

**Foodways under a microscope:**

**Revealing gender discrimination in food enthusiast community**

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## **Abstract**

Escaphiles come together professionally or privately, in kitchens or dining rooms, bars or restaurants, in person or through social media to share their enthusiasm for all that is food-related –cooking, eating, discussing its history, politics, or even just watching travel or competition shows. However, within this vibrant information community lurks a predilection to favor what are considered masculine foodways and culinary practices over the feminine ones. In modern times, even with more men, and those identifying as male, spending more time cooking in home kitchens –an area traditionally seen as a woman’s domain- gender discrimination is yet to be diminished, or even tempered in the foodie community. After a literature review of academic articles attesting to this, I will identify how their presented perspectives can help guide escaphiles –based on Social Identity Theory (Flanagin, Hocevar & Samahito, 2013)- to combat inequity and truly come together.

## Introduction

Food enthusiasts –also known as escaphiles- voraciously consume pictures and videos of food on social media, travel shows like Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations* and Sonny Side's *The Best Ever Food Review Show*, cooking competitions like *MasterChef* and *The Great British Bake Off*, and thousands of books featuring recipes, food history, nutrition and culinary science, and social, political and economic theories pertaining to our unequal distribution of sustenance on a global scale.

Then, coming off the satisfaction all this information could bring, they connect to admire each other's cooking techniques, discuss and debate where and how their food comes about, and, most of all, eat well together. This burgeoning information community attend culinary schools, shop for cookbooks, kitchenware, groceries, and bread, get their knives sharpened, and party together, regularly using the internet to learn, create, and teach the manifold definitions and meanings of food in their lives.

Researchers like Mark Kurlansky, Michael Pollan, and Samin Nosrat encourage escaphiles the world over to discuss how salt has controlled nations and empires, that what one eats may sum themselves up in more ways than what they are capable of grasping, and mastering the application of salt, fat, acid, and heat has been the cornerstone of food that has been moving hearts, minds, and palates for millennia.

However, there is another facet of the escaphilic community that must be brought to the table: its predilection for what is considered masculine, especially the opinions and assertions of male voices (Cairns, Johnston & Baumann, 2010). Thus, we must look also to researchers like Nathaniel G. Chapman and his coauthors discussing gender in craft beer consumption (Chapman,

Nanney, Lellock & Mikles-Schluterman, 2018), Jonatan Leer examining masculinity in European cooking shows post-*The Naked Chef* (Leer, 2016), Merin Oleschuk outlining how one learns to cook may be perpetuating gender stereotypes (Oleschuk, 2019), and others to guide escaphiles in exploring deeper through what could be their inherent gender-bias when endeavoring to connect and share within their information community.

Gender equality still remains only, for now, a cherished dream (United Nations, n.d.), and in no corner of multiple global cultures has it been harder to shake than where it concerns how we nourish ourselves. This paper will first present a literature review on information seeking behavior and group identification, gender in relations to participation in the kitchen, food choice, food tourism, and cooking-themed television shows. Then after outlining how these articles were decided on, I will discuss how their featured research may or not have met food enthusiasts' needs in understanding gender discrimination in their information community, where information centers and libraries should step in to rectify any perceived shortcomings, and suggestions for further investigation.

## **Literature Review**

Escaphiles, though having a broad definition, are exclusive in who they may consider a fellow food enthusiast, with a few admitting to cutting off friends who had approached food “improperly” (Ulver, 2019). However childish this reaction may be, it is still a thoroughly legitimate part of the information search process (Kuhlthau, 1991), as the foodie is actively trying to find meaning in their self-identity, and it speaks volumes to how they, and others in their community, may approach their Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS), the ways they “use various information sources to meet information needs” (Savoleinen, 2017). And it is through this context –as defined through information needs and seeking research (INS), that “usually refers to any factors or variables that are seen to affect individuals’ information-seeking behavior” (Talja, Keso & Pietilainen, 1999)- researchers have culled from questionnaires, surveys, literature, message boards, and personal experiences that an escaphile’s tendency to discriminate based on gender is most likely a reaction they may not entirely be aware of.

