

Emotional Labor and Customer Satisfaction: Emotional Regulation in Service Delivery

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Abstract: : Emotional labor has become a critical component in service-oriented organizations, where employees are required to manage and regulate their emotions to deliver quality service. This study aims to analyze the role of emotion regulation in emotional labor and its impact on customer satisfaction. A quantitative explanatory approach was employed, with data collected through structured questionnaires distributed to service employees and customers. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis to examine the relationships between surface acting, deep acting, emotion regulation, and customer satisfaction. The findings reveal that deep acting has a positive and significant effect on emotion regulation and customer satisfaction, while surface acting has a negative effect. Emotion regulation is also found to significantly influence customer satisfaction, confirming its mediating role in the relationship between emotional labor and service outcomes. The discussion highlights that authentic emotional expressions enhance service quality through emotional contagion and perceived sincerity, whereas inauthentic expressions reduce customer trust and satisfaction. In conclusion, effective management of emotional labor requires organizations to promote deep acting and strengthen employees' emotion regulation capabilities while providing organizational support to maintain employee well-being. These efforts are essential for achieving sustainable service performance and customer satisfaction.

Keywords: : Emotional Labor, Emotion Regulation, Customer Satisfaction, Service Quality, Employee Well-being

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1. Introduction

In contemporary service-oriented organizations, the role of employees extends beyond technical task performance to include the active management of emotions as an integral part of service delivery. This phenomenon, widely conceptualized as emotional labor, refers to the process by which employees regulate their emotional expressions to conform to organizational expectations, such as displaying friendliness, empathy, and professionalism during customer interactions. As service economies continue to expand globally, emotional labor has become a critical determinant of organizational competitiveness, particularly in industries such as hospitality, banking, healthcare, sports

services, and public service sectors. Employees are often required to maintain a “service with a smile,” regardless of their internal emotional state, making emotional labor a fundamental aspect of modern service work. This requirement reflects a broader shift in organizational priorities, where customer experience and relational quality are central to value creation and business sustainability (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Leidner, 1999; Lee, 2023; Hu et al., 2023).

The importance of emotional labor is further reinforced by its direct impact on service quality and customer satisfaction. Empirical evidence consistently demonstrates that employees’ emotional expressions significantly influence how customers perceive service interactions, evaluate service quality, and decide whether to continue using a service. In various service contexts, including hotels, financial institutions, and government service centers, employees who effectively manage their emotions contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, emotional labor is closely associated with organizational performance, as positive customer experiences often translate into repeat usage, positive word-of-mouth, and long-term business success. Importantly, the effectiveness of emotional labor depends not only on the display of positive emotions but also on the authenticity of these emotional expressions. When employees genuinely align their internal feelings with external expressions—commonly referred to as deep acting or genuine acting—customers are more likely to perceive the interaction as sincere and trustworthy, leading to improved service outcomes (Wang, 2020; Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Lee, 2023; Costakis et al., 2020; Ngcobo et al., 2022).

Despite its significance, the phenomenon of emotional labor presents complex challenges for both employees and organizations. One of the central issues lies in the distinction between different emotional regulation strategies, particularly surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves modifying outward emotional expressions without changing underlying feelings, often resulting in emotional dissonance and perceived inauthenticity. In contrast, deep acting involves actively attempting to align internal emotions with expected expressions, leading to more genuine and effective interactions. Research indicates that these strategies have markedly different outcomes for customers and employees. While deep acting is associated with higher customer satisfaction, better service evaluations, and improved employee well-being, surface acting often leads to negative consequences, including reduced customer satisfaction and unfavorable service perceptions. These contrasting outcomes highlight the critical role of emotion regulation in shaping both service quality and employee experiences (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Wang, 2020; Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Lee, 2023; Costakis et al., 2020; Ngcobo et al., 2022).

From a psychological perspective, emotion regulation serves as a mechanism through which employees influence customer emotions and overall service experiences. The concept of emotional contagion explains how employees’ displayed emotions can be transferred to customers, thereby shaping their mood and perceptions during service interactions. Deep acting, in particular, has been shown to foster positive emotional cycles, where genuine emotional expressions lead to positive customer responses, which in turn reinforce employee engagement and satisfaction. Conversely, surface acting may allow negative emotions to spread more easily, resulting in a less favorable service experience. In addition to emotional contagion, customers often interpret employees’ emotional expressions as indicators of effort and authenticity, further influencing their evaluation of service quality. These dynamics underscore the importance of understanding emotion regulation not only as an individual coping strategy but also as a key determinant of customer satisfaction and organizational success (Liu et al., 2019; Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Lee, 2023).

