

Relational sociology



1. Foundations

Methods overview

Classical (European) social theory

2. The individual in society (bottom-up)

Ethnicity, race, and nationality

Disability

Gender and sexuality

Class and culture

3. Populations and publics (top-down)

Inequality and stratification

Demography

Politics and economy

Social movements

4. Social systems (middle-out)

Interaction

Institutional change

Organizations and groups

Media and technology

Roadmap

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Relational Sociology

Relational sociology

“Relational” sociology puts *relations* at the core of social theory.

But what is a “relation”?



Relations are not...

Large-scale institutions

- ∴ **E.g. structural functionalism:**
(People do what they do because of the function of society as a whole and their particular institutional context.)
- ∴ **E.g. class analysis (conflict theory):**
(People do what they do because of their relationship to systems of economic production.)



Relations are not...

Individual actors

- ∴ **E.g. rational choice theory:**
(Individuals choose how to behave based on internal preferences.)
- ∴ **E.g. identity analysis (conflict/interactionist theories):**
(People act based on the values associated with their background and needs.)

Relational sociology

“Relational” sociology puts *relations* at the core of social theory.

But what is a “relation”?

Relations are...

The relationships, contrasts, interactions, and affiliations that situate us among one another

(Details forthcoming...)



Relational sociology

Relations 'all the way down'

- **Basic claim:** starting with relations we should be able to explain both individual behavior *and* large-scale social forces
- Addresses micro–macro divide by saying they are both result of relational processes and structures
- Growing trend in social theory since 1990s
Harrison White; Pierre Bourdieu
- Especially popular among researchers of culture, taste, organizations, and institutional structure

Relational sociology

Two main schools of thought on what relations “are” in relational sociology:

Relations as *bonds*

- ∴ Network theory
- ∴ Symbolic interactionism



Relations as *contrasts*

- ∴ Field theory
- ∴ Boundary analysis



Network relations

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Network relations

Network relations are links between *pairs* of individuals

Different kinds of relationships individuals have with one another

∴ Friends, siblings, parent–child, teacher–student, classmate, ...

Ties are not always “positive”

∴ Bully–bullied, opposing political parties, distrust, ...

From a purely relational view, people are nothing more than the sum of those different ties



Goffman's dramaturgical theory

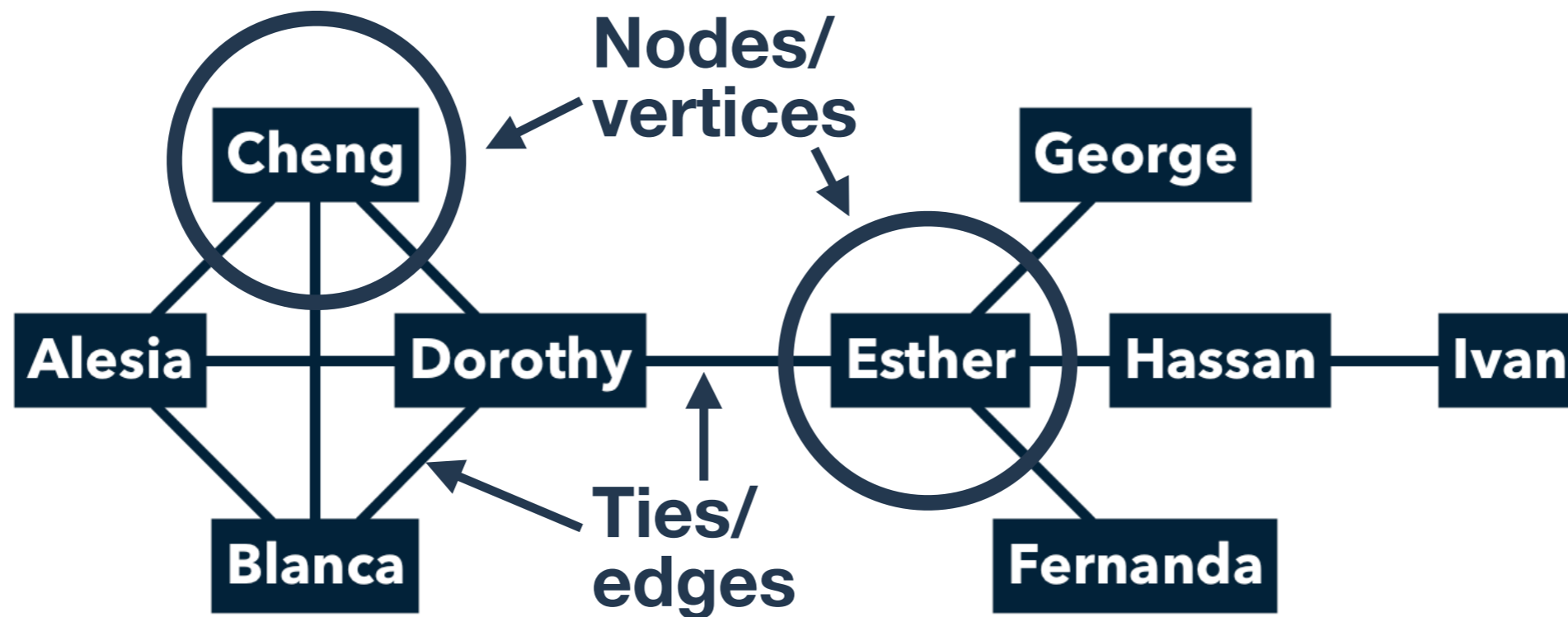
- Everyone has a collection of different masks (role expectations) they put on depending on the social situation.
- Goffman's surprising point was that once you take all those different roles into account, there is no remainder that we can call the individual.
- Fundamentally relational idea



