cultural tastes and activities differ in terms of *time cost*. Some activities, for example Wagner's operatic cycle or reading classics, are more time consuming than watching Netflix shows or streaming the latest hits from Spotify. Moreover, some activities, for example going to concerts and museums, might only be available in urban areas where most venues or museums are located, thus incurring travel and time costs. Third, cultural tastes and activities differ in terms of *knowledge cost*. Some activities, for example opera and contemporary art, require specific historical knowledge, language proficiency, and analytical skills for proper appreciation. Other activities, for example pop music and standup comedy, do not require such skills and are more easily accessible.

Four Dimensions of Social Stratification

We now present four dimensions of social stratification (wealth, education, income, and occupation; Hällsten and Thaning 2022), each addressing the different costs associated with cultural tastes and activities outlined above. Table 1 summarizes hypothesized links between the three costs and the four dimensions of social stratification. We address social stratification in each dimension *net of the other dimensions*, for example occupational stratification net of educational and income stratification (this matters because occupational stratification in part reflects educational and income stratification). It is also important to remember that the four dimensions of social stratification are partly overlapping, and the Nordic countries, to which Denmark belongs, are not an exception to this pattern (Erola et al 2016; Hällsten and Thaning 2022; Mood 2017).

Table 1. Dimensions of Social Stratification and their Association with Costs of Cultural Tastes and Activities

	Cost		
Dimension	Money	Time	Knowledge
Wealth	√	√	√
Education			√
Income	√		
Occupation			√

Wealth stratification refers to the unequal distribution of net worth, i.e., the total value of assets such as cash, commodities, stocks, bonds, and property (Killewald et al 2017). Wealth insures individuals against adverse economic shocks and provides a steady stream of income (e.g., via capital income; Hällsten and Pfeffer 2017). In relation to cultural tastes, wealth makes it possible for individuals to purchase cultural objects and experiences. Moreover, the steady stream of income that wealth affords enables individuals to reduce their reliance on the labor market and to pursue personal interests (e.g., painting or reading classics) that foster knowledge and skills that reduce the knowledge costs associated with cultural activities. In line with this idea, Bourdieu (1984: 46) argued that freedom from economic necessity enables individuals to foster aesthetic dispositions that are detached from "… the nature and function of the object represented and to exclude any 'naïve' reaction – horror at the horrible, desire for the desirable, pious reverence for the sacred." Consequently,

we argue that wealth addresses the monetary, time, and knowledge cost associated with cultural tastes and activities.

Educational stratification refers to the unequal distribution of educational qualifications and of the knowledge and skills that education provides. In relation to cultural tastes, education provides knowledge (e.g., historical) and skills (e.g., language and analytical) that make it easier to understand and appreciate demanding cultural activities (Ganzeboom 1982; Notten et al 2012). Moreover, time spent in education exposes individuals to peers whose cultural knowledge, skills, and tastes rub off on individuals and shape their cultural taste (Brunello et al 2010). Consequently, we argue that education addresses the knowledge cost associated with cultural tastes and activities.

Income stratification refers to the unequal distribution of disposable income (e.g., from wages, salaries, and self-employment) and the consumption opportunities than income provides. In relation to cultural tastes, income provides financial means to purchase cultural objects and experiences and thus principally addresses the monetary cost associated with cultural tastes and activities. We distinguish wealth and income stratification because, unlike income (that, in most cases, derives from the labor market), wealth provides income independently of labor market participation and time that can be used to foster cultural knowledge and skills.

Occupational stratification refers to the unequal distribution of the (dis)advantages that jobs afford in terms of income, work tasks, peers, and rank. As we have addressed education and income stratification, here we focus on occupational stratification *net of* these two dimensions of stratification. Occupations vary in terms of work tasks (e.g., creative vs. routine), rank (management vs. floor), and peer groups (e.g., co-workers with similar status and tastes; Sokolov and Sokolova 2018; Weeden and Grusky 2005). Individuals in high-status occupations (say architects) are more likely to have creative work tasks, high rank, and privileged peers than are individuals in low-status occupations (say factory workers). Better working conditions provide non-pecuniary benefits, for example more freedom to plan one's work, better access to training and skills development, and more interaction with other high-status peers. Consequently, we argue that, net of educational and income stratification, occupational stratification captures differences in work conditions (e.g., what you do, how much you learn, and with whom you interact) that principally addresses the knowledge cost associated with cultural tastes and activities.

Hypotheses

Based on our theoretical framework, and on evidence on social stratification in Denmark, we now present hypotheses pertaining to the expected social stratification of library borrowing and literary tastes in each of the four dimensions of social stratification we consider. For simplicity, we distinguish three levels of stratification: low, moderate, and high. Again, we note that the hypothesized level of stratification in one dimension is *net of* the other dimensions.

H1: Social stratification of library use by wealth is moderate. Wealth stratification is moderate in Denmark and comparable to that found in other industrialized countries (Skopek et al 2014). Moreover, wealth stratification has remained stable over time (Boserup et al 2018), and taxation of wealth (unlike taxation of income) is not particularly high in Denmark. As argued above, wealth addresses the monetary, time, and knowledge costs associated with cultural tastes and activities. Consequently, as wealth addresses all three costs, and wealth inequality is moderate in Denmark, we hypothesize moderate to high wealth stratification. Thus, we expect wealthier individuals to be more likely than less wealthy individuals to borrow books from the library and to prefer demanding, highbrow, and award-winning books to popular genres.

H2: Social stratification of library use by education is high. Educational stratification is fairly high in Denmark and comparable to that found in other industrialized countries (Landersø and Heckman 2016). After compulsory school, the educational system segregates students into (longer) academically and (shorter) vocationally oriented tracks, each with different curricula and intended labor market segments. The curriculum in the academic tracks, for example University College (e.g., nurse and schoolteacher) and University (e.g., medical doctor and lawyer), emphasizes general knowledge and skills (analytical, language etc.) to much larger extent than the curriculum in the vocational tracks (e.g., hairdresser and plumber). This means that, in addition to length of education, differences in curricula (academic vs. vocational) and peer groups create differences in knowledge and skills that link directly to the knowledge cost associated with cultural tastes and activities. Accordingly, we hypothesize individuals with more education to be more likely than individuals with shorter education to use libraries and to prefer demanding, highbrow, and award-winning books to popular genres.

H3: Social stratification of library use by income is low. Income stratification is low in Denmark compared to in other industrialized countries, both in terms term of overall inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient) and in terms of the shape of the income distribution (say, the top 1 percent income share; OECD 2016). As argued above, income addresses the monetary cost associated with cultural tastes and activities. As income inequality is low in Denmark, we hypothesize that social stratification of library use and literary tastes by income is also low.

H4: Social stratification of library use by occupational status is low. Social stratification of occupational status, in terms of differences in salary, work conditions, and rank, is lower in Denmark than in other industrialized countries. The Danish labor market is highly regulated, for example with regard to work conditions, on-the-job training, and health and safety regulation (Andersen et al 2021). Moreover, unionization is high, and public and private companies generally have flat hierarchies (Ibsen et al 2017). Together, these characteristics mean that inequality in the non-pecuniary benefits of high-status occupations, including inequality in work conditions, skills, and peer quality, is low. As occupational stratification (net of educational and income stratification) principally addresses the knowledge cost associated with cultural tastes and activities, we hypothesize that social stratification of library use and literary tastes by occupational status is low.

Data and Methods

We now present the data and methods we use to test the four hypotheses.

In terms of data, we use administrative registry data from Denmark that contain highly granular information on the books individuals borrow from public libraries (e.g., genre, author, title, etc.) in the period 2020-2021. We match the library records with administrative registries containing longitudinal information on, among other things, individuals' wealth, education, income, and occupation. Our sample consists of all adults (18+) living in Denmark on 31 December 2019, and we use information on books (physical, digital, text, and audiobooks) borrowed from any public library.

