

Talking Trash and Inside Jokes: Exploring the Role Language-Play has in Creating
Bonds in the Food and Beverage Industry

by

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Abstract

Throughout my career as a server, I have observed firsthand how language-play has shaped workplace relationships and evolved over the decades, and these experiences have deeply influenced my decision for making this the focus of this thesis. Language-play is a fundamental aspect of occupational folklore; it shapes workplace relationships, reinforces group identity, and serves as a tool for managing the stress inherent in this work. Within the food and beverage industry, servers, cooks, and other staff engage in ritual teasing, joking, and pranks to navigate the high-stress environment of restaurant work, developing a darker sense of humor as an essential skill for surviving the stress. This humor manifests in everything from sarcastic remarks on the expo line to the playful bullying between servers and cooks.

This thesis examines how this humor functions as both a coping mechanism and a means of community-building among service workers. Drawing on ethnographic interviews, participant and non-participant observations, and discourse analysis, I explore the cultural significance of workplace humor and how it reflects on the broader social dynamics within this industry. Theoretical frameworks from sociolinguistics, performance theory, and occupational folklore inform this study, particularly in understanding how in-group communication solidifies collective identity. Findings suggest that a shift has occurred, influenced by the implications of COVID-19 pandemic measures – such as smaller workplace cohorts and reduced social interactions due to distancing – have altered the occurrence of traditional initiation pranks and other forms of humor. By examining the social role of humor in this fast-paced industry, this thesis highlights the importance of occupational folklore and the ability to laugh in an often-grueling profession.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The goal of this thesis is to explore how language-play, including ritual teasing and joking, builds a sense of community among food and beverage workers. Through the framework of occupational folklore, while employing an ethnographic research approach, I will discuss how these interpersonal relationships have developed and influenced through linguistic play. Additionally, I will examine how service workers use language-play to alleviate the stresses of customer service labor, protect each other and create lifelong bonds.

Going with the Flow

This research paper is divided into five chapters. In this introduction, I will define key terms used throughout my thesis, clarify the extent of my research, and discuss how my dual positionality as both a researcher and career server has shaped my decision to explore this industry as a site of occupational folklore. I will also provide a (very) brief discussion on the cause and effects of humor within the hospitality industry. As I introduce industry-specific jargon and observed dialogue, I will follow these conventions: jargon will be italicized, and directed quotes from observations and interviews will be styled in Bookman Old Style type face. As these comments were gathered through observation and interviews, rather than sourced from published materials, individual citations will not be included, unless necessary.

Chapter Two: Literature Review explores relevant scholarship discussions surrounding occupational folklore, workplace humor and the social dynamics of the

service industry. Additionally, I will highlight the limited research on the daily interactions of service workers beyond a mental health approach. Chapter Three discusses my methodology and my experience in fieldwork, ethical considerations, and the challenges of researching a workplace where I, as the researcher, am also a participant. Chapter Four presents my findings in two sections. Part One is organized thematically, exploring the events that create opportunities for language-play, including how individuals reflect on their experiences in the industry and the role material culture plays in shaping connections. Part Two offers an in-depth look at a typical day in the life of a server, providing insight into the daily dynamics that shape language use in the workplace. Finally, Chapter Five provides an analysis and conclusion, reflecting on the implications of my research and suggests a further avenue for research.

Key Terms and Context

Before exploring how language-play encourages friendships among food and beverage workers, I must first examine its key elements, specifically the various forms and functions within the workplace. The context in which language-play occurs is vital for understanding how these interactions not only provide moments of relief but also reinforce group cohesion. For this thesis, language-play is defined as a form of verbal interaction in which a sense of enjoyment or relief is derived from deviating from conventional language use and applying the familiar form to an unexpected, and often inappropriate, context¹. Rather than predefining what constitutes as “unexpected” or “inappropriate,” I will allow these distinctions to emerge through my fieldwork. This

¹ David Crystal “Language-play and linguistic intervention,” *Child Language Teaching and Therapy* 12, no. 3 (1996): 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026565909601200307>

approach acknowledges that the meaning and function of language shifts depending on the workplace dynamics, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of its role in creating bonds among co-workers.

In this thesis, I have used the term ritual teasing in conjunction with initiation pranks to highlight how verbal play facilitates social interactions in the workplace. As Moira Marsh discusses in chapter 9 of her book *Practically Joking*² initiation pranks, often in the form of a senseless task, are targeted towards new employees, and supported by the group. This collective participation reinforces group identity, subtly communicating that the new employee has started to shift from being an outsider and is become a part of the inner circle. Once an individual catches on to the joke, they typically won't fall for it again, and ideally, wouldn't be tricked by a variation. As you will see in Chapter 4, this may not always be the case. Although any senseless errand in theory can only be a one-time event thus marking it as an initiation prank, the ongoing nature of similar pranks blurs the lines between initiation and ritual teasing.

For this writing, I will refer to the food and beverage industry as employees do, simply as *the industry*. This shorthand conveys shared experiences and reflects an implicit understanding of the job's distinctive demands. The ambiguity of using the term 'the industry' reflects the transient nature of this field, where individuals frequently shift between roles or establishments. For those unfamiliar with the context, 'the industry' might be misconstrued to refer to an entirely different field of employment. When discussing this industry in a broader sense, I will use the terms "service industry" or the

² Moira Marsh. *Practically Joking*. Utah State University Press, (2015)

“hospitality sector.” Front-of-house (FOH) staff – servers, waiters, bartenders, hosts and bussers – work in the public areas of an establishment, interacting with the customers. Back-of-house (BOH) staff, such as the cooks and dishwashers, operate in areas where guests are not allowed. FOH and BOH are used not only to describe the workers themselves, but also the physical spaces they occupy. FOH staff balances performance with service, while BOH employees work in the kitchen and storage areas, focusing on food preparation and logistics.

Between the FOH and BOH areas lies the expediter line, or *expo line*. *Expo* refers to both the physical workstation and the person managing it: a FOH employee who operates alongside BOH and is the point of communication between the two. Within the expo line is the pass-thru, where BOH staff presents dishes to the Expo for final quality check before food reaches the table, ensuring the plating, modifications and order accuracy meet both kitchen standards and guest expectations.

One of the challenges in this industry is explaining work schedules to those unfamiliar with it; this also poses difficulties for management when attempting to create an efficient schedule. Creating a weekly schedule is a balancing act, staffing needs to be available to cover peak hours, less during slow periods, all while accounting for employee availability, labor costs and labor laws. The industry’s unconventional hours, ranging from early morning prep to late-night service, require employees to adapt to various shifts that could impact their work-life balance and financial stability.

The daily workings of a restaurant operate in shifts, each with specific responsibilities. The first person on shift, though their role varies depending on the area

they are responsible for, is referred to as *The Opener*. The dining room and bar openers are responsible for their respective sides. They focus on setting up the floor by ensuring tables are clean, arranged properly and set with place settings. They are both responsible for cutting garnishes, filling ice wells and preparing drink stations. In the BOH, the openers are responsible for setting up the line, ensuring it is fully stocked for the start of service, and firing up equipment. This individual is different from the prep cook, who arrives before the opener and preps the appropriate stock for the day's service.

The Closer is scheduled to finish off service when the restaurant officially closes but rarely will they clock out at this time. They are responsible for end-of-night duties, such as emptying and cleaning of their respective ice wells, wiping and washing tables and counters and restocking supplies. Closers are also responsible for ensuring that all remaining guests have left, and their sections are fully cleaned before they can leave. If a closer still has active tables, they cannot leave until their last guest has departed.

Throughout service hours, additional staff are scheduled with staggered start times to ensure smooth operations without overstaffing during slower periods. Rather than having the entire team arrive at once, employees are brought in at different intervals based on anticipated demands, typically in fifteen to thirty-minute intervals until the restaurant is fully staffed for that shift.

FOH staff are assigned their tables, which is referred to as being their *section*, by the Manager on Duty (MOD) and in accordance with the schedule and individuals start and end times. Servers are responsible for guests in their assigned section, ensuring that tables are bussed, cleaned and ready for the next guest as quickly as possible. As service

slows, the MOD will *cut* staff, meaning they will *cut the board*. The board is the restaurant's floor plan, where server's sections are marked. Being *cut* refers to when a server will not receive any new tables but must stay until their current guests leave, their section is cleaned, and any assigned side duties are completed. These side duties would include rolling cutlery, emptying the dish pit (where clean dishes are stacked for servers to retrieve) filling ice wells and maintain the cleanliness of the expo line. These behind-the-scenes tasks keep service running smoothly throughout a shift.

Positionality

My firsthand experience in the demanding environment of the hospitality industry, combined with the sense of connection shared among those who have 'gone through the trenches'³ of service work, has not only drawn me to this field but has also made it difficult to leave, despite the mental and physical health challenges it presents. As both a service worker and a researcher, my position shapes the way I approached this study. My experience provides me with insight into the significance of language-play, offering an insider perspective to recognize the nuanced workplace humor and the role it has in this industry. However, I am mindful of these limitations and strive to balance my insider knowledge with critical reflection and acknowledge both the strengths and potential biases of my dual role.

Additionally, my perspective is shaped by auto-ethnographic elements and the multitude of customer interactions I have had. Many of these customers, more so those with no prior experience in the industry, hold a fantasy-like perception of the service

³ Anonymous Interviewee #1, interview by Jess Canada, January 24th, 2025

industry, one often disconnected from reality. This imagined version is reminiscent of fairy tales, where the service worker has been provided with a fixed role within the performance. These observations serve as a counter-narrative, which I chose to use as part of my research to help facilitate interviews.

Argument and Limitations

This thesis argues that language-play is fundamental in how service workers create and maintain workplace friendships, given that the service industry can be characterized as having transient employment, with exploitative conditions leading to high turnover⁴. Rather than viewing teasing and joking as trivial or simply following sociocultural customs of politeness, I suggest that these forms of communication are central to the occupational folklore of the service industry.

This research is limited to current workers in the food and beverage industry. Initially, I planned to conduct a comparative study between two establishments – a locally owned cidery and a franchised mid-size family restaurant – to examine how workplace dynamics and language-play differ across these settings. However, due to the logistical constraints outside of my control, such as participants work schedule and my own availability, I decided to focus solely on the franchised restaurant.

Moreover, due to the sensitive nature of the jokes and conversations, which I will discuss in Chapter Four, I have chosen to maintain anonymity for both the establishment

⁴ Jessica Brill. “Building a Strong Restaurant Workforce.” Restobiz, October 8, 2024. <https://www.restobiz.ca/building-a-strong-restaurant-workforce/>.

and participants. When necessary, and only for clarity or readability, I have assigned aliases to individuals.

The Hospitality Industry

Employing over 1.7 million people⁵ across Canada, the hospitality industry is vital for those employed within the various roles, from the front-of-house customer service to the chaotic routine of the back-of-house. Encompassing cafes, bars, breweries and multi-level chained restaurants, the fast-paced nature of this industry creates a unique culture where adaptability and communication are necessary for creating connections with co-workers to manage the high-stress environment. A few of the defining characteristics for this industry include the irregular and long hours, often working weekends and holidays and spending this time away from their friends and family, leading to a lack of balance that can be emotionally and physically demanding. This, combined with the needs and demands of the customers, points to how the hospitality industry has been regarded as one of the most emotionally laboring and stress-filled industries to work in.

