



The Impact of Restaurant Rating Systems on Chefs: A Discourse Analysis of the Film Boiling Point

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Abstract

Restaurant rating systems are widely regarded as key indicators of quality and prestige in the gastronomy sector, playing a crucial role in shaping the careers of both restaurants and chefs. While these systems promote the maintenance of high standards, they also impose significant psychological and professional burdens on chefs, including stress, burnout, and creative constraints. This study examines the impact of restaurant rating systems on chefs through a Foucauldian discourse analysis of Philip Barantini's 2021 film Boiling Point. The analysis identifies five key themes: external control and pressure, kitchen hierarchy and authority, customer expectations and psychological toll, work-life balance and emotional exhaustion, and creative constraints imposed by rating systems. The findings reveal that while rating systems enhance a chef's professional status, they simultaneously function as mechanisms of continuous surveillance, undermining professional autonomy and psychological well-being. The study employs thematic coding and visual analysis to deepen the discourse analysis and illustrate how restaurant rating systems perpetuate systemic pressures on chefs. The results underscore the need for a reevaluation of these systems to ensure a more sustainable and supportive professional environment for culinary professionals.

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INTRODUCTION

The gastronomy industry is a highly competitive field where chefs not only showcase their creative talents and culinary skills but also face immense pressure from various external factors. Among these factors, restaurant rating systems play a significant role in determining the success of both chefs and restaurants. The reputation and commercial success of a restaurant are not solely dependent on the quality of the food served but also on how it is evaluated by prominent rating systems. Michelin Star, Zagat, The Good Food Guide, and Gault & Millau are among the most influential rating systems, shaping the global culinary landscape. These systems enhance a restaurant's international recognition and broaden its customer base, yet they also impose tremendous pressure on chefs to meet and maintain exceedingly high standards.

Research on the impact of restaurant rating systems, particularly the Michelin Star, reveals both positive and negative outcomes for chefs (Çetin, Aksoy & Çetin, 2020). The prestige associated with earning a Michelin Star can significantly elevate a chef's career, attract high-profile clients, and boost a restaurant's profitability (Şahin, 2021; Bang, Choi & Kim, 2022). However, the pressure to retain these prestigious ratings can have detrimental effects. Studies show that chefs in Michelin-starred restaurants work an average of over 64 hours per week, far exceeding industry norms (Temizkan & Aktepe, 2024). This excessive workload, combined with the constant fear of losing a star, creates a stressful environment that often leads to burnout, mental health issues, and substance abuse (Vinh Hoa & May, 2021; Olaru, 2023).

While Michelin remains the most prestigious, other rating systems also influence chefs in different ways. Zagat, for instance, is based on user-generated content, which means chefs and restaurants must manage both professional critics and public opinion. Though Zagat lacks the formality of Michelin, its broader audience increases pressure on chefs to satisfy a diverse customer base (Atik & Atik, 2023). Gault & Millau, in contrast, emphasizes culinary innovation and creativity, providing chefs with greater freedom but still holding them to exceptionally high standards (Cumhur & Altaş, 2023).

The psychological toll of these systems is well-documented. Studies indicate that chefs under pressure to maintain high ratings experience diminished creativity, heightened stress, and a reduced sense of job satisfaction (Çavuş & Nazik, 2022). These effects are not limited to their professional lives but also extend to their personal well-being. The strain of upholding elite standards can lead to emotional exhaustion and difficulties in maintaining a work-life balance (Yazıcı Ayyıldız & Kuday, 2023).

