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# Reconceptualizing Professional Chef Identity: The Interplay of Talent, Creativity and Popularity in Contemporary Gastronomy

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# Abstract

This study reconceptualizes professional chef identity by examining the dynamic interplay between talent, creativity, and popularity in contemporary gastronomy. Although these concepts have been widely discussed, they have largely been treated as isolated constructs, leading to a fragmented understanding of professional identity. Addressing this gap, the study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore chefs' lived experiences and meaning making processes. Data were collected through in depth, semi structured interviews with 15 professional chefs selected via purposive sampling and analyzed using phenomenologically informed qualitative content analysis. The findings reveal that talent, creativity, and popularity operate as interdependent components of a dynamic professional system. Talent provides the foundational capacity through technical mastery and accumulated expertise. Creativity functions as a mechanism of differentiation, enabling originality and aesthetic production. Popularity transforms creative output into economic and symbolic value through visibility, recognition, and audience engagement. These dimensions do not operate independently; rather, they form a cyclical and mutually reinforcing structure conceptualized as the "Balanced Professional Chef Identity". The study contributes to the literature by offering an integrative framework that positions professional chef identity as an emergent and process based construct shaped by interaction, validation, and value transformation. By addressing conceptual fragmentation, the proposed model provides a structured explanation of how professional value is generated and sustained in contemporary gastronomy. The findings also offer practical insights for gastronomy stakeholders by emphasizing the importance of aligning technical competence, creative capability, and visibility strategies in an increasingly competitive and media driven environment.


# 1. Introduction

Gastronomy today represents one of the most visible domains of contemporary creativity, where culinary production extends beyond preparing food to encompass artistic expression, innovation and emotional transfer. Through global media, festivals and digital platforms, chefs' creative outputs have become central to both professional and popular culture (Engisch, 2020). As consumer expectations evolve, creativity has turned into a core competency that sustains gastronomic innovation and strengthens chefs' job satisfaction, professional commitment and aesthetic engagement (Robinson & Beesley, 2010). The creative process usually begins with intuitive ideation and develops through team based refinement and technical skill, ultimately materializing as a sensory and aesthetic experience on the plate (Madeira et al. 2022).

Despite this growing body of research, the literature remains conceptually fragmented, as talent, creativity, and popularity are rarely examined as an integrated system. This fragmentation limits the explanatory power of existing studies in capturing the complexity of professional chef identity. Accordingly, this study makes three key contributions: (1) it reconceptualizes chef identity as a multidimensional construct, (2) it develops an integrative model linking talent, creativity, and popularity,

and (3) it introduces a dynamic framework explaining how these dimensions interact to produce professional value.

Accordingly, a significant gap remains in understanding how talent, creativity and popularity function together as an integrated system within chefs' professional practices. Addressing this gap is essential, particularly in the context of the contemporary gastronomy sector, where professional success increasingly depends on the simultaneous management of technical expertise, creative production and public visibility.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how chefs prioritize and interpret talent, creativity and popularity, and how these elements interact in the construction of professional identity. In this context, the central research question guiding the study is: "In chefs' professional practices, how are talent, creativity and popularity prioritized and how do they interact in shaping professional identity?".

# 1.1. Creativity, Talent and Their Professional Basis

A chef's creativity is grounded in professional talent—mastery shaped by education, discipline and practice (Anderson, 2019). Functional talent encompasses culinary expertise, core competencies involve conceptual and managerial abilities, and general talent includes communication, leadership and motivation (Ko, 2012). High professional performance depends on the alignment of these skills with creative capacity (Suhairom et al. 2019). Beyond technical mastery, modern cheffing is also mediated by media visibility and consumer perception; thus, chefs are evaluated not only by their expertise but also by their ability to make this expertise publicly visible (Hyman, 2008). Platforms such as television, social media and gastronomic awards significantly expand chefs' visibility and cultural influence (Caraher et al. 2013), contributing to their rise as popular culture figures (Zopiatis & Melanthiou, 2019; Sternberg & Lubart, 1999; Lubart & Getz 1997).

# 1.2. Creativity in Gastronomy

Literature on chefs' creativity focuses on new dish development (Horng & Hu, 2009), waste related innovation (Sezerel et al. 2025), social and spatial creative contexts (Bouty & Gomez, 2013) and identity tensions within kitchen work (Lane & Lup, 2015). Creativity is conceptualized as a key 21st century competency supporting adaptability and flexible problem solving (Ritter & Mostert, 2017). Amabile's Componential Theory frames creativity as the interplay of domain relevant skills, creativity relevant processes and task motivation within a social context (Amabile, 1997; 1998; 2011). In gastronomy, this aligns with Bourdieu's concept of embodied cultural capital, where chefs' technical mastery and aesthetic preferences form a repertoire shaping creative expression (Bourdieu, 1986). Within this framework, the creative chef functions as an "artist" transforming imagination into tangible culinary outcomes (Balazs, 2002).

# 1.3. Talent as Competence and Professional Differentiation

Talent, defined as a behavioral pattern leading to sustained high performance (Tansley, 2011), reflects a dynamic integration of initiative, problem solving and creative thinking (Hinrichs, 1966). Based on the Competency Based Approach (Boyatzis, 1982; McClelland, 1973), chefs' talent is characterized by technical proficiency, aesthetic sensitivity, time management and teamwork under pressure—competencies refined through experience and lifelong learning (Wellton et al. 2019).

## 1.4. Popularity and the Chef as a Public Figure

The increased visibility of chefs is tied to the modern understanding of celebrity as public attention and symbolic value (Van Krieken, 2012). In line with Hegel's Theory of Recognition and Honneth's notion of social esteem, popularity emerges when professional contributions gain communal appreciation (Petersen & Willig, 2002). Chefs today operate within a multi layered performance arena, managing personal branding and media presence while influencing consumer decisions through their public identity (Hyman, 2008; Yang, 2018). Studies examine this rise in visibility in terms of social hierarchy (Johnston et al. 2014), industry impact (Zopiatis & Melanthiou, 2019) and destination marketing (Demirkol & Cifci, 2020).

