

A Review of the Research Progress on Emotional Labor of Service Employee in Service Encounter

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Abstract

Emotional labor, as the main form of labor for service industry employees, has a significant impact on service quality and customer satisfaction. This study systematically reviews the emotional labor of frontline service personnel, revealing the definition, types, and theoretical basis of emotional labor. Research has found that emotional labor includes various types such as surface acting and deep acting, supported by theories such as resource conservation theory, role theory, and exchange theory. Emotional labor is not only influenced by various factors such as individual traits, organizational culture, and customer requirements, but also has a profound impact on the job satisfaction, occupational burnout, and mental health of service personnel. In addition, the study also introduced measurement and evaluation methods for emotional labor, as well as the limitations of current research, and proposed prospects for future research directions.

Keywords

Emotional labor; Frontline service employee; Surface acting; Deep acting; Service marketing.

1. Introduction

With the booming development of the service industry, the role of service employee in various organizations has become increasingly crucial. According to the "2024 Report on the Development of China's Life Service Industry" released by the China General Chamber of Commerce, there will be 12.893 million business outlets in China's accommodation, catering, housekeeping and other life service industries in 2024, with approximately 115 million employees. Service employee are not only direct participants in service delivery, but also important influencing factors on organizational image and customer satisfaction. Emotional labor, as a core form of work for service industry employees, has attracted widespread attention from the academic community (see Figure 1). Emotional labor not only involves the management and expression of specific emotions by employees in their work, but is also closely related to their mental health, job satisfaction, and overall organizational performance.

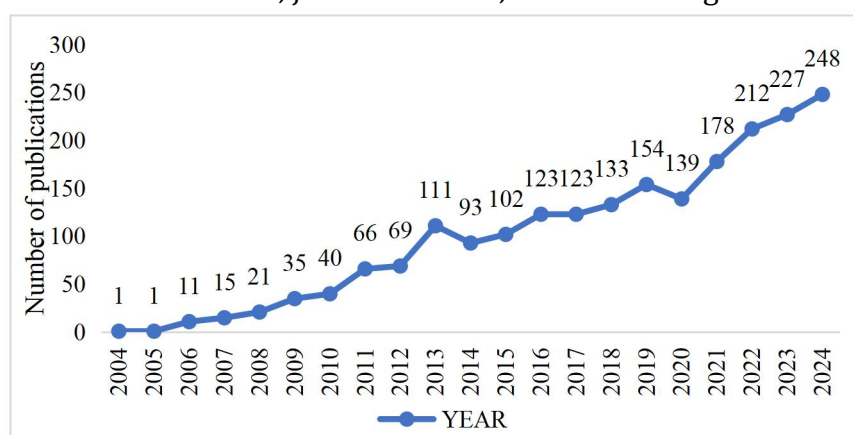


Fig. 1 Two or more references

Emotional labor is particularly prominent in various service industries. For example, salespeople need to present a perfect smile to customers to create a friendly shopping climate. Unlike manufacturing, the development of the service industry places greater emphasis on changes in customer needs. During the consumption process, customers not only focus on the quality of the goods and services themselves, but also pay more attention to the emotional consumption experience integrated into the goods and services. Therefore, service industry employees inevitably encounter emotional control issues in their work.

This study comprehensively clarifies the concept and dimensions of emotional labor, as well as its relationship with key variables such as job satisfaction, job burnout, and service quality, by reviewing the current research progress in the field. This not only helps to reveal the personal impact of emotional labor on frontline service employees, but also further elucidates its role at the organizational level, such as its potential impact on customer satisfaction and organizational performance. The research on emotional labor of frontline service employees not only has theoretical value, but also enriches and develops the theoretical system of emotional labor; More practically meaningful, it can provide specific and feasible management strategies and practical guidance for service industry organizations. Therefore, this study aims to comprehensively review and analyze the research results in the field of emotional labor, in order to provide useful references and inspirations for future theoretical and practical development.

