REVIEW CULTURE AND THE GROWING SIGNIFICANCE OF CUSTOMER EVALUATION IN SERVICE WORK: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF REAL ESTATE BROKERS AND THEIR WORK

Alexis Bryson

A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of the Philosophy in the Department of Communication.

Chapel Hill
2017

Approved by:

Michele Berger

Sarah E. Dempsey

Steve May

Torin Monahan

Dennis Mumby

©2017
Alexis Bryson
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT

Alexis Bryson: Review Culture and the Growing Significance of Customer Evaluation in Service Work: A Qualitative Study of Real Estate Brokers and their Work
(Under the direction of Sarah E. Dempsey)

Review culture, or the recent proliferation of online evaluation and feedback by customers about their consumptive experiences, places the expectations, desires, and opinions of customers at the forefront of service relations and organizational decision making. This dissertation investigates how workers experience the demands created by review culture. While customer opinions tend to be framed as valuable for the organization, they can also have serious impacts for workers' livelihoods. The study is situated in the work of real estate brokers in central North Carolina who are at the forefront of service industries experiencing structural changes stemming from new modes of customer evaluation and participation. Qualitative methods offer insight into experiences of real estate work including the norms of self branding that underlie reviewing trends. Interviews with real estate brokers, observations from meetings, events, and trainings, cultural artifacts, and fieldwork illustrate how customer review practices are transforming work relationships in the real estate context. Drawing upon interview data, the study discusses the conditions under which brokers adopt, disregard, and contest customer's increasingly public evaluation of their services.

To identify ways that workers perceive and negotiate review culture, each chapter explores a different aspect of worker-customer engagement in person and online. Key contributions include detailing how brokers manage customer relations as sources of value, as

well the mediating role of digital platforms that both facilitate and regulate customer review procedures and everyday work. Taken together, the chapters demonstrate the spread and influence of review culture in real estate work, including the troubling finding that customers' subjective assessments potentially exacerbate norms and expectations of service workers. As my study suggests, the benefits that result from review culture are unevenly distributed, raising questions about what type of interventions might be needed. Ultimately, this study highlights the ways that review culture, and the proliferate publication, promotion, and protection of consumer voices, impact workers less prepared to mitigate—or capitalize—the effects of customer opinions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I want to thank my advisor, Sarah Dempsey, whose unflagging commitment to nurturing, supporting, and challenging my work has made this dissertation possible. Sarah has been a mentor, teacher, writing partner, and so much more, and I will always be grateful for her contributions to my development as a scholar.

I am deeply thankful for my committee members and their sustained interest and investment in my academic pursuits. Steve May inspired my dedication to studies in communication, with endless optimism and encouragement. Torin Monahan taught me the art of generous reading, collegiality, and confidence. Dennis Mumby generously shared knowledge that helped frame my understanding of critical organizational communication scholarship. Michele Berger offered guidance—her course on intersectionality in particular changed the way I think about the role of critical scholars. Many others in the department have gone out of their way to read my work, offer valuable insights, and contribute significantly to my reading, writing, and teaching as pillars of academic scholarship. I could not have accomplished this without all of you and I am sincerely grateful for your support.

As for my colleagues, Jessica Rich, your work will always be my "exemplar." To my cohort, I was lucky to be paired with you all. I am especially grateful for the kindness and kindred spirit of Lucy Burgchart and Mary Domenico.

Finally, to my family, you rock. To my husband, I love you bunches of boatloads. Thank you for your understanding of what it took to complete this dissertation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures……xi

Chapter 1: Introduction to Review Culture ……1

The New, Neoliberal Economy and Post-Fordist Work……6

The Acceptance of Risk……7

Identity and Authentic Selves……7

Service Work……..8

Emotion Labor……...8

Changing Relations of Control and Resistance……9

Customer Service Expectations……...10

Study Context: Real Estate Work……13

Selling Property, Selling Themselves...……...13

Defining Jobs in Real Estate: Agent, Broker, REALTOR®...……15

Demographic Features……17

Income Potential and Commission Structures……19

Norms of Professional Networking……21

Formal Regulation: Fair Housing and "real estate jail"…….....22

Chapter Overview……24

Chapter 2: Developing a Qualitative Study of Real Estate……31

Setting the Scene: North Carolina Real Estate Work……...31

Paying to Work……32

Real Estate Broker Licensing……...33

Professional Training: Learning How to Self-Brand……...35

Role Distinctions……..36

Professional Associations……...…….37

Using a Qualitative Approach……...38

Immersion in the Real Estate Scene……..40

Team Meetings…….41

Open House Observations……....43

Customer Appreciation Events……44

Career Night…….45

Education and Training……....46

Motivational Seminars……48

Ride Along Interviews……....51

Interview Participants……...53

Locating Industry Discourse: Textual Analysis……55

Interviewing in the Context of Real Estate……...56

Developing Interview Questions……...59

Qualitative Data Analysis and Interpretation……60

Chapter 3: Experiencing Review Culture……..64

The Rise of Online Customer Review Platforms……..66

Online Customer Review Practices in Real Estate……...68

Evaluating Brokers' Reports of Customer Reviews……68

Contextualizing the Significance of Reviews……..70

Managing Reviews as Standard Practice……75

The Cost of Review Culture……78

Managing Negative Reviews, Bullying, and False Reports……81

Questioning the Ethics of Review Culture: Gaming the System……88

Reconfiguring Organizational Responsibilities through Customer Labor……...89

Discussion……93

Chapter 4: Coached Customer Relations: The Buffini Method……98

Methods for Studying Career Coaching Discourses……...100

Data Analysis for Understanding the Buffini Method……..102

The Buffini Method……103

Broker Perceptions of Career Coaching……106

Disidentifying from "Bad" Brokers: "Nobody Else Knows What They're Doing"……..108

Identifying as "Valuable" ……112

Creating Intimacy with Customers: Being Your Friend To Get "A Client For Life"…...115

Top of Mind……...118

Pop Bys……..121

Customer Appreciation Events……..124

Practices of Inclusion and Exclusion: Selecting "The Referral Type"……..128

Quantifying Relationships: A+ Customers……132

Managing Social Identity……138

Professional Identity: When the Brand is Your Family……138

Managing Customer Biases……...140

Discussion……144

Chapter 5: Digital Platforms as a Mediating Force in Real Estate Work:
A Case Study of Zillow.com……...148

Methods for Studying Algorithms……..150
Contextualizing Digital Experiences: Introducing Zillow.com……..153
Evaluating Brokers' Perceptions of Zillow…….154
Sources of (Mis)Information: Contesting Zillow as Authoritative……157
Discerning Zillow Advertising……..162
Algorithmic Calculations: The Zestimate®……168
Agent Profiles: Sources, Syndication, and Data Management……...172
Displaying Customer Experience……...177
Soliciting Brokers to Solicit Reviews……177
Management Rules, Algorithmic Codes, and Human Intervention……...181
Discussion……...184
Zillow as Active Participant: Mediating Work, Accumulating Capital…….186
Challenging Transparency, Authenticity, and Trustworthiness…….188
Chapter 6: Conclusion: The Future of Service Work…….191
Significant Contributions……192
Control and Resistance……..193
Customer Reviews as Prosumption……...195
Emotion Labor and the Commodification of Relationships……..196
Strategies of (Dis)Identification...…….198
(Online) Reputation Management……..198
Reflecting on Study Methods…….199
Future Directions and Questions…….202
Customer Surveillance as Multi-Way Watching……...203
Citizenship through Consumption…….205

Social Identity, Difference, and Intersectionality……..198

Final Thoughts……209

Appendix A: Interview Guide……210

Appendix B: Review Culture Examples……..…212

References……220

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Hand written thank you note mailed to potential client……...91

Figure 2 – "Happy Mother's Day" gift mailed by a broker…….118

Figure 3 – Pop By cookie mix and recipe gift, "Don't get stuck with a 'crumby' realtor. Thanks for 'baking' the world a better place."……..…….122

Figure 4 – "Happy Thanksgiving" pumpkin pie given at a customer appreciation event……...126

Figure 5 – Collage of hand-written customer reviews on display at a restaurant……212

Figure 6 – Facebook post by HGTV stars Drew and Jonathan Scott requesting customers to review their new book on Amazon…..……..213

Figure 7 – Box requesting customer feedback on employee service on display at a Harris Teeter grocery store……...214

Figure 8 – Personal follow-up email requesting customer survey "they are my personal report cards… If for any reason at all you feel that you cannot give me a rating of truly exceptional or all 10's on that survey could you please contact me with feedback so that I may improve and deliver the level of service that you deserve and expect?"……..215

Figure 9 – Survey request "It will help us to make improvements to our organization over the coming year" emailed by Operation Warm…….216

Figure 10 – Survey request "As a thank you for your time, at the end of this survey you will have the option to be entered into our drawing to win a $250 Staples Gift Card" emailed by Staples…….217

Figure 11 – Customer survey request emailed by Qdoba……218

Figure 12 – Survey request "Just rate your meals, and you're done! You'll be entered to win this month's prize" emailed by Hello Fresh……...219

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO REVIEW CULTURE

On December 14th, 2016 President Barack Obama signed into law H.R. 5111, the "Consumer Review Fairness Act of 2016." The Act stipulates that a contract can become void "if it prohibits, or restricts, an individual from engaging in a review of a seller's goods, services, or conduct" (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2016). The Act, passed by unanimous vote in Congress, concretizes review culture, a phenomenon that motivated this study more than two years ago. Review culture characterizes the recent proliferation of online evaluation and feedback by customers about their consumptive experiences.

For just over a decade, since the creation of online venues designed specifically to accumulate and display customer comments and ratings, reading, writing, and sharing customer reviews have grown as significant social, cultural, and economic practices. According to the Federal Trade Commission, "honest consumer assessments" can be shared "in any form" including "reviews, social media posts, uploaded photos, videos, etc." (Federal Trade Commission, 2017). Customer review solicitation has become so prevalent that it can be difficult to escape businesses' requests for reviews following nearly any consumptive experience (Van Ogtrop, 2016). Review culture practices warrant critical attention, particularly in terms of how they are impacting workers already navigating the emergence of a service-based, post-Fordist economy defined through neoliberal conditions.

Imperatives of customer satisfaction in the present service society, alongside regularized public reprimand for noncompliance, have significant implications for ongoing

changes in the (service) workplace and the nature of work and organizing. By focusing on how a specific group of service workers are currently experiencing review culture, the study offers critical examination of changes to organizational life, including how the structures, processes, and sensibilities of customer reviewing shape everyday work lives. At the same time, I offer evidence that not only service professionals, but also customers, are facing a reorganization of responsibilities. Customers produce value poised for corporate capture when engaging in review culture. Performances of emotional expression and intimacy, once relegated to service workers, are a form of customer labor. Regardless of employment status, individuals are increasingly drawn into relationships that generate value through communicative interactions of opinion and experience sharing available for systematic capture by capital.

The Consumer Review Fairness Act draws into public debate the legitimacy of online customer reviews, which I locate as the most prominent demonstration of review culture's spread. Opponents of the Act, primarily business entities, argue that it impedes their ability to preserve a positive public persona. Recent findings demonstrate repercussions for businesses subject to consumer assessment. While businesses demonstrate an increase in sales from five to nine percent due to positive reviews, they also show a revenue drop as much as seventy percent due to negative reviews (Investopedia, 2013). Businesses argue that customers' negative comments are directly responsible for losses in revenue and reputation (CBS News, 2012, 2016; Associated Press, 2017). As early as 2012, popular news reports noted the increasing occurrence and rising significance of customer review lawsuits brought by businesses against their reviewers (Jouvenal, 2012). Since then, the number of business-brought lawsuits has continued to increase, with some success for businesses, on the grounds

of defamation, libel, slander, and harassment, as well as accusations of "clearly false or misleading" statements (Investopedia, 2013; Miles, 2015). Following these events, Yelp, Amazon, and other well-known customer review websites that circulate public customer reviews now offer suggestions on how to clarify reviews as *opinions* rather than statements of fact (Investopedia, 2013). In addition, Yelp instituted a policy to notify website users of recent legal action with an alert that states: "This business may be trying to abuse the legal system in an effort to stifle free speech, including issuing questionable legal threats against reviewers. As a reminder, reviewers who share their experiences have a First Amendment right to express their opinion on Yelp" (Chamlee, 2016). Customer review websites have also brought lawsuits against organizations that offer to publish positive reviews as a service such as Fiverr.com, Freelancer.com, and Buyamazonreviews.com (Greene, 2015; Tuttle, 2015). As they argue, these "fake" reviews can jeopardize the legitimacy of review platforms that advertise access to authentic experience sharing. As recent events indicate, there are significant financial stakes in the presence and content of customer reviews. Business reputations and finances depend upon positive reviews; websites have a stake in encouraging consumers to continue posting their reviews as valuable website content.

Proponents of the Customer Review Fairness Act frame customer reviews as a form of democratic public participation. The Act has been hailed as "a big step to protect free speech online" because it outlaws the use of "anti-review contracts"—colloquially termed "gag orders"—used to limit "customers' ability to criticize products and services online" by threat of legal or monetary recourse (Addady, 2016; Harmon, 2016). Online customer reviews are seen as reliable sources of credible and trusted information from "real people." A recent survey found that ninety-two percent of customers trust online reviews as much as

personal recommendations (BrightLocal, 2013). Sixty-seven percent of customers in this survey reported forming opinions after reading six reviews or less. Surveys signal how consumers are looking to each other for a perceived sense of honesty, openness, and trustworthiness uniquely available through experience sharing. However, customer evaluations are not simply a form of consumer "empowerment" (Kuehn, 2015), but rather can be subverted as websites monitor and mediate customer input and presence.

While there has been a lot of attention to review practices within ongoing debates over consumer rights and business autonomy, worker protections are not readily apparent as a cause for concern. There is critical need to understand how reviewing is affecting workers. This study contributes to organization and communication analyses of work by asking: How is review culture changing experiences of service work increasingly defined through customer participation and evaluation? My study builds upon recent findings to illuminate the potential consequences of discourses and practices of customer input and participation in reshaping the landscape of contemporary workplace procedures (Fleming, 2009; Hochschild, 2012; Tracy, 2000, 2005). By examining how workers experience customer service imperatives and practices of evaluation on an individualized level, I argue that review practices are significant sources of value as well as strain. Workers benefit from the reputation and brand value of workers' positive opinions. At the same time, coached methods for acquiring positive reviews inculcate continuous efforts to build lasting relationships with customers by drawing on entrepreneurial abilities and emotional labor (Fleming, 2009, 2013; Fleming & Sturdy, 2011; Hochschild, 2012; Tracy, 2000, 2005). Workers internalize customer service discourses and generate strict standards of customer interaction defined as "good service." Further, publicly shared evaluations about individuals, alongside information

about workers' reputations, careers, values, personality, personal behavior, social interactions, and overall public image, can affect organizational hiring, firing, and disciplinary decisions (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Berkelaar et al., 2014; Sperber, 2014). Despite efforts to nurture relationships and craft intimacy with customers, however, anxiety over the threat of negative reviews remains as a preoccupying force for many workers. At the same time, through intensive efforts to manage and control customer interactions, workers effectively expand organizational boundaries to integrate customers as members (Korczynski, 2001; Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Leidner, 1991, 1993; Ritzer, 2013; Sturdy, 2001; Sturdy, Grugulis, & Willmott, 2001). Customers take on the labor of marketing, branding, and generating new business when they write reviews, share opinions, and encourage others to transact with a particular real estate broker. Performances of emotional expression and intimacy, once relegated to service workers, become a form of customer labor. Further, workers, organizations, and corporate entities regulate rules for customers' emotional display. Brokers direct customers on where, how, and how often to share their opinions while organizational rules and resources support brokers' efforts to control the emotional responses and direct the behaviors of customers (Leidner, 1999).

By examining the reconfiguration of work responsibilities to include customers as organizational participants, the study contributes insights to critical approaches on practices of work, organizing, and communication with significant attention to (re)productions of power relations among service workers and their customers. Two significant transformations in work and labor relations inform this study. They include the transition to a new economy characterized by neoliberal, post-Fordist organizing principles and the rise of the service

industry as the primary mode of employment in the U.S. In the following sections, I outline the defining features of work in this new, customer service-oriented economy.

The New, Neoliberal Economy and Post-Fordist Work

Widespread transformations in the conditions and rules governing the employment relationship define the new economy and work under post-Fordist, neoliberal political, social, and economic conditions (Kalleberg, 2009, 2011). The shift from Fordist to post-Fordist organizing is defined by a loss of institutional protections that once safeguarded workers' rights, wages, benefits, and sense of security. The social contract between workers and employers, or loyalty to a single company in exchange for lifetime employment, is no longer the predominant employment relation. Instead, flexible organizational structures and work processes, together with a shift towards prioritizing short-term returns rather than long-term wellbeing of companies, has led to part-time, temporary, contract employment as the new norm with continuous movement of workers into new, unstable and insecure job roles (Gossett, 2006). Corporate downsizing, rightsizing, workforce restructuring, and outsourcing have become familiar strategies of workplace organizing (Kalleberg, 2009; Ross, 2009). These changes place an increasing degree of risk and responsibility on individual workers, rather than corporations, who navigate insecure work environments defined by constant change and reorganization and the dominance of nonstandard work conditions, flexible work arrangements, and fluid job roles (Beck, 2000; du Gay, 1996). Post-Fordist workplaces offer freedom, flexibility, and empowerment in exchange for unstable work conditions of constant change, precarity, instability, and uncertainty (Ross, 2009).

The Acceptance of Risk

Ideologies of individual ability and self-reliance underlie acceptance of risky work (Gregg, 2011; Kunda et al., 2002; Neff, 2012). In this environment, workers engage in learning, training, and skill development to continually qualify for 'better' jobs (Kunda et al., 2002; Lair, 2011). Coached practices of self-selling and personal branding pervade job searches and career aspirations (Lair et al., 2005; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). In exchange for successfully navigating nonstandard employment relations, post-Fordist organizations promise opportunities for personal fulfillment through creativity, innovation, expert knowledge, and continuous improvement (Costea et al., 2008; Ross, 2003). Yet, although workers readily accept individualized financial responsibility and risk, they often fail to recognize larger conditions guiding their decisions (Neff, 2012). Temporary or contact work is believed to be a choice rather than the result of structural conditions such as layoffs (Kunda et al., 2002). These conditions of the acceptance of risk as commonplace in contemporary work arrangements inform the present study.

Identity and Authentic Selves

Although instances of employee empowerment suggest that work enables greater individual freedom (particularly in flexible movement between jobs), recent analyses attest to the transformation to more subtle, disciplinary control mechanisms impacting possibilities for identity and subjectivity (Costea et al., 2008; Gregg, 2011; Lair, 2011). Rather than achieving self-actualization through work, employees who bring their "authentic" selves to the workplace are subject to newer, more covert processes of value capture and commercialization (Gregg, 2011; Fleming, 2009). For instance, organizations encourage

employees to share and display their identities, and then capture those identities as a source of value that supports the corporate brand (Land & Taylor, 2010).

The next section details the defining characteristics of the current consumption-based, service society that meaningfully shape experiences of work in the context of post-Fordist organizing, risky work, and identity through work.

Service Work

Service occupations are now the leading form of labor in the U.S. (Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996). They span tourism and transportation services, medicine, finance, arts, entertainment, sales, and recreation. The service industry comprises a wide range of jobs that produce intangible goods such as relations, feelings, ideas, meanings, symbols, emotions, and other intangible qualities, as well as services. Service interactions are fundamentally communicative and centered on production of relationships, as opposed to products. Service workers, or 'frontliners,' engage with customers and clients through face-to-face and/or voice-to-voice contact (Bishop & Hoel, 2008; Leidner, 1993). Service relations can be short term such as when customers order food from a restaurant worker or ask questions of a call center employee. Or they can be long term such as ongoing interactions with a lawyer, financial advisor, or real estate agent. Regardless of the time frame of interaction, customer service relations blur distinctions between product/service and producer/consumer so that production and consumption are simultaneous, inseparable processes (Korczynski, 2001, 2005; Leidner, 1993, 1996).

Emotion Labor

During the service process, workers are responsible for maximizing customer satisfaction. Emotion labor describes the fulfillment of customer needs, desires, and identities

through the conveyance of carefully crafted displays of affect, likability, and comportment (Fleming, 2009; Hochschild, 2012; Tracy, 2000, 2005). A significant feature following the shift to a service society, therefore, is how workers' moods, expressions, and attitudes increasingly become legitimate areas for customer supervision, intervention, and control (Leidner, 1996). Emotion rules, once developed and regulated by corporations, are now measured by customers as participants in the service relation. For instance, measures of customer satisfaction, including focus groups, written surveys, secret shoppers, and customer-instigated responses, are used to evaluate, monitor, and discipline workers (Fuller & Smith, 1996). Here, customers become a "boss" when sharing comments regarding thoughts, feelings, and experiences influence workers' attitudes, interactions, and decisions (Fuller & Smith, 1996, p. 85). Customer influence over subjective work experiences comes to the forefront of this study, particularly when customers direct the emotion labor, behavior, identity, and subjectivity of workers through myriad forms of evaluation including online reviews.

Changing Relations of Control and Resistance

More nuanced understandings of control and resistance struggles emerge, however, when considering customers as inseparable contributors alongside organizations and workers engaged in service processes (Korczynski, 2001; Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Leidner, 1991, 1993, 1996; Ritzer, 2013; Sturdy, 2001; Sturdy, Grugulis, & Willmott, 2001). In many service industries, for instance, customers interact, engage, perform particular roles, and contribute skills and knowledge that benefit organizations (Mills & Morris, 1986). These contributions can become a significant source of value. In such instances, organizational boundaries expand to incorporate customers as participants, temporary members, quasi-

workers, partial employees, or prosumers (Mills & Morris, 1986; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The term 'prosumer' describes when customers are actively engaged in productive capacities that benefit the corporation (Ritzer & Stillman, 2001; Ritzer, 2013). As prosumers, unpaid customer labor produces corporately captured value (Ball et al., 2010; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011; Korczynski, 2005; Leidner, 1996; Mills & Morris, 1986; Ritzer, 2013). For instance, customers perform labor through acts of consumption. Homes, bedrooms, and other nonwork spaces become locations of 'work' when customers surf the internet, click on websites, and submit personal information online (Gabriel et al., 2015). Access to individualized products and gaining a sense of enjoyment or empowerment becomes a justification for control over customers' labor, which is ubiquitously removed from common understandings of what constitutes production (Andrejevic, 2002; Ball et al., 2010; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011). This study offers additional insight into the push-and-pull dynamics of control and resistance among organizations, workers, and customers by demonstrating instances when customers engage as controlling figures and when they contribute as unpaid producers of value.

Customer Service Expectations

Structural changes to service work, including transformations in contemporary organizational relations to include the input of customers, customer opinion, influence, and involvement, are resulting in new forms of control and resistance relations unique neoliberal conditions and post-Fordist organizing. As others have recently demonstrated, customer service discourses colonize new domains of work (Sturdy, 2001) and exacerbate contemporary conditions of post-Fordist organizing (Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Sturdy, 2001). Expectations of service increasingly preoccupy organizational decision making (Fuller & Smith, 1996; Gabriel, 2008) and erode barriers of employee protection and retention already

subject to deterioration under neoliberal conditions of work (Bishop & Hoel, 2008; Wray-Bliss, 2001). The present study contributes further nuance by addressing long-term struggles of control and resistance within customer service relations that involve participation and value generation by workers as well as customers. What follows is a case study of how workers manage the current climate of service work under neoliberal conditions within jobs that are contractual, insecure, and entrepreneurial. Real estate workers are at the forefront of service industries experiencing structural changes stemming from new modes of customer review, evaluation, and participation. Real estate jobs are knowledge-intensive and skilled, yet contractual relations with customers depend upon communicative interaction that increasingly takes place *beyond* the service transaction. While there has been much critical focus on the changing conditions of work within neoliberalism, little research has explored how customer reviewing, both in person and online through new technological venues, is impacting service workers. The case study offers a unique opportunity to examine how real estate workers understand customer reviewing in a service industry long dependent upon positive customer relations and professional referral networks. The project pulls from interviews with real estate brokers, observations from meetings, events, and trainings, cultural artifacts, and fieldwork to examine how the increasing significance of customer review practices are transforming work relationships. Customer referrals, including online reviews, are central to workers' success in real estate careers as professional service work. My analysis of interview data reveals the conditions under which brokers adopt, disregard, and contest customer's increasingly public evaluation of their services. Throughout the chapters, I highlight how customers, as readers and writers of reviews, actively shape real estate workers' branding, marketing, and reputational value. The study also thinks critically

about how customer review websites, as software systems that merge "traditional business directory information with a search engine, consumer-generated reviews and social networking features," take part in shaping how brokers engage with customers (Kuehn, 2015, p. 2). These digital platforms gather, aggregate, and display customer input according to corporate rules and coded procedures that remain opaque. Given these technological aspects, the study explores worker perceptions of opportunities for control in customer relations and review processes.

The project chapters cohere around three central questions addressing the experiences and discursive practices of real estate workers. First, how do workers engage in the recent proliferation of online information sharing, feedback, and evaluation by customers? Second, what strategies do workers employ as they navigate career success discourses tightly linked to long-term customer review and referral relationships? Third, how do workers understand the role of digital platforms that organize and mediate their customer relations work? Together, my pursuit of these questions establish the significance of reviewing practices for workers, and raise questions about the extent to which workers resist, adapt, or transform new modes of customer participation and opinion sharing as another significant force shaping the experience of work within the service industry. Review culture imperatives intensify and digitize social and communicative processes of service work by prompting constant attention to online reputation and self-branding as well as the marketization of relationships. Real estate workers are at the forefront of these new modes of evaluation and review. To identify ways that workers perceive and negotiate review culture, each chapter explores a different aspect of worker-customer engagement. Customer engagement within service relations warrants critical attention, particularly in terms of how workers manage conditions of post-

Fordist work defined through neoliberal conditions of risk. Imperatives of customer satisfaction, alongside regularized public reprimand for noncompliance, have significant implications for ongoing changes in the nature of work and organizing.

By focusing on how a specific group of service workers are currently experiencing review culture, the study offers critical examination of how the structures, processes, sensibilities of customer reviewing shape everyday work lives. At the same time, I offer evidence that not only service professionals, but also customers, are facing a reorganization of responsibilities. Customers produce value for poised for corporate capture when engaging in review culture via performances of intimacy and emotional expression. Ultimately, my findings point to how individuals are increasingly drawn into relationships that generate value through communicative interactions of opinion and experience sharing available for systematic capture by capital.

Study Context: Real Estate Work

Selling Property, Selling Themselves

The unique characteristics of the real estate industry make it a rich site for analysis of how professional service workers are experiencing the increasing significance of customer review practices. Industry norms require that real estate workers brand, market, and sell themselves in order to build a potential customer base (Fodge, 2011; Gandini, 2015; Lair et al.2005). Real estate workers purchase everything from business cards, pens, car decals, nametags, and shopping cart advertisements to memberships and certifications that can be used to publicly demonstrate their services. The vast majority of these marketing items are branded with workers' names, images, slogans, logos, and other identifying marks. Therefore, the current rise of review culture intensifies the relationship between personal

branding and social identity in organizing real estate work (Lair et al., 2005). Norms of marketing, advertising, and branding in real estate command that brokers operate as public figures through the open display of professionalized faces and bodies as standard practice. As one broker retold,

> I got a new head shot done and I was choosing between some different facial expressions and I was talking to the photographer and I said I feel like that one looks warmer… approachable … I paid one of my former clients actually to develop a logo for me and I wanted it to look professional like I take my job seriously and I'm not just packing at it ten hours a week or whatever. So I guess all of that is the image I'm trying to portray.

From photographs to logos, this broker demonstrates the importance of cultivating and displaying the right kind of professional image. Brokers' photographs are integrated as a prominent feature on display within not only brokerage websites and consumer platforms such as Zillow but also on road signs, print advertisements, business cards, market reports, and myriad other materials that brokers pay to produce as part of their personal marketing and branding efforts. Although my findings draw on the broker photographs and artifacts I gathered over the twelve month study, I was unable to incorporate many of these images. These visuals were so heavily branded with corporate logos, business partners, company slogans, brokers' names and faces, and other organizational markers that their inclusion risked undermining the confidentiality promised to participants.

A broker with nearly fifteen years of real estate industry experience that I interviewed over the course of this study exemplified the self-marketing mentality that pervades real estate work. He explained, "You have to market yourself for people to know who you are." He elaborated on his philosophy of self-marketing strategies as deeply ingrained in his everyday activities:

> That little twenty dollar nametag is one of your strongest marketing pieces because if you don't have it on, nobody knows who you are or what you do. And if you're at a grocery store, if you're at Starbucks, nobody knows who you are and what you do…People may see you. They may not talk to you the first time or the second or the third but after a while they get used to seeing you, they get used to seeing you as a REALTOR® and if they're in line or something they may say 'so how's the market?'

When helping mentees develop strategies to market their services, he explains: "kids and dogs are the best things. If you don't have them, borrow them, and take them to the park, take them to the dog park. Do whatever, walk the neighborhood. Because people talk to you." This example captures themes I discuss throughout the dissertation, including the commodification of relationships, the imperative to sell oneself as a requirement of real estate work, and the ways in which "life itself," the everyday, extra-work selves, private interests, independent social abilities, personal aptitudes, lifestyle elements, get put to work in the name of authenticity (Fleming, 2009). His recommendations demonstrate the extent to which brokers encourage *each other* to integrate self-selling tactics into their daily lives. These conditions serve as the backdrop for understanding how workers seek and cultivate customer relationships as a means of establishing and protecting professional reputations. The next section introduces the defining characteristics of the industry in greater detail.

Defining Jobs in Real Estate: Agent, Broker, REALTOR®

Real estate workers facilitate the lease, sale, and purchase of real property. Real estate workers are designated by three common titles: "broker," "agent," and "REALTOR®." Regulations for defining each role and advancing from agent to broker status are determined at the state level. Requirements typically include a minimum age, level of education, real estate coursework, and licensing exam. Generally, brokers are licensed to manage all aspects of a real estate transaction and may operate an independent real estate office. Brokers manage the financial dimensions of a transaction, including the earnest money deposit and

escrow account. Agents are licensed to manage many aspects of a transaction, but are not allowed to handle monetary elements. Agents must work under the supervision and mentorship of a broker during a set period of time during which time agents learn the complex legal, ethical, and practical elements of transacting real estate.

As independent contractors, workers can choose to affiliate with national franchises, local companies, or, with the correct licensure, they may establish an independent real estate company to become self-employed. Real estate workers solicit customers to buy, sell, and lease properties. Workers generally earn a commission based on a percentage of the property sale price. Workers also offer advice on price, mortgage, and market conditions, compare properties to recommend fair market pricing, promote and advertise properties through listing services, prepare documents such as purchase offers, and "stay current" on financing, government programs, and real estate conditions such as fair housing laws (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). As one broker I interviewed clarified, "We're independent agents…real estate is like the lowest cost franchise you can get into. Versus buying a McDonalds. It is a franchise. It's your business…I'm the only one that can downsize myself." Perceptions of flexibility and control over work infiltrated descriptions of real estate as contract work. For instance, one broker/owner said, "it's all in my hands in terms of the like income potential" yet he also said, "I have to really make a conscious effort" to stop working at night and on weekends to have "personal time." Others described feeling underappreciated, underpaid, or overworked when:

> The general public would tell you a REALTOR® either puts a sign in the front yard to sell a house or on the buy side they drive around and they open up doors to let people in. And I guess if you really break it down that is what we do but behind that is hours—and tedious hours—to get everything in order legally to transfer ownership of a fairly high valued asset from one person to the next.

Brokers' storytelling demonstrates how navigating conditions of Post-Fordist work, including perceptions of flexibility and control alongside expectations of overwork, are no longer exceptional (Gregg, 2011).

The term REALTOR®/ REALTORS® is a trademark owned by the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR), the largest trade association in the US. The NAR, founded in 1908, grew from 1,646 to over 1.2 million members including "residential and commercial brokers, salespeople, property managers, appraisers, counselors, and others engaged in the real estate industry" (National Association of Realtors, 2017a). According to the NAR, sixty-three percent of all REALTORS® are female with a median age of fifty-three. Ninety-three percent have some formal education beyond a high school diploma. REALTORS® have a median experience of ten years, working four years at their present firm (National Association of Realtors, 2017b). Workers exhibit diverse professional and educational backgrounds with careers "in management, business, and financial professions, followed by sales and retail" with only four percent indicating real estate as a first career (National Association of Realtors, 2017c). Despite high employment rates, the NAR finds that eighty-seven percent of real estate agents "fail in the first 5 years" (Ferry, 2014). Similar to other forms of service work, long-term customer interaction in real estate work can lead to effects of burnout, withdrawal, exhaustion, and absenteeism (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Tracy, 2000).

Demographic Features

The Bureau of Labor Statistics Population Survey and NAR Member Profile provide access to some of the demographic features of real estate work. According to Labor Force Statistics, of the 2,764,000 real estate workers in the U.S., forty-eight percent are female, just

under ten percent are "Black or African American," just over four percent are Asian, and almost fifteen percent are "Hispanic or Latino[1]" (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). According to the NAR, "the majority of members are female homeowners with a college education" (National Association of Realtors, 2017c). The NAR Member Profile provides a more detailed breakdown of race and ethnicity. Eighty-two percent of REALTORS® are white, nine percent are Hispanics/ Latinos account for nine percent of REALTORS®, five percent are Black/ African Americans, and five percent are Asian/Pacific Islanders. Furthermore, according to the report, only twenty-two percent of REALTORS® with two years of experience or less are minorities. Twelve percent of REALTORS® were born outside the U.S. Although these data provide a limited breakdown, they offer some insight into the raced, classed, and gendered dimensions of real estate work as a white, female dominated profession.

Another major implication of the study, therefore, is how workers navigate social difference within review culture. Norms of public display, alongside customer assessments of individuals' characteristics, heighten the visibility of social differences such as gender, race, sexual identity, or ability. The Consumer Review Fairness Act excludes protection from customer reviews that are "inappropriate with respect to race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or other intrinsic characteristic" (Federal Trade Commission, 2017). This is limiting, however, as the initial review of customers' comments come at the level of commercial customer review platforms. As Chapter Five demonstrates, review websites solicit, vet, and censor customer reviews through unique operational rules, regulations, and procedures that determine which comments to publish and which to reject. Although some filtering occurs

[1] The Bureau of Labor Statistics includes the disclaimer: "Persons whose ethnicity is identified as Hispanic or Latino may be of any race." ("Labor force statistics from the current population survey," 2017)

automatically by algorithms, such as on the Zillow website, review platforms also rely on human intervention to determine what qualifies as "appropriate" content. Cultivating and displaying the right kind of professional image becomes even more paramount when subjectively written, and potentially unevenly reviewed, customer comments determine the visibility and significance of difference in an industry comprised of white, female workers.

Income Potential and Commission Structures

According to the NAR, the median gross income of REALTORS® was $42,500 in 2016 (National Association of Realtors, 2017c). The Bureau of Labor Statistics places the national annual mean income of real estate workers slightly higher at $46,410 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). However, according to the NAR, fifty-six percent of members with two years or less experience earned less than $10,000 in 2016 whereas thirty-eight percent of members with more than sixteen years of experience made more than $100,000 (National Association of Realtors, 2017c). A variety of factors contribute to the gap in income among real estate workers new to the industry and those with more experience and established businesses, reputations, and professional networks. Yearly income depends on not only the number of transactions completed and commission rate but also the split of commission among various parties, as well as business expenses, taxes, and other monetary fees incurred as independent contractors competing for business among the same pool of potential customers.

Exact commission rates are not protected or regulated through formal mechanisms. As one broker explained, commission is "negotiated in advance" for each transaction. Brokers agree to specific splits with their brokerage, lead providers, and customers, which leaves only a portion the amount "earned" for each property sale. Workers new to the

industry frequently receive a reduced commission split—as low as fifty percent—"while they learn the business." Brokerages cite the time and resources workers require from the organization to justify the low split. As one broker lamented, "I wish I got six percent on every deal, you know. Usually we get three percent and then we have to split that with our company and then pay taxes." In a commission-based industry, when a sale falls through, brokers can "work forever and never get paid." As the chapters illustrate, real estate workers often seek ways to succeed, and are compelled by coaching, training, and marketing systems that offer strategies for how to become a Top Producer.

As a geographically-defined industry, workers compete to represent individuals looking to buy or sell real estate in their area. As participants reiterated, it can be difficult to explain or justify their commission rates to customers who have had a negative experience with a real estate agent in the past. Workers also described facing increasing competition from what they term "discount" or "cut rate commission" agents and "limited service real estate companies" that offer flat-fee services to list and market a home for sale. One broker found that "people want the cheapest possible agent out there and they want the cut rate commission agent….I'm not a cut rate commission agent. I have some flexibility in my commission but I provide full service." Another described losing a contract from someone who instead "paid some service that just lists it [a home for sale]—and it only cost him like 1,000 dollars instead of 14,000 dollar commission. That's what you're up against." In addition, individuals can buy and sell real estate without the services of a real estate broker through For Sale By Owner (FSBO) transactions. These are just a few examples of the limitations brokers face when assessing their income potential in the real estate industry.

Norms of Professional Networking

Traditionally, real estate workers have relied on professional networking through regional and national association memberships as well as interpersonal relations within community and family groups who produce referrals (House, 1977). According to one participant in this study, "relationships are huge in this business because it is cut throat. It's commission based. People can get very hungry on it. And [it can] bring out the worst in people." One broker explained how he became "an ambassador for the corporate relocations" to a department of a large job recruitment firm in order to develop a professional network for continued referrals. He said, "I just told the HR guy—I made this deal—'use me and I'll give you this incredible level of service plus you'll get some economic advantages as well.'" The broker described "head hunting," "schmoozing," and "romancing" customers during tours of "some good restaurants and things" in Raleigh, as well as offering them "discounts" and "concessions." This example demonstrates the pervasiveness of networking and self-marketing involved in generating real estate referrals. It also demonstrates how brokers capitalize on the flexibility of non-mandated commission rates—the source of discounts and concessions. In these instances, the broker foregoes income from individual transactions in order to secure a steady stream of new customers. Self-made networks are more common as professional associations originally formed to represent worker interests increasingly promote customer satisfaction at the expense of worker protections (Hornstein, 2005). For instance, the NAR provides resources and recommendations on how to earn business by "underpromising and overdelivering on your service to clients each and every day" and by "ask[ing] for reviews throughout the transaction" (Eberhart & Carr, 2016).

Formal Regulation: Fair Housing and "real estate jail"

The Fair Housing Act, or Title VIII of the Civil Rights Act of 1968, "prohibits discrimination in the sale, rental and financing of dwellings based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin" (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2007). The Fair Housing Amendments Act "expanded the coverage of the Fair Housing Act to prohibit discrimination based on disability or on familial status." Examples of discriminatory practices include steering or "discouraging a person from seeking housing in a particular community" and redlining or "being denied or subjected to stricter conditions in applying for a loan on property in a particular area because of the racial composition of the area" (North Carolina Real Estate Commission, 2014). The Equal Credit Opportunity Act of 1974, Home Mortgage Disclosure Act of 1975, and Community Reinvestment Act of 1977 were each passed following the Fair Housing Act to help reduce discrimination home loan and housing markets. Rather than welcoming fair housing laws as a safeguard to equal access to housing, however, participants generally framed these laws as an example of the legal burden and personal risk they take when representing buyers and sellers throughout real estate transactions. According to one broker, "there's so many different ways that we can open ourselves up to lawsuits if we say the wrong thing" when, in this example, transacting real estate among members of "protected categories." Here, participants mentioned the looming threat of "REALTOR® prison" as a theme in real estate education courses. According to one broker, "when you go to take your real estate class it really teaches you how to not go to jail instead of how to do the business. So it's all about the legal stuff about what can happen and even with the update classes they talk about real estate jail." Real estate resources elaborate on the liability real estate agents retain as legally responsible for upholding state and federal

fair housing laws, as well as the repercussions for noncompliance. For instance, if a violation occurs, the real estate agent as well as the real estate brokerage firm may be liable even if there is "no discriminatory intent." A violation, moreover, can result in suspension or revocation of a real estate license, as well as reprimand for supervisors. As one broker clarified, "if I mess up, it falls to the Broker-in-Charge." When I asked for clarification on experiences with difficult legal situations, brokers kept descriptions short with statements such as "I have a favorite attorney that I use and I will email him my question." These responses reinforced the need for professional relations and networks able to support brokers as they navigate formal regulations and procedures in a contemporary work environment that reproduces imperatives of self-reliance and individualized risk (Neff, 2012).

This study investigates real estate work as a professional service occupation subject to not only state, federal, and industry regulations, but also the whims, desires, and opinions of customers. Engaging with customers with the express purpose of gaining their referrals is common practice for real estate workers. Asking customers to write online reviews is increasingly common among brokers who develop detailed procedures to request, monitor, and manage the number, sentiment, and placement of reviews as an everyday work process. The study chapters examine how the increasing significance of review culture, and the cultivation of positive customer relationships, is shaping real estate work from the perspective of licensed brokers. In a time of increased and individualized risk, customer reviews become a significant source of value when brokers find methods to commodify customer relationships and opinions as a source of marketing and branding.

Chapter Overview

In the following chapters, I develop a critical, qualitative understanding of the work of real estate brokers. Building on organizational communication theory, sociology of organizations, and code/software studies, my study contributes critical assessment of recent transformations in the nature and experiences of service work that is reliant upon public customer evaluation. My findings are informed by research gathered over the course of a one year investigation. I examine customer relations work using field research, in-depth interview data, and discourse analysis. Analyzing brokers' accounts of their work, the project conceptualizes socio-technical relations among workers, customers, and digital review platforms as agentic participants in contemporary service work relations. The chapters weave together findings from micro-level, everyday practices of work with macro-level, societal discourses of customer service expectations.

Chapter Two introduces the qualitative methods of the study, including my methods of conducting interviews, observations, and discourse analysis of cultural artifacts. I interviewed thirty-four licensed real estate brokers who live and work in the Research Triangle Park (RTP) metropolitan area of North Carolina. Participants work under the header of national franchises, as team members in local brokerage organizations, and as sole proprietors who own and operate independent brokerages. The sample included buyer's agents, listing agents, and brokers-in-charge. Throughout, I adopted a grounded approach of careful and reflexive analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). This approach allowed me to integrate unexpected insights, while maintaining a central focus on brokers' experiences and framings of the cultural norms, discourses, and practices that characterize real estate work. For instance, interviews informed selective attendance at industry events;

findings at events motivated investigation into discursive trends not initially recognized in initial coding of emerging themes within interview data. My immersion into the world of real estate spanned from participant observations of team meetings at real estate offices, open houses, and client parties to participating in educational events and motivational seminars. Ride along interviews allowed me to better understand the vital role of software programs and digital platforms. They also gave me insight into workplace procedures such as the use of legal documents, sample surveys, and marketing materials. My analysis of industry discourses offered additional insight into the norms and practices of real estate work, including significant contextualization for my study based in experiences of the NC real estate market. These multiple methods reveal aspects of service work relations, including dimensions of control and resistance, not readily visible through wider social, political, and economic rules and structures (Trethewey, 1997).

In Chapter Three, I discuss how workers account for a contemporary work climate that places the expectations, desires, and opinions of customers at the forefront of organizational decision making (Gabriel et al., 2015). At the outset, I theorize review culture to capture the unprecedented proliferation of online information sharing, feedback, and evaluation by customers. Drawing primarily on in-depth interviews with real estate brokers, I indicate how workers manage, mediate, or mitigate customer's increasingly public role through online customer reviews as measures of satisfaction in real estate relations. I argue that published customer opinions are transforming brokers' every day work, particularly their customer interaction practices and policies. Although grounded in the context of real estate, these findings have broader relevance to service industries increasingly impacted by the rise of review culture.

I find that customer reviews and referrals function as significant sources of strain as well as potential value. Brokers feel pressure to earn five star reviews, while also benefiting from customer referrals as a significant source of business. In particular, I consider how the growing visibility of customer opinions simultaneously support business growth while also demanding new forms of labor, expense, and interaction from workers as well as customers as co-participants in real estate transactions. Understanding how brokers make sense of customer relations in the context of online review trends provides a useful context to examine how review culture is reshaping organization and labor relations through increased customer input. Therefore, this chapter also highlights how real estate customers engage in "prosumptive" activities—writing positive reviews, giving personal recommendations, starring in photo or video testimonials, and increasing broker visibility through personal, social networks—that produce value for organizations and workers. In doing so, I contribute to recent investigations that question what qualifies as "work," or value generating activities, within organization-worker-customer dynamics (Gabriel et al., 2015).

