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# **Psychological Safety at Amazon: A CCO Approach**

BY

KATHRYN K. ZYSKOWSKI

Bachelor of Arts, Communication Studies, University of Colorado

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THESIS

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\*

Dr. Joel Iverson, Chair

Communication Studies

Dr. Greg Larson

Communication Studies

Dr. Daisy Rooks

Sociology

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## Introduction

Amazon as a corporation is ubiquitous. What began as an online retailer for books grew into an eCommerce tech giant that regularly draws consistent critique from consumers and regulators alike—while remaining beloved for its convenience. National Public Radio (NPR) found that 92% of individuals who self-identified as online shoppers had purchased from Amazon (NPR, 2018). Online shopping became increasingly popular during the COVID-19 pandemic, which laid the groundwork for Amazon to become an integral part of daily life. Amazon is not only a giant in the retail space, but in the technology space as well. Amazon Web Services (AWS), the cloud computing and storage arm of the company, is inconspicuous and pervasive as it is used by Intuit (known for its TurboTax Software), Netflix (the original online streaming service), and Coca-Cola (the soda brand equated with American identity). Amazon is an almost universal retailer; and it is challenging to find a product or service that they do not sell or facilitate. In addition to viewing Amazon through the lens of consumer service, it is also critical to examine how Amazon operates through its expansive workforce.

Amazon currently employs almost 1 million people in the United States, making it the country's second-largest employer, with hundreds of thousands more employed worldwide and continually growing (NBCnews.com, 2021; Business Insider, 2020). Amazon has a troubling reputation for poor working conditions that employees at various levels have described as psychologically and physically problematic, including accounts of workers urinating in water bottles to meet work expectations. On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021, U.S. Representative Mark Pocan tweeted “Paying workers \$15/hr doesn’t make you a ‘progressive workplace’ when you union-bust & make workers urinate in water bottles” (Independent, 2021). In response, Amazon replied

“You don’t really believe the peeing in water bottles thing, do you? If that were true, nobody would work for us” (Twitter, 2021). This stark rejection from Amazon prompted an inundation of personal accounts and images of water bottles filled with urine from workers stating that this is a common occurrence. A UK warehouse study found that 74% of employees avoided using the restroom due to fear of missing productivity targets or being fired (Organise, 2018; Business Insider b, 2021). Even employees who hold a favorable view of Amazon as an employer reported that lack of restroom breaks and urinating in bottles and an inhumane but accepted part of the job (Business Insider, 2021). One Amazon employee stated, “They didn’t really force you to pee in bottles, you just didn’t really have time to go to the bathroom” (Business Insider a, 2021), noting that the highly structured and regulated work made taking restroom breaks unfeasible. While employees reported that Amazon did not explicitly instruct them not to take their breaks, they nevertheless expressed fear of retribution for doing so. Amidst promises to do better, Amazon also shifted blame for the working conditions to increased demand the organization faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether Amazon has been unaware or knowingly fosters these work conditions, the organization, its policies, and the experiences of its employees require further exploration and understanding.

While the working conditions within Amazon warehouses have garnered significant media attention, the conditions impacting white-collar corporate workers also require exploration. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reported that, on average, employees stay with their jobs for just over four years (BLS, 2020); meanwhile, the median tenure at Amazon is one year. Additionally, an Amazon recruiting video puts it bluntly: “You either fit here, or you don’t. You love it, or you don’t. There is no middle ground” (YouTube, 2015). The polarity is attributed by current and former employees to a work culture that has been described as bruising,

combative, punishing, back-stabbing, and terrifying by some, and invigorating and fast-paced by others. (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015; GeekWire, 2015). Former Amazon HR Executive Robin Andrulevich refers to this as “purposeful Darwinism” in the white-collar hiring process. They are constantly hiring and firing, and only the most committed superstar employees survive (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). In 2015, the New York Times (NYT) published a feature detailing the workplace culture at the corporate level of Amazon. Former employees referenced in the article report a virtually mandatory erosion of work-life boundaries, coupled with demeaning managerial feedback and ruthless attitudes towards advancement. Bo Olson, a former Amazon employee in the Books Marketing Department, stated, "Nearly every person I worked with, I saw cry at their desk" (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). Following the feature’s publication, in what appears to be yet another denial from the upper echelons of Amazon’s management, Bezos stated, “I strongly believe that anyone working in a company like the one described in the NYT would be crazy to stay. I know I would leave such a company” (Bezos, 2015).

Taking single instances and published stories of problems may not be indicative of the larger organizational culture in an organization the size of Amazon. However, employee experiences are not universally shared, therefore some reviews may highlight issues or grievances that not all employees share. Exploring employee accounts can cultivate an understanding of that organization. Further, while the blue-collar work in Amazon is more thoroughly documented, the white-collar work has not been as explored. The experience of white-collar work at Amazon requires further consideration. Further, while Amazon has long upheld the mission of “customer obsession” as the key to success, following the COVID-19 Pandemic, Amazon started recognizing that being employee-centric is also critical to that mission. Research conducted by Morning Consult (2020) found that 53% of respondents

indicated that they are “more likely to purchase from companies that treat their employees with flexibility and empathy.” Therefore, Amazon’s continued success as a business is in some part linked to their treatment of their employees, making employee engagement and sentiment worthy of examination.

Exploring complex organizations such as Amazon requires understanding how organizations are enacted or constituted. Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) Theory is built on the notion that organizations are communicated into existence rather than organizations being a site where communication occurs. CCO Theory posits that communication constitutes the organization and acts as an order-producing force (Van Every, 2000; McPhee, Poole, and Iverson, 2014). Members help create the organization through their communication practices and discourses within the organization. However, there is an implicit duality in this process as the member’s communication help build the organization but also creates meaning within and about the organization.

Additionally, CCO Theory postulates that certain communication practices are particularly powerful and interdependent. The Four Flows takes a structuration approach, which delineates system and structure (McPhee, Poole & Iverson, 2009). Structuration is defined as “the production and reproduction of a social system in interaction – is the process through which structures are constituted” (Giddens, 1986, McPhee, Poole & Iverson, 2009). The same structuration process by agents that produce and reproduce the social systems are also enacting organizations. The communicative practices of individual organizational members, for instance, are constituting the organization (Iverson, Myers, & McPhee, 2022). The Four Flows delineated these influential communication processes and helped demonstrate what happens with the organization on a micro and macro level. CCO Theory, and specifically the Four Flows, allow us

to take a more comprehensive view of the organization and demonstrate the impact that communication practices have on how the organization is structured, understood, and enacted.

This research contributes to scholarship regarding the communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) through the lens of psychological safety. It seeks to investigate how employee psychological safety relates to two of the Four Flows (McPhee & Zaug, 2001): membership negotiation and Institutional positioning. Psychological safety is an organizational culture marked by trust, openness, learning, and mutual respect while minimizing perceptions of risk (Grant, 2019). This paper proceeds by introducing psychological safety and building connections between psychological safety and existing communication scholarship on organizations to draw more significant implications for the study of CCO by applying McPhee and Zaug's Four Flows framework (2000). After analyzing relevant literature and describing proposed methods, I will present an analysis of Glassdoor reviews left by Amazon employees through psychological safety to identify CCO's potential for understanding Amazon's challenges.

## **Chapter 1: Literature Review**

### **Psychological Safety**

Paul Santagata, Head of Industry at Google, stated, "There's no team without trust" (Delizonna, 2017) when reflecting on the results of a multi-year study *Project Aristotle* that sought to determine what made Google's best teams tick. As a key component of trust, the study concluded that psychological safety is a crucial component of Google's highest-performing teams. The existence or absence of psychological safety in the workplace is one way to explore the experiences of employees in an organization such as Amazon. Additionally, psychological safety has impacts for the organization as a learning and adaptive organization.



Early foundations of psychological safety are derived from Khan (1990), who defines psychological safety as the individual “being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career” (p. 708). Kahn’s (1990) conceptualization of personal engagement in the workplace contributes to the idea that people bring their unique selves to work mentally, emotionally, and physically. Fear of consequences from managers and colleagues alike has historically acted as a deterrent that theoretically propels employees to produce high-quality work while reinforcing organizational norms and practices. Fearful employees are not speaking up, sharing ideas, or admitting mistakes: fear drives employees towards restraint, silence, and self-preservation. Therefore, Khan (1990) determined that trust in colleagues is essential in reducing the anxiety associated with interactions at work. Trust in colleagues is understood as confidence that a colleague’s future actions will be favorable to the individual’s personal interest (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman, 1995; Robinson, 1996; Edmondson, 1999). Employees of organizations may experience trust through psychological safety or fear and mistrust resulting in different workplaces and thus, potentially very different organizations.

Psychological safety can also foster an organization’s ability to learn. Team learning behavior is defined as “gaining and sharing skills, knowledge, and information about work through the interaction of team members” (Argote et al., 2001; Kim et al., 2020). Learning behavior has previously been understood in the workplace as deviant and vulnerable, given that organizations often do not view non-conforming behaviors or dissent favorably (Newman, Donohue & Eva, 2016; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Nemeth & Staw, 1989). Psychological safety is characterized by learning behavior such as seeking feedback, sharing knowledge, talking about errors, and experimenting, with the goal being that these behaviors foster conversation, creative

solutions, and prevent catastrophic failure (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is a shift in organizational behavior towards a culture that is more cooperative in nature.

In a psychologically safe group, each individual's responsibility is to help reinforce the learning culture by speaking up themselves and expecting the same from others (Edmondson, 2019, Grant, 2021). Error reporting, for example, is celebrated as an opportunity to learn from mistakes and prevent avoidable failures in the future, whereas silence is its unethical antithesis. Edmondson (1996) studied healthcare teams and found that groups with a climate of openness reported more errors but made fewer. Conversely, teams that were less open and more authoritarian in structure reported fewer mistakes but made more (Edmondson, 1996). The findings of Edmondson's (1996) study show that with more psychologically safe practices, teams were able to admit mistakes more freely and prevent these mistakes from happening in the future (Grant, 2021).

