

ABSTRACT

JONES, EMILY LEIGH. *The Positive Vibe: Cultivating and Communicating a Positive Culture in the Restaurant Industry*. (Under the direction of Dr. Melissa Johnson.)

This study explored the communication experiences of staff and customers at top-rated restaurants that have been characterized as having a positive culture, how customers communicate about the culture of a restaurant, and the role that internal and external relationships play in the culture of an establishment. This work highlights the intertwining nature of organizational culture and reputation. This project combined interviews and content analysis in order to fully explore the research questions: (1) What communication experiences of staff and customers characterize the culture as positive at top-rated restaurants?; (2) How is the positive culture communicated by customers? Traditionally? Non-traditionally (digital)?; (3) What is the role of internal and external relationships in creating a positive culture in the restaurant industry?; (4) What is the relationship between top-rated restaurants and a positive organizational culture? Interviews were completed with employees of the three restaurants involved in the study in order to explore in-depth the research questions while content analysis was completed using two online customer review sites, Yelp and Tripadvisor, in order to explore how a culture is communicated online.

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The Positive Vibe: Cultivating and Communicating a Positive Culture in the Restaurant Industry

By

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DEDICATION

This work of art, exploration, and passion is dedicated to my Grandma Ellie, the most perfect soul to have walked the Earth. Her heart filled with such tender kindness, thoughtfulness, and selflessness; her spirit so infectious and full of life. Her commitment to happiness is the very reason I devoted my research to exploring the positive side of life. She brought joy and spread genuine compassion to anyone that ever crossed paths with her. In this writing, I am forever grateful that I was blessed with your constant positivity, devotion, and delight in the sunnier side of life.

Peace Begins with a Smile.

And to my mom and dad, everything I do in this life is dedicated to you.

BIOGRAPHY

Emily Jones is currently a part-time instructor at Cape Fear Community College in Wilmington, NC. She also currently teaches courses at the University of North Carolina Wilmington and Brunswick Community College. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies from the University of North Carolina Wilmington in 2009 and her Master of Arts in Environmental Studies, with an environmental communication and education focus, in 2010. This dissertation was completed as the final piece for her to receive her Ph.D. from NC State University in Communication, Rhetoric, and Digital Media (CRDM).

Jones's research interests are in the areas of public relations, positive organizational culture, and environmental communications. Her research focus is primarily on the exploration and cultivation of positive communication and culture, with a specific focus on the restaurant industry. Her background is in public relations, having held positions within the field for organizations including the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher and UNCW Marketing and Communications Department. She has worked within the restaurant industry for 15 years.

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Chapter One:

Introduction

Fostering a positive organizational culture is beneficial to an organization and its key publics. Often referred to as “the way things are done around here,” organizational culture is described as the underlying assumptions surrounding the norms, values, behaviors, attitudes, and expectations that guide everyday organizational life (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). Stemming from positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), a body of literature has emerged on positive organizational culture (Skinner & Kelley, 2006; French & Holden, 2012). An organization with a positive organizational culture features more affirming daily practices, including being functional, engaging, innovative, and collaborative (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006; Douglas & Hickey, 2015). An underlying assumption of this dissertation is that an organization that builds and maintains a positive organizational culture will positively affect the organization by improving the well-being of employees and performance of the organization (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015).

One way to analyze an organization’s culture is through the patterns of communication that occur between key publics involved in the organization. This work explored the communication experiences of key publics related to an organization, including staff and customers, as a way to understand the communication in an organization characterized as having a positive organizational culture. Communication about an organization and its culture can be expressed through traditional and non-traditional forms of media, including word-of-mouth (traditional) and online review sites (non-traditional). Studies have shown that key publics of an organization are likely to spread their experience with an organization to other publics through word-of-mouth techniques, which will ultimately either help or harm the organization (Susskind, 2002). Less traditionally, online review sites allow people to communicate their experience with an organization in a digital word-of-mouth format. This study explored how different key publics participate in the construction of a positive

organizational culture through the use of word-of-mouth techniques and online review sites. This is a unique element of the research as it examines both internal and external aspects of a positive organizational culture.

One aspect of cultivating a positive culture in an organization is addressing the relational dynamics of the organization. Several theoretical approaches, including the appreciative inquiry model (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015) and the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), have addressed the importance of internal and external relationships in the creation of affirming patterns of communication, habits, cultural norms, and social interactions in an organization (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). My study, guided by the appreciative inquiry model, positive organizational literature, and Hon & Grunig (1999)'s relationship management theory, addressed the role of internal and external relationships in cultivating a positive organizational culture.

My study investigated the organizational culture of a particular setting, the restaurant industry. The organizational culture of a restaurant has an effect on the experience of key publics including staff, customers, and potential customers. In an industry nearing seven hundred billion dollars in sales and with approximately 990,000 restaurant locations across the United States, it is critical to better understand the process of cultivating and communicating a positive organizational culture in a restaurant setting and the role that relationships play in the process of creating the culture (restaurant.org).

In order to explore these phenomena, my investigation examined the communication experiences of staff and customers at restaurants that have been characterized as having a positive culture. Communication experiences refer to how key publics, specifically employees and customers, interact verbally and nonverbally with each other in the restaurant setting. To elicit conversation about employee communication experiences, this study delved into the communication norms and patterns of three particular restaurants by asking interview questions

related to the interactions that occur between the staff at the organization. To capture communication experiences with customers, this study examined how the positive culture is communicated traditionally (e.g., word-of-mouth) and non-traditionally (e.g., digital media). This study also considered the role that relationships play in the creation of an organizational culture in a restaurant.

The methodological approach combined interviews and content analysis in a mixed-methodology to fully explore the research questions: (1) What communication experiences of staff and customers characterize restaurants described as having a positive culture?; (2) How does this positive culture get communicated to multiple key publics?; (3) What is the role of internal and external relationships in creating a positive culture in the restaurant industry?

My work will contribute to the literature by advancing positive organizational culture literature into a for-profit environment, a unique aspect of this study. Furthermore, this endeavor will contribute to the literature through its unique combination of interviews and public data retrieved from Tripadvisor and Yelp. Finally, this study will help further the relationship between the fields of positive psychology and communication studies.

Chapter Two:

Literature Review

In this review of literature, this project will discuss the history of positive psychology, a brief overview of positive emotions, a history of positive organizational culture literature (including a brief discussion about the appreciative inquiry model), a discussion of the two communication tactics featured in this study (word-of-mouth and online reviews), and finally a look into relationship management theory in the public relations literature. To properly address the research questions for this endeavor, my study reviewed the history of the areas of scholarship discussed in this review, including major concepts and historical information related to each area of scholarship as well as an overview of previous studies completed.

Positive Psychology

The importance of cultivating a positive culture in an organization has been theoretically suggested and empirically supported over years of research in the field of positive psychology (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson, 2003; Fredrickson, 2004; & Fredrickson, 2013). Research related to positivity, including the topic of positive culture, stemmed from the field of positive psychology. With so much focus being placed on helping cure people of their mental illnesses, a strain of psychology focused on helping people stay positive and maintain a positive lifestyle seemed critical. Positive psychology is a sub-field of the psychology discipline that began in the late 1990s and was started by then President of the American Psychological Association, Martin E.P. Seligman. Seligman's career focused on researching mental illnesses and he began to notice that many of the mental illnesses he had been researching had become treatable, yet there were "virtually no scientifically sound tools for helping people to reach their higher ground, to thrive and flourish" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Fredrickson, 2003; Fredrickson, 2004). Seligman (2000) called upon the social and behavioral sciences to make a change toward understanding the vision of

a good life by providing empirical evidence to support the value of focusing on the positive, including an understanding of the actions that lead to well-being, to positive individuals, to thriving communities, the types of families that help children flourish, work settings that support satisfied and happy workers, and best practice policies that create civic engagement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The field of positive psychology can be defined as a strain of psychology that focuses on improving people's mental health and gaining a better understanding of how to help people flourish in life, versus the traditional approach which focused on reducing and understanding mental illness and the reasoning behind why people do not excel in life (Fredrickson, 2003; Skinner & Kelley, 2006). The aim of positive psychology is to focus more on building positive qualities in life versus understanding and repairing the negative aspects of life. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) stated, "A science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions promises to improve quality of life and prevent the pathologies that arise when life is barren and meaningless" (p. 5). Positive psychology investigates optimal functioning in people, groups, and organizations as well as the best practice conditions and procedures that contribute to optimal functioning (Gable & Haidt, 2005; French & Holden, 2012). Constructs used in the field of positive psychology focus on success and strengths rather than failure and weaknesses (Skinner & Kelley, 2006). At the individual level, positive psychology is about positive individual traits, and at the group level, it is about the civic qualities and the traditions that move individuals toward better social responsibility (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology researchers focus on issues related to happiness, hope, optimism, loyalty, creativity, innovation, empowerment, collaboration, flexibility, positive communication, satisfaction, interpersonal skill, capacity for love, wisdom, responsibility, work ethic, organizational behaviors, and cultural norms, to name a few (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Fredrickson, 2003; Skinner & Kelley, 2006; French & Holden, 2012; Douglas & Hickey, 2015).

In 2014, positive psychology research thrived with a growing interest in the topics of well-being, happiness, and positivity. Fields including psychology, marketing, business, nursing, and medicine have tapped into positive psychology by completing studies related to the body of research. A study completed by Douglas and Hickey (2015) explored various types of organizational cultures and climates in nursing facilities to better understand how to create a positive environment (2015, p.167). The study used concepts from positive psychology to suggest techniques and strategies that are effective in improving a positive organizational climate, including being an open-minded worker and studying ideal organizations (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). Like the above study, discoveries from positive psychology research have advanced the abilities to improve individual and collective functioning, and improve our physical health and mental well-being (Fredrickson, 2005). Similar to the study completed by Douglas and Hickey (2015), my study addressed the field of positive psychology from the organizational perspective. In the next section, I will discuss positive organizational literature, a body of scholarship that is considered to be a marriage between positive psychology and organizational studies (French & Holden, 2012).

Positive Organizational Literature

Positive organizational literature uses concepts and perspectives from positive psychology that are related to organizational functioning and performance (Skinner & Kelley, 2006; French & Holden, 2012). Positive organizational literature looks to “understand how to cultivate excellence in organizations” (French & Holden, 2012). The body of knowledge explores how people and organizations develop and utilize their strengths in order to create optimal performance at the individual and collective level (Linley et al., 2010).

An organizational culture can be defined as the shared beliefs, norms, attitudes, and behavioral expectations that “drive behaviors and communicate what is valued in organizations” (Cooke & Szumal, 1993; Verbeke, Volgering, & Hessels, 1998; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006;

Douglas & Hickey, 2015). An organization's culture creates the tone, content, and objectives of the organization's work mission and helps teach and guide employees in the proper expectations and behaviors of the organization (Blau, 1960; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Perkins, Shaw, & Sutton, 1990; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). Organizational culture helps interpret an organization's mission and goals and communicates the overall environment of an organization to key publics involved in the organization. Hemmelgarn, Glisson, and James (2006) stated, "Organizational culture provides a social context that invites or rejects innovation, complements or inhibits the activities required for success, and sustains or alters adherence to the protocols that compose the organization's core technology" (p. 75). Cultural expectations of an organization are learned through modeling, observation, personal experiences, rewards, punishments, and expected outcomes (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). Often, cultural values of an organization are learned through socialization experiences (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). Socialization largely occurs through communication that can help cultivate a positive organizational culture through relationships and interaction.

A positive organizational culture is known as the "ideal" or most effective way to accomplish daily life within an organization (Skinner & Kelley, 2006). A positive organizational culture can be found in organizations that invoke more affirming patterns of communication, behavior, and interaction between key publics involved in the organization. According to positive organizational literature, organizations can improve their operations by better understanding the strengths of the organization and the key publics involved in the organization (Roberts et al., 2005; Skinner & Kelley, 2006). Key characteristics of a positive organizational culture include flexibility, approachability, functionality, engagement, innovation, proficiency (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). An organization with a positive organizational culture maximizes the likelihood of success in that organization (Cooke and Lafferty, 1994; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). A positive culture

can lead to increased well-being and improved performance in the organization and among key publics involved in the organization (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015).

Key studies have been completed related to positive organizational literature. One specific study completed by French and Holden (2012) addressed the importance of a positive organizational culture as a key factor in effectively communicating “bad news.” The study found that developing a culture that values positive organizational behaviors and attitudes fosters a more effective way to craft and receive these difficult messages in an organization (French & Holden, 2012). Mixed-method organizational culture studies are uncommon, however one study used a mixed-method approach to address organizational culture within emergency rooms (Hemmelgarn et al., 2001). This study used focus groups, in-depth interviews, field observations, and a quantitative questionnaire to explore cultural norms, behaviors, and expectations across several emergency rooms. My study looked to further the study’s use of a mixed-method approach to studying organizational culture by addressing positive organizational culture in a restaurant setting using an approach that focuses on affirming and positive techniques to addressing the research questions, the appreciative inquiry model.

Appreciative Inquiry Model

One model through which a positive organizational culture can be observed and evaluated is the appreciative inquiry model. As Cooperrider, Avital, and Godwin (2015) stated, “The growth and application of Appreciative Inquiry over the past two decades has been nothing short of phenomenal. It is arguably the most powerful process of positive organizational change ever devised.” The model’s premise is that organizations with more affirming habitual patterns of communication, social interactions, and cultural norms will see an increase in the performance and overall well-being of the organization (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). In order to learn how an organization functions, the appreciative inquiry model works with narrative identities to help

members of the organization transform the narratives into more productive organizational communication and performance (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). By evoking life-affirming stories about an organization, appreciative inquiry explores an organization, its leadership, the individuals and teams within the organization, customers, and the relationships they have with all of them (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). My study used the appreciate inquiry model to explore the organizational culture of the three restaurants involved in this study. Furthermore, my study pulled key theoretical concepts from the model to explore the themes collected in the data.

Developed by David Cooperrider in his 1985 dissertation and more formally published in 1987 with the help of Suresh Srivastva, the article *Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life* opened up a new line of research that featured a positive standpoint on the topic of study (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Cooperrider, Avital, and Godwin (2015) stated, “AI is about the search for “what gives life?” to living systems- organizations, communities, industries, countries, families, networks, societies, relationships, and our global living systems – when they are most alive and jointly flourishing in their inseparable and intimate interrelations” (p. 6). The appreciative inquiry approach has been broadly used to explore organizations in a variety of situations using a positive perspective to change that focuses on the strengths of the organization and the individuals within the organization (Skinner & Kelley, 2006). The appreciative inquiry method to studying organizational life begins by asking the question “what works?” versus a more traditional approach that begins by identifying an issue (Skinner & Kelley, 2006). This more affirming approach to researching organizations’ cultures highlights the best practice way to enact positive change in an organization through the use of dialogue and questions that focus on the strengths and successes of an organization (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003; Skinner & Kelley, 2006). This approach is different from the traditional focus on studying an organization’s weaknesses and failures. Appreciative inquiry, like positive psychology, looks to discover the best practices in a business by evoking positive dialogue with key publics within the organization in an effort to elicit positive

images of the business, individuals involved in the organization, and the environment of the organization. For example, staff and customer interview questions for my study focused on eliciting positive memories and experiences related to the restaurants in the study, such as the question, “What points in a shift do you and your co-workers feel more positive?” By encouraging conversation related to the potential and strengths of an organization, appreciative inquiry recognizes the best in an organization and the key publics within the organization (Powley, Fry, Barrett, & Bright, 2004; Skinner & Kelley, 2006). As Whitney and Fredrickson (2015) stated, “AI is rewarding because it fosters a sense of community within organizations through which people can express what is important to them, work in ways that empower them and bring their best forward in service to the greater good” (p.25).

The appreciative inquiry approach has been used as a model, framework, theory, method, and concept creation in studies completed in several fields, including positive organizational studies, positive psychology, communication studies, and the medical field. Diana Whitney, a thought leader on appreciative inquiry, has completed studies using the approach to address what works in an organization in order to increase performance and create a flourishing business (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015).

Many appreciative inquiry and positive organizational studies emphasize the relational processes within an organization as a key to unlocking an organization’s potential. Positive organizational and appreciate inquiry scholars credit the building and strengthening of relationships within an organization as a way to transform an organization in a rewarding and productive way (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010; Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). My study used concepts pulled from positive organizational and appreciative inquiry literature as well as the widely used public relations theory, relationship management theory, in order to explore the role of internal and external relationships in the cultivation and communication of a restaurant’s positive

organizational culture. The relationship management theory will be discussed in detail in the next section of the review of literature.

Relationship Management Theory

The relational patterns an organization, such as a restaurant, cultivates helps foster the culture of the organization. Cultivating affirmative relationships in an organization has proven to have a positive effect on the organization as well as the people involved in the relationship (Skinner & Kelley, 2006; Douglas & Hickey, 2015; Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). One strategy that an organization can use to build a positive organizational culture is to foster positive relationships with key publics (French & Holden, 2012). Studies have demonstrated the value of relationships in creating a positive organizational culture, many of which have used the appreciative inquiry model to guide the research (Skinner & Kelley, 2006; Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015).

My research looked to contribute to the growth of positive organizational literature into the field of communication by using concepts taken from a contemporary public relations theory, relationship management theory, to analyze the data. With relationships playing a role in creating a positive organizational culture in organizations in the medical (Douglas & Hickey, 2015) and sales (Skinner & Kelley, 2006) industries, this study fills a gap in the literature by addressing the role of relationships in cultivating a positive organizational culture in the restaurant industry.

