Examining the Effects of Internal Communication and Emotional Culture on Employees' Organizational Identification

Cen April Yue[1] (iD), Linjuan Rita Men[1] (iD), and Mary Ann Ferguson[1]

Abstract

As one of the first empirical attempts investigating the emerging role of positive emotional culture within organizations, the study examined how a symmetrical internal communication system and leaders' use of motivating language contribute to fostering a positive emotional culture featured by joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude. Furthermore, the study examined the linkage between a positive emotional culture and employees' organizational identification. A quantitative online survey was conducted with 482 full-time employees in the United States. Results showed that both symmetrical internal communication and leaders' use of motivating language, including meaning making, empathetic, and direction-giving languages, induced employees' perception of a positive emotional culture of joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude, which in turn enhanced employees' organizational identification. Positive emotional culture fully mediated the impact of corporate and leadership communications on employee identification with the organization. Theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

[1]University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Cen April Yue, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida, 1885 Stadium Road, Gainesville, FL 32603, USA.
Email: yuecen@ufl.edu

Organizational researchers and practitioners alike have long acknowledged the impact of the *cognitive* component of organizational culture (Rousseau, 1990). Emotional culture, referred to broadly as the *affective* aspect of organizational culture, has largely been treated as a black box that affects a limited number of worker attitudes and behaviors. Different from cognitive culture, which dictates how organizational members think and behave, emotional culture sets the tone for how organizational members *feel* (Men & Yue, 2019). Organizations, though in the minority, are using apps to record how much fun employees are having while others hire technology experts to track employees' moods monthly, weekly, or even daily (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016). Despite that some progressive organizations are starting to find ways to harness a positive emotional culture to achieve organizational effectiveness, emotional culture is often ill-managed or not managed at all (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016; Kumar, 2017). Many organizations are not aware of the important role emotions play in building the right culture. In this study, we focus on exploring organization's positive emotional culture featured by joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude. Seminal empirical research suggests a list of beneficial outcomes of a positive emotional culture such as employee job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, employee advocacy, quality employee-organization relationships, or even hard measures such as financial performance and absenteeism (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016; Men & Yue, 2019). Given the value of emotional culture in shaping everyday organizational life across a range of settings (e.g., health care, finance, high tech, emergency services) and a lack of empirical research in this arena, this study delves into the question of why emotional culture matters and how to cultivate a positive emotional culture using strategic internal communications. Specifically, we proposed and tested a model that links organizational internal communications, a positive emotional culture, and employee organizational identification.

The power of internal communications in shaping organizational culture has been evidenced by empirical studies (e.g., Grunig et al., 2002; Sriramesh et al., 1996) and justified by a constructivist communication perspective (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2014). To expand the theoretical knowledge of emotional culture and internal communications, one purpose of the present study is to investigate whether and how strategic internal communications at the organizational and leadership levels can construct a positive emotional culture within organizations. Specifically, we examined two types of internal communications as antecedents of a positive emotional culture: leadership-level motivating language (ML) use and organization-level symmetrical internal communication. Symmetrical internal communication entails the notion of openness, reciprocity, negotiation, and tolerance for disagreement between organizations and employees. Organizations implement symmetrical internal communication model to empower employees in decision making in order to reach mutually agreed solutions. Another form of communication considered critical in dyadic, leader-to-follower communication is leaders' use of ML, which involves the employment of meaning-making language, empathetic language, and direction-giving language.

This study also attempts to understand why and how a positive emotional culture matters for employees and organizations. In particular, we examined organizational identification as the outcome of a positive emotional culture and internal communications. Based

on social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), organizational identification is a specific form of social identification in which individuals define themselves in terms of their association with the organization (Ashforth et al., 2008; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and refers to employees' "perception of oneness with, or belongingness to the organization" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 34; T. Kim et al., 2010).

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on emotional culture at workplace and reinforces the constructive role of internal communications in shaping organizational culture and employee organizational identification. Internal communication managers and organizational leaders will benefit from the findings in terms of why and how to strategically manage leadership communication and build a symmetrical internal communication system in order to create a positive emotional culture that will ultimately feed into employees' organizational identification.

Literature Review

Organizational culture, consisting of a set of norms, values, beliefs, and assumptions, is a social glue holding organizational members together and guiding their behaviors and interactions with each other (Baker, 1980; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Academic literature on organizational culture is rich and diverse (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000). Even though there is little consensus on what defines organizational culture and how we should observe and measure and it, it generally describes "the way things are done" or "the way things are understood, judged, and valued" in an organization (Davies et al., 2000, p. 112). Schein (1985) put forth one of the oft-cited definitions of organizational culture:

> Organizational culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to *perceive, think*, and *feel* in relation to those problems. (p. 2)

It is challenging to study culture because of its conceptual vagueness and measurement issues specifically related to the difficulty in capturing the dynamic of culture. Despite that, scholars have unanimously agreed that a robust and healthy workplace culture contributes to the success of an organization (Denison et al., 2004) by enhancing organizational effectiveness (Gregory et al., 2009; Ouchi & Jaeger, 1978), employee performance, cohesiveness, and organizational identification (Schrodt, 2002), just to name a few.