Additionally, Edmondson's (1996) study of patient care teams found that the relationship to consequences as tacitly understood by groups varied from team to team. Furthermore, Edmondson and Mogelof (2006) found differences in levels of psychological safety experienced at the team level and the organizational level. As highlighted in Edmondson's (1999) study, the psychological safety of one team does not inherently translate broadly; organizations do not adopt the psychological safety level of an individual unit. Psychological safety occurs at the crossroads of security and vulnerability. Through these practices team members feel comfortable taking risks and being wrong in front of peers and knowing that they will not face retribution. Psychological safety is understood as threat reduction; it seeks to minimize vulnerability and fear of consequence associated with behaviors that may be perceived as damaging to one's image.

Research on psychological safety emphasizes the importance of leaders modeling humility to promote learning behavior. Bolstrom (2021) indicates that the primary onus of creating psychologically safe work environments lies with Human Resources and individuals in leadership positions on an organizational level. Leaders can admit their limitations and mistakes while simultaneously celebrating and providing credit to their team members (Jia et al., 2018; WorkLife Grant, 2021). Leader humility has been deemed critical to promoting learning behavior and, by extension, creating psychological safety. Leaders who express humility acknowledge that they do not have all the answers; they express awareness of their shortcomings as well as how the capabilities of others can fill those gaps (Owens et al., 2013). Edmondson, Nembhard, and Tucker (2007) found three behavioral attributes associated with psychological safety and leadership: leaders are approachable and accessible, leaders acknowledge their fallibility, and leaders proactively invite input from their colleagues (Edmondson, Nembhard, & Tucker, 2007; Edmondson, 2019, p. 169). In this context, employees are more likely to feel empowered to speak up as this behavior is understood as appreciated, safe, and expected by those in power in their organization.

The importance of leader humility can also be illustrated by considering its alternative. Ashforth (1994) identifies petty tyranny as characterized by arbitrariness, self-aggrandizement, belittling subordinates, lack of consideration, a forcing style of conflict resolution, discouraging initiative, and noncontingent punishment (p. 757). These leadership behaviors undermine employees and the organization. They bolster employee fearfulness and makes employees less likely to engage with the organization in a way oriented to its goals. When leaders exhibit these behaviors, it leads to high frustration, stress, helplessness, and low leadership endorsement and team cohesiveness (Ashforth, 1994, p. 758), all factors that are counter-productive to

psychological safety. Edmondson (2019) demonstrates how fearful emotional climates perpetuated by bosses, perceived as all-knowing autocrats, can result in damaging preventable errors and reputational damage.

Edmondson (1999) builds on Kahn's individualistic definition to conceptualize team psychological safety and how groups of psychologically safe people may understand their workplace roles. Edmondson (1999) defines team psychological safety as "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" (p. 354), where the team climate is one of comfort, respect, and trust (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2019). While the feeling of psychological safety may be individual, as highlighted in Kahn's (1990) definition, Edmondson's (1999) description understands that individuals cannot have psychological safety within groups unless the group propagates it. While the leadership element is critical for setting the tone within the organization, it is also essential that the entire team continually fosters psychological safety. Underlying psychological safety is the concept of repetition, wherein these processes are not one-and-done but instead are constantly being redone and reinforced. Psychological safety must be enacted by the organization's leadership and membership, constituting a psychologically safe (or unsafe) workplace.

A psychologically safe workplace promotes a continuous learning climate built on candor and empathy but not devoid of accountability and expectations of achievement. Genuine psychological safety within an organization would require a continual enactment of relationships and perceptions of themselves within the process of working. Although psychological safety has been shown to propagate better outcomes (Edmondson, 1999), there are perceived risks and repercussions to exhibiting these learning behaviors in a workplace.

Critiques of psychological safety, while acknowledging its potential for positive impact, indicate that typical framing of it as solely positive is an undue oversimplification and that, at times, psychological safety may be counterproductive. These critiques are rooted in the notion that psychologically safe work climates stifle the behaviors they seek to promote, such as group voice and actively engaging in learning behaviors.

Scholars highlight that fear of termination is the through-line for understanding the potential negatives of psychologically safe work climates. For example, Deng et al. (2019) found that a psychologically safe work climate reduces risk-taking behavior due to reduced fear of failure. While salutary conceptions of psychological safety frame reducing fear of failure as a good thing that promotes risk-taking behavior, a lack of fear of failure can make taking risks to feel inconsequential. Deng et al. (2019) additionally point to accountability as an explanation for the duality of outcomes psychological safety can produce. Although there is some validity in asserting that the consequences of psychology in the workplace are all positive would be a generalization, Deng et al. (2019) fail to recognize their hypocrisy in stating that reducing the fear of failure in the workplace diminishes risk-taking behavior.

Varying levels of psychological safety coupled with different performance standards can yield different organizational cultures. Edmondson (2019) provides a breakdown of outcomes associated with performance standards in relationship to psychological safety (Figure 1.1). The duality that Deng et al. (2019) reference is situated more in the “Comfort Zone” (see Figure 1.1), where there is psychological safety but low standards, meaning employees feel safe in their roles but do not push toward high performance. Edmondson (2019) explicitly notes that psychological safety is not about being comfortable at work but about encouraging individuals and, ultimately, the organization to foster continuous learning and innovation as their cultural pillars. Therefore,

Deng et al. (2019) are correct in demonstrating that the presence of psychological safety does not inherently generate exceptional organizational outcomes; however, Edmondson's understanding and vision lie in the "Learning & High-Performance Zone" (See Figure 1.1). According to Edmondson, psychological safety, when coupled with high standards that the members of the team regularly reinforce, should present as a collaborative team, always learning and focused on innovation to solve complex problems.

*Figure 1.1 – How Psychological Safety Relates to Performance Standard*

	<b>Low Standards</b>	<b>High Standards</b>
<b><i>High Psychological Safety</i></b>	Comfort Zone	Learning & High-Performance Zone
<b><i>Low Psychological Safety</i></b>	Apathy Zone	Anxiety Zone

Grant (2021), Edmondson (2019), and Blomstrom (2021) feature Amazon as a company that models psychological safety through its internal processes. For example, Grant (2021) highlights processes that appear to foster a learning culture, such as allocating the first few minutes of a meeting for all present to read and review a meeting memo with the goal of ensuring that everyone has the same foundational knowledge. While this is likely a worthwhile practice, at times feedback from the media and other outside sources can present a less than rosy image of the organization. These scholars highlight how internal processes and feedback tools generate psychological safety and employee accountability, even though some employees report that these tools invoke fear. Psychological safety can undoubtedly be fostered through processes and practices; however, their implementation does not guarantee behavioral change or that employees feel psychologically safe. One distinction may be between two high performance possibilities. Edmondson (2019) notes that most organizations reside in the "Anxiety Zone" (see

Figure 1.1), where the performance standards are high, but the psychological safety level is low. The “Anxiety Zone” highlights the current paradigm of work, where the “Learning and High-Performance Zone” is aligned with an idealized future of work where employees feel and enact psychological safety while maintaining a culture of high expectations for performance. The apparent disconnect between the analysis of Amazon policies and processes creating psychological safety and the reports of the same processes leading to fear calls for further exploration.

Virtually all existing scholarship approaches psychological safety through organizational management or psychology lens. Many scholars elucidate the importance of quality communication practices within this literature, but this is often acknowledged rather than analyzed. Second, scholars often herald Amazon as having processes and policies that promote psychological safety. However, this sentiment is neither echoed in stories of employee experiences nor in employees’ feedback about Amazon. These differences between the policies and the stories of Amazon’s experiences justify further exploration. Since policy and process in the abstract do not make a psychologically safe workplace, I propose exploring employee accounts of Amazon to better understand the employee description of Amazon’s psychological safety.

Psychological safety is enacted through communication. Blomstrom (2021) notes that communication in the modern workplace is “buried under a mountain of stress, fear, and impression management and covered by acronyms and consulting speak” (p. 11). The underlying sentiment is that standard workplace communication is superficial and oriented towards self-preservation. Blomstrom (2021) notes that this communication style neglects to foster a deeper understanding of individual humanity and impedes building psychologically safe teams.

Psychologically safe teams are characterized by unrelenting, empathetic candor and driven by a mutual desire to achieve a common goal. Minimizing the perceived need for face-saving behavior can be fostered through understanding the humanity of the individuals on the team. Blomstrom (2021) states that everyone wants to have a positive experience at work: to be heard, valued, respected, and allowed to grow and learn (p. 22). While this inherently feels like common sense, the enactment and destruction of the engrained paradigm is a cumbersome but worthwhile undertaking grounded in communication. There are many ways that psychological safety may be exhibited within teams. The table (See figure 1.2) below attempts to demonstrate more concretely what delineates a psychologically safe workplace from a non-psychologically safe workplace in terms of team norms (Edmondson, Kramer, & Cook, 2004).

*Figure 1.2 - Team Norm Comparison based on Psychological Safety.*

<b>Team Norms</b>	
<b>Teams with Psychological Safety</b>	<b>Teams without Psychological Safety</b>
Taking the time to reflect on how we are doing as team and on our performance is part of work	Performance evaluation is the job of the team leader or divisional manager
We learn on the job through feedback, controlled experimentation and risk-taking, open debate and the analysis and discussion of errors, failures, and unexpected and unintended consequences	We learn by attending courses
Work is both a learning and execution problem	Mistakes, problems, and failures are due to employees deviating from policies and procedures. Ignorance in work-related matters is stigmatizing
It is unavoidable that there will be mistakes, omissions, and problems in the course of our work. Being imperfect and fallible is normal. Ignoring or hiding mistakes and failures is not acceptable.	Admissions of errors, lack of knowledge or skill have adverse implications for the individual involved
Dissenting views are appreciated and encouraged.	Outlying views are ignored. Dissent is seen as disruptive as is unwelcome.
We are on the lookout for ways to improve our work	Improvement and change are initiated externally to the team.



We seek feedback frequently from a range of stakeholders	We think, analyze and plan with the aim of convincing one another and senior management without testing our thoughts, analyses and plans.
Everyone's input, views, feedback, contribution is valued and appreciated irrespective of rank, status, or job title.	Rank, status and job title primarily determine whose view matters the most when discussing work matters.

Components of the non-psychologically safe teams are more aligned with what we have become accustomed to as part of a modern workplace. The assertion “we learn by attending courses” (Edmondson, Kramer, & Cook, 2004) is analogous to the standard training videos that new employees often engage with as part of their onboarding process. Similarly, job title and status being paramount in decision-making is a norm regularly reinforced in organizations with internal hierarchy and organizational charts. The norms established in psychologically safe and non-psychologically safe teams are communicatively constructed, reinforced, and upheld. Thus, psychological safety should be reflected in employee accounts of Amazon. These accounts not only reflect the meaning of the employee experience, but also contribute to the meaning of Amazon as an organization.

