



## **OVERSEEING CUSTOMER SERVICES: NAVIGATING EMOTIONAL LABOR IN SERVICE DELIVERY**

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### **Abstract**

As the significance of service sectors in the global economy continues to rise, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on customer service in recent years. This research, utilizing questionnaire responses, delves into the intricate dynamics among challenging customers, emotional labor, and Resignation predisposition. Additionally, it investigates the regulating roles of coworker support and Manager support within this context. The data, collected from 287 customer-facing employees across diverse sectors in the hospitality industry, including Diet services, lodgings, restoration, and performing, unveils significant findings through correlation and linear regression analyses: (1) Challenging customers exhibit a substantial correlation with

emotional labor and Resignation predisposition. (2) Genuine Expression, a component of emotional labor, emerges as a mediator in the complex association between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition. (3) Coworker support proves to be a moderator in the impact of challenging customers on emotional labor, while the regulating effect of Manager support is deemed insignificant. In conclusion, the paper elucidates theoretical advancements and practical implications, enriching the emotional labor literature and providing insights for human resources management in the service sectors.

***Keywords-emotional labor; service delivery; customer-contact employees***

### **Introduction**

In light of heightened competition among service providers and the overall expansion of the service economy, organizations are under pressure to prioritize the nature and quality of services provided to customers (Schneider & Bowen, 1993). The emotional display, particularly by employees who directly interact with customers, has a significant impact on



how customers perceive the quality of service, as it intertwines the emotional expression of service workers with the service itself. Many employees are required to exhibit specific emotions as part of their job responsibilities during face-to-face interactions with customers, which can potentially lead to emotional dissonance when their genuine feelings clash with organizational expectations. This emotional dissonance, in turn, can contribute to reduced job satisfaction and an increased likelihood of employees wanting to leave their jobs. Grandey (2000) argues that how employees manage their emotions at work plays a crucial role in predicting both individual and organizational outcomes. Despite the recognized importance of emotions in organizations, there is a relative scarcity of empirical studies on this subject. To build upon existing research, this study aims to delve into the complexities of emotional labor within service delivery, uncovering the underlying mechanisms and identifying effective strategies for managing emotions during service transactions.

### **Theoretical Background And Hypotheses**

Hochschild's groundbreaking study in 1979 delved into the realm of organizational emotion, focusing on the emotional encounters of flight attendants during their work and their endeavors to regulate their emotions and expressions in accordance with the demands of their job. In her research, she coined the term "emotional labor" to encapsulate the phenomenon of employees purposefully displaying particular emotions at work, regardless of their true sentiments, in return for remuneration..

Emotional labor, as defined by Morris and Feldman (1996), refers to the act of expressing emotions that are desired by the organization during interpersonal interactions. Building upon Hochschild's research, Rafaeli and Sutton (1990) further explored the concept and discovered consistent evidence of emotional labor in different service occupations. This phenomenon has been found to have significant effects on individuals' psychological well-being, job performance, and overall organizational outcomes. Consequently, the expression of emotions within work roles has become a subject of great interest in research.



Customer-facing employees in service interactions have a significant impact as they are responsible for establishing personal connections with customers and avoiding treating them as mere objects. Handling demanding customers requires a great deal of empathy and emotional engagement, which makes emotion management a crucial aspect of their job. However, effectively managing emotions in such situations can result in emotional exhaustion, professional fatigue, decreased job satisfaction, and ultimately, a decline in work performance, leading to a higher likelihood of turnover.

**Hypothesis 1 : Resignation predisposition is positively associated with challenging customers.**

In the context of emotional labor, guidelines and regulations determine the appropriate expression of emotions and when such expressions should occur. Organizations frequently impose expectations on service workers to exhibit particular emotions, impacting employee satisfaction. Despite these expectations, there is a wealth of evidence documenting the adverse consequences of emotional labor on service providers, encompassing role

stress, identity-related challenges, and emotional exhaustion.

**Hypothesis 2: The relationship between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition is mediated by emotional labor.**

Grandey (2000) delineated two facets of emotional labor: External emotional regulation and Genuine Expression. External emotional regulation involves the regulation of visible emotional expressions to conform to organizational display rules, while Genuine Expression involves the active alignment of felt and displayed emotions. This study seeks to investigate whether both dimensions exhibit comparable mediating effects on the association between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition.

Hypothesis 2a: External emotional regulation functions as a mediating factor in the connection between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition.

Hypothesis 2b: Genuine Expression serves as a mediating factor in the association between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition.



In the realm of emotional labor research, social support is considered to augment individuals' ability to cope with job stressors and elevate their sense of personal control. The presence of supportive social relationships is posited to assist individuals in managing conflicts between desired and felt emotions, thereby mitigating psychological distress.