In terms of methodology, we use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to regress the number of books borrowed of various fiction genres on four socioeconomic

indicators (wealth, education, income, and occupation)[1]. As our hypotheses and research design are descriptive, we do not claim to estimate the causal effect of individuals' socioeconomic characteristics on library use and literary tastes. In the main results presented below, we focus on figures that show predicted values across the four socioeconomic indicators conditional on the following control variables (described below): gender, age in years, immigrant status, dummy variables for being a student or retired, a dummy for children living in the household, and (five) region dummies.[2]

It is also important to provide some context about library use in Denmark. All municipalities (of which there are 98 in Denmark) are by law required to make (adult and children's) library services available and on average have about four libraries per municipality. In our sample, on average 22 percent of all adults have borrowed at least one book from the adult book collection within 2020-2021. It is free to borrow books from libraries, and books can also be accessed for free as E-books from the app E-Reolen ("E-Bookshelf"). While it is free to use libraries, one has to sign-up as a member, which can be done either online or at the local library. Except for the analyses on membership rates presented below, all variables measure the number of books borrowed within the sample of library users, as we cannot identify literary tastes for those who do not use libraries.

The library data contain transaction records for each time a book is borrowed, renewed, or returned. In this paper, we focus on the number of books borrowed. Each book in the data has a unique identifier, which can be matched with a database containing meta-information on the book, e.g., title, authors, and genre. In terms of genre information, each book can be categorized into several genres, and hence one book can count towards borrowing different genre categories. It is important to note that not all fiction books have a genre attached to them; about 29 percent of fiction books in our sample have no genre information. In some cases, genre information is missing from different versions of the same book and, in these cases, we impute the missing information. As genres are recorded in a written-text format, we also search for different variations in spelling (+ typos) of genres and re-code these in a uniform manner. In total, there are more than 100 different genre categories. We also note that poetry, a genre sometimes used to capture highbrow literary preferences, is not available as a genre in our data. The reason why is that, in the library data,

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[1] Files needed to replicate all recodes and analyses are available at https://osf.io/z2n4u/. Data can be obtained through agreement with Statistics Denmark.

[2] We have also run OLS models that do not adjust for these variables and present results from these models in Appendix A1 and A2. While the empirical results are not identical, the substantive conclusions are.

poetry is recorded as a form rather than a genre, and we do not have form information on books. To make patterns in borrowing comparable across genres with very different baseline takeout rates, we standardize the number of books borrowed from each genre. For example, the average number of books borrowed from the most popular genre (crime) among library users is 3.9, while for the fifth most popular genre (biographical novels) it is only 0.5. An important point lies in this fact alone – Crime is by far the most popular genre among Danish library users.

Library Usage

We use two indicators to measure library usage: (a) a dummy for whether the individual has taken out at least one adult book in 2020-2021 (proxy for library membership rates) and (b) the total number of books taken out in 2020-2021 among library users. Together, these measures give information on the extensiveness of library usage across the distributions of wealth, education, income, and occupational status.

Genre Preferences

In the main analyses, we focus on two types of genres: popular and highbrow. We define popular genres as the five genres where most books have been borrowed. The five genres are: Crime fiction, thrillers, biographical novels, historical novels, and family novels. Out of the fiction books with known genre information, 82 percent of books belong to one (or more) of these popular genres. We define highbrow genres based on a survey distributed among librarians ($N = 98$) and literary critics ($N = 7$) in which we asked them to rank genres in terms of literary quality (see Appendix A3). We define the three genres that received the highest literary quality scores as highbrow: Developmental novels/Bildungsroman (e.g., classical literature), descriptions of societies (e.g. social realism, social critique, etc.), and experimental literature.

Diverse Borrowings

To analyze social stratification of the taste for more diverse (or omnivorous) sets of books, we use two diversity measures. First, the number of fiction books taken out per genre, and second, the number of crime books per crime author. The first captures whether an individual reads widely across many genres or if they stick to only a few, while the second zooms in on the most popular genre and captures whether an individual reads many authors within that genre or whether they only read a few authors.

Supplementary Measures of Popular and Highbrow Tastes

To test the robustness of the findings to alternative specifications of the popular and highbrow measures, we construct three additional outcomes. First, the number of crime books by the top 10 most popular crime authors – i.e., do individuals at top of the distribution of education, wealth, income, and occupational status have a dis-preference for the most popular crime books? (Bryson 1996). Together, the 10 most popular crime authors account for 23 percent of all adult crime books borrowed in 2020-2021. Second, the number of books borrowed that have received a major award in the period 2010-2021,[3] and third, the number of books by an author that has received a major award in the period 2010-2021. The last two measures capture a preference for highbrow literature in the form of consecrated culture. Similar to the genre measures, we standardize these three indicators.

Indicators of Social Stratification

We include indicators of individuals' wealth, education, income, and occupational status based on population-level registry data. We measure *wealth* as total net family wealth in 2019. We recode the wealth variable into percentile-ranked dummies [1-100th], as this allows us to flexibly compare library borrowing and genre preferences across the wealth distribution. We measure *education* as the minimum years of education (as of 2014) for completion of the highest attained degree and code this as a dummy for each year of education [7-21 years]. We measure *income* as family disposable income (post-tax and transfers) in 2019, and similarly recode income into dummies for each percentile [1-100th]. We measure *occupational status* as the ISEI (International Socioeconomic Index of Occupational Status) score of the main occupation in 2019. We use Ganzeboom's (2010) conversion table from occupational categories (ISCO 08) into social prestige score (ISEI). We include dummy variables for each ISEI score [10-89] and also include a dummy for missing information (indicating that the individual has no known occupation).

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[3] We include the following awards: De Gyldne Laurbær ("The Golden Laurels," Danish), Nordisk Råds Litteraturpris ("The Nordic Co-Operation Literary Prize", Nordic countries), International IMPAC Award, Pulitzer Prize (Fiction), British Book Awards, Costa Book Awards, Booker Prize, and the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Control Variables

To account for the fact that students and retirees might have particular borrowing patterns relating to their social circumstances, in all OLS regressions we control for whether the individual in 2019 was either a student or retired. We additionally control for their gender (dummy for female), age in years, whether children are living in the household, region dummies (Northern Jutland, Central Jutland, Southern Denmark, Capital region and Zealand), and immigration status (Danish, immigrant, or descendant of immigrants).

Results

To reiterate, the purpose of this paper is to stretch the limits of the ubiquitous finding of social stratification in cultural tastes. In a context with low inequality (like Denmark), in a setting with no financial or access restrictions (like public libraries), and a type of culture with lower opportunities for visibly signaling status to peers (like the time-limited borrowing of books) – do we still find evidence of stratification in cultural tastes? Below, we present our main empirical findings. First, we focus on social stratification of library use, and second, we focus on stratification in literary tastes among those who use libraries.

