What Do Culture Vouchers Really Buy? Evidence from France's ‘pass Culture’ Policy Effects

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Abstract: Over the last decade, states throughout Europe have begun implementing universal culture vouchers for young adults to boost cultural participation. Little is known about the effects of these large-scale subsidies, specifically whether they are truly an effective means of widening participation. This article addresses this question by evaluating the French ‘pass Culture’, a €300 stipend for cultural consumption offered to all 18-year-olds. Drawing from the fields of the sociology of culture and cultural economics, this study aims to determine whether an increase in purchasing power for cultural goods can influence participation. The empirical analysis is based on an econometric examination of a large-scale survey examining cultural participation and the use of ‘pass Culture’. The results reveal that while the voucher does not affect participation in institutional highbrow cultural activities like museum visits, theater, or opera attendance, it significantly increases engagement with commercial popular culture, including cinema and comic book reading. These findings suggest that financial barriers are not the primary obstacle to consumption in cultural capital-intensive activities. However, financial constraints do appear to contribute to non-participation in popular cultural life among certain youth demographics. The article then discusses the theoretical implications of these findings for our understanding of the relationship between cultural consumption, cultural policies, and social inequalities.

Keywords: Cultural policy; cultural consumption; social inequalities; culture voucher; evaluation of policy; youth culture

Highlights:

- Examining the efficacy of culture vouchers in widening cultural participation.
- Econometric evaluation of France's €300 'pass Culture' for young adults.
- Voucher boost engagement with commercial popular culture (e.g., cinema, comic book).
- No significant effect on institutional highbrow consumption (e.g., theater, museum)
- Financial constraints not the primary barrier to cultural capital-intensive activities.

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1 Introduction

"*I want to create a cultural pass. […] On your 18th birthday, you'll receive 500 euros to spend on books and cultural content through a platform managed by the Ministry. This is what Italy has implemented, and it's working brilliantly. Why? Because it acknowledges that cultural exploration is a personal journey – young individuals should be free to make their own choices.*"[1] This statement, made by French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron in 2017, introduced his proposal for a voucher to support young people's cultural consumption. The initiative was intended to serve as the cornerstone of President Macron's cultural policy. When announcing the plan on the highbrow public radio France Culture, he emphasized that young people should have the freedom to choose, regardless of what they ultimately decided to consume. By 2019, this vision materialized as the 'pass Culture' (PC)—a fully state-subsidized digital marketplace designed to give young people access to the diversity of cultural production available in the French market, without filters based on pre-existing cultural hierarchies. Following the example set by the Italian '18app' program, which was implemented just a couple of years before, the PC strategy has since been adopted by many other European countries.

The mere existence of this type of policy raises a compelling question: what happens when people are universally provided with a substantial stipend to purchase cultural goods, regardless of their actual resources and without applying filters on the quality of what they can buy? Can this type of political intervention have any impact on participation, especially for people who are distant from culture?

Existing sociological literature primarily attributes unequal cultural participation among individuals to differences in the transmission of cultural capital within the family (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1964; Dimaggio & Mohr, 1996; Kraaykamp & van Eijck, 2010; Roaldsnes, 2025b). In other words, cultural scarcity is explained by cultural factors. According to this literature, culture vouchers would be bound to have little to no effect on participation. However, the literature in cultural economics demonstrates that the demand for certain types of cultural products varies when income and price change (Lévy-Garboua & Montmarquette, 2002), suggesting that the financial aspect of cultural consumption might not be as negligible as implicitly suggested by the focus on cultural factors. Moreover, the only existing econometric study on a large-scale universal culture voucher indeed shows that such policies influence cultural consumption, at least for cinema and books (Baldin et al., 2024).

This article contributes to the debate by studying the effects of the French PC policy. The aim of this paper is twofold. First, regarding policy evaluation, I intend to assess the impact of this culture voucher on the cultural participation rate of its users. I employ a different analytical strategy than the one previously used for the Italian case (Baldin et al., 2024). This will allow me to test the robustness of prior results and observe if the effect varies according to the national context. Second, on a more theoretical level, this paper aims to understand the role of financial constraints on cultural consumption inequality. This question, central to the sociology of culture, is instrumental for policy study. One of the primary goals of cultural policy across European countries is to increase participation in publicly subsidized culture (Stevenson et al.,

[1] Radio France. (2017). Emmanuel Macron : "Je veux créer un pass culturel : tous les jeunes à 18 ans auront 500 euros". Retrieved from https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/emmanuel-macron-je-veux-creer-un-pass-culturel-tous-les-jeunes-a-18-ans-auront-500-euros-5899195. Accessed October 6, 2025.

2017). Governments have primarily relied on making publicly funded culture financially accessible to achieve this. The study of the uses and effects of culture vouchers casts new light on the efficiency of this policy orientation.

This article draws on a large survey (N=5,010) conducted on a representative sample of the French population aged 18 to 21. The survey was specifically commissioned to evaluate the program. The question regarding the policy's effects will be operationalized into two empirical questions. First, does the apparent universality of the program conceal underlying inequalities? I will demonstrate that there is an unequal take-up rate, leading to a form of the Matthew effect: young people from privileged backgrounds participate in the program more than their less-advantaged counterparts. Although this phenomenon exists, it remains of low magnitude. Second, what are the actual effects of the program on users' consumption? I propose an econometric design to estimate the causal effect of the scheme, net of any substitution effects. I find a clear impact on cinema attendance and comic book reading, a small and somewhat uncertain impact on book reading and concert attendance, but no effect on more institutionalized cultural practices, such as theater, ballet, or museum attendance.

In the discussion section, I explore the implications of these contrasting results for understanding cultural inequality and the relevance of policies designed to combat it. The findings indicate that while financial aspects might not be strongly relevant in explaining non-participation in highbrow culture, economic deprivation is nonetheless a factor in non-involvement in popular culture consumption. Drawing from studies on youth culture (Cicchelli et al., 2023; Pasquier, 2005) and the formation of social ties based on cultural references (Lizardo, 2006), I argue that a policy like the ‘pass Culture’ could help reduce social isolation by enabling financially struggling young people to access widespread popular culture, while remaining irrelevant in helping participation in publicly funded highbrow culture.

2 ‘Pass Culture’ and market-based cultural policies

The PC scheme appears quite disruptive, as it opposes how the French state traditionally conceived cultural policy. The PC orientation can be described as strongly relativist. PC is fundamentally a universal voucher for cultural consumption targeted at a specific age segment. Following Macron’s initial proposal, the scheme was ultimately implemented as a €300 stipend for individuals upon turning eighteen, complemented by a smaller sum allocated during their high school years. It was tested in a handful of regions in 2019, then deployed across the national territory in 2021.[2] In addition, PC—like its European counterparts—isn't meant to be just a voucher; it's also a digital platform where the voucher is to be spent. The platform strongly resembles commercial platforms like Amazon. Users can browse available products either through a dedicated search bar or via a curated homepage, with content that is both human- and algorithm-generated. The booking procedure is designed to be uncomplicated and intuitive, without control over the quality of content available. In contrast to the historical orientation of

[2] The diffusion of the policy has been a considerable success to date. A comparison of the usage data with the census indicated that almost 84% of an age cohort effectively unlock their credit (Cour des comptes, 2024).

the French Ministry of Culture (L. Martin, 2011), the policy doesn't function as an instrument for promoting "high culture" or the "fine arts".[3]

The PC scheme entails a shift from a paternalistic perspective of the ministry's actions (in which the state determines what is best for the people) to a market-based approach (in which people can freely choose what they want on the market). Any form of top-down cultural mediation is conspicuously absent from PC. By design, the scheme was intended to impose no form of hierarchy between cultural goods. Beneficiaries can buy opera tickets as well as manga comic books. The promoters of the policy believed that this design would help to reach people who feel that culture is not for them because of symbolic boundaries. Once they entered the program to buy a comic book or a cinema ticket for a superhero movie, they would likely be exposed to more highbrow cultural goods through the recommending system of the PC digital platform.