2. The impact of emotional labor on service personnel in service scenarios

2.1. Definition and Types of Emotional Labor

The specific definition of emotional labor refers to employees consciously managing their emotional expression in order to comply with organizational norms and expectations. This management may include adjusting facial expressions, tone, and posture to ensure that the displayed emotions match the organization's expected emotions. According to different levels of individual regulation, many scholars divide emotional labor into two categories: "surface acting" and "deep acting". The emotional labor of surface performance refers to employees adjusting their external emotional expressions to meet the requirements of the organization without changing their true inner feelings. For example, a salesperson must show a passionate smile to greet customers even if they feel tired or impatient inside. This emotional labor is relatively simple, mainly focusing on adjusting the expression level. The emotional labor of deep acting is even more complex. It requires employees not only to adjust their external emotional expressions, but also to strive to change their true inner feelings to align with the organization's expected emotions. This typically involves cognitive processing and reinterpretation of objective facts to generate more positive perspectives and emotional experiences. For example, when a nurse faces a patient suffering from illness, she not only needs to show love and sympathy, but also truly feel care and understanding for the patient from the bottom of her heart. This deep-seated emotional labor places higher demands on employees' psychological qualities and emotional abilities.

Scholars have also classified emotional labor into two types from another dimension: active and passive. Active emotional labor emphasizes employees' self-regulation and proactive efforts, achieving external emotional expression that aligns with organizational goals through repeated self hypnosis and adjustment; Passive emotional labor refers to employees whose emotions are exactly in line with the organization's needs, without the need for additional emotional resources and without easily causing fatigue. This classification method further reveals the diversity and complexity of emotional labor.

2.2. Theoretical Basis of Emotional Labor

The theoretical basis of emotional labor covers multiple aspects such as resource conservation theory, role theory, and exchange theory. These theories complement each other and together construct the complex face of emotional labor.

The theory of resource conservation provides a unique perspective for the study of emotional labor. This theory advocates that individuals are always committed to acquiring, protecting, and maintaining the resources they consider precious in their daily lives. These resources may be material or spiritual, such as time, energy, self-esteem, and social relationships. Long term emotional labor may lead to the depletion of these resources, which in turn can cause employee fatigue and mental health problems.

Role theory examines emotional labor from a sociological perspective. This theory emphasizes that individuals play multiple roles in society, each with specific expectations and norms. For employees in the service industry, their roles often require them to exhibit specific emotional states, such as enthusiasm, friendliness, and professionalism. Emotional labor has therefore become an important means for employees to meet these role expectations. Through emotional labor, employees can shape a role image that meets organizational and social expectations, thereby maintaining their professional identity and status. When role expectations conflict with employees' true feelings, emotional labor may also become a burden, leading to role conflicts and role pressures among employees.

Exchange theory provides another explanatory framework for emotional labor. This theory holds that all behavior in society is based on the principle of exchange. In the service industry, emotional labor is seen as an exchange relationship between employees and organizations. Employees exchange emotional labor for compensation, promotion, and other forms of organizational recognition. Organizations improve customer satisfaction, shape brand image, and enhance organizational performance through employees' emotional labor. This exchange relationship to some extent explains why employees are willing to engage in emotional labor: because they expect to receive corresponding rewards from it. When employees feel that their efforts have not been adequately rewarded, they may develop resistance to emotional labor and even choose to resign.

2.3. Factors Influencing Emotional Labor

The research on the antecedents of emotional labor mainly focuses on three aspects: individual, situational, and organizational.

In terms of individual factors, employees' personality traits have a significant impact on emotional labor. At present, individual factors that affect emotional labor mainly include gender, age, role identity, emotional intelligence, personality. Previous research has shown that extroverted employees may be better at and willing to display positive emotions, while introverted employees may face more challenges in emotional labor. Employees with high emotional intelligence are better able to accurately understand and express their emotions, as well as effectively regulate and manage them, thus performing better in emotional labor.