**Hypothesis 3a: The association between challenging customers and emotional labor is tempered by coworker support.**

**Hypothesis 3b: The impact of challenging customers on Resignation predisposition is mitigated by Manager support.**

### **Participants and Procedures**

The distribution of questionnaires occurred within the hospitality sector, spanning food services, accommodations, recreation, and entertainment. The execution of employee surveys was conducted with explicit approval from company managers and facilitated by researchers on the premises of the company.

A total of 350 employees engaged willingly in the research, resulting in

287 studies considered usable, achieving an 82% response rate. The gender distribution comprised 42% male and 58% female participants. A majority of respondents (57%) fell within the age range of 20 to 29, with almost all possessing at least a high school education. Additionally, over 86% of participants held tenure with the firm for a minimum of one year, and the median tenure was 24 months.

### **Measures**

The survey instrument consisted of two segments. The initial section sought to collect demographic details from respondents, encompassing gender, age, education, tenure, and the particular service sectors to which they were affiliated. The second segment incorporated five scales, employing a five-point Likert-type scale with frequency or agreement anchors.

**Challenging Customer:** Measured using the scale developed by Bailey & McCollough (2000), encompassing four items. A sample item is: "I often meet fussy customers at work." The scale demonstrated a coefficient alpha of 0.93.

**Emotional Labor:** Assessed through the scale devised by Grandey (2003),



consisting of nine items reflecting two dimensions: External emotional regulation and Genuine Expression. Sample items include: “Just pretend to have the emotions I need to display for my job” for External emotional regulation and “Try to actually experience the emotions that I must show” for Genuine Expression. The scale exhibited a coefficient alpha of 0.81.

**Coworker Support and Manager Support:** Utilized the scale developed by Susskind et al. (2003), with each scale comprising four items. Sample items are: “I find my coworkers very helpful in performing my customer service duties” for coworker support and “My Manager provides me with important work-related information and advice that make performing my job easier” for Manager support. The coefficients alpha were 0.88 and 0.87, respectively, for each scale.

**Resignation predisposition:** Measured using the scale introduced by Landau (1986), featuring three items. A sample item is: “I am always thinking about quitting the job.” The scale demonstrated a coefficient alpha of 0.83.

**Results**

For to study variables Table 1 displays the standard deviations, means, reliabilities, and zero-order correlation coefficients. The results reveal a significant correlation between encounters with Challenging Customers and emotional labor. Parameter estimates underscore a more robust relationship with Genuine Expression ( $r=0.562$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) compared to External emotional regulation( $r=0.185$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that challenging customer interactions have an impact on employees' Resignation predisposition ( $r=0.352$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), providing support for Hypothesis 1. Survey respondents conveyed occasional frustration due to the ongoing need to be courteous and helpful, particularly when customers may not reciprocate

TABLE 1. MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, AND CORRELATIONS

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Challenging Customer	3.45	0.68	(0.93)					
2. Coworker support	3.33	0.60	0.232***	(0.88)				
3. Manager support	3.95	0.62	-0.056	0.407***	(0.87)			
4. External emotional regulation	3.51	0.73	0.185**	0.056	0.075	(0.89)		
5. Genuine Expression	3.45	0.72	0.562***	0.265***	0.011	0.410**	(0.90)	
6. Resignation predisposition	3.22	0.80	0.352***	0.321***	0.160**	0.303**	0.547***	(0.83)

Note: N=287; \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001; The alpha coefficients of reliability for scales are provided in parentheses along with diagonal entries.

TABLE 2. MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSES EXAMINING THE MEDIATION EFFECT OF EMOTIONAL LABOR

	Emotional labor		Resignation predisposition		Resignation predisposition	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Challenging Customer	0.443	7.741***	0.382	5.879***	0.159	2.618**
Emotional labor					0.454	7.138***
R <sup>2</sup> ( $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup> )	0.196		0.123		0.275(0.151)	
F	59.922***		34.566***		46.261***	

Note: \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001

TABLE 3. MULTIPLE REGRESSION ANALYSES EXAMINING THE MEDIATION EFFECT OF EXTERNAL EMOTIONAL REGULATION AND GENUINE EXPRESSION

	External emotional regulation		Resignation predisposition		Resignation predisposition	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Challenging Customer	0.185	2.943**	0.382	5.879***	0.306	5.190***
External emotional regulation					0.246	4.170***
R <sup>2</sup> ( $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup> )	0.034		0.123		0.182(0.058)	
F	8.664**		34.566***		27.161***	