Social Stratification of Library Use

Fig. 1 shows the estimated average share of the adult Danish population that has borrowed a book from the adult book collection in 2020-2021, and how many books those who used libraries on average borrowed. All estimates in the figure (and in the figures below) are based on OLS regressions that include all four dimensions of social stratification and the control variables. Fig. 1 shows that high-wealth and high-education groups are more likely to use libraries, and when they do, they borrow more books. These patterns are consistent with *H1* and *H2* and likely reflect the moderate to high level of social stratification by wealth and education in Denmark. Below, we address stratification of literary tastes. In contrast, the pattern is reversed when it comes to income, and there is no clear pattern for occupational status. These results go against *H3* and *H4*, in which we hypothesized low social stratification by income and occupational status. Yet, these results make sense in light of evidence that overall stratification in Denmark is strongest with respect to wealth and education. In particular, the clear stratification by wealth presented in Fig. 1 suggests that the omission of this dimension of stratification amounts to ignoring a key axis of taste stratification. Interestingly, Fig. 1 also shows that even elite groups (e.g., top 1%) use libraries. This means

that the sample of library users we use in the following analyses are not selected to the point where there are no library users from elite groups.[4]

Fig. 1. Social Stratification of Library Use and Number of Books Borrowed

Notes: Left axis measures the estimated share of the adult Danish population (in percent) that has borrowed at least one book from the adult library collection in 2020 or 2021. Right axis measures the estimated average number of books borrowed. All estimates based on OLS regression. Wealth and income measured in percentiles [1-100]; education in years of schooling [7-21]; and occupational status in ISEI 08 scores [10-89].

Social Stratification of Popular and Highbrow Tastes

Fig. 2 shows the average number of books borrowed (among library users) for the five most popular genres and the three highbrow genres. As explained above, we standardize the number of books borrowed within each genre to facilitate interpretation. We hypothesize in *H1* and *H2* that, due to lower money, time, and knowledge costs, wealthier and higher

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[4] In most survey data, there will be little evidence of elite cultural tastes simply because a random survey is unlikely to capture many individuals from elite groups. In our sample, we have 16,739 individuals from the top 1% of the wealth distribution who have used libraries in 2020-2021 and 15,315 library users from the top 1% of the income distribution.

educated individuals should have a distaste for popular genres, while they should prefer more highbrow genres. Based on *H3* and *H4*, we hypothesize less social stratification in the taste for popular or highbrow books based on income and occupation.

In line with *H1-H4*, we find that taste stratification is mostly present concerning wealth and education. For education, the pattern is, broadly speaking, as we would expect. Highly educated individuals borrow fewer of most of the popular genres (which is particularly remarkable considering that they borrow more books overall[5]) and they borrow more of the highbrow genres. The one exception to this trend is borrowing of biographical novels, where the educational pattern is more similar to the highbrow genres. While biographical novels are among the most popular genres, it is also one of the five popular genres that score highest in terms of perceived literary quality (though historical novels score slightly higher) – see Appendix A3.

In terms of wealth, Fig. 2 suggests that despite the little focus given to this domain of social stratification in previous research, it is an important axis of cultural stratification. High-wealth groups borrow more books from both the popular and highbrow genres. The evidence then supports *H2* with respect to the taste for highbrow books, but not with respect to a distaste for popular books. Wealthier individuals appear to have a taste both for highbrow and lowbrow genres, a pattern consistent with omnivorous tastes. It is only for education that we see some evidence of a distaste for the popular genres. For education, the preference for highbrow genres increases almost linearly across the educational distribution. This results indicates strong taste stratification by education (as expected, based on *H2*), but also that there is nothing particular about the very top of the distribution – the educational elite does not stand out in particular. In contrast, for wealth, the preference for highbrow books is non-linear. While there is a generally positive trend, it is particularly the top 10-20 percent or so who prefer highbrow books. We note that the same pattern does not entirely seem to hold for the experimental literature category (a possible explanation is that borrowing of this genre is rare: crime has about four million loans during the study period while experimental literature only has about 20 thousand).

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[5] See also Appendix A4 where we express results as shares of total fiction borrowing.

Fig. 2. Social Stratification of Borrowing of Popular and Highbrow Book
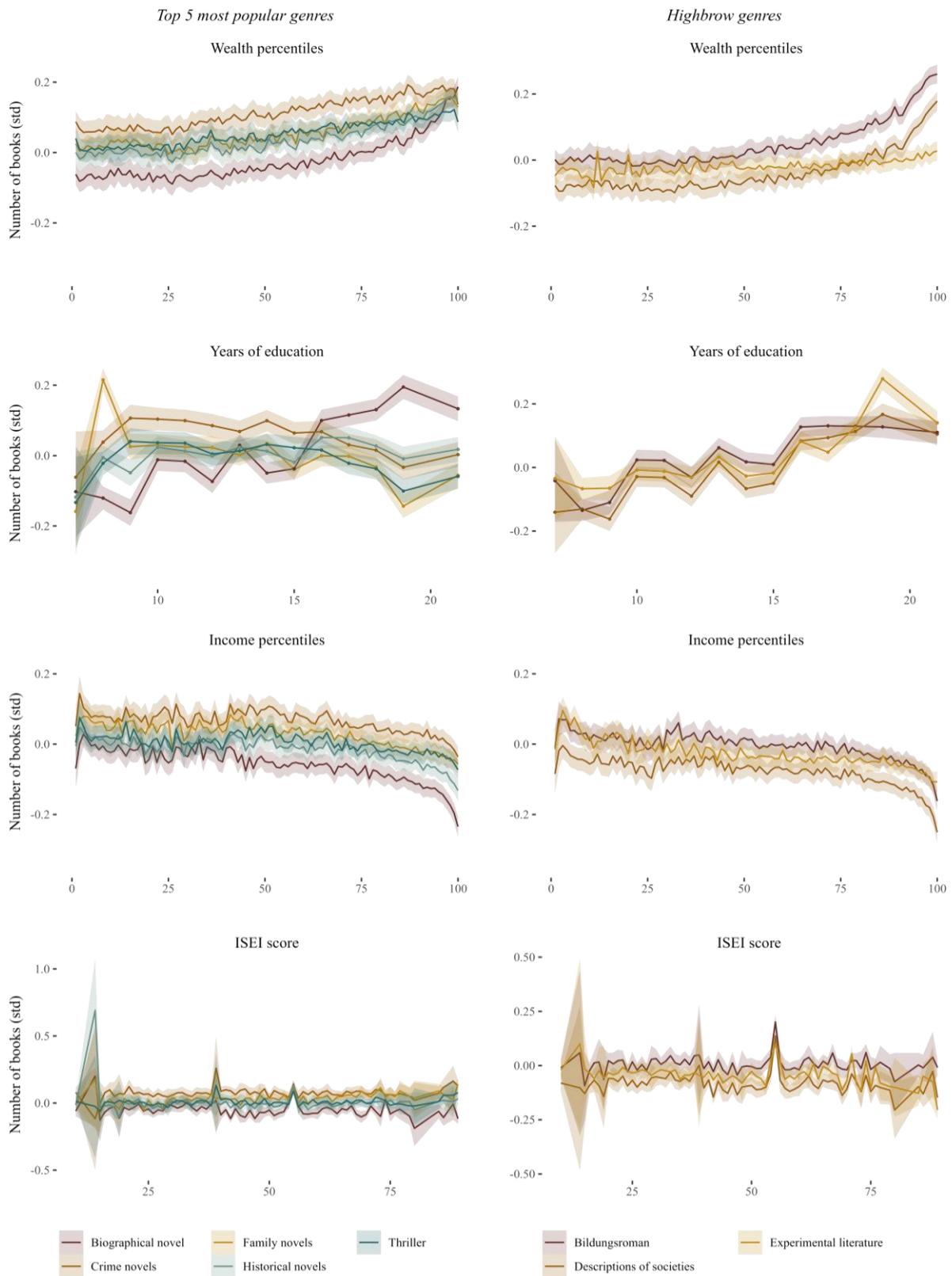
Notes: The figure shows the estimated number of books borrowed, standardized within each genre. All estimated based on OLS regression. Wealth and income measured in percentiles [1-100]; education in years of schooling [7-21]; and occupational status in ISEI 08 scores [10-89]. See Appendix 3 for definition and measurement of highbrow genres.

