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British Celebrity Chefs as Cultural Intermediaries: A Critical Reflection on Taste Construction

Abstract

Purpose: In today's media-saturated United Kingdom, celebrity chefs have emerged as influential cultural figures whose reach extends far beyond the kitchen. They actively shape public conversations about health, family life, social class, national identity, and moral responsibility. This study critically examines four UK celebrity chefs as cultural intermediaries who construct, legitimate and disseminate contemporary British taste through their media presence.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Positioned as a Critical Reflection Paper, this study synthesises sociology, cultural studies and hospitality scholarship to challenge the field's predominantly managerial orientation and argue for stronger engagement with symbolic and cultural power in shaping consumption. A qualitative, interpretivist approach is employed to explore how celebrity chefs function as cultural intermediaries in shaping taste. Grounded in Bourdieu's Theory of Distinction, particularly his concepts of cultural capital, class, and habitus, the paper examines how four prominent figures (Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Mary Berry, and Nigella Lawson) influence public perceptions of food, lifestyle, and identity. Using these British celebrity chefs as case studies, the analysis draws on qualitative textual examination of their television programs and cookbooks.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that these chefs mediate food and taste through persistent themes of class, gender, authenticity, and professionalism. They serve as moral and civic educators who simultaneously reinforce and challenge existing social hierarchies, while mirroring shifting cultural narratives.

Originality/Value: This research advances hospitality and food studies by positioning celebrity chefs as key agents in the production and legitimation of culinary taste and identity within postmodern, media-saturated society. Theoretically, it deepens understanding of how celebrity chefs critically engage with contemporary taste construction, while providing valuable insights into their roles as cultural intermediaries.

Keywords: Celebrity chefs; Taste; Bourdieu; Textual Analysis; Food culture; United Kingdom

1. Introduction

Food functions as a key marker of identity and social distinction in its symbolic, material, and aesthetic forms (Rashidin *et al.*, 2026). In contemporary Britain's media-saturated environment, food content permeates television schedules, social media platforms, streaming services, and print publishing at unprecedented scale (Hollows, 2022; Smith, 2020). Within this context, celebrity chefs have emerged as powerful cultural figures whose influence transcends culinary matters to shape discourses around health, family, class, national identity, and moral responsibility (Hollows, 2022; Zopiatis and Melanthiou, 2019). Despite growing interest in food media, hospitality scholarship has tended to treat consumption primarily as a behavioural or managerial phenomenon, often overlooking the cultural infrastructures through which taste is legitimised and reproduced. Studies published in leading hospitality journals have predominantly focused on service quality, customer satisfaction, operational efficiency, and revenue management, with comparatively limited engagement with the symbolic and cultural forces that shape what consumers value and how those values are produced (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2020; Zopiatis and Melanthiou, 2019). This conceptual narrowing risks limiting the field's ability to fully explain contemporary consumption dynamics.

Taste construction (the social process through which certain foods, culinary practices, and aesthetic preferences are defined as desirable, appropriate, or legitimate within a given cultural context) is central to understanding contemporary food culture (Bourdieu, 1984; Warde, 1997). It is not simply a matter of individual preference, but a socially structured phenomenon shaped by class, gender, media, and cultural authority. The prominence of British celebrity chefs reflects broader societal shifts in how food is produced, consumed, and understood. As traditional class structures evolve, food has become crucial terrain for negotiating and displaying identity (Rashidin *et al.*, 2026). Chefs such as Jamie Oliver and Nigella Lawson extend beyond recipe instruction to promote lifestyles, embody value systems, and perform roles that intertwine entertainment, education, and advocacy. They function as "taste makers," agents who actively define and disseminate what counts as good taste, influencing both aesthetic preferences and social norms (Johnston and Goodman, 2015).

While the concepts of "taste maker" and "taste construction" are related, they are analytically distinct: taste construction refers to the broader social process by which taste hierarchies are produced and reproduced, while taste makers are the agents who participate in and animate that process. These developments must also be understood within broader frameworks of media culture and neoliberal consumerism (Johnston and Goodman, 2015). Celebrity chefs operate as cultural intermediaries, a concept central to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of taste, who structure and disseminate dominant social group preferences, reinforcing symbolic hierarchies (Lee *et al.*, 2026). However, the literature remains largely silent on the specific role of celebrity chefs in shaping taste construction and influencing food culture at both national and international levels. Existing studies (e.g. Giousmpasoglou et al., 2020; Hollows, 2022; Matwick, 2017) have examined aspects of celebrity chef influence (gender; performance; civic advocacy; commodification; social media) but have not systematically analysed how these figures function as cultural intermediaries in the production and legitimation of taste as a socially stratified construct within a hospitality studies framework**.**

Grounded in Bourdieu's theory of distinction, cultural capital, and habitus, this paper critically explores the extent to which British celebrity chefs mediate culinary taste construction. It positions these figures as cultural intermediaries who contribute to social classification through eating practices, mobilising forms of cultural capital that both reinforce and contest

traditional boundaries of class, gender, and ethnicity (Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). Drawing on sociology, cultural studies, and hospitality management perspectives, the paper examines how Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Mary Berry, and Nigella Lawson shape taste construction in contemporary Britain through qualitative textual analysis of their television programmes and cookbooks. The specific research aim is to examine, through Bourdieu's theoretical lens, how these four chefs function as cultural intermediaries who construct, legitimate, and disseminate culinary taste across dimensions of class, gender, authenticity, and civic responsibility.

This study intentionally concerns a work critically reflecting upon a theoretically grounded synthesis of cultural intermediation and taste within hospitality scholarship. While the field has traditionally prioritised operational and managerial concerns, the symbolic and cultural forces shaping consumption remain comparatively under-theorised. By critically revisiting Bourdieu's framework in the context of a media-saturated food culture, the paper identifies important blind spots (particularly the limited attention paid to cultural authority, symbolic capital, and mediated influence) and advances a conceptual agenda for integrating cultural sociology more centrally into hospitality management research. In doing so, it deepens understanding of how celebrity chefs engage with contemporary taste construction while providing critical insight into their broader role in shaping food culture and social meaning.