Network analysis

Describing relations

- (Social) network analysis is one of the primary tools sociologists use to talk about these kinds of ideas.



- You can know something about people from the structure of networks they are in.
- In practice, lots of different relations, much larger networks, and highly formalized analyses.

Network analysis

Washington: High Sex-Segregation



Jefferson: Low Sex-Segregation



Faris, Robert, and Diane Felmlee. 2011. "Status Struggles: Network Centrality and Gender Segregation in Same- and Cross-Gender Aggression." *American Sociological Review* 76 (1) (February 1): 48–73.

Network analysis

Washington: High Sex-Segregation



Status struggles

- Aim to explain individual-level behavior (aggression) using relational structure
- Examined wide range of explanatory variables
Age, race, gender, grades, sports family background, ...
- Best predictor of aggression is network position
Students become less aggressive as they achieve high status (popular) or find themselves in the margins of the social network (unpopular)

Faris, Robert, and Diane Felmlee. 2011. "Status Struggles: Network Centrality and Gender Segregation in Same- and Cross-Gender Aggression." *American Sociological Review* 76 (1) (February 1): 48–73.

Relations as contrasts

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Relations as *contrasts*

- ∴ Field theory
- ∴ Boundary analysis



Relations as contrasts

Alternative take on the “relations” in relational sociology

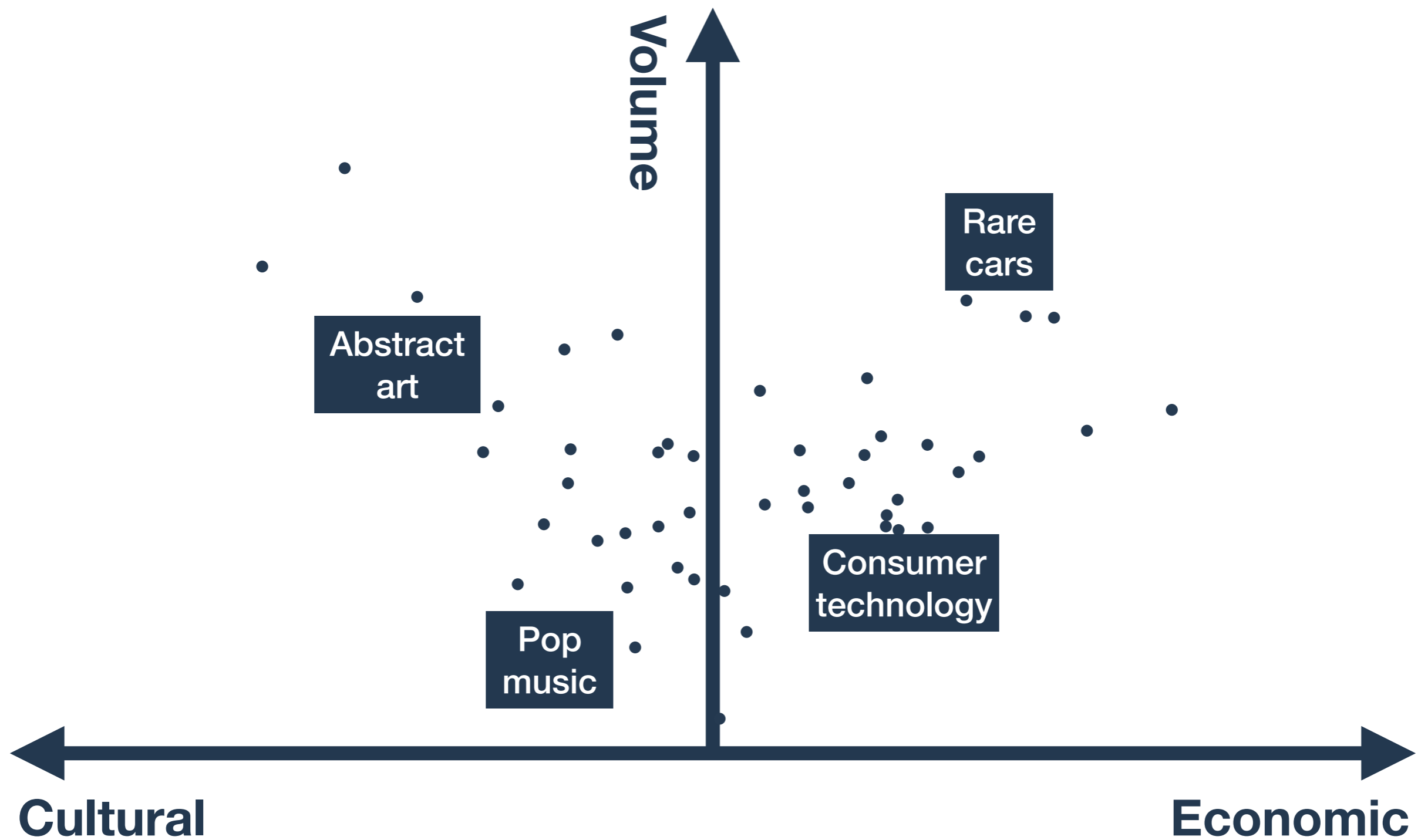
- The social world exists as a space of different resources, tastes, and orientations
- Best way to understand people and their behavior is by understanding how they relate to one another in that space

Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory

- Social space as “field”
Explicit reference to physical sciences—magnetic fields, etc.
- Relative positions in field define relations of power, affinity, indifference, etc.
- Network ties are outcome of field dynamics