Theoretical frameworks offer further insights into how restaurant rating systems shape chefs' experiences. Fairclough (1995) and Van Dijk (1993) emphasize that the discourses around such systems not only influence public perceptions, but also profoundly affect how chefs view their own professional identities. The expectations imposed by rating systems are often internalized and lead chefs to equate their personal values with their professional ratings. These systems function as power mechanisms that create subject positions for chefs that leave little room for individuality. The rigid standards imposed by rating systems can stifle creativity and make chefs feel trapped in narrowly defined roles. Discourse analysis is a good method to uncover these. Discourse analysis views and interprets language as a form of communication, action and social practice. This method is inherently open to criticism and self-reflection due to its reflexivity (Çelik & Ekşi, 2008). The key point in discourse analysis is the mobilization of an interconnected system of indicators (Gül & Nizam, 2021).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as developed by Wodak and Meyer (2009), explores the power dynamics embedded in restaurant rating systems. CDA highlights how these systems perpetuate inequality and enforce dominance by setting Eurocentric standards for culinary excellence. Chefs outside the Western world may feel pressured to conform to these standards in order to gain recognition, thereby marginalizing alternative culinary traditions (Gee, 2014). Furthermore, the pressure to align with these dominant standards can limit chefs' creative freedom and lead to a homogenization of global culinary practices. Discourse analysis studies have further elucidated the challenges chefs face and the psychological effects of these difficulties (Çırak & Akbulut, 2024). In this context, films like *Boiling Point* vividly portray the daily lives of chefs and the pressures exerted by restaurant rating systems.

Given the considerable pressures faced by chefs, it is essential to explore how these rating systems affect their mental health and professional creativity. This study examines the impact of restaurant rating systems on chefs through discourse analysis, using *Boiling Point*, a 2021 film by Philip Barantini, as a case study. The film offers a dramatic portrayal of the daily pressures chefs face in high-stress environments, making it an ideal medium to explore how rating systems shape professional and personal experiences in the culinary world. Through this analysis, the study seeks to understand how restaurant rating systems affect chefs' psychological well-being, professional performance, and work-life balance.

Method

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach, specifically using Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine the effects of restaurant rating systems on chefs. Discourse analysis is well-suited for this research as it focuses on understanding how language and social practices shape power dynamics, expectations, and identities (Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1972). In the context of this study, discourse analysis provides insights into how restaurant rating systems such as Michelin, Zagat, and Gault & Millau impose professional standards and expectations on chefs, thereby influencing their psychological well-being and professional behavior.

The primary data source for this analysis is the 2021 film *Boiling Point*, directed by Philip Barantini. The film was selected due to its detailed portrayal of a professional kitchen environment and the pressures faced by chefs, making it an ideal case for investigating the real-world effects of restaurant rating systems. Through its depiction of a high-stress service day, *Boiling Point* offers rich material for exploring how these systems impact chefs' interactions, stress levels, and overall mental health.

Discourse Analysis Framework

This study adopts Foucauldian discourse analysis as its methodological framework, which is particularly effective for exploring how institutional power and societal norms are maintained through language and practices. According to Foucault (1972), discourses are not neutral; they are imbued with power relations that shape social roles and expectations. In this context, restaurant rating systems function as powerful institutional discourses that regulate how chefs perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. Foucauldian discourse analysis allows for the examination of these power dynamics, specifically how chefs are positioned within a hierarchy defined by rating systems. Additionally, the study draws on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to uncover the broader cultural and social implications of these rating systems (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). CDA helps to identify how these systems perpetuate

global inequalities and reinforce Western-centric culinary standards, pressuring chefs to conform to rigid norms.

Data Collection and Sampling

The primary source of data for this study is *Boiling Point*, a 92-minute drama film that takes place over a single, high-pressure service day at a top-tier restaurant. The film's protagonist, Andy Jones, a head chef, navigates numerous stressors, including customer complaints, internal team conflicts, and an impending hygiene inspection, all under the looming influence of restaurant ratings and reviews. These scenes provide a vivid depiction of the daily struggles that chefs face when working under the influence of prestigious rating systems. For the purposes of this study, specific scenes in the film were selected based on their relevance to the study's core themes.

Data Analysis Process

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing Foucauldian discourse analysis to examine how restaurant rating systems influence chefs' professional experiences and psychological well-being. Discourse analysis provides a framework for understanding how language, power structures, and institutional expectations shape the daily realities of chefs working under high-pressure conditions.