2. Theoretical Context

2.1 Taste Theories and the Social Construction of Taste

Taste, in the sociological sense, refers to more than sensory pleasure. It denotes the socially acquired dispositions, preferences, and judgements through which individuals and groups distinguish themselves from others, particularly in relation to food, aesthetics, and lifestyle (Bourdieu, 1984; Warde, 1997). Taste construction, therefore, describes the ongoing social process by which certain preferences are produced, valorized, and naturalised as legitimate within a given cultural field, while others are marginalised or stigmatised. Taste encompasses physiological, aesthetic, and sociocultural dimensions. Anthropological and structuralist perspectives conceptualise food as a symbolic system of communication with culturally constructed codes, while materialist approaches examine external forces shaping taste (Mintz, 1996). Conversely, postmodern approaches argue taste is increasingly fluid and individualistic, shaped by consumer identity and lifestyle rather than stable class markers, with individuals constructing identities through omnivorous consumption combining highbrow and lowbrow elements (Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012).

Despite postmodern perspectives, Bourdieu's (1984) work remains central to understanding taste as social differentiation. He theorizes taste as a manifestation of habitus (the internalized, durable dispositions shaped by an individual's social conditions and class position) (Figure 1). Habitus is not simply a set of conscious preferences but an embodied, pre-reflective orientation to the world that generates consistent patterns of perception, appreciation, and action (Bourdieu, 1984). It is acquired through socialisation, reproducing class-based ways of seeing and valuing that feel natural to the individual but are, in fact, socially structured.

Taste is acquired, not innate, and its expression through food, fashion, and aesthetics reflects and reproduces social hierarchies. Bourdieu distinguishes three forms of capital (economic; social; cultural) with cultural capital, in its institutionalised (credentials), objectified (material possessions), and embodied (manners and preferences) forms, playing a particularly

significant role in shaping taste. Cultural capital is the accumulated knowledge, skills, and cultural competencies that confer social advantage; in the culinary domain, this manifests as familiarity with ingredient provenance, cooking techniques, food histories, and aesthetic conventions associated with legitimate or prestigious taste (Bourdieu, 1984; Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). Warde (1997) applied this to Britain, identifying culinary antinomies (novelty versus tradition, health versus indulgence) structuring food choice and underscoring taste's performative nature. Bourdieu also introduces the concept of symbolic violence, the process by which dominant class tastes are naturalised as universal standards of excellence, rendering social hierarchies invisible and making them appear to be matters of personal preference rather than structural power (Bourdieu, 1984). In the culinary domain, this explains how the tastes of privileged social groups (for artisanal, organic, or "authentic" foods) come to be treated as objectively superior through media, education, and gastronomic institutions. While critiqued for overemphasizing class versus gender, ethnicity, and other identity axes, Bourdieu's framework remains influential. His emphasis on social life's relational nature offers robust analysis of how culinary distinctions are reproduced and challenged, illuminating why certain practices are valorized while others stigmatised (Kamphuis *et al.*, 2018).

The social construction of taste, as synthesised from Bourdieu's framework and applied in this study, involves the interplay of several key elements: habitus (embodied dispositions); field (the social arena in which competition over cultural legitimacy takes place); cultural, social, and economic capital (resources that confer advantage); and symbolic violence (the naturalisation of dominant tastes as neutral or universal). Together, these elements explain how taste functions not merely as individual preference but as a mechanism of social distinction and reproduction (Figure 1). When applied to celebrity chef media, these concepts illuminate how culinary authority is produced through the intersection of class background, media performance, and narrative framing rather than culinary skill alone.

Figure 1: The Social Construction of Taste

Please insert Figure 1 here

Source: Adapted from Bourdieu (1984)

Bourdieu's (1984) framework has been applied across a range of fields beyond sociology, including education (Reay, 2004), health (Kamphuis et al., 2018), and consumer culture (Warde, 1997), demonstrating its versatility as an analytical tool for understanding social distinction. Within food studies, Naccarato and LeBesco's (2012) concept of "culinary capital" extends Bourdieu's framework to examine how food media and celebrity culture generate new forms of cultural prestige, making it particularly applicable to the study of celebrity chefs. However, Bourdieu's (1984) framework has been insufficiently mobilised within hospitality management, where research has largely remained functionalist and managerially oriented. This limited engagement risks obscuring how cultural authority and symbolic capital structure contemporary consumption. Without deeper dialogue with cultural theory, hospitality scholarship may struggle to adequately interpret the increasingly mediatised and symbolic nature of food practices. In hospitality and culinary studies, Bourdieu's theory deconstructs taste's seemingly neutral domain to expose socio-political underpinnings. His insights challenge individual choice myths by revealing structural forces guiding consumption. Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence explains how culinary standards are legitimised through media, education, and gastronomy institutions. This grounding is pertinent for analyzing celebrity chefs who, through media personas and culinary outputs, actively participate in legitimating and disseminating certain tastes (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2020). As cultural intermediaries, they reflect and shape dominant taste hierarchies, reinforcing Bourdieu's argument that taste concerns power, status, and identity, not merely food.

2.2 Celebrity Chefs and Cultural Intermediation

The emergence of the celebrity chef reflects the convergence of gastronomy, media, and consumer culture, corresponding with shifts in public relationships with food from necessity to lifestyle and entertainment (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Yang *et al.*, 2025). Celebrity chefs are unique cultural figures serving as both media industry producers and products, acting as conduits communicating culinary knowledge, values, and aesthetics to mass audiences (Huo *et al.*, 2022).

