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'Haha, what a twit I am'. The construction of a social identity in the comments sections of UK food blogs[1]

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the comments sections of a group of UK food blogs to investigate how bloggers shape their 'social identity' in direct interaction with the users. The bloggers' comments are analysed in view of Goffman's (1959) theory of society as a stage to see whether the food bloggers show their 'self-as-performer' (the real person) or their 'self-as-character' (a constructed persona). Moreover, the study uses Herring's (2004) criteria to understand if food blogs can be classified as virtual communities. Then, a qualitative analysis of instances of positive/negative politeness in the comments sections of the blogs aims at investigating the reactions to praise or criticism from the users. The application of politeness theory shows to what extent the blogger-user interaction is influenced by the users' perception of belonging to a (virtual) community.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, food blogs, pragmatics, discourse analysis, culinary linguistics.

1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) along with linguistics studies have shown an increasing interest in the analysis of practices in the discourse of food. Food-related discourse plays a significant role also in the entertainment industry as it is testified by the popularity of renowned

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chefs who are present daily on dedicated TV shows and networks. For instance, the BBC 'Good Food' show and Food Network are dedicated exclusively to food preparation and how to serve dishes to guests or family. In addition, we witness the growth of the number of amateurs who use the public's increased interest in cooking and the spread of digital media to make a career through online platforms, such as food blogs, YouTube channels, social networks, etc., in which they show how to organise and prepare meals. Online 'cooking personalities' particularly exploit the affordances of the medium of food blogs to increase the reach of their popularity to the extent that they have become acknowledged experts with the publication of cookery books and participation in TV programs or public events. Food blogs are also places of social interaction where the 'expert' who created the blog meets the 'non-expert' who visits the blog and posts comments. However, this interaction is more complex than just a dual relationship between the author spreading professional knowledge and the public receiving it since visitors include novices, who want to learn how to cook more creative dishes, and amateur specialists, who interact with the blogger at a higher expertise level (cf. Diemer – Frobenius 2013, Cesiri 2016).

This study continues the work conducted in a previous contribution which investigated the lexico-grammatical features in the recipes sections of the '2015 Top 10 UK's Food Blogs' (Cesiri 2016). In that study, food bloggers were found to constantly present themselves as food lovers rather than authoritative figures to reduce the distance from the users. In the present contribution the assumption is that communication in the recipes pages of a food blog is unidirectional, while real interaction happens in the comments section. Here, users provide feedback on the recipes and exchange their ideas, share their opinions and experiences. Before analysing the comments sections, the study seeks to address the question whether food blogs constitute a virtual community. To do so, Herring's (2004) six criteria proposed to identify an online community are applied to the ten food blogs considered in Cesiri (2016). If the six criteria are met, the food blogs can be considered virtual communities 'guided' by a leader (the food blogger) who has a specific social identity, and whose norms the users must abide by to be accepted as members of the community. Then, in order to investigate how food bloggers shape their 'social identity', the comments are analysed using Goffman's (1959) theory of society as a stage, in its particular application to blogs (McGaughey 2010). Finally, the exchange of comments between food blogger and users is employed to analyse instances

of positive and negative politeness (cf. Brown – Levinson 1987). The aim is to see how they reciprocally position themselves and how the bloggers manage praise or criticism from their users.

1.1 The corpus

As indicated in Cesiri (2016) the food blogs used in this study were selected according to their 'popularity' on the Web and the food bloggers' activity of posting comments. The ranking of the food blogs in this sense was the one provided by the website *Vuelio* (former *Cision UK*), a journalist and blogger database, monitoring analytics. *Vuelio*'s ranking was formed taking into consideration search criteria such as "social sharing, topic-related content and post frequency" (<www.vuelio.com>), with data updated in June 2015. A later consultation of the *Vuelio* database produced a slightly different ranking. However, a decision was made to keep the same list of blogs as in the 2016 study to investigate that corpus more thoroughly. Thus the analysis conducted here includes an updated list of food blogs, and takes into consideration their recipes and comments sections. The database search produced the following list of 'UK's Top 10 Food Blogs':

1. *Deliciously Ella*, <http://deliciouslyella.com/>;
2. *The Curry Guy*, <http://www.greatcurryrecipes.net/>;
3. *Lavender and Lovage*, <http://www.lavenderandlovage.com/>;
4. *Honestly Healthy*, <http://www.honestlyhealthyfood.com/>;
5. *Tinned Tomatoes*, <http://www.tinnedtomatoes.com/>;
6. *A Girl Called Jack*, <http://agirlcalledjack.com/>;
7. *The Crazy Kitchen*, <http://www.thecrazykitchen.co.uk/>;
8. *Eat Like a Girl*, <http:// http://eatlikeagirl.com/>;
9. *Amuse Your Bouche*, <http://www.amuse-your-bouche.com/>;
10. *Belleau Kitchen*, <http://www.belleaukitchen.com/>.

Earlier analysis of the recipes sections showed that the style used by the food bloggers in the recipes and in the comments sections are slightly different. In the recipes sections, when they describe the ingredients and the procedure to make the dish, the register is more formal; it also shows the usage of domain-specific, technical terminology such as the indication of specific cooking techniques, tools or ingredients (Cesiri 2016). On the other hand, the narration of the memories, or of some story behind the dish, engages the users' attention and creates a sort of emotive link between the food blogger

and the public. In the comments sections (and, occasionally, in the narrative parts of the recipes sections), the language could be described as more colloquial and conversational. However, suggestions and further advice to personalise the dish are always to the point and use technical terminology despite the informal tone of the food bloggers' responses.

