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Research Article

# "Food brings people together": The sociocultural factors that shape food literacies

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## Abstract

Food literacy, a multifaceted concept, is traditionally recognized across health, nutrition, and education disciplines as a critical strategy for combating dietary-related diseases and enhancing population health outcomes. Often viewed through a narrow lens focusing on food-related knowledge and skills, food literacy is now understood to encompass broader sociocultural influences. This study explored these influences on food literacy practices, using a qualitative approach that includes narrative writing activities and semi-structured interviews with community members in the Elmridge neighbourhood, a socioeconomically disadvantaged area in Niagara Falls, Ontario. The findings reveal that food literacy is shaped by a complex interplay of sociocultural factors such as social relations, health perceptions, gendered roles, economic status, and emotional connections to food. This expanded understanding suggests that food literacy education should integrate these contextual factors to more effectively address food insecurity and promote equitable food systems. The study's implications highlight the need for policy and educational frameworks that recognize the sociocultural dimensions of food literacy, advocating for more inclusive and comprehensive approaches to food literacy education.

**Keywords:** Case study; food literacy; food literacy education; narrative writing; sociocultural factors

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## Résumé

La littératie alimentaire – un concept aux multiples facettes – est traditionnellement reconnue, dans les disciplines de la santé, de la nutrition et de l'éducation, comme objet d'une stratégie cruciale pour combattre les maladies liées à l'alimentation et pour améliorer la santé de la population. Souvent envisagée à travers l'étroite lentille des savoirs et compétences culinaires, elle est maintenant considérée comme englobant, bien plus largement, les influences socioculturelles. Cette étude a exploré ces influences sur les pratiques de littératie alimentaire en utilisant une approche qualitative qui incluait des activités d'écriture narrative et des entretiens semi-structurés avec des membres de la communauté d'Elmridge, un quartier socioéconomiquement défavorisé de Niagara Falls, en Ontario. D'après nos constats, la littératie alimentaire est façonnée par un jeu complexe de facteurs socioculturels, dont les relations sociales, les perceptions sur la santé, les rôles de genre, le statut économique et les liens émotionnels avec la nourriture. Cela suggère que l'éducation à la littératie alimentaire devrait intégrer ces facteurs contextuels pour mieux contrer l'insécurité alimentaire et promouvoir des systèmes alimentaires équitables. Les résultats de l'étude font ressortir le besoin de politiques et de cadres éducationnels qui reconnaîtraient les dimensions socioculturelles de la littératie alimentaire, et qui préconiseraient des approches de l'éducation à la littératie alimentaire plus inclusives et plus complètes.

## Introduction

The growing literature on food literacy defines the term as more than food skills or nutrition knowledge. There is a consensus among three scoping studies (Azevedo et al., 2017; Cullen et al., 2015; Truman et al., 2017) that context affects understandings of food literacy with an increasing recognition of the food system, food environments, and sociocultural factors. Emerging concepts of food literacy include "extrinsic characteristics" (Azevedo Perry et al., 2017, p. 2412), such as food environments and the changing food system. They also include contextual influences (Colatruglio & Slater, 2016; Vidgen, 2014) like sociocultural (i.e., ways of living, values, and customs) and socio-economic factors.

The scoping study by Truman et al. (2017) finds that the term food literacy incorporates six domains: "skills and behaviours, food/health choices, culture, knowledge, emotions and food systems" (p. 365), as well as elements of "critical and functional knowledge" (p. 365). Truman et al. noted a shift away from a "health literacy lens focused on the individual, and towards a critical food studies lens that includes broader critical contexts" (p. 307). Within the definition offered by Truman et al. (2017), food literacy can be explored across multiple levels (individual, community, national and global) and across health, environmental, political, economical, educational, and ethical fields. It is indeed a very broad topic that encompasses and is affected by many facets of people's lives.

## Problem statement and research question

The term food literacy continues to be used more frequently in academic literature, though it is defined and applied in a variety of ways (Thompson et al., 2021). The expanding definition of food literacy reveals a growing gap between how food literacy is conceptualized and how it is promoted and implemented in practice. Food literacy education has been used as a strategy to promote population health in today's context of rising rates of obesity and health-related impacts, as well as address the apparent widespread "deskilling" of youth and adults alike (Jaffe & Gertler, 2006; Markow et al., 2012). Studies claim that being food literate also equips individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate today's complex food environment (Caroll et al., 2021). For the past decade, improving food literacy has been linked to healthier dietary behaviours (Begley et al., 2019a), increased nutrition (Howard & Brichta, 2013), healthier food consumption (Poelman et al., 2018), improved health outcomes (Howard & Brichta, 2019), and the creation of socially just food systems (Cullen et al., 2015). Further, food literacy has been identified as a tool to combat poverty (Sandor, 2016) and a strategy by policy makers to reduce food insecurity (Begley et al., 2019a). However, it is important to note that food literacy does not directly address the root causes of household food insecurity, which is rooted in a lack of income and is a "marker of pervasive material deprivation" (PROOF, 2022, p. 3). As Gallegos (2016) argues, food literacy programs may improve coping or resilience, but these interventions alone are not a solution to systemic poverty. Similarly, food literacy programs aimed at increasing healthier food consumption and better health outcomes often neglect contextual factors that prevent individuals from accessing healthy foods, such as a lack of sufficient income or access to an affordable grocery store.

This disconnect between food literacy development and the lived realities of participants points to a critical gap in current comprehension and applications of food literacy: a lack of understanding of how broader sociocultural and economic contexts influence individuals' food literacies. While increasingly recognized as a domain and attribute of food literacy, there is little research that illuminates what these sociocultural factors are and how they influence food literacies. To address this gap, this study asked: What are the sociocultural factors that influence participants' food literacies?

### Sociocultural impacts on food literacy

While there is great debate among scholars about the definition of food literacy, and various applications of its meaning and impact, it is evident that the move to a broader definition is gaining ground. Keeping in mind that the majority of papers related to food literacy continue to be from health-related disciplines (Thompson et al., 2021), sociocultural factors are increasingly recognized to influence food literacy (Araque-Padilla & Montero-Simo, 2025; Azevedo et al., 2017; Cullen et al., 2015; McManus et al., 2022; Truman et al., 2017).

Azevedo et al. (2017) specifically mention sociocultural factors and eating influences as attributes of food literacy. Identified as one aspect of the ecologic category (extrinsic) of food literacy, the authors state that "socio-cultural influences and eating practices encompass values and norms as well as understanding the impact of food on personal well-being" (p. 2411). In addition, the authors list the self-efficacy and

confidence category, which is defined as "the ability to produce a desired or intended result" (p. 2409) in the context of health behaviours. According to Azevedo et al., "these abilities are not inherent but rather are acquired through supportive environments" (p. 2409), suggesting a strong sociocultural connection across the five attributes of this category (nutrition literacy, nutrition self-efficacy, food self-efficacy, cooking self-efficacy, and food attitude).

Culture, as one of the domains of food literacy identified by Truman et al.'s (2017) scoping study, is placed in the social level category along with food systems and emotion, while Cullen et al. (2015) list culture under individual food skills. Whereas the three scoping studies agree that sociocultural factors influence food literacy, the authors have presented a range of planes where these are situated (from micro to macro).

### Food literacy versus food literacies

I am using the term *food literacies* in its plural form as opposed to singular to reflect the multi-modal (i.e., visual, tactile, oral, spatial) and multi-contextual (i.e., community setting, social role, identity) forms of literacies present in contemporary society (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). This conceptualization of literacy was coined "multiliteracies" by the New London Group (1996), and it represented a new approach to literacy pedagogy with a focus on "modes of representation much broader than language alone" (The New London Group, 1996, p. 64). In this view, literacy "entails a range of communicative resources" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 9) and looks different depending on the social and cultural context (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). Food literacies in its plural form also aims to promote the broader connotation of food literacy beyond the common interpretation of food skills and knowledge to include concepts related to social, cultural, and historical elements, as well as contextual factors, such as the food system, food sovereignty, and food security. As such, I will refer to food literacy *events* and *practices* in this paper to signify this understanding of literacy. Adapted from a theory of literacy as a social practice (Barton & Hamilton, 1998), events are observable acts related to food (i.e., reading a recipe, making a cake, ordering food, growing a garden, etc.). In contrast, practices are inferred from events and include purpose, values, beliefs, histories, and power relationships that shape and contextualize the event (Perry, 2022). For example, a child eating a cookie is a food literacy event, which turns into a practice when we consider that the child is eating a cookie in a church basement after Sunday mass, a cultural tradition that the child's family engages in every week.