Academic research spans several themes. These themes are interconnected in that they each illuminate a different dimension of how celebrity chefs operate as cultural intermediaries, that is, figures who occupy a mediating position between the field of cultural production (professional cuisine, food media) and the field of consumption (public taste, domestic cooking). Gender and performance studies interpret Nigella Lawson's media persona through postfeminist domesticity, where pleasure, sensuality, and self-care coexist with traditional gender roles, while Gordon Ramsay's hyper-masculine style reinforces aggressive professionalism and authority (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2020). Another focus examines civic roles: Jamie Oliver's campaigns for healthy school meals frame him as a moral entrepreneur promoting culinary literacy and blurring entertainment, advocacy, and pedagogy boundaries (Talbot, 2007). These civic interventions are themselves acts of taste construction, framing certain food practices (fresh; home-cooked; nutritionally informed) as morally responsible and socially desirable.

Culinary expertise commodification is significant. Television chefs sell lifestyles, brands, and ideologies alongside recipes. Nigella Lawson's authoritative tone resonates with order, reliability, and accessibility values, while Mary Berry evokes middle-class refinement and tradition, often appealing to nostalgic sensibilities while reinforcing taste norms (Rashidin *et al.*, 2026). The celebrity chef-class relationship is particularly salient. Bourdieu's (1984) cultural intermediaries concept (those influencing taste by shaping symbolic goods) directly applies to celebrity chefs who mediate between cultural production and consumption fields, translating elite culinary practices into accessible formats (Johnston and Goodman, 2015) while constructing moral hierarchies: fresh over processed, local over global, artisanal over industrial. Social media has expanded celebrity chef influence, enabling direct audience engagement and para-social relationships (Zopiatis and Melanthiou, 2019). Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube allow brand extension, authenticity cultivation, and real-time taste influence, providing more intimate and spontaneous connections than traditional television's edited performances (Carroll *et al.*, 2024).

Across these themes, a key insight is that different media formats from instructional television to travel documentaries, and lifestyle programming to social media, produce distinct registers of culinary authority and taste. Instructional formats position the chef as technical expert or pedagogical guide, while travel and lifestyle formats invite audiences into an aspirational world structured by cultural capital. Understanding how format shapes taste representation is therefore central to the analysis that follows.

Despite cultural ubiquity, tensions exist. Critics argue influence may be overstated, with limited evidence that media consumption alone translates to sustained behavioural change (Joya and Orth, 2025). This is an important caveat: while celebrity chefs clearly shape discourse and aspiration around food, the mechanisms by which media representations translate into actual changes in consumer behaviour remain under-evidenced, and this study focuses on the representational and symbolic dimensions of taste construction rather than

claiming direct behavioural effects. Aspirational messages may alienate or marginalize audiences lacking resources to replicate portrayed lifestyles, while concerns also exist about cultural exoticization and appropriation, particularly in travel-based shows (Mejia and Wilson, 2024). Nonetheless, celebrity chefs offer valuable lenses for examining late modernity taste dynamics, since they embody contemporary food culture contradictions (tradition versus innovation; elitism versus accessibility; health versus pleasure) with cultural work extending beyond entertainment to shape how food is understood, valued, and consumed. Celebrity chefs therefore function as complex cultural agents participating in taste construction, operating at media, market, and morality intersections to shape public food and identity discourses (Mejia and Wilson, 2024).

3. Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to examine celebrity chefs as cultural intermediaries shaping taste. Qualitative methods are appropriate for analyzing complex social phenomena like identity, class, and representation (Altinay *et al.*, 2016), particularly when framed through Bourdieu's sociology of taste. The study is positioned as a critical reflection paper, a genre that employs theoretically grounded analysis of existing cultural texts to generate conceptual insight rather than to produce statistically generalisable findings. This positioning means the media materials function as theoretically generative cases that illuminate broader cultural processes, rather than as a representative empirical sample. While the analytical procedures share features with qualitative research (including systematic coding and thematic interpretation) the primary aim is conceptual development and critical synthesis.

Primary data consists of television programmes and associated cookbooks, selected for their capacity to enable multimodal textual analysis capturing visual and linguistic dimensions of celebrity chefs' media outputs. Television programmes and cookbooks were chosen as the primary data sources because they represent the most sustained, carefully crafted, and widely consumed articulations of celebrity chef identity and culinary philosophy. Unlike social media, which is ephemeral, fragmented, and algorithmically mediated, television programmes and cookbooks are intentionally authored cultural artefacts that offer rich multimodal texts (combining narrative voice, visual aesthetic, mise-en-scène, and rhetorical framing) through which chefs construct and communicate their culinary authority and taste ideologies. These formats also reflect the historical period in which the four chefs rose to cultural prominence and built their lasting influence on British food culture. While social media represents an important and growing dimension of celebrity chef influence (and is acknowledged as a significant area for future research) it falls outside the primary focus of this study. Together, these formats reflect the diverse ways audiences engage with culinary media in contemporary Britain.

As presented in Figure 2, four British celebrity chefs serve as case studies: (i) Jamie Oliver, (ii) Gordon Ramsay, (iii) Mary Berry, and (iv) Nigella Lawson. While other prominent figures could have been included, such as Marco Pierre White (whose fine dining authority and proto-celebrity status shaped the field), Heston Blumenthal (whose molecular gastronomy represents a distinct and intellectually inflected form of culinary capital), Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall (whose food activism parallels Oliver's civic entrepreneurship), Madhur Jaffrey and Ken Hom (whose diasporic perspectives introduce questions of ethnicity and cultural translation absent from the four selected chefs), this selection was guided by four criteria: sustained and continuous public visibility across multiple media platforms; significant and documented cultural influence on British food discourse; diversity of media strategies and

genre conventions; and embodiment of distinct, contrasting gendered and class-based narratives that are directly legible through Bourdieu's framework. The four selected chefs together span working-class and middle-class habitus, male and female culinary authority, domestic and professional cooking contexts, and reformist and conservative ideological orientations, offering maximal analytical contrast for examining taste construction as a socially differentiated process. These four chefs represent a broad spectrum of culinary authority and media performance, offering insights into taste's symbolic construction within contemporary British society.

