UNDERSTANDING THE ACCESSIBILITY OF HIGHBROW CULTURAL EXPERIENCES THROUGH SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: THE CASE OF THE CLASSICAL MUSIC CONCERT

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ABSTRACT

While most of the literature on cultural experiences has focused on *in situ* mediation to make them more accessible, this paper addresses the question of the *a priori* accessibility of highbrow cultural experiences. Through 12 introspective semi-directive interviews with French consumers, it highlights the importance of considering how the representations of the classical music concert and its codes can affect the anticipation phase of the experience. Through them, some consumers look forward to the experience while others apprehend classical music's elitism by anticipation. The symbolic violence that they project they will emit or receive through the mastery, or the non-mastery of the codes can impede their will to participate. We posit that a middle-ground between legitimacy and accessibility exists, and advocate for a better *a priori* mediation of highbrow cultural experiences to address the barriers deriving from their codes and facilitate consumers' participation.

Keywords: Cultural Experiences • Highbrow Culture • Classical Music Concerts • Symbolic Violence • Accessibility

Introduction: the declining classical music concert audiences in France

Although having shifted to a less hierarchical and more inclusive definition of culture, the European states' cultural policies still convey to some extent an "ideal of cultural democratization, which advocates a more egalitarian distribution of high[brow] culture" (Menger, 2010, p. 6). That tension is notably found in France, where debates on the outcomes of French cultural policies as compared to their original objectives of democratization have been lively in the past decade. If a global increase in cultural participation can be witnessed (Glévarec, 2021, 2016), social inequalities still linger (Donnat, 2011), especially in participation in highbrow culture (Lombardo and Wolff, 2020). To some, the original goal of cultural democratization – "bringing audiences towards their country's cultural treasures […] legitimized by specialists" (Zask, 2016, p. 45) – has not been met (Le Guével, 2017). Of all cultural forms, the classical music concert is arguably the one experiencing the steepest decay. Its public, more educated and wealthier than the rest of the population, is ever ageing and rarefying (Dorin, 2018) in spite of French government's efforts to make classical music more accessible (Pébrier, 2015). In 1973, 8% of French people aged from 15-28 years old attended a classical music concert at least once during the year, as compared with 2% in 2018 (Lombardo and Wolff, 2020). In 2015, 75% of classical music concert goers were university graduates, 45% had a master's degree, their net average household salary was 5,600 euros/month and their median age was 61 years old[1]. To put this into perspective, only 23% of the French population holds at least a university degree[2], half of the country's households live with less that 2,552 euros per month[3] and the median age of the French population is 42.6 years old today[4]. This research attempts to address the accessibility – the character of what is "easy to approach, enter, or use" (VandenBos, 2015, p. 7) – of highbrow cultural experiences through an exploration of consumers' representations of classical music concerts.

The need to understand the *a priori* accessibility of cultural experiences

The accessibility of cultural experiences is not directly addressed by the literature in Marketing. Yet, a considerable stream of works has focused on how to enrich consumers' cultural experiences and/or to favor their immersion through on-site mediation and interactive devices (Ben Nasr et al., 2018; Carù and Cova, 2011, 2005, 2003; de Miguel de Blas et al., 2015; Debenedetti et al., 2009; Jarrier et al., 2019; Jarrier and Bourgeon-Renault, 2020; Passebois-Ducros and Flacandji, 2022; Roederer et al., 2020). Carù and Cova (2005, 2003) notably focused on the classical music concert, and showed that providing the audience with cultural references – in that case, through a conference prior to the concert – greatly favors consumers' immersion. These researches study consumers *in situ* or *a posteriori* recollections through the experiential paradigm (Bourgeon-Renault, 2000; Holbrook and Hirschman, 1982) and potentially provide useful tools to craft more accessible experiences. However, they don't consider the social status of cultural experiences nor what might impede consumers' intentions to consume them. In other terms, they focus on what creates easy to use experiences, but not on what might make consumers perceive that these experiences are or aren't accessible. A few models such as the RAND (McCarthy and Jinnett, 2001), the Motivation/Ability/Opportunity (Wiggins, 2004) or the Risks-Efforts-Rewards (Price, 2017) exhibit the perceptual barriers or risks associated to cultural participation and suggest the importance of studying what happens in the consumer's minds before

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[1] Le renouvellement des publics de la musique classique. France Musique, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.francemusique.fr/emissions/le-dossier-du-jour/le-renouvellement-des-publics-de-la-musique-classique-16790 on 12/05/2024.

