

## Article

# Communicating Values to Cultivate Sustainable Occupational Identity: How Restaurant Workers Resist Service Work Stigma

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**Abstract:** Pre-COVID-19 pandemic, restaurant workers comprised one of the largest workforces in the United States, contributing hundreds of billions of dollars to the national economy. Yet, restaurant workers routinely face customer abuse, meager wages, lack of benefits, sexual harassment, and one of the highest rates of turnover across industries. Given these conditions, this qualitative study investigates how restaurant workers make sense of a contested occupation and manage the stigma associated with their occupation. Specifically, this study examines how food and beverage service workers identify with and navigate a demanding industry while managing the sociocultural assumptions of service work. Using a multi-level discourse analytic framework, we analyze how service workers craft and enact occupational identities. Through an analysis of in-depth interviews with 19 restaurant employees, we demonstrate how people foreground the positive attributes of restaurant work while resisting social Discourses that position the work as dirty, demeaning, emotional, and meaningless. We analyze how workers frame the values of working in restaurants and the communicative strategies they use to navigate stigmatized social interactions, including emphasizing flexibility, empathy, emotion management, and teamwork. Theoretical and practical implications offer suggestions to improve workforce sustainability and working conditions for employees.

**Keywords:** occupational identity; organizational communication; emotion management; dirty work; stigma management; restaurant industry; service work; discursive analysis



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## 1. Introduction

As of 2020 and before the COVID-19 pandemic decimated the restaurant industry, more than 10 million people worked in food and beverage service in the United States [1]. In fact, more than six in ten U.S. adults have worked in the restaurant industry at some point in their lives [2]. With a median age of 29.5 years, it remains the youngest workforce in America [3] and normally contributes hundreds of billions of dollars to the national economy [4].

Although the food and beverage service industry is increasingly central to American culture [5], its workforce is treated as disposable, with the highest rates of employee turnover [6] and sexual harassment [7] across industries, as well as meager pay and lack of stability [1]. Restaurants rarely offer benefits such as healthcare, overtime, or retirement investments that sustain a secure lifestyle [8]. Likewise, restaurant workers are routinely underpaid and rely on customer tips to make ends meet [4]. As such, restaurant work is routinely framed as transitory and less meaningful than other “real” jobs [9].

At the same time, restaurant work, as with other service industry occupations, is rife with cultural discourses that position workers as servile and customers as kings [10]. Customer abuse of workers is all too common, and restaurant workers are routinely required to accept abuse, suppress negative emotions, and continue to provide “service with a smile” [11], all without receiving respect from customers or the broader culture. In fact, a customer-first organizational strategy is associated with workforce consequences that

reduce sustainability such as employee stress, burnout, and turnover [12]. Even in research aimed at improving restaurant sustainability specifically, most focus is given to environmental or fiscal sustainability, with very little attention to employee stakeholders [13].

So, how do restaurant industry workers make sense of a contested occupation? The current study examines how food and beverage service workers identify with and navigate a demanding industry while managing the socio-cultural assumptions of service work. Using a multi-level discourse analytic framework, we analyze how service workers craft and enact occupational identities in relation to restaurant industry d/Discourses and the resulting repercussions. To accomplish this, we compare discourses (local talk and texts in practice) and Discourses (larger societal systems of language that govern thought and action) [14] to understand the influence of varying d/Discourses on occupational identity [15] as we discuss more below. Specifically, we examine how restaurant workers resist stigmatized discourses and cultivate more sustainable occupational identities. Through an analysis of in-depth interviews with 19 restaurant employees, we demonstrate how people foreground the positive attributes of restaurant work while resisting social Discourses that position the work as dirty, demeaning, emotional, and meaningless.

To begin, we review relevant literature, methods, and analytic procedures. Then, we describe how workers frame the values of working in restaurants and the communicative strategies they use to navigate stigmatized social interactions. Finally, we discuss implications for theory and practice. Specifically, we argue that restaurant workers' resistance to and reframing of service work Discourses shows how workers cultivate positive and more sustainable occupational identities amidst precarious economic conditions and stigmatized micro- and macro-level communication.

### *1.1. Discourses of Occupational Identity Construction*

In this section, we discuss the literature associated with occupational identity construction, and how identity work functions in occupations that are framed as "dirty," not "real," or less-than meaningful.

Following the tradition of organizational scholars who emphasize the relationships between identity, meaning, power, and organizing [16], we draw upon scholarship that connects identity performance [17] with occupational identity construction [18,19]. To explain how organizational member identity is constructed and reconstructed in interaction, Alvesson and Willmott's [20] concepts of identity regulation, identity work, and self-identity are especially useful. In short, this perspective emphasizes the cyclical nature of identity as individuals reflect on self-narratives, which are then enacted in social processes, which are then transformed and reflected upon in relation to broader social Discourses and organizational experiences. In other words, workers consider who they are in relation to work, colleagues, and organizational interactions, and regularly shape how they see themselves and crucially, how they behave, in relation to organizational experiences and discourses.

In this study, we are interested in how restaurant workers craft and perform identity in relation to their occupation—meaning, how people relate to their type of work and not necessarily their particular organization [18]. An occupational lens helps us link individual and interpersonal level experiences in various restaurants with larger cultural Discourses about restaurant and service work. Following Fairhurst and Putnam, we differentiate between levels of discourse, with "little d" discourse referring to local talk and text such as personal and interpersonal exchanges in restaurants, and "big D" Discourse as "enduring systems" of meaning that are historically situated and constituted by "power/knowledge relations" [14] (pp. 7–8). Acknowledging Kuhn's [16] claim that attention must be paid to larger Discourses to make sense of the boundaries and connections between organizational members, organizations, and society, this study helps to clarify what organizational members draw upon to understand their experiences within the occupation of restaurant work.

Recent research about idealized identity performances in a stigmatized occupation provides a useful model. In her research with coal miners, Wieland [21] showed how

socially constructed ideals are an integral part of identity construction processes, and that enacting cultural ideals are a means by which organizational members can perform positive identities in a stigmatized occupation. Moreover, Wieland's research foregrounds the agency of organizational members, and how identity performances are inextricably bound to group norms and practices. We approach the current study using Wieland's concept of ideal selves to show how restaurant workers navigate and process various discourses to construct their identities in a particularly challenging work context.

