

**A SCOT Analysis of Home Cooking in American Culture**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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## **STS Research Paper**

### **An Examination of Home Cooking in America**

Home cooking has been deeply embedded in American culture for decades, but Americans are increasingly eating food made away from home, with around one-third of daily caloric intake coming from food prepared outside the home (Bittman, 2014). There are numerous cultural influences that have caused the rise and fall of home cooking over the years, ranging from the growing popularity of celebrity cooking shows to the associations of cooking with nostalgia and family bonding. A decline in home-cooked meals has been associated with obesity, poorer diet quality, and is caused by factors such as a lack of access to healthy food, time limitations, and increased female participation in the workforce (Wolfson & Bleich, 2015). Others simply lack reliable transportation to grocery stores and thus cannot effectively cook meals at home. Many benefits of home cooking are becoming prominent through various research findings and even through promotion within food blogs and television shows. The Seattle Obesity Study discovered that more frequent home-cooked meals result in higher quality diets at no added cost (Tiwari et al., 2017). These benefits, along with many other health benefits of home cooking, are becoming increasingly well-known and sought after. Besides physical health benefits, home cooking also has numerous social and emotional benefits. Home cooking lends a sense of pride, comfort, or even relaxation, and is a very social activity that strengthens relationships (Bittman, 2014). Depending on the cultural, familial, and social contexts a person is familiar with, home cooking is perceived to have different meanings and is held in varying levels of esteem.

To explore and identify the prominent place home cooking holds due to American societal and cultural influences, this research utilizes the STS framework of the Social

Construction of Technology (SCOT). This framework helps to identify how society has shaped the technology of home cooking. The SCOT analysis will include an evaluation of relevant social groups' perceptions of home cooking and how those perceptions affect home cooking in its broader context within American society and culture. Since home cooking is frequently discussed, is prevalent in the media, and is often encouraged as part of a healthy lifestyle, identifying the cultural and social relationships surrounding it is an important step to understanding home cooking's motivations and outcomes. By answering the question, "How is home cooking influenced by American culture?," the knowledge gained may be used to motivate public health initiatives to better encourage and promote the use of home cooking, which would lead to improved physical, mental, and emotional health outcomes for Americans.

### **Research Methods**

To collect relevant information surrounding the research question, "How is home cooking influenced by American culture?," current research is organized and explained through the utilization of discourse analysis including sources from scientific journal articles, magazine articles, web pages, and online posts written by food and health policy journalists. The information is organized using the following keywords: home cooking, cooking, social, culture, diet, and health. Documentary research methods aids in the organization and analysis of evidence surrounding home cooking. The information is organized by theme, with each theme focusing on a different social group's interpretation and perception of home cooking. Before the analysis is presented, this research paper presents background knowledge of home cooking in America, followed by a critical review of SCOT as an STS framework and how it is used. The analysis will then detail each stage of the SCOT analysis for home cooking; this discussion along with additional evidence will come together in the next section to answer the research question.

## **An Introduction to Home Cooking in America**

Home cooking is entrenched in American culture, evidenced by the many food magazines, cooking shows and competitions, food blogs, and how strongly people feel about cooking in their personal lives. Home cooking has been shown to have strong associations with nostalgia, positive memories, and social interactions (S. D. H. Mills et al., 2020). Based on the social, cultural, and familial backgrounds a person has, home cooking may be perceived as the norm or even the expectation. Beyond the cultural, social, and familial factors, the meaning and value of home cooking differs depending on a person's employment status, attitudes toward gender roles, and household characteristics (Daniels et al., 2012). All of these factors contribute to a wide variety of influences on home cooking by American society and culture. There are a select number of groups that have been identified as the most relevant for the purposes of this research. The relevant social groups surrounding home cooking are: medical professionals, home cooking media influencers, non-home cooks, practical home cooks, and sentimental home cooks. Authority figures, such as medical professionals or media influencers, hold great positions of influence in people's lives; these authority figures often supply information or inspiration surrounding home cooking. There are also many people who cook at home, but do so out of sentimentality rather than out of necessity or practicality. These are home cooks who enjoy the social bonding that comes with cooking and eating together, among many other social and emotional benefits. Then there are home cooks who cook out of practicality or necessity; these are people who may not be able to afford to eat out or who have health problems that require a diet made of non-processed foods prepared at home. Lastly, there is a group of people that does not participate in home cooking at all. This avoidance of participation could be due to a dislike of cooking, not having enough time, or a variety of other reasons. With all of these social groups

being relevant to home cooking, there are many divergent opinions that emerge surrounding home cooking. These diverse opinions lead to the idea of interpretive flexibility for home cooking, which allows for various groups to hold different meanings and uses for a given technology.