Context factors also have a significant impact on emotional labor, mainly including employee customer interaction and organizational expectations. Previous studies have shown that if customers expect warm and thoughtful service, employees need to demonstrate more positive emotions. Subsequent studies have also shown that under high-intensity work pressure, employees may need to put in more emotional labor to maintain a positive work attitude and emotional state. Excessive emotional labor may lead to emotional exhaustion and mental health problems among employees.

The impact of organizational factors on emotional labor cannot be ignored, mainly including factors such as work autonomy and organizational support. Previous studies have shown that supportive and encouraging leadership styles may stimulate positive emotions in employees, while strict or indifferent leadership styles may lead to negative emotions in employees. In addition, if the job design is appropriate and can stimulate employees' interest and enthusiasm for work, then employees will also engage in emotional labor more naturally and authentically.

2.4. The Impact of Emotional Labor on Service Personnel in Service Encounter

The academic community mainly focuses on the impact of emotional labor on the service performance of service personnel, which has both positive and negative consequences.

From a positive perspective, emotional labor provides employees with a platform to showcase themselves and realize their value. The study by Wu Shusheng (2004) shows that through effective emotional labor, employees can establish deep emotional connections with customers, which helps to improve customer satisfaction with services and enhance customer loyalty to the organization. When employees see that their efforts can directly translate into organizational success and customer satisfaction, their sense of professional achievement and self-efficacy will be greatly enhanced.

Emotional labor does not always bring positive effects. Chen Dong (2008) found that prolonged and high-intensity emotional labor may lead to emotional exhaustion and job burnout among employees. More seriously, if employees are under long-term emotional labor pressure and cannot receive effective relief and support, they may experience various mental health problems such as anxiety, depression. These issues not only affect employees' personal lives, but may also have negative impacts on the organization, such as an increase in employee turnover rates and a deterioration of organizational climate.

3. Measurement Tool for Emotional Labor of Service Personnel in Service Encounter

Emotional labor, as an indispensable part of the service industry, its measurement and evaluation are crucial for understanding employees' emotional states, improving job satisfaction and performance. There are various measurement tools for emotional labor, and from the emergence of emotional labor measurement to now, it has undergone a trend of change from one-dimensional to multi-dimensional.

3.1. Single Dimensional Measurement Method

This method regards emotional labor as an explicit work behavior, measuring the work characteristics of emotional labor, such as measuring the frequency or quantity of interaction with customers. Before 1998, researchers mainly used this method to measure emotional labor as a whole.

3.2. Two-Dimensional Measurement Method

The two-dimensional measurement method measures the ways of emotional labor, such as surface and deep acting, mainly using measurement tools developed by Grandey (2003) and Chua (2006). Grandey (2003) developed a two-dimensional measurement tool for emotional labor, which is widely used in emotional research. This scale is divided into two sub scales, the surface acting scale and the deep acting scale, with 8 items and scored using a 5-point Likert scale. Chua (2006) developed another two-dimensional measurement tool for emotional labor, the Service Emotional Labor Scale (HELSS). This scale has two subscales: the Emotional Discord Scale and the Emotional Effort subscale. The Emotional Discord Scale has 14 items

and measures surface play and true expression in emotional labor (surface play and true expression are the two ends of the emotional dissonance continuum); The emotional effort subscale consists of 5 items and measures the deep play in emotional labor.

3.3. Multidimensional Measurement Method

Brotheridge and Lee (2003) were the first to develop a multidimensional measurement scale for emotional labor. This scale is a self-reported measurement questionnaire with 15 items. It uses a 5-point Likert scale to measure 6 major categories of factors, namely frequency, intensity, rule diversity, persistence, surface behavior, and deep behavior.

Another multidimensional measurement scale is the Independent Emotional Labor Scale (DEELS) proposed by GlombandTews (2004). They believe that human emotions are complex and diverse, so they developed a scale consisting of 14 independent emotions representing six major categories of emotions (love, happiness, anger, sadness, fear, and hatred). This scale includes three sub scales: the True Emotion Expression Scale, the Disguised Emotion Expression Scale, and the Suppressed Emotion Expression Scale. The question for each subscale is to ask the respondent to evaluate the frequency of the 14 emotions mentioned above expressed in the work scenario. The range of responses measured ranges from "never truly expressed" to "requiring many times of true expression in a day", with a total of 5 measurement points.

