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### Service with a fake smile and emotional exhaustion. Does emotional intelligence matter?

**Abstract:** Research shows that positive affective displays in customer service interactions are positively related to customers' perception of overall service quality. Consequently, the way customer service employees manage their feelings is seen as an important aspect of providing their services. In most service contexts, employees are expected to express positive emotions, e.g., be cheerful and suppress negative emotions, such as resentment. Emotional labor is regarded as a type of impression management, because it involves deliberate effort undertaken by service workers in order to adhere to organizational display rules when dealing with customers. Surface acting is an emotional labor strategy and consists of managing observable emotional expression without modifying underlying genuine feelings (service with a fake smile). Research shows that surface acting is positively related to employee burnout. The present study (N=180) was designed to examine the effects of surface acting on emotional exhaustion while controlling for employees' trait emotional intelligence. The results demonstrated that employees who declared greater use of surface acting during their interactions with customers reported more symptoms of emotional exhaustion. As predicted, however, this effect was observed only among employees low in trait emotional intelligence. The discussion encompasses the implications these results may have for managing emotional expression in public performance that may result in reducing performance anxiety.

**Keywords:** emotional labor; surface acting; emotional intelligence; burnout

#### Introduction

Imagine you are at a restaurant. The food is great. The wine is wonderful. There's only one problem: the waiter. The waiter is slow, gloomy and bored. He looks unhappy, dissatisfied with his work, and not very interested in his customers. The behaviour of the waiter spoils the pleasure of staying at the restaurant. The chances of you returning to this restaurant are close to zero. Why? Because there are several other restaurants in the area and you can easily find a place where the quality of the food is as good as the quality of the service, and where the waiter is happy to see you. The question is: is the waiter truly happy to see you or is he just pretending to be happy? Is his smile genuine or fake? This paper is an attempt to answer these questions. It discusses the importance of emotional expression in service work and the consequences of "service with a fake smile" for service sector representatives. The application of a fake

smile in a job is considered as a technique of emotion management that may be used as part of the "public self", common to those who perform in public.

Emotions are a crucial aspect of human functioning affecting our thoughts, behaviors and actions. In the past, work and organizational psychology underestimated the importance of emotions in the workplace (Briner, 1999). Emotions and rational thinking along with making sound judgements were believed to be mutually exclusive and thus were not even perceived as a workplace phenomenon. At most, emotions were considered "second class citizens" in the workplace. Fineman (2008) described the organization of the late eighties as 'emotionally anorexic'.

Recently, we have observed an upsurge of interest in emotions in the workplace (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002; Brief, 2001; Forgas & George, 2001; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). This is due to many factors: new ideas in sociological

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thought (e.g., Fineman, 2006), the development of neuroscience providing evidence that emotional responses are an integral part of the “rational” decision-making process (e.g., Bechara, Tranel, & Damasio, 2000) and the popularization of the concept of emotional intelligence (Fisher & Ashkanasy, 2000; Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). The importance of emotions in the workplace has become more obvious with the expansion of the service economy (this trend is also noticeable in Poland: see Rogoziński, 2003) and a sharp increase in the number of workers employed in service industries. This begs the question: what is so special about service jobs? Do they have anything in common with public performance?

Employees in service sector occupations operate on the border between the organization and the outside world, i.e., the customer. Very often, it is difficult to separate the evaluation of product quality from the evaluation of the quality of interaction that occurs between a customer and an employee (Korczynski, 2005). There is ample empirical evidence to suggest that the quality of interactions between frontline employees and their customers is an essential determinant of service success variables, such as perception of the quality of the service, satisfaction with the service, and loyalty towards the service provider (Korczynski, 2005; Seth, Deshumkh, & Vrat, 2005). For example, Pugh (2001) showed that employees’ displays of positive emotion were related to customers’ evaluations of service quality. Employees’ expression of emotions has also been connected to customer mood (Luong, 2005), willingness to return as a repeat customer, and past positive comments to friends about the organization (Tsai, 2001).

Accordingly, emotions expressed by employees during interactions with customers have become important, as they can affect organizational outcomes. Therefore, many service organizations expect workers, in addition to having the right qualifications and professional competence, to be able to show appropriate emotions whilst serving customers (Hochschild, 1983; Pugh, 2001; Purcell, Hutchinson, & Kinnie, 2000). Such organizational requirements for emotional displays are known as display rules (Ekman, 1973). Organizational display rules specify which emotions are appropriate and how they should be expressed at work in order to comply with the standing rules of a given organization (Diefendorff & Croyle, 2008; Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). In most service contexts, employees are expected to express positive emotions, such as happiness, friendliness or cheerfulness, and suppress negative emotions, such as boredom, anger or resentment (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). Employees, however, naturally experience a variety of emotions during their workday (Baka, 2015; Baka & Derbis, 2012; Bazińska & Szczygieł, 2012; Lazarus & Cohen-Charash, 2001; Szczygieł & Bazińska, 2013a). Moreover, they often experience negative emotions (Diefendorff, Richard, & Yang, 2008; Szczygieł & Bazińska, 2013b). As a result, in order to conform to display rules, service sector representatives must often regulate their affective displays.

