

Emotional Exhaustion Stressors and Coping Strategies in London's Fine Dining Restaurants

Abstract

This study explores emotional exhaustion stressors and coping strategies among frontline employees (FLEs) in London's fine dining restaurants. Analysis of 23 semi-structured interviews reveals that factors such as unreasonable customer demands, incivility, and lack of support significantly contribute to emotional exhaustion and burnout. Strategies like self-care, mindfulness, and organisational support were identified as effective in mitigating these challenges. The findings highlight the critical role of working conditions and organisational lack of support in shaping emotional exhaustion and provide actionable insights for improving employee well-being, fostering resilience, and reducing turnover in the fine dining sector.

Keywords: Emotional Exhaustion; Surface Acting; Coping Strategies; Fine-Dining Restaurants; Front-Line Employees; Employee Wellbeing

Introduction

Frontline employees in fine dining establishments encounter a distinctive set of occupational challenges stemming from the elevated standards and expectations that define this hospitality sector. Guests often expect impeccable service, meticulous attention to detail, and personalised experiences, placing immense pressure on employees to deliver consistently high performance. This expectation is exacerbated by the demanding nature of fine dining roles, which often require long working hours, irregular schedules, and physical endurance (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2018). Employees must also manage challenging customer interactions, including handling complaints, accommodating special requests, and addressing incivility or even abusive behaviour. These roles frequently involve surface acting, where employees suppress negative emotions to maintain a positive demeanour, adding to the emotional toll (Lee and Madera, 2019). Moreover, the competitive and hierarchical structure of fine dining environments can foster high levels of stress, with limited opportunities for recovery or support. Combined, these factors create a high-pressure workplace that demands not only technical skill but also emotional resilience, significantly increasing the risk of emotional exhaustion that leads to burnout and turnover.

This study responds to the research call for coping strategies for emotional exhaustion (Wallace and Coughlan, 2023) with two objectives: investigating the stressors that lead to exhaustion, and identifying coping mechanisms used by frontline employees in fine dining. This paper explores the causes of emotional exhaustion among fine dining restaurant front-line staff and identifies coping strategies to manage these challenges. This study generates empirical data that informs contemporary debates about and emotional exhaustion in fine dining restaurants at a micro-level operational perspective. It is also the first study to provide emotional exhaustion coping strategies proposed by frontline employees in fine dining restaurants.

Literature Review

The concept of emotional labour has been a focus of research in the hospitality industry since Pizam's (2004) call for human resource programs to address its challenges. Emotional labour involves the regulation of emotions to meet organisational expectations, typically through surface acting (faking emotional displays) and deep acting (genuine emotional expression) (Amisshah et al., 2022). While systematic reviews have expanded understanding of emotional

labour's implications, much of the literature has centred on its general effects across sectors. Surface acting, in particular, has been linked to emotional exhaustion- a chronic state of emotional and physical depletion caused by suppressing emotions to meet service demands (Hori and Chao, 2019). Despite the high demands of fine dining roles, empirical research on emotional exhaustion in this specific context remains limited, highlighting the need for targeted investigations (Chen et al., 2019).

The Self-Regulatory Resource Depletion (SRD) theory offers a useful framework for understanding the relationship between emotional labour and emotional exhaustion (Lee and Madera, 2019). According to SRD, the self-regulation required for surface acting draws heavily on finite cognitive resources, which become depleted over time. Fine dining employees must continuously suppress negative emotions and maintain a composed demeanour across multiple customer interactions, leading to resource depletion and exhaustion. This depletion cycle not only impairs job performance but also contributes to increased turnover intentions, reduced job satisfaction, and negative behaviours such as withdrawal or passive deviance (Hori and Chao, 2019; Fatima and Majeed, 2023). These findings underscore the pressing need for strategies to mitigate the adverse outcomes of emotional labour in fine dining environments.