### 1.2. Discursive Framing of Service Work as Dirty, Emotional, and Not a "Real" Job

Restaurants operate within the context of service work, where, as the adage goes, "The customer is always right". Consequently, service workers navigate difficult subject positions. As Paules [22] states, "If the customer is king (or queen), the employee by extension is subject, or servant" (p. 132). To understand service d/Discourses, organizational scholarship has considered what it means to serve and how service workers derive meaning from their jobs. Common themes in this literature include focus on service work as "dirty," emotional, and not "real".

#### 1.2.1. Restaurant Work as Dirty

The term "dirty work" describes work that is considered physically, socially, or morally undesirable [23,24]. Service work can be considered socially undesirable because of the relationship between servitude and class, with serving equating to a lower-class position. In addition to the physical taint associated with cleaning up after people, and the stigma of low wages and instability, restaurant work can be understood as physically and socially dirty, contributing to an occupational taint that clouds workers' interactions with others.

This occupational taint is informed by organizational and social Discourses about restaurants. Restaurants are "professional back places" which refers to spaces where transgressions or non-normative behavior such as swearing at work or drug and alcohol use is accepted to some degree [25]. In fact, restaurant employees are often characterized as deviants and dirty workers, as evidenced in the autobiography of celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain [26] where he talks about the general filth and debauchery that saturates the industry, or any of the number of restaurant-kitchen reality shows such as Gordon Ramsay's "Kitchen Nightmares". When put together, the literature surrounding restaurant work as well as popular Discourses frame food and beverage service as deviant and dirty.

Working in a "dirty" occupation has significant identity implications for workers. For instance, those who perform dirty work are often asked to compartmentalize their identities and, in doing so, contribute to "passivity, subordination, and objectification" [24] (p. 183). Specifically, service workers either volunteer, or are asked to "fake" themselves at work to align with organizational expectations, typically emotionally, as we discuss below. This means that those in dirty occupations may unwittingly subject themselves to the will of the organization despite efforts to distinguish themselves as separate from it.

When confronted with occupational taint, research shows that organizational members use the strategies of reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing to combat stigma. Reframing is the practice of "transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatized occupation" [24] (p. 421). In other words, workers either imbue work as honorable, or focus on the societal demands and remark that it is "just the way it is". Another strategy is recalibrating, which renegotiates the standards by which individuals evaluate the dirtiness of work. Finally, workers can use refocusing as a strategy to combat occupational taint. Refocusing is the practice of shifting focus "from the stigmatized features of the work to the nonstigmatized features" [24] (p. 423). These strategies represent the ways in which dirty workers communicatively construct meaning from their occupations.

However, more recent scholarship has called into question the exclusivity and exhaustiveness of Ashforth and Kreiner's [24] framework when applied to stigma management. For instance, Meisenbach [27] argues that the concept of transcendence, which combines recalibration and reframing, may be a more useful to show how people reduce a stigma's

offensiveness or the focus on a particular stigma. Building on Meisenbach's theoretical model and her calls for qualitative and discursive research that examines stigma and identity management, the current study explores strategies used by restaurant workers to manage stigmatized discourses and how this affects occupational identity.

### 1.2.2. Restaurant Work as Emotional

Service work is also framed as emotional as so much of the job is focused on social performances designed to elicit positive emotions from patrons who may be emotionally demanding, impatient, or irritated from hunger. Service workers must manage their emotions according to cultural and organizational norms, performing emotional labor [28] as a fundamental element of the job. Emotional labor, which is performing emotions to meet organizational goals, involves variously simulating, suppressing, amplifying, minimizing, or masking emotions [29].

Dowling's [30] autoethnographic investigation of her waitressing work reveals the complex interplay of emotion, affect, and self (re)presentation while performing service work. In particular, Dowling evidences the difficulties associated with balancing the different demands of the job: Restaurant workers must simultaneously juggle roles of servant, expert, entertainer, and possession, with the emotional expectations of each role, and the affective experience of actually performing the role. Ethnographic works such as this and others [23] reveal how service work is inextricably bound to emotional performance, and how competing organizational and cultural expectations create tensions for workers. These tensions are exacerbated by the cognitive discomfort associated with managing competing emotional norms and expectations, which can lead to increased stress and burnout [31,32] that may account for the high turnover in restaurants.

Organizational research on emotion also emphasizes how emotion is socially constructed by workers and customers together [33], and how those social processes may contribute to work becoming emotionally tainted [34] or hidden taint emerging from challenging interactions with patrons [35]. For restaurant employees who engage with countless customers, emotional expectations are constantly shifting between varied interactions depending on how customers feel/act, and these interactions shape how employees view their work. Critically, emotionally abusive customers can evoke emotional exhaustion and burnout in restaurant workers, impacting organizational sustainability [12].

### 1.2.3. Restaurant Work as Not "Real" Work

One of the stigmas associated with restaurant work is that it does not constitute a "real" job or meaningful work as it is a low-skill occupation requiring no specific education, with irregular and limited hours, low wages, minimal benefits, and high turnover. These inconsistencies contribute to the perception of restaurant work as not "real," unimportant in relation to other career choices. Clair [10] indicates that cultural meanings for what constitute "real" work include (but are not limited to): good pay, the ability to enjoy work, a 40-hour workweek, and the ability to use one's education or potential. What constitutes "real" work is heavily influenced by perceptions of education-level and pragmatic Discourses focused on the ability to earn money, especially for college students [36]. For instance, restaurants are often staffed by college students working through school, where restaurant work as a means to support more lucrative and stable future work is seen as valid, but not as an occupation unto itself.