### **The Development and Critiques of the Social Construction of Technology**

These groups' beliefs contribute to how home cooking is influenced by American culture. The STS framework of SCOT will be employed as an analytical tool to identify these influences. Social constructions themselves are very important because they are beliefs that are collectively held by a society or culture. For SCOT, its key idea is that human action and an interactive sociotechnical process shape technology. In this case, the technology being shaped is home cooking, and SCOT will provide an extremely valuable vantage point to identify the influences of American culture on home cooking. SCOT's framework is composed of four components: interpretive flexibility, relevant social groups, closure and stabilization, and wider context. STS scholars Klein and Kleinman sum up interpretive flexibility with the idea that "technology design is an open process that can produce different outcomes depending on the social circumstances of development" (2002). The component of relevant social groups relies on the belief that all people in a specific social group share the same set of meanings in reference to a certain artifact or technology. Closure and stabilization refer to the resolution of conflicting interpretations between social groups so that all of the relevant social groups agree. Lastly, the component of wider context involves the technology developing in a larger sociocultural environment (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). After working through an analysis of these four components, an evaluation of various social groups' perceptions of home cooking can be realized and placed in a broader social or cultural context.

SCOT originated with Pinch, a British sociologist, and Bijker, a Dutch philosopher, who were the first to identify the need for an “integrated social constructivist approach towards the study of science and technology,” and introduced the framework that is now known as SCOT (Pinch & Bijker, 1984). Not all scholars are content with this theory as presented. One critique involves the idea that technology development is often shaped by groups that are preexistent to the technology, and therefore any shared meanings only came along in response to the technology. This critique also discusses how many individuals may share a set of meanings, but may not be able to become an organized group to influence a technology (Klein & Kleinman, 2002). These preexisting groups along with the absence of others may have great influence on the technology’s development and should be considered in a SCOT analysis. Klein and Kleinman argue that the wider context should be more highly valued as the relations between groups, and factors that lead to differences between them, are not considered (2002). Other scholars believe that the coexistence of new and old technologies needs to be considered, since it brings out the politics of technology (Vannini, 2009). Sometimes the meanings of an artifact change, causing the relevant social groups to change as well. In addition, Stewart Russel, an English STS researcher, identifies weaknesses in SCOT by focusing on the notion that a direct transfer of concepts from a sociology of science to that of technology is not appropriate (1986). With these considerations in mind, the original framework of SCOT is refined to create what is an exceedingly useful framework to analyze the influence of American culture on home cooking.

This analysis will present new information to the field of STS, as there has not been a study of SCOT and home cooking. There has been a SCOT analysis of housework and household technology which did discuss different methods of food preparation, including home cooking; however, this discussion of housework was only one very small aspect of the research presented

and how American culture influenced home cooking was not discussed. The authors successfully used SCOT to identify how housework was a social construction and what specific appliances in the home led to the change in social groups' views, with a particular focus on the housewife (Bose et al., 1984). The research presented here will build on these past researchers' work by focusing on a specific area of housework, home cooking, and contextualizing it in American culture.

### **SCOT Results, Analysis, and Discussion of Home Cooking**

American culture influences home cooking through the culture's inherent busyness and rushed norms, the abundance and costs of convenient and pre-packaged food options, the influential voice of media influencers and medical professionals, and through long-standing cultural and social beliefs about cooking itself. By working through a SCOT analysis of home cooking, these influences are made clear through an analysis of home cooking's closure and the delineation of its wider context. American culture has many influencing factors on home cooking and its associated uses and meanings, with many social groups having a critical role within culture and its influence.

The first step is to examine all of the relevant social groups involved with home cooking: non-home cooks, media influencers, medical professionals, sentimental home cooks, and practical home cooks. Together these groups provide the foundation for home cooking's interpretive flexibility. Interpretive flexibility simply means that each group modifies the meaning or use of home cooking for itself. By expressing the idea that the technology of home cooking is culturally constructed and interpreted, interpretive flexibility becomes the basis for the following analysis and allows for substantial evidence that will support the answer to the research question previously stated. What follows is an examination of each relevant social

groups' interpretation of home cooking, specifically noting why each group participates in home cooking or not, or what influence the group has on home cooking.

