ABSTRACT

Judging a Book by its Cover: A Multimodal Analysis of Gender Representations in Celebrity Cookbooks

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Cookbooks are valuable epistemological sites for gender study. It has been claimed that these mass produced texts reiterate and reinforce gender norms, providing “accounts of the ‘correct’ gender-specific way to undertake the activity of cooking” (Neuhaus, 1999, 531) and working to position and define women in society (Tobias 1998). As texts, cookbooks can be viewed as “multi-semiotic manifestations of discoursal meaning(s)” (Lazar, 2000, 377), where meaning is created through the interplay of visual images and language. Multimodality assumes that all modes have been shaped through their cultural, historical and social uses (Bezemer and Jewitt 2010). This renders cookbooks cultural artefacts which are “meaningful about the social environment in which they have been made” (ibid, pg 183), and useful sites for researching contemporary gender norms. Contemporary cookbooks capitalise on the audience recognition of the image of the celebrity chef. However, the commodification of culinary culture and the demands of media commerce have driven these celebrities towards “marketable stereotypes of themselves” (Brownlie et. al. 2005, 7). Consequently, in celebrity cookbooks, visual images of the celebrity are used alongside the written text to attract the reader. For the researcher, these visual images offer a further mode through which to explore representations of gender. Adopting a social semiotic approach (Kress 2009) to analyse celebrity cookbooks, this paper explores how gender is represented through the interaction of visual images (including embodied modes of gesture, gaze and posture) and written text and questions how one mode determines or influences the reading of the other.

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