One key concept of the relationship management theory is *relationships*. A relationship can be described and analyzed through the perceptions of both parties on the relationship. In order for a relationship to exist, both parties must be aware of the other, and both parties must acknowledge that their actions may influence the lives and experiences of the other (Broom et al., 1997). Relationships are defined when the consequences of an organization's actions affect key publics of that organization and vice versa (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Positive relationships with publics have

been shown to correlate with the effectiveness of an organization's public relations efforts (Center & Jackson, 1995).

With relationships at the forefront of an organization's communication efforts, relationship management theory was created to assist in providing a theoretical framework to quantifiably measure the success or failure of an organization's relationship management efforts with its key constituents. Heath (2001) stated, "Relationship management uses communication as a tool to negotiate organization-public relationships, and can both define and serve as a paradigm for the field" (p. 33). An organization-public relationship can be defined as the state which exists between an organization and its key publics, and one in which the actions of either party can affect the well-being of the other, including the party's economic, social, cultural, and political well-being (Ledingham, 2003). The theory studies the measurement of organization-public relationships and their linkages to key publics' attitudes, behaviors, perceptions, and knowledge (Grunig, 1992; Ledingham, 2003).

There are four outcomes of successful relationships that can be used to measure the effective management of an organization-public relationship. Guided by literature from the interpersonal communication field, control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment are indicators that an organization-public relationship has been successfully managed (Huang, 1997). The data for this study, both the interviews and content analysis, was explored for themes related to the four outcomes.

Control mutuality refers to the power levels of the relationship, and the degree to which each party believes they have power to influence the other (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Although more often than not there will be some form of imbalance in an organization-public relationship, if one party attempts to control all the power over the other party, then negative consequences have been found to occur, such as loss of satisfaction with the organization (Huang, 1997). A key public must

feel as though their opinions and concerns regarding organizational problems are of a concern to the organization. In a successfully managed relationship both parties should have the ability to influence the other.

Trust is related to the confidence level that one public has in the other public (Huang, 1997). Trust is *extremely* important to maintaining effective relationships with key publics, including employees and customers of the organization. Trust in an organization, such as a restaurant, is necessary to cultivate a positive organizational culture as it helps ensure that key publics feel safe and secure with their roles within the organization (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). Untruthfulness can cause key publics to turn against an organization, and the rebuilding of trust can be a long road that may never be fully re-paved (Baralt & Weitz, 2012).

Satisfaction occurs when positive expectations about one party are reinforced and in turn, the party feels more positively about the other (Huang, 1997). Satisfaction occurs when both parties feel positively about each other; when the benefits of the relationship outweigh the costs (Hon & Grunig, 1999). In order to successfully manage a relationship, organizations must attempt to sustain a satisfactory feeling in key publics to keep them active, happy, and involved in the organization. Without a level of satisfaction present, the organization-public relationship is likely to end. Organizations, such as a restaurant, can cultivate a positive organizational culture by ensuring that key publics, including employees and customers, feel a sense of satisfaction with the organization's habits, patterns, and cultural norms.

Commitment is the final indicator of a successfully managed relationship. A party feels committed to a relationship with another party based on the willingness each party has to spend energy promoting and maintaining the other party (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Huang (1997) discussed two types of commitment, continuance, which involves certain actions that cause commitment over time, and affective, the emotional side of the indicator. Commitment can help cultivate a positive

organizational culture within an organization by generating a sense of resilience and care between the organization and key publics, including employees and customers (French & Holden, 2012).

A fifth set of indicators involves the type of relationship that is created and maintained. There are two different types of relationships that organizations attempt to cultivate, exchange and communal relationships. Both types of relationships are characterized by the benefits that each party receives by being a part of the relationship. An exchange relationship is considered one in which one party provides benefits to the other party if they expect to receive reciprocal benefits in the future or they have received benefits in the past (Hon & Grunig, 1999). This type of relationship hinges on both parties providing each other with benefits, placing one party in the debts of the other once a benefit has been provided to the indebted party. For example, a restaurant announces that it will giveaway t-shirts to everyone that attends a particular event held by the restaurant on a particular night of the week. The people that arrive at the event expect that the restaurant will provide them with the t-shirt that the organization had promised as a benefit for attending the event. In return for the free t-shirts, the organization expects that the people will participate in the event and hopefully future events that are held by the restaurant. However, this type of give-and-take relationship does not always solidify a two-way symmetrical relationship between an organization and its publics. Exchange relationships rarely develop a sense of trust, which is considered key in maintaining a positive relationship within an organization-public relationship. Exchange relationships, however, are not considered completely negative; often relationships begin as an exchange type and blossom into the second type of relationship, a communal relationship.

Communal relationships are considered more of an altruistic relationship in which both parties provide benefits to the other party without regard to receiving a subsequent or previous benefit. In a communal relationship both parties are concerned more with maintaining the relationship, rather than what rewards they will receive from the other party. An organization that

strives to maintain communal relationships with key publics garners more support and less opposition, allowing the organization to build and sustain a positive reputation with its important publics (Hon & Grunig, 1999).

These two types of relationships work hand-in-hand. It is important for an organization to utilize both relationships when managing relationships with key publics. Exchange relationships may initially introduce trust, control mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction into an organization-public relationship, and then organizations further these indicators by building communal relationships that will increase the indicator levels and sustain them over a long-term period of time (Clark & Mills, 1993).

The building and management of organization-public relationships can be accomplished through several strategies that have been pulled from research on interpersonal relationships and conflict resolution (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Plowman, 1995). Bruning et al. (2004) reported, "The forms of communication, patterns of interaction, and actions of organizations influence the initiation, development, and maintenance of relationships with publics" (p. 336). The strategies an organization uses to manage relationships with its key publics can affect the behavioral outcomes and attitudes that key publics have towards an organization and ultimately contribute to the cultivation of the culture within the organization. Strategies include access, positivity, openness, assurances, networking, and sharing of tasks.

The strategy of access offers key publics the opportunity to communicate with the organization, and vice versa. Relationships can be managed using access as a strategy because issues are directly addressed by the parties; if an employee has a question concerning an issue related to an organization then they can call or write the organization who will respond to the question. Access also grants both parties the option to address negative comments or situations with each other as opposed to bringing in a third party, which could spread the negativity and

ultimately tarnish the relationship that has been built between the parties (Grunig & Huang, 2000). Access to an organization can be created through two-way communication channels, including the online customer reviews that were analyzed in my study.

The strategy of positivity was discussed across all three of the literatures that guided this study, including positive organizational and appreciative inquiry literatures and the currently discussed relationship management theory. The use of positivity as a strategy is accomplished by creating a more enjoyable relationship for all parties (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Key publics, including employees and customers, feel more confident and safe to be innovative within an organization if the organization fosters affirmative relational patterns (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). Positivity can be managed in an organization-public relationship through both traditional and nontraditional forms of communication. The use of positivity to manage an organization-public relationship is imperative for the continued support of key publics who are involved with an organization.

The third strategy, openness, involves the level of disclosure that both parties have with each other (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Openness is an essential part of managing relationship indicators, such as trust and satisfaction, between an organization and its key publics. When organizations lack openness, relationships can become strained and publics may choose to move forward with another organization. For example, several major nonprofit organizations, such as The Red Cross, United Way, and multiple 9/11 organizations lost a substantial amount of support due to the lack of openness regarding where donated funds had been allocated (Sisco, Collins & Zoch, 2010). The level of openness within an organization can contribute to the cultivation of a culture by determining the level of interaction and communication that the organization has with its key publics.

Assurances, a fourth strategy, are considered attempts by both an organization and its publics to assure each other that they are still important and that their concerns matter in the

relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999). The strategy of assurances may also be used when either party wishes to show their dedication to sustaining the relationship (Grunig & Huang, 2000). An example of assuring that a key public feels as though their concerns matter can be accomplished through eliciting customer feedback on diverse issues that occur within the organization.

A fifth strategy, networking, involves an organization's ability to partner with groups that share similar interests as the organization's key publics (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Networking helps manage organization-public relationships by granting an organization access to potential key publics and people who would be interested in becoming key publics.

Sharing of tasks, the final strategy, requires that both the organization and its publics be involved in resolving issues and problems that may arise (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Organizations that enlist key publics, such as employees and customers, to help complete tasks within the organization, help create a collaborative culture within the organization. Supporting collaboration between key publics within an organization has been shown to affect the culture of an organization in a positive way (Douglas & Hickey, 2015).

Ways in which the concepts involved in relationship management theory have been operationalized in studies include Hon and Grunig's (1999) pivotal scale and Ki and Hon's (2007) scale that measured the six relationship cultivation strategies to help establish and maintain a successful organization-public relationship. Hon and Grunig (1999) created "Guidelines for measuring relationships in public relations" in which the scholars laid out and defined the concepts found in relationship management theory. To measure the outcomes of an organization's relationships with key publics, Hon and Grunig (1999) developed a scale which measured the strength of relationships using a questionnaire that featured agree/disagree statements relating to the organization-public relationship. Participants in the study were asked to rate from 1-to-9 the extent in which they agreed or disagreed about statements related to the participant's relationship

with the organization. Each of the six dimensions included Likert items that helped to measure the strength.

The concepts involved in the relationship management theory were operationalized using a similar scale built by Ki and Hon (2007) that was used in a study on donor relationships. Waters (2009) adapted the scale found in Ki and Hon's (2007) study in order to operationalize the variables related to the six relationship cultivation strategies. The study addressed the six concepts by asking agree/disagree statements related to each variable.

Public relations practitioners and scholars have applied the relationship management theory in a variety of settings related to the quality of relationships, including community relations, business-to-business (Homburg & Stock, 2004), fundraising, and the nonprofit sector (Waters & Bortree, 2011). Many public relations researchers have focused on nonprofit organizations' and relationship management in relation to nonprofits and corporate sponsors (Rumsey & White, 2009; Waters & Lemanski, 2011), nonprofits and volunteers (Bortree, 2010; Randle & Dolnicar, 2009; Waters & Bortree, 2011), nonprofits and donors (McCort, 1994; Ostrander, 2007), and more recently nonprofits and their use of social media and the Internet (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2008; Waters & Jamal, 2011; Yeon, Choi, & Kioussis, 2007). However, the theory has been less investigated in the for-profit sector, such as in the restaurant industry.

The relationship management theory, along with the appreciative inquiry model and positive organizational literature, helps an organization become the best version of itself, a version of the organization that should be communicated to key publics in order to promote the organization's positive organizational culture. My study addressed how a restaurant's positive organizational culture is cultivated and communicated to key publics and the implications that the communication has on the organization's culture. My project was interested in learning how a positive organizational culture is communicated through both traditional and non-traditional

media channels and the connections between employee and customer visions for what a positive organizational culture includes. In the next section of the literature review, I will discuss the two communication channels that were addressed in my research.

How is a Positive Organizational Culture Communicated?

An organization's culture is often discussed in communication, both mediated and in-person, between key publics within the organization, including potential customers. Customers are likely to communicate their experience to other potential customers (word-of-mouth and online reviews). After a customer has dined at a restaurant they often communicate their experience to others within their social network. As Susskind (2002) found in her study on restaurant customers' word-of-mouth communication patterns, customers are likely to spread their experience to other potential customers affecting the organization either positively or negatively. Studies have shown that restaurants that hope to build, nurture, and maintain a positive culture must facilitate ways in which to train employees to engage with customers and ensure that the word they spread about the restaurant will be positive (Walter, Edvardsson, & Ostrom, 2010). Customers, and employees alike, communicate to others about their experiences with an organization, such as a restaurant, and often the conversation includes a discussion about the culture of the organization.

Word-of-mouth is not the only way in which customers communicate their experience to others. Online restaurant review sites, such as Yelp and Tripadvisor, have created a non-traditional way in which customers can communicate and spread the word about their experience at a particular restaurant. Online reviews are becoming more popular with the ever-expanding nature of the digital world and more people are taking the time to read and write reviews about restaurants at which that they dine. Customer reviews often focus on the service quality, food quality, and overall atmosphere of an establishment. Restaurants want to maintain a positive organizational culture which will encourage the customers to submit a positive review about their

experience on an online review site with the hope that others will read the review and attend the establishment themselves. Organizations that read, utilize, and respond to online reviews help generate two-way communication between the organization and its key publics which helps foster a positive relationship with the publics. Organizations, such as restaurants, should create an outlet or format for talking about or engaging with the online reviews, which can help the organization learn what they need to do/not do in order to cultivate a positive organizational culture. For this study, the researcher analyzed three top-rated restaurant's reviews on Yelp and Tripadvisor in order to explore digital communication about a restaurant described as having a positive culture.

Three prior studies have addressed online customer review sites. Lim and Heide (2015) analyzed the credibility of posts on an online review site using Yelp. The study explored the effects of review valence, the reviewer profile, and the receiver's familiarity with the platform on the perceived credibility of a review and attitude toward the reviewed item (p. 67). Fulgoni and Lipsman (2015) utilized Tripadvisor to analyze digital word of mouth and demonstrate how online review sites are used offline as advanced word of mouth techniques (p. 18). Vasquez (2012) explored digital narratives drawing a sample from Tripadvisor. The study examined how a person's wordage on the review sites is used to engage their audience and how different narratives were used for different purposes on the site. Despite these contributions, none investigated the role of online reviews in organizational culture.

Summary of literature review

This review of literature helped connect the lines of research that have been intertwined to develop a study on the communication and cultivation of a positive culture within the restaurant industry. The bridging of the fields of literature discussed above helped this study explore how to cultivate a positive culture within a restaurant, how that culture is communicated traditionally and non-traditionally, and the role of internal and external relationships in the cultivation and communication of a positive culture in a restaurant.

Research Questions

RQ1: What communication experiences of staff and customers characterize the culture as positive at top-rated restaurants?

RQ2: How is the positive culture communicated by customers? Traditionally? Non-traditionally (digital)?

RQ3: What is the role of internal and external relationships in creating a positive culture in the restaurant industry?

RQ4: What is the relationship between top-rated restaurants and a positive organizational culture?

Chapter Three:

Methods

This study combined the use of in-depth interviews and content analysis to collect and analyze data and explore themes related to the cultivation and communication of a positive organizational culture. This investigation explored the culture of three restaurants considered to have a positive culture and the role in which internal and external relationships play in the creation and communication of the culture.

Mixed-Method Overview

This study utilized a mixed-methodological approach that combined in-depth interviews and content analysis in order to address the research questions. Qualitative interviews were completed for the study based on the method's suitability to understanding the experience and perspective of the population being interviewed by listening to stories, accounts, and explanations of people with personal and direct knowledge of the topic being studied. After the interviews were completed, content analysis was used to complement and triangulate the data collected through the interviews. I chose to qualitatively and quantitatively interpret the content analysis data collected in order to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the topic and to allow for a more open and interpretive analysis of the themes found in the research.

A mixed-method approach offers several advantages to completing research, including the benefits and opportunities of cross-referencing data collected through two complimentary methods, and the ability to complete a study that is considered more reliable and valid (Lindlof, 2011). By including three restaurants, this exploration had the ability to make comparisons and support claims, which led to greater transferability of the findings. The use of a mixed-method approach is beneficial to social science research because it allows the researcher the opportunity to

analyze data through multiple lenses, providing the researcher with complex insights surrounding the topic of study. More specifically, when studying organizational culture, scholars have called for the use of a mixed-method approach by addressing the need for both qualitative and quantitative approaches to be used in the same study (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006).

Interview Overview

Interviews were selected and completed with restaurant staff and customers to address the research questions from a source directly connected to the topic of study (Lindlof, 2011).

Hermanowicz (2002) stated, "The interview is among the most basic and fundamental of methods, and one which, if executed well, brings us arguably closer than many other methods to an intimate understanding of people and their social worlds" (p. 480). Qualitative interviewing is a *subjective* procedure that involves an in-depth *conversation* with participants who are versed in the topic of study and the context of the interview. In-depth interviews are often used to gain a rich account of people's understanding of a particular communication context in which the person being interviewed has experience and knowledge with. Lindlof (2011) stated, "Qualitative researchers interview people for several reasons: to understand their perspectives on a scene, to retrieve their experiences from the past, to gain expert insight or information, to obtain descriptions of events that are normally unavailable for observation, to foster trust, to understand sensitive relationships, and to create a record of communication that can subsequently be analyzed" (p. 3). In-depth interviews search for the meaning behind participants' responses and unlock previously hidden data through detailed conversation and probing of the interviewee.

Interviews were chosen as they lend themselves to interpretation of experiences and challenges related to the focus of this study. The nature of the interview approach is concerned with "the way verbal and nonverbal signs create and reveal social codes of identity, relationships,

emotions, place, and communication itself” (Carbaugh, 2007). With my extensive experience working in the restaurant industry, interviews were chosen for this study as I have developed a rapport that lends itself to in-depth, fruitful conversations about the culture of a restaurant.

Content Analysis Overview

Content analysis was chosen for the study as it helped to validate the information from the interview results. Furthermore, content analysis was selected for the study as it is a successful method for analyzing content related to social relationships, public behaviors, and attributions, including attitudes, beliefs, and most importantly for this study, emotions (Krippendorff, 2004). Content analysis is focused on reducing complex communication phenomena into systematic manageable data. Data collected unobtrusively through content analysis can be analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively; both were completed for this study. Riffe, Lacy, & Fico (2005) defined content analysis as, “The *systematic* and *replicable* examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned *numeric values* according to *valid* measurement rules and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption” (p. 25).

