



Emotional Labour and Burnout Among Service-Sector Employees

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History Revised format: Aug, 2018 Available Online: Sep, 2018 Keywords Emotional labour, burnout, surface acting, deep acting, emotional exhaustion, service-sector employees,	Emotional labour is an essential but frequently overlooked component of service-sector employment. Workers in banking, hospitality, healthcare, education, retail, aviation, telecommunications, and customer-support services are commonly required to regulate their emotions and display attitudes that conform to organizational expectations. Although these emotional displays may improve customer satisfaction and service quality, continuously controlling genuine feelings can consume employees' psychological resources and increase their vulnerability to burnout. This conceptual review examines the relationship between emotional labour and burnout among service-sector employees, with particular attention to surface acting, deep acting, emotional dissonance, customer aggression, workload, job autonomy, and organizational support. The literature indicates that surface acting, in which employees conceal their actual emotions and display unfelt expressions, is consistently associated with emotional exhaustion, cynicism, reduced job satisfaction, and turnover intention. Deep acting may produce comparatively favourable outcomes because employees attempt to align their internal feelings with required emotional displays; however, it can also become demanding when emotional interactions are frequent or intense. Drawing upon emotional-labour theory and the Job Demands–Resources framework, the article argues that burnout develops when emotional demands remain high while resources such as supervisory support, recovery time, autonomy, staffing, recognition, and psychological safety remain insufficient. It concludes that emotional labour should be treated as a legitimate occupational demand and incorporated into human-resource policies, employee-well-being programmers, workload planning, and managerial training.

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Introduction:

The expansion of service-based economies has increased the number of employees whose work depends on direct interaction with customers, patients, students, passengers, clients, and members of the public. Unlike employees whose performance is assessed mainly through physical or technical output, service-sector workers are frequently evaluated through their tone of voice, facial expressions, patience, courtesy, empathy, responsiveness, and ability to remain calm in challenging situations. As a result, emotions become part of the service that employees are expected to provide. The term emotional labour was introduced by Hochschild to describe the management of feelings and emotional expressions as part

of paid employment. Organizations establish formal or informal display rules that communicate which emotions employees should express and which emotions they should suppress. A hotel receptionist may be expected to remain welcoming despite personal distress, a nurse may be required to demonstrate empathy while working under extreme pressure, and a call-centre representative may need to remain polite when dealing with an abusive customer. Grandey later conceptualized emotional labour as a form of workplace emotion regulation. From this perspective, employees regulate both their internal feelings and their external emotional expressions to achieve organizational goals. Emotional labour is therefore not limited to smiling or acting politely; it involves continuous psychological monitoring, emotional adjustment, and behavioral control. Burnout represents a major possible consequence of prolonged emotional regulation. It is generally characterized by exhaustion, psychological distance or cynicism toward work, and declining professional efficacy. The World Health Organization classifies burnout as an occupational phenomenon resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed rather than as a medical condition. Service-sector employees face a particularly high risk because they must often manage emotions while simultaneously handling heavy workloads, performance targets, customer complaints, irregular schedules, insufficient staffing, and limited decision-making authority. When these conditions are sustained, emotional labour may gradually deplete employees' energy and contribute to withdrawal, absenteeism, declining service quality, and intentions to leave the organization.

Conceptual Foundations of Emotional Labour:

Emotional labour involves displaying emotions that are considered appropriate for a particular occupational role. Organizations may communicate emotional expectations through training manuals, customer-service scripts, performance evaluations, managerial instructions, uniforms, professional codes, or workplace culture. Employees learn that friendliness, confidence, compassion, patience, neutrality, or enthusiasm may be required regardless of what they genuinely feel. Three important components of emotional labour are surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotional expression.