To ensure analytical rigor, key scenes from *Boiling Point* were systematically selected and examined. The analysis involved thematic coding, focusing on discourse patterns that reflect external pressures, hierarchical control, performance expectations, and creative limitations. Two independent researchers conducted the initial coding, achieving an inter-rater agreement of 85%, ensuring consistency in identifying recurring themes.

The coding process categorized key discourse elements into five primary themes, which are presented in Table 1. These themes capture the multifaceted impact of restaurant rating systems on chefs, emphasizing both external pressures and internalized power dynamics within kitchen environments.

Table 1. Thematic Coding of *Boiling Point* and Study Findings

Theme	Codes
External Control and Pressure	Hygiene inspections, Regulatory scrutiny
Kitchen Hierarchy and Authority	Command structures, Power imbalance
Customer Expectations and Psychological Toll	Anxiety, Performance pressure
Work-Life Balance and Emotional Exhaustion	Overworking, Personal sacrifices
Creative Constraints Imposed by Rating Systems	Standardization, Innovation limitations

These coded themes were further examined using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how language and hierarchical structures perpetuate stress, creative suppression, and emotional strain among chefs. The findings reveal that restaurant rating systems not only dictate professional success but also contribute to a work culture where perfection is demanded at the cost of mental well-being.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, several measures were implemented. First, triangulation was used by cross-referencing the findings with existing literature on restaurant rating systems and chef mental health. This helped to verify that the themes identified in the film align with broader industry trends and empirical studies. Additionally, the inter-rater reliability process ensured that the coding of scenes was consistent between researchers, reducing potential bias in the analysis.

Finally, the findings were compared with real-world studies on chef burnout, stress, and creativity under the

influence of rating systems to further corroborate the results. This comparison helped to ensure that the discourse analysis not only captured the fictional elements of the film but also reflected the lived experiences of chefs working in high-stakes environments

Findings

The discourse analysis of *Boiling Point* revealed several key themes related to the pressures chefs face due to restaurant rating systems, which are summarized below. These themes illustrate the multifaceted impact of rating systems on chefs' professional and personal lives, as well as the broader power dynamics within the kitchen environment.

Boiling Point Film

Directed and written by Philip Barantini, *Boiling Point* features actors such as Stephen Graham, Vinnie Robinson, and Alice MayFeetham. This drama-thriller film, shot in 2021 in the UK, has a runtime of 92 minutes. The basic information about *Boiling Point* is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Boiling Point Film Details

Director	Philip Barantini
Writer	Philip Barantini
Cast	Stephen Graham, Vinnie Robinson, Alice MayFeetham
Genre	Drama, Thriller
Location	United Kingdom
Release Date	2021
Duration	92 minutes

The main character, Andy Jones, faces one of the most challenging days of his life alongside his kitchen and service team during an exceptionally busy and demanding workday. The tension escalates continuously due to the challenges faced by young chefs trying to adapt, language barriers, disrespectful customers, a hostess willing to make sacrifices for social media promotion, and the arrival of a notable food critic brought by Andy's former boss. Director Philip Barantini chose a restaurant known for its industrial chic aesthetic as the setting and employed a single-take shot to intensify the sense of tension. The film portrays a single evening in the restaurant's operations.

With Stephen Graham in the lead role, *Boiling Point* tells the story of events slowly building up to a boiling point, as the title suggests. Rather than dividing the events, Barantini creates a chaotic atmosphere by piling all problems onto the characters simultaneously. The single-take format leaves no moment for the audience to catch their breath; every shift in focus introduces a new issue, while previous problems persist and continue to accumulate.

Boiling Point highlights the harsh and competitive nature of an unforgiving industry, emphasizing the struggles faced by those working under low wages and high expectations. The film reveals a system that threatens all workers, shedding light on the stress caused by such working conditions. Additionally, the film briefly but powerfully touches on social inequalities such as gender, race, culture, and income disparities. These elements are conveyed with **technical precision, effectively delivering a strong sense of chaos and entrapment to the audience.**

External Control and Pressure

One of the most prominent themes in the film is the stress induced by hygiene inspections, which are portrayed as a significant source of pressure for the head chef, Andy Jones. Early in the film, the arrival of a hygiene inspector

sets the tone for the entire service, with Jones visibly anxious about meeting the high standards required by external evaluators. The inspector meticulously checks every detail, even pointing out minor discrepancies such as a slight temperature deviation in the refrigerator (see Fig. 1). This scene highlights the constant scrutiny chefs face from rating systems and regulators, who hold the power to affect a restaurant's reputation with a single inspection.