As a method, content analysis provides an *objective* examination of the data in which the researcher’s beliefs and opinions related to the research are left out of the analysis, and concepts are defined by measurable variables, also known as *operationalization*. However, content analysis also offers itself to a more qualitative interpretation of the data. As Rose (2012) mentioned, content analysis lends itself to qualitative interpretation, which affords both an objective and subjective approach to the topic of study. Content analysis has been used in major studies related to positive emotions including two decades worth of studies completed by Alice Isen and her colleagues,

including several studies focused on the clinical reasoning of practicing physicians (Fredrickson, 2003).

Data Collection

Employee Interviews

This study completed in-depth informant interviews with staff from top- ranked restaurants, as rated by Yelp and Tripadvisor, as the population. Informant interviews were completed in order to inform the researcher about the customs, rituals, behaviors, actions, and identities of a particular setting using people whose knowledge is extensive and valuable to the research questions (Lindlof, 2011). Concepts that were addressed in the interviews included (See Appendix A for full interview script):

Emotions. Concepts related to emotions that were addressed in the interview were guided by positive organizational scholarship and the appreciative inquiry model.

Relationships (internal and external). Concepts related to the role of relationships were directed by relationship management and positive organizational scholarship literature.

Communication and behavior patterns. Concepts that were addressed in the interview script related to communication and behavior patterns were pulled from relationship management, appreciative inquiry, and positive organization literature.

Cultural norms and rituals. Guided by positive organizational scholarship and appreciative inquiry research, concepts related to cultural norms and rituals within each restaurant were explored in the interview questions.

Overall culture and organizational structure of the restaurant. Although guided by relationship management, appreciative inquiry, and positive organization literature, concepts related to the

overarching culture and structure of the organization were more explorative and were discovered during the interview process.

In stage one of the data collection, a list of potential restaurants was drafted based on the restaurant's ranking on two of the most prominently used and largest online review websites, Tripadvisor (Vasquez, 2012) and Yelp. Guided by the appreciative inquiry model of interviewing, top-rated restaurants were selected as the population as they offered best practice examples of a restaurant exhibiting a positive organizational culture (Skinner & Kelley, 2006). The top ten rated restaurants on each of the review sites (*the rankings were nearly identical*) were purposefully invited to participate in the investigation in order to obtain the initial 3-4 restaurants. Multiple restaurants were chosen as this allowed the study to triangulate the data related to each of the three restaurants into overarching themes found across all of the restaurants. After Institutional Review Board approval, the researcher contacted each restaurant via a phone call to the manager to inquire about the restaurant's participation. The final sample included three restaurants located in the coastal region of North Carolina in a small town with a large tourist population. The three establishments selected were ranked in the top three on both of the review site rankings. The use of independently-owned and operated restaurants was a strategic choice to examine restaurants that do not have the resources to promote themselves through mass marketing like larger chain corporations (e.g., Red Lobster; Outback Steakhouse). Potential restaurants were selected based on their overall ranking on the two online review sites that were used for this study (Tripadvisor and Yelp). Online travel review sites offer an individual the opportunity to create "short story" narratives about their experience with restaurants and other tourism related luxuries (hotels, car rentals, and activities). TripAdvisor is considered the most prominent online travel review platform (Zehrer et al., 2011) and Yelp is one of the most prominently used review sites for restaurant reviews.

After the three restaurants were selected, stage two of data collection focused on eliciting 5-10 informant interviews with staff members from each of the three restaurants, with a total sample size of 15-20 interviews. Fifteen interviews were collected before I reached saturation. Saturation was reached when no new themes were arising from the interviews and the common themes had been established. Initial interview participants from each of the three restaurants were purposefully reached out to using personal connections that I had with the staff members. Initial contact was made with staff members through a phone call or Facebook Messenger when I was unsure of the staff member's phone number. After the initial interviews were completed, a snowball technique was used to gain interviews with additional staff members from each of the restaurants. Staff interviews included members of the front-of-house staff, back-of-house staff, and managers. Each interviewee signed an informed consent form at the beginning of the interview. The age range of interview participants was rather broad due to the nature of people employed in the restaurant industry; interview participants ranged in age from 20-50 years old. All employees over the age of eighteen currently working in the establishments selected for the study were included in the population; however the employees were not required to be a part of the exploration. Out of the fifteen interviews completed, twelve interviewees were female and three were male. The interview participants' commitment to the restaurant industry ranged from part-time, full-time, seasonal, or career employment.

Each staff member was interviewed at a location that the participant and I agreed on. Interviews were not completed at the employee's restaurant locations in order to protect the identity of the participants. Coffee shops, personal homes, or other public locations were considered for the interviews. Per Lindlof (2011), I attempted to interview each staff member on a day that he or she was not working at the restaurant, a protected time, in order to avoid elements of fatigue, irritation, or preoccupation. Each interview consisted of 10-15 open-ended questions in an approximately 30-minute interview, although interview times ranged from 30-55 minutes.

Guided by the appreciative inquiry model of interviewing, each interview focused on stimulating positive communication that highlighted the benefits, strengths, potential, and successes of each of the restaurants and the key publics involved in the restaurants being studied (Skinner & Kelley, 2006). The appreciate inquiry approach to interviewing, grounded in positive psychology, is different from traditional interview approaches as the interview questions focus on what works in the organization and questions related to weaknesses in the organization are avoided (Skinner & Kelly, 2006). Taking this approach to the interviews allowed me to lead the interview in a positive direction and avoid a complaint-heavy interview. As one staff member mentioned after the interview was completed, "It was nice to have an uplifting conversation about my experiences with my job in the restaurant as often I find myself in "gripe" sessions with my co-workers that don't do much for increasing employee morale". I attempted to establish a relaxed and conversational tone at the beginning of the interview by bridging connections between her and the staff member being interviewed. This rapport building technique was often accomplished by opening up the interview with a 5-10 minute talk about our personal experiences working in the restaurant industry. Generating a casual and open conversation for each interview was important as it helped elicit fruitful and honest responses with specific examples (Lindlof, 2011). Surprisingly, the opening conversation often led the interview directly into the topic of study providing an easy transition into the interview script questions. Each interview was recorded using my personal cellphone audio recording device and was transcribed later to my personal password protected laptop. In total, there was approximately 34 hours of taped interviews. After each interview was completed, I thanked the staff member for the interview and requested additional staff member contact information to complete the interviews.

Content Analysis

Stage four, and the final phase of the data collection process involved triangulating the data collected through the employee and customer interviews by completing a content analysis of written reviews featured on two of the most prominently used online review sites, Tripadvisor and Yelp, for each of the three restaurants involved in the study. This project used content analysis to explore the ways in which a positive culture in a restaurant is communicated online. Online review sites were selected as more narrative experiences are taking place in digital contexts than ever before (Vasquez, 2012). Furthermore, online review sites were selected as a way to address the gap in the literature related to the study of digital narratives (Vasquez, 2012).

Tripadvisor and Yelp, considered two of the popular online customer review sites, act as online narratives for customers to communicate about their experience with an organization, specifically restaurants for this study (Zehrer et al., 2011). With over 350 million reviews on each site, more than 80% of travelers are utilizing online review sites, such as Tripadvisor and Yelp, in order to reduce risk and uncertainty related to experiences that cannot easily be evaluated prior to consumption (Zehrer et al. (2011). Considered to be “small stories”, the online review sites allow customers to rate their overall experience based on four main areas, food, service, value, and atmosphere in a first-person point-of-view (Vasquez, 2012). One of the key differences between traditional narratives and digital narratives, such as online customer review sites, is the opportunity for interactive two-way communication between the reviewer and the organization. Referred by marketing scholars as eWOM, electronic word of mouth), online customer reviews include comments, evaluations, and personal stories related to the products or organizations being reviewed (Vasquez, 2012).

Both Tripadvisor and Yelp allow users to create a profile on the website including demographic information about the reviewer; however a profile is not mandatory. Both review

sites are free to users. Each user-generated profile features the overall number of reviews created by the reviewer, the specific number of restaurant reviews, and the number of people that have found the review to be helpful. The average word count of each review ranges from 20-400 words in length. The extent of the content on the review sites are built by users and supported by advertising (tripadvisor.com). There have been some concerns about the quality of the reviews due to the crowd-sourced nature of the online review sites. Some scholars have suggested that discrepancies in the legitimacy of the review sites come into play when expert travel writers and restaurant reviewers are not in charge of the review process and reviews are crowd-sourced (Roberts, 2014). In order to reduce the number of fraudulent reviews being written, each review is subject to a verification review process before being posted to the review site and users are encouraged to report any suspicious or obscene reviews (yelp.com).

Guided by Riffe (2008), after the two review sites were selected for the data collection, the researcher decided on a final sample size for the content analysis portion. Fifteen reviews from Tripadvisor and fifteen reviews from Yelp were selected for each of the three restaurants that participated in the interview portion of the study. Overall, 30 online reviews for each restaurant were collected and a total sample size of 90 reviews were selected. Each review was randomly selected from a one- year time frame (September 2014-September 2015) of the reviews featured on each of the three restaurant's review pages. The one-year time frame allowed me to take into account the seasonal changes in each of the restaurant's reviews in regards to the content and number of reviews being posted. A screenshot was captured for each review and a full list of the reviews was printed for the analysis phase.

Data Analysis

Interviews

Guided by concepts pulled from the appreciative inquiry model, the relationship management theory, and literature related to positive organizations, a thorough analysis of the data collected through the interviews and content analysis was completed. Although I explored additional concept creation during the analysis phase, I used the pre-existing concepts as a framework to guide my exploration. Pseudonyms were provided for the restaurants and interview participants involved in the study to maintain confidentiality.

All transcribed interviews were explored using a qualitative interpretation approach. The use of qualitative interpretation was crucial as each interview was analyzed in an effort to explore themes and patterns related to the communication and cultivation of a positive culture in a restaurant and the role of relationships. After all of the interviews were conducted and recorded, I completed a series of data analysis stages.

In stage one, each of the interviews was transcribed. During the transcription stage, I focused on copying the interview recordings as closely as possible. In total, 242 pages of interview transcriptions were reviewed. Although no structured analysis was completed in the initial stage of transcribing the interviews, I recorded any clear or repeat themes that stood out when listening to the recordings. Furthermore, I highlighted key quotations and information in the transcriptions that I was interested in further exploring in future stages or including in the discussion section of this study. I pulled key quotes from each of the interviews completed in order to use the quotes as featured examples of the themes compiled during the analysis.

In stage two of the staff interview analysis, a theoretical concept sheet with guiding concepts pulled from the relationship management theory, the appreciate inquiry model, and

positive organization literature, was used to connect the themes to the literature. Several concepts were developed during the analysis phase, however theoretical concepts were pulled from prior research completed using the theories and models mentioned above.

Guarding Against Bias

Due to my history in the restaurant industry and my familiarity with several of the employees from one of the three restaurants in the study, I took measures to guard against researcher bias. I had no familiarity with two of the three restaurants included in this study. While I was briefly employed by the third restaurant, I only interviewed employees with whom I had not worked nor had any relational history with. I maintained neutrality during the interviews by managing my energy and facial expressions throughout the interview. In order to generate genuine conversation and make the interviewee feel comfortable, I acknowledged my familiarity with the industry; however I maintained a neutral stance and did not encourage a certain emotion or response from any of the questions asked.

I carefully worded all interview questions to be open-ended in order to illicit the interviewee's point of view. The fact that questions emphasized the positive aspects of their restaurant experience also guarded against the tendency toward social desirability bias.

In order to avoid confirmation bias, I continuously challenged my interpretations and conclusions by looking for disconfirming cases. The only disconfirmation that appeared was the difference between men and women's descriptions of the need for positive communication and relationships. The three males interviewed for the study appeared to value the need for positive communication and relationships less than the female interviewees. Although not a strong disconfirmation, the male interviewees appeared to value individual work mildly more than female interviewees, who noted stronger value in the interpersonal elements of the organizational culture.

Content Analysis

Prior to beginning the first stage of the content analysis of the online reviews, this study completed a pretest using 10 online reviews (5 from Tripadvisor and 5 from Yelp) from a similar local restaurant located in the same region, but not involved in the current study. I analyzed the reviews using the same structure discussed below in an effort to ensure that the analysis was thorough and yielded the appropriate data. A third of the sample size was used for the pretest. After the pretest was completed, the first stage of analyzing the content in the reviews began.

Each review was examined for themes similar to those explored in the employee and customer interviews. Guided by the same three frameworks as the interviews, the relationship management theory, the appreciative inquiry model, and positive organizational literature, concepts explored during the content analysis stage included emotions, relationships, communication experiences, and organizational culture (See Appendix C for full list of theoretical concepts). Although guided by pre-existing frameworks, this investigation also used an exploratory method of concept creation that was generated during the analysis phase, a common trend found in interviews and content analysis (Lindlof, 2011; Krippendorff, 2012).

In the first stage of analyzing the online reviews, a factual based code sheet was created that addressed questions such as the date of the posting, the restaurant discussed in the posting, the rating for the review, whether the review was considered positive, negative, or mixed, and the site the review was posted on. This quantitative analysis allowed me to collect identifying data related to each of the reviews that were analyzed. This stage was completed for each review and featured an objective element to the data collection.

After the initial code sheet phase of the analysis, an explorative stage two analysis of the online reviews was completed in an effort to gather more in-depth information. Using a social constructivist approach, the data was analyzed qualitatively to address the deeper meaning of the

reviews, which allowed my research to explore past the actual words in the review. The social constructivist approach was chosen for the analysis portion of my study as the approach offers a focus on discourse and analyzes how cultures are conceptualized (Averill, 1985; Krippendorff, 2004). Each review was read and terms, quotes, and themes in the post were recorded related to the creation and communication of a positive culture in a restaurant. Concepts were explored in an emerging themes fashion in which themes arose from the data when reading through the reviews. This study recorded reoccurring themes in the reviews as well as themes that were found to be similar to themes found in the interview portion of the analysis. Furthermore, key terms that featured a positive culture connotation were recorded.

After the exploratory analysis stage, the third stage of content analysis was completed in an effort to connect the themes to the concepts related to the literature guiding the study. I was interested in concepts pulled from the appreciative inquiry model, positive organization literature, and the relationship management theory. Reviews were analyzed for appreciative inquiry concepts that showcased the organization's culture, including comments that addressed social interactions, communication patterns, behavioral patterns, and cultural norms (Whitney & Fredrickson, 2015). Concepts pulled from the relationship management theory that were used to analyze the reviews included the six dimensions of a successfully managed relationship (control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, and exchange and communal relationship) as well as strategies to help maintain a positive public-organization relationship, which included access, positivity, openness, assurances, networking, and sharing of tasks (Huang, 1997; Hon & Grunig, 1999). Concepts pulled from positive organizational literature that were used to analyze the reviews included values consistent with an ideal organization, such as loyalty, engagement, skill development, positive communications, flexibility, motivations, teamwork, decision-making, and innovation (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). This study used a theoretical concept sheet to connect the emergent themes to the pre-existing concepts (See Appendix C for concept sheet).

In the final stage of the content analysis portion of the analysis, this investigation examined links between the three bodies of literature that guided the study as well as themes that were found in both the interviews and content analysis data. The work explored overlapping concepts that were found to be significant to more than one of the bodies of literature discussed in the study, including the appreciative inquiry model, positive organizational literature, and the relationship management theory. This final stage of analysis was completed to address how the three bodies of literature intersect with each other in order to understand more about the cultivation and communication of a positive culture in a restaurant.

This deep qualitative analysis of online reviews and interview transcripts was also supplemented by an exploratory quantitative analysis. Nvivo files were created for each and word frequencies were examined to ensure that no frequently mentioned terms were missed in the qualitative analysis. In short, the Nvivo analysis served as another way to enhance the reliability of the results.

Chapter Four:

Results

Overview of Results

In the first results chapter I will address the seven overarching themes that emerged from the fifteen employee interviews. Each theme will be supported by key points and examples from the interviews.

In the second results chapter I will discuss the themes that arose from the content analysis of online customer reviews of the restaurants involved in the study. This chapter concludes with a quantitative analysis of key aspects of the data.

Interview Results

The Umbrella of Positive Culture: Relationships

The importance of relationships was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Diverse relationships were discussed by all 15 interviewees and were relevant across all eight themes. More specifically, all three of the restaurants in this study attribute their positive culture to fostering positive relationships and managing negative relationships.

All fifteen interviewees related at least four communication experiences to diverse relationships that they maintained within the restaurant. Relationships, including employee-employee, employee-upper management, employee-owner, employee-customer, employee-restaurant, customer-customer, customer-upper management, customer-owner, upper management-owner, employee-head chef, upper management-restaurant, owner-restaurant, and front-of-the-house-back-of-the-house were all discussed and credited during the interviews as

having a role in the creation and maintenance of the culture of the three restaurants involved in this study.

More specifically, fostering a culture that breeds positive relationships and manages negative relationship interactions appeared across all of the themes discussed hereafter in relation to the positive culture of the three restaurants. The seven themes to be described below include (1) teamwork, (2) individual fit, (3) empathy and understanding, (4) emotion management, (5) empowerment, (6) focus on the customer, and (7) the power of online reviews.

