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Emotional labour: More of a burden than a benefit?

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Abstract

Hospitality workers, such as flight attendants and waiters, are expected to be courteous, friendly, and polite all the time. Training and managing their own feelings is part of the job. For many, people's true feelings differ from those shown to the outside world, thus prompting them to "put a mask on" throughout their working hours. This practice is called surface acting, which is as essential to this investigation as deep acting. In this context, this study's results were thought-provoking since a statistically significant positive correlation between deep acting and performance was found, while the surface acting–performance relationship was negative. These findings may serve as a warning signal for employers who are expected to keep their employees' mental well-being intact at work.

Keywords: Emotional labour, surface acting, deep acting, managing feelings at work



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1. Introduction

While the workplace has always been seen as a rational environment (Alias, 2022) where emotions were ignored when studying workplace phenomena (Grandey, 2000), emotions and emotional demands are still regarded as crucial components of everyday organizational life. The emotional dynamics in the workplace increasingly draw people's attention. On the one hand, employees are expected to contribute to high-quality interpersonal interactions in the workplace. On the other hand, employees are expected to articulate appropriate emotions as part of their job requirements (Alias, 2022).

The following quote from a female Vice President shows that emotional work is often taken for granted and receives little appreciation. The woman said, "I definitely think emotional labour is being taken for granted. We're so focused on revenue as opposed to the skills required to manage teams remotely in a COVID world. I don't think those skills and emotional labour are being formally recognized or that there's any strong awareness around it." (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

As the term emotional labour clearly indicates, it is a labour that, in a professional context, should also be paid. Emotional work has so many more facets than just greeting customers with a smile. Emotional work ensures that the work environment remains human and attractive, in which employees are inspired to work together well and thus complete tasks successfully. As a result, companies remain functional even during times of crisis. The problem is that emotional labour is often not perceived as labour (Hackman, 2023).

Based on existing studies on emotional labour, the implications are far-reaching, especially regarding two core outcome variables that were common in emotional labour literature, namely stress and performance.

This cross-sectoral and cross-national study tries to paint a clearer picture of emotional labour in work through the answers of 522 respondents. After a literature review in Chapter 2, the results of this study are presented in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 provides a conclusion and recommendations for employers.

2. Literature Review

The emotional labour concept refers to the emotional management of employees' emotions to achieve conformity with the emotional rules prescribed by the organization. The concept presupposes the presence of personal contact with the client, the induction of an emotional state in others, and the control of the employee's feelings by the employer (Hochschild, 1983). Morris et al. (1996) added further characteristics, namely duration of interaction and variety of emotional expression (Grandey, 2000).

In contrast to "emotional work", which is performed in private, "emotional labour" is carried out in public for a wage (Hochschild, 1983).

The original conceptualization of emotional labour goes back to Hochschild (1983). Emotional labour demands employees to manage their feelings by either surface acting or deep acting (Erickson et al., 2001). Surface acting and deep acting comment on the degree of authenticity of the employee's emotion (Steinberg et al., 1999). Besides these two acting



techniques, researchers also described other forms of performing emotional labour. For example, Ashforth et al. (1993) mentioned that naturally felt emotions as a further form of performing emotional labour. Emotional labour aims to produce a proper feeling in others. Through the emotional work of the employee, customers should feel good (in the case of retail) or bad (in the case of prison guards) (Steinberg et al., 1999). Different jobs call for different emotional displays (Grandey, 2000). Surface acting means that people are faking, suppressing, or amplifying emotions. One also speaks of surface acting when people choose not to display their actual feelings and when they do not try to embrace their emotions. People performing surface acting are putting on a mask. In contrast, deep acting aims at aligning desired and true feelings e.g. when smiling, people eventually get into a mood where they really feel that emotion (Hülshager et al., 2011; Lu et al., 2019; Fouquereau et al., 2018).

In this context, past studies have focused on the experiences of service sector workers (Erickson et al., 2001). An example, that is often cited and regarded as a classic case of emotional labour, is service workers. Service workers are trained to treat customers in a courteous and polite manner with a smiling face (Steinberg et al., 1999). Their interaction with others, might it be customers, patients, students, or children, belongs to the daily work of service workers. During these interactions, service workers have to carry out the demands of their jobs and part of their jobs is to perform emotional labour (Hülshager et al., 2010).

Although the main emphasis of emotional labour studies was on typical service professions for a long time – examples include flight attendants, nurses or cashiers – (Houben et al., 2014), emotional labour can be found in numerous industries and occupations (Humphrey et al. (2015).

