

## **Open kitchens: customers' influence on chefs' working practices**

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# Open kitchens: customers' influence on chefs' working practices

## Abstract

The open kitchen as a customer restaurant vista is an emerging phenomenon. The existing research on chefs has primarily focused on the dark side of professional kitchen work which is often facilitated by being closed production spaces. To date, limited research has explored the transformation of chefs' experience through the re-orientation of their work environment from closed to open kitchens which now necessitate customer engagement.

We build on the research gap, by investigating chefs' perceptions of this transition, through a Goffmanian lens to theorise the impact of customer interactions. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were employed to identify and interview twenty-eight chefs located in different cities in the UK. Chefs spoke passionately about how their social reality and shared perceptions of kitchen work are shifting due to exposure to customers. Fundamental, positive changes are occurring for chefs' working practices and the skills required in meeting the demands of the experience economy. Theoretically, our novel findings offer a fresh perspective of the modern chef and advance the conversation beyond the negative connotations portrayed of kitchen life.

**Keywords:** *chefs, hospitality, identity, job satisfaction, open kitchens, closed kitchens*

## 1. Introduction

In delivering unique service offers (Walls, Okumus, Wang & Kwun, 2011), restaurants have begun to change the orientation of their production space, moving from closed to

open kitchens, which for the first time has permanently placed the chef in front of the customer and fundamentally changed their work place vista. Chefs have traditionally constructed and interpreted their labour and identity through a shared understanding derived from interaction with their colleagues in closed kitchens (Fine, 1996), which had no requirement for customer engagement. Open kitchens have placed the private, production work space of the chef into the public domain for the customer to view. Prior to this, kitchen work was largely decoupled from the realities of the service delivery, creating a barrier, with the effect of amplifying a disregard for customers' needs (Bloisi & Hoel, 2008; Chen & Hao, 2009). Open kitchens have now necessitated chefs to deploy traditional '*hard skills*' (food preparation and cooking) fused with range of '*soft skills*' (customer service skills) to meet customer expectations. This intentional re-design of the restaurant creates a new employment perspective that requires a research understanding.

The extant literature on chefs has been principally constructed in closed kitchens and has documented the aggressive behaviours of this prevailing masculine world of work (cf. Burrow, Smith & Yakinthou, 2015; Cooper, Giousmpasoglou & Marinakou, 2017; Giousmpasoglou, Marinakou & Cooper, 2018a). Contributions have centred on alcohol, drug abuse, working-class backgrounds in closed kitchen environments and the exclusion of female chefs (Cooper et al., 2017; Pidd, Roche & Kostadinov, 2014; Robinson, 2008). With the growth in open kitchens, there is a need to comprehend how customers' affects chefs, but surprisingly the research remains largely silent on this understanding of chefs and their work re-orientation.

The research on service work has focused on the impact of customers on roles which are directly in the frontline (cf Korczynski, 2009; Korczynski & Macdonald, 2009) or those in roles with little customer interaction such as housekeeping (Sherman, 2011). **Customer-**

employee interactions have been given attention in the hospitality literature but this is dominated by a service delivery approach (cf. Kaminakis, Karantinou, Koritos & Gounaris, 2019). There has also been recent research in open kitchens but the focus is on service failure (Sohn & Lee, 2018), hygiene considerations (Chow, Alonso, Douglas & O' Neill, 2010) and customers perceptions (Alonso & O'Neil, 2010). There are clear divisions between front and back-of-house hospitality work (Robinson & Baum, 2020). However these boundaries are being eroded. The literature has not reported on those employees who move from being invisible, to being visible to the customer. The aim of this research is to examine this impact on chefs, whose employment has been repositioned from the closed world of production to the open world of customer engagement, leading to a fundamental transformation on their working environment.

Drawing on Goffman's interaction order, this research addresses this gap by analysing how customers impact on the labour process of jobs where workers are in a state of vista transition; through the embodiment of the chef. Despite the growing significance of the number of these workers, this has not been pursued by contemporary researchers. Alonso & O'Neil (2010) argued that more research is required on open kitchens as it is a growing trend. Moreover, the work of the chef in this environment requires a deeper understanding as open kitchens are changing their profession from production to experience work (Harris & Giuffre, 2010; Rousseau 2012).

This paper makes three main contributions. Firstly, through an in-depth analysis of chefs it identifies how deeply impacted they are by customers which has prompted changes in their behaviours and the way they work. Secondly, such influences are creating a different and more welcoming work environment which may help managers address staff shortages.

Thirdly, managers need to recognise how important it is to train and prepare these employees for customer engagement.

This paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the literature on chefs is reviewed and the case for the context of this study is presented. This is followed by a focus on Goffman's interaction order as the lens for exploring this work re-orientation of chefs. Our methodological approach is explained and a reporting and descriptive analysis of our findings is then presented. Lastly, the study outcomes are discussed regarding the implications for theory and practice in hospitality and tourism research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 The hidden chef and moving to the open kitchen*

Industrialisation created a work environment for chefs which has been labelled as unique and distinctive (Burrow et al., 2015; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018a). This ethos can be attributed to the *`partie`* system/kitchen brigade devised by Escoffier (1846-1935) whereby kitchens were managed through a social capital of strict codes of practice and masculine rules derived from the regimentation of the military (Balazs, 2002; Salin & Hoel, 2011). This traditional organisation of kitchens created a culture of aggression, deviant behaviours and use of street language and expletives (Alexander, MacLaren, O'Gorman & Tahari, 2012; Barker 2018; Bourdain, 2000; Burrow et al., 2015; Fine, 1996; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018a; Giousmpasoglou, Brown & Cooper, 2018b; Johns & Menzel, 1999; Murray-Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007) which was reinforced by chefs being hidden away from the public view i.e. closed kitchens.

Chefs were socialised into these practices and culture (Harris & Giuffre, 2010; Meloury & Signal, 2014; Robinson & Baum, 2020) as part of their induction (Alexander et al., 2012; Burrow et al., 2015) and they then maintained such actions (Wood, 2000). This socialisation process was important in creating a work culture of collective belonging (Barker, 2018; Fine, 1996).

Such belligerence became occupationally accepted (Alexander et al., 2012; Burrow *et al.*, 2015; Johns & Menzel, 1999; Murray-Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007) and perpetuated to embody kitchens as a masculine production environment (Bourdain, 2000; Schehr & Weiss, 2001) signified by an hostile culture, heavy lifting of pans, a closed, hot environment and power relationships which favoured men (Blanc, 2008; White, Jones & James, 2005; White & Steen, 2006). Fine (1996, p.126) observes that "much that goes on in the kitchen should not be reported to management and must be hidden from customers".

These hostile behaviours occurring in closed kitchens contributed to the marginalisation of female chefs (Bloisi & Hoel, 2008) as it created an unpleasant work environment. Such treatment occurred to remind women that they were outsiders and was used to protect the feminisation of the male chefs' territory (Harris & Giuffre, 2010). Female chefs were often confronted with harassment, discrimination, and mistreatment in kitchens (Bagguley, 1991; Cooper et al., 1997; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018a; Harris & Giuffre, 2010; Sims, 2012). Many of these women were pushed into the margins, working in the pastry section (Crompton & Sanderson, 1994), chopping vegetables and doing menial tasks (Bagguley, 1991). To claim their legitimacy, women often had to change to be accepted in the tribe and they did so by toughening up and copying the behaviours of their male colleagues (Fine, 1996; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018a; Harris & Giuffre, 2010). In the UK, women comprise fewer than 20% of chefs (Ritschel, 2019).

This closed kitchen environment was preserved through the French classical cookery style where chefs produced the food which was then displayed to customers by waiting staff. With the growth of nouvelle cuisine, plated food became the norm removing customer engagement with the servers (Graham, 2006). As nouvelle cuisine matured, restaurateurs recognised that customer satisfaction was not solely dependent on the food being produced, but also staff service interaction (Hansen, Jensen & Gustafsson, 2005; Wood, 2000). To fill this void brought by 'picture' plated food service, chefs were put on show in the open kitchen adding imagery and visual interaction to the dining experience. This is attributed to Pine & Gilmore's (1999) revival of the significance of experiences as a source of value for customers (Carreira, Patrício, Jorge, Magee & Hommes, 2013; Mathwick, Malhotra & Rigdon, 2001) and creating a competitive advantage for businesses (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004).

Involving customers as co-producers has become a dominant strategy for service organisations (Vargo & Lusch, 2016) as experiences, beyond the basic exchange of good or services, are of value to customers (Harrington, Hammond, Ottenbacher, Chathoth & Marlowe, 2019). Using the metaphor of a theatre, Pine & Gilmore (1999) defined the experience economy as the staging of experiences by employees as the actors/performers where customers derived value from the aesthetics, entertainment, education and escapism this experience offered. Co-creation can only take place if there are systems in place to facilitate this engagement (Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft & Singh, 2010; Chathoth, Altinay, Harrington, Okumus & Chan, 2013). The change in restaurant design to create open kitchens has enabled this co-creation.

