

EMOTIONAL LABOR IN HOSPITALITY: THE INVISIBLE WORK BEHIND THE SMILE

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Abstract

Service interactions in the hospitality industry depend not only on technical competence and operational efficiency but also on employees' ability to regulate and display appropriate emotions, often independent of their genuine interests. In this chapter, emotional regulation is examined within professional service settings, with a particular focus on key mechanisms such as surface acting, where emotions are outwardly displayed without being genuinely felt, and deep acting, where employees attempt to align their internal feelings with organizational expectations. Drawing upon the established literature and relevant real-life case studies, this chapter explores the psychological implications of sustained emotional labor, including emotional exhaustion, cognitive dissonance, and burnout. It highlights how the persistent gap between experience and expressed emotions can create significant strain for employees, particularly in high-contact, guest-facing roles.

Simultaneously, it addresses the perceptual disconnect between employees and guests, where carefully managed emotional expressions are

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frequently interpreted as authentic, rendering the underlying effort largely invisible and often undervalued. The discussion further extends to organizational consequences, such as increased employee turnover, reduced job satisfaction, and inconsistency in service delivery. It also considers the coping strategies employees adopt to navigate these pressures, including emotional detachment, peer support, and adaptive behavior techniques. Ultimately, the chapter argues that sustainable hospitality practices must move beyond an exclusive focus on service excellence to recognize, value, and actively support the emotional labor that underpins effective, consistent, and high-quality service delivery.

Keywords:

Emotional Labor, Surface acting and Deep acting, Employee well-being, Burnout, Employee Recognition.

Introduction

In the hospitality industry, guest experiences are influenced not only by the quality of service provided but also by the emotional interactions that occur throughout the service encounter. A warm welcome, a calm response to a complaint, or patience during busy periods can strongly affect how guests evaluate and remember their experience. Although these interactions may appear spontaneous, they often involve conscious emotional regulation.”

Employees are expected to remain positive, composed, and professional regardless of personal stress, fatigue, or other circumstances. Such expectations are deeply rooted in hospitality culture, where professionalism is often associated with the ability to manage emotions effectively. While maintaining this consistency contributes significantly to guest satisfaction, it can also create ongoing psychological demands for employees. Behaviors that appear effortless from a guest’s perspective often require continuous emotional control and self-regulation from the employee. As a result, much of this effort remains unseen.

Over time, managing emotions in this manner can become challenging, particularly when there is a mismatch between how employees genuinely feel and how they are expected to behave. This chapter therefore examines how these expectations are experienced in practice, the effects they may have on both employees and

organizations, and the differences between guests' perceptions and employees' lived realities.

Literature Review

The regulation of emotions within professional roles has been widely examined in the field of organizational psychology. Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) introduced this concept as the management of feelings to produce observable expressions aligned with organizational expectations, framing emotions as part of paid work.

Subsequent scholars have expanded this understanding. Ashforth, Blake E and Ronald H. Humphrey (1993) suggested that displayed emotions are not always inauthentic, proposing that individuals may internalize expected behavior. Alicia A. Grandey (2000) later described emotional labor as a process of emotion regulation and distinguished between two key strategies: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves modifying outward emotional expressions without changing underlying feelings, whereas deep acting involves attempting to bring internal emotions into alignment with the expressions expected by the organization.

Studies have consistently shown that surface acting is associated with increased stress and emotional exhaustion, largely because of the tension created when displayed emotions do not reflect genuine feelings. Although deep acting is often viewed as a more authentic approach, it nevertheless requires continuous psychological effort. Zapf (2000) further highlighted the role of ongoing interpersonal demands in contributing to strain within service environments. While much of the existing research has focused on employee outcomes, comparatively less attention has been paid to how guests perceive these emotional processes. In many hospitality settings, emotionally managed expressions are interpreted as genuine by guests, making the effort involved in maintaining them largely invisible.

Theoretical Framework: Unpacking the mechanisms

To gain a clearer understanding of emotional labor in hospitality settings, it is necessary to explore the psychological processes through which it operates. Surface acting refers to the adjustment of outward

emotional displays, including facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language, without changing one's actual feelings. Employees may therefore appear friendly, polite, or composed despite experiencing frustration, stress, or other negative emotions internally. This mismatch between felt and displayed emotions, often referred to as emotional dissonance, can become mentally and emotionally demanding when experienced repeatedly over time.