To position the PC scheme within cultural policy paradigms (Bonet & Négrier, 2018), one can say that it stands at the crossroads of radical cultural democracy and a creative economy approach, tinged with a form of techno-solutionism. These categorizations directly follow the relativist and market-based aspects of these vouchers. The cultural democracy paradigm states that policies should support people's cultural leisure in diverse ways without referring to arbitrary hierarchies (Bellavance et al., 2000). It is a direct response to criticism about the acknowledged paternalism of previous paradigms of "cultural democratization" and "cultural excellence" (Bonet & Négrier, 2018). PC pushes this aspect to an extreme by embracing a fully relativistic view, where the most commercial culture competes against publicly funded art to gain the audience's favor and thus win a share of the public subsidy. This policy orientation seems to recognize the failure of traditional policies to reduce unequal participation in high arts (Coulangeon, 2013), and therefore chooses to abandon efforts to forcefully orient citizens, favoring a pure consumer autonomy approach where any "participation" in culture (Stevenson et al., 2017) is considered equal.

In this sense, it is fueled by strong trust in the virtues of the market, and more specifically, digital marketplace platforms. In France, the program's promoters argue that the technological aspect of the solution will ultimately help it meet broad policy goals. It intends to follow the example of commercial platforms, implementing proven efficient strategies, regardless of whether these technological solutions were initially developed to meet goals (e.g. boosting user retention or maximizing sales) unrelated to the policy aims themselves.[4] PC thus ended up integrating a technology of distribution (the digital marketplace) as a core aspect of the scheme. This tendency is a defining facet of the creative economy shift in cultural policy (Garnham, 2005). The market-based system also helps resolve a dilemma about the funding attribution process. Instead of bureaucratic and arbitrary criteria, cultural industries are financed according to their appeal to the public (McGuigan, 2009, p. 158). While officially justified by a willingness to facilitate young people's participation in culture without being paternalistic, market-based policies offer the state the possibility to indirectly subsidize the most profitable

[3] In fact, the opposite is true: the most popular cultural goods and venues have benefited most from this policy (Cour des comptes, 2024).

[4] Typically, recommending algorithms are highlighted by the promoter of the scheme as a means to 'nudge' beneficiaries to consume a more diverse range of cultural goods. However, the theoretical idea has struggled to find an efficient implementation because existing recommending algorithms aren't designed to increase consumption diversity but, on the contrary, to predict already existing consumer tastes.

sectors of the creative economy, thereby maximizing the competitiveness of its national cultural industries (Schlesinger, 2017).

3 Theoretical framework

The theoretical questions raised by the PC pertain to the financial aspect of cultural consumption. Specifically, to what extent is an individual's choice to engage in a cultural activity related to its price and their ability to pay for it? Is the unequal cultural participation across social classes in any way related to the cost of culture?

3.1 Childhood socialization and unequal cultural participation

To explain unequal participation in culture, the dominant paradigm mainly mobilizes the mechanism of childhood socialization (Lareau, 2011; Roaldsnes, 2025b). According to this literature, a child's level of cultural participation is determined by the transmission of cultural capital from their parents (Blaabæk, 2022; van Hek & Kraaykamp, 2015). As a result, the financial aspect of cultural consumption is only marginally considered on its own. When it is considered, the studies clearly show that the "home cultural climate" far outweighs the importance of economic background (Dimaggio & Mohr, 1996). Scholars explain that children from working-class backgrounds participate less in highbrow culture than their middle- and upper-class counterparts not because they cannot afford it, but because they lack the proper socialization to be willing to do so.

This does not mean that the economic situation of families holds no interest for cultural sociologists; rather, this aspect is conceived as part of broader social class belonging (Lareau, 2011). A defining aspect of the sociology of culture since Pierre Bourdieu has been to consider social class through the lens of lifestyle (Bennett et al., 2009; Bourdieu, 1979). While money is certainly one aspect that determines lifestyle, the main vocation of the sociology of culture is precisely to re-contextualize the financial aspect of lifestyle with regard to cultural factors. What the PC policy is trying to do is orthogonal to this type of sociological reasoning, since it only uses financial incentives to affect cultural lifestyle. It ignores the idea of cultural socialization to focus exclusively on removing the financial barrier to cultural consumption. Thus, from a strict sociological perspective, a political intervention like the PC is bound to have little to no effect on inequalities in cultural participation.

3.2 The elasticity of demand for different art forms

Economically speaking, the PC represents a temporary increase in beneficiaries' purchasing power for cultural products. Due to the nature of their discipline, economists are more inclined than sociologists to consider how a change in purchasing power affects demand for cultural goods. The question is, given existing taste for a range of cultural goods, will an increase in someone's earnings or a variation in the price of the goods they like affect their demand for them? In economic terms, this refers to the income and own-price elasticity of demand for art (Hellmanzik, 2020). Both aspects are very often studied together in the literature. A review of this literature unambiguously shows that demand for art indeed varies according to income and prices (Lévy-Garboua & Montmarquette, 2002; Yang & Wang, 2023), but this effect differs quite drastically depending on the type of good considered.

The demand for two very popular types of cultural goods has been shown to be strongly susceptible to income and own-price elasticity: cinema tickets and books. Regarding cinema, early econometric studies conducted in the late 1980s, using cross-sectional time series, showed very positive own-price elasticity of demand for cinema tickets (Cameron, 1986, 1990). The author also demonstrates high-income elasticity. Similar results have been found recently using a more robust quasi-experimental approach (de Roos & McKenzie, 2014). This aspect is arguably even stronger for books. Ringstad and Løyland (2006) show strong income and price elasticity of demand in Norway. The same results were found more recently for price elasticity in the German book market (Barrot et al., 2015).

A rather different picture emerges for highbrow on-site culture. While the studies for books and cinema were clear and unambiguous, the case of performing arts is less straightforward. Overall, the literature suggests inelasticity on price, and more contradictory observations for income (Seaman, 2006). Early 1990s studies conducted in the United States show quite inelastic demand for opera performance (Felton, 1989, 1992). For public theater, solid evidence from Germany shows that demand is inelastic to own-price variation, but quite strongly elastic to income (Zieba, 2009). The problem is that these types of analyses don't take into account education, which is known to be a strong confounder for the demand for performing arts (Seaman, 2006). Lastly, in the late 1990s in the United States museum demand was shown to be inelastic to price variation (Luksetich & and Partridge, 1997).