Open kitchens were pioneered in Northern Europe the 1970s and has always been a key design feature of Italian pizzerias and Japanese Teppanyaki kitchens (Fang, Peng &

Weita 2013; Norii, 2015). It includes the chef's table and a full or partially open kitchen where the chef can be viewed at work. It was not until the early 1990s that open kitchens became popular (Baraban & Durocher, 2010; Rohatsch, Lemme, Neumann & Wagner, 2007) in casual, fine dining and both small and large restaurants (Byun & Jang 2018; Chow et al., 2010; Tuttle, 2012). With the growth of celebrity chefs and food entertainment, the location of the kitchen became increasingly important in restaurant design (Chow et al., 2010; Pratten & O'Leary, 2007) as communication with the chef was associated with a positive customer experience (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010). Open kitchens are a growing trend because it creates excitement and builds trust for diners as they can see the chef at work on stage which reassures them about the ways their food is prepared and cooked and the hygiene conditions employed (Alonso & O'Neil, 2010; Byun & Jang, 2018; Sohn & Lee, 2018).

## **2.2 Goffman's Interaction Order**

Goffman's theorisation provides a valuable lens for framing this research as the focus was on micro-structures of social interaction (the open kitchen) and the code of behaviour (new chef working practices and new presentation of self) which results from face-to-face conduct (customer interaction). His interaction order identified the theatre as a metaphor for work in front of customers (Goffman, 1959, 1983). Roles are enacted based on the normative requirements placed on the performer, as "it is a dramaturgical effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented" (Goffman, 1959, p. 253). Therefore a "front" is presented to manage the interaction and guide the audience's reaction (Blichfeldt & Gram, 2017). To preserve the self, different types of behaviours are enacted to become part of the working consensus. The identity of the individual is continuously remade as the person interacts with others, as it is about fitting in, and not causing a scene (Goffman, 1959; 1963),



as "to be awkward or unkempt, to talk or move wrongly, is to be a dangerous giant, a destroyer of worlds" (Goffman, 1961, p.81).

In closed kitchens, chefs' work was based on a worker-management relationship forged in the era of the manufacturing economy. The way chefs behaved in closed kitchens was grounded in their socialisation and interactions with other chefs to perpetuate the existing kitchen culture i.e. the kitchen brigade. In open kitchens, customers have become a core constituent in chefs' work and changed the management dyad into a tripartite relationship. Open kitchens have added a new interaction order of the customer as chefs are now part of the frontline worker dramaturgy. They need to adapt through combining a front stage performance with the technical backstage competence to meet the expected societal norms as they perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), aesthetic labour (Witz, Warhurst & Nickson, 2003) and impression work (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For chefs, servicing customers is a performative doing and a bodily performance which involves ways of delighting and entertaining the customers visually and audibly.

The research argues that the embodied social interaction with customers has created a new presentation of self for chefs, placing controls and new ground rules for their behaviours. Investigating this customer influence is important because it furthers the knowledge on the differences between intangible work (service oriented) and tangible work (manufacturing oriented), which is often fused together (Sherman, 2011) and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the growing number of workers experiencing this employment transition. This knowledge gap is addressed by providing empirical data to understand the effects of customers on chefs and their workplace and allows for a wider view of customers' influence.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Sample

The main intention of this research was to elucidate the perceptions of those chefs involved in the transition of their work environment from closed to open kitchens and were now opened up to customer scrutiny. Using a qualitative paradigm, 28 in-depth, face-to-face interviews and pencil drawings were utilised with chefs who worked in both closed and open kitchens in restaurants located in different cities in the UK. Each interview lasted for around 60-80 minutes.

Due to the nature of this study, both purposive and snowball sampling methods were utilised to recruit informants. Despite some shortcomings (cf. Varma, Jukic, Pestek, Shultz & Nestorov, 2016), the snowball sampling technique was used to increase the response rate (Zinkhan, Burton & Wallendorf, 1983) and to identify and approach relevant informants who were rich sources of information (Patton, 1990), through business networks, thus ensuring appropriate representation (Browne, 2005). At the end of each interview, informants were requested to introduce other chefs who have had similar transformational work place experiences. This approach offers both theoretical and literal replication based on two facets. *Firstly*, chefs who had work experience in casual to fine dining restaurants were interviewed based on the open kitchen where they were employed at the time of data collection and to ensure a representative sample. Our data shows that some chefs started their careers in casual dining but progressed into fine dining to grow their career whilst others having worked in fine dining moved into a casual dining for less intensive kitchen work. *Secondly*, chefs who had experienced the work transition from closed into the open kitchen were interviewed.

The first two interviews served as a pilot and led to a flexible, open-ended approach framed around key topics. This elicited greater discussions from participants when generating their account (Cassell, 2015) and brought about a softer probing level of questions and greater listening from the researcher to enable the direction of the conversation and develop trust with the chefs (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The main researcher was a former chef and this emic status also facilitated richer and more meaningful conversations, which was important in building rapport and giving voice to the experiences of these chefs.

