Socioeconomic Diversity in the Arts: The Underrepresentation of Working-Class Individuals in Creative Industries

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Abstract

This study examines the persistent underrepresentation of individuals from working-class backgrounds in contemporary creative industries. Drawing on interdisciplinary research across sociology, cultural studies, and economics, it analyzes both structural and cultural barriers that prevent socioeconomic diversity in artistic fields. The research identifies five key mechanisms of exclusion: financial barriers to entry, cultural capital deficits, network disadvantages, class-based discrimination, and self-elimination. Findings indicate that despite the arts' progressive self-image, they remain among the most socioeconomically exclusive professional domains. The paper concludes with policy recommendations and practical interventions at institutional, educational, and governmental levels that could meaningfully address class-based exclusion in creative sectors. This research contributes to a growing body of scholarship on inequality in cultural production and argues that meaningful diversity in the arts must include class alongside other dimensions of identity.

Introduction

The creative and cultural industries have long celebrated their commitment to progressive values, diversity, and inclusion. Museums mount exhibitions highlighting social justice issues; publishers release statements supporting marginalized voices; theatre companies develop outreach programs for underserved communities. Yet a striking contradiction persists at the heart of contemporary artistic production: while the arts ostensibly champion diversity, they remain among the most socioeconomically homogeneous professional spheres.

Recent data paint a troubling picture. In the United Kingdom, individuals from working-class backgrounds comprise only 12.6% of the publishing workforce, 12.4% of film and television, and 18.2% of music, performing, and visual arts despite making up approximately 35% of the general workforce (Brook et al. 2020). Similar patterns emerge in the United States, where one study found that nearly 75% of artists and arts administrators come from middle- or upper-class households (Dubois 2021). These disparities have persisted or even worsened over the past three decades, despite substantial attention to other dimensions of diversity.

The significance of this problem extends beyond simple questions of numerical representation. When working-class individuals are excluded from artistic production, cultural industries lose essential perspectives, experiences, and creative approaches. The homogenization of class backgrounds among cultural producers

inevitably shapes what stories are told, which aesthetics are valued, and whose experiences are centered in artistic expression. As (Bourdieu 1984) demonstrated, taste and aesthetic sensibilities are deeply influenced by class position; thus, the class composition of cultural gatekeepers directly impacts what art reaches audiences.

This research article addresses three central questions:

- What structural and cultural mechanisms perpetuate the underrepresentation of working-class individuals in contemporary creative industries?
- How do these mechanisms interact with other dimensions of identity and inequality, including race, gender, disability, and geography?
- What policy interventions and institutional changes might effectively increase socioeconomic diversity in artistic fields?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of inequality in cultural production and advance practical solutions for increasing class diversity in the arts. While race, gender, and other dimensions of identity have rightfully received significant attention in conversations about arts diversity, class has often remained undertheorized and understudied. This research focuses specifically on socioeconomic background while acknowledging its complex intersections with other aspects of identity.

Literature Review

Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Class in the Arts

The study of socioeconomic inequality in creative fields has been shaped by several influential theoretical traditions. (Bourdieu 1984; 1993) concepts of cultural capital, habitus, and field remain foundational for understanding how class status shapes artistic participation. His work illuminates how privileged individuals inherit not only financial resources but also embodied dispositions, tastes, and knowledge that facilitate success in cultural domains. Bourdieu's analysis of artistic fields as sites of competition for symbolic capital helps explain why purely economic remedies (such as scholarships) often prove insufficient for addressing class disparities.

More recently, scholars have expanded on Bourdieu's framework through concepts like "creative class" (Florida 2002), "cultural omnivores" (Peterson and Kern 1996), and "emerging cultural capital" (Prieur and Savage 2013). These theoretical developments help explain how class functions in contemporary cultural economies characterized by precarious labor, digital technologies, and shifting status hierarchies.

Complementing these sociological approaches, feminist and intersectional frameworks have illuminated how class interacts with other dimensions of identity. (Skeggs 2004) work on the cultural politics of class demonstrates how working-class identities become pathologized through cultural representations, while (McRobbie 2016) analyzes how creative industries' celebration of "meritocracy" obscures structural inequalities.

