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Unmasking the surface acting and emotional exhaustion of frontline employees in UK's fine dining sector

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the self-regulatory resource depletion theory, we unmask the process of surface acting and emotional exhaustion that takes place in the fine dining sector. We test a hypothesis and respond to three research questions using data with closed and open-ended questions from a purposive sample of frontline employees in the UK (N = 134). The findings offer a novel five-stage well-being model that explains how specific work conditions (Stage 1) trigger emotions that frontline fine dining employees regulate with surface acting (Stage 2), a phenomenon that gains momentum and magnitude as it continues, requiring employees to use resources (stage 3) which are limited and quickly depleted leading to emotional exhaustion (Stage 4), a negative work outcome that front-line employees in fine-dining use various strategies to cope with (Stage 5). Implications for practitioners are discussed and future directions for workplace wellness programmes are proposed.


KEYWORDS

Self-regulation; frontline employees; well-being; exhaustion; fine dining restaurants; workplace wellness

1. Introduction

The study of emotions is gaining significance within the field of hospitality mostly from the perspective of employees, and tourism mostly from the perspective of customers, because emotions play a fundamental role in shaping experiences and influencing satisfaction and loyalty (Cvetkova & Smith, 2024; Frost et al., 2023). This study aims to extend the engagement with this field of inquiry by unmasking the process of surface acting and emotional exhaustion among frontline employees in the fine dining sector. It does so in the context of field research's need to understand better the well-being mechanisms "linking emotional labour strategies, such as surface acting, to the outcomes" (Lee & Madera, 2019, p. 2820).

Fine dining restaurants, where the current study focuses would represent an excellent context for understanding the well-being mechanisms that link surface acting to

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emotional exhaustion. First, the operation of fine dining restaurants not only contributes to the advancement of culinary science but also reinforces the cultural identity of a destination (Lima et al., 2024). Second, fine dining restaurants represent a sought-after employer (De Guzman et al., 2022) because employment in these restaurants is considered as “résumé-building” (Gehrels, 2019). Third, professional standards in these restaurants are relatively high, with front-line employees representing the elite or “la crème de la crème” (Jerez Jerez et al., 2024, p. 574).

Within this context, the study contributes to the literature in the following empirical, methodological and theoretical manner. Theoretically, a well-being conceptual framework is developed based on theories of self-regulatory resource depletion (e.g. Baumeister et al., 1998). The framework explains how and why the fine-dining organisational display rules require frontline employees to project positive emotions while withholding any potential expressions of negative affect towards customers. It is a novel comprehensive sequential well-being model that explains how specific work conditions (Stage 1) trigger emotions that frontline fine dining employees regulate with surface acting (Stage 2), a phenomenon that gains momentum and magnitude as it continues, requiring employees to use resources (stage 3) which are limited and quickly depleted leading to emotional exhaustion (Stage 4), a negative work outcome that front-line employees in fine-dining use various strategies to cope with (Stage 5). We therefore address the call from Yao et al. (2024, p. 12) who stress that “contextual influences could give a more comprehensive view of the mechanisms affecting workplace deviance”.

Empirically, the scarce prior studies on fine dining such as DiPietro et al. (2019) and Magrizos et al. (2023) provide constructive endeavours to understand the face behind the mask of employees in the US and Greek fine dining sector. However, these empirical findings originate almost exclusively from employees working in the kitchen. We extend this rather unique aspect which is related to the management of employees that occurs “behind closed doors” by adding first evidence from frontline employees in the UK’s fine dining sector. Furthermore, methodologically, the findings from both DiPietro et al. (2019) and Magrizos et al. (2023) are based on grounded theory using abductive reasoning that transformed qualitative data to intuitive deductions from rule-and-result to the specific case of fine-dining employees. This study is complementary in the sense that it starts with deductive reasoning originating from a specific hypothesis that is tested using the data from the closed-end survey questions. Then, uses the data from the open-ended questions to proceed to intuitive deduction from the result of the hypothesis to the specific case using abductive reasoning.

The remainder of the paper is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review, which frames the definition, conceptualisation and theoretical framework to study the research aim based on recommendations from recent systematic literature reviews. Then, the self-regulation resource depletion theory is explained in the work context of our study before developing the hypothesis and the research questions. Section 3 outlines the methodology used to test the hypothesis and respond to the research questions, including the sample and the types of analysis. Section 4 describes the results starting from the testing of the hypothesis and moving to the findings regarding the work conditions that triggered surface acting, the personal conditions after the use of resources to perform the act, and the coping mechanisms aimed at resolving discrepancies from the emotional exhaustion. Section 5 combines the results into a five-stage model that unmasks the process of surface acting and emotional exhaustion that

takes place among frontline employees in the UK's fine dining sector and discusses the theoretical and practical implications. Section 6 before concluding, illustrates the limitations of the study and offers future avenues for research.