Consequently, creativity (aesthetic and innovative production), talent (technical and professional capacity) and popularity (visibility and recognition) have each been examined in the literature, their interrelations remain underexplored. This study therefore investigates the question: "In chefs' professional practices, which element—creativity, talent or popularity—is prioritized?" by drawing on the integrated theoretical foundations outlined above.

# 2. Materials and Methods

The study explores the lived experiences of chefs to uncover the underlying meaning structures that shape professional identity. For this purpose, a phenomenological design was adopted, enabling the exploration of lived experiences and subjective meanings constructed by participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Since phenomena such as creativity and popularity in the culinary profession are multidimensional and cannot be captured through quantitative indicators, phenomenology provides a holistic view through the voices of chefs themselves (Lodico et al. 2006; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). In line with the phenomenological approach, the study focuses on the lived experiences of chefs and how they make sense of talent, creativity and popularity within their professional practices. Phenomenology enables the exploration of these concepts not as abstract variables but as meanings constructed through experience. Accordingly, the analysis seeks to reveal the essence of chefs' professional identity by identifying common patterns across individual experiences.

## 2.1. Study Group

A purposive sampling strategy was used to obtain rich and relevant data (Büyüköztürk et al. 2019). Participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- Professional culinary experience above a minimum threshold,
- Recognition for creative and talented practices,
- A certain level of sectoral visibility or popularity.

To ensure diversity, chefs with different roles (head chefs, independent chefs, popular chefs) were included. In line with the phenomenological approach suggesting 15–25 participants for adequate depth (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), the study group consisted of 15 chefs, determined at the point of data saturation. Each participant was coded as K1–K15 to ensure confidentiality. The demographic characteristics and professional profiles of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Interview Information and Participant Profile

| Participant | Date | Duration | Interview Method | Age | Gender |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K1 | 01.04.2025 | 20 minutes 26 seconds | Face to face | 45 | Male |
| K2 | 05.04.2025 | 24 minutes 48 seconds | Face to face | 48 | Male |
| K3 | 09.04.2025 | 26 minutes 26 seconds | Face to face | 47 | Male |
| K4 | 13.04.2025 | 22 minutes 10 seconds | Face to face | 44 | Male |
| K5 | 16.04.2025 | 25 minutes 6 seconds | Face to face | 44 | Male |
| K6 | 19.04.2025 | 22 minutes 10 seconds | Face to face | 44 | Male |
| K7 | 20.04.2025 | 30 minutes 9 seconds | Face to face | 54 | Male |
| K8 | 23.04.2025 | 22 minutes 46 seconds | Face to face | 46 | Male |
| K9 | 28.04.2025 | 23 minutes 38 seconds | Face to face | 49 | Male |
| K10 | 03.05.2025 | 24 minutes 8 seconds | Face to face | 53 | Male |
| K11 | 07.05.2025 | 20 minutes 37 seconds | Face to face | 41 | Male |
| K12 | 12.05.2025 | 21 minutes 4 seconds | Face to face | 42 | Male |
| K13 | 16.05.2025 | 20 minutes 18 seconds | Face to face | 50 | Male |
| K14 | 22.05.2025 | 20 minutes 16 seconds | Face to face | 45 | Male |
| K15 | 29.05.2025 | 21 minutes 22 seconds | Face to face | 48 | Male |

Source: Created by the authors.

## 2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through semi structured interviews, a method that supports an in depth exploration of subjective experiences (Patton, 2015). The interview protocol was prepared based on an extensive literature review on creativity, talent and popularity in gastronomy (e.g., Sezerel et al. 2025; Madeira et al.

2022; Demirkol & Cifci, 2020; Engisch, 2020; Zopiatis & Melanthiou, 2019; Lane & Lup, 2015; Stierand, 2015; Stierand et al. 2014; Hyman, 2008).

To ensure content validity, the draft form was reviewed by a qualitative methodologist, a field expert and an industry chef. Following expert feedback, overlapping items were merged, irrelevant questions were removed and the form was finalized with seven core questions. Fieldwork took place between April 1 and May 29, 2025. Interviews were held face to face, lasted approximately 23 minutes, and were recorded with participants' consent.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis followed a structured phenomenological interpretation supported by qualitative content analysis. While phenomenology guided the interpretation of lived experiences and meaning structures (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009), content analysis was employed as a systematic tool to organize and categorize the data (Patton, 2015; Arastaman et al. 2018).

The analysis proceeded in three stages:

- Coding: Identifying meaningful units in participants' narratives;
- Categorization: Grouping codes into conceptually related sub themes;
- Thematization: Constructing overarching themes that reflect shared experiential meanings.

To enhance analytical rigor, the coding process was iterative and comparative. Initial codes were continuously refined through constant comparison, allowing the emergence of higher order themes. This process ensured that the themes were not only descriptive but also conceptually meaningful and theoretically grounded. In this framework, content analysis functioned as an analytical instrument, while phenomenology provided the interpretive lens through which the essence of professional identity was understood.

## 2.4. Validity and Reliability

Multiple strategies were used to ensure research rigor. Credibility was enhanced through expert review and thick description, allowing transparent links between participant statements and researcher interpretation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Dependability was supported by following Gibbs' (2018) procedural guidelines to prevent code drift. A second independent researcher coded a randomly selected subset of data, and inter coder agreement was calculated using the Miles & Huberman (1994) formula. The resulting 97% agreement indicates high reliability, exceeding the accepted threshold of 70%, a high level of reliability. In addition, the researchers adopted a reflexive stance throughout the research process, acknowledging the interpretive nature of qualitative inquiry. Efforts were made to remain aware of potential biases and to ensure that interpretations were grounded in participants' narratives rather than preconceived assumptions.

# 3. Findings

The data obtained from the in depth interviews conducted within the scope of the research reveal how the phenomena of creativity, talent and popularity are positioned in the professional lives of chefs. During the analysis process, the data were systematically coded and gathered under main themes reflecting the participants' experiences. The findings are presented supported by direct quotations from the participants' original statements.