Whatever the reason or motivation behind home cooking may be, not everyone enjoys or partakes in the practice. For some, it may be as simple as disliking to cook or not having the skills or equipment necessary to cook. For others, there is not enough time in the day or they are not home enough to be able to cook. Cooking is impossible in instances where there is unreliable transportation to grocery stores or a family that lacks a strong parental figure to provide home cooked meals. Cooking is unlikely when people think cooking has to be complicated or only use healthy ingredients (Kliff, 2015). There are also those who hold to historical views on gender roles, where men will not cook if they have someone else, usually a wife, to cook their meals for them. Despite the many positive social, mental, and physical benefits of home cooking, there are countless people who will not or cannot cook at home due to their beliefs or specific constraints in their lives.

Media influencers hold a prominent place of influence over the average American in regards to what, how, when, and how much food is prepared. Food is fetishized everywhere in American culture, with celebrity chefs always presenting new recipes and creating the latest television cooking show, a new social media food trend rising, and cooking competitions' fame growing. Americans love to watch cooks on television much like a spectator sport. All of this media leads to some people cooking more to try out the latest recipe or trend, or to even re-create their favorite cooking competition. On the other hand, some people are turned off of cooking themselves by the idea that cooking has to be complicated or use expensive, upscale ingredients (Bittman, 2014). Social media has changed the way we eat, with users and influencers constantly posting photos of their meals online. The United States Department of Agriculture carried out a



study that found that young adults may make healthier food choices with the help of social media (Bellanger, 2020). Influencers hold sway in this research finding through influencer marketing, which works by building trust through social networks, and then disseminating opinions and endorsements. Whatever influencer is on TV cooking, posting a new recipe on Instagram, or tweeting about their lunch, holds great sway over each consumer of that media and how people view cooking their own meals. Whether or not an individual decides to cook after interacting with a media influencer, it is clear that all aspects of American food culture, including home cooking, are heavily influenced by the media influencers themselves.

While media influencers use images, television, and trendy recipes to affect change surrounding home cooking, medical professionals can provide practical and logical information about well-balanced diets and how home cooking is nutritionally and physically better for you. Medical professionals present crucial information about health such as how “both the decline in cooking and the increase in prepared food consumption are associated with the rise in obesity, which affects approximately one-third of adults” (Wolfson & Bleich, 2015). There are innumerable health benefits that come along with an increase in home cooking, many that people are realizing they need if they want to live longer, healthier lives. Julia Wolfson, author of a study about the health benefits of home cooking, says “The evidence shows people who cook at home eat a more healthy diet. Moving forward, it is important to educate the public about the benefits of cooking at home, identify strategies that encourage and enable more cooking at home, and help everyone, regardless of how much they cook, make healthier choices when eating out” (*Study Suggests Home Cooking Is a Main Ingredient in Healthier Diet*, 2014). Quotes like this from medical professionals and researchers hold a great degree of influence over individuals and society, to the point where it would affect how much someone participates in home cooking.

It is important to note that it is not only external influence that can motivate or deter someone from home cooking. Sentimental home cooks enjoy cooking because they love the sense of comfort or pride they take in a specific dish they create. Others experience relaxation through the process or bond with friends and family over a home-cooked meal eaten together (Robinson, 2020). These feelings lead many people to believe it is important to cook and eat at home, not just because of the physical benefits, but because of the social benefits. These beliefs are more strongly held by particular cultures that emphasize meal-times as a time of coming together, or by parents who want to create strong ties with their children around the dinner table (S. Mills et al., 2017). For some, cooking can provoke happy memories and a sense of nostalgia or even allow for the strengthening of relationships. Social factors like these often lend significant meaning to home cooking that can be shared among a community of like-minded people.

For others, cooking at home is much more straightforward. There are innumerable people who cook out of practicality rather than sentimentality. People may simply lack the money to eat out and therefore eat meals cooked at home. In some cases of historical gender roles, a woman may feel it is her responsibility to cook at home for her family. Additionally, health problems, such as obesity or diabetes, may necessitate a diet consisting of healthier, home cooked meals (Kliff, 2015). Many motivating factors lie behind any given person's participation in the practice of home cooking, with each factor being influenced by various aspects of life and culture.