## **GENDER IN COOKING**

At the start of “Caring about food: Doing gender in the foodie kitchen” (Cairns, Johnston & Baumann, 2010), the authors assert that, though, escaphiles assume gender does not factor much into food media and culture anymore –because of the popularity of both hyper masculine and softer spoken male celebrity chefs- gender inequities still pervade their community due to foodies simply enacting gender in new ways. This is supported by “Bottling gender: Accomplishing gender through craft beer consumption” (Chapman, Nanney, Lellock & Mikles-Schluterman, 2018) stating that “alcohol consumption... has been associated with gendered

behaviors”, in that despite how more women are drinking more craft beer, threads and discussions on Reddit.com’s beer community, “beerit”, continue to be rife with sexism, championing notions that masculine drinking styles –of imbibing a lot as quickly as possible, and preferring darker beers- are superior to what are regarded feminine –a more considered pace of consumption at smaller volumes of lighter, fruitier-tasting brews. The chauvinism also spills over into how female brew masters are judged not for their skills in crafting worthy beers but instead sexually objectified.

This inequity in labor performed lends itself to the results and analysis in “Foodwork or foodplay: Men’s domestic cooking, privilege and leisure” (Szabo, 2013). Through interviewing 30 men of various ethnicities, sexualities and living arrangements in Toronto, Canada, with home observations of a third of the participants, the author found that given the opportunity to approach household chores as “just another job” like a woman would, stay-at-home dads found themselves savoring the same frustrations when their kitchen work was rejected or disrespected, and cooking was seen as “less fun” when men could not make it entirely a leisure activity. Even when taking on female roles, they could not perform them “like a girl”.

And according to “Gender, cultural schemas, and learning to cook” (Oleschuk, 2019), there is no role more female in the home than teaching the next generation how to cook. Analyzing interviews and observations of 34 primary home cooks, the author found that most instruction is taken by a mother’s side, which can reproduce gendered inequalities over generations with “women as the main transmitters of culinary knowledge”, while also likely, through overemphasizing childhood learning, neglecting the importance of acquiring skills later in life. However, despite those cherished memories of a mother’s devoted instruction, Klasson and Ulver’s “Masculinising domesticity: An investigation of men’s domestic foodwork” (2015)

pointed out how –interpreting data from an ethnographic inquiry of 12 young, middle-class, white, heterosexual Swedish males through the key concept of hegemonic masculinity- how men may act equitably gender-wise, but still uphold existing power structures. For example, they dramatize tasks housewives just take as a given, like feeding the family, by affirming that their form of cooking is “superior” due to a “patina of refinement”. These same men, in spite of their claims to “prize knowledge, creativity, procedures, and heritage” won’t follow a recipe, because it will seem “womanly”, too basic, to follow instructions.

### **HEALTHY EATING “DEFINED”**

According to articles “Motives for food choice: A comparison of consumers from Japan, Taiwan, Malaysia and New Zealand” (Prescott, Young, O’Neill, Yau & Stevens, 2002), “Creature of habit or embracer of change? Contrasting consumer daily food behavior with the tourism scenario” (Wang, Lehto & Cai, 2018), “Attitudes to food and the role of food in life” (Rozin, Fischler, Imada, Sarubin & Wrzesniewski, 1999), and “Food and life, pleasure and worry, among American college students: Gender differences and regional similarities” (Rozin, Bauer & Catanese, 2003), a woman’s food choices are often restrained by how they identify with their femininity.

Prescott and co-authors analyzed 654 responses to a food choice questionnaire by women from Tokyo, Japan, 11 cities in Taiwan, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Hamilton, New Zealand, and found “health”, “natural content” and “weight control” leading in the top three factors of each of the four countries. Factors reigning low on the list across the board were “ethical concern”, “mood” and, bottoming for all four, “familiarity”. This concurs with Wang, Lehto and Cai’s (2018) examination that, though both genders put the “sensory appeal” of food they would

seek on holiday as most important and “ethical concern” the least, women had more self-control whether at home or abroad because of expressed dietary goals, while men –at least while not traveling- will eat whatever felt “familiar” over foods representing other factors.