Defining Emotional Culture

Schrodt (2002) noted that organizational culture is a group learning process simultaneously involving a cognitive and an affective dimension. Previous literature defines cognitive culture as "shared *intellectual* values, norms, artifacts, and assumptions" in what to think, to say, and to behave, within organizations (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016,

p. 60; Rousseau, 1990). Cognitive culture is unarguably important for organizations as it determines the extent to which organizational members are customer-focused, innovative, and competitive; however, it is only part of the story (Barsade & Knight, 2015). The other key part is what we call the emotional culture, defined as "shared *affective* values, norms, artifacts, and assumptions that govern which emotions people have and express at work and which ones they are better off suppressing" (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016, p. 60). Emotional culture exists in organizations regardless of whether it is brought into cognizance by organizational leaders. Emotional culture can be transmitted and translated into meaningful outcomes through either *feeling mechanisms* or *normative enactments*. Feeling mechanisms reflect organizational members' emotions truly felt and experienced, whereas normative enactments account for emotions expressed simply to conform to organizational norms and expectations irrespective of members' real feelings (Levy, 1975; Parkinson, 2005). Like cognitive culture, emotional culture is expressed and observed through different structural levels of abstraction; from the most obvious to the deepest structural level, emotional culture comprises:

(a) nonverbal emotional expressions (e.g., tone, facial expression, body language) and cultural artifacts (e.g., physical space, decorations, stories, group rituals, lore, ceremonies);
(b) underlying values (i.e., collective importance placed on certain emotions such as an understanding of what emotions should be expressed or suppressed);
(c) underlying assumptions (i.e., the implicit, take-for-granted meaning of expressing or suppressing a certain emotion; Barsade & O'Neill, 2014; Schein & Schein, 2017).

While being referenced regularly in trade and professional literature, emotional culture has not received much scholarly attention (Barsade & Knight, 2015). In the current study, we proposed a normative model and empirically demonstrated the value of emotional culture in strengthening employees' identification with organizations and the role of internal communications in engendering emotional culture. Specifically, the study focuses on a positive emotional culture of joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude. *Culture of joy*, characterized by good humor, conviviality, pleasantness, and delight, guides everyday employee interactions (Boyle, 1986; O'Neill & Rothbard, 2017). Companies such as Ubiquity, Vail Resorts, and many start-ups emphasize having fun as one of their management principles. Emotional culture of joy is instrumental in employee flourishing (Hazelton, 2014), goal achievement, physical and social resources attainment (e.g., Rhee, 2007), and job success (O'Neill & Rothbard, 2017). In terms of team and organizational outcomes, a culture of joy enhances team effectiveness by uniting team members and alleviating work pressure (O'Neill & Rothbard, 2017; Rhee, 2007). It is also tied to organization's profitability, employee retention, and the fun experienced by customers (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016; Joyce, 2003). *Culture of companionate love* is manifested in the pervasiveness of support, caring, compassion, and affection among different levels of organizational members (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014).

It is different from romantic love, which is common in intimate relationships and at home. Instead, companionate love, or love at work, is characterized by warmth, support, and respect for others (Sternberg, 1986). Empirical evidence shows that people working in a culture of companionate love reported higher job satisfaction, commitment (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014), group attachment, enhanced teamwork, and personal accountability for work performance (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Furthermore, it even boosts external stakeholders' willingness to engage in organizations' activities (Barsade, 2002; Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). A strong emotional culture of companionate love can be felt through employees' use of words such as *us* and *we*. As described by an interviewee in Barsade and O'Neill's (2014) study: "We are a family . . . Everyone cares for each other . . . We all watch out for each other" (p. 554). *Culture of pride* arises from team success and group cohesiveness and captures employees feeling important, valuable, and admired about their jobs and organizations (Swanson & Kent, 2017; Todd & Harris, 2009). Proud employees are those embracing self-worth, self-esteem, and experiencing meaningfulness at work (Tracy & Robins, 2007). Moreover, culture of pride influences various organizational outcomes, as evidenced by increased organizational identification (Todd & Harris, 2009), job satisfaction (Tyler & Blader, 2001), organizational commitment (Ellemers et al., 2011), and intention to stay (Kraemer & Gouthier, 2014). Thus, culture of pride is regarded as an asset for organizational success (Katzenbach, 2003). *Culture of gratitude* is synonymous with thankfulness and appreciation. Cultivating a culture of employee gratitude is an alternative to solving issues related to incivility, high turnover, and employee entitlement in the workplace. Cultivating such culture can start with encouraging employees to show simple appreciative gestures such as a handwritten thank you note and use verbal recognition. Furthermore, organizations can implement systematic, gratitude-oriented human resources or internal public relations programs (Fehr et al., 2017).

Recall that one focus of this study is to provide a holistic view in understanding how communications at different levels in the organization interplay to affect organizational and employee outcomes. This is a key departure from past research, which primarily operationalized internal communications as either a dyadic, leader-to-member communication episode or an organizational, system-level communication. Furthermore, decades' worth of research shows the importance of internal communications on shaping *cognitive* culture with little mentioning of *emotional* culture (e.g., Berger, 2008; Men, 2014; Sriramesh et al., 1996). In the following sections, we reviewed literature on the two types of internal communications—leaders' ML use and organizational symmetrical communication—and articulated their respective influence on shaping a positive emotional culture.

Motivating Language Theory

Originally conceptualized by Jeremiah Sullivan (1988) as a linguistic framework, motivating language theory (MLT) posits that leaders can adopt different types of speech when talking with subordinates to induce their work motivation and positive psychological and behavioral outcomes (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018; Sun et al.,

2016). The three forms of leader ML are *meaning-making language, empathetic language*, and *direction-giving language*. Meaning-making language connects employees' personal goals with higher organizational purposes. To accomplish this, leaders go through two steps. First, they must paint a clear picture of the organizational value, mission, vision, and identity and be able to communicate these to employees, which can be interpreted as a sense making process. Second, leaders must link employees' individual goals with the overarching organizational purpose. It is accomplished by affirming the uniqueness and strength of each subordinate, coaching them to "enter and find their niches," and acknowledging their contributions to the organization (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018, p. 13). The second dimension of ML, empathetic language, refers to leaders using supportive, compassionate, and respectful language to connect with employees. Leaders can employ empathetic language in both work occasions and employee personal events, such as applauding employees' work success, congratulating employees on a personal matter, as well as providing comfort and reassurance in times of personal setbacks (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; Sun et al., 2016). Through emotional disclosure, leaders and employees reveal their human side, such as empathy, authenticity, and vulnerability, to each other. Even though it is least employed by leaders, scholars have associated the use of empathetic language with employee job satisfaction and engagement (Dutton & Spreitzer, 2014). The third dimension of ML, direction-giving language, is "a key to getting the right things done in the right ways" (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018, p. 15). Direction-giving language involves articulating what needs to be done to achieve organizational goals, clarifying role and task ambiguity, and providing performance feedback. In addition, direction-giving language comprises communication transparency, which reduces task uncertainty and elevates employees' work efficacy (Sun et al., 2016). By effectively communicating task goals and reward contingencies, employees understand what they can expect in return on task fulfillment.

