

Emotional labour and employee burnout in luxury hotels: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

Charalampos Giousmpasoglou*
Thi Hoang

Bournemouth University
FoM – Dept. of Tourism and Hospitality
Dorset House, Talbot Campus
Fern Barrow, BH12 5 BB, Poole
*Corresponding author email:
cgiousmpasoglou@bournemouth.ac.uk

Abstract

The growing attention on ‘Emotional Labour’ in the hospitality sector is the result of a customer driven demand for service excellence since the late 1990s. Emotional Labour (EL) describes the management of one’s emotions to achieve specific organisational outcomes that can be performed by either faking emotion (surface acting) or by managing felt emotions to be ‘authentic’ (deep acting) (Hochschild 2012). Despite the popularity of this topic, the research regarding relationship between EL and national culture is limited. This study aims to explore the impact of Individualism/Collectivism (a common studied factor in cross-cultural research) on service workers’ EL adoption, and its negative effects on users’ well-being.

An online survey questionnaire has been distributed to 130 hospitality front-line employees located in Vietnam and UK; the locations were chosen based on the scores of these countries in the individualism – collectivism index (Hofstede, 1991). The questionnaire design was based on the INDCOL survey, the Dutch Questionnaire on Emotional Labour and the Maslach Burnout Inventory. The key findings demonstrate the correlation between demographic characteristics

and EL Strategies; in addition, the employee burn out dimension in relation to EL is also highlighted.

Key Words: Emotional Labour; Human Resources Management, Cross-cultural management; Luxury hospitality; Culture; U.K.; Vietnam

Introduction

A number of hospitality organisations especially in the luxury sector, have attempted to manage their front-line employee's emotions in order to improve their interaction with customers; as a result it was expected to observe positive effects on customer satisfaction, purchase decision and loyalty (Bolton 2005). A stream of human resource management (HRM) as well as occupational psychology research has focused on the concept of Emotional Labour (EL). EL was first introduced by Hochschild (2012) to describe a process when employees induce their emotions, in order to create a visible facial and bodily display, producing a desired emotional state for customers. According to Hochschild (ibid.) EL strategies can be performed by faking emotions (Surface Acting) or eliciting felt emotions to be authentic (Deep Acting). Importantly, the EL's negative consequences on employees' well-being (such as high levels of stress and burnout), poses as one of the main reasons for employee turnover, a universal challenge in the hospitality industry (Visser and Rothman 2008). Among a few studies that explored the relationship between EL and national culture in service industries, it was only Brotheridge and Taylor (2006) who investigated the differences in EL performance between airline workers from diverse cultural backgrounds working in the same country.

This study focuses on EL in relation to the collectivism/individualism dimension of national culture according to Hofstede's (2018) categorisation. It is argued that employees from collectivist societies not only they are renowned to inherit authentic expression of gracious hospitality, but also they affected by the EL adoption its consequences differently from individualists. This comparative study aims to explore the relationship between EL and national culture, in the luxury hotel context in the UK and Vietnam. In addition, the negative effects from the adoption of EL on the employees' wellbeing and health (such as burnout) are also explored.

Literature review and hypotheses formulation

Culture in luxury hospitality context

The co-existence of different cultures in the workplace has always been a challenge for hotels worldwide (Lee-Ross and Lashley 2012). Being part of a truly global industry, the luxury hotel sector operates in different contexts, where both customers and employees come from diverse cultural backgrounds (Sucher and Cheung 2015). From a national perspective, culture provides the individuals with values and beliefs in early childhood and this in turn affects their socialisation and overall behaviour (Nazarian et al. 2017). It is argued, that the Individualism/Collectivism dimension according to Hofstede's (1991) theory of national culture, has been used mostly in cross-cultural studies to describe the relationship between an individual and the society (Meng 2010). From an individualists' workplace context perspective, the employee tends to demonstrate an "I" consciousness, which in turn creates competitiveness among co-workers and impacts team-work performance in a negative manner (Laroche et al.

