Italian Food Experiences on Airbnb: Comparing online textual and audiovisual promotional texts

First launched in Spring 2020, Airbnb now offers a wide range of "Online Experiences" (OEs). Among the most popular OEs are those related to food (cooking, baking or food/beverage tasting classes). In this study, we focus on how the hosts of these culinary OEs engage in digital self-promotion to discursively construct their professional expertise – especially their culinary knowledge.

The webpage for each OE (e.g., "Tiramisu Champion & Italian gestures", "The Great Pasta Journey"), which presents the OE to prospective participants, comprises several sections: a short text describing the activity, a "Host Bio," and a list of ingredients that will be used during the OE. Hosts are also required to upload pictures of the OE and are given the opportunity – but are not required – to upload a brief (i.e., 15-40 second) video to present their food-related OE. In the present study, we examine two sections of these webpages: i.e., the "Host Bio" texts and the promotional videos. Each format offers different affordances for hosts to present and promote themselves. Through a combination of digital and multimodal discourse analysis (Herring, 2004; Norris, 2019) we analyze and compare 34 targeted Italian food OEs and we explore how hosts exploit the different modal resources offered by these textual and audiovisual formats to construct their expert identities.

Our findings highlight some similar strategies across both formats, for instance, verbal references to passion, authenticity and local ingredients. At the same time, we also identified several differences. For example, the textual "Host Bios" often include references to hosts' education and previous work experience in gastronomy or tourism as well as social media metrics which serve as measure of success. In contrast, videos rely far less on language, instead use close-ups of raw ingredients, elements of setting and clothing to more indirectly index culinary expertise. In addition, videos exploit modes such as rapid editing, background music, gestures to communicate a sense of engagement and entertainment related to both the service provided and the culinary activity being promoted.

This study contributes to growing interest in digital food discourse (e.g., Chen & Erikson, 2019; Tovares & Gordon, 2021; Mapes & Ross, 2022)

Key references

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