Theme One: Teamwork

I Have Your Back...If You Have Mine

The first theme that was prevalent in the cultivation of a positive culture was the presence of teamwork among employees. All fifteen interviews included themes of teamwork among employees, including teamwork involving front-of-the-house staff, back-of-the-house staff, and upper level management. When asked what the keys to creating a positive culture in a restaurant are, all of the interviewees mentioned working together as a team to accomplish tasks and more importantly, maintaining a positive morale throughout the team in order to accomplish the tasks and sustain a positive culture. Representative statements include:

I understand when someone is busy that they are stressed and we all have those moments in the shift, so I help them clean the plates off even if they aren't the nicest with their approach, because I know they will have my back in the future when I need help...and let's be real, that day will come. (Interviewee Four)

When we are working together as a team I feel like the positivity trickles through the restaurant, however when teamwork breaks down, you can feel the stress rise in the

employees and that feeling will quickly seep into the customers' experience. (Interviewee One)

Several interviewees mentioned that employees in the restaurant industry spend a large amount of time with each other, both at work and outside of work, forming a family-like relationship with each other, based on understanding and empathy. During the interviews, a story was often told comparing and contrasting using a former restaurant the interviewee had worked in with the restaurant featured in the study. It became apparent that restaurant culture is affected negatively when the "I got your back" family-like relationship is lacking. One interviewee noted that they had previously terminated their employment with a restaurant because it lacked the family vibe among the staff. The interviewee felt the individualistic culture of this former restaurant hurt the business's bottom line, and more importantly, the atmosphere of the restaurant. In contrast, the same interviewee compared the individualistic culture of the prior restaurant to their current restaurant. The interviewee described a more collective approach to restaurant operations, in which employees worked together to accomplish tasks and motivate each other.

Employees of all three restaurants also described "the unwritten pact" that the employees form as they work closely alongside each other. They noted that tensions are higher at peak times during the workday, the rush and the end of the shift, when tensions are higher in the restaurant and employees' emotions are more visible. Yet interviewees described that when employees work together to get through the more stressful peaks, the culture was more likely to remain positive. Furthermore, interviewees across the three restaurants discussed that they do not let the stressful moments in the shift affect their relationship with other employees long-term, which helps to uphold the teamwork mentality.

There are definitely times in the night when I'm stressed and running around like crazy, I talk less to other employees, but I always know that everyone has my back if I need it and that we won't hold grudges for things we did during the rush. (Interviewee Two)

Not surprisingly, this "I got your back" mentality, filled with characteristics of understanding and empathy, was more difficult to create between front-of-the-house and back-of-the-house staff, but a common theme across all three restaurants involved in this study was that the relationship between the two "houses" was positive overall (eight of the fifteen interviewees noted that this positive relationship was unusual for the restaurant industry). Interviewees discussed how a negative relationship between the two "houses" often resulted in a communication breakdown and took a toll on the overall culture of the restaurant.

Interviewees noted that contrary to the norm, their restaurants maintained a teamwork approach that extended across the employees, not just employees of similar positions. Interviewee Seven discussed how she felt comfortable approaching the kitchen staff and that this helped her feel more confident when communicating with her customers and addressing any issues that might arise during the customer's experience. Interviewee Seven went on to elaborately discuss one shift when the positive relationship that the two houses maintained became stressed as the kitchen staff began to panic when it became busy. She stated, "I began to see the kitchen staffs' panic leak into the wait staff and the wait staff became visibly flustered. Ultimately customers were on edge and more irritated with their experience than usual. I have rarely experienced this type of evening and it became clear that teamwork is critical to the process."

Theme Two: Individual Fit

Fitting in can be tough in any type of organization. Interviewees often discussed the importance of “fit” regarding the personalities of the employees. When asked why they remained employed at the current restaurant where they worked, eleven of the fifteen interviewees discussed their connection with fellow employees as a key reason that they remained at the restaurant. Countering this, six of the fifteen interviewees mentioned not fitting in as a reason that they would potentially terminate their employment at a restaurant. Interviewee Three described a personal story about his first day working at his restaurant and how he felt welcomed by the other staff. He immediately felt as though his sense of humor would work well with others’ humor. He stated,

When I get ready to go to work, I don’t feel irritated, I feel excited. Excited to hang out with my friends at work and make some money. Excited to laugh with each other and joke around. Work would stink without the interactions that we have with each other all day (Interviewee Three).

The word “friend” was a common term that the interviewees used to describe fellow employees during the interviews. Based on the interviewees’ word choice, it appeared as though the use of the term “friend” highlighted the theme of individual fit with a restaurant. The relationships that employees build with each other appeared to be stronger than that of the usual coworker relationship. Many of the interviewees equated their positive attitude at work to the bond that they formed with each other, a bond referred to as a “family community” by two interviewees from two different restaurants. The term “family” was also used to describe the interviewee’s relationship with the rest of the restaurant staff in fourteen of the fifteen interviews, with the term being used multiple times when asked to describe the culture of their restaurant in a few words. Several interviewees suggested that working together as a family community helped the working dynamics and the overall mood of the restaurant. Interviewee Fifteen stated:

At my current restaurant we are a family. We have built bonds with each other that allow us to work more smoothly together and we are more likely to help each other when we are in need of help. More importantly, we know what makes each other “tick”, we can tell when one of us needs help, and we can tell when one of us is having a bad day....or a great day. We know each other. We care about each other. More than just work. (Interviewee Fifteen)

Feelings of loyalty and concern for each other were evident across the interviewees when employees felt as though they were part of the collective whole within the restaurant. Feeling welcomed at work and building connections with fellow employees appeared to help create a more cohesive collective whole between the employees, which many of the interviewees discussed as a catalyst to the culture of the restaurant. Interviewee Fourteen stated, “When our personalities mesh well together and we understand what makes each other happy and/or angry, then restaurant operations work more smoothly and overall our attitudes are more positive and our spirits are high”.

Like Interviewee Fourteen, other interviewees echoed this sentiment of an employee’s fit with the restaurant and how that could ultimately affect the culture of the restaurant. Interviewee Three summed up the theme of fit the best, “One bad egg can bring EVERYONE down; one good egg can lift everyone’s’ spirits up like a refreshing song that plays on your iPod on a Monday morning”.

Theme Three: Empathy and Understanding

Empathy and understanding were highlighted across all fifteen of the employee interviewees. The theme focused on the employees showing compassion for each other and acknowledgement that each employee has emotions that will be expressed and moods that will be felt while at work. This theme specifically emphasizes the emotions and emotion management at the restaurants. All fifteen interviewees acknowledged that not every shift was a good one and that every employee working on a particular shift might not be in the most positive of moods.

Interviewee Seven stated:

Life's challenges don't end once I walk into work. Some days I just start crying because I am overwhelmed with life, not work. My family at work always makes sure to be there for me and listen when I need an ear. They take it easy on me and help me throughout the shift. It makes me feel great just knowing that my friends at work care about me. (Interviewee Seven)

According to the interviewees, the key to managing less positive employee moods is the element of empathy. Empathy can be described as a person's ability to acknowledge and address the emotions, experiences, feelings, thoughts, and motor responses of others (Bonvicini et al., 2009). Empathy includes being sensitive to one's evolving and shifting emotions and understanding one's thoughts, emotions, and perceptual framework (Yildiz & Duy, 2013). The keys to empathy in a restaurant revolve around the acknowledging and understanding of one's emotions and expressing sensitivity toward one's changing emotions. As described during the interviews, empathy in a restaurant is often accomplished through the development and formation of deeper relationships among employees. Interviewee Two stated:

It would be a lie to say that I came to work happy every day (laughs), some days I am just in a bad mood. The restaurant I work at allows me to have bad days without crucifying me for

it. Instead my friends at work acknowledge that I am “in a mood” and often times they either leave me to myself for the day or they try and make me laugh and turn my day into a good day. (Interviewee Two)

As this quote illustrated, showing empathy to others while at work, specifically within the restaurant industry, helps to manage the culture of the restaurant while allowing for the expression of emotions, both positive and negative. In the sub-theme below, emotional management will be discussed in relation to empathy and understanding.

Theme Four: Emotion Management

“You can either learn to control your emotions or become hostage to them (Interviewee Six).” Emotions have the ability to take an entire restaurant staff hostage. During the employee interviews, a key theme arose, a theme of actively working to manage employee’s emotions that could potentially filter into the entire staff. Similar to empathy and understanding, emotion management involves controlling emotions, such as negativity. Emotion management was found to be two-fold, including being self-aware of one’s own emotions and having a supportive staff to help keep each other’s emotions in check.

Studies have shown that emotions are contagious (Christakis & Fowler, 2009). Learning techniques to manage emotions in a restaurant became an evident way in which employees attempt to maintain the culture of the restaurant based on the interviewee’s responses to questions related to the effects of emotions being displayed while at work. According to conversations with the interviewees, acknowledging each other’s emotions can help neutralize the contagious effects of negative emotions that threaten the culture of a restaurant. By recognizing an employee who potentially threatens the culture of the restaurant with their emotions, the employees’ empower each other to avoid the contagious nature of the negative emotions and help maintain the integrity of the culture of the restaurant. Interviewee Seven stated:

My friend has her good and bad days at work. Last summer we realized that when she would come in to work in a bad mood, that by the end of the night, we were all in more stressed moods. One night she realized that her bad mood had taken a toll on the entire staff and she decided to start announcing when she was in “a bad mood” to allow us to choose how we interacted with her that shift. As silly as it seemed at first; the announcement worked and the rest of the staff started using the same technique. The emotions stayed with the one employee and didn’t cause us all to stress out. (Interviewee Seven)

Communication experiences such as the one that Interviewee Seven described became a common theme in the interviews when the researcher asked questions related to the display of emotions at work. As Interviewee Seven noted, recognizing and acknowledging the negativity helped to reduce the likelihood that the emotion would spread to other employees. By not allowing negativity to consume the staff, the positive culture of the restaurant appeared to be maintained.

One key to this theme is the need for acceptance of emotions in order to manage them. The technique of announcing your mood worked for this particular restaurant because the employees agreed to show empathy for the employee that was experiencing the negativity. The technique falls flat, or even reverses the affect, if the employees show a lack of concern over the employee’s emotions. Interviewee Two stated:

I was having a very bad day at a previous restaurant that I worked at. I asked the staff to take it easy on me during that shift and mentioned that I wasn’t in the best mood over a family issue. Instead of showing any care, a fellow employee told me that he didn’t care about my problems at home and that I needed to suck it up and get over it. That night everyone was in a terrible mood. But then again, they were always in a bad mood. I quit that night. (Interviewee Two)

Interviewee Two went on to discuss the negative culture that ran rampant within that restaurant. Like the theme of finding the right fit, making sure that the employee is working in a restaurant with the right amount of “emotion acceptance” that fits their personal needs and attitudes helps manage emotions and ultimately help create a positive culture.

Being self-aware of one’s own emotions was discussed heavily in relation to the employee-customer interaction. Managing emotions extended to the customers when interviewees were asked questions related to displaying emotions to customers. Questions such as, “Do people know how you are really feeling at work?” almost always elicited a genuine chuckle from the interviewee, followed with a variation of the answer “no.” The interviewees discussed that in order to maintain a positive culture within the restaurant; they don’t allow themselves to display their negative emotions, if they have any, to their customers. Most interviewees told a story of a day when they were having the worst day of their life and yet they maintained a smile and a positive attitude towards their customers.

Interviewee One burst into laughter when asked if customers know how they really feel at work. Interviewee One stated, “Certainly not. I put on my “work” smile. Even on my worst days, I will frown, yell, and cuss in the kitchen, but when I walk through those doors towards the dining room, I put my best face forward.” Like Interviewee One’s story, all but one interviewee mentioned a variation of the “fake smile” technique to help maintain the culture of the restaurant. The “fake smile” communication experiences related to expressing positive emotions even when in a negative mood, including a smile, to customers, including when the employee had previously been expressing negative emotions out of view of the customer. Interviewee Twelve stated:

I will look mean as ever when I’m behind closed doors and be in the most piss-poor mood, but when I walk out into the dining room, I’m all smiles, ear-to-ear. According to my customers, I’m having the best day of my life. (Interviewee Twelve)

Managing emotions, both through self-awareness and staff support helped to achieve the culture of the restaurant across all three of the restaurants.

Theme Five: Empowerment

Interviewee Eight Stated:

One time I made a suggestion to our manager that we purchase stemless wine glasses for our heavier alcoholic drinks. I mentioned that I had noticed several major spills that had involved the top-heavy approach to the drinks and several spills had resulted in red wine drinks being spilled on customers or glasses being broken. A week later I noticed that there were stemless wine glasses sitting on the shelf in the bar. With sudden excitement I cheered loudly and praised the decision. My manager came around the corner and said, "I heard what you said last week and I appreciate your suggestion; I agree, the drinks were hazardous to transport." I was honestly speechless. When does that happen?? A manager? Listen to me? And actually purchase my suggestion? I could have cried with joy.

The communication experience described by Interviewee One in the above story was one that stuck out to me. When asked the question, "Do you feel like your opinions are considered within the restaurant?" Interviewee One responded with a large smile and energetically launched into the story described at the beginning of this section. Over the course of the interviews, the question of opinions being considered within the restaurant yielded some of the most emotional and fruitful stories out of the entire interview. From those stories arose a theme of empowerment.

Empowerment in an organization has often been determined by the level of autonomy, influence, and/or responsibility given to employees (Sharma & Sahoo, 2014; Sparks, Bradly & Callan, 1997). In the restaurant industry, employee empowerment might include being involved in the operations, equipment and services, work schedule, serving protocol, and style of the

restaurant. Communication experiences that involved elements of empowerment helped create a positive restaurant culture. Interviewee Seven stated:

We have daily employee meetings before the start of each shift with the general manager and the staff working that day. In each meeting we discuss an online customer review that the manager selects for us to discuss. Recently I noticed a trend of all negative reviews being brought to the meetings and no positive reviews. After one of the meetings I asked the general manager why we were only discussing negative reviews and I asked if a few days could focus on more positive reviews. He told me that my idea was an excellent idea and since that day a mixture of positive and negative reviews has been discussed. (Interviewee Seven)

Interviewee Seven further chatted about how the introduction of positive reviews to the meetings helped uplift employee morale and appeared to motivate the employees. As Interviewee Seven noted, creating an environment where employees' opinions are valued and considered helps to build a positive culture within the restaurant. All fifteen interviews included elements of empowerment and several of the interviewees mentioned empowerment as a key reason that they remain employed at the restaurant.

Multiple interviewees across the three restaurants emphasized the significance of empowering employees in their restaurants. Coming from separate restaurants, interviewees described how upper management makes the employees feel as though their opinions matter and how that translates into more invested and proud employees working in the restaurant.

Interviewee Four stated:

I am proud to work for my restaurant, the owners and managers make me feel important and not so disposable. I have often felt disposable at prior restaurants that I have worked at as a member of the wait staff. I started working here and

realized the worth that I do offer to a restaurant and that increased my commitment to my current restaurant by a landslide. I wait on my tables with pride now. I feel important. It feels great...and unknown. I feel excited to talk about where I work, even when I'm not at work. (Interviewee Four)

As Interviewee Four stated, empowering employees is beneficial to the culture of a restaurant as it elevates the mood of the employee who feels empowered and provides them with a sense of pride and dedication to their restaurant.

Interviewee Seven also noted how empowering communication experiences generate a positive culture within a restaurant:

When I feel valued at work, I feel happier. I feel like I'm part of an important process, a team. When I feel happier, I am more likely to pass that happiness to my customers. I find myself speaking about the restaurant to the customers with more excitement and honor. I feel more passionate about promoting the restaurant to customers when the restaurant is passionate about me as an employee.

Like Interviewee Seven, six of the other fifteen interviewees mentioned the contagious nature of empowerment and how the level of empowerment communicated to employees plays into the creation of the restaurant culture. Like emotions, empowerment appeared to trickle down through the restaurant, creating a positive experience for both employees and customers.

Although the interviewer focused on the appreciative inquiry model of interviewing in which a positive line of questioning is appropriate and best practices are discussed, eight of the fifteen interviewees discussed a contrasting story of a time at a previous restaurant job in which they felt less empowered, or not empowered at all. During these contrasting stories, the interviewee's emotions shifted both verbally and nonverbally. When talking about moments of

empowerment, interviewees sounded excited and happy and showcased smiles and increased energy nonverbally. On the contrary, nonverbal communication changed when negative stories were recounted, as the interviewee had hints of anger and dissatisfaction in their voice as well as less positive facial expressions. They all expressed gratitude that they were no longer working in that environment. For example:

A few years ago I worked at a restaurant in which the manager walked around all day criticizing the employees and telling us that we could be replaced at any time. It was such an unhealthy work environment. I dreaded going to work. I counted down the minutes until my shift was over. I was not engaged with my customers; I was just waiting on the tables, making my money, and going home. It was such a toxic environment. All the employees did was “trash talk” the restaurant, even to customers. Finally, I had enough. I had never quit a job before, but emotionally I couldn’t take the lack of concern and respect for the employees. Before I quit, I sat the manager down to try and explain why I was leaving and how terrible she had made me feel. Instead of listening to my words, she blamed me for my feelings and refused to care about any of my suggestions. I have never been so relieved when I walked out of that restaurant for the last time. (Interviewee One)

Interviewee One’s story about a negative work culture was echoed across the other interviews that included contrasting stories. The stories featured negative communication experiences related to lack of empowerment, which contributed to the restaurant culture in a negative way. Interviewees described more negative emotions as well as negative cultures in restaurants where they did not feel empowered. For example, Interviewees Six and Fourteen had both previously quit their employment from the same restaurant due to the lack of appreciation they felt from upper management and the owners. Interviewee Six described the restaurant’s

culture as “angry chaos” and a “nightmare,” while Interviewee Fourteen described the culture as “the worst” and “complete lack of order or care.”

