

## **Emotional labor strategies, customer cooperation and buying decisions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Emotional labor is an important topic for managers, particularly in the service sector, due to the impact of employee emotional labor strategic choices on consumer attitudes. In general, prior research has established that customer satisfaction is positively affected by the emotional labor strategy of deep acting whereas it is negatively affected by surface acting. However, there are two gaps in the literature. The first gap is the impact of emotional labor strategy on actual buying decisions (rather than attitudes). The second gap involves potential intervening variables, such as customer cooperation, that may influence the strength and direction of the relationship. The current field study on mobile phone shops in China fills the research gap, by empirically testing a theoretical model that proposes that the relationship between the employee emotional labor strategy and customer buying decision is mediated by customer cooperation. Findings indicate that emotional labor strategies impact customer buying decisions and those relationships are mediated by customer cooperation.

Keywords: Emotional labor strategies, deep acting, surface acting, customer cooperation, buying decisions

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## INTRODUCTION

Emotional labor is the process of regulating both internal feelings and external expressions in alignment with organizational goals (Grandey, 2000, p. 97) and has a major impact on a broad range of organizational outcomes, including customer relations and employee performance (Chebat, Filiatrault, Gelinas-Chebat, & Vaninsky, 1995; Tsai, 2001; Gountas, Ewing, & Gountas, 2007; Giardini & Frese, 2008; Martin, O'Neill, Hubbard, & Palmer, 2008; and Kaltcheva & Parasuraman, 2009). Essentially, there are two major types of emotional labor strategies that employees use, either surface acting, a change in outward emotional displays but without a change in inner emotional feelings, and deep acting, an attempt to change internal feelings to mirror external emotional display rules (Grandey, 2000).

Most emotional labor studies have examined the antecedent conditions and attitude outcomes of emotional labor strategies as they impact employees and customers (Grandey, 2000; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Guy, Newman, & Mastracci, 2008; Hsieh & Guy, 2009). Few studies, however, have explored the actual behavioral outcomes of emotional labor strategies, relying instead on general employee attitudes, rather than actual consumer buying decisions. In addition, even if emotional labor strategy is linked to actual consumer purchases, there is still the question of potential intervening mechanisms that may influence the strength or direction of the relationship.

This study aims to answer these questions by empirically examining mobile phone sellers' emotional labor strategy and the corresponding customer cooperation and buying decisions. Specifically, the premise of the current study is that employee emotional labor strategy influences consumer cooperation which subsequently influences consumer buying decisions. That is, consumer cooperation mediates the relationship between employee emotional labor strategy and consumer buying decisions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Emotional labor strategies and customer buying decisions**

The first part of the model is the relationship between employee emotional labor strategic choices and actual customer buying decisions, drawing on prior emotional labor research (Grandey, 2003). During the service encounter, employees need to manage their emotions in order to achieve organizational goals by following desired emotional display rules (Hochschild, 1979). When service employees' true emotions are not consistent with the organizationally required display rules, they can elect to either persuade themselves to accept the required emotional state and present it, which is deep acting (Lui, Prati, Perrewe, & Brymer, 2010); or they can present the required emotion display while maintaining a different internal emotional state, which is surface acting (Berry, Wall, & Carbone, 2006). In addition, research has demonstrated that employee job satisfaction is higher for those who are able to regularly employ a deep acting emotional labor strategy as opposed to those who suppress their feelings (Lui et al, 2010; Barry et al, 2006). In surface acting, employees are thought to regulate their emotions in order to keep their jobs, not to help the customer or

organization (Grandey, 2003). Thus, customers might be expected to view an employee's surface acting efforts negatively, which would affect their decision to purchase from that employee. In addition, according to the 'emotional contagion' perspective, if customers view sellers' emotions as genuinely positive, as with deep acting, they should be more likely to make a purchase (Westbrook, 1987). Although prior research on employee emotional labor strategic choices focused on attitude assessment (Grandey, 2003), the implication is that a shift in attitudes (positive or negative) would equate to a shift in actual behaviors (in this case buying decisions) which leads to the first set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Surface acting of service employees will exhibit a significant negative effect on customer buying decisions.

Hypothesis 2: Deep acting of service employees will exhibit a significant positive effect on customer buying decisions.

