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Impact of uniforms on emotional labor strategies

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Abstract

Emotional labor refers to the process of regulating one's emotions and expressions to fit the organizational requirements and employees regulate their emotions via two different acting strategies, deep-acting, and surface-acting. The following study focused on examining the role of the uniform and dress code in the employee's emotional labor capabilities, and whether there is a connection between uniform attributes and emotional labor outcomes. For the data collection, an instrument was used in form of an electronic questionnaire and a total of 124 participants participated in the survey. We analyzed the data using descriptive analysis and in order to get a deeper insight into the correlations, Wilcoxon's two-tailed tests were conducted. The results seem to imply that even though there was no correlation between the uniform and deep acting, the uniform does have an influence on the employee's ability if its perception is negative, thus influencing surface acting.

Keywords: Deep-acting, Surface-acting, Emotional labor, Uniforms, Dress-code, Emotional Dissonance, Authentic experience, Experience creation

Impact of uniforms on emotional labor strategies

In discussions about emotional intelligence and emotional labor and its role in hospitality, the implications of emotional labor are often overlooked. Emotional labor refers to the ability of employees to regulate their feelings and expressions to be more in line with the organization they are representing (Madera & Lee, 2019). Humans display emotional labor via two different acting strategies: surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983).

The main difference between the two methods of "acting" is that employees engaged in surface acting are "putting up a mask" to hide their emotions to match them to a guest or customer-related interaction. On the other hand, employees engaged in deep acting will try to achieve positive emotions by expressing their genuine feelings in a way that abides by the corresponding organizational standards. In both cases, employees engage in emotional labor; however, a dissonance occurs when expressing inauthentic feelings as opposed to personal emotions that are aligned with organizational values (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002)

1.1 Deep acting vs. surface acting

A study conducted on a service employee sample showed that employees engaged in deep acting receive better feedback from customers, as they are perceived as more authentic (Hur, Jung, & Moon, 2015). This implies that deep-acting employees are a direct link with increased customer satisfaction, which makes this an exciting find for hospitality managers, mainly because sales in the hospitality industry are often directly linked to customer satisfaction. Lee and Madera (2019) found that surface-acting employees experience emotional dissonance leading to rapid depletion of their mental resources and a need to invest more energy into emotional labor, resulting in emotional exhaustion. Their work showed that flight attendants reported higher stress levels when engaged in surface acting, which led to their emotional exhaustion (Lee & Madera, 2019).

In order to invoke deep acting, it is vital to hire individuals with high emotional intelligence and possessing the skill of active and empathetic listening. Such techniques allow the employee to be perceived as more engaged and authentic from the customer's perspective. This strategy also helps manage problems that often arise in the service industry due to its high-stress environment (Umasuthan, Park, & Jong-Hyun, 2017).

1.2 Deep acting role in creating a customer experience

Suppose an employee can engage in active-empathetic listening. In that case, the customer will feel more comfortable talking and sharing their input on the service and situation, which helps the employee provide a more personalized service, thus creating an experience. It is important to note that even though the emotional display may differ depending on the culture and location, it is important to be perceived as friendly by the customer to build positive employee-customer interactions charged with comfortable feelings. This argument is particularly important for leisure-focused hotel guests. (Umasuthan, Park, & Jong-Hyun, 2017) This client group demands high satisfaction for their loyalty and repeat business resulting in an increased revenue stream for the hotel.

Deep acting is associated with positive feedback from the guest involved in the interaction (Hur, Jung, & Moon, 2015), meaning that guests feel more relaxed in such interactions, which means that, in these circumstances, it is possible to create a better experience.

Guest satisfaction positively correlates to the employee's ability to deep act; furthermore, this link helps the guests' ability to judge the knowledge and professionalism of the employee. Previous research has shown that the guest can identify whenever the employee is engaged in deep acting or surface acting, meaning if he is faking his positive emotions or genuinely feeling positive emotions in that interaction (Madera & Lee, 2019). The argument that the employees who can create a genuine connection with their customers can create a better experience for the said customers is further proven in the research done by Hosenog and Beomjoon (2012). In the study, they argued that the customer determines the level of satisfaction through emotional bonding and the interaction itself. Employees with a high self-efficacy or team-oriented mindset can better and more naturally interact with the customer, making them more relaxed and inclined to provide positive feedback (Hoseong & Beomjoon, 2012).