Drawing from these results, the PC is more likely to have a stronger effect on the consumption of cinema tickets and books than on performing arts, if any. Due to the specificity of the French policy regarding museum pricing, it's very unlikely that the scheme has any effects on museum attendance (see Section 6.3: Leveraging the French cultural policy context for a robustness check).

3.3 Evidence from comparable policies

This review of the general literature identified two social mechanisms (childhood socialization to culture; demand elasticity) that help us to delineate the potential impacts of PC policy. However, studies of similar policies would offer more direct evidence on the matter. It's important to note that robust empirical data on this topic is quite limited, since this type of large universal voucher policy is a recent trend in cultural policy. Indirect evidence exists from different, yet comparable, programs, and one study on the similar Italian ‘18app’ is available.

First, a very large voucher program for young people's sports activities has been deployed and well-studied in Australia (Foley et al., 2021). While the program focuses on physical activity rather than cultural practices, it teaches us one crucial thing: even though sports participation is arguably less dependent on family cultural capital, the take-up rates of such voucher programs are still correlated with socioeconomic status. This means that young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds participate less in the program, even though they are the ones who engage in fewer sports overall (Foley et al., 2020). This leads to a situation where the people who would benefit most from the program use it less, or, put another way, it exemplifies the Matthew effect (Rigney, 2010). As demonstrated through the study of several cultural participation enhancement policies (Roaldsnes, 2025a), this type of effect is very common and should probably be found in the case of PC. Reviewing different policies, Roaldsnes also tested the effect of an "Active Kids" voucher on cinema and theater attendance. This voucher is means-tested and targeted at poorer families. Interestingly, he found that the voucher boosted

cinema attendance while having no impact on theater visits (Roaldsnes, 2025a, p. 239), which aligns well with this article's initial theoretical premise.

The most direct evidence of the effect of culture vouchers comes from a study of the Italian '18app', a €500 universal stipend comparable to the PC (Baldin et al., 2024). To the best of my knowledge, it is, to date, the sole available study of such a program. Baldin, Marenzi, and Zantomio use a difference-in-differences estimator, combined with matching, to measure the overall effect of the scheme on the cultural consumption of the targeted age range. Using this statistical procedure, they primarily find an effect on cinema attendance, which increases both for simple 12-month participation and in volume (i.e. number of attendances), and on e-book reading. They also find an effect on non-classical concert attendance and book reading, but of a lesser magnitude. No effect is found on classical concert, theater, or museum attendance. These results align quite well with the theoretical framework outlined above. Interestingly, they also find that the strong measured effect on cinema attendance is mainly driven by low socioeconomic status groups. This suggests that the program indeed allowed some relatively poor young people to access a cultural activity they were not able to pursue primarily due to a lack of financial resources.

4 Hypothesis

Based on this theoretical framework and previous studies of similar policies, I set out two hypotheses. The first hypothesis (**H1**) relates to participation rates in the 'pass Culture' policy. It states that individuals already participating in cultural life – i.e. mainly students in higher education or those from family backgrounds with high socioeconomic status – will engage more with PC, leading to a form of the Matthew effect. This hypothesis will be tested using descriptive statistics correlating PC activation with several demographics.

H1: The take-up rate of PC varies among young people, with a higher rate observed among those who already display a high level of cultural consumption.

The second hypothesis (**H2**) relates to the program's effect on the consumption habits of its beneficiaries. It states that the effect of the program drastically varies according to the type of cultural practices considered. Popular cultural practices (like cinema, comic book reading, and non-classical concerts) are impacted positively by the scheme, while highbrow, cultural capital-intensive practices (like theater, ballet, or museum attendance) remain unaffected by the use of the voucher. This directly follows the idea that barriers restraining participation in highbrow practices are mainly cultural and not financial. This hypothesis will be tested using an econometric strategy described in the section on methodology.

H2: The impact of PC varies across cultural products: The scheme has a positive effect on popular cultural practices, while highbrow, cultural capital-intensive practices remain unaffected.

5 Data

To test these hypotheses, I will primarily rely on a large survey (N = 5,010) commissioned by the French Court of Accounts to evaluate the policy's diffusion and effects. A survey company collected the data between 26 February and 15 March 2024. The study utilized a self-administered online questionnaire, which took approximately 15 minutes to complete. This

characteristic is a potential source of bias, as populations without access to digital tools are, by design, excluded from the sample. Nevertheless, this potential bias is not expected to be severe due to the targeted population's defining characteristics (see appendix 1.1 Sampling strategy for a detailed description of the sampling procedure). The survey aimed to reach a very restricted age range due to the nature of the policy scheme, including only young people aged between 18 and 21. According to the latest data, in France the penetration rate of digital tools, especially smartphones, exceeds 97 per cent within this demographic (Bendekkiche & Viard-Guillot, 2023).

5.1 Available variables

The survey questionnaire includes multiple questions about the demographics and family backgrounds of respondents. We asked if and how interviewees knew about, used, and liked the PC policy. A wide range of standardized questions about respondents' cultural practices were also included, covering cinema attendance, reading habits, and digital online consumption. These questions primarily focus on practices over the past twelve months, framed as: "During the last twelve months, have you been to the cinema at least once?"

It's important to note that no questions were asked about the volume of consumption. We only know whether the interviewee consumes the cultural good of interest, not their consumption patterns. This is a crucial point for understanding the scope of the results that follow; PC policy might influence the volume of consumption, but the survey cannot be used to measure this effect. It only covers simple participation.

This survey design choice was made for three reasons: one related to policy evaluation and two related to survey methodology. First, the policy was conceived to "increase the diversity of cultural consumptions of young people". With a view to evaluating public policy—specifically, whether the policy is meeting its assigned goal—the survey was designed to measure the composition of cultural participation, not its volume. Secondly, from a methodological perspective, we had constraints on interview length, which limited the number of questions we could include. The choice was made to cover a wide range of practices instead of asking more detailed questions about fewer practices. Lastly, the French national statistical institute (INSEE) has established that respondents tend to poorly estimate the true volume of their cultural consumptions, and this declaration bias is correlated with social characteristics (Landré & Verger, 2006). This issue could have been a severe source of bias for my estimates.

6 Methods

Assessing the effect of the PC policy raises a common problem of causal identification in a non-randomized treatment take-up situation (Imbens & Rubin, 2010; Rubin, 1974). To identify the average treatment effect on the treated individuals, one would ideally rely on a counterfactual set-up. This involves comparing two groups (treated vs non-treated) that are identical on potential confounding factors prior to treatment. As we'll see in the first subsection of the results, PC beneficiaries are self-selected based on strong confounders. Young people who don't use the PC tend to show little interest in cultural participation overall. This defining characteristic of the non-treated population makes any direct comparison between users and non-users irrelevant for a causal estimate of the program.

6.1 Analytical strategy to identify the net effects of ‘pass Culture’

The inherent nature of the policy, combined with the specific questions posed in the survey, will facilitate the implementation of an identification strategy less susceptible to potential selection bias. As previously stated, the PC policy constitutes a substantial financial stipend, amounting to €300 upon reaching the age of 18. Beneficiaries are able to spend this amount on multiple products, extending the expenditure over the two years during which funds are available. Consequently, at any given moment, many beneficiaries will have just enrolled in the program and not yet had time to spend the subsidy, while others will have spent much of it. The objective of the proposed analytical strategy is to undertake a comparative analysis of individuals who have expended a negligible proportion, if any, of their subsidy, with those who have utilized close to the entirety of their grant.