There are studies on emotional labour that relate to non-service industries or atypical service industries. For example, Houben et al. (2014) examined whether emotional work also occurs in atypical service jobs like service engineering in the mechanical industry field. Service engineers in the mechanical industry deal primarily with troubleshooting machines. Their tasks also include bringing machines into service, carrying out maintenance work, arranging machine relocations, working on the service hotline, advising customers on all aspects of the machine, and providing training on new machines. Although the service engineers' work centers around the physical and analytical part of the work, communication with customers is essential to solve the problem and to enable a service experience for the customer or even exceed the customer's satisfaction level. While concrete display rules do not seem to exist, the investigation showed that employers expected loyalty and customer orientation from their employed service engineers, which makes service engineers seem more flexible in their behavior, it turns out that service engineers also perform emotional labour. Indeed, customers' expectations of the emotional labour of service engineers are very low and stay rather vague. However, service engineers themselves claimed that emotional regulation is important to keep the customer calm so that they provide the necessary information about the machine to the service engineers. They have to deal with the different emotions of the customer. They might encounter an angry customer who is angry because the service technician is preventing him from doing his work, or a particularly demanding customer who puts pressure on the service engineer because he wants his machine repaired as quickly as possible. Again, the interviewee described a way of emotional regulation that might involve emotional labour (Houben et al., 2014).



Townsend (2005) investigated a food-processing plant where management strives to develop a unitarist culture. It has been shown that even in a setting where there is no interaction with customers, employees are required to perform emotional labour in many situations during the interaction with other employees. Situations that require a high degree of emotional labour in the field include team meetings, team-building activities, and general interactions with fellow employees.

Serebrenik (2017) highlighted that software developers are subject to emotional labour, even if software engineers are not immediately associated with emotional labour. Biometric channels (these tend to reflect real emotions) as well as text channels (these tend to reflect emotions required to be shown) can be applied to identify emotional labour. Biometric channels can also measure physical reactions of the human body using biometric devices such as electroencephalography (EEG), galvanic skin response measurement (GSR), and eye-tracking. Text channels include code review comments, or questions and answers on Q & A platforms (Serebrenik, 2017).

Emotional labour also seems to be an essential part of the job for temporary workers because these workers strive to get a permanent position or important orders and therefore have to try to show certain emotions such as friendliness, helpfulness, enthusiasm, calmness, and warmth (Lepadatu et al., 2018).

Furthermore, different jobs are associated with different frameworks of norms or so-called display rules (Steinberg et al., 1999). Display rules refer to expressive expectations for employees in a professional or organizational context. They shape the emotional expression of employees by facilitating the achievement of organizational goals (e.g. customer satisfaction, team morale) (Diefendorff et al., 2011). Display rules differ among occupations, organizations, and cultures. They can be easily observed in so-called “people work” jobs (e.g., health care, education, service). They tend to be general rather than role-specific in nature (Diefendorff et al., 2011; Hülshager et al., 2010; Alias, 2022). Display rules can be expressed to the employees through training materials. But they can also be experienced by observing co-workers (Grandey, 2000). Positive display rules are eager for positive emotions, while negative display rules demand the suppression of negative emotions (Humphrey et al., 2015). Humphrey et al. (2008) name three categories of service jobs according to their display rules. Firstly, there are the so-called customer service jobs. These include waiters and waitresses, hair stylists, and retail associates, who offer their customers service with a smile and show positive, friendly emotions. Secondly, caring professionals, this group includes nurses, doctors, healthcare workers, and social workers, should show sympathy and concern. These emotions are shown in an atmosphere of problems or illness and can, depending on the frequency, be problematic for employees. Professions such as police, guards, bill collectors, and bouncers belong to the social control jobs. Showing emotions such as anger, irritation, or dominance is expected from this group (Humphrey et al., 2008).

Studies are also increasingly showing that emotion management for wages can be good for the employer, but bad for the employee. Emotional work can cause stress for employees and lead to burnout (Grandey, 2000). While Hochschild (1983) assumes that emotional management is associated with effort for the employee and can be detrimental for the employee, Ashforth et al. (1993) assume that emotional work does not mean a conscious



effort for the employee, rather it becomes routine and does not represent a stress factor. According to the researchers, emotional labour is more about observing the employee's behavior than about managing emotions (Ashforth et al., 1993). Morries et al. (1996) highlight job dissatisfaction and emotional exhaustion as results of emotional dissonance, that is a discrepancy between expressed and felt emotion (Morries et al., 1996; Grandey, 2000).

While one part of the research focuses on the individual well-being of the employees as a consequence of emotional labour, the other part highlights organizational well-being (e.g. performance) (Grandey, 2000).