1.3 Deep acting role in guest satisfaction

Deep-acting plays one of the most crucial roles when it comes to experience creation for the guest, and one of the prominent pillars that supports a positive experience in the eyes of the guest is satisfaction. The customer's satisfaction level will define whether they will forget about the interaction and have a bad memory or whether they will become a loyal customer. A study

was done on the effects of employee labor strategies on customer purchasing intent showed that a deep-acting employee positively influences customers and that surface-acting is associated negatively with the customer purchasing intent, from which we can argue that the customer can determine whether an employee is faking emotions or feeling the displayed emotion (Tang, Seal, Naumann, & Miguel, 2013). From this, it is arguable that hospitality companies need to preserve a customer-centric approach since it is proven that the customer can, in fact, tell the difference between a sincere effort to have their needs met. In contrast, if the customer determines that the employee is faking emotions, it creates a dissonance between what the brand promised the customer and what they are getting, effectively creating a satisfaction gap. It is also interesting to note that in the same research, it has been shown that customers are more likely to buy something if the employee who is trying to sell is older. This might be because the employee should be able to get more experience throughout their professional career, and subsequently, to avoid burnout, they develop deep-acting skills naturally. (Tang, Seal, Naumann, & Miguel, 2013)

1.4 Deep acting role in employee satisfaction

A study on the correlation between happiness and productivity in the workplace by Oswald and Andrew (2015) showed that employees who are more satisfied with their work are more productive. The experiment was conducted so that the test subjects were given chocolate or a comedy movie to increase their happiness, and then they were given timed tasks to complete. The comparison was then made between the same group and a different one from whom the participants did not receive any stimulants. Oswald stated that "treated individuals have approximately 12% greater productivity" (Oswald, Proto, & Sgroi, 2015). Oswald also said in an interview how big companies like Google invest heavily into their employee support structure, and as a result, employee satisfaction has risen by 37% (Warwick University, 2015)

The results of this research show some insight into the relationship between employee satisfaction and productivity; however, it is also important to note the emotional labor or, more specifically, acting technique's effect on employees' job satisfaction. The exhaustion that surface acting caused not only negatively affects the guests, but it also causes the employee to experience emotional dissonance (Lee & Madera, 2019).

1.5 Role of the uniforms

A study done by Rafaelli and Pratt (1993) showed that uniforms play a role in emotional regulation. They noted that uniform could be used as an internal communicator to the employee, directing him to present himself in consistent ways with the organizational standards and subsequently “step into a role” (Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993). The argument that uniforms play a role in emotional regulation is further supported by research done by Nelson and Bowen (2000), claiming that uniforms create a unique system that lays grounds for the differentiation of staff from the customers and the differential between different departments in a hotel. In this way, the uniforms remove obstacles, subsequently reducing the emotional resources needed for providing the service and thus diminishing the emotional dissonance (Bowen & Nelson, 2000)

In the same research, it was also argued that if the uniforms themselves are designed with the functionality and role in mind, it will directly increase employees satisfaction (Bowen & Nelson, 2000), which is related to the research done by Warwick University (2015), which showed that increased employee satisfaction is directly connected to increased productivity.

1.6 Research goal

Research on emotional display and uniforms seems to imply that uniforms do play a role in diminishing the gap in which emotional dissonance can grow. As such, it is directly positively related to employee satisfaction. In contrast, due to the fact that increased mental resources are needed to perform a task while surface-acting, it can be argued that emotional dissonance does reduce the productivity of the employee, subsequently leading to a less authentic experience leading to a reduced customer purchasing intent (Tang, Seal, Naumann, & Miguel, 2013) The purpose of this research is to get a deeper insight in the connection between the uniforms and feelings, and the emotional labor strategies (deep-acting or surface-acting).