2005). In contrast, in a collectivist context the employee prioritise the group's interest and express a "we" consciousness in order to create harmony. In this case, it is highly likely that the employee faces high workloads and distraction by comments made by colleagues (Thomas and Peterson 2017). Sivakumar and Nakata (2001) suggest that due to the adaptive nature of culture, changes such as short or long term migration may also lead to the change of an individual's value system. For instance, some Asian students studying abroad may be affected by the Western culture; as a result they may demonstrate some individualist characteristics.

Emotional Labour and employee burnout

Emotional Labour (**EL**) describes the management of one's emotions to achieve specific organisational outcomes that can be performed by either faking emotion (surface acting - **SA**) or by managing felt emotions to be 'authentic' (deep acting - **DA**) (Hochschild 2012). When employees find their authentic feelings are conflicting with what they are expected to express, SA and DA represent coping strategies (Hochschild 2012). SA focuses on modifying observable outward expressions when hiding genuine feelings (Brotheridge and Lee 2002). For instance, a hotel receptionist might use SA to uphold a positive emotion towards rude customers (Shani et al. 2014). SA generates emotional dissonance - an uncomfortable tension resulting from experiencing a psychological discrepancy between true feelings and feigned emotion displayed (Grandey 2003). DA occurs when employees put effort in changing their inward feelings to align with the emotions that their company wants (Hochschild 2012). Employees try to put themselves in customer's shoes if they experienced those feelings before (Kinman 2009). DA requires much higher effort from performers but reduce emotional dissonance and build a healthy relationship with customer (Krum and Geddes 2000). Although Humphrey et al. (2015)

argued that the two strategies may bring harmful psychological effects and emotional exhaustion, their impact also depends on the frequency of use.

Employee 'burnout' is considered as one of the most serious EL consequences reported on individuals' health and wellbeing. The burnout phenomenon in the service industry has been studied systematically since the 1970s, in order to describe the challenges faced by employees when the relationship between them and their work breaks down (Gursoy et al. 2011). Burnout is measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) which assesses the Emotional Exhaustion (**EE**), Depersonalisation (**DP**) and lack of Personal Accomplishment (**PA**) (Schaufeli et al. 2017, pp. 207-210):

- EE is generated by the lack of energy and feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work;
- DP assesses the degree of unfeeling and impersonal manner towards customers; and
- PA evaluates employee's feelings of work achievement.

Grandey (2000) has focused on the effects of EL strategies on employee burnout; she found that SA has significant negative impact in all burnout dimensions as it requires negative emotions to be concealed, a condition that leads to stress. Meanwhile, DA is reported to enhance PA (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002). Kim (2008) found out that hotel employees performing SA are more likely to experience EE than employees using DA, as higher SA leads to cynicism when higher DA causes greater authenticity. Overall, it is argued that SA users tend to experience job burnout more than DA users (*ibid.*).

The Relationship between EL and Culture

Based on the findings of Matsumoto (1991), Oyserman (2002) and Merritt (2000) argued that individuals who originate from a collectivist culture are more likely to use DA. In collectivist cultures individuals are expected to contribute on their group's development efforts (Thomas and Peterson 2017). In this context emotional moderation is promoted: individuals adjust their emotions from inside-out in order to project a positive image of the organisation to the customers (Kim et al. 2012). In individualist cultures on the other hand, individuals are expected to feel more comfortable expressing real feelings to family members than to strangers (Matsumoto 1991). Individualists' emotions are linked to interactive experiences reflecting the social context and downplay connections to the innermost feelings, so their expressions are more controlled not to damage the relationship between them and others (Safdar et al. 2008). Hence, it is argued that individualists tend to use SA more than collectivists. From that point emerge the first two hypotheses of this study:

Hypothesis 1: Service workers who report themselves as individualists tend to use Surface Acting more than Deep Acting.