Each interview commenced with general questions about work experiences and professional background, and gradually elaborating with respondents on specific aspects of closed and open kitchen experiences. Some typical questions were: Can you tell me about your kitchen experience? How do you think the interactions/relationships are different between the open and closed kitchen? Can you give me some examples/ your thoughts/ experience? Qualitative data saturation criterion (i.e., the repetition of responses) was used to determine when to cease sampling as no additional data and insights were being yielded (Alam, 2005; Saunders, et al., 2018). Theoretical saturation was achieved when the sample was at 21 but a further 7 interviews were conducted to ensure no further knowledge was being missed (Saunders et al., 2018).

Moreover, since human experiences are subjective, complex, and difficult to articulate, they might need alternative modes of representation (Clarke & Holt, 2019). The interview design also required chefs to sketch their interpretation of the closed and open kitchen and explain their drawings following the interview questions. This approach was used to supplement the interview and enable a deeper understanding of the chefs' spoken narrative (Greene, 2007; Kearney & Hyle, 2004). Barner (2008) argues that the metaphor of

drawings enables the expression of emotions the researcher can elicit and explore additional meanings. Such drawings in research provides a creative approach to supplement a narrative (Leitch, 2008) and offer a richer account of feelings on organisational life which are often overlooked in management research (Gagliardi, 2007). Although the interviewees were highly skilled craft individuals, they might not have been able to fully verbally articulate themselves to provide their deeper thoughts on their work environment (Theron, Mitchell & Smith, 2011). All participants were supplied with a blank piece of A4 paper and a pencil and were informed that the image was supposed to represent their thoughts to facilitate a discussion on how they viewed the closed and the open kitchens. On completion of their drawings, each participant was asked to explain the image and what it meant to them. The drawings took on average six minutes to complete.

### *3.2 Data analysis*

The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and entered into NVivo software. The participants were coded to anonymise their identity by allocating them with a number from 1 to 28 and the letter m (male) or f (female) to indicate their gender. Close attention was paid to main quotations pertinent to facets of the subject. An inductive strategy entailing 'meaning units' (cf. Hellström, Hellström & Berglund, 2002) and thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017) using the six-step procedure recommended by Braun & Clarke (2006) was employed to evaluate the responses as expressed by the informants and determined by the researcher. Notes were transcribed to simplify the comparison and then crosschecked for accuracy and reliability (cf. Hellström et al., 2002; Tajeddini, Ratten, & Denisa, 2017). This allowed the interview statements to be categorised into themes, thereby establishing a meaningful understanding of the subjects' perceptions

and experiences, while maintaining the relationship to text in its original format to enable for a demonstrative of quotations and supporting the emerging concepts (Côté, Salmela, Trudel, Baria & Russell, 1995). Drawings coupled with verbal explanations, were used as intertwined facets of the progression of meaning-making. This approach assists in articulating and uncovering the line of thoughts of informants and how they visually achieve salience in imagery (Clarke & Holt, 2017, 2019).

### *3.3 Chefs' background*

The respondents' age ranged from 19 to 57 years old. The average age of the group was 35 years. All participants had spent their early years in catering education to learn basic culinary skills, either full or part time. They were generally motivated to work in the kitchen by having worked part-time in the catering trade whilst still at school. This stimulated interest and the desire to enter the professional kitchen to learn a craft. The group comprised of twenty-three UK (Inc. Northern Irish) nationals and five individuals from other nationalities (28 in total). Of the UK nationals, four had significant experience of working abroad for more than one year (see Table 1).

#### **TABLE 1 here**

The employment experience of the participants ranged from a small café, public house catering and menial work in local restaurants in the early career days, to being employed in casual and then upscale and fine dining establishments with a wealth of experience of both closed and open kitchens. Those interviewed identified themselves as chefs. Over 80% of the participants made reference to working in an establishment which

had achieved a food accolade, and all of the participants were proud of the skilled catering experience they had amassed.

#### **4. Findings and Discussion**

To determine the influence of customers on chefs' transition from closed to open kitchens, it was important to understand chefs' perspectives of this change in their world of work. Six areas emerged for the data analysis: improved job satisfaction, decrease in mockery, machoism and insults, a more welcoming work environment for female chefs, improved relationship with service staff, developing customer service skills and chefs looking good and sounding right. These areas are presented and discussed below.