2. Literature review

Twenty years ago, Pizam's (2004) editorial called "upon HR managers of hospitality enterprises to initiate a set of programmes aimed at preparing employees to deal with emotional labour issues" (p. 315). Earlier, only a few scholars have explored well-being from the emotional labour perspective in hospitality including Seymour's (2000) monograph, Sandiford and Seymour's (2002) ethnographic research and Chu's (2002) doctoral dissertation. Since then, the large number of empirical research has allowed hospitality scholars to take stock of the knowledge accumulated through systematic literature reviews (i.e. Hsu et al., 2024; Hwang et al., 2021; Lee & Madera, 2019).

Within this stream of emotional labour evidence synthesis, there are three recommendations relevant to our research aim, which relate to the definition, the categorisation and the theoretical framework proposed to study the link between emotional labour and work outcomes. Accordingly, emotional labour refers to processes through which individuals gain control over the experience and expression of their emotions (Hwang et al., 2021, p. 3755), which are distinguished by two acting strategies: surface (i.e. faking the required emotional display and engaging in negative emotion suppression); and deep (i.e. actually feeling the emotions and engaging in positive emotional expression) (Hsu et al., 2024, p. 2074) and the most useful framework to investigate the outcomes of emotional labour acting strategies is the self-regulatory resource depletion theory (Lee & Madera, 2019).

Self-regulation is a broad term that is utilised to explain the efforts of people to control their internal behaviours, feelings and thoughts (Koopmann et al., 2019). At work, and in particular the fine-dining sector, employees devote a great deal of effort to regulating their emotions (DiPietro et al., 2019; Magrizos et al., 2023). This self-regulation draws upon executive functioning and, in doing so, depletes a common pool of regulatory resources (Koopmann et al., 2019) which can be defined as a "limited, consumable strength ... [which] becomes fatigued by exertion [i.e. self-control endeavours]" (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000, p. 248). Schematically can be represented as a resource reservoir that is used "to control cognitive, behavioural, attention, emotional, and impulsive responses" (Vohs & Baumeister, 2013, p. 404).

How does this self-regulation take place? According to Lee and Madera (2019), the employee must first stay concentrated and pay attention, be self-controlled, to perform the suppressing and the faking. Then, once the performance starts the monitoring and correction follow over multiple service encounters with guests and co-workers. It is a resource depletion cycle/spiral which gains momentum and magnitude as it continues, leading to a decrease in positive outcomes (i.e. employee creativity) and an increase in negative (i.e. negative affectivity).

In terms of the link between surface acting and emotional exhaustion, the focus of our study, prior research among employees in casinos (e.g. Li et al., 2017), services in general (i.e. Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017) and nurses (e.g. Zhang et al., 2018) reveal a and in services a significant positive relationship. By contrast, research among employees in hotels (Kim, 2008), call-centres (e.g. Song & Liu, 2010) and general practitioners (e.g. Martínez-Iñigo

et al., 2007) reveal that deep acting has a null relationship to emotional exhaustion. Thus, drawn on regulatory depletion theory and the empirical findings from a multisectoral context we hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 1: Surface acting rather than deep acting will be significantly positively associated with emotional exhaustion.

However, this hypothesis provides only the link between the self-regulating act of the front-line employee and the negative outcome in the fine-dining work context. There are still three important stages that need to be explored; (a) the work conditions that trigger the emotions for the self-regulating act, (b) the personal conditions from the use of resources to perform the act, and (c) the coping mechanisms. This is because employees aspire to maintain a positive emotional condition and emotional exhaustion represents a deviation that triggers coping mechanisms aimed at resolving discrepancies (e.g. Cauchi & Falzon, 2023). Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the hypothesis and the relevant research questions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection and sample

Our data were collected online with a shared link to participants working in fine dining restaurants in the UK between November 2023 and February 2024. The online collection method was adopted which is a commonly accepted method in field research (i.e. Quaye et al., 2024; Saari et al., 2023). Snowball sampling was used with an invitation message sent via social media (Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp platforms) to complete the questionnaire and forward the invitation to colleagues who also work in fine dining. Participants were informed about the scope of the study and reassured that responses would remain anonymous and confidential. Ethics approval from the host university was also acquired for data collection.

A total of 172 responses were received excluding participants working in the kitchen ($N = 36$). We also excluded two more participants that did not provide any answer to the EL scale. Table 1 illustrates the demographic profile of our sample ($N = 134$) with 56% women and 15% being a non-EU/UK national. Most of the participants were working more than 35 h per week and almost half had an undergraduate and/or post-graduate degree. Almost 70% were 18–35 years of age and working for up to three years in their current employment restaurant. In line with recent field studies (see Saari et al., 2023; Sangkakorn & Krajangchom, 2024) the questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions to test the hypothesis and to answer the research questions, respectively. The closed questions captured participants' demographics and assessed their level of emotional labour and emotional exhaustion.