Hochschild (1983) described the phenomenon of self-regulation of affective displays within customer service

contexts as emotional labor. According to Hochschild (1983) employees engage in emotional labor in order to meet display rules established by organizations. She defines emotional labor as ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Hochschild (1983) distinguishes two forms of emotional labor: surface acting and deep acting (see also Bazińska, Kadzikowska-Wrzosek, Retowski, & Szczygieł, 2010; Grandey, 2000; Scott & Barnes, 2011; Szczygieł, Bazińska, Kadzikowska-Wrzosek, & Retowski, 2009). Surface acting refers to modifying emotional displays without changing internal feelings, and it usually involves suppressing one’s felt emotions and faking the desired emotions. In other words, employees who engage in surface acting put on a mask. For example, an employee is angry because of a quarrel with a colleague, but fakes a smile to satisfy the customer service requirements of the job. In contrast, deep acting involves attempting to modify actual feelings to comply with the standing display rules. Hence, deep acting refers to efforts aimed at changing the emotion felt in order to elicit the appropriate emotional display. For example, an employee faced with an annoyed customer tries to focus on a positive experience that occurred earlier to maintain a positive emotion through the potentially negative experience. Therefore, with surface acting, an employee “fakes” the appropriate emotional displays, while with deep acting, the employee tries to feel genuinely the desired emotion. Taken together – although surface and deep acting lead to similar consequences, in that they both allow employees to match their emotional expression to organizational display rules – they refer to different mechanisms by which an employee attempts to influence his or her emotional expression.

There is a common notion that emotional labor is good for the organization but bad for employees (Côte, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Scott & Barnes, 2011). It is good for organizations because it adheres to their expectations based on the assumption, that the expression of certain emotions helps influence customers to meet organizational goals (Pugh, 2001; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; Tsai, 2001). What is good for the organization, however, is not necessarily good for the employee. According to Hochschild (1983), emotional labor requires effort and leads to resource depletion, which in turn leads to increased burnout and lower job satisfaction. The results of numerous studies, however, have demonstrated that the negative consequences of emotional labor, emphasized by Hochschild (1983), relate primarily to its surface form (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2003; Kruml & Geddes, 2000; Totterdell & Holman, 2003). A number of studies have shown that surface acting, unlike deep acting, is associated with personal cost, such as burnout and physical complaints (for a meta-analysis, see Bono & Vey, 2005; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

Studies conducted in Poland generally indicate a similar pattern of results. For example, Bazińska and colleagues (2010), in a study conducted among 708 service sector employees, observed that surface acting is positively related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, but

inversely related to personal accomplishment. In contrast, deep acting is positively related to personal accomplishment, inversely related to depersonalization, but unrelated to emotional exhaustion. In another study, Bazińska and Szczygieł (2012) observed that both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization are positively related to surface acting, but unrelated to deep acting. We can also find results showing that both forms of emotional labor relate to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization (Wróbel, 2013).

### The present study

The current study was conducted in an attempt to gain more insight into the emotional labor–burnout relationship. The primary purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between the individual characteristics (i.e., dispositional affectivity and emotional intelligence) of emotional labor and its associated consequences, i.e., burnout. Given that the focus of the present study is the emotional aspect of work, it will concentrate on emotional exhaustion, which is considered to be the core symptom of the burnout syndrome (Shirom, 2005). Emotional exhaustion is a chronic state of physical and emotional depletion, and refers to feelings of fatigue and being emotionally overextended by demanding interactions with the people one works with, e.g., customers (Cordes, Dougherty, & Blum, 1997; Shirom, 2005; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

The main hypothesis states that there is a positive relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion. Deep acting was also measured in this study; however, given the results obtained in previous research, which suggest that deep acting is unrelated to burnout (see Hülshager & Schewe, 2011), there were no specific predictions about the association between deep acting and emotional exhaustion. What is important, the expected relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion should extend beyond the negative affectivity of the employee, as employees' negative affectivity may create a spurious correlation between surface acting and emotional exhaustion. This hypothesis is grounded in the majority of research, which shows that negative affectivity is linked both to surface acting (e.g., Grandey, 2000) and to its outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion (e.g., Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

