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Are 'Guilty Pleasures' Specific to Women? A Reflection on Gender and Culture

Guilty pleasures. We all have them. [Meghan Markle admits](#), "French fries and vino are my vices." Chloe Kim says "laying in bed and doing nothing and eating." Beyonce confesses "it's pizza, which is my favorite indulgence." Within these supposed guilty pleasures, there seems to lie a pattern of food, relaxation and self-care. This then raises the question: Are these truly guilty pleasures, or more likely, are these terms subtly reinforcing gender stereotypes and protecting male fragility within the context of gendered power dynamics?

We've likely all heard this term appended to everyday, ordinary, and sometimes mundane activities, such as chocolate, shopping, and wine. It seems these admissions often come from women rather than men. Generally speaking, women often feel compelled or encouraged to justify their enjoyment of more traditionally 'feminine' interests. Throughout our lives and in the media, women face judgment and scrutiny—whether it's unsolicited comments about our bodies, accusations of being 'too assertive,' or criticism for enjoying what's considered 'trashy' television.

Chocolate, a treat enjoyed by many, should be savored without shame. However, for women, indulging in sugary foods often carries the label of a 'guilty pleasure', with this association stemming from societal norms dictating activities that women engage in during their menstrual cycles. While many women find comfort in these practices, they are unfairly categorized as inherently feminine, intended to instill shame in women for behaviors that are universally human. Conversely, men often find admitting to similar behaviors emasculating, highlighting societal pressures to project guilt onto women and further stigmatize them.

Ironically, these comforting behaviors for women have been weaponized against them, perpetuating a culture of guilt. This harmful association is deeply rooted in historical expectations of women's body image, perpetuating unrealistic standards that regress rather than progress. The concept of an 'ideal woman' persists throughout history, imposing unattainable expectations that contribute to feelings of guilt about something as simple as eating chocolate.

Shows like *The Bachelor* and *Love Island*, centered around dating and featuring female protagonists, often face criticism from the media regarding both the audience and contestants. There are valid concerns to recognize about the harmful portrayal of women in reality television. The power of editing can exaggerate and fabricate competitive narratives among women, exploiting vulnerability and sexuality, perpetuating damaging stereotypes rather than challenging them.

However, reality television has also been a launchpad for successful careers and empires. The Kardashian family, for example, has amassed a large net worth through savvy marketing, business ventures, and brand deals, such as creating makeup brands and clothing lines— all attributed to their reality series *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*. [The Chronicle](#) explicitly states that Kim Kardashian, founder of SKIMS, has created an inclusive

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brand that 'caters to the people.' SKIMS is truly inclusive, offering products in sizes ranging from XXS to 5X, and diverse, with over 10 shades to match every skin tone. Reviews consistently highlight words like 'flattering,' 'sexy,' and 'soft.' These women have effectively used their visibility to establish impactful careers and global brands that celebrate femininity, while cementing themselves as household names in the process.

Despite the significant influence of women as consumers, developers, and creators, reality shows often struggle to be taken seriously. Yet, it serves as a platform for promoting diversity, inclusion, and amplifying unheard voices and a catalyst for economic prosperity and entrepreneurship.

I find myself actively perpetuating this toxic stereotype as well, hesitating to admit I watch these shows and labeling them as 'guilty pleasures.' I often wonder, why can't I simply enjoy them without stigma? It shouldn't be taboo to witness women freely exploring their authentic, powerful, and multifaceted selves. In a [Refinery29 article](#), journalist Siren Kale reflects on the feminist implications of reality television, stating, "I think about how rarely middle-aged women are allowed to discuss their relationships, ambitions, children, and sex lives on camera while being their eccentric, endearing, and lovable selves." If reality shows can launch careers, spark important conversations, celebrate diversity, and challenge gender stereotypes, why should enjoying it be something to be ashamed of

Men anonymously confess their guilty pleasures in a [Men's Health article](#), titled "23 Guilty Pleasures Men Will Never Cop To": 'Those cheer-leading competitions on ESPN2,' 'The Confessions page of Cosmopolitan magazine,' 'Emotional conversations with your closest buddy,' 'Chardonnay,' 'gossip,' 'Pottery Barn,' 'slippers,' and 'Kelly Ripa. There exists an intriguing yet challenging relationship between toxic masculinity and male fragility. It's worth considering the cultural standards of manhood that men are hesitant to depart from. Fearful of appearing vulnerable and losing their sense of masculinity, men often reclaim their manhood by projecting these insecurities onto women. This fear of emasculation permeates into traditionally feminine pleasures, relegating them to be seen as "lesser," "shameful," or even "comical."

There is a collective belief that adding "guilty pleasure" before enjoying chardonnay, slippers, or emotional vulnerability somehow protects and preserves the image of a tough, hard-working, physically strong man who prefers beer. These so-called guilty pleasures are essentially rooted in traditional definitions of femininity, thereby supporting the argument that these words reinforce patriarchal norms and enable misogyny. It's remarkable how much weight two simple words can carry.

There are many ways to dismantle the gender-binary and challenge these stereotypes, but it all begins with language. We must have conversations concerning dialect, and reflect on how our individual words perpetuate gender stereotypes. Because even small, seemingly throw-away words continue to reinforce gender stereotypes and further develop biases. The term 'guilty pleasure' suggests weakness, yet there is nothing shameful or weak about pursuing self-fulfillment in whatever forms that it manifests itself in.