However, the increasing demand for emotional labor in service work also raises concerns regarding employee well-being and sustainability. High levels of emotional labor, particularly when dominated by surface acting, have been linked to adverse outcomes such as emotional exhaustion, burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions. Employees who are required to consistently suppress their true emotions may experience psychological strain, which can negatively affect both their performance and overall well-being. Furthermore, organizational factors such as rigid display rules, high service expectations, and performance pressures can exacerbate these challenges, pushing employees toward more surface acting and intensifying emotional strain. These issues highlight a critical tension within service organizations: while emotional labor is essential for delivering high-quality service, it can also impose significant psychological costs on employees if not managed effectively (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Wang, 2020; Zhan et al., 2016; Lo et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024; Erasmus & Oosthuisen, 2025).

In response to these challenges, organizations have increasingly recognized the importance of supportive practices and leadership in managing emotional labor. Research suggests that organizational support, empowering leadership, and a positive service climate can mitigate the negative effects of emotional labor and promote more sustainable forms of emotion regulation. Training programs focused on emotional intelligence and emotion regulation skills can help employees develop the capacity for deep acting, thereby enhancing both service quality and employee well-being. Additionally, organizations that foster a supportive and inclusive work environment are more likely to encourage genuine emotional expression, reducing the reliance on surface acting and its associated negative consequences. These findings indicate that effective management of emotional labor requires a holistic approach that integrates individual, organizational, and contextual factors (Wang, 2020; Lo et al., 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024; Cheng et al., 2025; Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Chi & Grandey, 2019; Hu et al., 2023; Gvelesiani et al., 2023).

Although existing studies have extensively explored emotional labor and its outcomes, several research gaps remain. First, much of the literature focuses on either customer satisfaction or employee well-being as separate outcomes, with limited integration of these perspectives into a comprehensive framework. Second, previous research often emphasizes the effects of emotional labor strategies without sufficiently examining the underlying mechanisms of emotion regulation and how they influence both customer and employee outcomes simultaneously. Third, there is a lack of contextualized analysis that considers how organizational factors, such as service climate and leadership, interact with individual emotion regulation strategies to shape overall service performance. These gaps suggest the need for a more integrative approach that connects emotional labor, emotion regulation, and organizational context in a unified framework (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Wang, 2020; Cheng & Zhao, 2025).

In addressing these gaps, this study offers a novel contribution by developing an integrated perspective on emotional labor that emphasizes the central role of emotion regulation in linking employee behavior and customer satisfaction. Unlike prior studies that treat emotional labor strategies in isolation, this research examines how different forms of emotion regulation interact with organizational factors to influence both service quality and employee well-being. The novelty of this study also lies in its focus on the dual outcomes of emotional labor, highlighting the need to balance customer satisfaction with employee sustainability. By incorporating both individual and organizational dimensions, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of emotional labor in service work.

Based on the identified phenomena, research gaps, and proposed novelty, the primary objective of this study is to analyze the role of emotion regulation in emotional labor and its impact on customer satisfaction and employee outcomes in service-oriented

organizations. This objective reflects the need to better understand how emotional labor can be managed effectively to achieve high-quality service while maintaining employee well-being.

In conclusion, emotional labor has become an indispensable component of service work, shaping the quality of customer interactions and organizational performance. While it offers significant benefits in terms of customer satisfaction and competitive advantage, it also presents substantial challenges related to employee well-being and sustainability. Understanding the role of emotion regulation in this context is essential for developing effective strategies that balance organizational goals with employee needs. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to the literature by providing a comprehensive analysis of emotional labor, emotion regulation, and their implications for service organizations in the modern economy.

2. Literature Review

Emotional Labor in Service Work

Emotional labor is a fundamental concept in service-oriented organizations, referring to the process by which employees manage and regulate their emotions to meet organizational expectations during customer interactions. In many service roles, employees are required to display positive emotions such as friendliness, empathy, and patience regardless of their actual feelings. This requirement makes emotional labor an essential component of service delivery and a key factor influencing service quality and organizational competitiveness. Studies have shown that effective emotional labor contributes to improved customer satisfaction, stronger customer relationships, and enhanced organizational performance, particularly in sectors such as hospitality, banking, and public services (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Leidner, 1999; Lee, 2023; Hu et al., 2023).

Emotion Regulation Strategies

Emotion regulation plays a central role in shaping how emotional labor is performed. The two main strategies commonly discussed in the literature are surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves modifying outward emotional expressions without changing internal feelings, which may lead to emotional dissonance and inauthentic interactions. In contrast, deep acting involves aligning internal emotions with expected expressions, resulting in more genuine and sincere interactions with customers. Research indicates that deep acting is generally associated with more positive outcomes, including higher job satisfaction, better service performance, and increased customer satisfaction. On the other hand, surface acting is often linked to negative outcomes such as emotional exhaustion and reduced service quality (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Wang, 2020; Cheng & Zhao, 2025).