Women across the globe, even educated ones, have been self-policing their diets to seem healthier. Rozin and his co-authors’ 1999 article discovered –through data from a 52-question survey taken by 1781 participants from the United States, Belgium, France and Japan- that in stark contrast to males, females were more worried about how food choices impacted their health, admitting to feeling “fatter” than ideal, and so would limit themselves to eating less salty or fatty foods. Then in 2003, Rozin with Rebecca Bauer and Dana Catanese evaluated from a questionnaire taken by 2,200 American undergraduates across “six regionally dispersed campuses” that women were disguising food-related weight loss measures as “healthy diets”.

### **RIDING THE “COOKING IN POPULAR CULTURE” WAVE**

While women struggle to relate to regional and/or international culinary culture under the yoke of femininity, men have taken global mass media’s audacious rebranding of cooking to recodify for themselves what types of cooking and/or eating are socially acceptable to partake in.

“Who’s cooking? Trends in US home food preparation by gender, education and race/ethnicity from 2003 to 2016” (Taillie, 2018) evaluated data from the American Time Use Survey and found that, though, the percentage of American men who cook have increased, women overall still spend much more time in the kitchen, despite how the surge in culinary media disproportionately influence men, making them, not women, want to cook more. Similarly in the United Kingdom, “When convenience is inconvenient: ‘Healthy’ family foodways and the persistent intersectionalities of gender and class” (Parsons, 2016), by way of 75 responses to a



study, of which three-quarters were mothers with dependent children, the author determined that in face of decades of fighting towards gender equality, the concept of “feeding the family”, providing nutritionally and spiritually, is still considered the lot of female homemakers, with a considerable number of them upholding such a sexist and classist endeavor as cultural capital. All this will only serve to perpetuate class divisions and keep those who care-work at home –the most genuine of food enthusiasts- from supporting and cross-pollinating with each other.

Such a situation already exists as presented in “Gender politics in food escape: Korean masculinity in TV cooking shows in South Korea” (Rhee, 2019). By reviewing existing literature and television shows, the author traces how male celebrity chefs create for their audiences a sense of domestic comfort within a demandingly competitive social reality. This way, instead of inviting men to fully examine true domesticity –a woman’s essential and, most importantly, unpaid labor- these caricatures of care work have only reinforced existing Korean gender norms and hierarchies, while relegating women to the eternal role of the “ajumma”, a term Korean feminists believe denotes “low status... [and] widespread sexism and classism... particularly the idea that a woman’s worth can be assessed mainly on the basis of her age, looks and docility” (Wordfinder, 2020).

According to “what’s cooking, man? masculinity in European cooking shows after *The Naked Chef*” (Leer, 2016), French, British and Danish cooking shows also reflect such social responsibility-dodging. After applying poststructural gender theory to these programmes’ themes, the author concluded that –though there is more than one way to “do masculinity” through food- Jamie Oliver, by way of *The Naked Chef*, and Gordon Ramsay, via *The F Word*, have only presented cooking as mere “masculine escapism”, and thus the perceived change in gender codes of men in the kitchen may only be a shift in popular culture.

## **Methodology**

These research-based, peer reviewed articles were found on San Jose State University Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library's databases and Google Scholar by searching "peer reviewed", "foodie", "food enthusiast", and "foodie community". After a few rounds of searches yielding approximately four dozen articles, I selected 27 concerning participation in the food community, whether by eating or cooking. Then, in the course of building this research paper, I whittled the list down even further to concentrate on those focused on how gender authorizes or endorses food choice, or time spent in the kitchen. I have also included a few community-based sources when straightforward definitions were required.

## **Discussion**

It is because of our human need, our want of connection to others (Cook, 2013), that escaphiles have become a community intensely interested in food and culinary arts, science and history (Yeung, 2020).

From the mentioned articles, food enthusiasts have realized a wealth of perspectives in how to approach their aims in strengthening group identification. Then creating user-generated content on social media, escaphiles go on to leverage these information pools into powerful links bringing even more of their compatriots together (Liu, 2018). This is because, according to Social Identity Theory, “individuals will identify with and support their social group (‘ingroup’) over other groups with which they do not identify (‘out-groups’)” (Flanagin, Hocevar & Samahito, 2013). Allowing more space to marginalized voices, of those identifying as female or choosing more traditionally feminine roles, can only enrich the food enthusiast community.

However, many of these peer reviewed articles have shortcomings in either breadth of research or usability to escaphiles.