### **Communicative Constitution of Organizations & The Four Flows**

The fundamental link between Communicative Constitution of Organizations (CCO) and psychological safety is the understanding that the organization members mutually construct organizations in practice, communication, and culture. Psychological safety is enacted through communication, making CCO an ideal approach to elucidate how psychological safety is enacted. Much of the literature recognizes the importance of cultivating psychological safety at the organizational level and focuses primarily on team dynamics. Organizations are deemed psychologically safe or unsafe based mainly on policies and processes formally set up. However, research examining how employees experience and communicate psychological safety is needed.

This study focuses on the accounts provided by current and former employees regarding psychological safety. Additionally, CCO approaches recognize that the organizations such as Amazon do not exist separately from their employees, but are enacted through that communication. Therefore, in part, this study seeks to bridge psychological safety on the individual level with the organization to conceptualize psychological safety's impact on the enactment of the organization itself.

Previous models viewed organizations as sites of communication rather than communicatively constructed entities. Psychologist Karl Weick (1979) fostered a paradigmatic shift from examining organizations as static entities but rather as dynamic and continually being created and reconstructed through sensemaking processes. The underlying foundation of Weick's theorizing is that organizations are built, iterated, and evaluated as an active process. Weick outlines the dynamic process foundations in sensemaking works well with Giddens (1976) conceptualization of hermeneutics and agency. Giddens' (1976) hermeneutic interaction focuses on how an individual's understanding of their social situation can produce and reproduce the behavior. Giddens (1976) indicates that anticipation of given reactions can influence the activity of an individual.

### ***CCO Perspective***

Building on the theory of Giddens, McPhee and Zaug (2009) define an *organization* as: "a social interaction system, influenced by prevailing economic and legal institutional practices, including coordination action and interaction within and across a socially constructed system boundary, manifestly directed toward a privileged set of outcomes" (p.28). This definition recognizes that organizations exist within larger structures that have unavoidable impacts on their construction such as legal constraints, social responses to the organization, and the

availability of resources. The legal system, for example, demonstrates constraints that organizations face that may be inflicted from outside of the organization, such as Amazon's increasing and ongoing issues with antitrust regulations (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2021). However, this definition also acknowledges social construction, which implies that organizations inherently require collaboration and mutually identified and agreed-upon boundaries. Finally, this definition recognizes that the choices made within organizations seek to foster the desired outcome, and the communication processes constructed within the organization should be tailored towards those goals.

From this definition of organization, McPhee and Zaug (2009: 28-29) espouse four sentiments regarding CCO: first, communication has a constitutive force, second complex organizations beget increased complexity in processes of communication, third not all communication within organizations is organizational communication, and finally, communicatively constructing organizations is an expansive process. These general assumptions demonstrate that organizations are built through social process of communication, not separately existing entities. Thus, understanding the communication about an organization such as Amazon participates in the process of enacting Amazon as meaningful. Building off these assumptions regarding CCO, McPhee and Zaug (2009) identify four methods of constituting communication processes for organizations referred to as the *Four Flows*: membership negotiation, organizational self-structuring, activity coordination, and institutional positioning. They identify the Four Flows as such because they are “interactive, enduring, multiform, and multcurrent” (McPhee, 2015, p. 488). The Four Flows work together to constitute the organization, and their elements and outcomes are often interdependent and intertwined.

While all four flows are always present for organizations, psychological safety focuses mostly on the employees (membership) and whether or not the organization is a psychologically safe place (institutional positioning). This study will primarily focus on institutional positioning and membership negotiation as they are understood through employee feedback. Amazon has long been organizationally and operationally opaque, with employees being required to sign lengthy NDAs and most information coming from either sanitized internal documents or reporting and feedback from former employees. Ultimately, this makes it challenging to gather information regarding what internal processes may look like within Amazon. Examining this information through pre-existing, anonymized employee feedback allows us to access information that is not restricted by the communicative confines of the organization. Additionally, the anonymity of reviews minimizes the risk for employees who share candid feedback about the organization. This feedback provides accounts of the experiences of Amazon white-collar workers, and offers unique insights that employees are willing to share. For a better understanding of the way these accounts constitute the flows of an organization, the four flows require explanation with particular emphasis on the two featured in this study: membership negotiation and institutional positioning.

### ***Membership Negotiation***

Membership negotiation is the communication process of organizational gatekeeping. While this project only focuses on some employees and not all members, those accounts do enact the meaning of membership for them. Generally, the member's relationship to the organization matters, as the members, their agency, and the communication they facilitate are responsible for the organization's existence. Organizational membership is a mutual decision between the members (prospective or existing) and the organization itself where the relationship is

established, maintained, or altered (McPhee & Zaug, 2001). This flow is readily visible in the earliest stages of potential membership, such as recruitment and hiring, where entry into the organization is the focus of the negotiation. Within this process, the organization must iteratively ask and answer: "What does it mean to be a member"?

Membership negotiation can be readily understood during the early stages of organizational membership, such as hiring and onboarding. The primary components of onboarding processes are socialization and integrating new employees into the organization, which is usually fostered through knowledge sharing. McPhee and Zaug (2009) conceptualize membership negotiation as a crossing of organizational boundaries, where communication situates individuals on one side of a boundary as well as demonstrates implicit understanding of members' relationship with the organization. For example, McPhee and Zaug (2009) highlight question asking as informational requests that demonstrate these boundaries clearly. Simply put, an individual asking a question of another establishes a boundary wherein one person as a member is understood as needing information and the other as someone who has that information. As knowledge is shared and employees go through their lifecycle of meaningful experiences within the organization, membership and its meaning are communicatively enacted.

These boundaries also can help understand an individual's relationship to their organization. Andrews, Blaser, and Coller (1999) indicate that individuals who are integral to the information flow within organizations tend to identify more strongly with the organization itself rather than their colleagues. Thus, the level of engagement with boundaries and one's relationship to facilitating information exchange can be more critical to identifying with the organization than position title. A member's role within an organization is not dictated solely by their title but rather is grounded in role enactment. Organizational members produce and

reinforce their understanding of what it is to be a member, thus cultivating the larger culture through their communication. Therefore, the individuals who engage in more communicative processes across the organization play a larger role in communicatively constructing the organization.

Scholars also note the intersection of membership negotiation with identity and identification. Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998) define identity as “a set of rules and resources that functions as an anchor for who we are” and identification as interactions and behavior that demonstrate one’s attachment (p.303). Further, identity is regionalized, and people will pull from their own set of resources and rules (beliefs, habits, and experience) when interacting with others. Members will seek to communicate, reinforce, and enact elements that align with their identity and how they understand the organization. For example, McPhee and Iverson (2009) discuss *Comunidad* and how potential members may not have questions (i.e., will not need to engage with that informational boundary) as they are already ingrained in and identify with the community. The process of membership negotiation is variable from organization to organization and can depend on existing relationships and identification with the organization.

While the primary purpose of membership negotiation in this project is not to explore identity, it does serve to highlight how individuals engage and understand themselves within the workplace and in the boundary dynamics of Amazon. Membership negotiation is enacted through workplace experiences. Together, those workplace experiences also contribute to constituting Amazon as an organization. By exploring the discourse of workplace experiences of Amazon, the relationships between membership negotiation and psychological safety can be explored.

### ***Organizational Self-Structuring***

One of the flows not examined in this study, but is essential to organizations, demonstrates how structures are enacted. Organizational self-structuring pertains to rudimentary job tasks and shapes the relationships and norms that dictate the enactment of those tasks. Self-structuring within the organization can take on formal and informal appearances. This can be official documents, company policy, charters, mission statements but may be as informal as verbal announcements. Organizational self-structuring not only serves to establish and legitimize the organization legally but also helps dictate how resources such as people, time, and money will be utilized.

The messages, policies, handbooks, and other documentation produced through the self-structuring process can be “structural substitutions for communication” (Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott, 2008; McPhee, 1985). Members can rely on and reference existing structure as a resource at times in lieu of having direct communication with another member. It can also serve to educate those outside of the organization as to what the inter-workings of the operation look like or should look like.

Although organizational self-structuring is not the primary focus of this study, it is important to highlight the structural dynamics that could impact enacting psychological safety in the workplace. Organizational self-structuring creates boundaries within the organization. These boundaries reflect the organization's current constitution and ultimately reflect its larger values. While this study will engage with other flows, organizational self-structuring is uniquely poised as a starting point for larger internal change that future work around psychological safety could explore.

### ***Activity Coordination***

Activity Coordination covers the spontaneous need to coordinate with others. The activity coordination flow is defined by McPhee and Zaug (2001) as “interacting to align or adjust local work activities” (p. 586). McPhee and Zaug (2009) note that many organizational processes and attitudes can emerge in activity coordination. Activity coordination asks: How do members generate order to constitute the organization (McPhee, 2015)? This process is iterative and reflexive and is utilized to amend the organization's work processes and problem-solving. Additionally, an underlying assumption of activity coordination is that the individuals within the organization are interdependent and can use activity coordination to complete or not complete tasks and pursue changes in power dynamics. Activity coordination can also be assisted through objects. Okhuysen and Bechky (2009) highlight how objects such as checklists, planners, diagrams can bolster a shared understanding of what a given task requires. These objects help create structure that can inform how a task is to be completed and who needs to be engaged to complete these tasks.

Activity coordination demonstrates the importance of interaction and interdependence between team members on being an agile, adaptable organization. While psychological safety and workers' experiences undoubtedly impact activity coordination as a flow, it is less direct and would require direct observation as it happens spontaneously, which is beyond this project's scope. Rather, this study examines accounts of psychological safety.

### ***Institutional Positioning***

Institutional positioning is the flow that focuses on how the organization is situated in the larger societal landscape. Institutional positioning highlights that organizations do not exist in vacuums but instead require engagement with other entities outside of the organization, such as government agencies, customers, and competitors (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). McPhee, Poole, and



Iverson (2014) define institutional positioning as “communication positioning the organization in larger social systems” (p. 80). In part, the organization is constituted through communication processes such as public relations, coordinating with other organizations, and how members discuss and position the organization to external stakeholders.