[2] 23 % de la population dispose d'un diplôme bac + 3 ou plus. Observatoire des Inégalités, 2023. Retrieved from https://inegalites.fr/niveau-de-diplome-de-la-population on 13/05/2024.

[3] Revenus et patrimoine des ménages – Édition 2021. INSEE, 2021. Retrieved from https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/5371205?sommaire=5371304 on 12/05/2024.

[4] Âge moyen et âge médian de la population – Données annuelles de 1991 à 2024. INSEE, 2024. Retrieved from https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/2381476 on 12/05/2024

cultural participation actually take place. We thus build upon Haddad-Bacry and Michel's (2023) work on how categories can help consumers anticipate the nature and value of cultural experiences to explore the *a priori* accessibility of classical music concerts and how consumers project themselves into them before attending them.

Conceptualizing classical music as a genre to understand its rules

To approach classical music concerts as a category of cultural experiences, we conceptualize classical music as a musical genre (Buch, 2018; Bull and Scharff, 2021). Such approach helps us understand its rules (Fabbri, 1980), how they are enacted by consumers (Drott, 2013), and how they materialize social identities (Born, 2011; Bull and Scharff, 2021). Classical music's execution (Hennion, 1997; Leech-Wilkinson, 2016) and spectatorship (Ledent, 2007) are heavily codified. The public is expected to sit still, to only applaud in between pieces, to remain silent and sometimes even to dress up in a particular fashion. Such codes can constitute a desirable part of the concert experience for regular audiences (France, 2018; Wilson et al., 2014) while they can keep new audiences who don't master them at distance (Dobson and Pitts, 2011; Lehmann, 2018). Besides these codes, the places in which classical music is played and listened to (Lehmann, 2018) and the audience's social endogamy (France, 2018) are also deemed to be factors that can frighten inexperienced audiences.

How do consumers represent themselves classical music concerts and their codes?
What roles do these codes play in their a priori accessibility?

The lens of symbolic violence to understand the *a priori* accessibility of classical music concerts

To address these questions, we rely on the lens of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1985, 1970) to analyze consumers' projections into highbrow cultural experiences. Symbolic violence is the social discomfort stemming out of the recognition of the cultural hierarchical order and of the cultural dominance of the dominant by the dominate (Bourdieu, 1997). When confronted to dominant legitimate cultural forms, individuals can either acknowledge the cultural hierarchies or resist them, consciously or subconsciously (Lahire, 2006) in an act of symbolic resistance (Palheta, 2015). Such lens seems appropriate to study how consumers apprehend classical music concerts – a "rigid and guarded" (Pébrier, 2015) genre, with sacred codes and "for the elite" (Lehmann, 2018), of which concerts are the scene of a "social endogamy" (France, 2018) – as highbrow cultural experiences.

Methodology: 12 semi-structured introspective interviews

We studied consumers' apprehension of classical music concerts and their *a priori* accessibility through the lens of symbolic violence in an interpretative approach (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy, 1988). We interviewed 12 French consumers who had different levels of familiarity with classical music and its concerts (see Table 1). We recruited our informants with the screening question "have you ever wanted to attend a classical music concert–whether you already attended one or not?". The aim was to recruit informants already willing to attend to explore what could impede or enhance their will.

Table 1 – Informants' profile

Name	Age	Familiarity to classical music	Occupation	Education	Residence
Alia	21 y.o.	Quite familiar	Graduate Student in Psychology	Graduate degree	Paris, France
Nathan	22 y.o.	Quite familiar	Graduate Student in Management and Computer Science	Graduate degree	Parisian suburbs, France
Maria	25 y.o.	Not familiar	Graduate student in Archeology	Graduate degree	Paris, France

Agathe	25 y.o.	Not familiar	Laboratory Technician in the Fragrance Industry	Postgraduate degree	Paris, France
Giannis	30 y.o.	Very Familiar	Business Owner	Postgraduate degree	Paris, France
Jacqueline	30 y.o.	Familiar	Undergraduate Student in Psychology	Postgraduate degree	Paris, France
Marc	34 y.o.	Passionate	Management Accountant	Postgraduate degree	Paris, France
Lucia	38 y.o.	Not familiar	Project Manager	Postgraduate degree	Paris, France
Pierrick	41 y.o.	Quite familiar	Director of a Cultural Association	Baccalaureate	Rural zone in Mayenne, France
Margaux	50 y.o.	Familiar	School Teacher	Postgraduate degree	Rural zone in Maine-et-Loire, France
Lionel	58 y.o.	Not familiar	Higher Education English Teacher	Postgraduate degree	Parisian suburbs
Daniel	72 y.o.	Passionate	Professional Classical Pianist	Postgraduate degree	Paris, France