This design choice has multiple implications. First, the treatment of interest is operationalised as the impact of the grant's expenditure. The treated group comprises users who have spent more than €200 of their grant. The control group consists of users who have spent less than €50. The average treatment effect on the treated is thus the effect on cultural participation uptake of spending the voucher. This identification strategy ensures that the bias of self-selection into the program is avoided, as it only compares individuals who are already enrolled in the program.

Two potential sources for bias still remain. First, there's the question of the moment at which the grant is spent. This potential bias is related to the age of the beneficiaries. Indeed, people who have spent more of their grant tend to be older (see appendix 1.2 Amount spent from the ‘pass Culture’ across demographics). Eighteen-year-olds haven't had as much time to spend the grant as someone nearing their twentieth birthday, who has had almost two years to do so. One could argue that this isn't enough to significantly affect the result, but this would overlook the rapid changes in leisure habits around this age, as it's a transitional period between high school and higher education, and often involves changes in living arrangements (living with parents or not). The survey allows us to control for most of these potential biases. Age is obviously available, but questions include occupation status and residential situation and these will be included in the models.

A second set of potential confounders is related to the pace or speed at which beneficiaries spend the funds they are given. The problem is twofold. First, some people might enrol in the program, unlock the funds, but never spend them, and this population might also exhibit different cultural participation patterns than others. Relying on usage data from the app, we know that this population is very small and most likely residual in our sample (Cour des comptes, 2024). Second, the speed at which beneficiaries spend their funds could be correlated with their cultural participation. Comparing people based on how much they've spent exposes the analysis to this potential bias, as those who have spent more might also have spent it quicker.[5] Descriptive statistics show that individuals from more privileged backgrounds tend to spend the grant they are given somewhat slower. For this reason, I will use background and social origin variables as controls in the regression models.

[5] This is not always the case, as the moment when they ask for the grant varies. Unfortunately, the exact date of subscription to the program is not known.

6.2 Functional form

To estimate the effect of spending the voucher on cultural participation, I use a linear probability model (LPM) based on the ordinary least squares method. I chose this functional form over logistic regression for two main reasons. First, it has the advantage of producing coefficients that can be directly interpreted as probabilities, which makes the interpretation of results more straightforward, especially when effect sizes are of primary interest. Second, it's necessary for the comparative approach I intend to take. One of my main goals is to assess if the effect of 'pass Culture' varies according to the type of practices (H2). Logistic models don't allow for inter-group comparisons (Allison, 1999; Mood, 2010). The use of LPM partially circumvents this problem (Holm et al., 2015).

Although frequently used in econometrics, the limitations of the ordinary least squares linear probability model are well known (Horrace & Oaxaca, 2006). They include the fact that the model can produce estimated probabilities less than zero or greater than one, which is troublesome when used to make predictions. This isn't an issue here, as I'm only interested in marginal effects. For this use, Cibois (1999) showed that LPM produced results very close to those of logit and probit models.

6.3 Leveraging the French cultural policy context for a robustness check

To test if my analytical strategy effectively controls for most potential selection bias, I propose a procedure that leverages a specificity of the French national context regarding cultural policy. In France, museums are, for the most part, free for young people aged 25 and under. Consequently, the PC is almost never used for museum tickets. The program should, therefore, have no impact on museum attendance by beneficiaries.

As a robustness check, I test if my model finds any significant increase in museum attendance among those spending the grant. Finding such an increase would imply a "backdoor" in my analytical strategy, indicating unobserved confounding variables correlated with both treatment uptake and cultural participation. Museum attendance serves as a solid test, as we know it is strongly associated with a broad disposition toward cultural participation regardless of background (Haag & Specht, 2022), yet it shouldn't be impacted by PC usage.

7 Results

7.1 'Pass Culture' take-up rate across the social space

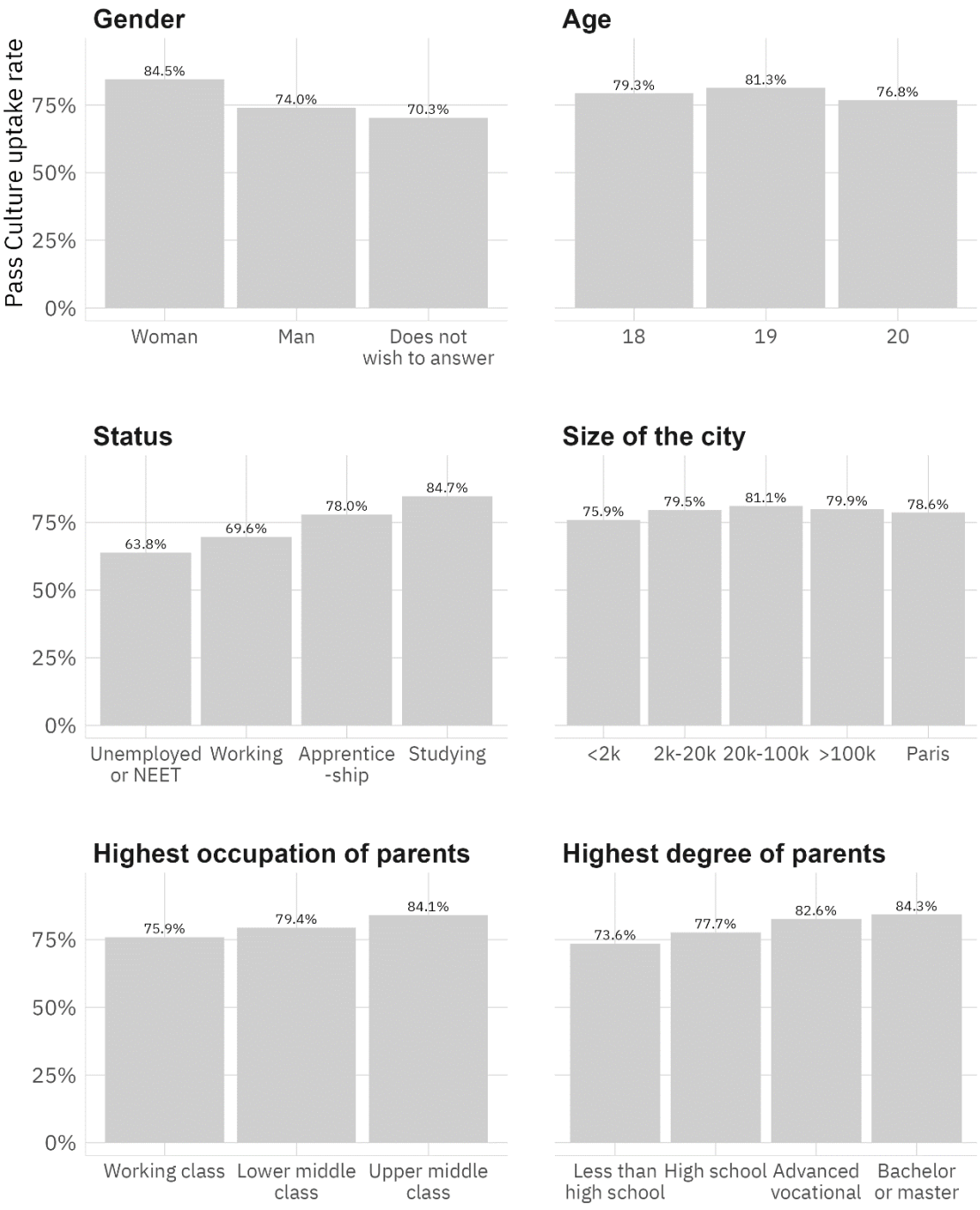
I start by examining my first hypothesis (H1) descriptively, looking at activation rates across several key sociodemographic variables. As we saw in the context section, the overall take-up rate of PC is high. This rate varies significantly across social groups (Figure 1), in the expected direction, directly confirming H1. However, the magnitude of this variation is not large.

