

Can the line cook speak: a critical discourse analysis of the voice and representation of Canadian restaurant staff during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, restaurateurs and wage-earning restaurant staff found themselves positioned as the focus of an immense amount of mainstream media attention. The restaurant industry has never been the recipient of such frequent and consistent coverage, yet scholars have yet to engage with the available media discourse critically. This research explores the mainstream media depiction of the restaurant industry and challenges journalistic practices prioritizing the voices and ideological perspectives of those atop the restaurant industry hierarchy. To demonstrate this phenomenon, I engaged in a critical discourse analysis of 55 published online news articles through the theoretical lens proposed by Gayatri Spivak. The sample was examined to demonstrate who was afforded the discursive space to utilize their voice and share their ideological disposition, as well as the ways in which the discursive voice found within the sample shaped a representation of wage-earning restaurant staff. The primary findings of this paper reveal that wage-earning restaurant staff within the selected sample were discursively silenced and needed to be provided with an adequate opportunity to share their experience of working in a customer-facing position throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Wage-earning restaurant staff were rarely afforded the opportunity to speak. Instead, they were spoken for. I argue throughout this paper that those atop the restaurant industry hierarchy craft the voice of wage-earning restaurant staff and that this phenomenon validates traditional restaurant industry hierarchical structures and reinforces hegemonic ideological perspectives. This study emphasizes the need for journalists to embrace the theoretical disposition of a standpoint theorist and strive to ensure that members of subordinated populations are not subject to the imposition of an inauthentic voice.

Keywords

voice, discourse analysis, restaurant, representation, silencing, standpoint theory, epistemic violence, hegemony



Introduction

The Covid-19 Pandemic served to impact workers in the hospitality industry dramatically. Many restaurant workers struggled financially due to being laid off during government-mandated closures and mentally as government restrictions and an increased workload imparted a heavy toll. Throughout this period, members of the hospitality industry found themselves positioned as the focus of a great deal of media attention. As the restaurant industry began to maintain some semblance of normalcy in their operations, discourse pertaining to labour shortages began to circulate in alternative media sources as many restaurants struggled to find adequate staff to fulfill day-to-day operations. Mainstream media has presented discourse which appears to serve as the antithesis to the narrative offered by alternative media sources, such as social media sites and small independent news sources, which problematized the work ethic of former, and current hospitality industry members and stipulated that they would rather receive government payouts rather than return to work.

Never has the restaurant industry been the recipient of such frequent and consistent media coverage, yet scholars have yet to critically engage with the available mainstream media discourse. The restaurant industry garners plenty of academic attention in economics, sociology, public health, and psychology, yet it is rarely highlighted as a discursive phenomenon. Because restaurant owners and employees were thrust into the forefront of public health discussions, an immense sample of media coverage is available for examination. A keyword search of the terms ‘restaurant’ and ‘Covid-19’ on the *ProQuest* database generates a sample of 11,758 Canadian newspaper articles. This sample of data provides an avenue to investigate relations of power as they pertain to the restaurant industry and how these relations serve to inform and regulate the lived experiences of those who work in the restaurant industry and the external perception of the industry itself. The objective of this study is to explore the mainstream media discourse on the hospitality industry throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to provide a holistic account of the discourse offered by mainstream news publications and demonstrate how prioritized voices serve to construct the perception of wage-earning hospitality staff.

My interest in the following research stems from my involvement in the hospitality industry as an employee and the experiences related to me through conversations with colleagues. My work in the restaurant industry continued during the Covid-19 pandemic as I worked part-time as a

restaurant server. This personal experience served to inform my research. However, it also fueled a biased perspective which I had to challenge throughout the research process constantly. Ultimately, my time working in the hospitality industry, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic, provided me with invaluable insights into the hospitality industry, which greatly aided and guided this research project.