Hypothesis 2: Service workers who report themselves as collectivists tend to use Deep Acting than Surface Acting.

Furthermore, Triandis and Gelfland (1988) investigated how culture affects individual health and well-being; they found that individualists suffering from stress weakened immune system and create more likelihood of infections and heart diseases than collectivists. Based on the fact that communitarianism is highly respected among collectivists, it is suggested that they have more social support in times of tough life moments caused by EL (Newham 2011). As a direct

consequence, individualists experience the effects of burnout to a higher degree than collectivists. Another two hypotheses are shaped from above discussion:

Hypothesis 3: Service workers who report themselves as individualists tend to experience high level of Emotional Exhaustion than those who report themselves as collectivists

Hypothesis 4: Service workers who report themselves as individualists tend to experience high level of Depersonalisation than those who report themselves as collectivists

Although EE and DP are associated with EL studies, the same cannot be suggested for PA (Newham 2011). PA is strongly related with personality characteristics and reactivity rather than with cultural differences (Humphrey et al. 2015; Williams 1989). Thus, it was decided not to be included in one of this study's hypotheses. In addition, based on the fact that SA has positive correlation with two different dimensions of burnout (EE, DP), another hypothesis is developed to test the relationship between societal culture, EL strategies and burnout:

Hypothesis 5: Service workers who report themselves as individualists and as using higher levels of Emotional labour, also report higher levels of Emotional Exhaustion and Depersonalisation.

Research Methodology

Both secondary and primary data were collected and analysed in order to conduct this study. The secondary data collection was focused on EL and employee burnout in hospitality context as well as in cross cultural studies. The authors researched a wide range of academic and non-academic sources such as textbooks, academic journals and industry reports. Numeric data sets (i.e. annual

industry statistics and country reports) were also retrieved from reputable organisations such as the International Hotel & Restaurant Association (IHRA). These data sets have the advantage of capturing adequate information regarding past changes and developments so they were used as a guideline in order to design and deliver the primary research (Veal 2006).

This study employs a mixed-method approach in order to explore the relationship between EL, employee burnout and national cultures (Davies 2003). A survey questionnaire was designed based on this study's aim and hypotheses; a qualitative element was also included in order to fully capture the participants' views (Bryman and Bell 2015). The study of the interrelationship between variables, was facilitated by the numeric data provided from the survey questionnaire. In addition, qualitative data were obtained from participants' views recorded on the questionnaire. Thus, participants could share valuable recommendations based on their experiences within the hotel industry. This compensated the quantitative method weaknesses, and increased the validity and reliability of the study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). On the other hand it can be suggested that, the weaknesses of mixed methods focus mainly on time and resources limitation. It is also argued that the differences in terms of culture, language, and work patterns among the participants generated significant challenges on the data collection process.

Saunders et al. (2009) suggest that the questionnaire is the most common data collection tool in surveys. Self-administered questionnaires are completed by respondents and allow to identify accurate sampling with high response rate (Dillman et al. 2009). A fast and cost-effective way to collect data in large volume and without any geographical limitations is via online platforms (Manfreda et al. 2006). In Vietnam, one in every three citizens uses Facebook (Anon 2015) when