## Conceptual framework

The conceptual framework of this study drew on three topics to understand the sociocultural impacts on participants' food literacies: sociocultural learning theory, literacy as a social practice, and the food system. This study was framed by sociocultural theories of learning and literacy to position food literacy as a socially situated and context-dependent practice embedded within the broader food system. Sociocultural learning theory recognizes the social and cultural impacts on learning and development. A

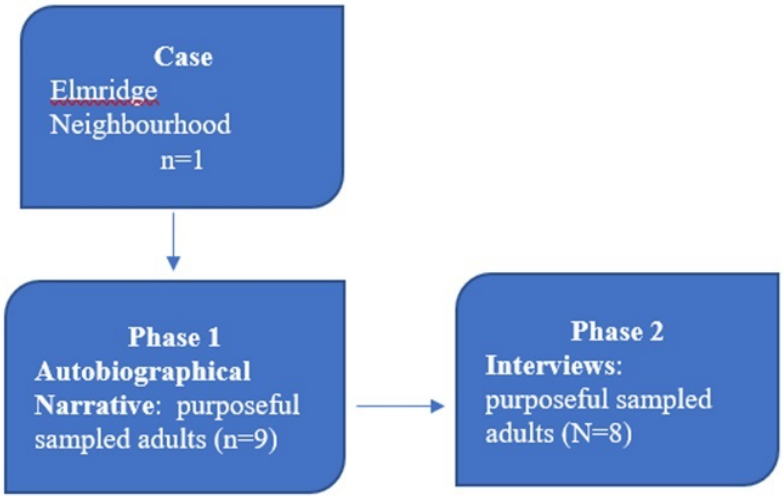
sociocultural approach to learning is "based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 191). This understanding directly links to the concept of literacy as a social practice, which is considered one of the major sociocultural theories of literacy (Perry, 2012). Because literacy as a social practice views literacy as "something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 3), it recognizes that literacy is "historically situated" and that literacy practices are "purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices" (p. 7). An important aspect of this theory of literacy is that it is conceived as a set of practices in specific contexts (Perry, 2015), and as a resource to "make sense of events" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 231). The food system presents the context for food literacies, as it entails every facet around food: growing, harvesting, preparing, marketing, packaging, consuming, and disposing. It links the biological, economic, political, social, and cultural aspects of life (Tansey & Worsley, 1995), which includes an individual's food literacy practices. The food system and food literacies are interdependent – the food system impacts a person's food literacies, and a person's food literacy practices (for example, food choice) impact the broader food system (Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, 2018).

## Methodology

This qualitative study aimed to explore with a sample of adult community members in the Elmridge neighbourhood (name changed) in Niagara Falls, Ontario, the sociocultural factors that influence and inform their food literacies. This neighbourhood presented a unique case, as it is considered a low-socioeconomic neighbourhood that would traditionally be targeted for food skills and knowledge development. It is also the neighbourhood where the author founded and established Canada's first community food literacy centre, a registered charity aimed at promoting critical food literacy and increasing food access in food deserts. Thus, the following research question guided this study: What are the sociocultural factors that influence participants' food literacies?

To answer this research question, this study employed a qualitative case study methodology, using an autobiographical narrative, interviews, and a researcher's reflexive journal as methods to gather data. Participants were asked to write about their food experiences, both positive and negative, drawing on sociocultural aspects of their lives. Study participants' writings were analyzed using a hybrid deductive and inductive thematic analysis framed within the food literacies conception identified earlier. Purposeful sampling allowed me to target a specific group, which is often used for case study research where generalization is not the goal (Cohen et al., 2011). I purposefully sampled the case and study participants (Merriam, 2009) with the sampling procedure displayed in Figure 1.

**Figure 1:** Sampling procedure




*Note.* Sampling procedure with methods and net sample sizes

The research sample for this study was selected as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| For Phase 1: | autobiographical food literacy narrative |
| Population: | members of the Elmridge Community |
| Sampling Frame: | adults living in the Elmridge Community (> 18 years old) |
| Gross Sample: | members who will participate (provide consent) |
| Net Sample: | members who provide data |
| For Phase 2: | interview |
| Gross Sample: | members who participated in phase 1 |
| Net Sample: | members who provided consent to be interviewed and participated in the interview |

## The case - The Elmridge neighbourhood

The case is a neighbourhood in Niagara Falls, Ontario (Elmridge), selected for its location in a low-socioeconomic area that has experienced social and economic difficulties over the last two decades. The name Elmridge is a pseudonym that protects the anonymity of the study participants. This location was purposefully chosen because it presents a unique and underrepresented context for exploring food literacy practices, particularly among residents who may face systemic barriers to food access and affordability. Food literacy programs are often implemented in marginalized communities, yet little is known about how residents in such areas make sense of and engage with food literacies, and how their experiences and histories influence their food literacy practices.

The Elmridge neighbourhood comprises approximately 12,000 residents and has the highest percentage (20.9%) of residents with a household income of under $20,000 (Niagara Region, 2019). Although a short drive from the main tourist

attractions in Niagara Falls, including the Clifton Hill entertainment district and the famous waterfalls, the Elmridge neighbourhood does not enjoy many amenities or the prosperity one would think of when picturing one of the biggest tourist cities in Canada. While efforts have been made to revitalize the area for several years, it is still plagued by signs of a disadvantaged community, such as boarded-up stores, derelict buildings, homelessness, and a lack of an affordable fresh-produce store. The aftermath of the pandemic has also increased home prices significantly, driven by the housing demand from Greater Toronto Area residents. Thus, the Elmridge neighbourhood has experienced accelerated gentrification, leaving many low-income renters unable to remain in the neighbourhood and the city. Located within the Greenbelt of Ontario, prized for its fertile farmland and numerous fruit growers, the Niagara Region offers diverse recreational activities and protected forests and wetlands nestled against the beautiful Niagara Escarpment. The region is home to a public research university, a world-famous college, and the town of Niagara-on-the-Lake with its famous Shaw Festival Theatre, first-class restaurants, and an abundance of wineries. The dichotomy between the haves and the have-nots is blatant but also presents as a unique opportunity to explore the food literacy events and practices of participants within this time and space.

## Research participants

A total of nine participants were recruited for phase 1 of the study. Although the Elmridge neighbourhood is a low-income neighbourhood in Niagara Falls, participants' socioeconomic status was not a selection criterion for participation in the study.

The sample size for this study was informed by qualitative research design principles that prioritize depth and richness of data over breadth or representativeness (Miles et al., 2020). Recruitment concluded when participants' writing and interviews began to yield recurring patterns and themes.

To participate, candidates needed to be over the age of 18 and reside in the Elmridge neighbourhood. Lengths of residency ranged from two months to 30 years. The youngest participant was Claire (33), and the eldest was Barb (67). Out of the nine participants, three identified as male and six as female, from various ethnic backgrounds. Eight participants identified as White, and one participant identified as Black. Table 3 shows an overview of participant demographics with their assigned pseudonyms.

**Table 1:** Participant demographics

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Race | Ethnicity | # Years in the Elmridge Neighbourhood | First Language |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Claire | 33 | Female | White | French Canadian | 7 | English |
| Barb | 67 | Female | White | Irish | 1.5 | English |
| Frank | 36 | Male | White | American | 1 | German |
| Gillian | 60 | Female | White | French Canadian | 30 | French |
| Wanda | 55 | Female | White | Scottish / Indian | 25 | English |
| Sandy | 63 | Female | White | Scottish | 12 | English |
| Jack | 54 | Male | White | Irish | 5 | English |
| Walter | 65 | Male | White | Scottish/Austrian | 0.16 | English |
| Evelyn | 52 | Female | Black | Haitian | 6 | French |

## Methods

I used three methods to capture the many nuances present in a single case (Cohen et al., 2011): an autobiographical food literacy narrative activity (referred to as the autobiographical narrative), semi-structured interviews, and a researcher's reflexive journal.