2. Food blogs as a genre

Blogs (or weblogs) are defined as "interactive webpages in which the blog owner, or author, posts regular updates. Blogs can be about a particular topic, current events, or personal thoughts and expression, much like that of a personal journal" (Blanchard 2004). Today, blogs have gone far beyond a mere personal journal and are used by their owners, a.k.a. bloggers, to share personal ideas as well as professional opinions, to set trends in domains such as fashion, cinema, travel experiences, and lifestyle in general, but also politics, and literature. Blogs are, moreover, sometimes seen as forms of journalism (Lasica 2003) to the extent that "journalists see blogs as alternative sources of news and public opinion" (Herring et al. 2004: 1). The power of blogs in many aspects of real life has attracted the attention of scholars who investigate to what extent (if any) the discursive practices already established in other genres of CMC (forums, electronic discussion lists, etc.) are present in blogs, and how these establish new practices and set new boundaries in CMC. For instance, Androutsopoulos (2011) reflects on how new digital media (such as blogs) influence already established writing practices and create new ones, as well as how the interface influences the creation of a digital identity (Androutsopoulos 2010). Leppänen (2012) investigates the language choices in the discourse of social media to see how "affective, social, and cultural alignments and affinities" (2012: 1080) are expressed by young Finns. Herring (2007) creates a scheme for a classification of genres in CMC, using blogs as a case study. Other studies draw a picture of a complex genre, in which blogs range from "individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression" (Herring et al. 2004: 1) to places for social action (Miller – Shepherd 2004) and sites where new personal connections are built (Baym 2010). More recently, blogs have been contrasted with other social media such as Facebook and Twitter (Baruah 2012, Bouvier 2015). Several other contributions focus on the sociolinguistic implications of blogging and use specific types of blogs as case studies. To name just a few, Luzón (2011) considers academic blogs, Limatius (2016 and this volume) analyses "plus-size fashion blogs", while Palmgren

(2015) examines blogging by "girls with eating disorders". What these studies have in common is the assumption that blogs go beyond traditional writing practices and the creation of social relations, while crossing the border between public space and the private sphere.

As regards the specific kind of blog investigated here, food blogs as a 'textual'[2] genre have only recently received more interest from scholars of CMC. The literature on food blogs is not as extensive as one might think considering the popularity that the genre has enjoyed in everyday life. Moreover, research into food blogs includes a variety of approaches that renders categorisation difficult. For instance, food blogs have been considered from the gender studies and feminist perspectives (Cairns et al. 2010, Salvio 2012); communication studies concentrate on food blogs as a kind of social media (Rousseau 2012), while sociological and cultural studies investigate how food blogs can affect eating habits, food culture (Lee 2014, McGaughey 2010), or how food blogs are used to communicate personal relationships with food and body image (Leggatt-Cook – Chamberlain 2012).

Domingo et al. (2014) investigate food blogs using "combined multimodal social semiotic, ethnographic and narrative methods" (2014: 2). The authors, however, use food blogs only as a functional means to prove that their framework is useful for the analysis of online material in general. On a similar note, Adami (2014) conducts a multimodal analysis on two versions of the same food blog to explore the "aesthetic meaning potential" (2014: 12) of a webpage constructed to achieve specific communicative intentions, which depend also on the accepted norms of the virtual social group that is targeted.

Corpus or discourse analyses have been employed in two studies thus far, (Diemer – Frobenius 2013 and Cesiri 2016). The former has drawn on a definition of food blogs as a genre, concluding that food blogs "are a written, asynchronous genre of CMC" (2013: 53). As it was also ascertained in Cesiri (2016), they are a complex sub-genre of blogs, containing recipes, information and discussion on nutrition, tales of personal events connected

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[2]   Here, the term 'textual' is used as in Herring (2004: 371) to refer to "any form of language, spoken or written, that can be captured and studied in textual form". It is important to point out that food blogs are not a 'textual genre' *stricto sensu*. Indeed, they are a multisemiotic genre since they use a combination of verbal and visual elements to make the users' browsing experience more appealing. Food blogs employ customised graphic design, both static and dynamic with animations, sounds, text, pictures and videos, hyperlinks, searchable archives and other features that allow users to directly interact with the food bloggers, such as comments, links to social media or the subscription to a newsletter.

to – or deriving from – the preparation of specific recipes. In the prototypical structure that recurs in every food blog, the pages are constructed as in the scheme presented by Diemer – Frobenius (2013: 56). This scheme is adapted as in Figure 1 below to describe the typical structure found in the food blogs examined in Cesiri (2016).