Empowerment of employees appears critical to the culture of a restaurant. It became abundantly clear, after listening to opposing stories, that a lack of empowerment of employees in a restaurant threatens the culture of the restaurant and the loyalty of the employees. All three restaurants clearly fostered a sense of empowerment in their employees, ultimately affecting the overall culture of the restaurant.

Listening

One way in which employees of a restaurant feel empowered is through active listening from upper management. By listening to the concerns, wants, and needs of the employees, a restaurant can cultivate a culture in which employees feel open and welcome to discuss issues and ideas with upper management and in turn feel empowered. Interviewees discussed communication experiences between the employees and upper management that involved listening when asked the interview question, “Do you feel like you are an important asset to the restaurant.” Interviewee Two stated, “I feel important when I make a suggestion for how to improve something at work and my manager actually listens to me and follows through with the suggestion that I have made.”

Like the stemless glasses story mentioned earlier, the above sentiment was echoed in several other employee interviews, including Interviewee Fifteen’s story about a time when the interviewee communicated to a manager about the need to reduce “double” shifts from the schedule. A double shift suggests that the employee works more than a single shift schedule in the same day. For example, an employee working a double shift might work both lunch and dinner shifts on the same day, a shift that could last between 12-15 hours. The interviewee discussed how emotionally and physically taxing it is to work a double shift and that she had noticed employees’ emotions becoming less stable and more difficult to control after a certain point in their double

shift. She decided, hesitantly because of prior negative experiences with making suggestions to managers at other restaurants, to mention the concern to the manager of the restaurant. She stated:

I was so nervous that I was sweating, not because of my current manager, but because of learned behaviors from past experiences in which I was scolded for making a suggestion. I was delighted and surprised when my manager responded that I had a great point and that he would consider the toll that working such long shifts took on the employees that worked the shifts, and furthermore the toll it took on the employees that have to work with the tired double shift employees. When the new schedule came out for the week, I noticed something different; each employee only had one double shift, generally each employee had 2-3 per week. I myself had none. A sight that I had been waiting to see for years. A few weeks later my manager approached me and discussed with me that he had seen such a huge improvement in my mood and productivity since taking me off double shifts. He mentioned that I clearly worked better when not working the double shift schedule. (Interviewee Fifteen)

Other interviewees mentioned the importance of listening to the creation of a positive culture in a restaurant. Interviewee Six stated, "You have to feel like upper management listens to you or your heart won't be in the job." Like empowerment, employee communication experiences that included elements of listening by upper management helped to increase the level of commitment and loyalty that an employee has to the restaurant. For example, Interviewee Six stated:

I am loyal to the people that care about my well-being, such as my manager and owner. I am loyal to my manager because he has listened to my concerns over the years of working at the restaurant and I am loyal to the owner of my restaurant because he cares about his employees on a deeper level, he asks how we are doing and actually listens to our response.

If we are having a difficult time in life, the owner doesn't hesitate to listen to our problems and try and help us resolve them. (Interviewee Six)

As this sub-theme has noted, in order to cultivate a positive culture in a restaurant, upper management must actively listen to their employees, in turn building more secure and positive relationships with the employees and a sense of loyalty to the restaurant.

Managers Acting as Advocates for the Employees

Similar to listening, managers acting as advocates for the employees evolved as a strong sub-theme for empowerment. A manager being an advocate for employees in the restaurant industry can be described as being supportive and trusting the employees as well as being a "voice" for the employees. Managers' actions that employees praised included being present and actively involved with the employees, training sessions and regular meetings, complimenting the employee's work, and being a mediator among the employees and between the employees and the owner of the restaurant. Interviewees discussed communication experiences related to managers "having their backs" or "taking up for them" related to the actions described above.

For example, Interviewee Twelve stated:

The owner of the restaurant can sometimes be overbearing, he will come in and try and make changes without understanding the full situation. Our manager does a wonderful job filtering our owner's suggestions and changes and then coming to the employees with the information. It helps reduce the likelihood of an "uproar" amongst the staff when a change is made.

Several interviewees specifically used the word "rare" when discussing the number of restaurant managers who genuinely advocated for the employee's interest. Interviewee Three stated:

Rarely do you find a manager who is there to help the employees. At the restaurant that I currently work at, our manager cares about us and our well-being. Not only is he a good manager, but he has developed personal relationships with us and is there for us when we need him. He's a key reason I stay at the restaurant. He's our glue. (Interviewee Three)

As Interviewee Three's story highlighted, communication experiences that included managers advocating for the employees of the restaurant was an uncommon, but valuable gem to restaurants described as having a positive culture.

In addition, a manager that trusts the employees appeared to have an effect on the culture of the restaurants involved in the study. Trust in employees included allowing the employees freedom to do their job without being scrutinized or monitored by the manager. As one interviewee put it, "We are treated like adults and not children by our manager." By placing trust in the employees, a manager empowers the employees and builds a more effective employee-manager relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Constant monitoring of employees appeared to cause a counter effect and made employees nervous and anxious.

Interviewee Two stated:

At the restaurant that I work at now, my manager trusts that we will do our job correctly and treats us like adults. He doesn't constantly hover around us and comment on how we are working. The employees appreciate him for trusting us. Previously, I worked at a restaurant where we were constantly monitored, to the point of video cameras being installed. I felt on edge all the time and never felt like I was doing anything right."

Furthermore, a manager being present and actively involved with the employees throughout the shift was another way in which managers acted as an advocate for employees. Being

present and actively involved includes the manager's physical presence during a shift as well as the manager maintaining communication with the employees throughout the shift and being active in the process. Being active included the managers helping the employees complete tasks, including service, cooking, and cleaning.

Interviewee Nine stated:

Our manager helps us do tasks that other managers would never do! At the end of the night, our manager is right there next to us cleaning and breaking down the restaurant. When he sees that we are busy, he helps out. He runs food to the tables and helps us clean tables. He understands that it is a team process and that he is a part of that team.

By being a good example to the employees, a manager can promote productivity in the employees and helps the employees focus more on the customer.

Theme Six: Focus on the Customer

Theme seven focused on the customer-centered nature of the restaurant industry. With customers being a key public and critical to the success in the restaurant industry, the culture of the restaurant can be affected by the energy and time that is placed on the customers dining in the restaurant. As the interviews revealed, focusing on the customers' needs and wants helped to increase the likelihood that the customer will enjoy their experience and ultimately helped to create the positive culture within the restaurant. This theme was heavily recognized in interviews with employees from two of the restaurants. Both sets of employees discussed ways in which they have focused their energy on the customer, including consistency in menu and food quality, being involved with the table throughout the experience, and actively listening to the customer's communication about their experience. For example, all of the interviewees for one of the three

restaurants conversed about the extensive steps that the restaurant takes to make sure that the customer is happy and enjoys the experience. Interviewee Eight stated:

From the moment the customer walks into the restaurant to the moment that the customer leaves, the number one priority is to make them happy. We do whatever it takes to rectify an unhappy customer, including free meals or desserts. We work hard to keep happy customers happy. (Interviewee Eight)

As Interviewee Eight described, the interviews showed that a restaurant with a positive culture holds the mantra that the customer is a main priority.

One key aspect of the customer-focused theme is the quality of the communication exchange. As the interviews uncovered, customers enjoy and benefit from what became known as “genuine conversation” in the interviews. Genuine conversation among employees and customers was described as conversation that went beyond the technical communication necessary to serve the customers, and included communication that helped establish a relationship with the customer. Interviewees noted that often when they talked to customers about the customer’s personal life, such as their day, vacation, or activities that they enjoy, the customer appeared more relaxed and willing to communicate with the employee throughout the dining experience. For example, three interviewees discussed a relationship that they have built with a group of regular customers through genuine conversations that they have had with them. The interviewees mentioned the importance of communicating in order to build a relationship with the customers through establishing openness and trust. For example, Interviewee Three stated:

I have built a strong relationship with one family. Any time they come into the restaurant I make it a point to talk to them about their personal life and how things have been going for them. I specifically ask about something that we have talked about the last time they came

in and dined with us and they always appear excited that I have remembered our last conversation. (Interviewee Three)

Through genuine communication, interviews uncovered that customers' feel more connected to the restaurant.

Similar to the theme of employee empowerment, creating a culture in which the customers feel as though their opinions matter is important to the culture of the restaurant. Just like employee empowerment, customer empowerment helped to create and maintain the positive culture of the restaurants. Making customers feel as though they are a part of the restaurant culture gives the customers a sense of connection to the restaurant. Many of the interviews addressed customer empowerment in relation to questions about the culture of the restaurant. Interviewee Four stated:

One of my regular customers brought in an article from a food magazine about the new chilled dessert fork trend in the restaurant industry, I brought the article to my manager and a week later we started serving chilled dessert forks. (Interviewee Four)

Interviewees discussed communication experiences related to empowering customers, such as the story above, as an element of maintaining a customer focus and in turn a positive culture in a restaurant.

Theme Seven: The Power of Online Customer Reviews

All fifteen interviewees commented that online reviews were utilized either internally, externally, or both internally and externally within the restaurant where they worked. According to the interviews, all three of the restaurants read and utilize the information written in the restaurant's online customer reviews, both Tripadvisor and Yelp, to help improve the operations and culture of the restaurant. Furthermore, two of the three restaurants frequently respond to the online reviews in order to generate two-way communication with customers. The interviewees

described that upper management communicates with customers via online reviews in an effort to rectify a negative customer experience, recommend a return visit, thank a customer for their comments, or to build a relationship between the restaurant and the customer. Interviewee One stated:

My owner and general manager spend a significant amount of time responding to customer's comments on the online reviews. If a customer has had a bad experience, our owner will respond to the review with an apology for the experience and a return visit suggestion. If a customer praises the restaurant, our owner will thank the customer for the positive comments and suggest that they promote the restaurant to others. (Interviewee One)

By using two-way communication to connect with customers digitally, the restaurants showed care and concern for the customer's experience in a non-traditional way. Moreover, by using the online reviews to have a two-way conversation with customers, the restaurants involved in the study empower the customers. As Interviewee Seven discussed, by making the customer feel as though their comments are valued by the restaurant, the restaurant in turn initiates and/or builds a relationship with the customer. As the theme of focusing on the customer discussed, the relationship that a restaurant builds with its customers has an impact on the culture of the restaurant. As discovered in the interviews, communicating with customers and building a relationship with them can be accomplished traditionally by communicating with the customer during the customer's dining experience or, as this study has revealed, digitally and non-traditionally through online reviews.

Internally, interviewees from two of the three restaurants mentioned that online customer reviews were discussed during employee meetings, while the third restaurant often displays reviews on the "employee board" for the employees to read. All of the interviewees from one of the

three restaurants elaborated on stories about the life of online customer reviews within their daily employee meetings. When asked about the purpose of bringing the reviews into the employee meetings to discuss, the interviewees credited wanting to make sure the restaurant was “providing the best experience possible for the customers” as the reasoning. Interviewee Fourteen described how this practice has helped maintain the positive culture of the restaurant, “We feel more connected with customer’s wants and needs when we discuss the reviews in our meetings. We go over ways to improve on the negative comments and receive praise for the positive comments.” As Interviewee Fourteen noted, being aware and understanding what customers are looking for in a restaurant is a characteristic of restaurants that are considered to have a positive culture and can be accomplished by allowing online customer reviews to have a life internally and/or externally in the restaurant, including two-way communication with customers via the reviews and discussions of the reviews with the employees of the restaurant.

One caveat to the internal introduction of online customer reviews to the employees in a restaurant is that a mixture of positive and negative reviews must be introduced in order for the experience to positively affect the culture of the restaurant, as mentioned early in the results section. If a pattern of negative reviews being introduced becomes the norm, the strategy becomes ineffective and the culture of the restaurant can see adverse effects. Interviewee Thirteen echoed this sentiment:

After a few weeks of listening to my manager discuss negative reviews in our daily meetings without any acknowledgement of a positive review (and we knew there was positive reviews), I noticed that the employees were leaving the meetings more tense and irritated and there was tons of “chatter” for the duration of the shift related to the contents of the review. It became distracting and not productive so I suggested to our manager that he bring in a positive and negative review to discuss versus just the latter. Now the staff leaves

the meetings with a sense of what needs to be worked on while also having a sense of “swagger” about the things that we are doing right. (Interviewee Thirteen)

As Interviewee Thirteen stated, focusing on communicating to the employees about what the restaurant is doing correctly is beneficial to the morale of the staff and the overall culture of a restaurant.

In the next chapter of this study, the researcher will further discuss online customer reviews and their effect on the culture of a restaurant by unpacking the results of the content analysis portion of the study. This chapter will present significant themes that arose from the analysis of online customer reviews featured on Tripadvisor and Yelp.

Chapter Five:
Online Customer Review Content Analysis Results

“Great location...great food...great staff”

“Wow. Excellent service. Phenomenal menu. Great food. Reasonable prices”

“Lovely place. Clean, great ambiance, professional, good service, amazing food”

In this results chapter, I will discuss the themes that arose from the content analysis of online customer reviews featured on Tripadvisor and Yelp of the three restaurants. This chapter incorporates quantitative analysis of key aspects of the data. The work highlights how a restaurant’s positive culture and reputation is communicated digitally by exploring the most common themes addressed in customer online reviews. Evaluations featured on Tripadvisor and Yelp are rated based on the service, food, atmosphere, and value of a restaurant.

The eight themes to be described below include (1) accommodation, (2) setting, (3) welcoming environment, (4) community identity, (5) service quality, (6) food quality and quantity, (7) value of price, (8) referred, recommended, returned.

Theme One: Accommodation

“We are a large family. Usually going out to eat is a challenge because places either don’t have room for us or we have to wait long periods of time to be seated. This place was the exact opposite! We were seated within 5 minutes at one of their many large party table selections, both indoor and outdoor.”

The online reviews revealed that customers enjoy restaurants that are accommodating to their customers. Accommodations discussed in the evaluations focused mainly on seating; more specifically seating options, timing, location, and availability of reservations. In the reviews, 30 out

of 90 (1/3) included an element of accommodation. One review stated, "It's all about accommodation. We select a restaurant to eat at based on how accommodating they are to us."

A key to accommodation in a restaurant is the time it takes to seat customers once they arrive at the restaurant. Customer wait time was a prominent mention in the reviews, both positive and negative. Positive comments were related to short wait times, while negative comments highlighted extended wait times or lack of available seating. For example, a review stated, "We are always seated right away; even when we are told the wait will be a little while, we are seated quickly and never wait too long." As the quote suggested, customers communicated that the amount of time they had to wait for a table had an impact on their overall experience with the restaurant.

The expectations in the feedback suggested that customers want to be seated immediately upon arriving at a restaurant, first and foremost. However, if patrons are told they must wait, the customers remain positive if the wait time is brief or shorter than the time they were told they would be waiting. For example, "We were told it would be a 30-40 minute wait, but we were seated within 15 minutes!" Countering this quote, a negative quote stated, "It was a 15 minute wait when we arrived, 45 minutes later we still had not been seated. As my husband's frustrations mounted, we decided to leave and just go home. The night was a bust." Like the comments above, many reviews suggested that when customer expectations are not met, such as wait time, that the customers are less likely to enjoy the overall experience with the restaurant.

In addition to wait time, another element of accommodation that was prevalent in the reviews was large party accommodation. The evaluations highlighted that patrons appreciate restaurants that are accommodating to larger groups of people, including six or more members in the party. The reviews suggested that the three restaurants are able and willing to seat large groups of people. The restaurants appeared to have the available space to seat large groups of people and are prepared and willing to accommodate the parties seating needs. One review stated, "We

showed up with 10 people and they were able to seat us right away without any hassle.” Like the quote mentioned, customers communicated that restaurants with large party seating options helped to create the culture of the restaurant and shaped the customer’s experience with the restaurant. A review stated, “We arrived with a very large party. Although the restaurant didn’t take reservations, we only had to wait less than 15 minutes to be sat. The restaurant is able to easily seat large parties because they have the space already available. It was refreshing.” In this review, the customer alluded to the fact that the specific restaurant was accommodating to large groups of people because they have the available space to seat the customers. By having larger tables already set up or easily moveable furniture, the restaurants are able to accommodate customers, even without the option to make a reservation prior to arriving.

Reservations were an interesting aspect of the accommodation theme. Two of the three restaurants do not accept reservations, while the third restaurant not only accepts reservations, but recommends them to their customers. Discussion of reservations in the evaluations involved whether or not the restaurant accepted reservations and reservation recommendations. It was clear from the feedback that customers appreciate the option to make a reservation at a restaurant. Many of the reviews directly mentioned whether the restaurant accepted reservations and how that impacted the customer’s experience. Customers discussed wait time as an issue that arose when reservations were not accepted. For example, one quote stated, “The restaurant does not take reservations for parties of 6 or less, this was surprising to us and it made us nervous, however once we arrived, we were seated right away which alleviated any worry in our minds.”