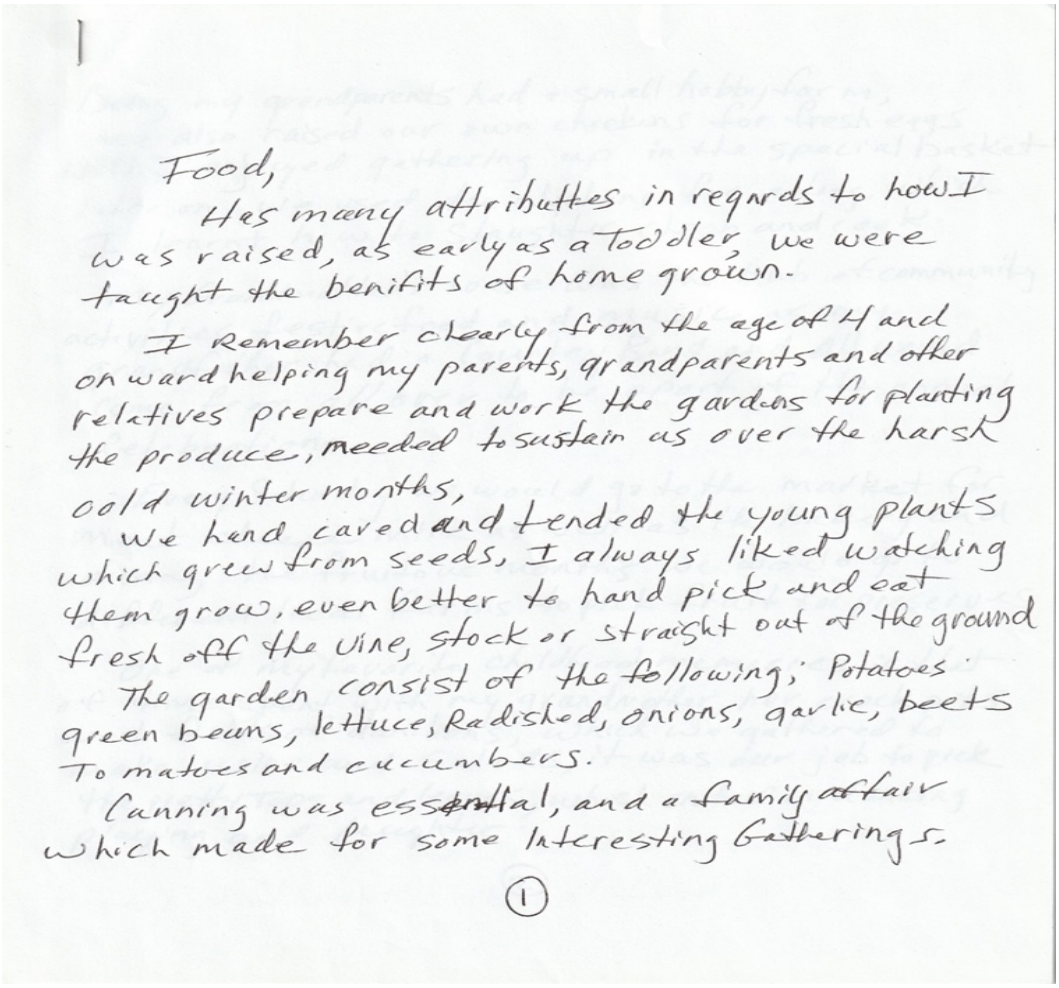
### Autobiographical narrative

Autobiographical narratives are drawn from people's autobiographical memories. As McAdams writes, "Autobiographical memory helps to locate and ground the self within an ongoing life story featuring extended lifetime periods or chapters, knowledge about typical or characteristic life events, and specific and sometimes vivid details of particularly well-remembered scenes" (2001, p. 117). Using autobiographical narratives as a data collection tool allowed me to view participants in the ways in which they view the world and offered rich evidence of participants' food literacy practices in a sociocultural context. Although it can convincingly be argued that people make errors and omissions in narrating autobiographical memory or life stories, Thorne (2000) has found "stability in basic story lines" (p. 46).

In this study, I introduced the autobiographical narrative as the first phase of data collection during the initial recruitment and consent process. I provided each participant with a short overview of the purpose of the activity, a clear set of written instructions, and a list of optional prompts and starter sentences to guide their reflection. Participants were asked to write about their food experiences across the six domains of food literacy: skills and behaviours, food/health choices, culture, knowledge, emotions, and food systems, as well as elements of critical and functional knowledge (Truman et al., 2017). This activity was independently completed, and participants were asked to reflect on both positive and negative experiences around food and draw on sociocultural aspects of their lives.

Participants had complete flexibility in how they completed the task. Some chose to handwrite their reflections on lined paper, others typed responses into Word documents or emails, and a few submitted scanned copies of their written work. No word count or time limit was imposed, allowing participants to express themselves freely.

Nine study participants completed the narrative activity. The length varied greatly and ranged from 45 words to 1,620 words, with an average of 777 words. I read each narrative in full before proceeding to interviews and began initial coding during this phase to identify follow-up areas of interest. Unlike the interviews, the autobiographical narrative activity was participant-led and offered a less structured entry point into their experiences. Because participants were not answering questions in real time, they had the opportunity to reflect deeply and respond in ways that felt most comfortable to them. In contrast to the interview, the autobiographical narrative allowed a liberated and less structured approach to data collection, which resulted in very intimate reflections that may not have surfaced by interviewing alone (see Figure 1).



Food,
Has many attributes in regards to how I was raised, as early as a toddler, we were taught the benifits of home grown.
I Remember clearly from the age of 4 and on ward helping my parents, grandparents and other relatives prepare and work the gardens for planting the produce, needed to sustain us over the harsh cold winter months,
We hand cared and tended the young plants which grew from seeds, I always liked watching them grow, even better to hand pick and eat fresh off the vine, stock or straight out of the ground
The garden consist of the following; Potatoes green beans, lettuce, Radished, onions, garlic, beets To matoes and cucumbers.
Canning was essential, and a family affair which made for some Interesting Gatherings.
(1)

As the second data collection method, I used semi-structured interviews to elicit "rich, thick descriptions" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015, p. 154). Interviews were conducted with participants who had completed Phase 1 of the study and had provided consent to be interviewed. All but one participant agreed to be interviewed. When I received an autobiographical narrative from a participant, I followed up with a phone call to schedule an interview. I immediately reviewed their writing and started to code the data, using annotations and highlighting areas where I had questions or required more information or clarifications. I used semi-structured interviews to clarify statements, pose follow-up questions based on the autobiographical narrative, and engage participants in member checking, ensuring the correct interpretation of the study participants' provided data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015). The interview explored participants' food literacy events and practices, which captured data related to the six domains of food literacy: skills, behaviours, food/health choices, culture, knowledge, emotions, and food systems (Truman et al., 2017) as well as elements of critical and functional knowledge. Questions were open-ended to elicit descriptive data (Merriam, 2009).

The interview guide was informed by my conceptual framework, drawing specifically on sociocultural understandings of food literacies. The interviews conducted in this study followed a semi-structured interview protocol and included the following eight core questions:

1. Who or what has influenced your food literacy experiences the most?
2. Where did you learn about food?
3. What does food mean to you?
4. How does where you come from affect your food literacy?
5. What impact does your family have on your food literacy?
6. What impact do your friends have on your food literacy?
7. What impact does your neighbourhood have on your food literacy?
8. Describe your ideal meal.

Interviews were conducted over Zoom (n=3), by phone (n=4), and in person (n=1). Interview length ranged from 18 minutes to 60 minutes. I strived to put participants at ease and to structure the interview so it would feel more like a conversation to allow space to speak freely and openly. This structure provided flexibility and allowed participants to share their experiences in how they interpreted the question. For example, question 4, "How does where you come from affect your food literacy?" was interpreted by participants in multiple ways, including physical space (country, city, or neighbourhood), ethnic background, and socioeconomic status.

Interviews were recorded using Zoom's recording function or the researcher's password-protected phone for those that took place over the phone or in person. The recorded files were immediately transferred to the researcher's computer (also password-protected) and then deleted from the phone. I personally transcribed the interviews to immerse myself in the data and hear and feel the stories of my research participants. This allowed me to pay special attention to pauses and emotions, which were noted in the transcripts.

### Researcher's reflexive journal

A reflexive journal is a method used to create transparency in the research process while also providing a research trail (Ortlipp, 2008). It further promotes critical self-evaluation by allowing me to consider how my positionality influences my research (Orange, 2016). Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I engaged in critical reflection

on the research process and reflected on my own food literacy practices as prompted by those of my participants.

As an *insider* in this study, I recognize that I am an intrinsic part of this research. I am "the main instrument of the data gathering" (Simons, 2009, p. 81). The work of researcher-as- instrument requires specific skills and knowledge to contribute to the trustworthiness of qualitative research (Miles et al., 2020). Miles et al. (2020) highlight a list of competencies I believe I possess as the researcher in this study. These include having a "strong familiarity with the phenomenon and the setting," "good investigative skills," and "being comfortable, resilient, and nonjudgmental with participants in the setting," as well as having a "heightened sense of empathetic engagement, balanced with a heightened sense of objective awareness" (p. 35).

According to Lincoln et al. (2018), reflexivity is "a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the processes of research itself" (p. 143). Through my research, I have come to understand reflexivity as an ongoing process of critically examining my own beliefs, biases, and roles, allowing me to navigate the dual positions of researcher and participant with greater self-awareness and authenticity.

## Data processing and analysis

I followed the six steps outlined by Cresswell and Guetterman (2019) to process and analyze my data. These steps involved collecting data, preparing the data for analysis (i.e., transcribing interviews and handwritten or typed autobiographical narrative), reading through the data, coding the data, coding for descriptions, and coding for themes. Coding was a time-consuming task that allowed me to think about the analysis of the data. As Miles et al. (2020) claim, "coding is a deep reflection about, and thus, deep interpretation of the data's meanings. In other words, coding is analysis" (p. 63). The process followed a deductive approach at first using a priori codes based on the research questions and conceptual framework that included beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, routine practices, social relations, political relations, economic status, educational status, cultural, ethnic or national origin, and linguistic group. These a priori codes were guiding the initial coding of the data, but the analysis was not restricted by these preliminary codes. Inductive codes were assigned when a new theme or pattern emerged or when an a priori code was too broad and needed to be divided.

The analysis was also guided by the conceptualization of food *literacies* adopted in this study, which draws on a multiliteracies framework and a sociocultural lens. This lens helped me consider how food-related events and practices were shaped by context and meaning-making, not just content.

Analyzing and interpreting the data was an iterative and reflexive process that involved collecting more data, re-reading the data, and coding the data, which allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the information provided by my participants (Cresswell & Guetterman, 2019). Coding the interview transcripts followed a process similar to that of the autobiographical narrative.

## Sociocultural factors impacting food literacies – Major findings

The analysis of the data produced the following five major findings:

1. Social relations: All interview participants cited social relations (including families, friends, and institutions) as the major influence on their food literacies.
2. Economic status: The majority of the participants' food literacy practices are impacted by their economic status.
3. Health: The majority of the participants indicated that their understanding of healthy food and its benefits (both physical and mental benefits) drives their food literacy practices.
4. Gender: The majority of the participants shared notions about gendered roles in food literacy events and practices that are often associated with traditional ideas and cultural practices.
5. Emotions: All participants indicated how various emotions are attached to and inform their food literacy practices.