Obtaining loyal customers and generating repeat business is one of the reasons why emotion regulation is used in the service industry. Emotional labour can be effectively related to organizational performance as long as the emotions are perceived as sincere by the recipient of the emotion (Grandey, 2000). Humphrey et al. (2015) conclude that, in contrast to surface acting, a positive relationship is assumed between deep acting and job satisfaction, between deep acting and organizational commitment, between deep acting and job performance, and between deep acting and customer satisfaction. According to Hülshager et al. (2011), there seems to be a weak relationship between deep acting and impaired well-being, but a positive relationship between deep acting and customer satisfaction. Accordingly, the results suggest that deep acting improves performance without harming the employee's well-being (Hülshager et al., 2011). Wang et al. (2011) concluded that deep acting is statistically unrelated to emotional exhaustion. They also stated a small negative relationship between deep-acting and psychosomatic complaints. The researchers reported a positive relationship between deep acting and self-reported task performance as well as between deep acting and non-self-reported task performance (Wang et al., 2011; Humphrey et al., 2015). In their study, Bakker et al. (2006) investigated the emotional job demands of nurses and police officers. This is interesting because different expectations are associated with these two groups when it comes to emotions. Nurses should be trusting, empathetic, and caring, while police officers should be distant and matter-of-fact. The study results show that nurses and police officers experience a mismatch between felt and displayed emotions during interactions with patients and civilians, which in turn results in emotional exhaustion. The authors highlight performance problems associated with emotional labour. The energy needed to regulate emotions is lacking elsewhere, namely for effective task performance or good decision-making (Bakker et al., 2006).

3. Own study

The following cross-sectoral (according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations – short “ISCO”) and cross-national study employs a questionnaire consisting of 22 questions, with a majority of it being Likert-Scale questions. Questions about how easy it is for the respondents to suppress their own emotions, whether it is necessary to wear a mask at work to fulfill job requirements, whether one is aware of the display rules at work, or whether positive emotions that one displays at work improve performance, are part of the survey. Some of the study's key findings are presented below.

The majority of respondents (~88%) knew the display rules associated with their job. They answered „strongly agree“ (34,7%), „moderately agree“ (29,7%), or „slightly agree“ (23,8%) to the question „I know the display rules at the organization where I work.”

The question “I am putting a mask at work to fulfill my job requirements.” identifies respondents who applied surface acting at work. As shown in Figure 1, 59,2 % of respondents apply surface acting in their job by answering „strongly agree“ (17,4%), „moderately agree“ (18,4%), or „slightly agree“ (23,4%) to the question “I am putting a mask at work to fulfill my job requirements” (see figure 1).

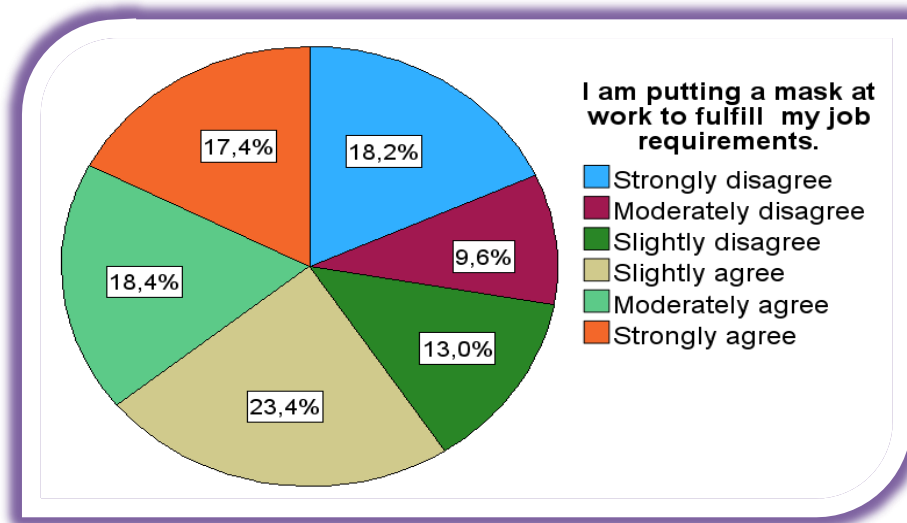


Figure 1: Applying surface acting

Source: own figure

Numerically, almost the same percentages result if the question is asked: "I am faking a good mood at work to fulfill organizational job requirements." This question also serves to identify respondents who applied surface acting. 58,2% of respondents apply surface acting in their job (answered „strongly agree“ (18,8%), „moderately agree“ (19,5%), or „slightly agree“ (19,9%) to the question “I am faking a good mood at work to fulfill organizational job requirements”.

The question “I am striving to actually feel the emotions that I display at work.” identified respondents who applied deep acting. As Figure 2 shows, 67,6% of respondents apply deep acting in their job (answered „strongly agree“ (15,7%), „moderately agree“ (27,4%), or „slightly agree“ (24,5%) to the question “I am striving to actually feel the emotions that I display at work.”

