

Hell's Kitchen: An Audience Ethnography

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Introduction

Background and History

Hell's Kitchen sounds fairly ominous and rightly so. The successful reality based television (RBTv) program features Chef Gordon Ramsay and is set in his California restaurant for which the show is named, Hell's Kitchen. Each season since its introduction in 2005, chef-contestants have vied for Ramsay's positive attention and the opportunity to work for him in one of his restaurants. The twist is that Ramsay's positive attention is nearly impossible to garner, instead abuse is heaped upon chef-contestants.

The plot revolves around chef-contestants who come to California, live together and compete weekly in cooking challenges. After each dinner service winners and losers are chosen and one chef-contestant is sent home. During each episode there is also a sprinkle if not an avalanche of signature Ramsay abuses directed toward his chef-contestants.

Ramsay's abuse has proven to be successful in more than molding the behavior of his chef-contestants. In 2005 the show was rated "second in the 18-to-49 demographic" during the Monday 9p.m. slot, demonstrating a "particular draw with young women" (Atkinson, 2005, p. 1). This trend continued in 2008 with 8.6 million viewers (Consoli, 2008).

Hell's Kitchen has not received scholarly criticism but has been written about by television critics and viewers alike. Reviews prove that Ramsay is a celebrity and his RBTv program *Hell's Kitchen* is popular among female viewers. The reviews also indicate a lack of concern regarding Ramsay's abusive behavior. Why? Why do women watch the program and

what is the nature of their relationship with Ramsay? The following audience ethnography will investigate these questions and raise others for future studies. First, what follows is a review of the literature and method used in this ethnography.

Literature Review

Why Viewers Watch RBTB

The popularity of RBTB has been the subject of extensive investigation. Reiss and Wiltz (2001) argue that viewers of RBTB share a competitive nature and a desire for status which can be met by the competitions offered in RBTB programs. According to Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) viewers who enjoy RBTB for its entertainment value also tend to perceive the contrived content of RBTB as realistic. Viewers who perceive RBTB as realistic are more likely to view RBTB in part to fulfill companionship and social interaction needs (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2007). One way that viewers can meet social interaction needs via television is through para-social interaction.

Para-Social Interaction (PSI)

The concept of PSI was introduced within the field of psychiatry in 1956 by Horton and Wohl. PSI is a one sided relationship between a viewer and a media persona “presented by television” (p. 216). Even though the persona’s image is contrived it does offer the viewer the opportunity for an ongoing relationship. The viewer “knows” the persona through observation of their appearance and actions along with an acquired history of shared experiences which is similar to the way viewers know their friends. With time the viewer comes to believe that they know and understand the persona better than others do, including a deeper understanding of both the character’s values and motivations (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

More recent research building on that of Horton and Wohl demonstrates strong relationships can be formed with characters on RBTV programs (Ho, 2007). In this ethnography it becomes obvious that viewers have indeed formed strong relationships with the star of *Hell's Kitchen*, who they believe is real rather than a contrived persona. The PSIs making up these relationships include patterns of enabling behaviors like those demonstrated by partners of substance abusers. The difference is that in this instance viewers enable abusive behavior instead of substance abuse.

Enabling Behaviors

The term “enabler” is used to describe the person in a relationship with a substance abuser who supports the abuse. Among the characteristics of enablers is a tendency to distrust their own perception of people and to dismiss their perceptions altogether (Schaefer, 1986). Some of the behaviors that make up enabling include: “making excuses for the addict, making rationalizations for their irresponsible behaviors, ignoring the problems caused by the addict's use, and not discussing the problem” (eGetgoing, 2005). These characteristics and behaviors are seen in the chat-board postings from female *Hell's Kitchen* viewers.

To recap, literature indicates viewers of RBTV may watch to meet their need for competition and status. Viewers are more likely to watch RBTV to meet social interaction needs if they perceive the program as realistic and those who perceive characters as realistic may have an increased likelihood of PSI. One specific type of relationship was overviewed, that of enabling, where a partner ignores and excuses an abuser's substance use thus allowing the abuser to continue. This audience ethnography incorporates these previous studies in an investigation of the specific nature of female *Hell's Kitchen* viewers' interest in the program and their PSI with Ramsay.