## 3.1. Professional Characteristics of the Participants

The nature of the study group is critical in terms of the research's reliability and the depth of the data obtained. Detailed data regarding the demographic and professional characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Participants' Culinary Profession Information

| Participant | Age | Position | Education | Work Experience (Years) | Monthly Income (2025) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| K1 | 45 | Head Chef / Executive Chef | Vocational High School + Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration | 29 | 3000 USD |
| K2 | 48 | Food & Beverage Director | General High School + Culinary Education | 35 | 3250 USD |
| K3 | 47 | President of the Professional Federation | Vocational High School + Bachelor's Degree in Tourism | 24 | 3500 USD |
| K4 | 44 | Kitchen Chef / Chef de Cuisine | Middle School + Professional Certificates | 29 | 2900 USD |
| K5 | 44 | Head Chef / Executive Chef | Vocational High School | 31 | 3750 USD |
| K6 | 44 | Head Chef / Executive Chef | Vocational High School | 31 | 3500 USD |
| K7 | 54 | Kitchen Coordinator (R&D) | General High School | 30 | 3500 USD |
| K8 | 46 | Chef | Vocational High School | 35 | 3500 USD |
| K9 | 49 | Collaboration Manager | Vocational High School | 33 | 6000 USD |
| K10 | 53 | Company Founder | Vocational High School | 36 | 5500 USD |
| K11 | 41 | Chain Hotel Kitchens Coordinator | Vocational High School | 25 | 6000 USD |
| K12 | 42 | Head Chef / Executive Chef | Vocational High School | 27 | 5000 USD |
| K13 | 50 | Head Chef / Executive Chef | Vocational High School | 30 | 3600 USD |
| K14 | 45 | Head Chef / Executive Chef | Vocational High School + Bachelor's Degree in Tourism | 22 | 4000 USD |
| K15 | 48 | Head Chef / Executive Chef | General High School + Culinary Education | 36 | 3800 USD |

Source: Created by the authors.

The participant group predominantly consists of upper level culinary professionals, mainly “Head/Executive Chefs” (n = 7), alongside managers holding strategic roles such as “Kitchen Coordinator”, “R&D Chef” and “Collaboration Manager”. The inclusion of a federation president (K3) and an international chain hotel coordinator (K11) enhances the sectoral representativeness and the visionary scope of the data.

Despite their managerial status, participants primarily define their professional identity through the concept of “chef”, indicating that their advancement is rooted in extensive kitchen practice and craft based experience. This highlights the sector’s reliance on experience driven merit in career progression.

Most participants (n = 11) are graduates of vocational high schools, complemented in some cases by associate or bachelor level education. The case of K4, who pursued certification programs despite limited formal schooling, shows that practical knowledge from traditional apprenticeship models remains influential alongside academic training.

The sample represents a highly experienced demographic, with professional tenures ranging from 25 to 36 years (average 30.4). This long term engagement provides them with firsthand insight into sectoral transformations, enriching the study with a strong historical perspective.

Economically, participants report monthly net incomes between 2,900 and 6,000 USD, averaging 4,291 USD. Income differences relate not only to culinary competence but also to managerial scope and entrepreneurial initiatives, illustrating how talent and position translate into economic value within the sector.

## 3.2. Views and Themes Regarding the Concept of Talent

This section examines how participants conceptualize their professional talent and how it informs their creative processes. The findings show that talent extends beyond technical skill, encompassing cognitive, sensory, and cultural dimensions.

### 3.2.1. Types of Talent that Enable Professional Prominence

The analysis of the answers given to the question, “What are your talents that allow you to stand out in your profession?” resulted in the main theme of “Talent Types”. Based on the participants’ statements, this main theme was categorized under five sub headings: Technical Skill, Artistic Skill, Communication Skills, Organization Skills and Sensory Skills. The distribution and frequencies of the codes are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3
Participants' Views on Talent Types

| Theme 1 | Sub Themes | Codes | Frequency of Expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Types of Talent** | Technical Skills | Cooking techniques, knife skills, sauce preparation and timing | 8 |
| | Artistic Skills | Plate design, visual aesthetics, the reflection of creativity in presentation, aesthetic perception, and manual dexterity enhanced by creativity | 7 |
| | Communication Skills | Guest communication, crisis management, internal and external kitchen communication, presentation and storytelling ability | 10 |
| | Organizational Skills | Kitchen management, team coordination, cost control, and team leadership | 9 |
| | Sensory Skills | Taste perception, aroma recognition, and evaluating color harmony | 8 |

Source: Created by the authors.

The analysis results reveal that chefs approach "talent" from a holistic perspective. For the participants, professional success depends not only on "technical mastery" (hard skills) in the kitchen but also on "social skills" (soft skills) like team management and communication and an "aesthetic vision" in plate presentation. The statements of participants coded K2 and K9, in particular, are noteworthy for emphasizing the balanced combination of technical proficiency and managerial competence:

"My aesthetic approach to plate design is as influential as my technical mastery in distinguishing my professional identity. Strong communication and coordination skills support kitchen organization, and integrating ingredient knowledge, flavor balance and creativity gives me a major advantage in product development." (K2)

"My command of cooking techniques and aesthetic presentation defines my professional stance. Communication and coordination abilities enhance kitchen management, while combining ingredient knowledge, flavor balance and creativity enables high quality product development." (K9)

These findings indicate that talent is not perceived as a static or purely technical attribute but as a multidimensional capability that integrates operational, social, and aesthetic competencies. This suggests a shift from a traditional "craft based" identity toward a more complex "hybrid professional identity".

# 3.2.2. The Impact of Talent on the Creativity Process

In another dimension of the research, participants were asked, "How does your talent affect your creativity in your profession?". The responses revealed that talent acts as a catalyst triggering creativity

and in this context, the main theme “Talent as Components of Creativity” was determined. Under this theme, five different areas of impact (sub themes) were identified: Aesthetic, Technological, Cultural, Cognitive and Sensory (See Table 4).

Table 4
Participants’ Views on How Talent Affects Their Work

| Theme 2 | Sub Themes | Codes | Frequency of Expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Effect of Talent** | Aesthetic | Presentation, plate design, and harmony | 8 |
| | Technological | Different cooking techniques and molecular gastronomy applications | 10 |
| | Cultural | The fusion of traditional elements with modern techniques | 11 |
| | Cognitive | Problem solving, alternative perspectives, and idea generation | 9 |
| | Sensory | Combinations of diverse flavors, aromas, and textures | 6 |

Source: Created by the authors.