Institutional positioning is two-fold in that it is understood through information created by the organization and is also dependent on the external perception of the organization. Bruschella and Bisel (2018) and Bean and Buikema (2015), in their studies of terrorist organizations (ISIL and al-Qa'ida, respectively), note how the four flows can influence perceptions of organizational legitimacy. The premise of the Four Flows is that working together, each flow plays a critical role in constituting the organization. According to Bruschella and Bisel (2018), strategies for institutional positioning are materially bound, aligned with McPhee's (2004) assertion that texts are critical to organizational construction. Objects produced and utilized through the activity coordination flow are then codified through organizational self-structuring. They can lend credence to an institution's perceived legitimacy and thus impact their institutional positioning.

Organizations, like their members, have a face that they seek to protect and inherently understand the value of curating their image and status. Outside of materials produced by the organization, the primary onus for organizational face maintenance is its internal members. Internal members influence institutional positioning in multiple ways. McPhee (2015) highlights that it is easy to misidentify the organization as having agency, but it is actually the individual agents within the organization that have agency as they engage in the communication processes with the external entities. Communication processes such as managing relationships with investors, labor unions, and the media, although they may be conducted on behalf of the

organization, are ultimately enacted by individuals on behalf of the organization, not the organization itself. These previously outlined types of interactions are considered “sanctioned interactions,” where an individual communicates on behalf of the organization to promote a positive organizational face. Sanctioned interactions are paramount to positive institutional positioning, as demonstrating security and legitimacy can affect an organization's ability to advance its goals through cultivating meaningful partnerships, membership negotiation, and recruitment.

The process of institutional positioning occurs not only in official capacities but also unofficially, which Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott classify as “non-sanctioned interactions” (p. 310). Non-sanctioned interactions are communication that occurs with individuals outside of the organization about the organization. For example, when members speak to friends or family about work, they are communicatively constructing an image of the organization to those people. They build, reinforce, or shift a reputation while also illustrating their relationship to the organization. This study examines non-sanctioned interactions, with the underlying assumption that this type of interaction lends itself more to candor. Non-sanctioned interactions have a lower possibility of repercussions for the individual within the organization. Meaning speaking to a colleague or media outlet candidly about an individual’s perception (especially if negative) could lead to disciplinary action, whereas having that same conversation with a friend likely does not carry the same weight as it relates to job security.

This study focuses on the flows of institutional positioning and membership negotiation. Analyzing non-sanctioned interactions should elucidate how individuals understand themselves within the workplace and how they understand and situate the workplace in the more significant social strata. Both flows intersect with psychological safety as a membership experience and the

meaning of Amazon as an organization. By exploring the discourses of these interactions, the relationships between institutional positioning, membership negotiation, and psychological safety is further explored.

### **Four Flows & Psychological Safety**

Knowledge, innovation, and problem-solving characteristics seem vital in the modern work organization and offer a competitive advantage in the ever-changing landscape. With these traits being so highly valued, organizations must cultivate collaborative environments where communication supporting these traits is both protected and encouraged. Psychological safety is "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 354), but what is considered a risk may vary from team to team based on their norms. Teams with high psychological safety and high standards have been shown to beget better organizational outcomes, demonstrating the importance of employees feeling safe and supported in their workplaces.

Much of psychological safety literature does not focus centrally on communication as an avenue for fostering psychological safety in the workplace. However, quality communication is often critical and present in psychologically safe workplaces. For example, in Edmondson's (1996) study of healthcare teams, openly and regularly reporting mistakes is a communication process impacted by the team norms. CCO theory, specifically the Four Flows, seeks to understand and demonstrate how communication cultivates these team norms and the larger organization. Ultimately, the Four Flows should also provide insight into how communication can shift and improve norms and the organization.

This study focuses on the two flows of institutional positioning and membership negotiation, which are inherently intertwined. In a psychologically safe work environment,

membership negotiation is the first opportunity to foster inclusion as it is the initial expression of a desire to belong and contribute. A potential member is self-selecting into the membership negotiation process by applying for a position. A company's reputation, based partly on the results of its institutional positioning, can seriously impact potential members' decision about whether or not to pursue membership. According to a study conducted by Harvard Business Review (2016) the top three factors that contribute to an organization having a bad reputation are job security, dysfunctional teams, and poor leadership. These three factors bear a striking resemblance to the norms of teams without psychological safety (See Figure 1.1). The goal of psychological safety is to improve the organization for both the employees and the organization.

Amazon's size and reach alone make it a worthwhile topic of study. In addition to being the second-largest employer in the United States, Amazon is also the largest tech company globally (Muhammad, 2022). While existing reporting certainly does not offer a comprehensive view of the Amazon employee experience, it points to troubling themes of employee insecurity and unhappiness. By examining the accounts of employees for discourse around psychological safety, this study also explores the meanings of membership in Amazon communicated by the white-collar employees of Amazon. Further, these accounts demonstrate the way the employees position Amazon itself as an organization, thus engaging in communicative constitution of the organization.

By examining Amazon and psychological safety through a Four Flows lens, this study seeks to provide insight on the following research questions:

**Research Questions:**

RQ1: How do employees express institutional positioning and membership negotiation when reviewing Amazon?

RQ2: How do employees reviewing Amazon express psychological safety?

## **Chapter 2: Methodology**

### **Data Collection.**

Data collection was structured around online reviews from Glassdoor. Glassdoor is an online public forum for current and former employees to report positions, salaries, and ranks and anonymously comment on the organization and their experience. Glassdoor's mission is "to help people everywhere find a job and company they love" and promote transparency about organizational culture and compensation to help people make educated decisions about their careers (Glassdoor, n.d.). Amazon has over 89,000 reviews active on Glassdoor and reviews are filterable by location, employment type/job status, primary language, and job function. To gain access to examine and filter reviews, users can create a free account. Though submitted for IRB approval, IRB determined this project did not require IRB review or approval because the proposed study did not fall into the category of "research involving human subjects" as defined in 45 CFR 46.102(e) and (l).

Glassdoor reviews are an excellent way to examine the two flows of institutional positioning and membership negotiation. Glassdoor reviews are left by individuals that are either actively involved in or have departed the organization they are reviewing, and as such would be categorized as "non-sanctioned interactions" (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2018). From a membership negotiation standpoint, Glassdoor data situates the reviewer across a communicative boundary wherein they fulfill the informational request from those asking, "What is it like to work at this company?" Similarly, this data informs how individuals are positioning themselves and the organization openly and in a publicly available manner. According to studies conducted by Glassdoor, 70% of job seekers look at company reviews before accepting a position

(Glassdoor, 2016), and 69% of job seekers would decline a position at a company that has a bad reputation (Inc, 2015). This shows that the data in these reviews is actively sought after by prospective employees and helps employees make sense of companies in the larger hiring landscape.

Numerous other studies have utilized Glassdoor reviews as data in order to examine and understand various concepts such as organizational culture and larger trends within an industry. For example, a study conducted by Swain et al. (2020) used Glassdoor reviews to examine and evaluate organizational culture using both a quantitative assessment and qualitatively identified keywords in a similar manner that this study will seek to identify themes. Bergstrom (2022) used Glassdoor to examine gaming industry work culture, and similarly identified themes from employee reviews.

Glassdoor engages in the “give-to-get” method of collecting reviews, meaning that individuals who want to use the website for their personal job search must contribute content to Glassdoor in writing a review or reporting a salary (Cision, 2017, Swain et. al, 2020). Company ratings are based on a five-point Likert-type scale and reviews are made up of a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions (see *Figure 1.3*). Glassdoor found that their “give-to-get” policy made ratings more evenly distributed across the scale and reduced polarization bias (Cision, 2017, Swain, 2020). Polarization bias is a common occurrence with online reviews, with research showing that the distribution of reported opinions is highly polarized, with very few reviews falling in the moderate range (Harvard Business Review, 2018). Glassdoor’s intentional efforts to minimize polarization bias in their reviews made them more appealing as a possible venue to examine employees’ perceptions and the ways in which they position the company to the outside world (PRNewswire.com, 2017).

*Figure 1.3 - Breakdown of Questions Posed in Glassdoor Reviews*

<b>Question</b>	<b>Measurement</b>
Overall Rating	5 Point Likert Scale
Work Life Balance Rating	5 Point Likert Scale
Culture and Values Rating	5 Point Likert Scale
Career Opportunities Rating	5 Point Likert Scale
Compensation and Benefits Rating	5 Point Likert Scale
Recommendation	Yes, No, Neutral, Blank
CEO Approval	Yes, No, Neutral, Blank
Business Outlook	Yes, No, Neutral, Blank
Pros	Text Response Field
Cons	Text Response Field
Advice to Management	Text Response Field

Historically, currently employed individuals are less likely to report negatively about the company they actively work for. The driving force is the fear that their comments could be traced back to them and ultimately jeopardize their position within the company. With Amazon being such a large organization and with individuals being able to self-select specific demographic criteria to include, the structure of Glassdoor reviews allows for more anonymity than perhaps other research mediums. Other forums such as Yelp and Google Reviews require more steps, such as creating a separate email address in order to remain anonymous. Glassdoor removes this step by automatically anonymizing every review.

### **Glassdoor Analytics and Reviewer Information.**

The filters applied to narrow the data set were: Full-time (Employment Type), Seattle, WA Area (Location), English (Review Language), Business (Job Function) and sorted the reviews from newest to oldest. Within these criteria there were 606 reviews, however this study applied a date-specific range of 2018 – 2019 to focus on a pre-COVID-19 timeframe. Once the date-specific range was applied, there were 59 reviews to analyze.

I examined and categorized Glassdoor reviews from current and former white-collar Amazon employees in 2018 and 2019 in the Pacific Northwest, where Amazon’s headquarters is located. Amazon’s Seattle Headquarters was the first company Headquarters for Amazon, and therefore the culture that exists at the organization foundations may be replicated elsewhere. As previously mentioned, while there is reporting as well as academic work that centers on white-collar workers at Amazon, their circumstances are traditionally less sensationalized than for blue-collar workers. Although there is less reporting of white-collar work at Amazon, there are still articles and exposes written each year about Amazon’s corporate culture. I chose to examine the time frame of 2018 – 2019 as it was still a contemporary time frame but occurred prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic. I chose to not examine Amazon during the COVID-19 Pandemic as it was an unprecedented time in business and workplace had changed in light of governmental work-from-home orders.

