



EMOTIONAL LABOR: A CONCEPTUAL STUDY

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Abstract

This paper presents a retrospective analysis of research conducted on the emotional labor of service workers during the past decade. It starts with a brief introduction of the concept, definition, and types of emotional labor. It then provides an in-depth understanding of emotional labor through various studies conducted during the past decade. This paper aims to analyse existing knowledge on emotional labor rather than create new knowledge. It was found that service workers typically expressed their emotional labor through surface acting, deep acting, or genuinely expressed emotions. In general, surface acting has been associated with the negative outcomes of emotional labor while deep acting and genuinely expressed emotions have been associated with the positive consequences of emotional labor. However, some studies can also reveal contrasting findings. Most studies focus on the emotional labor experienced by the service workers having direct contact with customers. The emotional labor experienced by non-service workers has also been briefly investigated. In addition to the workers, the leaders also experience emotional labor, and this perspective has also been highlighted.

1. Introduction

This paper dwells on the literature review of several studies conducted about emotional labor. A thorough investigation of emotional labor has been conducted with particular emphasis on what it is, how it originated, and what the types are, followed by an in-depth analysis of emotional labor practices among frontline service workers during the last decade.

2. Literature Review

The literature review starts with an understanding of the term emotional labor – the concept, the definition, and the types of emotional labor – followed by an analysis of previous research done on the topic. The period under investigation was a period of ten years from 2015 to 2024.

2.1 The Concept of Emotional Labor

In simple terms, emotional labor can be described as inward emotions versus outward displays of emotions. Employers are concerned about the displayed emotions and do not bother about their employees' inner feelings. If the employee's inner and outer feelings are aligned, the outcomes are positive both for the organization and the individual. If the inner and outer feelings are not aligned, then the outcomes could be detrimental to the employee. Emotional labor is the regulation of feelings at the workplace to conform to organizational regulations. The conceptualization of emotional labor arises from the basis that feelings are commodities to be exploited in an attempt to conform to the work environment.

2.2 Definition of Emotional Labor

Emotional labor has been defined as “regulating or managing emotional expressions with others as a function of the job's role and responsibility” (Hochschild, 1983). This display of emotions is not necessarily always be pleasant. Depending on the nature of the job, this displayed emotion can be pleasant or hostile. For instance, a flight attendant needs to project a smiling and welcoming expression to incoming passengers on board, while a bill collector needs to express a hostile and compelling expression towards the debtors to ensure that the latter abide by the payment on time.

Emotional labor can also be defined as “the act of displaying the appropriate socially desired emotions during service transactions” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). It was further defined as “effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions” (Morris & Feldman, 1996). It is a smiling mask that the frontline employees have to wear to perform their duties (Lo & Huang, 2017). Emotional labor is the effort required to regulate and fine-tune emotions (Rehman et al., 2021). As the number of research studies on emotional labor continued to grow, the definitions were also modified to include spontaneous and genuine experiences and expressions (Yang, 2020) and the internal state of tension or conflict that occurs when employees have to display fake emotions, known as “emotional dissonance” (Jeung et al., 2018).

2.3 Types of Emotional Labor

When dealing with customers or stakeholders, the frontline employees are expected to connect with them to be able to do business, and this connectivity is expressed in the form of emotions. Emotionally connected people understand each other better and can communicate openly, thus creating a fluid relationship for the business to flourish.

There are two most common strategies for performing emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983):

- (i) Surface Acting – This is a display of fake emotions; emotions that an employee is not feeling, but his external expressions are displaying it.
- (ii) Deep acting – The employee creates inside himself that emotion and then expresses it outwardly. There is a match between inner feelings and outward expressions.

A third strategy of emotional labor can be added (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993):

- (iii) Spontaneous and genuine emotional labor – Natural and genuine expressions that are unprompted revealed.

Surface acting is the display of fake positive emotions outwardly and suppressing negative ones inwardly according to the display rules, which should be consistent with social, occupational, and organisational norms (Fouquereau et al., 2018). Surface acting generally has been associated with negative consequences such as inauthenticity or emotional dissonance. Surface acting has also been associated with emotional exhaustion, as there is a constant effort required to fake or suppress true feelings and, in the long run, drain the employee's resources, resulting in negative outcomes (Fouquereau et al., 2018).

Deep acting attempts to truly feel the required emotion. Deep acting has been found to reveal positive outcomes. Since there are no discrepancies between felt and displayed emotions, deep acting does not produce emotional exhaustion, inauthenticity, or emotional dissonance. On the contrary, deep acting results in enhanced job satisfaction.