2. METHOD

This research was methodically designed to investigate employees' opinions regarding their uniforms and whether it impacts their ability to invoke deep acting strategies. The data collection instrument was composed of two parts. All of the 27 questions were Likert scale type questions whereby participants could choose from 1 to 7, i.e., from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”

The first part consisted of 13 uniform-based questions, which measured factors such as comfortability, character, and general work attitude. The second part, composed of 9 questions, included questions that measured the emotional labor engagement. It measured factors like suppressing negative emotions, expressing positive emotions, stress, deep acting, and surface acting.

Out of 27 questions included in this questionnaire, the 13 uniform-based questions were reused from Nelson and Bowen (2000). The second part of the questionnaire was composed of nine questions modified from Lee & Madera (2019).

The final part was composed of the demographics of the participants. The questions were used to mark the age, gender, employment sector, experience, and country of residence. The questionnaire was distributed in an electronic survey from Google Forms. It was published on LinkedIn and sent out to Dubrovnik and Zagreb campus students via official RIT mail.

This electronic distribution method was used to gain more responses, making the results more valid and applicable. The questionnaire was written in English because the pool of participants was international. The primary intention of this questionnaire was to collect 100 responses. However, the number was exceeded. In the end, 124 responses in total were received.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Participant demographic

The descriptive analysis shows the essential demographic attributes of our sample. The variable for the period included six items, with the most frequent item being the group 18-24 (43.2%), followed by 45-54 (24.%). Regarding gender, most participants were female (66.4%), while the minority were males (33.6%). The sector of employment item showed that most participants come from a hospitality and event management background (26.4%), closely followed by education (21.6%), with the work experience being seven years. The participants examined in this survey were mainly from Croatia (86.4 %)

3.2 Descriptive analysis

Tables 1 2 and 3 show the Likert scale results, including the means (first column) and standard deviations (second column) for the 12 uniform attitude attributes, which were grouped in

“Uniform attitude” and “Work attitude” groups, and nine emotional labor outcomes which were put in the “Emotional labor” group.

The mean identifies whether a particular attribute was perceived as positive, negative, or neutral. The distance from 4 (neutral) in the direction of 7 (maximum) indicates the participant's agreeableness with the statements in the positive direction. The distance from 4 (neutral) to 1 (minimum) shows means the same in the adverse order.

Furthermore, we calculated the average (Attribute Composite Mean) for each group.

Table 1: Work attitude attributes group; showing means, standard deviation.

WORK ATTITUDE	MEAN	S.DEVIATION	N#
I am always able to maintain a positive attitude when interacting with customers.	6,080	1,001	124
I get the positive feedback I deserve and expect.	5,490	1,328	124
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.	4,850	1,530	124
Overall, my working conditions are healthy.	5,660	1,337	124
Work Attitude	5,520	1,299	124

Table 2: Uniform attitude attributes group; showing means, standard deviation

UNIFORM ATTITUDE	MEAN	S.DEVIATION	N#
I can take pride in my appearance when at work.	5,98	1,082	124
The kind of uniform I wear affects my overall attitude toward my job.	5,19	1,797	124
The uniform I wear helps create a role for me to play while performing my job.	5,19	1,787	124
The uniform I wear increases my level of self-confidence while performing my job.	5,19	1,656	124
The style of uniform I wear enhances my credibility with customers.	5,39	1,617	124
The kind of uniform I wear has a very favorable influence on my overall attitude toward my job	4,34	1,667	124
The uniform I wear (excluding footwear) is comfortable.	5,4	1,502	124
The uniform I wear is tailored to fit my body.	4,58	1,853	124
Uniform attitude	5,1575	1,620125	124

Table 3: Emotional labor attributes group, showing mean, standard deviation.

EMOTIONAL LABOR	MEAN	S.DEVIATION	N#
I make an effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display to others at work.	5,06	1,486	124
I resist expressing my true feelings while working.	4,3	1,546	124
I feel a great deal of stress because of my job	4,06	1,761	124
When I am irritated at work, I keep it to myself.	5,07	1,688	124
When I am anxious at work, I keep it to myself.	5,26	1,652	124
When I am sad at work, I keep it to myself.	5,57	1,421	124
I genuinely express satisfaction while working.	5,75	1,173	124
I genuinely express happiness while working.	5,87	1,104	124
When I like something, I make it known.	6,02	1,055	124

3.3 Wilcoxon signed-rank analysis

Tables 4. and 5. show the results of the Wilcoxon signed-rank analysis (two-tailed), by which we tried to establish the statistical connection between the uniform and work attitude attributes and emotional labor outcomes.