48% of UK total population access Facebook at least once a month in 2016 (Anon 2016). Hence, it is easier to reach the target number of respondents. Furthermore, it can be suggested that the questionnaire design can affect the internal validity and reliability of the collected data (Krosnick 2018). As a result the researchers have made a significant effort in order to design a user-friendly and visually attractive survey questionnaire. A brief paragraph at the beginning of the questionnaire provided the participants information regarding the scope of this study. The main content of the questionnaire was divided in six sections. The first section aimed at the collection of demographic data (such as age, gender, nationality and job title) that could potentially affect EL performance. The second section was based on INDCOL scale – the most popular and well-validated measurement of Individualism and Collectivism (Sharma, 2010). A 5-point Likert-type response format was selected; this was used in order to clarify whether the respondent was individualist or collectivist. The third section was created from the Dutch Questionnaire on Emotion Labour (D-QEL) developed by Briet et al. (2005). A 5-point Likert scale was also used here in order to identify the level of using SA and/or DA for each participant. The fourth section assessed aspects of burnout (EE, DP, and PA) based on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach and Jackson 1981). The fifth section included two qualitative questions: participants were asked to identify who played the most vital role in helping them to reduce the EL negative consequences. It must be noted that the questionnaire design followed the BU research ethics guidelines and the use of this survey questionnaire was approved prior to its use.

Research Sample

The population for this study consisted from front line employees in hotels located in the U.K. and Vietnam respectively. Based on Hofstede's (2018) national culture dimensions, British

people achieve high scores in individualism (80), when on the other hand Vietnamese score high in collectivism (80). Due to the large population in both locations as well as budget and time constraints, this study uses non-probability sampling. This method allowed the researchers to target a more relevant sample by excluding front-line employees working in hotels but rarely serve customers directly (Vehovar et al. 2016). Among the non-probability sampling techniques, the snowball sampling was selected. A bilingual questionnaire was created and an on-line version has been available in Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>). A pilot study was launched in order to check the content, language and presentation of the survey questionnaire (Bryman and Bell 2015); the pilot study sample included 5 Vietnamese and 5 British respondents working in five-star hotels in UK. Based on the respondent's feedback, the questionnaire's content and layout was edited; the revised online version of the survey questionnaire was shared as a link via social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter) or by email. From the 129 questionnaires completed online, 124 were completed in full and used for the data analysis.

Data analysis and findings discussion

Hypothesis Testing

Hypotheses 1 and 2 explore the strategies (SA, DA) that individualist and collectivist respondents use to cope with EL. The results revealed that the majority of individualist front-line employees use SA (63.1%) when on duty; on the other hand collectivist employees are almost spitted to half in terms of using SA versus DA. Table 1 demonstrates an equivalence in the proportion of using EL strategies from both individualist and collectivist employees. However,

this result ($p=0.141>0.05$) does not provide sufficient evidence in order to conclude that a significant difference exists.

Table 1: Likelihood in choosing EL strategies (SA or DA).

		SA and DA		Total	p
		SA	DA		
IND COL	IND	41	24	65	0.141
		63.1%	36.9%	100%	
	COL	27	29	56	
		48.2%	51.8%	100%	

The survey's results also show that the percentage of individualists using SA is 14.9% higher than collectivists using DA, which confirms Hypothesis 1. Matsumoto et al. (2005) found that in individualist cultures people are expected to smile when they meet strangers; as a result the hotel industry adopts 'service with a smile' that requires employees to 'wear' a smiling-mask when at work (Kim et al. 2012). Hypothesis 2 was rejected because the number of participants using DA and SA among collectivists are nearly equal. It is argued that this may be caused by the growth of western multinational hotel chains in Asian countries (Webster 2016): collectivists working in these firms are obliged to follow organisational rules and culture; as a result their choice of EL strategy is affected to a certain degree.

The third hypothesis aims to test if Individualism/ Collectivism have correlations to burnout's dimension which is EE. People experienced regarding the EE is divided into two groups: respondents faced high or low level of EE. The p-value of this test is $0.037<0.05$, the null hypothesis can be rejected; these results suggest that there is an association between two cultural

groups and the level of experiencing EE. The proportion of participants coming from individualist cultures (73.8%) experienced high level of EE is higher than the proportion of collectivist workers (55.4%). Meanwhile, the number of people experiencing high level of EE is significantly higher than participants facing low level of EE in each group.