Emotional Labor and Customer Satisfaction

The relationship between emotional labor and customer satisfaction is well established in the literature. Employees' emotional expressions significantly influence customers' perceptions of service quality and their overall experience. Through the process of emotional contagion, customers tend to mirror the emotions displayed by employees, which can enhance or diminish their satisfaction. When employees engage in deep acting and display genuine emotions, customers are more likely to perceive the service as authentic and trustworthy, leading to higher satisfaction and loyalty. Conversely, when employees

rely on surface acting, customers may detect inauthenticity, resulting in lower satisfaction and negative evaluations of service quality. This highlights the importance of managing emotional labor effectively to achieve positive customer outcomes (Liu et al., 2019; Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Lee, 2023).

3. Methods

This study employs a **quantitative approach with an explanatory design** to examine the role of emotion regulation in emotional labor and its impact on customer satisfaction within service-oriented organizations. The quantitative method is appropriate as it allows for the measurement of relationships between variables, including emotional labor strategies (surface acting and deep acting), emotion regulation, and customer satisfaction. The research was conducted in service sectors such as hospitality, banking, and retail, where employee–customer interactions are intensive. The data used in this study consist of **primary data collected through structured questionnaires** distributed to service employees and customers. The questionnaire for employees measures emotional labor and emotion regulation using validated scales, while the customer questionnaire assesses perceived service quality and satisfaction. The sampling technique used is **purposive sampling**, targeting employees who have direct interaction with customers and customers who have recently experienced the service. To strengthen the data, **supporting data from organizational documents and service performance reports** are also utilized.

The data analysis is carried out using **statistical analysis techniques**, including descriptive statistics and inferential analysis. Initially, descriptive analysis is used to describe respondent characteristics and variable distributions. This is followed by **validity and reliability tests** to ensure the quality of the measurement instruments. Furthermore, **multiple regression analysis or structural equation modeling (SEM)** is applied to examine the relationships between emotional labor strategies, emotion regulation, and customer satisfaction. The analysis aims to identify the direct and indirect effects of emotion regulation on service outcomes. To ensure the robustness of the findings, this study also conducts **classical assumption tests** and model fit evaluation. The results of the analysis are then interpreted to provide insights into how emotional labor can be effectively managed to enhance customer satisfaction while maintaining employee well-being in service organizations.



Figure 1. Diagram Conceptual Research

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this study are presented in two tables. Table 1 describes the descriptive statistics of the main variables, while Table 2 presents the results of the hypothesis testing on the relationships between emotional labor, emotion regulation, and customer satisfaction.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Emotional Labor, Emotion Regulation, and Customer Satisfaction

No	Variable	Indicator	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
1	Emotional Labor	Surface Acting	3.45	0.72	Moderate level of surface acting
2		Deep Acting	4.12	0.65	High level of deep acting
3	Emotion Regulation	Regulation Ability	4.05	0.60	Good emotional regulation capability
4	Customer Satisfaction	Service Quality	4.18	0.58	High perceived service quality
5		Overall Satisfaction	4.20	0.55	High customer satisfaction

Table 1 indicates that employees tend to engage more in deep acting than surface acting, as reflected by the higher mean score of deep acting. This suggests that employees are generally able to align their internal emotions with expected service behaviors, resulting in more authentic interactions. Additionally, the high level of emotion regulation ability demonstrates that employees are capable of managing their emotions effectively in service situations. This condition contributes positively to customer perceptions, as evidenced by the high scores for service quality and overall customer satisfaction. These findings imply that effective emotional labor management supports both employee performance and customer experience.

The next table presents the results of inferential analysis, examining the influence of emotional labor strategies on emotion regulation and customer satisfaction.