In terms of income, Fig. 2 shows that the number of books borrowed of both popular and highbrow genres decreases with income, especially at the top. This then suggests that rather than high-income groups having a dis-preference for popular books – high-income groups simply borrow fewer books of all genres. Hence, these patterns suggest little taste for highbrow or popular genres in particular. The evidence then supports *H3*, which proposes that taste stratification by income is low (and, in fact, non-existing).

Finally, in terms of occupational status results from Fig. 2 support *H4* in that taste stratification is low. There is little clear pattern to detect. Individuals with jobs of higher status have neither a preference nor dis-preference for popular or highbrow book genres. Occupational status seems to have little relation to using libraries, amount of books borrowed or genres of books borrowed.

In line with the proposed hypotheses, and in context of Denmark, we find that taste stratification is heavily dependent on the dimension of social stratification under study. We find substantial stratification by wealth and education and little stratification by income and occupation. Results for wealth are consistent with the idea that wealthier individuals, and especially those at the very top of the wealth distribution, face lower money, time, and knowledge costs and develop a stronger taste for highbrow and popular books. Indeed, it is only for wealth that we see anything resembling a particular elite taste for highbrow genres. In Appendix A5, we replicate the analyses reported in Fig. 2 with non-fiction genres, and results are similar. In Appendix A6, we replicate the analyses in Fig 2 using the supplementary measures of popular and highbrow genres described above. First, we look at books by the top 10 most popular crime authors. Second, we look at books that have won major awards or books written by award-winning authors. Overall, our results show that individuals with more education have a stronger taste for consecrated books that have won awards or books written by award-winning authors, while they have a distaste for crime novels by popular crime authors. Wealthier individuals borrow more of both popular and consecrated books, while there is little taste stratification by income and occupation. Overall, results are similar to those reported in Fig. 2.

Social Stratification of Diverse Tastes

While the results so far show little evidence of social stratification in library borrowing and literary tastes by income and occupation, or that elite groups (except for the wealthy) have substantially different cultural tastes, it might be that this is because we capture the wrong

dimensions of cultural tastes. Research argues that advantaged groups are inclined to have more diverse cultural tastes than less advantaged groups (Peterson and Kern 1996). In Fig. 3, we study two measures of diversity in cultural tastes: the number of books per genre and the number of crime books per crime author. A higher score for each of these would indicate that individuals tend to cluster the books they borrow within fewer genres/authors (i.e., less diversity). Fig. 3 suggest that there are only few differences across the distributions of wealth, education, income, and occupational status in terms of the diversity in book borrowing. As high-wealth and high-education groups borrow more books, they also tend to borrow books of different genres – that would happen simply if you selected a large amount of books from the library at random. However, these results show that neither wealthy nor highly educated individuals tend to spread their borrowing across as many genres/authors as possible (conditional on the number of books they borrow). Consequently, we find little evidence that omnivorous tastes have replaced the distinction between highbrow and popular tastes.

Fig. 3. Social Stratification of Borrowing of Diverse Genres and Authors

Diversity measures
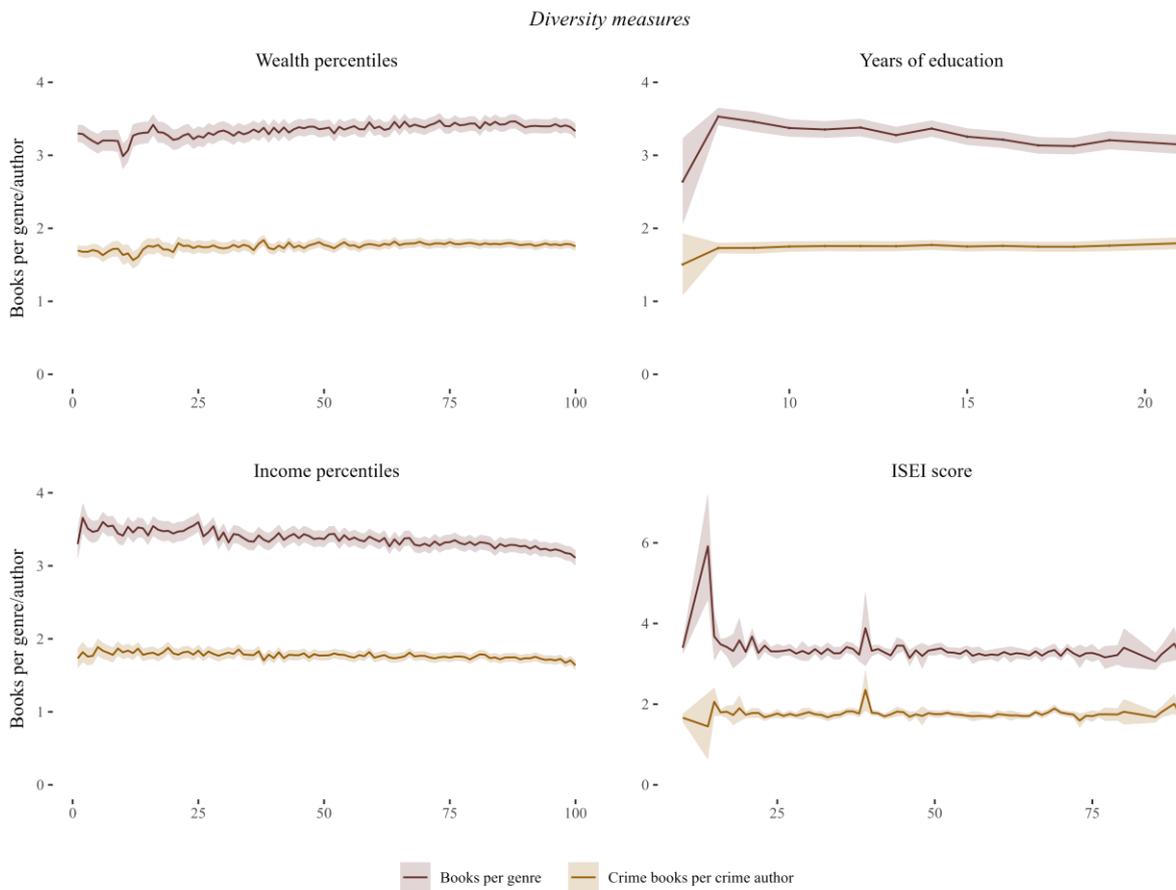
Notes: Figure shows the estimated number of books per genre and average number of crime books by author. All estimates based on OLS regression. Wealth and income measured in percentiles [1-100]; education in years of schooling [7-21]; and occupational status in ISEI 08 scores [10-89].

Library Use and Cultural Participation

Library borrowing is an interesting case for studying social stratification of cultural tastes given the low barriers to entry. Yet, library borrowing is not so detached from other cultural practices that we learn nothing beyond library use from these analyses. First, library loans reflect individuals' literary tastes beyond library use. In Appendix A7-A9, we merge survey data on cultural consumption based on a representative sample (*N* = 20,575) with registry data on library use. In Appendix A7, we report positive correlations between the genres of books individuals borrow from the library (measured in registry data) and their self-reported literary preferences (measured in survey data). Consequently, the registry data match individuals' self-reported literary tastes. Second, library use is a salient dimension of broader cultural tastes. In Appendix A8, we report correlations between borrowing at least one book from the library in 2020 or 2021 and individuals' broader cultural consumption. Here, we find positive correlations between borrowing books from the library (measured in registry

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data) and reporting (in survey data) visiting a library, reading/buying books, attending museums and highbrow art (e.g., opera and ballet), and having a taste for a wide range of literary genres. Consequently, individuals who borrow books from the library tend also to be culturally active in other areas and to have a taste for highbrow culture. Importantly, these patterns reaffirm that library borrowing is a salient dimension of cultural taste. Third, the patterns of social stratification we identify with respect to library borrowing match patterns of stratification of traditional indicators of highbrow cultural participation. In Appendix 9 we map the social stratification of cultural consumption similarly to in Fig. 1 and Fig. 2. Instead of using library use and literary taste as dependent variables, we use measures of cultural consumption from the survey data as dependent variables. As shown in Appendix A9, social stratification of highbrow cultural consumption is strongest by education and wealth, whereas there is little stratification by income and occupation. Consequently, patterns of social stratification of cultural consumption is similar to patterns of social stratification of library use and literary tastes.