Chapter Four develops a case study of how real estate brokers mobilize popular career coaching discourses. Given popular endorsement and application of career coaching (Gill & Pratt, 2008), this chapter examines how brokers draw on industry-specific recommendations of reputation management, self-branding, and customer relations exemplified by "The Buffini Method." Analysis includes implications for how brokers form professional identity through narratives of "serving" and "helping people" as forward-looking strategies designed to secure long-term relationships with clients who will continue to refer new leads. This chapter recognizes the continued importance of communicative phenomena, such as networking practices and word-of-mouth referrals, alongside novel

forms of digital experience sharing. For instance, this chapter takes into account instances when brokers cultivate networks of friends, family, and acquaintances—what they call their "sphere of influence"—as the primary marketing strategy underlying the culture, norms, and protocols of real estate work.

The principle goal of Chapter Four is to understand the ideologies, justifications, and rationalizations of career coaching discourses as they underlie brokers' expressions of professional identity. In pursing this goal, the chapter investigates brokers' endorsement of customer engagement as a key source of reputational value. Specifically, I examine workers' strategies for developing customer relationships through practices of inclusion and exclusion taught by popular career coaching programs and enabled through customer tracking software systems. Brokers utilize coached methods to not only manage customer relations but also select, integrate, and monitor the "right kind" of customer. While chapter three addresses ways that customers *rank* workers, this chapter demonstrates instances when workers *grade* customers.

The current rise of review culture intensifies the effects of social identity in organizing real estate work. Norms of marketing, advertising, and branding in real estate command that brokers operate as public figures through the open display of professionalized faces and bodies as standard practice. Three brokers discussed social identity as central to their work experiences. During their accounts, examples of difference, and how it impacts their work, emerged during instances when they experienced a clash of worldviews with customers. Their stories give significant insight into the structural (re)productions of power relations among service workers and their customers. My experiences with real estate brokers indicate a few of the ways in which intersecting social identity categories—familial relations,

ethnicity, nationality, marital status, and accent—organize work through social, discursive, and material processes.

Chapter Five analyzes brokers' work practices increasingly mediated through digital platforms as primary sources for self-marketing and customer reviews. In the realm of service industries, algorithmically-supported consumer websites have distinct effects on worker-customer engagement as unique user groups. This chapter draws on broker reports, arguing that digital platforms are not merely facilitators—but also active mediators—of service interactions and labor relations. Even given widespread use of online customer review platforms, very little is known about how these websites function through algorithms, or software programs, which aggregate customer feedback into meaningful data through proprietary data gathering, rating, and display systems. The chapter examines how real estate workers themselves perceive the role of algorithms in constituting service relations. This approach includes qualitative methods of how these workers engage with, are impacted by, and resist the original intent of commercial customer review platforms (Lenglet, 2011). By focusing on the real estate context, this study better addresses the contingent, relational, and situated effects of algorithms on a particular group of workers (Kitchin, 2016, p. 12). The chapter responds to calls to analyze the everyday integration of algorithmic systems into social, cultural, and organizational relations (Gillespie, 2012, 2014). There are many different consumer-driven review platforms with different functions, modes of participation, and effects. Such systems are not neutral. They introduce constraints on customer feedback and interaction above and beyond legal rules put in place at the state and federal level. Some websites solicit, vet, and censor customer reviews through unique operational rules, regulations, and procedures that guide user behavior. For instance, the coded mechanisms or

algorithms of review platforms "make decisions" about how to order, filter, interpret, and display customer feedback (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016, p. 118). The "politics" of these technological systems (Winner, 1980) are important in shaping experience, value, and meaning as they transform user-submitted data into knowledge about consumptive experiences and service interactions (Ghose et al., 2012; Rieder, 2016). By juxtaposing how brokers articulate everyday experiences with digital platforms alongside corporate discourses dictating their design and use, I argue for the unequal, algorithmic *effects* of consumer input-driven platforms.

Within the chapter, I develop a case study of Zillow.com, an exemplar customer review website named by twenty-eight of thirty-four participants as the most prominent consumer platform for real estate search. As a leading online home search website with advertising services available to real estate and mortgage professionals, Zillow acts as an agentic participant actively involved in contemporary service labor relations—soliciting engagement, directing interaction, and impacting user behavior. Therefore, I explore brokers' perceptions around issues of transparency, trustworthiness, and ethics in terms of data content, display, and circulation when brokers indicate "flaws" stemming from assumptions of online review platforms as transparent systems.

Chapter Six revisits insights and challenges of this study to offer potential directions for future research, including a sustained investment in critical attention to review culture, within as well as beyond, work and organizing. As my study suggests, the benefits that result from the rise of review culture are unevenly distributed, raising questions about what type of interventions might be needed. Taken together, my inquiry into different aspects of real estate workers' professional lives illustrates the need to reckon with the implications of the

rise of customer review. Customer opinions can contribute value and, just as easily, have serious effects for workers' livelihoods. The case study of real estate is unique in that workers have long integrated customers into processes of marketing, branding, and employability through word of mouth referrals and networks. Customer evaluations influence the reputation and credibility of professional service providers across industries, from doctors, dentists, and lawyers, to home maintenance, transportation, and care providers who are subject to seemly endless opportunities for customer review. Ultimately, I hope this work calls attention to the ways that review culture, and proliferate publication, promotion, and protection of consumer voices, may impact workers less prepared to mitigate—or capitalize—the effects of customer opinions.

CHAPTER 2: DEVELOPING A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF REAL ESTATE

At the outset of this study, I was interested in demonstrating the significance of a cultural and social phenomenon that kept capturing my attention: the rise of review culture. Review culture characterizes the recent proliferation of public evaluation of products, services, and experiences by consumers. As part of my early research into review culture, I gathered cultural artifacts demonstrating its pervasiveness: grocery store receipts touting customer surveys, opinion requests for reviews following a consumer purchase, customer feedback surveys following services and procedures, reports detailing the controversy and public debate over consumer review practices, and numerous other cultural artifacts indicating the contemporary preoccupation with consumer input. See Appendix B for some examples. Review culture is seemingly pervasive within customer service industries and consumer culture, and I wondered how this was impacting workers.

Setting the Scene: North Carolina Real Estate Work

North Carolina is a rich location for an exploration of real estate professionals. Consistently recognized as one of the best places to live in the United States (U.S. News & World Report, 2017), the Raleigh metropolitan area holds a unique position as one of the few regions to show strong population and housing growth following one of the biggest economic downturns in history (N.C. Office of State Budget and Management, N.D.; Tippett, 2016). Raleigh is currently ranked the eighth largest metropolitan housing market based on home price and sales gains (Kirchner, 2016). Analyses attribute growth rates, in part, to the continued affordability of housing in the Raleigh area (Cornett, 2015). Raleigh area housing

costs are ten percent higher than the national average while incomes are nearly twenty percent higher (Christie, 2014). Furthermore, NC has the highest rate of real estate employment in the United States with 11,320 real estate professionals, over five times the national average per capita. As a Raleigh broker highlighted, "even in 2010 when we were in the middle of the downturn, our company went out and we added 600—some 650, 700 agents at that time." Furthermore, NC real estate workers earn an annual mean income of $60,132 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a), almost $14,000 more than the national mean income of $46,410 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Paying to Work

To support high levels of employment, the area is home to national real estate franchises supporting hundreds of workers in a single office as well as local owner-operated brokerages with few to no additional employees. Real estate workers are licensed to manage real estate transactions as independent contractors. Brokers can operate a real estate office as the owner and broker-in-charge, or they can affiliate with a real estate company on a contract basis, earning a portion of the commission from each property transaction they complete. I will discuss later in this chapter how I approached my interviews with brokers. Here, I want to draw attention to the characteristics of their work context, including the many ways that they must "pay to work." In many instances, brokers said they "like the idea of being my own boss" and setting their own schedule as motivating factors for working in real estate. As independent contractors, however, brokers also reported their reliance upon training courses and reputation management services, software systems, marketing materials, and real estate resources that culminate in a significant cost necessary to working in real estate. According to the NAR, the median business expenses for real estate workers were $6,000 in 2016

(National Association of Realtors, 2017c). Although "businesses expenses" is a vague term, broker reports indicate much higher costs to function effectively in real estate, citing costs of over $6,000 (at $500 per month) in marketing fees alone. Brokers also noted costs related to industry memberships, advertising programs, education and training events, and myriad materials and resources they purchase each month for sales and marketing agendas such as note cards and market reports. I return to this theme later in the chapter when I discuss my use of participant observations of everyday professional practices.

Real Estate Broker Licensing

NC real estate professionals are licensed by the North Carolina Real Estate Commission (NCREC). Following the 2007 housing market crash, the NCREC instituted new licensing processes, education requirements, and qualifications for incoming real estate professionals. As one broker explained, the new rules are designed "to help protect the buyers and sellers more cause a lot of people got out there and did a lot of crazy things…so it was about 2010, 2011 when it really switched to a Broker state and you had to take those classes." One of the most significant changes the broker alludes to is the transition to a "broker license only" policy, with procedures and restrictions in place to manage who can legally transact in real estate. To qualify for a real estate broker license, individuals must now complete a 75-hour North Carolina Broker Pre-licensing Course, two-part licensing exam divided into state and national sections, and post-licensing education program. In addition to educational requirements, an applicant must be at least eighteen years old, a U.S. citizen or meet federal law qualification for employment, have a social security number, and submit an application to the NCREC that includes "Application Enclosures" such as a criminal record report and "character section":

> Every applicant for a real estate license has the burden of satisfying the Commission that the applicant possesses the honesty, integrity, good moral character, and general fitness, including mental and emotional fitness, necessary to protect the public interest and promote public confidence in the real estate brokerage business. (North Carolina Real Estate Commission, 2017b)

The NCREC evaluates and determines whether an applicants' character is "good" or if they have a "character issue" such as "criminal offenses, professional licensure disciplinary actions and liens/unpaid judgments" (North Carolina Real Estate Commission, 2017c). Furthermore, obtaining a license is a costly procedure. Brokers must pay for their criminal record report (the cost varies), the initial application fee ($100) and NCREC's annual renewal fee ($45), in addition registration fees and materials costs required for course enrollment.

Upon completion of all licensing requirements, NC uses three primary terms to demarcate residential real estate licensing status: Provisional Broker (PB), Broker, and Broker-in-Charge (BIC). The term "agent" does not indicate license status in NC. PBs are entry level licensees and must work under the supervision of a designated Broker-in-Charge. To become a full broker, PBs must satisfy post-licensing education requirements including three 30-hour courses. All brokers must complete a mandatory 4-hour General Update Course and a 4-hour elective developed and approved by the NCREC. According to NC rule, every real estate firm must designate a BIC responsible for supervising all licensees at the firm and maintaining records, in addition to other organizational duties. The BIC is ultimately responsible for the firm's adherence to legal and ethical rules. To become a BIC, a broker must have two years of full-time brokerage experience, or equivalent part-time experience, within the past five years. A BIC must submit a "Broker-in-Charge Declaration" form to the NCREC, complete an initial 12 hour Broker-in-Charge Course taught only by the

NCREC, and maintain their BIC status through a yearly Broker-in-Charge Update course (BICUP).

Professional Training: Learning How to Self-Brand

To meet the continued rise in demand for broker training, real estate schools offer education courses on the ethical, legal, technical, and marketing dimensions of real estate work. The NCREC provides a schedule of upcoming courses approved for credit including "Trends: The Current and Future Directions of the RE Profession," "Strategic Pricing Specialist," and "The Millennials are Here – R U Ready?" (North Carolina Real Estate Commission, 2016). Often, real estate schools are independent organizations such as the Home Coach Real Estate School and Brian Pate Seminars. I attended an online course offered by the Superior School of Real Estate, which offers licensing, post licensing, and continuing education courses in NC. National brokerages such as the Howard Perry and Walston (HPW) Real Estate School and Keller Williams University also offer paid education programs. For instance, the cost for the 75-hour Pre-Licensing course at HPW Real Estate School is $439. Brokerages may offer additional mentoring and teaching programs such as weekly meetings with topics in real estate. Although required education in real estate centers on the legal, ethical, and practical tasks of transacting real property, a significant portion of continuing education courses, online seminars, and weekly meeting topics center on the 'how to' of marketing, branding, and customer relations management. The popularity of tactics to secure customer referrals presented within these sources—through online review solicitation as well as in-person testimonial requests—is emblematic of review culture.

Role Distinctions

The NCREC's Real Estate Manual outlines the laws and regulations governing distinctions among types of broker agency: buyer's agent, seller's agent, and dual agent. According to the NCREC, buyer and seller agents must "promote your best interests," "be loyal to you," "provide you with all material facts that could influence your decisions," and keep confidential information private, in addition to following other ethical and legal rules (North Carolina Real Estate Commission, 2013). A dual agent represents the buyer and seller in the same transaction who agree to the "dual agency relationship." A form of dual agency, "designated agency," refers to instances when two brokers from the same firm represent the buyer and seller. The NCREC publishes a professional services disclosure brochure to explain these agency roles. NC Brokers are required by law to share the brochure with prospective clients at "first substantial contact" (North Carolina Real Estate Commission, 2017a). As an "attorney state," moreover, a licensed legal representative oversees real estate transaction closings—the actual settlement of a transaction—rather than NC real estate professionals. The North Carolina Bar Association regulates the forms utilized during real estate transactions. These characteristics of the real estate industry demonstrate just a few of formal procedures that regulate the activities of real estate workers, and give some indication to their lack of control over property sale processes. This complexity of real estate regulation was a cause for concern for some brokers who felt that customers readily blame agents for things beyond their control. For instance, one broker-in-charge described how customers can be "dissatisfied about something that didn't have anything to do with us but we happened to be the messenger…they were upset about how their closing went, which we have no control over. But we're the front-line of communication for that kind of stress." Although participants recognized such instances of communicative and emotional labor as an everyday

aspect of their service work (Leidner, 1993; Hochschild, 2012), they often discounted elevated work efforts as necessary to remain employable in the changing work environment (Gregg, 2011). In this instance, the broker-in-charge described "social media feedback sites" as the preferred locale for customers to vent their stress and frustrations. Similar reports indicate the spread of customer opinion sharing that targets individual workers as the subject of online reviews, an element of Post-Fordist organizing that heightens the responsibility of workers to account for larger structures beyond their control.

Professional Associations

Regional associations and paid membership services support professional tasks and public recognition of real estate workers. The North Carolina Association of REALTORS®, founded in 1921, has a current membership of 39,000 real estate professionals (NC Realtors, 2017). The Top Producers Council, an elite membership status within the Raleigh Regional Association of REALTORS®, supports networking through "a relaxed atmosphere wherein members may socialize, share 'war stories' and ideas" at six yearly luncheon events that feature a guest speaker "who presents relevant and beneficial information as it pertains to the real estate industry" such as home inspectors and financial managers (Raleigh Regional Association of Realtors, 2017). Membership to the Top Producers Council requires an annual production of $10 million in gross sales or 50 completed real estate transactions. Two interview participants in the Top Producers Council cited their membership as a valuable source of name recognition and brand awareness. Generally, brokers mentioned membership within national and regional associations as a factor that helped insulate them from the potential effects of negative customer reviews. For instance, brokers included membership

status, certifications, and trainings in their online profiles as credentials to demonstrate their value, experience, and effectiveness to potential customers.

REALTOR® status also permits access to additional resources necessary for real estate work, such as access to the Triangle Multiple Listing Service (TMLS), a paid service that provides access to a searchable database that contains information on all properties listed for sale. Members of the TMLS may display property listing information on their brokerage websites via Internet Data Exchange (IDX) software. The TMLS also generates statistical market trend reports. Brokers use their access to the MLS to "capture" online leads by requiring customers to submit personal contact information in order to utilize their website to locate property information. For instance, one broker-in-charge stated, "I let people search [the MLS] for—without registering—for a while before I then say 'hey you've been—you've saved ten properties or something. Now it's time to let me know who you are.'" This is a profession distinguished by self-branding and marketing, as well as professional networking efforts, designed to manage customer-dependent, commission-based labor. Brokers are subject to not only customer expectations and significant training and educational requirements, but also strict state and federal licensing and conduct regulations. These characteristics of real estate work emerge through brokers' storytelling and punctuate the case study chapters.

Using a Qualitative Approach

My study utilizes qualitative approaches to capture the experiences and perceptions of real estate workers. I draw upon semi-structured interviews, participant observations at real estate events, and analyses of cultural and organizational artifacts such as brokers' marketing materials, office meeting agendas, customer feedback surveys, marketing texts, and other

paraphernalia obtained from participants as well as online sources. The strategy of narrative interviewing (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) helps to effectively demonstrate the worldviews and ideologies most relevant to individuals experiencing contemporary transformations in service work relations that stem, in part, from public avenues of customer opinion sharing. Further, each chapter pays careful attention to depicting brokers' experiences in their own words.

Interview responses helped me identify significant sites for additional observation. For instance, my attention to exemplar career coaching discourses in Chapter Four was shaped by the unexpected insight from my participants that popular management discourse and coaching programs permeated their decision-making and daily work tasks. Broker reports also drew my attention to particular digital platforms that they framed as significant to their work. Findings in Chapter Five, therefore, focus on brokers' experiences with Zillow as an important digital location of professional marketing as well as customer interaction. Participant observations also meaningfully shaped my evolving understanding of real estate work. Attending office meetings and customer appreciation events hosted by prominent real estate brokerages confirmed interviewee comments about the role of career success discourses as deeply seated in their everyday work. My engagement with these multiple sources of qualitative data compelled continuous reflection about my own assumptions, assertions, and findings throughout the research process. Together, participant responses, observations, and discursive artifacts gave my investigation direction. Each source helped verify, validate, and contextualize the information I obtained, as I continually returned to the data to discover which sources and sites to visit and revisit with each new chapter. The following sections detail the overarching methods and research sites of data collection and analysis, including insights and challenges that arose throughout the research process.

Immersion in the Real Estate Scene

Field research for this project took place over the course of twelve months, April 2016 – March 2017. Rather than limiting my study to a single organization or job, I observed real estate professionals "at work" throughout public and private spaces and events. I audited team meetings at real estate offices, stopped by open houses, attended parties, joined a career night, sat with brokers in their homes, and met at coffee shops. I also participated in educational events, including three motivational seminars designed to help real estate professionals succeed in sales, two webinars sponsored by marketing firms, and one continuing education (CE) course. Finally, a handful of participants welcomed me to observe aspects of their work through "ride along" style interviews. I recorded observations through extensive field notes when brokers showed me how they operate software programs and when they demonstrated the function of legal documents, surveys, organizational tracking charts, and marketing materials.

The diversity of field observations strengthened the breadth and depth of information I was able to access. Each experience contributed valuable insight, from exclusive events hosted by local brokerages to public, paid training both in-person and online. My immersion in the world of real estate allowed me to experience aspects of brokers' work beyond organizational tasks and customer relations (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013). For instance, by moving in and out of organizations—gaining acceptance that allowed me to return for multiple events in some cases—my field work demonstrates what Tracy (2013) calls the "play participant" (p. 109).

Team Meetings

I attended three team meetings held at real estate offices in Raleigh and Durham. At each event, brokers introduced me as a Communication student conducting research on real estate work. The first team meeting, held in a large room with whiteboards at the front and rows of tables at the back, began with a presentation by a home inspector who was recently added to the company's list of "preferred vendors." This episode introduced me to the vast networks—and exclusivity—of professional relations that brokers cultivate with others in home finance, repair, inspection, and building industries. Throughout the meeting, the broker-in-charge and his team of brokers discussed aspects of their "corporate culture," including what it "means to be 'premier'" and why their organization consistently ranks high in independent industry surveys. Self-affirming practices appeared during each team meeting and drew my attention to brokers' tendency to combat industry stereotypes and negative connotations surrounding their work by reaffirming their value. For instance, the broker-in-charge used the company's ranking as a top growing real estate company named by the Triangle Business Journal as "a testimonial within itself" to demonstrate their premier status. Moreover, during this meeting, the broker-in-charge reminded attendees to ask the closing attorney to "snap a picture" of you and your clients so that it could be posted on Facebook. These examples further demonstrate the pervasiveness of review culture proclivities—instantiated through publicized rankings and endorsements—naturalized within everyday practices of real estate work.

Another participant invited me to observe two back-to-back events at his Raleigh office: a weekly team meeting and a session of "referral focus time." The team meeting consisted of a question-and-answer session with real-time digital polling. Each question addressed aspects of real estate work, including industry statistics and trends as well as topics

specific to the brokerage. As the meeting coordinator clarified, the goal was to reinforce what makes their policies and core values unique and why their standardized work process of "work by referral" is successful. Immediately following the team meeting, I met with the broker and one of his customer service managers while they coordinated a series of phone calls with industry professionals, including an insurance agent, as well as current clients. This was my most in-depth experience observing brokers' interaction with organizational support staff. The experience encouraged me to further investigate the complexity of worker roles within real estate organizations.

The final team meeting was themed for the opening of the 2016 Summer Olympics at a large franchised brokerage. The Business Meeting Agenda announced topics for a New Listing Presentation, Featured Agent of the Week, and announcements for upcoming training seminars, social events, and caravans to visit new listings by other brokers at the firm. The meeting included a presentation by a local photographer offering home photography services. After the event organizer introduced me as a visitor, attendees asked questions about my academic and professional goals. Together, these experiences drew my attention to themes of office interaction not present in one-on-one interview settings. For instance, team leaders and brokers-in-charge generated a sense of reassuring optimism, comradery (among brokers as well as vendors), support, and exclusivity by reminding attendees of available resources including access to mentoring, training, and networking opportunities, as well as recent 'data' demonstrating the success of the organization especially compared to competing brokerages in the Triangle area. Given trends across team meetings, themes of motivational coaching and professional networking emerge prominently in Chapter Four.

Open House Observations

Two brokers invited me to attended open houses. The first was a new construction home located in Durham, NC. I arrived early to conduct the interview and stayed to observe the event. I toured the home and asked questions about expectations and procedures for typical open houses. When I noticed that there had been no visitors during my multi-hour observation, I asked the broker, "do you mind telling me a little bit about why you run open houses and how it works?" Although she does "paid advertising on Facebook…[as] a way of letting people know that a house is open," the broker was unsurprised at the lack of attendance during our conversation. She explained that she holds "open houses in the hope of picking up a buyer" because "all I need is one person. And the more people I can see, I can get walking through my houses, the greater chance I have of that one person." The company she affiliates with holds open houses each weekend within a new construction neighborhood "to maintain a good relationship with the developer and show that we work hard for him." Holding open houses, regardless of attendance rates, was a priority for her as well as her brokerage. This experience helped me understand the interconnectedness of real estate industry roles (brokerages, independent contractors, home builders, and developers) invested in maintaining positive customer as well as professional relationships.

The second open house I attended was located at an existing home in Chapel Hill, NC. A broker-owner invited me to attend this event after participating in an interview. I toured the home, asked follow-up questions from the interview, and observed the broker working with her laptop at the kitchen counter. She elaborated on a story she told at our previous meeting by explaining the role of "an ombudsman to settle disputes between agents" that she had recently learned about "after nineteen years in the business." She also explained that, given low attendance rates at open houses overall, she often uses the time to

update her website and work on search engine optimization (SEO) to help generate new leads through online marketing. She, like many other participants, explained that open houses are ineffective at generating a buyer for a *particular* house and usually held to generate leads by starting conversations with visitors or to comply when a customer requests an open house event in the hopes of generating interest in their home for sale. Although I had hoped to witness broker-customer interaction at these open house events, participants' explanations added nuance to my understanding of the importance workers place on customer referrals as the best and most expedient way to generate new business.

Customer Appreciation Events

I also attended two invitation-only customer appreciation events. My observations contextualized brokers' descriptions of customer appreciation events as significant, costly occasions they used to cultivate long-term relations with customers and their families. The first event, hosted at a local inn, was advertised in an RSVP postcard as a four hour event for "clients and friends" to "come and go as you please." I saw kids getting their faces painted by costumed characters, families eating buffet style at outdoor tables near a live musician, and attendees waiting in line at the inn bar with free drink tickets provided by the broker-in-charge. The event offered a glimpse into social interaction and networking norms among real estate workers and their customers.

The second customer appreciation event I attended was an annual Thanksgiving Pie Party hosted at a brokerage office. The two hour event advertised "fun for the whole family—fall family photos, face painting, bounce house, and of course...a pumpkin pie for you to take home" as well as free wine, beer, and refreshments. I saw kids playing in the bounce house and families taking "fall photos" against a backdrop comprised of the company

logo. I saw several attendees enter the office and leave shortly thereafter holding a pie box. Our pie included a written reminder that "I am so ***thankful*** for your referrals!" signed by the interviewee. This event also included vendor booths staffed by event sponsors with informational giveaways. At one of these tables, a vendor advertised customer reviews and star ratings on a large poster that stood the full height of the outdoor event tent. The poster stated, "See what our customers are saying…" followed by five reviews that included customer comments, first names, last initials, and city of residence in NC. The posted also stated the company has the "Highest Rating in the Triangle" with "More than 350 5-Star Reviews." This is an example of how my immersion in the scene allowed me to witness the value placed on customer reviews and ratings across home industries.

Career Night

The interviewee who invited me to the Thanksgiving pie party also invited me to attend a two-hour career night at the Raleigh office. Her brokerage advertises career nights as events that explain the company's "track record of successful agents doubling or trippling [sic] their income" with "vacation, family time and a real estate business that works even when you're sleeping." I arrived early and chatted with members of the brokerage while we ate hors d'oeuvres and they drank wine. At the start of the event, attendees were asked to make a short statement about themselves, their families, and their real estate goals. I shared that my husband and I had a five-month-old daughter and that I was studying real estate as a graduate student. After introductions, each attendee was given a sticky note as a "parking lot" to write down questions during the presentation. I interpreted this practice as a method to encourage attendees to listen actively during the presentation so that we could fully understand the benefits of working at the brokerage. The organizer described hiring for two

organizational roles: broker and customer services manager (CSM). Each role receives 160 hours of sales training including weekly team meetings, one-on-one training, videos, quizzes, and "shadowing situations" with listings and closings. The CSM is an hourly-to-salary position for those who "don't want to focus on the transaction, but rather service." Brokers delegate tasks to CSMs such as repair negotiations, property valuations, and "problem solving" so they can instead focus on generating referrals. In this arrangement, CSMs must "sell themselves to agents" to gain "billable hours" which they accumulate to transition from hourly to salary employee. This experience drew my attention to the widespread employment of administrators, assistants, listing coordinators, closing coordinators, staff, and other organizational roles that facilitate real estate transactions in typically salaried positions. After this meeting, I paid even closer attention to brokers' perceptions of staff relations and the delegation of job responsibilities.

Education and Training

During informal conversations at real estate offices, several brokers asked me if I intended to pursue an NC real estate license as part of my research. Upon investigation of requirements for obtaining an NC license and seeing that it involves a costly, multi-year process of real estate education courses, I decided to get a feel for the industry through select courses. Given the wide range of organizations offering certified real estate courses, from local instructors to franchised real estate firms, I asked participants for recommendations on where to register. One recommended the Superior School of Real Estate where she obtained her post-broker licensing. The organization offers online and in-person courses for licensing, post-licensing, and continuing education (CE). Only CE courses were available to the public (i.e. individuals without a license). These CE course topics change over time, offering fresh

content to professionals looking for new ways to facilitate their work. After reviewing current CE courses, I paid $34.95 to participate in an online course titled "Social Media Success in Under 15 Minutes Per Day." The course discussed how and why to engage with social media platforms, including tips on how to manage social sites as business tools with the ultimate goal to manage online reputation, form relationships, and "get others to like you." This course inspired me to pursue additional sources of professional training and networking.

Throughout the study period, I selectively attended webinars with topics I thought would offer insight into how customer review trends have transformed real estate work. Both webinars followed a similar format, beginning with a description of industry trends and noting ongoing dilemmas, followed by proposed solutions that required the services or expertise of the organization sponsoring the event, and ending with a question and answer session among viewers and the host. Both webinars were hosted by organizations offering services to real estate workers, and each advertised their services during the event. Although such events are generally advertised as providing necessary training and resources, webinars pitch products and services to workers looking for help managing specific aspects of their work (in these cases, information on how to generate leads and respond to customer reviews).

The first webinar I participated in, hosted by Placester Academy, was called "Using Social Proof to Generate and Nurture Leads with Jeff Turner." This webinar offered to teach real estate professionals to "learn to leverage reviews to earn new business" by "generating in-depth client reviews" with "plenty of high praise and positive feedback" online. This webinar was "only available to subscribers," with "a special on Placester products for live attendees." The webinar host, Jeff Turner, is the president of RealSatisfied, an organization

that collects, publishes, and syndicates "success stories and testimonials" from customer surveys. Turner's presentation included tactics for generating and sharing customer reviews to "boost your brand" and "measure your success" through systematic management of customer satisfaction.

The second webinar, "10 Ways to Respond to Reviews in the Home Services Industry," was hosted by Surefire Local in partnership with Bill Owens, the president of a home design/build firm in Ohio. Surefire Local offers online marketing services, including website development, SEO, social media, and reputation management services. The webinar discussed negative reviews as an inevitable outcome of working in sales and service industries, and proposed that workers "spend more time on creating satisfied clients" and engage the help of a "well-developed and properly channeled reputation management system." Broker interviews confirmed my interpretation of these events as primarily advertising opportunities through discussions of the many ways in which they pay to work in an industry where "everybody's making money off an agent" such as real estate schools, marketing services, business card, pen, and name tag manufacturers, and lead generation services.

Motivational Seminars

In order to more fully immerse myself by experiencing the types of training and educational events that brokers attend, I participated in three motivational seminars for real estate workers: a sales training seminar organized by Shore Consulting in Raleigh and two day-long Success Tour™ events presented by Buffini and Company via live video stream. These seminars significantly altered the direction of my research, motivating the topic of analysis for Chapter Four. "Closing 2.0 with Jeff Shore" was my first exposure to real estate

sales seminars. This half-day event ran from 8:30am to 12pm at a Raleigh country club conference center. Advertised as an instructional seminar for sales professionals, the session lasted three hours during which "Jeff Shore calls upon his thirty years of real estate sales experience, his up-to-the-minute research on buying psychology, and his trademark humor for a presentation to set the closing world straight." For a $55 ticket, the seminar included a buffet-style breakfast in the foyer and refreshments in the convention room. Audience members, including local and out-of-state real estate professionals, filled the room at large round tables.

I relate the following story in great detail because it is a poignant example of how the strong cultural practice of "paying to work" combines with the demands of self-marketing. At the start of the event, organizers provided attendees with a fill-in-the-blank workbook so that audience members could interact with Shore's presentation. The workbook, copyright Shore Consulting, is a companion to Jeff Shore's latest book "Closing 2.0: How to Close More Sales Faster by Putting the Customer First." Throughout the presentation, Shore encouraged audience members to follow along in the workbook by inserting key terms as well as personal insights. The workbook opens with a section "About Jeff Shore" as a keynote speaker and sales training expert. Workbook topics include sample sales scripts as well as decision-making and problem-solving tactics explaining the psychology of selling in real estate. Throughout his presentation, Shore reminded audience members to purchase his book—only available at Shore Consulting Tour events—one of two ways. First, members could email Shore Consulting to reserve their purchase the book at any point *during the presentation*, to secure their copy. Second, members could walk to the back of the conference room *during the intermission* to purchase the book from a consultant. Shore reminded

audience members that his book sells out at every event, and this was no exception. I witnessed several audience members purchase multiple copies—even entire boxes—of "Closing 2.0." One professional at my table purchased three copies, one for each member of her sales team. I also observed audience members taking group photos with Jeff Shore during breaks in the seminar. Finally, throughout the event, Shore encouraged audience members to register for "Closing Academy," an eight week sales training program. He offered a discounted price for those who signed up during a limited time offer, including a registration discount of $20 for those who purchased "Closing 2.0" in combination. It was not until after this event that I began to more fully grasp what brokers meant when they said they "pay to work." Brokers pay a fee to attend training seminars centered on the advertisement of additional, paid training programs—all in the hope of learning how to get more referrals and be more successful in their real estate sales jobs. Other events, including the Buffini and Company presentations I discuss next, followed this same format whereby real estate professionals pay a fee to learn more about how to increase wealth through the use of paid advertising, marketing, and customer contact systems as a means of self-branding.

In October 2016 and March 2017, I participated in two Buffini and Company Success Tour™ events hosted in Fort Worth, Texas and Richmond, Virginia, respectively. As an online participant, I was only granted access to the first of these two-day events. The live broadcasts ran from 9:00am to 4:30pm, with presentations by Brian Buffini and other motivational speakers including special guests Emmitt Smith (of the Dallas Cowboys) in TX and Andy Andrews (NYT bestselling self-help author and speaker) in VA. Buffini and Company cites 2015 attendance rates at "over 35,000 real estate professionals either live streaming or attending the live broadcasts," with expected increases in the following years

(Riley, 2016). Each live broadcast costs $95 and each in-person seat costs $295. For Buffini and Company members, attendance is free. Similar to Shore Consulting, Buffini and Company provided audience members with follow-along, fill-in-the-blank workbooks. Throughout his motivational talks, including the financial, spiritual, and personal benefits of real estate work, Brian Buffini spent a great deal of time discussing coaching services, membership programs, and success strategies available to Buffini and Company members. I discuss these events, and their role in real estate work, in greater detail in Chapter Four.

Ride Along Interviews

Approximately one quarter of interviews included what I term "ride along" components. I define ride along interviews as those during which I engaged in a more proactive or "intensive" style (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). In an intensive interview, the interviewer expresses interest, follows "hunches," and offers "comments and questions [to] help the research participant to articulate his or her intensions and meanings" (p. 26). During ride along interviews, participants demonstrated software programs, navigated digital platforms, and explained industry and organization procedures through the use of artifacts such as legal documents, sample surveys, and marketing materials. Four brokers showed me how they operate Customer Relations Management (CRM) and other software programs which they use to track and monitor customer contact. During these events, I was able to watch the "flow" of tasks from login dashboard to client database management screens to social media integration tools. Four additional brokers walked me through their offices and work spaces to explain documents, artifacts, and objects significant to their daily work. For instance, one broker-in-charge welcomed me to view his office, including a full-wall whiteboard used to track recent written contracts of all buyer and seller agents on his team

(with columns for the broker name, contract amount, lender name, and source of business). This broker-in-charge also gave me a copy of the written survey his firm distributes to customers. Together, his explanation of the whiteboard and survey helped demonstrate the significance of long term customer relations to him and his organization. A member of his team, another interviewee, provided me with the full informational packet provided to home buyers. He explained each document in the packet, following the same procedure, including legal and ethical guidelines, as he would with a new client. The packet includes sample disclosure documents, buyers agency agreement, offer to purchase contract, contact sheet, professional services disclosure, impressions checklist for homes viewed, an "about" document with descriptions of each team member, client testimonials, mission and values statement, and miscellaneous documents describing the home buying process. Another broker showed me example road signs, and provided glimpses of the software that tracks his, and his company's, active listings—where he held almost half (fifty-six of one hundred and twenty-two) of the company's total listings.

Finally, a ninth participant used scrap paper to draw a diagram to explain the commission structure of transacting real estate in NC. She demonstrated the mathematical malleability of percentage splits among customers, brokers, teams, organizations, and other entities such as lead sources. As she explained, the brokerage takes a percentage of the sale commission "off the top," followed by "your team" so that the actual income of any given property transaction can be unique depending upon the configuration of relations. Following our coffee house discussion, this broker emailed me key documents she provides to clients including a "Working with Real Estate Agents" document for buyers and sellers, Questions and Answers of Home Inspection, Fair Housing Disclosure, and an "about" team sheet with

her organization's mission statement and core values. Brokers' generous contributions during these occasions enabled a more robust understanding of industry requirements, organizational norms, and worker practices guiding this study.

Interview Participants

I conducted in-depth interviews with thirty-four brokers who live and work in the Research Triangle Park (RTP) metropolitan area of North Carolina. Participants work under the header of national franchises, as team members in local brokerage organizations, and as sole proprietors who own and operate independent brokerages. Participants had from less than five to more than twenty years of experience in the real estate industry. Fourteen are owners, co-owners, or managing partners of a real estate brokerage. Seven function as the broker-in-charge. Nineteen work as buyer agents, seller agents, or both. Several brokers manage a team of agents, independently or under the header of a national franchise. Nineteen participants are women and fifteen are men. I did not select participants based on demographics, nor did I collect further demographic data. However, as I discuss in Chapter Four, social identity emerged as an important implication of the study.

Participants often held unique roles within the industry. One co-owner/broker-in-charge operates as a land broker and only transacts in residential real estate for "acreage heavy property." One broker manages every aspect of home transactions except the "paperwork" so that her name is never listed on the transaction. She shares a work email address with her husband, another interviewee, so that she can remain "the anonymous person behind the scenes." Two of the owner/broker-in-charge participants mentioned that they are also co-owners of property management companies. Prior to earning a real estate

license, participants worked in a wide range of professions from hairdresser to cartoonist and car salesperson.

I contacted initial participants through referrals from acquaintances. After each interview, I asked participants whether they could recommend brokers who might be interested in sharing their experiences working within the real estate industry. Snowball sampling, or calling by referral, granted access to leading figures in the local industry. Participants offered from zero to seven referrals. I contacted all referred brokers, with varying response success. Gaining referrals from participants provided opportunities to enact the cultural phenomenon of referral systems I was investigating. I also sent 'cold' emails to brokers whose information I located online. For instance, I contacted brokers with prominent profiles on Zillow, Realtor.com, and other marketing websites to increase participation from individuals with digital platform experience. Contacting brokers with prominent online profiles offered an avenue of reaching unique perspectives from workers actively engaged with online customer review practices. A combination of snowball and targeted sampling helped maximize the variation of experiences in line with recent organization and communication studies (Askay & Gossett, 2015).

Most interviews (twenty-two) were conducted face-to-face at brokerage offices, coffee shops, real estate properties for sale, and brokers' homes. The remaining twelve interviews were conducted via telephone. With participant consent, I hand-wrote field notes for all interviews. When possible, I also kept hand-written field notes during real estate and ride along events. I used these notes to document observations, record referral contact information, and contextualize materials provided by brokers such meeting agendas, market reports, advertisements, invitations, and other organizational paraphilia. In addition, I

audiotaped and transcribed thirty-two of the thirty-four interviews. Interviews ranged from twenty-six to eighty-seven minutes. After thirty interviews, responses seemed to be replicating that of earlier participants. To verify this perception, I interviewed four additional brokers and analyzed the data for new findings. These processes helped confirm my presumption that data was saturated (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Locating Industry Discourse: Textual Analysis

Industry discourse offered additional insight into the norms and practices of real estate work. Discourse analysis is a common method in critical communication studies (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). In particular, analysis of discursive texts such as organizational documents and mass media can complement interview methods and field observations and contribute to understanding "a larger discourse" (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 35, 37). In order to gather relevant texts, I subscribed to marketing distribution lists of well-known real estate marketing, networking, and resource websites including ActiveRain, Inman, MarketLeader, Placester, SurefireLocal, and KeepingCurrentMatters. I selected these resources based on the recommendations of participants as well as the prominence of their marketing and outreach. For instance, I subscribed to Keeping Current Matters (KCM) based on the recommendation of a broker new to the industry who uses KCM as "a real estate information service" with "great graphics, infographics" that keep herself and her customers up-to-date on industry trends. Further, the CE course I attended named ActiveRain the "best real estate industry site for social networking, link exchanging, idea sharing, blogging, and more." I subscribed to receive daily emails from ActiveRain, called the "ActiveRain Daily Drop," which provided insight into industry trends and topics of concern, with headlines from home industry sources as well as real estate bloggers. The site has nation-wide membership, offering significant

contextualization for my study based in experiences of the NC real estate market. ActiveRain bloggers helped confirm the applicability of brokers' experiences and my findings as representative of others throughout the industry.

Overall, real estate marketing sources delivered real estate industry information and trends including a strong emphasis on educational opportunities via the webinar platform. Example email subject lines include "Let your clients be your raving fans!" (ActiveRain), "Being average isn't enough: 7 characteristics of mega-producers" (Inman Headlines), "You can earn $20,000+ more from online leads this year" (MarketLeader), "Tomorrow: The 2017 website optimization action plan webinar" (Placester), and "[Webinar] Enhancing the customer experience with CRM tools" (SurefireLocal). Continuous review of real estate websites, blogs, and textual materials helped me to immerse myself in real estate culture and practices so that I could maintain awareness of key trends, perspectives, and events supplemental to interview content (Charmaz, 2006).

Interviewing in the Context of Real Estate

I conducted thirty four participant interviews from April – July, 2016. I obtained IRB-approval from UNC for my recruitment (Study#: 15-3336). In accordance with ethical interviewing techniques, I made a concerted effort to ensure that participants understood their involvement was voluntary and they were not obligated to answer questions that made them uncomfortable (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). In addition to providing an interviewee consent form, I reminded participants of these ethical guidelines prior to starting each interview as well as instances when participants seemed hesitant to answer a particular question.

I chose semi-structured format for questions about the culture and norms of real estate work, including the nature of relationships with customers, brokers, and other industry

professionals. A semi-structured interview protocol allowed me to integrate unexpected insights into subsequent interview questions, while focusing the research on the central topic of interest: real estate work (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Specifically, I was able to modify the wording of interview questions to more accurately apply to participant experiences, such as integrating industry jargon (e.g., 'for sale by owner') or referencing common trends (e.g., Zillow.com profiles) or materials (e.g., 'disclosure agreement'). This open-ended format also allowed me to follow up with targeted questions based on the participant's comments and to pursue stories and insights as they emerged. I took notes during conversations, which I used to form follow up questions and probe for additional detail or clarification of perspectives.

Despite open-ended questions, there can still be limits on the information obtained, depending on both the willingness of the participant to share with the researcher and also the researcher's ability to adapt to each participant's situation. Some limitations that arose included my own position as a researcher reaching out to workers during what I was frequently told was the busiest and most stressful time of the year for real estate: spring and summer seasons. Nine of the brokers I reached out to responded that they could not participate in an hour-long interview about their work due to time constraints or other factors. Interviews fell through with seven brokers who agreed to participate. For instance, one replied to my inquiry by offering to participate if "we could make the interview 15-20 mins" because "it's a busy market right now and it's tough staying on top of everything else." Another said "I'd be delighted to help your research in any way possible." Despite multiple attempts to regain contact, however, I was unable to get a follow-up response from these brokers.

When inquiring about customer relations and review practices, I expected that some participants may not disclose certain information or may regulate their responses (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013) given recent debates over ethical reviewing practices (Kuehn, 2015) and concerns of maintaining a positive reputation in the real estate industry. Therefore, I included indirect questions known to increase response rates and accuracy (Charmaz, 2006). For instance, I asked whether brokers knew *anyone else* who had a negative customer review experience. This strategy solicited fruitful storytelling. For example, one broker described the negative experience of "a friend" who had received a negative review from "somebody they never transacted with."

As an organizational communication student studying real estate work, my presence inevitably had an impact on the interviews. Brokers often assumed my goals were to improve communication skills and processes, with goals similar to the marketing resources they often encountered. A few participants spoke about communication as it takes place *within* their organization, and suggested how their work strategies could benefit others in the industry. Others supposed I intended to pursue a career in real estate, and were guarded about proprietary knowledge or insider secrets until I clarified my goals as academic. Over half of the participants asked if I was interested in buying or selling a home or if I knew anyone else that I could refer. Three brokers added me to their email marketing campaigns. One of these three had denied participation in my study, yet I received monthly newsletters from her organization from May 2016 – October 2017. I found it interesting that brokers consistently reached out to me as a potential customer, directly or indirectly, despite their knowledge that I was there for the purpose of academic research and speaking with a large group of brokers for my study. Such instances reinforced my interpretation of the social practices and

expectations around referrals-through-networking as a permeating, preoccupying force in real estate culture.

Developing Interview Questions

I conducted interviews through a flexible guide (Appendix A) that could be adapted to the varied experience and expertise of participants with regard to real estate work (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Guiding topics included real estate work, customer relations, personal and professional activities, and everyday experiences. Example questions include: "What is involved in your daily work activities?", "How have mobile and internet technologies impacted your job?", "Do you ask clients to write online reviews, give referrals or testimonials?", and "How do you manage your online presence?" I crafted these questions to learn more about real estate work as a professional sales and service job; to examine how those working in real estate understand the interactive elements of their job including their perceptions of how digital technologies impact customer relations; and to investigate the impact of customer review and referral practices on work and professional life.

The study proposal included interview questions directed at real estate customers. The goal was to understand the ways in which worker and customer perceptions converge and diverge, particularly when talking to workers and customers who had interacted with each other. After conducting the first few interviews, however, I decided to focus solely on speaking with real estate workers. I made this decision for three primary reasons. First, given the short-term, qualitative nature of the study, I determined that it would be most productive to narrow analysis to the insights of single, larger group of participants. Given the study's focus on work and labor, I decided to concentrate on broker interviews. Second, although a few brokers offered to put me in touch with past clients, I quickly determined that it would be

difficult to interview worker-customer pairs in sustained, consistent manner due to barriers of access and privacy. Finally, I was able to access customer opinions from digital sources, including customer review platforms, which offered a satisfactory level of qualitative insight into consumer perceptions of real estate experiences. As a result, I was able to conduct thirty-four worker interviews, rather than the original approximation of fifteen workers and fifteen customers.