As stated, these five relevant social groups have attributed various, and differing, meanings to home cooking in America. To move forward in the SCOT analysis, a resolution of these conflicting interpretations between social groups must be reached to allow for closure and stabilization for home cooking. Before this closure can be established, it must be considered that

only the groups actively using the technology of home cooking will reach closure surrounding its meaning and interpretation. In this research, those groups are the practical and sentimental home cooks. Even with as much influence as medical professionals and media influencers have on the realm of home cooking, their interpretation is not vital to home cooking achieving closure; however, the relevance of these two social groups does play an important role in how American culture influences home cooking, which will be addressed later. For the non-home cooks, closure simply cannot be reached for this group because of its lack of use of home cooking. These people do not contribute to home cooking's meaning like the practical and sentimental home cooks do; therefore, what follows is an explanation of how these two social groups have reached closure and stabilization for home cooking.

Closure for home cooking has been achieved collectively by both the practical and sentimental home cooks. This closure can be seen in the complementary views of home cooking that both social groups hold. The two groups believe that home cooking brings benefits to their lives, including physical, mental, social, or even financial benefits. These people see a need for home cooking to hold a prominent place in their life over the commonplace practice of regularly eating from restaurants or consuming ready-to-eat freezer meals. Whether a person cooks out of obligation or for enjoyment, these individuals give home cooking its meaning of preparing and cooking food at home. To further define home cooking as these two groups view it, home cooking involves a meal that is personally made in a home, usually from scratch or with fresh or raw ingredients (*Definition of Home-Cooked Meal Varies among U.S. Consumers*, 2015). It is these common views that lend closure to home cooking. In summary, both practical and sentimental cooks share the idea that home cooking means preparing food at home and that it

provides benefits to their lives; this idea holds true for both groups, even though they have disparate motivations for partaking in home cooking.

To finalize the SCOT analysis for home cooking, the closure that is achieved must be considered to place home cooking in its wider context. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, home cooking was everything to the average American family. Typically, each household had a homecooked meal every night and that was the expectation and the norm. When frozen dinners were invented, an increase in eating packaged or pre-prepared meals occurred and overtook, or at least lessened the commonality of, home cooking. Finally, the microwave was invented and fast-food chains became widespread, completely endangering home cooking itself (Bittman, 2014). This is still the case in present times, but culture in America is also experiencing a major shift towards healthy eating, an awareness of the dangers of processed or packaged foods, and an increased interest in local, fresh, or organic ingredients. With this perspective of American culture in mind, home cooking's place in its larger context is two-fold. On one side, home cooking is easily obscured by big food companies, omnipresent fast-food restaurants, and the plethora of pre-packaged options available to consumers. It is easy for many people to consume food that is not prepared at home. On the other side, home cooking is becoming more popular, as people seek to prepare their own food to be healthier, support local farmers, or simply be more aware of their food consumption. Currently, home cooking is a well-supported, and often sought after, activity to be implemented into an individual's life. It is usually viewed with interest or at least with an understanding of its benefits, which aligns with the closure reached by the two groups of home cooks previously examined and concludes the SCOT analysis of home cooking. The larger sociocultural context surrounding home cooking has clearly evolved over time and will continue

to change in the future as new services and technologies, like meal delivery and air fryers, become increasingly popular.

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there have been an increasing number of influencing factors on home cooking in America. Based on the SCOT analysis and other supporting evidence, the research question “How is home cooking influenced by American culture?” is now answerable. To accurately answer this question, all five relevant social groups must again be considered, as they all have influence over home cooking, even if they were not directly applicable to all stages of the SCOT analysis. The SCOT analysis reveals that many large social groups within American culture are influential to the motivations and meanings given to home cooking in today’s society and that those meanings change over time. American society has experienced an increase in its “cultural awareness of nutrition,” due in large part to the sway of media influencers and medical professionals (Bellanger, 2020). Media influencers contribute greatly to the food craze in America, which ultimately alters people’s views of home cooking and their opinion of whether they have the ability or desire to participate in it. American society is also obsessed with being healthy, and views people in the medical field as authority figures on the topic. Due to this view, medical professionals appeal to people’s logic, and empower or motivate them to begin home cooking based on its association with positive future health outcomes. As seen in the SCOT analysis stage of interpretive flexibility, those that do not cook are influenced by the culture around them as well. For these non-cooks, the nonstop pace of American culture drives them to be so limited in time that they do not even leave enough time to cook in their day-to-day life. Fast-food restaurants and pre-packaged meals are nearly omnipresent, often making these foods an easier option for time-pressed individuals or those who simply like convenience, as seen when home cooking was placed in its wider context. Additionally, American culture still