ML and Emotional Culture. Literature has consistently shown that ML is positively related to a wide array of employee and organizational outcomes, including job performance (Holmes, 2012; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2010), job satisfaction (Sharbrough et al., 2006; Simmons & Sharbrough, 2013), job creativity and innovation (Sexton, 2013; Wang et al., 2009), organizational commitment (Krause, 2013; Madlock & Sexton, 2015), and intention to stay (Krause, 2013; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2007). A recent study found that leaders who communicate with sympathy, compassion, and warmth, or what they called responsive leadership communication, are more likely to foster a positive emotional culture and employee advocacy (Men & Yue, 2019). Similarly, experts of MLT have proposed that ML facilitates quality employee-organization relationships by creating a positive communication culture (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). M. Mayfield and Mayfield's (2017) study further revealed that leader ML can create a welcoming, supportive, and creative environment for employee creativity to grow. Taken together, these findings provide a solid theoretical rationale for the current study to examine the role of leader ML in eliciting organizational culture, and particularly, a positive emotional culture.

To elaborate, employees feel valued, appreciated, and motivated under the influence of meaning-making language. This is because they see their personal goals aligned with organizational goals and meaningful work. We argue that only when employees make sense of their organizational goals and find meaning and value in fulfilling their work role can they genuinely experience joy and pride in work. Coworkers who experience positive emotions will likely internalize these emotions as their own and contribute to building a positive emotional culture. Furthermore, empathetic language directly conveys leaders' emotional support for employees. By displaying openness, sincerity, and sensitivity, leaders set the positive emotional display rules. In the words of J. Mayfield and Mayfield (2018), empathetic language can "ease and translate emotional labor into positive energy" (p. 39). Through emotional contagion, employees are likely to internalize positive feelings and emotions expressed by their leaders (Hatfield et al., 1993). Eventually, empathetic language may motivate all levels of employees to create a working culture replete with gratitude and companionate love. Finally, direction-giving language tells what needs to be done and how rewards will be allocated. We speculate that employees who receive clear task instructions, role expectations, and responsive feedbacks will appreciate the communication transparency and feel satisfied and happy with their work. This feeling in turn helps build a positive emotional culture. Taken together, we argue the three facets of ML all contribute to building a positive and shared emotional culture featured by joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude. We put forth our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Leader motivating language is positively associated with a positive emotional culture.

Symmetrical Internal Communication

First proposed by Grunig (1976), symmetrical communication has been a focal construct in public relations and communication management research (Kang & Park, 2017). In a nutshell, symmetrical communication is an ethical worldview organizations adopt in communicating with their stakeholders. This worldview puts great emphasis on openness, responsiveness, mutual understanding, mutual adaptation, interdependency, and a balance of interest and power (Kang & Park, 2017; Men & Stacks, 2014). The underlying motive for applying a symmetrical model is to negotiate, adjust, and promote ideas and behaviors to be respected and accepted by all parties involved. Thus, it contrasts with the manipulative, one-way, top-down asymmetrical approach and is considered the most ethical and effective communication system (Grunig, 2006). Grunig (1992) also suggested organizations implement symmetrical communication internally to bring out positive employee outcomes. A symmetrical internal communication system is employee-centered and built on "trust, credibility, openness, [. . .], tolerance for disagreement, and negotiation" (p. 558). In other words, symmetrical internal communication system values and amplifies employees' voice, feedback, and power to negotiate. Therefore, in this environment, employees generally feel empowered to participate in decision making.

It is worth noting that symmetrical internal communication is functionally and conceptually different from ML. Functionally, symmetrical internal communication mainly addresses organizational formal communication primarily disseminated from management to employees through various mass communication channels, such as intranet, email, newsletter, and social media. Communication/public relations department typically initiates such communication and controls message content and timing (Men & Bowen, 2017). In comparison, ML is about leaders directly using verbal language to engage in face-to-face or mediated interpersonal communication with subordinates. Not only the source and target of the message is clearer (i.e., a certain leader(s) to a certain subordinate(s), the content, format, and timing of the message is also more flexible and informal. Conceptually, symmetrical internal communication is theorized as a communication system or model to reduce power asymmetry between the management and employees (Kang & Park, 2017). It highlights active organizational listening, mutual understanding, and a balance of power through dialogue and negotiation. In contrast, ML is embedded in linguistics theory and is devised to *motivate* followers to achieve desirable work-related outcomes through leader's strategic use of spoken messages. Unlike symmetrical internal communication, the conceptualization of ML does not "represent an *entire* two-way conversation or a dialogue, even though it is often meant to be part of them" in an implicit manner (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018, p. 147).