The assessment of emotional labour, in line with recent recommendations from Lee and Madera (2019) was divided equally between deep and surface acting using three statements for each subconstruct from Näring et al.'s (2006) emotional labour scale. Emotional exhaustion was assessed with five items from Maslach's Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The answers to all 11 statements were rated on a five-point frequency Likert scale ranging from 1 "Never" to 5 "Always". Thus, the ratio for participants ($N = 134$) per measured variable ($N = 11$) was above the rule of thumb of 10 cases for conducting structural equation models (see Wolf et al., 2013, p. 13).

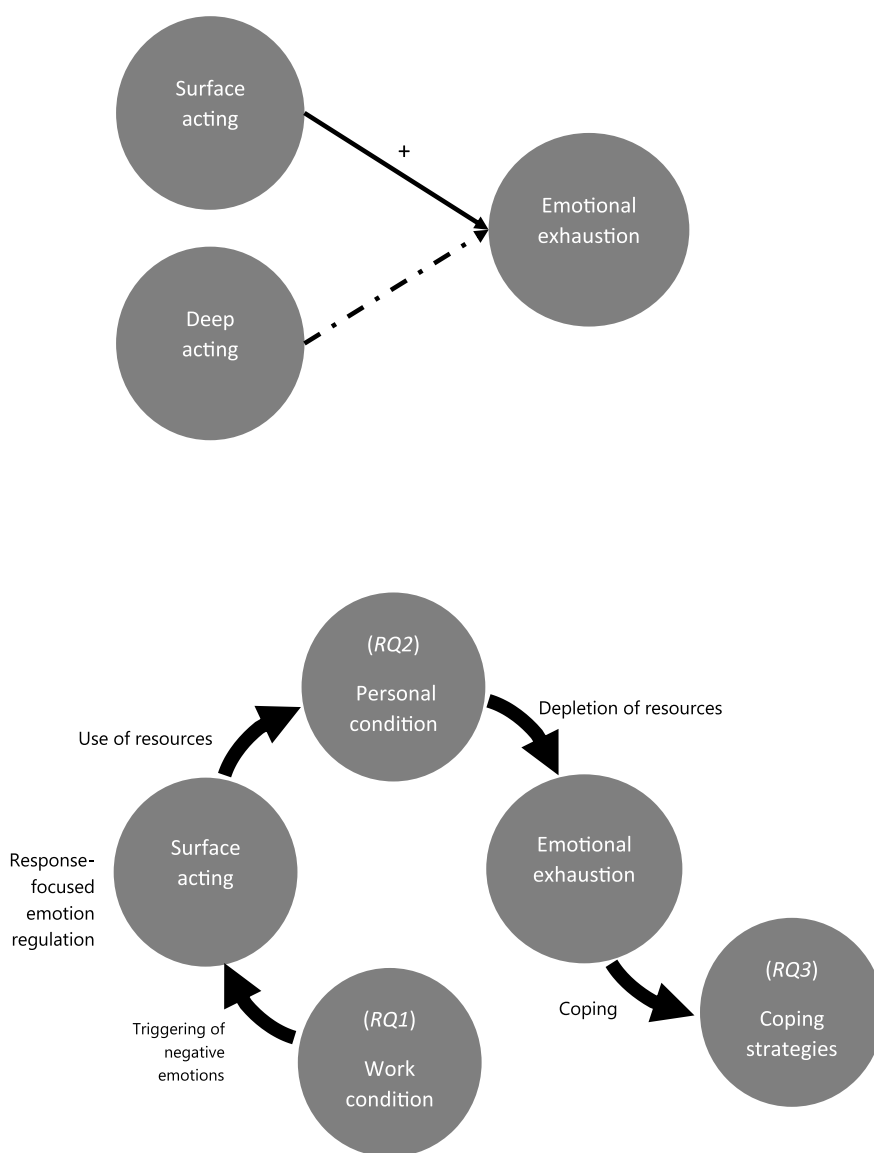


Figure 1. Conceptual framework to unmask the link between surface acting and emotional exhaustion among frontline employees in the fine dining sector.

Note: Dotted lines represent an insignificant path. H1: Surface acting rather than deep acting will be significantly positive related to emotional exhaustion. RQ1: Which work conditions trigger the negative emotions for the self-regulating act?, RQ2: Which personal conditions appear from the use of the resources utilised to perform the act? RQ3: Which coping mechanisms triggered by the need for a positive motional condition at work?

The open questions asked participants to share their insights regarding emotional labour and/or burnout. Participants were asked (a) if there is someone who helps them improve their performance and reduce pressure brought by emotional labour and how this was accomplished, (b) if they were willing to share any personal story(ies) regarding emotional labour and burnout and (c) to provide any other views they wanted to share with the researchers. The questionnaire was pilot-tested with five employees and

Table 1. Respondents' demographic profile (N = 134).

