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### **Foodies as Subculture and Lifestyle Movement: A convergence**

#### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper introduces the foodie in New Zealand as a participant in a subculture and begins to explore the relationship between subculture and contemporary lifestyle activism. The convergence of these two bodies of scholarship is an emergent field of research and forms the basis of my recently-completed Ph.D. Beginning with a definition of key terms, the paper then outlines the circumstances in which foodie behaviour can be defined as politically motivated activity that may be likened to political activism.*

#### **KEYWORDS**

foodie  
lifestyle  
subculture  
activism  
contemporary social  
movement

#### **INTRODUCTION**

For the purposes of this paper, ‘foodie’ refers to the people who place emphasis on the significance of food in their lives over and above basic nutrition. Foodies’ passion for food is sustained by the volume and increase in foodie media and of specialist food sources available in contemporary New Zealand – stores and markets – catering to their desire for local or artisanal foods. But significantly, the foodies in my doctoral research are more than a contemporary form of ‘gourmet’. They are driven by political and social motivations in addition to the sensual pleasure of food. Their subcultural leanings coalesce into something akin to a contemporary social movement, occasionally termed a ‘lifestyle movement’.<sup>1</sup>

#### **SUBCULTURE AND LIFESTYLE POLITICS**

‘Lifestyle’ is a term that has multiple meanings depending on context. Significantly, the term is used in both subcultural and social movement scholarship and goes some way toward being a shortcut in terms of the lexical usage that I adopt later in this paper. ‘Lifestyle’ in the subcultural sense is one of post-subculture’s alternative notions of subculture. It describes the cultural capital gained through use of commodities and the meaning ascribed to that capital by people who use commodities to inform their identity.<sup>2</sup>

The term ‘lifestyle’ evolved from dissatisfaction on the part of researchers with the historical baggage inherent in ‘subculture’. Where ‘subculture’ refers to the submerged nature of cultural activity that some ascribe to, it has also become overused in the sense that it is a glib label for a variety of (often youth-based fashion) styles that do not carry the cultural attributes of those early subcultural styles.<sup>3</sup> ‘Lifestyle’ however may be usefully applied to contemporary sociocultural phenomena including that of the foodie as it connotes the lifeworld-based lived experience of the subjects.

Debates within contemporary subculture scholarship commonly centre on cultural politics and this is where the scholarship around contemporary social movements can be usefully reintroduced.<sup>4</sup> Visible in both subcultural and social movement fields is an emphasis on the role of consumption and identity in shaping ideology. Melucci’s explication of ‘new social movements’ (NSMs) clearly articulates the presence of cultural political elements.<sup>5</sup> However Haenfler (2006) regards NSM theories to be incomplete in regards to the decentralized nature of contemporary movements and argues that the role of collective identity and lifestyle-based resistance has been overlooked.<sup>6</sup>

A perspective that was particularly cogent to my research was that of St John, who wrote that subcultural identity construction overlaps with social movement activism in what he calls ‘new protest formations’.<sup>7</sup> The participants of these new protest formations engage with concerns such as environment and global capitalism in both hedonistic and political ways. So the activity engaged in by individuals may appear subcultural in nature in the sense that it is a form of personal expression.

The activity may not be clearly tied to an ideological group or restricted to traditional forms of participation in formal organizations.<sup>8</sup> Instead, through networks of personal connections, a collective identity can be formed and reinforced which may, given the right conditions, coalesce into a more formal mobilized movement. However the participation is individualized and without ‘organization’ in the movement sense.

This is not to say that the practice of living an individualized subcultural lifestyle is apolitical. In consciously choosing to associate with others who share the subcultural leaning, or to act or consume in particular ways, the participant is challenging culture at a small-scale personal level. This is ‘small “p”’ politics where the ‘personal is political’ and individual action against the hegemonic reads as a form of protest.<sup>9</sup> As Haenfler writes, ‘individualized forms of participation, taken together, amount to a collective cultural challenge’.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, culture-based movements deliberately present social challenges which may be as meaningful for the individuals as participation in an organized movement.

It is patently on the social and cultural levels that lifestyles pose a challenge; it is less obviously so at the political level. Nevertheless the daily commitment made by the people engaging in this lifestyle is a constant criticism of the hegemonic state even as the form of participation varies between participants. But even as their activity is discrete and individualized, the participants appear to gain reassurance and confidence that others are behaving similarly hence there is a 'belief in the power of non-coordinated collective action'.<sup>11</sup> So individuals are developing their personal identities in conjunction with a collective identity.

The values and behaviour that develop are congruent with those of the wider movement and these values form the basis of a 'community of meaning'.<sup>12</sup> The choices made by the individuals who subscribe to a community of meaning are choices about identity and consumption and based on values. An argument can be made for these avenues being 'sub-political' – not apolitical but politically driven and marginal, fragmented or symbolic.<sup>13</sup>

In essence then lifestyle politics is a liminal space between consumption choices and sociopolitical contexts. It is political engagement on a personal level, inextricable from the day-to-day lifeworld of the individual. I argue that lifestyle politics is not a superficial 'toe-in-the-water' type of political engagement, but instead it is a deep dive into political realms where politics are embedded in everyday life.