According to Grandey (2000), employees high in negative affectivity need to engage in active emotion regulation (via surface or deep acting) to a greater extent than their low in negative affectivity counterparts. As Weiss and Cropanzano (1996) note, certain affective traits determine the intensity of our emotional responses. Hence, individuals high in negative affectivity may respond more intensely to unpleasant events if they occur while interacting with a customer. As a consequence, an employee high in negative affectivity implements more emotional labor to conform to organizational requirements (i.e., express positive and suppress negative emotions) in the face of difficult situations. In line with this finding, recent research has demonstrated that both deep and surface acting

are positively related to negative affectivity (e.g., Allen, Pugh, Grandey, & Groth, 2010; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005). Therefore, one may expect that individuals high in negative affectivity are prone to perform more emotional labor. Furthermore, negative affectivity has also been linked to the criterion variable. Research has consistently demonstrated that negative affectivity is strongly linked to higher levels of emotional exhaustion, with correlation coefficients ranging from  $r=0,28$  (Zohar, 1997) to as high as  $r=0,72$  (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Overall, there is strong evidence that dispositional affectivity may influence both the predictor (surface acting during interactions with clients) and the criterion (emotional exhaustion) variables, which are under study here. Thus, I predict the following:

*H1: Surface acting is positively related to emotional exhaustion, beyond dispositional negative affectivity.*

The results presented above indicate that unlike deep acting, surface acting is associated with negative consequences, such as burnout and physical complaints (Bazińska & Szczygieł, 2012; Bono & Vey, 2005; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Therefore, the question arises: is it possible to use merely deep acting when dealing with customers? Is it possible to avoid surface acting?

There is evidence that the propensity to employ surface vs deep acting is partly determined by situational factors. For example, Grandey, Dickter, & Sin (2004) observed that employees declared using deep acting during mildly stressful interactions with customers; in contrast, highly stressful interactions were connected with using surface acting. Similar results were obtained by Diefendorff et al. (2008) and Zapf (2002), who showed that deep acting is used in low stress situations, while surface acting is engaged in high stress situations, i.e., when dealing with a “difficult client”. This leads to the conclusion that in some (i.e., highly stressful) situations, surface acting is an inevitable part of service work and perhaps also part of a wider context of public performance.

Thus, the following question arises: is it possible to perform surface acting without being exhausted, drained and finally burnt out? Surface acting changes emotional expression while leaving the felt emotion intact. Hence, employees who resort to surface acting still experience the original emotion, which is merely suppressed and masked by fake outer expressions. Given that emotional labor usually refers to negative emotions, we may assume that surface acting promotes the experience of negative emotions. Negative emotions, in turn, activate stress (Mayne, 2001) and (if prolonged) lead to chronic stress (Gross, Semmer, Meier, Kälin, Jacobshagen, & Tschann, 2011), burnout (Bazińska & Szczygieł, 2012; Szczygieł & Bazińska, 2013) and negative health outcomes (Consedine, 2008). In order to avoid these adverse consequences of negative emotions, employees must rely on their ability to regulate emotions. This time, however, the purpose of emotion regulation is not to adhere to organizational display rules when dealing with customers, but to improve their subjective well-being.

Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence what emotions they experience, when they experience them, and how they express them (Gross, 1998). Research shows that people differ in their ability to regulate their emotions (Gross & John, 2003). The concept of emotional intelligence introduced by Salovey & Mayer (1990) has been suggested to reflect this variability. Therefore, as a secondary purpose of the current study, I want to examine whether employees' emotional intelligence acts as a moderating variable in the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion.

A number of different conceptualizations of emotional intelligence has been offered in research literature and can be categorized into two groups: ability models (e.g., Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and trait models (e.g., Petrides & Furnham, 2003). Ability emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate it in thought, understand it, and regulate it in oneself and others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), while trait emotional intelligence is defined as a constellation of self-perceptions of emotion-related dispositions which are located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, Pita, & Kokkinaki, 2007). Thus, the former captures individuals' ability to use emotions and emotional knowledge (i.e., what a person is capable of doing), while the latter relates to people's self-perceptions of their emotional abilities and is intended to capture what a person actually does (i.e., how many of these abilities manifest themselves in practice) (Petrides & Furnham, 2000). It should be emphasized that the distinction between these two models is based exclusively on the method used to measure the construct, and not on the features of emotional intelligence that both models are assumed to cover (for a discussion, see Petrides, 2011). Ability emotional intelligence (or cognitive-emotional ability) is measured by performance tests relating to maximum performance (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2003), whereas trait emotional intelligence is assessed by self-report inventories referring to typical performance (Petrides, 2011). Consequently, ability emotional intelligence belongs to the domain of cognitive ability, while trait emotional intelligence belongs to the realm of personality (Petrides, 2011). The present paper focuses on the trait emotional intelligence model.