### **Customer cooperation and buying decisions**

The next part of the proposed model links perceived customer cooperation with actual customer buying decisions, drawing on the growing body of customer participation literature (Yi, Nataraajanb, & Gong, 2011). Research on customer participation includes customer citizenship behavior (Groth, 2005), customer voluntary performance (Bettencourt, 1997), and customer co-production behavior (Gruen, Summers, & Acito, 2000). In the current study, customer cooperation behaviors are defined as those behaviors during a service encounter that include answering the employee's questions, cooperating with the employee's requests, and sharing information with the employee to facilitate the service encounter.

Given the cognitive effort and time involved in cooperation, customers who exhibit these behaviors should be more likely to complete the service encounter with a purchase. That is, being actively involved in a service encounter through customer cooperation would also be more likely to result in a decision to purchase.

Hypothesis 3: Customer cooperation will exhibit a significant positive effect on customer buying decisions.

### **Emotional labor strategy and customer cooperation**

The third part of the model proposes a link between emotional labor strategic choices and perceived customer cooperation. In general, the display of appropriate organizational emotions (i.e., positive emotions) coupled with an authentic perception of the display (i.e., trust) is likely to lead to an increase in customer cooperation (Schug, Matsumoto, Horita, Yamagishi, & Bonnet, 2010). As summarized by Russell, Bachorowski, and Fernandez-Dols (2003), emotional expression influences cooperation, altering the course of social interactions.

First, emotion is thought to have a social function, operating as a source of information that customers use to form judgments. Affect-as-information theory holds that people's emotions are a kind of social information, which in turn, will affect behavior and decision making (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2004). In particular, research in the negotiation area suggests a link between emotional labor strategies and customer cooperation,

finding that positive emotion expression is more likely to elicit information sharing and cooperation intention (Forgas, 1998).

Second, emotional labor strategies can affect interpersonal trust. Social exchange theory suggests that people aim their reciprocation efforts toward the source from which they obtain benefits (Blau, 1964). Research in the relational marketing area has found that when sales representatives and their customers believe their goals are cooperatively related, they trust they can rely on each other and, as a result, go out of their way to help each other, give information, and explain issues (Tjosvold & Wong, 1994). Therefore, it follows that the customer might attribute his/her state to the success of the service encounter and, according to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), might be willing to reciprocate by behaving cooperatively.

As with customer buying decisions, it is expected that surface and deep acting would exhibit differential effects on customer cooperation. First, it is anticipated that surface acting of service employees will exhibit a significant negative effect on customer cooperation. Recall that according to the 'affect-as-information' theory, individuals place value on emotional information they perceive as germane to their judgments (Schwarz & Clore, 1988). Therefore, when service employees do surface acting, customers are unlikely to regard the unauthentic emotion as valid social information and instead might view the employee as unreliable, distrustful, or unable to satisfy their needs. Thus, under these circumstances, customers would be less likely to want to reciprocate by engaging in cooperative behaviors. Conversely, when service employees engage in deep acting, customers will unintentionally regard this emotion as valid social information (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006) and perceive that the employee is sincerely interested in satisfying their needs. According to social exchange theory this would increase the likelihood that the employee would reciprocate by exhibiting cooperative behaviors. Thus it is expected that emotional labor strategies will demonstrate the following differential effects on customer cooperation.

Hypothesis 4: Deep acting of service employees will exhibit a significant positive effect on customer cooperation.

Hypothesis 5: Surface acting of service employees will exhibit a significant negative effect on customer cooperation.

### **Emotional labor strategy, customer cooperation, and buying decision**

The final part of the model incorporates the prior relationships into an integrated framework. In general, the premise is that employee choice of strategy, deep acting or surface acting, may influence customer buying choices through customer cooperation, as indicated by the emotional contagion, authenticity, and affect-as-information supporting literature.

First, as noted earlier, from the perspective of emotional contagion, sellers' emotions affect customers' emotional experiences (Westbrook & Oliver, 1991). In general, emotions have a social function that impacts interpersonal behaviors (Morris & Feldman, 1996), which are often contagious to others (Barsade, 2002). Specifically, Barsade (2002) found that emotional contagion of positive emotions led to enhanced levels of cooperation. Thus, the emotional contagion perspective suggests that positive emotions of service employees should

facilitate positive customer evaluations, buying decisions, and post-purchasing behavior (Westbrook, 1987).