Deep acting, on the other hand, involves an effort to modify internal feelings so that they correspond with expected emotional displays. Employees may attempt to develop genuine feelings of empathy, patience, or positivity by changing their perspective or mindset. When successful, this approach can contribute to more authentic interactions for both employees and guests. However, deep acting also requires considerable effort, and when it proves unsuccessful, employees may resort to surface acting while simultaneously coping with the strain of emotional regulation.

Another important dimension of emotional labor is its cumulative effect. A single challenging interaction may have little long-term impact; however, repeated exposure to emotionally demanding situations can gradually contribute to emotional exhaustion and psychological strain. In this context, burnout does not result from a single difficult experience but rather from the ongoing requirement to regulate emotions over extended periods without adequate opportunities for recovery. Another important mechanism associated with emotional labor is identity disruption. When employees continuously manage and adjust their emotions, particularly through deep acting, distinguishing between genuine feelings and professionally expected expressions can become increasingly challenging. Over time, this may create a sense of emotional detachment, affecting not only job performance but also employees' overall well-being.

Case Study: Emotional Labor Among Indian Hospitality Employees

A phenomenological study conducted by Sanjay Bhattacharya and Hirak Dasgupta (2021) examined the lived experiences of frontline

employees working in luxury hotels and upscale restaurants in Pune, India. Using in- depth interviews, the researchers explored how employees regulate and manage their emotions while delivering high-quality guest experiences in service environments characterized by demanding expectations. The findings indicated that employees frequently suppressed their personal emotions in order to display warmth, patience, and positivity, even during periods of stress, fatigue, or personal difficulty.

The researchers referred to this experience as “emotional manoeuvrability” and an “ambivalent disposition,” describing a situation in which employees remain consistently available to meet the emotional needs of guests while becoming increasingly disconnected from their own emotional experiences. The effects of this emotional strain were found to extend beyond the workplace. Over time, the constant effort required to manage emotions contributed to exhaustion that carried over into employees’ personal lives, influencing their relationships and overall sense of well-being. Although emotional labor plays a significant role in maintaining service quality and guest satisfaction, the study found that it often remains insufficiently recognized within formal organizational structures and support systems.

This study highlights a key contradiction in luxury hospitality: the comfort and satisfaction experienced by guests are often supported by the emotional suppression of employees. This observation is consistent with the work of Arlie Russell Hochschild and later research by Alicia Grandey and Brotheridge and Lee, suggesting that such dynamics are not limited to a specific context but are widely present in premium hospitality environments.

Reflective Observations

The themes identified in the study by Sanjay Bhattacharya and Hirak Dasgupta (2021) were clearly observed during a professional internship in a luxury hospitality setting. During peak operational periods, particularly festive occasions and high-occupancy days, employees are expected to maintain a high level of professionalism throughout long and demanding shifts. While such expectations are

an accepted part of the profession, they often require considerable effort, especially during periods of physical fatigue.

One notable observation was during festivals such as Diwali, Christmas, New Year's and Easter. While guests experienced celebration, warmth and comfort, employees played a central role in creating that environment through continuous emotional engagement. At the same time, this often involved spending long hours at work and being away from family during important personal occasions. In some instances, operational demands were so intense that staff had to prioritize service continuity even during basic breaks. For example, kitchen staff sometimes stepped away from meals midway to return to their duties during peak service periods. Such situations reflect the intensity and immediacy of service expectations in high-end hospitality environments.

This reflects the dual nature of hospitality. The ability to create memorable moments for guests is a rewarding aspect of the profession, but it also requires emotional commitment and personal sacrifice. This observation aligns with what the literature describes as the invisibility paradox of emotional labor: the more effectively it is performed, the less noticeable it becomes. In this context, emotional labor remains a fundamental yet often overlooked component of service delivery, shaping guest experiences while placing ongoing demands on employees.

The Hidden Cost of Emotional Labor

The psychological consequences of sustained emotional labor often unfold gradually but follow a relatively predictable pattern. Emotional exhaustion is among the most immediate and common outcomes. Unlike physical fatigue, it is largely invisible and is often misinterpreted; employees may attribute their sense of depletion to a demanding shift rather than to the ongoing cognitive effort required to regulate emotional expression. Consequently, the root cause of strain is frequently unrecognized and unaddressed.