The construct of trait emotional intelligence defines emotional intelligence as a constellation of emotion-related dispositions capturing the extent to which one is able to attend to, identify, understand, regulate, and utilize one's own and other people's emotions (Petrides, 2011). The results of several studies provide evidence that trait emotional intelligence is a useful construct to assess individual differences in emotion regulation. For example, Mikolajczak, Roy, Luminet, Fillee, & de Timary (2007) observed that individuals high in trait emotional intelligence (compared to individuals low in trait emotional intelligence) showed significantly lower reactivity to a stressful event (i.e., a public speaking task) at both physiological (i.e., salivary cortisol) and psychological (i.e., mood deterioration) levels. In another study, Mikolajczak & Luminet (2008) demonstrated that individuals high in

trait emotional intelligence are both more likely to appraise stressful situations as a challenge (rather than a threat) and are more confident that they can cope with such situations. Moreover, individuals high in trait emotional intelligence reported a smaller increase in negative mood as a result of laboratory-induced stress than their low in emotional intelligence study counterparts (Mikolajczak, Petrides, Coumans, & Luminet, 2009). The results of another study revealed that students high in trait emotional intelligence appraised stressful events, such as exam sessions, as less threatening and displayed fewer psychological symptoms and somatic health complaints during exams than their low in trait emotional intelligence counterparts (Mikolajczak, Luminet, & Menil, 2006). Thus, it is highly plausible that employees high in trait emotional intelligence are more likely than employees low in emotional intelligence to be able to reduce the likelihood of emotional exhaustion caused by negative emotions experienced as a result of surface acting. Hence, the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion should be weaker among those high in trait emotional intelligence. Controlling for negative affectivity in order to ensure that the surface acting–emotional exhaustion relationship is not driven by the affective disposition of employees, a moderating hypothesis was developed:

*H2: Trait emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion, in such a way that the relationship is stronger in those lower in emotional intelligence than in those higher in emotional intelligence.*

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were recruited by five psychology students who volunteered to participate in this project. Each student was instructed how to recruit participants, defined for the purpose of this study as full-time employees of the service sector. More specifically, two kinds of occupations were the targets: sales assistants and insurance customer service representatives. Each student was given 50 packets consisting of a cover letter that provided overall information about the research project (i.e., an assessment of occupational stress in service sector jobs) and questionnaires on demographics, emotional labor, emotional exhaustion, emotional intelligence and dispositional affectivity. Employees who expressed interest in this research project were asked to complete questionnaires at home, seal them in the enclosed envelope and bring them back to work within the next few days. Completed questionnaires, placed in sealed envelopes, were collected approximately one week after their distribution. Participants were assured that data collected would be kept confidential and would only be used for research purposes. A total of 197 envelopes (i.e., questionnaires) were returned, giving a 79% response rate. Seventeen participants were excluded from this sample because of missing data and the final sample size consisted of 180 participants. Participants were either insurance customer

service representatives (59.4%) or retail sales assistants (40.6%). This final sample had a slightly greater number of female than male respondents (53.3% female, 47.7% male). The participants were on average 36 years old ( $M=36.01$  years,  $SD=6.89$ ). Of all the respondents, 65.6% reported they had a university degree whereas 34.4% reported being high school or vocational school graduates. The participants reported spending more than two thirds of their time on the job with customers, i.e., face-to-face ( $M=72.59\%$ ,  $SD=16.11\%$ ). Their average tenure with their current employer was approximately 7.67 years ( $SD=5.40$ ) and ranged from one year to 22 years.

### Emotional labor

Emotional labor strategies were measured using the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS) developed by Bazińska et al. (2010). The ELS is a 10-item scale, which consists of five items for surface acting and five items for deep acting. The following represents a sample item from the deep acting sub-scale: 'I'm trying to change my true feelings to fit those that I need to display to customers'. The following represents a sample item from the surface acting sub-scale: 'I don't really feel the emotions that I present to the customers'. Participants were asked to answer items in response to the question: 'During an average day at work, how often do you do each of the following when interacting with customers?' The items are scored on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from seldom to always. The scores for each sub-scale are calculated by summing up the item scores. Higher scores on each of the sub-scales represent higher levels of the dimension being assessed. Deep and surface acting had an alpha coefficient of .84 and .89 respectively.

### Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion was assessed with the 9-item sub-scale of the Polish version (Pasikowski, 2000) of the Maslach Burnout Inventory – General Survey (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). This 9-item scale measures how often one feels emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. All items were scored on a 7-point rating scale, ranging from 0 "never" to 6 "every day", and the score was calculated by summing up the item scores. The present study established a Cronbach's alpha of .87.

### Trait emotional intelligence

The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire–Short Form (TEIQue–SF; Petrides & Furnham, 2006; Polish adaptation Szczygieł, Jasielska, & Wytykowska, 2015) was used to measure trait emotional intelligence. The TEIQue–SF is derived from the full form of the TEIQue (see Petrides, 2011, for a comprehensive description of the factors and sub-scales) and comprises 30 items rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). A trait emotional intelligence score is calculated by summing up the item scores and dividing them by the total number of items. In this study, the average internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for this measure was .87.

### Negative affectivity

Negative affectivity was measured using the 10-item sub-scale of the Polish version (Brzozowski, 2010) of the Positive Affectivity Negative Affectivity Schedule (PANAS, Watson, Clark, & Tellegan, 1988). The scale consists of ten negative adjectives describing emotional states. Participants were asked: 'To what extent do you generally feel this way, on average, across all situations?' Participants rated their experiences on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (very slightly or not at all) to 5 (extremely). The score was calculated by summing up the item scores. In this study, the average internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for this measure was .82.