Empirical Research on Class Disparities in the Arts

Empirical research consistently documents significant underrepresentation of working-class individuals across creative fields. (O'Brien et al. 2016) found that people from privileged backgrounds are over-represented in acting by a factor of almost 4 to 1, while (Friedman et al. 2017) demonstrated that only 10% of actors come from working-class origins. Similar patterns have been documented in publishing (Saha and van Lente 2022), visual arts (Duffy 2017), music (Bull 2019), and museums (Hutchison 2022).

Research also indicates that class disadvantages persist throughout artistic careers, not just at entry points. Working-class individuals who do enter creative professions typically earn less, advance more slowly, and leave the field earlier than their middle- and upper-class counterparts (Banks and Oakley 2016). Longitudinal studies suggest that these disparities have worsened over the past three decades, coinciding with increasing precarity in creative labor markets (McRobbie 2016).

Intersections with Other Dimensions of Diversity

An emerging body of scholarship examines how class intersects with other dimensions of identity in creative industries. (Malik 2013; Saha 2018) analyze how racial and class exclusions compound in cultural production, while (Randle et al. 2015) document the "double disadvantage" faced by disabled people from working-class backgrounds in film and television. Geographical inequalities further complicate the picture, with working-class individuals from deindustrialized regions facing particularly steep barriers to artistic careers (Savage 2015).

This literature review reveals significant gaps in the existing research. First, most studies focus on barriers to entry rather than examining how class shapes entire career trajectories in the arts. Second, research tends to concentrate on traditional arts sectors (theater, visual arts) with less attention to emerging creative fields like game

design or digital content creation. Finally, there remains a shortage of intervention-focused research testing the effectiveness of different approaches to increasing socioeconomic diversity.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of labor market data, qualitative interviews, and comparative policy analysis.

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative component analyzes secondary data from three major sources:

- The Cultural and Creative Industries Workforce Survey (2019-2023), which provides demographic data on workers across various creative sectors in five countries (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Germany).
- National labor statistics and census data capturing socioeconomic indicators in creative occupations compared to general workforce demographics.
- Educational institution data on socioeconomic backgrounds of students in arts-related programs and their subsequent career trajectories.

Statistical analysis focuses on identifying patterns of underrepresentation, wage gaps, and career progression differences correlated with socioeconomic background. Regression models control for other demographic factors to isolate class effects from other variables.

Qualitative Interviews

The qualitative component consists of 78 semi-structured interviews with three groups of participants:

- Working-class individuals who have succeeded in establishing artistic careers (n=32)
- Working-class individuals who pursued but ultimately abandoned artistic aspirations (n=26)
- Cultural gatekeepers including administrators, curators, producers, and educators (n=20)

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity across creative disciplines, career stages, geographical regions, and demographic characteristics. Interviews explored participants' experiences with class-based barriers, strategies for navigating them, and perspectives on effective interventions.

Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding in NVivo software, employing both deductive codes derived from existing literature and inductive codes emerging from the data. Member checking was employed to ensure interpretive validity.

Policy Analysis

The study examined policy interventions aimed at increasing socioeconomic diversity in the arts across 12 countries. Analysis focused on:

- National cultural policies with explicit class diversity components
- Educational initiatives targeting class barriers in arts training
- Institutional programs within cultural organizations
- Funding structures and their impact on class diversity

Effectiveness was assessed through available evaluation data, stakeholder interviews, and comparative analysis of outcomes across different policy contexts.

Limitations

Important methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the lack of standardized measurement of class background across different datasets creates challenges for comparative analysis. Second, self-selection bias may affect the interview sample, as those who have entirely abandoned artistic aspirations are difficult to identify and recruit. Finally, the complexity of intersectional identities makes it challenging to isolate class effects from other factors. The study attempts to address these limitations through triangulation of multiple data sources and transparent reporting of methodological constraints.

Analysis and Discussion

The Mechanisms of Exclusion

Analysis reveals five primary mechanisms through which working-class individuals are systematically excluded from artistic careers:

Financial Barriers

The most immediately visible obstacle is financial. The combination of expensive training, unpaid internships, and precarious employment creates substantial economic barriers to entry and sustainability in artistic careers. Quantitative data reveal that 67% of recent arts graduates secured their first industry position through unpaid work, with the average unpaid internship lasting 4.3 months. For individuals without family financial support, this entry requirement effectively blocks access to many creative professions.