##### *4.1 Improved job satisfaction*

Closed kitchens were observed to be an isolated world, hidden from society and filled with aggression (Alexander et al., 2012; Murray-Gibbons & Gibbons, 2007). This seclusion impacted the mood and attitudes of chefs before they entered work. **Many chefs, when they were not at work, would not act in this way (Harris & Giuffre, 2010).** For many, the experiences of closed kitchen work were summed up by 26m when he said, "it nearly broke me it, it really did" and 1m, "you feel a sink in your stomach, you know I've got to go in". Such a work environment led to feelings of solitude and being hidden away which was described as "the Devil's forge" (23m) and the "dungeon" (18m) with examples of being disengaged from customers on first floors, in basements or in back areas lacking light. This resonates with Fine's (1996) view to the feeling of being hemmed in a world of heat. The motivation to go to work in the closed environment stemmed from the comradeship and

level of collective support this work brought and perhaps subconsciously by not wanting to let the '*tribe*' down (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018b; Palmer, Cooper & Burns, 2010).

In contrast, the attitudes towards going to work in the open kitchen were more positive due to the wider contact with people and the physical location giving them a greater feeling of light and space. Chef 27m depicted this in Figure 1 as working in isolation, with a mirror as the representation of looking back at himself, as compared to the open kitchen where the audience is lined up to view and appreciate the skill of the chef, placing the role at the centre of customer engagement.

**FIGURE 1 here**

This feeling of seclusion between the closed and open kitchens is further elaborated in Figure 2 by Chef 15m. The closed kitchen is perceived as a restricted office with the chef confined to a desk and works in an environment operating on a production line mentality with tight management control. In comparison, 15m stated that the open kitchen "is like an oasis, it is open, it is the mountains...it is just like the open kitchen".

**FIGURE 2 here**

By being on view, customers have inadvertently improved chefs' motivation and how they felt about their work through the appreciation they directly received. The findings of the research clearly identified that open kitchens have improved the job satisfaction of chefs because customers were giving them validation for their work. Chef 7m commented

that “if you are interacting with the customers it is a bit more fun; it makes the job a little bit more worthwhile”. Buel, Kim & Tsay (2014) argued for more restaurants to embrace open kitchens as the visual connection between chef and customers improves job satisfaction, appreciation and motivation. Open kitchens have demarcated customers as an important external verifier and panoptic for chefs and this is influencing how they feel about work and their job satisfaction. Moving to the frontstage has enabled chefs to experience first-hand customer's accolades and appreciation of their work. In closed kitchens, there was little external verification and this was primarily reinforced through their peer group (Bloisi & Hoel, 2008).

#### *4.2 Decrease in mockery, machoism and insults*

Banter, insults and displays of machoism are expected as routine from working in closed kitchens and part of the ritual passage to becoming a professional chef (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018a; Palmer et al., 2010). One chef commented that “swearing led us, it’s a kind of cultural thing, you don’t even know you are doing it” (28m). The findings of this study confirmed the dominance of macho, aggressive behaviours in closed kitchens through the language used and the *'laddish'* activities such as throwing food items and playing practical jokes (Burrow et al., 2015; Cooper et al., 2017; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018a; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018b; Robinson & Beesley, 2010).

In contrast, when working in open kitchens, these chefs experienced a significant reduction in the banter, obscenities and hostile activities as 3m identifies, “in these more open kitchens you have to maintain at all times super professional behaviour because you are always on show”. Chefs have now entered a different world of social acceptability and service work (Fillby, 1992). Open kitchens have triggered a change in chefs' behaviours as



they have tailored their interactions and language according to service requirements as described by 26m, "you watch your p's and q's when people were there, yes because people are there. But in a closed kitchen you started to shout across and have a row". Customers have therefore played a critical role in re-orienting chefs' socialisation process and behaviours as they were more cognizant that they can be seen and heard and the impacts on the business.

These chefs were explicitly discussing Goffman's front stage presentation of self as the kitchen became a place of performance where customers were invited in. Customers also wanted to witness the kitchen as depicted on popular television shows by Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White. To provide this service, chefs would raise their voice and if shouting occurred in the open kitchen, it became an act for the customers' benefits as identified by 3m, "generally they do enjoy it [customers] watching us getting shouted at; well just to hear a little bit of shouting." According to Goffman (1959), these chefs' actions were based on the outcome of creating a great service experience for the customer. Chefs' performance in the open kitchen was not calculated, but rather based on being affective and embodied in the interaction as accepted within society. Urry & Larsen (2011), states that such service performances are often habitual and unplanned. The presence of the customer has demarcated the kitchen as a stage to accommodate and entertain the customer. Therefore the aggressive kitchen environment filled with expletives and macho behaviour, through public performance is no longer a fully accurate description of chefs working in open kitchens.