Figure 2: Celebrity chefs discussed in this study

Please insert Figure 2 here

Picture sources:

For Jamie Oliver: Britannica (2026). *Jamie Oliver*. Available from: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jamie-Oliver (Accessed 28/3/2026)

For Gordon Ramsay: Olusegun, D. (2023). "Gordon Ramsay: From Humble Beginnings to Culinary Stardom". *The Creators Blueprint*, Available from: https://www.creatorsblueprint.co/p/gordon-ramsay-from-humble-beginnings (Accessed 28/3/2026)

For Mary Berry: Penguin (2026). Mary Berry. Available from: https://www.penguin.com.au/authors/mary-berry (Accessed 28/3/2026)

For Nigella Lawson: Mosqueda, S. (2022). "Food writer and cooking show host Nigella Lawson comes to Irvine". *Daily Pilot*, Published 2nd November, Available from: https://www.latimes.com/socal/daily-pilot/entertainment/story/2022-11-02/food-writer-and-cooking-show-host-nigella-lawson-comes-to-irvine (Accessed 28/3/2026)

The coding process was iterative rather than linear, with themes repeatedly reviewed and refined through ongoing movement between the empirical material and the theoretical framework. Particular attention was paid to recurring narrative patterns, visual symbolism, affective performances, and forms of cultural positioning across the media texts. As this study is interpretivist and critically reflective in orientation, the aim of coding was not quantitative measurement or inter-coder reliability, but theoretically informed interpretation and conceptual coherence. Following Riley (2019), the study employed thematic textual analysis. Thematic textual analysis is a qualitative method for identifying, interpreting, and reporting recurring patterns of meaning within cultural texts. In this study, it involved close, repeated engagement with each media text to identify motifs, narrative structures, visual codes, and rhetorical devices, followed by systematic coding and interpretation guided by the theoretical framework. The process followed these steps:

(i) Familiarisation, involving multiple viewings of all programme episodes and thorough readings of each cookbook.

(ii) Generation of initial codes, documenting visual and verbal tropes, camera angles, mise-en-scène, voiceovers, editing patterns, narrative arcs, and rhetorical devices.

(iii) Theme development, organising codes into broader thematic patterns.

(iv) Review and refinement of themes against the theoretical framework and the data corpus.

Analysis was guided by a theoretical framework focusing on themes including class, gender, cultural capital, habitus, identity, lifestyle, professionalism, ethnicity, authenticity, and civic responsibility. These themes correspond directly to the elements of Bourdieu's framework outlined in Figure 1, ensuring analytical coherence between the theoretical context and the empirical analysis. A coding system employed both deductive (theory-driven) and inductive (data-driven) themes, allowing structured yet flexible data engagement to identify expected and emergent patterns. The coding was conducted by the lead author, with themes and interpretations subsequently discussed and reviewed by all co-authors to establish analytical consensus and reflexive scrutiny. The researcher maintained a reflexive stance throughout,

critically reflecting on social positioning, assumptions, and potential biases, essential given the research's interpretive nature.

The full data corpus is detailed in Table 1. In total, the analysis drew on six television episodes per chef (with the exception of Gordon Ramsay's Great Escape India, which comprised three episodes), each viewed five times, yielding approximately 3,210 minutes of total viewing time across the four programmes. Each associated cookbook was read in full on at least two occasions. Selected media texts span genres from instructional and documentary to lifestyle and travel formats, each framing chef personas and culinary messages distinctly (Table 1). Analysing varying formats captures how celebrity chefs mediate taste across contexts, since genre conventions shape the registers of culinary authority available to each chef: instructional formats foreground pedagogical expertise and accessible technique, travel formats generate cosmopolitan and adventurous cultural capital, and lifestyle formats construct affective and aspirational identity. Ramsay's travel-based series performance differs markedly from Berry's traditional instructional tone or Lawson's emotive, sensual domesticity, enriching comparative analysis. Cookbooks were analysed as cultural artefacts beyond recipes. Layout, photographs, typography, and narrative voice contribute to taste and legitimacy construction. These books extend chefs' television personas, reinforcing brand identities and value systems. Paratextual elements (forewords; endorsements; acknowledgements) were also examined to understand how authority and authenticity are framed.

Table 1: Data collection sources

Please insert Table 1 here

Source: Authors' own work

This methodology enables engagement with culinary media's symbolic power beyond surface description, deconstructing how certain tastes are valorized while others are marginalized and how these dynamics reflect broader social hierarchies. Following Bourdieu's framework, the analysis reveals how celebrity chefs operate within cultural production fields, contributing to social distinction's reproduction or transformation. While qualitative and exploratory, the study seeks analytical depth rather than statistical generalizability. The aim is interpreting how meaning is produced, circulated, and contested in culinary media, acknowledging cultural texts' complexity and diverse audience decoding possibilities, though reception is not the primary focus. Ethical considerations were minimal, as data consisted of publicly available materials. Analysis respected intellectual property with scholarly responsibility in representing chefs' work. All media sources are cited appropriately with interpretations supported by textual evidence. The empirical material is therefore used as theoretically generative cases that support critical reflection rather than as a basis for statistical generalisation.

4. Findings

The findings are organised around the seven key themes that emerged from the analysis (cultural intermediation; class; gender; authenticity and affect; civic and moral discourse; media format and culinary authority; and national identity) and are illustrated through close textual analysis of each chef's media texts. For each chef, the discussion demonstrates how their media performance constructs taste as a socially positioned, value-laden practice, drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, cultural capital, and symbolic capital.