Method

Audience ethnography was used to investigate why women watch *Hell's Kitchen* and the nature of their relationship with Chef Ramsay. Instead of a traditional ethnological method the investigator utilized postings from a publicly accessible chat-board dedicated to Chef Ramsay's programs on the FOX network. Numerous television chat-boards maintain large volumes of daily postings, making them a great source for audience study (Jenkins, 2006). Other benefits to online sources include public availability, low cost, and instantaneous data, plus anonymity online may lead to less self-conscious responses (Hookway, 2008). Internet-based audience ethnography has previously been used to perform audience analysis; for example, a six-year ethnography by Gatson and Zweerink utilized the official posting board of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to understand viewer responses to the program (2004). To the knowledge of the current investigator there have been no such audience ethnographies involving viewers of *Hell's Kitchen*.

During data collection the investigator performed a combination of participant observation (in the form of archive review) and interviews (in the form of publicly posted exchanges requesting feedback for inclusion in an academic paper). Per Walther, 2002:

Behavior in public settings is in fact not protected from recording for research; the only communication outside one's personal space that is protected by the CFR [Code of Federal Regulations Title 45, Part 46 Protection of Human Subjects] due to an expectation of privacy is that which occurs within very restricted contexts such as one's physician's, therapist's, or attorney's office. With regard to identification between the data and its human source, if the records are not linked by the researcher to the subject, it also fails to be human subjects research (p. 207).

Data and Analysis

As Horton and Wohl state, celebrities seen on television are personas which have been contrived and constructed. Chef Gordon Ramsay is no different. The man seen on television is not Ramsay; rather, he is a persona of Ramsay which has been created through production and editing. The persona of Ramsay is exaggeratedly abusive. In case the reader has not seen the program, the first episode is used to demonstrate typical Ramsay abuse. From the opening credits viewers are positioned to perceive Ramsay as hostile. Ramsay stands staring in disapproval, arms crossed, head shaking, while digital flames and steam are superimposed on top of his image, ensuring that the viewer associates him with Hell's fire.

The first challenge for the chef-contestants is to cook their signature dish; once complete, the narrator's nondiegetic voice explains that soon the chef-contestants will meet Ramsay and "they have no idea what they are in for." Again the stage is set for viewers to perceive Ramsay as hostile, thus helping to create the Ramsay persona.

Ramsay enters the scene and one by one calls on the chef-contestants to justify their dishes. "That is absolute dog shit," yells Ramsay after spitting out a mouthful of the first chef-contestant's dish and then ordering the chef-contestant to "get back in fucking line." His criticism continues, "boring," "shit," and "too bloody hot" he barks in reference to their dishes. Within the first ten minutes of the show the viewer has seen Ramsay curse, spit, yell, insult and threaten, all of which provides strong evidence that his behavior is exaggeratedly abusive. Unfortunately, his behavior does not improve as the program continues. During dinner service Ramsay is heard screaming at his chef-contestants: "when I say now, it means fucking now," "that was pathetic," "fuck yourself," and "what the fuck is that?"

There are continuous examples of Ramsay's abusive behaviors which could have been edited out but instead have been glorified, becoming central to the plot. The simple act of watching the show enables these behaviors to continue by filling Ramsay's celebrity pockets with funding from advertisers and providing positive reinforcement for the Ramsay persona. Some women who participate on the FOX chat-board not only enable Ramsay's abusive behavior by watching, they also use their PSI to defend, excuse and deny his behavioral problem altogether. These female viewers' behaviors are the same as those of enabling partners. For example, the following posting demonstrates PSI which includes enabling behavior:

I love Gordon! Every episode no matter what show he does a great job!! I watch HELLS kitchen and I loved him there. He does Kitchen Nightmares and I love him there too. You just have to get past the swearing and you'll LOVE him too!!