Bourdieu's fields

Capital and social space



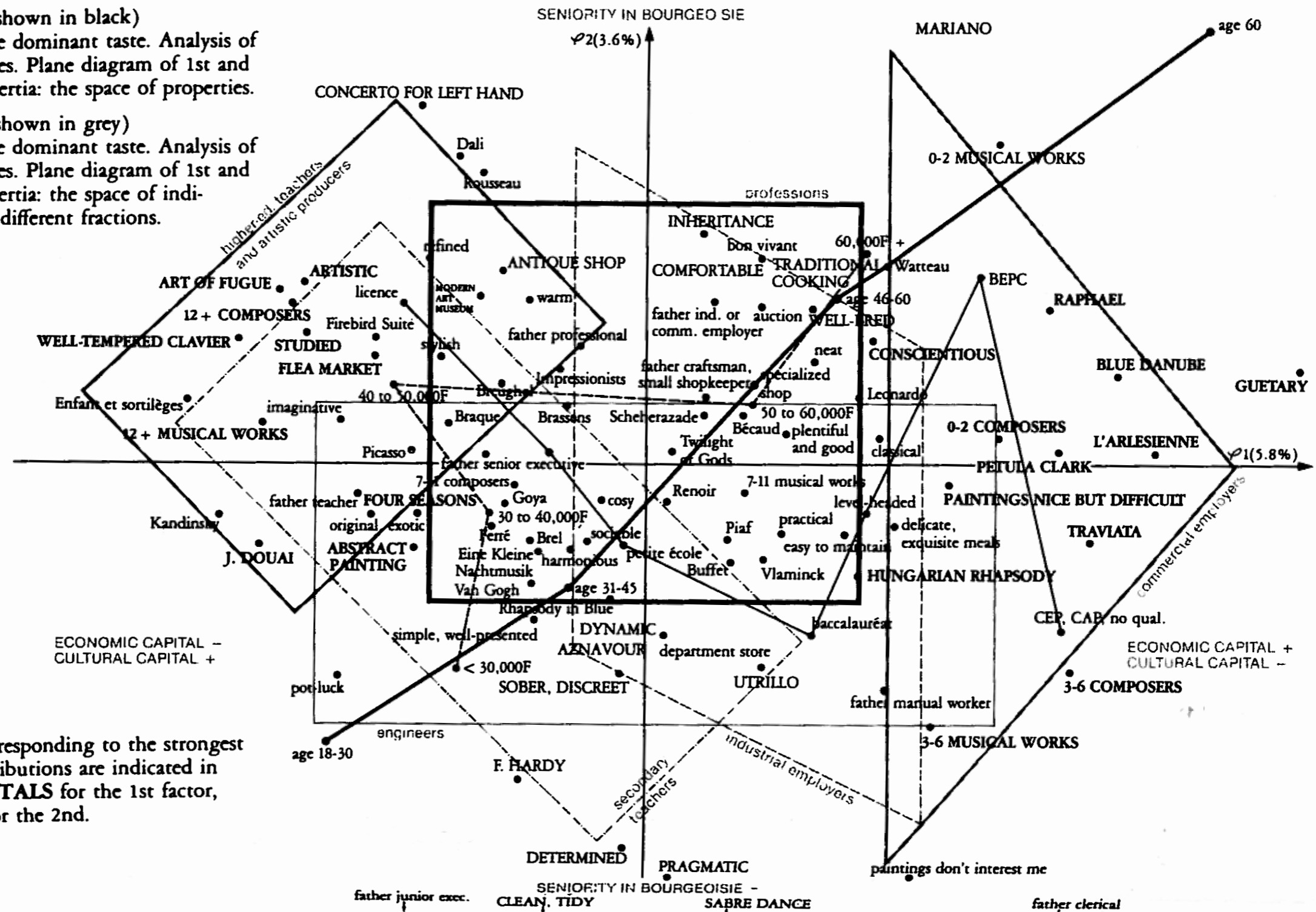
Bourdieu's fields

Figure 11 (shown in black)

Variants of the dominant taste. Analysis of correspondences. Plane diagram of 1st and 2nd axes of inertia: the space of properties.

Figure 12 (shown in grey)

Variants of the dominant taste. Analysis of correspondences. Plane diagram of 1st and 2nd axes of inertia: the space of individuals of the different fractions.