Qualitative Data Analysis and Interpretation

Critical research requires a careful balance of analysis and interpretation that is open, emergent, and theory driven (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). I took a grounded approach of careful and reflexive data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Using this approach, I concentrated on comparing data throughout the research process. To track my own changing interpretations, I recorded analytic memos of thoughts and reactions throughout stages of data collection and analysis (Tracy, 2013). I noted emerging themes, codes, and industry trends, and regularly returned to the data for confirmation of findings and consideration of new avenues of analysis. This process of iterative analysis involved continuous reflections of the data collected as well as existing literature (Tracy, 2013). It also helped me maintain critical self-reflection on my own commitments as an organizational communication researcher interested in relations of power and control (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Further, a grounded, iterative approach allowed me to integrate unexpected insights, while maintaining a central focus on brokers' experiences and framings of the cultural norms and discourses that characterize their work (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For instance, interviews informed selective attendance at industry events; findings at events motivated

investigation into discursive trends not initially recognized in initial coding of emerging themes within interview data.

To analyze the interviews, I followed two-step coding process offered by Tracy (2013). First, I read interview transcripts to develop loose descriptions, or first-level codes, of participant statements. For example, in an interview with a broker working at an office of a large brokerage franchise, I made note that she described "company support and training with expert visitors for weekly meetings" because I was interested in how participants framed their relationships with affiliated organizations given their independent status. I identified significant codes for all interviews, observing how similar concepts emerged throughout responses. First level codes included terms and ideas brokers identified as meaningful to their work such as "working on the business versus working in the business," "referrals from past clients," and "we pay to work." Industry-specific terms helped identify common tasks and roles such as "desk time," "weekend" versus "full service agent," "rainmaker," and "top producer." When reviewing transcripts, I engaged in a constant comparison of the codes to allow for reflexivity. For instance, as participants explained, the code "desk time" refers to brokers' discussion of the organizational procedure whereby brokers sit at the front desk of an office building during pre-scheduled periods to answer phone calls made to the organization. While some participants saw desk time as an opportunity to secure new leads, others found it an unnecessary commitment, usually when they had established enough business to no longer need "cold leads" or non-referred customers.

I used second-level codes to group the first-level codes into more specific categories attuned to the chapters. Second level, or analytic, codes included industry terms and jargon (Tracy, 2013). For instance, Chapter Four utilizes the second level codes of "Oh By the

Way™" and "Referral Maker™," "business coach," and "client appreciation event" to thematize career coaching discourses significant to real estate work. Chapter Five uses the codes "user search behavior," "home search," "Zillow rules," "misinformation," and "generating leads" to understand brokers' associations with technological artifacts and digital platforms. I continuously returned to the interviews, field notes, and cultural artifacts to look for themes emerging from the data. As I reflected on emergent themes, I paid attention to current literature and theories I expected to be relevant to the study (Tracy, 2013, p. 184).

One of the most challenging aspects of my grounded and emergent research process was conceptualizing real estate as "a strange place" (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 167). As brokers often reminded me, buying and selling property is something "most people" experience. Despite assumptions that omit significant populations without access, means, or resources for property management or ownership, I do have personal experiences that align with participants' generalizations including direct experience with members of the real estate industry. I have also been exposed to cultural representations real estate trends, events, and phenomena from a consumptive standpoint (i.e., news reports and television shows). The study's qualitative design allows for a rich exploration of the real estate context beyond, and sometimes in spite of, personal experience. In-depth interviews, participant observations, and analysis of cultural artifacts allowed me to move through organizing phenomena—familiarizing and de-familiarizing myself—to formulate case studies of real estate work.

The real estate industry is an ideal context to explore the impacts of review culture due to its long-standing history of customer referral practices and increasing use of online sources for customer experience sharing. Those working in real estate are particularly impacted by customer review practices, and brokers' experiences are a significant site to

interrogate how deeply customer relations penetrate and mediate day-to-day work experiences. The case study chapters analyze how brokers perceive, adopt, contest, or disregard various aspects of their customer service work. Chapter Three investigates how brokers understand online customer reviews as a growing trend imbedded in the practices and policies of real estate work. Brokers rationalize the pressure to earn five star reviews alongside the benefits of customer referrals as a significant source of business. Chapter Four looks at the role of career coaching discourses influencing brokers' routines of reputation management, customer relations, and self-branding. Securing and commodifying long-term customer relations becomes a preeminent strategy among brokers looking for ways to generate "business by referral." Finally, Chapter Five investigates the effects of Zillow.com as a prominent customer review and ranking platform designed for the real estate industry. This digital platform, made up of software codes and algorithmic rules, mediates possibilities for customer engagement, feedback, and interaction in ways not readily apparent within brokers' narratives.

CHAPTER 3: EXPERIENCING REVIEW CULTURE

Until recently, customer assessments were limited to organizationally maintained collection procedures such as mail-in surveys and feedback cards (Turner & Krizek, 2006). Now, publicly voiced customer opinions are increasingly defining organizational relations (Gabriel et al., 2015). Online review platforms have become the preferred vehicle for communicating opinions on consumptive experiences and service quality (Kuehn, 2015; Sperber, 2014; Yang & Fang, 2004). Review culture characterizes this recent proliferation of online information sharing, feedback, and evaluation by customers. Review culture techniques persist in gathering and documenting customer feedback on employee performance, particularly in service industries such as grocery stores, fast food restaurants and coffee shops. Here, businesses regularly ask customers to voice their experiences of shopping and interacting with sales workers. Review culture extends these practices from internally controlled procedures into public events (Gabriel, 2005). The democratizing assurances of online review platforms compel endless engagement, enabling unprecedented access to consumer-generated, opinion-based information about businesses, products, and services (Kuehn, 2015).

Even given widespread customer participation in review platforms, few studies have investigated how workers experience organizational and work effects of customer commentary. Growing visibility and credibility of customer reviews increasingly define organizational policies, goals, and standards of acceptable employee behavior (Gabriel et al., 2015; Truner & Krizek, 2006). Customer judgments regarding quality, speed, and

acceptability of services can have direct, financially damaging consequences for workers held accountable to idiosyncratic assessments of intense service standards (Sperber, 2014). Customer reviews can justify management firing decisions, eliding former conditions of due process and eroding organizational barriers of employee hiring, protection, and retention (Sperber, 2014). In some cases, online reviews are a significant source of reputational value for workers (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Kuhn, 2015; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Zwick et al., 2008). These instances indicate the significance sharing, reading, and writing reviews as forms of unpaid customer labor. Studies are beginning to investigate how customers utilize online review platforms as modes of public engagement (Kuehn, 2015), sources of self-branding (Kuehn, 2016), and markers of elite organizational identity (Askay & Gossett, 2015). Yet workers' experiences of increasingly publicized customer opinions, and ensuing reconfigurations of labor relations through value-generating customer input, remain largely unexamined.

This chapter examines how workers experience review culture. Using a case study of real estate, I explore brokers' understanding of their everyday engagement with online customer review platforms and practices. Analysis of interview data reveals conditions under which brokers adopt, disregard, and contest online review activities. Thus, this study addresses ongoing calls to acknowledge customer reviews as a significant site of analysis (Kuehn, 2016) and the changing role of customer opinions in influencing organizational relations (Gabriel et al., 2015; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Understanding how brokers engage within review culture can inform questions of how workers manage, mediate, or mitigate customer's increasingly public role in labor relations and employment conditions. In particular, I consider how the growing visibility of customer opinions—and expectations

thereof—affects individual workers. I begin by describing the context of contemporary review culture before examining real estate as an exemplar industry experiencing significant structural changes stemming from increasing customer involvement.

The Rise of Online Customer Review Platforms

The internet has dramatically accelerated the spread, exposure, and impact of customer recommendations (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004) previously limited to word of mouth sharing (Z. Zhang et al., 2010). Unprecedented customer input now appears within a growing number of outlets designed to accumulate, interpret, and quantify customer input through textual and numerical ranking systems (e.g., TripAdvisor, AngiesList, Epinions, ReviewCentre, Consumers' Checkbook). Customer comments also appear in directory databases (e.g., YellowPages, Google+ Local, CitySearch), consumer websites (e.g. Amazon), and social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, FourSquare, Instagram). These digital venues make customer feedback readily and easily accessible, in addition to expert assessments (Clemons et al., 2006). Search engines escalate the importance of customer reviews. For example, Google grants higher search result priority to websites with customer review content (Clemons et al., 2006; DeMers, 2015). Although digital word of mouth sharing is not a new social trend (Dellarocas, 2003), how workers are experiencing this magnification of presence, importance, and permanence of customer opinions is uncharted territory.

Growing attributions of customer opinions as valuable and consequential subject organizations and workers to new forms of public assessment and reprimand (Kuehn, 2015). For example, the restaurant industry is paradigmatic of interactive service work (Leidner, 1991) where employees face the consequences of increasing customer feedback through

platforms like Yelp and TripAdvisor (Sperber, 2014). Yet the implications of review culture are not limited to traditional service organizations. Customer opinions are treated as reliable data points in employment decisions across industries where reviews characterize professional workers' success, reputation, and hiring potential (Berkelaar et al., 2014) as digital review sites continue to emerge and review content continues to increase in new arenas.

In order to accumulate review data, commercial platforms solicit customer input (Askay & Gossett, 2015). Customers' creative, digital labor has long been recognized as productive of brand value (Gabriel et al., 2015; Mumby, 2016; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Sperber, 2014). However, review culture draws customers deeper into the service process when they write, read, and evaluate online reviews (Bauer & Gegenhuber, 2015; Ghose et al., 2012; Terranova, 2004; Kuehn, 2015, 2016; Willmott, 2010). Customers receive social benefits from writing reviews, such as entry into local communities, prestige, popularity, and identity confirmation (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Kuehn, 2015, 2016). Yet, commercial platforms, organizations, and workers also benefit from this unpaid labor from customers. Therefore, this study responds to ongoing calls to investigate the changing role of customers as third-party participants in the service labor process (Fontenelle, 2015; Korczynski, 2001; Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Leidner, 1991, 1993; Ritzer, 2013; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Sturdy, 2001; Sturdy et al., 2001).

This chapter demonstrates how review culture intensifies and digitizes existing social and communicative processes of experience sharing. In particular, I show how review culture extends the significance of customer input on the service labor process with significant effects on power, control, and resistance relations among workers and their customers. To

identify ways that workers perceive and negotiate review culture, I asked real estate brokers how customer review practices fit into their work routines. Broker experiences offer insight into established review solicitation practices, consequences of publicized customer feedback, and novel relations among workers and customers. Real estate brokers' experiences serve as an example of how workers are increasingly exposed to the plusses and penalties of customer service discourses and continuous, public experience sharing.

Online Customer Review Practices in Real Estate

Customer reviews and referrals function as significant sources of strain as well as value. Taken together, the findings highlight how brokers experience review culture. These data show how participants perceive and manage online customer reviews as sources of referral as well as reputational risk. Online customer reviews simultaneously support business growth while also demanding new forms of labor, expense, and interaction from workers.

Evaluating Brokers' Reports of Customer Reviews

Customer referrals are a significant source of business for real estate professionals. All participants in this study reportedly engaged in at least one form of referral practice (e.g., asking past clients "if I could use their name for a reference"). The majority of brokers described online customer reviews as a significant trend increasingly impacting industry members, as customers are "going to be looking for more reviews online." Almost half of participants reported that they recently began to solicit online customer reviews as standard practice. While some reported that customer reviews have only "recently come up" as a topic of conversation on how to "improve business," several described customer reviews as an ongoing objective. In the words of one agent, soliciting online reviews is "one of my goals

for this year." Another stated, "I need to do better about [asking] because people do say it's important." Several participants reported detailed procedures to manage customer reviews as part of their overall "online presence." For example, brokers would usually "wait 'til after the transaction is finished" to explain how "a five star review would mean a lot to me." They reminded customers about online reviews throughout the real estate transaction in conversation. As one broker stated, "you should always be asking for business." Several brokers solicit reviews over email by including a request at the bottom of their signature block. One broker knew another agent who "makes [review solicitation] a part of her listing agreement." Yet customers also write reviews without prompting from brokers. Participants found that "our clients do go out online and review us" on their own. These experiences indicate a more complex, agentic dimension to customer engagement in review culture. Customers contribute to, and interact with, online review platforms more often than is readily apparent.

Although participant responses suggested widespread engagement with online customer review platforms, brokers reported mixed judgements about their consequence and legitimacy. Overall, adoption of review culture tended to be dependent on the presence or absence of existing referral networks. Brokers with strong personal and professional networks felt least impacted by online review trends. As one broker stated, "my business has already come by referral…and that's really the way my business is run." In addition, reliance on "old style," or offline marketing strategies, helped brokers generate business. As one broker summarized, "I believe that signs still work" to capture attention and generate referrals. The majority of brokers felt some sense of obligation to request, monitor, and manage customer reviews, particularly when new to the industry or invested in internet

marketing strategies. Thirteen participants initially stated that online customer reviews were irrelevant. However, five of those thirteen said they planned to request reviews soon. The other eight dismissed online reviews but relied heavily on traditional word-of-mouth recommendations. Overall, broker responses demonstrate a consistent reliance on various forms of customer referral for everyday industry success.

Contextualizing the Significance of Reviews

As they described the role of online customer review platforms in their everyday routines, most brokers contextualized the significance of reviews for real estate work with discursive framings like "this is a referral business and reviews are everything." Several brokers cited findings released by the National Association of REALTORS® that "eighty percent of people find their agent through somebody that they know." A small portion of participants reported working "only by referral," which meant helping "a friend of a friend" without "any online marketing." What made the current moment different, however, were the conditions under which brokers chose to engage or disengage with customer review practices given the advent of platforms such as Zillow, Trulia, Realtor.com, and Yelp. These platforms add opportunities for feedback and referral, alongside traditional methods of opinion sharing.

Concurrent with the advent of online platforms, brokers reported awareness that customers conduct online reputation research as a first step in the real estate process. Participants noted that over the past few years they felt as though "sellers are doing more research and looking at testimonials" online. As one broker reported, "people are being a lot more vetted" though digital means. In their experience, customers "Google everything"—including broker profiles and existing customer reviews—prior to scheduling a meeting, requesting a property visit, or signing a listing agreement. Here, brokers reiterated that there

is a “review foundation” that provides them with new business, while also “let[ting] the world know” about customer experiences. The digital nature of customer reviews, both positive and negative, meant that there is “no faking anything.” Brokers found that customers were often drawn to opinions written by strangers, and digital platforms were treated as deeply trusted sources of information sharing where “people now truly do trust these reviews as much as if their best friend recommended me.”

Brokers actively working to build their customer base—especially those new to the industry with few existing referrals—tended to view customer reviews as an essential component of their online marketing portfolio. For instance, a broker with two years’ experience said he asks every client for an online review to “grow my business.” Although he found that “it is not a difficult process to ask for reviews” and “people are never surprised that I ask,” he was motivated by his lack of referral base, stating “I still worry about where my next client will come from.” Others agreed that “it takes a little bit of time to…get a certain number of deals done” before they can expect referrals to “kick in.” One participant estimated that “it takes probably about three years to start to get repeat business or to start to get referrals.” Online reviews filled a perceived gap in business growth—and earning potential—for real estate careers.

Participants who did not actively seek customers to share opinions online revealed barriers protecting them against potential consequences of nonexistent or negative reviews. Brokers with a considerable customer referral base, professional networks and vendor referral programs, years of industry experience, or effective online marketing portfolios found that customer reviews held less significance for their daily work “because we have

plenty of business." One broker summarized his view on online customer review platforms, positing why reviews matter to others, and what made his business model different:

> I have a Trulia and Zillow profile. I don't know that anybody's looked at it or I don't know that I have any endorsements on there. [Other brokers are] really worried about their profile because that's how their clients are coming to them—is through that profile. They're looking at how—they're googling an agent or they're trying to find an agent based on somebody's review of them. And that's not typically where my review happens. My review happens like this. At somebody's breakfast table, at somebody's dinner table or somebody's kitchen or at soccer practice or at church—'hey you should use—oh, you're thinking of selling, you should use [Name].'

In this instance, the broker positioned his work style as resistant to review culture, simultaneously insulated by his personal and professional networks. Interestingly, brokers with the largest customer referral base often had the most customer reviews published online, even when they did not ask clients to publicly post feedback. As one broker explained, "if you like me and I've done a good job for you, you're likely going to tell your friends and your family about your experience." As this broker indicates, word of mouth referrals can easily replicate into online reviews, magnifying the reach of individual transactions and reinforcing the status of already successful workers.

Brokers also expressed a change in perspective on digital review practices. In a few instances, participants who initially solicited reviews found that a growing referral base supplanted their need for additional online content (e.g., "it's probably been six months, easy, since the last time I sent [a review request]"). One broker-in-charge exemplified this switch in perception, stating, "we do ask for reviews. I used to do it a lot more because I thought it was more important. We're really kind of now—now we're standing on the shoulders of our success." In this example, the participant employed a "large support staff" including a Search Engine Operator, or SEO Manager, whose "top priority" is to keep the company website visible on the first page of Google results for key real estate search terms. Years of

experience, combined with specialized internet marketing strategies, allowed him to instead focus on operating his real estate business like a "concierge service." Despite protections from review culture and a strong belief that "word of mouth is still better and stronger than internet testimonials," this participant also instituted an organizational policy requiring his staff to solicit reviews from every customer. These instances illustrate that even when brokers do not appear to recognize how actively their organization solicits feedback, customer reviews and opinion sharing is a widening trend impacting their industry.

Despite differing personal views on soliciting reviews, almost all participants agreed that shared customer observations capture attention, validate work, and demonstrate success. This was expressed as having a robust online presence to prove "that you're real" or "legit" demonstrated through a commitment to customer service (Clair, 1996). Brokers frequently used customer reviews as "proof of effectiveness," experience, and knowledge. Even when working by referral, positive reviews were deemed "invaluable" at verifying what a "real life person" has said because "even if someone's referred to us we find that they still might look us up at Zillow or Trulia to see our reviews and how many reviews we've gotten." Consistently, brokers reported that customers take online reviews seriously in hiring decisions. In their experience, customers "go out there and look and see" what reviews exist. When they find "fifteen great Yelp reviews" and a five star profile, it "confirms" their choice. When asked how they know customers are conducting online research, brokers recalled statements from customers who admitted, "'oh I Googled and you have a lot of good reviews.'" Given customers' insistence on confirming referrals through online review content, one broker-in-charge described his strategy for accumulating reviews:

> It's become so important that it was about a year and a half ago, I [sent] my former clients…an email and a little letter saying 'Hey we're looking to try to get more

> reviews on Zillow and Trulia. If I get ten reviews, I'm going to do a drawing for a fifty dollar gift card to your favorite restaurant. If I get twenty-five reviews, I'm going to do a drawing for a mini IPad.' And so I anyway I got from that like thirty-five to forty reviews on Zillow and Trulia because it is that important.

This broker had thirteen years of experience in the local real estate industry and an extensive referral network, yet he still found it necessary to demonstrate success from the perspective of publicly posted customer opinions.

For a subset of participants, customer reviews served as significant markers of value and meaning. The designation as a "five star agent" was deeply ingrained in the professional identity of three brokers who expressed its importance as, "the way that I approach my every day is I just want to be a five star agent" and "I like to get five stars on everything." Here, the phrase "five star agent" becomes a novel colloquialism defining what makes a broker "real" and valued within contemporary work relations (Clair, 1996). Further, these brokers not only aimed for top rankings, but also regarded anything less as damaging, with assertions such as "he gave me a three star instead of a five star there but he didn't realize he was hurting me when he did it" and "occasionally someone will write me four out of the five and it just urns me up." These examples demonstrate the extent to which workers internalize the values of review culture, namely the practice of quantifying professional abilities through subjective assessments and symbolic rating systems. Attaining positive reviews can become a primary source of meaning and identity for these workers (Fleming, 2014).

A small handful of brokers tracked how effective they were at soliciting reviews. One noted, "I probably have doubled my success rate of getting reviews. I might have been at ten percent three or four years ago, now I'm at twenty-five percent." Some participants knew exactly how many reviews were currently published about them online. Others went so far as to track the number of clients who transacted as a direct result of reading online reviews. One

broker reported "I had three closings last year as a direct result of someone finding me on Zillow, reading my reviews, and then saying 'wow—she's—I really want to hire her.'" Overall, brokers found that accumulating a large quantity of customer reviews, whether positive, negative, or neutral, helped confirm their reputation and draw new business.

As these examples demonstrate, digital forums imbue customer opinions with more credibility and sway than ever before. Although real estate professionals have always benefitted from interpersonal networks and customers' word of mouth referrals, they now require online customer reviews as a strategy for generating new business and maintaining a positive brand image.

Managing Reviews as Standard Practice

To keep pace with the growing importance of reviews in the market, brokers developed structured ways to manage online presence. Soliciting reviews has become standard practice for sixteen participants, following the advice they garnered through industry training events, post-broker licensing courses, and sales team meetings. In a few exceptional cases, brokers-in-charge set organizational rules or "ongoing communication plans" to mandate customer review solicitation. More than half of brokers with a standard process in place said they wait "after the closing," "when the deal is over," and "not until the very end" of a transaction to request a review. Few "wait a couple of days" to give customers "some breathing time." Two participants emphasized techniques for frequent mention of reviews to customers "throughout the process" when customers are "extremely happy with our services." Participants typically request a review in person and follow up with instructions over email because "most people don't write reviews unless you guide them." Most brokers indicated that they include a follow-up email in their standard process because,

for example, “you’ve got to reach out multiple times” to remind customers to post feedback. During their request and follow up processes, participants generally focused on Zillow and Facebook reviews because, in the words of one agent, “they get the most exposure.” Brokers also cited the importance of building review profiles on Trulia, Yelp, Angie’s List, Realtor.com, GooglePlus, Yahoo, and brokerage websites. As one broker stated, “not only do we spend marketing dollars on Zillow but having more reviews [on Google] definitely will you know get you more attention.” In order to build content across these platforms, participants would, for example, “just kind of rotate through like, [ask] one person for Zillow, ask the next person for Yelp and the next person for Realtor.com or whatever.”

Participants often preferred to keep their review request casual with statements to customers such as “Hey, do you mind posting a review on one or more of your favorite sites?” In this instance, the broker used examples of Facebook, Zillow, and Trulia as preferred sites where “nine out of ten people” will go to write them a review. In most cases, brokers found that “you gotta ask for positive” or five star reviews to ensure a positive response. Brokers found it helpful to explain the importance of online reviews for their business with requests such as “Hey we had a great experience with you. We hope you feel the same. If you did, it would really help us out if you could do a review for us on Zillow.” One broker gave an extended example of how he frames the significance of online reviews to customers:

> I want a commission and I want that check but I understand if I sell you a house that isn’t right for you, here’s what you’re going to do. You’re going to go online and you’re going to go to Zillow and you’re going to put a one star, this is the worst REALTOR® in the history of REALTORS®, never use him. And yes I have—I could get a check and I made 5,000 dollars off of you but I’m not going to retire on 5,000 dollars. So trust me, your one commission is not my motivation. My motivation is to get your one hundred friends you know each buy a 500,000 dollar house where each one of those people I make 5,000 dollars on. That’s how I’m going to get rich.

> So if Mr. and Mrs. client—you found me because my reviews. I'm going to earn a five star review from you and at the very end of the transaction, after you've gotten into your house and you realize I had your motivation and your best interests in mind, I'm going to ask you to put that same five star review that you found me from.

This example demonstrates not only specific tactics brokers utilize to convince customers to write positive reviews, but also how deeply rooted referral systems—and expectations of customer service—have become within real estate industry norms.

Brokers who pay less attention to online customer review processes still reported plans to solicit reviews as a new, or less sporadic, practice. When asked "have you ever asked a client to write a review of you online?" five brokers answered "not yet," but clarified their response, as in, "that's recently come up in conversations" as a "topic of how we can improve business." Three more had minimal experience soliciting online reviews and qualified their affirmative response, noting, "I need to get better at it" and "I'm not consistent enough." These participants reported that soliciting reviews "is something I do feel very consciously that I need to create a website and I need to reach out to my clients to get reviews."

Brokers rationalized their inattentiveness. One broker recently transitioned from being a stay at home mom to working as a realty assistant and full-time broker. Although she works with home buyers and sellers through a small "sort of a new company," she estimated that ninety percent of her business comes from marketing and selling new homes in a single community. In addition to having a steady stream of referrals in an exclusive neighborhood development, she reported being "too concerned about my own safety" to work with "blind leads," or customers who contact brokers based on internet research. Another broker attributed her lack of attention to online customer reviews to their high volume of business where "we have so much referral business now that we literally wouldn't need the leads. We

could work a business strictly off referrals." Although she planned to ask customers "to write us a review" in lieu of sending thank you cards and gifts, the company's current success meant that "it doesn't hurt us" to forgo online customer reviews. Instead, she focused on forming positive relationships with customers, maintaining trust, and advocating as their "teammate" throughout the real estate process. These examples illustrate that brokers least engaged with online review solicitation practices still acknowledged customer reviews as an important phenomenon in the industry, and felt some sense of urgency to solicit reviews in the future.

The Cost of Review Culture

Broker responses indicate how managing customer reviews through a "public forum" can become a cost and labor intensive process. Almost half used phrases like "we pay to work" to describe their up-front investments in industry marketing. Participants reported paying for advertising on Zillow, a prominent real estate consumer platform, to reach widespread audiences interested in reading customer reviews. Even when brokers work primarily by referral, they rely on review-centered advertising. As one stated, "we still spend a lot of money on internet and we spend money on the Zillow and Trulia and Realtor.com to be, to be a preferred REALTOR®." One broker described investments in a separate marketing campaign designed to spread the visibility of his positive customer reviews:

> One of my ads says 'What are my clients saying about me?' That is very important. You have to show that you have a great track record. You have to show that you could overcome problems, challenges, and you have to have the experience to make—to get to the closing table.

Although less frequently, brokers also invest in programs offered by independent reputation services designed to "manage all of your online reviews." Such reputation management services offer step-by-step instructions on how to build influence and trust with

customers through participation in online review platforms (Brogan, 2010). These companies collect, promote, and distribute positive reviews "in the right spots" such as Yelp, Facebook, and other platforms targeting real estate customers. Strategies center on capturing feedback from satisfied customers, while preventing or mediating expressions of dissatisfaction from others (Shankman, 2011; Vaynerchuk, 2011). However, these services come "for a price." As one broker summarized, "having your online reputation managed by a for-fee service" requires "a certain income level to make it worthwhile." In addition, these strategies require constant interaction with customers both on- and offline to generate positive reviews that reflect trust, integrity, and personalized relationships.

Finally, brokers bought trust from clients by contributing financially to 'close a deal' and earn positive—or prevent negative—reviews. Some said they had engaged in purchasing an appliance, helped cover closing costs, or reduced their commission. One broker described an instance when he "took responsibility" by spending three hundred dollars to install a garbage disposal he accidentally advertised in a home.

> Maybe if I have to throw four or five hundred dollars at something just to…make everybody happy, you do it. Even if it's not your fault. You have to keep, you have to always keep sight of the larger picture…Make sure your clients are happy. That's the only—that's the bottom line.

Brokers also noted what they saw as an intense level of labor necessary to manage a positive digital reputation through online review platforms. As the following examples demonstrate, reacting appropriately to commentary by customers requires not only industry knowledge, but also communication skills, emotion labor, and technological expertise (Hochschild, 2012; Leidner, 1993). Some pursued formal training on customer review platforms through continuing education courses, while most relied on everyday experience. Therefore, brokers had varying exposure to the rules of engagement with online platforms.

Given the complexity of platform rules, brokers largely rely on website syndication to help spread review content, even when they were "not positive" about how the syndication process works. For instance, brokers noted that Zillow's recent purchase of the Trulia platform meant that "anything that goes on Zillow also gets put on Trulia…they get populated on both sites" via automated cross-posting. Another clarified, "Zillow bought Trulia so you don't have to worry about Trulia anymore. If it's in one place it's in both places." While some would ask customers to "cut and paste" their review into social media websites such as Facebook, others would copy or "summarize" review content into their own website. One broker said she "can take those Zillow reviews and plug them into Realtor.com," which offers a self-managed profile that works "like a blog." These Brokers found it easier to monitor and approve content on their own websites, as they simply "don't have to approve [a review]" if it's not positive. Together, these responses indicate how managing customer reviews can become a cost and labor intensive process impacted by commercial platforms and social media sites with "increasingly integrated digital infrastructures" (Rieder, 2016, p. 12).

Despite best efforts as soliciting reviews, and despite reliance on website syndication, technological, mediating factors were out of their control, namely Google. Google's search engine algorithm increases the spread and visibility of customer reviews published online (DeMers, 2015). Google indexes customer reviews, elevating the search result rankings of websites with reviews as "having higher authority, more relevance," sometimes even ranking an individual customer review above a business website (DeMers, 2015). Google encourages organizations to expand customer review content and hyperlink to other review forums (Clemons et al., 2006). These technological developments grant online communities

unrestricted access to customer feedback, dramatically increasing the sale and reach of customer opinions previously limited to word of mouth sharing within local networks of friends, family, and acquaintances (Trenz & Berger, 2013; Zhang, Ye, Law, & Li, 2010). Three brokered demonstrated an awareness of interaction between Google search engine and Zillow reviews. The first found that

> If somebody's doing a google search [for] 'REALTORS® in the Triangle,' 'REALTORS® in Raleigh' whoever is popping up on top five of the Google search, that's who's going to get contacted. Somebody's not going to go to page twelve to find the real estate agent you know that's never been heard of. You know what I mean? So you know by having the higher [Zillow] ranking as well that's definitely important.

Similarly, another found that, because of the popularity of Zillow on Google search results, her "personal website, isn't coming up until you know page two, page three, page ten—I don't know what page it's going to come up depending on the day and how Google's working that day." Due to Google's search algorithm, a third broker recently started "asking people to write reviews on Google as well because that's just going to be higher ranking for people to do a Google search [on] "REALTORS® in Raleigh."

Managing Negative Reviews, Bullying, and False Reports

Managing online reputations while working through review platforms was notoriously difficult. Although some platforms ostensibly enable service providers and customers to negotiate and settle unresolved situations, participants expressed frustration with platform rules that impeded their ability to rebut claims or take counter-action. When responding to customer complaints through formal rules designed by platform operators, brokers often felt "there's no recourse" and "you don't get to tell the other side of the story." A few brokers described online review systems as a "conspiracy" where "you are completely

hostage" to seemingly arbitrary rules and restrictions of customer interaction. One of these participants, a broker-in-charge, reported that

> I also own a couple of rental houses. I had to do an eviction. My first eviction in ten years. Couple of months ago. And I thought, 'what the hell do I do?' They could put an online review saying any dag gone thing that they want, you know, and I can tell my side of the story because it was a legal eviction going on, I'm not sure that I could tell my side of the story. But there's a hostage aspect to that as well.

She explained further,

> I cut somebody off in traffic recently because they just—I wasn't paying enough attention. Like a typical REALTOR®, I was on the phone. And I cut him off and they were mad. And they were very assertive about how mad they were. And I thought 'oh crap, I wonder if driving offenses are an issue for Google reviews'—yeah, she's a terrible driver—and it's ridiculous for that to go through your mind and yet in this environment, you do. Like, I'm sorry I cut you off. It was a mistake. But it's really quite funny that that even crosses your mind.

Although brokers can dispute customer comments on some consumer review websites, such as the formal re-moderation process enabled on Zillow, platform operators may or may not adjust or remove the contested comments (Zillow, 2014a). Former, existing, and even *potential* customers can rate their experience with an agent on Zillow. Agents cannot opt out of receiving customer reviews without removing their entire profile from Zillow—an action that would forfeit potential marketing exposure on the most popular online real estate search tool (Zillow, 2014a). Zillow's rules of engagement are not unique. Participants found it difficult to work with most platforms. After receiving a negative review on Yelp, for example, a broker-in-charge:

> Tried to contact Yelp and work with them and say listen at least let us put up—and they wouldn't let us make any response. They said 'no, that's not part of our system.' You know. You can have other people go on and say how great you are but you can't rebut any criticism that's on there…I wouldn't mind that if they were two-way conversations and they're not. I haven't, at least I hadn't come across one where the person being reviewed can go on and say "yes, but" and give some reply or rebuttal. It's just you're kind of tied to the wall and people get to throw tomatoes at you and you can't do anything.

Anticipation of negative reviews was a preoccupying force. In part, brokers' fear stemmed from lack of control over customer feedback where "anybody can post negative or positive on there at any time," "whether we worked with them or not or whether it's just germane to the real estate business or not." Popular discourse presents two primary techniques to manage negative reviews. First, workers can publicly reply to the review and offer some sort of acknowledgement of wrong doing or a rebuttal to the situation. While some platforms recommend this as the best course of action, each platform has its own coded rules and corporate policies that dictate when, how, in what ways a post and reply can be made. Some platforms do not allow the opportunity for replies from businesses, such as CitySearch, a searchable "guide" offering information on restaurants, shopping, hotels, and other businesses. Other platforms allow users to update, edit, or remove a negative review, such as Care.com, a site offering information on child, adult, pet, and home care service providers. Second, workers can solicit positive reviews in order to rebut or 'lower the significance' of the negative review. Even when following best practice guidelines, it remains difficult to obtain enough positive reviews to lower a negative review for it to be "out of sight." Despite attempts to reduce the visibility of negative comments, however, ratings, symbolized by stars appear prominently on worker profiles.

Although brokers expressed awareness of these types of rebuttal processes, they had a difficult time describing the rules for soliciting or rebutting customer reviews when requirements varied by platform or changed over time. One participant stated, "I think there's some ways on Zillow where you can kind of rebut it if you like go to them and say look I don't know who this person is. And then they do an investigation and open it up and take it

away." This broker, however, had no experience to validate the process. Another discussed the benefit of being able to reply to negative reviews, but did not discuss *how* he did so.

> I had a renter of a home that complained about us and they weren't even the owner of the property. And what can you do? You know. Public forum…usually the very first thing I do is I respond. I try to reply to the review because you're able to do that. I put a reply to the review…you give a very political—and you know not bashing that person back. Just to give everyone out there a reference my character and response and my knowledge of whether there was or wasn't you know an issue at hand that could of or couldn't have controlled.

A third participant offered a more detailed description of the review solicitation process:

> If you want somebody to give you a review on Yelp for example, they have to go to Yelp. They have to sign up and get a Yelp account. They may have to give the review. You cannot send them a link because if you do that, it somehow the link—and I'm not very tech savvy—somehow the link registers that it came from your computer and Yelp can tell that you were soliciting the review from your client and they won't accept it. So your client has to go to Yelp themselves. They cannot click on the link that you sent them to Yelp. Zillow and Trulia, you can I think email them directly from Zillow and Trulia and say 'can you, you know, write a review for me?'

Here, brokers offered examples of how navigating review platforms' coded rules of conduct can be a labor-intensive process for customers as well. One stated,

> Zillow is difficult because they require you to set up an account and a password and you know it's good because people know that it's legitimate, but it's sometimes cumbersome enough that people don't end up doing it just because they don't want to go through the process. Zillow also requires it to be from a personal IP address. So we have to make sure we let people know that because if they're at work and they try to do it, Zillow won't accept it.

Another participant clarified that "someone has to be registered [to write a review]. You know they have to have their own login." Given platform-specific mediation rules and perceptions that responding is a complex and time-consuming process, one broker said he'd rather "almost pay them off" than deal with procedures for recourse against a negative comment online. Another broker exemplified underlying apprehension of online customer reviews with a description of a client as "so wacky…I thought 'that's going to be the lady

who goes and writes something negative about me.'" Several others reported instances when co-workers felt that a single mistake could cause a client to "immediately drop everything and make a negative review." In response to anticipation of negative reviews, two brokers discussed how their companies rely on paper surveys as a strategy to prevent customers from posting negative comments online "because some people, even if they think that you did great and they still may have a concern that they're going to give you on paper."

> When you give people an option, if they have something negative they want to say, they're going to put it on paper and mail it back to you versus putting it on the internet. Most cases. You know there's still people that want—if they want it really, really bad, then they're going to want everyone to know. But usually if it's small things that they think you should change, putting it on paper they're more open to do that.

Similar to this example, participants attribute recent preoccupation with negative reviews. One agent attributed this to "old classic human nature" where:

> When somebody has something good to say, they'll say it to half a dozen people. But when they have something bad to say, they'll say it to sixty people…so you always worry about how that's going to affect you…You know it, it's affected my behavior as a consumer.

These perceptions that customers are more likely to share negative experiences align with market research findings. Customers are more likely to share bad experiences rather than good ones, and are more likely to share negative reviews online than in person (Zendesk, 2017).

Others framed recent experiences as bullying and even "blackmail" when clients threatened to write a negative review unless some form of financial concession was made. In one instance, a customer "threatened to go on social media and tear us up" and "wrote a scathing review" over a broker's refusal to return a home sale commission. Yet, bullying and abusive situations are often internalized by workers as "part of the job" for service workers

(Bishop & Hoel, 2008). For instance, another broker described herself as "lucky" when a client did not follow through on their threat of a negative review. While overt threats only occurred in exceptional instances, participants remained wary of the possibility of negative customer reports. Many regard negative feedback as "inevitable" in a climate of review culture. Brokers considered that a negative review is "going to happen because it happens to everybody." Several made remarks suggesting that at some point they were going "to get a bad client" likely to publish negative comments. One broker called it "only a matter of time" before she would receive a negative review for something out of her control because "you can't make everybody happy all the time." In this situation, the broker treated the threat of a negative review as an everyday dilemma, to be addressed preemptively in her daily routine. She was trained by her broker-in-charge "to really just reach out and try to get as many people as possible to write more legitimate reviews that reflect positively on you to just try to outweigh whatever negative has been posted about you." Similar responses from other participants echoed her feelings that "we can't please everybody," particularly when events are beyond their control. Therefore, brokers developed processes to respond to negative comments, with publicly written replies that could "give everyone out there a reference [to] my character…and my knowledge of whether there was or wasn't, you know, an issue at hand that [I] could have or couldn't have controlled."

Further, false reports are another pressing concern for participants who had, or knew someone who had, experienced potential review fraud. Often, stories of false reviews were told about friends, co-workers, or professionals in related industries. For example, one agent relayed:

> A friend of mine who I know to be a good agent and a good person had a review put up with somebody they never transacted with. They never transacted with that person.

> Was it a mistake? Is it? Who knows. And all you can do is put a comment back saying sorry we have that experience—wasn't with us—but, you know, it sounds fairly lame, right?

Brokers hold pessimistic views on the future of online review platforms, stating "we may see more of that [review fraud] the way, you know, different sites are and all." One broker told a story about a home inspector she knew:

> He had someone that con—that wrote a negative review about him on Yelp and it was a client of someone he had never met before. And he contacted them and it was a scam of trying to get money from him. But it was out there and it took forever to get it, prove it to Yelp because Yelp, their whole system and how they do everything…but what do you do in a situation like that when it's a person you've never even met...So um and I even had several of my clients that would look at his reviews before using him and I'd explain that ahead of time and say "he does not know this person, you know he's trying to get this figured out" but that's what's more scary to me than a client actually having a negative feedback…that scares me, that whole Yelp thing.

These instances help contextualize implications of review culture, where the subjective nature of anecdotal feedback is a pressing concern. Brokers skeptical of review platforms often recognize that customer opinions and ratings are tied to personal experiences, beliefs, and circumstances. Not only customers, but also complete strangers, could easily write negative reviews under conditions where "anyone's opinion is weighted as highly as anyone else's." One broker felt especially strongly about the ubiquity of review culture and the looming possibility of losing business through a negative internet reputation. Although she reported having "no beef" with workers receiving "bad reviews," she, along with four others, framed the review solicitation process as completely out of their control. These brokers used the phrases "knock on wood" and "praise God" to describe the process, as if maintaining a five star rating was akin to tempting fate.

Questioning the Ethics of Review Culture: Gaming the System

While no participants disclosed unethical means of interacting with online customer review platforms, several speculated how others could easily be gaming the system. In these instances, brokers believed that reviews "can be bought, can be skewed," or can be "cherry pick[ed]." Here, participants reported suspicions that others had written reviews about themselves, asking "so how many of those did you do?" You know, your own review?" They also admitted to ways of influencing ratings by asking only "the clients that I had lots of warm fuzzy feelings with" or avoiding clients when "it's been a difficult process and I just know personalities weren't fantastic."

Two brokers strongly questioned the ethics of online reviews. The first believed there are "lots of ways you can create a lot of online reviews…. what's interesting about real estate reviews is that it's not very common that you see a one star review person out there." The other refused to solicit feedback even "at the cost of business":

> I hate the whole testimonial review thing because I know people are cheating them. I know their aunts and uncles are doing them for them. Ah when you see somebody has twenty three closed sales and one hundred reviews, um it's dirty…the whole online review thing I think is just out of control.

In this instance, the broker's opinions were largely based on receiving "sales pitches" from "social media companies" where "I can hire reviews. I bet I can get reviews from India, Pakistan for a dollar each. And they'd be flowery, they'd be flowery." This example demonstrates the use of cynicism as a mechanism of resistance to the "colonization" of real estate work by commercialized customer review practices (Fleming & Spicer, 2003). In agreement with other brokers who rejected the solicitation of online reviews as an important aspect of their work, however, he attributed his ability to evade online review trends to being "blessed to be working" in one of the "best markets in the country" for real estate

professionals. As an independent owner/broker, he managed a complex online marketing portfolio including a website syndicated to "three or four other websites," a blog, YouTube channel, and Facebook business page, in addition to direct mail postcards, in person networking, professional referrals, and other industry-specific techniques to increase self-branding such as "certified negotiating expert" credentials. While reportedly half his business "comes from repeat business or from referrals from satisfied clients," he also found unique ways to advertise through what he termed "guerrilla marketing" such as including a business card in packages he sells on Craig's List.

In a few cases, brokers discussed the potential for review platforms to solicit and publish content based on a commercial bias towards increasing content and potential for advertising revenue. Here, brokers discussed the commercial nature of review platforms as something that makes them "inauthentic" compared to "organic" customer referrals, which they reasoned as grounds to boycott online reviews. For instance, some believed that commercial platforms will only "give priority to who will advertise on their website." In one instance, a broker had received "unbelievably beautiful amazing reviews" that she believed "Yelp wouldn't publish" until she agreed to "buy their service." Despite the accumulation of seemingly authentic user-generated content, brokers believe that commercial platforms have a marketing bias that influences the display and prominence of individual broker profiles, an issue I pursue further in Chapter Five.

Reconfiguring Organizational Responsibilities through Customer Labor

Throughout broker interviews, participants discursively positioned customers as organizational members and co-producers of brand value (Gabriel et al., 2015). Their stories demonstrate specific ways in which workers proactively expand organizational boundaries to

include customers as members (Mills & Morris, 1986). Brokers would "interview" potential clients to determine if they were a "good fit" before signing a contract, train customers on how to effectively refer new business, and fire customers who did not comply. Five brokers discussed their strategies for "training" customers as "part of my sales team":

> We take it a step further, actually train people. I train my clients how to refer me. I will say something to the effect of 'when you come across people that are thinking about buying or selling, I'd certainly love to help them. So when you do find out about them, give me a call with their name and phone number, and I'll follow up with them and take really good care of them for you. Does that make sense?' 'Yes it does,' they say that. 'Are you comfortable doing that?' 'Yes, absolutely.'

When asked how they train clients to refer them, brokers provided specific examples such as "I have a template email that I will send to people so that way they can use that to send us referrals." Another reported, "I'll say to people 'you know just share their contact information with me. Get permission, too, so they'll know I'm calling.'" In order to increase compliance, brokers explained the importance of customer referrals by explaining how "we're going to do the best job we can so you can tell everyone else."

> One of the things I tell my clients is I don't go out, I don't market, I don't advertise. Usually they came to me from a referral, you know, and I say you came to me for a referral and I'm going to keep my head down working hard for you helping you meet your goals. I need you to keep your head up looking at your friends and family looking at who needs my assistance right now. So I can stay focused on helping you. That way I don't have to advertise. I don't have to do these other things that agents do to run their business.

This broker maintained a database of customer information, a Customer Relations Management (CRM) system, where he could "organize" and "grade" past customers based on their likelihood of providing referrals, assigning an "A+" to those mostly likely to send referrals. As these examples demonstrate, brokers organize-in customers as quasi-workers or members of the sales team working towards the same goals: getting more business through referrals.



Figure 1: Hand written thank you note mailed to potential client: "I am confident we will do a great job for you with the sale of your home so much so that you would feel confident to tell your friends."