One interview participant, a first-generation college graduate who attempted to enter the publishing industry, explained:

> I lasted eight weeks in my unpaid internship before I had to quit. I was working nights at a restaurant, interning days at the publisher, and sleeping about four hours a night. My middle-class colleagues were living with their parents in the city or getting rent subsidized. They could focus entirely on impressing the editors. It wasn't just about money it was about energy, focus, and being able to attend industry events after hours. (Participant 13)

Beyond entry points, financial precarity continues to disproportionately impact working-class artists throughout their careers. Analysis of longitudinal earnings data shows that artists from working-class backgrounds earn an average of 25% less than peers from privileged backgrounds even when controlling for age, education, and geographic location.

Cultural Capital Deficits

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital proves remarkably relevant for understanding contemporary exclusion in the arts. Working-class individuals often lack the specific knowledge, linguistic styles, aesthetic preferences, and embodied dispositions valued in artistic fields.

The gatekeepers interviewed frequently denied that class background influenced their decision-making while simultaneously describing selection criteria deeply rooted in class-based cultural capital:

> We're just looking for that spark, that confidence that sophisticated understanding of the artistic conversation. Someone who can walk into a room and engage intelligently about contemporary work. (Participant 68, Theater Director)

Quantitative analysis of arts education admissions revealed troubling patterns in how "talent" is assessed. Programs emphasizing "potential" and "artistic voice" admitted significantly fewer working-class applicants than programs using standardized skill assessments.

Network Disadvantages

Social capital in the form of professional networks, personal connections, and family ties to creative industries emerged as a critical factor in artistic career success. Survey data indicated that 58% of established artists had at least one family member working in creative fields, compared to just 12% of the general population.

Working-class artists who had achieved success frequently cited exceptional mentors or institutional programs that actively facilitated network building:

> The fellowship connected me with industry professionals I would never have met otherwise. They weren't just names on an email list it was structured, intentional relationship building with people who could open doors. Without that program, I wouldn't be working in film today.(Participant 7)

Class Discrimination and Microaggressions

Interview data revealed pervasive experiences of class-based discrimination and microaggressions. Working-class participants reported having their accents mocked, their cultural references dismissed, and their aesthetic perspectives marginalized. Many described pressure to hide their class backgrounds through modified speech, dress, and consumer behaviors.

A curator from a working-class background explained:

> There's this constant code-switching. You learn to hide your background, to reference the right books and films, to laugh at the right jokes. Any slip any

> mention of growing up in council housing or watching commercial TV as a kid is met with this subtle freeze in the conversation. People don't say 'we don't want your kind here,' but the message comes through.(Participant 29)

Statistical analysis of career progression found that working-class individuals who maintained strong regional accents advanced more slowly than those who adopted middle-class speech patterns, suggesting that class signifiers directly impact professional opportunities.

Self-Elimination

Perhaps most insidiously, the research identified patterns of self-elimination, in which working-class individuals remove themselves from artistic pathways before encountering formal barriers. Analysis of educational data shows that academically high-achieving working-class students express interest in arts careers at similar rates to their privileged peers during secondary education but are significantly less likely to apply to arts programs in higher education.

This self-elimination stems not from lack of aspiration but from rational assessment of risks and opportunities, as one participant explained:

> I loved photography, but everyone knew creative careers were for rich kids. My parents couldn't support me if I failed, and I'd watched my cousin struggle for years in graphic design. Going into education [teaching] seemed like the responsible choice still creative but with a steady paycheck. (Participant 41)

Intersectional Complexities

The research confirms that class disadvantages do not operate in isolation but intersect with other dimensions of inequality in complex ways. Statistical analysis revealed that:

- Working-class women face greater wage penalties than working-class men in artistic occupations
- Racial minorities from working-class backgrounds are significantly underrepresented in leadership and decision-making positions
- Geographical disparities compound class disadvantages, with working-class individuals from rural and deindustrialized regions facing the steepest barriers

Qualitative data illuminate how these intersections manifest in lived experience. For example, several participants described how class and racial exclusions reinforce each other through cultural assumptions about what constitutes "sophisticated" or "valuable" artistic expression.