### Finding 1: Social relations

Social relations were the most cited influence on participants' food literacies. Social relations can be defined as the interaction between two or more people, groups or organizations (Notta & Aiello, 2017). For study participants, social relations included parents, siblings, aunts, grandparents, and friends, as well as institutions such as schools and community organizations. Participants also reflected on being parents and how raising their own children affects their food literacies.

#### *Parents*

Parents were a major influence on participants' food literacies as role models, teachers, and agents of traditions. Participants explained how their mothers and fathers created food literacy events and practices that instilled and fostered attitudes, values, and beliefs around food choices and decisions.

Frank reflected on his food literacy practices and how his parents have guided him on that journey. In the writing activity he recognized: "I'm still learning things, but the things I learned are because my parents and the people before me helped connect little dots along the way". Walter's love of cooking is directly attributed to his dad. He remembered his dad "really enjoying" cooking and he believes that is where he "picked it up". Jack shared vivid memories in his writing of both of his parents cooking their large Sunday dinners with "all the pots steaming with vegetables and meat". He associates "food with his mom" and remembers his father's vegetable garden, where he picked carrots for the first time. Events and practices related to eating out with his mom have made lasting memories for him.

Sandy's mom taught her how to cook at the age of 13, and values around food waste and gluttony were instilled and made a lasting impact on her. Growing up in a food-insecure household, Sandy recalled in the interview that "We were raised in a way that, if we said no to anything on our plate we went without supper. So, we learned to like everything on our plate". For Evelyn food literacy practices were heavily influenced by her parents, but also her aunt, recalling how she taught her without recipes.

Not all food literacy events and practices with parents were positive. Gillian, Sarah, and Barb reported negative and abusive relationships with their parents

growing up that resulted in negative food literacy practices. For Gillian and Barb that meant learning how to take care of themselves and their siblings at a very young age and becoming homemakers in their teens. Barb was the main cook in her family at the age of 13. Her mother did not influence her cooking skills, but her absence due to alcoholism thrust Barb into the position of family cook. While Gillian would sometimes watch her mother cook, she mostly taught herself. She was the eldest of five children and "had to take over the cooking".

### *Grandparents*

Grandmothers and grandfathers were mentioned as having an impact on food literacy practices and serving as role models. This was especially salient for Claire who had abusive parents and has fond food memories of her grandmother who not only provided her with nutritious food her parents neglected to provide, but also the family connections infused food literacy practices. She credits her grandmother in her writing for "instilling a love for cooking and a passion for serving her own children".

Being raised on her grandparents' farm, Wanda was greatly influenced by their way of life. Her earliest and fondest memories are those spent on the farm helping to "work the gardens for planting the produce needed to sustain us over the harsh cold winter months".

Similarly, Sandy credits her grandfather for exposing her early in life to a vegetable garden. She pointed out in the interview: "I think my grandpa's garden, that was a really good encouragement to let us see and let us taste fresh vegetables right at the garden and in the glory of growing and the enjoyment of it all".

### *Children and childhood*

The impact participants' children have on their evolving food literacies was most prominent for Claire, Jack, and Frank. Reflecting upon their food literacy practices growing up, both positive and negative, they saw opportunities for change and growth for their own and their children's food literacies.

Claire stated in her writing, "As a mom I have a passion to serve my family much like the example my Granny set for me." She sees the importance of serving as a role model for her children and feels grateful to be able to "provide good meals to my family and show my kids all the ways I cook."

Jack reflected in the interview on his varied food literacy practices as well as experiences with food insecurity as a child and young adult:

> When you have kids and then you think about, well, food literacy: what does that mean to our children and how did the negative experiences in food literacy... want you to change so that you can address them for your children to make... food healthier and more impactful for them from... a nutritional point of view.

Brian feels a sense of obligation as a parent to ensure that his children are confident in their food literacies. He explained in the interview:

> What it means to me when it comes to food and family is, it provides a platform for us as parents to educate, instill confidence, and just nurture kids with a lot of skill. If there is any skill building they need right now it's emotional and food.

He strives to provide food literacy events for his children following the example his mother set. "Their palate has been broadened every time we've done a trip. I've exposed them to something new; I pushed just like my mom did with me."

### *Celebrations / gatherings / family*

Food literacy practices shared with family, friends, and sometimes the community through celebration or just simple gatherings were extremely memorable for participants in this study. The social connections that are formed and strengthened through food are important aspects of food literacies. Frank's statement speaks volumes about this facet. He stated in the interview: "I think that the fundamental reason why I make food is because I want to connect to people." Participants shared sentiments around the value and impact of food and how it can "bring people together" (Barb). The idea that food is more than food, but also a tool to gather and connect with friends and family was articulated by many participants. For Frank, when asked in the interview about what his ideal meal would be he replied, "It would probably be with my mom, dad, and family" and "It wouldn't matter what the food is."

Cooking for friends and family (Frank, Barb, Claire, Walter, Sandy, Evelyn, Gillian), and for those less fortunate (Barb, Claire), brings joy and satisfaction to participants. Walter absolutely enjoys cooking and baking and will regularly cook for his friends a variety of meat dishes, although he is a vegetarian. As Claire explains in her writing:

> I absolutely love cooking for friends and family whenever I can. I cook every day for myself and two kids. It is my favourite part of the day because we are all together. I love when they help; it is good time spent as a family.

Family dinners are cited as important aspects of food literacy practices in the home. Barb always made sure they had a "family dinner at home", and Frank greatly values "dinner at the table" to connect with his children and friends. "Big Sunday dinners" were a tradition at Jack's home growing up and canning at Wanda's grandparents farm was a "family affair".

Participants also have a celebratory relationship with food, and this was most prominent with Jack. When asked during the interview what food means to him, he explained:

> Well, there's so many levels to food; there's celebration, and growing up in our family we had a lot of celebrations, so food was definitely about celebrations, birthdays..., any milestones that we had... , but food was about gathering, when we all got together, when family came over we would always surround ourselves with food and celebrate with food. The food..., was very important in our family and basically everything that we did we celebrated through food.

As I reflected on my earliest memories of food in my reflexive journal, I remembered an outing with a neighbourhood friend to a strawberry patch. It was the first time my family went to a pick-your-own strawberry patch, and it was an exciting experience because our friend's family also came along. Although we were not allowed to taste the strawberries as we were picking them, all the kids had red juice over their faces when we arrived at the little building where we weighed and paid for our harvest. It was such a memorable food literacy event because the experience was shared with a friend.

### *Institutions*

Schools and community organizations were also mentioned as an influence on participants' food literacies. Many cited schools (Barb, Gillian, Jack, Evelyn) as a place where they learned about food. Jack in particular remembered Canada's Food Guide as part of his early school experience. Gillian, Barb, and I took home economics in high school and credit those

experiences for learning about food and how to prepare meals.

Claire's time spent at the maternity home provided her with many rich and memorable food literacy practices. There she learned how to cook, grow food, budget for food, and "mak[e] food last longer". Each week she also had to choose and prepare a meal for all the residents of the home, which ignited her love of cooking for others.

Community organizations also provided opportunities for participants to gather and create food literacy practices together. Gillian used to cook at various community gatherings, such as churches and the soup kitchen, while Sandy belonged to a community garden for four years growing her own produce with the support and guidance of the community.

## Finding 2: Economic status

Economic status is a prevalent sociocultural factor. The majority of participants' food literacy practices are impacted by their economic status. Many participants highlighted how their low economic status has limited their food choices throughout their lives, and this is evident in participants who experienced food insecurity (six out of eight participants). Food insecurity is described as the "inadequate or insecure access to food due to financial constraints" (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020, p.3). According to Tarasuk and Mitchell (2020), levels of food insecurity can be categorized into three groups:

1. Marginal - limit food selection or worry about running out of food;
2. Moderate - compromise quality and/or quantity of food;
3. Severe - miss meals, reduce food intake.

Examples of how higher economic status impacts food literacies also emerged and illustrate how food literacy events and practices are impacted by financial status.

### *Low economic status*

Many participants highlighted food literacy events and practices that were greatly impacted by their low economic status. This included not being able to afford the foods they wanted, like Sandy who would like to eat more seafood but cannot afford it. Similarly, Gillian spoke about this in the interview: "I wish I could have afforded healthy food and I had to use canned food, you know vegetables in cans instead of fresh, because the prices were too high on the fresh ... items." She also mentioned how she cannot afford take-out food or desserts and will often use coupons or discounts to stretch her food budget.

Both Jack and Walter pointed out that they grew up in poverty. It was difficult for Jack's parents to provide for their large family. Jack explained in the interview: "We grew up in a very poor area, disadvantaged, so we didn't ... have access to a lot of food. ...You know, on one occasion my father was arrested for stealing meat to feed our family." Walter reflected on his family's changing economic status and how that impacted their food choices: "At the beginning, I mean we were very poor and you know, I don't think we ate all that great. As I grew up, we started to get more into the middle class and had better choices of foods".

### *High economic status*

Frank's travels as a child and adult afforded him the opportunities to explore a vast array of food literacy events and practices. He acknowledges in his writing that his "connection to food literacy has been diverse

and privileged". He points out that growing up, "on occasion, we would have breakfast in Germany, lunch in Austria and dinner in Italy. I was so fortunate and privileged my parents exposed me to so much during my developmental years." He continues these experiences today with his own children, broadening their "palate" every time they go on a trip.

