



Cooking at home: A multimodal narrative analysis of the Food Network



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ABSTRACT

This article explores the mediated discourses of food and gender in a multimodal narrative analysis of two *Food Network* instructional cooking shows hosted by female protagonists. Through a discussion of the openings and closings, side-narratives and evaluations, this article shows how multimodality advances the cooking show narrative. In examining the presentation of the women cooks in the context of their homes and family, the analysis illustrates how the mediated context facilitates the transition of women from underappreciated and expected caretakers in the kitchen to confident and empowered agents.

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1. Introduction

Cooking shows have become a mainstay in contemporary media, producing celebrity cooking show hosts known on a first-name basis. Scholars have turned attention to this rise of celebrity chefs, from identifying a typology of “culinary personas” that relate to gender and social hierarchies (Johnston et al., 2014) to examining gendered ideology on celebrity chef cooking shows (Swenson, 2009) and in their cookbooks (Mitchell, 2010; Hollows, 2007; Brownlie and Hewer, 2007), to seeing how celebrity chefs work as cultural intermediaries (Piper, 2015), to analyzing how storytelling fosters intimacy between the cooking show host and viewer (Matwick and Matwick, 2014), to observing the material experience of celebrity chefs by consumers (Abbots, 2015).

Part of this shift in relationships between the performer and audience on cooking shows is a result of a more fluid multimodal discourse of expert-friend talk. Hosts address their viewers in colloquial and informal ways (Chiaro, 2013), assume dual teacher/student roles (Davies, 2003), and act as the “ordinary expert” (Lewis, 2010) to build solidarity with their audience. The conversational set-up is achieved through rhetorical questions (Matwick, 2016), trademark expressions (such as Martha Stewart’s ‘It’s a good thing’) (Davies, 2003, p. 149), personal language (such as Jamie Oliver’s ‘mockney’) (Brunsdon et al., 2001, p. 39), and more. Hosts look directly at the camera, breaking the “aesthetic distance

between performer and audience” (Adema, 2000, p. 115). In this combining of instruction with entertainment, cooking shows have become “less about how to cook and more about how to live” (Naccarato and Lebesco, 2012, p. 48). The domestic settings and inclusion of the celebrity’s private troubles and family life (Rousseau, 2012) are additional means that help construct seemingly personal relationships between celebrities with their audiences.

Polan (2011) notes that a realness was performed by Julia Child with spontaneity and mistakes that were not edited out of the final shows. Polan (2011) suggests that Julia’s larger-than-life persona combined with her joy in cooking made her cooking show such a success, and ultimately, changed the genre of cooking shows. Personality in cooking show hosts becomes indispensable if not more so than their cooking skills to their success on the screen. Cooking shows are part of the cultural shift in mass media where “rather than public figures presenting themselves as awesome, distant or threatening, they increasingly strive to be as one of the neighbours” (Chaney, 2002, p. 109). This ordinarization of authority however does not make the expert less of an expert. As Lewis (2008) describes, “the new food expert tends to be constructed more as a mediator and an interpreter of knowledge than an overarching authority” (p. 51). The food expert’s legitimacy comes from the “discourse of familiarity and celebrity” (Lewis, 2008, p. 51), which suggests that commercialism and the mass media play an influential role in determining who to promote as an expert.

Eriksson (2016) argues that the ordinarization of the celebrity chef does not make the cooking itself an ordinary experience. Instead, in a multimodal historical analysis of Swedish cooking

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show discourse, Eriksson (2016) proposes a paradox: the ordinarization of cooking expertise occurs alongside the “decoupling” of cooking from daily routines (p. 1). In comparing six series of cooking instruction shows from 1967 to 2013, he suggests that shows airing since 2001 emphasize more the aesthetics and taste of food and center cooking around festivities and weekend entertaining rather than everyday concerns of health and budget. At the same time, television production changes from a professional set to a home-like kitchen, aprons to casual clothes, and long shots to medium shots and close-ups of the chef or the food (Eriksson, 2016). These multimodal changes along with the lively talk and simulated eye-contact between the expert host and the viewers are evidence of lifestyle television’s “strategies of ordinary-ization” (Taylor, 2002, p. 479). This present study also considers the interconnectedness of the semiotic modes but also addresses gender roles and a company’s social responsibility.

In this context of media, culture, and gender, a multimodal narrative approach offers the possibility to identify analytically the narrative elements that are deployed in cooking shows and to show the semiotic modes’ meaning-making roles and to explain how their interrelations contribute to a discursive presentation of reality in the chosen data. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001), Toolan (2010), and Page and Herman (2010), among others, have observed, multimodal texts nearly always emphasize not just language, but all modes of meaning, such as images, sounds, gestures, and symbols that appear in a text, to convey meaning. Aspects such as the camera work, background music, screen text, paralanguage, and language project a certain version of reality. Political ideologies are promoted (Mackay, 2015), preferred lifestyle choices offered (Lorenzo-Dus, 2006), and “the making of” corporate films (Maier, 2014a) illustrated through strategic multimodal narrative.