Literature Review

Various academic studies prior to the Covid-19 pandemic have outlined employee dissatisfaction with the working conditions offered by the restaurant industry. Employees have expressed frustration with careless supervisors, the lack of provided employee benefits, low rates of pay, and poor treatment of employees perpetuated by their superiors (Young & Gavade, 2018). The restaurant industry is also perpetually plagued by instances of wage theft (Baum, et al., 2020), wherein wage-earning staff are underpaid, subject to illegal wage deductions, or have their tips stolen by members of upper management. It is documented that women must navigate sexual objectification and the consequences of the incessant male gaze (Szymanski & Feltman, 2014) and that people of colour often find themselves battling systemic industry-imposed barriers which segregate the workforce and impose hierarchical structures and inequality amongst wage-earning staff members (Revelle & Wilson, 2020). Wage-earning restaurant staff members work under heavy constraints and feel an immense lack of autonomy which often leads to occupational dissatisfaction (Fine, 2008). Employees often work long and ambiguous hours during both weekends and holidays while others are out engaging in enjoyable activities (Fine, 2008). It is extremely common for restaurant workers to sacrifice time with friends, family, and their community for the sake of their occupation (Fine, 2008).

Because the Covid-19 pandemic has propagated the most rapid global occupational disruption ever experienced, it seems imperative to examine the effects of these shifts among service workers (Malkawi et al., 2021). A holistic review of the academic literature pertaining to the working conditions of restaurants, both prior to and throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic, demonstrates that the working environment of restaurants is highly stressful, the conditions of labour are precarious, and the restaurant workers' experience of the unsavoury conditions of restaurant work has been amplified on account of the Covid-19 Pandemic (Baum, et al., 2020, Khawaja et al., 2021, Jones & Comfort, 2020, Fine, 2008, Rožman & Tominc, 2020). Restaurant

employees were placed in a position wherein if they wished to remain employed, they were required to navigate the typical stressors of the hospitality environment while also negotiating their fears and anxieties regarding the possibility of being infected by a virus which was poorly understood (Khawaja et., 2021).

Recent work completed by Lippert et al. (2021) found that 75 percent of workers who participated in restaurant labour during the pandemic experienced heightened concern for their health and personal well-being, and 50 percent of these workers also perceived it to be the case that their employers were willing to place their staff in harm's way should it lead to fiscal gains (Lippert et al., 2021). Wage-earning restaurant staff members also addressed that the continually shifting government-mandated legislation also increased their perceptions of anxiety (Lippert et al., 2021). Not only were they forced to navigate altered legislation, but they were also placed in a subjugated position such that they needed to comply with the ways in which the policies were implemented by their employers or find themselves subject to lost shifts or fired. Many of these workers mentioned the fact that various government-mandated restrictions were inconsistently enforced by their superiors (Lippert et al., 2021). The increased and prolonged levels of stress experienced by restaurant staff led to greater levels of anxiety, fear, detrimental impacts on both physical and mental health, and feelings of burnout (Lippert et al., 2021). Of the sixteen workers interviewed, half claimed that they could not cope with the stress levels caused by the conditions of their working environment (Lippert et al., 2021).

Davahli et al. (2020) conducted a systematic review of published studies of the hospitality industry throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. They found that research focused primarily on the economic hardship experienced by restaurant owners rather than investigating the impact of the pandemic on wage-earning hospitality staff members (Davahli et al., 2020). Academic papers were more than twice more likely to explore the economic impact of the pandemic on restaurants than they were to examine the lived experiences of staff members (Davahli et al., 2020). Overall, academic research has yet to explore the experiences of restaurant workers throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, nor have researchers engaged with the media representation of the hospitality industry. This study aims to examine mainstream media discourse to provide an account of who is permitted to share their perspective and how a hegemonic representation is serving to reinforce the imbalance of power between restaurant owners and wage-earning staff members.

Theoretical Framework

This study is informed by the theoretical frameworks proposed by Gayatri Spivak and Michel Foucault, specifically, Spivak's subaltern theory of voice and conception of epistemic violence and the Foucauldian tradition of recognizing silences as discourse. Spivak (1988), in her text, *Can the Subaltern Speak*, acknowledges the practices wherein dominant social groups participate in the subordination of the subaltern. The restriction of voice alters the ideological perspectives and undermines the experience of being of those unable to speak knowledge into existence (Spivak, 1988).