Characteristics	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	59	44.0%
	Female	75	56.0%
Age	18–25 years	35	26.1%
	26–35 years	58	43.3%
	36–45 years	32	23.9%
	46–55 years	8	6.0%
	> 55 years	1	0.7%
Cultural background	Non-U.K - Non-EU	20	14.9%
	U.K	59	44.0%
	EU	55	41.0%
Educational level	School graduate	47	35.1%
	Vocational education	20	14.9%
	University degree	48	35.8%
	Postgraduate	18	13.4%
Average working hours per week	Less than 20 h	5	3.7%
	21–34 h	8	6.0%
	35–48 h	65	48.5%
	More than 48 h	56	41.8%
Years of service in this restaurant	Less than 1 year	47	35.1%
	1–3 years	46	34.3%
	3–5 years	11	8.2%
	More than 5 years	30	22.4%

minor changes were made in section 1 as the average hours per day/shift and time spent with customer contact were added.

3.2. Data analysis

Structural equation modelling (SEM) was applied to analyse the data from the closed questions and test the hypothesis using SPSS 28 and AMOS 26 software. The sample size of 134 participants was deemed adequate because the ratio of participants per variable was above 10 cases. This ratio is in line with Wolf et al.'s. (2013) simple size recommendations for structural equation models. Data were inspected for completeness with a few missing values identified, which were assumed to be random. In line with Hair et al.'s (2014) recommendations these values were replaced with the median value. Then, the demographic description of the respondents was generated, and the internal consistency was determined using alpha coefficients (Cronbach's α with a cut-off value of 0.7; Hair et al., 2014). Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was followed to determine the reliability and validity. Reliability is established when composite reliability (CR) is greater than 0.70 and convergent validity when the CRs are greater than the Average Variance Extracted (AVEs) which should be greater than 0.50 (Papavasileiou et al., 2017). Discriminant validity is accomplished when the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) is smaller than the AVE and the squared root of the AVE is greater than any inter-construct correlations. About model fit there is some agreement (Hair et al., 2014) that the following profile of indices should be reported: the χ^2 goodness-of-fit statistic with its degrees of freedom (df) and the difference between them (χ^2/df), the comparative fit index (CFI) and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR). For an acceptable model fit, the CFI would be "close to" 0.90 (or higher) in combination with $\text{SRMR} < 0.06$ and the $\chi^2/\text{pdf} < 3.0$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The SRMR is preferred to RMSEA because our data is smaller than 250 and, in such cases, RMSEA "over-rejects true models" (Iacobucci, 2010, p. 96).

The rich in-depth data collected from the open-ended questions were analysed with the use of NVivo 12 software and thematic content analysis. This approach helped to systematically gather and organise the vast volume of text into identifiable and distinct content groups that were subsequently interpreted to answer the research questions (see Chauhan et al., 2023; Cui et al., 2024).

4. Results

4.1. The role of surface and deep acting on emotional exhaustion

Before testing our hypotheses, it is imperative to determine the extent to which the set of the above-measured items reflects the respective theoretical constructs. Table 2 shows that the α values (0.83–0.88) and the CR values (0.82–0.89) were above the recommended threshold of 0.70 for internal consistency and reliability, respectively. About convergent validity, Table 2 shows that AVE was greater than 0.50 (0.13–0.65) reflecting – in combination with the CR values – an acceptable level. In terms of discriminant validity, the MSV values (0.41–0.5) were smaller than the AVE values and the squared root of the AVE values (0.78–0.81) (on the diagonal, marked in *italics*) were higher than any inter-construct correlations (0.45–0.71), indicating acceptable levels (Table 2). Furthermore, the estimation of the fit indices for both the measurement and structural model (see Figure 1) revealed levels of acceptable fit. For the measurement model the $\chi^2/df = 1.819 < 3.0$, CFI = 0.958 > 0.9 and SRMR = 0.058 < 0.06 and for the structural model $\chi^2/df = 1.992 < 3.0$, CFI = 0.909 > 0.9 and SRMR = 0.057 < 0.08.

Having accomplished acceptable levels of reliability, validity and model fit we tested our hypothesis as shown in Table 3 using four demographic characteristics as control variables that have been found to impact emotional labour and/or emotional exhaustion (Rathi & Lee, 2016) including age (Sun & Pan, 2008), cultural background (Fiorilli et al., 2015), tenure (Karatepe & Karatepe, 2009) and gender (Wang et al., 2018).

Data analysis revealed that surface acting, and not deep acting had a direct significant positive relationship to EE, supporting our hypothesis. In addition, no differences or statistical significance was found in testing the model using age, culture, tenure and gender as control variables.

4.2. Work conditions that trigger the negative emotions for the self-regulating act

Participants' stories revealed that work-related demanding requirements, and high expectations placed on them, coupled with the needs of discerning clientele, create a multitude of stressors that often lead to surface acting. Within the fine dining sector, P64 suggested

Table 2. Correlations, means, standard deviation, reliability and validity.