Social media logos Banner

Title of the recipe	
Photo of the finished dish	Awards and reviews
	Other recipes
A few introductory paragraphs The recipe Concluding remarks	Advertisements Newsletter subscription Searchable archives Videos
Comments section	

Links to other recipes of the books by the blogger Presentation of the blogger with photo
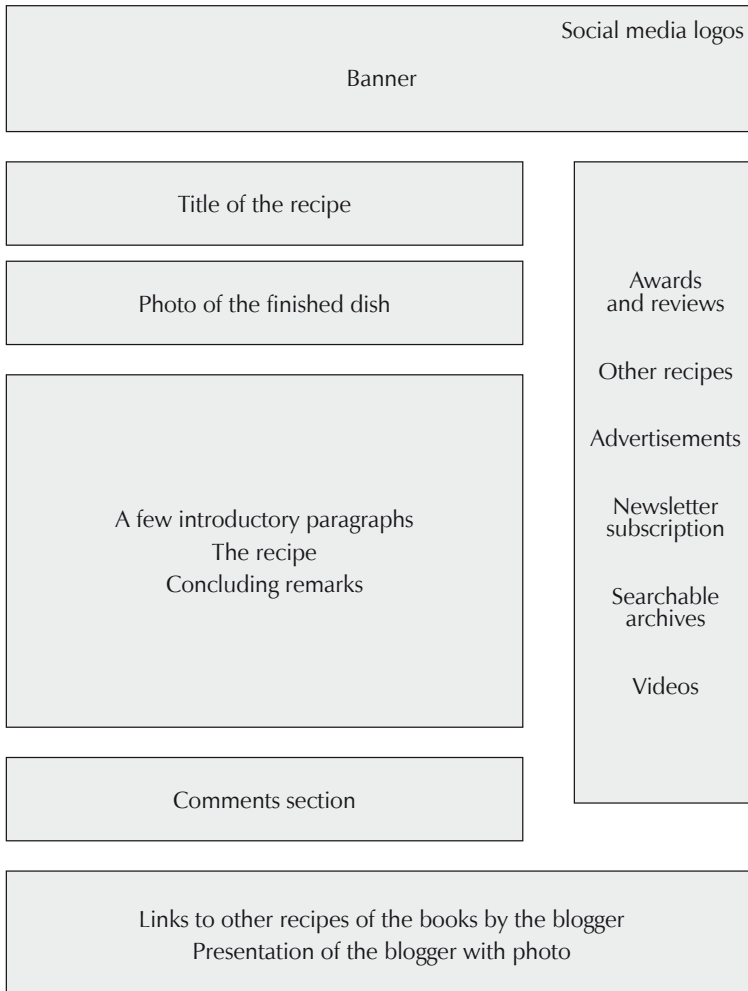
Figure 1. Prototypical structure of the food blogs in the corpus
(adapted from Diemer – Frobenius 2013: 56)

As regards the textual aspects of the genre, the recipes sections show a recurrent pattern, which is also typical of the more traditional genre of cookbooks: the recipe is preceded by a few introductory paragraphs, in which the blogger informs the users of its origins and of his/her source

of information. Typical of the food blog genre is the part where the bloggers tell how the dish, or its preparation, is related to their personal experience or to some anecdote in their family history, including the description of emotions recalled thanks to that very recipe. The actual recipe follows giving information on the serving size, the time necessary for preparation, the level of difficulty and the list of ingredients. The verbal description of the preparation is accompanied by photos and/or videos of the different steps, and the addition of some more information on how to best serve or enjoy the dish. The abovementioned multimodal element is further enhanced by the sensory descriptions given in the recipes and in the comments sections, and which help create and enrich the phraseology typical of communication about food. The concluding remarks are usually in the form of one expressive sentence (e.g., 'Good, eh?', Cesiri 2016) or some expressions in the imperative tense (e.g., 'enjoy!', Cesiri 2016). The final part of the page is occupied mostly by the comments section, the object of the present study.

3. Food blogs as virtual discourse communities

Previous research has established that food blogs are places where expert knowledge (food bloggers and expert users) and 'common practice' (non-expert users) meet and interact (Cesiri 2016). However, the occurrence of interaction is not sufficient to identify virtual communities (i.e. where communicative practices are influenced by a sense of in-group identity) involved in food blogs. The following Sections are dedicated to addressing the question whether or not food blogs can be considered virtual communities. Such identification will be instrumental to a contextualisation of the interactional practices that emerge from the analysis of the comments, and to explaining some reactions of the users to the bloggers being praised or criticised.

      The identification of a virtual community is not an easy task, considering the intangible communicative and physical boundaries that food blogs have as a genre of CMC. Using the literature available on virtual communities, Herring (2004: 352) identifies "six sets of criteria" that help identify a virtual community and that "suggest concrete ways in which the notion of 'virtual community' might be broken down into component behaviours that can be objectively assessed" (353). These criteria are (Herring 2004: 352):

1) active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants;
2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values;

3) solidarity, support, reciprocity;
4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution;
5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups;
6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals.

Applying Herring's (2004: 353) criteria, the first one is met in the recurrent posts by certain users who receive regular replies by the blogger. Criterion number 2 includes the presence of searchable archives as well as the use of recurrent linguistic practices that are shared by bloggers and users alike. The criterion of solidarity and reciprocity is measured through the specific usage of speech acts such as expressions of positive politeness, while the fourth criterion of expression of conflict and its resolution can be measured by an analysis of "speech acts violating positive politeness" (Herring 2004: 353). The fifth criterion is evident when the comments contrast the 'us' as a group to the 'them' used to refer to some other food blog. Finally, the sixth criterion identifies the hierarchical roles among the participants that can be measured through the analysis of the participation patterns emerging in the comments where blogger and users engage in conversation-like interactions.