My firsthand experience in the demanding environment of this industry, along with the sense of connection shared among those who have ‘gone through the trenches’ of service work, has not only continued to draw me to this field but also makes it difficult to leave, despite the mental and physical health challenges it presents. One of my first experiences working in this industry was in my family’s restaurant as a busser and host, assisting with catering events and spending time in the kitchen learning knife skills and

⁵ Statistics Canada. [Table 14-10-0202-01 Employment by industry, annual](#)

listening to the cooks' stories. Over two decades later, I have seen the way this industry has changed; health and safety standards have improved, with customers seeking higher quality food and supporting farm-to-table or locally owned establishments⁶.

Despite these changes, I have seen several constants that have shaped the distinct culture of this industry. From my family restaurant to franchised establishments, small town pubs to city clubs, each place shared common jargon, elements of language-play and unwritten rules that are known to those who have worked in the food and beverage industry. By examining and understanding how both everyday language and language-play function as a means of communication and as a social tool I highlight how co-workers build relationships, navigate hierarchies, and establish a sense of belonging in their day-to-day interactions.

Bullying as Love

“Bullying as love” may seem paradoxical, yet it captures the complex social dynamic observed in the service industry. In many kitchens and restaurants, aggressive banter and harsh tones are expected, appearing so frequently that it has become normalized. As one interviewee stated, “If I’m not telling you to fuck off and in the next breath asking if you want to grab a beer after work, I don’t like you⁷.” Bullying, in this context, often manifest due to the intense workload and is a way to blow off some steam. However, being able to distinguish between camaraderie bullying and harmful bullying is crucial. Though one may perceive aggressive or

⁶ Bill J. Gregorash, “The modern Canadian restaurant: food for thought”, *Worldwide Hospitality and Tourism Themes* 9, no 4 (2017) DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/WHATT-04-2017-0016>

⁷ Anonymous Interviewee #1, interviewed by Jess Canada, January 24th, 2025.

inappropriate comments as welcoming, others may experience anxiety or feelings of harassment. This culture can create an environment where workers feel pressured to normalize mistreatment and toxicity and can play on one's mental health.

Struggles Working in the Hospitality Industry

As stated earlier, when choosing to work in a restaurant one must be willing to put themselves in a high-stress and demanding environment. Aside from needing to meet customers' expectations to perform beyond perfection, the long hours and the constant physical demands provide little to no spare time to focus on your personal needs both on and off shift. As I will discuss later in this thesis, restaurant employees are subjected to unpredictable scheduling, creating a lack of a work-life balance, which contributes to their exhaustion and irritability and may bleed into their personal relationships. One interviewee goes as far to say that they would never date someone who has not ever worked in a restaurant:

They just wouldn't understand what it's like. I don't know what time I'll be home cause it's not like we get off at whatever time the schedule says we do. I've tried explaining to someone who hasn't ever done this what it's like. I work every long weekend, every holiday, and no, I don't know what I work next Friday or if I can go to whatever party you're asking about cause the schedule isn't posted yet, and no I can't just ask for it off, that's not how it works. It's just easier to date a fellow bartender cause they just get it. They don't find it weird to stay out till 2am on a random Monday night, it just makes sense to us. Ya, it sucks to miss out on so much, it probably doesn't help the whole depressed/I want to die feelings but whatever (soft giggle/shrugs) ⁸

⁸ Anonymous Interviewee #2, interviewed by Jess Canada on February 13th, 2025.

These off-hand comments about depression and feelings of not wanting to be alive are common to hear amongst staff. In recent years, research on the mental health of employees in the industry has expanded, likely influenced by the sudden death of celebrity Chef Anthony Bourdain, shifting research focus away from the commonality of drug use to mental health⁹. In my literature review, I will discuss the gaps in existing scholarships that address drug and alcohol use as coping mechanisms while ignoring and providing the room to explore the lived experiences of service workers.

⁹ Andrew Muth “Understanding the Mental Health Needs of Restaurant Employees” (Master of Science Thesis, Purdue University, Indianapolis, Indiana, 2020)

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The service industry has been more than just a job for me, having worked in it for several decades, it has become a lifestyle, a second home built on teasing and humor-infused “harassment” among co-workers - though to outsiders, this dynamic might seem abrasive, even inappropriate. To those unfamiliar with the industry, the way service workers interact may appear to be genuine harassment, but in reality, this form of communication, while often harsh, is rooted in respect and friendship. In many restaurants, if a co-worker isn’t playfully giving you a hard time, it likely means you haven’t yet been accepted as part of the group. These interactions form the bonds that have kept us (relatively) sane. This would be an example of “bullying as love” as discussed in Chapter 1.

My focus for this research is on the way language-play is used within the service industry. The goal of this literature review is to examine the current discussions taking place that focus on the ways humor is used as a coping mechanism, the language of the service industry, and the research that has been done on this industry. Throughout this chapter, I will situate some of the jargon I encountered through my research and provide an overview of the existing narratives on language use in the service industry and how these inform interpersonal relationships, alongside discussions surrounding the mental health of workers.

Language and Language-Play

The Jargon

“I’m in the weeds!” “86’d”, “sharp!” are just a few examples of the specialized language common in the restaurant industry. Not only do these terms have functionality - “in the weeds” referring to when a server (or chef) is overwhelmed and acknowledging they need support¹⁰, “86’d” refers to an item that is no longer available, and “sharp” is called when one is walking with a knife or broken glass – they also contribute to the dark humor shared among co-workers. Those comfortable with each other may use a dual script, incorporating phrases like “I’ve 86’d the will to live” or asking a co-worker when they shout “sharp!” to “please stab me”.

Learning the vocabulary shared among service workers is not difficult to attain¹¹, however for a long time it was ignored or twisted when written about. In his article “The Server’s Lexicon”, Michael Adams provides a compelling case on why restaurant jargon is one of the most pervasive occupational dialects in the United States due to the size of the workforce and the high turnover rate. In this paper he presents a glossary of 102 entries collected from servers across multiple states¹², demonstrating the prevalence and consistency of restaurant terminology. Adam speculates that there may have been a

¹⁰ In my experience, and hearing others, when a worker acknowledges the fact, they are ‘in the weeds’ and need support, often there is no support available as the rest of the team are in a similar position. Typically, if one person is overwhelmed, everyone is, making it impossible to pull out of until the end of service. That being said, there are times where being in the weeds has a trickle affect, and in rare times, can be mitigated, or at very least, anticipated. This will be elaborated on in Chapter 4

¹¹ Michael Adams. “The Server’s Lexicon: Preliminary Inquiries into Current Restaurant Jargon,” *American Speech* 73, no. 1(1998) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/455927>

¹² Similarly, I have included an abbreviated glossary, along with brief descriptions on how these terms may be used both in their functional form or in joking manner.

separation between journalists and service workers leading to the exclusion of the jargon in previous publications, this may stem from service workers having omitted their jargon out of politeness and social expectations. As this may be partially true, it is likely that servers modify their language similarly as they do for guests, as they have identified journalists as outsiders. Folklorists, much like journalist, at times struggle to accurately capture the use of obscenity in language-play, as it is context based, with many occupational dialects relying on humor and profanity to build relationships and cope with stress. The use of vulgar language and obscenity in various social contexts are not a reflection of poor manners, but a tool used by the group to manage their stress within that moment. In the case of service workers, obscenity becomes a linguistic resource that creates a shared space for defiance against authority and solidarity among peers, where humor and irreverence work together to maintain a sense of control and identity in an otherwise chaotic workplace¹³.

Often following a script provided by the company or developed through experience, FOH staff adjust their communication style from table to table and shift to shift, depending on the guests they have and the co-workers who are on shift with them. This adaptability extends beyond these interactions, as staff will adjust their language depending on whether they are speaking with management, co-workers, or outsiders unfamiliar with industry-specific terminology. Despite the scripted nature of guest interactions as an interesting aspect of language-play, particularly when servers recognize

¹³ Herbert Halpert. "Folklore and Obscenity: Definitions and Problems." *The Journal of American Folklore* 75, no. 297 (1962): 190-94. <https://doi.org/10.2307/537720>.

fellow industry workers and drop the façade, my focus remains on language-play amongst co-workers.

The Role of Humor as a Coping Mechanism

The service industry, as discussed previously, is notorious for elevated levels of stress, burnout, and workplace abuse, including verbal, physical, and sexual harassment from customers¹⁴. Long hours, high-pressure environments, and low wages contribute to widespread mental health struggles among workers¹⁵. In response, humor serves as a critical coping mechanism, with jokes being exchanged among co-workers rarely being lighthearted; often leaning into dark humor, touching on themes of self-harm, exhaustion, or frustration with difficult people.

These instances of dark jokes typically do not follow what Moira Marsh refers to as the signs of joke telling. Telling a joke typically has a structured familiarity to it, a buildup and an understanding that what is about to be said is not factual, whereas joking talk is an interruption to the moment¹⁶ during which those around the teller may not recognize which was said was done so in jest but upon later reflection, they come to this understanding.

¹⁴ Yahua Bi, *et al.* “Stress on Frontline Employees from Customer Aggression in the Restaurant Industry: The Moderating Effect of Empowerment,” *Sustainability* 13 no. 1433 (2021): <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13031433>

¹⁵ Jessica Brill, “A look at the mental health of today’s hospitality workers,” *RestoBiz*, December 18th, 2023, <https://www.restobiz.ca/a-look-at-todays-hospitality-workers-and-the-state-of-their-mental-health/>

¹⁶ Moira Marsh “Believe me, I’m Joking: The dialectics of the Legend and the Dialectics of Humor.” *Journal of American Folklore*, 131, no. 522 (2018) <https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.131.522.0444>

Using humor as a coping mechanism has been extensively discussed from a professional viewpoint, and in recent years, more articles have emerged focusing on individuals currently working in the food industry with the goal of reducing the stigma surrounding mental health discussions. The use of humor allows workers to redefine and, in turn, lessen the impact of stressful situations, it is a way to shield themselves and push through their shifts. This can provide a sense of empowerment, as explored by Laura Talbot, Yahua Bi et al. in their article “Stress on Frontline Employees”, nevertheless, there remains a gap between employers promoting mental wellness and workers actually recognizing the signs of burnout.

This is where industry lifer Hassel Aviles¹⁷ has stepped in. Having spent over two decades working in restaurants, event production, and entrepreneurship, Aviles co-founded Not 9 to 5 in 2018 after her own struggles with mental illness and trauma. What started as a series of workshops, panels, and webinars has since grown into a global movement advocating for inclusive and proactive work environments. Unlike generic mental health initiatives that often overlook the realities of service work, Not 9 to 5 is created by and for food service workers, providing resources tailored to their unique challenges.