### Finding 3: Health

The majority of participants indicated that their understanding of healthy food and its benefits (both physical and mental benefits) drives their food literacy practices. Physical and mental health as a factor impacting food literacies emerged from the data as a key finding and entails ideas and understandings from participants that were two-fold: first, the way in which food impacts our health; and second, the way in which health impacts our food literacies. Participants did not define health or what they meant by "being healthy" (nor were they asked to do so), but rather shared ideas and values around food intake, quality of food, and physical limitations impacting selected food literacy practices.

#### *Food impacts health*

Many participants equate food with health and described food as nourishment (Evelyn), sustenance and a necessity (Frank); "It is healthy for us" (Sandy), provides nutrition (Gillian), is the "most fundamental element of life" (Wanda), and aids us in staying and looking healthy (Walter). As Gillian stated in the interview: "Food is ...to keep you healthy, ... nutrition that you need, vitamins and different ... essentials, and you got to find it through food most of the time." Sandy echoed this sentiment saying that food "is a source of keeping us healthy" adding that we should "stick to vegetables and seafood". Evelyn highlighted that "natural" foods are good for us, but that moderation is key. For Walter, in addition to staying healthy, the right foods can also make you look healthy and younger. He described in the interview: "I eat fairly well. I'm not going to say I eat perfect, but I eat fairly well and you know I don't smoke or drink, any of that kind of thing, so that certainly helps [me] stay young."

In the interview, Frank reflected on the impact of his divorce, which prompted him to reconsider the foods he puts in his body. His sentiments about the impact of food on a person's overall health were most striking, highlighting the physical, mental, and spiritual transformative power of food.

#### *Health impacts food choices*

Participants also cited their personal health, both physical and mental, as a significant contributor to the ways in which they develop and act on their food literacies. The most prominent example of this is Claire, who struggled with bulimia and anorexia as a young adult. She explains in the writing activity:

> It started out as me not eating for days and when I did it was very little. I knew I couldn't keep going like that; people were noticing. So... I began to eat at least one full meal a day and then bring it back up. It had more to do with self-love and self-esteem than anything. I used food to punish myself.

Another salient example is Barb, who uses food as a tool to fight her cancer; she changed her diet significantly after learning more about how food affects her health. After being diagnosed with cancer eight years ago, she started a "healthy lifestyle". She expanded on her food literacies following a new strict diet that cut out all sugar, carbohydrates, and processed foods. She then started intermittent fasting and now follows

OMAD (one meal a day), which means she fasts for 22 hours and eats for 2 hours.

For Gillian, her health problems had also restricted her food choices and her food literacy practices growing up. During the interview, she cited her health as being the biggest influence on her food literacies:

> Well, now I am more cautious [about] what I can eat and I cannot eat... and ... the kind of spices I can use or not use in certain dishes. I'm more cautious because of my health problems and being a diabetic, so...[laughter].

Only after becoming aware of her dietary-related health issues has Gillian become more cognizant of the impact of food on her health. She has also tried to take medication that would allow her to enjoy a greater variety of food.

Health not only impacts food choices but also other aspects of food literacies. Sandy used to be an avid gardener, something her grandfather inspired in her. She had a plot at a community garden where she grew a variety of produce for herself, something she was very proud of. But because of physical limitations, she had to give up her plot as she can no longer do the demanding physical work involved.

### Finding 4: Gender

The majority of participants shared notions around gendered roles in food literacy events and practices that are often associated with traditional ideas and cultural practices. The positioning of women and girls in food literacy activities was often based on traditional ideas associated with the gendered expectations of Western society. As Kolata and Gillson (2021) posit, "food literacy is also intrinsically gendered insofar as it corresponds with responsibilities women share due to their gender, rather than their social position or occupation" (p. 572). This was especially apparent for the role women played in passing down knowledge and skills related to food preparation and cooking.

Notions around gendered roles in food literacy practices and experiences were shared by numerous participants. Evelyn highlighted in the interview how learning and working on her father's farm was promoted for boys only. She explained during the interview: "They teach me sometimes [but] because I'm a woman, they teach more for the boys." Judy noted how meals were divided on gendered practices, stating: "The man of the family always had the extra pork chop [laughter]. That was the rule because he went out and worked for it." I wrote in my reflection journal how my brother was excluded from doing the dishes and how this chore always landed on my sister and me.

Earliest memories around food shared in participants' writing often involved mothers in kitchens: watching a mother preparing meals (Frank), a memory of a mother wearing an apron as she stood by steaming pots (Jack), a grandmother "serving" her grandchildren her favourite breakfast (Sarah), a mother teaching her 13-year-old daughter how to cook gravy (Sandy), and a wise aunt passing down family recipes and traditions to her young niece (Evelyn). Women, more so than men, were remembered and observed in the role as sustenance provider, and all the women in this study who participated in the interview went on to become these sustenance providers in their own families. For example, Barb mentioned how she always made sure there was a family dinner at the end of the day, and Claire relishes the opportunity to "provide good meals for her family".

Males also played significant roles in food literacy experiences for some participants, in particular for Walter, who was inspired by his father's joy of cooking. While his mother also cooked, it was "mostly my dad

[who] cooked 'cause he really enjoyed it. That's kind of why I picked mine up". Walter has detailed that he is an avid cook now, loves experimenting with food, and will often cook for his friends and family. These views were also captured in my reflexive journal, as my father would always cook on the weekends and would engage my siblings and me actively in meal preparation that often involved new dishes. For him, it seemed to be more of an adventure and an opportunity to experiment, whereas for my mother, it seemed to be more of a chore. Similarly, Sandy credits her grandfather for inspiring her in growing her own fruits and vegetables and learning to make bread. She also fondly remembers "grandpa's raspberry bush" growing up. While she has not been able to garden since the operation on her shoulders, she holds loving memories of growing her own vegetables for years, and greatly values the benefits of gardening.

## Finding 5: Emotions

This study elicited many emotions from the participants as they shared their unique food literacy practices. All participants indicated how a variety of emotions are attached to and inform their food literacy practices. While emotions can greatly impact food choices (Ashurst et al. 2018), participants' reflection in their writing and interviews evoked strong emotions across a variety of food literacy events and practices. By its design, participants' autobiographical writing was bound to produce a variety of explicit and implicit emotions in connection with participants' food literacy practices. The prompts provided to participants asked them to critically reflect on their food literacy practices, starting with their earliest memories. I believe that the writing activity provided a safe space from which participants could reflect, connect, and explore how food literacy practices influenced their past and shaped their present. This drew a variety of emotions including joy, passion, guilt, love, shame, pain, and nostalgia into their writing.

### *Joy*

Many participants shared how they felt a sense of happiness and joy when cooking for others, or when mastering a new dish and having their cooking skills validated. Claire, for example, finds "so much joy in cooking and trying new foods/recipes". Frank pointed out that he "enjoyed finding new recipes to share with friends and roommates". When thinking about food, participants explained that "it's a happy thing" (Claire) and that "I feel good because it's healthy for us" (Sandy).

Wanda's favourite childhood memory captures the joyful emotions food literacy practices provide. She detailed this in her writing:

> One of my favourite childhood memories is that of time spent with my grandmother, her crock pots and fields of dandelions, which we gathered to make wine and salads. It was our job to pick the pretty tops and leaves, which ended in dancing and playing and laughter.

### *Passion / excitement*

Food literacy experiences also evoked a sense of passion and excitement in participants. The most noticeable example of that was Frank. He shared in the interview this sense of excitement he feels about food stating that "it transforms us, like physically and mentally, and spiritually". When Gillian moved away from home, she experienced a new world of food, noting in her writing:

> Trying out new foods for [the] first time was a little like a new adventure. New chapters at every turn. When living in Ottawa, I wasn't so open to trying

> new tasty food until I moved here to a smaller city. I found that there was more gatherings and openness about people's choices of food. It was exciting to taste new foods I never tried before.

For Claire, being "deprived" as a child, and now having experienced the power of good food and being able to create and share food literacy practices with her family, fills her with passion: "As a mom I have a passion to serve my family."

### *Guilt*

The emotion of guilt, although not as prevalent, also surfaced and is worth mentioning as guilt plays a role in food literacy practices, particularly around food choices. Referring to his "sweet tooth", Walter wishes he "could kind of stop that but I guess that's my thing when I don't eat all these meats and stuff I gotta have something that I reward myself with, and I reward myself with something that's sweet." Claire, who was a vegetarian for six months, feels bad when she eats meat, adding "I believe it is good nourishment but I also believe that big companies are not always humane, and I feel bad eating meat when I do not know where it comes from."

### *Love / affection*

In general, food literacy events with families, whether these take the form of family dinners, picnics in the park, or celebrations evoked emotions of love, affection, and warmth. Participants also shared how they loved certain foods or smells of food. Gillian, recounting one of her earliest memories, said: "I love the tasty cake very much, and chocolate was my favourite flavour. It was very moist and enjoyable. Texture was very fresh and natural." Similarly, Jack mentioned a memory in the grocery store with his mom, walking in the coffee aisle. To this day, the smell of coffee evokes a sense of "comfort".

Participants also expressed a love of cooking for others. Claire "absolutely loves cooking for friends and family", and Gillian "loved" running a restaurant for three years in a small town.

### *Shame / unworthiness*

The emotion of shame or feeling of unworthiness, while not as common, highlights how food literacy practices can evoke this negative feeling. This was most prominent for Claire, who struggled with eating disorders as a young adult. She confides in her writing: "I was severely depressed and thought bad feelings needed to be punished, so I starved myself from basic human needs."