The findings indicate that the sources feeding the chefs’ creativity differ. Some participants (e.g., K1) seek the origin of creativity in “cultural capital” and “sensory memory”, emphasizing the ability to combine traditional codes with modern techniques:

“Culture is the main source of my creativity. I enjoy modernizing traditional flavors and can generate ideas quickly by viewing problems or new dishes from different angles. I easily sense the harmony of taste, aroma and texture; sometimes combinations form just by smelling ingredients. Cultural inspiration, quick thinking and flavor knowledge together enhance my creativity.” (K1)

On the other hand, participants (e.g., K7) who frame creativity through “technological proficiency” and “visual design” (aesthetics) point to the impact of modern cooking techniques and visual harmony on originality:

“Different cooking techniques significantly support my creativity. I prioritize color and harmony in presentation, believing a dish must appeal visually. Modern methods such as sous vide or molecular touches enable distinct results from the same ingredients, and combining these elements leads to original plates.” (K7)

These findings demonstrate that talent is not a monolithic phenomenon; it shapes creativity for some as a “cultural synthesis tool” and for others as a “technological application tool”.

# 3.3. Dynamics of the Creativity Process and Environmental Interaction

This section examines the internal mechanisms and external factors that stimulate participants' creative thinking. The findings indicate that creativity is not a sudden personal "inspiration", but a dynamic process shaped by risk taking, problem solving and collaborative interaction.

# 3.3.1. Internal and Cognitive Elements that Fuel Creativity

Based on the answers to the question, "How does your creative thinking process work in your profession and what elements make you more creative?" the main theme of "Creative Elements" was created. This theme was structured across four basic cognitive/behavioral dimensions (sub themes): Flexibility, Imagination, Originality and Problem Solving. Participants' views regarding these cognitive processes are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Participants' Views on Cognitive Processes

| Theme 3 | Sub Themes | Codes | Frequency of Expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Creative Elements** | Flexibility | Experimenting with different combinations and going beyond the recipe | 9 |
| | Imagination | Drawing inspiration from nature, art, and travel, and conceptualizing ideas mentally | 8 |
| | Originality | Unconventional flavors and new cooking techniques | 7 |
| | Problem Solving | Producing quick solutions to unexpected setbacks | 6 |

Source: Created by the authors.

According to the analysis results, chefs' creative processes develop along two different axes. The first axis is "aesthetic and discovery oriented" creativity. In this approach, chefs enrich their imagination by drawing inspiration from nature and cultural interactions. The statements of participant K4 prove that creativity is a process of observing and internalizing the external world:

"The strongest source of creativity for me is imagination. Especially the colors, scents and seasonal changes I see in nature give me new ideas to use on the plate. Experiencing different cuisines during travels and seeing the food presentations of different cultures also broaden my horizons." (K4).

The second axis is "operational and risk oriented" creativity. Here, creativity ceases to be an "art" and manifests as producing solutions during crises (K15) or the courage to try the unknown (K7). K15's emphasis on "calmness in crisis" shows that creativity is also an "adaptive creativity":

“Unexpected setbacks can sometimes occur during service. For example, a planned ingredient may be missing, or a technical failure may happen. In such situations, quick solutions are needed to achieve the same quality with the available ingredients. I believe a chef’s success is measured by the composure they show during crises.” (K15).

Similarly, K7 draws attention to the experimental nature of creativity, which requires stepping out of the comfort zone:

“I don’t believe there can be progress in the kitchen without taking risks. Sometimes, it’s necessary to step outside the known, trying unusual flavors and cooking methods. There is certainly a chance of failure in this process, but you can’t learn anything new without trying.” (K7).

This dual structure suggests that creativity in gastronomy operates along both exploratory and adaptive dimensions, indicating that chefs’ creative performance is shaped not only by inspiration but also by situational demands and professional constraints.

## 3.3.2. Social and Organizational Context of Creativity (Environment)

Although creativity is an individual mental process, the environment in which this process flourishes is shaped by social relationships. The answers given to the question, “How does the support of your teammates or industry environment affect your creativity in your professional life?” were gathered under the main theme “Environment”. In this context, the sub themes of Collaboration and Team Spirit, Emotional Support, Managerial Support and Feedback emerged (See Table 6).

Table 6
Participants’ Views on Environmental/Contextual Factors

| Theme 4 | Sub Themes | Codes | Frequency of Expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Environment** | Collaboration and Team Spirit | Working together, sharing, and generating ideas collectively | 14 |
| | Emotional Support | Providing morale, motivating, and encouraging experimentation | 13 |
| | Managerial Support | Rewarding, listening to ideas, and providing resources | 9 |
| | Feedback | Developing and discussing new products, offering constructive criticism | 6 |

Source: Created by the authors.

The findings reveal that creativity in professional kitchens is a “collective act”. Participant K5 states that creative ideas develop through team interaction (brainstorming) rather than an isolated mind:

“I develop most of the dishes I am creative with while exchanging ideas with the team. Working together in the kitchen, sharing and hearing different perspectives feeds me greatly. Things that would not come to mind if I thought alone emerge thanks to the team.” (K5).

Examining the dimension of organizational support, the direct impact of “psychological safety” and “resource allocation” provided by management on creativity is observed. K3’s statements confirm that the autonomy provided by the establishment encourages creative experimentation:

“I have worked at the same establishment for many years and proven myself through various achievements. During menu renewal, they always supported me with equipment and ingredients for new trials. Their trust makes these processes easier and allows me to be more open to creative experimentation.” (K3)

Furthermore, the importance of the “constructive criticism” mechanism in the process of perfecting a creative product was emphasized by K12. This situation indicates that creativity is not only about production but also about evolving the product through feedback:

“Receiving honest and constructive feedback from my kitchen team, service and F&B colleagues regarding the dishes I prepare is very valuable to me. Sometimes, even a single detail they mention can cause the plate to completely change and become much better. This feedback from the team constantly keeps my creativity alive.” (K12).

## 3.4. Perception of Popularity as a Professional “Capital”

This section of the research examines how the phenomenon of popularity, which is gaining increasing importance in today’s gastronomy world, is interpreted by chefs. The participants’ answers to the question, “How would you define your popularity in your profession?” show that popularity is more than a single dimensional state of “fame”; it is a strategic tool with social, commercial and cultural layers. As a result of the analysis, the main theme “Dimensions of Popularity” and four sub themes were reached (See Table 7).