Spivak (1988) highlights the colonial practice of imposing homogenizing narratives upon the subaltern and claims this practice enables dominant members of society to construct a totalizing representation of those positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy (p.101). The act of restricting and subjugating the voice and epistemological position of marginalized populations, Spivak (1988) labels "epistemic violence" (p.102). One of the profound consequences of "epistemic violence" is the "disappearing" of subjugated knowledge at the hands of their oppressors (Spivak, 1988, p. 102). In the context of this paper, hierarchical structures are understood through the lens of a Marxist interpretation: dominant parties are those who own and control the means of production, and the "subaltern" (p. 102) are best understood as the proletariat: wage-earning employees.

The work of Michel Foucault also inspires the theoretical disposition of this paper. Critical discourse theory advances the notion that discursive silences play a foundational role in the formulation of discourse (Foucault, 1978). Statements and silences form a discourse that produces knowledge and power. There is no inherent distinction between what is and is not said; the stated and unstated work simultaneously produces discourse and thus reinforces structures of oppression and domination (Foucault, 1978).

I want to make a brief note regarding the use of theory and terminology. I am distinctly aware that there is a chasm of privilege separating Canadian restaurant workers and the individuals whom Spivak originally called the 'subaltern.' The intention of this work was not to coopt Spivak's work in a manner which disrespected the original context of the theory. Rather, the aim was to

explore the discursive voice produced by the selected sample; in this sense, Spivak's work is highly appropriate. It is worth noting how I opted to utilize the term 'subaltern' and the way in which the term intersects with the discursive representation of wage-earning hospitality employees. In the context of this paper, 'subaltern' is defined as those at the bottom of a particular social hierarchical structure. Wage-earning hospitality staff do not occupy the primary subjugated hierarchical position in society at large. However, as will be demonstrated, it is the case that wage-earning hospitality staff occupy the primary subjugated position in the restaurant industry hierarchy.

Methodology

This qualitative study employs a critical discourse approach to analyze mainstream media discourse about the hospitality industry. Critical discourse analysis is a methodological framework wherein texts are examined in relation to power and hierarchical socioeconomic structures. As stated by Foucault (1978), within the confines of a discourse, "power and knowledge are joined together" (p. 100). The primary inspiration for the methodology of this project is the framework for critical discourse analysis proposed by Norman Fairclough. Critical discourse analysis highlights how a discourse reinforces and maintains existing power structures and modes of domination (Fairclough, 2003). Fairclough (2003) argues that embedded within a textual discourse are elements of structural power which contribute to real-world social effects. Texts, as per Fairclough (2003), have a direct impact on lived experience, though lived experience also directly impacts texts; in other words, "social life and language are dialectically related" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 2).

The data for this research project was collected through purposive sampling. The sample consists of 27 articles from *The Globe and Mail* and 28 from Postmedia-owned news sources: *The National Post* and *The Financial Post*. Articles were collected using a keyword search of the following terms: 'Covid-19 and Restaurants', 'Coronavirus and Restaurants', and 'Restaurant Impact and Covid-19'. Searches were conducted on the online platforms offered by *The Globe and Mail* and both Postmedia-owned news sources as well as the ProQuest research database. This combination of keyword searches generated a sample of 6505 articles. To refine the sample, each article was briefly analyzed, and articles were selected for the sample only if the article's content demonstrated a primary focus on the intersection of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the restaurant industry. Selected articles were all published between April 17th, 2020, and March 30th, 2022. Note

that the selected sample also included three published opinion pieces because they played a significant role in formulating the restaurant industry media discourse.

The selected sample was systematically analyzed to provide an account of who was granted the opportunity to speak and the ways in which the textual content and silences produce knowledge and power effects that intertwine to formulate a discursive representation of wage-earning restaurant staff members. Spivak postulated her theory to advocate for those whose voice was restricted; this paper aims to follow in this tradition.