	Mean	SD	α	CR	AVE	MSV	MaxR(H)	SA	EE	DA
SA	3.33	1.10	0.846	0.848	0.652	0.501	0.864	<i>0.807</i>		
EE	3.03	1.04	0.885	0.888	0.613	0.501	0.894	0.708	0.783	
DA	3.15	1.10	0.828	0.826	0.614	0.415	0.832	0.644	0.449	<i>0.784</i>

SA = Surface Acting; DA = Deep Acting; EE = Emotional Exhaustion; α = Cronbach's alpha coefficient; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; CR = Composite Reliability; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance; MaxR(H) = Maximum H Reliability; *italics* reflect the squared root of the AVE.

Table 3. The structural parameter results.

	R2	SDE	SE	<i>p</i>
Surface Acting → Emotional Exhaustion	.671	.204	.204	***
Deep Acting → Emotional Exhaustion	.671	.105	.105	.429
Age → Emotional Exhaustion (control variable)	.671	.077	.077	.744
Culture → Emotional Exhaustion (control variable)	.671	.090	.090	.273
Tenure → Emotional Exhaustion (control variable)	.671	.061	.061	.245
Gender → Emotional Exhaustion (control variable)	.671	.127	.127	.071

R2 estimates = squared multiple correlations; SDE = standardized direct effect; SE = standard error (SE); *** $p < 0.001$.

that fine dining restaurants draw a particular clientele whose expectations and demands must be fulfilled, irrespective of the strain this may impose on the entire staff:

I believe there is a stigma with doing anything for the guest, especially in a fine dining world as they are paying so much money, for example – late orders, orders off the menu, difficult requests, demanding more of your time. It seems the more money that is paid the more that they feel that can ask for and there is the pressure to say “yes”! How do we create a culture where we add boundaries to the fine dining world? (P64)

Furthermore, within the fine dining sector frontline service providers must repeat high expected service performances more frequently in comparison to other hospitality sectors because of the more knowledgeable consumers. The repetitive nature of scripted work tasks and the necessity to control emotions (P36) emerged as significant stressors for surface acting. For example, a Michelin-starred restaurant hostess (P4), diligently carries out her duties numerous times each day. Despite facing customers who may exhibit “rude, uncaring, sexist, or even violent behaviour”, she maintains a cheerful demeanour, speaking in a high-pitched “happy voice.” Below, she vividly described her daily routine:

Every day with each guest, I need to act like I am excited and happy when entering the restaurant. Every time I bring a guest upstairs, I need to yell “Welcome to the XY Room!” like is the first time I see that room. I do this at least 17 times a day (some days 40), receiving only about 2–8 reactions from the guest a day. (P4)

Another hostess (P37) implied that they have limited interaction with customers, as their role primarily involves welcoming guests and escorting them to their tables. They feel that, ultimately, they become invisible in the eyes of the patrons. P35 expressed a desire for a “re-education” of fine dining restaurant patrons, noting that “they are not always right.” This sentiment is underscored by observations that the situation has deteriorated since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, primarily due to staff shortages. Echoing their feelings, P44 depicted this situation with strong language:

Well, it’s just classic industry burnout, even after Covid. Expected to work a lot of the time, even when over the hours, feel guilty for leaving the team in the sh*t if you do leave, and constantly having to put a smile on for customers regardless of how bad yours or even their evening is going. Never mind the late nights and early starts, not enough time to recover. (P44)

Interactions with the customers appeared to often encounter various manifestations of incivility, ranging from rudeness and harassment to verbal and physical abuse. P47 graphically illustrated the culture of abuse within this sector:

More awareness needs to be made around this, hours are always gruelling in hospitality and there will NEVER be a day when you are not verbally abused by someone ... no one would want to be screamed at and disrespected in their workplace. (P47)

Incidents of emotional and physical abuse may also stem from other staff members, managers or “old-school” employers who believe that such treatment is necessary to “build character,” according to P66. P42 also disclosed instances of discrimination based on their physical appearance, age, and ethnicity. Additionally, many participants (i.e. P4, P19, P33, P36, P83, P84) reported experiencing salary disparities within the same role.

The long working hours across the sector also emerged as a pervasive issue for most participants. P8 argued that working long hours “greatly impacts your general emotional state,” and P55 advocated for a legal limit, by proposing that any workweek exceeding 45 h should be deemed unlawful. Such work patterns have consistently been a source of employee dissatisfaction and a major obstacle to staff retention (see Marinakou & Giousmpasoglou, 2019). Nevertheless, as per P72, FLE who choose to stay in this sector, appear to view irregular hours and precarity as inherent aspects of the job:

We are soldiers, we deal with problems people how no clue about it. We work weekends when friends and families are having time off. Does this sound like a complaint? It's not! When I chose this path, I knew I would work long hours and weekends under huge stress. (P72)

4.3. Personal conditions that appear from the use of the resources utilised to perform the act

Participants brought forth various concerns regarding the impact of surface acting on their well-being. The prevailing sentiment among the participants was a sense of emptiness and depletion. P53 and P68 vividly illustrated their emotions:

The emotional investment needed means you go home bankrupt and drained, so your own life is in tatters. (P53)