The application of these criteria to the comments sections of the food blogs reveals that only some of the food blogs meet them and can thus be properly considered as virtual communities, namely: *Deliciously Ella* (henceforth DE), *Lavender and Lovage* (L&L), *Tinned Tomatoes* (TT), *Amuse Your Bouche* (AYB). As for the remaining six food blogs, they show no interaction; occasionally the users post some comments but they do not receive an answer by the food blogger. Alternatively, if bloggers do reply, they write just a very short comment that does not encourage further interaction, such as a thank you note for the feedback on the recipe and for following the blog. These food blogs were excluded from the present analysis, which focuses only on those that involve interaction between bloggers and users. The next Section will show how the four food blogs selected meet the six criteria that identify them as virtual communities.

3.1 The food blogs as virtual communities

The first criterion of participation and presence of a core group of participants is easily measured in the users' comments[3]. The core participants are recognisable from the acknowledgement that they have been following

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[3]   The examples reported in this paper were taken from a pool of 1727 comments, thus divided: DE 1022, L&L 202, TT 333, and AYB 170. Most of the comments by the users,

the bloggers for a long time (1, 2, 3), from reference to older recipes (5 and 7) or to the personal life of the blogger. For instance, (4) refers to how busy the blogger is imagined to be, while (6) includes a reference to the blogger's son appearing in the photo accompanying the recipe:

(1)   Looks lush!! Love following your recipes… What steamer do you use? (DE);

(2)   This recipe looks amazing – I am obsessed with your blog! (DE);

(3)   Another gorgeous looking recipe and how interesting about how it got its name! (L&L);

(4)   Well, that looks simply wonderful! How in the world do you find the time to do everything you do?! (L&L);

(5)   Oooh these look lovely! As you know I've made sausages a couple of times recently […] (TT);

(6)   Look at how big Cooper is getting. These are pulled together beautifully […] (TT);

(7)   We love your beer batter, so this sounds like another recipe of yours that we will love (AYB);

(8)   Thank you once again for a lovely looking dish (AYB).

Criterion 2 is also fulfilled thanks to the presence of searchable archives in all the four blogs. The other aspect included in this criterion (a shared domain-specific language) is measured through the specific terminology used in the recipes by the bloggers. These are repeated with skilled expertise by the users, who sometimes also suggest alternatives to the original recipe, as in the following examples, which use specific terminology such as 'sautéing' in (9), the procedures explained in (10), or reference to alternative ingredients to personalise the blogger's original recipe (11, 12):

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and the replies by the bloggers, did not contain particularly articulate interactions, most remarks being just general 'thank you for the new recipe' by the users and 'thank you for your comment' by the bloggers. These examples were not chosen to be included in the present analysis since they show only the kind of interaction that is part of normal acts of '(n)etiquette'. Thus, the examples given in the following Sections, both users' comments and bloggers' replies, are all those that allow for the analysis of how the food bloggers keep their 'social identity' in their interactions with their users, especially in the case of criticism. The examples are reported verbatim from the comments sections of the food blogs; punctuation, spelling, and possibly non-standard forms are all as they were posted by their authors. When no other indication is provided, the comments come from the users and the blog in which they were posted is given in round brackets.

(9)   Wonderful! I made it last night and just soaked the tomatoes in warm water for about an hour prior to sautéing, and it worked wonderfully! (DE);

(10)   I made the sorbet this afternoon as I had some strawberries that were looking a bit tired. I only had regular elderflower cordial so I added a generous tablespoon of rose water instead (L&L);

(11)   Sylvia loves chickpeas so I must try these (though I don't like coriander so might try parsley) (TT);

(12)   Haven't tried these before. They look good. I imagine they'd be even better with a dollop of tomato chutney (AYB).

Criteria 3 and 4 are also fulfilled by the numerous acts of positive politeness and the expressions of support in the case of criticism (see Section 5 for background on politeness). As regards the last two sets of criteria (self-awareness as a group and emergence of roles and hierarchies), they are met when users name other food blogs with an implicit contrast between the 'us in this food blog' and the 'them in the other food blog'. This contrast is used to mark the personal sense of belonging to that food blog in particular, with no criticising intention towards the 'other' food blog, as examples (13) to (16) show:

(13)   Hey Ella! I found your website about 2 weeks ago and I wanted to eat vegan and gluten free for a while now but I just couldn't find enough delicious recipes and when I first discovered yours I was skeptical (DE);

(14)   Trying to pick a recipe from Tara's blog is practically impossible! I have made MANY dishes from her site and they're all fantastic. You ended up selecting a great one (L&L);

(15)   I will definitely give these a go, they are probably a lot healthier than the deep fried version I make from Jo Pratt's book and I'm sure even more delicious for it! (TT);

(16)   I loved this! I focus on beauty/lifestyle blogs so it's really refreshing to read through different kind of blogs :) x (AYB).