Discussion

In this paper, we adopt a falsificatory approach to the sociological truism that cultural tastes are always socially stratified. In seeking to challenge this truism, we have focussed on a least likely case with high-quality, population-level data – library borrowing in Denmark. We find that, even in an egalitarian setting where barriers to consumption are low, cultural tastes are indeed still socially stratified. Wealthy and highly educated people are more likely to use libraries and, when they do, they borrow significantly more books. But this is not just about usage or voracity. Very wealthy and highly educated people also borrow more highbrow books – classical literature, experimental literature or social descriptions and critique. This does not mean, however, that cultural tastes are socially stratified on every dimension. Intriguingly, library use and literary taste is not stratified by income and occupational status in Denmark.

Two key takeaways emerge from our analysis. The first is a reaffirmation of the ubiquity of taste stratification. Our analysis has only focussed on book borrowing, of course, but our results should be read in the context of an extensive literature on social stratification in almost all the main areas of cultural consumption. Indeed, the stratification of library borrowing is especially important in this regard because it contains less obvious economic and cultural barriers than most other areas. This does not imply that library borrowing is so different that we can learn nothing from it, however. As discussed above, merged registry and

survey data suggest that library borrowing is a salient dimension of cultural taste that is positively correlated with self-reported literary tastes and cultural consumption.

The second takeaway from our analysis is that taste stratification is embedded in particular inequality regimes (Acker, 2006: DiPrete, 2002) and that the specific ways that taste is stratified may differ across contexts. Library borrowing (along with other forms of cultural consumption) in Denmark is more strongly stratified according to wealth and education than income and occupation. Cross-national work on taste and social stratification, both quantitative and qualitative, has increasingly drawn attention to the ways that this relationship can vary (Chan, 2010; Lamont, 1992; Reeves 2019; van Hek and Kraaykamp, 2013). In light of this, it is not that surprising that a country with moderately high wealth inequality and relatively low income inequality sees a greater degree of social stratification in book borrowing by wealth rather than by income. More broadly, we would argue that, while taste always seems to be stratified, the nature of that stratification is contingent on the nature of the wider inequalities within a given context.

One way that inequality regimes may structure taste is by creating non-linearities in the relationship between taste and some measure of social stratification. The tastes of elites, for example, have historically been distinct from others in the population but they have also, at times, been the vanguard of changes in patterns of cultural distinction. It was a group of elites in the UK, for example, who sought to supplant "the old aristocracies of blood and business" with an "aristocracy of the arts" in the early 20th century (Friedman and Reeves 2020). And yet, in recent years, we have seen certain elites adopt a more populist orientation to cultural taste, seeking to position themselves within the cultural sphere of the ordinary and the everyday (Hahl et al 2019; Jarness and Friedman 2017). Indeed, elites may be more ordinary in their tastes than some members of the upper middle class and these potential non-linearities need to be examined in more detail in future work. Moving to the bottom of the wealth and income distribution, there is evidence that some groups explicitly reject the dominant aesthetic modes of the society and this might produce some clear differences in how they approach cultural consumption that, again, potentially produce non-linear patterns in consumption of some cultural forms. Uncovering these non-linearities will require both large data sets covering the whole of the society and detailed data on cultural consumption, but as these data sets become more readily available it will be possible – as our analysis is able to gesture towards here – to unpack these non-linearities in the relationship between cultural taste and location within the social hierarchy.

There are, of course, important limitations to our analysis. First, it might be the case that the books you borrow from the library are different from the books you have on the shelf at home. We cannot be entirely sure either way, but our survey data suggests this is unlikely to explain our results here. We find, for example, that the genres people borrow from libraries match those that they say they prefer on a survey (and presumably buy for themselves; cf. Appendix A7). Second, the gradients we observe may be driven entirely by cohort effects that are going to change as the older and more socially stratified groups are replaced by younger and more culturally egalitarian groups. We do find, for example, that the social gradients among high-wealth and high-education individuals are strongest for the older population. Our results do not vary when we control for age, but this does not resolve the issue of whether these differences are in part due to cohort effects or age effects. It could be, for example, that cultural stratification becomes more accentuated with age in part because wealth inequality increases with age too. Third, and perhaps most importantly, while our results suggest that wealth and education are the main sources of cultural stratification in Denmark, this finding only applies to what books people borrow. It does not tell us how people engage with or consume the books they read – their *style* of cultural consumption – which is arguably the most telling marker of cultural distinction (Flemmen et al 2018; Jarness 2015; Friedman, 2014).

Going forward, we hope the approach adopted here will prompt researchers to pursue work in two key areas that flow from our analysis. First, to trace how distinct cultural political economies (and the institutions that create and reinforce them) shape the stratification of taste. We know a great deal about how cultural tastes are connected to experiences within certain social institutions or formations, such as family life, schools, and social networks (Edelman and Vaisey, 2014; Fishman and Lizardo, 2013; Klokker and Jæger, 2022). These social institutions are almost certainly accentuating taste stratification but how they do it, and in which directions, may vary from place to place, and are likely rooted in wider norms that are emblematic of the country's wider political economy (e.g., liberal market economy) and the ideas in which that political economy is embedded within (e.g., aspirational individualism). We do not yet have a good handle on these issues but pursuing these questions will be critical if we are to understand why, for example, wealth and education stratifies taste in some settings but not others. Second, we hope the distinct approach adopted here – focussing on a least likely case – may prompt other researchers to re-examine certain stylized facts using newly available, high quality data. Examining deviant cases can, as Seawright and Gerring (2008) have argued, play an important role in moving

forward social scientific debates by encouraging researchers to test their theories against limit cases.