We used the guided introspection method (Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993) to explore our informants past mental states. Inspired by Eroglu and Michel (2018), we sent them 5 introductory questions via email on their rapport with classical music and their last concert experience or the last time they wanted to attend one. Interviews were led on a conversational mode (Belk et al., 2013, p. 35) and explored informant's life trajectories (Lahire, 2006) to unfold the social forging of their rapport with classical music and its codes. We then explored their last concert experience – whether they attended or simply wanted to attend – through the lens of categorization (Haddad-Bacry and Michel, 2023). Interviews were led from August 2021 to April 2022 and partially transcribed with the help of Trint. We analysed them through multithematic coding (Ayache and Dumez, 2011) to shed light on several dimensions of similar verbatim, that we translated from French into English.

Results

Our rich data enables us to explore our informants' representations of classical music and their concerts through their codes, that act as categorical attributes. We show different attitudes towards these codes – acceptance, embracement, questioning and resistance – and how they can help consumers project themselves into the experience by anticipation. They play a role in materializing future emitted or received symbolic violence during the anticipation phase of the experience and can impede participation.

The representation of classical music concerts and their codes

First and foremost, we asked our informants how they saw classical music. Following Fabbri's (1980) dimensions of the musical genre, we can identify formal/technical, semiotic and social/ideological representations of classical music. Our informants had a rather clear notion of the instruments on which it is played:

"It's music composed for one or more instruments of [...] the symphony orchestra. So, there are winds, woodwinds, brass, percussions, strings." – Margaux, 50 y.o.

Besides the *instrumentarium* and although not all of them were experts, many of our informants acknowledged the richness, complexity, and specific structure of classical music:

"It's music that's constructed, thought out, developed, that also tries to be inventive, creative and make the language evolve." – Daniel, 72 y.o.

"How harmony works, how cadenzas work, how does the creation of a melody work, the intervals, the... [...] It's all in classical music already, I'm convinced. I hear it and I'd love to study it if I had a bit of time." – Lionel, 58 y.o.

Semiotically speaking, classical music was associated to a more or less specific period in history, from classicism – for the most knowledgeable such as Daniel, Giannis or Marc – to a broader spectrum ranging from the "17th century" (Maria, 25 y.o.) to our era, with "film music" (Pierrick, 41 y.o.). It is also a kind of music associated to evasion and appeasement, or to a music "without lyrics" (Alia, 21 y.o.) to listen to when you need to focus and work:

"Ah, it's when the week has been dense, when I can't have silence and I want something that keeps within that quiet thing. [...]That's going to respond to the absence of silence, and yet it's not going to put me into a frenzy of energy, running around." – Pierrick, 41 y.o.

"To work as well, to work, a lot. [...] Having music with lyrics will distract me from my work, I'll feel like singing, the song will go round in my head. [...] So, classical music that's a bit soft, that lets me hear my thoughts while I'm working." – Alia, 21 y.o.

To some of our informants, classical music is generally listened to alone and is "not really adequate in society, with friends, in a daily social context" (Jacqueline, 30 y.o.). Maria and Pierrick also see classical music as music that accompanies other art forms, mainly movies. Ultimately, our informants associated classical music to a set of societal and ideological representation. We find there one of the first traces of cultural legitimacy and the symbolic violence that emanates from it. Many, as Nathan, presented classical music as a superior kind of music:

"Something beautiful, you don't take anything away, you don't add anything, it stays beautiful. What needs not to be touched up. And so, when I listen to classical music, that's what I think, classical music is... 'Perfection'. That would be a bit of a stretch, but yes." – Nathan, 22 y.o.

Such perfection is only attainable – both when composing and when listening – through knowledge. Classical music was described as scholarly music that necessitates a form of knowledge to be composed:

"Anyone can create music. Except that there are some who create it with prior knowledge and others with no prior knowledge. That, for me, is what distinguishes classical music from non-classical music." – Giannis, 30 y.o.