More recently, O'Connor and Raile [37] discovered a major shift in perceptions since Clair's study, revealing that nearly half of college students reject the colloquialism of what constitutes a "real" job, instead focusing on how jobs are subjectively meaningful to workers. The authors attribute this finding to the circumstances of the Great Recession, noting that, "Millennials might be choosing to reject the notion of a real job due to shrinking employment opportunities" (p. 286) which aligns with how people communicate to manage stigma [28]. For the current study, it is worth considering how restaurant workers relate to the notion of "real" work amidst growing economic insecurity.

### 1.3. Research Questions

Taking into account the aforementioned literature and how service work is discursively constructed, the following research questions guided this study: RQ1: How do restaurant workers construct and enact occupational identities? RQ2: How do restaurant workers negotiate stigmatized discourses associated with service work?

## 2. Materials and Methods

To explain how occupational identity is constructed in service work, we took an interpretive qualitative stance, using open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews to understand how restaurant workers enact identity and negotiate stigma. We engaged in purposive sampling [38], focusing on full-service restaurants, contexts with extended interactions between servers and guests. While full service does include a variety of restaurant types from casual sit-down to fine dining, all offer the opportunity to understand how worker identity is constituted and negotiated via communication.

### 2.1. Participants and Data Collection

To build the interview guide and recruitment interview participants, the first author conducted a pilot study with 71 restaurant workers, whose backgrounds ranged from styles of dining (casual to fine) and culinary traditions (e.g., American, Japanese). Participants answered questions including: “What does working in the industry mean to you?” and “How would you describe the culture that exists within the food and beverage service industry?”. Key themes from a thematic analysis of participant responses included: highlighting the stressful, transitory, and degrading nature of the work; the importance of finding ways to cope with negative guest interactions and ineffective communication between coworkers; the high levels of coworker camaraderie; and learning to adapt to a variety of social interactions. These themes were used to develop a semi-structured interview guide.

To recruit interviewees, we contacted those questionnaire respondents who indicated willingness to participate in future research. Additionally, we recruited participants by dropping flyers off at several restaurants within a large, metropolitan area in California, and posting to the Communication Studies list-serv run by the National Communication Association.

Nineteen current and former restaurant workers participated in in-depth interviews. Participants ranged in age from 20–29 ( $n = 11$ ), 30 to 39 ( $n = 5$ ), and 40 and above ( $n = 3$ ). Four had some college experience, six held bachelor’s degrees, four held master’s degrees, three held doctoral degrees, and two did not disclose their educational level. Additionally, 63% of participants identified as female and 74% as White. Each participant had a unique combination of experience relative to the types/locations of restaurants, their years of service, and their recency of employment within the industry.

The goal of interviewing is, “*understanding the social actor’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews*” [39] (p. 173, italics in the original). The first author, with extensive restaurant experience, conducted in-depth interviews to understand how restaurant workers make sense of their occupational identities, after receiving Institutional Review Board approval. Prior to participating, interviewees received informed consent letters. Fourteen interviews happened face-to-face or via videoconferencing, and two occurred via email, ranging in length from 33 to 91 minutes, averaging 56. With participant permission, conversations were recorded and then transcribed, resulting in 405 pages of single-spaced data.

Additionally, one focus group with three participants took place during data collection as a means to process emergent interview themes. In reflecting on the themes, focus group participants helped explain and contextualize the individual experiences. Moreover, we sought to encourage self-disclosures that might have otherwise remained hidden during one-on-one interviews [38] and maximize the opportunity of the “chaining”, or “cascading” known to occur in group interviews [40].

## 2.2. Data Analysis

To analyze the data, we employed an iterative, inductive approach [38], oscillating between local, emergent themes within the data and existing theoretical frameworks. First, we conducted primary-cycle coding which involved the first author reading through transcripts and identifying salient meanings line-by-line. Best practices in qualitative analysis emphasizes the concept of cycle in this process by stating that initial coding activities should occur more than a “first” time and that, “data might be read and coded several times during this primary stage” [38] (p. 189). As interviews were conducted, the first author analyzed them to find emergent themes, which informed subsequent interviews.

Midway through data collection, the first author randomly chose three interviews to code. In this primary code cycle, he immersed himself in the data, coding salient terms, phrases, and themes in descriptive ways. From this initial cycle, he created a codebook to serve as a visual guide to build out the analysis. From this, he coded the remaining transcripts using the primary codes, and created new codes where necessary.

After this process, he conducted secondary-cycle coding, which is the process of analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating the primary codes to synthesize meaning [38]. Drawing from Wieland’s [22] work, we searched for examples of ideals, values, virtues, or other expressions of identity that revealed normative behaviors and expectations within the industry, which included: “managing emotion”, “coping with stress”, “molding” and “adapting”. This analytic process yielded several secondary codes such as “empathy”, “composure”, “flexibility” and “teamwork” that were grouped into categories to represent identity being enacted in restaurant work. Relevant literature helped us analyze these codes, for instance, including framing the participant values of teamwork and camaraderie as markers of strong occupational identification in contrast to the salience of dirty work stigma.

After secondary-cycle coding, we created visual displays to make sense of the emergent themes and categories. Using poster paper, we mapped primary terms and grouped smaller, related terms around them. We analyzed this display to make sense of how the data related to one another, creating subsequent drawings and models that helped to identify relationships. Moreover, both authors engaged in multiple analytic conversations to ensure rigor throughout the interpretive stages of the analysis. During this process, the first author also shared the models with others familiar with the research to evaluate the concepts and receive pertinent feedback. This process was an effort at crystallization by which the data were interpreted through various means to ensure trustworthiness and credibility in the findings [40].

## 3. Results

During interviews, restaurant worker participants reflected on stories about “crazy” guests, admirable coworkers, and service experiences that remained top-of-mind years later. They conveyed restaurant work as demanding and stressful, using metaphors to describe chaotic shifts as being “in the weeds” and “in the trenches”, service as “sink or swim”, and coworkers as “family”. Along the way, they described certain values that helped them make sense of and navigate the demands of service.