Sandy, who has experienced food insecurity throughout her life, disclosed in the interview that she was too "embarrassed" at first to go to the local soup kitchen. She added: "I cried the first time I went, you know having to go to the soup kitchen to survive. It was very depressing, even though I was poor growing up, you never expect that, you know?"

### *Pain*

Participants experienced pain, particularly around food insecurity. Sandy, reflecting on how she feels about food, states: "Bad at times in my life, I had to go without." While living on welfare in Toronto, she also remembers a time she felt pain because she could not provide a good meal for her son. Similarly, Gillian feels bad when she cannot "afford healthy food".

Evelyn explains how it was hard for her to adapt to a new food culture in Canada. She highlights how she continues to struggle to prepare culturally relevant meals for herself and her family because of a lack of

food choices available to her, saying: "Yeah it is different, everything is different… if you live tropical and you come here, it is very different."

Frank became very emotional when asked what his favourite meal would be. He wished for a meal that he could share with his mom and dad, whom he had not seen for a very long time.

### *Nostalgia*

Nostalgia is commonly regarded as a "yearning for yesterday" (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014, p. 227). Research has shown that nostalgia plays a significant part in food consumption (Vignolles & Pichon, 2014). Nostalgic experiences shared in this study involved food products related to childhood, but also rituals or specific place-based food literacy practices. Jack mentioned all three of these concepts in this statement in his writing:

> My earliest memory of food would be with my mother and father going to church and having cookies and tea after the service. I was around four years old, I was really excited to go downstairs in the church basement with my parents and siblings and run around with other children and eat cookies. It was a weekly event and they had a variety of cookies that we could eat along with tea and sometimes juice. It made me feel very special to be a part of this event with my parents.

Cookies were a common thread in Jack's account of his food literacy practices. He acknowledged that "cookies from my childhood to adolescence to my adulthood looking back have played an important role and they have provided comfort, memories of my past being with my parents."

For Gillian, gravy holds a nostalgic association with her upbringing, connecting her to her family, especially her mother, who taught her how to make it at the age of 13. When Walter moved back to Canada from the United States, he rediscovered some of his favourite childhood sweets. He said: "It's like when I just moved back here; you know I hadn't had a lot of the different sweets when I was down in the States. So I ended up buying a bunch of that just to taste it again so you kind of miss foods [like] that when you're away but you don't get where you're living."

These five major findings highlight the sociocultural factors that influence and inform food literacies for participants in this study. The most prevalent factor is social relations. Participants highlighted how, in particular, parents play a major role in food literacies development. Economic status and health were also significant factors in impacting food literacies, particularly affecting participants' food choices. Values and beliefs related to gendered practices in food literacies were guiding factors in how participants described food literacy practices. And lastly, all participants indicated how a variety of emotions are attached to and inform their food literacy practices.

## Discussion of key themes

The aim of the study was to identify the sociocultural factors that influence food literacies in study participants. In this section, I draw connections between the five major findings (social relations, economic status, health, gender and emotions) and the conceptual framework guiding this study, which is based in sociocultural learning theory, literacy as a social practice and the food system. The result is four key themes:

Theme 1: Social relations influence and inform food literacies
Theme 2: Economic status impacts food literacies
Theme 3: Values and beliefs influence food literacies
Theme 4: Emotions are attached to and inform food literacy practices

In turning my key findings into key themes of the study, I critically reflected upon my findings using a problem-posing approach applied by Freire (1970) as a "means to develop critical inquiry and understanding of experience" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2015, p. 236). The concept of critical literacy is an embedded factor in literacy as a social practice, which recognizes the impact of social institutions and power imbalances in literacy practices (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In interpreting the themes, I drew on the work of Azevedo et al. (2017), Truman et al. (2017), and Cullen et al. (2015), all of whom identify sociocultural influences as attributes of food literacy in their scoping studies. The domains outlined in these scoping studies include social relations, culture, values and norms, and emotional connection.

## Theme 1: Social relations influence and inform food literacies

This theme reflects the role of social context in food literacies, a key influence identified by Azevedo et al. (2017), Cullen et al. (2015), and Truman et al. (2017), particularly in relation to family and peer relationships. Finding 1 found that social relations, involving parents, siblings, friends, and institutions – such as schools or community organizations – are the primary influence on participants' food literacies. Participants also reflected on being parents and how raising their children affected their food literacies. These social relations are impactful in that they greatly influence food literacies across all domains (culture, values and norms, and emotional connection). As Barton and Hamilton (1998) posit, "literacies are embedded in social relationships that give them their meaning" (p. 282), and the data suggest that this is indeed the case.

### *Parents*

The most notable influence on participants' food literacies was that of parents. Participants described how they observed and learned various cooking and food preparation skills from a parent and the knowledge that is inherently passed down with these events and practices. Participants in this study reflected deeply on their childhood and earliest food literacy practices, and we can draw connections with how these practices have carried forward to their adult lives. For example, Walter observed his father's love for cooking growing up, and he believes that is the reason why he also enjoys cooking now. He attributes learning about cooking and meal preparation in his early years to his parents. Similarly, Sandy, now an avid and passionate cook, gained cooking skills from her mother while also observing her older sister cook. Her grandfather also passed down the craft of making bread and instilled a love for growing her own vegetables. Likewise, I noted in my reflexive journal how values related to where and how we eat that were modelled in my childhood are important practices I try to emulate with my family today.

Drawing on sociocultural learning theory, we understand that learning is inherently social (John-Steiner & Souberman, 1978). The data suggest that learning about the various domains of food literacies, and the social, historical, and cultural norms embedded in these activities begins in the home, mostly with parents and siblings, as well as grandparents and extended family. As Barton and Hamilton posit (2012), the "home is a prime site for learning because it is where children are brought up and it is the place where

personal life is regulated in the most intimate ways" (p. 190). Therefore, food literacy events and practices are key elements of our developing years and form part of our "world" that we read before we read the "word" (Freire, 1987). This means that even before we enter school as children or attend formal food literacy programming, we have a rich repertoire of food literacy practices informed by our histories.

### *Friends*

Friends are also a factor that can impact a person's food literacy practices. Participants expressed how friends can influence eating practices and expose us to new cultural traditions. Jack expressed it this way:

> Because your friends are so important and they encourage you to go out and eat what they are eating. Or they talk about their food experiences at home and then you try them, or you are encouraged to try them. Yeah, I think [there's] even peer pressure with food; I remember going to my friend's house and he wanted me to try goat, and … I couldn't do it. I said no, absolutely not, and then there's another friend of mine who ate pigeons, and … I couldn't because I also associated them with being … dirty. So, when it comes to your friends and … influences that they have, … I think they expose you to different types of food and … their knowledge of food.

In addition, friends also served as the reason for various food literacy events, particularly cooking and eating, as was the case for Walter. He prepared a variety of meat dishes for his friends, although he is a vegetarian. "Tailgating" parties at football events always involved a variety of dishes that Walter would put together to socialize with his friends. What is interesting in Walter's case is that he never changed his firmly held convictions about not eating meat and was never influenced by his friends or surroundings to change his diet. However, he chose to cook meat dishes for his friends (he even bought a smoker), which perhaps speaks to the strong social connections he could form through these meals and gatherings with his friends and the importance of friendships to him. In Barb's case, her friend taught her how to preserve and can, and exposed her to elk meat. However, when asked during the interview if friends impact her food literacies, she replied, "no." Friends undoubtedly can impact our food literacies in a variety of ways, often without our explicit recognition.

Most food literacy events are driven by the social aspect, whether with family, friends, or community gatherings. While there is a physiological need for food, participants in this study described how food is a medium over which we gather, celebrate, and connect. As Frank described in his interview, "The fundamental reason why I make food is because I want to connect to people."

### *Institutions*

Institutions such as schools or community-based organizations also represent social relations that participants engaged with. These places of learning play a role in food literacy development; however, they were rarely mentioned by participants in this study. Schools have been identified as a "promising setting" for developing food literacy (Amin et al., 2018), and the Ontario education curriculum speaks to food literacy skills and knowledge in both the Physical and Health Education Curriculum and the Science and Technology Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2015, 2019). Participants in this study often described home-based food literacy practices as more meaningful and personally significant than those in school. Schools were referenced as a place where participants *learned about food*, but not to the extent that those events provided memorable experiences or lasting influences on participants' food literacies. Just as Amin et al.

(2018) finds, children associated domains of food literacy with the home and family more so than experiential food literacy programs at school. This, they explain, could be either because the school programs do not reach all students or because food literacy experiences at home or in the community are more personalized or memorable. This sentiment is echoed by Barton and Hamilton (1998), who find that certain literacy practices are best learned at home, which they term "vernacular learning" (p. 198). In their study of literacy practices in homes, the authors find significant differences in the amount and quality of dialogue in the home. Barton and Hamilton also point out the power relations between parents and children and between children and teachers, as well as "more real-life modelling in home where adults are using literacy for their own purposes" (p. 198). The authors explain how literacy events in school are often evaluated formally in terms of meeting a curriculum standard, whereas home literacies, which are embedded in practical activities, are judged by whether they "served their purpose" (p. 194).