Surface Acting:

Surface acting occurs when employees modify their visible expressions without changing their underlying feelings. An employee may smile while feeling angry, speak calmly while experiencing anxiety, or demonstrate sympathy despite feeling emotionally detached. The gap between the emotion that is felt and the emotion that is displayed is known as emotional dissonance. Surface acting can be psychologically costly because employees must continuously suppress genuine emotions while producing an acceptable external performance. The individual remains aware that the displayed emotion is not authentic, which may create tension, self-alienation, and cognitive strain. Research has repeatedly connected surface acting with emotional exhaustion and less favourable employee outcomes.

Deep Acting:

Deep acting occurs when employees attempt to change their internal emotional state so that the required emotional display becomes more genuine. A customer-service worker may reinterpret an angry customer's behavior as a response to frustration rather than as a personal attack. Similarly, a healthcare worker may focus on a patient's vulnerability to develop genuine compassion. Deep acting requires effort, but it may reduce emotional dissonance because internal feelings become more consistent with external expressions. Research suggests that deep acting is generally less damaging than surface acting and may support more authentic service interactions. However, its effects depend on workload, personal resources, interaction intensity, and the extent to which employees identify with their occupational roles.

Naturally Felt Emotions:

Naturally felt emotional expression occurs when employees genuinely experience the emotions required by their role without needing to manipulate them. For example, an employee may sincerely feel pleased when helping a cooperative customer. Such interactions normally require fewer regulatory resources and are therefore less likely to produce emotional exhaustion. The Emotional Labour Scale developed by Brothring and Lee measures several dimensions of emotional display, including the frequency, intensity, variety, and duration of emotional interactions, as well as surface and deep acting. This

multidimensional approach demonstrates that emotional labour is influenced not only by the type of strategy employee's use but also by how often and how intensely emotional interactions occur.

Emotional Labour in Service-Sector Employment:

Service-sector employees operate at the boundary between organizations and the public. They are expected to protect the organization's image while meeting the emotional and practical needs of customers. This boundary-spanning position creates conflicting pressures because employees may have limited authority to solve customer problems but remain responsible for managing customers' reactions. In hospitality and retail settings, employees are often expected to maintain cheerful and attentive expressions during long shifts. In banking and telecommunications, workers may face strict performance targets while responding to complaints involving financial loss, billing errors, or service interruptions. Healthcare employees are required to demonstrate compassion and reassurance while coping with suffering, staff shortages, and emotionally demanding decisions. Teachers and social-service workers must balance professional boundaries with expectations of care, patience, and understanding. Digital service environments have not eliminated emotional labour. Call-centre representatives, online-support employees, social-media moderators, and live-chat agents must regulate emotions through written language, response speed, scripted communication, voice control, and customer ratings. Electronic monitoring and performance dashboards may further intensify the pressure by measuring call duration, customer satisfaction, response time, and compliance with prescribed scripts. Customer incivility is an especially important source of emotional strain. Employees may experience insults, threats, unreasonable demands, discriminatory comments, or personal criticism but still be required to remain calm and respectful. When organizations apply a rigid "customer is always right" approach without protecting employees from mistreatment, workers may feel that customer satisfaction is valued more highly than their dignity or psychological safety. Research among hotel service providers has shown that surface actors tend to experience greater exhaustion and cynicism than employees who rely more heavily on deep acting. Service settings therefore create burnout risk not simply because employees interact with customers, but because employees may be required to conceal repeated negative emotional reactions without adequate opportunities for recovery.

Pathways from Emotional Labour to Burnout:

Burnout develops through a gradual process of resource depletion. Emotional regulation requires attention, self-control, empathy, memory, and behavioral monitoring. When these resources are repeatedly used without sufficient recovery, employees may experience emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion is usually the most immediate burnout response to emotional labour. Employees may feel drained before beginning a shift, struggle to demonstrate empathy, or find it difficult to recover after work. Continued exhaustion may lead to cynicism or depersonalization, in which workers distance themselves emotionally from customers and begin treating them as problems rather than individuals. Reduced professional efficacy may emerge when employees believe that they can no longer provide high-quality service or meet organizational expectations. Employees may continue performing required emotional displays while privately feeling ineffective, detached, or frustrated. This conflict between external professionalism and internal depletion can conceal burnout from supervisors until performance or attendance begins to decline. The Job Demands–Resources model provides a useful explanation for this process. Job demands are aspects of work that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort. Emotional display requirements, customer aggression, excessive workloads, time pressure, role conflict, and electronic monitoring can therefore function as job demands. Job resources include autonomy, social support, fair supervision, adequate staffing, recognition, recovery time, training, and access to decision-making authority. When emotional demands remain consistently high and resources remain inadequate, the likelihood of exhaustion and disengagement increases. Conversely, job resources may suffer the effects of demanding customer interactions and help employees maintain motivation and professional effectiveness. A meta-analysis covering several decades of emotional-labour research found that surface acting and emotion-rule dissonance were more consistently associated with impaired well-being than deep acting. Emotional dissonance has also demonstrated a meaningful relationship

with emotional exhaustion across occupations. Burnout may eventually influence organizational outcomes. Emotionally exhausted employees may become less patient, less attentive, and less capable of resolving complex customer problems. They may withdraw psychologically, increase their absence from work, reduce discretionary effort, or consider leaving the organization. Emotional exhaustion may therefore connect emotional labour with turnover intention and other withdrawal behaviors.

Individual and Organizational Moderating Factors:

The relationship between emotional labour and burnout is not identical for all employees. Individual differences, workplace resources, leadership practices, and employment conditions can strengthen or weaken its effects.

Emotional Intelligence and Regulation Skills:

Employees who can recognize, understand, and regulate emotions may be better prepared to manage emotionally demanding encounters. Emotional intelligence may support cognitive reappraisal, empathy, impulse control, and the use of deep acting. However, emotional intelligence should not be treated as a substitute for safe and supportive working conditions. Even emotionally skilled employees can become exhausted when workloads and customer aggression remain excessive.

Self-Efficacy:

Employees with stronger emotional self-efficacy may feel more capable of managing difficult interactions. Confidence can reduce uncertainty and help workers select more constructive emotional-regulation strategies. Nevertheless, organizations should avoid interpreting burnout as evidence that an employee lacks resilience. Burnout is influenced strongly by the structure and organization of work.

Job Autonomy:

Autonomy allows employees to decide how to respond to customers and how to organize their tasks. Workers, who can adapt scripts, take short recovery breaks, escalate abusive interactions, or offer appropriate solutions may experience less emotional conflict. Research applying the Job Demands–Resources model to service workers indicates that job autonomy can moderate the association between surface acting and burnout.

Social and Supervisory Support:

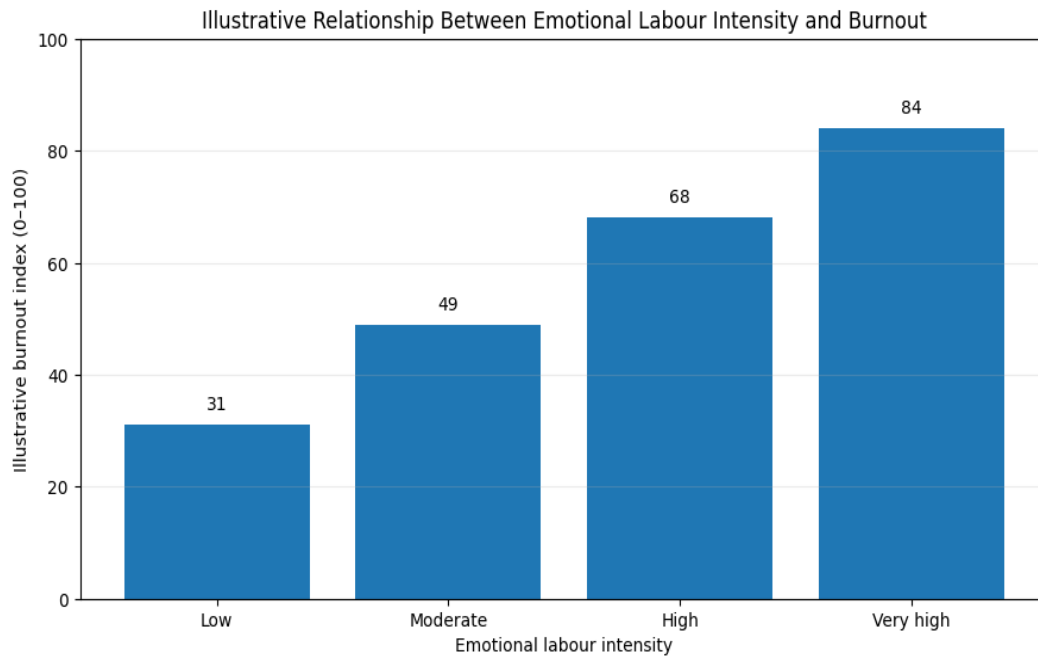
Supportive supervisors can validate employees' emotional experiences, provide assistance after difficult customer encounters, and establish clear boundaries against abuse. Co-worker support allows employees to share experiences, seek advice, and feel less isolated. Workplace support has been associated with greater job satisfaction and lower burnout in emotionally demanding public-service contexts.

Workload and Staffing:

Emotional demands become more harmful when employees handle a high volume of interactions without adequate breaks. Understaffing may reduce recovery opportunities and increase customer waiting times, which can create further hostility toward employees. Effective staffing is therefore both an operational requirement and an employee-well-being intervention.

Employment Insecurity and Performance Monitoring:

Temporary contracts, fear of job loss, customer-rating systems, and aggressive performance targets may pressure employees to tolerate mistreatment and intensify emotional displays. When employees believe that one customer complaint could threaten their employment, surface acting may become more frequent and psychologically costly.



Note: Conceptual values created for presentation; they are not participant data.

Summary:

Emotional labor is central to service-sector employment because employees are expected to regulate emotions in accordance with organizational and professional display rules. Although emotional regulation can improve customer experiences, its psychological effects depend on the strategy used and the context in which it occurs. Surface acting is particularly harmful because employees display emotions that conflict with their genuine feelings. Repeated emotional dissonance can consume self-regulatory resources and contribute to exhaustion, cynicism, diminished professional efficacy, withdrawal, and turnover intention. Deep acting may be less damaging because it reduces the gap between felt and displayed emotions, but it still requires effort and may become exhausting when emotional interactions are frequent, intense, or unsupported. Burnout should not be interpreted solely as an individual failure to cope. It is shaped by the balance between job demands and job resources. Emotional labor is most likely to produce burnout when it is combined with customer aggression, excessive workload, inadequate staffing, rigid scripts, low autonomy, unsupportive supervision, employment insecurity, and insufficient recovery time. Emotional labor is a central requirement of service-sector employment because workers are expected to control their feelings and display emotions that meet organizational and customer expectations. Employees in hospitality, healthcare, banking, retail, education, telecommunications, and customer-support services frequently need to remain polite, calm, friendly, or empathetic even during stressful or unpleasant interactions. Surface acting, in which employees hide their genuine feelings and display emotions they do not actually experience, are strongly associated with emotional exhaustion, dissatisfaction, cynicism, and burnout. Deep acting, where employees attempt to genuinely experience the required emotion, may be less harmful, although it can still become exhausting when emotional demands are intense or continuous. Burnout becomes more likely when emotional labor is combined with excessive workloads, customer aggression, staff shortages, strict performance targets, limited autonomy, and inadequate managerial support. Organizations can reduce these risks by providing supportive supervision, reasonable workloads, sufficient recovery time, emotional-regulation training, employee autonomy, counseling services, and policies protecting workers from abusive customers.

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