Many participants defined their clients as brand advocates, brand ambassadors, and raving cheerleaders. "Good referrers" are customers who draw on personal networks and social capital to recommend brokers to friends, family, and acquaintances, as well as complete strangers. As one broker summarized, customers put "their name on the line to give that referral." Brokers considered their best advocates those who wrote online reviews to enhance "online presence" and help maintain a "five star rating." Online reviews and high customer ratings, as forms of brand advocacy, translated into direct value for brokers.

Brokers also "fired" customers. Instances of firing occurred when customers did "things that were inappropriate," or when they asked brokers violate "rules of ethics." In some cases, clients were simply not "an enjoyable person" to work. Others had unreasonable expectations and "helping certain people isn't worth our time" because they are "costing me financially" or working together isn't worth the "stress." Participants used euphemisms when

terminating a real estate contract, asking customers to "seek support somewhere else." One broker likened firing clients to "breaking up with your boyfriend," saying "you don't want to hurt somebody's feelings and so it kinda goes on much longer than it should."

These instances demonstrate how deeply embedded customers—and their opinions—are within real estate relations. Yet participants very rarely noted that asking for online reviews could be "asking a bit much." Only a few brokers expressed customer review solicitation as something they were "not comfortable" doing or that they were "not very good at…because I don't like to ask people for things." For instance, brokers reported that writing reviews meant that customers had "to take time out of their day to do that and it—even if it takes a few minutes." Although these descriptions seem to initially suggest that brokers are conscious of the efforts of customers as 'free labor,' this does not appear to be the case. While recent studies present recognition of customers reviews as not only a 'public service' but also a 'job' (Kuehn, 2015, p. 9) or form of 'work' (Kuehn, 2016), no broker explicitly framed the efforts of customers as "work" or "labor." Instead, participants considered it a "favor" and found ways to "make it very easy for your clients to give you a review because they don't have a lot of time, patience, or energy to devote to it." Brokers who expressed discomfort with soliciting reviews were often the ones who maintained a five star rating online and implemented a standard processes to ask each client for a review. One felt better about asking customers when they were "just dying" to do something nice for her. In these instances, she "only" asked customers to post their comments on one or two websites rather than "Yelp and Yahoo and all these other places."

In return for customers' time and effort, brokers provided what they called "items of value," including hand written thank you notes, seasonal gift packages, home repair service

recommendations, and invitations to "client appreciation events" designed to say "thank you for being awesome and telling people about me" and to "continue to serve in some capacity for you, your family, ongoing." Gift packages included citronella candles in the summer and homemade mason jar recipes in the fall. Client appreciation events included local sporting events, cookouts, pumpkin giveaways, private viewings at art galleries, and "pie parties" sponsored with food, drinks, and family activities.

> For instance, I'll bring a pumpkin at Halloween or I'll bring a rum cake at Christmas or I'll bring condiments around the fourth of July—mustard, ketchup, and relish—or some of the—an ice scraper or a fly swatter or something like a lighter that they can use on their grill. Something like that. And so I'm just stopping by to see them, asking if there is anything that they need at their house. Sometimes they need their gutters cleaned. Sometimes they need this air conditioning has been bothering me. Or so it's like the pediatrician going to the house when they're—or going to the house and seeing the kids when they're well. And they really like that.

Brokers offered examples of what it meant to provide benefits to customers "over years of time" "just like any good advisor would do." One would "just check in to see how things are going, what questions they have, do they need a good referral for somebody to do you know a service or product or things like that." Although gifts, favors, events, and professional referrals for home service needs were viewed by brokers as a form of recompense, they primarily leveraged these instances as "a good excuse to call and say hello." Brokers termed the process as staying "top of mind" to receive additional referrals by reminding customers about their services—yet another instance of customer labor. These strategies are representative of real estate career success coaching systems, which I investigate further in Chapter Four.

Discussion

This study contributes to communication and organization research by examining transformations in contemporary organizational relations to include the involvement and

influence of customers. Specifically, broker experiences offer a useful context to examine how review culture is reshaping organization and labor relations through increased customer input. Scholars have already noted the significance of online customer reviews as measures of satisfaction in customer service relations (Yang & Fang, 2004). Yet customer ratings of workers have even greater influence over hiring, pay, and promotion possibilities (Bishop & Hoel, 2008) as well as likelihood of termination than ever before (Sperber, 2014). The increasing visibility of customer feedback has important implications for the level of labor demanded of service professionals as well as contributions of customers as unpaid producers of value (Fontenelle, 2015; Rice & Leonardi, 2014) and as agentic participants navigating intimately blurred spheres of work and consumption (Fontenelle, 2015). Inquiry into additional service industry experiences is necessary to understand how workers as well as customers experience review culture, as well as the role of technical systems as a fourth entity embedded in the interactive service labor exchange. Two questions emerge around the impacts of review culture on organizational relations.

First, how does the looming possibility of online customer reviews impact how workers engage with customers? If the responsibility of customer satisfaction falls to individual workers, investigations can discover what processes or protections exist and how employees mitigate ongoing effects of increasingly publicized customer opinions. Exiting or opting out of a career is a fallible measure of resistance to review culture. When workers exit a job or change career paths (Gabriel, 2008), their digital review footprint follows, and online reputations remain subject to ongoing inspection and evaluation (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014). Customer comments appear in search results summoned through cybervetting (Berkelaar, 2014), a process of online data gathering conducted by prospective employers to

inform personnel decisions (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014). Information about workers' reputations, careers, values, personality, personal behavior, and overall public image become deciding factors for personnel selection (Berkelaar et al., 2014). Online profiles, or aggregated data double personalities (Haggerty and Ericson 2000), are more visible than readily apparent within digital background checks (Berkelaar, 2014; Berkelaar et al., 2014; Ellerbrok, 2010; Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014). Given the easily searchable nature of digital reputations, service professionals express the need to cultivate, monitor, and protect online customer reviews as significant data points impacting their employment potential.

Although the brokers I interviewed described word of mouth as the "most powerful form of advertising," opting out of technological and social systems was often difficult without sufficient networks, long-term contacts, or organizational support systems. In one outlier case, a broker talked about how she self-markets her real estate services while simultaneously working to earn five star reviews as an Uber driver. She explained,

> I drive around with bottled water….I got a cord if they want to plug in their IPhones….When I very first started I wasn't doing a very good job because I didn't know what I was doing. So I didn't get all fives. And I usually give the people fives—rate them—but my husband has gotten to where—I mean he's been doing it a year and a half or so. It's like, if they're obnoxious….I give them a three, a two, because they don't need to be using this service and he's only had one person throw up on his car. But he made him clean it up and kept the meter running.

Her narrative highlights two significant aspects of review culture as a ubiquitous influence on service jobs. First, she indicates a desire to provide "good" service in order to receive continued business and positive ratings despite undesirable—and in this case, potentially unsanitary—working conditions. Second, her experiences indicate two-way possibilities for review practices whereby customers can review service providers—from real estate agents to Uber drivers—and service providers can review customers. Amidst this backdrop, real estate

professionals struggled to understand, respond to, and mediate effects of review culture. Although they engaged in constant cultivation of professional and personal networks, ongoing development of personal blogs and online profiles, and voiced rejection of the validity and integrity of online customer rating and review systems, they failed to indicate other ways of engaging with customers.

Second, how do customers understand their role as producers of value through unpaid reviewing labor? Concomitant with the upsurge in online review outlets, individual customers hold increasing sway as authorial figures drawn into organizational decision making (Gabriel, 2005; J. Zhang et al., 2010). As others have recently shown, customer opinions can curry immense influence over organizational reputation and consumer knowledge (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Dellarocas, 2003; Gesenhues, 2013; Kuehn, 2015; Yang & Fang, 2004; Z. Zhang et al., 2010). Individuals, whose only credentials are engaging in consumptive experiences, can structure preferences, guide decisions, and influence behavior (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Bauer & Gegenhuber, 2015; Kuehn, 2015). In order to guide decisions, however, customer service ideologies demand that customers engage as informed participants. Customer reviews incorporate not only personal opinions but also in-depth product knowledge and attuned discernment between genuine and feigned service quality (Bishop & Hoel, 2008). On one hand, customer service discourses promise new modes of consumer sovereignty. Individuals have greater access to information and ability to participate in the public discussions. On the other hand, review culture draws the customer deeper into the service process. Commitment to the consumptive process through reading and writing reviews becomes a form of unpaid customer labor. Therefore, this chapter highlights how real estate customers engage in prosumptive activities, producing value for

organizations and brokers by writing positive reviews, giving personal recommendations, starring in photo or video testimonials, and increasing broker visibility through personal, social networks. Yet perceptions vary on what qualifies as "work," or value generating activities. Surfing the internet and other forms of digital consumption are ubiquitously removed from common understandings of what constitutes production (Gabriel et al., 2015). Together, intensified expectations of how workers engage with customers and increased responsibilities for customers as "partial employees" are changing the dynamics of service labor relations. Efforts to identify who accumulates value from review culture habits—businesses, workers, or other customers—remain open to further investigation.

CHAPTER 4: COACHED CUSTOMER RELATIONS: THE BUFFINI METHOD

This study began as a qualitative inquiry into everyday experiences and practices of real estate workers. I soon noticed common reference to career coaching discourses as a significant, unexpected finding for understanding the culture, norms, and protocols of real estate work. Only a few brokers openly revealed how closely they adhere to coaching methodologies. It was not until my eighteenth interview that a broker named Buffini and Company as fundamental to his business approach. During my twenty-fourth interview, a broker outlined how she employs what I term "The Buffini Method" to generate "business by referral." Once I identified language and practices specific to career coaching discourses, I recognized that nearly all brokers mentioned some level of exposure. Using data gathered from participant interviews, cultural artifacts, and ethnographic observations, this chapter examines the meaning making and discursive practices of brokers as they engage with popular career coaching discourses as a significant feature of real estate work.

Workers' exposure to career coaching, success, and self-help literatures has been the topic of scholarly critique for the past few decades (Brown, 2003; Carlone, 2001; Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Lair et al., 2005; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). Studies explore conditions of neoliberal, post-Fordist organizing that make it difficult to achieve coached ideals for personal and professional success. For instance, studies examine how coaching discourses of flexibility, adaptability, employability, and enterprise act as an ideological, disciplining force influencing worker identities (Brown, 2003; Carlone, 2001; Lair et al., 2005). Within such analyses, focus tends to be on workers' (in)ability to appropriate or resist performance

protocols and scripts for success (Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Carlone 2001). Even given the rising popularity of career coaching texts, training programs, and consulting services available to a widening audience of managers, workers, and job seekers (Fogde, 2011; Gershon, 2016; Vallas & Cummins, 2015), there is relatively little attention paid to how workers are not only disciplined by, but also use coaching tools and resources to manage customers as a source of value.

There is already evidence that organizations increasingly derive value from collaborative efforts by employees and customers, or prosumers, who contribute unique skills, insights, and labor (Fontenelle, 2015; Gabriel et al., 2015; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Zwick et al., 2008). There is also evidence that customer labor generates brand and reputation value (Cova, Pace, & Skålén, 2015; Mumby, 2016). This body of research is ripe for elaboration on how workers enact career coaching approaches that endorse customer engagement as a key source of reputational value. My study contributes to recent findings by exploring how workers, informed by coaching discourses, create new forms of customer integration. Specifically, I examine workers' strategies for developing customer relationships through practices of inclusion and exclusion taught by popular career coaching programs and enabled through customer tracking software systems.

I develop the case of real estate as an exemplar of an industry characterized by coaching and training discourses promoting intense modes of worker-customer engagement. Rather than limit analysis to popular discourses, therefore, I find it instructive to juxtapose the discourse of prominent career coaching firms with the voices of real estate brokers. This allows me to explore paradoxes and contradictions that ensue when brokers integrate and reject recommendations for success dependent upon customer engagement. This chapter

develops a critique of how brokers understand and implement The Buffini Method, a prominent coaching system advocating long-term, highly selective customer engagement in the real estate process. Findings demonstrate that coaching discourses underlie brokers' expressions of professional identity and impact everyday decision making. Brokers utilize coached methods to not only manage customer relations but also select, integrate, and monitor the "right kind" of customer.

Methods for Studying Career Coaching Discourses

Three sources of data offer insight into how career coaching discourses—and their customer relation strategies—converge with brokers' expressions of work. Broker interviews exhibit everyday experiences of career coaching discourses. Namely, the extent to which real estate brokers take seriously the claims, values, and recommendations of career coaching centered on succeeding personally and professionally via long term customer relations and referrals. Interviews also address how brokers encounter and use sales coaching systems and ideas. Participants either maintained membership subscriptions to companies like Buffini and Company or were indirectly connected through organization-sponsored seminars, brokerage events, and office mentoring programs.

Participant interviews and brokerage events drew my attention to four of the most prominent career coaching firms: Buffini and Company, Shore Consulting, Tom Ferry International, and Ninja Selling. Each consulting company offers membership programs, training systems, coaching services, and events throughout the U.S. and Canada, with in-person and live webcast viewing options. Marketing materials produced by the four career coaching companies comprise primary evidence of real estate coaching discourses, including website pages, informational blog posts, marketing emails, role play videos, and sample

scripts. These materials contain strategies to build, develop, and maintain close relations with customers as the central formula for professional and personal achievement. While it is difficult to locate the net worth of these privately-held companies, membership fees and event attendance costs offer some insight into the financial structure and profitability of real estate career coaching systems. The cost to view a Buffini and Company Success Tour™ event via digital stream, for instance, is $95—the lowest advertised price for any event offered by these four companies. In comparison, Tom Ferry International charges $297 to view an event online and Ninja Selling charges $595 to audit an in-person event and $995 for full in-person access. Coaching system fees vary widely based on the company, access to personal coaching, provision of marketing materials, and subscription to customer tracking software programs. Although Buffini and Company advertises services for as low as $49/month for access to the CRM software, one broker-in-charge divulged that it costs roughly $500 in monthly membership fees for access to the level of coaching, marketing materials, and software that his business requires.

I also collected observational data at over a dozen real estate events. Event experiences helped capture the tenor of industry trends and career coaching paraphernalia not readily available in media publications or during participant interviews. My observations offer insight into how workers *actually perform*, rather than simply talk about, career coaching discourse (Carlone, 2001; Fodge, 2011; Lair et al., 2005; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000). I attended two customer appreciation events, three team meetings, two open houses, and a career night at real estate brokerages. I also attended a real estate training seminar hosted by Jeff Shore Consulting and participated in two day-long Success Tour™ events presented by Buffini and Company via live video stream. Together, these additional data

sources offer insight into how brokers negotiate dominant discourses of real estate work as a referral business dependent upon professional, personal, and customer relations. My analysis of these data suggests that career coaching strategies are indeed pervasive. For instance, this chapter takes into account instances when brokers cultivate networks of friends, family, and acquaintances—what they call their "sphere of influence"—as a significant marketing strategy promoted by coaching sources. Here, brokers' narratives of "helping people" are forward-looking strategies designed to secure long-term relationships with clients who will continue to refer new leads.

Data Analysis for Understanding the Buffini Method

I followed a grounded, iterative method of data analysis developed through a multi-level coding approach (Tracy, 2013). First level codes included terms brokers consistently identified as meaningful to their work such as "value," "trust," "service," "helping people," "long term relations," "choosing clients," "professional referrals," as well as job analogies (e.g., counselor, mentor, and guide). My initial coding inspired further investigation into national career coaching and consulting texts. For instance, the majority of participants reported at least one instance when their brokerage sponsored attendance at motivational seminars or sponsored access to career coaching materials. Although I attended events hosted by two coaching companies, Buffini and Company and Jeff Shore Consulting, I subsequently narrowed search of management discourses to Buffini and Company—the only career coaching company spontaneously cited by five brokers during responses to independent interview questions (Charmaz, 2006).

Subsequent analysis of management consulting texts indicated a more prevalent uptake and application of career coaching discourses and methods than previously

recognized in initial coding of emerging themes within interview data (Tracy, 2013). Second level codes included key terms and jargon associated with Buffini and Company discourse such as “Oh By the Way™,” “relational business,” “top of mind,” “Pop By,” “Referral Maker™,” “business coach,” “client appreciation program,” “client appreciation event.” These codes reflect an industry-specific language that reflects a worldview of real estate work as intimately centered on meaningful connections, continuous contact, and familial relations among individuals engaged in short-term business transactions.

Career coaching discourses emerge from a variety of sources not limited to coaching seminars. Every day talk among agents also impacts norms and expectations of real estate work. Corporate offices, brokers in charge, colleagues, and “buddies” in real estate served as primary centers of knowledge, expertise, and advice, providing training, coaching, and mentoring around the challenges of real estate work. This chapter examines actual strategies that workers employ as they navigate discourses of career success. How, in other words, have brokers responded to career coaching discourses? How do they view and assimilate the practices and recommendations career coaching promotes?

The Buffini Method

My extensive reading of coaching texts, as well as participation in seminars, webinars, and training sessions, confirms remarkably similar themes to those popularized by Buffini and Company, Shore Consulting, Tom Ferry International, and Ninja Selling. This observation concurs with findings that demonstrate that career coaching curriculums tend to be remarkably similar, regardless of sponsor, location, or target audience (Gershon, 2016). Therefore, this study draws on examples from dominant coaching strategies and themes with a sustained emphasis on Buffini and Company as an exemplar career coaching firm.

Buffini and Company is the largest real estate agent coaching and training company in North America. Recent mention in national news situates the international following, sell-out attendance records, and "guru-like status" of Buffini and Company (McLaughlin, 2014). Established in 1996 by Brian Buffini, the company boasts membership of more than 25,000 real estate professionals. One in eight homes is sold by a Buffini and Company member, and Buffini members earn eight times the national average income of National Association of REALTORS® members: NAR sales agents have an average yearly income of $39,900 while coached agents have an average yearly income of $336,698. The company attributes members' success to participation in conferences, training programs, extensive professional networks, marketing tools, and proprietary Customer Relations Management (CRM) software available through paid coaching programs.

The Buffini Method centers on building "deep relationships" with customers as well as professionals through "relational" strategies that cohere around the philosophy of "work by referral." Core values include efforts to "improve the lives of people" by acting as not only property brokers but also advocates and advisors to customers and commitment to business growth through ever-expanding referral networks. Modes of interaction emphasize constant, personalized communication. For instance, the Buffini Method recommends that brokers email, call, and visit customers on a regular basis, like a close friend. Ultimately, the Buffini Method promises to help brokers build a personal brand that will help them capitalize on the good opinion of customers.

Some brokers indicated a subtle awareness of the Buffini Method, with attributions of business success that closely aligned with Buffini training and strategies. In these instances, participants did not name or credit Buffini and Company, yet they spontaneously integrated

the trademark terms of Buffini and Company into an anecdotal story or description of their daily work. For instance, one broker talked about how she maintains contact with customers over long periods of time "so that I'm meeting their needs before, during, and long after the sale" as a way to stay "top of mind."

Other interviewees demonstrated more enthusiasm for the Buffini Method. Indeed, I interviewed five brokers who advocated for the Buffini brand as indispensable to their success. These brokers sponsored Buffini events, trained others to "work by referral," and engaged in all steps of the Buffini method, which I examine in greater detail below. Additional participants reported adherence to strategies, tasks, and values represented by—or deeply similar to—the Buffini Method, indicating a much more widespread exposure to coaching discourses than readily apparent.

Participants also demonstrated ambivalence and resistance to the Buffini Method. Some rejections primarily centered on practical concerns rather than an objection to the standards and expectations of the Method itself. One broker stated, "I don't have time" to learn and follow a coaching regimen. Another said "I am too new to the business" to opt into a training system outside resources already available through the brokerage. A third stated, "I already get referrals by 'just being a good person.'" Only one participant expressed an outright rejection of the Buffini Method, stating,

> I don't do any of the Brian Buffini stuff. I don't do any leads generation stuff. People will tell you "Well [Name] says that your business is lead generation." No. My business is client service. So I'm, you know, so he's worth 50 million bucks and I'm not. I'm crystal clear on what my business is because I know I'm always going to have leads. They just don't come as smoothly as I want to.

Yet this broker regularly attended training events with similar advice regarding the importance of generating strong professional networks. He stated, "I go to anything that I

can classify as education or networking. That would be a good thing, education of course and I try to go where I'm going to meet different people." This instance illustrates the status of the Buffini Method as exemplary of the broader industry of career coaching texts offering similar recommendations centered on developing relationships. Despite this outlying report, moreover, by far the most common responses I encountered indicate an active embrace and internalization of coaching discourse. Therefore, I use the Buffini Method as a framework for understanding, contextualizing, and analyzing broker reports and actions wrapped in larger contexts of career coaching, advice, and training.

Broker Perceptions of Career Coaching

Career success discourses occupy a prominent role in the world of real estate brokers. Adopting coached strategies becomes a way to manage the work process, generate customer referrals, and navigate professional relations. The findings begin by examining broker narratives of identity tightly linked to coaching discourses to cultivate reputations as valuable, trustworthy, and indispensable to the real estate process.

Strategies of Disidentification: "I Don't Want to Feel Dirty With My Sales Job"

During interview responses, brokers spent a great deal of time and effort spontaneously disassociating themselves from stereotypes common within the real estate industry. Most often brokers found themselves attempting to disprove the "bad reputation" of real estate as a "dirty car salesman-y" job. Dirty jobs involve activities that are physically, morally, or socially unacceptable according to broad cultural standards (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Brokers exemplified the need to overcome perceptions of their work as "dirty," "slimy," and unethical with comments such as, "I don't want to feel dirty with my sales job" and "a lot of times real estate agents are kind of seen like car salesmen." Here, brokers

engaged in strategies of disidentification to distance themselves from the stigma of sales work as devalued (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). About one quarter of participants positioned their job as a "true consultant and not a salesperson," "not sales-y," "not just salesmen," and "about more than selling houses," discursive techniques to actively separate real estate work from sales work. Separating themselves proved difficult in many cases. Real estate work inherently requires workers to not only sell their services, but also tangible products as well—namely, real property. As one broker-provided e-book demonstrates, brokers "sell your home 4 times: 1. to the Buyer 2. to the Agent 3. to the Appraiser 4. to the Underwriter." Overall, participants resisted devaluing of their jobs as simply "sales work" (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014).

Well over half of participants utilized analogies in an attempt to reframe their roles. In the words of one participant, [we are] "advisors, which is what we really are, not just salespeople." They compared their work to not only advisors, but also educators, mentors, consultants, coaches, advocates, ambassadors, teachers, emergency medical technicians, therapists, guidance counselors, personal trainers, psychologists, fortune tellers, doctors, heart surgeons, pediatricians, and mommas.

When analogizing their work to jobs designated as meaningful, desirable, valued, and 'good' (Kalleberg, 2011) brokers discussed how they help customers "through the emotions associated and the stress," as well as the difficult, technical, and financial aspects associated with transacting real estate. The use of these analogies aligns with popular career coaching discourse, which encourages brokers to brand themselves as essential to customers' mental, physical, and emotional health and wellbeing. For instance, one broker likened the "behind

the scenes" complexity of real estate work to the job of a surgeon where "[patients] have no idea how bloody it is and what really is happening in there."

Among the many different terms they identified, interviewees most often came to self-describe as "advisors" and "advocates." The next most common set of descriptors included "educator," "consultant," and "doctor." These terms resonate with Buffini and Company's advice that brokers develop "your role as their trusted advisor" by offering services that "show your expertise" and Shore Consulting's recommendations that broker "#BeTheHero" (Shore, 2016). As the advisor, hero, mentor, and doctor, brokers identify their work as ethical, valuable, and "clean," attributes that disassociate their real estate work from the "dirty" connotations of sales jobs.

Disidentifying from "Bad" Brokers: "Nobody Else Knows What They're Doing"

Brokers also laid claim to their professional status by defining themselves as "*not* having the same attributes," principles, and values as their peers, another strategy of disidentification (Kreiner & Ashforth, p. 3). In the words of one participant, "we have to differentiate ourselves" [from other brokers] to succeed in real estate. Brokers' negative assessments of each other were far more prevalent and condemning than expected. Rather than simply describing their own work skills, priorities, and values, brokers offered in-depth descriptions of the ways in which their peers give "us a bad name."

One broker stated, "I take the approach that nobody else knows what they're doing….And then if I'm pleasantly surprised because I worked with a great agent, then hallelujah." One broker-in-charge offered a telling view on how public sentiment—and negative stereotypes—arise from past experiences with "most agents aren't very good":

> Let's say twenty percent of agents are capable, which I think is extremely generous, but let's say twenty percent are capable. The average consumer will sell five or six

> times in their lifetime, right? Which means one time you're going to get a capable agent. One time you're going to have a capable agent. Four out of five. One time. And if it's not the first or second time, you're not going to think much of agents, and nor should they. But that's kind of a horrifying statistic. I mean—nor should they think much of agents.

Furthermore, she stated, "at the end of it, our clients know more than a whole lot of REALTORS® know and we take pride in that." Her strongly negative opinion of other workers is not unique. Participants echoed the perception of a persistent need to prove their own trustworthiness and value in contrast to what customers had experienced in the past. Many offered stories of instances when they were required to make up for the "poor service" offered by "most agents" who are "making mistakes." One broker likened her experience with other REALTORS® to "babysitting" when they "come into the business with little experience" and cannot complete basic tasks. Another described experiences with others who "seem to be complete idiot[s]." As one broker summarized, "unfortunately all agents are not created equal. I mean it would be nice if they were but sometimes you run into people that don't have a clue, that are just flat out difficult that make your life miserable." In such instances, brokers often positioned themselves as the only ones with the experience, expertise, and desire to manage the real estate process "in the best interests of the client," despite legal and ethical obligations to do just that.

In another instance, a broker shared, "I think that there so many jerks in our business and so, so much posturing and so much shading of the truth and, and rationalizing making misleading statements because there's a shred of truth you can say it's not a lie." As a result, as one participant stated, "we believe that our job is to get in front of that client before, before they end up with a lousy agent providing lousy service and providing them a bad

experience." Here, brokers told stories about how their peers lacked the training, experience, and skills necessary to help customers make "good decisions."

> There's a lot of people that aren't trained well. There's tons of people getting into the business—the market's good. So I'm going to get into the business and, and they're just like whoa, I know this guy, or my cousin is an agent so I have to work with him. If your cousin was a, you know an OB, would you have him do your heart surgery?

Another participant echoed this sentiment, stating "all you have to do is pass the exam and be over eighteen and have a pulse and you can get your real estate license." In another similar report, another broker stated,

> I just had an agent absolutely kill a deal on one of my listings because she didn't know the rules the right way… huge problems creep up between agents because there's crazy people out there who don't know how to be reasonable. It comes down to education.

In many instances, participants designated the influx of "new, inexperienced" and "millennial" workers as troublesome, forcing them to take extra steps—and labor—to "protect" their clients. One broker offered insight into an underlying belief that real estate is a "broken training industry" where the vast majority of resources available to REALTORS® are centered on self-marketing and lead generation strategies rather than the legal, technical, or ethical aspects of working with home buyers and sellers. According to this broker, it is up to the real estate organization—and the team of brokers and trainers—to overcome the industry's own low standards of training in order to develop qualified workers.

> It's kind of scary to think about all the people out there that are getting potentially really poor representation. So that's why it's important to us to keep our agents very well trained. Give them a lot of resources until they know what they're doing because otherwise you could have a client that just has no idea what they're not getting.

In line with this perspective, one broker disclosed that he trains colleagues to "be prepared for the worst in this business because things can fall apart really quickly if you let them. But if you strive to stay on top of it and manage the process yourself, you'll be more successful."

He attributes negative perceptions to past experiences of having to "manage" and guide competing agents through the real estate process. In one telling story, an interviewee said that the quality of work she experienced with another broker was so poor that she "wondered if [the other broker] drank at night." Here, lack of experience and education were not the only issues; time, availability, and unwillingness to do the job also contributed to negative assessments of each other.

Finally, several brokers disassociated themselves from other brokers whose actions they described as outright unethical or illegal.

> I have found that if you are very difficult to work with, agents won't even submit your offer because they don't want to spend forty-five to sixty days with you…It is illegal…Or they'll present it and tell their seller 'this agent is going to be a huge pain in the butt. I don't know if you want to go forward with this because it's going to be a difficult process.'

Despite accounts of such behavior, however, only one broker mentioned the need for an Ombudsman—an official who helps settle disputes that arise between REALTORS® involving professional negligence or unethical behavior.

Instead, brokers preferred to follow the norms of collegial interaction prompted by career coaching discourse. According to participants, having "the best relationships" with other brokers are "the key to having a really smooth transaction" because "the agent on the other side can make everything a lot easier or can make it a big pain in the butt." Consistently, participants stated that "having good agents on the other side is imperative" and "we try to build good relationships with other agents." Assignments of brokers as "competitive" and "combative" or "collegial" and "collaborative," terms that appear prominently throughout Buffini resources, punctuated interviewee discussions how they interact during real estate transactions. As one broker summarized, "the toughest part of my

job a lot of the time is dealing with the other agents," which prompts her to be as "collegial" as possible. In line with the Buffini Method, several brokers reported hosting "events to bring other agents here to thank them for doing business…so we try to foster those relationships and keep good open feedback." Participants agreed that it is important to be able to work together throughout a transaction. As one broker elaborated, "I typically know the other agent on the other side [of a transaction]" and will have to continue to work together in the future. This focus on congeniality, however, is at odds with the adversarial relationship of buyer and seller agents who are pitted against one another "almost like in a court room and we're the defense attorney versus the prosecuting attorney and it's like I mean it really is like a ridiculous case of Perry Mason." Therefore, despite career coaching recommendations to develop strong professional networks among brokers, achieving "positive relations," such as working with someone they could trust to do their job and not "make problems" or get in the way of a successful transaction, was considered a rare occurrence.

Identifying as "Valuable"

Alongside negative stereotypes of sales work as "dirty" and sales workers as incompetent or unethical, brokers frequently contested customers' expressions that they "make a lot of money" without doing a "lot of work." As one broker explains, "a big part" of succeeding in real estate "is showing them your value"—a significant task, as a core challenge of working in real estate is "to convert [prospective customers] into meeting with you." As one broker summarizes, "the general public would tell you a REALTOR® either puts a sign in the front yard to sell a house or…they drive around and they open up doors to let people in." Another broker labels this as "the kitchen agent," where the agent walks in "and says 'and this is the kitchen. The stove is there.'" Due to such perceptions, according to

one broker, “I have more people ask for part of my paycheck than I think in any other profession.” As this example demonstrates, brokers often have a difficult time justifying their income to customers.

In part, stereotypes stem from the financial structure of real estate as commission-based work where “agents only know how to multiply by six percent.” The geographical context of North Carolina standardizes commission rates from roughly five to six percent split between buyer and seller agents. As one broker explained, on a six percent commission, the buyer’s agent typically receives 2.4 percent and seller’s agent typically receives 3.6 percent of the total property sale price. Commission rates can be split further among entities involved in the transaction. A lead source such as a brokerage, unaffiliated marketing firm, or out-of-state agent who provided the customers’ contact information may confer a portion of the commission. On a 250,000 dollar home sale, the seller typically pays 15,000 directly to other professionals and organizations. According to broker reports, the complexity of commission splits, however, are often misunderstood, ignored, or hidden by brokers who perpetuate a “lack of transparency about the money that, [so] that yes people are extremely careful.”

As a commission-based industry, according to one broker, “the reality is these people are paying me a lot of money to guide them through this process and get the result they are looking for.” Real estate work, as others confirmed, provides a “tremendous return on investment.” When asked their motivations for entering real estate, brokers repeatedly stated “the money.” Brokers reiterated, “customers expect a high level of service because they are paying a lot of money.” It is not surprising, therefore, that “a big part” of succeeding in real estate, according to brokers as well as coaching discourses, “is showing them your value.”

Indeed, thirteen brokers talked about their work in terms of "value." When answering questions like "what is involved in your daily work activities," participants integrated statements like "I'm going to add value" to customers' lives. Others said "you're hiring me to bring value," "it's all about the value," "I bring value to the equation," "it's my job to really add value to the transaction," and "my whole business is based on providing things of value to people so that they come to me." Brokerage mission statements reiterated the emphasis on "value" as a core commitment and meaningful marker of professional identity.

A dominant resource defining the concept of value includes real estate career coaching discourse. According to Buffini and Company, "when you provide value to your clients, even when you're not currently working with them on a transaction, you build strong relationships with them." According to Ninja Selling, "Customers are attracted to value. Create more value and you will have a continuous flow of customers coming to you." These philosophies are clearly reiterated throughout broker definitions of "value" as the information, knowledge, experience, and personal attention, as well as "items" they provide to customers such as hand-written notes, small gifts of appreciation, and invitations to exclusive events. As several participants repeated, "the value I'm adding is I've seen more transactions than ninety percent of the REALTORS® in the Triangle. I've seen everything that can go wrong."

Nine other brokers defined their value as helping, protecting, educating, guiding, problem solving, and "keep[ing] you out of trouble." According to one, "everything we do is helping people achieve a goal." For another, the job is about "guiding them through the process." Two brokers used the term "hand holding" to describe their role in protecting customers through the real estate process where "people think it's such an easy process when

in reality they don't know….we're behind the scenes putting out fires that clients don't even know about." Four brokers defined their value through negotiation skills, or the "highly strategic" mindset to win "the chess game of negotiations." For these brokers, expressions of value as tough negotiators "out there advocating, fighting, and negotiating for the best interests of our client." Broker perceptions of their value often correlated with job analogies in statements like, "I continue to provide value like any good advisor would do," a clear application of dominant coaching discourse.

The next section discusses how brokers cultivate long term customer engagement that allows them to commercialize on relationships and generate referrals through explicit application of the Buffini Method and other career coaching systems.

Creating Intimacy with Customers: Being Your Friend To Get "A Client For Life"

Career discourse coaches brokers to develop a personal brand, reputation, and set of loyal contacts responsible for perpetuating that brand. Participant interviews confirmed the dominance of this approach. Despite spending a significant amount of time during interviews explaining their desire to "help" customers, become their "friends" and cultivate "deep relations," brokers freely admitted that their primary goal in developing long-term relationships is to build enough trust and likability to "earn" their customers' referrals. Participant's emphasis on creating relationships with customers, at the expense of other sources of intimacy, meaning, pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfillment, is problematic (Gregg, 2011; Hochschild, 2000), especially when a commitment to (over)work comes at the expense of self and family needs (Gregg, 2011).

As one broker exemplified, "my end game is 'relationship through service' ultimately to hopefully have the opportunity to talk to those people's referrals." Three brokers directly

reiterated their desire to generate customer referrals "over years of time" by securing "clients for life" as "always the goal" of real estate work. When brokers said "my business is all built by referral," they explained that their everyday activities are primarily centered on solidifying their role so that "when they know someone thinking about buying or selling, they're going to tell them about me." According to another interviewee there are "basically the two ways we get business: people either seeing what we did or being told what we did." Participants seldom questioned this prolonged emphasis on creating intimacy with customers. Instead, they opted into formalized systems that supported such contact.

The Buffini Method provides strategies and step-by-step guides for establishing long-term, meaningful customer interaction designed to help brokers "run their business on referral," or, in other words, succeed through the word of mouth and online reviews of past, satisfied customers. One Buffini member summarizes the concept of work by referral this way:

> Basically you tell your clients 'we're not spending all this money on advertising because we just want to do the best for you, so you tell your friends…you know you have leverage over us because we're going to do the best job we can so you can tell everyone else.'

This broker's statement directly aligns with coaching strategies that contrast work by referral to "a traditional system where you rely on cold leads and door-knocking," lead purchasing services that can cost tens of thousands of dollars a year, and online marketing strategies such as customer review websites that Brian Buffini likens to "the New Mafia." In line with career coaching discourse, moreover, interviewees shared that their job is "more about relationships" and having a "personal approach" rather than "a transactional kind" where a relational approach is asking "hey how's your day going?" and a transactional approach is asking "did you fill out the paperwork?" For one broker, "what real estate to me comes down

to is really connecting with the people." For another, "it's about the relationships we have with people and how we communicate them." Brokers defined 'relational work' as the process of forming meaningful, long term interactions with customers:

> I'm not just helping you sell or buy this house. I'm looking at having a relationship—a working relationship with you for as long as you need real estate—real estate advice…I like the relationships…it's the relationships with people and helping them—especially first time home owners—helping them get into the next stage of their life. And ah the ongoing relationships…I mean right before this I was visiting with a couple that I sold a house to just around the corner, and they've renovated their kitchen and I went over to see it and – so it's like it's a long term relational business.

When developing connections, brokers found that customer relations were "more like talking to a friend. It's not like talking to a client." Brokers frequently claimed that "there are some clients that I would very much call friends now" who stay in touch for long periods of time and "have become like really good friends of mine. Three participants mentioned attending birthday parties, weddings, baby showers, house warming parties, and other events as "a part of their family." Another said he would "go out and have a beer" with clients when there was a "great connection." One found that [customers] "always come back and so it's like our kids have grown up together." Others send cards to "all my clients for their birthdays, for their anniversaries, for their children's birthdays, for their home buying anniversary they get cards…if they get pregnant, I send them a card or I call them or I send them something. It just develops into friendships." In reply customers would "send me pictures of their kids." Frequently, regardless of gender, brokers made statements like:

> Most of our clients become part of the family. We keep in contact with them so we have a much more friendly interaction with them so when we're calling people and catching up, they know who we are. They're excited to hear from us.



Figure 2: "Happy Mother's Day" gift mailed by a broker

These examples demonstrate brokers' acquiescence to career coaching discourses' approach to real estate as a 'relational' business. Yet, as the following examples demonstrate, brokers' use of relationship building strategies, especially those provided by the Buffini Method, culminate in a false sense of friendship and crass manipulation of personal and professional relations.

Top of Mind

The Buffini Method teaches relational strategies for agents to stay "top of mind," or at the forefront of customers' thoughts when asked to recommend a real estate broker. According to Buffini and Company, workers achieve "top of mind" status through "marketing touchpoints" or "connections" that require constant contact with current and past clients so "when they hear someone say they're thinking of buying or selling a home, they think to refer to you." Six interviewees described their strategies to stay "top of mind" through regular, personalized contact designed to "develop a relationship" and "make it more likely they will remember to refer you." Brokers used phone calls, emails, marketing flyers,

and handwritten notes, as well as holiday, birthday, and "purchase anniversary" cards, to "check in" or "keep in touch with people." As one broker explains, 'staying top of mind means' that "on a typical day I might be picking the phone up to call past clients just to see how they're doing, to see if they have any referrals." In line with Buffini and Company's career coaching advice, one broker reported,

> Staying top of mind like that is the way that you build your business on referrals. And if you care about relationships more than transactions, which I do, then I think you're going to be more successful that way. I could spend a lot of money on marketing and I could spend a lot of money on internet lead generation. I could also spend a lot of time chasing those leads because they're not warm leads. A lot of them are very cold. They're very—maybe one in ten will actually result in a closing whereas eight out of ten of my referrals will end in a closing.

This excerpt demonstrates that brokers who apply top of mind strategies find them effective not only in terms of time and cost investment, but also in terms of eliminating stressful aspects of their work. As one broker exemplifies, "most people don't know how hard it is to generate a client." And that's what makes top of mind strategies so appealing.

My own observations of industry discussions, including "Success Tour™" events indicate that real estate workers take these top of mind recommendations seriously. I attended the opening of the "Summer Olympics," a month-long, themed event designed to motivate brokers to fulfill organizational goals within a large franchised brokerage. During this particular team meeting, the broker-in-charge distributed a schedule with the Events, Medals, Prizes, and Prospectrian Score Sheet. The Score Sheet included a list of "events"—or forms of customer contact—for each broker to track their activities over the course of a week. Each customer contact was assigned a point value: "Write two personal notes per day" earned 10 points; "Add names to Database" earned 1 point per address; "200 Farm/Mail Pieces" earned 20 points; and "Attend Scripts" earned 5 points. The winning Olympic Team could receive

one of several prizes, including a "free coaching session with Tom Ferry." Here, the circular logic of a prize of a free coaching session was particularly telling—the reward for following coached recommendations for customer contact and relationship building is additional exposure to such recommendations. Brokers' enthusiastic engagement with the contest rules, events, and prizes made it clear that customer tracking and contact touch points are standard practice. These observations align with prominent career coaching discourse. After all, according to Brian Buffini, hand-writing "two and one quarter notes a day" "is what made me a millionaire." As brokers further explained, top of mind strategies are most effective when brokers keep in touch over long periods of time because "you need to stay in touch. If you don't stay in touch with your, you know, former clients they'll forget you." Therefore, as one broker reports, "I make myself available and I stay in touch so that I'm meeting their needs before, during, and long after the sale." One broker who writes personal note said, "I get more mileage off a hand-written note even though I look like a first grader wrote it."

Providing referrals for other industry professionals was another key strategy to stay top of mind over a longer period of time:

> If somebody has bought or sold a house with us that they have a question about a roofer, a plumber, or if they need something, we're keeping in contact with them so we can give them recommendations along the way to their, to trusted vendors that we've worked with and we know are going to take good care of them…And it just keeps you top of mind so that's our marketing in a nutshell.

In addition to sending personal notes, one broker tries to manage the complex "triangle" relationship among himself, the referrer, and the referee:

> I'm always talking to the person that got referred about the referrer and how, you know, trying to build that relationships stronger and then, and vice versus for the one that did the referring you know and keeping them in check, in tune with what's going on.

Despite claims that top of mind strategies simplify their work, these two experiences demonstrate the potential complexity of staying in touch, over long periods of time, which requires continuous attention, energy, and follow-through with not only customers but also other industry professionals as implicated in the complex web of real estate relations.

Pop Bys

"Pop Bys," or "popping by your clients' homes or offices with a small gift of appreciation," are another significant component of the Buffini Method. Four participants conducted Pop Bys as a regular practice. One broker offers an extended explanation of Pop Bys as a customer relations strategy:

> [Pop Bys are] just stopping by and seeing my clients. And I will typically bring them some kind of a gift. It's not anything expensive or important. But it's something that they could use. For instance, I'll bring a pumpkin at Halloween or I'll bring a rum cake at Christmas or I'll bring condiments around the fourth of July—mustard, ketchup, and relish—or some of the—an ice scraper or a fly swatter or something like a lighter that they can use on their grill….And so I'm just stopping by to see them, asking if there is anything that they need at their house. Sometimes they need their gutters cleaned. Sometimes they need this air conditioning has been bothering me. Or so it's like the pediatrician going to the house when they're—or going to the house and seeing the kids when they're well. And they really like that. And I'm—if they're there then I ring the doorbell and I or I try to ring the doorbell every time. And I talk to them. And if they're not, then I just leave the gift in the mailbox or right there on the porch. Sometimes I'll take a picture and I'll text it to them. Sometimes I won't. But everybody likes to get unexpected stuff. I've never had anybody go, you know what, stop bringing me stuff.

Another broker described Pop Bys as a popular trend:

> A lot of real estate agents will put together fun things that they go off and drop by their clients. So these are just little mason jars with a coke and a whiskey and it says 'Looking forward to mixing up with your referrals.' So something tangible that they can hold onto and makes people laugh.



Figure 3: Pop By cookie mix and recipe gift, "Don't get stuck with a 'crumby' realtor. Thanks for 'baking' the world a better place."

During Success Tour™ presentations, Brian Buffini spent a great deal of time advertising the Buffini and Company Monthly Marketing Kit, which supplies Pop By instructions, ideas, and gift tags. Buffini demonstrated example Pop By giveaways: a pack of Peeps with the note "have your Peeps call my Peeps"; a doggie clean up bag key chain: "I'll give you the 'inside scoop'"; girl scout cookies: "Scouting for a good REALTOR®? Give us a call." Potato scrubber: "Here's a little scrubber for all your buds, don't refer me duds". Prunes: "when the urge to move hits you, call us." A pie: "any way you slice it, I'm grateful for your referrals." A turkey baster: "don't let your friends get burned by using a Turkey of a REALTOR®." Although brokers use seasonal events as an excuse to 'pop by' with themed gifts such as an ice scraper in the winter, Mother's Day flowers in the spring, bar-be-que supplies in the Summer, and a pumpkin pie in the fall.

During Success Tour™ presentations, Buffini estimated that his members purchased over one million pies as giveaways in a single year. Buffini and Company is currently

engaged in negotiations with Costco—a members-only wholesale retailer of food and home goods—to secure a discount pumpkin pies for REALTORS®. As a testament to the popularity and success of pumpkin Pop Bys, Buffini displayed photos of REALTORS® purchasing pies by the cartload. These photos demonstrate the immense popularity of Pop By gifting.

Despite the seemingly gracious and spontaneous nature of these events, Pop Bys are carefully planned and executed strategies designed to secure ongoing customer referrals. One broker summarized his execution of Pop Bys this way:

> I'm just stopping by to see them, asking if there is anything that they need at their house and trying to provide an extra level of service so that when they do have the opportunity to refer me, you know they're going to say something because they know me and they continue to get service from me. A lot of agents will—once the transaction is done, it's over—that's it. I'm never going to talk to you again. And that's just not how I want to do my business. I want to work with your friends and I want to work with you and I want to continue to help you.