While this thesis does not focus directly on the mental health of individuals, it acknowledges that the language and humor used within the industry may inadvertently highlight those who are struggling. In recognizing this, I have ensured that relevant information and resources are made available to those who may need them. As the focus

¹⁷ Not 9 to 5, “About Us,” Accessed March 17th, 2025, <https://not9to5.org/about-us/>.

of his master's thesis, Andrew Muth¹⁸ examines depression, burnout, workplace bullying, and perfectionism among restaurant workers. The study finds a high prevalence of depressive symptoms and a strong correlation between workplace bullying and mental health deterioration. Perfectionistic concerns, rather than perfectionistic strivings, were significant predictors of burnout. As social support was negatively correlated with burnout, its protective effects were limited when bullying and perfectionism were present. The study's reliance on the Job Demands-Resources (JDR) model and organizational psychology literature situates it within broader discourses on workplace mental health.

Dark humor used while working in the hospitality industry often intersects with profanity, another form of language-play that encourages a bond. Fine and Corte¹⁹ discusses this, arguing that while offensive language varies by individual perception, within specific occupational spaces, it becomes a shared dialect that reinforces group identity.

Julia Wilson, Emily Moyer-Gusé and James Alex Bonus explore the psychological benefits of humor in eudaimonic entertainment in their article "If I Don't Laugh, I'll Cry"²⁰. They argue that humor provides relief from anxiety while establishing a connection with the audience. In the context of my research, the audience is the guest - those dining in the restaurant - who become participants in the humor exchange by

¹⁸ Andrew Muth "Understanding the Mental Health"

¹⁹ Gary Alan Fine and Ugo Corte. "Obscenity Factories: Profanity and Community in Workgroup Cultures." *Work and Occupations* 51, no. 3 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1177/07308884241256101>

²⁰ Julia M. Wilson, Emily Moyer-Gusé and James Alex Bonus. "If I Don't Laugh, I'll Cry: Examining the Mechanisms and Gratifications of Humor in Eudaimonic Entertainment Experiences." *Media Psychology*, (2024). DOI: 10.1080/15213269.2024.2396289

service workers. This dynamic supports the theory of relief humor, as the use of jokes and banter helps diffuse tension in high-stress environments. Although the effects on prosocial behaviors remain ambiguous, my study examines how humor enables individuals to make sense of and navigate these demanding moments.

Language-play in high-stress environments is complex and layered with subtext²¹. Edgework, that is behaviors that are temporarily outside the social norm and occur with like-minded individuals²² would include the use of profanities and self-harm/self-deprecating jokes to mark the boundaries of a social group²³. Although low-risk, profanity use while working establishes a ‘backstage’ performance space²⁴, where employees can temporarily escape the pressures of customer service. This “moral holiday²⁵” provides emotional relief and reinforces social bonds among workers.

The ability to take these ‘moral holidays’ could be understood as a reason there are still cases of hazing within this industry. Often these events can be viewed as morally gray, for example in Natasha Josefowitz and Herman Gadon’s article the first practice discussed is a new supervisor being locked in a walk-in freezer. Although Kathryn, the new supervisor in this article, discussed how she was told by her manager this prank would happen, she mentions how she may have ‘freaked out’ at the thought of being

21 Bateson, “Steps to an ecology of mind.” And Henricks, “Play reconsidered” Quoted in Fine and Corte “Obscenity” (2024)

22 Stephen Lyng, *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk Taking*. New York: Routledge, 2005, 297 pp

23 Fine and Corte “Obscenity” (2024)

24 Goffman E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*.

25 Collins, “Explosive Conflict” Quoted in Fine and Corte “Obscenity (2024)

locked in the freezer overnight, risking death had she not been previously informed²⁶.

This is an example of a morally gray area, although not intended to reach this stage, it can be said that locking someone in a freezer and leading them to believe they will not survive is not morally appropriate.

Humor, Hazing and Initiation Pranks

Humor's role in workplace bonding goes beyond language-play and into the blurry realm of hazing and initiation pranks. Often morally ambiguous, workplace hazing functions as vehicle to allow for an individual to transition from outsider to insider, as illustrated by the previously mentioned instance where a new supervisor was locked in a walk-in freezer as her initiation prank. To an outsider, or an HR department, this prank might be perceived as harassment. However, within the context of the restaurant, such interactions often signify social inclusion rather than malice. In many cases, being on the receiving end of these pranks is a sign that a worker has been accepted into the group.

Josefowitz and Gadon distinguish hazing from harassment, noting that while harassment seeks to exclude, isolate and assert dominance, hazing serves as a rite of passage, moving from outsider status to insider. Similarly, Benjamin Thomas and Patricia Meglich discuss in their article "Justifying New Employees' trials by fire"²⁷ how bullying and hazing may appear similar in practice but serve fundamentally different social functions. Further supporting this, Aldo Cimino and Thomas argue that hazing acts as a

²⁶ Natasha Josefowitz and Herman Gadon. "Hazing: Uncovering One of the Best-Kept Secrets of the Workplace." *Business Horizons*, no. 3 (1989)

²⁷ Benjamin J. Thomas and Patricia Meglich. "Justifying new employees' trials by fire: workplace hazing." *Personnel Review* 48, no. 2 (2019). DOI 10.1108/PR-01-2018-0025

mechanism to assess a newcomer's willingness to transition from outsider to insider, whereas bullying and harassment lack this transitional purpose²⁸.

From my own experience in the service industry, not everyone undergoes the same hazing rituals. Some individuals may bypass an initiation prank because of their prior service experience, signaling that they are not viewed completely as an outsider. As someone moves through the ranks, entering the establishment as a busser or host prior to becoming a server, are often seen as having earned their place within the new cohort. This linear progression is a rite of passage, one that provides the insider status without the necessity of an initiation prank.

Emicly, I anticipated that workplace narratives would use the term "harassment" to describe a moment of hazing as inclusionary, as well as in the form of exclusionary practices. This is one area where I believe my research will contribute to understanding language-play in the service industry. Notably, I have yet to find literature that examines how harassment as a form of workplace affection can be viewed positively, as this discourse is often framed within the context of abuse.

Occupational Identity and Performance

Michael J. Bell's ethnographic work examines occupational identity and performance in the service industry, focusing primarily on the roles associated with working behind the bar. His research challenges the perception that tending bar is a

²⁸ Aldo Cimino and Benjamin J. Thomas. "Does hazing actually increase group solidarity? Re-examining a classic theory with a modern fraternity." *Evolution and Human Behavior* 44, no. 2 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2022.07.001>

passive labor. Instead, Bell positions bartenders, and by extension general employees within the service industry, as participating in a performative act that requires the skills to navigate social expectations, providing the upper hand for controlling the brief moments of interactions between bartender and guest, all while cultivating a different persona for each one.

In his article “Tending Bar at Browns²⁹”, Bell explores how bartender working at a Black-owned bar in Philadelphia shape their social environment. They employ verbal play, humor, and strategic self-presentation to shape patrons’ behaviors and maintain a sense of order. Bell highlights the contrasting approaches bartenders have with their service personas, Harriet engages in playfulness with patrons, where as Sarah has a more reserved demeanor. Bell situates these performances within a broader framework of knowledge³⁰ and symbolic interactionism, arguing that bartending requires improvisation and social intuition.

Expanding on these themes in his book “The World from Brown’s Lounge³¹”, Bell examines how verbal sparring and competitive socializing is a form of negotiating identity within a bar setting. Within this space, bartenders reinforce the idea that service work is performative as they shape not only the atmosphere of the bar, but each

²⁹ Michael J. Bell “Tending Bar at Brown’s: Occupational Role as Artistic Performance” *Western Folklore* 35, no. 2 (1976) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1498433>

³⁰ Bell, “Tending Bar,” 97.

³¹ Michael J. Bell “The World from Brown’s Lounge: An Ethnography of Black Middle-Class Play” (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983) <https://archive.org/details/worldfrombrownsl0000bell/page/n217/mode/1up>

individual interaction held within. His findings align with Erving Goffman's notion that occupational roles are socially constructed and strategically performed³².

Although it is foundational research that links service work to performance, Bell is primarily focusing on race and class, leaving space for further exploration on how gender influences bartending performance, beyond the scope of sex(uality) sells alcohol.

Summary

The literature reviewed in this chapter provides valuable insights into humor, burnout, mental health, and occupational identity across various professions. Despite extensive research on these topics, several gaps remain, particularly within cultural contexts through comparative analyses and a deeper exploration into communication through humor.

In regard to the service industry, research on language-play and occupational folklore appears to be limited or potentially outdated on its focus. Existing studies acknowledge how humor and initiation pranks offer momentary relief from stress and reinforce bonds among co-workers, there is a noticeable lack of research specifically examining the role of occupational folklore and vernacular among service workers.

Exploring language-play in the context that I will be analyzing provides a valuable insider perspective on workplace dynamics and social cohesion. This literature

³² Bell, "Brown's Lounge" pp. 78-79

Erving Goffman "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life." (New York: Anchor Books, 1959)

review will support my research and gain a better understanding on how they create and support relationships.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Ethnographic Research

As an industry insider, I have firsthand experience with workplace rites of passage and initiation pranks, such as asking new bartenders to delime all the Corona bottles or instructing a new server that part of their duties include draining all the hot water from the coffee machine³³. My insider status provided me with a pre-established connection based on trust, which not only provided a sense of comfort and friendship with those I interviewed, but it also allowed me to recognize the nuances of workplace interactions and ask informed follow-up questions that may not be obvious to an external observer.

I chose to approach this research by employing an ethnography fieldwork framework, focusing on the rites of passage, humor, teasing and jargon that shaped workplace interactions. Given that some of the terminology serves a dual purpose, while humorous moments and banter were spontaneous, subtle, and context-dependent, a combination of non-structured interviews, content analysis and both participant and non-participant observation were used to capture these moments as they occurred. My focus remained on expressions, storytelling, and the role these played in building friendships among staff, while contributing to the broader framework of occupational folklore.

Participants and Interviews

Participants were recruited from a locally owned franchise restaurant in Nova Scotia who were currently employed at the time of my research. Participants varied in

³³ On the surface, this may sound like an easy task, however, the coffee machine is typically directed connected to a water source, therefore making it an impossible task.

age, with the only stipulation being that they were of legal age (19 years old). Individuals from both FOH and BOH, as well as management, were included to provide a well-rounded perspective.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion, allowing for flexible questions tailored to each participants' unique experiences. These interviews explored how humor functioned in their daily work life, the context in which it arose and how they categorized it, whether as dark humor, a stressor response, or a reflection of the shared workplace humor. Oral histories, specifically how jokes have evolved from when a person first started in the industry to now, supported an understanding of how occupational humor has evolved over time.

To complement my observations, one-on-one interviews were conducted with individuals, when possible. Due to the nature of the industry, scheduling and finding mutually available times for in-person discussions presented a challenge. To address this, an anonymous online forum was offered as an alternative, or as an initial step for those who were interested in being interviewed. This platform allowed for individuals to engage with the study at their convenience while providing me with preliminary insights and identify recurring patterns. This forum was set-up to be anonymous, there was a space to indicate their name and if they wish to be interviewed or followed up with.