Previous studies present crucial insights into the gender of today’s cooking programs. For instance, Swenson (2009) provides a detailed description of cooking as gendered work in instructional *Food Network* shows, and Johnston et al. (2014) identify in a study of celebrity cooks that celebrity chef personas are gendered, racialized, and classed. Taking a historical lens of American television, Collins (2012) suggests that domestic cooking show women hosts continue “to teach, to entertain, and to sell”—roles they served more than fifty years ago (p. 17). Andrews (2003) takes these concepts one step further by pointing out a more overt sexualized consumption of food and cooking on two popular British instructional cooking shows as indication of an anxiety and reworking of domesticity and the boundaries between public and private spaces.¹ The potential readings of gendered identity formation, domesticity, and television are further illuminated by addressing the corporate social role of the television cooking channel, *Food Network*, in this present paper’s case. By examining the social semiotic modes’ functions, this analytical endeavor expands the existing research on gender and cooking shows, as the primarily textual focus of discourse analysis and gender theory (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Sunderland, 2006; Talbot, 2010) is extended to a multimodal one.

Intending to clarify some aspects of how gender issues are communicated in a mediated context, this study is focused on how a major lifestyle and food network, *Food Network*, communicates its involvement in society in order to enhance its image and reputation among its viewers. To do so, this paper analyzes the multimodal discourse of one particular format (how-to-cook) in one specific context (*Food Network*, United States) of two similar shows (female, single-hosted, domestic): *Barefoot Contessa* and *The Pioneer Woman*. Building on Van Leeuwen’s (2008) theory of discourse as recontextualization of social practice, we see women’s cooking

as a social practice and examine how the patterned interplay of semiotic modes is used strategically to project a certain version of reality. Television cooking shows are multimodal mediums with visual and verbal communication elements that are played out in the cooking instructions and the narrative. The main research questions addressed in the present paper are: how do the hosts orient themselves towards the camera, both verbally and physically, in order to teach and relate to viewers? How are the women “doing gender” as they cook in the domestic space? How is the discourse of these values presented in the narrative structure of the episode and intertwined with multimodal strategies?

Answering these questions demands a detailed form of discourse analysis that includes the talk and camera work and how the hosts orient themselves to viewers. A narrative approach (Labov, 1972) combined with social semiotics (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006) and gender studies (Cameron, 2009; Holmes and Marra, 2010) provides a useful frame for this study through which it is possible to map and explain the multimodal persuasive strategies employed by *Food Network* in its instructional cooking shows.

2. Data

Generally, the traditional instructional cooking shows, similar to lifestyle improvement shows (Smith, 2010), have elements of a narrative structure: introduction, orientation, story, side narrative, evaluation, and conclusion. Simultaneously, these programs are similar to the first cooking shows that began appearing in the late 1940s in that they teach viewers not simply how to cook but how to live (Collins, 2009); but also different with a shift towards entertainment and the fostering of “synthetic personalization,” or intimacy with the audience (Fairclough, 2001). Actually, the distinct feature of the “how-to-cook” programs of this genre indicates a tension between formal instruction and recurrent persuasive discursive strategies of entertainment and ordinarization (Bonner, 2003). Chefs weave technical cooking language with ‘ordinary talk’ on topics such as consumption, family, and leisure, demonstrating that, as Tolson (2006) points out, “it [ordinariness] is a *discursive practice*; not a way of ‘speaking about’ but a way of speaking” (italics original, p. 131), or “on doing ‘being ordinary’” (Sacks, 1984). ‘Being ordinary’ does not mean that certain categories of persons or tv cooking shows are ordinary, but rather that presenting ourselves as ordinary is something that has to be worked at in order to be achieved, with the goal of gaining the audience’s support.

The two chosen programs reveal this kind of tension. First, the programs revolve around the life and cooking of the hosts: Ina Garten and Ree Drummond, who are among the most popular contemporary celebrity chefs featured by *Food Network* (Collins, 2009; Swenson, 2009). Secondly, the hosts, through their cooking, products, and activities, are persuasively shown as experts, even though they are self-taught home cooks. The recurrent discourse strategies are rather simple. The traditional solution to the problem of feeding the family has always been the hard and unnoticed work of women at home. Public professional cooking has historically been a space dominated by men. The solution offered by the programs is to solve this with the emergence of female home-taught cooks as stars in the media.

The transcription and analysis of these data have been made by segmenting the episodes by the level of shots and by using the analytical parameters of visual attributes, verbal attributes, sound, and context, in order to reveal some of the multimodal persuasive strategies employed in the communication of the *Food Network*. In the present analysis, the focus has been on the interplay of images, speech, sound, and written texts. The table below exemplifies the method employed for recording the transcription and analytical method (see Table 1).

¹ Andrews (2003) discusses Nigella Lawson’s *Nigella Bites* (1999) and Jamie Oliver’s *The Naked Chef* (1999) primetime series shown on Channel 4 and BBC2, respectively.

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