Findings

Silencing of Staff Voices

Throughout the discourse in its entirety, wage-earning hospitality staff are rarely afforded the opportunity to speak. However, it was found to be customary practice for journalists to turn to industry executives or restaurant owners to speak on behalf of wage-earning industry members. Only four percent of the direct quotations allocated throughout the discourse are attributed to and discuss the perspective of wage-earning restaurant staff. Comparatively, 76 percent of the direct quotes were attributed to restaurant owners, hospitality industry executives, upper-level management, or head chefs. The remaining 20 percent of the quotations are attributed to outside experts, such as professors or prominent figures within various government agencies (15 percent) or politicians (5 percent). This phenomenon permits those atop the industry hierarchy to perpetuate a hegemonic narrative with little to no resistance. The dominant members of the hospitality industry hierarchy are afforded discursive perspective to such an extent that their speech serves to construct a totalizing representation of not only the hospitality industry itself but also those who participate in restaurant employment. The *Globe and Mail* and Postmedia sources perpetuate the neo-capitalist notion that those atop the industry hierarchy have a greater understanding of the industry itself. Because of this understanding, these are the voices that should be amplified for the sake of generating knowledge amongst media consumers. Moreover, it was found that not only did the discourse serve to lay the groundwork for a relatively unchallenged media representation of hospitality staff, but it was also the case that language was used in such a way that it served to obscure or completely erase the existence of those who were being spoken on behalf of: the wage-earning restaurant staff members.

The personification of the ‘restaurant’.

Eighty-two percent of the articles in the sample participated in the linguistic practice of personification wherein the author employed the term ‘restaurant’ in such a way that the restaurant was presented as an entity capable of participating in human affairs. Most instances of personification throughout the sample either obscured the existence of wage-earning staff members (56 percent) or excluded wage-earning staff members as a collection of agents not entailed as a component of the ‘restaurant’ (43 percent). Only two instances of personification were noted wherein the journalist utilized the term ‘restaurant’ such that it was evident that the use of the term entailed the existence of wage-earning staff. For example, Corey Mintz (2021) of the *Globe and Mail* personifies the term ‘restaurants’ in the following way: “restaurants scrambled to serve diners with skeleton crews” (para. 6); in this instance, it is evident that in the discussion of ‘restaurants,’ wage-earning staff are included as a component of the restaurants. However, as noted above, most instances of personification obscured or excluded the existence of wage staff.

In multiple instances, the term ‘restaurants’ was blatantly used synonymously with the terms ‘restaurant owners’ or ‘restaurant managers.’ For example, consider the title of the following *National Post* article: “Restaurants near virus hot spots weigh safety-vs-profit with locals only dining” (McKenzie-Sutter, 2020). Note that in this sentence, the term restaurant is used as a stand-in term for the individual, or individuals, who was/were tasked with deciding whether their restaurant should prohibit the visit of non-local guests. This was a commonplace practice amongst the journalists who contributed articles to the sample of this project.

Pronoun usage.

It is also worth noting that pronoun usage served to further obscure the existence of wage-earning staff members. Pronoun usage in written texts is a key component of the representation and construction of groups and communities (Fairclough, 2003). Of particular importance within the selected sample are first personal plural pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘us.’ Most uses of these pronouns enhanced the silencing or obscuring of wage-earning staff. A detailed analysis of pronoun usage amongst the selected sample reveals that the pronouns in question rarely provide clarity for the question of who is being spoken of or addressed. This phenomenon was most evident in the analysis of direct quotations.

It was common for restaurant owners and managers to use the terms ‘we’ and ‘us’ as they discussed the inner workings of their restaurants or the restaurant industry itself. However, it was unclear whether the usage of these terms necessarily entailed wage-earning hospitality staff. For example, the head chef of Enoteca Sociale, an Italian restaurant in the heart of Toronto, stated the following: “we can’t wait to be able to invite guests back and get to really share what we do with our guests” (Dawson, 2021, para. 21). This statement does not make clear who is entailed by the use of the pronoun ‘we.’ Perhaps wage-earning staff were spoken with and shared in the desire to welcome patrons back into their dining room. Conversely, it could also be the case that the chef is solely touting the perspective of the restaurant’s ownership team. The sample provides little evidence of who is included when restaurant owners employed personal pronouns such as ‘we’ or ‘us.’ Either restaurant owners opted to speak on behalf of their staff, or the perspectives of their employees were silenced and excluded from their discussions of the hospitality industry.