Second, from the perspective of 'authenticity' Pugh (2001) found that during the emotional labor process, service employees will unconsciously reveal their real emotion through face and voice tone. For example, Henning-Thurau et al. (2006) found that the more frequently the service employee smiles, and more authentic the emotional expression is, the more positive emotions customers will have. These subtle differences of the service employee's emotional authenticity can be perceived and recognized by customers (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002) by observing their facial expressions (Chóliz & Fernández-Abascal, 2012) and positive responses (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005). Therefore, authentic emotions from service employees can arouse customers' positive emotions through conscious or unconscious emotion contagion.

A third perspective mentioned earlier, 'affect-as-information' theory, may help clarify the differential effects of employees' deep and surface acting on customer attitudes and behaviors. According to the affect-as-information theory, individuals regard their emotional cues as credible if there is a match between affect state and perception (Schwarz & Clore, 1988). However, when service employees do surface acting, customers are unlikely to regard the unauthentic emotion as social information in order to decrease the uncertainty. In contrast, when service employees do deep acting, customers will intentionally regard this emotion as social information (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006).

Taken together, the implications are that emotions in general are contagious, they provide social information, and that when they are authentic, then the impact on others is likely to be positive. Therefore, when an employee engages in a deep acting emotional labor strategy, customers would think he/she was actually interested in their needs and sincerely wanted to satisfy their needs, which would increase a customer's evaluation of the service quality as well as enhance a customer's loyalty. On the contrary, a surface acting strategy would lead to poor evaluations of the service employee, considering him/her unreliable, irresponsible and unable to satisfy customer needs (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009). Taken together, the perspectives of emotional contagion, authenticity, and affect-as-information suggest that customer cooperation will mediate the relationship between sellers' emotional labor strategies and customer cooperation. That is, emotional labor strategies (deep or surface) significantly impact customer cooperation behaviors (either positively or negatively) which, in turn, affect customer buying decisions (either buy or no-buy).

Hypothesis 6: Customer cooperation will mediate the relationship between sellers' deep acting and customers' buying decisions.

Hypothesis 7: Customer cooperation will mediate the relationship between sellers' surface acting and customers' buying decisions.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Data were collected in 27 mobile phone shop sites in Beijing, China in 2010. The original sample consisted of 326 seller-customer interactions that filled out the

questionnaires. However, only 294 interactions completed the full matched surveys and were used in the study. The sellers were 59% female, with a mean age of 28.12, and a mean work experience of 2.91 years. The customers were 53% male, with a mean age of 32.5, and 71.5% had previously owned three or more mobile phones before entering the interaction.

## **Procedures**

Four research assistants coordinated the data collection efforts. At the end of a transaction, regardless of whether or not a sale occurred, the employee would fill out the survey as part of the transaction process.

## **Measures**

Most of the measures were adapted from English instruments, using a back translation procedure to convert to Mandarin Chinese, and all measures used a Likert scale, using a five option response, asking for level of agreement (from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree).

The emotional labor strategy, deep acting and surface acting, measure was derived from Grandey's (2003) scale and was a self-report from the seller. The deep acting (DA) component consisted of six items ( $\alpha = .83$ ), which focused on a reappraisal strategy. The surface acting (SA) component consisted of five items ( $\alpha = .78$ ), which focused on a repression strategy.

Customer cooperation was measured by a two-item scale ( $\alpha = .73$ ) specifically developed for the current study: (1) the customer cooperated with me and (2) the customer answered my questions. The seller completed the survey, based on their impressions of the customer.

Buying decision was measured by the seller using a categorical item concerning whether the customer ultimately decided to make a purchase (purchase = 1; no purchase = 0).

In addition, the analysis controlled for the gender, age, education, and either sales experience (in the case of the seller) or prior phone experience (in the case of the customer).

## **Analysis**

SPSS 18.0 and AMOS 7.0 were used to run the data analyses, which included the descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, analysis of variance, and multiple logistic and linear regressions.

## **RESULTS**

### **Descriptive statistics**

The means, standard deviations and correlations for all continuous study variables are presented in Table 1 (Appendix).