4.1 Jamie Oliver

Jamie Oliver's representation in *Jamie's Italy* (Optomen Television, 2005) exemplifies culinary moral entrepreneurship and civic masculinity, constructing identity rooted in democratic food

access, working-class sensibility, and reformist ethos framing cooking as social responsibility. In a characteristic scene from episode two, Oliver sits with an elderly Italian farmer preparing hand-rolled pasta dough, emphasising tactile craft and generational knowledge: “This is what real food is about; it's not fancy, it's just proper.” He positions himself as a traveller-learner who discovers Italian foodways through respect and empathy, foregrounding the stories of local producers while constructing an “authentic” Italy that privileges rusticity and tradition. Mediated through his British lens, Italian food is reinterpreted for British audiences with a moral clarity that emphasises community, sustainability, and provenance.

Oliver mobilizes hybrid class identity blending working-class Essex background with middle-class culinary sophistication through informal mannerisms and populist discourse referring to “proper” and “real” food, resonating across class boundaries while critiquing industrialized food systems (Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). His cookbook *Jamie's Italy* reinforces this through a vernacular visual aesthetic: unposed photographs of market stalls, rough wooden tables, and hands-on cooking, accompanied by recipes framed as stories rather than instructions. This editorial style translates Italian culinary capital into an accessible, democratic register. This is what Bourdieu (1984) would describe as the conversion of cultural capital into a form legible across class habitus. His affect-infused performative style (cooking with hands, enthusiastic eating, rustic visual aesthetics) enhances genuineness impressions through media conventions strategically blending intimacy, authority, and lifestyle branding, exemplifying the “mediatised moral entrepreneur” where cooking becomes pleasurable experience and civic duty.

Unlike Ramsay's assertive masculinity, Oliver enacts care, empathy, and community engagement, embodying post-traditional masculine identity where emotional expression and moral concern coexist with culinary authority. His persona challenges traditional culinary expertise hierarchies by reframing taste as moral and emotional capacity (Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). As cultural intermediary, he bridges global food heritage with local practice, performing cosmopolitan yet grounded Britishness, modeling culinary citizenship situating food at social identity and moral action's heart. Through the lens of Bourdieu's framework, Oliver's habitus, rooted in working-class origins but refined through professional culinary training and media exposure, allows him to occupy a hybrid field position that grants broad symbolic legitimacy. His taste construction democratises culinary capital while simultaneously reinforcing moral hierarchies around “real” and “proper” food. More broadly, this raises questions about the extent to which hospitality scholarship may inadvertently reproduce middle-class taste hierarchies by treating dominant culinary norms as culturally neutral.

4.2 Gordon Ramsay

Gordon Ramsay's persona in *Gordon Ramsay's Great Escape* (Optomen Television, 2010) articulates culinary authority blending cosmopolitan masculinity, technical expertise, and adventurous sensibility, positioning himself as global explorer seeking authenticity through non-Western cuisine engagement. His mediated identity combines professional rigour and affective intensity as both master chef and cultural ambassador. Traveling through India, Sri Lanka, and Southeast Asia seeking “real” food, Ramsay frames himself as intermediary translating foreign cuisines into Western-accessible forms. In one representative episode, Ramsay joins fishermen on the Kerala coast before preparing a spiced fish curry with local women, narrating: “I want to understand why they cook this way. It's not just technique, it's a way of life.” His physical and emotional immersion (fishing with locals, cooking in village homes, engaging street food culture) produces affective audience bonds while reinforcing culinary capital. This aligns with Bourdieu's (1984) cultural capital conversion: Ramsay transforms embodied experience into symbolic authority legitimizing taste through global

immersion. Yet this reinforces colonial knowledge hierarchies; while ostensibly celebrating non-Western cuisines, he presents himself as value arbiter evaluating dishes and positioning his expertise as quality's final measure, valorizing cultural difference while reinforcing a Eurocentric culinary gaze, a cosmopolitan masculinity that is adventurous yet authoritative and hierarchical.

In the domestic sphere, Ramsay targets home audiences with simplified recipes, reshaping into pragmatic teacher. His hyper-masculine intensity from restaurant shows (e.g., *Hell's Kitchen*) subdues for instructional mode framing cooking as achievable, rational skill, positioning him as egalitarian mentor bridging professional expertise and everyday cooking through "cosmopolitan paternalism." His cookbook *Gordon Ramsay's Great Escape* employs a markedly different aesthetic from Oliver's: clean white pages, precise technical photography, and recipes structured as step-by-step procedures, reflecting a masculine, efficiency-oriented habitus that frames domestic cooking as mastery rather than pleasure. Ramsay negotiates gendered boundaries by bringing masculinity into traditionally feminized domestic space, reframing domestic cooking as masculine competence site rather than emotional labour through minimalist aesthetic, direct language, and technical precision appealing to viewers seeking mastery and efficiency.

These dual personas (adventurous global seeker and domestic guide) enable appeal to diverse audiences. His performative versatility contributes to symbolic authority allowing taste construction across multiple registers. Ramsay's media texts reinforce Bourdieu's (1984) insight that taste is social construct shaped by position, capital, and performance. His transnational mobility, elite training, and media charisma converge to produce powerful culinary legitimacy, performing taste across cultural and domestic frontiers to assert not only what is good to eat but who has the right to say so.