Lifestyle politics seems to tie two forms of motivation: to act in ways that ensure one's own life is lived according to an ethical or moral standpoint, and to take responsibility for the effect one has on society or the planet. Therefore, subcultures and social movements are interwoven in the form of lifestyle activism. Individuals appear to engage in lifestyle politics without necessarily identifying themselves as activists as the latter section of this paper will show. They can and do however speak knowledgeably about the consumption choices they make and are able to discuss these in the context of a wider effect, whether that be social or environmental.

## **THE NATURE OF THE FOODIE**

The foodie participants in my research took an approach to food that was more deeply considered than other people. They sought out other foodies and gained much pleasure and education from their foodie networks. The easy self-identification as foodie that began our researcher-participant interaction was confidently made although definitions of 'foodie' differed between participants.

Criteria for inclusion in the study was simply that they identified as a ‘foodie’. As interpretive naturalistic research this study was intended to explore the lifeworlds of self-identifying foodies in order to draw together the common themes but not to define the moniker or create a taxonomy of ‘foodiness’. Snowball sampling led to the recruitment of the participants and the recruitment of participants ended at fifteen when it became clear that the themes and patterns identified in the interview data had reached saturation.

Many of the fifteen participants had food-related role models and fond memories of childhoods that included growing fruit and vegetables and baking with loved ones. Most of the participants drew upon popular media for inspiration and reinforcement of the central tenets of ‘foodie-ness’, in addition to the commonly-expressed idea that they now ‘love others through food’ – meaning that they demonstrate their care for people by nurturing them with home-cooked and nutritious food. More than this, though, there was a heightened awareness of the qualities of food – of taste and texture, flavour, and preparation techniques. These foodies pay particular attention to the origin of the ingredients, the reputation of the chef or the method of cooking. These qualities occupied the time of the research participants to a great extent and the foodies spoke easily on these topics in a manner similar to the way that other subculture participants are animated by their culture.

### **FOODIE LIFESTYLE MOVEMENT ACTIVITY**

Through thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants it became clear that while taking pleasure in food and the social aspects of food are fundamental to these foodies, a political stance on global food issues is also powerfully present.<sup>14</sup> The following is a selection of the main themes with supporting extracts from the interview material which demonstrates the range of the politically-rich food-related subjects that occupy the minds of the foodie participants.

Notable among the foodies was the sense of purpose they expressed around food. The participants described feeling, to varying degrees, a level of responsibility when it comes to food choice and preparation. For some this meant shopping ethically; for others it meant modelling healthy food habits. The sense of purpose present in the research data is evidence of there being a motivation other than purely pleasure in food.

For example one participant spoke of her choice to spend more on free-range products:

There are a lot of people who aren't in a position financially to make that choice, and they don't have a choice; they need to buy what is cheapest... we're not rolling in money but I've got the choice... I can afford to pay a little bit more and

buy the free range product, which hopefully will keep those people in business and as more people use them maybe the price will come down and it'll be more accessible to other people. ('Ingrid.')

Ingrid<sup>15</sup> sees her choice to pay a higher price for free-range eggs as a small contribution to change. This activity is a humble one. It will not, on its own, revolutionize the egg industry. But there is a quiet determination and certain optimism on behalf of the foodie participants that their consumption behaviour will enable a more just future. Indeed, this quiet determination sometimes takes the form of a kind of martyrdom; there is a 'do-it-yourself' attitude that emerges even when it is less convenient because of the sense of purpose around living according to their food values.

Robert is a firm believer in the importance of learning to cook:

I reckon if you know how to do it you have a great deal of control over your life; you expand your food choices.

In Robert's view, spending more money or time on the food lifeworld is an act of reclaiming the power that is so often held by fast food and convenience food companies. In this way there is some liberty in being a foodie. For many it would be acceptable to buy a ready-made meal but these foodies prefer to avoid those shortcuts.

Foodies integrate knowledge of food into their consumption practices in a nuanced way and food is more than sensuous enjoyment. Rather, their approach to food is embedded in an ethical framework that results in a holistic understanding of the effects of their own consumption on the world. Foodies are thoughtful in regard to food; concern for taste and texture and nutrition is certainly present but these are accompanied by perception of the social, cultural and political contexts in which they purchase and consume. Although this research is not generalizable across a population due to its small scale I would venture that an essential part of being a foodie is the enjoyment of meaningful, deliberate consumption that both satisfies the self and aligns with the foodie's wider perceptions and values.

At the time of the research interviews, discussion of the TPPA (Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement) was topical in the media and Andrew mentioned it in the context of being distrustful of the involvement of the government in food. His concern was about the import of foreign manufactured irradiated food and the standard of supermarket labelling:

We don't [in New Zealand] generally have irradiated food for instance but I suspect that's depending on which government is in at the time and if the TPPA came in then maybe that's more likely to occur. So I'd be more particular about what I wanted and I suppose in supermarkets now I want to see a lot more labelling about what is and what isn't [irradiated]. (Andrew.)