To summarize, the likelihood of using the scheme depends on an individual's social distance from the education system, and thus their overall willingness to participate culturally. A direct illustration of this can be observed in the widest gap separating two groups: the unemployed or NEET (64 per cent) versus students (85 per cent). The gap between men and women could also be interpreted in this regard, as women tend to stay longer in education and achieve greater

success (De Hauw et al., 2017). Family background aligns with this view as well; individuals from high socioeconomic status family backgrounds are more likely to unlock the funds offered by the state. The correlation with parents' educational attainment follows the same pattern, demonstrating the deep intertwining of cultural participation and social reproduction.

Interestingly, the size of the city of residence isn't correlated with PC use. One might have expected that people from less densely populated areas would use the scheme less, due to a lack of cultural facilities where the voucher could be spent. This would be the case if PC were mainly used for on-site cultural experiences, but that isn't the case.

Figure 1. ‘Pass Culture’ activation across several demographic variables



Note: See appendix 1.3 ‘Pass Culture’ activation rate across demographics *for full table with significance test. Figure can be read as follows: “84.5% of women activated their ‘pass Culture’”.*

7.2 Toward an estimation of the net effect of ‘pass Culture’

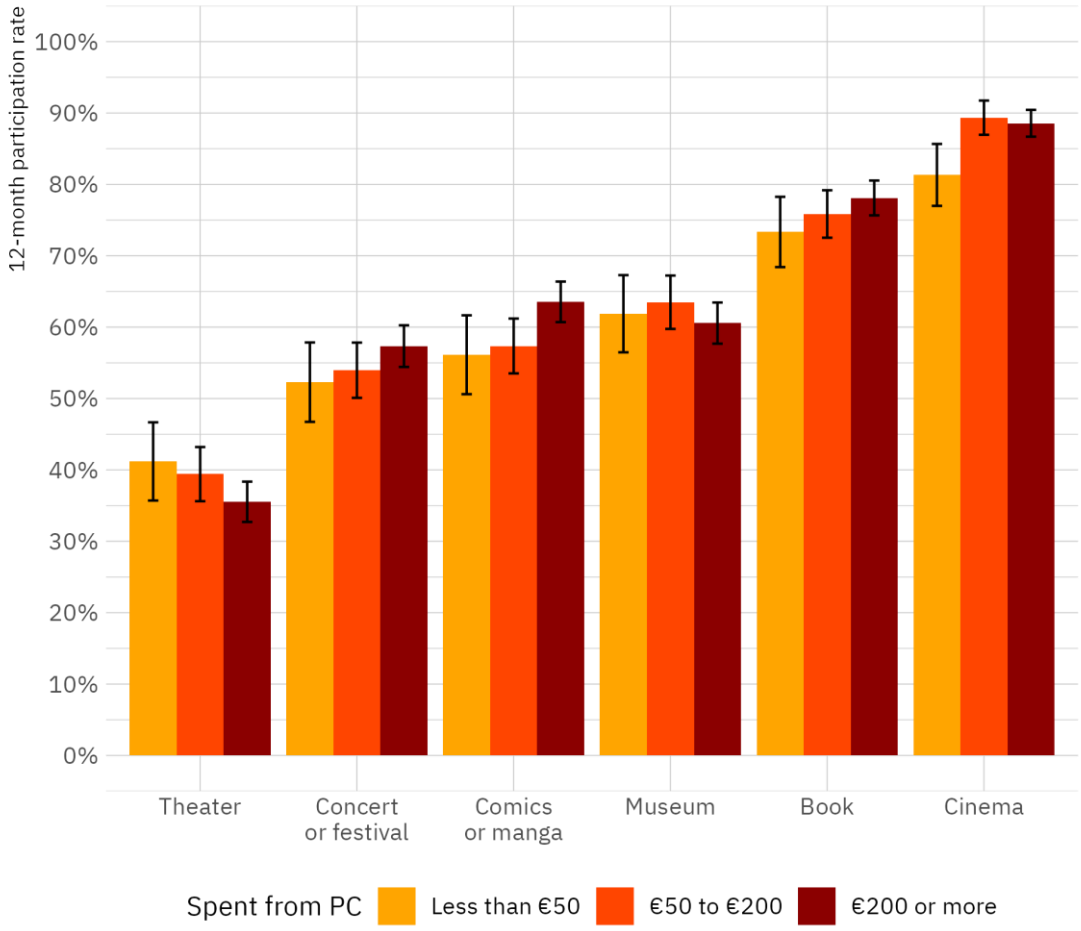
Relying on the analytical strategy described in the methods section, I now estimate the effect of PC usage on the cultural participation of its beneficiaries. The protocol was designed to show the impact of the scheme, net of an expected "substitution effect". Both the aforementioned

administrative reports shows that PC was mainly used to buy books, graphic novels, and cinema tickets (Amsellem & Orsini, 2024; Cour des comptes, 2024). But are the people who used the full stipend really more likely to have read and attended cinema and concerts than those who did not?

7.2.1 Raw differences

Let's first examine the baseline differences (Figure 2), without controlling for any confounders related to the pace at which users spend their grant. As we can see, the main differences between those who spent more than €200 of their allocated money and those who spent less than €50 are in cinema attendance and comic books. The increase is around ten percentage points in both cases, considering that cinema attendance is overall more frequent—over 80 per cent of PC users went to the cinema during the year, regardless of their grant usage. These are the only two types of practices that show statistically significant positive differences between groups of users prior to controlling for confounders. There's a positive difference in regular book reading and concert or music festival attendance, but we lack statistical power in these cases to confirm the significance of the gap. As expected from the analysis of within-PC consumption, museum and theater attendance are not positively correlated with grant spending. Theater attendance is even slightly less frequent among those who spent their entire grant, but this difference is not significant.