Of the 59 reviews that fell into the aforementioned criteria, 80% were left by individuals who were currently employed by Amazon (See Figure 1.4).

*See Figure 1.4 - Breakdown of Reviews by Employment Status*

<b>Employment Status</b>		
Current Employee	48	81.36%
Former Employee	11	18.64%



The average rating for the quantitative questions are reported in Figure 1.5 below. For each of the 6 rating questions, reviewers rated Amazon as either average or above average across all criteria, with Compensation & Benefits being the most highly rated amongst them (*Figure 1.5*). In this specific data set, the ratings reflect the sentiment of the organization that is neutral to positive (See Figure 1.5).

*Figure 1.5- Average Rating of Organization Through Quantitative Fields*

<b>Average Ratings</b>	
Overall	4.15
Work Life Balance	3.30
Culture and Values	3.89
Career Opportunities	4.30
Compensation & Benefits	4.32
Senior Management	3.93

The primary data source for this study was the open text response fields that asked reviewers to comment on pros, cons, and advice to management. Responses to these fields varied in length, from bullet-pointed fragments to short paragraphs. A benefit of this approach is that each reviewers highlighted what was most poignant about their experience with Amazon with no external prompting or probing. Reviewers craft their responses without outside influence from manager, researcher, or other guiding force. While having access to the Likert scale rated elements is useful, text fields allow more in-depth insight related to the experience of being and Amazon employee.

### **Analysis of Data**

The reviews were collected and compiled into a master document, and each review was assigned a reference number. While this study utilized Glassdoor reviews rather than participant

interviews, the overall goal was to use data from individuals to understand the nature of their lived experiences with Amazon as an employer. Within this conceptualization of CCO, there are four distinct flows: (i) membership negotiation, (ii) activity coordination, (iii) organizational self-structuring, and (iv) institutional positioning, however, this study focused on specifically the membership negotiation and institutional positioning flows. Data in this study was examined through content analysis. Content analysis is intended to identify and interpret meaning in communication by isolating segments of the data that represent poignant concepts and allows the researcher to build a framework (Kleinheksel, 2020). This study examined the two flows of membership negotiation and institution positioning while understanding that additional concepts and conclusions may emerge from the data analysis. In addition to the two flows, psychological safety was added as a category. These initial categories were deemed “low-inference” as they were predetermined by the descriptive framework (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019, p. 316.) Although this study began with three defined categories as established by the study’s theoretical framework, additional themes were also added based on the results of deductive Nvivo coding of Glassdoor reviews.

While significant research exists on CCO and psychological safety, none has examined a potential connection between the two constructs. Psychological safety is inherently a communicative process as building practices and policies. CCO provides a lens to understand how policies surrounding psychological safety help to enact the larger organization.

### **Chapter 3: Results**

Some of the categories associated with this project are low-inference, membership negotiation, and institutional positioning, derived from the Four Flows. From these two categories, axial coding was used to determine how different themes may be intertwined with

existing categories. This data recounts Amazon employees' reported experiences with being a part of the organization with guidance from a predetermined, simplistic questionnaire.

The analysis of these 59 Glassdoor reviews produced six distinct themes under the two flows, membership negotiation and institutional positioning (See Figure 1.6). Four of the six themes were identified in relationship to membership negotiation. They identified characteristics and traits about the organizations and its members that help inform what it is like to be a member of Amazon as an organization. The themes that emerged from the institutional positioning category, reflected the differences between how positive and negative conceptions of Amazon are communicated in reviews.

*Figure 1.6 – Thematic Breakdown by Flow*

<b>Flow</b>	<b>Theme</b>
Membership Negotiation	Smart People
	Fast Paced
	No Work Life Balance
	Intense Work Environment
Institutional Positioning	Negative Referencing Horror Stories
	Ambiguous Positive Positioning

### **Membership Negotiation**

Membership negotiation is the communication process of managing boundaries related to who is involved with the organization. Four themes emerged from the data that align with membership negotiation: smart people, fast paced, no work life balance, intense work environment.

#### ***“Smart People”***

The most prominent theme that emerged from the data was *smart people*, appearing in 19 of the 59 reviews examined. Many of the reviewers stated explicitly that they work with “smart people”. A relatively simple theme, “Smart People,” indicated that reviewers understood their

colleagues as intelligent people. However, there were discrepancies across reviews about whether this was framed as a benefit or a warning. Reviewer #26, a Director who had been with the company for over eight years at the time of review, stated: “Smart and dedicated people. Will root out low performers.” This review highlights traits that Amazon values in its employees and the resulting action when those characteristics are not exhibited. The reviewers comment that low performers are rooted out indicates that a membership determination was made either partly or entirely due to misalignment with what Amazon understands as a quality member.

### ***“Fast-Paced”***

“Fast-Paced” was the second most prominent theme from the data, appearing in 12 reviews. “Fast-Paced” is another intuitive theme. “Fast-Paced” indicates that work components can require agility and that workplace operations happen at high speed, usually accompanied by the need to complete work quickly. Similar to other themes, while the underlying theme remained intact, the responses to the theme were varied across reviews ranging from reportedly thriving in a fast-paced work environment to those who feel unable to keep up. Taking a positive approach, a current and relatively new (less than a year) Regional Manager, Reviewer #46, wrote: “It’s very fast-paced, and things change rapidly--this could also be a pro if you like that sort of environment.” While this reviewer identified fast-paced as a con, they also acknowledge that this could be seen as a benefit or pro for someone else. This theme is framed more around organizational fit than a distinctive sentiment amongst reviewers. Fast-paced is understood and an accepted part of the organization, for better or worse, rather than a negotiable or avoidable experience element. As referenced in the “pro” column by Reviewer #25, a current business development manager who has been with the organization for over five years, stated: “Autonomy, fast-moving, strong leadership support. Overall, depending on the area of the

business, you can find a productive and fulfilling role at Amazon.” This reviewer understood the fast pace required by Amazon’s working environment as a benefit to their overall experience as productive and fulfilling.

### *“No Work-Life Balance”*

“No Work-Life Balance” was another theme that emerged but was also able to be anticipated given Amazon’s existing reputation. References to “Work-Life Balance” appeared 13 times within the dataset. Reviewer #31, a current employee and senior product manager with Amazon for over three years, stated: “It can be hard to prioritize personal time against work you want to accomplish. You need to set your own goals for how you want to achieve work/life harmony.” Unlike other themes, this review puts the primary responsibility for managing work-life balance on the individual rather than the organization. Whereas other reviewers stated their sentiments more bluntly, such as Reviewer # 52, a Director actively employed at Amazon for over five years, said: “Work-life balance is horrible.” More reviewers aligned with this understanding of work-life balance or lack thereof. Work-life balance seems to be understood less as a personal boundary and more as an unspoken job requirement. Even reviews that mentioned work-life balance in a more neutral manner, indicated that it can be challenging to maintain and that the expectations of the job make it difficult to do so.

### *“Intense Work Environment”*

Another theme that emerged from the data was *Intense Work Environment*, appearing in 9 reviews. According to reviewers, *Intense Work Environment* is an undesirable amalgamation of high stress, pressure, competition, and minimal downtime.

Reviewer #10, a former manager who spent over three years at Amazon, described the work environment in the following way:

*“Work and stress levels are through the roof – which would be fine if the work was valuable and beneficial to career growth. Unfortunately, that’s not the case here. I have seen employees work through serious illness, miss family funerals, sob or sleep at their desks – it’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen. And this is at corporate!”*

This review portrays the negative possibilities of having an intense work environment. However, not every reviewers viewed this as a negative; some viewed it as a working style that may be right for some and not others. For example, in the “Con” section, Reviewer #43, a Contracts Manager whom Amazon currently employed, stated:

*“Very little downtime - this is not necessarily a draw-back, but if you are used to having lots of free time during the working hours, you are going to get a rude-awakening at Amazon. If you (really) like being busy and thrive under pressure, this is the place for you!”*

Regardless of whether it was framed positively or negatively, the reviewers seemed to demonstrate a consensus as to the characteristics of the work environment. No instances contradicted the tenets of the *Intense Work Environment*. In contrast, other organizational factors such as quality of communication, opportunities for advancement, or learning potential garnered more varied sentiments. For membership negotiation, the reviews communicate an intense and stressful work environment, but do not agree on whether those conditions are psychologically unsafe. The meanings of membership communicated in the reviews provide a consistent image of Amazon membership by identifying the same underlying themes regardless of sentimental association. Institutional positioning, on the other hand, focuses on the organization itself, and how the organization is framed in the larger societal context rather than just individual employee perception.

### **Institutional Positioning**

Institutional positioning focuses on how organizations situate themselves in the larger landscape within society and how the organization is understood outside of itself. There were two themes that emerged related to institutional positioning being: negative referencing horror stories and positive feedback is indirect.

### ***Negative Referencing Horror Stories***

Reviews that discussed Amazon's institutional positioning tended to skew more negative. Specifically referencing existing media or a ubiquitous reputation, reviewer #42, a Business Development Manager who had been with Amazon for less than a year, wrote: "You will work hard, but you already knew that otherwise you wouldn't be reading the review." The reviewer assumes that people reading her review already have an understanding of what Amazon is like as an organization. This reviewer tries to demonstrate that the dominant narrative of what being an employee at Amazon is like is so pervasive that it does not need to be explained.

Other reviewers, however, explicitly tied the content of their review to existing media that attempted to shift or reinforce the public perception of Amazon. Reviewer 9, a former Buyer who had been with Amazon for over three years, wrote:

*"You have excellent people in the ranks- stop treating them so badly. Make 'encourages others and brings out their best' a key leadership principle. You're on track for another NY Times article, or worse, if you don't fix this massive problem."*

While this review references a specific piece of reporting, other reviews plead with the reader to "believe the horror stories." Therefore, this discourse of institutional positioning presented from the data in part relies on the reader's anticipated and tacit awareness of Amazon.

### *Ambiguous Positive Positioning*

While many of the negative reviews were explicit about employees' experiences and perceived organizational shortcomings, the positive feedback in the reviews tended to be more tacit and indirect. Positive feedback was more superficial referencing often a bulleted list of corporate buzzwords that offered little depth when seeking to understand the organization. Reviewer # 41, a former buyer who had worked at Amazon for over five years, simply stated "Great place to work at." Similarly, a current Retail Vendor Manager who was working with Amazon for over a year wrote "- Smart People -Direct Influence on your business – relevance and opportunity." Positive reviews were often characterized by sweeping statements that informed very little about the experience of being an Amazon employee, the dynamics of the organization, or specific details driving the review.