## **COULD USE MORE DEPTH AND BREADTH**

For example, though the author’s methods has shown her to be a devoted and intensely scholarly foodie, the research in “From mundane to socially significant consumption” (Ulver, 2019) could be richer if compared and contrasted with data from other cultures and regions. A European escaphile might find this article useful, but students from Southeast Asia or North Africa will most likely grasp only the surface to mid- level implications of the Scandinavian experience.

Another article with narrow research parameters is “Bottling gender” (Chapman, Nanney, Slade & Mikles-Schluterman, 2018). Many internet users readily contribute their opinions to Reddit.com, but it is in their willingness to gain an audience through this easily accessible venue that the information they present may not always be appropriate for scholarly research. Also, the subreddit “beerit” collects contributions from only North America, despite how drinkers the world over enjoy, brew and speak much about beer. It would serve this “gender in craft beer” discussion better if data could also be collected from other continents, and possibly by field work through areas that have no access to the internet.

Analysis in “Motives for food choice” (Prescott, Young, O’Neill, Yau & Stevens, 2002) could have been more impactful if data were gathered over a longer period of time as to track generational changes, and to add at least three more cultural perspectives, especially from urban areas in Africa, and North and South America. As it was –despite noting similarities on “previous FCQ studies on European populations”- the scope seemed too small for escaphiles to clearly determine how and why women across regions will choose what they eat, only empathize with their preferences.

### **ROLE OF LIBRARIES AND INFORMATION CENTERS**

Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent cessation of social activity making the world seem to grind to a halt (Holt-Lunstad, 2020), libraries and information centers have their work cut out for them to remind the food enthusiast community that there are many ways to carry on sharing, teaching, and connecting.

Cooking videos and more gender-in-food-related articles can always be linked and discussed on a library’s home page, through scheduled Zoom sessions, Google Meet, or similar

online gathering applications, and –for one of the lower tech options- presented by a wide screen television at a front window where patrons can, after hours or if immuno-compromised (CDC, 2020), watch a pre-selected reel of what is new considering the escaphilic community. If budget and facilities would allow, cooking demonstrations and interactive infographics can be produced by staff to be presented on YouTube or any number of video-sharing websites.

Cooking schools, mental and/or physical health clinics, and similar information centers can move classes outside, use pre-recorded lectures, or interface online to answer questions stakeholders submit via email, suggestions box, webpage comments section, or postal box. An exciting prospect for any scholarly escaphile would be having the opportunity to chat or listen to the voice of their favorite researcher in real time. This is not to say authors of the articles presented in this research paper have so much time on their hands to cater to a fan base, but with the internet making it so much easier to come together, food enthusiasts should, as they always have, take every day and idea as an opportunity to request knowledge from each source they encounter. All these researchers can say is ‘no’, or these databases stymying the curious with a subscription fee.

## RESOURCES AND SERVICES FOR THE FUTURE

Universities and organizations like the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (UN, n.d.) can collaborate and keep a running blog or playlist of articles and videos on gender discrimination affecting the food community, from Korean *mukbang* starring women broadcast jockeys seen as food porn (Ligahon, Ramirez, Flores & Enriquez, n.d.) to the stunted international rise of female sushi chefs (Bondy, 2019, and Wisdom, 2016). In keeping with the times, for maximum exposure it would be best to attach continually tended Instagram, Twitter,

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and Reddit accounts to each post. This way, any escaphile interested in gender dynamics shifting in food culture can stay as connected as one can without searching alone through so many disparate sources.

## **Conclusion**

Researchers in food and culinary culture will, whether they intend it or not, work in the service of escaphiles, and those revealing gender discrimination in the details are closest to the front lines in uniting conversations and thoughts towards a more inclusive food enthusiast community. Critical mass has been met with men participating in the kitchen, and though their help and presence are welcome and needed, society still has a long way to go reconciling all the masculinities into a whole that will work alongside the kind of femininity that continues to bar women and home care-workers from realizing the level of escaphilic satisfaction men can more readily access.

The future belongs to those who love to eat and would try to understand why. This gives libraries and information centers any reason to develop culinary makerspaces, their cookbook, food history, molecular gastronomy, and other food-related collections, and even a studio kitchen for those ready to launch their dreams of producing a cooking or broadcast jockey (eating) channel, all governed by gender-considered policies to provide equal access to all.

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