Perhaps because of that reason, classical music is perceived as a musical form that also necessitates prior knowledge to be understood. Giannis or Daniel, both musically educated, speak of different "levels of reading" (Giannis, 30 y.o.) to classical music. Agathe, Lucia and Maria also perceive that aspect of classical music, but don't feel that they have the required knowledge to understand such an erudite music form:

"I've never been to a conservatory or played an instrument. I don't have all that training that allows me to understand what I'm listening to." – Maria, 25 y.o.

Yet, classical music was presented by most as a musical form that "needs" (Lucia, 38 y.o.) to be understood. Even Daniel as a pianist said that his goal is to make classical music "readable" to others. That created a dissension between what classical music listeners wish to accomplish when listening to classical music and what they can accomplish. Its status as a superior music form, its complexity and the fact that it needs to be understood is a vector of symbolic violence. All recognised its cultural significance, and those who thought they lacked the knowledge to fully understand it felt that something was unattainable.

Apprehending the codes of the classical music concert

Our informants, whether or not they were experienced classical music concerts attendees, had clear ideas of the codes and rules that constitute a classical music concert. While some of them were mentioned during the conclusion of the interview, following the direct question "are there codes to classical music concerts?", most of these codes were spontaneously mentioned during the core section

of the interview, following the questions "what is classical music?" or "what is a classical music concert?". We listed codes related to:

- **How the music should be played** | *"classical music to me is a music without microphones, without amplification"* (Marc, 34 y.o.), *"there is no room for mediocrity, you need an absolute mastery"* (Lucia, 38 y.o.), *"usually, it's a concert in two parts"* (Daniel, 72 y.o.).
- **The places in which the music is played** | *"there are magnificent venues to play classical music in"* (Giannis, 30 y.o.), *"there are many people, employees, welcoming us"* (Agathe, 25 y.o.)
- **The way the audience is or should behave** | *"a superior social class"* (Lionel, 58 y.o.) *"I believe that silence is the bare minimum"* (Daniel, 72 y.o.), *"to get all dressed up is the minimum for a classical music concert"* (Nathan, 22 y.o.), *"it is important to really listen to it fully"* (Alia, 21 y.o.)

Our informants demonstrated a plurality of rapports with the codes of the classical music concert, which riddled their representations and their anticipation of the experience. Almost all respondents, such as Maria, accepted the expected silence of the public as an immutable reality of the classical music concert:

"It's like when you take the car, you know there are rules, a code to respect. If you're not prepared to obey the red lights, then you don't take the car. If you're going to a classical music concert to chat with a friend, in that case, you stay outside, chat with your friend, and you don't bother anyone. That's just the way it is!" – Maria, 25 y.o.

She compares the silence classical music concerts' audiences to a form of strict legislation by drawing an analogy with traffic regulations. Her application of the codes is almost automatic in the sense that she doesn't even question them. Codes can sometimes be seen as something that constitutes or enables a pleasant experience, or on the contrary, as something that impedes enjoyment. Some informants therefore fully embraced and praised some of them:

"To go the Philharmonie de Paris, yes, you have to respect dress codes, wear a suit, even if you're a member of the public. […] It contributes to the elegance of classical music." – Nathan, 22 y.o.

"People, a bit like in church, are going to be careful not to make any noise, and all that. It's a performance! I'm telling about my experiences, my representations. I get the impression that there's something very respectful about classical music." – Pierrick, 41 y.o

Similarly, it is evident to Lionel that classical music audiences should not make any noise when listening to the music. However, even though he stated he never went to a concert, he anticipates the disrespect of the codes as something that might infuriate him:

"It's the sacred aspect. [...] It's the kind of thing that's going to kill me. The last thing I want is to be around people who are there to talk, because that's going to kill my thing, because I'm there to live it to the fullest" – Lionel, 58 y.o.

Others are more reserved about the codes and feel that they are not mandatory. In that case, they were not perceived as an impingement to the experience:

"You need to attend with your ears, your eyes and your heart. As for the rest? Well, you have the right to go there wearing jeans!"– Margaux, 50 y.o.

"I was at a piano concert recently. We applauded after movements, well, single pieces, that were part of a group. Well, why not? It's not very, very embarrassing." – Daniel, 72 y.o.