Both surface acting and deep acting require an effort to suppress or alter true emotions. These two strategies can be used separately or in combination in an ultimate effort to serve the customer with the required emotions as per the working circumstances. While deep acting is a type of antecedent-focused emotion regulation, surface acting is a type of response emotional regulation (Grandey, 2015). Both surface acting and deep acting have their advantages and disadvantages. Surface acting has the benefit of creating a positive work environment but has the adverse effect of inauthenticity. While deep acting can lead to job satisfaction, it can also result in emotional exhaustion.

2.4 Understanding Emotional Labor through Studies Conducted during the Past Decade

Several studies have been conducted on emotional labor. Most of these studies have concentrated on the employees working in the service sector. A review of these studies provides a better insight into the topic.

A qualitative study was conducted to gain insights into important spheres of emotional labor performed by Polish social workers and the findings were that deep acting generally has positive outcomes and is positively related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and customer satisfaction (Humphrey et al., 2015). It was also found that natural and genuine emotional labor has positive effects on both the employees and the customers.

Another study conducted to investigate the link between emotional labor strategies, burnout, and job satisfaction in women community health workers in India revealed that surface acting was found to be a more desirable strategy associated with reduced burnout and increased job satisfaction (Pandey & Singh, 2016). This can be explained based on the engagement and detachment analogy, where deep acting is regarded as an association of the workers with the work, and in the healthcare sector, this association has a negative effect on

the worker. However, when the worker adopts surface acting while performing the work, he can better perform as he is emotionally detached from the work environment. As a result, the service worker has increased job satisfaction and decreased burnout occurrences.

To investigate whether mindfulness reduces emotional exhaustion, casino frontline employees were surveyed, and it was found that these employees' perceived mindfulness has a significant negative influence on their surface acting and a positive effect on their emotional exhaustion (Li et al., 2017). Moreover, a high degree of authenticity within the climate weakens the positive impact of surface acting. The limitation of this study is that it has been restricted to investigating mindfulness as an employee coping behavior.

A survey was conducted on 260 employees working in the restaurant industry to investigate how these employees with different types of passion for work use emotional labor strategies and their effects on emotional exhaustion (Chen et al., 2018). It was found that restaurant employees with a 'harmonious passion' for their job are more likely to use deep acting as an emotional labor strategy when dealing with challenging customer interactions, while employees with an 'obsessive passion' tend to use surface acting, which can lead to greater emotional exhaustion.

Another study focusing on the moderated mediation model was conducted to examine the effects of emotional intelligence and emotional labor on job satisfaction (Wen et al., 2019). 279 Chinese hotel employees were surveyed, and it was found that deep acting partially mediated the effect of emotional intelligence on job satisfaction, perceived organizational support moderated the mediation of deep acting, and surface acting did not mediate between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction.

A study conducted on hotel employees in Pakistan to investigate the correlation between emotional labor strategies and emotional exhaustion revealed that emotional exhaustion was positively correlated to surface acting but negatively to deep acting (Rafiq et al., 2020). This study also found that cultural intelligence provided support as a moderating factor between the two variables under investigation.

A study was conducted to analyze the relationship between emotional labor and burnout among educators, and it was found that there was a significant association between surface acting and burnout, while the association of deep acting and naturally felt emotions with burnout was mixed (Kariou et al., 2021).

Another study was conducted to understand the mediating role of psychological contracts on the impact of transformational leadership on emotional labor in Taiwanese private nonprofit long-term care institutions (Chen et al., 2022). It was found that the transactional and relational psychological contracts fully and negatively mediated the influences of transformational leadership and surface acting, while they partially and positively mediated the impacts of transformational leadership and deep acting.

A study conducted on 436 employees working in call centres in China to investigate the mediation effects of psychological empowerment between transformational leadership and emotional labor revealed that transformational leadership had a positive result on deep acting and negative results on surface acting. The

positive effect on deep acting was partially mediated by psychological empowerment, and the negative effect on surface acting was fully mediated by psychological empowerment (Cheng et al., 2023).

This study, conducted to examine the relationships between emotional labor strategies and their antecedents and consequences among academic staff in Jordanian universities, revealed that those who engaged more in surface acting were more likely to experience burnout (Alrawashdeh et al., 2024).

While the above-mentioned studies focused primarily on a single sector, for instance, call centres, hotels, restaurants, casinos, banks, universities, or care institutions, the following study encompasses several sectors, providing a more generalized interpretation of the topic under study. The study was conducted on 600 customer service professionals in India to assess the frequency, intensity, variety of emotional display, surface acting, and deep acting as major contributors leading to emotional labor at the workplace and investigate the adequacy of the original factor model of the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS). The validation showed satisfactory results, and therefore, the ELS is suitable for the assessment of emotional labor in the Indian context (Shrivastava et al., 2024).