#### *4.3 A more welcoming work environment for female chefs*

Simonton (1998) argued that men are drawn to craft work, such as being chefs, because of the socially created message that the craft of a chef is skilled masculine employment. This leads to the self-constructing belief that females are somehow not capable of being chefs (Bloisi & Hoel, 2008; Robinson, 2008; Robinson & Barron, 2007; Robinson & Beesley, 2010). Our findings confirmed that female chefs often encountered ill-treatment, were relegated and had to prove their worth (Bagguley, 1991; Cooper et al., 1997; Harris & Giuffre, 2010). Male chefs commented how their male colleagues felt “[female chefs] were not strong enough” and “they cannot handle the pressure” (28m). Male respondents acknowledged the attempts to legitimise their feelings of power and superiority over female chefs and demonstrate their dominance through aggressive, controlling behaviour and the language used (Bloisi & Hoel, 2008) in closed kitchens. The chefs interviewed discussed how female chefs, “had to be quite aggressive and masculine in many ways” (5m), to cope in closed kitchens (Segal, 1997) and be accepted. This was a challenging situation for most female chefs (Nixon, 2009; Sims, 2012).

Due to the change in language and behaviours required in open kitchens, female chefs identified open kitchens as being a far more acceptable work environment. People 1<sup>st</sup> (2014) report specifically discuss this situation, stating that a difference is starting to be made in the recruitment of female chefs and open kitchens are clearly adding to this transformational landscape. This suggests a potential change to the traditional male dominance in the kitchen as a consequence of the increased level of direct service contact and the need for traditional male chef to engage with the customer (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clarke & Fugate, 2007).

#### *4.4 Improved relationship with service staff*

The alienation of the chef in the closed kitchen from the customer led to tense feelings and mistrust between the service staff as the intermediaries. This was partly brought on by the fact that the chef could not observe or understand the waiting staff role, and the tension between them was further developed as a result of the kitchen staff's envy of the tips the waiting staff received from the customers. This divide between the kitchen and restaurant often led to disagreements. This was in contrast to the open kitchen narratives, which revealed how the chef for the first time was able to view the progress of the restaurant service as chef 5m discussed,

“The biggest thing for me was the interaction between front of house and back of house staff. In the opening kitchen you were literally in the restaurant, face-to-face, it was very open and that's changed the relationship and really the way you communicated with each other”.

Goffman (1974, p.8) reasoned when individuals are faced with a situation they ask, "what is it that's going on here?". Their response to this directs their behaviour. This new social interaction has created a positive culture of working co-operatively as chefs are now behaving differently through obtaining a more nuanced understanding of customer facing restaurant operations. The chef is now working more clearly as additional support for the restaurant, even to the extent of the respondents identifying which tables required clearing as their main course was ready and the service staff indicating to the chef if a dish is potentially going to be overcooked, working collaboratively in a manner never possible in

the closed kitchen. It can be surmised that the sphere of influence of the chef vista from the open kitchen has widened, crossing over the boundary into the restaurant, with the chef now being able to participate in the orchestration of the restaurant service in a manner which they were never able to do in closed kitchens.

#### *4.5 Developing customer service skills*

The customer service interaction required in open kitchens presented chefs with a clear challenge of having to change their behaviour (Snyder 1987) and created anxiety. This communication aspect of the job task involved them being able to understand the customer type and the amount of engagement that was acceptable. Chefs, as new frontline service workers, are for the first time deploying a range of customer service skills (Hampson & Junor, 2005; Hurrell, Scholarios & Thompson, 2012) in order to align themselves with guests' expectations.

“Most of the chefs find that talking to the customers a little bit alien because all they have done in the past is cooking classes, they did never really do any customer care work, and so they do find it difficult” (23f).

When transitioning to open kitchens, chefs were not trained in customer service delivery. These skills were developed primarily through heuristic learning by watching and listening to more experienced colleagues interacting with customers or drawing on past work experience in front line roles. As a result, this created initial stress and anxiety, “I used to be really nervous about going up to the chefs table” (10m). Once this apprehension had been overcome, the positive and constant chef-customer interface had the effect of forcing

and strengthening their interaction skills which are now the expected requirements in a customer facing role.

“I think that if I had stayed in a closed kitchen, I would be ten times as worse now, but I think this place, with it being an open kitchen, the chefs table has made a massive difference... totally improved me” (7m).

For chefs, customers played a pivotal role in enabling them to develop a new skill set. Customer engagement has socially constructed chefs as front office labourers demanding '*soft skills*' which are not usually inherent in the traditional working class backgrounds from where chefs were recruited, creating a potential skill gap.