The third emotional labor measurement tool is the Emotional Labor Scale proposed by Diefendorff (2005). This scale has three sub scales with a total of 14 items. There are a total of 7 items in the surface role-playing subscale; The deep role-playing subscale consists of four items; The true emotional expression subscale consists of three items.

In practical applications, researchers can choose appropriate measurement tools or combine multiple tools based on research needs and limitations to obtain more comprehensive data. At the same time, in order to improve the accuracy and reliability of measurements, attention should also be paid to controlling possible interference factors and conducting appropriate statistical analysis and processing of data.

4. Future Research Directions and Prospects

4.1. The Practical Application and Technological Innovation of Emotional Labor

With the rapid development of technology, the practical application of emotional labor is gradually combining with technological innovation, opening up new research fields and application scenarios. For example, in the field of customer service, AI technologies such as intelligent speech analysis and natural language processing are being used to monitor and analyze the emotional expressions of service personnel in real-time, in order to provide more accurate feedback and improvement suggestions. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies also provide new possibilities for emotional labor training. Through these technologies, real service scenarios can be simulated, allowing employees to practice and practice emotional labor in a safe and controlled environment, thereby more effectively enhancing their emotional labor abilities. In the field of healthcare, emotional labor is particularly important. With the help of technological innovation, such as wearable devices and biometric technology, the emotional state of medical staff can be monitored in real time, and timely warnings and interventions can be made to prevent occupational burnout and mental health problems caused by excessive emotional labor.

4.2. Cross Cultural Research on Emotional Labor

In the context of globalization, cross-cultural research on emotional labor is increasingly being emphasized. Employees from different cultural backgrounds may face different challenges and expectations when engaging in emotional labor. For example, in a collectivist culture, employees may place more emphasis on team harmony and the expression of collective emotions, while in an individualistic culture, employees may place more emphasis on personalized and self emotional management. In depth research on emotional labor practices under different cultural backgrounds can help organizations develop more precise and effective emotional labor management strategies. This includes but is not limited to providing culturally sensitive training materials, designing emotional labor norms and assessment tools that are tailored to specific cultural backgrounds.

4.3. Emotional Labor and Career Development

Emotional labor not only has a significant impact on employees' mental health and job satisfaction, but is also closely related to their career development. With the increasing emphasis on emotional labor ability in organizations, employees with excellent emotional labor ability often have more promotion opportunities and career development space. Future scholars can study the relationship between emotional labor and career development, as well as how to promote employees' career development by enhancing their emotional labor abilities, such as designing targeted career development plans, providing continuing education and professional training related to emotional labor, and establishing an emotional labor ability certification system.

4.4. The Social Impact of Emotional Labor and Public Policy

Emotional labor is not only an individual and organizational issue, but also has certain social impacts. For example, in the service industry, employees' emotional labor is directly related to customer satisfaction and service quality, which in turn affects the well-being of the entire society and economic development. Exploring how to support and regulate emotional labor from the perspective of public policy would be a meaningful research direction. This may include developing relevant labor regulations and standards, providing public services and support related to emotional labor, and promoting social recognition and respect for emotional labor. Overall, emotional labor, as a complex and multidimensional research field, will be extensively studied in multiple directions in the future. By integrating multiple perspectives such as theory and practice, technological innovation and cross-cultural research, career development and social policy, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the essence and impact of emotional labor, thereby promoting the sustained development and progress of organizations and society.

5. Conclusion

Emotional labor, as an important component of the work of service industry employees, has significant research and practice implications. In the future, with the advancement of technology and the development of globalization, the field of emotional labor will usher in more research opportunities and practical challenges. By continuously innovating and improving relevant theories and methods, we will be able to better understand and respond to various issues brought about by emotional labor, and promote the sustainable development and progress of the service industry.

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