This study, as well, instead of focusing on a single service, included the South Korean frontline public service employees to analyze whether surface acting and deep acting have a significant impact on burnout and altruistic behavior. This study revealed that surface acting had a significant and positive association with burnout, whereas there was no significant effect on altruistic behavior (Lee, 2020). Deep acting was found to have a significantly positive relationship with altruistic behavior but an insignificant relationship with burnout.

Most studies on emotional labor have concentrated on the employees working in the service sector who deal directly with customers. This particular study conducted in France attempted to compare the emotional labor of the frontline officers (who have direct contact with customers) with those employees who have limited or no direct contact with the customers (Fouquereau et al., 2018). The study aimed to explore how emotional labor is affected by the nature of the contact between the employees and the customers, and it was found that the effect of emotional labor was more profound where there was direct contact between the two parties involved. This study investigated the profiles of the employees working in the service sector and concluded that all workers in the service sector do not experience the same level of emotional labor. Factors such as duration of the interaction, intensity, and frequency are all determinants of the emotional labor being created. For instance, teachers and nursing staff would experience different strategies of emotional labor as compared to phone operators and checkout assistants.

So far, all the studies mentioned have been focusing on managing the emotional labor of frontline employees, and no attention has been given to managing the emotional labor of the leaders. The leaders also exercise emotional labor while performing their supervisory role. To investigate the influence of female managers' emotional displays on frontline employees' job satisfaction, a study was conducted in the banking sector in the northern cities of China (Mehmood et al., 2020). The results showed that the positive relationship between

customer orientation and job satisfaction in frontline employees is strengthened by increases in female managers' deep acting, but it is weakened by the increase in their surface acting.

Another study conducted on the emotional labor of being a leader provides an insight that while leaders are attending to their employees' mental and physical health, they need to address their own as well (Smith & Grandey, 2022). This particular study integrates the literature on leadership with the research on emotional labor. It distinguishes emotional labor performed by leaders from that performed by frontline service workers. Unfortunately, most leadership developmental programs overlook the emotional labor aspect of the leaders in managing the emotional labor of their subordinates, and the leaders themselves face adverse effects like emotional suppression and surface-level acting.

3. Methodology

Google and Google Scholar were utilized for this study. Access to those studies has been principally done using Google and Google Scholar for the period 2015 to 2024. One study on emotional labor per year has been randomly selected for the period under investigation. A brief assessment of these studies was then conducted. These ten studies concentrated on a particular service sector, such as healthcare, casinos, banks, restaurants, hotels, call centres, and universities. Two further studies were considered where emotional labor was investigated across several service sectors instead of a single service. Another study contrasting the emotional labor of frontline employees with that of employees with little or no direct contact with customers was examined. Finally, two studies were included that investigated the emotional labor of the leaders rather than from the employees' perspective.

4. Findings

An in-depth analysis of the literature has shown that emotional labor can take the form of various strategies. It can be surface acting, deep acting, or genuinely expressed emotions.

4.1 Summary of Findings

A tabular representation of the findings is shown in Table 1.

Author (s)	Year	Service sector & Country	Aim	Outcomes
Focus on Single-Sector				
Humphrey et al.	2015	Social Workers in Poland	To gain insights into important spheres of emotional labor performed by Polish social workers.	Deep acting generally has positive outcomes, and it is positively related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and customer satisfaction. It was also found that natural and genuine

				emotional labor has positive effects on both the employees and the customers. Emotional labor may have more positive outcomes when organizations grant more autonomy and adopt positive display rules.
Pandey & Singh	2016	Community health workers in India	To investigate the link between emotional labor strategies, burnout and job satisfaction in women community health workers in India.	Surface acting was found to be a more desirable strategy associated with reduced burnout, and increased job satisfaction.
Li et al.	2017	Casino in China (Macau).	To investigate whether mindfulness reduces emotional exhaustion.	Employees' perceived mindfulness has a significant negative influence on their surface acting and a positive effect on their emotional exhaustion.
Chen et al.	2018	Restaurant employees in Taiwan	To investigate how employees with different types of passion for work use emotional labor strategies and their effect on emotional exhaustion.	Passionate frontline employees tend to adopt a deep acting strategy, while frontline employees with obsessive passion tend to employ a surface acting strategy, which in turn exhausts their emotional energy.
Wen et al.	2019	Hotel employees in China	To examine the effects of emotional intelligence and emotional labor on job satisfaction.	Deep acting partially mediated the effect of emotional intelligence on job satisfaction, perceived organizational support moderated the mediation of deep acting, and surface acting did not mediate between emotional intelligence and job satisfaction.
Rafiq et al.	2020	Hotel employees in Pakistan	To investigate the correlation between emotional labor strategies and emotional exhaustion and the use of cultural	Emotional exhaustion was positively correlated to surface acting but negatively to deep acting, and cultural intelligence supported the correlation as a moderator.