The last set of criteria (recognition of hierarchical roles) is met in those comments where users (the non-experts) ask the blogger (the expert, the 'leader' in the blog) to provide some advice on variation of ingredients or procedures to meet special conditions, or simply as a viable alternative to the original recipe. This is illustrated in the following examples, in which 'U' stands for the 'user' who posted the comment and 'FB' for the 'food blogger' who replied:

(17)   U: Hi Ella, when i made this, the chick peas kept popping and bursting all over my oven! Made a bit of a mess, is this normal? It was my first

time to bake chick peas Love your recipes! – FB: Yes they tend to pop as they're roasting. You could try putting the oven on a lower heat to avoid burning, hope you loved the bowl x (DE);

(18) U: I've always been hazy about coddled eggs. So basically they are a poached egg in a pot? – FB: Yes, it is a poached egg in a pot [User's Name], but with added extras! I think you would love them cooked this way! (L&L);

(19) U: Just found this recipe and really want to try it as good English style sausages, veggie or otherwise, are tough to find in France. Freezing half the batch would suit us, but would you recommend freezing at stage 5 or after stage 6? – FB: I would probably cook them a little then let them cool before freezing (TT);

(20) U: My husband isn't a fan of aubergine but I think he would eat this. It looks yumt to me! – FB: You could always stack it up with slices of roasted tomato or courgette instead :) (AYB).

4. The construction of the food bloggers' social identity

Cesiri (2016) established that, in the recipes sections, food bloggers tend to present themselves as food lovers with some expertise rather than as authoritative experts. This was interpreted as their desire to reduce the distance from their public and thus gain more popularity. However, in the previous Section we have seen that, in the comments, users consider the food bloggers to be real experts who can be addressed for advice and specific information. To clarify this contradictory characterization, Goffman's (1959) theory of society as a stage is employed here together with its specific application to bloggers (McGaughey 2010). This will help address the question as to which characterization of the food bloggers actually prevails: the food lover who is just sharing recipes or the expert sharing their specialised knowledge? Disentangling this question will be useful in the analysis of how food bloggers manage praise and criticism since their communicative strategies could be explained in light of their adherence (or the lack of it) to their preferred characterization.

According to Goffman's (1959) theory, people are social actors wearing a mask, i.e. a self-constructed social identity that is presented to the others (other actors) as if during a performance on stage[4]. However, as we decide

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4   This idea is reminiscent also of Shakespeare's famous quote: "All the world's a stage, /And all the men and women merely players; /They have their exits and their

how to interact with other actors, our surrounding society, we also construct for ourselves two different social identities that are called 'self-as-performer' and 'self-as-character'. The former corresponds to the person who wears the mask, our real persona, while the latter is the mask itself, our constructed identity, namely the way we behave when interacting with other people. McGaughey (2010) applies this dual characterization to the cultural analysis of the personalities of two German food bloggers. The study finds that the two bloggers present idealised online identities, quite different from their identities in real life, thus they construct for themselves a 'self-as--character' which is considerably different from their 'self-as-performer'. This is especially evident in the different communicative behaviours they have in the recipes sections and in the comments sections, where they show their 'self-as-character' and their 'self-as-performer', respectively (McGaughey 2010: 89). The framework used in Goffman (1959) and in McGaughey (2010) was, then, applied to the analysis of the four food bloggers. The following Sections will describe the 'selves' that characterise the four food bloggers and make them recognisable by the core participants[5] of the virtual community engaged in interaction.

4.1 *Deliciously Ella*

DE presents herself to the public as a natural, fresh-faced woman in her thirties. She describes how her interest in cooking healthy food developed after being diagnosed with a chronic disease, which required major and sudden changes to her diet and lifestyle. The aim of the blog is to help people with similar health issues find a way of eating the appropriate food, cooked simply but gratifying to the taste. In the comments sections, she replies individually to users. More often than not she thanks them for their comments, even if these are just very brief expressions of enthusiasm for a new recipe. When asked specific questions, she replies extensively using many hedging devices (underlined), to lessen the authority of her 'voice', as the following examples show:

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entrances; /And one man in his time plays many parts, /His acts being seven ages" (*As You Like It*, II.vii, 1600 c.).

[5] For the criterion followed to select the examples, see fn. 3. As in the previous Section, 'U' indicates the comments of the users ('U1', 'U2', etc. indicate comments from more users in the same thread); 'FB' indicates the comments by the food bloggers; emphasis added throughout.

(21) U: This recipe looks amazing – I am obsessed with your blog! I'm on Weight Watchers :(and worried about the oil in the recipe, do you think it would work if I followed the recipe but just left the oil out? – FB: So happy you're loving the recipes! You <u>could always</u> omit the oil in the mash as the potatoes <u>should</u> mash quite easily as they are although the chickpeas will dry out without the oil sadly x;

(22) U: Hey Ella! I want to make this during the week for my dinners. […] I want to try this one in the coming week but just wondering if I could make it Sunday night and it would hold until Thursday? Or do you have to make it fresh every night? Look forward to your response – thank you again for these delicious recipes. […] – FB: Hi Emily, so pleased to hear that you're enjoying the recipes! I haven't tried keep it in the fridge for that long but I imagine that it <u>wouldn't</u> keep so well after four days, it's much better made fresh on the day as it can end up quite soggy otherwise. It <u>should</u> freeze well too! Hope you love it x.

Even when replying to criticism she is always polite in her apologies (underlined in example 24), offering alternatives (in boldface in 24), and trying to keep the user engaged in her blog (as in the salutation in 24), or clarifying the user's doubts about a recipe (23); in the case of a highly negative comment, she does not reply, leaving the other users to reply for her (25).