Developing this new skill set can be attributed to being a theatrical prop to communicate at the appropriate level of staging to meet with customer service requirements, operational expectations and the impression required for the customer performance. These skill developments also bears resemblance to Goffman's fear of being humiliated, as chefs now have to exert significant effort to ensure the appropriate staging. The ambiance created was dependent on them being able to fulfil the role which customers require and receive an authentic experience (Kakavelakis, 2010). For chefs, the risks are high if they fail in this service delivery and they experience distress which led some chefs leaving open kitchens as identified by 21m, "some people [chef] would say that it was the environment, the open environment that they did not like", and 22f, "when he heard that there was to be an open kitchen he left".

#### 4.6 Looking good, sounding right

Chefs revealed how their levels of personal grooming and cleanliness became of greater consideration when directly engaging with customers. This resonates with Goffman's (1959, p. 81) dramaturgical view of social interaction where he states "to be a given kind of person is not merely to possess the required attributes, but also to sustain the standard of conduct and appearance that one's social grouping attaches thereto". There was perhaps something of a subconscious paradigm shift from the prior dirty, masculinised job of chef, where the uniform represented a functional garment, to the new representation of the chef, whose clothing reflects the image of a cleaner more stylish service. Chef 10m states that, "you will always be very well dressed as well, look smart all the time, ironed tops, ironed aprons".

Respondents also acknowledged that their dialect, vocabulary and street language created issues for them as their vernacular speech was difficult for some customers to understand. This can be understood as unsuccessful performances and to save face (Goffman, 1963) and chefs solicited the help of the waiting staff to interpret the chef's language for the guests. It was found that over time the respondents learned to speak with more subtle accents and thus facilitate improved service interactions (Postrel, 2003). These discursive rules were clearly being learned and practised on the job. Social learning of accents would normally occur through education at school and at home (Sheehan, 2012); however, what seems clear is that the change of the chefs' dialect was now being learnt during their employment. The respondents stated that during the service interactions they slowed down their speech patterns so customers could better understand the explanation of the menu and food preparation. These chefs had to now identify and analyse the expectations and requirements of the customers. Through their dress, appearance and

speech these chefs were aiming to generate positive external impressions of themselves (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). There is the obligation of employees in public facing roles to conform to some style of uniformity with expectations of high standards of personal hygiene, dress and demeanour (Mouzelis, 1971; Witz, et al., 2003).

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This research provides invaluable insights on chefs whose employment has been transformed by being placed in front of the customers. Traditionally kitchens have been closed work environments, operating in brigades akin to a military hierarchy in the *partie* system which embedded and perpetuated a kitchen culture characterised by aggressiveness and macho behaviours (Burrow et al., 2015; Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018a; Salin & Hoel, 2011). The walls of closed kitchens are being eroded due to new styles of cooking, food service presentation and the customer's interest in food which requires the chef to be visible to meet the orientation brought about through the experience economy. Whilst hierarchical kitchen brigades still exist; the findings revealed that this is no longer the only way through which chefs transfer and reinforce their occupational identity. This exposure to customers has created a new kitchen work environment, one where the customers are impacting on how chefs work, behave and interact with their colleagues, therefore, for the first time challenging the stereotypical contemporary debates of the occupational identity and culture of the chef.

### 5.1 Theoretical implications

The most significant theoretical contribution of this research is that it has empirically extended the work on the critical importance of the influence of customers on service workers. This is the first known study which examines how customers can be transformative for a group of workers, i.e. chefs, whose employment has been re-positioned from being traditionally located in confined quarters to an open work environment. Job roles which were once considered to be back of house in a manufacturing era, are now becoming front of house orientated in an experience economy, with other examples such as the baker and the confectioner. The literature has clearly evidenced how chefs in the closed kitchen construct and interpret their identity through the tribe (Giousmpasoglou *et al.*, 2018a). A few hospitality studies have researched the impact of customers on employees however these papers concentrated on employees in frontline role such as restaurant servers (cf. Korczynski, 2009; Korczynski & Macdonald, 2009) and the service environment (Horng, Chou, Liu, & Tsai, 2013; Kaminakis *et al.*, 2019; Wan & Chan, 2013) and emotional labour (Choi, Mohammad & Kim, 2019; Shapova, 2019). Yeh & Huan's (2017) study on customer-employee engagement comprised a sample of chefs but their focus was on creativity. Whilst there has been credible research on back of house workers in hospitality (cf Dutton *et al.*, 2008), the attention given the customer impact is under-investigated (Sherman, 2011). None of these extant studies have researched employees in transition such as the chef. The strength of our findings demonstrates that these employees should not be absent from the scholarly debates on service work.