Using the concept of “ideal selves”, we identified examples of idealized and valued behavior in restaurant work. “Members’ taken-for-granted assumptions about how a good member of the organization should look, act, and feel (shape) their understandings of ideal work (and nonwork) identities” [22] (p. 514). We took a similar approach to understand what values guided occupational identity performances, answering RQ1. In this section, we describe four occupational ideals that participants described enacting in and sometimes outside of work: Flexibility, empathy, emotion management, and teamwork. Subsequently, we discuss how these values communicate resistance to stigmatized Discourses of service work answering RQ2.

It is important to note that we situate these values offered by restaurant workers as micro-level discourses within the context of larger social Discourses about service work,

as depicted in the literature review. In some cases, participants specifically connected their personal and interpersonal experiences to restaurant work Discourses, whether organizational or cultural.

### 3.1. *“We Are the Best Multitaskers”*: Flexibility in Restaurant Work

Restaurant service work is characterized by instability and uncertainty. Despite the mechanics of the job being consistent—serving food and beverage—each day brings new people, with different tastes and requests. Additionally, the demands of the job are often in competition with other responsibilities such as working a second job, going to school, and raising a family, etc.). As restaurant workers must nimbly respond to the spontaneity of the work (and life), it is not surprising that our participants described being flexible as crucial for success. Indeed, our analysis shows that flexibility is a central value in restaurant work, and involves multitasking, adapting communication, and juggling competing work/life responsibilities.

One way that flexibility emerges in restaurant work is through multitasking. As Lauren—a former server with years of experience in fine-dining—stated, “We are the best multitaskers”. The ability to handle several tables and cognitively juggle various requests second-to-second requires prodigious skill. Several participants cited flexibility as a skill worth emulating. Consider Jenna, a former server at an Italian restaurant in the Midwest. When asked to recall a coworker she tried to emulate, Jenna described an employee nicknamed “Whitey”. She remarked, “Everyone talked about how like amazing he was” because of his ability to handle a large number of tables simultaneously and still be highly personable. Jenna discussed Whitey in an almost mythical light because of his competence under pressure.

Flexibility also appeared in the form of flexible communication. Service workers cited the ability to adapt their communication to fit different people and contexts as very important. Examples included: changing communication styles from table-to-table (e.g., accent shift, intonation, energy), reworking communication styles from restaurant to restaurant, and playing with styles depending on audience (e.g., kitchen, service, management, etc.).

Some described adaptable communication as a necessary function of the job. For instance, Bob, a 22-year-old banquet server in a large hotel with experience at a small, privately owned restaurant, claimed that he “tweaks” his communication to make guests feel “more comfortable”. He explained “tweaking” as picking up on verbal/nonverbal cues from guests to trying to mirror their styles, thereby emphasizing similarities and minimizing differences between him and his guests. Likewise, for Bob, the ability to flex his communication included coworkers as well. Recognizing the differences between the kitchen and service staffs, Bob said he tries to “mold” himself “into the kitchen dynamic”, which means acting louder and more noticeable to avoid collisions. Bob’s example illustrates how communication changes by restaurant area and audience.

One unique way servers adapt their communication relates to sexual identity. For instance, Brandon, a 25-year-old gay man, described using his sexuality to make guests “feel better”. He explained:

When there’s a table of mixed company and I can tell that like two of them are dating, I’ll give the girl a compliment. But it’ll be something that, like, only someone who is gay . . . like, her eyebrows. So, I’d be like, “Oh my God! Your eyebrows are beautiful!”. And then she’d . . . get like, “Oh my God! He just gave me this really important compliment!”. And you could see her boyfriend sit up just a little bit . . . and then I’ll be like, “Yeah, my boyfriend really is into his eyebrows”. That like lets him know that I’m not a threat to him, but I am here to make them feel better.

Brandon’s example shows how sexuality can be used as a resource to enact the welcoming personality of a server by picking up on social cues to build rapport. He declared, “I worry for servers who can’t change their communication patterns based on the guests because, to me, that’s . . . so fundamental to being able to succeed”. Brandon’s ability to adapt and showcase features of his personality for organizational purposes is

borne out in research that relates employee personality traits to organizational efficiencies and productivity [41].

Besides adapting communication, service workers also described the ability to juggle responsibilities as a vital skill. Beyond simply being able to keep food and drink orders organized, participants discussed “juggling” in terms of work–life balance and negotiating multiple obligations. As mentioned, restaurant work is fraught with instability. Shifts are picked up and let go. Scheduling is often irregular. High turnover rates force managers to find bodies to cover vacancies. To be able to cultivate stability is a skill crafted through restaurant work.

In fact, many participants argued that the experience of juggling multiple responsibilities is an inherent value of the job. Lauren asserted, “I wouldn’t have been able to juggle all of the things in my life that I can juggle (if I hadn’t) worked in the (restaurant) industry”. Likewise, LJ—a graduate student, mother, and 20-year restaurant veteran—concurred, “(Working in restaurants) also helped me balance time really well and manage sometimes competing obligations”. As noted, it’s rare that these workers only work in a restaurant without other academic, professional, or personal responsibilities. So, the ability to balance a precarious schedule with multiple personal responsibilities is an important skill developed through restaurant work that benefits restaurants and workers alike.

### 3.2. *Empathy, with a Side of Compassion*

In addition to flexibility, participants cited empathy as an important value that workers should have, or will gain through, restaurant work. Participants discussed empathy as the process of arriving at an understanding with the various guests they encounter. Primarily, empathy talk emerged from stories of engaging with customers having “bad days”, or emotional episodes, and acting compassionately in response. Participants cited compassion as the ability to see guests as “human” or being able to feel for others (coworkers and guests alike) when they are acting out. These meanings diverge slightly from scholarly definitions of compassion as, “‘connection’ to others (either cognitively through perspective taking or affectively through empathy) and ‘caring’ for those others (often in communicative or behavioral ways)” [42]. We portray the meanings used by participants in order to emphasize the voices of these individuals.