Reviews that were not in bulleted list format were more conceptual, indirect, and relied on the tacit knowledge of the reader. Reviewer #33, an active Senior Manager with over five years of tenure states: "Amazon is a great place for innovators. We are always pushing the boundaries of what is possible and we value employees who are able to help chart the course of the future. Amazon is also filled with high performers who continually raise the bar." While this review is certainly positive, it is conceptual, aspirational, and speaks more about the organization generally than focusing on the individual's own experience. Additionally, it forces the reader to rely on their interpretation and definition of certain terminology such as "innovator" or "high performer". Many positive reviews seemed to regurgitate a surface-level positive understanding of the organization, while failing to engage more thoroughly on why specific elements were identified as worthy of praise and understood as positive. Most positive reviews, in their concise construction and matter-of-fact tone, give the impression that the reviewer has the expectation that others will inherently trust their positioning of Amazon. For example, if a reviewer has a



positive view of Amazon, then they believe that Glassdoor readers would be swayed by their opinion regardless of lack of detail included or outside information.

These themes associated with membership negotiation, such as Smart People and Fast Paced all concretely identify elements associated with being an Amazon employee that are either required or directly tied to success. Meanwhile, the themes related to institutional positioning, such as Negative Referencing Horror Stories and Ambiguous Positive Positioning, rely on implicit understandings of Amazon regardless of whether the reviewer conceptualizes the organization positively or negatively. While negative reviews provided more detailed accounts and references to support the reviewers' view of Amazon, positive reviews relied on short vague descriptions with minimal references to lived experiences or personal sentiment. The next chapter will focus on the implications of these findings in connection to membership negotiation, institutional positioning, psychological safety, and the larger communication landscape.

#### **Chapter 4: Discussion and Conclusion**

The results discussed in the previous chapter explain how the four flows can be used to understand psychological safety from a communication perspective. This chapter discusses the implications of these findings; both theoretical and practical. Glassdoor reviews provide insights into the ways current and former employees communicatively constitute Amazon membership negotiation and institutional positioning.

##### ***Glassdoor Reviews and Socialization***

Membership negotiation is the communication process that facilitates organizational entry and exit through an internal understanding of what it means to be a member (McPhee & Zaug, 2009). In circumstances where reviewers reference their colleagues, the consensus is that the white-collar Amazon workforce, by design, is made up of bright, driven individuals. This

research ideally helps people make better choices about the organization that they work for regarding how the company aligns with their traits, values, and work style. This analysis uncovers unwritten norms about Amazon and what it might take for someone to be successful as a white collar Amazon employee. While alignment with these identified themes may be a positive indicator to a potential employee that Amazon may be a good fit for them, and subsequently, others may be more inclined to end their membership endeavor at this time.

Most reviews were presented in a very matter-of-fact way. The identified themes were spoken of as undeniable elements of working for the organization regardless of how any individual felt about those themes. Many of the themes identified were present in both the “pro” and “con” text response fields with a varying reports as to how these experiences were understood by reviewers. As it relates to membership negotiation, these themes indicate what the organization seeks to maintain, allow to enter, and forced to exit from their organization. For example, with the theme of Fast-Paced the organization will not seek to bring in individuals who will not be able to match and succeed with the organizational work culture. McPhee and Zaugg (2009) reference that communication associated with membership negotiation highlights information that clearly demonstrates the organization’s boundaries. However, in the case of Glassdoor reviews, reviewers indicate that the organization’s boundaries extend beyond ordinary work-life balance, because the theme No Work-Life Balance demonstrates that workers need to be comfortable with workplace demands on their personal time. Reviewers directly discussed the requirements for organizational maintenance and entry, which in turn also communicates what is not acceptable within Amazon’s boundaries.

Some reviewers’ comments about Amazon are glowing: brilliant colleagues, phenomenal opportunities, and a tough, fast-paced place to work. However, some pieces touch on very

similar criteria, but these elements are framed and understood as contributing to an overall negative experience with the organization. Amazon's reputation, externally and anecdotally, has been described as unforgiving. Some reviewers allude to the work environment being harsh, but a place where bringing your best is the expectation, such as Reviewer #26, who stated:

“Entrepreneurial environment with lots of ability to innovate. Smart and dedicated people. Will root out low performers.” While others describe the environment as hyper-competitive, toxic, and unforgiving such as this Reviewer #2, who stated, “It is easy to get lost in the shuffle of an incredibly competitive environment and ruthless prioritization.”

While reviewers' reactions to the environment may vary, there seems to be a collective understanding of the underpinnings of the organization. Knowing this, membership negotiation theoretically tailors itself to addressing the many facets of being a member. In part, being a member involves operating within the existing environment, but a part of membership negotiation is also a reciprocal ongoing evaluation of whether or not a potential or current member fits within the organization. Through the lens of polarity and membership negotiation, reflections made in the data apparent that specific individuals departed the organization (whether of their own volition or not) due to being misaligned with what membership is understood to be at Amazon. For example, Reviewer #35, a Senior Manager, stated, “If you don't want to be constantly challenged, this is not a good fit for you.”

### ***Psychological Safety is Partially Individual-Based***

Membership negotiation is communicatively enacted and the perception of psychological safety is in part dependent on the individual. The existing literature related to psychological safety focuses little on the individual and almost exclusively on the norms and practices that are reinforced by individuals on the team. My findings about membership negotiation aligned more

with individual traits rather than organizational norms, however, these traits do shape what norms related to membership are. Numerous reviews referenced themes such as “smart people” and “fast paced,” as membership dealbreakers. A norm of a psychologically unsafe workplace is “Outlying views are ignored. Dissent is seen as disruptive as is unwelcome.” (See Figure 1.2). While the characteristics that emerged in the themes are not inherently negative, the reaction to deviation from these characteristics that are understood as integral to membership is departure from the organization, and therefore is more closely aligned with a lack of psychological safety.

The danger of identifying traits that one needs to be successful within the organization is that it places the burden of responsibility solely on the individual to determine whether or not the organization is a good fit for them. This analysis, existing journalism, and research suggest that turnover at Amazon is high, and at times encouraged, if an individual does not fit within expected work environment in terms of pace and intensity. While high turnover may preserve the culture that Amazon wants to foster, the approach of predetermining seemingly fixed membership requirements does little to interrogate the implications on the people involved in it. Although past work has determined a workplace psychologically safe in a static and concrete way, this study finds that cultivating psychological safety is a dynamic and ongoing process. As a result, organizations should be regularly re-evaluating their organizational culture and actively seek to understand the circumstances that prompt individuals to leave the organization or report that it is unsafe.

While reviews do not explicitly indicate membership negotiation, they do identify characteristics that potential workers members need to possess or at least be aware of when making a membership determination. Themes such as “No Work-life Balance,” “Fast-Paced,” “Intense Work Environment,” and “Smart People” are all de facto indicators of what

membership at Amazon requires. Some reviews explicitly offer elements that they consider membership deal-breakers or things that potential new members should be aware of when considering whether they want to pursue membership. Therefore when reviewers identify organizational characteristics crucial to their experience as a current or former member, they are defining what membership entails.

In his 1997 letter to shareholders, founder and then CEO Jeff Bezos spoke of his hiring philosophy and how to work at Amazon: "You can work long, hard, or smart, but at Amazon.com, you can't choose two out of three" (Bezos, 1997). What Bezos does in this circumstance is communicate what qualities he is looking for with potential new hires. Subsequently, in hiring a specific individual, they should have these qualities, which reinforce the larger culture at Amazon. Therefore, individuals applying for and accepting positions within Amazon tacitly accept and confirm that they promote and embody these traits.

### ***Dichotomy Within High Standards***

Through the lens of psychological safety, it is highly beneficial that people seem to value their colleagues' intelligence, and the additional identification of these employees being highly driven places them in a higher likelihood of being among the teams with high standards (see Figure 1.1). However, within the high standard category a dichotomy is formed. The dichotomy is either the "Learning and High-Performance Zone" or the "Anxiety Zone" (Figure 1.1) where both maintain high standards related to output but have opposing levels of psychological safety, which in turn makes individuals secure or anxious.

One of the themes was "Smart People," one of the implications within this theme was that the reviewers felt that their colleagues were knowledgeable that they were high-performing individuals. The theme indicates that the intelligence of the individuals employed is one of the

standards that Amazon has. Those who do not meet that standard are either understood as not a good fit for the organization or are ousted from the organization. Explicitly, Amazon's leadership principle #7, "Insist on the Highest Standards," states, "Leaders have relentlessly high standards — many people may think these standards are unreasonably high" (Amazon, 2021). In his 2018 letter to shareholders, then CEO Jeffrey Bezos boasts, "high standards are fun!" and highlighted that high standards are beneficial for staying competitive in the modern consumer market. According to *Figure 1.1*, having high standards can evoke different cultures based on the associated level of psychological safety within the organization – either the Anxiety Zone or the Learning & High-Performance Zone. A differentiating factor between the two groups is the relationship to learning, such as how the organization values questions, conducts training, and manages knowledge. While the concept of learning appeared in the dataset (appearing in ten reviews), there was no consistent discourse of what learning looked like, how it occurred, or how it was valued that emerged – it was clear that the experience of, and relationship to, learning varied across individuals. The learning element is a critical factor in understanding the organization's level of psychological safety. Therefore, we could reasonably confirm that Amazon does operate in a "high-standards" manner, however, there was not enough data to prove where the organization fell on the spectrum between *The Anxiety Zone* and the *Learning and High-Performance Zone* (See Figure 1.1).

Psychological safety focuses on learning and trust as opposed to traditional management practices that emphasize outcomes only, but not all employees care about alternative management practices. Reviews left by both former and current employees, reflect being content with the workplace and feel like the organization is a good fit for them. Psychological safety is rooted in seeking to foster a learning culture and workplace marked by both high performance

and high standards. Elements that may contribute to membership negotiation and specifically an existing employee choice of whether to remain at or depart from an organization. Psychological safety is not the promise of a happy, healthy workplace, although some of its directives seek to address historical pain points, such as fear or speaking up. Psychological safety is an organizational culture marked by trust, openness, learning, and mutual respect while minimizing perceptions of risk (Grant, 2019) and is grounded in both communication and process. The themes that emerged from the data do not necessarily relate to psychological safety on a one-to-one basis. The theme of “smart people” could indicate trust, but could also be a hindrance to a learning culture, since being surrounded by a plethora of smart people may impact someone’s willingness to ask questions or engage in learning behavior for fear of being identified as “not smart”. Ultimately, management practices and styles are not one-size-fits-all, and each management style comes with its own set of strengths and shortcomings.