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Appendix A1. Social Stratification of Library Use and Number of Books Borrowed, Not Conditioning on Control Variables
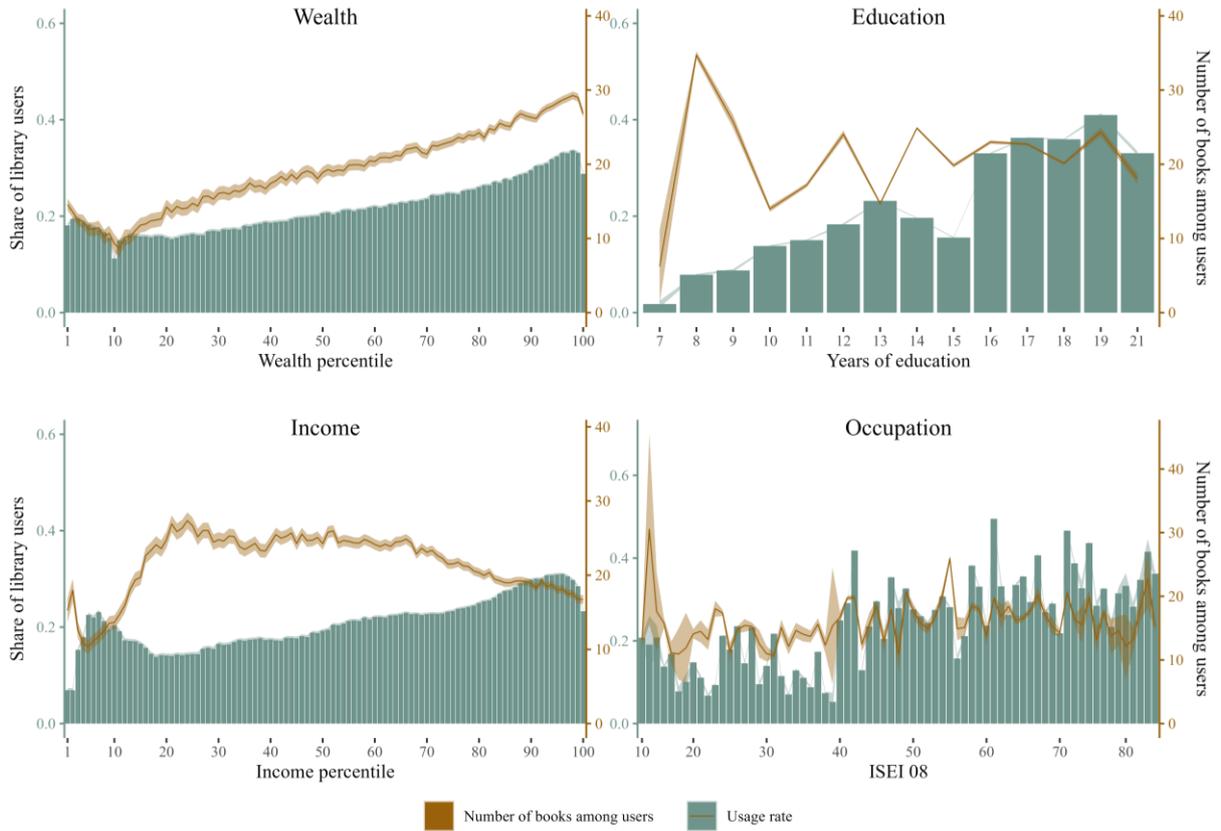
Appendix A2. Social Stratification of Borrowing of Popular and Highbrow Books, Not Conditioning on Control Variables

Top 5 most popular genres

Highbrow genres

Wealth percentiles

Wealth percentiles

Years of education

Years of education

Income percentiles

Income percentiles

ISEI score

ISEI score

| Biographical novel | Family novels | Thriller |
| Crime novels | Historical novels | |

| Bildungsroman | Experimental literature |
| Descriptions of societies | |
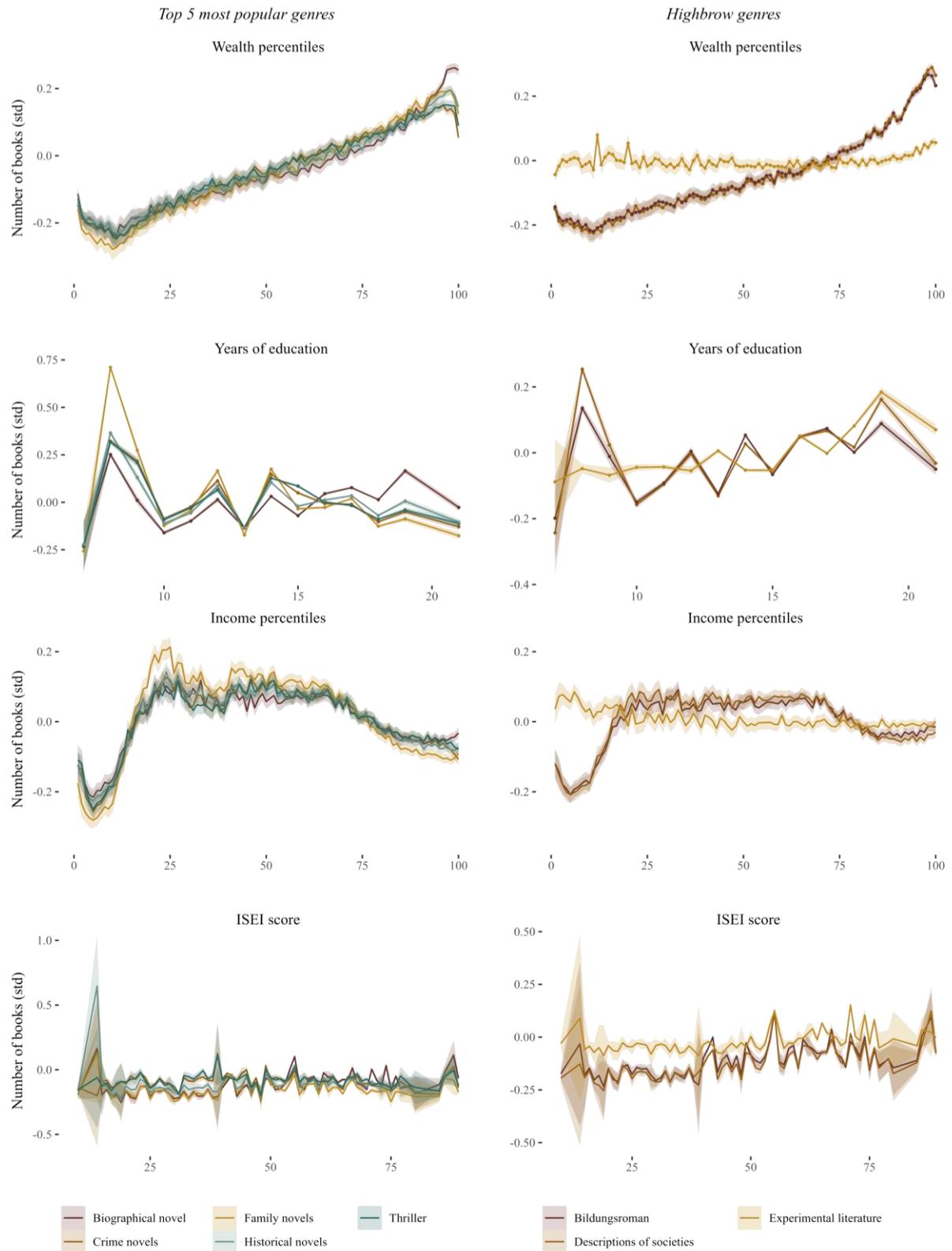
Appendix A3. Ranking of Literary Quality

Rank	Genre	Points (literary critics)	Points (librarians)	Total points
1	Developmental novels/Bildungsroman	20	281	301
2	Experimental novels	21	234	255
3	Descriptions of societies	4	199	203
4	Critique of society	11	140	151
5	Historical novels	6	113	119
6	Magical realism	10	99	109
7	Biographical novels	3	104	107
8	Collective novels	0	55	55
9	Fantasy	0	53	53
10	Dystopian novels	11	38	49
11	Science Fiction	3	44	47
12	Humor	1	24	25
13	Crime	5	19	24
14	Gothic	4	19	23
15	Family novels	0	22	22
16	Thriller	4	16	20
17	Rural life	2	3	5
18	Chick lit	0	4	4
19	Domestic noir	0	3	3
20	Femi-crime	0	0	0

Notes: Results from surveys with literary critics and librarians. We sent the survey to all national Danish newspapers and asked them to distribute it to their literary critics. We advertised the survey with librarians on librarian Facebook groups and in relevant newsletters. In total, we collected data from 7 literature critics and 98 librarians. First, we asked respondents in both surveys to select the five genres they believe have the highest literary quality (among the 20 most common genres in our data). Second, we asked them to rank the chosen genres according to literary quality. If a book was ranked first, we coded this as five points and if it was ranked fifth we coded this as one point. We calculated sum scores reflecting (a) whether a book was chosen among the top five (meaning it got at least one point) and (b) its rank among the five chosen categories. The total score is the sum across all replies, both from literary critics and librarians.