Table 2: Level of EE experiences based on cultural background

		EE		Total	p
		High level (M \geq 3)	Low level (M $<$ 3)		
IND COL	IND	48	17	65	0.037
		73.8%	26.2%	100%	
	COL	31	25	56	
		55.4%	44.6%	100%	

Several studies test the relationship between IND/COL and individual well-being that can explain for the above findings. Service employees from individualist societies often face personal problems on their own, while workers from collectivist societies receive social support from family, friends and other group (Chhokar et al. 2013). This generates a negative impact on psychological and physical well-being among individualists. Therefore, when people from the two groups suppress their emotions, individualists may be affected by stress to a greater degree than collectivists, since emotional regulation requires more effort in their cultural context. On the other hand, the collectivist employees' social support represents a correlate of self-esteem and life satisfaction that eventually help them reduce stress levels (Mastracci and Hsieh 2016).

The fourth hypothesis investigates the level of DP among the collectivist and individualist front-line employees. Based on the results presented in Table 3 in relation to DP experience, the respondents are divided into two groups, high and low level experience of DP. The differences between the proportion of respondents from the two groups experiencing DP provide enough evidence to in terms of statistical significance ($p=0.037<0.05$). The percentage of individualist respondents experiencing high level EE is 18.7% higher than the collectivists'. In both groups, the number of participants facing a low level of DP, is less than people experiencing high level in this dimension.

Table 3: Results from Chi-square test to examine respondents coming from different societal cultures and their levels of DP experiences

		DP		Total	p
		High level ($M \geq 3$)	Low level ($M < 3$)		
IND and COL	IND	47	18	65	0.037
		72.3%	27.7%	100%	
	COL	30	26	56	
		53.6%	46.4%	100%	

Sierra-Siegert and David (2007) also suggested that highly individualistic societies confer vulnerability to DP. They emphasised that individualists coming from Western cultures are easily to suffer psychological threats and fear of losing control, which eventually leads to DP. On the other hand, collectivists often receive an implicit social support, which works as a protective factor against DP experiences (Sierra 2012). Service workers whose 'individual self' is threatened more severely, experience negative moods and face more anger than those who have a 'collective self' (ibid.).

The last hypothesis investigates the interaction between Individualism, SA, EE and DP. A positive correlation is observed between the SA factor and the EE and DP dimensions (almost $p < 0.005$). Although the p-value between SA and DP factors is 0.052, which is just slightly higher than the significance threshold (0.05), the result is marginally close to being statistically significant (Vogt and Johnson 2011). Hence, it should not be ignored that the test may miss a relatively important assessment. Table 4 demonstrates that respondents with a tendency towards individualism are more prone to use SA. Thus, when they adopt high levels of SA will eventually lead to higher levels of EE and DP. The relationship between Individualism and SA is also explored in hypotheses 1 and 2; in addition the relationship between Individualism and Burnout is explored in hypothesis 3 and 4. Therefore, it can be argued that Individualism plays a mediating role in this context. In individualistic cultures, the act of faking unfelt emotions is not effortful as in collectivist cultures, but it brings more emotional dissonance (Allen and Diefendorff 2014). Thus, the higher level of SA that individualist service employees use, the higher emotional dissonance they gain and the higher level of EE and DP they have to face.

Table 4: Pearson correlation coefficients and p-value between IND, SA, EE and DP

	Pearson correlation coefficients (p-value)			
	IND	SA	EE	DP
IND	1			
SA	0.361 (0.0000)	1		
EE	0.311 (0.001)	0.259 (0.004)	1	
DP	0.279 (0.002)	0.177 (0.052)	0.550 (0.000)	1

EL and employee well-being

The last two questions of the survey questionnaire explore the EL negative consequences on front-line employee well-being. This section of the survey questionnaire investigated the impact of six different EL coping strategies: Entertainment/Hobbies; Communication; Working Environment; Motivation; Training; Mental Support. Half of respondents chose family and friends as people who have most impact to minimise the harm of EL; the second most popular answer was dealing with the EL consequences on their own with 32 responses. The results also suggest that there are no significant differences in the number of responses between co-workers and managers / supervisors with 17 and 15 responses, respectively. Table 5 summarises the data collected from the open-ended questions:

Table 5: Summary of results collected from open-ended questions

Theme	Family/ Friends	Managers/ Supervisors	Co- workers	Yourself
Entertainment/Hobbies Play instrument, shopping, reading books, sports, fitness, hanging out, drinking, travelling,...	11.67% (7)	-	5.9% (1)	43.75% (14)
Communication Sharing opinions, listening, giving advices, show perspectives, talking with each other...	41.67% (25)	13.33% (2)	41.17% (7)	12.5% (4)
Working Environment Co-worker helps and supports, cooperation, working hours reduction, manager's supports and attitudes...	1.67% (1)	6.67% (1)	29.41% (5)	12.5% (4)
Motivation Money, recognition, manager's motivation, meetings for sharing experiences, praises...	6.66% (4)	53.33% (8)	-	3.13% (1)
Training Training sessions based on self-assessment, Supervisor and manager's guides, different ways to deliver training...	-	26.67% (4)	11.67% (2)	-
Mental Supports Family care, encouragement, think positive, optimistic,....	38.33% (23)	-	11.67% (2)	28.12% (9)
Total responses	60	15	17	32
Total respondents	60	15	17	32

The above table demonstrates that the theme ‘communication’ emerged as the most common method to minimise the negative impact of EL, followed by the ‘mental support’ theme. Based on the open-ended question responses, it is argued that EL coping strategies for front-line employees are developed in two different levels, within and outside the workplace. The impact of this important finding is discussed in the following section under ‘recommendations’.

Conclusion and Implications

This study explored the influence of national culture and more specifically the Individualism/Collectivism dimension, on the EL performance and its consequences in the luxury hospitality industry. This study found that employees from individualist’s contexts, cannot express authentic emotions and DA as employees with collectivist background. The findings also suggests that high levels of EL can cause a negative impact on hospitality workers’ well-being; this in turn may result to an increase in employees’ turnover rate as well as job dissatisfaction. Front-line employees from individualist cultural backgrounds were found more vulnerable in relation to the negative impacts of EL i.e. high levels of stress and eventually burnout. On the contrary, employees with a collectivist background found it easier to cope with the negative consequences of the EL adoption in their workplace mainly due to the social support receiving from the surrounding environment.

There are both theoretical and managerial implications from this study. It is argued that the findings of this study contribute on the EL literature in relation to cross-cultural differences and employee burnout. In addition, this study contributes to the wider HR literature in service

industry context, by the exploration of the different EL facets in relation to context. From a managerial perspective there are several implications for HR managers and senior managers in hotels. The creation of coping strategies within and outside the workplace in relation to EL and burnout is imperative especially in individualistic contexts. Co-worker support is referred as a cost effective strategy, enabling service workers to deal with stressors and emotional difficulties (Yue et al. 2015). Supportive colleagues can help front-line employees reassess current situations by framing negative emotions towards guests' perspectives. This helps to understand alternative views and may assist overcome negative feelings originating from the employment of SA (Gross 1988). Non-work related social support is also deemed crucial; i.e. effective communication can buffer the mental impact of individual stress (Iwasaki and Mannell 2000). Family and friends can provide effective communication, where talking is less than listening to understand one's emotions. This way of communication helps individuals experience the process of stress reduction and emotional well-being (Slonim 2014). Moreover, this group can provide mental and esteem support (Miller 2015). For example, family members can relieve employees from home responsibilities. This will work effectively during the time of crisis regarding the burnout dimensions.

Although this study offers a valuable insight on the relationship between EL, culture and burnout there are a few limitations related to the survey sample size and context. Future studies can target a bigger sample in different cultural contexts; in addition more hospitality industry sectors can be included such as restaurants and casinos.

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