Brokers confirm the effectiveness of Pop Bys. According to a Buffini member and broker-in-charge, "every time I do [Pop Bys], I get like two referrals out of it":

> Pop Bys are when we might just pop by and give a little – like we have these little citronella candles and we put this little tag on it so here's – ah – it was corny. A little joke – something about "bugging you in real estate"…. it will be seasonal like there's this three pack of ketchup and mustard and relish and you'll, the card says "I relish the opportunity to ketchup" and ah sometimes your clients can't cut the mustard – I don't know – some cheesy little thing. You do that a week before summer. So you just do these you know. And I don't know why people seem to like the cheesy pop by gifts.

Yet this broker had a difficult time explaining why Pop Bys are so effective. He gestures towards an explanation, stating,

> Dropping off ketchup and mustard jogs their memory or maybe just keeps the antenna up a little bit more….it seems to be maybe that sort of fact that if they see your name then maybe the just seem to be a little bit more aware of it somehow?

In his analysis, this broker makes the underlying connection between top of mind and Pop Bys as two interconnected personal branding strategies that "sort of" make customers "a little bit more aware" of their continuous presence/interjections in their lives.

Interviewees who did not participate in the Buffini Method still recognized Pop Bys as common practice for other REALTORS®. For instance, one stated, "[Name] who works with me, she's the queen of Pop Bys. So she will literally just go knock on people's doors and she brings them cute little gifts. She's really good at that." The widespread awareness of Pop Bys indicates two key elements. First, not all brokers choose to utilize these coached marketing and branding strategies. Second, as this broker continues in her report, Pop Bys are "just one way to stay in touch with people," and real estate workers determine which strategies fit best with their overall marketing persona and platform. This broker, for instance, asks her customers to write reviews on Zillow.com, hires a videographer to film video testimonial inside clients' homes that she then posts on her real estate website, stays in contact with past customers through hand-written birthday and purchase anniversary cards, and hosts customer appreciation events every other year.

Customer Appreciation Events

Career coaches also promote hosting customer appreciation events as a relational marketing technique. As broker reports as well as personal invitations extended during my fieldwork indicate, customer appreciation events can range from informal cookouts and home-based events to bowling leagues, professional sporting events, and gatherings at local hotels and venues. Eight participants reported hosting customer appreciation events or "client parties." While some participants hosted events every other year, others held events up to eight times a year. Brokers provided examples, such as, "I have a cookout at my house for

my clients every year." One said, "I had Baguette About It food truck come and I also had a three piece jazz band set up in the foyer." According to another, "sometimes I'll host them at restaurants. Sometimes I've hosted them at my office. Sometimes I've hosted them at…a particular house that I have on the market." Another broker said, "this Friday I rented out Tobacco Road at the Durham Bulls and I'm bringing past clients in and just treating them to a baseball game and all you can eat and all you can drink." Another took customers to the Harlem Globe Trotters. Finally, brokers gave examples of hosting community events, private art gallery viewings, and even an SPCEA sponsored walk. Most brokers described these events as "something that's really family oriented so everybody can be a part of it," including Fall pumpkin giveaways and Thanksgiving pie parties as the two most common types of events. According to one broker,

> Usually at Thanksgiving I will do something like a pie. And everybody can come get their pie. Do you want chocolate, do you want strawberry rhubarb, do you want pumpkin, you know and you can come get your pie. I'm at this address and it's a different address usually but it's a house I have on the market and people can come and see it. The seller really likes it because they're getting people to come look at their house and who doesn't want a free pie?

This broker provided additional examples of recent events he hosted for customers:

> They come and eat at Nana Taco on me or we'll do a men's beer night close to Valentines Day or Mother's day and so the guys will walk out with flowers coming home to their wives. Then they've come to drink beer, they haven't come to get flowers, but they walk home with flowers for their wife and they look like a hero and they're excited about that.

As part of my fieldwork, I attended two customer appreciation events. The first event was described in the invitation as: "friends, live music, entertainment for the kids, a couple of adult beverages and light food to eat." Kids were invited to meet costumed characters offering animal balloons and face painting. A live musician played in the background. The participant and his team socialized with past customers—and provided drink tickets for the

hotel bar. The second was an annual Thanksgiving pie party hosted at the broker's office. The event advertised "fun for the whole family—fall family photos, face painting, bounce house, and of course...a pumpkin pie for you to take home" as well as wine, beer, and light refreshments. Brokers frame such events as a way to "thank customers" and show "your appreciation to your clients" in a way that is above and beyond "just sending a thank you note or a fruit basket at the end of the year." As one broker summarized, "I'm just saying thank you for being awesome and telling people about me."



Figure 4: "Happy Thanksgiving" pumpkin pie given at a customer appreciation event.

Another participant explained his view on customer appreciation events:

> Whether it be a Durham Bulls' event—last year I took everybody to the Rail Hawks game and we had a drawing for somebody to kick a soccer ball from the goalie box to midfield into a trashcan and if they could do it I gave them 100,000 dollars cash. Just events where I'm not in a shirt and tie, I'm not helping them buy or sell a house.

As this example demonstrates, brokers perceive events as occasions that set him apart from the "typical" broker-customer relationship. Yet, although he is not spending his time "helping them buy or sell a house" at these sporting events, he *is* using these events as a branding and marketing tool. Buffini and Company discourse reinforces this observation. As the company states, appreciation events allow REALTORS® to "connect with your best clients while

expressing gratitude for the referrals they've sent your way." Here, the Buffini Method reinforces such forms of contact as providing "the opportunity to connect with their clients and remind them you're never too busy for referrals." In agreement with dominant career coaching discourse, participants described events as not only a "great way to thank [customers] for working with us" but also to "thank them for the referrals they've sent us." Brokers confirmed "the reason we do client appreciation is…[to] generate more business." Following the Buffini Method, brokers also use event announcements as an excuse to contact past customers, as "a good excuse to call and say hello" and "just one way to stay in touch with people." Buffini and Company worksheets help identify "the most referring type people" so that brokers can decide whether to "invite your whole database or just your A+ and A clients" who are "your top referrers" with the most potential to bring new business.

The events I attended reinforce generating business as the ultimate goal. The pie party invitation stated, "Our clients are not just a number, they are carefully cared for referrals from people like you! For these relationships we are truly grateful and wish to celebrate this with you!" As one form of "celebration," however, customers could pose for family photos in front of a backdrop designed entirely out of company logos. Whether families kept these photos for themselves, or shared them with others through digital or social means, the corporate reminder remained: their REALTORS® works for the branded company in the background.

These strategies emphasize brokers' fixation on integrating customers into their work processes. As a significant consequence of their integration, customers become the primary source of "warm" leads. Having a "steady stream" of customers, particularly ones who arrive with a level of trust based on a friend or family member's recommendation significantly

reduces brokers' commitment of time, stress, and labor. According to the organizational representative of the Career Night I attended, moreover, referred customers are "awesome clients who listen to our expertise [and] do the work to prep their house for sale."

There is some indication that brokers recognize planning, effort, and expense required to host customer appreciation events, and, in some cases, struggle to manage the process. According to one broker, "we pre-plan for the year what our events are going to be depending on the input from, from our agents, what they are excited about that year." Another reiterated, "of course we cover all the expenses of buying their tickets. You know we coordinate it all." Despite the associated costs in time and expense, however, securing trusting, cooperative, and industrious customers remains a key ambition of brokers.

Practices of Inclusion and Exclusion: Selecting "The Referral Type"

Amid the foundation of career coaching techniques in sales industries, the Buffini Method, as well as Shore Consulting, Tom Ferry International, and Ninja Selling, provide detailed dialogues that facilitate brokers' selection of customers. Buffini's most prevalent script is the tagline, "Oh, by the way®…I'm never too busy for any of your referrals." Ninja Selling's training webinar to "Maximize Your Referrals" provides a script to help agents ask for referrals from their "best customers" with the line: "Could you send me more people just like you?" Tom Ferry provides "5 Proven Scripts to Ask for Referrals Confidently" with the line "Before I let you go, who else do you know now that might need my services?" Here, an interviewee offers a telling example of the importance of scripts in selecting customers to work with:

> Scripts are real big in real estate training and one of them is 'I'd rather turn you down now than let you down later' from Nicki Baldini. But it's true. You would, right? Because particularly so much of it's referrals, right? If we don't have a good relationship and you're not going to be happy and say good things about me.

Participants confirmed that scripts and dialogues helped them to select and reject customers. One brokerage I visited provided me with a month-long schedule of motivational training events, which included "scripts practice…held each week 30 minutes prior" to the training. "Good fit" was the most common scripted term utilized during interview examples. Brokers let customers know when "we're just not a good fit together." And they tell customers "we need to make sure we're a good fit for each other." As brokers indicate, such scripted sales relationships can involve an ongoing process of "enchantment" or trust building through which customers *feel* in control even if they are subject to coached interactions (Korczynski, 2005, p. 76). Indeed, the ability to select customers—and therefore exert some control over their work—is perhaps the most acclaimed benefit of utilizing the Buffini Method.

Seventeen brokers reported following career coaching strategies and scripts designed to help them work with customers they "like" or who are the "referral type" and will "to continue to refer me" new business. Within these accounts, brokers described their search for the "right" kind of customer. Definitions of the "right" kind of customer depended upon brokers' perceptions of customers' attitudes, goals, financial capabilities, and likelihood of providing referrals. For instance, one broker defined the "right" kind of customer as "someone who already has a little bit of trust established and knows that, you know, I'm not going away so I want to make sure that they're pleased." Another explained,

> Well I only really want to do that with people I like working with. I don't—if I think someone [is] not fun to work with then I don't really want to work with their friends because most of the time people do flock together.

Participants elaborated on their selection of customers with statements like, "I don't want to work with a client that's out to stick it to somebody" and "I've turned down sellers." Brokers described specific strategies to "try to figure out…do we want to help them?"

> I don't work with everybody and I can get a gauge on whether or not you're an enjoyable person to—because it's a—it's intense kind of fellowship to be involved in. We're going to talk about some things that are going to be difficult and some people are just a little bit more abrasive than others and yeah the technical term is a 'jackass' and they tend to know other jackasses and so I don't like to work with them. But great people tend to know other great people. They tend to be—they just tend to know other great people so I want to work with them and I want to serve them.

One broker whose job involves intra-office training for new agents said she coaches others to walk away from "a bad client," whom she defined as "somebody who's not going to listen to your advice; somebody who's going to be fighting you, [and] takes up a lot of time." In this case, the broker coached others to focus on customers who will "be somebody who refers" in the long run because "from a repeat business standpoint, you know, I tell them 'hey don't invest any more time based on sunken dollars. It's better to just cut it off then and there and move forward.'" Several brokers retold instances when they turned down customers or "walked away" from high value transactions due to difficult customers with undesirable behavior. One stated, "I walked away from a 600,000 dollar listing…They weren't going to be satisfied and I wasn't going to be satisfied with what was going on so you know it's worth it to lose that salary." In this case, the broker reported that her "mental state" could not handle "all the anguish" she attributed to the customers' expectations, decisions, and demands. In another instance, a participant reinforced the belief that "helping certain people isn't worth our time":

> We want to help everyone because we want to make money. But in the end, you know, helping certain people isn't worth our time. No matter what the money is. It's just not worth out time….All the sudden it doesn't become worth it anymore, we have the ability to fire someone working with us. Tell them you might want to go hire another agent because it's just not worth our time.

As this example illustrates, participants perceived their selection of customers as a practical necessity. Working with only certain customers, they found, was the best way to guarantee a

successful real estate transaction and maintain a positive reputation. Therefore, brokers avoided working with customers who they believed could damage their professional brand. One broker said, "if someone seems like they could be a little cuckoo cuckoo for coco puffs" she would recommend that they "should look on Zillow for another agent" or she would recommend "a great agent down the street." One stated, "really smart seasoned agents will know how to say no to a listing. I can only take listings I can sell. I'll push it, I'll bring it to the edge of the envelope…I'll only take it if I can sell it."

In some cases, brokers depicted their selectivity of interaction in ways that demonstrate patterns of exclusion. A broker-in-charge reported that he only works with customers who are "serious" about purchasing a property:

> I go out. We evaluate the topography. Identify where the corners are. I let them know where the good home sites are, whether or not we have any stream buffers, sometimes I take out an auger and we look at the soils. I'm not a licensed soil scientist but I've been in this game long enough that I can tell them what's good and what's bad. And so we look at the positive and negative attributes and then based on that, we'll go back to the office and do some research and see if they want to make an offer on it.

In this case, the interviewee defines a "serious" customer as someone who pre-qualified through a mortgage lender and therefore has reasonable potential to purchase a particular piece of property. Processes of customer selection and exclusion support Trethewey's (1997) findings that everyday discursive interactions can organize individuals into value-based 'categories' that determine whether or not customers gain access to certain services (p. 282). In Trethewey's study, organizational discourses position low income, single parents as "passive, deficient, and depoliticized" recipients of social services (p. 281). In the present study, real estate norms position not-yet-qualified customers as not "serious" with similar results: a potential refusal of service. Despite the desire to work with particular types of customers, one broker found that transformations in how customers use the internet to locate

and hire brokers meant that he is not always able to "pick and choose" his clients. In contrast to others' expressed experiences, this broker stated,

> I have had people I've worked with that I may not have chosen to give—given my druthers—used to be pre-internet. You sort of were able to pick and choose your clients because they found you from a friend who knew a friend so there was this network almost like a little vein of we're probably going to get along because you know Joe and etc…I now work with anybody and everybody and I don't have a lot of say over that because their access to me.

In some ways, refusing to work with difficult customers is actually a form of resistance to dominant coaching discourse, as some training systems *encourage* brokers to "work with someone who is 'difficult'" because "nasty people are a huge opportunity for you to close more sales" with the customers who others avoid, "since every other salesperson is running for the hills" (Taft, 2017). My conception of resistance is consistent with Zoller's (2014) understanding of resistance as "contesting, nonconforming, or negotiating dominant relationships of power" by challenging taken-for-granted organizational realities (2014, p. 604). In this instance, resistance emerges through the refusal to work with "nasty" customers "way out" of unequal organizational power relations, despite working in a job dependent upon positive customer relations (Weeks, 2011; Fleming, 2009). We are reminded of the agentic capacities of workers when individuals pick and choose among widely circulating recommendations for customer service interaction.

Quantifying Relationships: A+ Customers

Given the time and effort required to manage customer relations as a core aspect of real estate work, it is no surprise that career coaching systems that take a 'relationship approach' to managing customer relations come hand-in-hand with software programs designed to track customer information "such as their children's names, profession, hobbies." Individuals opt into Customer Relationship Management, CRM software systems, when

submitting personal data through website use, credit card transactions, and other digital, consumptive practices in exchange for tailored, personalized products and services (Ball et al., 2010, p. 113). As Buffini discourses demonstrate and broker stories reiterate, CRM systems are designed to "systematically nurture" and "deepen" customer relationships through "powerful insight" based on stored information on customer preferences, needs, and habits that result in 'lifetime' customer relationships (Ball et al., 2010). Often, such systems designate involuntary customer categories utilized to serve corporate interests at the expense of individual identity, status, and life conditions (p. 122). From a critical perspective, therefore, CRM systems are more than simply technological tools that provide opportunities to solicit referrals. They also target certain customers for attention, benefits, and contact through *built-in* forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Participants often referred to CRM systems and lead tracking websites as essential to their everyday work routines. During ride-along interviews, five brokers demonstrated their use of CRM software available through Buffini and Company and BoomTown. Participants explained how to operate these subscription-based systems, including how to view customer information, send scripted emails and pre-crafted marketing materials, and track customer engagement.

One broker-in-charge exemplified the significance of using a CRM system to manage customer contact, stating, "each morning I come and I open this up and I can refresh it and it will tell me down here that, you know, how many follow ups I have that day." He continued,

> So every day I log into here and I put in how many sales I want to make a year, my average sales price. I put this, I put that, and it takes those numbers and has this algorithm and whatever and says okay, if you're going to do that, you need to make five phone calls a day, you need to write three notes a day. Every year they want you to do these goals.

As his narrative demonstrates, coached CRM strategies enable him to track and manage customer interaction with calculated returns on investment. Similarly, another broker-in-charge stated that she relies on reminders and pre-scheduled emails from her CRM system as a platform for advertising so that her customers are "getting emails with listings from us, branded, so they know exactly who it's coming from." These accounts align with dominant discourse about CRMs as a platform for workers to "make connections that lead to closings" because "every conversation, email, text, or interaction is tracked so nothing gets lost in translation" and "automated email drips, follow up to-do's, and templated Action Plans help you stay connected and top of mind at any stage" (Boomtown, 2017).

The most prominent example of how exclusionary practices are built into brokers' use of CRM systems is the option to "grade" customers based on their likelihood of referring new business. As the following examples demonstrate, CRM systems help workers distinguish among "risky" and "desirable" customers (Ball et al., 2010). According to Buffini resources, as well as Brian Buffini's demonstrations during Success Tour™ events, brokers should assign grades to customers from "A+" to "O." A+ customers are the "people who have sent you multiple referrals," A customers "have sent you a referral in the past or are most likely to refer you," B customers "would refer you, if asked and shown how," C customers "might refer you in the future," D customers are those "you do not wish to market your services to" and O customers are "online contacts to be moved up to C or down to D." Here, Buffini provides how-to guides to "clean" your database and "sort" customers. By assigning grades, and maintaining a clean database, workers can "give more of ourselves to the givers" by knowing who to give "more attention, care and affection." For instance, Buffini recommends that only top rated A+ and A customers receive Pop By gifts.

Participants confirm that individual workers do, indeed, engage in customer sorting. During a "ride along" interview at his office, one broker-in-charge demonstrated to me how he "organize[s] all my clients as 'A+', 'A', 'B', 'Cs'" within Buffini and Company's Referral Maker® CRM.

Once identified as the "referring type," particular customers receive additional attention, information, access to home industry networks and invitations to exclusive events, as well as "items of value" such as "unexpected extras" such as invitations to workshops with access to experts on lending, legalities, and contractors. Together, career coaching, industry recommendations, and CRM systems standardize and legitimize ways of vetting the quality and value of maintaining relationships with particular customers. One broker, for instance, revealed how he uses his smart phone to access his CRM system to "pull up" the addresses of "past clients who are around me so I can go and see them."

Brokers also demonstrated how CRM systems are uniquely coded to enable conspicuous information sharing across internet sources. When a customer "freely" submits personal information to a real estate property search website, their contact information and in some cases click data becomes automatically available for detailed monitoring within CRM systems (Andrejevic, 2007). For instance, Zillow's Tech Connect platform automatically inputs customer-provided information directly into REALTORS'® CRM systems. CRMs also manage other forms of "click data" available through website tracking, as one interviewee demonstrated: "So he's looked at four hundred and eighty-four properties. He's not favorited anything. Though. Because it will show if somebody has favorited five of the properties and then I can see exactly which houses he has looked at." This broker, as well as several others, described conducting their own internet research to fill in missing

information. In this case, the broker subscribes to PeopleSmart, a database that allows her to search for names, phone numbers, and other personal information. Social networks also interact with CRM systems to share customer information, as inter-networked software systems. In the words of one broker-in-charge, CRMs are "hooked up to Facebook," which allows brokers to easily search for "relational data," such as birthdays, weddings, or new job announcements, that can be used as an excuse to contact customers. As he demonstrates:

> So if I go to here… there's a little Facebook thing here. It shows [customers'] last few posts on Facebook so that way I can kind of see if they've posted about like their son graduating or this or that. So I can put a little note on there saying 'Noah's so awesome!'

This brokers' experience mirrors career coaching recommendations to use Facebook announcements as an excuse "to connect on a deeper level" by calling or visiting customers to congratulate them. Here, a Buffini Ebook guides brokers to "check your Facebook News Feed regularly and look for opportunities to connect offline" (Company, 2016).

In one exceptional case, an interviewee provided an extended example of how brokers evaluate and quantify the quality of customer relationships by tracking "every bit" of interaction. This participant is a partner at a firm that requires brokers to complete minimum standards of "Proactive Activity Time," during which brokers write personal notes, call, visit, and interact with customers through "touches [that] have meaning behind them." He explained,

> So if we write a note, it's got a point value to it. If we make a call, it's got a point value to it. And what we figured out is that the more, the deeper the, the higher quality connection you make with somebody, the more value it has so therefore it has more value in the point, in the point system. But that's just one way that we can quantify our relationships.

Similar to the Prospectrian Score Sheet, the broker with the highest weekly point value "wins" and his or her name is displayed on the lobby television screen. Despite proclivities to maintain and track customer contact, not all participants use a CRM system.

> I don't do any of the stuff I'm supposed to be doing. There's a lot of management tools for the computer to go through and I've seen them and I know some folks are using these, great—I think they would be really good, but it's hard because I'm at a point where I stay really busy.

As he continues, this broker offers two explanations for avoiding CRM systems: they are generally time-consuming and require monthly subscription fees.

> It's really flexible but I would say I work at least 60 hours a week so it's like I don't have time to learn that system, even though that system would probably save me some time in the long run. You've got to pay for that system. So that's another—none of them are that cheap, another 30, 40 bucks a month and I'm already paying my website fee, my premier Zillow fee, my REALTOR® fees. So I'm already paying three to five hundred a month, any month, in fees for all that.

Yet this broker, and many other participants, reported spending a great deal of time finding other ways to gather, track, and manage customer information. As a standard practice, for instance, one broker asks all "new leads" to fill out an "About You and Your Family" form "just because I like to know about people and their families and then I follow up." As he demonstrated during the interview, the form includes categories for contact information, kids, pets, hobbies, and "fav things" such as flowers, restaurant, music, vacation sport, and 'other.' These categories include information auxiliary to a real estate transaction—and are included to help the broker develop a relationship with the customer that simply *feels* more personal. This form serves as "a start so we kind of get an idea of their family"; the broker adds details to the record as new information emerges during their relationship. Several additional participants indicated that they build and store customer files with "detailed notes" gathered over time from email and phone interactions as well as customers' online activity. One

interviewee specified, “I have folders. I have a buyer folder. A seller folder. Potential clients and then sort of subfolders under that with each person’s individual names.”

These examples endorse Buffini resources that find “the more information you have on your clients, the more you can anticipate their needs and serve them” with the added benefit that “when you serve them well, they’re more likely to refer you.” Whether or not brokers utilize CRM systems, moreover, these examples indicate an underlying preoccupation with integrating and managing customers, through information gathering and tracking, as organizational members and producers of reputational value.

Managing Social Identity

Three brokers discussed social identity as central to their work experiences. Their stories provide a glimpse into the structural reproductions of power relations among real estate professionals and their customers. Specifically, my experiences with real estate brokers indicate a few of the ways in which particular social identity categories—familial relations, ethnicity, nationality, marital status, and accent—organize work through social, discursive, and material processes. My interview questions did not specifically ask brokers to discuss their work in relation to these forms of difference. Instead, discussions of social identity emerged organically through brokers’ storytelling.

Professional Identity: When the Brand is Your Family

As one broker-in-charge asserted, “there is no separation between personal and public any longer. Your brand is you.” Another expressed a similar sentiment in their depiction of a real estate industry dependent upon the “philosophy of branding the agent, not the company.” Yet brokers’ experiences indicate that their brand is not simply tied to themselves, but also their *family*. As another participant stated, she includes a “profile video” of herself and her

family that "tells about our business, our team" so that potential customers can "understand the true person that you're about to reach out to and work with." According to this broker-owner, "my team has really grown from social media," which shows that she has "a real life and a family."

> So for those reasons I felt the need to, you know, during my profile video, I share kind of why I enjoy real estate, why I wanted to get into real estate, and it all goes back to having a kid and [I] wanted to create a lifestyle for her that I you know growing up you know money was super tight and I just didn't want her to go through some of the same experiences I had to go through because we were limited you know in funds and I guess what I could provide for her.

One broker-in-charge shared that she has "a multi-cultural family," which impacts her decision making regarding online impression management (Berkelaar, 2016) in regards to representing her professional identity in online venues utilized to market and advertise real estate services.

> My daughters are domestic adoptions—were adopted at birth…and for a long time on my Facebook page I was very conflicted about putting pictures of my children because I am my brand. So, and, there are some people who would object to, you know, I believe—praise god—a smaller and smaller portion of the consumer public. And quite frankly if they object to multi-cultural family, maybe I'm not the agent for them, and yet isn't that the damnedest thing to have to think 'hmm should I put pictures of my kids up?' Because your business—you are your brand. In this internet-enabled, social media-enabled world—everything you do is marketing.

This example demonstrates the broker-in-charge's intuitive insight that whiteness is an invisible, unmarked, neutral relationship expected to span members of the same family group (Frankenberg, 1993). Yet, whiteness is created, maintained, and normalized through everyday processes. In this case, the brokers' perception of the importance of downplaying racial difference impacts her decision making of online marketing, and causes her to reproduce the perception of whiteness as spanning across her family. Although a conflation of cultural, social, and political factors likely impact this decision, the broker attributes it to

the fear that the consumer public could "object" to visual representations of the non-white bodies of her "multi-cultural family" and reject her "brand." Whether or not her concern of a "smaller and smaller portion of the consumer public" as prejudiced are founded, her thinking emerges from the standpoint of a racially identified family/body. In her musings, she demonstrates the sometimes fraught everyday decision making around self-marketing. Throughout my study, participants consistently named self-marketing as one of the most significant, costly, and time-consuming aspects of real estate work. My participant's comments here are suggestive of the way that participants must navigate between highlighting, concealing, or perhaps revealing aspects of their identities.

Managing Customer Biases

Another broker offers insight into possible effects of customers' biases, through recent experiences with an "old southern woman."

> I had this old southern woman come in and she said 'I have a REALTOR® and I don't like him'…. We're interacting, we're having a very positive conversation, she's liking what she has to say. Then she says to me 'I don't want you coming and Jewing me down on the price.' And I'm Jewish. And I'm not getting mad. She's an older woman. She's just stuck in her ways. I'm not upset. But I say 'I don't think I'm the agent for you.' With a very polite voice. I went up and I got another agent to take over because I choose not to…I do enough business where I don't have to have every client.

The broker viewed this as an exceptional incident, stating, "I want to feel good about what I do and who I work with and most of the people are just great so, you know, it's fine." Rather than confront the customer, the broker framed it as a choice to not work with certain customers because he had enough business to forgo opportunities for a contract. His long-standing position with steady business after nearly fifteen years of experience as a broker insulates him from "bad" clients. He said,

> There's clients I've had to fire because they've asked me to do things that were inappropriate ah against, you know, there's strict rules of ethics and procedure and if a client asks you to do some—I say 'listen, I'm not going to do it and I might not be the best REALTOR® for you.' Fair housing. You know there are people that 'oh I'm not going to live in a b'—I can't—I don't deal with it. I say 'listen, I'm not the guy.'

This statement is significant. The broker indicates how customers' prejudices about the social identity of *other customers* can also impact experiences of work. By asking brokers to violate the Fair Housing Act, enacted to protect individuals from discrimination and access to housing based on race, color, religion, sex or national origin, customers put workers at serious legal and ethical risk.

Another broker offered insight into the risks of working with customers who express biases that could be interpreted as a violation of the Fair Housing Act. Her stories offer insight into how real estate workers new to the industry—who are in the words of one participant "hungry" for business—might manage instances of customer prejudice. This broker, who transitioned into real estate after a career as a scientist, described instances when customers reminded her that "you've got to be mindful of fair housing." She explained,

> If you came to me and said '[Name] you've got to help me find a house in a safe neighborhood,' I can't, I cannot say 'hey [Name] I've got you a house in a great, safe neighborhood just like what you want.' Because who am I to say, to make the determination what's a safe neighborhood or not? But say 'hey [Name] I've found you a great house. I think you should go to this website here and check it out and see if you think it meets your criteria for being a safe neighborhood.' I can't say whether it's safe or not. If you came to me and said 'I want a LGBT friendly neighborhood' or 'I'm a LGBT family, where should I buy a house?' I can't directly make any recommendation, at all. Somebody says 'I do not want to be in a neighborhood with a lot of foreigners,' I cannot.
>
> Alexis: Do people try to say those phrases differently to get [a recommendation] out of you?
>
> 007: Yep. Yep. And I've had people—if—I've also had sellers ask me questions about the national origin of buyers and indicate to me that their preference is not to sell to certain, to buyers of certain demographics…[I] never would have been able to disclose anything about the buyer to my seller that could allow them to make a

> decision that would disadvantage or give them additional advantage based on the protected class. So we can—there's so many different ways that we can open ourselves up to lawsuits if we say the wrong thing.

When discussing her nationality—something that differentiates her from other brokers—she explained,

> A lot of people make comments. They forget after they know you for a long time, they always forget that I'm not from America. And I'll get a lot of – a- a surprising – I don't want to say a lot because it makes it sound like more than there is. So a surprising number of comments about foreigners. And it's – and I know that they don't mean white foreigners. But they use the word foreigners because it's better than the other words that they might choose to use whether they are having an anti-Hispanic or an anti-Asian an anti-Arab moment or whatever that anti-moment is, they use the word foreign. But then that puts me in the same category and I'm sitting there going did you forget who you're speaking to?...That was one thing that, that I wasn't expecting to come up so often is the prejudice side of things and when people have been working with you for a while they feel comfortable allowing that side of them show...so those will come out kind of late in the transaction.

Here, the broker attributed the "surprising number of comments about foreigners" to customers associating her white skin tone with an American nationality. Yet, she added,

> My husband's Hispanic, it's a bit of a give-away with a last name of [Name] but people don't see me as Hispanic, which they shouldn't, but they forget when talking with me that they've got a Hispanic [husband] and they start talking about mix-raced marriages or something like that. Those are not the people I end up going and visiting long term. And I'm OK with that.

However, her "mix-raced" marriage has led to contentious experiences as a factor within customer interactions. She explained a particularly striking experience:

> So I was standing in the driveway [of a home for sale] talking to these people and they said 'oh what's your name?' And I said '[Name].' And they said 'what's your last name?' And I said '[Name].' 'Oh' she said, 'I thought you were going to be Hispanic. Otherwise I would have given you a call.' And I'm sitting there going wow, did you just say that out loud to my face? I didn't say that. I'm like 'yeah you know you can't tell from my name.' But I was like wow…I didn't want to work with you anyway the way…but you—it's—it does surprise me what people say out loud.

In response to prejudiced customer attitudes, she said she may not work with people "if I was acutely aware of somebody's prejudices or something that was said that, that was personally

offensive to me" yet she also said that she "will still continue to….go and visit and I call them up on the phone and say hey how's your dog doing and things? That's like the little extra keeping the relationship going." She continued:

> Everybody—whether they've got their prejudices I found somewhat offensive or whatever—everybody will continue to get material from me to keep a relationship going beyond the transaction. But I won't necessarily go out and visit them face to face with them…nobody has been so offensive that I wouldn't ever do business with them again.

Although she described the real estate market as a profession where "we have the luxury of being able to choose. We don't have to take a client," her narrative implies that she still works with customers who make "offensive" statements regarding her nationality, marital status, and, as the next example demonstrates, her accent. In order to avoid speaking with potential customers on the phone, "because of my accent," this broker explained how she intentionally visits customers in person.

> If people are not already expecting to be speaking to somebody with an accent like mine, if I talk to them on the telephone, they spend the first five minutes trying to figure out what the heck I'm saying. Which is also why I go and knock on the door. Um, because and—I can—when I'm talking to somebody I can tell if they haven't understood what I've said. Cause there's this glazed look on their face and I can read whatever I can say again. But if I'm talking to them on the telephone, I can't tell if they've spaced out on me cause they've got no clue what I'm saying. I also find face to face it makes me stand out because I sound funny. I sound different.

Although social identity can be visually distinguishable through embodied dimensions (Freeman, 2000; Trethewey, 1999; Trethewey et al., 2006), this broker's experiences demonstrate how difference can be audibly identified as well. These differences have a direct impact on her work processes and efforts. She continued,

> I try to be better about capturing everybody's email address and phone number but because of what I said before about my accent, not only do people find it a little bit hard to understand me on the telephone, I'm so self-conscious about calling people on the phone. So but it doesn't really bother me when I don't get their phone number. What I do do is if I can get their address, then I turn into that creepy real estate agent.

> And don't say too much about the creepy real estate agent because it's something that most of us do. If they put their address down, then I'll go into the records, I'll look at their house, see where they live, see how long they've lived there. I'll remember if they're an older couple and they're at a 4,000 sq ft two story house and they're looking at a you know 1,500 sq ft ranch, they're probably going to be downsizing. [I] write them a note and say "Hey, thanks for coming to my open house today. It was great to meet you. If there's anything I can do to help you make your real estate goals, please feel free to contact me." And just drop them a note in the mail. I'm way more likely to drop them a note in the mail….my mailings go to about 900 people and at least twice a year I will hand address envelopes to every single one of them.

Each of these strategies, designed to minimize time spent speaking with customers, involve an intense amount of labor above brokers who feel comfortable calling customers on the phone. Rather than question these customer relations strategies, however, the broker defines her efforts as part of the process of being a "full service agent."

Discussion

By calling attention to how workers manage popular career coaching discourses, I identify a preoccupation with generating ostensibly "meaningful" customer engagement. Brokers spend a substantial amount of time, labor, and expense following the Buffini Method, and other coached methodologies, to cultivate "friendships" for the express purpose of garnering future business. In this section, therefore, I discuss the implications and effects of the Buffini Method as a defining feature of real estate work.

Brokers spent a great deal of time identifying themselves as "true advocates" rather than "dirty," "slimy," unethical salespeople. They promoted themselves as providing "value" to customers, particularly in contrast to their colleagues. Yet, only in rare instances did brokers talk about their work in terms of the day-to-day tasks of transacting real estate such as "paperwork, problem solving, fighting repair people, de-staging, staging a house…reviewing floor plans, taking notes." Instead, brokers concentrated their energy on "building relationships," and admitted to offloading the actual tasks of buying and selling

houses onto assistants, listing coordinators, closing coordinators, staff, and organizational team members. This configuration of job responsibilities is problematic, however, given brokers' persistent claim to their value as their *personal* education, experience, and expertise. When assistants and administrators manage a significant portion of the real estate process, including, as one broker admits, all the steps to "get to closing," it is no surprise that brokers struggle with justifying their commission. Assistants complete transactional tasks. Customers refer new business. Brokers stop by customers' homes, debate between pumpkins and pies, and call their "friends" to see if they "have any referrals." All in accordance with the Buffini and Company motto to "Earn More. Work Less. Live the Good Life.™"

Indeed, brokers attest to the financial and career benefits of the Buffini Method. Their experiences confirm the effectiveness of top of mind strategies, Pop Bys, and customer appreciation events in generating business. In addition to the benefits of "work by referral," however, there are associated costs. For instance, brokers lament their inability to exit "REALTOR® mode" or deviate from their professed values when not "at work." Here, brokers' experiences clarify that their reputation *is* their business, an extension of post-Fordist, neoliberal conditions of work that mandate entrepreneurial self-reliance. Brokers also have a difficult time managing the emotional aspects of customer relations work. Brokers define their relationships with customers as "intense" and "long term." Although sales and service organizations have long been understood as dependent upon emotional, communicative, and relational labor (Hochschild, 2012; Leidner, 1993; Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996), brokers' experiences draw attention to clear emotional effects when customers do not reciprocate friendship or exhibit the same level of commitment and attachment. One broker-in-charge described customer relations as an "emotionally tense

fling" that ends when "they ditch you after closing," a feeling she likened to "stepping off a cliff." Only in rare cases did brokers question the commonplace expectation that customers can, and should, become close friends.

This study also suggests ethical and moral implications of coaching discourses that encourage brokers to systematically target certain individuals as customers. Working with only "serious" customers who they "like," based on subjective assessments of individuals' personality, motivation, and financial capabilities, means that some customers are barred access from even entering into a contractual relationship with the self-described "best" brokers. Brokers' use of CRM systems supports such patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014). Software systems not only store information; they provide the ability to sort, rank and qualify relationships, to help ensure a "focus on clients whose referrals drive your business." Although critical analyses of 'social sorting' typically address segregation along lines of socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation (Ellerbrok, 2010), CRM software adds a novel criterion for (de)selection—customers' likelihood of referring a professional to others—derived from information tracked in a database as well as ongoing, subjective assessments *of* customers *by* workers. Here, customers must earn an A+ grade to gain access to real estate networks, communities, and events, as well as items of "value" such as referrals to preferred home industry vendors, gifts, and real estate market updates.

Overall, the data discussed in this chapter illustrate how managerial discourses and individual decision-making converge in unique and sometimes unpredictable ways. Workers internalize career coaching and customer service discourse to the point where little managerial or organizational oversight of their work is necessary (Gregg, 2011). Instead,

workers generate their own, strict standards of customer interaction defined as "good service." Here, I demonstrate how professional and social identity—instantiated through discursive and social categorizations of difference—actively shape brokers' experiences of work. As a fundamentally communicative phenomenon, social identity emerges through individual meaning making practices as well as larger discourses, expectations, and norms. Although I argue that brokers adopt career coaching recommendations as common practice, at the same time, I also show moments in which they reject career coaching recommendations. Instances when brokers refuse to heed norms of customer friendship and professional collegiality help demonstrate that structurally-prescribed expectations and norms impact, but do not define worker subjectivity (Fleming & Spicer, 2004).

This chapter welcomes additional investigations into how customers perceive workers' practices stemming from their use of career coaching in everyday interactions. Such opportunities are significant, as career coaching services thrive as a tributary industry impacting the everyday decision making and tasks of not only sales and service work but also myriad professional service jobs experiencing the input of customers as organizational members within neoliberal capitalism.

CHAPTER 5: DIGITAL PLATFORMS AS A MEDIATING FORCE IN REAL ESTATE WORK: A CASE STUDY OF ZILLOW.COM

Everyday work practices are increasingly mediated through digital platforms and the software codes and algorithmic rules that structure their use. In the realm of service industries, algorithmically supported consumer websites have distinct effects on worker-customer engagement as unique user groups. This study draws on the real estate industry as a prime example of this trend, arguing that digital platforms take part in shaping asymmetries in control over worker-customer interactions. There are many different consumer-driven review platforms with different functions, modes of participation, and effects. Such systems are not neutral. They introduce constraints on workers' online profiles as well as customer feedback and interaction. Some websites solicit, vet, and censor customer reviews through unique operational rules, regulations, and procedures that guide user behavior. The "politics" of these technological systems (Winner, 1980) are important in shaping experience, value, and meaning in service work relations.

Scholars have devoted significant attention to uncovering how software systems, fundamentally composed of algorithms, progressively permeate more areas of social, cultural, and political life (Kitchin, 2016). Scholars agree that algorithms are difficult to represent. Reference to an algorithm can indicate the source code, the coded display on a web screen, or discourse about the algorithm (Lenglet, 2011). Therefore, code/software studies clarify the defining features, uses, and effects of algorithms particularly as they impact everyday relations and practices (Beer, 2016; Willson, 2016). In the broadest sense,

"algorithm machines" are "all digital technologies" composed of "sets of defined steps structured to process instructions/data to produce an output" (Kitchen, 2016, p. 1). In other words, algorithms gather and process 'data' to output newly compiled 'information' (Willson, 2016). Algorithms, and the information they output, are often perceived as neutral, trustworthy, and objective. However, as recent studies demonstrate, algorithms do "work" when they shape everything from financial trade markets (Lenglet, 2011) to social and communicative life (Beer, 2013; Luca & Zervas, 2016).

Customer feedback platforms such as Yelp, TripAdvisor, Amazon, and Angie's List have already garnered significant scholarly attention across diverse academic arenas (Luca & Zervas, 2016; Sperber, 2014; Willmott, 2010). Each of these websites contains unique operational rules, regulations, and procedures that guide user behavior. Yelp is perhaps the most studied platform, as the first large-scale online venue designed specifically to accumulate and display consumer-generated reviews (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Kuehn, 2015; Sperber, 2014). Prior analyses of Yelp and other customer review platforms largely investigate social, cultural, and organizational phenomena. Askay and Gossett (2015) explore how Yelp members identify as 'elite' contributors within a hidden organization. Kuehn (2015) explores customers' use of Yelp as a locale for commodity activism. And Sperber (2014) discusses novel control relations among Yelp website users, service employees, and organizations as entwined within this online interface. Less attention, however, has been paid to the actual algorithmic *effects* of Yelp and myriad additional consumer input-driven platforms that now play a prominent role in everyday decision making. Even given widespread recognition of customer review platforms as significant digital sites of analysis, very little is known about how these websites aggregate user-entered data into meaningful

information. Further, even less is known about how workers manage these sites through everyday interaction and work processes.

Drawing on literature from organization, communication, and code/software studies, this chapter investigates how commercially operated customer review platforms mediate interaction among workers and customers through proprietary data gathering, rating, and display systems. Responding to calls for scholars to analyze the everyday integration and use of algorithms (Gillespie, 2012, 2014), I highlight the role of customer review platforms. That is, from a technical, code-enabled and algorithmic perspective, how do customer review platforms mediate service work?

Methods for Studying Algorithms

The study unpacks the socio-technical assemblage of Zillow, a prominent customer review and ranking platform designed for the real estate industry. My discursive analysis examines the managerial discourses surrounding and promoting Zillow, including publicly available (i.e. not "black boxed") information about its construction and use. I located corporate documents available to real estate workers including training and resource website pages (Agent Resource Center, Zillow Help Center, Zillow Group Media Room, Zillow Questions, etc.). These pages help explain the intent of Zillow algorithms stemming from corporate directives. These sources identify operational aspects of Zillow, including rules behind the search and display of real estate worker profiles: how algorithms calculate, order, and place agent profiles, including customer ratings and reviews, within the visual structure of the website. For instance, I searched the Agent Recourse Center and Zillow Help Center for information regarding how real estate professionals submit listing and past sale

information to Zillow. I searched for corroboration among corporate resources and broker responses.

I also gathered texts from news and industry sources that investigate, analyze, critique, and promote real estate consumer platforms such as Zillow. I subscribed to distribution lists of prominent real estate marketing, networking, and resource websites including ActiveRain, Inman, MarketLeader, Placester, and SurefileLocal. Together, management and marketing texts help compile a picture of the visible, textual representations of Zillow algorithms. These managerial resources provided insight as to how Zillow discourses construct, communicate, and facilitate worker-consumer-platform interaction. Finally, I navigated Zillow from a consumer perspective to inform analysis of the visual representation of Zillow algorithms. My observations of the platform in-use helped clarify how users encounter, navigate, and interact with three algorithmic functions of Zillow: agent profiles, Zestimate® calculations, and customer review systems. My observations offer insight into the visibility, prominence, and placement of information on the website, including input from professionals as well as customers. Specifically, Zillow platform functions according to programmed rules that 'make decisions' such as how to display agent profiles, how to valuate properties through a proprietary algorithm, which customer reviews to publish and which to reject, and how to calculate agent rankings. Each of these decisions have implications for the branding, marketing, and customer contact efforts of real estate workers as well as the problematic assumptions of transparency and authenticity surrounding customer-entered information presented within the platform Investigation into the actual, coded rules of the Zillow platform, including managerial discourses describing its use, clarify the platform's role in gathering, transforming, and displaying information that is often

dependent upon brokers' and customers' role in inputting, updating, and verifying the accuracy of such information.

The study also examines how real estate workers themselves perceive the role of algorithms in constituting service relations. This approach includes qualitative methods of how these workers engage with, are impacted by, and resist the original intent of commercial customer review platforms (Lenglet, 2011). By focusing on the real estate context, this study better addresses the contingent, relational, and situated effects of algorithms on a particular group of workers (Kitchin, 2016, p. 12). I explore brokers' perceptions of Zillow around issues of authenticity and transparency in terms of data gathering, assessment, display, and circulation. Interviews with real estate workers include assessments of how they experience and make sense of algorithms (Bucher, 2016). Drawing on brokers' reports, management texts, and my own website use, this chapter examines how users navigate and experience Zillow as a mediating force in real estate relations and as a significant factor in worker decision making.

This study's focus on researching algorithmic phenomena offers insight into workers' perceptions of how algorithms function in practice as part of a larger configuration of organizational, social, and work relations (Bucher, 2016). The study contributes to understandings of algorithms as political entities able to (re)shape organizational relations. Findings show ways in which Zillow enters into workers' decision making of branding, marketing, and customer interaction efforts such as when they purchase advertising programs, submit personal information and housing data, and contact customers based on the website's publicized recommendations. Findings also indicate how Zillow enters into

consumer action when individuals use the website to analyze properties, select professionals, and submit reviews.

Below, I develop a case study of the algorithmic effects of Zillow by drawing upon my participant interviews, critical analysis of management texts, and my own observational data as a consumer of Zillow. Each form of data offers a unique understanding of the existence of multiple algorithms that give Zillow agency. Specifically, this study highlights the contradictions and consequences that emerge when considering Zillow as an agentic participant actively involved in contemporary service labor relations—soliciting engagement, directing interaction, and impacting user behavior.