Many expectations come along with accepting reservations, including seating the customers at the time of the reservation and reservation recommendations. The one restaurant in the study that did accept reservations was held to a higher seating expectation standard than the other two restaurants in the study. The reviews for the reservation-friendly restaurant stressed the

expectations that the customers held in relation to reservations. For example, customers with reservations expect that they will have little to no wait time and that they will receive a table in a nice seating location. When the expectations are met, customers were more positive about the experience, however when expectations were broken, the customers noted their dissatisfaction with the experience in the reviews. One review stated, "Our reservation was at 7, we arrived 10 minutes early and were seated right away. It started our dinner off the right way." Conversely, another review stated, "We made a reservation several weeks in advance and arrived on time the day of the reservation. After waiting 20 minutes past our reservation time, we started to get angry. Finally, after 30 minutes of waiting we were seated at a table in the back of the restaurant with no view. I will not be going back." As the two reviews noted, customers expected prompt seating if a reservation had been made.

The reviews for the reservation-friendly restaurant often included a recommendation to other potential customers to call ahead prior to dining at the establishment. For example, one review stated, "I would definitely recommend making a reservation to eat at this restaurant. They are constantly busy and without a reservation you will wait a while and may have to dine at the bar." Like the quote above, over half (16 of 30) of the reviews for the restaurant allowing reservations included an element of reservation recommendation. Customers communicated the importance of a reservation in order to help make the dining experience positive.

A final element of accommodation that was prevalent in the online reviews was seating options. The main focus of seating option discussion in the reviews was related to the availability to dine inside or outside, which could be impacted by the coastal nature of the restaurants. All three restaurants involved in the study offer the option to dine inside or outside of the restaurant. With the availability to dine inside and outside, the restaurants provided the customers with the opportunity to customize their own dining experience. As the reviews communicated, the seating

options that a restaurant offers have an impact on the culture of a restaurant. For example, one review stated, “We love the option to eat outside when the weather is beautiful and the option to eat inside when the bugs are bad or the weather isn’t great. We love that you can decide how you are feeling that night and that the option is there to eat in different places.” Like the comment above, many of the reviews mentioned that customers value the choice to eat outside versus inside a restaurant. One remark noted, “I am so thankful to be able to sit outside and feel the ocean breeze when we are eating. I have always enjoyed eating outside when I go to a restaurant. It just makes the atmosphere that much more relaxed and the experience better.” One of the key reasons that customers stated that they valued the option to dine outside was the scenery and environment surrounding the restaurants, a theme that will be discussed in the next section.

Theme Two: Setting

“Great location only bettered by the food”

Online reviews suggested that the scenery surrounding a restaurant was a factor in the evaluation of the restaurant. The reviews highlighted that a restaurant with a nice environmental view helped to create a positive customer experience. For example, one review noted, “The food is wonderful. More than that, the views are unbeatable. You feel like you are eating dinner on the beach, literally. I often find myself lost in the views surrounding the restaurant. We love dining here because the views of the ocean and the sunsets always put us at peace and allow us to escape from life’s worries.” Like the review mentioned, customers communicated that they valued dining at restaurants that featured scenic views, including a view of a body of water. The element of water was the most discussed setting related to outdoor scenery. Over 1/3 (32 out of 90) of the reviews analyzed for the study mentioned the outside setting of the restaurant when communicating about their experience and the overall impression of the restaurant. Water was an environmental setting for all three restaurants; however, the water element was different for each establishment. One

restaurant is located directly on the oceanfront, the second restaurant features a waterway view, and the third restaurant is located on a marina. Quotes from the reviews that highlighted the setting of the restaurant included, “wonderful dining on the water”; “The only thing they overlook is the ocean”; and, “The restaurant is right on the water and every seat has a view of the water.”

Furthering the outside setting of a restaurant, the inside environment of a restaurant was also discussed as having an impact on a customer’s evaluation of a restaurant. Customers communicated that they value restaurants that have a positive atmosphere. The words “atmosphere,” “ambience,” “décor,” and “quaint” were used to describe the inside environment of the restaurants. The word “atmosphere” was found to be one of the top thirty words featured in the reviews for all three restaurants on both Tripadvisor and Yelp (See Appendix C for a list of word frequencies). Comments related to the inside environment of a restaurant included, “The atmosphere is so unique and special!”; “The atmosphere and décor is very nice”; and, “One of the very few places that really blew me away with its charm and décor.” Like the quotes in this theme have highlighted, customers communicated that their experience with a restaurant was affected by the outside and inside environments of the restaurant. Furthering the physical features of a restaurant, customers communicated in the online reviews that one aspect of a restaurant atmosphere that impacts their impression of the restaurant is the nature of the interpersonal environment that is created by the staff and customers of the restaurant.

Theme Three: Welcoming Environment

“Go here if you want to be treated like family. They really have customer service down pat, even like a blast from the past like in 1923 when people still cared about these kinds of things”

Customers stated in the online reviews that they value being comfortable while dining at a restaurant. Being comfortable included feeling welcomed by the staff and other patrons while dining at an establishment. Past the physical setting of a restaurant, the way in which the people in that establishment interact plays a part in the culture of a restaurant. Customers communicated that they value a restaurant culture that makes them feel special. Feeling special statements included positive interpersonal interactions with the staff, including servers, managers, and owners. For example, many of the observations, such as the one depicted in the quote at the beginning of theme three, stated that the customer “felt like family” when dining at the restaurants involved in the study. Another review stated, “Frequent customers are treated like family”.

Customers communicated that meaningful interaction with the staff was important to creating a welcoming environment in a restaurant. The remarks highlighted the importance of the server-customer, the owner-customer, and the customer-customer interaction. Meaningful server-customer interaction factors included being friendly and helpful to the customers. For example, one review stated, “Our waitress was friendly and kind, and we were greeted by multiple employees as we arrived and also left.” The evaluations discussed that clientele appreciate communicating and connecting with their server throughout the dining experience and that the server has the ability to affect the overall experience that the customer has with the restaurant, specifically how welcome the customers feel. One quote stated, “The server made our visit a welcomed one,” “he cared for us with expertise, friendliness, and speed,” “It was excellent.”

Furthermore, the owner-customer interaction was discussed in the online reviews as an aspect of creating a welcoming environment for the customers. One remark stated, “Superb Italian

with excellent wait staff, *welcoming owners*, and delicious food.” Two of the three restaurants’ reviews featured comments regarding the presence of the owner during the customer’s experience. For example, one review stated, “The owner always comes out and talks to our table. He is constantly walking around the dining room and talking to the guests. We feel so special when he comes and asks how we are doing and addresses us by name. We always feel so important and loved by this place.” By communicating with customers, being present in the restaurant, and making the patrons feel significant, the owner builds a relationship with the clientele that helps create the culture of the restaurant.

“Snooty rude diners...NEVER again.” The final relationship that appeared to have an impact on the culture of a restaurant was surprising, the customer-customer interaction. The customer-customer relationship was an intriguing one as it only appeared in one of the three restaurant’s reviews. The theme of the statements related to the customer-customer interaction focused on customer empowerment, including treating each other with respect. Through the reviews, it was clear that customer empowerment is a factor in creating the culture of a restaurant; however, the balance of customer empowerment in a restaurant must be contained. When giving too much power, customers can impact the experience of other customers in a negative way. There appeared to be a tipping point for this balance and when the tipping point of empowerment leaned too heavily towards the customer, an adverse effect could potentially occur. One of the three restaurants had a common and peculiar customer complaint, one that complained about other customer’s attitudes and interactions at the restaurant. For example, one evaluation described a time in which the patrons were dining at the restaurant and were approached by other customers dining in the restaurant regarding their use of flashlights to read the menu in the dim dining room. The feedback described how the seated customers were scolded by the other customers and that ultimately the table left without dining. The approached customer’s refused to ever return due to how embarrassed they were by the whole experience. The review, and other similar reviews,

addressed the balance necessary to maintain a positive culture in a restaurant while empowering customers. One review commented, "If you want to wait an hour for some over-priced food with some pretentious, arrogant customers then this is the place for you!" Restaurants must maintain control of the customer interactions with each other. A culture with too much customer empowerment can cause other customers to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Clientele should feel as though their opinions are valued within a restaurant; however, the customers should not feel as though they have control over the culture of the restaurant and experiences of others.

Theme Four: Community Identity

"The dining options are limited, very limited, on the Island, but fortunately what is available is surprisingly good", "We enjoyed the meals at this restaurant, would not hesitate to eat there again- and would go there if it were in our town"

The fourth theme that was identified in the online reviews related to a restaurant's identity within the community that it is located in. The community identity of a restaurant and its market position in reference to other local establishments had an impact on the culture of a restaurant, based on the comments in the reviews. The reviews often compared the quality of the restaurants involved in the study to the quality of other restaurants in the surrounding area of the establishment. Of the reviews analyzed, 38 out of 90 (42%) included a remark that compared the restaurant in the study to other restaurants in the same area. For example, "This restaurant is the best place I've been to *in this town*." Customers communicated that they valued a restaurant that is considered to be a good quality restaurant compared to other restaurants that the customer had dined at in the same geographic area. As the statements noted, a restaurant might not be considered to be the same quality if it were located in a different geographic location. For example, a restaurant might be considered good/bad quality based on the quality of the other restaurants in the same area.

Although all three restaurants featured an element of community identity, it was most prevalent in one of the three restaurants. The restaurant is located on an island that features only a few dining options (less than 7). Out of the reviews for the one particular restaurant, half (15 out of 30) reviews analyzed featured a mention of community identity. The reviews included comments such as, “Ok on the island”, “One of the better places on Island”, “With a captive audience, the restaurants just don’t have to try very hard on the island”, and “Best meal on the island.” The other two restaurants also featured remarks related to the identity of the restaurant within the area which they are located. Out of the statements examined, 11 out of 30 (37%) comments featured a mention of community identity for one of the three restaurants and 12 out of 30 (40%) for the other restaurant. Remarks included, “Great for this area”, “Wonderful addition to the community”, and “you can’t get any better than here locally.”

With differing expectations for restaurant quality, people within a community and other establishments surrounding a restaurant determine the value of a restaurant by connecting it to the community standards that have been set. The setting of the community appeared to determine the culture of a restaurant. If a restaurant is found to exceed the customer’s expectations of the restaurant based on their experiences with other establishments in the same area, then the comments tended to suggest that the restaurant had a positive reputation. As the three restaurants were selected based on their popularity on the two review sites, all three restaurants surpassed the customer’s expectations of the culinary options in the community.

Theme Five: Service Quality

“The staff is friendly and courteous”, “You can tell that they enjoy their job”, “I actually enjoyed watching them clean up the tables and get them ready for new diners”

Customers communicated in the online reviews that service quality was crucial to the culture of a restaurant. Of the reviews analyzed, 60 of the 90 (67%) featured a service quality element, showcasing the strong relationship between service quality and a positive culture within a restaurant. Many of the reviews included a “thank you” related to the customer’s experience based on the quality of the service received. Comments such as, “Thanks to the staff for a wonderful experience” were found across all three restaurants’ reviews.

The online reviews suggested that customers expect quality service that includes being knowledgeable and competent as well as friendly and attentive. Customers communicated that they value helpful service that provides guidance, including food and drink recommendations. Furthermore, customers discussed that they value pleasant service, including being approachable and kind to the customers. For example, comments in the reviews included, “The waiter was attentive and the staff was friendly and personable”, “Fast friendly service awaits each guest”, and “Great service with a very friendly wait staff.” The online reviews suggested that customers expect the server to be knowledgeable about the restaurant, menu, food and drink, surrounding area, and other information pertinent to the customer’s dining experience. Lastly, the reviews communicated that customers appreciate attentive service, including timely communication, refilling drinks, being present and available, and maintaining a clean and orderly table. The words “attentive” and “friendly” were frequently found within the review comments related to the service quality. The term “friendly” was found to be one of the top ten words frequently used in the reviews analyzed. One review stated, “The “restaurant” service is always excellent; very attentive yet never intrusive.” Customers vocalized that they value quick and alert service that includes interaction with the

server throughout the dining experience. One comment stated, “Wonderful experience! Great, fast, and friendly service!”, “We are so glad we came here. We will be back.” As the comment highlights and other reviews corroborated, customers are more likely to enjoy their experience if they have a positive relationship with the server.

It was evident in the reviews that slow or rude service had the counter effect on the culture of a restaurant. Customers communicated in the reviews that slow service was a key area in which the dining experience could become less positive. Customers’ expect to be served in a timely fashion; when those expectations are broken, the customer’s overall experience with the restaurant can be tarnished. For example, one review discussed how the service at one of the restaurants has become progressively slower over the years of them dining at the establishment and that they were reconsidering whether they would return again. They cited how disappointed they were because they had had such wonderful service in the past, but that it wasn’t the same recently. The comment stated, “The service was frazzled and inconsistent”, “Just not that good; we will think strongly before returning to the restaurant again.” As the remark noted, broken service expectations can lead to wavering customer loyalty and ultimately harm the culture of the restaurant.

Overall, the service quality of a restaurant appeared to have a major impact on the culture of the restaurant based on the extensive inclusion of service-related comments in the online customer reviews. Even more strongly acknowledged in the reviews related to having an impact on the culture of a restaurant was the quality and quantity of the food featured at the restaurant.

Theme Six: Food Quality and Quantity

“The food here is fresh, inventive, wholesome, and SO tasty”

One thing was incredibly clear from the online customer reviews; the food served at a restaurant has an impact on the reputation of the restaurant. Reviewers had clear expectations of the quality and quantity of the food that a restaurant featured. The most prevalent theme featured in the reviews, food quality and quantity was mentioned in 70 of the 90 (78%) reviews examined, with less than 1/3 of the remarks lacking a mention of food related comments. Customer evaluations were critical and specific when discussing the quality and quantity of food items at a restaurant. In the reviews, patrons frequently elaborated on specific food items that they had ordered or others dining with them had ordered. Out of the reviews studied, 43 of the 90 (nearly half) featured a discussion of specific food items. For example, one review stated, “I ordered the black and blue steak and my mom ordered the fish tacos; we both loved our meals! The steak was cooked perfectly and my mom said her fish tacos were fresh and some of the best she had ever had.”

Customer remarks were concerned with freshness of food items, portions of items, quality of taste, authenticity of food, originality and creativity of the food, and cooking time. The evaluations highlighted that customers expect that the food served at a restaurant will match the culture of that restaurant. For example, “The atmosphere at the restaurant was casual yet elegant, the food matched the elegance of the restaurant with its delicious taste and sophisticated look on the plate.”

Two of the main aspects of food quality and quantity that were discussed included the freshness and taste of the food items as well as the portions received of the food items. Food taste was of the utmost importance to the rating of a restaurant. Customers communicated that taste was crucial to their overall experience with a restaurant. If the customer enjoyed the taste of the food,

they vocalized it in the reviews. For example, “The food tasted like Heaven! My mouth was in a magically wonderland of happiness and deliciousness.” Furthermore, patrons were concerned with the freshness of the food items, including the fish and vegetables featured on the menu and if any items were considered local. Reviews included comments such as, “All of the food is very fresh and light”, “Fresh, funky food”, and “Food is exceptionally fresh and the portions are generous.”

Freshness and taste of the food appeared to be crucial to the evaluation of a restaurant as customers communicated that their experience was impacted by the quality of the food.

Additionally, the portion size of the food was emphasized in the reviews as being important to the clientele of a restaurant. The quantity of food served in a meal was important to customers, with larger portions praised in the reviews. Quotes such as, “The portions were huge” and “5 star food and large portions” were included in the feedback. Diners expect to receive a certain portion of food and when those expectations are met or exceeded, the customers wrote positive comments about the portion size, however when the portions were smaller than anticipated, the customer review included more negative feedback regarding the lack of food for the price.

Remarks about food quality included mentions of authenticity, originality, and creativity of the recipes and presentation of the food. The reviews highlighted customers’ appreciation for restaurants that serve food that is authentic to the type of food the restaurant serves. For example, one of the three restaurants featured Italian food; many of the statements mentioned in the reviews included a discussion of the genuineness of the Italian dishes. One review stated, “The food was incredibly authentic, like it was made in Italy. This restaurant could rival any Italian restaurant in Italy or New York...and that’s saying something.” Like the quote noted, when a restaurant specializes in a traditional type of food, diners expect that the food quality will match or exceed restaurants from the region where the type of food originated from. Authenticity of the food was important to the evaluation of a restaurant that featured a specific type of food; however the other two restaurants featured more feedback that related to the originality and creativity of the food

served. For example, one review stated, "This restaurant has a wonderful menu full of creative dishes. The dishes are traditional, but made with an original twist." Although it was evident in the statements that customers valued authenticity in all three of the restaurants involved in the study, adding a creative touch to the dishes appeared to have a positive effect on the customer's experience as well. Providing patrons with traditional yet creative food recipes and food presentations were communicated as having an effect on the overall rating of a restaurant.