Table 7
Participants' Views on the Dimensions of Popularity

| Theme 5 | Sub Themes | Codes | Frequency of Expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| **The Dimensions of Popularity** | **Social Popularity** | TV programs, Instagram posts, social media visibility, follower count | 11 |
| | **Commercial Popularity** | Brand value, being a reason for restaurant preference, menu sales, customer density, brand recognition | 9 |
| | **Cultural Popularity** | New job offers, workshop invitations, sponsorships, brand collaborations | 7 |
| | **Trend Based Popularity** | Vegetarian cuisine, fermented products, gluten free options, adaptation to new trends | 5 |

Source: Created by the authors.

The findings reveal that the most common form of popularity is "Social Popularity", which is associated with digital visibility (Instagram, YouTube, etc.). Participant K8 emphasizes that social media has become an indispensable part of professional identity and that the "shining of the screen" is as important as the "boiling of the pot":

"Social media is now an important part of the profession. Thanks to the dishes I share on Instagram or the programs I participate in, I reach a wider audience. This visibility both increases my recognition and ensures that my work reaches more people." (K8).

On the other hand, popularity is defined not only as individual recognition but also as "Trend Based Popularity", related to the ability to read market dynamics. The statements of K4 show that the chef can maintain popularity to the extent they adapt to current trends (glüten free, fermented, etc.):

"Adapting to trending topics, such as fermented products, glüten free recipes, or plant based dishes, increased my popularity. When I add innovations of this kind to the menu, I attract more interest both on social media and from the customers." (K4).

Another dimension of popularity is "Cultural/Commercial Popularity", where the chef is positioned as a "thought leader" or "brand face". K14 points out that the visibility gained through television programs and workshops provides the chef with a status of sectoral authority:

"Recently, I have started receiving invitations for television programs and workshops, brand collaborations and training offers. These invitations both show that my work is appreciated and increase my cultural visibility in the sector." (K14).

These results demonstrate that popularity functions as a form of professional capital that extends beyond visibility, operating as a mechanism that connects creative production with market recognition and socio cultural validation.

## 3.5. Conceptual Synthesis: Hierarchy Among Talent, Creativity and Popularity

In the final stage, participants were asked to evaluate the causal links and priority order among the three concepts. The findings show that these elements are interconnected and together form a cyclical "Success Ecosystem".

### 3.5.1. Synergy of Talent and Creativity

When questioning the origin of popularity, participants defined talent as the "starting point" and creativity as the "driving force". The views gathered under the main theme "Interaction of Talent and Creativity" (See Table 8) show that talent alone remains static, while creativity adds dynamism to it.

Table 8
Participants' Views on How Talent and Creativity Influence Popularity

| Theme 6 | Sub Themes | Codes | Frequency of Expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Interaction Between Talent and Creativity | Innate Talent | Sense of taste, manual dexterity, culinary intuition, quick reflexes, and coordination | 6 |
| | Creativity | Experimental recipe development, cultural synthesis, aesthetic presentation, passion, team synergy, empathy, and social connection | 4 |
| | The Synergy of Talent and Creativity | The fusion of experience and instinct, blending classic techniques with innovative touches, sustainable creative development, personal branding, and signature dish creation | 12 |

Source: Created by the authors.

One participant explained this relationship with the metaphor of "energy", drawing attention to the synergy of the two elements:

"My success did not come from talent alone nor creativity alone. Talent gave me the initial energy and creativity shaped that energy. If they weren't together, I wouldn't be where I am today." (K9).

According to another view, while talent (sensory acuity) is an innate "infrastructure", creativity (storytelling) is the "architecture" built upon this infrastructure:

“My popularity started at a certain point with innate talent. My ability to distinguish tastes allowed me to analyze a dish just by smelling it. But talent was only like the starting line... What differentiated me was my creativity. I don’t just mix ingredients; I combine their story.” (K1).

## 3.5.2. Integration of Success Elements

The answers given to the core research question, “Talent, Creativity, or Popularity?” were analyzed under the main theme “Success Elements” (See Table 9). The common consensus among chefs is that popularity is not an “aim” but a natural “outcome” of the right combination of talent and creativity.

Table 9
Participants’ Views on the Question “Creativity, Talent, or Popularity?

| Theme 7 | Sub Themes | Codes | Frequency of Expression |
|---|---|---|---|
| Key Success Factors | Talent | The cornerstone of the kitchen, the foundational basis for success | 13 |
| | Creativity | A source of originality and differentiation | 9 |
| | Popularity | Sustainability | 8 |
| | Interaction and Balance<br><br>(Talent + Creativity + Popularity) | A balanced chef with a professional chef identity | 15 |

Source: Created by the authors.

Participants view these three concepts like a tripod. The following statement summarizes that the sustainability of popularity is only possible when grounded in talent and creativity:

“Popularity is an outcome; the basis is talent and creativity is what feeds it. When the three are mixed, sustainable success emerges.” (K1).

However, the realities of the modern gastronomy world have also not been overlooked. The following statement, which draws attention to the new media order where “the chef who is not visible is considered non existent”, is one of the most striking findings of the study:

“We used to think that just cooking well was enough. However, talent starts you, but creativity makes you noticeable. People remember you as the chef who made that plate. Furthermore, in today’s digital age, you also need to narrate this dish and make it visible. The invisible chef is not noticed.” (K3).

# 4. Results and Discussion

The findings indicate that the professional chef identity operates within a cyclical success ecosystem where talent, creativity, and popularity interact continuously. Creativity in haute cuisine is not an isolated act but a highly organized social phenomenon (Bouty & Gomez, 2013). This perspective aligns with the componential theory of creativity, which emphasizes that individual and entrepreneurial creativity emerges through the synergy of motivation, domain skills, and supportive environments (Amabile, 2011; Amabile, 1997). Within this framework, talent extends beyond technical execution. Culinary professionals are often trained primarily for technical roles; however, they are simultaneously expected to act as competent managers and to establish professional authority within the material and organizational structure of the kitchen (Wellton et al. 2019; Wellton et al. 2017; Boyatzis, 1982). In this respect, the study goes beyond existing approaches by conceptualizing professional chef identity not as a set of discrete attributes but as a dynamic system in which value is continuously produced, validated, and transformed.