(23) U: […] Lived in Italy for 25 yrs so understand olive oil. You use huge amounts! Vast no. of calories. May I have your thoughts, please. Thank you – FB: Hi […], I found that you need this amount of olive oil to make sure that […]. This recipe also serves 4 people so you need enough for all the servings! X;

(24) U: hi there i haven been a vegan an gluten free cook for 25 years i have to say your recipes sound very exciting but sorry to say having tried a few i do find them very bland and a little bit expensive regards […] – FB: Hi [user's name], <u>I'm sorry you feel that way. Everyone has different taste buds and enjoys food in different ways</u>. **You can always alter the recipes slightly to suit your personal preference.** It's difficult for me to advise as this is a very personal thing. […] Really hope continue to make more of the recipes and start to enjoy them! <u>Have a lovely day x</u>;

(25) U1: Ella, this is the second of your recipes where the amount of coconut milk has totally overwhelmed – and quite frankly ruined – the dish. I have now cancelled my order of your cookbook because

I am very doubtful that you actually cook these recipes before posting them. – U2: Hum, Marion, that's a bit harsh! I'm quite sure Ella does cook those recipes herself, and the amount of praise you can read in the comments will show you that most people who tried it loved it. So, maybe you didn't like it, and decided to cancel your book order, but there's no need to be mean about Ella's cooking skills. U3: Well said! I'm sure that the publishers wouldn't go ahead with this book if the recipes weren't tried and tested. U4: Everyone's taste is different. I always adjust recepies for my own taste. Just a suggestion…

The 'self-as-character' shown in the 'About' section of the blog is thus consistent with her 'self-as-performer' emerging from the comments section: an agreeable person, interested in keeping a friendly relationship with her public and avoiding engaging in 'conversations' with users that are showing a potentially aggressive attitude in their posts.

4.2 Lavender and Lovage

The L&L blog is constructed to communicate a deep connection with English traditions, with the 'countryside lavender' theme repeated in the choice of decorative elements in the pages (quite flowery) and in the combination of colours (using mostly white, lavender and pastel colours). The food blogger's 'self-as-character' – emerging also in the same pictures of the blogger – is that of a motherly middle-aged woman, with a still youngish, friendly and reassuring appearance. The food blogger's presentation of herself is that of a traveller, who has also lived abroad for some time, with a keen sense of affection for her English upbringing but with a knowledge of the flavours and traditions of other countries. The persona emerging from the comments section is consistent with that emerging from the self-presentation; she always replies, first thanking the user for the comment, and then making a point by adding some comment or detail (underlined sentences in the examples):

(26)   U: These are so cute! I love how golden they look and how perfectly burst those berries have popped!! […] – FB: Thanks [User's name], I love seasonal berries and blackberries have to be a favourite of mine, but I have never added them to muffin type cakes before!;

(27)   U: Those look delicious!! – FB: Thanks [User's name], they WERE delicious, all gone now!

To more specific comments, she replies in a very general but polite way never sounding too professional but consistent with the image of a food lover like the users. In general, she tries to be as polite as possible, sharing the feelings that the users express in their comments (underlined in 29 and 30), and also providing suggestions even when they are not solicited (in boldface in 28 and 29). When asked directly, she tries to reply as thoroughly as possible (30).

(28)   U: What a lovely recipe; I loved the Brambly Hedge books too – so nice that you could work an illustration into your post. – FB: Thanks so much for your kind comments [user's nickname] – **and do try this recipe if you have time**!;

(29)   U: I do miss lobster. […] Of course it looks wonderful, I'll just gaze and remember the days before a shellfish allergy! – FB: <u>It's such a shame about your allergy [user's nickname] and it's also weird how it just happened too</u> …… **hopefully you can make up for your lack of shellfish with more cheese and wine**!;

(30)   I'd love to make these – would you kindly post a conversion table to American measurements? thank you! – FB: There is a conversion table here four you to convert them! UK to US conversions.

4.3 Tinned Tomatoes

The 'self-as-character' presented by the food blogger is, in this case, a young mother and wife who specialises in vegetarian and vegan recipes for family meals. Simple recipes and genuine food is the *leitmotif* of her blog, recalled also in the combination of colours (white background, simple design and drawings of vegetables that remind people of those in old-fashioned cookbooks). The 'self-as-performer' emerging from her replies is consistent with her self-presentation: the tone is always polite with the addition of advice, often unsolicited by the users. As we see in (31) and (32), her feedback seems to come from a friendly expert rather than a food lover sharing her cooking experiments with her peers: she rewards the clever comments just like a teacher ('Good point!', 31), or builds upon something mentioned by the user to provide her own advice (underlined sentence in 32).

(31)   U: Bookmarked! These sound awesome. Bet they'd work really well as veggie burgers too :-) Thanks for sharing – FB: They probably would work well as burgers too […]. Good point! Glad you like them :);

(32)   U: I grew up on pickled beets, or beetroot as my mom called it, even
        layering sliced pickled beets in sandwiches. […] – FB: I like the pickled
        beets sliced on a sandwich <u>that is spread with salad cream and topped
        with cheddar</u>.