Representation of homogenized experience.

This section of the paper will explore the representation of wage-earning restaurant staff members formulated throughout the discourse. The first task will be to examine the discursive representation perpetuated by the few token wage-earning restaurant staff members who were afforded the opportunity to speak and share their perspectives. This task will be completed by analyzing the direct quotes allocated to wage-earning staff members throughout the sample and the one opinion piece written from the perspective of a former wage-earning hospitality staff member.

A small selection of the examined quotations, as well as the knowledge produced by the token opinion piece, aligns directly with the academic literature produced by Lippert et al. (2021), which qualitatively examined the lived experience of hospitality staff members throughout the pandemic insofar as they highlighted the unsavoury working conditions of the restaurant industry. Restaurant workers claimed that their working environments “[were] hot and stressful, the hours long, and the pay awful” (Bundale, 2021, para. 3). They also expressed their experience of “working to the point of burnout” (Bundale, 2021, para. 4). Lori Fox, a former restaurant server, noted that “restaurant workers don’t want to work a physically demanding job in substandard conditions without benefits for minimum wage” (Fox, 2021, para. 7). Consequently, a small portion of quotations found within the sample serves to formulate a representation of wage-earning

hospitality workers as hard-working individuals who have suffered increased levels of stress and hardships because of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, on account of the aforementioned phenomenon wherein wage-earning staff members were only allocated a minuscule number of quotations (20 out of 511 quotations) to share their perspectives, this representation does not dominate the discursive space in its totality.

The discourse generates a representation of wage-earning restaurant staff wherein the Covid-19 pandemic ultimately had a negligible impact on their general well-being. Hospitality staff are presented as a privileged group of workers who, when the pandemic struck, fell upon their savings to pursue novel business ventures, learn new skills, return to school to further their post-secondary education, or take time to relax and focus on their physical and mental health. The following selections of text highlight the discursive representation of hospitality staff that permeates throughout the discourse:

“When bars closed, I was so happy because I was so tired,” Gagnon said in a recent interview. “And on top of that, it was like there was a little lucky star over my head; I found horticulture evening classes I was able to attend (Ann, 2021, para. 3).

Jonathan Frederic...He took sound recording lessons with a friend who works in the television industry and enrolled in classes in information technology at a junior college (Ann, 2021, para. 16).

Luke Bergmann...spent most of the time at home collecting the \$2,000 a-month Canada Emergency Response Benefit. As the pandemic dragged on, he began to worry that his experience was not giving him the skills to survive tough economic times. So, he decided to learn to code (Hannay, 2021, para. 14).

With my hours open, I was able to grow my freelance business and secure a regular income as an editor. I also enrolled in an MFA program at the University of British Columbia, because I realized I want to teach writing (Fox, 2021, para. 14).

These examples suggest that wage-earning hospitality staff could navigate the pandemic's inception and the loss of their employment with ease because of either personal savings or reliance upon government pandemic response benefits. The extensive coverage of government assistance programs and their impact on staffing levels in restaurants formed a representation of hospitality

workers wherein the sole factor as to why wage-earning staff were opting not to return to their previously held jobs is because the government provided them with support payments. This idea further cemented the discursive representation discussed previously, where it was deemed the case that hospitality employees who lost their jobs because of the pandemic ultimately experienced little hardship. Representation of this nature is amplified throughout the sample and is evident in consideration of the immense amount of coverage dedicated to staffing shortages and government assistance programs. For example, consider the following selection of text:

The pinch is felt by restaurant owners across the country, particularly as many servers or cooks remain hesitant to return to work amid Covid-19. Many business owners say the issue is due to a decision by employees to try new lines of work, while by far the next highest concern is the federal government's continued support programs for the unemployed (Snyder, 2021, para. 16).