Participation and Non-Participation Observation

To gain a comprehensive understanding of language-play in the workplace, I employed both participant and non-participant observation methods. As I centered my fieldwork within an establishment I have been employed in, I was able to directly engage

with and observe instances of language-play as they emerged naturally. Being a part of the environment allowed me to be attuned to the daily rhythms, knowing when and where events would naturally emerge, how they may differ during a busy shift, day and evening workers, the liminal time that appears during shift change and the curse of downtime. This also allowed me to be present to hear the intent and tone from both an outsider and insider perspective; I was an outsider as the comments (at times) were not directed at me, and I was an insider as I understood where and how the comment was formed.

Observations took place during January and February of 2025, during the post-holiday slowdown. The reduced pace provided an opportunity for more in-depth observation without the heightened stress of peak-season demands. Despite it being the slower time of year, this does not equate to the restaurant being without stressors.

Informal Conversations

Informal conversation occurring before and after shifts were vital for reflecting on how humor is being used. These times were often when workers vented out their emotions without restraints and provided plenty of space to start a “Remember when . . .” story. Engaging with my co-workers during these times allowed them to have the opportunity to share their stories, connecting their lived experiences with my research.

Theoretical Framework

Having been fascinated with the different personas I have encountered working in the service industry, my interest in studying occupational folklore was informed by Erving Goffman’s concepts of frontstage/back-stage behavior, as well as impression

management. Goffman theorized that individuals present different versions of themselves, depending on the setting. Within the food and beverage industry, these personas are slipped on and off seamlessly. Slipping into a “frontstage” role occurs when interacting with customers, being polite and enthusiastic; in contrast, the “back-stage” environment allows for the unfiltered expressions to be shared.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

As I explored how language-play functioned in the service industry, I noticed a shift that had started to occur post-COVID, at least with the individuals with whom I interviewed. To aid in examining and theorizing this, I have divided the discussion into two parts. Part One examines the thematic elements of language-play in the workplace, including initiation pranks, jokes, teasing and the divide between veteran servers and post-COVID hires. Part Two provides an ethnographic narrative following the events of an evening shift, capturing the lived experience of language-play as it unfolds on the floor.

Harden with Age³⁴

I remember one of the first times I went to the walk in to cry. I was just a baby, like maybe three or four weeks in? I don't know, but anyways, I was standing on line and all I could think of was how I needed to pee, like I had to pee so badly that my back teeth were floating. And I was thirsty, and starving. I was on hour 7 or 8 of my shift, with no end in sight. And I just wanted to go sit for like five minutes. That doesn't matter, that's not why I wanted to cry, I wanted to cry because I just had some old perv tell me yet again that I should smile, I would be prettier if I smiled more...ugh...he was easily in his late sixties and the way he said it..it was the last straw...³⁵

³⁴ As I introduce industry-specific jargon and observed dialogue, I will follow these conventions: jargon will be italicized, and direct quotes from observations and interviews will be styled in Bookman Old Style typeface. Direct quotes from interviews will be cited accordingly, while quotes from observations will not be individually cited.

³⁵ Anonymous interview #2, interviewed by Jess Canada on Feb. 13th, 2025. This interviewee has been in the service industry for over twenty years. At the time of this story, they were newly 18 and it was their first serving position. Prior to this, they had spent several years working as a host and busser in the same establishment.

Ask anyone who has worked in the industry for any length of time and there is a high probability that they would have countless stories of similar interactions.

Unfortunately, this experience, the sensory overload and the customer chats with pervasive undertones, and subsequently the need to cry, yell or scream inside the walk-in cooler in the kitchen common. This space is a refuge for hospitality workers during a busy shift, or after dealing with a particularly disgruntled or rude guest. It is so common, in fact, that pointing out a designated safe crying space has become an unofficial part of the new-hire tour. Several of the participants I spoke with recalled their own training shifts, where their non-management trainer made a point to identify the best places to break down in. Walk-in cooler and freezer? Prime locations. Dry Storage? Usable, but not recommended due to the lack of soundproofing.

During their overwhelmed moment, the interviewee quoted above recalled hearing another server casually mentioning if you need to go to the walk in, go ahead, no ones gonna know. The offhandedness of this statement indicates one layer of the emotional disconnect servers achieve -the other server, having been in the same position before, registers the moment but remains unfazed. They recognized the need for release but did not react because, in this industry, emotional breakdowns are routine. This emotional disconnect extends beyond the quiet need for a release in the walk-in cooler; it manifests in how employees are expected to work around emergency situations without breaking their professional façade. In these moments, the ability to briefly indulge in humor or vent frustrations serves as a controlled release, allowing the server a fleeting moment of relief before shutting it off and returning to their tables, composed and in character. Whether it is a medical emergency at a table, or behind-the-

scenes involving one of their co-workers, staff are expected to push forward, maintaining their composure and their server persona, smiles and all.

The normalization of this detachment reinforces the idea that emotional reaction, and the way staff continue to talk and joke with each other in extreme circumstances, are secondary to the performance required in this industry. This expectation, and its implications, will be explored further in Part Two of this chapter.

This (un)spoken industry standard is taught with the same level of importance as being taught the restaurant's menu or the *POSie*³⁶ system, which is used to process orders for kitchen and bar items. In addition to relaying orders, the POS system can track sales, provide guest checks and process payments, making it a vital tool for daily operations. This is just one of the survival tactics that are shared with new hires and also a sly way to warn them of what they may be getting into. It is an acknowledgment that the job itself may get to you from time to time, and that it is okay to let it, but if you cannot handle the pressure, this may not be the job for you. Long-time service workers reflect on their experience with a mixture of resignation and pride, noting that if you cannot laugh at the absurdity of it all, you won't last. For many, verbal abuse, crude jokes, and relentless teasing no longer shock them, to the extent that they will joke about the mind-destroying effects of the job. The source of these mind-destroying effects has been portrayed in pop culture, notably through Anthony Bourdain's book "Kitchen

³⁶ POS stands for Point of Sale. *POSie* is the term used by servers when referring to it.

Confidential³⁷” and the television shows inspired by it, as well as Gordon Ramsay’s various restaurant related reality series³⁸, both of which have played a role in normalizing some of the behavior. What is most striking about the need for emotional release while working is how nonchalantly everyone would talk about it. There is no embarrassment, or hesitation, nothing was dramatized, and it is not unusual; it is just the status quo. Even though it is an industry norm, to an outsider, they may find it bizarre and argue that no one should have to work somewhere where they need a space to go cry. Ironically enough, a significant reason restaurant staff need a safe space to vent their emotions *on-the-fly*³⁹ is influenced by the behavior of guests. Often it is the entitled, demanding, or demeaning customers, colloquially referred to as *Karens*⁴⁰, that pushes workers to their breaking point. Considering the fast-paced nature of this industry, these encounters follow a similar pace, providing no opportunity to process them; servers are expected to simply nod and agree, apologize, and move on to the next table.

Over time, the emotional response to such interactions begins to change. As new hires may find themselves shaken by the constant barrage of difficult customers and non-stop multi-tasking, seasoned workers tend to develop a certain level of dissociation with their work. This detachment does not stem from a lack of empathy or human connection, it is simply a coping mechanism forged over time, whereas instead of crying they simply

³⁷ Anthony Bourdain “Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly” (New York: Bloomsbury, 2000)

³⁸ Gordon Ramsay *Hell’s Kitchen* and *Kitchen Nightmares*. Fox, 2005-present.

³⁹ Term used when referring to something that is needed to be done as soon as possible.

⁴⁰ “Karen” is an internet slang term used to describe an individual, typically a middle-aged female who embodies the mentioned behaviors that has quickly been adopted as a part of every day speech.

shrug and laugh it off. This ability to detach and see humor in an otherwise humorless context shows up more often during bantering sessions, particularly during a chaotic shift.

In these instances, the jokes and off-putting comments are often dark, inappropriate and cringe-worthy. It was common to hear someone say, I'm about to stab the next person who comes through that door, so help me god after having been triple sat, including a 10-top⁴¹, or honestly, if he doesn't hurry the fuck up on grill, I'm gonna go back there and use the flames to set his ass on fire. These types of jokes do not reflect the need for humor for humor's sake; however, they are indicators of the need to release frustration with others who share their hardships without the need to dwell on it. Such exchanges are not confined to any specific physical space or moment, they are embedded into the daily routines.

It is not just the words used for venting that reveal the darker humor found in the service industry. Throughout my observations, and later confirmed during interviews and informal discussion, I noticed the use of inappropriate nicknames for pieces of equipment was more prevalent among staff who have been in this industry for fifteen years or more, predominantly those who spent the majority of their time working in the BOH. I discovered this during one particularly slow evening. As I was looking for a pair of scissors, I asked the manager on duty (MOD) where I could find the snip-snips⁴², while

⁴¹ "Triple sat" refers to when a server has had that number of tables filled in their section without any type of reprieve. A "#"-top refers to the number of guests sitting at one particular table.

⁴² This nickname for scissor dates to when I worked as a baker. One day, a co-worker was asking for the pair of "skip-sors" while making the same motion, confused, I asked them to repeat themselves. Still confused I asked if they meant the "snip-snips?" I've called scissors snip-snips since then.

mimicking the motion of scissors cutting. I had done this in front of several co-workers who were hanging out on the expo line, giving me a look of confusion. However, over hearing this, one of the chefs replied without hesitation Do you want the castrators or the stabs-stabs⁴³? This led into a hilarious discussion on the different ways we have renamed items. Below are two examples, with a more disturbing undertone:

1. Food storage container.
 - a. Proper Name: 22 Quart Cambro
 - b. Nickname: Baby Killer
 - c. Explanation: Due to the shape and depth of the Cambro, there used to be a warning label on the side of these depicting a child playing inside the container, headfirst, with the “do not” warning sign over it. Below it included a warning saying that there is a risk of death, or drowning, if child is left unattended with it.
 - d. Reaction: Asides from myself, and the previously mentioned long-term employee, everyone else reacted with a mix of shock and laughter. The absurdity of needing such a warning for a food storage container was deemed as ridiculous by the group, but also led to a discussion on how, or why, someone would let a child play in a container filled with food. Included in this was a discussion recalling the first time someone in

⁴³ This individual has worked in the service industry for over twenty-years, with the entirety of it being in the back of house. They’ve worked in multiple locations across Canada and in different types of establishments. In this moment, they were referring to the different size of scissors available, the castrators are similar in size to kitchen shears, with the ability to cut cartilage, and the stab-stabs are regular scissors.

the kitchen where I had situated my fieldwork used the term “baby killer.” Rather than being directed to a storage container, jokes followed, directing them to where they kept metal coat-hangers, the back stairs and asking in jest who they had knocked-up⁴⁴.

2. Vegetable slicer

- a. Proper Name: Mandolin
- b. Nickname: The Un-aliver⁴⁵ or Quick-Killer
- c. Explanation: A mandolin features multiple sets of extremely sharp blades, making it easy to injure oneself. It is commonly used to julienne vegetables, cutting them into thin, 2-inch-long pieces. The blade used for this has around a dozen triangular-shaped blades protruding up. In dark humor, it is often referred to as "the un-aliver," a joking reference made when someone sarcastically suggests they should use the mandolin to "help end" a particularly tough shift.
- d. The group had a mixture of reactions, ranging from grim and uncomfortable laughter (newer service staff) to a general sense of “meh” from long-term staff. Despite the morbidity behind the

⁴⁴ These are other indicators of how jokes in the restaurant industry flirt with the line of appropriateness.