Fine dining burnout is the most severe ... (this job) takes so much and gives so little! (P68)

P50 suggested that maintaining meticulous attention to excellence and customer service can lead to feeling physically and mentally drained and added that this commitment to excellence leads to what they described as “emotional taxation”, a phenomenon experienced by all staff in fine dining restaurants, irrespective of their seniority or position. As per P5, the recuperation period following extended shifts without a day off could span several days or even weeks. Furthermore, P47 argued that navigating emotional expectations in fine-dining restaurants can lead to feelings of loneliness and, at times, helplessness. P83 recounted an incident in which they were implicated in a serious customer injury that was not their responsibility. Their line manager’s lack of support during this situation had a significant adverse effect on their mental well-being:

I had to take almost two weeks of emotional leave from work as a result of not being supported by him and having the blame put on me for such a life-changing event that this gentleman (customer) had experienced – even when I knew that everything I did that night was compliant with company procedures. I felt alone and lost, and frankly had nightmares regarding the situation for months afterwards. (P83)

P2 reported experiencing sleep deprivation, as a direct consequence of stress and anxiety, a phenomenon directly related to workplace fatigue. P3 identified alcohol and drug consumption (AOD) as one of the key impacts of emotional exhaustion that can lead to addiction:

Even if the emotions are not forced and caring is what some industry workers feel natural, it is draining for some to give so much of it all the time. I believe alcohol and drug consumption in the industry can be also related to this, unfortunately. (P3)

Moreover, the intensely pressured working conditions in the fine dining sector stand out as a primary factor that drives the employees' "intention to leave". P1 explained that they switched jobs previously due to experiencing burnout triggered by EE. Similarly, as articulated by P6:

I sometimes feel on the verge of quitting because I am at the end of my rope, but it is just temporary, it gets better. (P6)

Interestingly a few managers also shared their experiences regarding the impact of emotional exhaustion at work. For example, P51 suggested that restaurant managers often endure significant pressure, a burden they must shoulder alone. An experienced manager (P63) shared their account of facing a lack of respect from their employer, despite demonstrating years of loyalty and making significant sacrifices. P84 recounted a story that resonates widely across the sector, detailing the unreasonable workloads and expectations placed on restaurant managers, she argued that "sometimes the workload is just a little too much."

4.3. Coping mechanisms triggered by the need for a positive emotional condition at work

The participant responses regarding their coping strategies for emotional exhaustion point to three distinct support networks: coworkers and managers, personal self-care practices, and friends and family.

Leaning on the support of coworkers emerged as the primary method for coping with emotional exhaustion in the UK's fine dining restaurants. Within this setting, colleagues are perceived as integral members of a familial unit (P45), providing a sanctuary where individuals can freely discuss both positive and, crucially, challenging experiences encountered in the workplace:

Hospitality has this "we're all in the sh*t together" mentality as well as a "whatever it takes to get the job done" ethos. It's like going to war every day. Your co-workers are your allies and you all work to get through the long stressful day, every day. (P69)

According to P19, "recognising that your colleagues are facing similar challenges can offer fresh perspectives on certain situations". Moreover, P51 stated, "It is crucial to have coworkers with whom we can be honest, knowing they can empathise with our experiences". P19 emphasised the importance of ensuring that no one is left to navigate difficult times alone, underscoring the critical need for mutual support within the team. P54 proposed that the team engages in end-of-shift discussions, akin to an informal "debriefing" session, where they openly share both positive and negative experiences. This practice resembles a form of group therapy, fostering a supportive environment for collective reflection and emotional processing. Furthermore, P56 pinpointed the genuine rationale behind depending on coworkers:

... after a rough service, we just look at each other and say "Trauma bonds" so that's it only the people who have been in those situations can truly understand and they do their best but sometimes that's not even enough. (P56)

In addition, connections that extend beyond the workplace, encompassing former colleagues or friends within the industry were identified as people who understand these challenges firsthand. As highlighted by P5, these networks serve as invaluable sources of emotional support, offering solace and alleviating stress during times of need. P66 observed that the significant amount of time spent with the team fosters an intimate understanding of one another, often surpassing that of their own family and friends. Consequently, they expressed that being able to vent and engage in open discussions with their colleagues serves as a vital outlet, with the reassurance that their team members will provide support during particularly challenging moments.

Another coping strategy highlighted by P33 involved selecting workplaces with "supportive people who can understand your job and push you to be better." Consequently, this reduction in exhaustion and cynicism was positively correlated with decreased turnover intentions. P31 and P48 underscored the critical role of line managers in cultivating such a supportive work environment:

I've worked in the industry for 14 years and unlike my previous bosses, I like to make sure that my team are my number one priority My team knows I have their back ... (P48)

The general manager is someone who cares a lot about his team and he makes me so happy and changes my mood if I am not feeling well. (P31)

P40 also acknowledged the capacity and influence of managers to intervene and rectify challenging situations before they escalate and adversely affect their team. Conversely, an experienced General Manager (P47) suggested that there exists a boundary that should not be breached with staff, implying that the manager-employee relationship should maintain a formal tone in alignment with the restaurant's established work practices and code of conduct.