Contextualizing Digital Experiences: Introducing Zillow.com

Zillow.com serves as the digital context for this study, as the most prominent property search website cited by brokers during interviews. Founded in 2006 by Zillow Group, Inc., Zillow has grown into a leading online home search tool directed at home buyers, sellers, and renters, with advertising services available to real estate and mortgage professionals. Zillow describes itself as a "living database" "dedicated to empowering consumers with data, inspiration and knowledge around the place they call home, and connecting them with the best local professionals who can help" Zillow, 2017c). As a consumer-driven, database-supported website, Zillow contains searchable information on real estate properties and professionals. Specifically, Zillow algorithms process and compile information from multiple sources. Real estate agents input personal information and sales data. Customers submit ratings and reviews. Public sources provide property information such as tax valuations.

Early participant interviews drew my attention to Zillow as the most prominent consumer-driven real estate advertising website. Most of my participants, 29 out of 34, have

a personal or team profile active within the Zillow platform. Participants without a Zillow profile indicated reasons for their absence. For instance, one subscribes instead to an online marketing service and two did not find it necessary to create a profile given their successful marketing through customer relations and word of mouth referrals. Of the 29 brokers with a Zillow profile, 8 hold the "Premier Agent" membership status purchased through Zillow's advertising program for real estate professionals. Participant profiles currently display between 0 and 135 reviews, with an approximate average of 24 and median of 7 reviews. Twelve participants have fewer than 5 reviews. Only 5 participants have more than 50 reviews on Zillow.

The majority of participants who reported experience with Zillow were unsure of where the website pulls information from, who owns the platform, or what the actual rules of customer interaction through website features are. Therefore, these codes reflect more complex interaction among website users, and their input, than previously recognized in initial coding of emerging themes within interview data (Tracy, 2013). These data indicate—and individual accounts confirm—that brokers have differing perspectives on the import of accumulating customer reviews on Zillow. In other words, brokers in this study tend to pay either a lot—or very little—attention to Zillow reviews. Whether or not they purchased advertising or solicited customer reviews, however, brokers shared a strong sense that customers care about what they encounter on Zillow.com.

Evaluating Brokers' Perceptions of Zillow

Twenty-eight of thirty-four participants discussed the significance of Zillow as the most prominent consumer platform for real estate search. Responses included two themes. First, that Zillow is often the first source consumers utilize when searching for real estate

information. Second, that Zillow's marketing platform directs attention to particular homes as well as professionals. Brokers found that, more than ever, customers research real estate information online before contacting a brokerage. As one participant states, "most people" prefer to use Zillow, Trulia, Realtor.com, and Homes.com as "big web-bases" to get an idea of market conditions and local agent experience before reaching out to a particular buyer or seller agent. Three participants cited recent findings that attest to the significance of online search for home buyers and sellers. One broker cited that "about seventy percent of buyers start their search online." Another stated, "there have been some studies that hold that eighty to ninety percent of people have done some research online prior to talking to an agent." A third discussed the current popularity of Zillow as a shift, where "ninety-seven percent of consumers start their search online, where back in the day that wasn't the case."

Nine other participants named Zillow as a popular real estate consumer website, stating that "numbers have shown that Zillow is one of the heaviest trafficked website when people are going on to look for houses or find an agent." One broker commented that because Zillow is consistently highly ranked in internet search results, "most buyers already actively out there end up on Zillow." One said, "I just know that a lot of my clients are always on Zillow." And another said "I've got plenty of clients of mine that will go online and search daily on Zillow." When customers search for real estate information, according to one broker, "Zillow's coming up." As these examples indicate, participants credited the popularity of Zillow to the website's "ease of function" as a search tool as well as Zillow's ability to reach "the public eye." Recent experiences solidified brokers' perceptions of Zillow as impacting consumer behavior. One broker stated, "clients are finding their own houses now…a client will come to me and [they] already know the house they want to see." Another

said, “They’re calling me and saying ‘hey I found this house on Zillow.’” The general consensus among participants was that “clients are finding their own houses…they already know the house they want to see.” Because customers’ preference for Zillow, and other consumer websites, brokers found that “having an online presence is going to be the biggest way to advertise and get out there and even get leads…instead of putting an advertisement in the newspaper.”

Brokers also found that customers use Zillow to locate real estate professionals. One broker said that “Zillow is definitely a place that people look up REALTORS®.” Another agreed, stating, Zillow is where clients “find me.” A third stated, most customers “are internet savvy so they’ll go to Zillow for their estimates before they meet with me.” Here, one participant theorized the importance of Zillow as a place where customers can learn more about brokers because “I think people care about who you are and what you’ve done.” Finally, another participant found that

> [Customers] usually end up getting on Zillow and they can read a little bit about what I’m like to work with and then if they’re still trying to make up their mind, then I’ll say before we meet in person if you want I can give you some names of references and you can call them directly.

Overall, participants found it useful to maintain a profile on Zillow because “it’s good advertising” and helps to generate ongoing contact from “people who are inquiring from Zillow.” In their experience, two factors determined whether customers would make contact: the visibility of brokers’ recent transactions represented as the number of closed sales and the count, rating, and content of customer reviews on Zillow. For instance, one broker stated, customers decide whether “they’ll call me” after “just see[ing] references or things on Zillow.” According to another broker with a Premier Agent profile, Zillow “shows how many reviews you’ve got and how many [homes] you closed and how many stars you’ve got,

all that kind of junk." In these instances, participants attributed extreme importance to Zillow as a digital site impacting customer decision making and possibilities for one-on-one interaction.

Sources of (Mis)Information: Contesting Zillow as Authoritative

Often, discussions of Zillow emerged through objections to customers' insistence that Zillow, and the internet more broadly, serves as a stronger source of knowledge and expertise than brokers. Understanding brokers' perceptions of Zillow as a source of (mis)information as well as a source of marketing is significant. These experiences offer contextualization of the algorithmic functions of Zillow that rely on broker's continued input of new information.

Broadly, participants expressed similar sentiments along the lines of one participants' assessment that "the internet has allowed the consumer to come in fully armed and prepared with some of that data," so that brokers manage real estate as an "ever changing game" where "our local knowledge of the market" matters. According to one broker-in-charge, it is her job to have "experience and knowledge base" that is "far beyond what a consumer can get on their own from the internet" and "something technology can't do." In another example, a broker distinguished his knowledge and expertise from what could be found online:

> Where REALTORS® still have value, extreme value, is really knowledge of the neighborhoods and the local market and the details. I mean I know where the major roads are, I know where things are backing up to you know, you know where the issues are. So someone might like how the house looks online but they don't necessarily know that the neighborhood doesn't meet their criteria or actually been in that house and it's a dog.

Another broker offered specific types of information that customers need to know, but cannot find online:

> I can tell you that if a yard is sloping this way, you're going to have water problems at some point. You can't find that information online. It's only going to come from experience having seen everything, everything that can go wrong with houses. So we walk in, client falls in love with the house, they start talking about where they're going to put the white picket fence and what color they're going to paint the baby's room and then I come in and I burst their bubble and say yes the roof is old, the air conditioner is shot, you have mold in the crawl space and you've got erosion in the back yard that's going to get worse.

Zillow openly admits to lacking the local details, neighborhood knowledge, and other types of additional information that is not systematically "measurable" mentioned by brokers as areas of knowledge and expertise. Zillow does, however, provide additional access to information previously unavailable to the general public. As brokers explained, the National Association of REALTORS® once controlled access to information regarding real estate properties for sale. REALTORS®, as association members, managed the distribution of that information to customers. As one broker summarized, "we originally were keepers of the information. We're no longer keepers of the information, and that's the seed change." Another reiterated, "what we used to be the holders of is now immediately, generically, generally available." A third stated that professionals used to "find the homes to show the buyers" but now buyers "can find all the homes so they tell us which homes they want to see….we don't find the homes nearly like we used to. It's our buyers [who are] are pretty much running that." When discussing customers' access to information online, another found that,

> I can't give them a lot of information that they can't already find themselves. You know, what is the house worth, what did the house down the street sell for? What is the tax value? Used to be that REALTORS® had all that information and that nobody else did. Well now the internet has allowed the consumer to come in fully armed and prepared with some of that data.

With this transformation in access to information, one broker said, "now with the internet, it's almost like information overload. And it's just—they can find it on Zillow, they can find

it on Trulia…Realtor.com is kind of coming back now." Yet, as a few participants indicated, customers' use of information available online can lead to misperceptions about the real estate "process":

> Zillow and Trulia and those types of websites—they're great because you can search for property in your pajamas and you don't have to call me. I don't have to be involved in that. You can just look and you can get all kinds of ideas, you can get all kinds of information, you can find out the tax value, you can find out what schools are there. And you don't need me for that and that's great. It's really wonderful but then sometimes they come with all this information and they think that they know more than you and sometimes they have more information about the property [but] they don't have the process down.

In these instances, brokers struggled to define themselves as "the experts at finding out the information" even if that information is simply their compilation of data available across multiple internet sources. One said it was his job to educate customers by explaining how information online may not be accurate:

> So buyers are more educated. It's a good thing. It's always a good thing. I mean I really appreciate how much research people do. And it's you know my job to add to their knowledge base and if they, if something's not right to explain to them why it's not right. Or show them new data or whatever it is.

Here, brokers discussed Zillow's role in increasing access to information—as customers' preferred location for online research—as problematic when it fosters misperceptions. Brokers agreed that "Zillow's wrong a lot" and "it's not the most accurate." One broker believed that customers should "stop looking on Zillow" but conceded that she "probably would look on Zillow too if I were just some random person because you see it on TV." One commented, "some of the consumer sites are better than others. One is quite bad in my opinion. In my very strong opinion…[it] is Zillow" One said, "the problem with like Zillow is it's not always accurate." Another added, "Zillow prides themselves on being 50% accurate. It's like flipping a coin."

Approximately one third of participants provided examples of the types of "misinformation" they have witnessed on Zillow including square footage, amenities, tax values, for sale status, and sale price. According to one participant,

> There's so much more information online, which can be good and bad, because a lot of the information's not accurate information….So I've had people just send me stuff especially from Zillow that's the wrong information like the wrong tax information on there, the wrong details on there.

Another said, Zillow "might say a house has a basement and a fireplace and nowhere is it listed that the house has a basement or fireplace. They just like—they just randomly pick up words. And it also says houses are still on the market that might have closed six months ago." These examples illustrate some sense of awareness of the coded backdrop of Zillow that results in inaccurate displays of information. Others elaborated on the need to "clean-up" Zillow's information, stating, "Zillow is famous for just having outdated information and so [customers will] write an email say 'hey you know there's six houses I've found that I want to see.' And actually three of them would already be under contract." As several brokers reiterated, inaccurate information available online makes their job more difficult because

> We have to go back and kind of do some re-education like ok let's, let's get rid of the, let's dis-inform the improper information. Let me explain to you why it's not accurate. Let's look at it and see if it is I mean because I mean even a blind squirrel gets a nut, right? So sometimes they are accurate. Sometimes they happen to be right on. [Zillow's] model's not total crap. It's just not one that can be designed to be one hundred percent accurate all the time…they've got some statistics on there but they—so you just have to get in and figure out what's reality. And so yeah it takes a lot longer.

Along these lines, six participants defined their role as helping "to help steer people between information and misinformation" distributed by Zillow. In some instances, brokers found themselves working hard to correct misinformation, particularly when it impacted customers' perceptions of home values or decisions during the transaction. Brokers made statements

such as, “I do believe a REALTOR®’s job at this point is to open up the eyes of the consumer” and “our job is to provide all the information that our client needs to make a great real estate decision.” Another stated,

> The access to information is incredible…And so it’s one of those things where like a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing. So the customer comes in with a lot of preconceived notions. They go onto a site like Zillow and punch in a couple of numbers and they think that’s what their house is worth. And that can be an incredibly low number or it could be an incredibly high number. It is often and inaccurate number. But they put a lot of faith in that because Zillow does such a good job of advertising. They certainly still need access to an individual agent that knows that market and the peculiarities of that market.

Access is not enough, however, when brokers “don’t know where they’re getting information.” In contrast to Zillow, one broker claimed to have the “truth,” which he framed as information found directly from public records:

> I’m meeting a client tomorrow that I’ve already shown them five properties and that’s the first thing that I notice. They had pretty extensive knowledge already of the properties we wanted to see…Some of the knowledge they had was incorrect because they found it on Zillow or Trulia and you know some of those services don’t have the truth and that’s okay because when I go I have the truth because I’ve pulled up the county records and I you know past history of the property, age, and all that stuff.

This broker’s definition of the “truth” as available within “county records” is problematic, however, as Zillow also pulls data from public record databases. Despite inaccuracies, moreover, brokers reported using Zillow as a place to conduct market and property research. According to one participant, she looks at Zillow to “see what else is out there” in terms of homes for buyers to visit. According to another, Zillow has “got the easiest way to find stuff. I mean if I’m searching in a market that I’m not part of the MLS, I search on it. And I know better. I know it’s not going to be accurate but it’s really easy and you just call the agent and say is this even still active?” Another stated, “I might be in front of my computer seven to ten hours and I’m on Zillow.” A third said she uses Realtor.com and Zillow Apps as “the biggest

thing that I'll use day to day." These remarks were usually added as off-hand remarks following brokers' deriding of Zillow as a source of misinformation and contestations of Zillow as authoritative in real estate decisions. Such comments demonstrate brokers' judgments of Zillow as conflicted, and help situate their reliance on the website as a resource for engaging customers.

Discerning Zillow Advertising

Approximately one third of participants reported paying for Zillow advertising services, a common marketing tactic within the industry. As a recent news article states, "Zillow makes big money….In the first quarter of this year, it reported $245.8 million in revenue—a 32 percent jump over the year before—including $175 million in payments from 'premier' agents, who pay for advertising" (Harney, 2017). As one broker summarized, Zillow is "trying to help agents find clients. And [trying to get] agents to pay for those services. That's why they exist." One participant offers insight into what he sees as the industry-wide transition to paid Zillow advertising:

> Every agent had a website, every real estate firm had a website. We had to differentiate ourselves so we started paying premium packages for the big three: Zillow, Trulia, and Realtor.com. And because there's just no way you can compete with their marketing, we were paying them fees to take care of that for us. At first, franchises were paying those companies and that's how they did it. And then Zillow, Trulia, and Realtor.com decided to go after individual offices as a way to get income and now they have evolved where individual agents are now paying those three directly.

According to participants, Zillow commonly solicits participation from brokers, especially those with a high volume of real estate transactions or large number of customer reviews. One stated that Zillow and other marketing websites "market to us pretty heavily for products and so forth [and] for an agent profile that they set up there." One participant explained, "They solicit. They call me. In fact right when we get off this phone call, I guarantee you I

get another phone call from Zillow…They want my business. They want me." Another stated, "I get sales pitches from social media companies. I get sales pitches all the time." One broker said, "And early on I'd gotten a bunch of positive reviews and somebody from Zillow called up and said 'do you want to be a preferred agent?' You've got to pay some money but then your listings will pop up higher and we could really market the good reviews." Responses like these, which indicate widespread participation in paid advertising programs, are even more significant given brokers' repeated contestations to the accuracy of the site's information.

The most common form of advertising discussed by brokers was the Premier Agent Program. The program, according to Zillow, "is designed with the simple purpose of bringing agents more buyers, more sellers, and more business" (Zillow, N.D.-h). One broker explains how she uses the Premier Agent Program to target users searching for properties in select zip codes:

> With Zillow you can pay a monthly fee. So you pick a zip code…and on the side when anybody clicks on a house, you'll have three or four agents that come up on the side and people can click on you and ask you questions about a house.

Another broker clarified further that

> If you go search in the [zip code] in Durham, Zillow comes up, you click on Zillow, and then you see that house you like and then there's three agents that come up on the side of Zillow. Those agents pay a lot of money to be up there… [to be] one of those three agents. And as one of those three agents, you don't necessarily get a shot on every listing every time… you can show up on every listing every time, but that's like really expensive.

Here, corporate discourse states that Zillow limits the "Premier Agent Platinum" program to a set number of brokers per zip code to "an elite" set of agents, stating, "if your ZIP code is full, make sure to get on our waitlist. The moment space opens up, you'll be the first to know!" (Zillow, N.D.-h).

On one hand, brokers discussed the success of Zillow advertising, with statements like "Zillow's been awesome" at generating business. One broker who pays for the Premier Agent status on Zillow said, "I've got a Zillow inquiry somebody asking about a home that's not even my listing but where we market…so we definitely are getting a lot more internet, I guess, touches and a lot more incoming email." According to one more, "we do spend marketing dollars on internet leads for example like Zillow.com," with the caveat that it is her job to "look at the numbers" to see "if we go six months in and there's not a closed sale from Zillow maybe spending marketing dollars on Zillow is not the way to go." One the other hand, brokers contested the effectiveness of paid advertising on Zillow. As one participant demonstrates, brokers can spend thousands of dollars each month on Zillow advertising, with a low return on investment:

> You can sign up for leads through like Zillow and you can pay them you know two or three thousand dollars a month and all the sudden you're considered a top agent and they advertise you as a top agent and then they give you hundreds of leads and maybe out of these hundreds of leads that you contact maybe one every other month would, you know, you'd actually end up working with them.

Another explained further how agents compete to "earn" the call from the same pool of prospective customers, who see advertisements of agents all in a row:

> If you go on Zillow or Trulia, you look at the bottom there's 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 agents listed down there. They paid to be on that site. To be put up there an all. And they buy – they buy zip codes and things like this but you may if you go on Zillow you may get a call from all those agents the next day.

As these examples illustrate, agents throughout the industry constantly debate whether Zillow's Premier Agent status is effective at generating business or whether it is, in the words of several agent bloggers, a "total rip off" (Murphy, 2017). Furthermore, brokers reported that Zillow, as an internet source, produces "low" quality leads. Others found the volume of

brokers—who purchase "space" next to each other on the same search results page—to be too competitive.

To better understand how zip code advertising works from a consumer perspective, I navigated the Zillow website with the intent of observing agent profile visibility. I began on the homepage of Zillow.com, which offers four "Search" categories: Buy, Rent, Sell, and Zestimate®. The website search box prompts users to "Enter an address, neighborhood, city, or ZIP code." I searched "Apex, NC" within each category. Each search returned the same page content layouts and options to click for more information. Each time I entered the city name and clicked "Search," the website returned an interactive city map on the left-hand side of the computer screen and series of homes on the right. The page included Sponsored homes alongside presumable non-sponsored, or organic, search results. Premier Agent profiles were not visible until I clicked to view a particular home, and scrolled down the screen. Profiles include the agent's photo, star rating, count of reviews, count of recent sales, phone number, and status (Listing Agent or Premier Agent). Once visible on the city search webpage, the row of agent profiles remains visible while scrolling through home data (Facts and Features, Home Value, Price/Tax History, Mortgages, Price this Home, etc.). When I click on an agent's name, the website navigates to the full profile page (About, Listings and Sales, Active Listings, Past Sales, Ratings and Reviews, Service Areas). Agent photo, reviews, and recent sales remained the most prominent categories of information about real estate professionals. Here, it is important to note that my observations of Zillow search functions were determined, in part, by the size of my laptop computer screen and use of a personal computer rather than smart phone, tablet, or mobile device, which can determine the type, order, and presentation of information on a mobile-enabled website.

Zillow offers some insight into the algorithmic base of advertising programs, which helps explain brokers differing views on the costs and benefits of Zillow:

> The price for Premier Agent Platinum varies by ZIP code, as well as the number of impressions that you choose for your ads to display each month. Each ZIP code has a unique pricing plan, based on amount of visitors. ZIP codes with high traffic will cost more than ZIP codes with less traffic. (Zillow, N.D.-h)

Only one broker mentioned the term impressions to explain how Zillow advertising works:

> It's a pretty expensive proposition through Zillow to get your name out there and be number one. So it can be bought. In fact I know exactly how much I would have to pay right now to buy the number one spot for Zillow in my zip code…the top real estate agents [in my zip code] spent over 40,000 dollars in advertising space last year.

When asked to clarify, the broker said, "[Zillow] charge[s] 4 cents per impression. So every 400 dollars a month, it creates a ton…of impressions." In a similar conversation, another broker said,

> So I pay a monthly—it's a hundred and fifty dollars a month—it's [a] pay per click kind of deal. You can spend thousands of dollars on it if you want to constantly be up there. But actually the hundred and fifty has been decent. So it works.

'Impressions' occur when a website user conducts a property search and then views an agent's profile in the results page. As Zillow explains,

> An impression is when an agent appears on the Buyer's Agent List on a home profile page. You will not be charged for the number of times you appear in neighborhood or ZIP code searches. For example, 1,000 impressions would mean that you have appeared on the Buyer's Agent List 1,000 times on homes for sale. (Zillow, N.D.-h)

To avoid Zillow's pay per click structure, another broker described how she gets "free exposure on Zillow" by entering her contact information in the Multiple Listing Service (MLS), which Zillow pulls into the listing profile. Yet, as this broker explains, the consumer must read "all the way through the listing" to "the description at the very end of the listing [where] you'll see 'Brought to you by [Name]'" in order to see her contact information. Given the "hidden" location of her contact information, she clarifies that brokers who "pay a

lot of money to become a Preferred Agent on Zillow" "will always be more prominent" in the website page.

Only three brokers who discussed the role of Zillow "didn't see it as a priority" in their marketing plan. The first said "it's probably been six months, easy, since the last time I sent that [Zillow profile] to anyone." The second said, "I've just taken a different angle as far as rather than paying that money to [Zillow, Trulia, and Realtor.com] directly, I pay the SEO guy to enhance my name and my properties." The third said "I have a profile on Zillow and Trulia and Realtor.com" but "my marketing comes from my past clients and from my friends and my sphere of influence." This broker also stated, "Zillow does help" with generating leads "but I don't pay for Zillow. I don't buy Zillow ads. I don't buy online ads." For her, the main benefit of Zillow is when customers "read the reviews" and call her as a result. Several other brokers who claimed to "work by referral" still purchase Zillow membership advertising, often citing the positive potential of customer reviews on Zillow as the motivating factor:

> It's funny because I—we still get most of our business is referrals—but we still spend a lot of money on internet and we spend money on the Zillow and Trulia and Realtor.com to be, to be a 'Preferred REALTOR®.' Because even if someone's referred to us we find that they still might look us up at Zillow or Trulia to see our reviews and how many reviews we've gotten.

These examples of online marketing experiences demonstrate widespread recognition of Zillow as an important site of analysis when investigating experiences of work impacted by digital platforms. Yet, although participants recognized Zillow as a significant website, they rarely demonstrated awareness of the algorithmic attributes guiding its information display and marketing functions. The following sections investigate three algorithmic

procedures that define brokers' experience and use of Zillow: Zestimate® calculations, agent profiles, and customer review systems.

Algorithmic Calculations: The Zestimate®

Zillow's Zestimate® was brokers' primary example of how the website produces misinformation or inaccurate data. The Zestimate®, developed by Zillow Group, Inc., is an algorithm that estimates the market value for individual homes. According to Zillow, "the Zestimate® is automatically computed daily based on millions of public and user-submitted data points":

> We use proprietary automated valuation models that apply advanced algorithms to analyze our data to identify relationships within a specific geographic area, between this home-related data and actual sales prices. Home characteristics, such as square footage, location or the number of bathrooms, are given different weights according to their influence on home sale prices in each specific geography over a specific period of time, resulting in a set of valuation rules, or models that are applied to generate each home's Zestimate®. Specifically, some of the data we use in this algorithm include: Physical attributes: Location, lot size, square footage, number of bedrooms and bathrooms and many other details. Tax assessments: Property tax information, actual property taxes paid, exceptions to tax assessments and other information provided in the tax assessors' records. Prior and current transactions: Actual sale prices over time of the home itself and comparable recent sales of nearby homes. (Zillow, 2017d)

This extended excerpt explains how the site utilizes a "computer-generated estimate" to "provide data in a user-friendly format to promote transparent real estate markets and allow people to make informed decisions." Brokers' reports clarified the function and effects of the Zestimate® as a trusted source:

> People love their Zestimates® but all that does is it takes an average of the area. It doesn't care if it's a million dollar custom build home or a KB Home community where they're all the same. They're basically box. So if they're within the same square footage, it just averages it out. So that's why Zestimates® aren't so accurate and that's where we just sometimes have to have conversations with our clients. So whether they're buying or selling, don't get so caught up in the Zestimates®.

Another reported that it is difficult to explain to customers how Zestimates® work, and why they are often wrong:

> Zillow estimates are almost always completely wrong. And by a long shot. They're either way over or they're way under. And so that's, that's difficult to help someone understand Zillow gets their information from tax records and other public sources but no one from Zillow has ever seen your house. No one has driven through your neighborhood. No one has said "oh this house has been gutted and completely redone, therefore, it's going to be worth this amount." Your house hasn't had the wallpaper changed since 1960 and you've got a black toilet in your powder room so your house is not going to sell for what this you know gutted completely remodeled house sold for next door. So it's hard to explain to people why Zillow isn't actually accurate.

In response to seeing customers "put so much faith into Zestimates®" that are up to "200,000 dollars off," one broker said he discusses the Zestimate® with customers "as part of my presentation." Perhaps as a counter to user grievances, Zillow reports, "Our accuracy depends on the home data we receive….When it comes to unique homes (e.g. luxury mansions, unusual designs) we are less accurate in our Zestimates®" (Zillow, 2017d). Yet only one broker acknowledged Zillow's disclaimers during our interview, stating,

> If you go on their website, you can see their disclaimer there is basically saying this isn't accurate. I… they say 'talk to your local real estate agent to get accurate information on the marketplace.' Like, it's that blatant but no one looks at that. They only look at the number.

According to this broker, even the public record is inaccurate at times.

> I mean the county is notoriously inaccurate because they don't have time to figure out exactly what's going on inside everybody's house so they do blanket appraisals. But that's an available number that's right there for people to see. It's public record so therefore that's the value. And those aren't always right. It could go either way. You know, there could be a swing of 20 or more percent either direction, depending on where they are in the marketplace. Depending in some cases in Durham especially…there could be 50,000 dollars in difference or 100,000 dollars in difference in two neighborhoods but if you just are looking on those websites that doesn't show you that.

Since Zillow draws information from public sources, inaccurate information gets, in the words of one participant "comingled with good data" during Zillow's data processing procedures. This is the only broker who discussed the difference between "information" and "data" as an important distinction to make when analyzing the role of Zillow as responsible for making data "meaningful" to customers.

> Having access to data is a necessary but not sufficient condition to know what you're doing in real estate, right? You absolutely have to have access to data to know what you're doing. You have to know prices, Z-Estimates on Zillow were terrible. They're a horrible—bad data put into a really bad statistical model. Nonetheless, people think that they mean something. So, and that's OK, there's bad data and a good agent can talk people through why it's bad data…. I don't consider that to be a bad thing. Here's what's not available and consumers don't even know needs to happen. Data has to be processed. Data has to be evaluated. Data has to be made meaningful.

Brokers' frustration with the Zestimate® is mirrored in customer experience. For instance, the first homeowner-brought lawsuit against Zillow claims that the Zestimate® has "repeatedly undervalued her house, creating a 'tremendous road block' to its sale." As a news article states, "homeowners, realty agents and appraisers have been critical for years about the valuation tool, citing estimates that too often are far off the mark — sometimes 20 percent or 30 percent too low or too high — and misleading to consumers" (Harney, 2017). This example demonstrates one of the ways in which Zillow algorithms are increasingly "articulated, experienced and contested in the public domain" (Bucher, 2016). Perhaps in response to negative sentiment surrounding the Zestimate®, Zillow recommends that agents "talk about why the Zestimate® is a good starting point as well as a historical reference, but it should not be used for pricing a home" (Zillow, 2017d). Here, Zillow relies on users to insert and update property information to increase the accuracy of Zestimates®.

Despite dissatisfaction, brokers expressed varying levels of awareness about how the Zestimate® operates, including how it gathers, filters, and presents information. As one

stated, “their system doesn’t really link up with our system so I’m not even sure how they get the data that they get on Zillow.” Although some participants received formal training on online marketing strategies, brokers largely became familiar with the rules and procedures of the Zestimate® through everyday use of its code-enabled features (Bucher, 2016). Zillow corporate discourse offers some insight into the coded/algorithmic function of the Zestimate®, stating, “We refresh Zestimates® for all homes daily. On rare occasions, this schedule is interrupted by operations associated with algorithmic changes or the deployment of new analytical features.” According to Zillow, the Zestimate® algorithm is living code:

> A team of statisticians is working every day to make the Zestimate® more accurate. Since Zillow's inception in 2006, we have deployed three completely new versions of the algorithm (2006, 2008 and 2011), but incremental improvements are made between major upgrades with new iterations being deployed regularly…. We refresh Zestimates® for all homes daily. On rare occasions, this schedule is interrupted by operations associated with algorithmic changes or the deployment of new analytic features. (Zillow, 2017d)

Although Zillow claims “the Zestimate® is created by an automated software process, designed by statisticians, and there is no ability for humans to manually alter the Zestimate® for a specific property,” the algorithm accounts for human intervention via user-entered data with “additional details that the sellers added, such as upgrades and remodels that they wanted buyers to know about the home…[which] provide[s] a more polished profile of the home.” This user-entered data, or “home facts” are “factored into your home’s Zestimate® immediately” and “might also be enough to affect the Zestimate® home value” (Zillow, 2017d). Zillow explains the ways in which the Zestimate® is coded to allow for customer feedback,

> We monitor customer feedback for systematic issues with the algorithm, but do not change individual Zestimates® in response to customer feedback. The Zestimate® is designed to be a neutral, unbiased estimate of the fair market value of a home, based on publicly available and user-submitted data. For this purpose, it is important that it

> be based on identical information about homes (e.g., beds, baths, square footage, lot size, tax assessment, prior sale price) and that the algorithm itself be consistently applied to all homes in a similar manner. This ensures that there is no preference for some homes relative to others nor are there valuations based on facts that are not accessible to all Zillow users. Some homes may be very unique in ways that are not well captured by existing data, and the Zestimate® may be less accurate on these homes. To provide more data on your Zestimate®, you can post your estimated value and comment in the Owners Estimate section. (Zillow, 2017d)

This extended disclaimer demonstrate how the Zestimate® algorithm can change over time, with new input, criteria, and motivations (Hallinan & Striphas, 2016), including as a response to user interaction and experience (Bucher, 2016). In this sense, Zillow users and the Zestimate® algorithm are 'entangled' such that user interaction determines its significance, function, and effect (Bucher, 2016; Gillespie, 2014). The following section further details the 'entanglement' of Zillow users and coded properties within the context of agent profiles.

Agent Profiles: Sources, Syndication, and Data Management

Zillow compiles agent profiles from multiple sources: agent-submitted personal and professional information, public records data, and consumer-submitted ratings and reviews. According to Zillow, agent profiles are designed so that "consumers can easily browse relevant information" regarding professionals' self-asserted "value proposition and credentials" (Zillow, N.D.-b). Profiles include several categories of information: About, Professional Information, Active Listings, and Past Sales. According to corporate discourse, brokers can influence their "brand" by submitting, verifying, and tracking data in these categories. The About section includes agent specialties, expertise, credentials, accomplishments, memberships, and personal statement designed to include specialized knowledge such as niche markets and years of experience. Professional Information includes a photo, address, phone number, associated websites, and screen name. Active Listings includes agents' current properties listed on the market. Past Sales refers to recently

completed real estate transactions. Zillow's Help Center Resources provide 'best practice' and 'how to' guidelines directing the form and content of information input by professionals. For instance, Zillow recommends that agents include a photo with "an inviting posture, which conveys your commitment to customer service" (Zillow, 2017a) and to "add your past sales to your profile" in order to demonstrate to "buyers and sellers how active you are in their local area" (Moore, 2017). The site also recommends to "list the most critical information first" because "potential clients can only see about seven lines of text without clicking More to reveal your full bio" (Zillow, 2017a). This example indicates how Zillow.com's visual webpage is coded to reveal and conceal certain broker-entered information, made visible through consumer interaction or "clicks." Furthermore, Zillow's recommendations demonstrate industry norms that require that real estate workers continually brand, market, and sell themselves in order to build a potential customer base (Fodge, 2011; Gandini, 2015; Lair et al., 2005).

When discussing their profiles on Zillow, brokers often indicated mixed reactions to processes through which the platform accumulates and displays profile information, especially listings and past sales. One broker observed that "they don't do a good job of tracking sales. They're like 40 properties behind right now on my stuff so I have to keep emailing in stuff." Another agreed that Zillow's automated processes for inputting and tracking listing data are inaccurate, and therefore require ongoing input from professionals. She said,

> You can see sales but it's definitely not accurate in any way because it only picks up on listings, the listing side and not the buy side. In order to have your sales put in, you have to manually put them in, which none of us have time to do that. Or you can also send an excel spreadsheet and Zillow would do it for you.

The broker continues by explaining the importance of displaying up-to-date past sales on Zillow, due to customer effects:

> So [past sales are] not necessarily accurate but I mean I definitely would say if somebody's only showing one closed sale in the last year, and another of us showing fifty, I bet a client would probably reach out to the person that's sold fifty because it just looks like they have more experience and they know what they're doing.

Zillow resources confirm the need for agent interaction and input as common practice, stating, "make sure every transaction you close is uploaded to your agent profile" (Zillow, 2017a) and "if you have a large number of past sales, we will be happy to enter them for you" (Zillow, N.D.-d). Brokers' ability to input data is limited by Zillow restrictions, however, as one broker finds:

> Zillow's gotten a lot better. It used to be difficult to have um to really show how many transactions you've had. I…can't go back and, and put them in from years and years and years ago but they're getting better at, at being more accurate. I used to look at my numb—at my transactions and be like gosh people are going to think…I haven't been in the business that long or I don't do that many transactions but it's gotten better…but you can only go back so many years.

This example illustrates one way that the coded backdrop of Zillow acts upon and restricts workers' ability to "build their brand" when it fails to "keep up" with brokers' sales history, a criterion most brokers claimed customers care about. Zillow resources indicate additional ways that the website acts on the information brokers enter. For instance, Zillow recommends that agents "claim" their listings, which are "matched" in data feeds:

> We match agent's listings based upon the e-mail address syndicated in the data feed. If your listing has been sent to Zillow with an email address that is not associated with your profile, it may not appear under your 'My Listings' tab. We encourage you to search through Zillow and claim your listing if necessary. To claim those listings, you can sync the e-mail address on your profile with the e-mail address in the feed. (Zillow, N.D.-j)

This example illustrates Zillow's use of not only agent interaction, but also "automatically" syndicated data provided by presumably accurate and reliable sources, including the Multiple

Listing Service (MLS) as well as brokerage offices (Zillow, N.D.-f). One broker explained how the MLS functions as a professional membership service as well as "software system"

> that gives us all the background information on houses, histories, we pull comps that way…. So I pay dues every quarter and then a one-time fee in order to have access to that system and every REALTOR® no matter what firm you're with, you almost have to pay into that system.

Another broker clarified,

> We all have equal access to MLS. By virtue of having access to MLS, we all have access to every other third party website in the world because they pull from MLS so anyone who tells you that they're going to give you more internet coverage is not really being accurate. Because we all have the same capability unless they are paying for featured listings on those third party websites. We do pay for featured listings on those third party websites: Zillow, Trulia, Yahoo, AOL, Homes.com. Actually [Company] as part of our franchise fee does that for all of our listings.

According to one participant, for instance, "Zillow is just another App" to view the same property information that is also visible, in different formats, across many different websites and platforms. As another broker clarified, these "third party" or consumer websites "talk to" the MLS service in order to gather and display property and listing information. A third broker used the analogy of a "well" to describe how the MLS contains information that "all" brokers "draw from."

Finally, one broker described the MLS feed as providing almost instant information-sharing where "when I entered this listing in the MLS, it was immediately sent out to REALTOR.com and all these other things." Here, Zillow clarifies the role of the MLS as an automated, data-sharing software system that makes information available to broker profiles:

> Listings are published via a direct data feed from your MLS or brokerage. Your listings will automatically sync with your profile — as long as the email address attached to your listing feed matches the email address you used for your Zillow account. (Zillow, 2017a)

Due to "direct data feeds," one broker stated that customers "have almost as much information as we do at the same time. As soon as a listing hits the market, it gets channeled out through the MLS system to Realtor.com, Trulia, Zillow, and then it's instantly" available. Therefore, according to Zillow, "The best way to get your listing onto Zillow and Trulia is for your Multiple Listing Service (MLS) to send us a feed. Please ensure that you broker has opted-in to have your listings included in the syndication to Zillow Group" (Zillow, N.D.-g). Despite instant access to MLS data on Zillow, however, customers cannot "view" complete property information. As one broker explained:

> The general public doesn't necessarily have access to—well they don't have access to our software system, which goes into much more depth into tax records does. And I'll have a lot of for sale by owners, they just pulled up tax records, saw what sold over the last year or two years and price their house that way. But it doesn't show you that oh that was a two story house or a ranch style house or if that had a master down versus all the bedrooms up and it, there's supposed to be, there's value in one or the other.

Yet, one broker said that when he enters information into MLS, it can become "transposed" as it is inserted into Zillow fields:

> [Zillow] purchase[s] the information from our MLS system and how it's syndicating down to their fields somehow gets confused and I haven't been seeing that as much but I've even had my own listings of things to be transposed there that I know I only typed it in once and I didn't change it for their fields like it's—and it would be like pictures of another house that were included in there so sometimes just the information's wrong.

Zillow resources encourage real estate professionals to monitor and correct information, including instances when automated processes lead to inaccurate data display. As blog sources indicate, Zillow's reliance on broker input is a controversial topic. For instance, an ActiveRain blog contributor poses the question, "why feed them any info, why help?":

> Zillow actually wants us to update our home's details with criteria corrections, remodel updates & comps! Now, that may be sleeping with the enemy, but how much

> will your seller appreciate you doing this when Zillow actually reflect[s] the true market value of the home? (Nelson, 2016).

This REALTOR®'s answer aligns with the perceptions of many workers in this study, namely that Zillow provides "exposure" to potential customers but can only do so with the aid of broker input.

Displaying Customer Experience

Ratings and reviews are perhaps the most publicized aspect of the Zillow agent profile. According to industry commentary, Zillow relies on customer reviews as a way to "differentiate itself" from other real estate platforms (Carter, 2010). Zillow agrees that customer reviews are a significant aspect of the platform. Rather than simply reporting customers' comments, however, Zillow utilizes software systems and management rules to accrue, analyze, and display consumer experiences in very particular ways.

Soliciting Brokers to Solicit Reviews

First and foremost, Zillow generates content by encouraging real estate professionals to solicit reviews from their customers "to attract contacts who are looking for a trustworthy real estate agent" (Robbers, 2015). For instance, Zillow encourages agents to "think of reviews as a personal online billboard written by your fans" (Thompson, 2014b). By offering the "new word of mouth," Zillow reviews "can make a memorable digital first impression" (Robbers, 2016). Often, Zillow assesses the quantifiable value of customer reviews as a key source leading to new business, stating, "agents with 10 or more reviews on Zillow see more than a 300 percent increase in contacts versus agents with no reviews" (Robbers, 2015). Given the success of reviews as attracting customers, "some all-star agents add reviews to their listing presentations, websites and social media platforms; others use reviews in drip email campaigns" (Robbers, 2015). In order to generate a higher volume of customer

reviews, Zillow recommends that agents make reviews part of "your daily business" by dropping hints, incorporating "the ask" into conversations, making personal phone calls and emails, offering examples of past reviews to simplify the process for customers, and offering rewards such as holding a prize drawing, offering a reward, hosting a party, or inviting "reviewers to a special 'only-for-reviewers' event" (Thompson, 2017). "Making an effort to continually build your reviews" with twenty minutes a month spent on soliciting reviews "is an investment that will pay off throughout your career" (Moore, 2015). For instance, Zillow suggests that agents:

> Plug reviews at your summer barbecue and winter holiday party. These events are low-key gatherings where your clients and guests are relaxed and happy—perhaps even exchanging stories about you. If they're jogging their memories by reminiscing about their experience with you, it's the perfect time to pick the 'low hanging fruit' of satisfied clients. Thank the ones who have provided you with a review and ask those who haven't done so to take a moment and write one when they get home. (Zillow, N.D.-a)

Zillow sources clarify that "swag," gifts, and incentives should only be offered after a customer completes a review (Robbers, 2017). Although these resources frame retroactive gifting as a way to eliminate accusations that agents "pay for reviews," thus making them more reliable, Zillow is perhaps responding to recent ethical and legal debates over review fraud and organizations purchasing or commissioning false reviews (Luca & Zervas, 2016). Furthermore, these examples indicate the additional time, expense, and labor required of brokers who learn and navigate the procedures to accumulate customer reviews. Zillow provides numerous guidebooks, scripts, and resources designed to facilitate brokers in their review solicitation as a multi-stage process that requires repeated action and interaction. According to participants in this study, however, their daily job tasks leave little time to follow the procedures for soliciting and submitting reviews within not only Zillow but also

the wide range of customer review platforms (i.e., Trulia, Yelp, GooglePlus) that each have their own rules, guidelines, and requirements.

Brokers in the present study discussed their experience with processes for requesting reviews through Zillow's automated system. One broker said, "you just click 'ask for referrals' and then you put in emails of people…. And then you send it and then that goes to them and they click the link and…[the review] automatically goes when they answer the email." Zillow resources clarify this broker's explanation of the process for requesting customer reviews. Agents can "email individual clients with a link to a review form on Zillow" (Zillow, 2014). They can email "multiple clients using one general form (up to 50 email addresses allowed per day)," or they can "cut and paste the URL" to "send a client a direct link to your review form" (Zillow, N.D.-e). To encourage customers to submit their review, agents can "pre-populate the form with the address of the home you helped them buy or sell, and fill in the service you provided" (Zillow, 2014). Agents can monitor who has submitted a review and resend the request to those who have not responded.

When not solicited for their feedback through this email process, customers can independently submit reviews by clicking the "write a review" button located on agent profile pages. The review form contains eight fields for data entry. First, users select a star rating to indicate "How likely are you to recommend [Agent], local knowledge, process expertise, responsiveness, and negotiation skills." Ratings one through five indicate how likely the customer is to recommend the agent. According to Zillow, "an agent's overall rating is then calculated by averaging the 'likelihood to recommend' rating with the 4 sub-ratings (local knowledge, process expertise, responsiveness, and negotiation skills)" (Zillow, 2014). Next, Zillow directs users to "Describe in detail your experience with [Agent]," and

"include details to help others decide if they should contact this pro." According to Zillow, moderators rely on the "golden rule" of being a "good neighbor" to determine whether or not users have followed the ethical guidelines of being honest and respectful in their review comments (Zillow, N.D.-c). Then, users select one of ten options for "Services provided," ranging from "Listed and sold a home or lot/land" to "Never responded to my inquiry" and "None. We connected, but it did not work out." Users select the point of contact as the agent or an associate. Next, users enter the year and address for the transaction. Finally, users must create a Zillow account, which requires an Email address and password, "to prevent fraud."

However, although Zillow resources describe the process to request a review as "easy," brokers offered examples of how navigating Zillow's rules of conduct, such as user registration processes, deterred participation. For instance, one broker stated, "someone has to be registered. You know, they have to have their own login." Another participant clarified:

> Zillow is difficult because they require you to set up an account and a password and you know it's good because people know that it's legitimate, but it's sometimes cumbersome enough that people don't end up doing it just because they don't want to go through the process. Zillow also requires it to be from a personal IP address. So we have to make sure we let people know that because if they're at work and they try to do it, Zillow won't accept it.

Here, Zillow resources explain that "using an office or publicly accessible computer to submit multiple reviews is a tactic often employed by spammers and gamers. We suggest that you ask your clients to submit reviews from their own computers, away from your office" (Thompson, 2013). This example indicates one way that the Zillow platform has coded processes in place to help mitigate deceitful review practices. Yet the rules and procedures in place highlight the role of Zillow—and real estate workers—in selecting, pursuing, and securing reviews from *particular* customers. Although customers also self-select when

submitting online reviews, customers who agree to attend brokers' "review parties" are presumably more likely to write positive comments and ratings.

Management Rules, Algorithmic Codes, and Human Intervention

Management rules, algorithmic coded processes, and human intervention govern the content and placement of customer reviews. According to the company, "Zillow is vigilant about ensuring every single review is high quality and credible" (Robbers, 2016) through a combination of corporate policies, employee review, and "proprietary Zillow fraud filters" (Thompson, 2014c). First, customer reviews must adhere to Zillow's Good Neighbor Policy and Review Guidelines designed to verify that customer contributions are "respectful and appropriate." Here, Zillow states that "content that we feel is inappropriate, off-topic, or not useful will not be published" (Zillow, 2014). Zillow's "strict guidelines" are designed promote respect for "other folks on the site" (Zillow, N.D.-c) and "to prevent spam and inappropriate language or comments" (Robbers, 2016). For instance, Review Guidelines provide examples of "suspicious activity or potential conflicts of interest" such as "reviews from family members, invalid email address, including use of 'disposable' addresses, unusually high number of submissions by one user, unusually high number of reviews for a professional, reviews from users who have received or have been offered compensation for writing a review" (Zillow, 2016). It can be difficult to determine what qualifies as "information that is not relevant within the context of the Zillow website" (Zillow, N.D.-i). Therefore, a team of moderators enforce these rules by vetting reviews before they are published, a process that can take up to one week.