⁴⁵ Prior to its usage on TikTok as a euphemism for death and suicide, "unaliver" was not widely recognized as a term. However, in workplace humor, especially in high-stress environments like kitchens, similar darkly comedic nicknames for dangerous tools have long existed. The mandolin's reputation for causing injuries made "the un-aliver" a fitting, albeit morbid, joke among service industry workers.

nickname, there was a general understanding of how the nickname makes sense.

These examples illustrate the ways in which language-play in the form of morbid humor demonstrates the desensitizing that comes with working in this industry for an extended amount of time. The themes of death, dying and self-harm often reflected in employees' dark humor, which is joking about not surviving their shift or asking to be put out of their misery mid-way through. Along with those themes, there is a prevalence of language-play referring to aggressive sexual assault, often used to vent about a relentless rush that has left all staff feeling overwhelmed. That rush railed me so hard, and it didn't even kiss me when it ended or I got bent over by that big top, they did separate checks and shitty tips...so not fucking worth the ass-tearing⁴⁶. Using humor to blow off steam might feel cathartic, but it also reinforces the stigma around poor mental health in the service industry, blurring the line between venting and accepting that anxiety and depression are a perk of the job⁴⁷.

This phenomenon aligns with the broader research on occupational humor mentioned in my literature review, which suggests that high-stress industries develop their own vernacular as a means of mitigating the emotional and physical toll of the job. The service industry is relentless, and because using morbid humor is not done so for the sake of being crass, it often does not register with the employee who says it as being inappropriate. Once an employee has become comfortable with skirting the edges of dark

⁴⁶ Anonymous Interview, interviewed by Jess Canada, Feb. 13th, 2025.

⁴⁷ A variation of this statement was overheard several times through the time I spent observing. It is also a common joke to say when welcoming and engaging with new staff.

humor, it acknowledges the bond that has started to form with their co-workers. Furthermore, participating in this kind of humor serves as an informal mark of initiation, as one becomes comfortable partaking in and understanding the service industry's unique brand of language-play demonstrates their acceptance into the group.

As I mentioned previously, the conversation surrounding the more disturbing jargon occurred on the expo line. This area serves as a liminal space within the restaurant, as it is technically off-limits to the general public; however, staff are still within view and hearing range of customers, depending on where on the line they are. Beyond its function as the transition point between the kitchen and front of house, the expo line is also where servers retrieve guest drinks (pop, coffee, tea) and keep their own personal drinks and snacks in a designated area away from guest food to prevent cross-contamination. A small section is set aside for rolling cutlery – something I will expand on in my discussion of material culture – but it is important to note that this task is performed at the very edge of the expo line. While doing this, servers remain visible to guests but are still in a safe space where they can drop their professional demeanor and be themselves.

Once someone steps behind the five-foot partition separating the expo line and the kitchen from the main floor, a shift occurs. The smile they maintained for guests drops, replaced with a more honest expression reflecting their true emotions in the moment. The kind, cheerful language shifts to bantering and eye rolls exchanged between staff. It is in this semi-private space that language-play thrives. Contrasting with the agreeable tone used when interacting with guests, servers use their time spent on the expo line venting and connecting with their co-workers. A server who has just been triple sat may sarcastically state, Oh great, love that for me, while another might feign enthusiasm

over the need to brew a pot of coffee, exclaiming how they were just thinking how [I] needed another reason to have an existential crisis today! These remarks, though laced with annoyance, serve the purpose of using language-play to bond with their peers, sharing in the understanding of the job's irrationality.

This shift in demeanor deepens as individuals move further into what I refer to as the “far backstage” areas, which is the storage spaces, staff washrooms and lockers, and the prep spaces, where the likelihood of public exposure is nearing non-existent. The tight quarters of these spaces, and the distance from the service floor, makes lingering here impractical. The far backstage areas allow for a more uninhibited release of emotion, unlike the expo line, where venting is quick and coded. To an outsider, the far backstage may seem like the more appropriate place to express frustrations, where in reality, retreating to this area would pull staff away from the service floor, potentially escalating frustrations from mild annoyance to high stress.

The contrast between morning and evening shifts further shapes how and when these backstage spaces are used. Morning shifts tend to lack the intensity of evening shifts, not only because service is typically slower but also because the day has yet to provide reasons for frustration. The morning crew – whose start times are staggered between 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 a.m. – generally engage in casual chit-chat about their lives outside of work rather than venting about service, as it has not happened yet. Based on both my observations and personal experience in the industry, complaints about a shift rarely carry over to the next day unless something truly exceptional happens. Once the shift ends, so does the frustration; by the time a new day begins, workers are prepared to face whatever comes next.

During weekday day shifts, the team typically consists of twelve to fourteen people. This includes four to five kitchen staff: prep cooks, a line opener, and various positions on the line, commonly referred to as the fryer station, flat top or grill station, sauté or pan station, and salads/desserts. In some establishments, prep cooks transition to the line for service before returning to prep, while in others, there are designated line cooks and prep cooks. It is not common to have a dishwasher scheduled during the day, so this task becomes communal, with BOH staff working together between lulls to stay on top of it. FOH staffing includes two openers (one for the bar side and one for the dining room), two hosts, and one to three additional servers, depending on the season. FOH staff, excluding the openers, are usually scheduled to begin between 11:30 a.m. and 12:00 p.m. An opening manager arrives at 9:00 a.m., while a mid-shift manager starts between 12:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m., depending on the time of year and projected guest volume.

Staffing for evening shifts is structured to accommodate the higher volume of guests and increased service demands. In the BOH, staffing typically remains at 4-5 individuals, but unlike the day shift, a dishwasher is scheduled to manage the heavier load of dishes throughout the night. In the FOH, staffing increases to include 2-3 hosts, an expo, and a takeout person. On busier evenings, there is one person specifically scheduled for takeout and another for expo, while on quieter nights, a single person may handle both roles. The evening crew also includes a closing bartender, a closing restaurant server, and up to 8 additional servers, depending on the projected sales volume.

Initiation Pranks

So far, my analysis of language-play has primarily focused on humor and stress relief in the workplace. Although I could easily spend days discussing the numerous ways I joke with co-workers and guests alike, something unexpected stood out to me; I was already aware that staff often gather at two principal areas during shifts, the bar-service well and the expo line, what I had not fully realized was just how vital the expo line is when it comes to initiation pranks. The expo line, providing a central area for the frenetic and chaotic energy that the hospitality industry thrives on, provides the perfect space for initiation pranks to originate. For newcomers, or newbies as they are referred to by a number of participants, to both the industry and the establishment, this space is a stage where veterans engage in subtle, often humorous forms of socialization. The pranks that are placed on the newbies mark them as being given entry into the workplace culture.

In many ways, initiation pranks are more than just joking. They are a form of communication that reinforces the social hierarchies, which is the veteran staff orchestrating the testing of the newcomer, which will then lead to a sense of belonging, regardless of if they catch on to the prank or fall to it. The dual purpose of playfulness and displaying the hierarchical structures is evident in the many pranks that I've encountered or observed; these pranks are harmless, often invoke a laugh out of those involved, and connect the new initiate with the elders through the bond of having been through the same situation. Though the nature of these pranks is often playful, they are reflective of the way the service industry operates, offering a nuanced interpretation on the nature of power, and the vulnerability and need for support in high pressure environments.

Popular media representation of the restaurant life, such as the television show *The Bear*⁴⁸ and the movie *Waiting*⁴⁹ portray the various paths one takes when entering this industry and an overall understanding of the demands of this industry. Throughout its seasons *The Bear* accurately portrays the high-pressure, chaotic environment that is the kitchen. The series highlights the need for strong connections within a team to allow for open and clear communication. On the other end of the spectrum, *Waiting* portrays initiation pranks as essential to the overall narrative of the restaurant industry. Despite the overly sexualized and blurred homo-erotic/homophobic pranks shown in *Waiting* not being factual representation of pranks that have been done in the past, it does accurately present the blurring of heteronormative narratives often shared among close co-workers who have gone through their initiation phase.

In an earlier iteration of my research, I explored how individuals in the restaurant industry blur the lines between professional roles and personal relationships through humor and interaction. A key element in this exploration was the way staff members would joke with each other, often referring to someone of the same sex as their work wife/husband. These playful, almost familial titles reflect the intimate, close-knit dynamics that form among co-workers in high-pressure environments like kitchens and dining rooms. While these relationships may seem outwardly flirtatious or sexual in nature – characterized by comments about appearances, playful ass-slapping, or lighthearted teasing – they are, in reality, a form of candidness and camaraderie. Staff

⁴⁸ *The Bear*, created by Christopher Storer (2022; Los Angeles, CA: FX Productions, 2022), streaming on Disney+

⁴⁹ *Waiting*, written and directed by Rob McKittrick (Santa Monica, CA: Lions Gate Films, 2005), DVD.

members often use humor, at times crossing boundaries of appropriateness, as a way of fostering trust and easing the emotional toll of the job. For example, jokes about someone's appearance, whether they are admired for their revealing clothes or teased about their choice of work attire, serve as a means of affirmation and connection, even though the context might appear flirtatious to an outsider. These interactions, while often bordering on inappropriate, are essential to the social fabric of the workplace, helping employees maintain a sense of normalcy and relief amidst the pressures of service.

As I began to reflect more on the pranks shared with me through my own research structure, I realized just how deeply they are connected with the survival strategies they express. Below I have compiled the two most discussed initiation pranks that I gathered through my interviews. I will discuss the cause and effect of each one, and the various transmission that were described. I will note here, to avoid unnecessary repetition, that through all these pranks, veteran staff perform them as a show of power, as well as initiating first contact, marking a newbie as potentially worthy.

Contextualizing the Pranks

“Fetch the [. . .]”

Narrative: A favorite among kitchen staff, however front staff do partake. This prank involves sending the new guy into the walk-in cooler, or dry storage, to retrieve an item that does not exist. Some of the most common “items” include:

- a. Bucket of steam
- b. Gallon of air

- c. Ice-mix for the ice machine.
- d. A bacon stretcher
- e. Banana straightener

Effect: Like the fetching of a left-handed item, once the newbie is sent out, the rest of the staff watches as they search the kitchen for the items. This prank serves similar functions to the previous prank: it tests the server's patience, their ability to handle frustration, and how well they can think on their feet when faced with an impossible task.

Transmission: This prank is typically passed down through word of mouth, with veteran workers sharing it as a rite of passage. It thrives in kitchens with a keen sense of camaraderie, where it fosters collective humor and serves as a lighthearted way to deal with the pressures of a chaotic work environment.

“The Left-Handed [. . .]”

Narrative: A veteran server recounts the numerous left-handed items that they have sent new employs to look for. The prank being that all these items do not have a designated left- or right-handed orientation. This list included the “left-handed” . . .