The time that the food took to be served was noted in the reviews. Customers expect that they will receive their food in a timely manner and that it will be served hot when it arrives. Clientele discussed that they value fast delivery of the food and that their experience is impacted negatively if the process of receiving food is slower than expected or if the food was cold when it reached the table. One quote stated, "Our food took FOREVER to come out. By the time we got our food we were all irritated, starving, and ready to leave. We arrived happy and excited about dining at this restaurant and left thinking that we will never go back unless we hear of an improvement in the speed of the dining process. What a bummer." Other comments discussed the positive experience that customers had at the restaurants in this study due to the quick nature of receiving the food, "We ordered our food and before we could blink our meals were in front of us and steaming hot. We were so impressed by the fast process. We will be going back."

The quality and quantity of food at a restaurant appeared to have an impact on the reputation of a restaurant with many remarks also mentioning the pricing of food as a key component to the culture of a restaurant.

Theme Seven: Value for Price

“The food is delicious”, “Yes, it’s a little pricey, but well worth the \$\$\$”

The online reviews highlighted elements of pricing, including a strong dichotomy related to the worthiness of the pricing. Simply put, price wasn’t an issue if the food was worth it to the customer, however if the food wasn’t worth it, the price wasn’t worth it. For example, “For the price, this is a great value with a good atmosphere” and conversely, “We spent way too much money on subpar food!” Out of the remarks evaluated, 23 of the 90 (26%) included a statement about the value of the price of food. Patrons communicated that when it came to the food, the expectation was that the higher the price, the higher the quality. Surprisingly, cost was not a deterrent, if the quality of the food matched the cost. One review stated, “Good prices, but not cheap. Can’t complain when the food is so good.” However, if the price of food didn’t match the value of the food, customers were vocal about how it impacted their experience negatively. Quotes included, “Not worth the money”, “Overpriced for the quality of food”, and “It’s a lot to pay for less than delicious food.”

All three restaurants featured “\$\$-\$\$\$” in the overview of the restaurants on the review sites, meaning that the prices for the restaurants ranged in the middle of the low to high price scale. Average entree prices for all three restaurants ranged from \$15-\$30. With prices in the medium range, clientele discussed that they projected that the food would be of the same quality. If the customer felt as though their money had been well spent on the dining experience, then price didn’t appear to negatively affect the overall experience. As this section has discussed, the value for price at a restaurant impacts the reputation of a restaurant, a reputation that is often communicated to others and creates loyal customers.

Theme Eight: Referred, Recommended, Returned

“Everyone was very happy with the experience and we will continue to return again and again”

The online reviews revealed that customers were frequently referred to a restaurant by others, recommended a restaurant to others after dining at the establishment, and returned to the restaurant after having an initial positive experience.

One key aspect of theme eight is related to restaurant referrals. All three restaurants featured reviews that discussed being referred to a restaurant by someone else. Of the remarks evaluated, 20 of the 90 (22%) included a referral comment. For example, “We were referred to dine at the restaurant by family friends. They told us how much they love the restaurant and how delicious the food is.” Customers communicated through the online reviews that they would dine at a restaurant that was referred to them by others. Referrals helped customers decide to dine at a particular restaurant based on other customer’s positive experiences. By being referred to a restaurant, customers envision a particular culture of that restaurant based on the referral, as the reviews noted. Customers communicated in the reviews that if they had been referred to a restaurant, they arrived with expectations regarding that restaurant based on the referral that they received. One quote stated, “My sister mentioned this restaurant and that it was amazing. My boyfriend and I decided to try it out and we were NOT disappointed!” As the remark mentioned, if the patron’s expectations were met by the restaurant, they discussed that in the reviews. Similarly, if a customer’s expectations were not met by the restaurant or the experience was not the same as that of the referral, the clientele’s experience appeared to be impacted negatively.

The online reviews of all three restaurants often read like a digital word-of-mouth technique. Out of the feedback evaluated, 22 of the 90 (24%) included a recommendation by the reviewer to dine at the restaurant that the review was being written for. The term “digital word-of-mouth” refers to the traditional public relations technique involving the spread of a message to

more and more potential consumers communicated by the customers themselves, word-of-mouth. The digital element occurs with the more non-traditional technique of using online review sites to “digitally” spread a message. Digital word-of-mouth comments acted as an online reference for the culture of a particular restaurant. Comments included, “Relaxed elegance sets the stage for a meal you will tell your friends about and will savor over and over in your memory” and “Highly, highly recommend this place.” Customers communicate to other potential customers their opinions on the culture of a restaurant through the online format, specifically in instances like recommendations when the customer is vouching for the culture of the restaurant.

“A never miss restaurant when in town”. The most commonly noticed portion of theme eight were comments related to returning to the same restaurant after the initial visit; aka return customers. Almost half, 42 of the 90 statements explored, were written by return customers or customers that planned to return in the future. Return customers acted as loyal backers of a restaurant, and loyalty acted as restaurant credibility in the reviews. Comments included, “*A go back to and try everything on the menu*”, “*Each time the food, service, atmosphere were all wonderful*” and “*Always a wonderful experience*” highlighted the fact that the reviewer enjoyed their experience enough the first time to return for another experience...and possibly many more. For example, terms such as “always” appeared frequently in the comments related to returning customers. Additionally, reviewers communicated their plans to return to a restaurant in the future if they enjoyed their initial experience. Many reviews included terms related to the next time the customer visited the location of the restaurant. Quotes included, “Looking forward to going back next year”, “Will be top of our list on our next trip to the island!”, “Everything was wonderful and we would definitely go back when in the area”, and “Always visit here if you come to the area.” Customers that communicated their plans to return to a restaurant were a credible support of that restaurant and its culture.

Conclusion

This results chapter highlighted how a restaurant's positive culture is communicated digitally by exploring the most common themes addressed in customer online reviews found on Yelp and Tripadvisor. The reviews, rated based on service, food, atmosphere, and value of a restaurant, was found to include eight common themes that were discussed; accommodation, setting, welcoming environment, community identity, service quality, food quality and quantity, value of price, referred, recommended, returned.

In the next chapter, the researcher will discuss how the themes from the two results chapters, interviews and content analysis, connect to the research questions drafted for this study. Using the literature examined for this study, the researcher will discuss how the findings relate back to the explored scholarly works, the limitations experienced in the study, and recommend future research directions.

Chapter Six:

Discussion

Summary of results

In this chapter, I will summarize the two results chapters, discuss the key findings from the study, talk about the limitations, and look at future research. The interview and content analysis results chapters helped the researcher to explore and address the research questions for this study.

The interview results highlighted employee communication experiences that characterize the culture of a top-rated restaurant as positive. The seven themes, teamwork, individual fit, empathy and understanding, emotion management, empowerment, focus on the customer, and the power of online reviews, showed that first and foremost, communication among employees at a restaurant is critical to the overall culture of the restaurant. The results concluded that top-rated restaurants with positive cultures maintain a positive line of communication among the staff of the restaurant and manage negative communication experiences. Overall, the interview results showed that restaurants described as having a positive culture foster constructive communication among employees in an effort to maintain the culture of the restaurant. As the results showed, fostering positive communication among employees was completed using tactics that included managing negative communication experiences, understanding that negative communication is inevitable at times, and empowering employees.

The results from the content analysis portion of the study revealed that customers value their relationship with the employees of a restaurant as well as the quality of several key aspects of a restaurant, the service, food, accommodations, pricing, and location. The results of the online customer reviews highlighted how the culture of a restaurant is communicated non-traditionally by

customers and the most important aspects of a restaurant, in the eyes of the customers, in relation to the culture and overall reputation of a restaurant.

Research Question Discussion

In this section of the discussion, I will highlight several key findings from the results and connect those findings back to the literature reviewed. The chapter will include a conversation about internal and external publics, empowerment, digital word-of-mouth, the importance of relationships, the relationship between the appreciative inquiry model and the relationship management theory, and a final note about culture and reputation.

Organizational culture communicates the overall environment of an organization to key publics (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). When addressing the research questions, this study addressed positive organizational culture within the restaurant industry by exploring both internal and external key publics' opinions and addressing how both play into the creation of a culture. With a heavy focus on internal publics, positive organizational studies have been centered on how the internal environment and employees impact the overall culture of an establishment (French & Holden, 2012; Douglas & Hickey, 2015). The results chapters highlighted the importance of internal and external relationships to the culture of a restaurant. When creating a positive culture within a restaurant, the interview results noted that the culture of a restaurant was impacted by a web of relationships, including employee-employee, employee-upper management, employee-owner, employee-customer, employee-restaurant, customer-customer, customer-upper management, customer-owner, upper management-owner, employee-head chef, upper management-restaurant, owner-restaurant, and front-of-the-house-back-of-the-house. The web is intertwined of complex relationships that, if properly maintained, can play a significant role in the cultivation of a positive restaurant culture and the overall reputation of a restaurant.

The opinions and thoughts of the internal publics of an organization are important to the evaluation of a culture. However, also knowing what external publics believe is important to the culture of a restaurant is critical to understanding what factors make up a positive culture, especially for organizations with a customer-centered focus. With customers at the helm of a restaurant's success or failure, this study concluded that in order to determine what creates a culture, studies should explore not only internal publics, but external publics as well.

When addressing what communication experiences characterize a culture as positive (RQ1), the researcher found that customers and employees have similar ideas as to the factors that signify a positive culture in a top-rated restaurant. Following positive organizational literature, ideal cultures emphasize innovation, autonomy, positive communication, flexibility, skill development, minimized conflict, shared authority, teamwork, and shared decision making, many of which were found to be prevalent in this study's results (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). Organizations that invoke more affirming patterns of communication, behavior, and interaction between key publics involved in the organization will have a more positive organizational culture (French & Holden, 2012). Like the positive organizational literature stated, a positive culture is generated through the successful management and dedication to invoking positive interactions between key publics, including employees and customers, and a dedication to breeding positive communication experiences and behaviors among the key publics of a restaurant. By better understanding the strengths of a restaurant and the wants and needs of the publics involved in a restaurant described as having a positive culture, this study furthered the positive organization literature. Employees were concerned with interpersonal elements, such as keeping the negative communication between the employees under control and not expressing negative emotions to the customers. Employees emphasized positive communication as being key to maintaining an ideal culture, including personal recognition and feedback. Like the literature noted, the interpersonal relationships

between the employees, including teamwork and collaboration were found to be important to employees.

With less of an interpersonal focus, customers were concerned with positive communication experiences as well as the overall reputation of a restaurant. Customers were more worried with the quality of the food and service and seating accommodations at a restaurant. Although employees and customers were found to have differing opinions of the most important elements of an ideal organizational culture, one theme was found across both key publics, the theme of empowerment.

Empowerment involves the level of autonomy and discretion that are given to key publics involved in an organization (Sparks, B., Bradley, G., & Callan, V. (1997). Sharma and Sahoo (2014) stated, "Conventional wisdom proposed in academic and professional journals is that empowering employees anywhere, globally, leads to improvements in employee satisfaction at work and enhances relationships with customers, suppliers, other employees, supervisors and management" (p. 177). A factor that was similar between employees and customers was the need for empowerment of both employees and customers in order to have a positive culture in a restaurant. Like Douglas and Hickey (2015) discussed, empowerment is one of the three key characteristics in an organizational culture (p.169). Empowerment has been found to increase employee satisfaction and enhance relationships among employees, customers, supervisors, and management (Sharma & Sahoo, 2014; Fawcett et al., 2004; Huyton & Sutton, 1996). Employee empowerment has been studied and found to be significant to the overall organizational culture of an organization; what has been less studied is the impact of customer empowerment on the culture of an organization, specifically a restaurant. Like the results discussed, customers value being a part of the dining process and feeling like their opinions matter, just like employees. However, a restaurant must also make sure that the customers don't abuse their empowerment.

There appeared to be a tipping point for the customer empowerment balance and when the tipping point of empowerment leaned too heavily towards the customer, an adverse effect could potentially occur. One of the three restaurants had a common and peculiar customer complaint, one that complained about other customer's attitudes and interactions at the restaurant. For example, one online review described a time in which the customers were dining at the restaurant and were approached by other customers dining in the restaurant regarding their use of flashlights to read the menu in the dim dining room. The review described how the customers were scolded by the approached customers and that ultimately the table left without dining and refused to ever return due to how embarrassed they were by the whole experience. The review, and other similar reviews, addressed the balance necessary to maintain a positive culture in a restaurant while empowering customers. Restaurants must maintain control of the customer empowerment. A culture with too much customer empowerment can cause other customers to feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Customers should feel as though their opinions are valued within a restaurant; however the customers should not feel as though they have control over the culture of the restaurant. After a dining experience, customers often communicate their experience to others via traditional word-of-mouth and non-traditionally through online customer review sites.

Restaurants have an unprecedented way to influence the conversation with customers writing online reviews. When addressing RQ2 related to customer communication and how patrons communicate their values in a restaurant, the researcher discovered that the online customer evaluations acted as a non-traditional digital form of word-of-mouth marketing. Through the online remarks, customers discussed their thoughts on a restaurant, which in turn is viewed by other potential customers who frequently decide where to dine based on the comments in the reviews. Patrons communicate their experience with a restaurant through the online format, which is often read by employees of that restaurant. Restaurants can use those communicated experiences to

explore the best practice strategies to maintain a culture within a restaurant and explore what customers value the most in a restaurant.

The non-traditional form of word-of-mouth, online review sites allow for customers to voice their opinions about a restaurant in a digital format. One difference in traditional word-of-mouth and online customer review sites is the availability for the restaurant to be a part of the conversation with the reviewer and ultimately improve or maintain the organization-public relationship. With the interactive nature of user-generated online reviews, restaurants have the unique opportunity to build relationships with key publics. Just like traditional word-of-mouth, restaurants must be a part of the conversation in order to better manage relationships with key publics. An interesting dichotomy occurred between the interviews and content analysis related to the two-way communication nature of the review sites. During the interviews, employees from all three of the restaurants noted that management interacted with customers through the online customer review sites, however upon further investigation during the content analysis portion of the study; the researcher discovered that only one of the three restaurants actively utilized the two-way communication nature of the reviews. With online reviews being a clear avenue for customers to communicate their experience with a restaurant, it was a bit surprising that only one of the three restaurants actively utilized the two-way nature of the online reviews and the availability to communicate with customers digitally.

Restaurants could more effectively manage their relationships with key publics by addressing the customer's concerns in a response to the review in order to strengthen the restaurants in-person relationship with the customers. By strengthening the online relationship with the customer, the restaurant in turn potentially improves the face-to-face relationship with the customer. For example, the one restaurant that actively conversed with reviewers replied to several negative experiences with an opportunity for the restaurant to rectify the initial negative

experience. One response to a review stated, “We are sorry to hear that you did not fully enjoy your experience dining with us. We value our customers and would love the opportunity to improve your experience with us. Please come back and see us and let us know that we communicated online about your initial time with us.” By communicating with the customer about their experience, the restaurant potentially improves the connection between the customer and the restaurant. Without the online avenue, restaurants would rarely have the chance to be involved in a conversation about a customer’s dining experience.

Just like traditional word-of-mouth, bad news can spread quickly in the digital sphere. One bad customer experience can be read by countless other potential customers and threaten the culture of a restaurant. In order to maintain a positive culture, a restaurant has to manage negative customer experiences. By utilizing the two-way nature of the online customer review sites, restaurants have the opportunity to rectify a customer’s negative experience with the restaurant. The one restaurant that responded to customer comments often did so in order to manage a negative customer experience. The restaurant acknowledged customers that communicated that they had a negative experience by apologizing to the customer for the experience and welcoming them to return to the establishment for a second chance to improve the customer’s impression of the restaurant. In order to maintain a positive culture, restaurants should follow the practice of acknowledging negative customer experiences in order to effectively manage the customer-restaurant relationship.

Duck (1985) said it perfectly when he stated, “Relationships mean everything.” Simple, yet, powerful, the statement highlights the importance of relationships to every aspect of life, including the link to a positive restaurant culture. Effectively managing a large web of relationships between the establishment and its key publics was discovered to be critical to the overall evaluation and culture of a restaurant. The top-rated restaurants included in this study all shared the key similarity

of maintaining positive relationships among a multitude of key publics, including employee-employee, employee-upper management, employee-owner, employee-customer, employee-restaurant, customer-restaurant, customer-customer, customer-upper management, customer-owner, upper management-owner, employee-head chef, upper management-restaurant, owner-restaurant, and front-of-the-house-back-of-the-house.

Expressed in both the interviews and the online reviews, employees and customers of the three restaurants discussed the value of affirmative relationships in maintaining a positive culture in a restaurant. Through the use of the appreciative inquiry method of interviewing and exploring the content analysis, the researcher was able to focus more on the strengths and successes of the restaurants versus the weaknesses. By eliciting more affirming conversation during the interviews, using the appreciative inquiry technique, I was able to explore the concepts featured in the relationship management theory as they were discussed during the interviews and uncover the best practice ways in which the restaurants optimally function. By focusing on the positive aspects of the restaurants during the analysis portion of the study, I was able to see whether the three restaurants involved in the study featured the concepts discussed in the relationship management theory that highlight successfully managed organization-public relationships. For example, by asking questions that probed the interviewee about the strengths of the restaurant, I was able to identify the core relationship management strategies that the three restaurants used to successfully maintain relationships with key publics. It became apparent through the discussion with the interviewees about affirming patterns and habits within the restaurants, that the establishments utilized several of the key relationship management strategies to help build and maintain relationships with employees and customers, including access, positivity, and openness in order to effectively manage key internal and external relationships. Access was apparent in all three of the restaurants as it was clear from the interviews and content analysis that customers and employees had the opportunity to freely communicate with the establishments, both traditionally and non-

traditionally. The interviews brought to light the nature of available access to communicate with the restaurant; specifically the interviewees discussed how comfortable they felt communicating with the upper-level employees about issues that arise. For example, servers being interviewed discussed the need for access to communicate with the kitchen staff without feeling hesitant to communicate with them. If the access to communicate with the kitchen staff was open, then the culture was positively impacted. Furthermore, the content analysis portion of the study directly highlighted the access to the three restaurants digitally. Customers are given the opportunity to be involved in two-way communication with the restaurant through the online review sites. Although only one of the restaurants frequently communicated with reviewers through the online review platforms, all three restaurants either conversed with the reviewers or used the information featured in the reviews to help improve the establishment's functioning.