While the characteristics identified as necessary to be successful at Amazon are a critical component to understanding what membership and maintaining membership would entail, it also broadcasts a larger image of Amazon and consequently demonstrates its values. Identifying individuals as highly intelligent and subsequently noting that this trait is an indicator for success at the company highlights that the organization has a way of self-selecting and perpetuating the types of individuals that do well within the organization. Amazon clearly values the intelligence of their employees, however the relationship between having intelligent colleagues and psychological safety is not inherently causal.

Although it did not concretely emerge as a theme, the data suggests that there may be a difference in the way the reviewers evaluate and understand managers versus lateral colleagues. Managers, by virtue of their position and engagement in the hiring process, are some of the most

active agents of membership negotiation. They are often the communicators and reinforcers of what is acceptable as part of being a member and what is not. They are also the most primed to be agents of change in their teams and the organization related to psychological safety. Simply having intelligent, highly driven colleagues does not guarantee a psychologically safe, comfortable workplace, nor that a given individual is a good fit for the organization. This analysis indicates that the characteristics of the individuals are not the full picture when it comes to understanding organizations and that the norms and the communication practices matter.

While themes such as “Smart People,” “Fast-Paced,” and “Intense Environment” are in alignment with how Amazon is understood in both positive and negative contexts both internally and externally, they are not necessarily indicators of psychological safety. Psychological safety touches many communicative cultural elements but not environmental factors. Based on those criteria alone, a fast-paced, intense environment is not necessarily psychologically safe or unsafe.

### ***Subjective Experiences Shape Understanding and Communication Surrounding an Organization***

Glassdoor reviews provide multiple narratives of an organization and allow the reader to form their own perception of Amazon. Glassdoor aggregates reviews, ratings, and company information for distribution, essentially serving as a technology-driven mediator.

Glassdoor reviews are just one resource for prospective employees to build understanding and meaning about Amazon. The data suggests that many reviewers have an implicit impression that reviewers have an existing understanding of Amazon as an organization, in primarily negative contexts. Reviews that referenced Amazon negatively provided more direct and specific feedback about their perceived shortcomings of the organization. Reviewers who understood Amazon negatively provided more formed narratives of their personal experience as well as



recounting how the organization impacted their colleagues. Underlying these negative reviews was the implication that Amazon was at fault for the reviewer's negative experiences, not any employees. Some reviews explicitly referenced other pieces of media, which serves to highlight that media influences the dominant external narrative of Amazon as an organization. Institutional positioning is "communication positioning the organization in larger social systems" (Iverson, 2014, p. 80). The direct references to media, such as the 2015 New York Times expose, is an example of reviewers attempting to situate their negative experiences within the broader existing understanding of Amazon.

Positive reviews also relied on readers' implicit understanding of Amazon. Positive reviews do not describe the specific instances where the reviewer felt their growth was fostered, their value was recognized, or the organization rallied around a difficult time. Reviews that reflected positively on Amazon were much less descriptive and concrete often relying on one or two-word descriptions with existing positive connotations. These reviews used terms such as "innovative", "entrepreneurial", and "thinking big" to describe Amazon as an organization and rarely referenced their own unique experiences with the organization. Contrary to the negative reviews, positive reviewers seemingly offer glowing conjecture related to Amazon, but also indicate that their colleagues are in part responsible for their view of the organization. In addition to providing little insight on individual experience, these descriptions also explain very little about the organization relying on a reader's association with those terms to derive meaning.

Depending on the reader's relationship to and understanding of Amazon, there is opportunity for individuals to ascribe different meaning to each of those terms, as their vagueness leaves room for interpretation as to the reviewers' meaning. The presence of both positive and negative reviews complicates the notion and image of the organization as one way

or another. Given that people have varied experience with Amazon, it is not possible to identify a singular experience of being an employee at Amazon.

### ***Lack of Consensus Regarding Status of an Organization as Psychologically Safe***

The themes identified in relation to institutional positioning complicate the notion of psychological safety within Amazon. This analysis indicates that the organization has both staunch partisans and opponents, which demonstrates that the employee experience is not uniform. Some reviewers understand Amazon through a positive lens that aligns with their values, practices, and conception of the workplace. Meanwhile, others understand Amazon's work culture as constricting, bureaucratic, and toxic. Positive reviews seem to be written by individuals who align with the existing paradigm of the organization and therefore can offer glowing reviews due to minimal friction with the organizational practices and values. Negative reviews on the other hand, outwardly present a very different image of the organization where individuals who are not in alignment with the organization face ostracization, negative outcomes, or termination. Ultimately, the experiences of different individuals can influence a subjective impression of psychological safety.

Existing literature on psychological safety presents the concept as a collection of norms and practices that an organization either has or does not have. Edmondson's definition of team psychological safety is "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking" (p. 354) and presents safety as a dichotomy between safe and unsafe based on shared belief. This analysis suggests that there is no consensus amongst reviewers as to whether or not the organization was safe, healthy, or constructive. Psychological safety is not a dichotomy, but rather it is a subjective spectrum based on each individual's experience and relation to the organization's norms and practices.

While positive reviewers gave little information or narrative to support their perception of the organization, negative reviewers were decisive and clear regarding their grievances. Positive reviews, although vaguely, indicate that Amazon is an organization with psychological safety, while negative reviews do not. Many of the negative reviews highlight experiences that closely resemble the norms of non-psychologically safe teams as outlined in Figure 1.2 such as “mistakes, problems, and failures are due to employees deviating from policies and procedures. Ignorance in work-related matters is stigmatizing” and “admissions of errors, lack of knowledge or skill have adverse implications for the individual involved.”

While institutional positioning can at times be understood as communication that reinforces the dominant narrative of the organization in the larger socio-economic sphere, Glassdoor reviews and personal experiences allow for a myriad of understandings of the organization and in varying contexts. Therefore, if there are numerous conceptions of the organization on an individual level, the communication that helps situate the organization will also be varied, and subsequently perceived levels of psychological safety will similarly not be uniformly understood.

While this study did not attempt to investigate the impact of Glassdoor reviews or employee sentiment on the status and understanding of Amazon within the broader social systems, it does highlight the subjectivity through which organizations can be understood and framed by employees. Employees’ experiences at a company are shaped by their past experience as well as their position within the company. Consequently, their individual position at the company leads to a unique lens through which they view their experiences.

*Expressions of Institutional Positioning and Membership Negotiation at Amazon (RQ1)*

Institutional positioning is expressed by reviewers selecting which elements of their experience to share as part of their public review. Reviewers chose to share experiences that portrayed Amazon in alignment with their understanding of the organization. The data demonstrated discrepancies between those who understood Amazon positively or negatively and those who identified their experiences as negative being more inclined to explicitly share their misgiving about the organization. Conversely, those who related positively to their experiences at Amazon were much less concrete in their descriptions and shared fewer personal narratives.

Glassdoor reviews are an excellent example of what Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2015) refer to as “non-sanctioned interactions” (p. 310) within institutional positioning. Non-sanctioned interactions are communication that occurs between individuals outside of the organization, about the organization. Although Glassdoor reviewers are not engaging directly with potential Amazon employees, their reviews live on the website as a resource for job seekers. In alignment with the findings of this study, these reviews show how Amazon is being positioned to be perceived in the larger societal context. In addition to sharing personal experiences, negative reviews also periodically referenced other pieces of existing media, other non-sanctioned interactions, to reinforce the validity of their negative review. Positive reviews on the other hand, attempt to counteract other reviews and negative conceptions of Amazon, but ultimately, were more ambiguous and provided less substantive information about the organization and its dynamics. The ways that institutional positioning is expressed in Glassdoor reviews is in part tied to personal experience and perception of the organization, but the subjective nature of institutional positioning can lead to a myriad of narratives about the nature of employment at Amazon.

Membership negotiation is expressed in Glassdoor reviews through reviewers identifying what either implicitly or explicitly makes a successful Amazon employee. Membership negotiation typically happens in the early stages of organizational membership, which primarily revolve around socialization and integrating a new employee into the organization. Glassdoor reviews present job seekers with a view into what working at Amazon is like and allows these potential employees to anticipate how they may fit into the organization prior to entry.

Jablin (2001) defines Vocational Anticipatory Socialization (VAS) as “beliefs concerning how people communicate in particular occupations and in formal and informal work settings” (p. 734). Glassdoor reviews present a medium for VAS because individuals identified not only what characteristics impacted perceived employee success or failure, but also served to highlight organizational reactions to those traits. In particular, Glassdoor reviews can be categorized as description messages. Description messages “convey[ed] details about job-specific environments, tasks, satisfaction, and required knowledge” (Myers et al, 2011, p. 100). Themes identified through this study such as “smart people”, “fast-paced”, and “intense work environment” serve to provide a potential new Amazon employee with an understanding of workplace culture and implicit expectations for individual employees. While there seemed to be consensus regarding what some characteristics of the organization and membership are, it was clear through reviewer’s expressions that relationship to each of these elements varied.

These Glassdoor reviews are a mechanism for current and former employees to explain their experience working for Amazon. All CCO perspectives agree that “communication is the primary mode of explaining social reality” (Schoeneborn et al, 2014, p.302). From these reviews, we understand that employees have varied experiences at Amazon, and communicating them through Glassdoor helps codify the notion that there is not one unified work experience. From an

organizational communication perspective, it's not just about the employee relationship with the organization. Through these comments, and especially through Glassdoor, Reviewers talking about what membership is and communicatively constitutes the meaning of membership and meaning of Amazon itself. Glassdoor does not provide a comprehensive understanding of Amazon, however the experiences recounted in the reviews offer meaning to individual experiences.