Figure 2. Twelve-month participation rate of several cultural practices in respect of the amount spent from 'pass Culture'

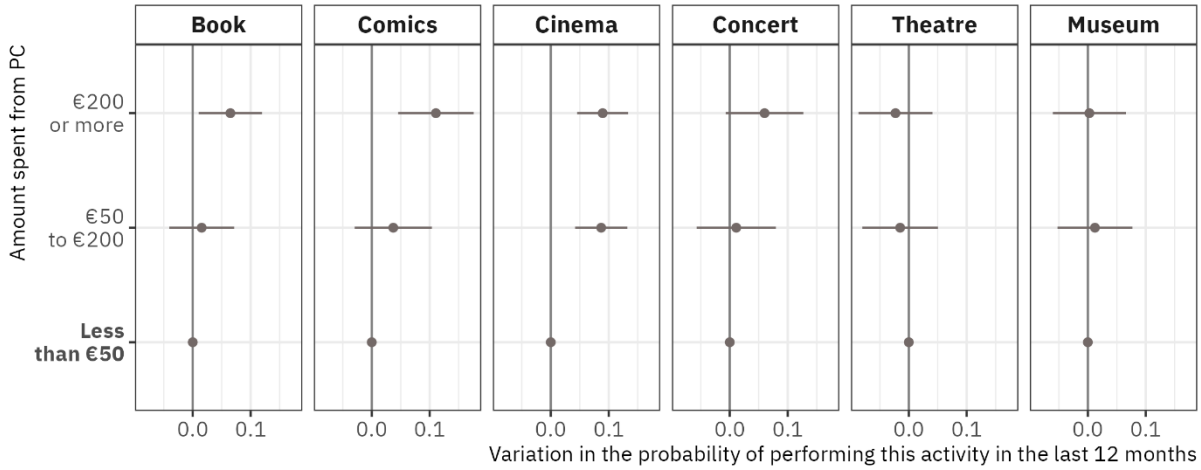


Note: See appendix 1.4 Twelve-month participation rate of several cultural practices in respect of the amount spent from the 'pass Culture' *for full table with significance test. Figure can be read as follows: "88.6% of the beneficiaries who spent €200 or more of their PC have been to the cinema at least once during the past twelve months".*

7.2.2 Net differences

Controlling for sex, age, residential situation, occupation, and family background doesn't alter the trend of the results, though it does impact the significance of certain differences (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Net effect of ‘pass Culture’ grant spending on 12-month participation likelihood of several cultural practices



Note: Each box represents one regression model (*see appendix* 1.5 Complete regression tables). *Dots with confidence interval refer to the coefficient of the model for the ‘pass Culture’ spending variable. Figure can be read as follows: An individual's probability of having attended the cinema within the past 12 months is 0.09 points higher if their expenditure on the ‘pass Culture’ was at least €200, as opposed to those who spent €50 or less.*

The results verify hypothesis H2. Practices that are less highbrow are more impacted by spending the grant than others. The two practices for which participation is most increased are comic books and cinema attendance. The relative probability of reading comic books and attending the cinema is increased by 0.1 in both cases for beneficiaries who have spent most of their subsidy. A substantial number of young people who would not go to the cinema or read any comic books now do, thanks to the PC policy. The effect on cinema attendance appears as soon as more than €50 has been spent, while reading comic books is only affected from an expenditure of more than €200.

Book reading follows the same pattern as that of comics titles, but the magnitude of the effect is half, at around a 0.06 increase in probability. Books (excluding comic book) are the type of good most frequently purchased using PC, yet reading books isn't the practice most impacted by spending the grant. This means that most beneficiaries who buy books using their PC are already reading, while this is less often the case for those who buy comic books or manga. The substitution effect is stronger on regular book reading than it is on comic books.

Regarding more costly on-site cultural practices, the effect is rather small to non-significant. The impact of PC usage on concert and festival attendance is positive but tenuous. Statistical power is lacking in this case to confidently assert a result. After controlling for confounders, we see that theater (including opera and ballet) isn't affected by PC spending. The coefficient is close to zero and not significant.

7.2.3 Robustness and limits

Museum attendance is not impacted by PC usage. This result was expected, as mentioned in the previous section, since museums are already mostly free for young people in France. It also validates the robustness check proposed earlier: if the reported estimates were biased toward

heavy consumers of culture, we should see a difference in museum participation, even if the PC can't influence it.

While this is reassuring, it is still possible that unobserved confounders bias the results. This would be the case if people more willing to consume only popular culture (cinema and comic books, but not theater and museums) were also prone to spend the grant much faster than those who consume culture that is less popular. If such bias exists, it would need to be orthogonal to education, family background, and other included demographics, as these variables are accounted for in the regression models.

The unlikely existence of such a bias is supported by the fact that similar effects were observed in the Italian '18app' study mentioned earlier in the literature review (Baldin et al., 2024). Baldin and colleagues used a completely different identification strategy that isn't subject to the same type of bias. They looked at population-level trends using difference-in-differences matching estimators, yet they observed their main effects on cinema attendance, book reading, and non-classical concert attendance. No effect was measured on theater or museum participation. The ability to observe the same results with two different data sources and various identification strategies greatly reinforces the degree of trust we can have in the estimated effects of such a program.

8 Discussion

8.1 Do those who need it least benefit most?

Uptake rates across demographics seem to point to a Matthew effect (Rigney, 2010), in the sense that those already more prone to cultural participation due to their social background are more likely to engage with the program. In this regard, the PC appears to be an instrument that increases inequality rather than reducing it. Students, already well-engaged in culture, will use the subsidy more often and in a more profitable way than unemployed, disadvantaged young people. This helps the former reinforce their already distinctive disposition to cultural participation, thus widening the gap between social classes. This type of phenomenon is inevitable for any policy conceived as non-means-tested (Giuliano et al., 2017). While problematic due to the gap it might widen between classes, this universal aspect is beneficial for the policy's overall uptake rate (Mkandawire, 2005).

The rate of PC take-up is close to 75 per cent for groups whose parents have no formal qualifications or belong to the working class. This demonstrates that PC is not an elitist program; it is popular across the social spectrum, and this widespread success is largely due to the program's universal aspect. One could thus argue that, while being more used by the middle and upper classes, PC helps at least some young people from the working class to go to the cinema, buy comic books, or attend a concert—activities they would have struggled to pursue without this voucher. A survey question about whether the respondent "knows" about the program also reveals that almost every young person in France is aware of the PC policy, even those who are unwilling to use it. This broad recognition would certainly not have been possible with a means-tested policy. It is a known fact from the literature that any administrative barrier to accessing a social policy drastically reduces the uptake rate in the target population (van Oorschot, 2002).

8.2 Free access to public cultural institutions: From the same causes to the same effects

While widely used, the PC, like the Italian ‘18app’, is proven to have no effect on institutionalized culture participation (museums, theater, opera). This absence of impact can be interpreted in light of the policy of free admission to museums that has been in place in France for 15 years, or in Great Britain in the late twentieth century (Gombault, 2013). As identified by Gombault, this type of free entrance policy is always vigorously justified by a willingness to reach "new publics" and increase the social accessibility of these institutions. The problem is that the economics and sociology literature show no evidence that a reduction in price alone is sufficient to reduce unequal participation (A. Martin, 2002; O’hagan, 1995). This is because the financial aspect of such a cultural activity "is secondary to the planning and practical realisation of the visit project […] Under certain conditions free admission can bring more visitors to the museum, but their social segmentation will be difficult to change. It benefits visitors who are already involved in visiting, such as the middle classes and tourists, whose willingness to pay is not particularly low" (Gombault, 2013, p. 97).

The ‘pass Culture’ effects show that the same can be said for opera and theater. Populations whose socialization keeps them distant from institutional culture have very little chance of changing their behavior due to a simple price signal or a very temporary increase in purchasing power. Direct subsidies to cultural consumption are no magic wand. The reason sociologists aren't very concerned with economic inequality when scrutinizing the origins of unequal cultural participation isn't due to some disciplinary bias against the economic aspects of life. It's because this aspect is of negligible relevance in the realm of highbrow cultural consumption inequality. And highbrow culture is what matters most regarding broad social inequality, above all, school inequality (DiMaggio, 1982; Jæger, 2009).