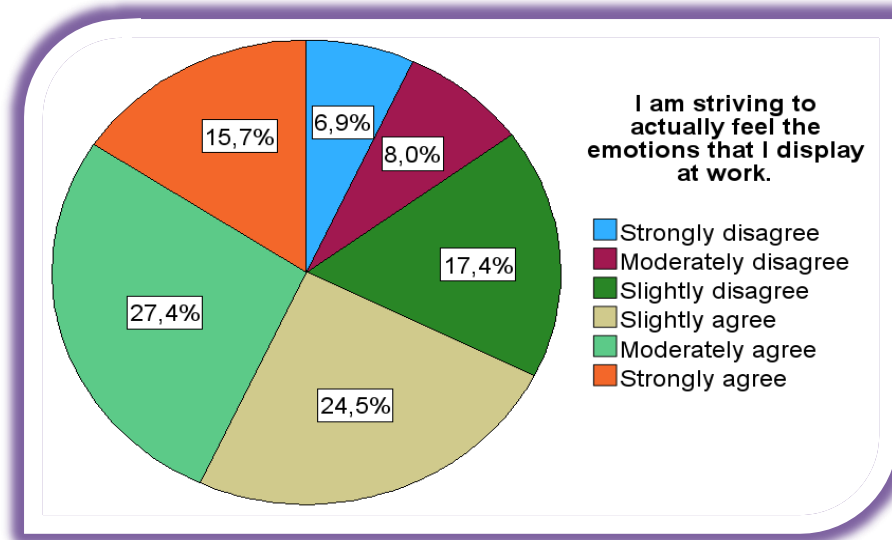


Figure 2: Applying deep acting
Source: own figure

To study the relationship between surface acting and performance, the questions “I am putting a mask at work to fulfill my job requirements” (provides information about surface acting) and “I feel I make progress at work most of the days.” (provides information about performance) were utilized. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r) was applied to analyze the relationship between these two variables. The relationship between surface acting and performance was found to be negative and it was statistically not significant.

The Pearson Correlation Coefficient (r) was applied to analyze the relationship between two variables. The questions “I am striving to actually feel the emotions that I display at work” (provides information about deep acting), “I feel I make progress at work most of the days.”, “I am satisfied with my performance at work”, and “I think my employer is satisfied with my performance.” (all provide information about performance) were included. A statistically significant positive correlation between deep acting and performance was found.

Table 1: deep acting and performance

Correlations

		I feel I make progress at work most of the days.	I am striving to actually feel the emotions that I display at work.	I am satisfied with my performance at work.	I think my employer is satisfied with my performance.
I feel I make progress at work most of the days.	Pearson Correlation	1	,152**	,451**	,483**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		<,001	<,001	<,001
	N	522	522	522	522
I am striving to actually feel the emotions that I display at work.	Pearson Correlation	,152**	1	,087*	,071
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001		,046	,105
	N	522	522	522	522
I am satisfied with my performance at work.	Pearson Correlation	,451**	,087*	1	,608**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	,046		<,001
	N	522	522	522	522
I think my employer is satisfied with my performance.	Pearson Correlation	,483**	,071	,608**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<,001	,105	<,001	
	N	522	522	522	522

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Source: own table

When studying answers to the questions „I am putting a mask at work to fulfill my job requirements.“ and „It is easy for me to suppress emotions at work.“, it is possible to learn something about how much effort it costs the respondents to disguise their emotions. Although most respondents (83,3%) find it easy to suppress emotions at work (21,3% answered „strongly agree“, moderately agree“ (38,1%), „slightly agree“ (23,8%) to the question “It is easy for me to suppress emotions at work.“). In the opinion of the author, it certainly takes a lot of effort to suppress emotions if this is not in the nature of the person and they have to engage in deep-acting.

Answers to the questions „I am striving to actually feel the emotions that I display at work.“ (provides information about deep acting), “I feel mentally exhausted from my job” (provides information on mental exhaustion), and “I feel empty at the end of the working day” (provides information on mental exhaustion) were studied in more detail. The relationship between (surface) deep acting and mental exhaustion was found to be positive and it was statistically significant. Also, the relationship between (surface) deep acting and feeling of emptiness was found to be positive and it was statistically significant.

4. Conclusions

This study found that emotional labour is of great importance in today’s working environments as shown not only by the existing literature but also by the questionnaire study conducted here. The analysis of the responses of 522 questionnaire participants from a wide



range of industries and countries showed that 59,2 % of respondents applied surface acting in their job, whereas 67,6% of respondents applied deep acting in their job. The majority of respondents (~88%) knew the display rules associated with their job. A statistically significant positive correlation between deep acting and performance was found. Interestingly, both the surface-acting-mental exhaustion relationship and the deep-acting-mental exhaustion relationship were found to be positive and statistically significant. However, further analysis and research are needed to break down the results by sector or gender. What can be concluded from this study's results is that emotional labour, at least in the form of deep acting, seems to have a positive influence on performance, but it is about the substance of the employee, which in turn leads to a drop in performance. Employers should urgently address emotional labour, value it, make it visible, and invest in its preservation at work.



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