Symmetrical Internal Communication and Emotional Culture. Research has flourished in recent years examining the role of symmetrical internal communication in engendering different employee outcomes. For instance, scholars have made positive associations between symmetrical internal communication and employee-organization relationships, work engagement, employee communication behavior, organizational advocacy, organizational citizenship behavior, and organizational identification (Jiang & Men, 2017; Kang & Sung, 2017; Y. Kim, 2018; J. N. Kim & Rhee, 2011; Men & Stacks, 2014; Men & Yue, 2019; Smidts et al., 2001). Even though public relations scholars have articulated that symmetrical internal communication can foster a horizontal participative organizational culture by empowering employees in organizational decision making (e.g., Men, 2014; Sriramesh et al., 1996), empirical evidence is undeniably lacking, which limits our understanding of the impact communications can have on organizational culture (Schrodt, 2002). In this study, we argue that a symmetrical internal communication system that conveys empowerment, collaboration, and tolerance for different opinions will most likely lead to a greater sense of belonging and cohesion among organizational members. On the contrary, highly controlled, one-way, top-down communication cuts the human connection and fails to elicit the notion that "we are all in this together." Active listening and genuine input solicitation made easily accessible by various internal communication channels also showcases organizations' care and respect for employees. We therefore believe that employee who feel their voice being heard and respected, feedback encouraged and valued, will be more grateful for and proud of being a contributing member of their organizations. Eventually, positive emotions and

feelings created by a symmetrical internal communication system will transmit among individuals and groups and form a positive emotional culture on the organizational level. We thus propose:

Hypothesis 2: Symmetrical internal communication is positively associated with a positive emotional culture.

Organizational Identification

Scholars across disciplines, such as management, social psychology, and communication, have explored organizational identification for decades given its importance for the well-being of both the organization and its members (Edwards & Peccei, 2010; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Emphasizing one's strong attachment and oneness with an organization, the modern conceptualization of organizational identification derives from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to Tajfel (1978), social identity is "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him of that membership" (p. 31). Thus, identification happens when individuals define themselves as members of social categories and ascribe the characteristics of those categories to themselves, and when members feel pride, meaningful, and acknowledged being part of the social group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Smidts et al., 2001). The cognitive (sense of belonging/oneness) and affective components (pride in membership) reflected in the conceptualization of identification suggest two basic motives of individuals: need for self-categorization, which helps define individuals' place in society, and need for self-enhancement, which requires the group membership be rewarding for members' feeling of self-worth (Pratt, 1998; Smidts et al., 2001).

As employees begin to identify with the organization, they link their self-concept with the organization either cognitively or emotionally. In other words, they conceive themselves as a part of the organization, feel attached to the organization, and find pride in their organizational membership. Because of the sense of ownership and belonging, employees who are identified with the organization tend to internalize the values, beliefs, goals, and culture of the organization and act in the organization's best interest (van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Employees also tend to show supportive attitudes and behaviors toward the organization that they feel identified with and make decisions aligned with organizational objectives (Smidts et al., 2001). Numerous studies in management and communication have demonstrated the positive effects of organizational identification on various employee and organizational outcomes, such as enhanced interpersonal trust, employee retention, cooperation, positive job attitudes (Nakra, 2006), organizational commitment (Riketta, 2005), perceptions of work environment (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004), and organizational citizenship behavior (Riketta, 2005). The literature has also suggested a number of factors that foster organizational identification, among which communication plays a central role (Neill et al., 2019; Sha, 2009; Smidts et al., 2001), along with factors of organizational leadership

(Epitropaki & Martin, 2005), perceived organizational support (Edwards & Peccei, 2010; Wiesenfeld et al., 2001), perceived external image or construed external prestige (Myers et al., 2016; Smidts et al., 2001), and employee demographic and dispositional characteristics (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005).

Internal Communications and Organizational Identification. The symbolic linkage between organizational members and the organization is at the core of organizational identification (Myers et al., 2016), and such linkage cannot be established without proper communications at the leadership and organizational levels. Cheney (1983) suggested that through communicating values and goals, organizations can help facilitate the process of employee identification. Research demonstrated that a positive communication climate in the organization characterized by openness and trust in communication, participation (perception of having a voice in decision making), and supportiveness (feeling of being taken seriously) largely contributed to employees' identification with the organization (Neill et al., 2019; Smidts et al., 2001). Likewise, stressing the importance of communication from both leaders and the organization, Nakra (2006) showed employees' satisfaction with the organization's overarching communication climate and supervisory communication both linked to employees' enhanced organizational identification. Along this line of reasoning, the current study posits that leadership communication in the form of using ML and the organization's symmetrical internal communication both could positively predict organizational identification as perceived by employees.

Specifically, as leaders depict the organization's fundamental values, mission, vision, history, and cultural heritage to employees using meaning-making language (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018), it helps unveil the organization's unique identity and distinctiveness, which facilitates members' self-categorization. Furthermore, leaders who use meaning-making language strive to connect employees' personal goals with organizational purposes. Such process helps employees internalize organizational attributes, values, and practices as part of their own self-identity, which could enhance organizational identification. In fact, leadership scholars have long made similar observations, suggesting that certain charismatic and transformational leadership behaviors, such as communicating a compelling vision, emphasizing shared values, and priming the collective level of employees' self-identity, increase employees' levels of identification with the organization (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005; Kark & Shamir, 2002). Likewise, because employees tend to associate themselves with membership that is rewarding (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), leaders' use of empathetic language that is supportive, caring, and compassionate can induce employees positive affect toward the organization, thus strengthening their identification and connections with the organization. Along the line of reasoning, leaders' use of direction giving language clarifies role and task expectations, provide feedback for employee improvement, and reduces ambiguities, which promotes a climate of openness and transparency; such attributes could also enhance employees' positive experiences within the organization, strengthening their feeling of belonging in the organization. Therefore, we put forth the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Leader motivating language is positively associated with employees' organizational identification.