- a. Coffee pot
- b. Spatula
- c. Broom/Mop
- d. Debit Machine

e. Pot or Pan

Once the newbie has been sent out on their mission, the rest of the staff would watch as they searched, offering suggestions on where they should look next. This prank serves several functions: it tests one's patience, their ability to think critically and their willingness to ask for help (or not) on an easy task.

Transmission: This prank has been passed down through word of mouth. It is easy to share, driven by humorous relief when the newcomer recognizes the senseless task.

Role and Effect of Initiation Pranks

Initiation pranks in the restaurant industry are not just set in place to be an act of humor; they serve multiple functions within the workplace. On one level, they are bonding rituals, but on another they are a method of socialization, not only teaching newcomers the dynamic environment of the restaurant industry, but also used as an icebreaker, shifting the base-level connection of co-workers behaving formally toward each other, and stepping towards familiarity.

On a deeper level, these pranks allow for members of the group to reconnect with each other as they reminisce on the initiation pranks, they went through, or the more memorable ones they've witnessed, often referred to as being a legendary prank. One such legendary prank was shared with me over the course of several interviews and perspectives. The following is the comprehensive version shared with me during a cutlery rolling night.

We had this one guy here years ago, God love him it was a good thing he was cute cause he wasn't the brightest. I don't know how many times he fell for it, but we sent him off on soooo many wild goose chases. I think we sent him out for something new every few months, changing up where he would need to go look. One of the best ones though was getting [lists four other restaurants near by] to play along. So, one day, we told him that we specifically need a bag of Himalayan salt, and a bag of the pink powder to mix together. I don't know who told him this story but somewhere along the line he was told that the salt is pink because when they are out harvesting the salt off of the mountain and their pack donkeys would fail, they would kill them right there on the mountain, slice their throats and that's why the salt is pink and where the minerals come from. Well, oh my god I don't remember what [they] said but [they] can tell it better.

Oh ya, well I don't remember what we were doing, but somehow, we got on talking about the poor donkeys and the rock salt. He said something about how he felt bad so many would have to die to get the pink all over the mountain. Well, I, without thinking, just said that they don't just let the blood free flow, they take and dry it, cause you know when salt get wets it clumps, so the blood would need to be dried. So, ya, from then on, he thought that the blood got dried and mixed in with the salt. So anyways, we had a bet going on to see how long, how many restaurants we could send him to get a bag of salt and a bag of [dry blood] mix. He came back rather grumpy, someone at [the third restaurant] let him in on the joke. It went on for maybe two weeks. I don't think that could happen again....

Several individuals overheard this story and started discussing how they never experienced something akin to a fool's errand. This shocked me, but because I included a question regarding initiation pranks as part of my structured interviews, I soon discovered that with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic there was a significant shift in the dynamic of pranks occurring during on-boarding. With the introduction of smaller cohorts, stricter safety protocols and a heightened sense of working together separately⁵⁰,

⁵⁰ This sentiment that was brought up when asked if felt that working during a pandemic made them feel as if they weren't as close with their cohorts as individuals who on-boarded when there were less restrictions.

those who entered the industry during, or since, the pandemic expressed a feeling of having missed experiencing some of the pranks they've heard being shared. Interviews with these employees suggested a longing for the sense of connection that pranks once provided. One interviewee went as far as to say that we should bring those back. They sound fun and would be a great way to bond together!

Material Culture

Introduction

Material culture in the restaurant industry extends far beyond the food and the dining experience. Workplaces are shaped not only by the people who inhabit them but also by the physical objects they rely on. Material culture encompasses everything from the tools of the trade and the spatial layout of workstations, down to the smallest items, such as the rolling cutlery or pieces of art left by guests. The tools, uniforms, and physical space where the job is done do more than serve a functional purpose; they carry history, tradition, and unspoken rules that shape workplace culture. In folklore studies, this intersection of objects and meaning falls under the study of material culture – these are the tangible aspects of human experience that reflect social relationships, identity, and tradition, providing insight into how workers interact with their environment, establish group identity, and negotiate their place within a broader occupational world.

Within the food and beverage industry, material culture plays a particularly significant role in shaping the rhythms of daily labor. The tools of service work are not merely instruments of efficiency but also markers of status, memory, and belonging. A

well-worn apron, a favored knife, or the style of the kitchen space can all communicate knowledge, authority, or even humor in ways that words often do not. Through an ethnographic lens, examining these objects offers a deeper understanding of how workers create meaning in their profession, reinforce social structures, and engage in the shared rituals that define their work environment.

Material Culture in Service

A prominent feature of material culture within a restaurant is what has been referred to as the wall of fame and the wall of shame. The wall of fame is a space, often found on the communication board on the expo line, where servers post little notes or drawings left by guests, as it is a communal space. These can range from children's doodles to kind messages about a server's exceptional service. In contrast, some restaurants, though not the one where this fieldwork was conducted, have a hidden wall of shame. This is typically found behind the bar or in the manager's office and is where staff post more humorous or negative messages from guests. These can include passive-aggressive complaints, bizarre requests, or even phone numbers left for the server and/or bartender. Outside of the physical establishment of a restaurant, one can find these posted on social media pages and Reddit threads dedicated to the service industry, that highlights some of the most absurd wall of shame entries, such as napkins scrawled with unhinged customer rants, receipts with \$0 tips and smug notes about earning it, or creepy messages. These walls serve as both catharsis and entertainment, offering a collective space for venting about the absurdity of the job.

The Ritual of Rolling

A mundane task, rolling cutlery is a fundamental aspect of service work, deeply embedded with routines, interactions, and even occupational humor. It is a task performed on autopilot, yet it also becomes a moment of community, and a space to vent frustration or just relax and take a moment break.

Rolling cutlery is a ritual that can occur at any time: the end of a shift, before service begins, during slow periods when there is a moment to breathe and in the middle of an all-out rush. The process itself is straightforward: collect clean silverware from the dishwasher, polish it to a shine, place it in a napkin, roll it, and secure it with a sticker or a fold. Yet, within this simple sequence, variations in technique become markers of personal work style and even social belonging.

Some workers prefer efficiency-driven methods learned from past kitchen experience: unfolding all napkins first, stacking them neatly, rolling multiple sets at once, and then binding them in batches. Others follow a more individualized approach, completing one roll-up at a time from start to finish. These differing techniques can become the subject of lighthearted teasing, often framed through claims of obsessive-compulsive tendencies. As one server put it, I just couldn't do that, my OCD wouldn't allow me, a statement that is commonly overheard in restaurant settings, and often reflecting a misunderstanding of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and one who prefers their own routine. Given that approximately 1% of the Canadian population has OCD⁵¹, it is unlikely that over half the restaurant staff truly experience the disorder.

⁵¹ Canadian Psychological Association, "Psychology Works Fact Sheet: Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder," <https://cpa.ca/psychology-works-fact-sheet-obsessive-compulsive-disorder/>.

These interactions reflected not only how workers cope with the pressure of their job through humor, but also how neurodivergence is sometimes misinterpreted or playfully acknowledged in the workplace. This topic will be explored below as this rhetoric is part of the broader language-play in restaurant culture, where mental health terminology is used colloquially to describe workplace behaviors. This kind of language-play is pervasive in the industry, blending occupational jargon with exaggerated personal quirks as a way to bond over shared routines.

Rolling Styles and Material Culture

The technique used to roll cutlery is often dictated by the type of napkin available. Cloth napkins typically allow for a fully enclosed roll, while smaller paper napkins leave the utensil ends exposed. Even though variation in rolling styles exists between individuals, these structural differences are primarily dictated by necessity. Unlike other aspects of restaurant service that have undergone automation, factory-packed rolled cutlery does not exist for dine-in establishments, only for takeout orders. The physicality of rolling remains an integral part of the work experience, reinforcing the idea that even the simplest acts in the industry are deeply embedded in material culture.

Cutlery Rolling Parties

In high-volume establishments, particularly in casual family dining establishments, rolling cutlery often extends past closing time, leading to what workers refer to as cutlery parties. These gatherings, while still a form of work, offer a rare

moment of collective decompression after a long shift. The necessity of preparing copious quantities of roll-ups due to high customer turnover creates an environment where camaraderie thrives, even in exhaustion. Rolling cutlery is a task that occurs both during shifts and at the end of the night. During active service, it is typically handled on a "need it" basis, with servers rolling cutlery as required for their own tables, while also managing other side duties such as bussing tables, maintaining ice wells, and clearing the expo line. In contrast, at the end of shift, particularly when staffing is lower (usually only two or three employees remain), the responsibility for completing all the cutlery falls to the remaining staff. This end-of-shift cutlery task often turns into a shared responsibility, resulting in what are sometimes referred to as “cutlery parties,” where the task is completed in a more communal, albeit less formal, atmosphere.

These gatherings, though driven primarily by necessity, can take on a social dimension. As the night winds down, there’s a unique energy that emerges in these late, half-exhausted moments. The humor in these situations often reflects a mix of relief, frustration, and camaraderie – exaggerated complaints about customers, absurd hypothetical scenarios, and even impromptu comedy skits, with the cutlery itself becoming a prop for creative expression. However, this ritual tends to be reserved for high-volume nights; lower traffic shifts rarely see these same post-shift cutlery rituals develop, as fewer staff members are needed, and the workload is lighter.

Management Participation: Performative or Genuine?

Despite being considered backstage work, rolling cutlery is often done in semi-visible areas, such as the expo line, where customers may still observe staff. However,

this is also one of the times when workers let loose and engage in unfiltered conversation. Michael Bell's concept of "bullshitting" in *The World from Brown's Lounge* describes the ritualized nature of workplace talk, where storytelling, teasing, and playful exaggeration create camaraderie among workers⁵². The cutlery station, though physically separated from the dining area, becomes a prime location for such exchanges, as the task is monotonous enough to allow for casual conversation but necessary enough that management cannot interrupt without consequence.

Interestingly, cutlery rolling is also one of the few tasks where management will often participate, albeit in a different social role. Unlike their usual presence on the floor - where they are engaging with guests - rolling cutlery provides a rare opportunity for them to interact with staff in a more casual setting. This interaction is often different from the camaraderie among hourly workers, but it remains a moment where the usual hierarchy is slightly blurred, allowing for more open exchanges. Managers may use this as an opportunity for a performative gesture to demonstrate teamwork, others take it as an opportunity to check in on staff in a way that feels more natural than direct inquiries. However, outside of work hours, these interactions rarely translate into genuine social bonding, maintaining the division between management and hourly workers. A manager might roll cutlery and share a joke, but once the task is accomplished, the divide is back in place. This space, therefore, represents a fleeting, transient sense of community that is primarily functional, where both workers and managers momentarily come together in a shared experience of work rather than genuine social bonding. The sense of connection

⁵² Michael J. Bell, *The World from Brown's Lounge: An Ethnography of Black Middle-Class Play*, Chapter 1 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

that emerges here is not lasting; instead, it reflects the temporary suspension of the usual divisions in the high-pressure environment of the restaurant.