4.3 Mary Berry

Mary Berry's taste construction in *Classic Mary Berry* (BBC Studios, 2018) centres on nostalgic domesticity, tradition, and middle-class respectability, offering reassuring, stable British food culture grounded in home-cooked values and social propriety. Her taste leadership derives from British culinary heritage preservation rather than experimentation, representing conservative yet emotionally resonant authority. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) notion of embodied cultural capital: Berry's authority is not claimed through institutional credentials alone but through the naturalised performance of middle-class culinary competence, the appearance that correct taste is simply known, practised, and felt. Berry's performative style features calm instruction, politeness, and gentle encouragement reflecting her institutional background (Le Cordon Bleu qualification and former BBC cookery demonstrator), reinforcing pedagogical authority rooted in traditional culinary education. The show's aesthetic (rural homes, floral settings, classically British dishes) reflects idealized English middle-class domestic space, reproducing what Bourdieu (1984) describes as embodied middle-class cultural capital: modesty, tastefulness, and decorum. In *Classic Mary Berry*, episode three, Berry prepares a Victoria sponge, remarking: "There's nothing complicated here. It's about doing the simple things properly." This framing naturalises middle-class domestic taste as timeless and obvious, enacting what Bourdieu (1984) calls symbolic violence: the dominant group's taste presented as universal common sense. Her cookbook emphasizes consistency and reliability through clear, practical recipes framing food as achievable and comforting, presenting domestic cooking as care, routine, and order expression promoting moral and aesthetic values: punctuality, cleanliness, gratitude, discipline.

This persona aligns with the historical feminisation of British domestic culinary labour. Unlike Lawson's postfeminist sensuality, Berry's maternal and conservative femininity embodies the “ideal homemaker,” drawing upon nurturing mother and well-mannered lady tropes. Her emphasis on manners, family values, and simple pleasures resonates with older and conservative audiences, offering continuity amid cultural change. Berry's affective cues (calm presence; modest voice; warm smile) generate comfort and familiarity, deepening symbolic capital as audiences trust her for emotional stability alongside recipes. As Matwick (2017) notes, affective trust centrally establishes culinary authority for female chefs whose legitimacy rests on perceived warmth and authenticity.

Through her long career (from *The Great British Bake Off* [BBC Studios, 2010] to BBC solo programmes) Berry has become emblematic of "Britishness" in food. Her promotion of traditional recipes, seasonal ingredients, and table etiquette contributes to a nostalgic cultural imaginary where national identity stabilizes through culinary routines. Her continued popularity signals the enduring appeal of culinary conservatism and domestic ritual. Berry's authority lies in naturalizing taste as obvious, timeless, and proper (British), with simple dishes serving profound symbolic functions linking eating to family, place, and tradition. In Bourdieu's terms, she converts cultural capital into symbolic capital by aligning performance with dominant middle-class norms, making her taste legitimate and aspirational. Mary Berry mediates taste through emotional resonance, pedagogical clarity, and cultural continuity, exemplifying traditional domestic femininity's enduring power in food and hospitality's symbolic economy.

4.4 Nigella Lawson

Nigella Lawson's taste construction in *Simply Nigella* (BBC Studios, 2015) foregrounds sensuality, affect, and lifestyle-oriented femininity. Unlike traditional figures like Berry, Lawson's postfeminist, cosmopolitan persona roots in performative mastery of pleasure, aesthetic style, and emotional resonance rather than formal expertise (Smith, 2020), positioning domestic cooking as an indulgent, self-affirming act, a source of well-being and personal expression rather than duty.

Lawson eschews fast-paced energy for a slower, intimate aesthetic employing soft lighting, close camera angles, and domestic settings creating a quiet pleasure atmosphere. She often appears alone, cooking for herself or loved ones, suggesting calm, control, and self-care. In episode one of *Simply Nigella*, preparing a golden turmeric milk and a bowl of miso-dressed noodles, she narrates: “I cook because it makes me feel good, not because I should.” This frames cooking as therapeutic and emotionally restorative, echoing postfeminist discourses valorizing self-improvement through lifestyle practices. Featured recipes (health-conscious globally inspired dishes alongside indulgent treats) reflect this ethos. Lawson navigates between restraint and indulgence, constructing complex femininity combining sensual gratification with emotional intelligence and cultural sophistication, modelling balanced, affective food relationships that feel empowering rather than obligatory.

Lawson's culinary authority emerges through a blend of self-presentation and narrative performance. Speaking directly to audiences conversationally with personal anecdotes and emotional reflections, her authority is affective and narrative-based rather than institutional, challenging traditional domestic versus professional cook binaries through a hybrid model where emotional authenticity and aesthetic pleasure are central (Smith, 2020). The *Simply Nigella* cookbook reinforces this: its design foregrounds warm photography, intimate prose, and recipe introductions framed as personal essays, positioning the reader as a confidante rather than a student. This format encodes a specific form of cultural capital (one rooted in

cosmopolitan lifestyle, emotional intelligence, and aesthetic sensibility) which resonates with audiences who value self-expression over culinary mastery. Her performance reconfigures traditional food media gender roles, rejecting disciplinarian tones for softer, personalised approaches. Her unapologetically sensual yet intellectual femininity combines tactile engagement with cultural capital, reclaiming the kitchen as pleasure and autonomy space. Her polished yet accessible presentation, cooking in casual clothing without heavy makeup, reinforces naturalism and approachability, resonating with audiences seeking emotionally connected, less prescriptive cooking models.

Lawson's "feel good food" embodiment aligns culinary practice with emotional self-regulation and self-care, turning cooking into personal identity affirmation. She invites audiences to engage with food as sensory joy, cultural exploration, and emotional balance, messaging resonating in media environments attuned to wellness, authenticity, and mental health. Yet Lawson's taste construction is not politically neutral. Her style reflects privileged access to global ingredients, leisurely cooking time, and conducive home environments. Her culinary authority presumes certain cultural and economic capital, even while downplaying them through informal presentation. This contradiction is central to her appeal: making elite taste seem accessible, reinforcing Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital disguised as natural preference. Nigella Lawson mediates taste through affect, sensuality, and emotional narrative, representing a postfeminist, cosmopolitan culinary figure reframing domestic cooking as empowerment, care, and aesthetic pleasure. Her contribution to food's symbolic economy lies in making taste personal, pleasurable, and emotionally resonant.