	Genuine Expression		Resignation predisposition		Resignation predisposition	
	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t	$\beta$	t
Challenging Customer	0.562	10.651***	0.382	5.879***	0.065	0.997
Genuine Expression					0.510	7.880***
R <sup>2</sup> ( $\Delta$ R <sup>2</sup> )	0.316		0.123		0.302(0.178)	
F	113.438***		34.566***		52.696***	

Note: \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001



As delineated in Table 2, challenging customers exert a substantial influence on emotional labor ( $\Delta R^2=.196$ ,  $F=59.92$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and Resignation predisposition ( $\Delta R^2=.123$ ,  $F=34.57$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Upon introducing the main effects of challenging customers and emotional labor in Step 3, it became evident that emotional labor significantly anticipates Resignation predisposition. The regression estimate for challenging customers decreased from ( $t=7.741$ ,  $p<.001$ ) to ( $t=2.618$ ,  $p<.01$ ), signifying that emotional labor acts as a partial mediator in the relationship between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2.

Table 3 outlines the outcomes of multiple regression analyses investigating the mediating effects of External emotional regulation and Genuine Expression. In the External emotional regulation model, both challenging customers ( $t=5.196$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and External emotional regulation ( $t=4.176$ ,  $p<.001$ ) significantly forecasted Resignation predisposition. This indicates that External emotional

regulation does not serve as a mediator in the relationship between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition, thereby refuting Hypothesis 2a. In the Genuine Expression model, challenging customers significantly influenced both Genuine Expression and Resignation predisposition. Upon introducing the main effects of challenging customers and Genuine Expression, Genuine Expression ( $t=7.886$ ,  $p<.001$ ) emerged as a noteworthy predictor of Resignation predisposition, while challenging customers ( $t=0.997$ ) did not exert a significant impact on Resignation predisposition. These findings confirm that Genuine Expression entirely mediates the relationship between challenging customers and Resignation predisposition, substantiating Hypothesis 2b.

Hypothesis 3 is scrutinized through structural equation modeling, dividing the sample at the median into high and low coworker support and Manager support groups. The outcomes reveal that coworker support effectively moderates the relationship between affective events and emotional labor ( $X^2=5.44$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $\Delta X^2/\Delta df=2.72>2$ ),



substantiating Hypothesis 3a. In contrast, the moderating effect of Manager support is statistically insignificant ( $X^2=2.19$ ,  $df=2$ ,  $\Delta X^2/\Delta df=1.09 < 2$ ), consequently not substantiating Hypothesis 3b.

## **Discussion**

The primary objective of this research is to examine the intricate connection between Challenging Customers, emotional labor, and Resignation predisposition. The results of the study highlight the significance of facing Challenging Customers in predicting the emotional expression of employees, underscoring the substantial implications of emotional labor for organizations. It is crucial for individuals in work roles that involve face-to-face interactions to have a heightened level of control over their emotional expression, encompassing both vocal and facial aspects.

A key aspect to consider is the differentiation between surface acting and Genuine Expression, as each implies a fundamentally distinct internal state that can have varying effects on the well-being of workers. External emotional regulation involves suppressing one's authentic self-

expression in favor of putting on an emotional mask, while Genuine Expression involves aligning one's true feelings with the required emotional display. The study suggests that efforts towards Genuine Expression should be given higher ratings compared to surface acting. Engaging in Genuine Expression not only involves regulating one's expressive behavior but also managing inner feelings, which proves to be pivotal in delivering quality service.

Additionally, the research explores the moderating effect of organizational support on the relationship between Challenging Customers and emotional labor. The findings emphasize the importance of having a supportive peer group to navigate the demands of service-related duties, while perceived support from managers demonstrates a weaker association with emotional labor. This observation aligns with the understanding that frontline employees, who are heavily involved in service-related tasks, interact more frequently with customers than managers do, making coworkers a more immediate source of support in service interactions. Given the diverse elements of support within service-based organizations, it is



crucial to examine the role of organizational support in managing emotional labor effectively. The results underscore that employees engaged in emotional labor are prone to emotional exhaustion, potentially leading to job dissatisfaction and Resignation predisposition. In customer-contact settings, high turnover rates not only escalate recruitment and selection costs but also adversely impact sales growth due to the learning curve faced by new employees (Batt, 2002). Given the increasing demand for regulated emotional expression and the consequential outcomes of emotional labor, there is a compelling need for increased attention to emotion management.

### Conclusion

This study underscores the vital significance of emotional labor in the realm of service delivery. Specifically, Genuine Expression, as a dimension of emotional labor, emerges as a mediator in the intricate relationship between Challenging Customers and Resignation predisposition. Moreover, employees benefiting from substantial support from their coworkers are more likely to exhibit service-related behaviours

toward customers. Consequently, the outcomes of our research hold implications for human resources practices within service organizations, emphasizing the necessity to enhance emotion management among customer-contact employees.

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