Moreover, schools and teachers are often seen as the "authority" of learning and hold a certain weight over what knowledge is the right knowledge. This power dynamic needs to be considered, and informal or vernacular knowledge that supports literacies needs to be taken into account in the formal school learning environment (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). In addition, schools and other institutions, compared to the home, often follow a restricted curriculum and attached guidelines such as Canada's Food Guide. As a former K-12 teacher, I am familiar with worksheets used in elementary school to "teach" the food guide. It is more likely that a parent, for example, refers to a family recipe jotted on a piece of paper, perhaps even memorized, rather than consult Canada's Food Guide when engaging in a cooking event. Evelyn shared this notion when reflecting on cooking with her aunt: "I don't have paper, I don't have a pencil, but they teach me everything: do this, do that…". We can see how, in this example of home *versus* school, the home environment is less formally structured and more engaging and meaningful compared to school. This is not to say that this is always the case, as was illustrated with Claire's negative home experiences growing up, which are discussed further below.

In addition, schools and other institutions often differ in the way in which they provide instruction compared to the home. To that argument, Kozulin (2003) finds that learning events with parents often involve more mediation, that is, more scaffolding and guidance, compared to a formal learning environment. Food literacy events in the home are akin to what Rogoff (2003) terms "guided participation in cultural activities" (p. 283) in that children learn about food literacies as they engage with and are guided by "the values and practices of their cultural communities" (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 283-284).

One counter-example to the aforementioned argument is Claire's story. She was the only participant in this study who shared personally significant and lasting memories of the food skills development program in a maternity home, which she credits for developing and nurturing her food literacies. It was there she experienced the joy of cooking for herself as well as for the other residents. Of note is that Claire did not have positive experiences at home growing up; her parents did not provide the basic necessities, and she was often left to fend for herself, including finding enough food to eat. It appears that Claire found the missing social relationships that gave her food literacies meaning (Barton & Hamilton, 2012) in the maternity home. Similarly, Gillian had abusive parents; she learned her food-related skills and knowledge in high school as well as the group home she attended. Therefore, lacking positive food literacy caregivers

growing up, who provide enough food and engage in positive food practices, necessitates the need for formal food literacy programming in institutions, such as schools and community organizations.

### Theme 2: Economic status impacts food literacies

This theme builds on Azevedo et al. (2017), Truman et al. (2017), and Cullen et al. (2015) recognition of food systems and structural influences as essential domains of food literacy, detailing a more nuanced look at how economic status shape participants' food literacy experiences. The second theme that emerged from finding two was that a participant's economic status greatly impacted their food literacies. Many participants shared how their low economic status limited their food choices throughout their lives, and this is evident in the participants who experienced food insecurity (six out of eight participants). These findings are consistent with a study completed by Araque-Padilla and Montero-Simo (2025) that observes that lower-income individuals are likelier to buy food that is less expensive. Higher economic status also influences food literacies and allow for more diverse food literacy events and practices. This is not to say that participants with low economic status did not have diverse and varied food literacy practices, but that their low income restricted their food choices and placed certain food literacy events out of their reach.

Economic status determines where one lives and what is accessible; it determines one's food environment and positioning within the food system. Jack shared in his interview that he grew up in government-subsidized housing and that often the fridge would be empty. He highlighted that his father was once caught stealing meat at the local grocery store to provide for his family. In addition, Jack reflected on his participation in a kids' cooking show where he realized the socio-economic differences between himself and the teen host of the show. He revealed in his writing how he felt he was speaking to a "girl from another country" and how this experience was the first time he became aware of his economic position within the food system:

> I guess I felt uneasy; it was a good experience for me because I was now aware that people in different neighbourhoods have different values and different incomes. My observations relating to food literacy [were] that she had such great knowledge and expensive knowledge on food and desserts and I think that has a lot to do with her family's income bracket and their socioeconomic status.

Similarly, Judy "had to go without" food growing up and still experiences food insecurity as an adult. She shared how, on one occasion, her mother gave her and her siblings a spoon and a jar of peanut butter. She thought back then it was a treat, but later realized that they were low on food.

On the other hand, increased financial means can provide opportunity, choice, and flexibility in relation to food literacies. A higher economic status can provide more diverse food literacy practices, as was shared by Frank. He reflected on his upbringing and how his parents provided him and his brother with unique and diverse food literacy events that included culinary experiences in different countries made possible by his father's profession. He credits travel as the most significant influence on his food literacies, which was sparked by his mother and which he later, as an adult working in the travel industry, could continue and build on. For example, in his interview, he shared how he "learned how to make sushi with a world-famous sushi artist" and observed "rain forest tribes in Panama feed and find sustenance." Frank's economic status allows him to continue to develop new food literacy

events and practices and act on his existing food literacies.

Although participants shared that they experienced food insecurity and had "to go without" food at times, the study's data show little to suggest that their food literacy practices were of less significance. Participants pointed out how scarce financial resources did not limit their food literacy practices, both past and current. For example, Judy has rich food literacy practices from her childhood that included making gravy with her mother and working a plot in a community garden. Similarly, Jack highlighted vivid experiences of shared food literacy practices with his family, which included large family dinners, picnics in the park, and many celebrations with and around food. Even though he grew up in government-subsidized housing, he reported how his neighbourhood exposed him to different cultures and their "enjoyments of food" like roti (flatbread) and chicken curry. Likewise, Gillian's low-income status did not prevent her from developing new food literacies, such as learning how to preserve foods for her family. This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that food literacy practices are usually shared between people – it is the people that give meaning to the practices, and it is those practices that are remembered in a historical context by participants. This is in direct connection to Theme 1 in that social relations, including those with parents and friends, are the primary influence on participants' food literacies.

## Theme 3: Values and beliefs influence food literacies

The data suggest that values and beliefs related to food literacies are culturally driven and historically situated. Participants' narratives and interviews demonstrated that food literacy practices are informed and influenced by values and beliefs, and this is supported by sociocultural learning theory and literacy as a social practice approach. From a sociocultural learning perspective, we understand that "children learn as they participate in and are guided by the values and practices of their cultural communities" (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 283-284). Literacy as a social practice posits that literacy practices involve not just texts, but also values, feelings, attitudes, and social relationships (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). And Azevedo et al. (2017), in their scoping study to identify attributes of food literacy, describe values and norms as sociocultural influences on food choices and eating practices. In this study, the impact of values and beliefs on food literacies was most prevalent in the ways in which participants highlighted two particular concepts: 1. health and 2. gendered practices.

### *Values and beliefs related to health in food literacies*

Many participants equate food literacies with good physical and mental health, and this is certainly also the existing academic view of food literacy. As discussed previously, food literacy has traditionally been viewed from a health perspective with the ultimate goal of improving population health. Many food literacy scholars, the majority of whom are from a health discipline, position food literacy as a subset of health literacy along with nutrition literacy (Azevedo Perry et al., 2017; Cullen et al., 2015; Howard & Brichta, 2013; Krause et al. 2018; Nutbeam, 2000; Renwick, 2013; Truman et al., 2017). Participants in this study highlighted how food impacts health, but also how health impacts their food literacy practices.

Participants in this study described how their values and beliefs related to healthy food drive their food literacies, in particular their food choices. The concept of healthy food is relative because everybody has a different idea of what is healthy and good, but

generally, participants used words such as nutritional, balanced, natural, variety, and moderation to describe their preferred food choices. Often, these values and beliefs are rooted in a variety of sociocultural contexts. For example, Evelyn described in her interview how she values "all foods that are natural" and reminisced about her time in Haiti, where all that was needed to grow produce was "only wind and sun." She tries as much as possible to make meals that meet her values of natural foods, but she is restricted by income and access to tropical choices. Another example is Judy, who was glad she accessed the local soup kitchen to counter her food insecurity. Her values and beliefs were met by the food choices offered there. She described how food served at the soup kitchen was culturally relevant to her, stating that "it's nice because you get … everything in the food order that you need; you know, your vegetables, your tators and your meat….and your fruit."

While values and beliefs are culturally driven and historically situated, they are not necessarily stagnant. Values and beliefs can change over time, and participants in this study shared how significant life events prompted them to reconsider their values and beliefs in relation to their food literacies. This was particularly the case with Barb, who significantly changed her food literacy practices when she began to value her health more highly after being diagnosed with and treated for cancer. Her food literacy practices prior to her diagnosis were rooted in what could be described as traditional Western food literacy practices, with traditional gendered roles (wife as the homemaker who had meals ready when her husband came home from work) and "meat and potato" dinners. She recalled in her interview that it was her family life and her husband's values and beliefs that influenced her food literacies. She was also a home economics teacher instructing grade seven and eight students in how to cook "from scratch" following Canada's Food Guide and later became and still is the leader of a weight loss chapter that also runs their programs around Canada's Food Guide. Her food choices were dictated by these values and beliefs, which completely changed after her cancer diagnosis, when she "started a healthy lifestyle." She was "taught" that "sugar, carbohydrates and processed food are what make live cancer cells grow"; she also started intermittent fasting, which resulted in significant weight loss. Three years ago, she started canning and preserving. She now has new values and beliefs around her food literacy practices that were a direct result of her cancer diagnosis. Specifically, Barb engaged in food literacy events "as a transformative tool to promote or cope with personal change" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 231). Through her participation in new food literacy events, she modified her values and beliefs related to her existing food literacies, in particular, her food knowledge and food choices.