### ***Expressions of Psychological Safety Within Glassdoor Reviews (RQ2)***

Psychological safety is enacted through both membership negotiation and institutional positioning. It is important to note that employees were not explicitly focusing on psychological safety when writing their reviews. However there are connections between psychological safety and the tenets of CCO that emerged from the reviews. Psychological safety is expressed through institutional positioning through the stories that reviewers told. Reviewers did not relay stories of instances where they felt their growth was fostered or their voice was valued. However, many reviewers were vocal regarding instances where they felt wronged or vulnerable. Psychological safety is expressed through the relationship that the reviewer is creating with the job seeker. Reviewers are sharing their stories and it is then up to the potential employee based on their own preferences, preferred work style, approach, and ability to cope to determine whether or not Amazon would constitute a psychologically safe organization for them.

A key takeaway related to this research question is that psychological safety has the capacity to be individual and perception-driven. Through the comments reviewers left it is clear the individuals have varying experiences when it comes to their relationship with Amazon and whether they understand Amazon as a workplace that embodies the tenets of psychological safety in relation to their individual work preferences. Reviewers who understood Amazon

negatively imply that Amazon is a psychologically unsafe work environment, meanwhile positive, and to a lesser extent lukewarm, reviewers depicted Amazon as “not for everyone.” The positive reviews take the position that Amazon is not for everyone, meaning they recognize that they are putting the responsibility for considering it unsafe on the individual, and reviewers also create space for Amazon to be argued as safe. Thus, consistent with the CCO approach, they communicatively enact Amazon as psychologically safe for some, not all. This is consistent with Khan’s (1990) definition of psychological safety as the individual “being able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences of self-image, status, or career” (p. 708). In essence, psychological safety is primarily individually felt and enacted, not a trait of the organization..

Much of the existing literature on psychological safety was conducted with already formed teams that had established norms, versus studying teams being created from the ground up. As a result, expressions of psychological safety, such as those expressed in Glassdoor reviews, provide only a snapshot as opposed to a longitudinal view of psychological safety over time at Amazon. Psychological safety in Edmonson’s (1990) conception is heavily norm-based and is reliant on continued reinforcement by individuals on the team. In some capacity, psychological safety is mutually agreed upon as what the majority determines is psychologically safe. This study shows that psychological safety needs to be more expansive in understanding that this particular enactment of psychological safety will differ from organization to organization based on their unique circumstance.

### **Conclusion**

Although reviews indicated alignment with the existing knowledge of institutional positioning, many could offer a deeper understanding of what membership negotiation might

look like with Amazon—based primarily on traits that reviewers identified as being present, necessary for success, or deal-breakers. A potential employee could utilize the precise identification of these traits to make a membership consideration based on these criteria. This means that based on the requirements and features that emerged from membership negotiation flow into our more extensive understanding of the organization outside of it. Glassdoor reviews in itself are vehicles of institutional positioning; with current and former employees sharing their experiences, they indirectly impacts the way organizational outsiders perceive the organization.

This study helps better understand the intersection between two flows, membership negotiation and institutional positioning, and psychological safety. This study demonstrates that Glassdoor is one avenue for communicatively enacting membership negotiation and institutional positioning. Additionally, through the analysis of these Glassdoor reviews, this study was able to identify themes associated with membership negotiation and institutional positioning at Amazon that helped foster a deeper understanding of organizational culture in relation to psychological safety. Glassdoor provides one avenue for understanding psychological safety through a communicative lens, however there are other ways to view psychological safety in order to holistically determine or evaluate the presence of psychological safety within Amazon. Exploring the application of the Four Flows to psychological safety and organizations extends communication literature and has practical applications.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This study was exploratory in nature, as it attempted to bridge a gap in the literature between communication, specifically how organizations are constituted, and psychological safety, a concept that is primarily examined in business literature. A benefit of this research is that it can serve as a starting point for future research examining the connection between



communication and psychological safety. Additionally, psychological safety has primarily been studied at the team level, and this study expanded on existing research by demonstrating that psychological safety can be understood through larger organizational norms and, on some level, employee discourse. Additionally, these findings complicate the concept of psychological safety, in the sense that while psychological safety is tied to organizational norms, maintenance of psychological safety likely requires ongoing evaluation and iteration to maintain.

While the purpose of this study was not to determine whether Amazon is or is not a psychologically safe organization, it does demonstrate that Glassdoor reviews can be used by researchers to glean information and understanding about employees' experiences. The strongest connection that this research method provided was to membership negotiation as Glassdoor reviews are specifically geared towards commenting on employee feedback and experience.

This study provides the groundwork for exploring psychological safety within communication studies. The results show that psychological safety occurs through interactions with other employees and organizational policies. One implication of this research is that it highlights that psychological safety is not based simply in policy but rather is grounded in policies (structures) and also enacted by the employees who make up the organization in differing ways. CCO provides a framework for understanding the discourse within an organization, such as Amazon, in relation to psychological safety. Furthermore, organizational discourse does not exist in a vacuum as Glassdoor illustrates, and therefore this study sets the stage for further understanding between organizational discourse and implications of that discourse.

***Practical Application***

The long-term practical application of this research is to help organizations identify instances where psychological safety is not present. Currently, psychological safety is viewed through an organizational behavior and management lens, but the concept is inherently grounded in communication. Psychological safety policies and practices do not simply appear, they are enacted through interactions with other people within the organization. By emphasizing the communication element of psychological safety it is easier to highlight instances on both an organizational and individual level where psychological safety is not happening. The ultimate goal of this study is to begin to bridge the gap between how psychological safety has been studied within organizations previously, which has been more evaluative in nature, and in turn, start to address how to generate psychologically safe organizations. This study sought to connect the concept that organizations are communicatively constructed with psychological safety, based on the assumption that psychologically safe organizations do not happen into being are consciously constructed. The tenets of psychological safety also can serve as an evaluative standard against by which we examine other businesses and organizations. There is benefit in critically examining organizations in this way, as it can help us better understand workplace environments and the impact that communication can have on them.

This research demonstrated that whether an employee understood Amazon as a positive or negative place to work, they tended to identify the same through lines and themes in their reviews. For example, reviewers discussed the theme “fast paced” as both a workplace benefit and drawback, thereby agreeing that it was a norm in the workplace without relating to it in the same way. This helps to understand themes, especially those identified in connection with membership negotiation, as conditional for individual success. Meaning that relation to and

sentiment regarding a specific identified theme could assist an individual in the decision-making process pertaining to membership negotiation.

### ***Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research***

One of the primary challenges with this study is the concise nature of the reviews. Most of the reviews pulled for this study were short form, often made of bullet-pointed lists and sentence fragments. Very few offered more thorough explanations. In approaching data collection in this manner, there was no opportunity to follow up with individual reviewers regarding the content of their reviews, which made it impossible to expand on their reported experiences and opinions or to seek clarification on specific facets of their review.

With Amazon being an expansive organization, it would be challenging to understand the whole experience of being an Amazon employee accurately. However, encompassing more reviews from a smaller subset of the organization helps foster an understanding of some of the organizations without overstating the reach and scope of the project. While utilizing Glassdoor reviews allowed for engagement with a more significant number of reviewer information, the depth of that information is also heavily limited by the format. Using an interview approach may offer more depth than reviews in future studies, although it may be more challenging to reach data saturation.

Future research should investigate the relationship between psychological safety and the two flows, activity coordination and organizational self-structuring, as their examination was not within the scope of this study. This study was a pilot study to see if Glassdoor is an appropriate medium to analyze the CCO tenets. Given the results, it does seem feasible to use these methods, however there should be an expansion of the methods used. Investigation of these two flows would likely benefit from a different qualitative approach. For example, interviewing or a

narrative approach might have been more beneficial in cultivating more depth in information and giving the researcher additional opportunities to follow up and direct reviewers to the information they are seeking. Future research could also use the intersections of the four flows with other theories like identity, corporate social responsibility, vocational anticipatory socialization, and belonging. This could be beneficial because the analysis of the intersections of organizational concepts helps to create a more complete picture of organizational life.

An additional limitation was identifying independent and concrete instances of institutional positioning within the dataset. As previously mentioned, the themes associated with institutional positioning were tied to existing external examples of content that have helped shape institutional positioning or implicit images of Amazon from the reviews. While much of the data may have reinforced conceptions and understanding of Amazon, I could not reasonably point to these as instances of institutional positioning. It was impossible to assess the impact of these Glassdoor reviews on public sentiment and reputation within the bounds of this study.

This dataset also provided little insight into what and how communication occurs in practice at Amazon, which made specifically drawing insights about psychological safety particularly challenging. Glassdoor reviews are written asynchronously and therefore are reflections on experiences rather than examinations of the actual communication between individuals. However, as this study was able to verify that Amazon does have high standards for their employees through a combination of existing company policies and employee reviews. It would be beneficial to conduct a study that focuses primarily on Amazon's relationship to learning using a different research methods such as surveys about individual's level of comfort in admissions of knowledge gaps. This would help provide a more concrete grasp on the level of psychological safety in the company. Psychological safety focuses heavily on the deconstruction

of workplace norms that promote silence about mistakes, therefore engaging in a study that focuses on comfort level allows both researchers and managers to start work toward solutions and more open psychologically safe workplaces. Future studies may expand on this research by conducting interviews or using participant observation as a research method to gain a deeper understanding of the discourse between employees to point to elements of psychological safety more concretely.

Overall, the application of the Four Flows to understanding psychological safety and Amazon was effective and opens up a new line of research. Additionally, the Four Flows can be vague and broadly applicable. This study does not fully capture what membership is like or what Amazon is like, but the themes help us understand how employees make sense of their experiences as an Amazon employee retrospectively. Similarly, Glassdoor reviews, both positive and negative, contribute to our understanding of the institutional positioning of Amazon. From an institutional positioning perspective, individuals outside of Amazon are able to make sense of the workplace as it relates to the rest of Corporate America and white-collar career opportunities.

Psychological safety has primarily been studied through the lens of business management and has been presented as a dichotomy where organizations are either psychologically safe or unsafe based on the norms (Edmondson, Kramer, & Cook, 2004). This study demonstrates that psychological safety can be subjective based on employee experience and identifies employees and their discourse as critical to cultivating and reinforcing organizational norms. Within this however, employee experiences are not universal, and therefore room to interpret the psychological safety the organization can vary by individual. While expressions of psychological safety offer another lens to understand organizations, they also serve as an additional metric that

potential employees should evaluate in relationship to their preferences and values prior to accepting a position.

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