- The attribute of Pride is significantly statistically connected to Positive feedback, Suppressing anxiety, Suppressing irritation, Suppressing sadness, Stress, Deep-acting, and Surface acting.
- Uniform attitude is significantly connected to Positive attitude, Expressing satisfaction, Expressing happiness, Expressing happiness, Expressing likeness, Stress, and Surface acting.
- Role creation is significantly connected to Positive attitude, Expressing satisfaction, Expressing happiness, Expressing happiness, Expressing likeness, Stress, and Surface acting.
- Confidence is significantly statistically connected to Positive attitude, Working conditions, Expressing satisfaction, Expressing happiness, Expressing happiness, Expressing likeness, Stress, and Surface acting.
- Credibility is significantly statistically connected to Positive attitude, Motivation to work, Expressing likeness, Expressing happiness, Stress, and Surface acting.
- A favorable attitude is significantly statistically correlated to all emotional labor outcomes except Stress and Surface acting.
- Functionality is significantly statistically connected to Positive attitude, Positive feedback, Working conditions, Suppressing irritation, Suppressing anxiety, Suppressing sadness, Expressing satisfaction, Expressing happiness, Expressing likeness, and deep-acting.

Table 4: Connections between the Uniform Attributes with Emotional labor outcomes.

Outcomes	Pride		Uniform Attitude		Role Creation		Confidence	
	Z	P	Z	P	Z	P	Z	P
Positive Attitude	-0,840	0,200	-4,668	0,000	-5,102	0,000	-5,068	0,000
Positive Feedback	-3,536	0,000	-1,167	0,122	-1,648	0,050	-1,515	0,065
Motivation to work	-6,586	0,000	-2,445	0,007	-1,955	0,026	-2,375	0,009
Working Conditions	-2,247	0,012	-2,245	0,013	-2,167	0,015	-2,858	0,002
Supressing irritation	-5,237	0,000	-0,804	0,211	-0,671	0,251	-0,886	0,188
Supressing anxiety	-4,437	0,000	-0,122	0,452	-0,004	0,498	-0,270	0,393
Supressing sadness	-2,669	0,004	-1,915	0,028	-1,983	0,024	-2,078	0,019
Expressing satisfaction	-1,945	0,026	-3,146	0,001	-3,065	0,001	-3,101	0,001
Expressing happines	-1,036	0,150	-3,635	0,000	-3,735	0,000	-3,687	0,000
Expressing likeness	-0,393	0,347	-4,501	0,000	-4,646	0,000	-4,793	0,000
Stress	-7,569	0,000	-4,746	0,000	-4,743	0,000	-4,844	0,000
Deep acting	-5,862	0,000	-1,297	0,098	-0,878	0,190	-1,209	0,114
Surface acting	-7,915	0,000	-4,210	0,000	-4,132	0,000	-4,615	0,000

Table 5. Correlations between the Uniform Attributes with Emotional labor outcomes.

Outcomes	Credibility		Favorable attitude		Functionality	
	Z	P	Z	P	Z	P
Positive Attitude	-4,071	0,000	-8,001	0,000	-7,061	0,000
Positive Feedback	-0,510	0,305	-5,415	0,000	-4,456	0,000
Motivation to work	-3,502	0,000	-3,125	0,001	-1,928	0,027
Working Conditions	-1,438	0,075	-6,466	0,000	-5,516	0,000
Supressing irritation	-1,638	0,050	-3,812	0,000	-2,845	0,002
Supressing anxiety	-0,831	0,203	-4,808	0,000	-3,762	0,000
Supressing sadness	-1,138	0,127	-6,013	0,000	-5,239	0,000
Expressing satisfaction	-2,204	0,014	-6,991	0,000	-5,882	0,000
Expressing happines	-2,831	0,003	-7,618	0,000	-6,465	0,000
Expressing likeness	-3,682	0,000	-7,613	0,000	-6,714	0,000
Stress	-5,809	0,000	-1,229	0,110	-1,519	0,065
Deep acting	-2,083	0,019	-4,358	0,000	-2,975	0,002
Surface acting	-5,271	0,000	-0,176	0,440	-0,630	0,264

4. DISCUSSION

Based on our interpretation of the descriptive statistics for the uniform attitude and work attitude, the results show that the participants do have a favorable attitude towards their work, and work-uniforms. The reasoning behind these results can be that a foundation for learning deep acting strategies exists.