## Results

There were no significant differences between the two occupational groups in the variables measured. Therefore, the occupational groups were combined for the analyses reported in this paper. Prior to treating all participants as one sample, t-tests were performed on all variables using gender as the independent variable. Only one significant difference emerged. The results show that female participants reported higher rates of NA than male participants:  $t(178)=3.45$ ,  $p<.01$ , Cohen's  $d=.50$ ,  $M=22.52$  ( $SD=5.11$ ) and  $M=20.10$  ( $SD=4.19$ ) respectively. Given that there were no other gender differences, it was decided to treat the group as one sample. Table 1 contains the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of all the variables measured.

The pattern of correlations between the variables was in line with my expectations. As predicted, emotional exhaustion was positively related to negative affectivity and surface acting, but unrelated to deep acting. Trait emotional intelligence was positively related to deep acting but inversely related to emotional exhaustion, negative affectivity and surface acting.

As anticipated, surface acting was positively related to emotional exhaustion (see Table 1). As a more conservative test of this relationship, H1, which stated that surface acting is related to emotional exhaustion beyond dispositional negative affectivity, was tested with two multiple regression analyses. The results revealed that negative affectivity, which was entered in the first step of the regression equation, was significantly related to emotional exhaustion ( $\beta=.37$ ,  $p<.001$ ), explaining 13% of the variance. Beyond this control variable, surface acting emerged as a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion ( $\beta=.33$ ,  $p<.001$ ), explaining an additional 9.7% of the unique variance. Therefore, H1 was supported. Entering deep acting into a regression equation did not affect the results, and produced the same amount of variance explained.

It should be noted, however, that when surface acting was entered into the model, the effect of negative affectivity on emotional exhaustion decreased from  $\beta=.38$ ,  $p<.001$  to  $\beta=.28$ ,  $p<.001$ . This result suggests that surface acting mediates the relationship between negative affectivity and emotional exhaustion. Such mediation is likely, given that correlational analysis revealed a significant association

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations among all study variables**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. Negative affectivity	21.39	4.85	—				
2. Surface acting	15.36	6.91	.27***	—			
3. Deep acting	18.83	6.54	.11	.30***	—		
4. Emotional intelligence	4.95	.49	-.20**	-.17*	.24**	—	
5. Emotional exhaustion	19.64	10.01	.37***	.40***	.06	-.43***	—

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$  (all two-tailed significance tests).

between negative affectivity and surface acting (see Table 1). Therefore, following Baron and Kenny's (1986) criteria for mediation, partial mediation is indicated. A Sobel test, obtained using procedures developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004), confirmed partial mediation ( $z = 2.95$ ,  $p < .01$ ). The mediation analysis reveals that negative affectivity directly and indirectly (through surface acting) relates to emotional exhaustion.

H2 stated that emotional intelligence would moderate the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion, namely that the positive relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion is stronger among employees low rather than high in emotional intelligence. In order to test this hypothesis, I performed moderated hierarchical multiple regression analysis. The variables were entered into the regression equation in three steps. The control variable, i.e., negative affectivity, was entered in the first step. In the second step, we entered the "main effects" (surface acting and emotional intelligence). Finally, the surface acting  $\times$  emotional intelligence product term

variable was entered in the third step. Surface acting and emotional intelligence were centered prior to creating the interaction term, allowing the beta-weight of the interaction term to be more directly interpretable (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). The interaction of the surface acting and emotional intelligence term was significant ( $\beta = -.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and accounted for a considerable portion of the variance in emotional exhaustion ( $\Delta R^2 = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ; see Table 2).

In order to examine further if the interaction matches the hypothesis, the relationship between surface acting and emotional intelligence was plotted comparing people who scored more than one standard deviation above and below the average level of trait emotional intelligence (see Figure 1). The interaction form was consistent with our predictions. Further, following guidelines suggested by Aiken and West (1991), a simple slopes analysis was conducted for participants who scored one standard deviation below and above the mean on emotional intelligence. As predicted, surface acting was positively

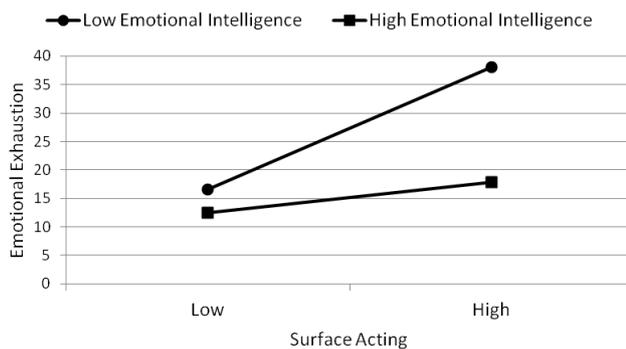
**Table 2. Regression of surface acting and emotional intelligence on emotional exhaustion**