The results of this research clearly demonstrate that this tribe is now becoming socially influenced by the customers who are beginning to impact on the behaviours of chefs. The presence of the guest has had a positive suppressive effect, developing a new



culture and working practices in these new kitchen layouts. In this study, customers have not only changed the behaviours and physical appearance of chefs, but they have also improved their job satisfaction and relationships with other colleagues. As a result of the changing kitchen culture, open kitchens seem to have unintentionally created a world of work that has become less intimidating for those female chefs. The number of female chefs has grown by 11.3% against male growth of 5.9% over the last five years, to represent one in four, from one in five from 2016 (Witts, 2017). The findings revealed that being under the customer gaze creates a work environment which requires a new set of softer skills; ones that are needed to complement the hard skills of chef's work. This new work environment must be considered with the growth of open kitchens.

The second theoretical contribution of this current study is that the results contradict the general stereotypes and expectations of chefs, suggesting that there is a misrepresentation of the modern chef in the open kitchen. The aggressiveness and macho image that the chef has typified as in the academic and popular literature (Fine, 1996; Robinson & Beesley, 2010; Bourdain, 2000; Blanc, 2008) do not necessarily generalise the work environment of chefs in the open kitchen. The empirical data clearly identifies chefs in this new open world are no longer fully engaging in abusive aggressive behaviours. The orientation of being placed under the sight of the customers has had the influence of significantly reducing such traditional closed kitchen behaviours. Customer engagement in the service delivery through the open kitchen and its variants, has reconstructed the chef as a front office worker which has created new social and behavioural working pressures for the chef.

Goffman (1959) research on social interactions was used in this study to situate and discover the influences of chef-customer, face-to-face exchanges in the open kitchen. The

third theoretical contribution of this research validates the applicability of Goffman's work by empirically evidencing the importance of a social face. For these chefs, their work has become a relational activity encompassing both body and verbal exchanges i.e. an interactive service performance. The energy from these interactions has left both positives and negatives experiences of working in open kitchens as they have to change their demeanour (Jonasson & Scherle, 2012).

### *5.2 Practical implications*

This article provides several practical implications for the hospitality industry. The results provide a deeper knowledge of the transformative effects customers are having on the work of chefs which is of particular importance for hotel, restaurant and human resource managers. There is a shortage of chefs. People 1<sup>st</sup> (2017) estimated that turnover is at 40% and predicated that 11,000 chefs would be required in the next five years in the UK. The report also cited the toxic work environment in kitchens as a source of this turnover. The progressive impacts on the chef and the open kitchen work environment created can be used by management to change the prevailing kitchen culture narratives in order to retain and attract talented chefs. This can be used as a strong message as part of their recruitment, showing that the cycle of kitchen culture can and has been broken. Such an enabling milieu may act as a new '*window*' of opportunity into the craft trade for women, encouraging more female chefs.

The results revealed that chefs received limited organisation support to develop the customer care skills required to operate effectively in the open kitchen. Chefs learnt these skills through observation, experiential interactions and seeking help from the waiting staff. The findings suggest the human resource and restaurant managers must now work closely

with chefs to provide them with the necessary training and develop personal confidence to operate in the open kitchen. Chefs are hired for their skill as a cook, the customer service skills must now be built into their job training similar to that of other front-of-house staff. Such a formal proactive approach together would help to alleviate some of the apprehension of working in this new open production environment and reduce labour turnover from those chefs unable to cope with the world of work. If employment in the open kitchen is to be optimised, chef educators need to focus on the customer service as a necessary requirement to complement the traditional cooking skills. Failure to recognise this and not make provision for this form of education will only exasperate this issue, and stands to further alienate the traditional routes into work as open craft trades and the softer skill requirement becomes more of the employment norm.

### *5.3 Limitations and future research*

This research focused on chefs employed in various types of open kitchens (semi-open, fully open and chefs table) across a range of restaurant types (from casual dining to fine dining) in the UK context. Generalisability claims cannot be made outside of this setting. However an original contribution to knowledge was elucidated by recognising how the identity, culture and skills required by chefs are changing in open kitchen. Future research can focus on this transformation in specific restaurant settings such as Haute Cuisine and determining to what extent the open kitchen has reduced the levels of banter and bollocking. While this research has illuminated key issues of open kitchen from the point of chefs, further investigation is required to explore the perception of customers and other restaurant workers regarding open kitchens.

In conclusion, our paper has shown that a fresh positional thinking is required to understand the impact of customers on workers whose jobs are transitioning from backstage to frontstage. It has challenged the existing assumptions held of chefs by empirically validating that a new work paradigm is being created, as the manufacturing logic of kitchen restaurant service work is being dismantled through the experience economy.

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