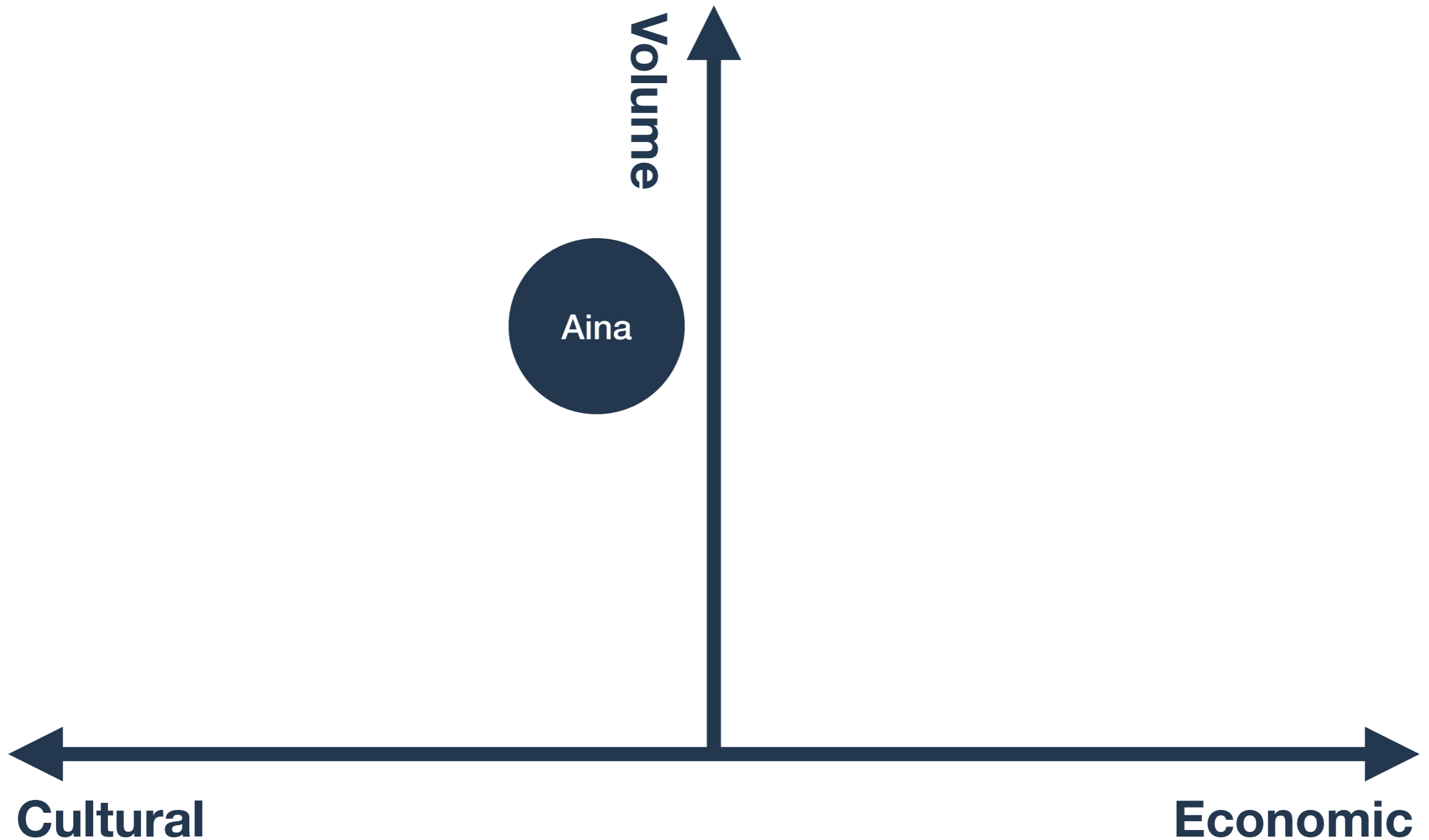


The items corresponding to the strongest absolute contributions are indicated in **BOLD CAPITALS** for the 1st factor, **CAPITALS** for the 2nd.

Figures 11 and 12 from Bourdieu, P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press, 1984.

Fields and relationality

Individualist view:
Measure *characteristics*
of Aina to describe her.