When she finds an expert user, who highlights some flaws in the recipe,
she replies keeping her 'identity' of an expert, lessening the relevance of
her inaccuracy with the use of irony (underlined), justifying her slip-up
(boldface) and adding additional suggestions for the recipe to compensate
for the original mistake (italics), as in the following example:

(33)   U: Looks great and it is lovely to have time […] interested the you
        have both flax seeds and linseeds in the recipe – in Australia flax seeds
        are called linseeds (though "flax seeds" is becoming more popular).
        These burgers would be great with a bit of nutritional yeast flakes and
        some lemon juice for a slight cheesy taste. […] – FB: <u>Haha, that shows
        how much I know</u>. **I bought the flax seeds and brown linseeds in the
        same health shop and didn't realise they were the same, although
        one is slightly ground**. <u>So funny!</u> *I did think about adding nutritional
        yeast, but wanted to keep the flavours pure this time. I have been using it to
        make Graham cheese sauce though*.

To the indirect criticism from another food blogger she replies in the same
way as in (33). In fact, in (34) we see that she starts her reply with a laugh
and some self-mockery (underlined), then she continues with a justification
(italics) and further 'teacher-like' comment (boldface) that rewards the user
for the clever remark. Then a small conversation occurs aimed at reducing
the supposed threat that the criticism might have posed:

(34)   U: They look great. Have you tried a burger press for them? I find
        that really helps veggie/vegan burgers to stick together. No mention
        of lentils or tahini in the ingredients though ;-) – FB: <u>Haha, what a twit
        I am</u>. *I have added them in now. Must have been distracted.* **Well spotted** :)
        – U: I'm always doing that and can never spot my own mistakes until
        I've published them. – FB: Well thanks for telling me :) I was probably
        answering Cooper's a million and one questions while I typed.

In the second part of (34) we see also that the user replies with the intention
of lessening her/his criticism by mentioning the fact that s/he makes similar
mistakes too. The food blogger acknowledges the attempt at mitigation with
the description of the situation that led her to make the mistake in the first place,

a distraction caused by her son. This justification is useful to reduce distance from the users, by adding details from her personal life, and to stress the fact that the mistake was not due to carelessness. Thus the 'self-as-character' shown in the description of herself (a mother who runs a food blog) is consistent with her 'self-as-performer' replying in the comments sections.

4.4 Amuse Your Bouche

The 'self-as-character' of the fourth food blogger presents a young woman in her twenties, with a friendly, 'girl-next-door' look. Her short self-presentation is that of a shy person who runs a blog on vegetarian dishes. Her preference for simple recipes is also reflected in the graphic composition of the blog: light colours in the combination of white (the background), pastel yellow and orange (other graphic elements), with a simple and clear font type. The 'friendly shyness' acknowledged by the food blogger emerges also in the comments section where she tries to establish a personal connection with the users. In (35), when the user provides enthusiastic feedback on more than one element present in the original recipe post, the food blogger replies in a concise but friendly way.

(35)   U: I am digging YOUR definition of a "foodie" and why Yes, I would consider myself one! I am also digging the 24 hour food marathon! How awesome is that!! I totally WISH I could attend, I am sure it is worth every calorie! :) Also on my list of things I dig- these tarts! They are fabulous! Love that they are stuffed with leeks, broccoli and walnuts! Plus that smoked cheddar topping! SERIOUSLY YUM! Pinned! Cheers and thanks for sharing the deliciousness! – FB: Haha! Wow I love your enthusiasm ;) thanks for sharing!

In (36) and (37) she invites those users who are perceived as more or equally expert to provide feedback, thus presenting her 'self' as a food lover more than the expert.

(36)   U: That all sounds so good! Do you think it could be made with gluten free ingredients? – FB: I'm afraid I've not tried making the batter with a gluten-free flour, but if you do give it a go, let me know how it turns out! :);
(37)   U: I made this the other day with a number of modifications. It turned out well, so I thought I'd share […] – FB: Glad you enjoyed it! Your modifications all sound very reasonable :) thanks for the comment!

5. Managing praise and criticism in the comments sections

The users provide positive as well as critical feedback on the recipes proposed by the food bloggers. This kind of feedback may be useful to identify if and how the food bloggers respond by keeping the 'identity' they shaped for themselves in the blog. Moreover, it can also be used to examine how the sense of belonging to the community and in-group identity are reaffirmed by both bloggers and users. In this respect, the comments already analysed in the previous sections can be seen in the perspective of Brown – Levinson's (1987) politeness theory which includes the notions of face-threatening acts (FTAs) and negative/positive politeness. The authors draw their notion of 'face' from Goffman's (1959) ideas on the construction of our social identity (see Section 4). In short, 'face' is the individual "public self-image" (Brown – Levinson 1987: 62) which might be threatened by acts performed by our interlocutors. These threats might be addressed to our negative face (i.e. our "freedom of action and freedom from imposition", Brown – Levinson 1987: 62) or to our positive face (i.e. our "desire that this self-image [is] appreciated and approved of", Brown – Levinson 1987: 62). Within this framework, the notions of positive and negative politeness are strictly connected to FTAs directed by our interlocutors to our self-constructed image, or 'self-as-character', in Goffman's (1959) terms. Instances of positive politeness are those acts that keep the positive face intact just as negative politeness "is redressive action addressed to the addressee's negative face" (Brown – Levinson 1987: 129).