5. Conclusion

This study explored how British celebrity chefs function as cultural intermediaries in culinary taste construction. Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) framework of habitus, field, and cultural capital, the research examined media texts and public personas of Jamie Oliver, Gordon Ramsay, Mary Berry, and Nigella Lawson through close textual analysis of their television programmes and cookbooks, illuminating how these chefs shape, reflect, and contest narratives of class, gender, national identity, and morality through food, performing complex social roles influencing how audiences engage with taste, identity, and lifestyle (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2020). Each chef contributed uniquely to culinary taste's symbolic economy: Oliver's civic reformism positioned him as moral entrepreneur navigating public health and social responsibility; Ramsay's globalised masculinity articulated elite culinary authority while tapping working-class sensibilities; Berry's nostalgic domesticity preserved traditional middle-class values reinforcing culinary competence norms; Lawson's postfeminist persona reimagined the domestic kitchen as female empowerment space through pleasure, intellect, and aesthetic expression.

The study revealed that these chefs function not only as educators and entertainers, but also as powerful cultural figures who construct symbolic meanings around food and shape public perceptions of taste. Their personas operate through affective labour, aspirational narratives, and stylistic authority, influencing how audiences encounter, internalise, and contest culinary taste. Rather than prescribing behaviour directly, they repeatedly model classed and gendered identity scripts that normalise certain culinary dispositions as desirable, responsible, or sophisticated. Culinary authority is therefore both performative and affective, embedded within broader structures of class, gender, and national identity (Cooper et al., 2017).

Food media also functions as a site of ideological work, moral regulation, and the reproduction of cultural hierarchies. Through storytelling, affective performances, and carefully constructed

media texts, these celebrity chefs act as “taste leaders,” influencing dietary perceptions while framing broader social values related to health, sustainability, family, and national belonging. In doing so, they play a critical role in the mediatisation of hospitality and the symbolic economy of contemporary food culture (Hollows, 2022). Ultimately, hospitality management and food studies cannot be fully understood without acknowledging their cultural, symbolic, and affective dimensions. Examining how taste is constructed, performed, and mediated therefore offers deeper insight into hospitality as both a professional practice and a significant cultural force.

This study critically reflects the need for what might be described as a cultural turn within hospitality research. While the field has generated substantial insight into operations, service quality, marketing, and consumer behaviour, it has paid comparatively limited attention to the symbolic systems through which value, legitimacy, and taste are socially constructed. Celebrity chefs illustrate how cultural authority increasingly operates through media visibility, narrative performance, and affective engagement rather than technical expertise alone. Recognising these dynamics requires hospitality scholars to engage more directly with sociology, cultural studies, and critical theory. Doing so would expand the field's analytical capacity beyond managerial logics and enable richer interpretations of how consumption practices are shaped by class, gender, identity, and mediated forms of influence. A stronger cultural orientation would not replace managerial research but complement it, positioning hospitality as a socially embedded practice rather than solely an economic activity. Such a shift is essential if the discipline is to remain theoretically responsive to the complexities of contemporary consumption.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study advances theoretical understanding across hospitality, food studies, and cultural sociology by situating celebrity chefs within Bourdieu's (1984) cultural production theory, demonstrating how chefs operate as cultural intermediaries across overlapping fields (gastronomy, media, education, and commerce) accumulating and converting symbolic capital. These figures construct and legitimise taste as a performative, socially stratified construct shaped by narrative, personality, media convergence, and affect rather than culinary expertise alone (Hollows, 2022).

Focusing on four British chefs, this research refines cultural intermediation concepts for contemporary food and media cultures. These chefs extend their influence beyond food preparation, offering aspirational and affective identity models engaging audiences across class, gender, and morality lines (Başaran, 2025). Culinary authority is revealed as not only gastronomic but deeply symbolic, moral, and emotional, offering viewers lifestyle scripts, pedagogical cues, and cultural values through which they negotiate social positions (Johnston and Goodman, 2015). The analysis illuminates Bourdieu's habitus notion, showing how embodied dispositions are shaped through media representations. Each chef performs distinct habitus modes: Oliver's civic engagement, Ramsay's cosmopolitan masculinity, Berry's nostalgic domesticity, Lawson's sensual post-feminism provide performative models of classed and gendered identity. These personas demonstrate how food media negotiates contemporary femininities and masculinities, enriching feminist discourse by revealing how traditional and transgressive gender norms are maintained, challenged, or hybridized within culinary performance.

Seven key themes emerge (Figure 3): First, all chefs function as cultural intermediaries translating cultural capital through media, shaping perceptions of "good" food, "authentic" cooking, and "appropriate" taste. Second, class remains the dominant structuring force. Oliver

and Ramsay mobilise hybrid class identities merging working-class personas with middle-class ideologies, while Berry represents traditional middle-class authority and Lawson articulates fluid, cosmopolitan cultural capital. Taste is relational practice shaped by social positioning and mediated through cultural performance (Cappellini *et al.*, 2016). Third, gender plays a critical role. Female chefs navigate postfeminist sensibilities within frameworks both subverting and reinforcing normative femininity, while male chefs assert expertise through performance, adventure, and mastery. Domestic cooking feminisation and professional cuisine masculinisation remain operative binaries (Matwick, 2017), though increasingly blurred through hybrid performances. Fourth, authenticity and affect underpin performances (Koufodontis and Gaki, 2025). These chefs deploy affective labour creating authenticity and relatability, contributing to multi-sensory taste pedagogy where feelings equal technique importance. Fifth, civic and moral discourses are integral, linking food to responsibility, discipline, and social cohesion, cooking becomes a civic act, and these chefs engage in moral interpellation, positioning audiences as responsible citizens (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2020). Sixth, media format shapes culinary authority. Genre conventions produce distinct affective and epistemological registers influencing taste representation. As multi-platform figures, these chefs exemplify contemporary media convergence culture (Proesmans *et al.*, 2023). Finally, these chefs participate in national identity negotiation, invoking traditions and aesthetics contributing to culinary "Britishness" construction. Food becomes medium through which collective identity is imagined, challenged, and reasserted.