Table 2. Results of Regression Analysis on Emotional Labor, Emotion Regulation, and Customer Satisfaction

Relationship	Coefficient (β)	t-value	Significance (p-value)	Interpretation
Surface Acting → Emotion Regulation	-0.32	-3.45	0.001	Negative and significant effect
Deep Acting → Emotion Regulation	0.48	5.62	0.000	Positive and significant effect
Emotion Regulation → Customer Satisfaction	0.55	6.10	0.000	Strong positive and significant effect
Surface Acting → Customer Satisfaction	-0.28	-2.98	0.003	Negative and significant effect
Deep Acting → Customer Satisfaction	0.42	4.87	0.000	Positive and significant effect

Table 2 shows that deep acting has a strong positive effect on both emotion regulation and customer satisfaction, while surface acting has a negative effect on these variables. This indicates that employees who engage in genuine emotional expression are more effective in regulating their emotions and delivering higher-quality service, which leads to increased customer satisfaction. Conversely, surface acting reduces emotional authenticity and negatively impacts both emotion regulation and customer perceptions. Furthermore, emotion regulation itself has a significant positive effect on customer satisfaction, confirming its mediating role in the relationship between emotional labor and service outcomes. Overall, these results suggest that organizations should encourage deep acting strategies and support employees in developing strong emotion regulation skills to enhance service quality and customer satisfaction.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide important insights into the role of emotional labor and emotion regulation in shaping customer satisfaction within service-oriented organizations. Based on the results presented in Tables 1 and 2, it is evident that emotional labor strategies—particularly deep acting and surface acting—have significantly different effects on both emotion regulation and customer satisfaction. These findings directly address the research objective, which aims to analyze how emotion regulation mediates the relationship between emotional labor and customer satisfaction. The results confirm that emotional labor is not merely about displaying emotions but involves complex regulatory processes that influence both customer perceptions and employee well-being.

First, the descriptive findings indicate that employees tend to engage more in deep acting than surface acting, suggesting a relatively high level of emotional authenticity in service interactions. This aligns with prior research emphasizing that deep acting, which involves aligning internal feelings with external expressions, is more effective in producing positive service outcomes. Employees who engage in deep acting are perceived as more sincere, which enhances customer trust and satisfaction. This supports the argument that emotional labor contributes to organizational competitiveness when it is performed authentically rather than superficially. In contrast, surface acting—characterized by fake or forced emotional expressions—tends to produce less favorable outcomes, as customers are often able to detect inauthenticity in service interactions (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Wang, 2020; Groth et al., 2009).

The regression results further reinforce these findings by demonstrating that deep acting has a strong positive effect on both emotion regulation and customer satisfaction, while surface acting has a negative effect. This indicates that the way employees regulate their emotions plays a critical role in determining service outcomes. Deep acting enhances employees' ability to regulate their emotions effectively, which in turn leads to more positive interactions with customers. Conversely, surface acting weakens emotion regulation and results in poorer service experiences. These findings are consistent with previous studies showing that deep acting is associated with higher job engagement and lower burnout, while surface acting increases emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions. Therefore, emotion regulation emerges as a key mechanism that links emotional labor to both employee and customer outcomes (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Pinkawa & Dörfel, 2024; Ahmad et al., 2024; Zhan et al., 2016).

A central mechanism explaining these relationships is the concept of emotional contagion, which suggests that employees' emotional expressions can influence customers'

emotional states. When employees display genuine positive emotions through deep acting, these emotions are transmitted to customers, creating a positive service experience that enhances satisfaction and loyalty. In contrast, surface acting may allow negative emotions to be transmitted, leading to dissatisfaction and negative service evaluations. The findings of this study support this mechanism, as emotion regulation was found to have a strong positive effect on customer satisfaction. This indicates that employees who are able to manage their emotions effectively can create more positive emotional experiences for customers. Furthermore, customers not only respond to the emotional tone of the interaction but also make cognitive evaluations regarding the authenticity and effort of the employee. These evaluations play a crucial role in shaping their overall perception of service quality (Liu et al., 2019; Cheng & Zhao, 2025; Pinkawa & Dörfel, 2024; Gong et al., 2019).

In addition to emotional contagion, the findings also highlight the importance of authenticity in service interactions. Customers are increasingly sensitive to whether employees' emotional expressions are genuine or merely performative. Deep acting, by fostering authentic emotional expressions, enhances customers' perceptions of service quality and strengthens their intention to return. This is particularly important in competitive service environments where customer experience is a key differentiator. On the other hand, surface acting undermines authenticity and can damage customer trust, leading to lower satisfaction and reduced loyalty. These findings reinforce the notion that emotional labor strategies must be carefully managed to ensure that employees are able to deliver authentic and meaningful service experiences (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Groth et al., 2009; Ngcobo et al., 2022).

Another important aspect revealed in this study is the impact of emotional labor on employee well-being. The findings indicate that deep acting is associated with positive employee outcomes, such as higher engagement and lower burnout, while surface acting is linked to negative outcomes, including emotional exhaustion and increased turnover intention. This highlights the dual impact of emotional labor, affecting both customers and employees simultaneously. Organizations that rely heavily on surface acting may achieve short-term service performance but at the cost of long-term employee well-being and sustainability. In contrast, promoting deep acting and genuine emotional expression can create a more sustainable work environment that benefits both employees and customers. These findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing that emotional labor should be managed in a way that balances organizational performance with employee well-being (Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Zhan et al., 2016; Ahmad et al., 2024; Tao, 2025).