Finally, some of the codes were deemed unpleasant, for our informants themselves of for other members of the audience. Codes were then associated to disagreeable feelings, either drawn from the informants' memories or from their projections of what a classical music concert should or would be like:

"I'm always afraid of going to the wrong place. I'm afraid of going through the wrong door. I'm afraid of sitting in the wrong seat. I'm afraid of getting a billion things wrong. It's always a real adventure." – *Agathe, 25 years old*

"At some point, these codes contribute to people's distancing from classical music. I remember someone saying to me, 'Do you applaud after arias?' [...] In the end, they're a bit ridiculous, because they drive people away and create fantasies." – *Marc, 34 y.o.*

The role of codes in the anticipation of the concert's symbolic violence

All the verbatim about classical music concerts' dress code illustrate the wide range of attitudes found in our informant's representations. Codes were either embraced, accepted, suffered or resisted. Only the necessity to remain silent reached a consensus. All in all, they allowed our informants to project themselves into the experience and to better anticipate it, both through pleasant and unpleasant dimensions:

"I think the venue is important. It's... a bit exceptional sometimes. I like that. [...] I'm in another world when I go to a concert hall." – *Margaux, 50 y.o.*

"I think we're getting dressed up, we're making ourselves beautiful, perhaps we're going somewhere beautiful, and we're going to see something beautiful. So we want to be beautiful too. And maybe that's the most basic way of participating in this experience that is a classical music concert." – *Jacqueline, 30 y.o.*

"Classical music is something that I believe is linked to studying, something coded and normative. [...] And since I don't have all that, well…" – *Lucia, 38 y.o.*

"There is still a part of me that goes 'right, it's great [...] that I have the codes other people don't [...] and then I tell myself 'well, it is elitist, it is endogamous, people that I don't like." – *Giannis, 30 y.o.*

"I'm projecting when I walk into the room... [...]. I wouldn't make any effort with my clothes, for example." – *Lionel, 58 y.o.*

Through the codes, our respondents knew in advance how they might feel during the experience. Margaux expects an enjoyable evasion in exceptional venues while Jacqueline envisions getting dressed up as a pleasant contribution to the magnificence of the experience. Some informants expressed a discomfort vis-à-vis the codes of the classical music concert and were able to anticipate the symbolic violence they might receive, resist, or emit. Lucia, who did not receive a formal classical music training, anticipates the symbolic violence that she would suffer from due to her lack of mastery of the codes. Such symbolic violence does not result from another encounter than that with the music itself. It is also somewhat self-inflicted since it originates in her representations of classical music as an elitist genre of music that you need an education to enjoy. The fact that she must remain sat and silent during the concerts – in her mind at least, because she has never attended one – confronts her to her social anxieties and would in her mind lead to an unpleasant experience. Interestingly and quite oppositely, Giannis feels guilty for mastering the codes and therefore for being part of the elitism. He is not the victim of the symbolic violence, but rather the emitter. Both confessed that this discomfort causes them to never attend classical music concerts. Lionel, on the contrary and although he never attended a classical music concert, plans to resist the codes that he finds do not correspond to his simplicity. He anticipates the symbolic violence emanating from the codes but finds a coping mechanism. The anticipation of the symbolic violence frightens Agathe to the point of cancelling her plans:

"I ended up cancelling my plans, thinking it would necessitate a whole physical preparation. I'd have needed to dress up in a certain way, to behave in a certain way… [...] I didn't have the will and the energy for it." – *Agathe, 25 y.o.*

However, she told us of a time when she benefitted from a last-minute ticket offer to which she immediately responded positively. She didn't ask herself too many questions about the codes and the social effort she associates them to, and overcame the apprehension of the symbolic violence:

"I went there last minute, really. […] I got a text message from the Opera saying seats for young people were still available, and I told myself 'I'm dying to go!'" – Agathe, 25 y.o.

This shows the importance of the anticipation phase in the materialisation of the symbolic violence of the classical music concert as barriers, through the *a priori* apprehension of its codes.

Discussions, managerial implications, and limits

Our results allow us to better understand the challenges of crafting accessible experiences for classical music audiences. While Haddad-Bacry and Michel (2023) showed the role of the anticipation in value creation, we showed how the anticipation of the categorized experience through its codes can create barriers and impede participation. The codes of the experience can provide the public with elements to anticipate the experience and to project themselves into it. The knowledge of these codes can result from a past experience or from preconceived ideas about the category of experience – in our study, classical music concerts. Some codes are deemed mandatory, others can be considered pleasant, might be questioned, and resisted or can generate a social discomfort. Through the knowledge or the ignorance of the codes of the classical music concert, the anticipated symbolic violence, and the discomfort it may cause are mobilized in the decision whether to attend, both by novice and experienced audiences.