Amidst the “bitching” and complaining about guests, participants discussed compassion and empathy as if they were muscles to be flexed to survive the grind of restaurant work. Although the average shift lasts less than eight hours, participants described the work as physically and emotionally “exhausting” due to being on their feet and getting “hit” by the “rush” at lunch or dinner. In a physically and emotionally demanding environment, these workers expect to be pushed to an emotional edge by guests. However, remaining empathetic is what keeps workers calm and focused. As Kat—a 10-year veteran—stated, “Empathy is what would make the best restaurant worker”. Citing empathy as the ideal attribute, Kat argued empathy must be practiced to understand others; and if practiced enough, servers can be successful.

In restaurants, empathy takes the form of being in-tune to what guests want, sensing how they’re feeling, and being able to understand what is needed as the meal progresses. Servers described maintaining awareness of guests by placing themselves in the guest’s shoes and enacting “the golden rule” by treating others as they would want to be treated. LJ explained that empathy and compassion is necessary because she has “no idea what’s going on in these people’s heads. So, it’s just important for me to be kind, you know, even if they’re not being kind”. Participants described the ability to keep guest emotions and perspectives at the forefront as a particular skill that gets them through difficult times in service work.

According to some, practicing empathy is a personally transformative process. Bob stated that, in restaurants, “You get a new perspective on life. You understand that . . . people are human”. Responding to the question “What do you get out of working in restaurants?” Bob cited service work as a learning experience. He insisted, “The restaurant experience—it

teaches empathy". By combining the perspectives of Kat and Bob, empathy is shown as something that develops through restaurant experience but requires practice in order to succeed. Other participants echoed this sentiment. Julie—a 27-year-old who worked in restaurants throughout college—said, "I think (restaurant work) has changed my compassion levels for other people". Mel—a 33-year-old veteran of the industry—stated that the restaurant experience "helped me to get some social skills . . . and understand—and be empathetic".

Many participants also cited the lack of empathy from customers as an injustice towards service workers that needs resolution. Consider Lauren's perspective: "(As a guest), you need to know when you're sitting at the table what's going on with the person standing in front of your table. So, it's that respect and compassion . . . their job is so fucking hard!" From her experience in a well-known, busy restaurant, Lauren lamented that not enough people are compassionate, respectful, and empathetic to service workers. Jenna also communicated this attitude by arguing, "I think everyone should work in some, sort of, industry job because (they) would recognize, like, it is hard work and you should be nice to the people who are bringing you food, right?" Participants posited that serving tables would be a lot easier if more people understood the amount of work and attention that goes into the craft. From the server's point of view, empathy is something that must be practiced by everyone involved in the dining experience (servers and guests) to alleviate the unnecessary difficulties that arise.

Participants emphasizing empathy as an ideal demonstrates two things: One, it shows how service workers value being able to understand customers and provide a human element to their work, which demonstrates an embracing of organizational discourses that overwhelmingly emphasize customer satisfaction [43]. Second—and more significantly—it shows how restaurant workers subtly resist the lack of empathy from customers, taking the "high road" in practicing empathy despite receiving little. Enacting empathy is another way for workers to deal with emotion management requirements, as we discuss next.

### 3.3. Composure: Keeping Cool Amidst the Chaos

Unsurprisingly, given the stressful environment, emotion management is a critical value of restaurant work. For instance, when asked to identify what makes a "bad" restaurant worker, Bob repeated the words of one of his trainers, stating, "Anyone can carry a tray, but not everyone can handle the pressure of being in (the) industry". This quote reveals how composure is an essential attribute in restaurant work.

In restaurants, it is expected that workers respond to guests with respect, civility, and kindness. Participants regarded the maintenance of this dynamic as crucial to their work. As Bob stated, "The cardinal sin (in restaurant work) would be (the inability) to maintain composure . . . If you snap or yell back . . . that's when you have a problem". He contended that it is okay to "melt down" and "break down" in a "back" area, a place out of sight and earshot of the guest, usually the kitchen. However, if a server snaps in front of a guest, that guest "will take full advantage" and "break" the employee. This "breaking" might be complaining to management about the service, writing a negative online review, or some other act that illustrates how the server provided "bad" service. Eric—a former bartender at a college bar/restaurant—echoed Bob's sentiment and cited "keeping your composure" as central to the industry experience. He stated, "You're gonna be frazzled at some point, yeah. But you have to, when you're relying on tips, you know, that customer's being a jerk . . . you just apologize. You do a great job (and say) 'I'm sorry'". Both examples demonstrate how participants perceived "keeping composed" as the norm and expectation for their work, something that could be described as an organizational emotion rule [30]. By actively maintaining composure, service workers enact training ideals and preserve expectations from guests and the meanings attributed to service work. That restaurant workers are forced to regularly perform composure illustrates how service work is rife with emotional taint [44].

For our participants, maintaining composure meant practicing significant restraint to conceal emotions or let emotions pass entirely. When encountering tough situations, restaurant workers are forced to either: conceal their true emotions and perform organizationally acceptable emotions, or surface acting, or align their internal emotional state with their expected emotional state via deep acting [30]. Jon—a college instructor who worked restaurants to pay for school—looked back on his experience and succinctly stated, “I learned restraint”. Jenna was more specific, arguing, “Even if like you’re raging mad . . . you have to put on a smile, you have to, yeah . . . pretend to, you know, just be roses and flowers”. Both examples demonstrate how individuals conceal their emotions and perform emotions that align with organizational expectations of service work. This behavior resembles the emotion management technique of “masking”, which involves displaying an emotion while feeling a different one [31]. This emotion work reflects ideal service workers and reinforces cultural expectations of service.

Participants also revealed the virtue of “letting go” in their work. This is different from restraint or concealment because it involves people actively engaging their emotions—by recognizing the emotions, and actively letting them pass—rather than stifling, experiencing, or transforming them. Julie described this as “learned patience” and how she is now able to “brush things off” and “get over things that happened”. From her perspective, the restaurant experience was a valuable resource that developed her ability to manage her emotional state. Others, like Kat, mentioned how restaurant work cultivates the ability to “let go of anger quickly”. Together, the practice of “letting go” allows service workers to neutralize their emotional states to meet organizational expectations, rather than perform expected emotions to align with organizational expectations, akin to the Buddhist concept of “non-attachment” and not holding on to emotion.