Appendix A4. Social Stratification of Number of Books Borrowed as Share of Total Number of Fiction Books
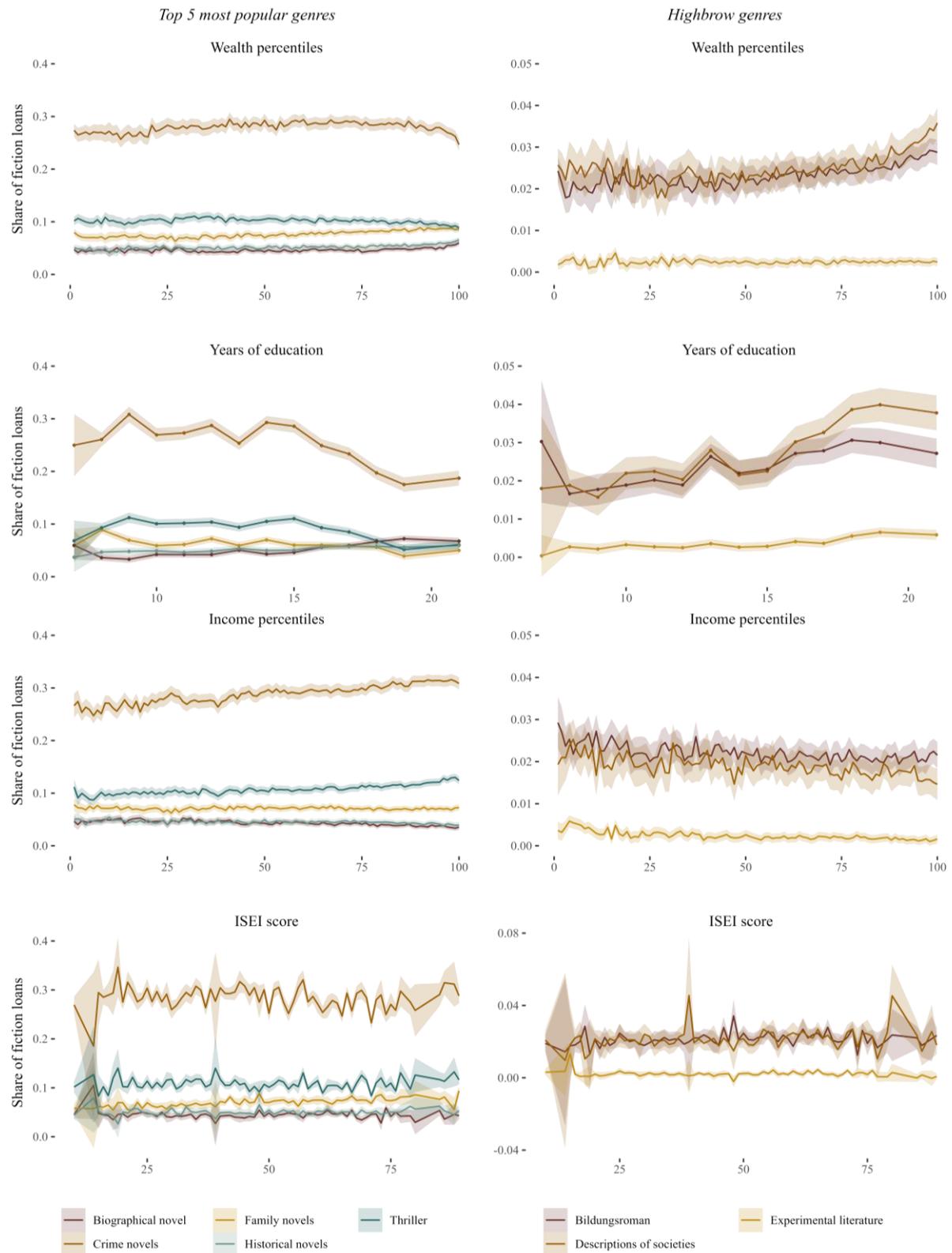
Appendix A5. Social Stratification of Number of Books Borrowed, Popular and Highbrow Non-Fiction Genres
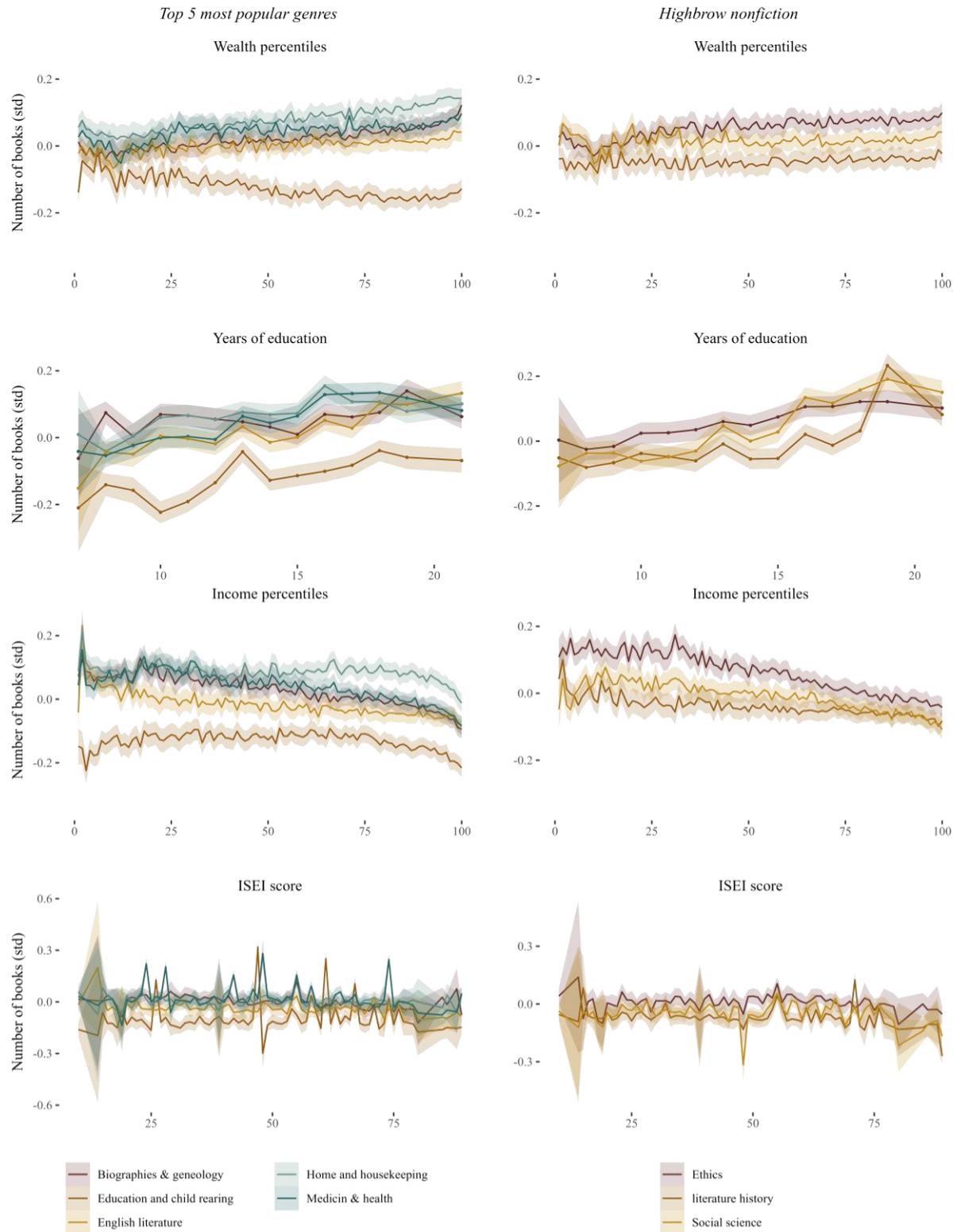
Appendix A6. Social Stratification of Number of Books Borrowed, Supplementary Indicators of Popular and Highbrow Non-Fiction Genres
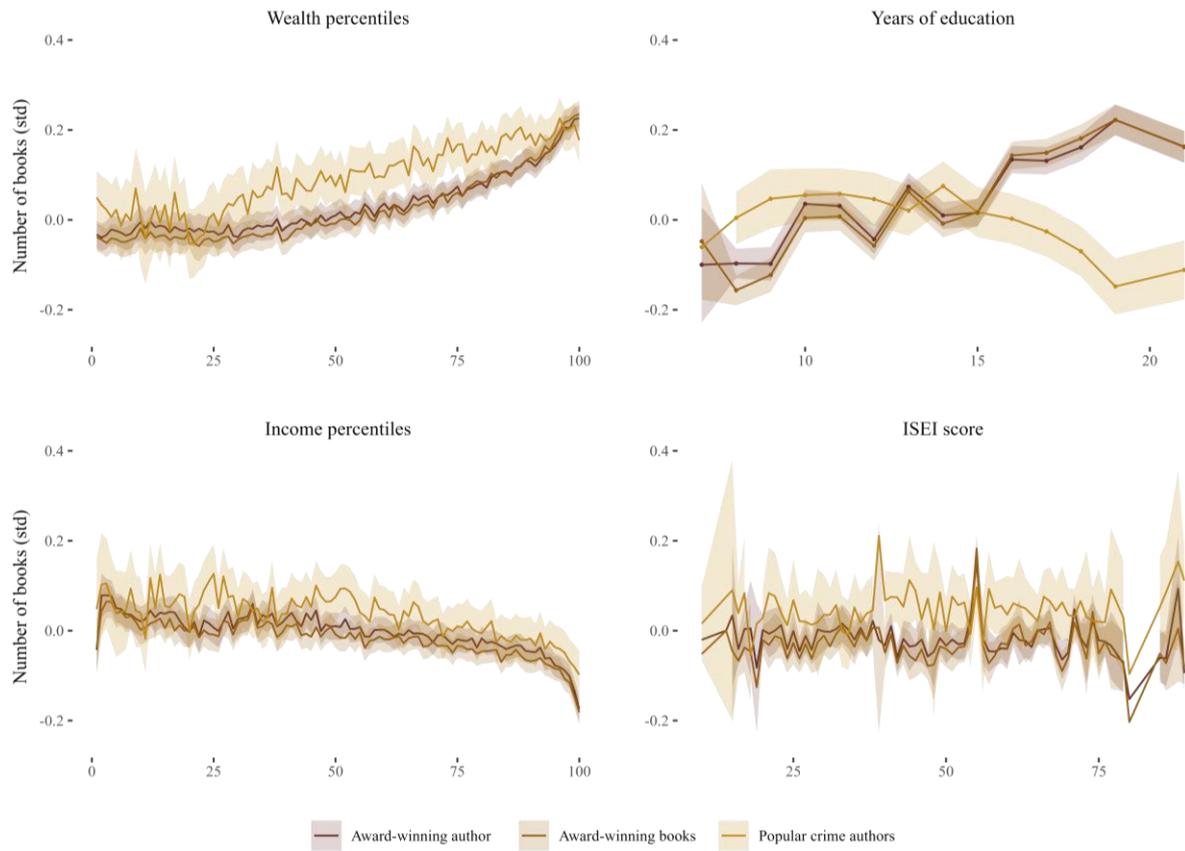
Appendix A7. Pairwise Polyserial Correlations between Book Genres Borrowed from the Library (Registry Data) and Self-Reported Literary Tastes (Survey Data)