In hospitality settings, one of the most visible expectations is the consistent display of a pleasant and composed demeanor, often conveyed through something as simple as a smile. While this may appear effortless in service interactions, maintaining such expressions over extended periods, particularly when internal feelings do not

match, requires continuous emotional effort. Over time, this becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, and subtle changes may emerge, such as reduced warmth in interactions or a decline in visible enthusiasm. These shifts do not necessarily indicate poor professionalism but rather reflect the difficulty of continuously aligning outward behavior with internal emotional states.

Burnout represents a more advanced stage of this process. It is typically characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach and Leiter 17–20). In hospitality contexts, depersonalization is especially significant, as it directly affects the quality of interpersonal interactions that define service encounters. Employees experiencing burnout may begin to disengage, not due to a lack of commitment, but because their emotional resources have been significantly depleted.

Identity-related effects may further intensify this impact. Prolonged engagement in emotional labor, particularly when there is a persistent gap between internal feelings and external expressions, can make it increasingly difficult for individuals to distinguish between authentic and performed emotions, even outside the workplace (Hochschild 187–90). Overall, these outcomes demonstrate that the costs of emotional labor extend beyond immediate fatigue, shaping both professional performance and long-term personal well-being.

Gendered Dimensions of Emotional Labor

The distribution of emotional labor within hospitality is not gender neutral. Female employees are often expected to display higher levels of warmth, empathy and emotional attentiveness compared to their male counterparts in similar roles. These expectations are rarely outlined in formal policies but are reinforced through hiring practices, performance evaluations, and everyday workplace norms. Because such behaviors align with broader societal expectations of femininity, they are often perceived as natural traits rather than as learned professional skills, making this form of labor less visible and less recognized. Research by Amy S. Wharton (2009) supports the idea that gendered expectations significantly shape both the intensity of emotional demands and the extent to which they are acknowledged.

Male employees, on the other hand, are more commonly associated with emotional expressions such as confidence, control and composure. These forms of emotional display are often interpreted as indicators of professionalism and competence and are therefore more likely to be recognized and valued within organizational settings, as highlighted by Catherine L. Williams (1992).

Further complexity arises from the intersection of gender with factors such as race, class, and nationality, particularly in luxury hospitality environments. Employees may be expected to perform culturally specific forms of emotional expression while suppressing aspects of their own identity, adding another layer to the demands of emotional labor.

Guest Perception and the Perceived Authenticity

In hospitality, guest satisfaction is often shaped by how genuine service interactions appear. Warmth, attentiveness, and patience are usually perceived as natural expressions of care. However, these behaviors are not always spontaneous. In many cases, they are carefully managed and sustained as part of professional expectations. Since such emotional expressions form a routine part of service delivery, the effort involved often goes unnoticed. Guests respond to what they experience in the moment, without necessarily considering the regulation required to maintain that experience. This creates a subtle gap between perception and reality, where service appears effortless even though it depends on continuous emotional effort.

As a result, consistent positivity becomes an expected standard rather than a recognized form of work. Over time, this reinforces the idea that such behavior is natural, making emotional labor less visible despite its central role in shaping guest experiences.

Organizational Consequences

Emotional labor has significant implications not only for employees but also for organizations. The hospitality industry consistently reports some of the highest employee turnover rates across sectors, with annual rates often ranging between thirty and seventy percent. While multiple factors contribute to this trend, sustained emotional demands play a critical role in shaping employees' decisions to leave.

The impact of turnover is both direct and indirect. Organizations face immediate costs related to recruitment, training, and the time required for new employees to reach expected performance levels. At the same time, indirect effects, such as inconsistencies in service delivery and the gradual loss of institutional knowledge, can be equally damaging. Emotional exhaustion has been widely identified as a key predictor of voluntary turnover in service-based roles (Maslach and Leiter 38–42), highlighting the connection between employee well-being and organizational stability.

In addition to turnover, patterns of absenteeism and presenteeism further reflect the strain associated with emotional labor. Presenteeism, where employees are physically present but emotionally disengaged, is particularly relevant in hospitality, where service quality depends heavily on genuine interaction and attentiveness.

Over time, these factors begin to influence the overall guest experience. Employees experiencing burnout may continue to perform their roles, but their interactions can become more routine and less emotionally engaging. While service standards may still be met at a functional level, the warmth and attentiveness that define high-quality hospitality may gradually decline. For organizations positioned around personalized and emotionally rich service, this shift can subtly but significantly affect brand perception and guest satisfaction.