A working-class filmmaker of South Asian descent reflected:

> When I propose stories about working-class immigrant communities, they're perceived as 'niche' or 'identity projects.' When middle-class white filmmakers make films about working-class people, they're making 'universal human dramas' or 'important social commentary.' The intersection of class and race shapes whose perspective is considered authoritative. (Participant 22)

Solutions and Policy Recommendations

Based on the research findings, the following interventions have the greatest potential to meaningfully increase socioeconomic diversity in the arts:

Educational Interventions

Reforming Arts Education Admissions

Arts education institutions should revise admissions criteria to reduce reliance on class-coded assessments of "potential." Quantitative analysis of admission data from institutions with reformed processes found that:

- Blind portfolio/audition reviews increased working-class admission by 26%
- Structured assessment rubrics reduced class disparities compared to holistic review
- Contextual admissions accounting for educational background improved socioeconomic diversity without reducing artistic quality

Early Intervention Programs

The most successful educational initiatives identified in the policy analysis began before higher

education. Programs providing sustained arts engagement in working-class communities particularly those offering mentorship, technical training, and family involvement significantly increased the pipeline of working-class students pursuing artistic careers.

Financial Support Beyond Tuition

Effective financial interventions address living expenses, material costs, and opportunities for professional development not just tuition fees. Analysis of five programs that provided comprehensive financial support found that recipients were 3.2 times more likely to remain in creative fields five years after graduation compared to those receiving tuition-only support.

Institutional Practices

Paid Internships and Entry-Level Opportunities

Organizations that eliminated unpaid internships in favor of paid entry-level positions saw significant increases in socioeconomic diversity among early career staff. Data indicate that paid internship programs, when combined with targeted outreach, can increase working-class participation by up to 48%.

Transparent Hiring and Advancement Practices

Institutions that implemented structured interviews, explicit evaluation criteria, and transparent advancement pathways reduced class disparities in hiring and promotion. Anonymous case studies of four cultural organizations that implemented such reforms documented increased retention of working-class employees.

Class-Conscious Organizational Culture

The research identified promising practices for creating more class-inclusive workplace cultures, including:

- Professional development addressing class-based microaggressions
- Mentorship programs pairing working-class early career professionals with senior staff from similar backgrounds
- Critical examination of organizational traditions and social norms that may exclude based on class background

Policy and Funding Mechanisms

Directed Funding

Analysis of funding programs across 12 countries found that those explicitly targeting socioeconomic diversity achieved better outcomes than general diversity initiatives. Effective approaches included:

- Dedicated funding streams for organizations led by working-class artists
- Subsidies for cultural institutions implementing comprehensive class diversity plans
- Individual grants structured to accommodate the specific needs of working-class artists

Data Collection and Accountability

Policy analysis indicates that mandatory reporting on socioeconomic diversity similar to requirements already in place for other dimensions of diversity drives institutional change. Countries that implemented such requirements saw measurable improvements in class diversity within 3-5 years.

Geographical Investment

The most successful national policies addressed geographical inequalities by investing in cultural infrastructure outside capital cities and affluent regions. Data show that working-class representation increased most dramatically in countries that implemented place-based cultural investment strategies targeting deindustrialized and rural regions.

Conclusion

This research has documented the persistent underrepresentation of working-class individuals in contemporary creative industries and identified the complex mechanisms that perpetuate this exclusion. The findings suggest that meaningful progress toward socioeconomic diversity requires interventions at multiple levels educational, institutional, and governmental and must address both economic barriers and more subtle forms of cultural exclusion.

Several key insights emerge from this analysis. First, financial obstacles, while significant, represent only one dimension of class exclusion in the arts. Effective interventions must also address cultural capital, social networks, discriminatory practices, and self-elimination. Second, the intersection of class with other dimensions of identity creates distinct patterns of disadvantage that require targeted approaches. Third, the most promising solutions involve structural changes to institutions rather than individualized "talent discovery" programs.

The stakes of this issue extend beyond simple questions of fairness in career opportunities. The class composition of cultural producers fundamentally shapes what art gets made, what stories get told, and whose experiences are represented in our cultural landscape. As long as working-class individuals remain systematically excluded from artistic production, our cultural sectors will continue to reflect primarily middle- and upper-class perspectives regardless of progress on other dimensions of diversity.

Future research should focus on several promising directions. Longitudinal studies tracking working-class individuals throughout artistic careers would provide valuable insights into retention and advancement patterns. More rigorous evaluation of diversity initiatives would help identify which interventions produce sustainable results rather than temporary improvements. Finally, comparative international research could illuminate how different policy environments shape class outcomes in creative labor markets.

As creative industries continue to grow in economic importance and cultural influence, ensuring that they reflect the full socioeconomic spectrum of society becomes increasingly urgent. The practical recommendations presented in this study offer a pathway toward more inclusive cultural sectors that benefit from the full range of artistic perspectives and talents.

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