### Confirmatory factor analysis

Using AMOS, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis on the items of each of the study's continuous variables in order to demonstrate that they empirically define distinct latent factors. Specifically, we put deep acting, surface acting, and customer cooperation into a three-factor model and compared its fit with a one-factor model in which all continuous study items were set to load on one factor. Goodness-of-fit indices indicated that the three factor model ( $\chi^2=120.85$ ,  $df=42$ ,  $\chi^2/df=2.88$ ,  $RMSEA=0.08$ ,  $RMR=0.06$ ,  $GFI=0.94$ ,  $NFI=0.93$ ,  $CFI=0.95$ ,  $IFI=0.95$ ,  $TLI=0.93$ ,  $RFI=0.89$ ) provided a superior fit to the data over the one-factor model ( $\chi^2=671.22$ ,  $df=54$ ,  $\chi^2/df=12.43$ ,  $RMSEA=0.20$ ,  $GFI=0.94$ ,  $NFI=0.62$ ,  $CFI=0.64$ ,  $IFI=0.64$ ,  $TLI=0.56$ ,  $RFI=0.53$ ).

### Emotional labor strategies of different service employees

The independent sample test and ANOVA were used to explore the difference of emotional laboring strategies among sellers of different genders, ages, education levels, and sales experience. The results of the test presented in Table 2 (Appendix) demonstrate that the difference among sellers of different ages and education levels is highly significant, but no significant difference was detected between males and females in terms of strategic choices. Specifically, older and more educated employees tended to use higher levels of deep acting as opposed to surface acting strategies.

### Mediating effects

The test for mediation followed the procedure outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), using linear regression and three logistic regressions because the dependent variable "buying decision" is a categorical variable (*yes/no*). Hypotheses 4 and 5 involved the effects of deep and surface acting on customer cooperation. Because these hypotheses included exclusively continuous variables, they were analyzed first and linear regression was used to test their effects. Results indicated that both deep and surface acting had a significant effect on customer cooperation, with deep acting having a significant positive relationship (standardized  $\beta=0.69$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ), and surface acting having a significant negative relationship ( $\beta=-0.25$ ,  $p < 0.000$ ). Thus, Hypotheses 4 and 5 were supported.

The logistic regression results are shown in Table 3 (Appendix). Odds ratios and 95% confidence intervals (CI) were derived from these models. Model 1 included the control variables. Customer purchase decisions were significantly affected by customer's age, education and employee's gender and age (OR=.386, CI (0.251 to 0.593),  $p < 0.000$ ; OR=.429, CI (0.277 to 0.664),  $p < 0.000$ ; OR=.504, CI (0.275 to 0.925),  $p < 0.05$ ; OR=15.464, CI (8.145 to 29.359),  $p < 0.000$ ). Model 2 indicated that both deep and surface acting had a significant effect on customer buying decision, with deep acting having a significant positive relationship ( $\beta=2.878$ , OR=17.770, CI(7.322 to 43.124),  $p < 0.000$ ), and surface acting having a significant negative relationship ( $\beta=-2.163$ , OR=0.115, CI(0.058 to 0.228),  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting Hypotheses 1 and 2.

Model 3 demonstrated that when perceived customer cooperation was added in Model 2, it exhibited highly significant effects on customer buying decisions, indicating support for Hypothesis 3, and the coefficients of deep and surface acting emotional labor strategies decreased but the effects on the dependent variable were still significant. Thus, customer cooperation functioned as a partial mediator in the model in support of Hypotheses 6 and 7. The total model validity indices were acceptable (Chi-square improved = 6.336,  $p < 0.000$ , likelihood test = 169.926, Cox & Snell  $R^2 = 0.558$ , Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.744$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the evidence supports the premise that employee emotional labor strategy has a significant impact on customer buying decisions by either facilitating (in the case of deep acting) or hindering (in the case of surface acting) customer cooperation. Seller surface acting had a direct and negative effect on customer buying decisions and an indirect negative effect on customer buying decisions via customer cooperation. In contrast, seller deep acting had a direct and positive effect on customer buying decisions as well as an indirect effect on customer decisions via customer cooperation. In other words, customer cooperation mediated the effect of seller emotional labor acting strategy on customer buying decisions (either positively or negatively).