The text gives the appearance of a nuanced and balanced perspective as it highlights the viewpoints of both hospitality workers and their employers. However, the article wherein this selection of text is situated, other than the one sentence provided, dedicated most of its coverage towards examining government assistance programs and their contribution to the occurrence of staffing shortages. The notion of restaurant workers being “hesitant to return to work amid Covid-19” (Snyder, 2021, para. 16) was not mentioned again anywhere in the article, nor was the phenomenon of restaurant staff “trying new lines of work” (Snyder, 2021, para. 16). This selection of text, when considered in context, mirrors the sample at large; it contains minimal traces of a nuanced discussion regarding the lived experiences of wage-earning hospitality workers while simultaneously formulating a homogenized discursive representation.

Throughout the sample, wage-earning restaurant workers are represented, by journalists and restaurant owners alike, as a homogenized group that was able to weather the effects of the pandemic with ease. Wage-earning restaurant workers were homogenized into a distinct and unified class with little individual deviation. Contrastingly, restaurant owners, who were afforded a more distinctive voice throughout the sample, were presented as a nuanced group of individuals with personal struggles and distinct burdens to navigate throughout the pandemic. Restaurant owners were provided with a platform to discuss the internal challenges facing their restaurants

and used the increased media spotlight to discuss their increased workload, decreased revenue, personal finances, levels of stress, and mental health struggles. Wage-earning restaurant workers were not afforded such a nuanced perspective.

The homogenized discursive representation of restaurant workers formulated throughout the sample neglects to account for the vastly nuanced lived experiences of an immensely diverse group of people. The discursive representation of hospitality workers built throughout the sample fails to examine or discuss the fact that the pandemic was experienced differently by individuals who vary by gender, racial background, or socioeconomic class. Instead, the sample presents wage-earning hospitality workers as a homogenized group who could avoid the pandemic's detrimental effects because of their personal savings and government assistance programs. While it will not be explored directly in this paper, it seems likely that the lived experiences of many wage-earning hospitality workers throughout the pandemic would not align with the discursive representation embedded within the examined sample.

Assumptions and silences

The notion that the experience of working in a restaurant throughout the pandemic was inherently stressful, as demonstrated, was not completely silenced from the discourse entirely. A small selection of token articles within the sample recognized the difficulty wage-earning staff members faced while working in restaurants throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this recognition, it was continuously assumed that the role of the restaurant staff was to accept these working conditions as the reality of their occupation. Consider that from the onset of the pandemic, health officials bombarded Canadian citizens with messaging that emphasized the need for increased social distancing, especially around those outside of one's immediate household, and perpetual mask use in public spaces. Only two articles within the sample discuss hospitality workers being placed in a position of increased exposure to Covid-19 because it is a necessary component of the dining experience for a diner to remove their mask (Brehaut, 2020). In many smaller restaurants, social distancing measures would not have been possible, and thus staff would have found themselves in close contact with maskless individuals (Brehaut, 2020). For those hospitality industry members who took government legislation and suggestions seriously, this likely would have been their only close contact with maskless individuals outside of members of their household.

In multiple instances throughout the sample, restaurant owners are presented as struggling with the decision of whether it was appropriate to open their restaurants to the public. “Roger Yang, owner of Avelo Restaurant and Pizzeria Du” (Brehaut, 2020, para. 4), claimed that he opted to refrain from opening his dining room to the public because he didn’t feel it was safe and he ““wouldn't want anyone to work in a position where he himself wouldn't feel safe”” (Brehaut, 2020, para. 4). Contrastingly, wage-earning restaurant staff are not afforded the discursive space to share perspectives of this nature. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that not all restaurateurs shared the sentiments of Mr. Yang. Many restaurant owners opened the doors of their establishments the moment they were given the green light from their respective provincial governments. This decision to reopen would primarily have been made without any input from wage-earning staff members, many of whom had no other option but to return to their previously held positions of employment (Brehaut, 2020). Amidst the discursive representation of the restaurant industry, there is an evident underlying assumption that wage-earning restaurant staff inherently agree with the decisions made by, and share in the ideological perspectives of, their respective employers. Because restaurant owners and executives were allowed to speak on behalf of their members of staff, the perspectives they shared were taken to be synonymous with those of their members of staff.