8.3 The consequences of a market-based mechanism

Making the entire program dependent on a market mechanism is not a neutral choice; it has significant implications for what beneficiaries will consume. As with any digital marketplace, a vendor's ability to be listed on the platform and effectively reach an audience largely depends on their pre-existing market presence and marketing resources. Retail distribution, even for intangible cultural goods, presents logistical challenges, and not all sellers are equally equipped to manage them.

The disparity between cinema and live theater in showcasing their offerings on the PC platform is particularly telling. Large cinema chains quickly integrated their information systems with the PC to automatically upload available tickets. While efforts have been made to do the same for theater venues, the lack of a centralized system and the existence of multiple independent performance halls make the process less straightforward. In 2023, PC offered 420,000 cinema seats compared to just 60,000 theater seats (Cour des comptes, 2024).

Commercial retailers are well-equipped to compete in the market; it's an existential struggle for them. Major players swiftly recognized the financial windfall from the PC and promptly allocated resources to secure a share of the subsidy. This stands in contrast to publicly subsidized venues, which rely only partially on the commercial aspect of their activities. This explains why one of the fiercest opponents of the PC is the Syndicat national des entreprises

artistiques et culturelles (National Union of Artistic and Cultural Enterprises) (Rahal, 2024). This union of publicly subsidized theater venues views the scheme as a potential threat to historical financing mechanisms from the ministry. Although it's currently impossible to determine whether the PC will lead to a loss of subsidies for theaters, what is certain is that the PC is a costly new scheme from which the subsidized public culture sector benefits only very marginally.

8.4 Commercial culture as a relevant part of social inequalities

Based on these structural aspects, we can conclude that the PC is primarily a tool for disseminating commercial culture. This raises a legitimate question about its effectiveness in addressing cultural participation inequality: should the state be helping young people consume cultural goods that are already very popular?

I would like to emphasize a point about cultural inequality that is often overlooked in studies focusing on the link between cultural consumption and academic achievement. While it's true that being able to reference manga or superhero blockbusters may not be instrumental to academic success, other aspects of young people's social lives are known to be heavily dependent on their ability to engage with commercial culture. According to Dominique Pasquier's work (2005), the ability to form friendships at school or during leisure time and thus build social ties is conditioned by sharing common cultural references. For young people, these common references are largely derived from mass-market culture.

Lizardo also made a critical contribution to this subject (Lizardo, 2006). Drawing on DiMaggio's work on the link between cultural consumption and social capital (DiMaggio, 1987, 2004), Lizardo shows how one's ability to reference popular culture is involved in establishing weak-tie social connections. While not being as profitable as highbrow culture for accumulating social capital, being deprived of popular culture references could lead to social isolation. The measured effect on cinema attendance and manga reading shows that for at least 10 per cent of the beneficiaries, the financial windfall offered by the PC was involved in their decision to engage with such pieces of culture. This suggests that some young people struggle to access these widespread cultural products because of a lack of economic resources.

Moreover, while manga reading or international popular music aren't typically part of the school curriculum, they are related to emerging forms of symbolic boundaries in youth populations (Prieur et al., 2023). Cicchelli and Octobre (2018) show the existence of an "aesthetico-cultural cosmopolitanism" in French youth culture, which serves as a form of cultural capital. With several colleagues, they expanded this investigation to different national contexts (Cicchelli et al., 2021, 2023), revealing similar trends. Young people unable to mobilize these popular cultural references face the risk of a form of social exclusion. A defining aspect of these cosmopolitan cultural goods is that they originate in commercial culture and are, consequently, quite costly compared to publicly subsidized culture. A scheme like the PC can, in this regard, help reduce the gap between low-resource, working-class young people and middle- to upper-class groups.

9 Conclusion. Are culture vouchers an efficient tool to reduce inequalities?

The answer to the question of whether culture vouchers are relevant to reduce inequality fundamentally depends on how one frames the link between cultural consumption and social reproduction. According to the classic framework of Bourdieu and Passeron (1964, 1970), the ability to succeed in the school system has its roots in dispositions acquired within the family. An initial unequal distribution of the ability to meet the expectations of the education system leads to the reproduction of a stratified society (Lareau, 2011). These expectations take various forms, one of which is possessing the correct cultural references. Legitimate cultural references, valued in school, are unequally distributed, and this contributes to unequal success in school. Is a scheme like the PC likely to mitigate this phenomenon? This article shows that it is not the case. The stipend does not particularly help disadvantaged young people to close the gap regarding highbrow culture. It is first and foremost a help to access commercial popular culture, practices that are probably not instrumental to performing well at school.

However, cultural consumption isn't solely related to school success; it's also a vehicle for sociability (Lizardo, 2006). It is a way to make friends and foster a sense of belonging in a community. If commercial culture is a core part of social tie formation in contemporary societies, then being able to afford access to such culture becomes essential. In this regard, the ‘pass Culture’ is an instrument of inequality reduction. It helps young people go to the cinema or read comic books—for some of them, something they wouldn't have been able to do without the scheme.

In Western countries, where the creative industries have been politically promoted as one of the main sources of economic growth (Garnham, 2005), it has become crucial for citizens to be able to engage with commercial culture, otherwise risking being left behind. This type of voucher might not be of any help to radically change the stratification of cultural participation, but it is likely an efficient tool, among other mechanisms, to combat social exclusion related to cultural scarcity.

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Appendix

1.1 Sampling strategy

The sampling strategy was non-probabilistic and based on quotas. The quotas applied were age, gender, occupation, and region of residence. Two methods of collecting responses were used. First, the survey company relied on its usual "access panel" to distribute the survey to young people, but this panel did not include enough individuals in the selected age range. In this way 1,500 responses were collected this way. To reach the remaining 3,500 respondents, the company launched an ad campaign on 3 digital social media platforms (Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat), targeting specific social profiles to meet the quotas.

Quota sampling is subject to bias, as the propensity to answer might be correlated with certain variables of interest in the questionnaire. One cannot be sure that the quotas used cover all potential self-selection biases. Fortunately, we have access to reliable data regarding the true values of the main variables of interest in the population. We know from administrative data the true penetration rate of the policy within an age cohort. This allows us to say that any residual bias due to sampling is small. Indeed, according to this administrative data, the uptake rate of the policy was slightly more than 80 per cent for the most recent age cohort (those turning 19 years old in early 2024). This uptake rate tends to increase each year as the policy grows in popularity. Our survey yields very similar results. The computed uptake rate in our sample for 19-year-olds is 81 per cent, and this rate tends to be lower for older respondents.