The existing literature identifies individual factors, such as personality and emotional intelligence, and job characteristics, such as autonomy, as influencing emotional exhaustion (Wallace and Coughlan, 2023). However, gaps remain in understanding emotional labour under high-pressure conditions like fine dining. Recent studies emphasise exploring work-related stressors, personal resource depletion, and effective coping mechanisms to address emotional exhaustion (i.e. Choi et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2020). By focusing on frontline employees in fine dining restaurants, this research aims to identify the factors contributing to emotional exhaustion and identify coping strategies, to alleviate its effects and improve employee well-being.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach to investigate emotional labour and exhaustion among frontline employees (FLEs) in fine dining restaurants in the UK. Recognising the critical role of FLEs in hospitality, the research adopted an inductive methodology to explore real-life settings and develop theory from raw data (Thomas, 2006). Purposive sampling ensured the selection of participants with at least one year of experience in the fine dining sector, emphasising their unique perspectives. Participants were fully informed about the study's scope, guaranteed anonymity, and ethical approval was obtained. This design facilitated trustworthiness and rigor in data collection and analysis (Campbell et al., 2020).

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2023 and February 2024 in Central London and Greater London. The interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and utilized open-ended questions to gather demographic information, work characteristics, and detailed insights into emotional labour and exhaustion. Interview questions were informed by established tools such as Näring et al.'s (2006) emotional labour scale and Maslach's Burnout Inventory (1981). Snowball sampling expanded the participant pool to 23 individuals, achieving data saturation after 18 interviews but continuing to incorporate additional perspectives. Participants shared personal stories and coping mechanisms, offering rich qualitative data for analysis.

Thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 12 software, was used to identify patterns and themes within the data (Bingham, 2023). Researchers collaboratively developed first-order codes and

second-order themes, focusing on topics such as emotional labour, exhaustion, stress, and working conditions. Independent coding by researchers enhanced reliability and validity, while the inductive approach uncovered emergent themes relevant to the study’s aims (Zaman et al., 2021). The methodology ensured transferability through detailed documentation of participants’ demographics and settings, and confirmability by grounding findings in the data rather than researcher bias. The diverse participant profile further enriched the study, with most respondents having significant industry experience and representing a range of educational backgrounds and roles.

Table 1: Participants Coding and Profile

Code	Gender	Age	Nationality	Specialisation	Education	Average working hours (per week)	Contact time with Customers	Years of service in hospitality
P1	Male	26-35	U.K.	Manager	Uni. Degree	> 48 hours	50%-75%	> 10 years
P2	Female	Over 55	E.U.	Manager	Uni. Degree	> 48 hours	25%-49%	> 10 years
P3	Male	18-25	U.K.	Waiter / Waitress	VET	35 – 48 hours	More than 75%	1 to 3 years
P4	Female	18-25	E.U.	Host / Hostess	Uni. Degree	> 48 hours	50%-75%	1 to 3 years
P5	Male	18-25	International	Waiter / Waitress	VET	> 48 hours	More than 75%	1 to 3 years
P6	Female	18-25	E.U.	Waiter / Waitress	Uni. Degree	> 48 hours	More than 75%	< 1 year
P7	Female	26-35	U.K.	Manager	VET	> 48 hours	More than 75%	> 10 years
P8	Female	26-35	International	Host / Hostess	Uni. Degree	35 – 48 hours	More than 75%	1 to 3 years
P9	Female	18-25	U.K.	Waiter / Waitress	School graduate	35 – 48 hours	50%-75%	3 to 5 years
P10	Female	18-25	E.U.	Food runner	Uni. Degree	> 48 hours	Less than 25%	1 to 3 years
P11	Male	36-45	E.U.	Manager	School graduate	35 – 48 hours	Less than 25%	> 10 years
P12	Male	26-35	E.U.	Manager	School graduate	> 48 hours	More than 75%	6 to 10 years
P13	Female	26-35	E.U.	Waiter / Waitress	VET	35 – 48 hours	More than 75%	> 10 years
P14	Male	18-25	U.K.	Sommelier	Uni. Degree	> 48 hours	More than 75%	3 to 5 years
P15	Female	18-25	U.K.	Manager	School graduate	> 48 hours	More than 75%	6 to 10 years
P16	Male	26-35	U.K.	Host / Hostess	School graduate	35 – 48 hours	More than 75%	6 to 10 years
P17	Male	18-25	E.U.	Food runner	VET	Less than 20 hours	Less than 25%	< 1 year
P18	Female	26-35	E.U.	Host / Hostess	Uni. Degree	35 – 48 hours	More than 75%	6 to 10 years
P19	Female	46-55	E.U.	Waiter / Waitress	School graduate	21-34 hours	50%-75%	> 10 years
P20	Male	26-35	U.K.	Bartender	School graduate	35 – 48 hours	More than 75%	> 10 years
P21	Female	18-25	U.K.	Waiter / Waitress	VET	35 – 48 hours	More than 75%	1 to 3 years
P22	Female	36-45	E.U.	Assist. Waitress/er	VET	35 – 48 hours	50%-75%	> 10 years
P23	Female	26-35	U.K.	Manager	School graduate	> 48 hours	50%-75%	> 10 years