Hospitality workers, as discussed, were afforded almost no voice to express concerns for their personal safety in the workplace. Instead, their perspectives were discursively formulated by restaurant owners and hospitality industry executives. Even when “more than half of Canadians had the intent to hold off on eating out as a means of protecting their health” (Brehaut, 2020, para. 5), wage-earning staff were expected to carry out their routine tasks as usual. It is discursively assumed that because the wage-earning staff were working in a restaurant, then it must be the case that they feel safe and comfortable doing so. Consider the following example wherein Laura Brehaut (2020) of the *National Post* claimed that “patio season, after all, is about fun, and ensuring that everyone is as relaxed as possible” (para. 13). The article continues by stating that “if you are ready to return to restaurants, the best plan of attack is to conduct a quick assessment of the environment to gauge your comfort level” (Brehaut, 2020, para. 13) and “above all else, choose a patio where you’re going to enjoy yourself and feel safe” (Brehaut, 2020, para. 13). These statements, when examined within the broader context of the article, make it evident that this sentiment is directed solely at potential restaurant guests. The general public was met with grace

and patience as they slowly regained confidence in the safety of restaurant dining. Though wage-earning restaurant staff members were not afforded such considerations, this group of individuals was assumed to be comfortable returning to work the moment that restaurateurs were allowed to reopen their establishments. When restaurant owners provided statements such as “*we* can't wait to be able to invite guests back in” (Dawson, 2021, para.21), the use of the personal pronoun ‘*we*’ suggests that the speaker represents the ideological perspective of all members of staff, management, and ownership alike. However, a critical examination of discursive representation requires that one challenges the assumption that the desires and perspective of the speaker and those who are spoken on behalf of are, in fact, synonymous. Failure to challenge assumptions of this nature reinforces hegemony as it allows dominant ideological perspectives to flourish and undermines and discredit the knowledge produced by those at the bottom of the industry hierarchy.

Discussion

In the discursive formulation of the hospitality industry, wage-earning restaurant staff were not afforded the opportunity to formulate their own distinct and nuanced voice. Rather than being provided with the discursive space to speak, this collection of individuals was spoken for. Their discursive representation was primarily constructed by journalists and hospitality executives alike. There is an interesting distinction to be made here between Spivak’s theoretical disposition and the findings of this research. Spivak (1988), in her discussion of the ‘subaltern’ (p.102), describes the totalizing imposition of the colonial voice upon members of a marginalized population. In the context of Spivak’s (1988) work, the ‘subaltern’ (p.102) truly had no voice. Throughout the selected sample, Wage-earning hospitality staff were not the subject of such absolute, totalizing subordination. This research demonstrates that wage-earning hospitality workers were provided with a discursive voice; however, this voice was produced on their behalf by journalists and hospitality industry executives. The silencing of wage-earning hospitality staff is more subtle and manipulative than the silencing of Spivak’s (1988) ‘subaltern’ (p.102). Media consumers are led to believe that the discursive voice of these workers, as found throughout the sample, is, in fact, *theirs*. In reality, as demonstrated throughout this research, the discursive voice of wage-earning hospitality staff is crafted by those atop the hospitality industry hierarchy, and the voice attributed to said staff members is *inauthentic*.

The imposition of this *inauthentic* voice has the potential to detrimentally impact the lived experiences of wage-earning restaurant staff. First, I wish to note that because hospitality executives were provided with the discursive space to impose their ideological perspectives upon the restaurant industry in its entirety, wage-earning restaurant staff who wish to challenge these perspectives could face increased scrutiny from the general public and potentially even their industry colleagues. Wage-earning staff who employ their voice to call into question the ideological dispositions, as discussed throughout this paper, could be perceived as an ideological outlier, when in reality, because these staffs have not been provided with the discursive space to postulate their knowledge and perspectives, we have little understanding of the actual disposition of restaurant staff.

For example, I previously discussed the ways in which the voice of hospitality industry executives fueled the discursive assumption which maintained that wage-earning restaurant staff felt safe and comfortable in the workplace despite the presence of, and risk of contracting, the Coronavirus. Were this assumption to be interpreted as true, any wage-earning restaurant staff who claims to be uncomfortable or unsafe in their work environment could be perceived as a member of a marginal community. To reiterate, we have little understanding of the actual disposition of restaurant staff throughout this period because of their lack of voice. The knowledge that appears to be marginal could be shared by a wide array of wage-earning hospitality staff. However, unless they are provided with the discursive space to share said knowledge, this knowledge will remain alien to media consumers. The only understanding of the hospitality industry provided for Canadian consumers will be directly shaped by the interests of those atop the industry hierarchy.