1.2 Amount spent from the ‘pass Culture’ across demographics

Table A1.1. Amount spent from the ‘pass Culture’ across demographics

Characteristic:	**Less than €50** 15 % N = 310	**€50 to €200** 31 % N = 637	**€200 or more** 54 % N = 1104
Gender			
Woman	12.0 %	32.8 %	55.2 %
Man	19.7 %	28.8 %	51.6 %
Does not wish to answer	6.3 %	28.1 %	65.6 %
Age			
18	25.0 %	38.7 %	36.4 %
19	5.5 %	23.6 %	70.9 %
Status			
Unemployed or NEET	6.7 %	25.8 %	67.5 %

Working	9.3 %	30.8 %	59.9 %
Apprenticeship	15.1 %	29.5 %	55.4 %
Studying	16.4 %	31.6 %	52.0 %
Highest occupation from both parents			
Working class	13.8 %	28.3 %	57.9 %
Lower-middle class	15.0 %	33.1 %	51.9 %
Upper-middle class	17.0 %	33.4 %	49.6 %
Highest degree from both parents			
Less than high school	12.3 %	27.7 %	60.0 %
High school	15.4 %	31.8 %	52.8 %
Advanced vocational	15.3 %	31.1 %	53.6 %
Bachelor or master	17.8 %	34.3 %	47.8 %

1.3 ‘Pass Culture’ activation rate across demographics

Table A1.2. ‘Pass Culture’ activation rate across demographics

Characteristic:	**Activated PC** 79.1 % N = 3,109	**p-value**
Gender		<0.001
Woman	84.5 %	
Man	74.0 %	
Does not wish to answer	70.3 %	
Age		0.028
18	79.3 %	
19	81.3 %	
20	76.8 %	
Status		<0.001

Unemployed or NEET	63.8 %	
Working	69.6 %	
Apprenticeship	78.0 %	
Studying	84.7 %	
Highest occupation from both parents		<0.001
Working class	75.9 %	
Lower middle class	79.4 %	
Upper middle class	84.1 %	
Highest degree from both parents		<0.001
Less than high school	73.6 %	
High school	77.7 %	
Advanced vocational	82.6 %	
Bachelor or master	84.3 %	
Size of town of residence		0.3
<2k	75.9 %	
2k-20k	79.5 %	
20k-100k	81.1 %	
>100k	79.9 %	
Paris	78.6 %	

Note: P-value is calculated from a weighted X^2 (Rao & Scott adjustment).

1.4 Twelve-month participation rate of several cultural practices in respect of the amount spent from the 'pass Culture'

Table A1.3. Twelve-month participation rate of several cultural practices in respect of the amount spent from the 'pass Culture'

Practices:	**Less than €50** 13.8 % N = 310	**€50 to €200** 28.5 % N = 637	**€200 or more** 57.7 % N = 1104	**p-value**
Theater	41.2 %	39.4 %	35.5 %	0.11

Concert or festival	52.3 %	54.0 %	57.3 %	0.2
Comic book or manga	56.1 %	57.4 %	63.5 %	0.012
Museum	61.9 %	63.5 %	60.6 %	0.5
Book	73.3 %	75.9 %	78.1 %	0.2
Cinema	81.3 %	89.3 %	88.6 %	0.002

Note: P-value is calculated from a weighted X^2 (Rao & Scott adjustment).

1.5 Complete regression tables

Table A1.4.1. Estimated probability of 12-month participation (book, comic book, cinema)

	Book		Comic book		Cinema	
Characteristic	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**
Amount spent from PC						
Less than €50	—		—		—	
€50 to €200	0.02	0.6	0.04	0.3	0.09	**<0.001**
€200 or more	0.07	**0.020**	0.11	**<0.001**	0.09	**<0.001**
Age	-0.04	**0.043**	-0.04	0.12	-0.01	0.5
gender						
Woman	—		—		—	
Man	-0.17	**<0.001**	0.11	**<0.001**	0.00	0.7
Does not wish to answer	0.03	0.7	0.28	**0.001**	-0.06	0.3
Status						
Unemployed or NEET	—		—		—	
Working	-0.05	0.2	-0.05	0.4	-0.04	0.3
Apprenticeship	-0.01	0.9	-0.07	0.2	0.01	0.8
Studying	0.09	0.019	0.00	>0.9	0.04	0.2
Lives with parents						
No	—		—		—	
Yes	-0.02	0.3	0.00	>0.9	0.00	>0.9
Size of town of residence						
<2k	—		—		—	
2k-20k	0.07	0.016	0.03	0.4	0.03	0.2
20k-100k	0.06	0.077	0.01	0.7	0.03	0.3
>100k	0.05	0.063	0.02	0.6	0.01	0.6
Paris	0.08	0.018	0.12	0.002	0.01	0.8
Highest degree from both parents						
Less than high school	—		—		—	

	Book		Comic book		Cinema	
Characteristic	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**
High school	0.01	0.6	-0.04	0.3	-0.01	0.8
Advanced vocational	0.09	<0.001	0.04	0.2	0.06	0.003
Bachelor or master	0.11	<0.001	0.06	0.038	0.06	0.003
Highest occupation from both parents						
Working class	—		—		—	
Lower middle class	0.02	0.5	-0.03	0.2	0.00	0.9
Upper middle class	0.00	>0.9	-0.01	0.9	0.00	>0.9

Note: Each column represents one regression model. Coefficients can be read as follows: An individual's probability of having attended the cinema within the past 12 months is 0.09 points higher if their expenditure on 'pass Culture' was at least €200, as opposed to those who spent €50 or less.

Table A1.4.2. Estimated probability of 12-month participation (concert, theater, museum)

	Concert		Theater		Museum	
Characteristic	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**
Amount spent from PC						
Less than €50	—		—		—	
€50 to €200	0.01	0.7	-0.01	0.7	0.01	0.7
€200 or more	0.06	0.078	-0.02	0.5	0.00	>0.9
Age	-0.01	0.6	-0.03	0.13	0.02	0.5
Gender						
Woman	—		—		—	
Man	-0.04	0.057	-0.06	0.003	-0.07	<0.001
Does not wish to answer	-0.01	>0.9	0.01	0.9	0.12	0.14
Status						
Unemployed or NEET	—		—		—	
Working	0.03	0.6	-0.01	0.9	0.01	0.8
Apprenticeship	0.05	0.3	-0.04	0.5	0.13	0.017
Studying	0.05	0.3	0.05	0.2	0.17	<0.001

	Concert		Theater		Museum	
Characteristic	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**	**Beta**	**p-value**
Lives with parents						
No	—		—		—	
Yes	-0.03	0.2	-0.03	0.2	-0.07	<0.001
Size of town of residence						
<2k	—		—		—	
2k-20k	0.04	0.2	-0.01	0.8	0.02	0.6
20k-100k	0.05	0.2	0.09	0.016	0.05	0.2
>100k	0.08	0.021	0.01	0.7	0.03	0.3
Paris	0.04	0.4	0.11	0.006	0.18	<0.001
Highest degree from both parents						
Less than high school	—		—		—	
High school	0.08	0.026	0.02	0.5	0.02	0.5
Advanced vocational	0.04	0.15	0.04	0.2	0.04	0.2
Bachelor or master	0.07	0.019	0.15	<0.001	0.16	<0.001
Highest occupation from both parents						
Working class	—		—		—	
Lower-middle class	0.06	0.043	0.05	0.090	0.04	0.10
Upper-middle class	0.05	0.11	0.09	<0.001	0.07	0.009

Note: Each column represents one regression model. Coefficients can be read as follows: An individual's probability of having attended a concert within the past 12 months is 0.06 points higher if their expenditure on 'pass Culture' was at least €200, as opposed to those who spent €50 or less.