This participant's perspective is one of suspicion that there may be a direct negative impact on consumers from legislative activity by government. His depth of knowledge was not great but he gave the impression, as did many other participants, of having done sufficient reading about the area of concern related to food to have formed an educated view that is essentially in opposition to any state intervention in food production.

Another participant was disappointed by the defeat of the 'Food in Schools' bill presented to Parliament. She said:

So recently the 'Food in Schools' bill that got defeated in Parliament - kids can't learn when they're hungry; can't perform when they're hungry and I firmly believe that there is a widening gap in the socio-economic strata of our society and there are kids who come to school five days a week without any food in their stomach. (Carys.)

Here Carys has traced a link between government (non-)intervention in a food concern and the effect on wider society. She has removed herself from the subject at hand and, in her position as a politically engaged foodie, is sharing her view about a food matter that affects children in New Zealand state schools.

On environmental matters the foodie participants were voluble and passionate. Although their concerns spanned a range of environmental problems, the issues of sustainability, pollution and care for the planet (and animals) were explicitly articulated in the interview data. Significantly some of the participants actually position food as a central issue around which society must negotiate a future.

Amy discusses New Zealand society's slow start in developing sustainable practices unlike certain other countries. In her words:

It is just more to do with government that I feel puts us behind, depending on which government is in, depending on what agenda they're pushing. I think that the government isn't pushing more sustainability of the land and how to generate a better way of producing food.

In this case Amy is explicit that she holds the government of the day responsible for failing to put in place best practise models of food production that are environmentally responsible. So the foodies' desire for change was clearly stated during the interviews and coalesces into the key finding of this research: that alongside the pleasure derived from food foodies are desirous of change in food production systems to benefit wider society and the planet.

The foodies in this research tended to be tertiary-educated and arguably financially better-off than some in New Zealand, but this did not go unnoticed; in fact some of the participants were quite open about being privileged in terms of having a little extra money that enabled them to purchase in the ways they wished to. It is important to acknowledge here that buying free-range or from local artisan producers rather than large supermarkets is something that the financially comfortable may be able to do but that there are many in New Zealand who cannot do this.

The validity or otherwise of the activity undertaken by the relatively wealthy foodies is the subject of another paper. However, some participants use the financial diversity they see as a further motivator of their foodie lifeworld. For example Renee refers to the income gap here:

Oh, I guess [I feel], kind of, sadness, you know, that not everyone gets to eat as well as I do, and from that, I guess, stems appreciation; really appreciating what is on my plate and in my kitchen because a lot of people don't have that. I guess from that stems the desire perhaps to change [income inequality] a little bit.

In addition to her advocacy for social justice, Renee has strong views on the welfare of animals. Her sense of moral outrage about 'gavage' – a method of force-feeding ducks and geese in order to fatten the liver – is clear in this extract:

Like for example *foie gras* being overfed duck, geese livers - that's disgusting to me as a foodie. I find that quite offensive because it's not right; it's not ethically right; it's inhumane whereas a gourmet would not possibly think twice about eating it whereas I would. (Renee.)

Renee also reveals her perception of the difference between a foodie and a gourmet. For her, being a foodie means drawing an ethical line past which she will not go no matter how

delicious a food may be. Indeed in this case she describes foie gras as ‘disgusting’ – inferring that the food cannot taste good because the way it is produced is so immoral.

Whether they were behaving in explicitly political ways was contentious among the participants; however in relation to the definition of politics that I refer to early in this paper, the issues that are expressed by these foodies regarding food production and consumption are innately political because they exist, for them, in their everyday food lifeworlds. When I asked Sam to talk about the ways she was political in relation to food, she said:

In a sense it’s political in that I’m conscious of the choices I’m making and the consequences of them and I know that’s driving other behaviours ... what you do does have [an] effect even if it’s only small.

Sam and the other foodie participants demonstrate conscious consumerism in relation to many aspects of food production be they social, environmental, animal welfare-related or legislation-related. These concerns live for these foodies in their day-to-day experience and form a significant part of their identity and so therefore are not explicitly articulated by them as being a form of activism. However I argue that their heightened awareness of the wider issues around food are politically driven and may be contributing to a change in the global food system on some level.

## CONCLUSION

Lifestyle politics is an emergent field of study. Research into lifestyle-based activism will reveal more about the ways that ‘off-the-grid’ political activity is contributing to societal change. This research demonstrates that the self-identifying foodie participants, while largely unconnected in a social sense, are very much connected via a collective identity and political acumen. Taken together, the actions of these foodies, in addition to their subcultural merits, constitute lifestyle movement activity that is about autonomy of food choices against the hegemonic, big business, environmentally damaging practices they decry. They are suspicious of the role of governments in creating the problems that exist and of the function of traditional activists in attempting to address them. Instead these foodies are taking responsibility for politically-charged food matters in the sphere in which they hold influence: in the way they engage with the world, in their homes and in their lived experience. By acting in this sphere they are able to live – to a large extent – according to their values, and create ‘transformative social spaces’.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Haenfler, *Straight Edge*.

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