Humor, Coping Mechanisms, and Neurodivergence

Amid the tediousness of rolling cutlery, humor becomes a necessary coping mechanism. Common jokes among workers include exaggerated frustrations, such as wanting to stab themselves with a fork or dramatically pretending to knight a co-worker with a butter knife. Teasing about rolling styles is also common, often taking the form of confused observations rather than outright critiques of "what are you doing differently than everyone else?" illustrating the way minor deviations from the norm become sites of micro-social interactions.

While the restaurant industry may not be teeming with individuals with OCD, it does tend to attract neurodivergent workers, particularly those with ADHD. The fast-paced nature of the work, the demand for rapid problem-solving, and the ever-changing interactions with customers align well with ADHD traits such as adaptability and the ability to thrive under pressure⁵³. In many ways, the industry itself is structured around short, high-intensity bursts of activity, making it an environment where neurodivergent individuals can excel. The ability to function in a chaotic, unpredictable setting is a valuable skill, and while neurodivergence is not always openly discussed in professional kitchens or dining rooms, the industry's culture often reflects a deep understanding of

⁵³ American Culinary Federation, "ADHD and the Culinary Mind," *National Culinary Review* (September-October 2022), https://issuu.com/acfnationalculinaryreview/docs/ncr_2022_sepoct_digital_rdc/s/20368600#:~:text=It's%20a%20fast%20paced%20high,asset%20in%20cooking%20and%20hospitality.

how different cognitive styles operate. In fact, neurodivergent workers naturally engage in language-play as a way to process stress, turning frustrations into jokes or using repetition and pattern-based speech to keep their minds engaged in repetitive tasks like rolling cutlery.

The act of rolling cutlery is more than just a closing duty or a mechanical process, it is a moment of respite, a site of social interaction, and a reflection of the broader occupational folklore of restaurant workers. From the language used to describe personal habits to the rhythms of teamwork and teasing, this simple act encapsulates much of the culture and community that defines life in the service industry.

Entering the Mystical Worlds of a Restaurant

Introduction

The following narrative is a composite of multiple shifts, merged together to highlight the recurring patterns, interactions, and coping mechanisms that shape life in the restaurant industry. No single night would fully capture the relentless pace, the absurdity, and the camaraderie of service work, so this account distills common experiences into a single shift, one that any seasoned server would recognize as both chaotic and all too familiar.

For this piece, I have assigned characters names from the popular TV show *2 Broke Girls*⁵⁴. These names serve as a nod to the representation of restaurant work in

⁵⁴ *2 Broke Girls*, created by Michael Patrick King and Whitney Cummings (Los Angeles: Warner Bros. Television, 2011-2017), streaming on Amazon Prime

pop-culture, while providing anonymity for the participants. The individuals portrayed here are influenced by real people I observed and/or interviewed, but none are exact representations of any single person. Instead, they are amalgamations of industry archetypes; the veteran server who's seen it all, the co-worker who always has perfectly timed sarcastic quips, the manager who remains oblivious to the chaos unfolding right in front of them, and the new hire who insists they know what they're doing while their section burns around them.

Through this narrative, I aim to illustrate how the restaurant shift itself becomes the antagonist, pushing workers to their limits, demanding adaptability, and forcing them to rely on humor, ritual, and each other to make it through. Beneath the banter and the breakneck pace lies a deeper reality. one that outsiders may see as a fairy-tale of effortless hospitality, but those inside know is a relentless, unpredictable, and often darkly comedic battlefield.

A Tale of Service: A Journey Through the Friday Night Rush

Stepping through the back doors, Max is immediately hit with the scent of fryer oil and of onions sizzling on the flattop. She nods a greeting to the line cooks as she dodges a food runner balancing a precarious stack of plates.

“Hey, how's it going?” she asks as she watches Oleg who's mechanically munching on a plate of fries with the enthusiasm of a zombie.

“Oh, you know. Living the dream. But, like, a dream where you forgot to study for finals, your teeth are falling out, and you’re naked in public, all while on hour thirteen of a double clo-open” Oleg deadpans. “Oh wait, that last one isn’t a dream.”

Max snorts. “So, the usual?”

“Pretty much. We’re all suffering,” replies Han, passing by with a tray of condiments and a thousand-yard stare.

“Love that for us.”

Someone nearby chuckles, another mutters a half-hearted “kill me now so I don’t hafta punch in,” and the night’s camaraderie is established.

As Max heads to the staff area, she overhears the day staff chatter, one complaining about a table that camped for three hours at lunch. Another swears, for the fifth time this week, that they’re quitting. It’s a symphony of shared suffering, and Max loves it. Sort of.

After clocking in, Max checks the 86’d board: No spinach dip. No frozen margaritas. And running low on house Merlot. Guests will definitely throw tantrums about that. But in the corner, a new masterpiece catches Max’s eye: a (somewhat used) napkin with hearts, stars and flowers surrounding a stick figure, with bushy hair, and big blue eyes. Below it, a scrawled note:

"Our server Caroline was AWESOME!"

Max smirks. “Well, at least someone had a good time, and it looks just like her!”

Heading over to the host stand to check her section, Max scans the reservation book. Her face falls. “A fifteen-top? Are you kidding me?”

Strolling up with a clipboard in hand and a little too smug look on her face, Peach, the Manager on Duty, pipes in. “Oh, you saw it’s in your section? Lucky you! You get the biggest table of the night; means you get the biggest tips!”

“‘Lucky’ isn’t the word I’d use,” Max mutters. “But sure, let’s call it that.”

The shift starts suspiciously smoothly. Orders flow, tables turn, guest are happy and laughing. But, as the night starts to pick up pace, the kitchen starts to slow down. The lobby fills, kids are screaming as they run between tables not paying attention to anyone, the phones won’t stop ringing, and guests at the door are complaining about wait times. The restaurant has become pure chaos.

As one of Caroline guests at Table 12 demands their well-done steak be “juicy, not dry, with a little bit of pink still.” “*That would be medium then dumbass, bet they’ll yell at me when their well-done steak comes out well-done*” she thinks to herself. Heading to the POSie screen, Caroline starts to complain to herself, and anyone who’ll listen. “I hate tables sometimes. Why is it, when I look at you and say “Can I grab you anything else? They all say no, but the second I step away, they flag down the host and ask for another beer? Like, really, why the host? Ya do realize that the host can’t get that for you, right? They aren’t me.”

From behind Caroline, Oleg pipes in with “Nope, they sure don’t. They think that anyone working here are at their beck and call. They don’t care that the host is only

sixteen. But ya know what's worse than that? Your table 12 over there? They've flagged me down twice now for more waters, with extra extra lemons and extra extra EXTRA sugar for their coffee....are they missing a coffee?"

"No, they never ordered coffee. I brought them lemonade and they snapped at me cause 'we don't want lemonade, we want waters.' Well, ya know what, I don't care! I'm not cutting three freaking lemons and cleaning up a pound of sugar just cause you don't want to pay for lemonade."

Simultaneously, Oleg and Caroline mutter "Fricking people!", laughing as they headed over to the expo window, listening to the chefs yelling for food-runners.

As she's filling drinks from the fountain pop station on expo line, Max is muttering under her breath as she tries to get things for her tables: "Table 2 needs ranch, table 5 needs ketchup, table 3 wants me to sing a birthday song. F-me, I'll just stop everything right now to sing to your kid, who is crying cause they don't want that, and you can be the one to tell the wine-moms next to you why their next bottle took me so long to get. Why is table 1 looking at me? I'm not their server, I don't think? Shit, maybe I am...No. No, I'm not, I've never been there, but they have food. Shoot, what did the dad at the big table want? Diet Pepsi? No, Root Beer? I'll bring both. Ugh, I need to pee, crap, why is that guy staring? Did he just SNAP HIS FINGERS AT ME?!?! Nope, not my table, not my problem. Where's my appies for Table 5?? Oh FUCK! I forgot to send them in... crap crap crap...it's ok, I'll just tell them the kitchen dropped them when plating and a new order in already."

Then, from behind Max, a crash happens. Looking over, she sees that the new host has dropped a full tray of glasses and is standing there with tears in her eyes. “First time breaking something?” she asks her. The host nods her head slowly. “It’s alright, we’ve all done it, just means you’re part of the crew now!” Behind her, she hears a sharp intake of breath, Earl was cleaning up the shattered glass and he sliced himself from palm to the wrist. “Well, that sucks... I missed the vein,” Earl jokes “Guess I’ll have to aim better next time.” And then, because one crisis is never enough, Caroline takes one look, goes ghost-white, and faints hard, cracking her head against the stainless-steel counter.

For a moment, everyone on expo line and in the kitchen freezes. Then, controlled chaos ensues. Oleg shouts to anyone who’ll listen to get Peach. Someone else hands him a bundle of towels, as he hollers at the new host to grab some ice to put on Caroline’s head for the swelling. Even though she’s laying unconsciousness, and not showing signs of coming to, the night doesn’t stop.

“Oh, man,” Max mutters. “Why does she get to slack off and sleep on the job?”

“Right? Selfish,” Oleg deadpans, barely stifling a laugh as he shoves a plate onto a tray and heads back to his bar.

Sure enough, there’s no pause - the relentless shift does not slow down as Peach refuses to put a full stop at the door, muttering something about “guests not needing to know what’s happening.” The servers continue to work around their down colleagues as they wait for the arrival of the EMTs, weaving through the madness with practiced ease. Plates go out, bills are dropped, smiles remain in place.

Finally, the paramedics arrive. And this is when the guests finally notice. Forks pause mid-air. Conversations slow. The guests, blissfully unaware until now, suddenly realize they are dining in the middle of an active emergency.

As Max keeps her composure, she heads over to take payment for one of Caroline's tables. "Hope you enjoy the rest of your night!" she says in a chipper tone as the table watches their server get wheeled out the door on a stretcher, Earl following behind, arm held up awkwardly, bandages wrapping up his forearm. Max notes a look of concern on their faces and thinks to herself "huh, they didn't look so concerned when they were arguing with her earlier...wonder what they must think of us for not stopping service."

Heading over to the bar, Max eyes the chits sitting at the service station waiting to be ran. "Hey, Oleg...where's the bottle of Merlot for the Wine Moms?" Laughing, Oleg replies, "Sorry love, we're out. But I have something better for you," winking at Max. "Oh ya? I doubt you'll have anything I want right now, this night forgot to kiss me before it screwed me" she laughs. "Oh, you'll love this. Its dark, rich and... creamy" he says slowly, sliding an espresso shot across the counter. "Yesssss, I'll take it!" Max laughs as she hops behind the bar to enjoy the momentary caffeinate relief it gives her. "And this is why I love you the most-est! Wish me luck with the Wine Moms!" "Luck!"

Finally, the night ends. Max rolls cutlery alongside everyone else, recounting the night's horrors with her comrades-in-arms. "I swear, if I ever go down, make sure I hit my head hard enough, so I don't wake cause I doubt hell is any worse than this." Han

grins back at Max, “I’ll throw a menu over you to keep you warm, cause hell will have frozen over before you get out of this place.”