The findings further reveal that popularity functions as the mechanism through which creative talent is transformed into enduring socio economic value. Modern professionals operate within a “celebrity society” shaped by the economics of attention (Van Krieken, 2012). Accordingly, chefs assume multiple roles that extend beyond the kitchen. The strategic use of digital platforms and social media facilitates the diffusion of innovation, enabling chefs to construct personal brands and engage directly with global audiences (Giousmpasoglou et al. 2020; Clarke et al. 2016). In this sense, popularity becomes not only a visibility tool but also a structural component of professional sustainability.

In line with these findings, creativity emerges as a phenomenon intertwined with team dynamics and institutional expectations, including recognition systems such as Michelin stars (Bouty & Gomez, 2013). Talent, in this context, constitutes the structural foundation of professional identity, encompassing both visible technical skills and less visible competencies such as self concept and personal motives (Suhairom et al. 2019). However, technical mastery alone is insufficient. Contemporary chefs are required to balance artistic culinary production with market oriented demands, positioning them as “contemporary commercial artists” (Lin & Baum, 2016). Thus, creativity operates as a differentiation mechanism that must be both contextually grounded and socially validated.

Moreover, the transformation of creative output into symbolic and economic value is mediated by popularity, which functions as a key sustainability mechanism. Celebrity chefs increasingly adopt multiple occupational roles, including entrepreneur and media performer, thereby reshaping traditional professional boundaries (Giousmpasoglou et al. 2020). The validation of creative work depends significantly on social evaluation processes, particularly by domain gatekeepers, highlighting the relational nature of creativity (Stierand et al. 2014).

Overall, the findings suggest that culinary success cannot be reduced to a single variable but instead emerges from the dynamic interaction of multiple interdependent components. Talent represents the foundational dimension of professional existence, creativity serves as the primary tool of differentiation, and popularity enables the transformation of these elements into social capital. Participant narratives

indicate that the absence of any one of these dimensions results in an incomplete professional identity. Creativity without talent is unsustainable, while creativity without popularity remains invisible. This interdependence points to the necessity of well planned strategies and strong professional relationships in an increasingly competitive and globalized environment (Saoualih et al. 2025). Accordingly, popularity should be understood not merely as an outcome but as a central mechanism that validates and transforms creative production into recognized socio economic value.

# 4.1. Theoretical Implications

This study reconceptualizes the professional chef identity by moving beyond single dimensional analyses and positions it as an emergent outcome of the interplay between technical competence, creative expression, and socio symbolic recognition. The proposed “Balanced Professional Chef Identity” model demonstrates that identity is not a static or linear construct, but rather a dynamic configuration shaped by the continuous interaction of these core dimensions. In doing so, the study systematically addresses the theoretical tension between a chef’s artistic identity and operational work identity, as highlighted by Lane & Lup (2015), by integrating creativity and implementation within a unified analytical framework. The proposed model can be interpreted as a “professional value transformation mechanism,” in which talent generates potential, creativity activates this potential, and popularity converts it into recognized economic and symbolic capital. This perspective provides a process based understanding of professional identity construction.

Furthermore, the construction of culinary personas emerges as a central mechanism in the establishment of cultural legitimacy. In this respect, Johnston et al. (2014) and Zopiatis & Melanthiou (2019) provide complementary yet critical perspectives. While Johnston et al. (2014) emphasize that culinary personas may reproduce socio cultural hierarchies based on gender, race, and class, Zopiatis & Melanthiou (2019) underline the transformative role of the celebrity chef phenomenon in reshaping the public image of the profession and elevating culinary arts into an academic and cultural domain. By integrating these perspectives, the present study advances the argument that sustained professional legitimacy in contemporary gastronomy depends on the continuous synergy of embodied experience, intuitive ideation, and public visibility.

The study also contributes to the literature by addressing the fragmented structure of prior research. Existing studies on culinary creativity, although extensive, have largely examined the concept through isolated dimensions such as cognitive processes (Horng & Hu, 2008), waste management (Sezerel et al. 2025), spatial dynamics (Bouty & Gomez, 2013), and master–apprentice relationships (Stierand, 2015). Similarly, research focusing on technology (Seyitoğlu et al. 2025), environmental interaction (Engisch, 2020), and social media (Fathy et al. 2025) tends to conceptualize creativity as an independent phenomenon.

In contrast, the concept of talent has remained theoretically underdeveloped and is often treated as a secondary element, either as a prerequisite for creativity or as a purely technical/manual skill (Lin &

Baum, 2016; Peng et al. 2013). The literature on popularity exhibits a comparable limitation. This predominantly focuses on the media visibility and social representations of celebrity chefs (Zopiatis & Melanthiou, 2019; Johnston et al. 2014; Hyman, 2008), while largely neglecting its functional and transformative role within the professional production process.

In response to this conceptual fragmentation, the present research proposes an integrative perspective in which talent, creativity, and popularity are understood as an interconnected system that collectively produces professional meaning and value. The “Balanced Professional Chef Identity” model extends existing theoretical frameworks by positioning professional identity at the intersection of these three dimensions and by demonstrating that their interaction constitutes a holistic and self reinforcing mechanism.

Additionally, in relation to the evaluation of creative output, the study bridges differing theoretical approaches. While Torrance (1972) emphasizes the predictive validity of standardized creative thinking assessments, Stierand et al. (2014) argue that in haute cuisine, creativity is predominantly validated through subjective social evaluation and consecration by domain gatekeepers. By synthesizing these perspectives, the study posits that sustained professional legitimacy requires a dynamic equilibrium among entrepreneurial creativity, embodied experience, and public visibility.

Overall, the most distinctive theoretical contribution of this research lies in demonstrating that talent, creativity, and popularity should not be conceptualized as isolated variables but rather as an integrated and interdependent mechanism that constructs the balanced professional chef identity. This integrative model not only bridges previously disconnected strands of the literature but also provides a robust conceptual foundation for future empirical and theoretical inquiries in gastronomy and creative professions.