The second approach to coping with emotional exhaustion involved implementing self-care practices both during and after work hours. According to P20, taking a moment to pause and "allowing oneself time to unwind during breaks" proves beneficial, particularly during busy service periods. Additionally, self-reflection and deriving lessons from personal mistakes emerge as widely adopted strategies:

Although friends do help, at the end of the day, it is still me who has to overcome any problems. I think I am good at talking to myself and feeling better and more positive about a past situation. I also try to learn from these. (P11)

Many responses to this approach emphasised the need to disconnect from work by any possible means and "take regular breaks to remind yourself that it's not the end of the world if some things are not done" (P78). Furthermore, P82 contended that taking time away appears to be the sole method for resetting negative emotions or burdens linked to work. Given the extensive working hours and demanding conditions, prioritising physical rest is also essential for allowing the body and mind to recuperate:

... I make sure to use my days off wisely I've realised the only way to succeed is to make sure you take rest when you can. 70-hour weeks will never end but your 48 h off can be so restorative if you allow yourself to rest and regroup. (P75)

As per P61, the effectiveness of self-care practices hinges on the individual's willingness to confront and overcome emotional exhaustion:

You have to want to help yourself. Others can try to guide you but ultimately, it's you who has to want to change. (P61)

The last coping strategy involves seeking support from friends and family. By "breathing out their frustrations" with loved ones (P27), FLE finds solace and a means to unwind, releasing the pressure from work without necessarily seeking solutions to their work-related issues:

After work my family listens about how my day was, and if it was a hard one, they just give me all the support and love. (P10)

Friends and family offer a distinct form of emotional support that differs from the support provided by coworkers, whenever it is available:

My family is my emotional support network as I don't or can't have this kind of conversation or connection in the workplace. (P68).

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical implications

Our findings lend support to Lee and Madera (2019) who advocate that self-regulation resource depletion theory offers the strongest theoretical framework to explain the various outcomes of emotional labour in the hospitality context. It was found that surface acting and not deep acting was significantly positively related to emotional exhaustion among frontline employees in the fine dining sector. Previous studies have also failed to find significant relationship between deep acting and emotional exhaustion (i.e. Kim, 2008; Martínez-Iñigo et al., 2007; Song & Liu, 2010). The theoretical explanation for this phenomenon is that deep acting – unlike surface acting – entails an alignment between an individual's true self with what is displayed (Grandey, 2003). Within this context, deep acting does not lessen a person's sense of self (Uy et al., 2017). This rational is entirely consistent with our theoretical stance on the role of the self in whether emotional labour depletes employees' resources, which in turn leads to emotional exhaustion.

5.2. Practical implications

Knowledge about emotion regulation aspects such as surface acting is essential for hospitality practitioners beyond the fine dining sector to co-create satisfying social interactions and working/consumption experiences. Individualised treatment by practitioners can lead to a more positive emotional exchange and contagion. Practitioners must identify stressors and individual coping methods to enhance employee resilience and reduce burnout and emotional exhaustion (Choi et al., 2019). Training programmes on emotional regulation can foster positive emotions in frontline employees in the fine dining sector and enhance well-being. Strategies like mindfulness and resilience, practiced in the present, help employees manage stress and comply with organisational

display rules. Businesses could sponsor yoga classes, meditation sessions, or create designated mindfulness spaces. Subscriptions to meditation apps can also be useful. These programmes might include techniques for deep acting, proactive customer service, and relationship-building with colleagues and customers. Providing physical amenities such as rest areas and ensuring workplace safety while leveraging technology are beneficial strategies to address exhaustion and enhance well-being.

Additionally, extensive interpersonal contact and increased intimacy in interactions can facilitate this effect, involving all parties in service encounters from supervisors and employees to customers and observing others (Hsu et al., 2024). Orientation/induction sessions could include training on display rules and regulation techniques, laying the foundation for effective emotional management from the outset. Additionally, providing professional support through coaching sessions can be highly beneficial. Managers should actively work to destigmatise mental health concerns and ensure access to physical wellness resources. This may involve partnering with external psychiatrists or clinics to offer counselling services for effective well-being management. For example, the Burnt Chef Project is a commendable initiative, offering 24-hour mental health support and free training on mental health techniques for restaurant workers. The implementation of workplace wellness programmes can play a critical role in this direction by establishing a culture of health and using strategic communications (Buxton et al., 2019).