Findings

The study revealed several key stressors contributing to emotional exhaustion among frontline employees (FLEs) in fine dining restaurants. High customer expectations, such as managing demanding or off-menu requests, placed significant pressure on staff. These interactions often involved incivility, ranging from rude behaviour to verbal and physical abuse, intensifying emotional strain. One participant (P7) noted that fine dining clientele often expect all requests to be met, regardless of the strain this imposes on staff. P7 raised concerns about the lack of boundaries in such environments, where saying “no” becomes increasingly difficult under pressure.

Additionally, employees reported long working hours, irregular schedules, and physically demanding tasks as significant challenges. These factors led to exhaustion and disruptions in personal lives. A participant (P11) described such conditions as an accepted reality of the profession, highlighting the inevitability of working weekends and enduring high stress. Despite the acknowledgment of these hardships, P11 indicated that individuals entering the industry often do so with an understanding of these demands, viewing them as inherent to the job.

Another significant finding was the emotional toll of surface acting, where employees suppressed negative emotions to present a positive demeanour. This constant emotional regulation led to depletion, with one participant (P2) describing the experience as emotionally “bankrupting,” leaving little energy for personal life and well-being. Many employees reported

severe impacts, including mental and physical fatigue, feelings of emptiness, and disrupted sleep patterns. The lack of managerial support, especially during crises, exacerbated these effects, with some employees requiring time off to recover from the emotional strain.

In response to these stressors, FLEs employed various coping mechanisms. Social support from colleagues was the most common and effective strategy, as employees relied on their coworkers for emotional relief and solidarity. One participant (P5) described a strong team dynamic, comparing the work environment to a battlefield where colleagues become allies, united in overcoming daily challenges. Informal “debriefing” sessions and team cohesion were identified as essential tools for processing experiences and building resilience.

Beyond workplace support, self-care practices such as taking breaks, engaging in mindfulness activities, and prioritising physical rest were critical in managing emotional exhaustion. Many participants also sought support from friends and family, using these relationships as an outlet for decompressing and sharing frustrations. This external emotional support provided a different form of relief compared to the camaraderie within the workplace.

The study underscored the vital role of organizational support in mitigating emotional exhaustion. Participants highlighted the importance of strong managerial leadership, manageable workloads, and a positive work culture in reducing burnout. Effective line managers were seen as instrumental in creating a supportive environment. For example, one participant (P23) emphasised prioritising their team’s well-being and ensuring their support, while another (P13) described how a caring general manager could positively influence mood and morale.

Overall, resilient employees who had access to these resources were better equipped to navigate the challenges of emotional labour. The findings suggest that fostering supportive work environments, promoting healthy coping strategies, and strengthening managerial support can significantly enhance the well-being of FLEs and alleviate the negative impacts of emotional exhaustion in fine dining establishments.