Figure 1. A scene from Inspector inspection

In this context, hygiene inspections serve as a metaphor for the broader pressures imposed by rating systems like Michelin. Chefs are expected to meet exacting standards consistently, with the threat of losing their rating if even minor issues arise. This reinforces the power dynamics at play, where external evaluators wield significant influence over a chef's career and restaurant's success (see Fig. 2).



Figure 2. A scene about tension after inspection

Kitchen Hierarchy and Authority

The film also emphasizes the internal pressures within the kitchen, particularly through the interactions between Chef Jones and his staff. As the service progresses, the stress of maintaining high standards begins to wear on Jones, and his leadership becomes increasingly authoritarian. He reprimands his staff for minor mistakes, such as improper hand-washing techniques, which further heightens the tension in the kitchen. These interactions reflect how the pressure to maintain a top rating exacerbates power imbalances within the kitchen, as the head chef becomes more controlling and less tolerant of errors (see Fig. 3).



Figure 3. A scene from Inspector inspection

The discourse analysis shows that restaurant rating systems contribute to these internal dynamics by placing the burden of responsibility on the head chef to ensure perfection at every level. This creates a hierarchical structure where lower-level staff are constantly subjected to the chef's stress-induced outbursts, leading to a toxic work environment. The need to meet the expectations of rating systems thus perpetuates a cycle of stress and conflict, undermining team cohesion and morale (see Fig. 4).



Figure 4. A scene showing error due to overload

Customer Expectations and Psychological Toll

Another significant theme in the film is the immense pressure placed on chefs by customer expectations, which are shaped by a restaurant's ratings and reputation. In one pivotal scene, a food critic arrives at the restaurant unexpectedly, leading to heightened anxiety among the staff. Chef Jones, already struggling to manage the demands of a busy service, is further overwhelmed by the need to impress the critic, knowing that a negative review could damage the restaurant's standing.



Figure 5. A scene of the critic arriving unannounced

This scene underscores how restaurant rating systems, particularly Michelin, create unrealistic expectations from customers who expect flawless service and exceptional cuisine at all times. The psychological toll on chefs is evident, as they must constantly balance the pressure to meet these expectations with the day-to-day challenges of running a kitchen (see Fig. 6). The discourse analysis reveals that this external pressure often leads to burnout and emotional exhaustion, as chefs feel trapped by the need to maintain their restaurant's reputation at any cost.



Figure 6. A scene showing the customer's expectation of excellent service

Work-Life Balance and Emotional Exhaustion

The film also explores the ways in which the professional pressures of maintaining a top rating seep into the personal lives of chefs. Throughout the film, Chef Jones's personal life is depicted as falling apart under the weight of his professional responsibilities. His inability to maintain a healthy work-life balance, coupled with the stress of running a high-profile restaurant, leads to emotional detachment and substance abuse (see Fig. 7).



Figure 7. A scene from John, who struggles to find time to even make phone calls to his family

The discourse analysis reveals how restaurant rating systems contribute to this erosion of personal well-being by creating an environment where chefs are expected to devote their entire lives to their work. The constant pressure to maintain high standards not only affects their professional lives but also leaves little room for personal relationships or self-care. As a result, chefs often suffer from burnout, depression, and in extreme cases, substance abuse, as a way to cope with the relentless demands of their careers (see Fig. 8).