6. Conclusion

Drawing on the self-regulatory resource depletion theory, we unmask the process of surface acting and emotional exhaustion that takes place in the fine dining sector. We go beyond the norm in hypothesis testing to fully unmask the conditions that surround this relationship. Figure 2 provides a schematic representation of our findings in five stages following the conceptual framework. In the first stage, a series of work conditions such as unreasonable customer demands, repetitive script work, incivility (customer & staff-based), harassment and physical abuse and long working hours and shift work trigger negative emotions. In the second stage, the front-line employees perform the response-focused emotion regulation by faking the required emotional display and engaging in negative emotion suppression – surface acting. This act requires the use of specific cognitive resources that create at the third stage personal conditions related to physical/mental draining, stress and anxiety symptoms, sleep deprivation, intention to leave and addictions (i.e. AOD). These conditions result in the depletion of the limited cognitive resources that cause the fourth stage the feeling of emotional exhaustion. However, in the fifth stage, self-preservation needs to maintain a positive emotional state triggers at the fifth stage coping mechanisms including support from friends and family and organisational support aimed at resolving discrepancies caused by the feeling of emotional exhaustion.

6.1. Limitations and future research

The findings of our study should be considered under the following limitations. Conceptually, the study proves the applicability of the self-regulatory resource depletion theory for explaining the positive relationship of surface acting to a single negative outcome – emotional exhaustion. Future studies that want to extend the knowledge related to

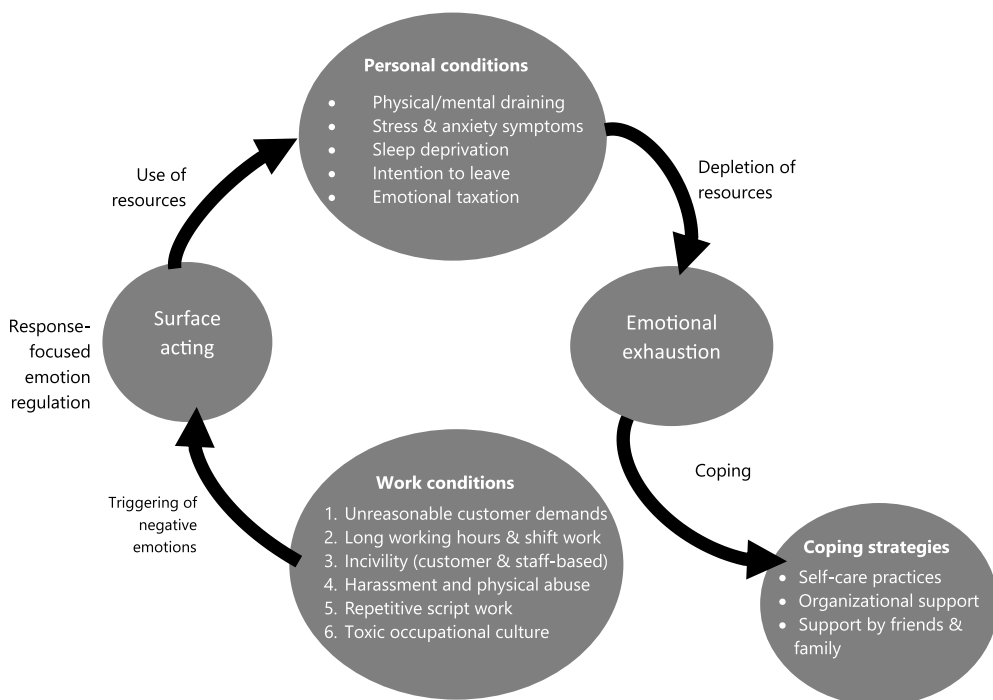


Figure 2. Unmasking the link between surface acting and emotional exhaustion among frontline employees in the fine dining sector.

frontline fine-dining surface acting could test both directions; the positive relationship with other negative outcomes including among others negative affectivity, hindrance stress, customer satisfaction and interpersonal harming towards coworkers and the negative relationship with positive outcomes including among others employee creativity, work engagement and organisational behaviour citizenship.

Contextually, the study is limited to frontline employees in the fine-dining sector and those interested in complementing the findings within the same sector can test the generalisability of the findings with empirical evidence of surface acting that occurs behind closed doors as in the case of kitchen chefs. Methodologically, the empirical evidence stems from data collected from surveys with both closed and open-ended questions and at no point represents a mixed-method design. By contrast, a fruitful avenue for further research should be to employ an explanatory sequential quantitative followed by qualitative design. Specifically, future studies could initially collect survey data to test the applicability of the depletion of cognitive resources theory for explaining the positive and negative relationship of surface acting with negative and positive outcomes, respectively. Then, based on the findings organise focus group discussion with some of the survey participants to complement the quantitative findings with rich in-depth qualitative data. As it was commented from the reviewers, qualitative data analysis in psycho-social research might be more important for practitioners and academics.

Overall, a better understanding of surface acting can also facilitate the ever-growing stream of research on human-robot interaction in the wider service industry (see Henkel et al., 2020), taking into consideration that artificial intelligence-based

technologies are being used to an increasing extent in fine-dining. Frontline employees in fine dining are using these technologies and their effect on their emotional experience including their emotional regulation should be also explored to truly understand the enhancement of these technologies to the provision of the service experience.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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