At the organizational level, just as how a positive communication climate can be associated with organizational identification (Neill et al., 2019), symmetrical internal communication defined by two-way information flow, reciprocity, feedback, listening, employee participation, and balance of interests (Dozier et al., 1995; Men, 2014) can also predict employee identification with the organization. Sha (2009) provided the earliest empirical evidence on how symmetrical and ethical public relations efforts enhanced organizational identification in the university setting. She concluded that symmetrical/ethical communication not only improves public identification with organizational mission but also is "most strategic for getting stakeholders to feel a sense of belonging to the organization" (p. 309). Similarly, this study argues that when the organization's internal communication system is symmetrical, employees will feel listened to, cared for, empowered, and involved. Such positive feelings satisfy employees' need for self-enhancement and reinforce employees' attachment and feeling of belonging to the organization. Therefore,

Hypothesis 4: Symmetrical internal communication is positively associated with employees' organizational identification.

Emotional Culture and Organizational Identification. Organizational culture has been suggested as the foundation of organizational identity, the internalization of which could enhance employees' identification with the organization. According to Dutton et al. (1994), organizations' culture representations such as rituals, symbols, ceremonies, and stories could "objectify and communicate the collective organizational identity to organizational members" (p. 243). Hatch and Schultz (1997) also suggested perceived organizational identity is a self-reflective product of the dynamic processes of organizational culture. Therefore, emotional culture manifested in nonverbal and verbal communication, artifacts, values, and assumptions naturally comprises the affective component of organizational identity. Perceived organizational identity, "a member's beliefs about the distinctive, central, and enduring attributes of the organization," could in turn serve as a powerful image that affects members' levels of identification with the organization (Dutton et al., 1994, p. 244). In particular, the more attractive the organizational identity is perceived, the stronger the organizational identification is. As such, it is safe to argue that a positive emotional culture, serving as the foundation for collective organizational identity and featuring joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude, could enhance employees' identification with the organization. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: A positive emotional culture is positively associated with employees' organizational identification.
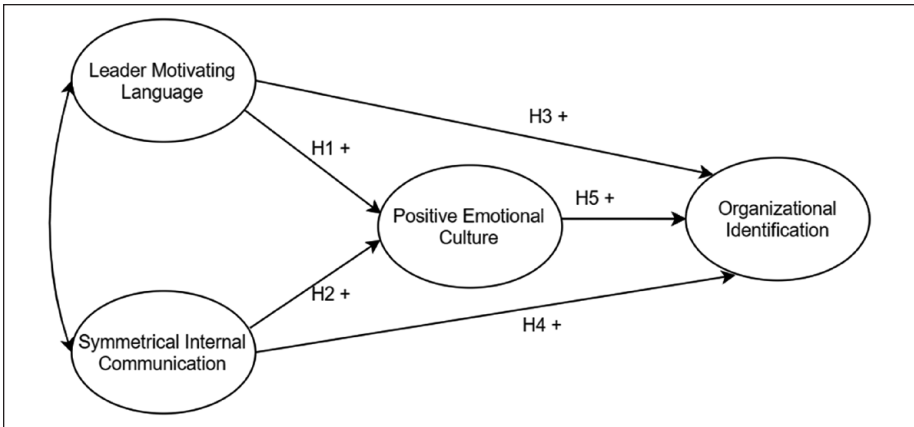
Figure 1. The conceptual model.
Note. Mediation Hypothesis 6–Hypothesis 7.

Mediating role of a positive emotional culture. Given the interplay between leader ML, symmetrical internal communication, positive emotional culture, and organizational identification as hypothesized, the study also proposes the mediating role of positive emotional culture, which can potentially explain how communication in the organization influences employee identification. In particular, since leader ML and organizational-level symmetrical communication could both predict a positive emotional culture and organizational identification, and given the innate linkage between culture and identification (Ismail & Baki, 2017; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), the study suggests that positive emotional culture could mediate the effects of leader ML and symmetrical internal communication on organizational identification. In other words, leaders' use of meaning making, empathetic, and direction-giving language and an employee-centered internal communication system jointly create a positive emotional culture, which can in turn, boost employee organizational identification. Therefore, the following hypotheses are generated.

> **Hypothesis 6:** A positive emotional culture mediates the positive relationship between leader motivating language and employees' organizational identification.
> **Hypothesis 7:** A positive emotional culture mediates the positive relationship between symmetrical internal communication and employees' organizational identification.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model.

Method

Data Collection and Participants

We designed an online survey using Qualtrics platform and distributed the survey link through Dynata (formerly known as Survey Sampling International[1]) in November

2018. With the assistance of Dynata, we utilized stratified random sampling strategy to ensure a representative employee sample at varying levels of age, gender, income, and education. After eliminating invalid responses (e.g., failed quality check questions, straight line answers), we retained a final sample of 482 full-time employees. Table 1 summarizes the demographic information of the participants.

Measures

All the key constructs in this study were adopted from previous studies using a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. A total of 13 items were utilized to operationalize a positive emotional culture (Allen et al., 1988; Barsade & O'Neill, 2014; Todd & Harris, 2009). Respondents were asked to report the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the words describing the prevailing emotions in their organization and their feelings about its atmosphere or culture. Specifically, a culture of joy was measured by four items (i.e., delighted, happy, joyful, and excited, α = .94), and a culture of companionate love measured by three items (i.e., affectionate, loving, and companionate, α = .91). Three items measured a culture of pride (i.e., proud, superior, worthy, α = .82), and three items measured a culture of gratitude (i.e., grateful, thankful, appreciative, α = .95). A measure of six items from Dozier et al. (1995) was used to assess symmetrical internal communication (e.g., "My organization encourages differences of opinions", α = .88). As far as for the three dimensions of ML, Cronbach's alphas for meaning-making language were .94 (eight items, e.g., "My direct manager/boss tells me stories about key events in the organization's past"), .93 for empathetic language (six items, e.g., "My direct manager/boss expresses his/her support for my professional development"), and .95 for direction-giving language (ten items, e.g., "My direct manager/boss offers me helpful directions on how to do my job"), taken from J. Mayfield and Mayfield (2018). Finally, six items were adapted from Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Men and Bowen (2017) to measure organizational identification (e.g., "When I talk about this organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they," α = .90).