These processes, in their totality, serve to reinforce hegemonic ideological structures. By failing to provide wage-earning hospitality staff with an adequate opportunity to speak, an array of journalists working for the *Globe and Mail* and Postmedia-owned media sources have afforded restaurant executives the means to define the practices and ideological perspectives of the hospitality industry. This work highlights the notion that as both academics and consumers of media, there is further work to be done in holding mainstream media practitioners accountable for their discursive representation of specific segments of contemporary society. Should mainstream media members wish to avoid promoting the circulation of hegemonic discourse, they should embody the theoretical disposition of standpoint theorists such that they highlight the voices of

those at the bottom of industry hierarchies rather than the industry executives whose voices are continuously prioritized in the formulation of discourse.

Any examination of media should be based on the notion that “the media play an immense role in the education of content consumers and thus, the knowledge produced by media practitioners contributes to the ways in which consumers behave, think, believe, and feel” (Kellner, 2003, p.9). Because of this phenomenon, it is vital that critical scholars continue to examine the media-perpetuated discourse to point out practices that perpetuate hegemonic ideology. The discursive representation of the hospitality industry perpetuated throughout the examined sample ultimately reinforced the age-old ideological practices that have traditionally had a negative impact on wage-earning hospitality staff members. Even with the inclusion of token pieces that directly reflected the perspectives of wage-earning hospitality staff, the discourse in its entirety maintains and justifies the top-down, ‘customer is always right’ hospitality industry ideals, thus supporting the hierarchical structures of an industry which, as demonstrated in the literature, allows for, and often requires, unsavoury business practices, at the expense of wage-earning staff, because of the industries marginally dismal profit margins (Jones & Comfort, 2022).

One way in which media practitioners could avoid circulating hegemonic discourse would be to embrace the perspectives of a standpoint theorist. From this perspective, the knowledge of those that are the most subjugated in a given hierarchical structure is prioritized. It is thus provided with the necessary discursive space required to accurately comprehend the nuanced experiences of those who find themselves at the bottom of social hierarchies. To construct an accurate discursive representation of the hospitality industry, from the theoretical disposition of a standpoint theorist, we must examine the viewpoints of the line cook, the hostesses, the part-time table bussers, servers, and bartenders. Providing this group of individuals with a distinct and *authentic* voice would serve to formulate a rich discursive representation of the hospitality industry in its entirety. However, this is not to say there is no place for the voice of restaurant owners and executives in the formulation of restaurant industry-related discourse. Still, there is an inherent and imminent need for the voices of a wider array of restaurant industry members to be heard as well.

Conclusion

The nature of this study is limited, such that it cannot be generalized across media publications or genres. However, understanding the mainstream media’s discursive representation

of the hospitality industry in its totality is a near impossibility. This does not negate the importance of the findings of this work. The intention of this project was not to arrive at a complete and holistic understanding of the discursive representation of the restaurant industry but rather to highlight the ways in which media practitioners prioritized the knowledge and perspectives of the powerful and privileged members of the restaurant industry and subjugated the knowledge of the wage-earning staff who worked on the front lines, in customer-facing roles, throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though the findings of this study cannot be generalized further than the examined sample, the practice of holding media practitioners accountable for producing a nuanced discursive representation of wage-earning staff members remains relevant for nearly every Canadian industry. This practice is especially important in Canadian industries, which tend to disproportionately employ members of various minority groups. I also wish to address the fact that this paper is also unable to comment on or generate any knowledge of the lived experiences of restaurant staff who worked throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Outside of the work completed by Lippert et al. (2021), this subject remains a greatly underexamined realm of academic scholarship and requires further attention. Hopefully, this paper draws increased attention to this fact and inspires additional research projects in which greater consideration is taken to examine the nuanced lived experiences of restaurant workers throughout a tumultuous period of Canadian history.

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