Model	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Step 1: Control	.13***				
Negative affectivity			.72	.14	.37***
Step 2: Main effects	.33***	.29***			
Negative affectivity			.43	.13	.22**
Surface acting			.40	.09	.29***
Emotional intelligence			-6.60	1.23	-.34***
Step 3: Interaction	.39***	.06***			
Negative affectivity			.41	.12	.21**
Surface acting			.40	.08	.29***
Emotional intelligence			-4.99	1.23	-.26***
Surface acting $\times$ Emotional intelligence			-.65	.15	-.27***

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

related to emotional intelligence among employees who were low in trait emotional intelligence ( $\beta = .79, p < .001$ ). In contrast, surface acting and emotional exhaustion were unrelated among employees who were high in trait emotional intelligence ( $\beta = .09, p = .59$ ). In other words, surface acting increases emotional exhaustion only for employees low (vs high) in trait emotional intelligence. Hence, H2 was confirmed.

**Figure 1. Experience of emotional exhaustion as a function of surface acting and emotional intelligence**



Low surface acting is defined as mean  $-1$  standard deviation from the mean; high surface acting is defined as mean  $+1$  standard deviation. Note that this high/low split is for illustrative purposes here only; the moderation analyses conducted use all variables as continuous variables.

I also tested this hypothesis without the control variable included, following Becker's (2005) recommendation for treating control variables. Dropping negative affectivity from the regression equation produced essentially the same amount of variance explained and did not affect the nature of the interaction. The regression results without the control variables are presented in Table 3.

Given that there have also been some suggestions that age, job tenure and directness (i.e., face-to-face) of the employee–customer interactions may be linked to emotional exhaustion, I also tested the hypotheses while statistically controlling for these variables. Age, job tenure

and directness of interactions had essentially no influence on the results.

I also checked whether emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between negative affectivity and emotional exhaustion. In the first step, the “main effects” (negative affectivity and emotional intelligence) were entered into a regression equation. The negative affectivity  $\times$  emotional intelligence product term variable was entered in the second step. The interaction term was not significant ( $\beta = -.05, p > .10$ ) and did not explain any additional variance in emotional exhaustion beyond the main effects of negative affectivity and emotional intelligence ( $\Delta R^2 = .01, p > .10$ ). Instead, both negative affectivity and emotional intelligence were found to be directly related to emotional exhaustion,  $\beta = .29, p < .001$  and  $\beta = -.36, p < .01$  respectively.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to gain more insight into the emotional features of service employees' work experiences and their links to job burnout. I examined the effects of emotional labor and individual differences in both dispositional negative affectivity and trait emotional intelligence on emotional exhaustion. I focused primarily on surface acting as a form of emotional labor that refers to the modification of emotional expression without changing any underlying internal feelings.

Bono and Vey (2005) in their meta-analysis summarized the predictors and outcomes of emotional labor and noted: ‘It seems plausible to us that the positive correlations between emotional labor and outcomes may be entirely a function of negative affectivity and its effects on the other variables’ (Bono & Vey, 2005, p. 230). Therefore, it is now common to control for dispositional affectivity in emotional labor research (e.g., Allen et al., 2004; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Szczygieł & Bazińska, 2013). The approach adopted here underlined a prediction that there would be a positive relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion beyond the dispositional negative affectivity of participants.

**Table 3. Regression summary for the interaction of surface acting and emotional intelligence on emotional exhaustion without control variables**

Model	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$B$	$SE B$	$\beta$
Step 1: Independent variables	.29***				
Surface acting			.48	.08	.35***
Emotional intelligence			-7.31	1.25	-.37***
Step 2: Interaction	.36***	.07			
Surface acting			.47	.08	.34***
Emotional intelligence			-5.62	1.25	-.29***
Surface acting $\times$ Emotional intelligence			-.67	.16	-.27***

Note. All coefficients are reported for the final step.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

The results demonstrate that dispositional negative affectivity correlates significantly with surface acting, which is consistent with previous research (e.g., Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005; Szczygiel & Bazińska, 2013). It was also observed that negative affectivity is associated with emotional exhaustion, which is also consistent with previous studies (Szczygiel & Bazińska, 2013; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998; Grandey et al., 2004; Zellars & Perrewé, 2001). Most importantly, the current study demonstrates that surface acting predicts emotional exhaustion *beyond* negative affectivity. Interestingly, in the current study deep acting was unrelated to both negative affectivity and emotional exhaustion. This implies that employees high in negative affectivity are more likely to suppress their genuine emotional expression and/or fake emotional expression than to change their inner emotions to adhere to display rules.