Results

Structural equation modeling was utilized for data analysis because the hypothesis testing involved multidimensionality latent constructs and relationship testing between latent constructs. We followed the two-step procedure to first assess the measurement model and then the structural model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The analysis was performed with AMOS 24.0 software using maximum likelihood procedures.

A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was first performed and the measurement model test revealed satisfactory model fit: $\chi^2(146) = 452.60$, $p < .001$, $\chi^2/df = 3.10$, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07 (90% confidence interval [CI]: .06, .07]), standardized root mean square residual (SRMR) = .03, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI) = .95, and comparative fit index (CFI) = .96 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The scale items and their factor loadings can be found in Table 2. The proposed structural

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample.

Respondent profiles	Frequency	Valid % of sample
Gender	482	100
Female	279	57.9
Male	203	42.1
Position	482	100
Nonmanagement	254	52.7
Lower-level management	90	18.7
Middle-level management	110	22.8
Top management	28	5.8
Age (years)	482	100
18-24	34	7.1
25-34	116	24.0
35-44	111	23.0
45-54	102	21.2
55-64	98	20.3
65-74	21	4.4
Ethnicity	482	100
White	337	69.9
Black or African American	64	13.3
Hispanic or Latino	44	9.1
Native American or American Indian	4	0.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	30	6.2
Other	3	0.6
Education	482	100
No college (secondary education or below)	68	14.1
Vocational level (diploma, higher diploma, and associate)	67	13.9
Some college	121	25.1
A bachelor's degree	156	32.4
A master's degree	55	11.4
A doctoral degree	15	3.1
Income ($)	478	100
<10,000	7	1.5
10,000–29,999	76	15.9
30,000–49,999	108	22.6
50,000–69,999	115	24.1
70,000–89,999	57	11.9
90,000–109,999	49	10.3
110,000-129,999	23	4.8
130,000-149,999	17	3.6
150,000-179,999	12	2.5
180,000–200,000	5	1.0
>200,000	9	1.9

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Respondent profiles	Frequency	Valid % of sample
Industry sector	478	100
Banking and finance	28	5.9
Building and construction	21	4.4
Government/public administration	27	5.6
Health care and social assistance	67	14.0
Information technology	23	4.8
Manufacturing	42	8.8
Real estate and rental and leasing	5	1.0
Arts, entertainment and recreation	13	2.7
Accommodation and food service	22	4.6
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	3	0.6
Professional, scientific, and technical services	32	6.7
Educational services	34	7.1
Retail trade	40	8.4
Transportation and warehousing	25	5.2
Utilities	6	1.3
Others	90	18.8

equation modeling model demonstrated good fit and was thus retained as the final model: $\chi^2(146) = 452.60, p < .001, \chi^2/df = 3.10$, RMSEA $= .07$, 90% CI [.06, .07], SRMR $= .03$, TLI $= .95$, and CFI $= .96$.

Hypotheses Testing

Standardized path coefficients were illustrated in Figure 2. Hypotheses 1 and 2 predicted that leader ML (Hypothesis 1) and symmetrical internal communication (Hypothesis 2) are positively associated with a positive emotional culture. The results suggest that the more leaders employ ML, the more likely organizational members feel a positive emotional culture ($\beta = .60, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. Likewise, Hypothesis 2 was supported because symmetrical internal communication was positively related to a positive emotional culture ($\beta = .25, p < .001$), though this association was weaker compared to the influence of leader ML on a positive emotional culture. Hypotheses 3 and 4 proposed a direct positive association between leader ML and organizational identification (Hypothesis 3), as well as between symmetrical internal communication and organizational identification (Hypothesis 4). Results did not support Hypothesis 3 or Hypothesis 4; neither leader ML ($\beta = .04, p = .59$) nor symmetrical internal communication ($\beta = .05, p = .44$) was directly related to organizational identification. Finally, as hypothesized, a positive emotional culture and organizational identification are positively and strongly related ($\beta = .68, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 5. Leader ML and symmetrical internal communication explained 67% of the variance in a positive emotional culture. A positive emotional culture explained 57% of the variance in organizational identification.

Table 2. Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results.

Factor	Scale items	Standard loadings	SE
Leader motivating language	Meaning-making language	.77	NA
	Empathetic language	.90	.05
	Direct-giving language	.93	.05
Symmetrical internal communication	Most communication between me and my organization can be said to be two-way communication.	.63	.06
	My organization encourages differences of opinion.	.82	.06
	One purpose of communication in our organization is for managers to be responsive to employees.	.70	.05
	Supervisors encourage employees to express differences of opinion.	.83	.06
	Employees are usually informed about major changes in policy that will affect jobs before they take place.	.73	.06
	Employees are not afraid to speak up during meetings with supervisors and managers.	.76	NA
Emotional culture	Emotional culture of joy	.92	NA
	Emotional culture of companionate love	.85	.04
	Emotional culture of pride	.85	.03
	Emotional culture of gratitude	.86	.03
Organizational identification	When someone criticizes this organization, it feels like a personal insult.	.74	NA
	I am very interested in what others think about this organization.	.72	.06
	When I talk about this organization, I usually say "we" rather than "they."	.82	.06
	This organization's successes are my successes.	.87	.06
	When someone praises this organization, it feels like a personal compliment.	.89	.06
	If a story in the media criticized this organization, I would feel embarrassed.	.62	.06

Note. NA = not applicable. All the loadings are standardized and significant at the .001 level.