Book genres borrowed (registry data):	Preferred book genres (survey data)						
	Crime	Thriller and horror	Historical novels	Poetry	Fantasy	Romance and erotica	Humor
Crime	0.52***	0.12***	0.08**	-0.01	-0.05	-0.05	0.05
Thriller	0.44***	0.17***	0.16***	-0.01	-0.05	0.01	0.04
Historical novels	0.12***	0.07*	0.23***	-0.06	-0.08	0.09**	-0.01
Family novels	0.09**	-0.02	0.22***	-0.19	-0.24	0.11***	0.00
Biographical novels	0.02	0.00	0.18***	0.06	-0.19	0.01	0.02
Critique of society	0.09**	0.02	0.14***	0.00	-0.13	0.04	0.02
Bildungsroman	0.07*	0.00	0.10**	-0.08	-0.11	0.06	-0.01
Experimental literature	0.01	0.02	0.06	0.14***	0.02	-0.07	-0.01

Notes: We matched individual-level registry on library borrowing in 2020 and 2021 with survey data on literary preferences. Data on preferred genres come from the Cultural Habits Survey – a nationally representative survey on cultural participation run by Statistics Denmark. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Appendix A8. Pairwise Correlations between Libraries Borrowing (Registry Data) and Self-Reported Cultural Participation and Literary Tastes (Survey Data)

	Borrowed at Least One Book in 2020 or 2021 (registry data)						
	Total sample	Top 1% wealth	Top 5% wealth	Top 1% income	Top 5% income	ISEI > 79	ISEI > 69
Cultural participation (survey data):[a]							
Visits libraries	0.69***	0.71***	0.74***	0.67***	0.64***	0.51***	0.58***
Reads fiction	0.44***	0.41***	0.48***	0.29**	0.37***	0.23	0.36***
Buys books	0.19***	0.21*	0.04	0.18	0.10**	0.06	0.15***
Goes to museum	0.27***	0.29***	0.23***	0.23*	0.19***	-0.03	0.22***
Looks at art (museum, public, at home)	0.20***	0.31***	0.17***	0.17	0.10*	-0.05	0.11*
Attends highbrow stage art (opera, ballet, theater)	0.19***	0.29**	0.14***	0.17	0.13**	-0.06	0.12*
Attends lowbrow stage art (musical, stand-up, revue)	0.01	-0.04	-0.02	-0.29	-0.04	-0.17	0.02
Goes to cinema	0.20***	0.14	0.16***	0.07	0.06	-0.02	0.06
Attends sport event (live)	-0.04	-0.04	-0.01	-0.01	-0.06	0.04	-0.08
Goes to amusement park	0.08***	0.10	0.03	0.29**	0.07	0.13	0.01
N	20,575	336	1,838	291	1,767	149	1,358
Book genres preferred:[b]							
Crime	0.25***	0.02	0.19**	0.11	0.27***	0.03	0.10
Thriller	0.16***	-0.08	0.15	0.50**	0.16	-0.07	-0.03
Fantasy	0.09***	0.13	0.06	-0.16	0.04	0.06	0.07
Historical novel	0.28***	0.39**	0.31***	0.15	0.19*	0.17	0.11
Humor	0.18***	0.06	0.15	0.22	0.14	-0.12	0.20
Romance/erotica	0.27***	0.30	0.39***	0.30	0.29**	0.01	0.23*
Poetry	0.31***	0.08	0.30*	0.31	0.14	0.39	0.33**
N	5,654	94	521	82	456	49	399

Notes: We matched individual-level registry on library borrowing in 2020 and 2021 with survey data on cultural participation and literary preferences Data on preferred book genres come from the Cultural Habits Survey – a nationally representative survey on cultural participation run by Statistics Denmark (we used the most recently available data from the Cultural Habits Survey but omitted data pertaining to lockdown periods during the COVID-19 pandemic), [a] Dummy variables for reporting having engaged in each cultural activity in the last 3 months, [b] Dummy variables for preferring each literary genre. *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Appendix 9. Social Stratification of Cultural Consumption, Survey Data (*N*=20,575).

Popular culture — Highbrow culture