Building on this integrative perspective, the conceptual model developed based on the research findings provides a systematic explanation to address the gap in the literature (see Table 10). The model explicates the functional roles of each core dimension within the professional identity construction process. Accordingly, talent ensures professional legitimacy through technical accumulation and mastery, creativity enables competitive differentiation through originality and aesthetic synthesis, and popularity facilitates the transformation of this created value into economic and symbolic capital through media visibility and personal branding.

Table 10
Balanced Professional Chef Identity

| Interaction | Definition | Outcome |
|---|---|---|
| Talent + Creativity | The integration of craft and art | **Balanced Professional Chef Identity** |
| Talent + Popularity | Technical excellence and media influence | |
| Creativity + Popularity | Originality and trend sensitivity | |
| Talent + Creativity + Popularity | Experience, originality, and media visibility | |

Source: Created by the authors.

More importantly, the model demonstrates that these dimensions do not operate independently but through specific interaction patterns. The integration of talent and creativity represents the fusion of craft and art, forming the basis of a balanced and professional chef identity. The interaction between talent and popularity reflects the alignment of technical excellence with media influence, while the relationship between creativity and popularity highlights the role of originality combined with trend sensitivity. At the intersection of all three dimensions (talent, creativity, and popularity) the model captures a holistic configuration characterized by experience, originality, and media visibility.

As visualized in Fig. 1, the ideal chef profile emerges at the intersection of these three dimensions. This multidimensional structure is particularly significant as it shifts gastronomy literature away from reductionist, one dimensional approaches toward a more holistic and integrative paradigm. In doing so, the model provides a structured response to the conceptual fragmentation identified in prior studies.

Source: Created by the authors.

The theoretical framework presented in Fig. 1 is directly validated by the chefs' lived experiences. For instance, K9 states, "Talent gave me the initial energy and creativity shaped that energy". This confirms the synergy between craft and art. Furthermore, K3 notes, "The invisible chef is not noticed". This empirical voice proves that popularity transforms culinary output into recognized capital. Thus, the field perfectly mirrors the proposed model.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that the proposed model is context dependent and reflects the professional realities of experienced chefs operating within contemporary gastronomy environments. While it offers a robust conceptual framework for understanding professional chef identity, its applicability may vary across different cultural contexts, organizational structures, and levels of professional experience. Therefore, the model should be interpreted as a dynamic and adaptable framework, open to further empirical testing and theoretical refinement. Ultimately, the model conceptualizes professional chef identity as an emergent outcome of the interaction between talent, creativity, and popularity.

## 4.2. Practical Implications

From a managerial and practical standpoint, the gastronomy sector must adapt to the multi dimensional nature of professional chef identity. The findings indicate that organizations should prioritize employee empowerment as a core managerial strategy. Providing chefs with autonomy and a supportive work environment directly enhances their proactive performance and creative output in high stress kitchen environments (Haykir & Çalışkan, 2021). In this sense, managerial practices should not be limited to operational efficiency but should also foster creative agency and professional ownership.

In terms of education and career development, traditional culinary training alone is no longer sufficient to meet the demands of contemporary gastronomy. Training programs must be restructured to reflect the realities of the “celebrity society,” incorporating competencies such as digital literacy, social media engagement, and e-marketing (Fathy et al. 2025; Clarke et al. 2016). In particular, developing skills related to visual presentation, “foodstagramming,” and digital content production is essential for increasing chefs’ visibility and strengthening audience interaction (Fathy et al. 2025). These competencies enable chefs to actively participate in the socio symbolic dimension of their profession and to transform their creative outputs into recognizable personal brands.

Furthermore, the integration of technological tools into professional kitchens presents both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, technological applications can enhance efficiency, support skill development, and create additional time for creative processes. On the other hand, there is a potential risk of deskilling and the erosion of traditional craftsmanship, which must be carefully managed (Seyitoğlu et al. 2025). Therefore, a balanced approach is required, where technology functions as a facilitator rather than a substitute for professional expertise.

At a strategic level, the findings suggest that destination marketers and restaurant managers can effectively leverage the cultural authority and symbolic capital of celebrity chefs. As cultural intermediaries, celebrity chefs play a significant role in shaping consumer perceptions, building trust, and enhancing brand equity (Demirkol & Cifci, 2020; Giousmpasoglou et al. 2020). Accordingly, integrating chefs into branding and marketing strategies can contribute not only to individual business success but also to the broader development of culinary tourism.

Overall, the practical implications of this study highlight the necessity of aligning managerial practices, educational frameworks, and strategic initiatives with the integrated structure of talent, creativity, and popularity. This alignment is essential for sustaining professional performance, fostering innovation, and maintaining competitive advantage in an increasingly globalized and visibility driven gastronomy landscape. This shift requires organizations to move from a production oriented mindset toward a visibility and value oriented strategy, where chefs are positioned as both creators and strategic assets.

## 4.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The proposed model reflects contemporary gastronomy contexts shaped by visibility and media influence. This condition may limit its generalizability across different cultural settings and organizational structures. The study presents an integrative conceptual framework. Empirical relationships between talent, creativity, and popularity are not directly tested. The relative weight of each dimension remains unclear.

A major limitation of this study is the all male sample. The proposed “Balanced Professional Chef Identity” model primarily reflects male experiences. It may not capture the structural barriers faced by female chefs. As Johnston et al. (2014) note, culinary personas can reproduce gender based hierarchies. Therefore, the model’s applicability to women requires further investigation. Future studies should include female chefs to test gendered dynamics in professional identity construction.

Future research should examine the model across diverse cultural contexts and professional levels. Comparative studies may reveal variations in identity construction. Quantitative and mixed method designs can test the interaction between dimensions. Longitudinal approaches may explain how professional identity evolves over time. The role of digital platforms and emerging technologies should be explored in greater depth, particularly within the evolving methodological and ethical frameworks of digital ethnography (Lane & Lingel, 2022). Further studies may refine the model and expand its applicability within gastronomy and other creative industries.

# 5. Conclusion

This study reconceptualizes professional chef identity as a multidimensional and dynamic construct. The proposed “Balanced Professional Chef Identity” model is grounded in the interaction of talent, creativity, and popularity. Identity is not defined by a single attribute but emerges from the continuous interplay of these three dimensions. Each component plays a distinct yet interdependent role in shaping professional existence.