Figure 3: Key themes in the social construction of taste

Please insert Figure 3 here

Source: Authors' own work

Celebrity chefs perform complex cultural work, constructing taste not merely through recipes but through narratives, aesthetics, and values. Their influence is contingent upon broader media structures, social inequalities, and historical narratives framing food as both sustenance and symbol. They serve as moral entrepreneurs, educators, entertainers, and brand ambassadors (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2020), shaping how food is discussed, practiced, and valued. Through media texts, these chefs shape consumption's social meanings, reinforcing and transforming taste's symbolic economy in contemporary Britain. They are central figures in food culture mediatization, exemplifying how personal style, public discourse, and structural power converge in everyday taste making.

5.2 Practical Implications

This study has significant practical implications for hospitality professionals, culinary educators, food media producers, and policymakers. From an educational perspective, findings underscore incorporating media literacy and cultural analysis into curricula. Given celebrity chefs' expanding influence shaping public taste perceptions, training programmes should equip students with technical skills and critical tools to understand how food narratives, visual aesthetics, and symbolic capital shape consumer behaviour and brand identity. Embedding modules on food media, narrative construction, and service's affective dimensions could help future professionals navigate mediatised hospitality landscapes effectively.

From an industry standpoint, the study highlights affect and storytelling's strategic value in customer engagement (Ahmed *et al.*, 2024). How celebrity chefs connect with audiences through authenticity, emotion, and value-laden narratives can inform branding strategies for restaurants, hotels, and culinary experiences (Rodrigues *et al.*, 2023). Understanding how figures like Oliver or Lawson frame taste and lifestyle could help businesses develop resonant marketing messages appealing to consumers' identities and emotions beyond functional

needs. Aligning brand communications with values like sustainability, heritage, or wellness through emotionally compelling narratives may enhance consumer loyalty and perceived authenticity (Naccarato and LeBesco, 2012). For food media producers, the research provides insight into hybrid chef identities' enduring appeal. Successful food programming increasingly blends instructional content with lifestyle branding, emotional intimacy, and cultural discourse. Multi-platform storytelling is key to building strong culinary brands transcending individual shows or cookbooks.

At the policy level, celebrity chefs can be powerful health messaging agents, with caveats. While figures like Oliver have demonstrated effectiveness in food-related advocacy, their symbolic authority must be contextualised within broader structural dynamics, namely inequality, access, and cultural fit. Campaigns should be designed in partnership with communities and educators to avoid moralistic or exclusionary framings. The gendered and classed nature of culinary authority must be acknowledged to ensure diverse health communication representation.

Finally, hospitality institutions and cultural organisations may benefit from leveraging celebrity chefs in heritage and tourism projects where national identity and food culture intersect. Chefs' influence framing Britishness through food suggests potential for destination branding, cultural festivals, and museum exhibitions enhancing visitor engagement (Yang *et al.*, 2020). However, care must represent diverse cuisines and voices, avoiding narrow or nostalgic culinary identity portrayals. This study highlights how hospitality education and industry practice can no longer be separated from media and culture. As celebrity chefs increasingly shape public understandings of taste, responsibility, and identity, the hospitality sector must develop more nuanced, interdisciplinary approaches to engaging these cultural forces.

5.3 Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While this study offers rich theoretical and empirical exploration of celebrity chefs' role in taste construction, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample was limited to four British chefs, albeit highly influential ones. Broader comparative analysis including chefs from more diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds could yield more nuanced insights into how intersecting identities shape culinary authority. The exclusion of diasporic voices such as Madhur Jaffrey or Ken Hom is an important limitation, as their work raises different questions about authenticity, cultural translation, and the politics of representation in British food media (Watson, 2015). Second, the study relied on textual and media analysis, leaving audience reception and interpretation unexplored. Future studies might include ethnographic fieldwork or audience research to understand how consumers engage with culinary media in everyday life. Third, the media landscape continues evolving rapidly, particularly with digital influencers and user-generated food content. More longitudinal or platform-specific approaches would capture ongoing taste-making evolution in digital spaces.

Future research should examine how race, gender, sexuality, and age intersections influence food media figures' authority and legitimacy. Significant scope exists to explore how social media influencers, home cooks, or diasporic chefs construct counter-narratives to dominant culinary taste models. International comparative research could illuminate how national food identities are shaped through distinct media ecologies. As boundaries between professional and amateur cooking, public and private spheres, and culinary education and entertainment continue blurring, researchers must remain attuned to how media texts, bodies, and performances co-produce symbolic kitchen value, offering insights into broader cultural processes through which food, identity, and social life are made meaningful.

Celebrity chefs are more than entertainers or culinary experts, they are powerful cultural figures shaping how society understands food, taste, and identity. Their media texts are rich with symbolic meaning, social instruction, and emotional resonance. Through their stories, styles, and performances, they help compose a shared cultural food language reflecting and reconfiguring contemporary Britain's social fabric. Understanding their role more fully enriches not only our appreciation of culinary culture but our understanding of broader processes through which everyday life is shaped by media, class, and culture.

Taken together, this reflection suggests that hospitality management must move beyond managerial reductionism and engage more seriously with cultural power, media, and symbolic production if it is to remain theoretically relevant. Understanding hospitality today requires not only analysing how services are delivered, but also how tastes are legitimised, identities are performed, and cultural hierarchies are reproduced through increasingly mediatized environments.

Declaration of Generative AI in Manuscript Preparation

During the process of preparing this manuscript, the authors employed Claude.ai for language refinement. All outputs were carefully reviewed and revised by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the final manuscript.

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