### Why is surface acting related to emotional exhaustion but deep acting is not?

One possible mechanism through which surface acting might relate to burnout refers to the ego-depletion paradigm (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). According to this view, people have a limited pool of mental resources that can be used up. This central resource, parallel to “strength” or “energy” is consumed by tasks requiring controlled and intentional action. Consequently, exerting self-control in one task impairs performance on subsequent unrelated tasks requiring the same resource (see also Buczny, Layton, & Muraven, 2015). Surface acting implicates the perpetual monitoring of one’s actual and desired emotional state. Self-detection of a discrepancy between what one feels and what one wants to feel or express (e.g., an employee feels bored or irritated when s/he wants to or simply has to appear cheerful and happy), triggers self-monitoring and self-corrective processes aimed at reducing this discrepancy and accomplishing the desired emotional expression, e.g., appearing cheerful and happy (Magen & Gross, 2010). These self-monitoring and self-corrective processes help people achieve their goals, e.g., look cheerful while they are angry inside, but at the same time they consume attentional resources needed for other concurrent or subsequent tasks (Grandey, 2000). As a result, performance of these concurrent or subsequent tasks can be quite poor. Indeed, there is evidence that surface acting reduces job performance (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011), exerts a huge strain on emotions and decreases well-being (Côté, 2005; Grandey, 2003).

The depleting effect of surface acting and its relation to burnout can also be explained from the perspective of the process model of emotion regulation proposed by Gross (1998). In his model, Gross (1998) distinguishes between two major classes of emotion regulation strategies that occur in emotion-generating processes. Antecedent-focused emotion regulation occurs early in the emotion generation process (i.e., before the emotion response tendencies have become fully activated and have managed to change behavioral and physiological responding). In contrast, response-focused emotion regulation refers to

regulatory processes that occur after an emotion has been generated and involves emotion modification once an emotion has been activated and once response tendencies have been fully developed. Two emotion regulation strategies have been extensively studied in recent years: expressive suppression, which represents response-focused emotion regulation, and cognitive reappraisal, which represents antecedent-focused emotion regulation (Gross, 2002). There is ample empirical evidence, which shows that expressive suppression and cognitive reappraisal have different consequences. Reappraisal leads to a decrease in both expressive behavior and the experience of negative emotion whereas suppression leads to a decrease in behavioral responses, yet it fails to decrease emotional experience (Gross, 1998). There is also evidence that suppression increases sympathetic activation of the cardiovascular system (Gross & Levenson, 1993, 1997), impairs cognitive functioning (Richards & Gross, 2000), leads to poorer performance on working memory tasks (Szczygiel & Maruszewski, 2015) and worsens emotional information processing (Szczygiel, Buczny, & Bazińska, 2012). In contrast, reappraisal has no such effect. Surface acting is considered a form of response-focused emotion regulation, i.e., it occurs relatively late in the emotion process, potentially after affective experience has already been engendered and after response tendencies have been activated (Gross, 2013). In contrast, deep acting is considered a form of antecedent-focused emotion regulation, as it occurs at the beginning of the emotion process (Gross, 2013). Therefore, the claim that surface acting reduces mental resources and, thereby, leaves the employee feeling exhausted is understandable from the perspective of the process model of emotion regulation.

Hülshager and Schewe (2011) have outlined other plausible pathways through which surface acting may impact burnout, such as feelings of inauthenticity, unpleasant social relationships with customers and persistent experience of negative emotions connected to surface acting (this was discussed in an earlier section of this article).

### Emotional intelligence and emotional labor

Many researchers (e.g., Grandey, 2000; Lam & Kirby, 2002; Zapf, Seifert, Schmutte, Mertini, & Holz, 2001) believe that emotional intelligence is a prerequisite for executing emotional labor, as it provides skills enabling employees to perceive accurately both their own emotions and those of their customers. Employees who perform emotional labor have to be able to understand their present emotional state (*how I feel*), what caused it (*why I feel the way I feel*), and how it evolved. Going further, employees must be equipped with emotion regulation skills which allow them to modify their current emotional state in order to meet the organization’s requirements with regard to emotional display.

Existing literature on emotional labor considers deep acting as a step above surface acting because employees performing deep acting are not just altering their physical

display (which is the essence of surface acting) but, first and foremost, attempt to modify their internal thoughts and feelings (Hochschild, 1983; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Zapf, 2002; Totterdell & Holman, 2003). Obviously, in the case of surface acting, employees are aware of organizational display rules, but their efforts are limited only to enhancing, faking, or suppressing emotions when it is necessary for the sake of the ongoing interaction with the customer. There is no effort to feel genuinely the required emotion. Unwillingness to engage emotionally may be due to several reasons, such as employees' low work motivation, low sense of self-efficacy or low energetic resources at their disposal (Buczny & Łukaszewski, 2008). In order to perform deep acting effectively, however, employees have to be able to recognize, understand and regulate their emotions, and this leads us directly to the emotional intelligence concept (Petrides & Furnham, 2003; Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2004).