A final example of emotional management demonstrates how workers cope with a common negative experience—receiving a low tip, symbolically referred to as the “Two-Dollar Tip”. LJ recounted her strategy for overcoming these negative experiences:

It kind of got under my skin that a lot of people that I worked with just complain, and complain, and complain about the clientele. This restaurant was . . . hit-or-miss, and it was probably a lot more miss than it was hit. And . . . I am a freaking Pollyanna—I made myself a Two-Dollar Tip jar that I kept at home. So, every time I would get like a crappy tip . . . I would take all my crappy tips and put them in my Two-Dollar Tip jar at home, and at the end of the month, I would take that and go get my nails done, or take myself out to dinner or something, you know. So, I turned it into something that was positive.

This example reveals how one participant chose to deal with negative feelings about “bad” tipping as well as negative coworker talk about “bad” tipping. LJ made the decision to reframe her experience and manage the emotions that surround tipping. As tipping is an illustration of power dynamics between patrons and servers, and low wages a key stigma of the occupation, aggregating bad tips into a real reward shows LJ working to transcend and reframe the meaning of repeated attempts to stigmatize her work.

All of these examples demonstrate how participants perceived composure as an important value in and gained from restaurant work. By explicitly discussing and demonstrating emotion management, restaurant workers emphasized managing emotions as vital to success in service work even as that emotion work reifies larger Discourses about service work expectations (e.g., the customer is always right; it is okay for customers to emotionally abuse wait staff).

### *3.4. Teamwork: A Vital Element of ‘Wartime’*

Finally, participant talk illustrated how service work relies on teamwork. For some, teamwork emerged via commiserating about working conditions and “bitching” about guests. As Lauren proclaimed, “People are assholes. That’s the one thing that anyone can bond over”. For others, teamwork is something that must occur in order to survive the workplace. ROBOcook 9000 shared that, “The chef would always joke, ‘Once the flesh wave hits,’—you know, the rush—‘If we aren’t able to get them all the food, then we have

to go out there and let them eat us". Echoing this morbid "us versus them" metaphor, Lauren agreed, "You're there as a team, and you're gonna live or die as a team".

For many, teamwork means being specifically helpful to coworkers and emphasizing cooperation. Lauren explained that to be team-oriented, one should, "Keep an eye out and an ear open. (It's) that teamwork aspect of maintaining your restaurant because you're all, you know, you're gonna open it together, you're gonna shut it down together". Rory—a 30-year-old server with 12 years of experience—agreed, stating, "It's such a fast-paced environment that you're constantly having to bounce off people and ask for help . . . you're relying a lot on them". The language used by both participants reflects the larger feeling towards teamwork, which is that teamwork is not optional, but necessary. The necessity for teamwork came up repeatedly with Jenna describing teamwork as, "Just getting in there and doing what needs to be done," and Eric insisting, "Working with waiters, and cooks, and bartenders . . . you have to work together because there's no other choice".

The ways that participants talked about teamwork positioned restaurant work as about helping others, regardless of the circumstances. Some, like Julie, discussed this in quid pro quo terms, claiming that teamwork is, "Reciprocal". There's the idea of, like, if you help somebody else out, they'll help you out when you're struggling with something . . . nobody was trying to win something over another person". Brandon echoed this attitude, saying, "Like 'you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours,' but not in a way that's like keeping score, (but) in a way that's gonna make everything work as effectively and efficiently as possible". These perspectives show that reciprocity is expected, but not necessarily for personal gain but for the functioning of the team.

Some participants moved beyond quid pro quo views of teamwork, toward a more unconditional perspective. LJ described teamwork as being about, "Walking into work and just knowing that you're gonna do what needs to be done; not necessarily expecting the same in return". Jenna agreed and claimed that, in her work, "Everyone would just, like, whatever needed to be done, we did it". "Even if it's not part of, like, my job duties, like, it needs to be done . . . I'm just gonna do it. I don't need to be thanked for it; I don't need recognition. It just needs to be done right now". In fact, some like Jon, claimed, "You don't waste words" in restaurant work, and Lauren agreed there is no need for pleasantries. These examples show how some restaurant workers see no conditions for support; all they need in return is the support for the combined efforts of the team.

Indeed, a key part of the restaurant worker identity seemed to emerge in participants lauding the value of belonging to a team as more important than the value of teamwork as necessary for a functioning restaurant. In other words, participants fondly remarked upon the highly cohesive culture that is fostered through service. Consider Jenna's metaphor of war: "(You're) working, like, in the trenches, right? Yeah . . . it's hard work, and I think you . . . learn that you have to trust and rely on the people that you work with" in order to overcome the chaos. ROBOcook 9000 added to this by mentioning Sebastian Junger's [45] conceptualization of "the platoon". She argued, "It's like you're all depending on each other. You, like, are with each other a lot and . . . it's almost like you're willing to give your life for them". These allusions to wartime reveal a glorification of restaurant work and a unified effort to support one's comrades through waves of hungry aggressors in the "war" that is the dinner rush.

The pressure that emerges from tense, time-sensitive situations is the catalyst for high cohesion within the restaurant industry according to Jon. He claimed that, "Friendships are forged in unfamiliar situations, (and these relationships) are more enduring than casual friendships . . . It's trial-by-fire". From Jon's perspective, teamwork is not just something that happens in restaurant work, it is something that is born of restaurant work. Consequently, employees attach to each other and seek solace because of the perceived extreme circumstances. Arguing that these bonds create durable friendships, Jon also argued, "There's no work experience I've ever had that generated that much deep feeling and genuine affection for people . . . everybody felt that toward everybody else".

As a nod to close relationships, participants also used the metaphor of family to describe teamwork in restaurants. Similar to Jon's perspective, Lauren explicitly stated, "(Restaurant name) is my family . . . I said family because we all have just seen each other in each level of, you know, being our 'perfect' serving selves". Lauren's allusion to family represents a bond that cannot be broken regardless of what "level" people reside in. She implied that restaurant work is marked by "perfect" performances for the public. In contexts that are deemed private (while only in the company of coworkers), Lauren indicated that she could be imperfect and feel accepted by her coworkers. Her reference to "'perfect' serving selves" reveals how service is a performance. Being able to drop the performance of service and be honest with her work family is of great value. Through the ups and downs, her family is there to support her because they, themselves, have gone through the same shared experiences.