> Zillow runs every single review that is submitted past a human being. Why? Primarily to ensure the review complies with our Review Policies and Guidelines—to maintain integrity of the review system and to reduce potential gaming. Yes, sad as it sounds, the simple fact is there are agents out there that try to submit fake reviews on their

> behalf, and to a lesser extent, fake reviews taking digs at competitors. In order for consumers to get the most out of any review system, that system must be trusted—trusted to contain only valid reviews, trusted to have procedures in place to reduce gaming. (Thompson, 2013)

Zillow also levies punishment on platform users identified as posting "fraudulent" reviews, including disabling accounts or terminating advertising (Zillow, 2016). In addition to formal review evaluation procedures, real estate professionals may dispute customer reviews and ratings through a formalized re-moderation process through which Zillow employees may or may not adjust or remove the contested comments (Zillow.com, 2014). Once customer reviews are moderated and integrated into an agent profile, "agents have the opportunity to respond to any reviews published. If an agent feels a review does not meet our review guidelines or any of our other applicable policies, the review can be flagged for re-moderation by Zillow's moderators" or "customer service team" (Zillow, 2014). Once reviews are (re)moderated by Zillow, they are displayed on agent profiles with the date, username, relationship (i.e. the "Service provided"), approximate sale price, and city.

According to Zillow, "reviews cannot be individually deleted," but, "at any time, agents can opt out of being rated by deleting their Zillow profile. This will remove all reviews and presence from Zillow" (Zillow, 2014). Professionals who opt out of the customer review process must remove their entire profile, eliminating their presence on Zillow. Given participant's comments on the value of exposure on Zillow, however, deleting their profile would eliminate potential exposure to new customers on Zillow as a strong source of new business. Instead, a common recommendation by Zillow, and writ large, is for workers to "respond publicly on the site to any review they receive" (Zillow, 2014). According to a contributor on Zillow's Trends & Data, "replying to all reviews—even negative ones—helps reveal your character, humanity and professionalism" (Robbers, 2016).

Here, management resources agree that the presence of "bad" reviews can reinforce the legitimacy of an agent's profile. These negative reviews help show "that they are real" (Moore, 2015). Here, demonstrations of "being real" or authentic through positive, negative, and even 'neutral' reviews reinforces their commercial and promotional value (Duffy, 2017). Varied experiences demonstrate reviews—and workers as the subject of review—as more "authentic" or "credible" amid findings that "there is an actual industry for writing and submitting fake reviews" (Robbers, 2016). Therefore, Zillow offers scripts to guide agents on how to reply to all reviews, positive, negative, or neutral, as, "whether a client leaves you a five-star review or a scathing denunciation, you should respond…graciously and humbly" even to "irate" customers (Thompson, 2014b; Zillow, 2017b). Furthermore, when searching for additional information regarding Zillow's rules for evaluation, I found a question in the Zillow Home Buying Discussion Guide asking, "How do I know if an agent review on Zillow is real?" One contributor to the discussion forum stated, "Zillow compares the parties involved with the transaction on county records and the person submitting the review to do their best at verifying the review is real" (Nelson, 2014). This lender's comments may suggest one way in which Zillow employees enact corporate policies to strategically and recurrently investigate review content.

Despite Zillow resources, algorithmic vetting of Zillow reviews remains largely secret. According to Zillow's Tips and Advice, "we can't give away everything that we look at when vetting a review (those pesky gamers don't need to know all the secrets" (Thompson, 2013). It is difficult to discern the number, content, or frequency of reviews that get filtered or rejected. Zillow does, however, signal instances when it has deleted "forbidden" content posted to Zillow Group's public boards. For instance, a reply posted to the question "How

successful has the Zillow Premier Agent Program been for you?" in the "Pro-to-Pro" discussion guide includes the disclaimer, "[personal attack deleted by Zillow moderator. Please see our Good Neighbor Policy for posting guidelines]." In the same discussion forum, however, another contributor commented, "[Agent Name] was the most arrogant agents have dealt with in 35 years in the field. He talked down to me and hung up on me." This example illustrates the transient, inconsistent nature of human intervention in the selection and display of content. Given the sheer volume of Zillow comments in online discussions as well as agent profiles, it is no wonder that not all content is consistently filtered.

Discussion

Taken together, the above findings point to the need to think critically about how customer review websites take part in shaping real estate work. There are many different consumer-driven review platforms with different functions, modes of participation, and effects. Such systems are not neutral. They introduce constraints on workers' online profiles as well as customer feedback and interaction. Some websites solicit, vet, and censor customer reviews through unique operational rules, regulations, and procedures that guide user behavior. The "politics" of these technological systems (Winner, 1980) are important in shaping experience, value, and meaning. By juxtaposing how brokers articulate everyday experiences with digital platforms alongside corporate discourses dictating their design and use, I argue for the actual algorithmic effects of consumer input-driven platforms on experiences of work and modes of customer participation. Therefore, analysis incorporates broker perceptions of the function and significance of Zillow as a popular customer review platform that operates through management rules, regulations, and coded procedures that

solicit user input, regulate advertising and profile display, valuate properties through a proprietary algorithm, and decide which consumer perspectives to publish and which to reject. As the data illustrate, real estate workers engage with, are impacted by, and resist the original intent of the Zillow platform in different ways. Given these aspects, the study explores worker perceptions of opportunities for control in the review process. While some use Zillow advertising to manage their online profile and reputation, others disregard the website as irrelevant to their work. Yet even brokers who declined Zillow's marketing found that customers often relied on information within the platform to make decisions about real estate, including which agents to contact and houses to view.

Therefore, I signal two implications for real estate work that are also deeply relevant to other service industries experiencing the infusion of software coded, algorithmic platforms. First, participant comments point to how Zillow actively mediates workers' efforts of personal branding, marketing, and customer contact. Brokers pay for Zillow advertising programs, input personal and property information to "clean up" instances of "misinformation," work to recuperate customers' "misperceptions," and solicit reviews, all according to the management rules and socio-technical structures of Zillow. Second, my analysis interrogates assumptions about transparency, authenticity, and objectivity attributed to Zillow. The website seeks, transforms, aggregates, and displays user-provided information as seemingly objective consumer content. Here, I question Zillow's power to act upon multiple forms of data in ways that discipline and control user engagement through a complex configuration of human action and technological intervention and regulation.

Zillow as Active Participant: Mediating Work, Accumulating Capital

Brokers' stories situate Zillow a significant website impacting their digital marketing and online customer relations work. To capitalize on Zillow's potential to increase business, participants described delegating significant time, effort, and expense to cultivate a professional profile according to 'best practice' and 'how to' guidelines. In some cases, brokers' efforts entailed constant interaction with the website. Brokers would enter profile information, submit listing and sales data, and contact customers to ask them to write reviews on Zillow. The selection, retention, placement, and display of information provided are regulated by Zillow. For instance, Zillow determines the placement, and size, of broker photos, as well as the prominence of star ratings, review counts, and recent sales as widely accepted factors impacting online reputation. Agent photo, reviews, and recent sales are the most prominent categories of information displayed about real estate professionals.

Rather than simply increasing online visibility and facilitating customer contact, however, Zillow algorithms imbue it "with the power to act upon data and make consequential decisions" regarding the norms and costs of brokers' online marketing (Kitchin, 2016, p. 2). As customers' preferred website for locating real estate agents, brokers found it important to participate in Zillow's paid advertising programs. As a few brokers recognized, Zillow has an explicit role in determining which profiles receive more "views" through paid advertising. For some, the completeness of their Zillow profile—impacted by algorithmic procedures for ranking, aggregating, measuring, and representing customer reviews as a key marker of online reputation—became a factor in consumer's judgement of whether or not to make contact. What is at stake, then, is uncovering how algorithms are acting to produce online personas and regulate customer relations in ways that increase the

efficiency of capital accumulation for select brokers. Here, brokers with the means to pay for Zillow advertising are more able to increase the level of their online profile, which, according to Zillow discourses, leads directly to an increase in transactions and income. Even more insidious, however, is Zillow's role as a commercial platform profiting from brokers' participation. On one hand, Zillow's financial gain is clearly represented in public formats, which reported $175 million earned from premier agent advertising in the first quarter this year (Harney, 2017). On the other hand, the value of user contributions is unclear. By submitting personal information, photographs, professional accomplishments, home listing data, and myriad other forms of information, brokers provide Zillow with data that can be assessed, aggregated, and displayed according to the coded rules of the platform. Additional, accurate information may increase the Zillow's claim to credibility, the subject of concern in recent popular media accounts of homeowner complaints (Harney, 2017).

Customers' online activities, in the form of ratings, reviews, and clicks, also contribute value to the website. These voluntary practices are an example of free, or prosumer, labor conducted on the behalf of consumers (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). Customer ratings and reviews—often solicited by brokers at the direction of Zillow—generate unique content for the website. These activities also help Zillow market services and entice brokers to opt-into the platform. As one broker confirmed, "Zillow sells eyeballs…They're monetized by advertising placements to agents. So when they call me, as they do every month, [they say] 'hey we have more eyeballs than the last time we spoke.'" The role of customer input—alongside the commercialized aspects of Zillow—make questions of transparency and authenticity even more pressing, as the next section addresses.

Challenging Transparency, Authenticity, and Trustworthiness

Participants in this study questioned the accuracy of Zillow's information, and often described themselves working to justify their role as "advisors" needing to correct "misinformation" on Zillow. Although few participants recognized the algorithmic aspects of Zillow, their uneasiness stemmed from the platforms' capacity to aggregate, display, and quantify information. Zillow operates according to pre-structured and coded rules that regulate possibilities for interaction: soliciting input, granting public access, and distributing information. Yet claims to accuracy, authenticity, transparency, and trustworthiness permeate Zillow discourses, which tightly link website content, particularly customer reviews, to empowered consumption and ideologies of access to information. Similar to recent popular news articles discussing the Consumer Review Fairness Act (Addady, 2016; Harmon, 2016), Zillow states, the "goal has always been to empower consumers" (Zillow, 2014). One way that Zillow supposedly empowers customers is by publishing customer reviews written by "neutral contributors" who "write in an authentic, natural voice" that is both "believable and genuine" (Thompson, 2014a, 2014b). According to Zillow, such user contributions provide users with "third-party reassurance" not accessible within traditional, corporate marketing (Moore, 2015). Recent findings demonstrate that customers do, indeed, trust consumer evaluation sites that evidently empower customers to make responsible decisions when otherwise faced with "carefully cultivated brand images" (Kuehn, 2015, p. 5). The carefully managed and branded nature of website content, however, contradicts its emancipatory potential based in differentiation from 'typical' marketing.

As brokers assert, they have solicited customer to write many—if not all—of their own reviews on Zillow. Zillow encourages brokers to accrue as many reviews as possible,

and provides a software coded system that enables brokers to email up to fifty customers *per day*. Additional coded features help agents monitor who has submitted a review—a tactic for persistent follow-up. Rather than viewing Zillow as simply a technological tool, therefore, these examples indicate that worker profiles may contain opinions from "cherry picked" customers trusted to post positive comments.

Furthermore, as even Zillow recognizes, customer comments are subjective statements and may not account for instances when "things sometimes go wrong and, as that focal point, the real estate agent often gets the blame even if wasn't their fault" (Thompson, 2014b). Rather than question these instances, however, Zillow reinforces the role of real estate workers in remedying and enhancing customer review content though formal procedures of re-moderation and inspection by automated procedures overseen by Zillow employees. However, this also is a source of contention, as there have been cases of "gaming the system" by service providers creating or purchasing reviews to bolster grades and review counts (Greene, 2015; Tuttle, 2015). Here, Zillow operates according to a complex configuration of factors, from corporate regulation and human participation to technological intervention, that culminate in particular arrangements of information generation, evaluation, aggregation, and display (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014). Brokers are both responsible for, and to, these procedures. The burden of proof to get an "improper" review edited, rebutted, removed is necessarily high. Therefore, this study encourages further attention to how algorithmic systems interpret and validate input.

Finally, as a software coded system, Zillow has distinct effects on consumer perceptions of empowerment that come at the expense of critical investigation of "who can participate, what kinds of information they can contribute, and in what format it is

represented to others" (Hearn, 2010, p. 431). Zillow is merely one instantiation of the technological systems available to workers, as well as consumers, invested in service labor relations. As the company states, Zillow's algorithmic qualities are continually evolving. As such, Zillow, and other customer review websites, will continue to act as political entities that empower and disempower users in unequal ways.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF SERVICE WORK

Situated within the real estate context, this study develops qualitative insight into how contemporary review culture intensifies social and communicative processes of service work. To this end, each chapter explores a different aspect of worker-customer engagement, including attention to the agentic role of software technologies. Chapter Two establishes real estate as an ideal context to explore the increasing use of online sources for customer experience sharing in an industry with a long-standing history of customer referral tendencies. Qualitative methods draw on semi-structured interviews, participant observations at real estate events, and analyses of cultural and organizational artifacts such as brokers' marketing materials, office meeting agendas, customer feedback surveys, and other paraphernalia. Chapter Three highlights the significance of review culture and public customer opinion sharing as significant trends impacting real estate workers. Almost half of participants reported that they recently began to solicit online reviews as standard practice for online marketing, with detailed procedures to request, monitor, and manage customer reviews integrated into everyday work processes. Chapter Four develops a case study of The Buffini Method, a prominent coaching system advocating long-term, highly selective customer engagement in the real estate process. Coaching discourses underlie brokers' expressions of professional identity and impact everyday decision making when they utilize trained methods to not only manage customer relations but also select, integrate, and monitor the "right kind" of customer as a significant source of reputational and brand value as a strategy aimed at attempting to manage risky conditions of work in real estate. Chapter Five

brings a focus on the structuring aspects of digital platforms, software codes, and algorithmic rules. These platforms influence worker-customer relations through their everyday use. Rather than simply facilitating customer interaction, consumer websites such as Zillow.com exhibit a politics of participation whereby operational rules, regulations, and procedures fundamentally shape user behavior. Zillow actively mediates brokers' personal branding, marketing, and customer contact efforts through seemingly objective access to user contributions, resulting in unequal effects that are important in shaping experience, value, and meaning within review culture.

In developing each of these chapters, my study contributes to a critical understanding of the experiences of real estate workers who are at the forefront of new modes of customer participation in evaluation and review as a growing condition of contemporary, neoliberal work. In this concluding chapter, I establish the need to understand how the rise of review culture potentially exacerbates norms and expectations of service workers in an era where social relations are increasingly rationalized (Weber, 1930) through market logics of calculation and control (Ritzer, 2013).

Significant Contributions

My study contributes to ongoing interest in service work relationships within post-Fordist conditions of risk. The rise of customer reviewing as a significant cultural, social, and economic practice further demonstrates how a lack of institutional supports—alongside customer demands for quality service and financial concessions—influences workers' perceptions of flexibility, control, and influence over work, income, and employment conditions.

Control and Resistance

Organization studies and organizational communication scholarship examine the complex relationships and interactions that define interactive service relations. Service industries expand modes of control beyond the organization, to include workers and customers/clients (Berkelaar, 2014; Berkelaar et al., 2014; Gossett, 2006; Korczynski, 2001; Korczynski & Ott, 2004; Lair et al., 2005; Leidner, 1991, 1993; Ritzer, 2013; Sturdy, 2001; Sturdy et al., 2001; Tracy, 2000). For instance, scholars investigate customer roles in short-term interactions within fast food, call center, and sales industries (Hochschild, 2012; Korczynski, 2001; Leidner, 1993; Wharton, 1996). However, relatively few studies address the impact of sustained customer interaction in the labor process. While previous analyses critique manifestations of consumer influence as enacted or solidified through organizational and management policies and control mechanisms, they fail to address instances when customers gain significant, lasting control over long-term service transactions. This study contributes significantly by addressing the dialectical, entwined, and transformative nature of control and resistance relations among workers, customers, organizations, and digital technologies in service industries.

The present study contributes further nuance by adding a fourth dimension to the contest for control, transforming the 'triangle' to a 'square' of relations. Namely, my findings indicate instances when software coded technologies, particularly online customer review platforms, take on a fourth agentic role within service interactions previously defined by the trio of organization, worker, and customer relations. Service evaluations are no longer limited to managerial assessments internal to an organization. Instead, online review platforms subject individual workers to continuous, long-term, public customer assessment

by gathering, sorting, and displaying customer opinions on individual workers' skills, characteristics, and performance. Here, public images, cultivated across online profiles and customer review websites, act as pivotal points of control and resistance within contemporary service work relations (Gabriel, 2008). On one hand, professional relations and networks insulate workers as they navigate formal regulations and procedures in a contemporary work environment, experiencing the loss of organizational protections and barriers through increasing public exposure to consumer assessment and reprimand. On the other hand, findings demonstrate how workers' everyday tactics of resistance sometimes reproduce, rather than contest, imperatives of self-reliance, entrepreneurial abilities, and individualized risk (Neff, 2012). For instance, although brokers exhibit cynicism as a mechanism of resistance to online customer review demands (Fleming & Spicer, 2003), they also manage complex online marketing portfolios, cultivate professional networks, and generate customer referrals through self-generated, innovative, and "guerrilla" self-marketing tactics in accordance with the entrepreneurial spirit of post-Fordist work.

This study also highlights how websites solicit, vet, and censor customer reviews through hidden operational rules, regulations, and procedures that fundamentally shape user behavior. The politics of these technological systems (Winner, 1980) are important in shaping experience, value, and meaning within review culture. Customer review platforms are purported to have built-in protections to bolster the integrity of customer reviews through coding in rules, procedures, and filtering mechanisms to prevent false, misleading, or untrue content. In effect, these rules guide behavior and determine who can participate in reviewing as a democratic imperative. Findings reflect a need to expand conceptualizations of

organizational control to include customers and algorithmic platforms as agentic participants in the labor process.

Customer Reviews as Prosumption

This study also expands on conceptualizations of the 'prosumer' by demonstrating new ways that customer participation and labor create value available for capture by organizations, workers, and commercial entities. Customer activities, including social and communicative interaction and cooperation, have long been recognized as prosumptive or value producing (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Zwick et al., 2008). However, review culture draws customers deeper into the service process when they write, read, and evaluate online reviews (Bauer & Gegenhuber, 2015; Ghose et al., 2012; Terranova, 2004; Kuehn, 2015, 2016; Willmott, 2010). Building on organization and communication studies of customer participation, this study demonstrates how review culture further enables value extraction through the unpaid activities of customers (Bauer & Gegenhuber, 2015; Willmott, 2011).

Customers engage in prosumptive activities that produce brand and reputation value when writing positive reviews, giving personal recommendations, starring in photo or video testimonials, submitting personal information, clicking on websites, engaging in other social and communicative activities, and drawing on social networks to recommend workers to friends, family, and acquaintances as brokerage "team members" and "brand advocates." My findings elaborate on the significance of sharing, reading, and writing reviews as a significant source of value for workers (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Kuhn, 2015; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010; Zwick et al., 2008) when brokers calculate, quantify, and commodify customer input as a source of marketing, branding, and reputational value. In exchange for reviews, referrals, and marketing efforts, brokers reward customers with forms of "appreciation" including

invitations to exclusive events, access to home industry networks, personal attention, hand-written notes, and small gifts.

Customer labor also benefits commercial platforms that integrate ratings, reviews, and feedback in website content and track customer clicks to generate advertising revenue. On one hand, customers receive social benefits from writing reviews, such as access into local communities, prestige, popularity, and identity confirmation (Askay & Gossett, 2015; Kuehn, 2015, 2016). On the other hand, as findings indicate, scripted sales relationships can involve an ongoing process of "enchantment" or trust building through which customers *feel* in control even if they are subject to coached interactions (Korczynski, 2005, p. 76). Together, findings contribute to recent investigations that question what qualifies as "work," or value generating activities, within customer-worker-organization dynamics (Gabriel et al., 2015). If customers' opinion sharing and social interaction, in addition to digital labor, are a source of value organizations as well as workers, questions emerge regarding the rights of customers to demand remuneration for their efforts.

Emotion Labor and the Commodification of Relationships

Findings around brokers' habits of self-marketing and the shift towards branding through intimate customer relations contribute to critical organization and communication studies. Although the norms of real estate work have reinforced self selling tactics, participants in this study indicate an overwhelming amount of time and labor dedicated to self-marketing achieved through the commodification of relationships. Brokers enlist their families, as well, in online reputation management campaigns in the form of profile videos and photos. Attempts to cultivate "long term" friendships and nurture "customers for life" drive contemporary real estate work to the degree in which brokers say they are left feeling

disoriented, like "stepping off a cliff," after a contract concludes or when customers refuse to return phone calls. Norms of communicative and emotional labor (Leidner, 1993; Hochschild, 2012) mean that brokers are even willing to work with customers who voice prejudices about their social identity. Participant's emphasis on creating relationships with customers, at the expense of other sources of intimacy, meaning, pleasure, satisfaction, and fulfillment, is problematic when a commitment to (over)work dominates meaning making, identity formation, and social relations (Gregg, 2011; Hochschild, 2000).

A significant contribution of this study is identifying customers' participation as a form of emotion labor. Customer reviews and referrals are emotive. Whether online or in-person, individuals share experiences by narrating personal stories and disclosing detailed information about themselves and others. Rather than simply conversations, however, customers' experiences and expressions of emotions are highly regulated so that they become easily available for capture. For instance, customers' emotional display rules are developed and regulated by workers, service organizations, and corporate entities that sponsor review culture. In this study, brokers direct customers on where, how, and how often to share their opinions. Organizational rules and resources support brokers' efforts to control emotional responses, direct behaviors of customers (Leidner, 1999) and encourage review practices as a significant trend in the real estate industry. Corporate entities, such as Zillow, place further restrictions on the emotional dimensions of reviews by dividing responses into written comments and numerical ratings. Additional studies of emotional branding (Gobe, 2001) can extend these findings to uncover how customers' emotional labor becomes incorporated into corporate branding efforts.

Strategies of (Dis)Identification

Customer reviews, referrals, and opinions come to the forefront of organizational decision making and worker identity formation for participants in this study. The desire to generate positive customer comments can discipline workers into making decisions, following particular organizational processes, such as opting into expensive advertising and training programs. Although organization and communication scholars have long studied aspects of professional identity formation and struggles to craft a coherent 'self' alongside organizational roles (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), my study highlights the role of *dis*identification as a significant strategy. Specifically, findings exhibit ways brokers engaged in strategies of disidentification to distance themselves from the stigma of sales work as devalued, "dirty," "slimy," and unethical work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Brokers compared their work to jobs generally regarded as meaningful, desirable, valued, and 'good' such as doctors and advisors (Kalleberg, 2011), and they laid claim to professional status by defining themselves as "*not* having the same attributes," principles, and values as others in the industry (Kreiner & Ashforth, p. 3).

(Online) Reputation Management

Finally, this study contributes to recent explorations of how the increasing visibility of information online impacts career management strategies, professional reputation efforts, and employment potential of workers navigating the fluid, insecure conditions of post-Fordist work (Berkelaar, 2016; Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Berkelaar et al., 2014). Given the trend towards cybervetting, the process of online data gathering by prospective employers, online reputations remain subject to ongoing inspection and evaluation (Berkelaar, 2014; Hansen &

Flyverbom, 2014). Customer reviews emerge when employers Google information about applicants, and help form representations of reputations, careers, values, and personality based on subjective assessments of personal behavior, social interactions, and overall public image (Berkelaar & Buzzanell, 2014; Berkelaar et al., 2014). Given the easily searchable nature of digital reputations, which increasingly incorporate customer reviews, additional examination is needed to understand how, and with what consequences, workers continue to cultivate, monitor, and protect online customer reviews as significant to employment and earning potential.

Reflecting on Study Methods

My analysis of service work experiences flows from a commitment to demonstrate how personal and professional identities and social realities are products of communicative interactions, language, and culture. Critical communication research requires a careful balance of analysis and interpretation that is open, emergent, and theory driven (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Therefore, as a qualitative, emergent, and empirical undertaking, participant experiences, meaning making practices, and discourses, as well as organization and communication theories ground this study.

Interviewing and participant observations, supported through discourse analysis and ethnographic inquiry, allowed me to document the effects of recent phenomena: review culture and its impact on service work. I chose semi-structured format for questions about the culture and norms of real estate work, including the nature of relationships with customers, brokers, and other industry professionals. A semi-structured interview protocol allowed me to integrate unexpected insights into subsequent interview questions, while focusing research on the central topic of interest: real estate work (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). To track my own

changing interpretations, I recorded analytic memos of thoughts and reactions throughout stages of data collection and analysis (Tracy, 2013). I noted emerging themes, codes, and industry trends, and regularly returned to the data for confirmation of findings and consideration of new avenues of study. This process of iterative analysis involved continuous reflections of the data collected as well as existing literature (Tracy, 2013).

My immersion in the world of real estate allowed me to experience myriad aspects of brokers' work (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013). Moving in and out of organizations and gaining acceptance that allowed me to return for multiple events in some cases enabled my study to recover material aspects of work as a situated, embodied practice (Ashcraft, 2006; Barley & Kunda, 2001). I encourage researchers in organization studies and organizational communication scholarship to explore ride along interviews as a qualitative method. Ride along style interviews are particularly useful for observing workers with difficult schedules and limited time to interact. When suggesting ride along components to potential participants, I explained my goals to "shadow" their work, similar to organizational procedures used when explaining systems and processes to new employees. When participants requested more details regarding the ride along process, I relayed my interest in observing what they considered a "typical work-related experience" that might be informative for someone unfamiliar with the industry. I offered an example of attending an open house event, and asked participants what they thought might be most informative related to their own work and organizational experiences. It was important to reiterate that a ride along session was not required for participation in the study. The ride along component added approximately thirty minutes to the one-hour interview process. In some cases, the ride along component coincided with the interview when brokers would demonstrate

technological aspects of their everyday work as part of their response to interview questions. In other cases, brokers invited me to join events pre-scheduled for a later date. Overall, ride along components offered insights and opportunities to understand service work processes unavailable through interview procedures alone.

The ability to establish rapport was invaluable to gaining access to ride along components, garnering invitations to organizational events, and generating referrals. Upon meeting brokers in person, my identity as a female graduate student likely aligned with the experiences of participants working in a female gendered industry. Although I revealed my new role as a mother with only a handful of participants, sharing stories about starting a family may have helped establish interpersonal connections. For instance, I shared details about my family with one broker whose wife was pregnant with their first child. More significantly, however, I believe that expressing genuine interest in their work experiences, philosophies, and successes was pivotal to establishing strong relationships and ongoing interaction throughout the research process.

Disclosing my affiliation with a well-known, local university and my interest in organizational communication was perhaps the most significant aspect of my ability to establish legitimacy and gain access (Monahan & Fisher, 2015). For instance, one broker shared with me that she had originally intended to decline my request for an interview based on her busy schedule, but soon changed her mind. She shared, "at first I started to say 'no I don't have time for this,' but then I stepped back. I was in graduate school at one time and I needed to interview" in order to complete a Master's degree. In this instance, the broker agreed to an interview because she identified with the challenge of participant recruitment.

Future Directions and Questions

As new forms of customer participation and evaluation continue to emerge, review culture imbues customer opinions with the power to affect not only business interests, but also the employability of individual workers. By revealing wider effects of power relations within service relations organized through corporate logics and managerial discourses, scholars may identify opportunities for revised organizational experiences (Deetz, 1992). What opportunities exist for developing more democratic modes of organizing, decision-making, and action in service work relations that resist reproducing the status quo of power and control (Zoller, 2014, p. 609)? To this end, I agree with Deetz's proposal to locate possibilities for more democratic organizing within everyday political micropractices such as taking vacations, leaving work, joining community organizations, and finding other ways to step outside workplaces and logics (p. 344). It is the role of critical scholars to identify, engage with, and challenge the ways in which customers engage in labor and value-producing activities in increasingly complex ways that complicate "time away" as a source of resistance given conditions of neoliberal organizing and post-Fordist work. Ultimately, I hope this work calls attention to the ways that review culture, and the proliferate publication, promotion, and protection of consumer voices, may impact workers unprepared to mitigate—or capitalize—the effects of customer opinions.

Although this study primarily identifies review culture as the online evaluation and feedback by customers about consumptive service experiences, activities of reviewing and ranking extend beyond employment relations. As others have recently suggested, rating, ranking, and reviewing will continue to spread as significant consumptive, productive, social, cultural, and even political activities (Kuehn, 2016). Review systems are increasing in

influence. Reviewing practices are predicted to become more prominent and interconnected through efforts to accumulate input and develop more sophisticated ranking systems (Tagrin, 2014). Ranking, rating, audit, assessment, and classification systems have already attracted notice (Andrejevic, 2005; Espeland and Saunder, 2007; Power, Scheytt, Soin, & Sahlin, 2009; Rouvroy, 2011; Sauder & Espeland, 2009; Shore & Wright, 2015; Willmott, 2011). As a timely, pressing example of the role of rating and ranking in citizenship and social relations, *Wired* magazine recently published an article outlining China's Social Credit System and algorithmic calculation of citizens' "national trust score" (Botsman, 2017). Citizens' trust scores are public rankings—informed by not only commercial purchases, but also social interactions online—and determine social, economic, and political status. Scores will determine access to loans, schools, and jobs. Even more insidiously, negative scores earned by *associates* can lower an individuals' rating. The author describes the Social Credit System as "yelp for humans," "a culture of constant monitoring plus rating," and a "panopticon" of "coveillance." Given such a poignant attestation for additional, critical examination, I end by offering inspiration for three significant areas that require further research. My suggestions center on ways to assess not only the nature of contemporary service work impacted by customer review culture, but also other areas of social, political, and economic life impacted by emerging systems of public evaluation, ranking, and review.

Customer Surveillance as Multi-Way Watching

In calling attention to new monitoring capabilities enabled through online customer review systems, the study presents opportunities to investigate how review culture generates and facilitates new forms of surveillance and multi-way watching as routine practice. Multi-way watching refers to the multidirectional nature of modern surveillance technologies and

techniques, which capture "nearly everyone by default" (Hansen & Flyverbom, 2014, p. 876). Past studies indicate a range of ways in which organizations, workers, and customers can engage in tracking, monitoring, and surveilling unique to service work. For instance, Leidner (1996) and Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010) discuss in-person monitoring of workers' affect, including moods, facial expressions, and communication skills (Leidner, 1996). Further, Korczynski (2001) investigates organizaitonal surveillance of workers thorugh systems that monitor, track, and evaluate the average length of call, number of calls, time between calls conducted by call center workers (Korczynski, 2001). Together, these studies demonstrate forms of monitoring through direct observation as well as surveillance through computerized technologies.

However, the increasing availability of new surveillance technologies and sources of monitoring, together with growing habits of digital background checks and online reputation research conducted by organizations and workers—*as well as customers*—indicates surveillance is a far more widespread and multi-directional trend than currently realized. Participants described instances when customers "Googled everything about me," and when online rankings became a 'surveillance from a distance.' Brokers also defined their actions as becoming a "creepy agent" when investigating personal and financial details about a customer. They noted instances when home buyers and sellers would seek out information about each other, an example of peer-to-peer surveillance or co-monitoring (Andrejevic, 2005). As one broker indicated, individuals research not only details about properties for sale and aspects of the surrounding area, but also information about the current owner including "how much they owe on their mortgage."

As these situated examples indicate, surveillance is a multi-directional process. On one hand, there are existing tendencies to investigate and "surveil" one another (Andrejevic, 2005). On the other hand online platforms add an opportunity to extend forms of surveillance through digital rating, ranking, and reviewing systems. The present study opens new possibilities to discuss how the increasing availability of new monitoring sources, together with growing habits of online research, make multi-way surveillance a far more widespread and provocative trend than currently realized (Andrejevic, 2002; Andrejevic, 2005). Further investigation is necessary to continue uncovering unknown consequences of 'Googling' and other investigatory, digital monitoring as intuitive practices symptomatic of customer review culture that encourages multi-way surveillance as routine practice. For instance, future studies of surveillant cultural practices (Monahan, 2011) can analyze in detail how technological systems mediate customer service engagement via continuous influx of customer voices available for aggregation and analysis. Customer evaluations influence the reputation and credibility of professional service providers across industries not limited to healthcare, transportation, and home maintenance providers, as well as restaurant workers and small business owners, who are subject to seemly endless opportunities for customer review (Kuehn, 2015; Sperber, 2014).

Citizenship through Consumption

There is a long history of initiatives to frame consumption as a 'public duty' or civic obligation, such as when governmental institutions have encouraged increased consumption to support public interests and "ward off" recession (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010, p. 16). Scholars have recently problematized conceptualizations of civic engagement through consumption. For instance, investigations of 'commodity activism,' or individualized acts of resistance through politicized practices of (non)consumption, demonstrate how consumer

purchasing may replace or obscure other forms of public engagement or civic protest (Kuehn, 2015; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Here, the danger lies in limiting access to citizenship, and achievement of civic responsibility, based on economic standing and consumptive capability.

Although sovereign customer ideologies can form a basis for control within interactive service transactions, the effects of customer service discourses in terms of subjectivity are obscured or neglected due to predominant emphasis on consumption as the way to achieve agency and sovereignty (Ball et al., 2010). Engagement as citizen-consumers becomes a form of 'pseudo-democracy' when empowerment through consumption is carefully mediated and managed by corporate interests at the expense of individual identity, status, life conditions, and fundamental democratic practices (Ball et al., 2010). Review culture exemplifies the transition to logics that equate consumption with citizenship and public life (Zwick, Bonsu, & Darmody, 2008). The Consumer Review Fairness Act highlights consumption, and talking about consumptive experiences, as a protected right. Problematics pertaining to equating consumption with public participation, and the shift from citizen to consumer logics, have already entered organizational communication discussions of 'doing democracy' at work and beyond (Cheney & Cloud, 2006; Deetz, 1992). As a prominent force impacting not only control relations within contemporary organizational relations, but also modes of public participation, questions of how citizen-consumers perceive and manage the rise of customer review culture are increasingly poignant. Questions of agency and sovereignty become even more pressing as ranking systems enter into new arenas, including governmental assessments and evaluations of citizens (Botsman, 2017).

Social Identity, Difference, and Intersectionality

Finally, the present study calls for continued attention to identifying and interrogating which dimensions of difference "matter," or have an organizing function (Allen, 2011; Acker, 2006) within myriad forms of service work experiencing the rise of review culture. Norms of marketing, advertising, and branding in real estate command that brokers operate as public figures through the open display of professionalized faces and bodies that align with popular perceptions of the heteronormative, nuclear family structure as an assumed standard of homeownership. Such expectations are especially significant for real estate workers' experiences of social and professional identity. Brokers' experiences demonstrate the ways in which forms of difference, including non-compliance with normative expectations, result in overlapping, multiplicative effects on everyday work decisions and efforts to generate business. When developing a personal brand and managing customer relations, brokers encounter prejudice and offensive situations that may entail serious risks of legal and ethical reproach and reprimand. As they engage in real estate work, these brokers developed individual strategies to avoid or manage customers with prejudices. Informed by intersectional theories capable of uncovering what becomes (in)visible in contemporary customer service work through lived experience and storytelling (Crenshaw, 1991), my analysis of brokers' stories brings significant insight into the structural, social, discursive, and material processes of power relations among service workers and their customers.

Attention to race and gender emerged through examination of the experiences of women of color in the workplace (Parker, 2001), and critical organization and communication scholars continue to expand understandings of difference through intersectional theory (Dempsey, Parker, & Krone, 2011; Parker et al., 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2016). Qualitative study is one way that communication and organization scholars can

engage with intersectional thought to clarify which forms of difference, or social identity categories, matter when, where, and to what ends (Guidroz & Berger, 2009). This study has already begun to expand the "inevitable etc." by calling attention to familial relations, ethnicity, nationality, marital status, and accent as categories of difference that workers self-narrate as interconnected and impactful for their real estate jobs. Here, intersectional theory offers significant contributions by considering the ways in which constructions of difference are interlocking, interconnected, and impactful so that membership in multiple social categories shapes experience of social power and advantage in service work relations (Cole, 2009; Guidroz & Berger, 2009). Intersectional perspectives illuminate how professional identities are not fixed and emerge through the negotiation of various forms of difference across multiple contexts (Adib & Guerrier, 2003). Continued studies of the organizing function of difference, therefore, should pay attention to aspects of work that span traditional boundaries of space and time no longer predominant within neoliberal, post-Fordist forms of organizing.

Without integrating interview questions that inquire about social identity and difference, it has been difficult to speculate on the significance and extent of customers' discriminatory mindsets on brokers' experiences of work. This is an area of research ripe for elaboration, particularly through the lens of review culture. In order to make further sense of how unmarked categories of difference organize real estate work, critical communication research can extend the present findings through open and emergent methods (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Additional inquiry can address how workers encounter, perceive, and manage the effects of contentious situations that emerge in person and *extend* and *amplify* through textual and visual content of online reviews. From the

perspective of review culture, investigating effects of workers' social differences within customer relations is a worthwhile endeavor.

Final Thoughts

The current trend towards reviewing, rating, ranking, and quantifying every aspect of our social, cultural, economic, and political lives is alarming. My study examines the effects of increasingly publicized customer opinions on the identities, decision making, and everyday experiences individual service workers. Yet review proclivities, and circulating discourses purporting their emancipatory potential, extend beyond service relationships. Consumers can rate books, movies, purchases, hotel stays, vacations, restaurant servers, transportation providers, medical personnel, and educators; organizations can rate workplaces, schools, and cities; and, now, governments can even rate their citizens. It is up to critical scholars to uncover the implications of review culture as a method for achieving transparency and accountability as well as a tool to levy new demands on an individualized level.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Today is _____ and this is participant number _____.

I would like to ask for your thoughts on your job, including how industry developments, the introduction of new technologies, and changes in customer relations management impact daily tasks. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering, and you are welcome to stop this interview at any time.

Interview Questions – Real Estate Agents and Brokers

Identity, Real Estate Work, and Customer Relations

1. Tell me about your current job position.
    a. What is involved in your daily work activities?
        i. What resources do you use to facilitate daily tasks?
        ii. Describe work tasks that take place online, as well as in person.

2. How have mobile and internet technologies impacted your job?
    a. What social media sites, digital forums, or other online platforms do you use and for what purpose?

3. Describe a typical interaction with a customer.
    a. Through what means do you typically communicate with customers?
    b. How long do you typically work with a customer, and what factors help determine the time span of interaction?

4. How do you connect with clients?
    a. In what ways has the internet changed how customers approach you?
    b. What do customers already know when they contact you?
    c. Do people typically "interview" or "vet" you before signing on as clients?
        i. What types of questions do they ask you?
        ii. What do you think determines whether or not they sign on?

5. Do you ask clients to write online reviews, give referrals or testimonials?
    a. Describe an instance when you were reviewed by a customer online.
        i. Positive experiences with online reviews?
        ii. Negative experiences with online reviews?
    b. Who, when, where, what, how, why? What is the impact of online reviews and their visibility?

6. What sources do you go to for information about managing customer relations?
    a. How do you manage your online presence/profile?
    b. Who or what do you turn to when you come across an unusual situation?

Personal Background and Experiences

Next, I have some questions about your personal background and experiences working within the real estate industry.

1. What trends or changes have you noticed in the norms and expectations of your daily work activities?
    a. How has your job transitioned from when you first started?

2. What time(s) of day do you work most often?

3. Where do you work most often?

4. What do you like about your work?

5. What do you dislike about your work?

6. How long have you worked in this position?
    a. What brought you to this particular job?
    b. Is this your only job, and if not, can you tell me a bit about other work that you do?
    c. What were your previous work experiences?
    d. What educational, professional, or certification credentials do you use and how do they function in your work?

Other

Finally, I would like to ask for your input on anything else you'd like to share.

1. Is there anything significant that you feel people don't necessarily recognize about the work you do? If so, what would you want others to know about the work you do?

2. Do you have anything else that you'd like to say? Is there anything else that you feel is important for me to know?

3. Who else may be important for me to interview in a study of the work related to real estate?

APPENDIX B: REVIEW CULTURE EXAMPLES



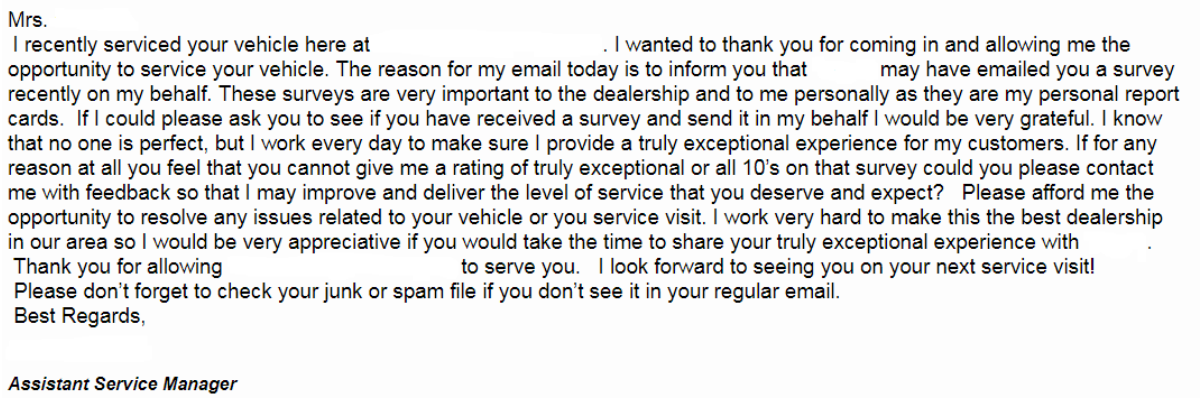
Figure 5: Collage of hand-written customer reviews on display at a restaurant (includes a local news story with a photo of the collage)



Figure 6: Facebook post by HGTV stars Drew and Jonathan Scott requesting customers to review their new book on Amazon



Figure 7: Box requesting customer feedback on employee service on display at a Harris Teeter grocery store



Mrs.
I recently serviced your vehicle here at . I wanted to thank you for coming in and allowing me the opportunity to service your vehicle. The reason for my email today is to inform you that may have emailed you a survey recently on my behalf. These surveys are very important to the dealership and to me personally as they are my personal report cards. If I could please ask you to see if you have received a survey and send it in my behalf I would be very grateful. I know that no one is perfect, but I work every day to make sure I provide a truly exceptional experience for my customers. If for any reason at all you feel that you cannot give me a rating of truly exceptional or all 10's on that survey could you please contact me with feedback so that I may improve and deliver the level of service that you deserve and expect? Please afford me the opportunity to resolve any issues related to your vehicle or you service visit. I work very hard to make this the best dealership in our area so I would be very appreciative if you would take the time to share your truly exceptional experience with .
Thank you for allowing to serve you. I look forward to seeing you on your next service visit!
Please don't forget to check your junk or spam file if you don't see it in your regular email.
Best Regards,

Assistant Service Manager

Figure 8: Personal follow-up email requesting customer survey "they are my personal report cards… If for any reason at all you feel that you cannot give me a rating of truly exceptional or all 10's on that survey could you please contact me with feedback so that I may improve and deliver the level of service that you deserve and expect?"