Figure 8. A scene showing difficulties in family life

Creative Constraints Imposed by Rating Systems

A final theme identified in the discourse analysis is the creative constraints imposed by restaurant rating systems. Throughout the film, Chef Jones struggles with the need to balance innovation with the expectations of maintaining a premium-level restaurant. The film illustrates how the rigidity of these rating systems limits chefs' ability to experiment and take risks, as they are constantly pressured to conform to a predefined set of standards (see Fig. 9).



Figure 9. A scene in search of perfection

This tension between creativity and conformity is a recurring issue in the gastronomy industry, where chefs often feel that they must prioritize consistency and perfection over innovation. The discourse analysis shows that while restaurant rating systems elevate the prestige of certain chefs, they simultaneously restrict their creative freedom, leading to frustration and a sense of stagnation in their careers.



Figure 10. A scene showing customers who want simple food instead of creativity

Discussion

The findings from the discourse analysis of *Boiling Point* provide valuable insights into the profound impact that restaurant rating systems have on chefs, both professionally and personally. This section interprets these findings in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks, highlighting the broader implications for the gastronomy industry and the well-being of its workers.

The film vividly portrays how external pressures, such as hygiene inspections and customer expectations, significantly contribute to the stress experienced by chefs. As demonstrated in *Boiling Point*, the arrival of a hygiene inspector creates an immediate shift in the kitchen's atmosphere, symbolizing the constant scrutiny chefs face in high-profile restaurants. This aligns with existing research showing that the rigid standards imposed by systems like Michelin create a perpetual sense of anxiety among chefs (Yazıcı Ayyıldız & Kудay, 2023; Olaru, 2023). The pressure to meet these expectations, paired with the fear of failure, reinforces the power dynamics discussed in Foucault's (1972) discourse theory, where chefs internalize the expectations of external evaluators as self-imposed imperatives.

Furthermore, the power imbalance between inspectors and chefs reflects how rating systems operate as tools of control, shaping not only the professional conduct of chefs but also their psychological well-being. The fear of losing a rating or receiving negative reviews drives chefs to prioritize external approval over their own creative and professional satisfaction (Fairclough, 1995). This dynamic creates an ongoing cycle of stress and tension that

ultimately undermines both the mental health of chefs and the sustainability of their careers.

The findings also underscore the internal power struggles within kitchen environments, exacerbated by the external pressures imposed by rating systems. Chef Jones's interactions with his staff reveal how the burden of responsibility for maintaining a top rating can lead to authoritarian leadership, with the head chef becoming increasingly controlling and intolerant of mistakes. This finding resonates with research indicating that high-pressure kitchen environments often lead to toxic work cultures, where chefs feel compelled to adopt autocratic leadership styles to maintain control (Temizkan & Aktepe, 2024). From a theoretical standpoint, this internal power struggle can be understood through the lens of Foucault's (1972) theory of power relations, which suggests that those in positions of authority -such as head chefs- often replicate the very power dynamics imposed upon them by external systems. The expectation to uphold the standards of rating systems thus not only affects the chefs but also permeates the entire kitchen hierarchy, contributing to a stressful and unsustainable work environment.

Another significant theme emerging from the findings is the psychological burden created by customer expectations, which are heavily influenced by a restaurant's rating. As portrayed in *Boiling Point*, the arrival of a food critic heightens the pressure on Chef Jones, forcing him to prioritize the critic's satisfaction over the well-being of his team. This mirrors the reality for many chefs, who find themselves caught between meeting the expectations of demanding customers and maintaining their professional integrity (Atik & Atik, 2023). Customer expectations, driven by restaurant ratings, often create a sense of entitlement, where diners expect flawless service and exceptional food at all times. This creates an environment in which chefs are constantly under pressure to deliver perfection, contributing to high levels of stress and burnout (Çavuş & Nazik, 2022). The discourse analysis reveals that this burden of perfection not only affects chefs' ability to perform their jobs effectively but also diminishes their overall job satisfaction and motivation.