#### **The buffering role of trait emotional intelligence in preventing burnout associated with surface acting**

I tested the hypothesis that trait emotional intelligence acts as a moderator in the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion. The results support this prediction. It was demonstrated that employees who declared a greater propensity for performing surface acting reported more emotional exhaustion symptoms than others; however, this effect was observed only among employees who were low in trait emotional intelligence. In contrast, surface acting and emotional exhaustion were unrelated among employees who were high in trait emotional intelligence. The results of the study suggest that, when confronted with the burden of surface acting and the strain resulting from it, employees high in trait emotional intelligence experience less stress than employees low in trait emotional intelligence. This favorable effect of emotional intelligence has been demonstrated by previous research. For example, Mikolajczak, Menil, & Luminet (2007) have demonstrated that service sector employees with higher trait emotional intelligence scores reported fewer symptoms of burnout than their counterparts who scored lower in trait EI. Ogińska-Bulik (2005) has observed that human service employees high in trait emotional intelligence suffered fewer negative health consequences and reported a lower level of occupational stress than those low in trait emotional intelligence. It has also been demonstrated that trait emotional intelligence facilitates the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as positive reappraisal, and prevents the choice of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies, such as self-blame, in the case of stress (Mikolajczak, Nelis, Hansenne, & Quoidbach (2008). There is also evidence that when confronted with stressful situations, individuals high in trait emotional intelligence, unlike individuals low in trait emotional intelligence, are more likely to apply coping styles regarded as adaptive, such as task-focused coping, rather than those which are regarded as maladaptive, such as emotion-focused coping (e.g., Bastian, Burns, & Nettelbeck, 2005; Petrides,

Pérez-González, & Furnham, 2007; Saklofske, Austin, Galloway, & Davidson, 2007).

I believe that the buffering role of emotional intelligence in the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion pertains to negative emotions resulting from surface acting. As mentioned above, however, there are other possible mechanisms explaining the unfavorable effect surface acting has on burnout (see Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Thus, it is also possible that, among customer service employees, emotional intelligence plays its role in reducing the emotional havoc wreaked by the depletion of mental resources, feelings of inauthenticity or unpleasant relations with customers. The mechanisms described by Hülshager and Schewe (2011) are not mutually exclusive and it is possible that they all play a part in this process.

#### **Service workers as actors in the service theatre**

When describing the nature of emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) draws from Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical perspective. In order to explain the structure of social interaction, Goffman (1959) described its process as a drama. According to Goffman (1959), people try to maintain a certain appearance during interpersonal interactions in order to obtain positive evaluation from others. This is similar to actors who make efforts on the stage and follow the script to get applause from the audience. Accordingly, Hochschild (1983) views the work setting as the stage, the customer as the audience, and the employee as the actor. Indeed, service workers, who exhibit an emotional expression to customers, are like actors who present themselves to spectators by complying with a prescribed scenario (i.e., a job description). Consequently, in order to get the job done and fulfill professional duties, service workers have to face challenges that accompany public performance.

There are situations when faking emotions is an unavoidable part of service work. Similarly, public performance often involves hiding or suppressing felt emotions to show what is required. In service jobs, however, which were the object of study here, an employee is obliged to provide "service with a smile" throughout the entire working day; thus, the discrepancy between the perceived display of emotion may last for hours. And what about the people who display a fake smile for a short period of time, such as actors or dancers? Is fake smiling increasing or decreasing their stress and performance anxiety? Kraft and Pressman (2012) emphasize that when analyzing the fake smile-stress relationship one has to consider such factors as duration, frequency and context of displaying fake positive emotional expressions. They suggest that fake smiling may be useful when one is exposed to short-term stress given that the results of their study demonstrate that a fake smile facilitates cardiovascular recovery from experimentally induced stress (Kraft & Pressman, 2012). These findings raise the possibility that maintaining positive facial expressions is useful when one is exposed to short-term stress, such as performing on stage. Given that in a public performance a fake smile may be both advantageous and

disadvantageous, both increasing and reducing performance anxiety, future research should explore contextual factors that may determine the effects of fake smiling in public performances.

### Limitations and future directions

There are limitations to the present study that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the present study used a cross-sectional design; therefore, statements of causal relationships cannot be made. I imply a causal order of the variables, such as emotional exhaustion resulting from surface acting performance, but other causal directions are possible as well, i.e., emotional intelligence as an antecedent of surface acting. Future longitudinal studies might clarify the potential reciprocal nature of this relationship. Secondly, the dispositional measures used in the study were assessed at the same time, which raises concerns that the relationships among the variables might be inflated (see Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Nevertheless, dispositional affectivity, a likely source of such bias, was controlled and support for the moderation effect was found, which is less likely to occur as a result of such biases (see Allen et al., 2010). Thirdly, the generalizability of the current findings is limited to emotional intelligence defined as a trait. The results of the present study, however, are partly consistent with the results obtained by Wróbel (2013), who reported that ability emotional intelligence moderated the relationship between emotional labor (both surface and deep acting) and emotional exhaustion.

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