The strategy of positivity was heavily prevalent in the interviews, especially due to the appreciative inquiry line of questioning that focused on bringing out the best practices of the restaurants. It was evident that in order to have a positive culture, an organization must foster and maintain enjoyable relationships among key publics. When questioned about positive communication experiences, the interviewees discussed the importance of constructive organization-public relationships, specifically impacting the loyalty and commitment to the restaurant. The content analysis helped validate the presence of positivity in the three restaurants as customers communicated in the reviews about the welcoming and friendly nature of the employees and the restaurant environment.

The restaurant industry is no stranger to evaluating the strength of relationships among the key publics involved with an organization. With the strategies present, I continued to illicit conversation during the interviews that discussed the optimal functioning of the restaurants. I was interested in exploring the presence of the four outcomes that are present in successfully managed

organization-public relationships. Like Hon and Grunig (1999) highlighted, evaluating the strength of organization-public relationships can be completed using four outcomes. The four outcomes, control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment, are indicators that an organization-public relationship has been successfully managed (Huang, 1997). All four outcomes of successfully managed relationships were found to be present among the three restaurants, a presence that was noted due to the positive line of questioning used in the interviewees. When answering the research questions, specifically RQ3, I noted the presence of all four indicators among employees and customers. Like the relationship management literature discussed and the positive organization literature echoed, maintaining a level of control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment with key publics involved in an organization helps to foster a certain culture; the more the four outcomes are present, the more positive the culture appeared to be. For example, control mutuality was present in all three of the restaurants and was discussed as the theme of empowerment in the results. Publics that feel as though their opinions are valued are more likely to maintain a positive relationship with the restaurant. Trust was a key outcome featured in the restaurants involved in the study. When exploring the strengths of the restaurants in the online reviews, I noted the presence of trust between the customers and the restaurants they were reviewing. Several of my questions during the interviews were directly related to the third outcome, satisfaction. It was clear that if the employees and customers were satisfied with the restaurant and the relationship they maintained with the organization, that the culture was positively impacted. Finally, several of my interview questions featured an aspect of commitment. I was interested in learned what drove employees to feel a sense of commitment to an establishment and in order to garner this information, I used the appreciative inquiry method to discuss the level and importance of commitment to the overall culture of a restaurant. Fascinatingly, culture appeared to play into something much larger, the reputation of a restaurant.

The restaurant industry, like many other customer-centered industries, is dependent on the reputation of that establishment, in part due to the organizational culture. As this study discovered, the culture of an organization is just one aspect of a larger system working to create the overall reputation of a restaurant. The interpersonal elements of this study's findings, including the welcoming environment that a restaurant creates by fostering effective relationships among key publics, including customers and employees, was found to contribute to the culture of a restaurant. As the positive organizational literature noted, the culture of an establishment involves the social and behavioral environment that is created by the parties involved with that organization, including the values, beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes of that organization (Douglas & Hickey, 2015). Interestingly, when exploring the research questions related to organizational culture, I discovered that the organizational culture that was communicated by employees and customers is one ingredient in a recipe for a restaurant's reputation. Employees and customers discussed the importance of interpersonal elements to the culture of a restaurant; however they also conversed about additional components of a restaurant that are important to the evaluation of that establishment. The setting and community identity of a restaurant as well as the price and value of the food collaborated with the fostered culture to create the overall reputation of an establishment. Combined to create the overall rating of a restaurant, the components mentioned above generate the referred, recommended, and returned customer base, ultimately helping to create a successful, top-rated restaurant.

Significance of Research

My research looked to address the gap in literature related to the specific setting featured in my study, the restaurant industry. Research on positive culture is emerging as a popular topic in fields including psychology, marketing, business, and the medical field, and this study contributes to this research by investigating the restaurant industry, an industry in which positive organizational literature is quite sparse. When completing an academic search for previous literature, I failed to locate *any* positive organizational related studies completed using the restaurant industry as the setting. Moreover, this study advanced the relationship management theory literature as most, if not all, literature related to the theory doesn't address the role of relationships in creating an organizational culture *within a restaurant setting*.

Although research on the restaurant industry is minimal in relation to the communication studies field, other fields have heavily studied the setting. Pioneered by projects related to the workplace culture of a restaurant, William Foote Whyte (1946, 1948, 1949) explored the unique setting of a restaurant and the social relationships that occur within the setting. Fields, including business, marketing, and hospitality have all completed extensive studies using the restaurant as their setting. Research related to the restaurant industry has a heavy focus on the managerial side of the industry. Current studies research the perspective of the managers of the restaurant (Homburg & Stock, 2005; Bartlett, 2000; Kent, 2009; Uysal, Sirgy, & Lee, 2013). My exploration highlighted other important key publics to the industry, including employees other than managers, and customers. The specific focus on the restaurant industry further solidified my niche area of research.

Considered to be the "digital word of mouth", my project addressed a major gap in the communication literature related to the investigation of digital user platforms, such as online reviews. I was only successful in locating three studies that had been completed with a focus on

analyzing online customer reviews (Vasquez, 2012; Lim & Heide, 2014). Neither study utilized a content analysis approach to the research design, which my study featured. One of the three studies focused solely on *negative* customer reviews on Tripadvisor, which is contrary to my study that analyzed reviews for affirming themes (Vaquez, 2012). Lim and Heide (2014) addressed the credibility of online reviews using Yelp as the user platform, while my study addressed the meanings in the reviews and what the reviews communicate about a particular organization.

Furthermore, my research addressed the gap in organizational culture research related to the use of a mixed-method approach to studying the topic. Often considered the best practice approach to studying organizational culture, studies featuring a mixed-method approach to assess the culture of an organization are incredibly rare (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). Time and energy are two key factors in the lack of organizational culture studies that use a mixed-method approach. Extensive time is needed to design a framework for each of the separate methods used in a mixed-method study, conduct and complete the research for each method, and organize all the data collected after the analysis has been completed (Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv, & Sanders, 1990; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). My study aimed to showcase the use of a much-praised yet rarely completed mixed-method approach to studying organizational culture in hopes of highlighting the triumphs and challenges of completing such a study.

Limitations

One of the key limitations to this study involved the geographic location of the three restaurants. All three restaurants are located in a coastal community with a high tourist population, which could have an impact on the results and particular themes that arose. Determining the transferability of the study's findings from coastal communities to urban settings, such as New York or San Francisco, would help to decide if a difference in location would have an impact on the results, particularly whether different locations have different views of what a positive culture looks like in a restaurant setting. Following the location limitation, I determined that the environment surrounding the three restaurants may have had an impact on the results. All three restaurants featured water in the surrounding environment, including an ocean and a waterway view. The cultures of the restaurants may have been impacted due to the scenery surrounding the restaurants. With scenic views, the findings may have been mildly different compared to establishments located in less environmentally scenic areas.

In addition, the study addressed one specific industry, the restaurant industry. This study only addressed the organizational culture of the restaurant industry; the transferability of the findings to a different industry is undetermined. In the future, I plan to further this study by addressing the transferability of the findings to other industries, specifically customer-service based industries. Due to the customer-service based nature of the restaurant industry, an additional limitation to the study included the lack of non-customer-service based organizations. With the lack of customer-service, different themes could arise related to what makes a positive organizational culture.

Time constraints for completing research had an impact on the limitations of the study, specifically the triangulation of the results. I had planned to originally interview the same number of customers as employees, however it became evident throughout the data collection process that

time would be an issue. Completing and transcribing interviews is a tedious task; after transcribing all of the employee interviews, it was determined that the timetable for the project would be significantly pushed back if customer interviews were to be completed as well.

Furthermore, the gender and job level of the employees' interviewed were skewed towards female and lower tiered employees. For the employee interviews, I reached out to both female and male employees working at the three restaurants; however, the majority of employees who agreed to participate in the interview were female. Two out of the fifteen employee interviewees were male, leaving a large gap between the voice of female employees and male employees. However, this pattern could be similar to the actual employment patterns of restaurant worker genders.

The breakdown of the employee interview population created another limitation for the study; only one upper-level employee agreed to participate in the study, other upper-level employees agreed to participate, but due to scheduling conflicts, the interviews were never completed. With the majority of the employee interviews coming from lower-level employees, the results didn't fully highlight an upper-level employee's view of the factors that play into having a positive organizational culture.

Theoretical Implications

This study's successful collaboration of concepts from the public relations theory, relationship management theory, with concepts from the areas of positive psychology, positive organizational literature, and the appreciative inquiry model, created a unique bridge among several major disciplines, including the field of communication and psychology. Converging concepts from the differing, yet similar, bodies of research proved that concepts from the relationship management theory can be theoretically relevant to fields other than public relations.

The successful use of relationship management theory concepts to explore organizational culture *within a restaurant setting* highlighted the relevance of the theory to studies completed using the restaurant industry as the setting. The relationship management theory provided an effective avenue to explore the most effective habits, attitudes, behaviors, and communication to cultivate in order to foster a positive culture in a restaurant.

Practical Implications

This study offered a best practice model for restaurants to use in order to cultivate a positive culture and overall a positive reputation. Restaurants can use the findings from this study in order to better understand the strengths and successes already present within an establishment as well as learn new techniques to benefit the culture and reputation of that restaurant. The findings from this study practically showcase the optimal way a restaurant should function in order to maintain a top-rated reputation and a positive culture.

Future research

In order to address the limitation of the geographic location of the restaurants, I plan to complete a follow-up study that analyzes the culture of restaurants located in a more urban location. With all three restaurants being located in a coastal community, I would like to compare and contrast the factors that foster a positive organizational culture in restaurants located in a city setting versus a coastal environment. To address the time limitation, I plan to also complete a follow-up study that will focus on upper-level employees. The future study will help to decide if there are differences in what the two tiers of employees believe fosters a positive organizational culture.

My scholarly work plans include replication of this study, but using different industries. Specifically, the tourism industry is of interest for a future study related to fostering a positive organizational culture. Similar to the restaurant industry, the tourism industry is customer-service based and culture is important to the success of a tourism based organization. In a unique twist, I would like to explore the cultures of countries and how that impacts the tourism industries in those countries. In the past, I completed a study that explored the happiest countries on the planet; a future study would address the factors that play into the cultures of the countries related to their ranking on the Happy Planet Index and how that impacts the tourism industry of that country. In addition, I would like to explore culture related to the sports industry, specifically college and professional teams, and the factors that create the organizational culture of a certain sports team. Teams often manifest a particular culture; I am interested in uncovering what those factors are and how they create a certain organizational culture.

In a contrasting study, I would like to explore organizations considered to have a negative culture and what factors breed cultures that are considered to be negative. This study explored positive organizational cultures, which helped to determine how to foster a positive culture; in the

future; a study that explores negative cultures could help organizations better decipher the best practice techniques to implement in order to generate a positive culture and practices to avoid in order to prevent a negative organizational culture.

Chapter Seven:

Conclusion

In the words of Aristotle, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.” Creating a positive organizational culture in the restaurant industry takes hard work, dedication, and consistency. Striving to be a top-rated restaurant is a goal of most, if not all, restaurants. As this study discovered through the communication experiences of employees and customers, being a top-rated restaurant involves fostering an affirmative atmosphere, as well as ensuring that the quality and value of the food, the setting of the restaurant, and upholding the community identity is of the utmost excellence. Like Aristotle stated, excellence is a habit; restaurants must consistently strive for excellence in order to maintain a top-rated reputation, a reputation in part built by the positive organizational culture that this study explored.

Jon Katzenbach, founder of the Katzenbach Center, a center for excellence in organizational culture, stated, “Culture can become a ‘secret weapon’ that makes extraordinary things happen”. The intriguing nature of organizational culture is one in which I hope to continue to explore using varying factors that will inevitably produce working guidelines for best practice strategies to create a thriving organizational community. Using the appreciative inquiry method, I plan to further explore cultures using a positive approach that focuses on strengths and successes in order to determine optimal organizational flourishing.

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Table One**Online Reviews: Frequency in which words were featured Trip Advisor and Yelp reviews**

| Word | Frequency (overall) |
|-------------|---------------------|
| Food | 113 |
| Good | 77 |
| Great | 63 |
| Service | 61 |
| Island | 46 |
| Friends | 45 |
| Improvement | 45 |
| Restaurant | 41 |
| Positive | 38 |
| Best | 27 |
| Excellent | 26 |
| Wonderful | 21 |

n=90

Appendices

Appendix A

Employee Interview Script

Thank you so much for agreeing to allow me, Emily Jones, the researcher of this study, to interview you regarding your experiences and challenges related to your work in the restaurant industry, the relationships you have with your co-workers, and how satisfied you feel with your job. Please remember that you are not required to answer the questions that I ask and that at any time during the interview, you may choose to end the interview. I will be recording the interview with a recording device on my cell phone, I will let you know when I start and stop recording.

Opening Questions

Gender:

Age:

Job title:

How many years have you been employed by the current restaurant you work at:

How many years overall have you worked in the restaurant industry?

List the job titles for all positions within the restaurant that you have previously held (for example, I have previously been a busser and hostess before becoming a server)

How would you describe your commitment to the restaurant industry (part-time, full-time, career, retirement, summer job)

Interview Questions

1. Do you enjoy working at the current restaurant that you work at? How would you describe your relationship with other members of the wait staff? How would you describe your relationship with members of the support staff (hostess, bussers, food runners)? How would you describe your relationship with members of the back-of-the-house staff (chef, line cooks, dishwashers)? How would you describe your relationship with the managers of the restaurant? How would you describe your relationship with the owner of the restaurant? Do you have relationships with any coworkers outside of the restaurant?
2. What are the key reasons that you remain employed at the restaurant? What would be key reasons that you would consider terminating your employment with the restaurant?
3. Are there points in a shift when you feel your relationship with fellow co-workers and customers is more negative than other points in the shift? More positive points in the shift?
4. Who within the restaurant would you consider to have the majority of the “power”? Do you feel like your opinions are considered within the restaurant? How much control do you feel you have over the decisions that the organization makes? Do you feel like you are an important asset to your restaurant, why?
5. Do you think your emotions at work effect how you perform at work? Do the emotions of other members of the staff or customers affect your emotions at work? Do some affect you more than others? (don't name specific names, just job titles)?
6. How do you think you and your fellow co-workers' display your emotions while at work?
7. Do you think others in the restaurant know how you are really feeling when you are at work?
8. How do you think the physical location of the restaurant affects the culture/reputation of the restaurant?

9. How does the restaurant promote itself to new customers? If/how does the restaurant build relationships with their customers (aka create loyal customers that return after their initial visit)?
10. When you communicate to others outside of your work environment about your restaurant, what are some common responses that you receive about the restaurant that you work at? Do you overhear people discussing your restaurant outside of the restaurant, what do you commonly hear people say about the quality of your restaurant?
11. Do you read your restaurants' review? Traditionally or non-traditionally? What life do customer reviews, such as Yelp and Tripadvisor, have in your restaurant?
12. Describe the culture of your restaurant in a few key words (think of adjectives to describe the atmosphere):
13. How would you describe the overall work environment here? What do you think are the primary contributors to that environment or work climate?
14. Would you describe the culture of your restaurant as a positive culture? What is the key to creating the culture in your restaurant? Do you believe a positive culture in a restaurant translates to a successful restaurant?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share about this restaurant or positive restaurant environment in general?

Thank you for all your time and help with this interview. Your time is greatly appreciated. Please remember that if you have any comments, questions, or concerns related to this interview, you can reach me via email at eljones4@ncsu.edu.

Appendix B

Theoretical Concept Sheet

Appreciative Inquiry Model Codes

Atmosphere, environment, food quality, service quality, experience, attitudes, behavior, perceptions, knowledge, strengths, designation of roles, success, commitment, unique talent, contributions, teamwork, positive thinking, motivation, morale, compensation, benefits, communication, supervision, team development, affirming habits, resilience, Voice,

Positive Organizational Literature Codes (including Broaden and Build Theory)

Flexible, Creative, Open to information, joy, contentment, love, optimism, social bonds, happy, broadened outlook, problem-solving skills, satisfaction, community, interaction, attitude, behavior, self-efficacy, hope, loyalty, energy, engagement, collaboration, empowerment, participation, growth, responsibility, cooperation, structure, predictability, social support, productivity, improvement, skill development, autonomy, achievement motivations, safe climates, minimize conflict, sharing of authority, honesty, accessibility, approachability, openness, respect, alternative solutions

Relationship Management Theory Codes

Communal and exchange relationships, one way versus two way, power, internal and external, control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, commitment, confidence, access, positivity, openness, assurances, networking, sharing of tasks, reflective, authentic, mindful, candid

Exploratory Codes

Family, empathy