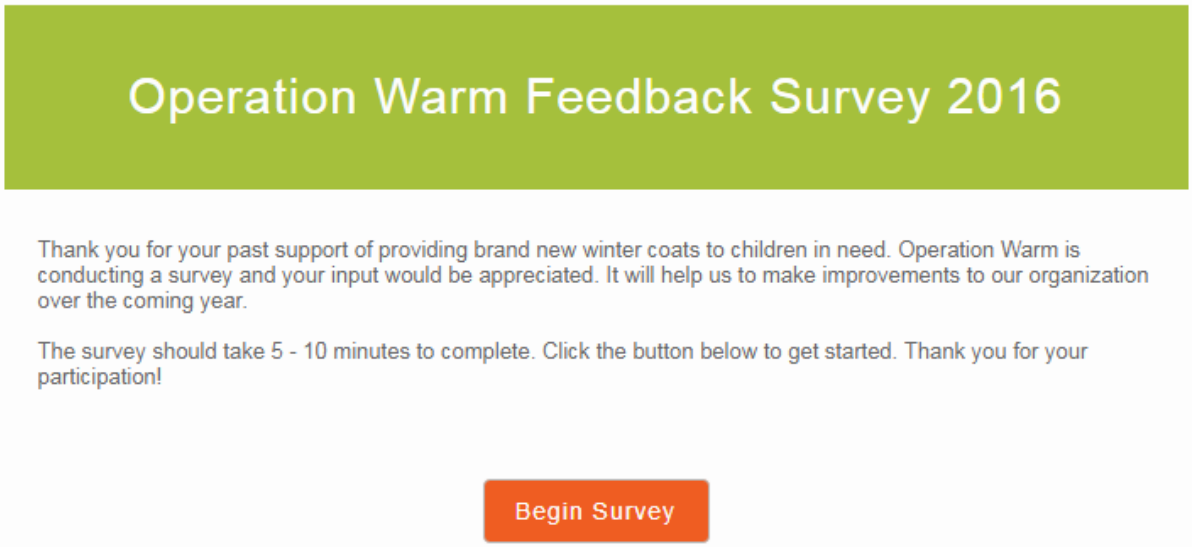


Figure 9: Survey request "It will help us to make improvements to our organization over the coming year" emailed by Operation Warm

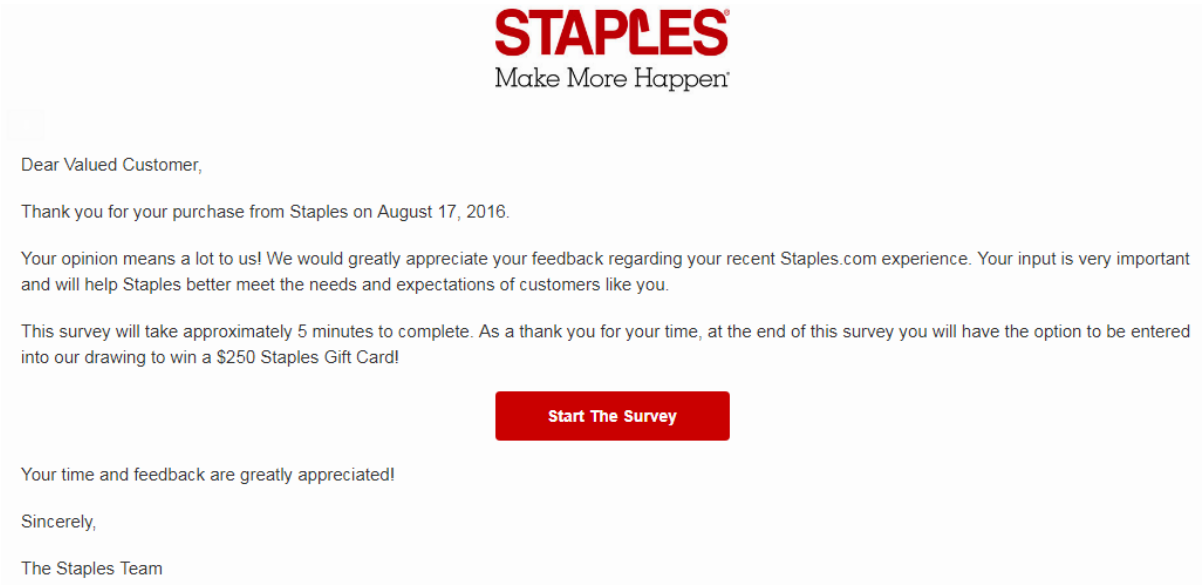


Figure 10: Survey request "As a thank you for your time, at the end of this survey you will have the option to be entered into our drawing to win a $250 Staples Gift Card" emailed by Staples

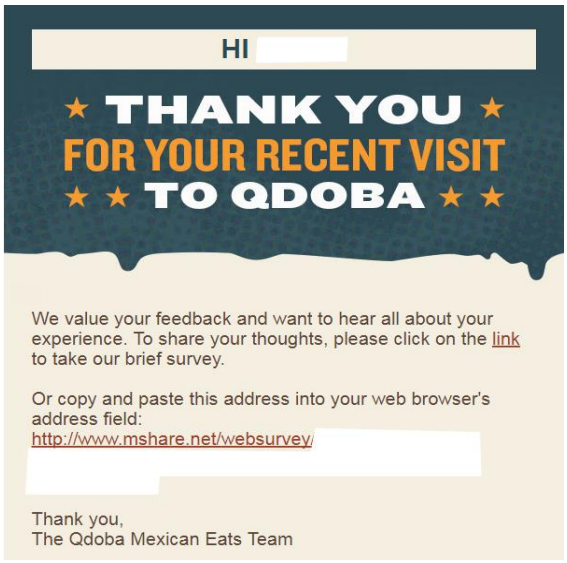


Figure 11: Customer survey request emailed by Qdoba

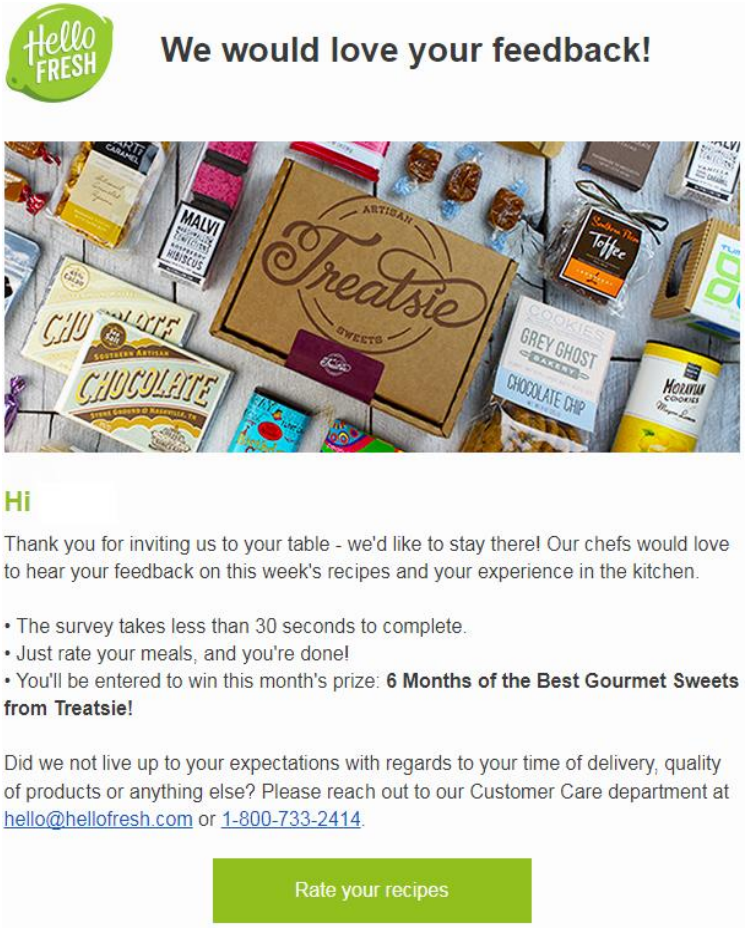


Figure 12: Survey request “Just rate your meals, and you’re done! You’ll be entered to win this month’s prize” emailed by Hello Fresh

REFERENCES

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations. *Gender & Society, 4*(2), 139-158.

Acker, J. (2006). Inequality Regimes: Gender, Class, and Race in Organizations. *Gender & Society, 20*(4), 441-464.

Acker, J. (2012). Gendered organizations and intersectionality: problems and possibilities. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, 31*(3), 214-224.

Addady, M. (2016, September 13). This controversial business practice may soon be outlawed. *Fortune*. Retrieved October 10, 2017, from http://fortune.com/2016/09/13/consumer-review-fairness-act/

Adib, A., & Guerrier, Y. (2003). The interlocking of gender with nationality, race, ethnicity and class: The narratives of women in hotel work. *Gender, Work and Organization, 10*(4), 413-432.

Allen, B. J. (2011). *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (2 ed.). University of Colorado at Denver: Waveland Press, Inc.

Alvesson, M., & Deetz, S. (2000). *Doing critical management research*. London: Sage.

Andrejevic, M. (2002). The work of being watched: interactive media and the exploitation of self-disclosure. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 19(2), 230-248.

Andrejevic, M. (2005). The work of watching one another: Lateral surveillance, risk, and governance. *Surveillance & Society*, 2(4), 479-497.

Andrejevic, M. (2007). Surveillance in the Digital Enclosure. *The Communication Review, 10*(4), 295-317.

Ashcraft, K. L. (2006). Back to Work: Sights/Sites of Difference in Gender and Organizational Communication Studies *The Sage Handbook of Gender and Communication* (pp. 97-122). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Ashcraft, K. L. (2011). Knowing Work Through the Communication of Difference: A Revised Agenda for Difference Studies. 3-29.

Ashcraft, K. L., & Mumby, D. K. (2004a). A Feminist Communicology of Organization *Reworking Gender: A Feminist Communicology of Organization* (pp. 111-130). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Ashcraft, K. L., & Mumby, D. K. (2004b). Introduction: Situating Gender in Critical Organization Studies *Reworking Gender: A Feminist Communicology of Organization* (pp. xiii-xxx). Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Ashforth, B. E., & Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *The Academy of Management Review, 24*(3), 413-434.

Askay, D. A., & Gossett, L. (2015). Concealing communities within the crowd: Hiding organizational identities and brokering member identifications of the Yelp elite squad. *Management Communication Quarterly, 29*(4), 616-641.

Associated Press. (2017). Jury: Couple who defamed texas wedding photog must pay $1M. *Associated Press*. from https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/texas/articles/2017-08-01/jury-finds-unhappy-couple-defamed-texas-wedding-photographer

Ball, K., Daniel, E., Dibb, S., & Meadows, M. (2010). Democracy, Surveillance and "knowing what's good for you". In K. D. Haggerty & M. Samatas (Eds.), *Surveillance and Democracy* (pp. 111-126). New York, NY: Routledge.

Barley, S., & Kunda, G. (2001). Bringing work back in. *Organization Science, 12*(1), 76-95.

Bauer, R. M., & Gegenhuber, T. (2015). Crowdsourcing: Global search and the twisted roles of consumers and producers. *Organization, 22*(5), 661-681.

Beck, U. (2000). *The brave new world of work*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Beer, D. (2013). *Popular culture and new media: The politics of circulation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Beer, D. (2016). The social power of algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(1), 1-13.

Berkelaar, B. L. (2014). Cybervetting, online information, and personnel selection: New transparency expectations and the emergence of a digital social contract. *Management Communication Quarterly,* 28(4), 479-506.

Berkelaar, B. L., & Buzzanell, P. M. (2014). Online Employment Screening and Digital Career Capital: Exploring Employers' Use of Online Information for Personnel Selection. *Management Communication Quarterly, 29*(1), 84-113.

Berkelaar, B. L., Scacco, J. M., & Birdsell, J. L. (2014). The worker as politician: How online information and electoral heuristics shape personnel selection and careers. *New Media & Society, 17*(8), 1377-1396.

Berkelaar, B. L. (2016). How implicit theories help differentiate approaches to online impression management: A preliminary typology. *New Media & Society*, 146144481665413.

Bishop, V., & Hoel, H. (2008). The customer is always right?: Exploring the concept of customer bullying in the British Employment Service. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 8*(3), 341-367.

BoomTown. (2017). BoomTown Launch. *BoomTown*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://boomtownroi.com/launch/

Botsman, R. (2017). Big data meets Big Brother as China moves to rate its citizen. *Wired*. Retrieved November 4, 2017 from http://www.wired.co.uk/article/chinese-government-social-credit-score-privacy-invasion

BrightLocal. (2013). Local Consumer Review Survey 2013. *BrightLocal*. Retrieved 4-25-2015, from http://www.brightlocal.com/2013/06/25/local-consumer-review-survey-2013/

Brogan, C. (2010). *Trust Agents: Using the Web to Build Influence, Improve Reputation, and Earn Trust*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Brown, M. (2003). Survival at work: flexibility and adaptability in American corporate culture. *Cultural Studies, 17*(5), 713-733.

Bucher, T. (2016). The algorithmic imaginary: exploring the ordinary affects of Facebook algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(1), 30-44.

Buffini & Company. (2016). 8 real estate and marketing trends to embrace. *Buffini & Company*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://resources.buffiniandcompany.com/8-real-estate-tech-marketing-trends-to-embrace-in-2016/

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2015, December 17). Occupational Outlook Handbook: Real Estate Brokers and Sales Agents. *Bureau of Labor Statistics.* Retrieved September 27, 2017, from https://www.bls.gov/ooh/sales/real-estate-brokers-and-sales-agents.htm

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017a, March 31). Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2016. *Bureau of Labor Statistics.* Retrieved October 14, 2017, from https://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes419021.htm#st

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2017). Labor force statistics from the current population survey. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Retrieved October 6, 2017, from https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18.htm

Carlone, D. (2001). Enablement, constraint, and the 7 habits of highly effective people. *Management Communicaiton Quarterly, 14*(3), 491-497.

Carter, M. (2010, December 2). Zillow launches agent ratings. *Inman.* Retrieved September 19, 2017, from https://www.inman.com/2010/12/02/zillow-launches-agent-ratings/

CBS News. (2012, December 6). Contractor suing homeowner over negative Yelp, Angie's List reviews. *CBS News.* Retrieved March 1, 2017, from http://www.cbsnews.com/news/contractor-suing-homeowner-over-negative-yelp-angies-list-reviews/

CBS News. (2016, February 19). Pet sitting business bites back after getting bad Yelp review. *CBS News.* Retrieved October 11, 2017, from https://www.cbsnews.com/news/yelp-negative-online-review-texas-couple-sued-jeremy-stoppelman/

Chamlee, V. (2016, July 26). Yelp is warning users about businesses that sue over bad reviews: Consumers have a "right to Yelp". *Eater.* Retrieved October 10, 2017, from https://www.eater.com/2016/7/26/12286430/yelp-consumer-alert-lawsuits

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory*. London: Sage Publications.

Cheney, G., & Lee Ashcraft, K. (2007). Considering "The Professional" in communication studies: Implications for theory and research within and beyond the boundaries of organizational communication. *Communication Theory, 17*(2), 146-175.

Cheney, G., & Cloud, D. L. (2006). Doing democracy, engaging the material: Employee participation and labor activity in an age of market globalization. *Management Communication Quarterly, 19*(4), 501-540.

Christie, L. (2014). 10 Fastest Growing Cities. *CNN Money.* Retrieved 3-13-2015, from http://money.cnn.com/gallery/real_estate/2014/03/27/fastest-growing-cities/index.html

Clair, R. P. (1996). The political nature of the colloquialism, "a real job": Implications for organizational socialization. *Communication Monographs*, 63(3), 249-267.

Clemons, E. K., Gao, G., & Hitt, L. M. (2006). When online reviews meet hyperdifferentiation: A study of the craft been industry. *Journal of Management Information Systems, 23*(2), 149-171.

Cole, E. (2009). Intersectionality and research in psychology. *American Psychologist, 64*(3), 170-180.

Cornelissen, J. P., & Werner, M. D. (2014). Putting framing in perspective: A review of framing and frame analysis across the management and organizational literature. *The Academy of Management Annals, 8*(1), 181-235.

Cornett, B. (2015, September 10). Home Prices Hit Peaks in Denver, Raleigh, Nashville and Other 6 Markets. *Home Buying Institute*. Retrieved September 11, 2015, from http://www.homebuyinginstitute.com/news/home-prices-hit-new-peaks-671/#ixzz3lQItD7wg

Costea, B., Crump, N., & Amiridis, K. (2008). Managerialism, the therapeutic habitus and the self in contemporary organizing. *Human Relations, 61*(5), 661-685.

Cova, B., Pace, S., & Skålén, P. (2015). Marketing with working consumers: The case of a carmaker and its brand community. *Organization, 22*(5), 682-701.

Crenshaw, K. W. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*, 1241-1299.

Deery, S., Iverson, R., & Walsh, J. (2002). Work relationships in telephone call centres: Understanding emotional exhaustion and employee withdrawal. *Journal of Management Studies, 39*(4), 471-496.

Deetz, S. (1992). *Democracy in an Age of Corporate Colonization: Developments in Communication and the Politics of Everyday Life*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Dellarocas, C. (2003). The digitization of word of mouth: Promise and challenges of online feedback mechanisms. *Management Science, 49*(10), 1407-1424.

DeMers, J. (2015). *How important are customer reviews for online marketing?* Retrieved from http://www.forbes.com/sites/jaysondemers/2015/12/28/how-important-are-customer-reviews-for-online-marketing/#76c409a5788c

Dempsey, S. E., & Sanders, M. L. (2010). Meaningful work? Nonprofit marketization and work/ life imbalance in popular autobiographies of social entrepreneurship. *Organization, 17*(4), 437-459.

Dempsey, S. E., Parker, P. S., & Krone, K. J. (2011). Navigating Socio-Spatial Difference, Constructing Counter-Space: Insights from Transnational Feminist Praxis. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 4*(3), 201-220.

Duffy, M. (2007). Doing the dirty work: Gender, race, and reproductive labor in historical perspective. *Gender & Society*, 21(3), 313-336.

du Gay, P. (1996). *Consumption and identity at work*. London: Sage.

Eberhart, T. & Carr, M. (2016, October). An Easier Way to Get the Reviews You Want. *Realtor Magazine*. Retrieved October 14, 2017, from http://realtormag.realtor.org/sales-and-marketing/relationship-management/article/2016/10/easier-way-get-reviews-you-want

Ellerbrok, A. (2010). Empowerment: Analysing technologies of multiple variable visibility. *Surveillance & Society, 8*(2), 200-220.

Elsbach, K. D., & Bhattacharya, C. B. (2001). Defining who you are by what you're not: Organizational disidentification and The National Rifle Association. *Organization Science, 12*(4), 393-413.

Espeland, W. N., & Sauder, M. (2007). Rankings and reactivity: How public measures recreate social worlds. *American Journal of Sociology, 113*(1), 1-40.

Federal Trade Commission. (2017, February) Consumer Review Fairness Act: What businesses need to know. *Federal Trade Commission*. Retrieved October 11, 2017, from https://www.ftc.gov/tips-advice/business-center/guidance/consumer-review-fairness-act-what-businesses-need-know

Fenstermaker, S., & West, C. (Eds.). (2002). *Doing Gender, Doing Difference: Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Ferry, T. (2014). 87% of all agents fail in real estate. *Tom Ferry International.* from http://www.tomferry.com/blog/87-of-all-agents-fail-in-real-estate/

Fleming, P. (2009). *Authenticity and the cultural politics of work: New forms of informal control.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fleming, P. (2013). When 'life itself' goes to work: Reviewing shifts in organizational life through the lens of biopower. *Human Relations, 67*(7), 875-901.

Fleming, P. (2014). *Resisting work: The corporatization of life and its discontents.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Fleming, P., & Spicer, A. (2003). Working at a cynical distance: Implications for power, subjectivity, and resistance. *Organization*, 10, 157-179.

Fleming, P., & Sturdy, A. (2011). 'Being yourself ' in the electronic sweatshop: New forms of normative control. *Human Relations, 64*(2), 177-200.

Fogde, M. (2011). Governing through career coaching: negotiations of self-marketing. *Organization, 18*(1), 65-82.

Fontenelle, I. A. (2015). Organisations as producers of consumers. *Organization*, *22*(5), 644-660.

Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Freeman, C. (2000). *High Tech and High Heels In the Global Economy: Women, Work, and Pink-Collar Identities in the Caribbean*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Fuller, L., & Smith, V. (1996). Consumers' Reports: Management by Customers in a Changing Economy. In C. L. Macdonald & C. Sirianni (Eds.), *Working in the Service Society*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Gabriel, Y. (2005). Glass cages and glass palaces: Images of organization in image-conscious times. *Organization, 12*(1), 9-27.

Gabriel, Y. (2008). Spectacles of Resistance and Resistance of Spectacles. *Management Communication Quarterly, 21*(3), 310-326.

Gabriel, Y., Korczynski, M., & Rieder, K. (2015). Organizations and their consumers: Bridging work and consumption. *Organization, 22*(5), 629-643.

Gandini, A. (2015). Digital work: Self-branding and social capital in the freelance knowledge economy. *Marketing Theory, 16*(1), 123-141.

Gershon, I. (2016). "I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man": Typing the neoliberal self into a branded existence. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory, 6*(3), 223-246.

Gesenhues, A. (2013, April 9). 90% Of Customers Say Buying Decisions Are Influenced By Online Reviews. *Marketing Land*. Retrieved October 15 2017, from http://marketingland.com/survey-customers-more-frustrated-by-how-long-it-takes-to-resolve-a-customer-service-issue-than-the-resolution-38756

Ghose, A., Panagiotis, I., & Beibei, L. (2012). Designing ranking systems for hotels on travel search engines by mining user-generated and crowdsourced content. *Marketing Science, 31*(3), 493-520.

Gill, R., & Pratt, A. (2008). In the Social Factory?: Immaterial Labour, Precariousness and Cultural Work. *Theory, Culture & Society, 25*(7-8), 1-30.

Gillespie, T. (2012). Can an Algorithm Be Wrong? *Limn, 1*(2).

Gillespie, T. (2014). The relevance of algorithms. In T. Gillespie, P. J. Boczkowski & K. A. Foot (Eds.), *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*. (pp. 167-193). Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Gobe, M. (2001). *Emotion branding: The new paradigm for connecting brands to people*. New York: Allworth Press.

Gossett, L. M. (2006). Falling between the Cracks. *Management Communication Quarterly, 19*(3), 376-415.

Gregg, M. (2011). *Work's intimacy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Greene, J. (2015, April 8). Amazon sues to block fake reviews on its site. *The Seattle Times*. Retrieved October 11, 2017, from https://www.seattletimes.com/business/amazon/amazon-sues-to-block-fake-reviews-on-its-site/

Guidroz, K., & Berger, M. T. (2009). A Conversation with Founding Scholars of Intersectionality: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Michelle Fine. In M. T. Berger & K. Guidroz (Eds.), *The Intersectional Appraoch: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class and Gender* (pp. 61-78). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Haggerty, D., Richard, V., & Ericson, K. (2000). The surveillant assemblage. *British Journal of Sociology,* 51(4), 605-622.

Hansen, H. K., & Flyverbom, M. (2014). The politics of transparency and the calibration of knowledge in the digital age. *Organization, 22*(6), 872-889.

Harmon, E. (2016, December 21). President signs law protecting your right to review. *Electronic Frontier Foundation*. Retrieved October 10, 2017, from https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2016/12/president-signs-law-protecting-right-review

Hallinan, B., & Striphas, T. (2016). Redommended for you: The Netflix Prize and the production of algorithmic culture. *New Media & Society, 18*(1), 117-137.

Harney, K. R. (2017, May 10). Zillow faces lawsuit over 'Zestimate' tool that calculates a house's worth. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/realestate/zillow-faces-lawsuit-over-zestimate-tool-that-calculates-a-houses-worth/2017/05/09/b22d0318-3410-11e7-b4ee-434b6d506b37_story.html?utm_term=.081a98ec1744

Hearn, A. (2010). Structuring feeling: Web 2.0, online ranking and rating, and the digital 'reputation' economy. *ephemera, 10*(3/4), 421-438.

Hennig-Thurau, T., Gwinner, K. P., Walsh, G., & Gremler, D. D. (2004). Electronic word-of-mouth via consumer-opinion platforms: What motivates consumers to articulate themselves on the Internet?. *Journal of Interactive Marketing, 18*(1), 38-52.

Hochschild, A. (2000). *The time bind: When work becomes home and home becomes work.* New York, New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Hochschild, A. (2012). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (3 ed.). California: University of California Press.

Hornstein, J. M. (2005). *A Nation of Realtors: A Cultural History of the Twentieth-Century American Middle Class*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

House, J. D. (1977). *Contemporary Entrepreneurs: The Sociology of Residential Real Estate Agents*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc.

Investopedia. (2013, January 25). Can you be sued if you give a bad review on Yelp? *Forbes*. Retrieved October 10, 2017, from https://www.forbes.com/sites/investopedia/2013/01/25/can-you-be-sued-if-you-give-a-bad-review-on-yelp/#4650fc6a1275

Jouvenal, J. (2012). Virginia woman is sued over her Yelp review. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved October 11, 2017, from https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/crime/2012/12/04/1cdfa582-3978-11e2-a263-f0ebffed2f15_print.html

Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious Work, Insecure Workers: Employment Relations in Transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), 1-22.

Kalleberg, A. L. (2011). *Good Jobs Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s to 2000s*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Kirchner, J. (2016, November 30). Realtor.com® 2017 national housing forecast. *Realtor.com* Retrieved September 29, 2017, from https://research.realtor.com/2017-national-housing-forecast/

Kitchin, R. (2016). Thinking critically about and researching algorithms. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(1), 14-29.

Kitchin, R., & Dodge, M. (2011). *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life*. Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Korczynski, M. (2001). The contradictions of service work: Call centre as customer-oriented bureaucracy. In A. Sturdy, I. Grugulis & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. (pp. 79-101). Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Korczynski, M. (2005). The point of selling: Capitalism, consumption and contradictions. *Organization*, 12(1), 69-88.

Korczynski, M., & Ott, U. (2004). When production and consumption meet: Cultural contradictions and the enchanting myth of customer sovereignty. *Journal of Management Studies, 41*(4), 576–599.

Kreiner, G. E., & Ashforth, B. E. (2004). Evidence toward an expanded model of organizational identification. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 25*(1), 1-27.

Kuehn, K. M. (2015). Brand local: Consumer evaluations as commodity activism on Yelp.com. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 146954051558686.

Kuehn, K. M. (2016). Branding the self on Yelp: Consumer reviewing as image entrepreneurship. *Social Media + Society, 2*(4).

Kunda, G., Barley, S. R., & Evans, J. (2002). Why do contractors contract? The experience of highly skilled technical professionals in a contingent labor market. *Industrial and Labor Relations Review, 55*(2), 234-261.

Kuhn, T. (2017). Developing a communicative imagination under contemporary capitalism. *Management Communication Quarterly, 31*(1), 116-122.

Lair, D. J. (2011). Surviving the corporate jungle: The apprenticeas equipment for living in the contemporary work world. *Western Journal of Communication, 75*(1), 75-94.

Lair, D. J., Sullivan, K., & Cheney, G. (2005). Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: The rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. *Management Communication Quarterly, 18*(3), 307-343.

Land, C., & Taylor, S. (2010). Surf 's Up: Work, Life, Balance and Brand in a New Age Capitalist Organization. Sociology, 44(3), 395-413.

Leidner, R. (1991). Serving hambergers and selling insurance: Gender, work, and identity in interactive service jobs. *Gender & Society, 5*(2), 154-177.

Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food and fast talk: Service work and the routinization of everyday life*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.

Leidner, R. (1996). Rethinking questions of control. In C. Macdonald & C. Sirianni (Eds.), *Working in the service economy* (pp. 29-49). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Leidner, R. (1999). Emotional Labor in Service Work. In R. Steinberg & D. Figart (Eds.), Emotional labor in the service economy. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (pp. 81-95). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lenglet, M. (2011). Conflicting codes and codings: How algorithmic trading is reshaping financial regulation. Theory, Culture & Society, 28(6), 44–66.

Lindlof, T., & Taylor, B. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Luca, M., & Zervas, G. (2016). Fake it till you make it: Reputation, competition, and yelp review fraud. *Management Science, ePub ahead of print January 28*.

Macdonald, C. L., & Sirianni, C. (Eds.). (1996). *Working in the Service Society*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Miles, D. (2015, September 23). Woman sued $1,000 for negative Yelp review. *ABC7NY* Retrieved October 11, 2017, from http://abc7ny.com/news/woman-sued-$1000-for-negative-yelp-review/998800/

Mills, P., & Morris, J. H. (1986). Clients as 'Partial' employees of service organizations: Role development in client participation. *Academy of Management Review*, 11(4), 726-735.

Monahan, T. (2011). Surveillance as cultural practice. *The Sociological Quarterly, 52*, 495-508.

Monahan, T., & Fisher, J. A. (2015). Strategies for obtaining access to secretive or guarded organizations. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 44*(6), 709-736.

Moore, P. (2017, March 12). Create a Free Agent Profile in 7 Easy Steps. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/create-a-free-agent-profile/

Moore, P. (2015, May 4). Getting reviews from clients: Top keys to success. *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2016, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/getting-reviews-from-clients/

Mukherjee, R., & Banet-Weiser, S. (Eds.). (2012). *Commodity activism: Cultural resistance in neoliberal times*. New York: New York University Press.

Mumby, D. K. (2011). *Reframing Difference in Organizational Communication Studies: Research, Pedagogy, Practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Mumby, D. K. (2016). Organizing beyond organization: Branding, discourse, and communicative capitalism. *Organization, 23*(6), 884-907.

Murphy, D. (2017, January 9). How Successful Has The Zillow Premier Agent Program Been For You?. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 17, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/advice-thread/How-Successful-Has-The-Zillow-Premier-Agent-Program-Been-For-You/470910/

Nadesan, M., & Trethewey, A. (2000). Performing the enterprising subject: Gendered strategies for success (?). *Text and Performance Quarterly, 20*(3), 223-250.

National Association of Realtors. (2016, June 3) REALTOR® profession experiencing shifts in demographics. *National Association of Realtors.* Retrieved October 2, 2017, from https://www.nar.realtor/newsroom/real-estate-story-ideas/realtor-profession-experiencing-shifts-in-demographics

National Association of Realtors. (2017a). About NAR. *National Association of Realtors*. Retrieved September 21, 2017, from https://www.nar.realtor/about-nar

National Association of Realtors. (2017b, May 1). Field guide to quick real estate statistics. *National Assocation of Realtors*. Retrieved September 29, 2017, from https://www.nar.realtor/field-guides/field-guide-to-quick-real-estate-statistics

National Association of Realtors. (2017c). Member profile. *National Association of Realtors*. Retrieved September 27, 2017, from https://www.nar.realtor/reports/member-profile

Neff, G. (2012). *Venture labor: Work and the burden of risk in innovative industries*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Nelson, R. (2014, November 26). How do I know if an agent review on Zillow is real? *Zillow*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/advice-thread/How-do-I-know-if-an-agent-review-on-Zillow-is-real/560648/

Nelson, T. (2016, April 5). Take It Back! (From Zillow). *Active Rain*. Retrieved October 16, 2017, from http://activerain.com/blogsview/4862424/take-it-back---from-zillow-

N.C. Office of State Budget and Management. Annual North Carolina population growth. (N.D.). *N.C. Office of State Budget and Management* Retrieved September 29, 2017, from https://www.osbm.nc.gov/facts-figures/annual-north-carolina-population-growth

NC Realtors. (2017). At a glance. NC Realtors. Retrieved September 29, 2017, from http://www.ncrealtors.org/at-a-glance-about-us-consumers-menu.html

North Carolina Real Estate Commission. (2013) Working with real estate agents. *North Carolina Real Estate Commission.* Retrieved September 28, 2017, from http://www.ncrec.gov/Brochures/HTML/WorkingWith.html

North Carolina Real Estate Commission. (2014, June 1). Questions and Answers on: Fair housing. North *Carolina Real Estate Commission.* Retrieved October 14, 2017, from http://www.ncrec.gov/Brochures/Print/FairHousing.pdf

North Carolina Real Estate Commission. (2016). Continuing education course schedule. *North Carolina Real Estate Commission.* Retrieved September 28, 2017, from http://www.members-base.com/ncrec/oecgi3.exe/O4W_CE_CRSE_RPT

North Carolina Real Estate Commission. (2017a). General FAQ's. *North Carolina Real Estate Commission.* Retrieved September 28, 2017, from https://www.ncrec.gov/Resources/Faq

North Carolina Real Estate Commission. (2017b). Licensing FAQ's. *North Carolina Real Estate Commission.* Retrieved September 27, 2017, from https://www.ncrec.gov/Licensing/Licensingfaq

North Carolina Real Estate Commission. (2017c). Real estate licensing in North Carolina. *North Carolina Real Estate Commission*. Retrieved September 28, 2017, from https://www.ncrec.gov/Brochures/general.pdf#page=14

Parker, P. S. (2001). African American women executives' leadership communication within dominant-culture organizations: (Re)conceptualizing notions of collaboration and instrumentality. *Management Communication Quarterly, 15*(1), 42-82.

Parker, P. S., Jiang, J., McCluney, C., L., & Rabelo, V. C. (2017). Race, gender, class, and sexuality. In J. Nussbaum (Ed.), Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication. New York: Oxford University Press.

Power, M., Scheytt, T., Soin, K., & Sahlin, K. (2009). Reputational risk as a logic of organizing in late modernity. *Organization Studies, 30*(2-3), 301-324.

Putnam, L. L., Jahn, J., & Baker, J. S. (2011). Intersecting Difference: A Dialectical Perspective. 31-54.

Raleigh Regional Association of Realtors. (2017). Top producers council. *Raleigh Regional Association of Realtors.* Retrieved September 29, 2017, from https://www.rrar.com/association-services.cfm/s/144/page/370

Rice, R. E., & Leonardi, P. M. (2014). Information and communication technologies in organizations. In L. Putnam & D. Mumby (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational communication: advances in theory, research, and methods* (3 ed., pp. 425-448). Los Angeles: Sage.

Rieder, B. (2016). Scrutinizing an algorithmic technique: the Bayes classifier as interested reading of reality. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(1), 100-117.

Riley, Mike. (2016, January). Buffini & Company announces "Brian Buffini's Success Tour™" 2016 schedule. *Buffini & Company*. Retrieved September 13, 2017, from https://press.buffiniandcompany.com/buffini-company-announces-brian-buffinis-success-tour-2016-schedule-2/

Ritzer, G. (2013). Predictability and Control. *The McDonaldization of Society* (pp. 87-122). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Ritzer, G., & Jurgenson, N. (2010). Production, consumption, prosumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital 'prosumer'. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 10*(1), 13-36.

Ritzer, G., & Stillman, T. (2001). From Person- to System-Oriented Service. In A. Sturdy, I. Grugulis & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Robbers, N. (2015, February 10). Zillow passes 1 million reviews. *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/industry-news/zillow-passes-1-million-reviews/

Robbers, N. (2016, March 1). Why consumers prefer to connect with agents on Zillow and Trulia. *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2016, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/consumers-connect-on-zillow-trulia/

Robbers, N. (2017, May 17). Rewarding reviewers: How to show appreciation to your clients. *Zillow*. Retrieved September 19, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/rewarding-reviewers/

Rodriguez, J. K., Holvino, E., Fletcher, J. K., & Nkomo, S. M. (2016). The theory and praxis of intersectionality in work and organisations: Where do we go from here? *Gender, Work & Organization, 23*(3), 201-222.

Ross, A. (2003). Refugees from utopia: No-collar workers and the electronic sweatshop. *New Labor Forum, 12*(2), 96-103.

Ross, A. (2009). *Nice work if you can get it*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Rouvroy, A. (2011). Technology, virtuality, and utopia: Governmentality in an age of autonomic computing. In M. Hildebrandt & A. Rouvroy (Eds.), *Law, human agency, and autonomic computing: The philosophy of law meets the philosophy of technology* (pp. 119-140). New York, NY: Routledge.

Sauder, M., & Espeland, W. N. (2009). The discipline of rankings: Tight coupling and organizational change. *American Sociological Review, 74*, 63-82.

Shankman, P. (2011). *Customer Service: New Rules for a Social Media World*. Indianapolis, IN: Pearson Education, Inc.

Shore, J. (2016). How to #BeTheHero in your customer's story. *Shore Consulting, Inc.* Retrieved June 21, 2017, from http://jeffshore.com/2016/04/how-to-bethehero-in-your-customers-story/

Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2015). Governing by numbers: audit culture, rankings and the new world order. *Social Anthropology, 23*(1), 22-28.

Sperber, J. (2014). Yelp and labor discipline: How the internet works for capitalism. *New Labor Forum, 23*(2), 68-74.

Sturdy, A. (2001). Servicing societies? Colonisation, control, contradiction and contestation. In A. Sturdy, I. Grugulis & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. (pp. 1-17) Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Sturdy, A., Grugulis, I., & Willmott, H. (Eds.). (2001). *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Tagrin, T. (2014, August 28). 5 predictions about the growing power of online customer reviews. *Entrepreneur.com*. Retrieved October 15 2017, from https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/236891

Taft, R. (2017). 5 Ways to Win Over Your Mean, Nasty & Crazy Customers. *Shore Consulting, Inc.* Retrieved June 20, 2017, from http://jeffshore.com/2017/04/5-ways-win-mean-nasty-crazy-customers/

Terranova, T. (2004). *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. London: Pluto Press.

The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. (2016). *Statement by the Press Secretary on H.R. 3471, H.R. 4419, H.R. 5111, H.R. 5509, H.R. 5995, S. 795, S. 817, S. 818, S. 1550, S. 1555, S. 1632, S. 1808, S. 1915, S. 2234, S. 2873, S. 2974, S. 3028, S. 3076, S. 3183, S. 3395, S. 3492*. Retrieved from https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/12/15/statement-press-secretary-hr-3471-hr-4419-hr-5111-hr-5509-hr-5995-s-795

Thompson, J. (2013, November 4). Why reviews (sometimes) get rejected. *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/why-reviews-sometimes-get-rejected/

Thompson, J. (2014a, January 7). Agent reviews: Not just for closed transactions. *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2016, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/agent-reviews-closed-transactions/

Thompson, J. (2014b, May 21). Rea estate agent reviews: What are clients looking for? *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/real-estate-agent-reviews/

Thompson, J. (2014c, November 4). Zillow to launch Zillow Tech Connect: Reviews. *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/industry-news/zillow-tech-connect-reviews/

Thompson, J. (2017, May 19). Real estate agent reviews: 19 tips to get more. *Zillow*. Retrieved September 19, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/trends-and-data/tips-and-advice/real-estate-agent-reviews-19-tips/

Tippett, R. (2016, June 28). NC in focus: Growth rate of southern states, 2010-2015. *Carolina Population Center*. Retrieved September 29, 2017, from http://demography.cpc.unc.edu/2016/06/28/nc-in-focus-growth-rate-of-southern-states-2010-2015/

Tracy, S. J. (2000). Becoming a character for commerce: Emotion labor, self-subordination, and discursive construction of identity in a total institution. *Management Communication Quarterly, 14*(1), 90-128.

Tracy, S. J. (2005). Locking up emotion: Moving beyond dissonance for understanding emotion labor discomfort. *Communication Monographs*, 72(3), 261-283.

Tracy, S. J., & Trethewey, A. (2005). Fracturing the real-self↔fake-self dichotomy: Moving toward "Crystallized" organizational discourses and identities. *Communication Theory, 15*(2), 168–195.

Tracy, S. J. (2013). *Qualitative research methods: Collecting evidence, crafting analysis, communicating impact*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.

Trenz, M., & Berger, B. (2013). Analyzing online customer reviews - An interdisciplinary literature review and research agenda. *ECIS 2013 Completed Research, Paper 83*.

Trethewey, A. (1997). Resistance, identity, and empowerment: A postmodern feminist analysis of clients in a human service organization. *Communication Monographs*, 64(4), 281-301.

Trethewey, A. (1999). Disciplined Bodies: Women's Embodied Identities at Work. *Organization Studies, 20*(3), 423-450.

Trethewey, A., Scott, C., & LeGreco, M. (2006). Constructing embodied organizational identities. In B. J. Dow & J. T. Wood (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of gender and communication* (pp. 123-141). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Turner, P. K., & Krizek, R. L. (2006). A meaning-centered approach to customer satisfaction. *Management Communicaiton Quarterly, 20*(2), 115-147.

Tuttle, B. (2015, October 19). Amazon lawsuit shows that fake online reviews are a big problem. *Time*. Retrieved October 11, 2017, from http://time.com/money/4078632/amazon-fake-online-reviews/

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2007, September 25). Title VIII: Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity. *U.S. Department of Housing and Urban*

Development. Retrieved October 7, 2017, from https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/fair_housing_equal_opp/progdesc/title8

U.S. News & World Report. 100 best places to live in the USA. (2017). *U.S. News & World Report.* Retrieved September 29, 2017, from https://realestate.usnews.com/places/rankings/best-places-to-live

Vallas, S. P., & Cummins, E. R. (2015). Personal branding and identity norms in the popular business press: Enterprise culture in an age of precarity. *Organization Studies, 36*(3), 293-319.

Van Ogtrop, K. (2016, May 19). Don't Make Me Rate You. *Time, Inc.* Retrieved June 1, 2016, from http://time.com/4341388/dont-make-me-rate-you/

Vaynerchuk, G. (2011). *The Thank You Economy*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Weber, M. (1930) *The protestant work ethic and the spirit of capitalism.* (T. Parsons, trans.) New York, NY: Scribner's.

Wharton, C. S. (1996). Making people feel good: Workers' constructions of meaning in interactive service jobs. *Qualitative Sociology, 19*(2), 217-233.

Willmott, H. (2010). Creating 'value' beyond the point of production: branding, financialization and market capitalization. *Organization, 17*(5), 517-542.

Willmott, H. (2011). Considering the 'big picture': Branding in processes of financialization and market capitalization. In M. Brannan, E. Parsons & V. Priola (Eds.), *Branded lives: The production and consumption of meaning at work.* Northhampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc.

Willson, M. (2016). Algorithms (and the) everyday. *Information, Communication & Society, 20*(1), 137-150.

Winner, L. (1980). Do Artifacts Have Politics? *Daedalus, 109*(1), 121-136.

Wray-Bliss, E. (2001). Representing Customer Service: Telephones and Texts. In A. Sturdy, I. Grugulis & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Customer Service: Empowerment and Entrapment*. Palgrave, Basingstoke, UK: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.

Yang, Z., & Fang, X. (2004). Online service quality dimensions and their relationships with satisfaction: A content analysis of customer reviews of securities brokerage services. *International Journal of Service Industry Management, 15*(3), 302-326.

Zendesk. (2017). The good, the bad, and the ugly: the impact of customer service. *Zendesk*. Retrieved October 15 2017, from https://www.zendesk.com/resources/the-impact-of-customer-service

Zhang, J. Q., Craciun, G., & Shin, D. (2010). When does electronic word-of-mouth matter? A study of consumer product reviews. *Journal of Business Research, 63*(12), 1336-1341.

Zhang, Z., Ye, Q., Law, R., & Li, Y. (2010). The impact of e-word-of-mouth on the online popularity of restaurants: A comparison of consumer reviews and editor reviews. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 29*(4), 694-700.

Zillow. (2014). Agent reviews and ratings FAQ. *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/wikipages/Agent-Reviews-and-Ratings-FAQ/

Zillow. (2016). Review guidelines. *Zillow*. Retrieved July 14, 2016, from https://www.zillow.com/wikipages/Review-Guidelines/

Zillow. (2017a). Build a competitive profile. *Zillow*. Retrieved September 20, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/training/premier-agent-101/build-competitive-profile/

Zillow. (2017b). Scripts: Asking clients for reviews. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/download/scripts-ask-client-review/

Zillow. (2017c). What is Zillow. *Zillow*. Retrieved September 20, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/corp/About.htm

Zillow. (2017d). Zestimate. *Zillow*. Retrieved September 20, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/zestimate/

Zillow. (N.D.-a). 10 ways to get more reviews. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/download/10-ways-to-get-more-reviews/

Zillow. (N.D.-b). Free Download: Professional Bio Template. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 17, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/agent-resources/download/professional-biography-template/

Zillow. (N.D.-c). Good neighbor policy. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/howto/GoodNeighborPolicy.htm

Zillow. (N.D.-d). How can I add Past Sales to my Zillow profile?. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 17, 2017, from https://zillow.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/227824027-How-can-I-add-Past-Sales-to-my-Zillow-profile-

Zillow. (N.D.-e). How can I request a review from a client? *Zillow*. Retrieved May 18, 2017, from https://zillow.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/228449828-How-can-I-request-a-review-from-a-client-

Zillow. (N.D.-f). How do I manually claim my listing?. *Zillow.* Retrieved October 17, 2017, from https://zillow.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/228189167-How-do-I-manually-claim-my-listing-

Zillow. (N.D.-g). How does Zillow get listings?. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 17, 2017, from https://zillow.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/227960468-How-does-Zillow-get-listings-

Zillow. (N.D.-h). Premier Agent Frequently Asked Questions. *Zillow*. Retrieved October 15, 2017, from https://www.zillow.com/advertising/frequently-asked-questions.htm

Zillow. (N.D.-i). What is Zillow's policy on reviews? *Zillow*. Retrieved July 14, 2016, from https://zillow.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/202105914-What-is-Zillow-s-policy-on-reviews-

Zillow. (N.D.-k). Why is my listing missing from Zillow?. *Zillow.* Retrieved October 17, 2017, from https://zillow.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/228010168-Why-is-my-listing-missing-from-Zillow-

Zoller, H. (2014). Power and Resistance in Organizational Communication. In L. Putnam & D. Mumby (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of organizational communication: advances in theory, research, and methods* (3 ed., pp. 595-618). Los Angeles: Sage.

Zwick, D., Bonsu, S. K., & Darmody, A. (2008). Putting consumers to work: `Co-creation` and new marketing govern-mentality. *Journal of Consumer Culture, 8*(2), 163-196.