Jack highlighted a shift in values and beliefs related to food literacies that occurred after he got married. Jack indicated how getting married changes the food literacies dynamic "because now I'm combining my food literacy with my wife." He reflected on becoming a parent and how he could change his food literacy practices to be "healthier and more impactful" for his children. Others shared how the birth of a child and becoming a parent prompted a renewed emphasis on existing values and beliefs.

### *Values and beliefs related to gender in food literacies*

Values and beliefs related to gender play an integral role in food literacy practices. The positioning of women and girls in food literacy events and practices was often based on traditional concepts associated with gendered expectations that our society holds. This was especially evident in the role women played in passing down

knowledge and skills related to food preparation and cooking. For example, mothers were remembered in traditional roles, preparing meals and providing sustenance. Mothers played a significant role in participants' food literacy events and held traditional gendered roles and practices, such as cooking and serving meals.

Food literacy events and practices recalled by participants often involved mothers in kitchens: watching a mother preparing meals (Frank), a memory of a mother wearing an apron as she stood by steaming pots (Jack), a grandmother "serving" her grandchildren her favourite breakfast (Sarah), a mother teaching her 13-year-old daughter how to cook gravy (Sandy), and a wise aunt passing down family recipes and traditions to her young niece (Evelyn). The women in this study who participated in the interview went on to occupy these traditional gendered roles in their adult lives. For example, Barb shared in her interview how she always prepared a "family dinner at home when my husband comes home from work and my son from school," and Claire relishes the opportunity to "serve" her children just like her grandmother did. The prior comments illustrate how these gendered practices were modelled in childhood and how these practices became the roadmap for future practices. As Barton and Hamilton (1998) posit, "children see which literacies are associated with women and which with men" (Barton & Hamilton, 2012, p. 191), highlighting how food literacy practices are deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts.

While fathers and grandfathers also shaped food literacy practices, their participation was less prominent and seemed to include mainly what could be considered "masculine" practices. For instance, gardening was mentioned as a practice performed by Jack's father and Judy's grandfather. Judy mentioned in her interview how "the man of the family always had the extra pork chop (laughter) that was the rule because he went out and worked for it." Evelyn highlighted how farming skills in her native Haiti were mainly taught to boys rather than girls. This would indicate that values and beliefs around gendered food literacy practices are firmly rooted in traditional and patrilineal roles, which greatly influenced participants' food literacy practices.

Conversely, research on gendered home literacy practices also found that factors such as confidence, resources, time, and routines can challenge traditional notions of what would be considered a woman's or a man's job (Barton & Hamilton, 1998). These factors would be evident in Walter's case, whose father was the main cook in the home growing up, or Frank's case, who, after his divorce, had to take on all food literacy practices in the home with his two young children. Therefore, while values and beliefs related to traditional gendered roles in food literacy practices inform and influence food literacies, various factors can challenge this notion.

### Theme 4: Emotions are attached to and inform food literacy practices

Emotion is one of the themes that Truman et al. (2017) identify in their scoping study to define food literacy. This theme appears 13% of the time across novel definitions of food literacy (compared to the theme of knowledge, which appears the most at 69%) and is described as a theme that covers "the influence of attitudes and motivation" (Truman et al., p. 367). The authors do not define or elaborate on the meaning of emotions in food literacy in their study. Slater (2017) also includes emotional dimensions in her conceptualization of food literacy, emphasizing "positive relationships with food" (Slater et al., 2017, p. 553). Although emotions appear less frequently in food literacy frameworks (Truman et al., 2017; Azevedo et al., 2017), this theme expands on their inclusion by

showing how emotional experiences, ranging from joy to shame, are deeply tied to food literacy practices.

The most prevalent aspect of the connection between emotion and food literacy in the academic literature is how emotions and/or mood (sometimes these terms are used interchangeably) drive food choices and consumption (see, for example, Ashurst et al., 2018; Gardner et al., 2014). Scholars examining the connection between emotion and food consumption describe the relationship as one that is very complex and includes physiological factors (hunger and satiation), psychological factors, previous experiences, memory and habit formation, sociological factors (economic status, eating culture), emotional coping mechanisms, and personality traits (Köster & Mojet, 2015).

Emotions were omnipresent in food literacy events and practices of study participants. In this study, emotions refer to the implicit and explicit feelings attached to food literacy events and practices. These included joy, passion, guilt, love, shame, pain, and nostalgia.

Research has found that emotions can greatly impact food choices (Ashurst et al., 2018; Gardner et al., 2014), and the data from this study have produced examples of how emotions affect food behaviours and decisions. For example, Claire was a vegetarian because she felt bad when eating meat; Walter rewards himself with sweets. However, emotions impacted more than just food choices and are present in a variety of food literacy events and practices.

Kitchener (2002) posits that "the link between food and emotions is a sensible one because being nourished (food/feeding) and being nurtured (feelings/emotions) are linked" (p. 1). In this sense, the theme of emotion is also closely tied to Theme 1 (social relations influence and inform literacy) as well as Theme 3 (values and beliefs influence food literacies). Emotions are closely linked to social relations, values, and beliefs in that they are part of food literacy practices rooted in historical, social, and cultural contexts. For example, Jack's narrative writing and interview referred to cookies. He acknowledged in his writing that "Cookies from my childhood to adolescence to my adulthood, looking back, have played an important role and they have provided comfort, memories of my past being with my parents." For Jack, cookies provided nourishment, but more so, provided nurture. Another example is Claire, who "loves" to serve her family just like the example her grandmother set for her. She is connecting the social relations with her grandmother, and the feeling of love she felt as a child when being served by her, to her present food literacy practices with her own children.

Barton and Hamilton (1998) claim that "all literacies have an emotional dimension to them" (p. 255). It is evident in this study that literacy events and practices have a variety of emotions attached to them. However, most of these events and practices would be considered informal or vernacular food literacies – those practiced in the home, with parents or friends. As discussed in Theme 1 above, formal food literacy practices were not as personally significant for participants. This is important to consider in school or community food literacy programs, as "emotions are most likely overlooked in formal food literacy education programs" (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 255). Recognizing the prevalence of emotions in food literacies could help educators and program designers create more impactful programs that address the diverse experiences of learners.

### Sociocultural factors not mentioned by participants

This study did not find that participants' food literacies were influenced by such social media platforms as Facebook, Instagram, or TikTok. Although Hui (2022)

proclaimed that TikTok is "upending our ideas on what we eat - and how we talk and think about food" (Hui, 2022, para. 7), participants in this study did not mention any type of social media influencing or impacting their food literacies. In TikTok's case, Hui's observation could be explained by the platform's user demographic, which is 75% under the age of 35 (Hui, 2022). The median age of participants in this study was 55 years old at the time of data collection. Only one participant in this study was under the age of 35.

Participants in this study also did not highlight school food (lunch or snacks provided at school for students, usually in the form of a cafeteria) as a factor impacting their food literacies. Only, Frank, who grew up in the United States, mentioned his experiences with school cafeteria food, and he expressed surprise that his children's school in Canada does not offer school food and that parents are responsible for providing lunches and snacks for their children at school. The lack of data relating to school food in this study could be explained by the fact that Canada is one of the few countries that did not have a universal school food program at the time of data collection (Food Secure Canada, n.d.). The federal government only recently committed funding to establish a national school food program, which is still in its early stages of development (Government of Canada, 2025). Since starting my teaching career in 2007, I know that most schools will offer lunches to families who cannot afford them, and many schools, with the assistance of their parent council, will offer snacks, such as fruits and yogurt to students free of charge.

## Conclusion

This study is among the few that qualitatively explores the food literacies of adults in a low-income Canadian community through a sociocultural lens. The data gleaned from this study suggest that there are numerous sociocultural factors that influence food literacies, including social relations, health, gender, economic status, and emotions. Specifically, the study highlighted how participants practice their food literacies in relation to their histories, cultural identities, economic status, and shifting life experiences. As such, food literacy practices are not neutral and void of meaning and emotions; they hold significant historical, cultural, and social elements. Therefore, an ideological approach to food literacy is necessary to acknowledge the social and cultural diversity that is present among different contexts (Street & Lefstein, 2007, p. 42). This is consistent with the work of Truman et al. (2017), Azevedo et al. (2017), and Cullen et al. (2015), who argue that food literacy is not only a set of individual competencies, but is shaped by structural, cultural, and relational factors.

Sociocultural factors not only influence food literacies; they also define them. As such, this study supports a shift away from a definition of food literacies that is centred around skill and knowledge development to improve health to one that is critical and views food literacies as something people do and considers why they do it. This study contributes to a growing body of research that challenges dominant health-oriented definitions of food literacy by emphasizing the deeply embedded sociocultural, emotional, and relational dimensions of food practices. The broader implications of this study could extend to how academia conceptualizes food literacy and how policymakers and educators can design more context-sensitive food literacy programs that take into account the various sociocultural factors that influence food literacy practices, particularly in low socio-economic areas.

The results are limited by the small participant sample and single case. Still, I hope my descriptions of the case, participants, and methodological framework allow readers to make connections to similar contexts. To build on this study's findings, future research should consider a larger and more diverse sample across multiple communities to capture a broader range of sociocultural influences on food literacies. Comparative studies could explore differences and similarities between urban and rural settings or between various age, cultural or socioeconomic groups. Longitudinal studies would be valuable in understanding how food literacies evolve over time and in response to changing sociocultural conditions.

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