Indirect (Mediation) Effects. A test of indirect effects using bootstrapping procedure ($N = 5,000$ samples) was conducted to test the mediating role of a positive emotional culture. Bootstrapping uses nonparametric method based on resampling and does not violate assumptions of normality. Results revealed a significant indirect effect of leader ML on organizational identification via a positive emotional culture ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.32, .70]). Therefore, H6 was supported. In addition, a positive emotional culture significantly mediated the effect of symmetrical internal communication on organizational identification ($\beta = .18$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [.07, .34]), supporting Hypothesis 7. In other words, the effects of leader ML and symmetrical internal
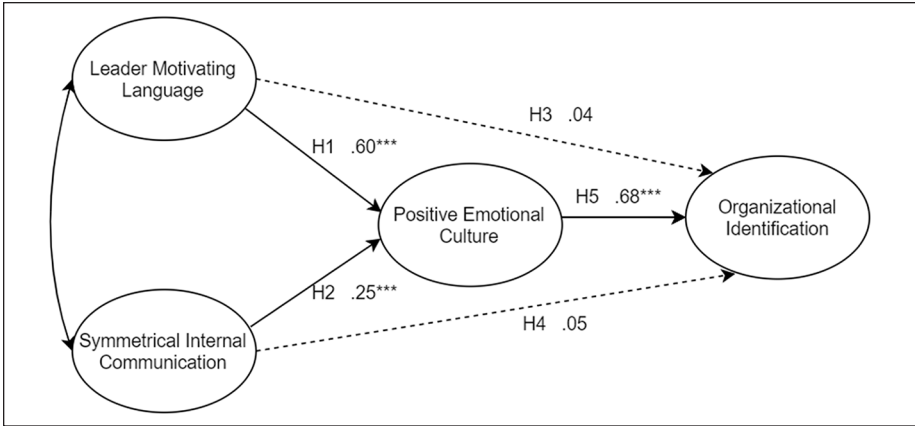
Figure 2. The hypothesized structural model with standardized path coefficients.
Note. Mediation Hypothesis 6–Hypothesis 7. Leader motivating language has an indirect effect of .408 and a total effect of .448 on organizational identification. Symmetrical internal communication has an indirect effect of .17 and a total effect of .22 on organizational identification.
***$p < .001$.

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations, Reliability Coefficients, Means, and Standard Deviations for the Main Variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. SIC	(.88)								
2. DL	.74**	(.95)							
3. EL	.64**	.84**	(.93)						
4. ML	.54**	.71**	.70**	(.94)					
5. Joy	.63**	.65**	.66**	.61**	(.94)				
6. Love	.54**	.62**	.63**	.63**	.80**	(.91)			
7. Pride	.59**	.63**	.64**	.56**	.78**	.72**	(.82)		
8. Gratitude	.60**	.62**	.63**	.56**	.79**	.71**	.73**	(.95)	
9. OI	.52**	.53**	.55**	.53**	.64**	.61**	.63**	.62**	(.90)
M	4.87	4.92	5.04	4.28	4.59	4.24	4.75	4.95	4.70
SD	1.23	1.28	1.32	1.43	1.45	1.49	1.31	1.51	1.35

Note. SIC = symmetrical internal communication; DL = direction-giving language; EL = empathetic language; ML = meaning-making language; OI = organizational identification. The numbers on the diagonal are reliability coefficients.
**Correlation is significant at $p < .001$ (two-tailed).

communication on organizational identification were fully mediated via a positive emotional culture. Zero-order correlations and descriptives for the major variables are reported in Table 3.

Discussion and Conclusions

As expected, this study unveils a strong, positive role of leader ML in eliciting a positive emotional culture within organizations. Symmetrical internal communication is also positively related to a positive emotional culture. A positive emotional culture is directly and positively linked to organizational identification and mediates the relationship between internal communications (i.e., leader ML, symmetrical internal communication) and organizational identification. However, we did not find a direct association between internal communications and organizational identification, indicating that a positive emotional culture fully mediated the relationships.

The full mediating function of a positive emotional culture supports the proximal and indispensable value of emotional culture in creating organizational identification. In other words, effective internal communications indirectly strengthen employee organizational identification by first and foremost fostering a positive emotional culture in which employees embrace and share. It is essentially how employees feel about the organization that produces the degree of identification (Schrodt, 2002).

Among one of the earliest empirical attempts to examine the linkages between communication, organizational culture, and organizational identification, findings of the study provide significant implications for management and business communication scholars. First, the study expanded the scope and offered a new perspective for research in organizational culture by focusing on the affective component of culture in the organization that is centered on how employees *feel*. It further provided strong empirical evidence regarding the impact of a positive emotional culture in building organizational identification, adding to the body of knowledge on why emotional culture matters (Barsade & O'Neill, 2014). Previous studies on cognitive culture argued that cultural artifacts such as organizational dress, totems, rituals, and ceremonials contribute to identification because these artifacts signal to individuals that they are part of the group (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). Extending this argument, this study highlighted that *emotional* culture provides a similar context for organizational members to define and experience themselves with a shared social identity that in turn fosters organizational identification (Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Turner, 2001). More specifically, the emotional, affective component of organizational culture filled with joy, companionate love, pride, and gratitude is a positive motivator for employees to strengthen their self-distinctiveness, self-esteem, and self-enhancement (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994). It is also likely that employees working in an environment with positive emotional culture tend to pay back their organizations by showing stronger identification as suggested by organizational support theory (Eisenberger et al., 2001).