When looking at the emotional labor attributes group, we can see that the participants regulate their emotions to an extent, even though they are not aware of the labor itself. When asked about the degree to which they mask their negative emotions, the participants agreed, which could be due to the context they were employed in. Looking at the demographics, the most

prominent employment sector in hospitality and event management is closely followed by education. To an extent, participants from both of these sectors provide service to their customers and, as such, practice emotional labor strategies, which leads us to conclude that the reason for a favorable answer can be found in the practice that is instilled in the employees, and that practice being that if they do suppress their negative emotions, they will be perceived as more professional. The same conclusion can be drawn from looking at the results for the degree of expressing positive emotions. We can see the same general agreeableness with the statements involving the expressed positive emotions. The conclusion we draw from this is that, as previously mentioned, service employees are empowered to "Put up a mask" and hide their own negative emotions while expressing positives, as such behavior is considered to be professional (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002).

Based on the literature and our interpretation, we would argue that this act of "Putting up a mask" is highly resource-demanding due to the Surface acting aspect of it, and if practiced, does lead to accelerated depletion of mental resources that leads to a faster burnout, and in practice, should not be empowered.

When presented with direct statements measuring deep-acting or surface acting, participants answered neutrally when asked about the degree of hiding their personal emotions while working, i.e., surface-acting. In contrast, when asked about the degree to which they employ effort to feel the emotions required of them, i.e., deep-acting, the participants chose a somewhat favorable answer. We would argue that the reason for such is the fact that the participants are not aware of the emotional labor that goes on in the background and, as such, are not certain whenever they mask their emotions or if they genuinely feel the emotions required in the context of service. Hochschild (1983) argued that deep-acting requires an active effort in regulating emotions. However, we would argue that if an active effort is required, the mental resources are still being occupied. There is no clear distinction between active regulation and just plain suppressing of emotions, i.e., surface-acting.

Our argument is further supported by Kruml and Geddes (2000). They argued that deep acting has two dimensions: passive deep acting, a strategy where the emotions are felt. The emotions themselves come intrinsically, as opposed to active deep acting strategies where a conscious effort is employed to regulate emotions and behaviors in order to match the organizational standards.

A study done by Hayward and Tuckey (2011) argues that engaging in emotional regulation does not remove the need for authentic emotions, further implying that in order to maintain an authentic display of the emotions, the employee needs to learn how to regulate naturally emerging emotions in order to actively diminish the gap between what is felt, and what is portrayed, i.e., emotional dissonance.

In terms of the connection between the uniforms and the emotional labor attributes, we found no statistically significant connection between uniforms and deep-acting strategies. However, in contrast, the results seem to imply that there is a connection between uniform attributes and surface acting. We concluded that while the uniform does not necessarily have a direct impact on the employee's ability to invoke deep acting strategies, the overall context of the interaction is essential, and uniforms are just one of the possible pain points that need to be removed in order for the employee to deliver an authentic service.

The previously mentioned connection implies that, while a good perception of uniform attributes does not necessarily impact the ability to invoke deep-acting, it does influence the surface-acting outcomes. As such, we can argue that a negative perception of the uniform does create additional problems, which hinder the employee's ability to be more "in role" with the position.

5. LIMITATIONS

Notable limitations include the relatively small sample collected (124), further research would definitely require a larger sample to examine possible correlations between different cultures and emotional labor attributes.

Future research might focus solely on hospitality and event management to provide more data relevant to hospitality professionals and shed insight into inexpensive and simple adjustments to maximize their revenue.

One more limitation worth mentioning is the aspect that some of the participants might be confused between referring to work designated uniforms and a designated dress code, as previously mentioned in the discussion. Thus, further research could include a modified instrument to get more reliable data.

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