Talent represents the foundation of professional legitimacy through technical mastery and accumulated expertise. Creativity enables differentiation by supporting originality and aesthetic production. Popularity transforms these outputs into economic and symbolic value through visibility, recognition, and audience engagement. The findings indicate that professional success depends on the balanced interaction of these dimensions. The absence of any one component weakens the overall structure of professional identity. The study demonstrates that professional identity in gastronomy is not a fixed state but a continuously evolving process shaped by interaction, recognition, and transformation.

The study contributes to the literature by addressing conceptual fragmentation and offering an integrated framework. Talent, creativity, and popularity are positioned not as independent variables but as a coherent system that produces professional meaning and value. This approach provides a clearer understanding of chef identity within contemporary gastronomy and extends existing discussions on creative professions.

The findings also provide practical direction for the gastronomy sector. Managers should recognize chefs as both technical experts and symbolic actors. Recruitment and performance evaluation should consider creative potential and visibility alongside technical competence. Culinary education should integrate digital literacy, communication skills, and personal branding with traditional training. Strategic use of chef visibility can strengthen brand value and support competitive advantage.

Overall, the model presents chef identity as an evolving and context sensitive structure. It offers a conceptual and practical framework for understanding professional identity in contemporary gastronomy.

## Declarations

# Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Ethics Approval**

**-Institutional Review Board Statement**

**Ethical approval**

was granted for this study and standard protocols were followed. Before data collection, a favorable statement for the study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Anadolu University (Approval number: 734740 – 28.05.2024). The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

**Consent to Participate**

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

**Consent to Publish**

All participants consented to the publication of anonymized data.

# Authors’ Note

Based on Academic Integrity and Transparency in AI-assisted Research and Specification Framework (Bozkurt, 2024), the authors declare that OpenAI’s ChatGPT (November 2025 versions) was used solely for linguistic editing purposes, under human supervision. The authors reviewed and validated all content to ensure academic rigor and take full responsibility for the final version of the manuscript.

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# Author Contribution

E. Y. Writing original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Resources. D. C. Writing original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Resources. O. T. Writing original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Resources. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

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# Data Availability

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 15 professional chefs selected via purposive sampling. The collected qualitative data were analyzed using phenomenologically informed qualitative content analysis.

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## Figures

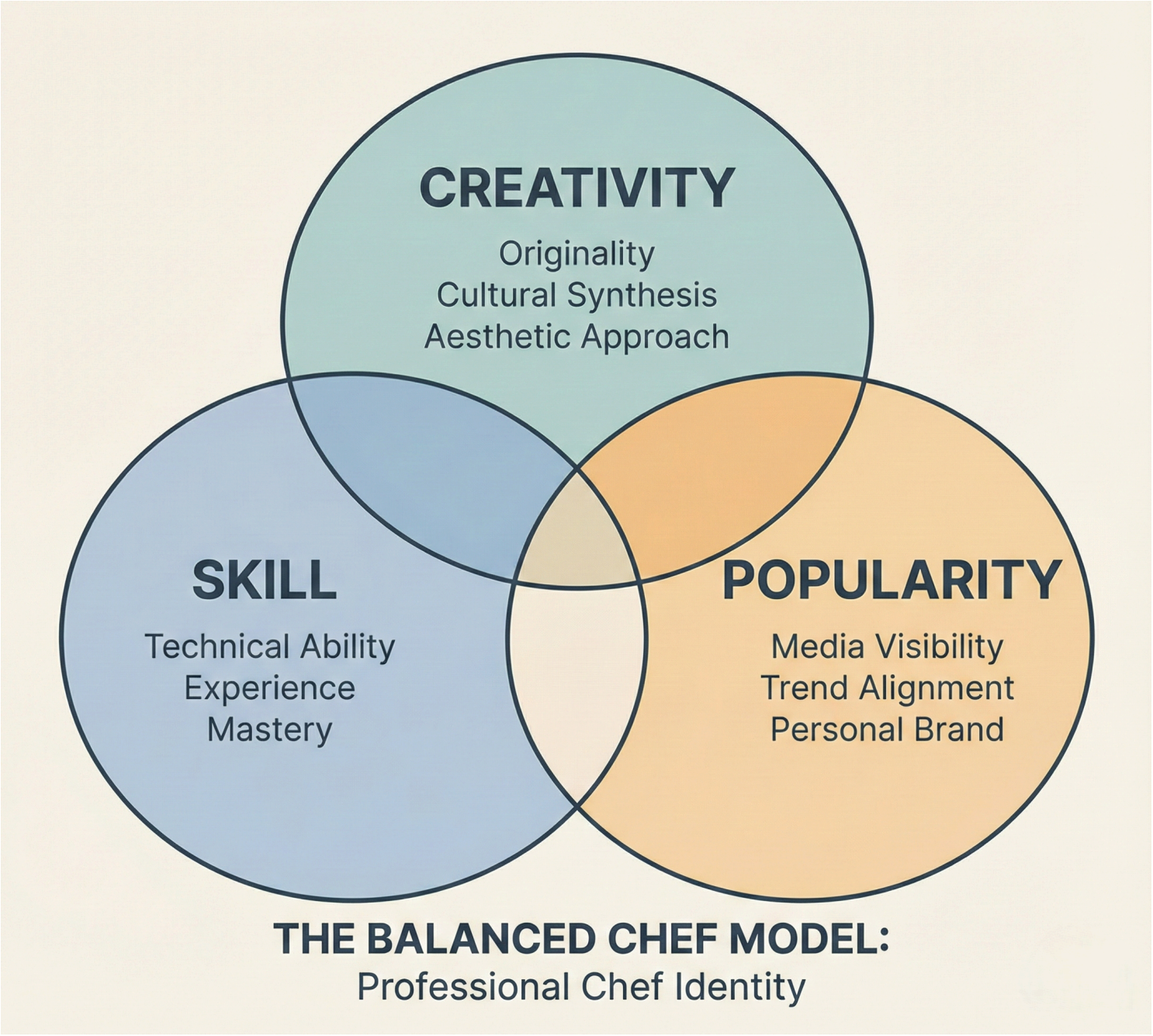



**Figure 1**

The Balanced Chef Model of Professional Chef Identity

Source: Created by the authors.