supports the idea of women cooking more than men, which is another reason some men may not participate in home cooking as much, and some women feel obligated to (Taillie, 2018). For those that do cook, American culture is still a powerful influence on their motivation and understanding of home cooking; this understanding was made clear as home cooking reached closure within its SCOT analysis. Sentimental home cooks are likely often influenced by the ideals that occurred in the 1940s and 1950s, where putting a meal on the dinner table offered a sense of pride and was an expectation. American culture has long been a culture of food, one where people often gathered with others to enjoy a meal, again appealing to the sentimental home cooks (Basile, 2018). Culture has also influenced the practical home cooks by creating a society in which it is often more expensive to eat outside the home than it is to prepare and cook food at home. This financial influence from culture and society is commonly a driving factor for these individuals to cook at home (*Cooking at Home vs. Eating Out. What's Better?*, 2021). The way home cooking is placed in its wider context within the SCOT analysis elucidated and demonstrated culture's far-reaching influence on home cooking. The very fact that the meaning of home cooking has changed considerably over the years goes to show how influential culture is on the practice. It is through the direct influence of medical professionals and media influencers, the long-held American cultural beliefs about cooking itself, the time-pressed societal norm, and the plethora of convenience food options available (even at high costs), that American culture influences home cooking.

This research considers many aspects of culture that influence home cooking, but it is important to note that it has limitations. One such limitation is that the effects of meal delivery services, such as Daily Harvest or Blue Apron, on home cooking were not evaluated. Questions arise as to whether the use of these services would still be considered home cooking or if these

services would create an additional social group that would need to be included in a SCOT analysis. Also, the emergence of new technologies and appliances, like the air fryer, was not thoroughly captured. These devices would appeal to a new group of people who may have an increased likelihood to participate in home cooking if they could utilize the new technology. A limitation of SCOT is that the relevant social groups chosen are impactful to the SCOT analysis and the answer to the research question as a whole; by simply leaving out or adding a group, the results of this research could significantly change. In continuation of this research, each of these limitations should be addressed, included in the SCOT analysis, and considered within the results of the research. Many modifications and extensions have been made to the original framework of SCOT since its initial publication, and addressing these modifications in future research could lend new insight into the research question. This research should be applied to inform public health initiatives or to lead to cultural change surrounding home cooking and human health and well-being. By extending this research, its impact could be meaningful not only to the field of STS, but to American society as a whole.

### **Impact and Conclusion of Home Cooking Analysis**

The impact of this research is based in the idea that society shapes technology, namely home cooking. The findings of this research outline how American culture influences home cooking, both broadly and at an individual level. Medical professionals and media influencers have a public voice and position of authority in people's lives that influences home cooking. It is also through the busy societal norm, abundance of pre-packaged foods and fast-food restaurants, and the cost of eating outside the home that American culture influences home cooking. Long-held American cultural beliefs about cooking itself play a significant role in prompting home cooking use for many people as well. A multitude of factors are at play in shaping any given

technology, even something as routine as home cooking. Various people in society, the community and familial make-up someone grows up in, the finances and time people have available, people's own opinions on the benefits of home cooking, and many other factors all play a role in shaping the meaning and use of home cooking in America. This meaning will continue to change as time passes, culture shifts, more information becomes available, and new technologies develop, resulting in the need for a renewed understanding of home cooking and its place in American culture. These current findings are significant in the fact that the motivations for and outcomes of home cooking are better understood; this knowledge could be used to inform public health initiatives to encourage the use of home cooking, which could improve the overall health of Americans. By understanding the cultural influences behind why people participate in home cooking or not, methods to improve or increase the likelihood of individuals' ability to cook at home are more readily identified and implemented. In making these changes within American culture, a society with a higher quality of life and overall well-being could be achieved.



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