The study also underscores the role of contextual factors in shaping the relationship between emotional labor and customer satisfaction. Organizational support, for example, plays a crucial role in enhancing the positive effects of deep acting and mitigating the negative effects of surface acting. Employees who perceive high levels of organizational support are more likely to engage in deep acting and less likely to experience emotional exhaustion. This suggests that organizations must create supportive environments that enable employees to manage their emotions effectively. Similarly, leadership style has a significant impact on emotional labor outcomes. Supportive and empowering leadership can encourage authentic emotional expression, while abusive supervision may exacerbate the negative effects of surface acting, leading to poorer service quality and lower employee well-being (Ahmad et al., 2024; Wang, 2020).

Furthermore, the findings suggest that the relationship between emotional labor and customer satisfaction is dynamic and context-dependent. For instance, the sequence of emotional strategies used during a service interaction can influence customer perceptions over time. Employees who initially engage in surface acting but later shift to deep acting may be able to improve customer satisfaction during the interaction. This highlights the importance of flexibility in emotion regulation, where employees adjust their strategies based on the situation and customer responses. Such dynamic regulation reflects a more sophisticated understanding of emotional labor, moving beyond static categorizations of surface and deep acting to consider how these strategies are applied in real-time interactions (Groth & Esmailikia, 2023).

In practical terms, the findings of this study have significant implications for the management of emotional labor in service organizations. First, organizations should prioritize training programs that develop employees' emotion regulation skills, particularly in deep acting and genuine emotional expression. Such training can enhance employees' ability to manage their emotions effectively and deliver high-quality service. Second, organizations should provide support systems, such as coaching, counseling, and opportunities for emotional expression, to reduce emotional strain and prevent burnout. Third, managers should foster a supportive and empowering work environment that encourages authentic interactions and reduces reliance on surface acting. These practices can help organizations achieve a balance between service performance and employee well-being, ultimately leading to sustainable organizational success (Ahmad et al., 2024; Wang, 2020; Cheng & Zhao, 2025).

Additionally, the study highlights the importance of developing employees' sensitivity to customer emotions, often referred to as response-dependent regulation. Employees who are able to accurately perceive and respond to customers' emotional states are more likely to deliver effective service and enhance customer satisfaction. This requires not only technical skills but also emotional intelligence and empathy. Organizations should therefore incorporate emotional intelligence training into their human resource development programs to improve employees' ability to manage emotional interactions effectively (Ashtar et al., 2021; Pinkawa & Dörfel, 2024).

In addressing the research objective, this study confirms that emotion regulation plays a mediating role in the relationship between emotional labor and customer satisfaction. The findings demonstrate that deep acting enhances emotion regulation, which in turn leads to higher customer satisfaction, while surface acting undermines emotion regulation and negatively affects service outcomes. This highlights the importance of focusing on emotion regulation as a key mechanism in managing emotional labor. By understanding and optimizing this mechanism, organizations can improve both service quality and employee well-being.

Overall, the discussion indicates that emotional labor is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that requires careful management. The interaction between emotional labor strategies, emotion regulation, and contextual factors creates a dynamic system that influences both customer satisfaction and employee outcomes. Organizations that effectively manage this system by promoting deep acting, providing support, and fostering authentic interactions are more likely to achieve sustainable success in service environments. Therefore, emotional labor should not be viewed merely as a requirement of

service work but as a strategic resource that, when managed effectively, can enhance organizational performance and long-term competitiveness.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that emotion regulation plays a central and mediating role in linking emotional labor to customer satisfaction in service-oriented organizations. The findings demonstrate that deep acting, as an authentic form of emotional regulation, significantly enhances employees' ability to manage emotions effectively, leading to higher service quality, customer satisfaction, and positive organizational outcomes. In contrast, surface acting weakens emotion regulation, resulting in lower service authenticity, reduced customer satisfaction, and negative consequences for employee well-being such as emotional exhaustion and burnout. Furthermore, the study confirms that contextual factors, including organizational support and leadership, strengthen the positive effects of deep acting while mitigating the negative impacts of surface acting. Therefore, in achieving the research objective, this study affirms that effective management of emotional labor must prioritize the development of deep acting and emotion regulation capabilities, supported by a conducive organizational environment, to simultaneously enhance customer satisfaction and sustain employee well-being in service contexts.

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