According to the research her positive feelings toward Ramsay may be spurring her PSI with him. Her relationship with Ramsay has developed through time as she has followed him in multiple programs. Her posting states that she loves him. She campaigns for others to do the same and excuses his language, which is a form of abuse. By ignoring his abuse she acts as an enabler in her PSI with Ramsay. This response is not unlike other postings on the chat-board.

Another loyal fan posts:

I just absolutely adore you Gordon Ramsey! At first I was taken aback by your cursing and your toughness. Though after awhile I just saw your getting the passion out of people and the best that they can be...I just wanted to say, keep up the good work and it's so wonderful to see you help so many out there with their place of business. It's really awesome what you do.

In this instance of PSI the viewer addresses Ramsay directly. Her relationship with Ramsay has purportedly evolved. In the beginning of the relationship she could identify that his behavior was inappropriate but with time she made excuses for his abusive behavior until she

had entirely excused it. She demonstrates a characteristic of an enabler by dismissing her own original perception of Ramsay. Now she praises him like a saint.

The following posting also excuses Chef Ramsay's abuse:

I like Ramsay because I like his rawness. He doesn't pussyfoot around. There's no misunderstanding about what he wants and how he expects it to turn out. The opportunity the show presents for someone whose dream it is to be a great success in this field is amazing. It's the lotto prize of culinary aspirers.

In this posting the viewer alludes to her understanding of Ramsay; she knows his motivations, wants and expectations, which are among the PSI indicators per Horton and Wohl. The viewer does not seem to recognize that what she sees on television is a persona, not Ramsay the man. Her response also enables his abusive behavior by referring to it with euphemisms such as "rawness" and "not pussyfoot[ing] around." Her posting justifies his abuse. A final point of interest in this posting is the reference to opportunity, success and the lottery, which is perfectly in line with the findings from Reiss and Wiltz regarding the need for competition and status amongst viewers of RBTv.

Directly in response to a question regarding Ramsay's abusive behavior, a viewer posted:

It's how he was trained and a lot of professional kitchen staff operate the same way. It's run with military efficacy and uses a lot of military terms as well hence brigade. The head chef is the drill sergeant. Also note he only gets abusive when he sees someone screw up when they shouldn't have done so.

Once more the viewer claims to know Ramsay better than others do and to understand his motivations as a friend might. She too is enabling his behavior by excusing it. First, she argues that it should be ignored because he is only doing what he was trained to do. Second, it should be excused because the people he abuses deserve it since they made a mistake.

There are hundreds of postings on the chat-board, many of which demonstrate similar PSIs that include enabling behaviors. For the viewers included in this ethnography the program facilitates two social needs. One, by providing a relationship with Ramsay and two, by sparking a relationship with other viewers of the show participating in the FOX *Hell's Kitchen* chat-board. In the "off topics" section of the chat-board these viewers chat about their personal lives. They ask each other what is for dinner, wish each other happy birthday, and console one another when dealing with love or family problems.

Conclusions

It is likely that women watch for a combination of reasons. Based on their responses these women watch in part because they like Ramsay (who they see as real, not a persona) and they are involved in PSI, which includes enabling behaviors.

This investigation does have weaknesses; it lacks generalizeability to other populations due to its limited sample. There is also an inability to know definitively the gender of participants in the sample. Weaknesses aside, the current ethnography provides insight into some reasons female viewers watch *Hell's Kitchen* and the nature of their relationship with Ramsay. At the same time this investigation provides questions for future research.

The relationship between viewers of RBTV and participants in television oriented online chat groups requires further study. Are the viewers of RBTV more likely to participate in internet communications and are these individuals somehow more primed for PSI? To what extent do they use these two means to satisfy their social interaction needs?

Another area that requires further research is that of specific types of PSI. Are there categories of PSI that viewers fit into and does each category represent a different social need? Are people who enable in social interactions more likely to enable in para-social interactions?

The final area of research proposed by this investigator involves the effects of Ramsay's abuse on viewers. Specifically, what are women learning by watching Ramsay's abuse?

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