To add to the family metaphor, Lauren also acknowledged challenging family dynamics. She described her restaurant coworkers as, "Quite literally, a family. Well, we're dysfunctional. We yell at each other . . . I've seen our staff go from almost punching each other to, like, clinking drinks at the end of the night". Lauren reasoned that dysfunction is natural in family settings. "That's why I say family because we fight. We get over it. We help each other through it. And then we celebrate at the end of it". This perspective was also shared by Jenna, who—when asked to describe the relationship with her coworkers—claimed that she is part of a "working, dysfunctional family". Through the lens of a family, it is understood that there will be conflict, drama, pain, annoying little sisters and brothers, discipline at times, but the family will endure.

The concept of teamwork and family evokes a sense of unity in restaurant work, a norm that everyone complies with or else. For example, Mel described a former coworker who did not fit with the team, "He was a really nice guy, but he just couldn't get in the feel for it, yeah. And so, he ended up quitting of his own volition because he just hated it . . . it didn't work out". Mel's example shows how teamwork is central to the work experience and an idealized norm. Workers are compelled to abide by the norms and expectations of the team, which relates directly to the concept of "ideal selves" [22] by exhibiting the social pressure that governs identity performances. Thus, teamwork can be understood as a non-negotiable ideal in restaurant work.

Similar to empathy, enacting teamwork demonstrates how individuals make meaning of work that is chaotic and lacking prestige. Being part of a "team" is a way to make sense of this work and find meaning within the collective experience. This sense of unity demonstrates the strong culture that emerges from dirty work in which organizational members exhibit high task interdependencies, close physical proximity, and clear physical boundaries around the team [25]. From an organizational lens, teamwork as an ideal demonstrates the derivation of meaning from work that is discursively constructed as not meaningful.

#### 4. Discussion

In this study, we described how restaurant workers construct and enact occupational identity by illustrating occupational ideals including flexibility, empathy, emotion management, and teamwork. In this section, we answer RQ2 and explain how restaurant workers negotiate stigmatized discourses associated with service work and cultivate sustainable occupational identities. In short, we argue that enacting positive work values serves as an important form of resistance to the stigmatized discourses of service work and enables the cultivation of sustainable occupational identity.

At the local level, workers expressed team-oriented values that facilitate support and camaraderie, sustaining their commitment to restaurant work and creating a sense of belonging. Although teamwork can be interpreted as an organizational discourse that is communicated through training, our participants emphasized local and interpersonal discourses of teamwork. Citing necessity and admiration for coworkers as reasons for performing teamwork, participants portrayed collaboration as necessarily endemic to

the work of restaurants. Using the metaphor of family and emphasizing friendship, participants discussed teamwork as personally meaningful, transcending work functions to create kinship among the staff. While personally valuable and organizationally necessary to complete the tasks associated with the work, the strong ties of restaurant teamwork may also point to problematic organizational culture issues. The need to “band together” against the “flesh wave” of entitled customers illustrates the clash of interpersonal discourses of restaurant work and macro-level Discourses of service expectations. However, it may be that strong relational ties provide a buffer against the stress of restaurant work, particularly regarding challenging customers, not unlike how empowerment functions to reduce the stress associated with abusive customers [12].

The values of flexibility, empathy, and emotion management were also drawn from local and organizational discourses, reflecting and reifying some macro-level Discourses. For example, several organizational discourses in service work enforce the emotional labor expectation of smiling and performing pleasantness to customers no matter how the customer behaves. Indeed, many participants communicated pride in “rising above” customer abuse and derision towards those coworkers who “can’t hold it together” and keep composed, framing tolerating customer abuse as a badge of honor. Participants did not reference formal organizational rules that promote composure and customer service, but rather occupational-level norms and micro-level discourses among coworkers that giving into emotions is “not worth it,” and one should “claim the high-road” in emotionally charged situations with customers. Likewise, our participants depicted a keen awareness of the cultural Discourse that in U.S. restaurant work, good customer service almost directly equates to better tips. So, these workers choose to enact composed identities and perform emotion management in ways that resist micro-level discursive conflicts with guests while reifying cultural level emotional expectations for service work as well as capitalistic discourses about compensation.

Cultural Discourses of service work also reflect expectations for U.S. restaurant workers to remain docile and amenable in the eyes of the guests. Indeed, our data is full of examples where participants described communicating empathy and adapting communication to appear appealing to guests. While some research on emotional labor might describe this as self-subordination [46], the restaurant workers in our study did not use this language or convey passivity or docility for the sake of organizational goals per se. Instead, participants claimed that maintaining composure is an artful skill that allows workers to position themselves as above their guests. Rather, participants described giving in to negative emotions (that lead to emotional outbursts with guests) as acts that subordinate workers. Thus, restaurant workers draw upon micro-level discourses with peers to construct and communicate composed identities that resist macro-level Discourses of service and micro-level expectations of customers. This example demonstrates how these workers reinterpret and restructure macro-level Discourses through micro-level talk, reframing and recalibrating stigma associated with their work [25,28].

At the center of this data is the notion that restaurant work is inherently tumultuous, but something valuable is gained once the work is mastered, an occupational discourse not reflected in cultural Discourses. We liken this notion of mastery to the archetype of the “hero’s journey” narrative where one must travel away from home, confront danger/evil, and transform themselves in the process [47]. This metaphor helps to draw parallels between the hero archetype and the language used by participants to describe the value of restaurant work as necessarily experiential—it must be lived to be understood. By navigating the hardships faced in restaurant work, people craft positive occupational identity, emphasizing the learning opportunities and deflecting Discursive stigma. As Goffman noted, “(The stigmatized) may also see the trials (they have) suffered as a blessing in disguise, especially because of what it is felt that suffering can teach one about life and people” [48] (p. 11).