Figure 1 – A framework to account for the perceived accessibility of highbrow cultural experiences
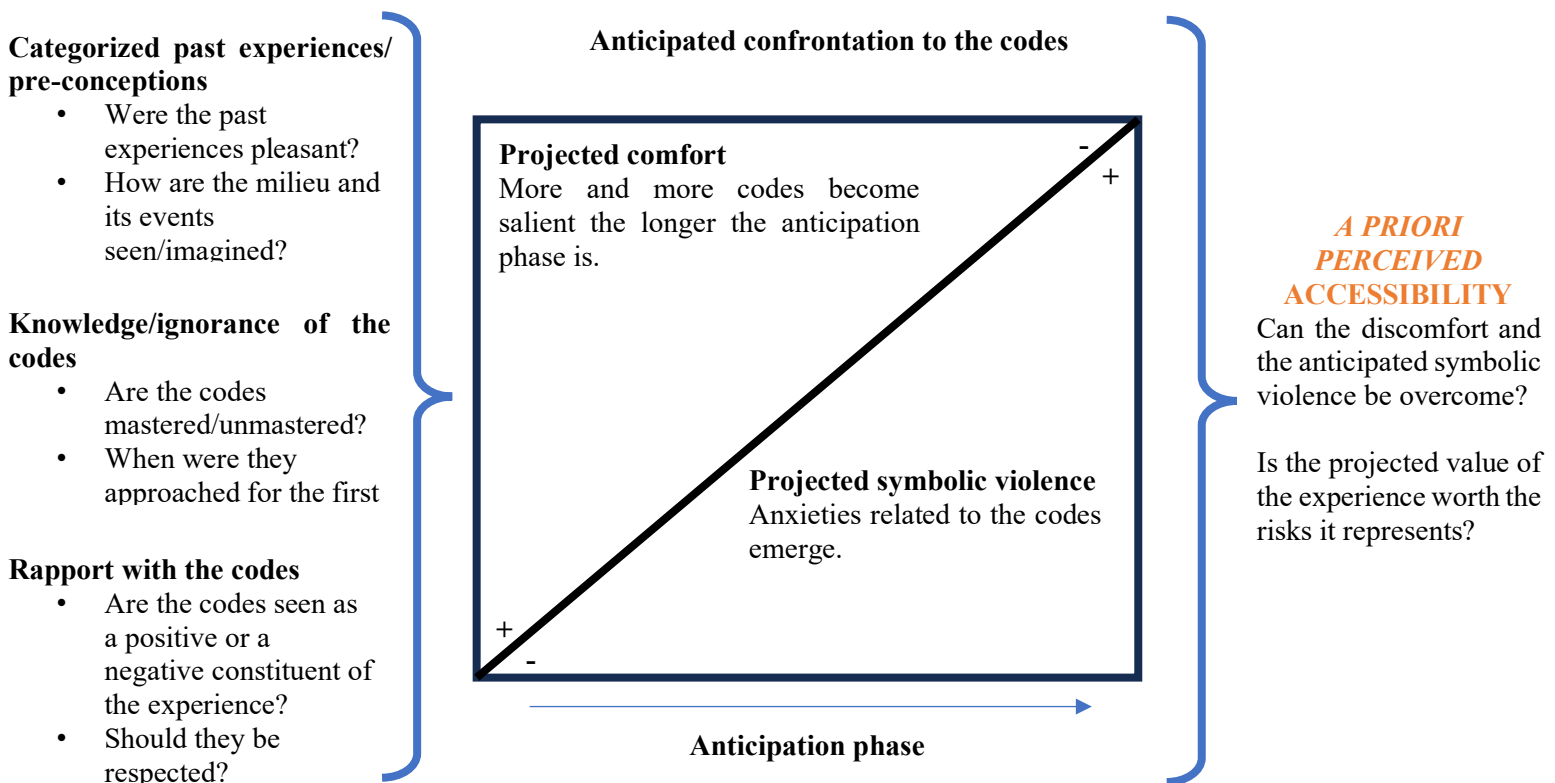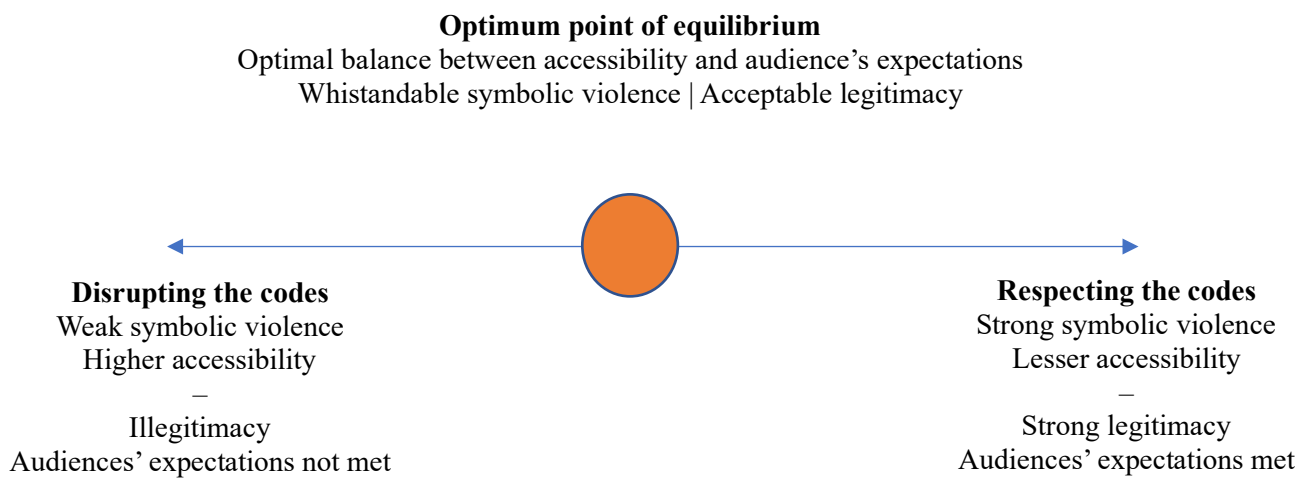