			intelligence as a moderator.	
Kariou et al.	2021	Educators	To analyze the relationship between emotional labor and burnout among educators.	There was a significant association between surface acting and burnout, while the association of deep acting and naturally felt emotions with burnout was mixed.
Chen et al.	2022	Care institutions in Taiwan	To understand the mediating role of the psychological contract on the impact of transformational leadership on emotional labor.	The transactional and relational psychological contracts fully and negatively mediated the influences of transformational leadership and surface acting, while they partially and positively mediated the impacts of transformational leadership and deep acting.
Cheng et al.	2023	Call centres in China	To investigate the mediation effects of psychological empowerment between transformational leadership and emotional labor.	Transformational leadership has a positive result on deep acting, which was partially mediated by psychological empowerment, and negative results on surface acting, which was fully mediated by psychological empowerment.
Alrawashdeh et al.	2024	Universities in Jordan	To examine the relationships between emotional labor strategies and their antecedents and consequences among academic staff in Jordanian universities.	Those who engaged more in surface acting were more likely to experience burnout.
Focus across several sectors				
Shrivastava et al.	2024	Service professional in India	To assess the frequency, intensity, variety of emotional display, surface acting, and deep acting as major contributors	The validation showed satisfactory results, and therefore, the ELS is suitable for the assessment of emotional

			leading to emotional labor in the workplace and investigate the adequacy of the original factor model of the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS).	labor in the Indian context.
Lee	2020	Frontline public service employees in South Korea	To analyze whether surface acting and deep acting have a significant impact on burnout and altruistic behavior in the sample of frontline public service employees.	Surface acting had a significant and positive association with burnout, while deep acting had an insignificant effect on burnout.
Contrast between frontliners and non-direct service				
Fouquereau et al.	2018	Service sector workers in France	To explore how emotional labor is affected by the nature of the contact between the employees and the customers.	The effect of emotional labor was more profound where there was direct contact between the two parties involved.
Focus on Leaders' emotional labor				
Mehmood et al.	2020	Banks in Northern China	To investigate the influence of female managers' emotional display on frontline employees' job satisfaction.	Female managers' deep acting positively strengthened the relationship between customer orientation and job satisfaction in frontline employees, but their surface acting weakened the relationship.
Smith & Grandey	2022	Service workers	To provide an insight into the emotional labor of being a leader while leaders are attending to their employees' mental and physical health, they need to address their own as well.	This particular study integrates the literature on leadership with the research on emotional labor. It distinguishes emotional labor performed by leaders from that performed by frontline service workers.

Table 1: Summary of studies conducted on emotional labor.

5. Discussion

It was found that service workers typically expressed their emotional labor through surface acting, deep acting, or genuinely expressed emotions. In general, surface acting has been associated with the negative outcomes of emotional labor, while deep acting and genuinely expressed emotions have been associated with the positive consequences of emotional labor. However, the findings cannot be arbitrarily generalized since one of the studies conducted in 2016 highlighted that surface acting showed beneficial outcomes. This can be explained by the fact that the workers acknowledged a sense of detachment from their jobs, which promoted the adoption of surface acting. The detachment acted as a shield for the workers which protected them from any negative consequence of surface acting and produced positive outcomes.

The surveys conducted on several service sectors, rather than concentrating on a particular service sector, reinforced the findings that surface acting and deep acting are major contributors leading to emotional labor in the workplace. The focus of most studies was on the emotional labour experienced by the service workers having direct contact with customers. However, emotional labor can also be experienced by workers who are not on the frontline and it was found that depending on the nature of their work, emotional labor will vary. Lastly, it was also found that in addition to the workers, the leaders also experience emotional labor.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that several researches were conducted on emotional labor, and their findings were principally reporting similar outcomes. Deep acting was associated with positive outcomes, while surface acting revealed negative outcomes, though an exception was also found. The exception could be explained by other factors that mediated the negative effects of surface acting. In addition, it was found that most studies previously carried out concentrated mainly on a single service sector. Later, this gap was addressed by investigating emotional labor across several service sectors simultaneously. This allowed for the generalization of the findings to some extent. Just like service workers experience emotional labor, the leaders also are susceptible to this phenomenon.

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