Second, this study advanced our understanding that communication is fundamental to both the creation of culture and organizational identity (Grunig et al., 2002; Myers et al., 2016; Sriramesh et al., 1996). In discussing the relationships between culture and communication, a substantial body of literature has been dedicated to testing the role of organizational culture in influencing the practice of internal communications

(e.g., Buffington, 1988; Reber & Cameron, 2003). However, the relationship between organizational culture and internal communication practice is likely reciprocal (Berger, 2008; Sriramesh et al., 1996). In fact, a constructivist communication perspective has long held communication as a process through which culture is shaped, influenced, and altered (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, 2014). The study first highlighted the importance of leadership communication for organizational effectiveness by demonstrating the strong positive effects of leaders' use of ML in nurturing a positive emotional culture. It thus provided new insights into the efficacy of the MLT, an emerging approach in theorizing leadership communication from a linguistic and rhetoric perspective (M. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2012; J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). The present study further examined communications at organizational level and expanded the influence of symmetrical internal communication in cultivating a positive organizational *emotional* culture.

This study made further contributions in comparing two forms of internal communication—leader ML and symmetrical internal communication system—in the model with regard to their effects on positive emotional culture and organizational identification, and therefore provided a synergistic understanding of how communications at different levels in the organization interplay to affect organizational and employee outcomes. The value of the symmetrical internal communication mainly resides in *organizational* listening and feedback, which, if implemented properly, can narrow power distance between management and employees and elicit a positive emotional culture, as shown in this study. Scholars have identified organizational listening and feedback as key components of effective public relations (Broom & Sha, 2013; Macnamara, 2016, 2018). Though some may argue that leaders entail listening as part of their ML practice, organizational listening emphasizes systematic organizational-level efforts, such as building resources, technologies, skills, policies, as well as conducting research and consultation, to be more symmetrical, open, and interactive (Macnamara, 2016, 2018).

From a practical standpoint, the study findings offered strategic insights into how organizations and leaders should communicate to create a benign cultural environment filled with positive emotions and boost employees' sense of belonging in the organization. First and foremost, leaders at different levels in the organization should recognize the benefits of ML and utilize meaning-making, empathetic, and direction-giving languages appropriately. In particular, leaders should avidly communicate the vision and culture of the organization to enhance employees' collective understanding of *who we are, what we believe in, why we exist*, and *where we are going* as an organization. A compelling vision unites and motivates employees to strive for the same organizational purpose that goes beyond individual goals. Stories, anecdotes, and metaphors can be utilized in leaders' vision communication and storytelling to connect employees' individual goals to the organization's big picture. Furthermore, leaders' verbal communications should be genuine, caring, show compassion, empathy, and provide emotional support for employees. Such support is not necessarily limited to employees' work roles or task-related events but also can be pertinent to employees' personal life events (J. Mayfield & Mayfield, 2018). For instance, a manager can communicate

heartfelt concern about a serious illness in an employee's family. Additionally, leaders should provide clear verbal guidance and feedback to employees so that they get the right thing done in the right way.

Along with leaders' use of ML, the organization should invest resources, tools, technologies, and training to develop a two-way, employee-centered internal communication system that emphasizes trust, reciprocity, employee feedback, voice, and participation. Some examples include using organizational listening tools such annual surveys, internal social media platforms, management townhall meetings, or informal gatherings to gather employee feedback, address their concerns timely, and foster conversations and dialogue. More importantly, organizations and leaders should be devoted to creating an organizational culture where employee feelings are respected and cared for and promoting an atmosphere that is filled with joy, companionate love, pride, and appreciation. For instance, wearing big smiles to work every day communicates joy; using wordings of *we* and *us*, and gestures of hugs and proper touching communicates companionate love; celebrating employee milestones and achievements in the organization promotes a sense of pride; writing thank you notes and programs such as employee appreciation day contributes to fostering a culture of gratitude. Likewise, office décor and furnishings convey the appropriate emotions expected. To detect the prevailing emotional culture, organizations may consider adopting new technologies such as mobile apps to track employees' daily mood. For instance, an app called Niko Niko allows each team member to record a graphic assessment of their mood during each day so that, over time, management can spot the patterns of change in the moods of employees and teams. Eventually, the internal communication efforts and a positive emotional culture together create employees' shared identity and enhance their identification and deep bonding with the organization.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the implications and insights offered, the study encountered some limitations that can be addressed in future research. First, the study adopted a quantitative approach in examining emotional culture. While this helps verify a priori relationships drawn from previous literature, it focused more on the explicit and tangible manifestations of emotional culture, with little references to the espoused values and underlying assumptions. Future research could utilize qualitative and interpretive approaches such as observations, document analysis, and in-depth interviews to investigate how a positive emotional culture fosters organizational identification. Second, the cross-sectional survey design is limited in suggesting the order of influence among focal variables of communication, emotional culture, and organizational identification. It is likely that organizational identification forms prior to employee entering the organization. Organizational culture can also provide a context for internal communications to happen. To establish the true causal links among the variables in this study, future scholars should conduct experimental and longitudinal investigations. As culture and identity are formed over time; communication also happens on a day-to-day basis, it is worthwhile to examine how these factors interplay over time. Given the complex

nature of culture, future research should explore other dimensions of organizational culture (e.g., organizational culture profile, O'Reilly et al., 1991) in relation to communications and organizational identification.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID IDs

Cen April Yue (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9320-842X
Linjuan Rita Men (iD) https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5770-1647

Note

1. Dynata is a well-known market research and data collection company with 1.5 million research panel members in the United States. It has been utilized by scholars who study public relations and communication management.

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Author Biographies

Cen April Yue is a PhD candidate at the University of Florida's College of Journalism and Communications and Research Editor of the Organizational Communication Research Center at the Institute for Public Relations. Her research interest focuses on internal public relations, leadership communication, organizational change management, and relationship management.

Linjuan Rita Men is associate professor of Public Relations at the University of Florida. Her research interests include employee communications, leadership communication and organizational reputation management. She is Chief Research Editor of the Organizational Communication Research Center at the Institute for Public Relations.

Mary Ann Ferguson is a professor in the Department of Public Relations, College of Journalism and Communications, University of Florida. Her research interests are in corporate social responsibility, ethics, and public relationships.