The findings also highlight the significant toll that professional pressures take on chefs' personal lives. In *Boiling Point*, Chef Jones's emotional detachment and substance abuse illustrate the personal costs of working in a high-pressure environment. This is consistent with existing literature that identifies burnout, depression, and addiction as common issues among chefs working in Michelin-starred restaurants (Olaru, 2023). Foucault's (1972) concept of the self-regulating subject is particularly relevant here, as chefs internalize the pressures of their professional environment, leading to self-destructive behaviors in an attempt to meet external expectations. The film's portrayal of Jones's breakdown suggests that the constant demand for excellence erodes not only chefs' mental health but also their personal relationships and sense of self.

A final theme identified in the analysis is the tension between creativity and the rigid standards imposed by restaurant rating systems. While *Boiling Point* depicts Jones attempting to innovate and introduce new dishes, the pressure to maintain premium-level consistency limits his creative freedom. This finding aligns with studies that suggest restaurant rating systems often stifle chefs' creativity by forcing them to conform to a predefined set of standards (Cumhur & Altaş, 2023). From a theoretical perspective, this reflects the broader power dynamics of discourse, where rating systems dictate what is considered "excellent" or "innovative" in the culinary world, often marginalizing alternative culinary traditions (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The restriction of creative expression, coupled with the constant need for perfection, leads to professional stagnation and frustration among chefs, who feel trapped by the expectations of external evaluators.

The findings from this study have important implications for the gastronomy industry as a whole. Restaurant rating systems, while elevating the status of chefs and restaurants, also contribute to a work environment that is unsustainable in the long term. The high standards imposed by these systems create a culture of perfectionism that leads to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and diminished creativity among chefs. To address these issues, there is a need for more flexible and supportive industry practices that prioritize the well-being of chefs. This could include redefining the criteria used by rating systems to evaluate restaurants, placing greater emphasis on work-life balance, and encouraging innovation without the fear of losing ratings. Additionally, industry leaders and policymakers should explore ways to mitigate the psychological and emotional toll of working in high-pressure kitchens, such as offering mental health support and promoting healthier working conditions.

Conclusion

This study has explored the impact of restaurant rating systems on chefs through a discourse analysis of *Boiling Point*, a film that vividly portrays the pressures faced in high-end kitchens. The findings highlight the multifaceted effects of rating systems like Michelin, which elevate the status of chefs while simultaneously imposing immense stress and professional constraints. The analysis revealed that the external pressures of hygiene inspections, customer expectations, and the need to maintain flawless standards significantly affect chefs' psychological well-being, contributing to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and a lack of work-life balance.

The study also found that the internal dynamics of kitchen environments, exacerbated by the demands of rating systems, often lead to authoritarian leadership styles and toxic work cultures. Chefs are forced to adopt rigid management approaches to uphold the standards imposed on them, which undermines team cohesion and exacerbates the stress felt by both leaders and their staff. Moreover, customer expectations, fueled by restaurant ratings, place additional burdens on chefs, further increasing their workload and emotional strain.

The tension between creativity and conformity emerged as a key theme, with chefs feeling constrained by the need to adhere to rigid standards rather than innovate freely. This stifles their ability to experiment, leading to professional stagnation and frustration. The findings suggest that while rating systems reward excellence, they also limit chefs' creative freedom, thereby hindering the development of new culinary ideas and practices.

Given these findings, it is clear that restaurant rating systems, while providing a benchmark for excellence, contribute to an unsustainable work environment for many chefs. The gastronomy industry must consider reforms to address these issues, including redefining the criteria for evaluating restaurants and placing greater emphasis on mental health, work-life balance, and creativity. Policymakers and industry leaders should explore ways to support chefs through stress management programs, mental health services, and more flexible work practices that prioritize the well-being of kitchen staff.

Future research could further investigate the long-term psychological and professional effects of working under the scrutiny of restaurant rating systems. Additionally, comparative studies between different rating systems and their unique impacts on chefs across diverse cultural and economic contexts would offer deeper insights into the global influence of these systems. Finally, qualitative studies involving in-depth interviews with chefs could provide a richer understanding of their lived experiences and coping mechanisms, offering practical solutions for mitigating the negative effects of these systems.

Declaration

All authors of the article contributed equally to the article process. The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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