As Max grabs the last set of cutleries from Han’s to bind, she replies “Well duh! But ya’ll know how it is, Peach’s would reach out to me with a Ouija board to see if I’ll be making my next shift!” Laughter bubbles up around her at this, everyone muttering their agreement. “Damn it, I shouldn’t have laughed... I forgot I still had to pee and it’s back so bad that my back teeth are floating...” “Just go, we’ll finish up here,” Oleg says, stacking the last of the cleaned menus with a dramatic sigh. Max hesitates for half a second before bolting for the bathroom, calling back, “If I’m not back in five minutes, I’ve passed out. Just leave me there, alright, I open tomorrow anyways.”

“She’s not coming back,” Han mutters, shaking his head. “Good for her,” Earl grunts, tossing his apron onto the counter. “If she’s smart, she’s already halfway to the parking lot.”

As they finish the last of the closing tasks, receipts get counted, floors get mopped, and one by one, everyone clocks out, tosses back their post-shift drinks and slip into the night like ghosts escaping purgatory. Max re-emerges from the bathroom just as Han is about to leave. “You survived,” he notes. “Barely,” she replies. “If I get another 15-top tomorrow, I might just walk out and say screw ‘em.” Han claps her on the shoulder. “Nah, you’ll be back. We always are.”

With a groan, Max pushes open the back door and steps into the cool night air, counting down the far to few hours before she’ll be back to do it all over again.

Chapter 5: Discussion & Conclusions

The Role of Language-Play in Workplace Bonding

Up to this point in my research, I have discussed how language-play, specifically ritual teasing in the form of initiation pranks and dark humor, is a tool commonly used within the hospitality industry, more notably its use by food and beverage service employees. The extent and style of how someone would engage in language-play is shaped by various external factors, including their experience within the industry, the current workplace culture, their audience and the immediate context. As new hires and those new to the industry adapt to the flow of their shifts, they gradually become more at ease with their co-workers and the way they joke and joke and poke fun at each other. Even if they do not actively participate in the dark humor or teasing, their increased comfort becomes apparent; instead of avoiding moments where they may have felt discomfort with the language used, they begin to respond with a quiet laugh or shared smile, signaling the connection that has started to form.

These interactions play a critical role in identity formation and socialization within the workplace. Michael J. Bell expresses occupational identity in service work as performative, requiring workers to adopt personas to navigate both social and professional roles⁵⁵. Aligning with this concept, my research demonstrates how the use of humor allows servers to maintain their frontstage performance while utilizing backstage spaces to express their authentic frustrations.

⁵⁵ Bell “The World from Brown’s” 72

My findings are also supported by Erving Goffman's frontstage/backstage framework, which reinforces the concept that service workers' language is dependent on their audience. The moment employees step away from the eyes of the guests, the shift in language is immediate. This is where and when occupational folklore thrives, with inside jokes, verbal shorthand, and ritualized teasing forming the foundation of workplace relationships. As much of the existing literature has focused on the customer and service worker dynamic, my research contributes by emphasizing the internal, worker-focused use of humor, filling a critical gap in discussions on occupational folklore.

Post-COVID Shifts in Restaurant Culture

Another key finding is the noticeable shift in workplace humor and bonding events post-COVID. The pandemic disrupted traditional initiation practices, with smaller cohorts and stricter workplace regulations reducing opportunities for classic pranks and teasing rituals. As a few of my participants noted, they felt a sense of "missing out" and a feeling of disconnectedness from the oral traditions and inside jokes that defined earlier service industry experience due to them having started in this industry during or post-COVID. They also noted that they would like to bring back initiation pranks and rekindle the tradition.

This aligns then with Marsh's⁵⁶ concept of joking as a social initiator, and when these rituals are removed or diminished, the workplace risks losing a crucial mechanism for building cohesion. Additionally, this generational shift highlights a broader cultural change in the service industry, where workers increasingly prioritize mental health and

⁵⁶ Marsh, "Believe Me, I'm Joking"

professional boundaries over endurance-based bonding rituals. The industry's historical tolerance for harsh humor as a survival mechanism is evolving, leaving space for discussions on how to balance camaraderie with inclusivity.

The Function of Humor as a Coping Mechanism

Echoing the findings of Muth⁵⁷ and Wilson *et al*⁵⁸ my research further supports the idea that humor serves as an essential coping strategy in high-stress environments. Service workers engage in morbid and exaggerated humor to create a sense of solidarity, which allows them to reclaim agency following difficult customer interactions and physically exhausting shifts. The ability to joke about crying in the walk-in freezer, being “railed” by the dinner rush, or treating exhaustion with espresso shots highlights the way humor reframes negative experiences into collective, manageable ones.

This research reveals a downside to this coping mechanism: when humor becomes the only acceptable form of processing workplace stress, it can prevent employees from addressing deeper issues, such as burnout, mental health struggles, or workplace exploitation. In other words, while humor is an effective short-term relief, it should not replace systemic solutions to industry-wide issues.

Implications for Workplace Well-Being

One of the most practical applications of this research is its potential to improve workplace well-being. Humor is not just a by-product of restaurant work; it is a

⁵⁷ Muth “Understanding the Mental Health”

⁵⁸ Wilson *et al* “If I Don’t Laugh, I’ll Cry.”

fundamental tool workers use to navigate the challenges they face as a part of their day. Nonetheless, humor cannot and should not be the only form of support one has to cope with their stress and mental health. If those within this industry wish to create a healthier and more sustainable work environment, they must recognize that humor can not replace meaningful structural support. To truly support their employees, management must distinguish between natural workplace humor and persistent jokes that signal burnout or mental strain. This would require tangible mental health resources, such as contact information for local resources, a willingness to discuss and implement flexible scheduling and advocate for industry-wide changes that would prioritize workers' well-being over profit.

Future Research: Cross-Industry Comparisons

As my research focused on a mid-size, family-focused establishment, it raises questions on how humor functions within other food and beverage venues. Future research could examine and compare how language-play is used in various establishments, such as food trucks, cafes and independent establishments, with consideration of the type of service they focus on – food, alcohol, entertainment or a space to relax. Expanding the scope to include these other venues could reveal the different forms humor takes as a coping mechanism and for building relationships. This type of cross-industry comparison would enhance the current understanding of occupational folklore.

Final Thoughts

The service industry is a relentless, often absurd environment, where the shift itself feels like an antagonist and humor is both armor and a weapon. While restaurant workers may joke about quitting during every bad shift, they return night after night, not just for the paycheck, but for the camaraderie forged in the trenches of endless refills, forgotten ranch dressings, and large parties that show up unannounced.

As this research has shown, language-play is not just a pastime, it is an essential part of surviving and thriving in the service industry. And if all else fails, at least there's always the walk-in freezer for a quick cry before rolling cutlery with your favorite co-worker.

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Glossary

Back of House (BOH) – 1. The areas of a restaurant that customers typically do not see, including the kitchen, dishwashing station, and storage areas. 2. Refers to employees who work in these areas, such as cooks and dishwashers.

Example: "I had to run to the back to grab take-out containers."

Example: "BOH is short-staffed tonight, so food is taking longer to come out."

Bartender – The person responsible for making drinks, serving alcohol, and managing the bar area, see ‘wood’. In many establishments that server food, the bartender will also have a section of tables ‘on the floor’. *Example: "The bartender was backed up, so my drinks took forever to come out."*

Board – The area in the kitchen or expo line where tickets (orders) are displayed for the kitchen staff. Also refers to the section or floor plan used to organize server assignments.

Example: "The board is full, so the kitchen is running behind on orders."

Example: "I got the worst section on the board tonight—it's all big tops and no turnover."

Campers – Customers who linger at a table long after finishing their meal, preventing table turnover.

Example: "My section would have flipped already, but I've got a table of campers just sitting there with empty glasses."

Close – The time when the restaurant ends daily operations.

Example: "We close at 10, but we still have customers sitting at a table."

Closer – The person scheduled to work until the restaurant officially shuts down for the night and completes final cleaning and closing duties.

Example: "I hate being the closer because I'm stuck rolling cutlery for an extra hour."

Clo-Open – When an employee works the closing shift and then the opening shift the next morning.

Example: "I have a clo-open tomorrow, so I won't get much sleep."

Cut – When a server is removed from the floor and stops taking new tables, usually in preparation to finish their shift.

Example: "I just got cut, lets hope my table doesn't stay long so I can leave."

Cutting the Board – When the manager cuts servers and reassigns sections to the remaining servers.

Example: "We're slowing down, so the manager is cutting the board and sending some people home."

Eighty-Six (86'd) – When an item is no longer available or a customer is asked to leave. Also used as part of servers' language-play to jokingly refer to running out of patience or energy.

Example: "We're 86'd on fries until the next shipment comes in."

Example: "That double shift 86'd my will to live."

Expedite Line (Expo Line) – The area where food is prepared to be sent out to customers, often managed by an expeditor.

Example: "The expo line is packed with tickets tonight."

Expeditor (Expo) – The person who ensures that food is plated correctly and sent out to the right tables in a timely manner.

Example: "The expo was getting frustrated because the kitchen kept messing up orders."

Floor – The dining area of a restaurant where guests are seated and served.

Example: "We need more servers on the floor tonight; it's way too busy."

Front of House (FOH) – 1. The areas of a restaurant where customers interact with staff, including the dining room and bar. 2. Also refers to employees who work in these areas, such as servers, bartenders and hosts.

Example: "I've worked both front and back of house, and FOH is definitely more chaotic."

Example: "FOH is handling a rush right now, so the hosts are scrambling to seat people."

In the Weeds – Overwhelmed with too many tasks or customers.

Example: "I just got triple-sat and now I'm in the weeds!"

Karen/Kyle – A demanding or entitled customer, often characterized by excessive complaints. Originally internet slang but has been adopted into everyday restaurant language.

Example: "That Karen sent her meal back three times and still wasn't happy."

Last Call – The final opportunity for customers to order food or drinks before the kitchen or bar closes.

Example: "Last call is in five minutes, so if you want another drink, order now."

On the Fly – A request to make something immediately, often due to a mistake or urgent need.

Example: "Table 12 never got their fries, we need their order on the fly!!"

Opener – The person working the first shift of the day, responsible for setting up.

Example: "As an opener, I start my side work before customers even arrive."

Sat – When a table is given to a server. If multiple tables are assigned to a server at once, they are double-sat, triple-sat, etc.

Example: "I just got sat, so I'll be with you in a second."

Example: "I got triple-sat and about to be in the weeds."

Shift – The scheduled hours an employee is expected to work.

Example: "I'm on the closing shift tonight, so I won't be home until late."

Side Work (Side Duties) – Additional tasks that servers must complete as a part of their shift, such as rolling silverware or refilling condiments.

Example: "My side work tonight is cleaning the soda machine."

Section – A group of tables assigned to a specific server.

Example: "I love my section tonight, its all booths!"

Service Hours – The time when a restaurant is actively serving customers.

Example: "We closed at 9, so we're no longer serving food or drinks, but you don't need to leave yet, just whenever you finish up."

Top (Two-Top, Four-Top, etc.) – The number of seats at a table.

Example: "I just got a six-top, so I hope they tip well."

Wood – The section of the bar where guests can sit and have drinks and/or food.

Example: "I prefer working the wood because the customers are usually just grabbing quick drinks and snacks."