Our research therefore shows the need to consider the accessibility of highbrow cultural experiences not solely on-site, but also *a priori*. Accessibility is what is easy to use, but also to "approach" (VandenBos, 2015, p. 7). That being said, mediation endeavours should not solely focus on crafting easy to understand classical music concerts – and other easy to understand highbrow experiences – with mediation devices on-site, but should also facilitate the overcoming of barriers or mitigate the risks (see Price, 2017 for a discussion on the difference between risks and barriers) perceived by consumers in anticipation, prior to attending.

In the case of the classical music concert, the perceived elitist codes or rules (Dorin, 2018) of the genre can act as an "invisible hand" (Lehmann, 2018) that distances audiences through symbolic violence, felt as soon as the experience is anticipated. A potential solution to this problem lies in last-minute offers, which could prevent audiences from over-anticipating the symbolic violence of highbrow experiences. Further, we also posit that while breaking some codes might contribute to the *a priori* accessibility of the experience, breaking all the codes might harm the perceived value, both for experienced and inexperienced audiences, who might find some of them desirable and mandatory. We call for researchers and marketers to find an equilibrium between breaking the codes of highbrow experiences and maintaining them and develop an awareness of the effects of such practice on different audiences (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Optimum equilibrium between respecting and disrupting the codes of the classical music concerts.

Optimum point of equilibrium
Optimal balance between accessibility and audience's expectations
Whistandable symbolic violence | Acceptable legitimacy

Disrupting the codes	**Respecting the codes**
Weak symbolic violence	Strong symbolic violence
Higher accessibility	Lesser accessibility
–	–
Illegitimacy	Strong legitimacy
Audiences' expectations not met	Audiences' expectations met

Limitations and pathways for further research

First, this research is deeply embedded in its social context, that of France, and in its subject, classical music concerts. The classical music milieu can be very different from one country to another, and the *bourdieusian* concept of symbolic violence could be experienced differently in different regions of the world. Conducting similar studies in different countries, settings and regarding different kinds of highbrow experiences – ballet, theater, opera, haute-couture shows – would certainly further our understanding of consumers' apprehension of highbrow cultural experiences. We also would like to highlight the difficulties we had in recruiting a socially diverse crowd of informants, which could arguably be both attributed to our screening question – "have you ever wanted to attend a classical music concert" – and the highbrow status of classical music concerts. The projected symbolic violence one might expect could lead consumers to not even envision the possibility to eventually attend a classical music concert. Finally, our informants' familiarity to classical music was self-assessed. We could try different more objective assessment methods such as a short questionnaire to evaluate their distance to the object being studied more thoroughly.

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