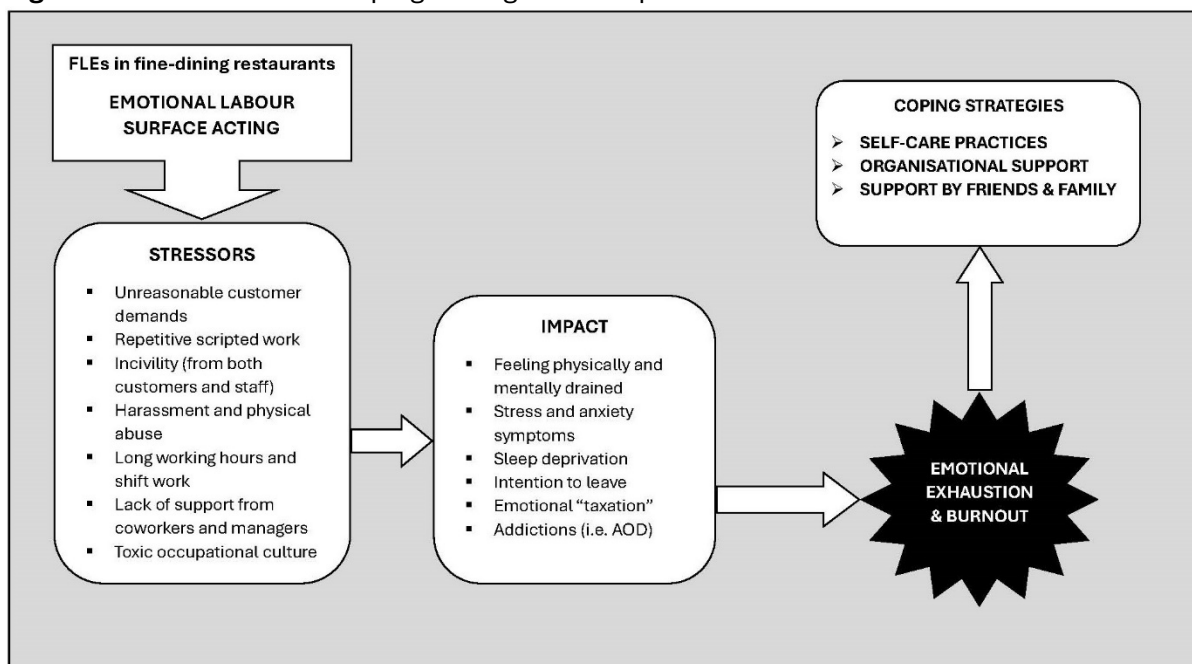
Conclusion

The study confirms the applicability of the SRD theory in explaining the relationship between surface acting and emotional exhaustion among FLEs in the fine dining sector. Surface acting, which involves suppressing negative emotions to present a positive demeanour (Lee and Madera, 2019), was found to significantly contribute to exhaustion due to the depletion of cognitive resources. This exhaustion is exacerbated by challenging work conditions, such as demanding customer expectations, incivility, long hours, and inadequate support. These findings underscore the importance of addressing occupational culture and implementing effective coping mechanisms, including organisational support, mindfulness practices, and fostering resilience, to mitigate the adverse effects of emotional labour (Figure 1).

The study also highlights practical implications for the hospitality industry. Managers and organisations are encouraged to implement strategies that promote employee well-being, such as training programs on emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and deep acting techniques. Supportive workplace environments, fair compensation schemes, and opportunities for professional growth are essential to reducing burnout and turnover. Additionally, integrating these insights into hospitality education can prepare future professionals to manage emotional exhaustion effectively. While the study provides valuable contributions, its focus on frontline employees in fine dining limits generalisability, and future research could explore broader

contexts, including back-of-house roles and emerging technologies like AI in service interactions.

Figure 1: EE stressors and coping strategies conceptual framework



Source: authors' creation

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