If we apply these notions to the comments sections of the four food blogs, most of the interaction appears to be directed towards keeping the positive face of both users as members of the community and of the bloggers as the (perceived) 'leaders' of this community. Brown – Levinson (1987: 101) state that

> the linguistic realizations of positive politeness are in many respects simply representative of the normal linguistic behaviour between intimates, where interest and approval of each other's personality, presuppositions indicating shared wants and shared knowledge, implicit claims to reciprocity of obligations or to reflexivity of wants, etc. are routinely exchanged.

These linguistic realizations are fully in operation in the comments, such as in (1) to (8), (21), (22), (26) to (29), (35) and (37), where users and bloggers

show a sense of intimacy that favours social acceptance as well as in-group solidarity and membership. Indeed, these examples show that bloggers tend to use emphatic language to keep the users engaged and to reinforce the sense that they all belong to a community with strong social bonds.

As regards criticism, some users employ FTAs, addressed at the positive face of the blogger. In such cases, as we have already seen in the previous sections, the tendency of the food bloggers is to reply in such a way that their positive face is preserved (using face-saving acts). In fact, their replies to criticism involve irony and self-mockery (33 and 34) to minimise the potentially negative impact of the criticising feedback on their role of experts in their community. However, it may also be observed that criticism by users (such as in 33, 34, and 37) aims at keeping the sense of in-group solidarity. In the cases in which criticism violates this norm, the food blogger does not respond in similar terms but minimises the negative effect by emphasising the fact that the quantity of ingredients varies according to the serving size (23) or by providing alternative options that might satisfy the user's specific needs (24). In another case (25), in which the criticism is quite aggressive and poses a direct threat to both the positive and the negative face of the blogger, she does not reply. Instead we observe interventions of two other users who stand up for the blogger. As a result, they help to maintain her face (the face of their perceived 'leader') while reinforcing their membership in the group. Their replies are FTAs directed towards the positive face of the user who has criticised the blogger as they indicate that the flaws are not in the recipes but in the user's personal cooking skills. In this way, their self-constructed image of being 'more expert than the blogger' is ruined, and this is actually used to emphasise her social distance from the rest of the group. These replies are also directed against the user's negative face, since they indirectly obstruct their freedom of action (participation to the group) by identifying her as a non-member, whose comments are inappropriate for the community's shared norms of interaction.

6. Conclusions

The general picture emerging from the present analysis is that the bloggers present themselves as food lovers only superficially. In fact, they tend to reinforce their role as experts especially when they interact with expert users. In this respect, then, the difference between recipes (Cesiri 2016) and the comments sections is explained: the roles bloggers take in the recipes

and in the comments might differ, but the 'social identities' (or personas) that they construct in their blogs are consistent in both sections.

It was certainly difficult to ascertain the 'real' persona of the bloggers from the asynchronous interactions in the comments sections, from the recipes pages or from their presentation in the 'About' sections that are intentionally shaped by the food bloggers themselves. However, we might presume that a different persona would occasionally emerge – even unintentionally – in some of their replies, especially when they are exposed to cases of harsh criticism by some users. Unlike McGaughey's (2010) results, each food blogger's 'self-as-character' seems to match their 'self-as-performer'. If the 'self-as-character' permeates the whole food blogs, including the choice of pictures, combination of colours, and even the font used in the blog, it is the 'self-as-performer' that emerges in the food bloggers' narrations of real life events, of their families, or in the sharing of personal memories and experiences connected to the recipe. Moreover, my analysis has shown that the food bloggers wear four different self-constructed social masks as experts. DE and TT are the 'experts disguised as food lovers'; they both present themselves as friendly persons. Still, while the former always presents herself as more knowledgeable than the users, the latter uses more emphatic language, acknowledging mistakes with the pattern 'laugh – justification for the mistake – extra information', in which the 'extra information' is provided to reinforce her role as expert in the first place. L&L is the 'expert disguised as a motherly character'; her comments show a very polite lady who shares traditional memories about her upbringing in the English countryside but with an international touch from her travels abroad. Lastly, AYB is the 'open expert'; polite, less emotional in her replies than the other food bloggers, she reacts to criticism or negative feedback by providing some further advice. Strategies of positive politeness prevail in the comments sections of the four food blogs with the aim of reinforcing in-group solidarity and support. The latter is expressed especially in cases of aggressive criticism by some users who are indirectly silenced by other users who, by doing so, reclaim for the food blogger the role of 'leader and expert' of their community.

Finally, this study has shown that food blogs are an interesting genre of CMC that needs further investigation. The popular topic of food, its preparation and consumption rituals are the common ground that favours the friendly interaction of the leading figure of the blogger and the users. This characteristic opens the way to future studies on the discursive practices of this interaction and how they change when communication happens with perceived members and non-members, respectively. Also

worth investigating are gender-related issues that might influence the same discursive practices in the self-presentation pages as well as in the recipes, and if and to what extent gender-related differences are present in the comments sections in the way users interact with the food bloggers and/or other users. As already mentioned at the beginning of the paper, the corpus might also be extended with an updated list of food blogs that could enlarge the scope of data analysis and lead to further generalizations on the genre.

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