Fields and relationality

Relational view:
Describe *contrasts* of
Aina in relation to others

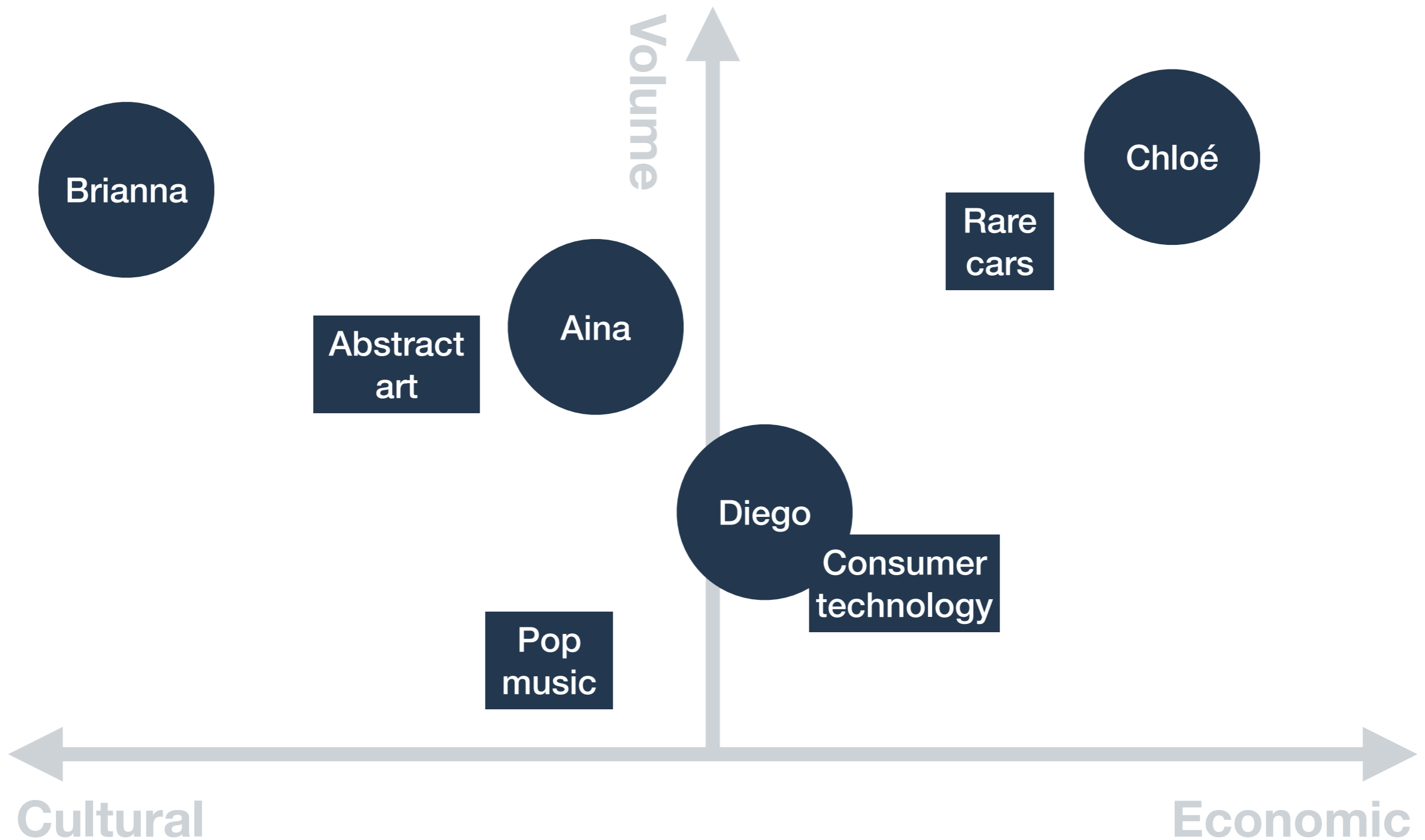


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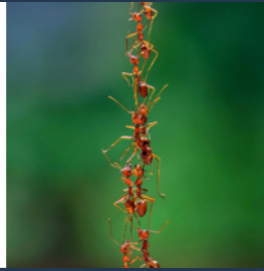
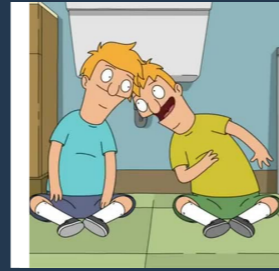


Photo via express.co.uk



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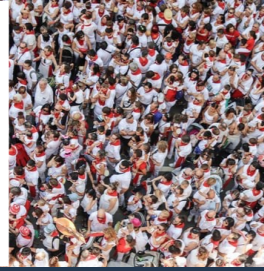


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