Coping Mechanisms

In response to the ongoing demands of emotional labor, employees develop various ways to manage the pressures of their roles while continuing to meet service expectations. These coping mechanisms are often informal and evolve through experience rather than structured training, as discussed by Alicia A. Grandey (2000). One of the most common forms of coping is peer support. Conversations with colleagues during or after shifts provide a sense of shared understanding, allowing employees to process difficult interactions in an environment where their experiences are recognized. In many cases, humor becomes a way to momentarily relieve tension and maintain a sense of normalcy within demanding work conditions, a pattern also noted by James M. Brotheridge and Raymond T. Lee (2002).

At the same time, some employees begin to create a degree of emotional distance from their interactions. This is not necessarily a lack of interest or commitment, but rather a way of conserving emotional energy in situations that require continuous engagement. Over time, this distancing can become a protective response to repeated emotional demands, as highlighted by Dieter Zapf (2002). Others rely on a sense of purpose or personal motivation, finding meaning in creating positive experiences for guests. This can make the work feel rewarding, even when it is demanding. However, these strategies tend to address the immediate experience rather than the underlying pressure. They help employees continue functioning within the system but do not eliminate the need for ongoing emotional regulation. As a result, coping becomes less about resolving the challenge and more about sustaining oneself within it.

Discussion

The analysis reveals a clear imbalance between service expectations and employee well-being. Emotional performance is often treated as an inherent requirement rather than a skill that involves effort, recognition, and consistent organizational support. The gap between employee experiences and guest perceptions further reinforces this imbalance. While guests benefit from seamless and engaging interactions, the effort behind them remains largely invisible and, in many cases, unacknowledged. This lack of visibility contributes to the normalization of emotional labor as an expected baseline rather than a demanding aspect of service work. What appears effortless is, in reality, sustained and intentional regulation over extended periods. Recognizing this distinction is essential for rethinking how service work is valued, managed, and supported within the industry.

Reflections and Way Forward

Recognizing the emotional demands of service roles is essential for creating more sustainable work environments within hospitality. Rather than viewing emotional expression as an inherent expectation, it can be understood as a skill that requires effort, awareness, and ongoing support. From a practical perspective, even small forms of acknowledgment can influence how employees

experience their work. Simple gestures such as appreciation from guests and recognition from supervisors can contribute to a greater sense of value and motivation. In addition, structured incentives and rewards, performance-based

recognition programs, opportunities for career growth and skill development, and supportive leadership through feedback and mentorship can further enhance employee motivation and engagement. While these may appear minor, they can have a meaningful impact in environments where much of the effort remains unseen. There is also value in considering how workplaces can better accommodate the intensity of service roles. Access to quiet areas or short breaks within the work environment may provide employees with moments to reset during demanding shifts. Similarly, the availability of quick refreshments, such as snacks or beverages, can support employees in managing long working hours where regular meal breaks are not always feasible.

In addition, opportunities for social interaction outside of daily work routines, such as informal activities or team-based engagements, may help employees maintain a sense of connection beyond their professional roles. This becomes particularly relevant in contexts where extended working hours can limit personal and social time.

Equally important is the role of organizational culture in shaping these experiences. A work environment that acknowledges effort, encourages mutual respect, and allows space for employees to express challenges can contribute to a more balanced and supportive setting. Ultimately, these reflections point toward a more human-centered understanding of hospitality—one that recognizes not only guest satisfaction but also the well-being of the individuals who make those experiences possible.

Conclusion

Hospitality is often defined by the experiences it creates, yet these experiences are not produced by service standards alone. They are shaped by the consistent emotional effort of individuals who are expected to remain composed, attentive, and positive, even under demanding conditions. This expectation, while central to the industry,

places a continuous and often unseen demand on employees. What makes emotional labor particularly complex is not just the effort it requires, but the fact that it is rarely recognized as effort at all. When performed effectively, it blends seamlessly into the guest experience, making it difficult to distinguish between genuine expression and regulated behavior. Over time, this invisibility can contribute to a disconnect between the value of the work performed and the recognition it receives. This chapter highlights the importance of understanding emotional labor not as a background element of service, but as a defining feature of it. A more complete understanding of hospitality must account for both the experience delivered and the effort required to sustain it.

Ultimately, hospitality is not only about creating comfort for guests, but also about acknowledging the individuals who make that comfort possible. Recognizing this balance is essential for shaping a more aware and sustainable perspective on service work.

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