Significantly, this study illustrates how restaurant workers evoke images of the “struggler” identity as a stigma management strategy. Alvesson describes the struggler identity

process as, “at times uphill, enacted in order to construct a self-identity that at least provides a temporal sense of coherence and a reduction of fragmentation and pain” [49] (p. 211). The struggler identity evokes the need for individuals to accomplish identity by fighting for it. The participants in this study described an occupation that is full of chaos, financial instability, and emotional demands, evoking metaphors of war like being “in the trenches,” on the “front line,” and sharing “battle wounds”. However, the transformative experience of restaurant life leaves workers with skills and values that act like a shield to defend against negative Discourses of dirty, non-“real”, stigmatized work. Although food and beverage service workers admit to the job being “shit” sometimes, our participants shared a sense of pride and honor in their work, referring to it as “a learning experience” and transformative in helping discover personal identity.

This leads to our primary scholarly contribution: That enacting positive work values serves as an important form of resistance to the stigmatized d/Discourses of service work and enables the cultivation of sustainable occupational identity. Specifically, by emphasizing the important values and idealized restaurant worker identities, participants are able to transcend the stigma of “two-dollar tips” and customer emotional abuse, the lack of stability, and connotations of service work as being “less real” and important than other occupations. These positive enactments resemble situated examples of the transcendence of stigmatized discourses which is when people demonstrate “via words or actions, that the stigmatizing characteristic they embody is not as bad or serves some higher transcendent purpose than might be otherwise assumed” [50] (p. 7). By emphasizing the key values of restaurant work and how those values offer benefits long after leaving the occupation, restaurant workers imbue their jobs with meaning not depicted by organizational or cultural Discourses.

The cultivation of positive occupational identity likely also provides important foundations for organizational workforce sustainability. As depicted by our participants, those who are able to be flexible, adaptable, empathetic and team-oriented are those who can succeed in restaurant work and avoid the high turnover associated with the industry. While this positive occupational identity is useful for workforce stability, it also emphasizes identity work that relies on the workers themselves to address or transcend organizational problems. This frames organizational and occupational problems such as instability, low wages, and customer abuse as personal problems for workers to deal with, rather than serious issues that organizations should be responsible for addressing. Especially in light of the current industry issues stemming from COVID-19—namely workforce shortages—restaurants should take seriously the underlying issues and stigmatizing discourses that shape restaurant worker identity and help make it easier to cultivate sustainable occupational identities that benefit workers and organizations alike. Likewise, organizations must take employee sustainability issues seriously and should center them more prominently in sustainability planning.

## 5. Conclusions, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

The context of the restaurant industry provided a significant opportunity to examine how emotions shape organizing. As demonstrated in the results, restaurant worker tasks and interactions are reciprocally shaped by personal emotions and the emotional expressions of customers. Furthermore, service work is inherently emotional and the ways that restaurant workers must align their emotions with organizational expectations have considerable influence on how these workers craft occupational identity. By lauding composure as a cornerstone to service, these participants reveal how emotion is routinely suppressed in this line of work, which past research has shown to promote burnout and other negative consequences over time [12,32] which impact workforce sustainability. However, the differences between composure and empathy should be noted. When explaining the value of composure, our participants discussed how the practice of emotional management and constraint was essential to success but required difficult emotional suppression, whereas talk surrounding the value of empathy conveyed a sense of being in-tune with one’s emo-

tions and recognizing the emotions of others. This discrepancy reveals that emotionally acceptable behavior in these organizations is dynamic and dependent on context, requiring workers to be nimble to suss out appropriate responses. Future research should expand on this by focusing on how restaurant employees perceive the standards that guide acceptable emotional displays and emotion management.

This study also demonstrates strategies used to resist occupational taint in “dirty” work. Specifically, participants exhibited recalibrating—magnifying the redeeming qualities of service work [25]. In doing so, workers focus attention on positive attributes gained from service work to combat stigmas. One of those stigmas is the perception of service work as not a “real” job. However, as more people continue to turn to restaurant work—and if the upcoming generations continue to reframe what constitutes “real” work—it is worth considering how meanings towards this work change over time. In particular, future research should examine how public perceptions towards this line of work have changed. This study was based on assumptions of service work as “dirty” and not a “real” job. However, with an ever-changing global economy, restaurant work may have different meanings in the public eye. During the COVID-19 pandemic for instance, restaurant employees were included as “essential” workers. It is possible that worker and public perceptions of service work have been influenced by the turbulent economic circumstances and vital importance of restaurants in getting people through the pandemic. Therefore, future researchers should investigate how related and updated discourses have influenced this occupational identity.

While providing important conclusions about communication, emotion, and occupational identity, this study is not without limitations. For instance, the conclusions drawn from this research are not intended to wholly represent the experience of the typical, American restaurant worker, nor the entirety of the food and beverage service industry, as representative sampling is not a particular goal of qualitative research [40]. However, our limited sample size meant not having a full diversity of voices. For instance, although our participants represented some of the diversity found in restaurant work (e.g., age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, locale, years of service), participation was limited to full-service restaurants, and English-speaking servers. Future studies would do well to include more diverse voices and extend a critical gaze towards restaurant culture. Particularly fruitful would be to examine if “back of house” workers, who are much more likely to be from minoritized populations, describe the same occupational values as “front of house” workers. As recent research describes, these workers face even more organizational challenges than front of house workers [8]. Likewise, it would be useful to understand if these same types of values hold up in other food and beverage service contexts such as fast-food restaurants or bars and pubs.

Moreover, it would be useful to understand occupational discourses from people who leave the service industry or do not identify with it. One limitation of this study was having a majority of participants who identified with the industry, even years after leaving restaurant work. Indeed, only one of our participants described not feeling meaningfully shaped by her occupational identity and time as a restaurant worker. In light of this, more research can be conducted to investigate how workers who avoid identification with the restaurant industry view the stigmas surrounding service work. Likewise, acknowledging what organizational scholarship describes as ambivalent identification [51], more work should be carried out to explore how restaurant workers communicatively disidentify with the culture of restaurant work while still maintaining a position within the industry.

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