The study has implications for theory and practice. First, the study builds on the current research examining a relationship between emotional labor strategies and attitudes. No existing research has empirically reported an association between emotional labor strategies and subsequent customer buying decisions or with customer cooperation as a mediator. Second, a key practical implication of the present study is that employees should be trained in deep acting, given the positive association with customer cooperation and buying decisions.

It is important to note the limitations of the present study and opportunities for future research. First, the fact that the sample involved one industry (mobile phone sales) and a homogeneous population (China) indicates additional populations and industries should be considered. Second, the measure of customer cooperation would benefit from further examination and, in particular, obtaining the customers' views in conjunction with the sellers views.

In addition, the study also found some interesting results related to age, experience, and education that may influence employee strategic choice. Although future studies are required to confirm the findings, preliminary results indicate that more educated, more mature, and more experienced employees were more likely to utilize deep acting over surface acting during the employee-customer encounter. This has profound implications for the recruitment and selection of future employees, as well as the training and development of current employees.

As more people seek jobs in the service sector, it is becoming especially critical to examine the factors that impact customers' levels of cooperation and buying decisions. Future research should continue to examine the impact of emotional labor strategies on customer cooperation. Although prior studies have addressed parts of the equation, such as the connection of strategy to attitudes, there has been little research on the customer social



exchange relationships with sellers that address the overall antecedent, intervening and behavioral outcomes of relationships. In particular, it is important to examine the role of the reciprocity embedded in these relationships because employee-to-customer interactions are a key component of service encounters.

In sum, whereas prior research has examined the link between emotional labor strategies and attitudes, the current study contributes to the literature by presenting empirical support for a relationship between emotional labor strategies and subsequent behavior: customer buying decisions. In addition, the study's detection of a mediation effect suggests that the mechanism through which these strategies affect customer buying decisions involves customer cooperation.

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## APPENDIX

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	M	St. Dev.	1	2	3
Surface acting	3.349	0.637	(0.779)		
Deep acting	3.103	0.727	-.201**	(0.831)	
Customer Cooperation	3.379	0.810	-.230**	.612**	(0.731)

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , two-tail test

Table 2: ANOVA

		surface acting	deep acting
Seller Gender	Male	3.24±0.72	3.17±0.84
	Female	3.17±0.69	3.23±0.78
	T	.83	-.64
Seller Age	20-25	3.79±.43	2.50±.35
	26-30	2.87±.55	3.59±.68
	30-35	2.30±.71	4.27±.44
	Above 35	2.15±.57	4.17±.68
	F	85.19**	96.45**
Seller Education	high school	3.25±.68	3.14±.77
	2-3 year undergraduate	3.19±.70	3.18±.79
	4-5 year graduate	2.34±.43	4.36±.45
	F	10.96**	15.34**

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , two-tail test

**Table 3: Logistic regression: Customer cooperation as a mediator of the relationship between deep acting, surface acting and buying decision**

Independent Variables	Model					
	Model I <sup>a</sup>		Model II <sup>b</sup>		Model III <sup>c</sup>	
	OR (95% CI) P value	$\beta$	OR (95% CI) P value	$\beta$	OR (95% CI) P value	$\beta$
Customer's gender	0.675(0.371, 1.227)	-0.393	0.638(0.299, 1.362)	-0.450	0.590(0.270, 1.287)	-0.528
Customer's age	0.386(0.251, 0.593)***	-0.953	0.533(0.264, 1.077)	-0.630	0.473(0.225, 0.996)*	-0.749
Customer's education	0.429(0.277, 0.664)***	-0.847	0.596(0.307, 1.156)	-0.517	0.526(0.258, 1.074)	-0.643
Employee's gender	0.504(0.275, 0.925)*	-0.685	0.384(0.173, 0.851)*	-0.957	0.377(0.169, 0.842)*	-0.975
Employee's age	15.464(8.145, 29.359)***	2.738	4.185(1.759, 9.956)**	1.431	4.453(1.826, 10.860)**	2.494
Employee's education	0.889(0.550, 1.437)	-0.117	1.048(0.570, 1.929)	0.047	0.986(0.531, 1.832)	-0.014
Surface acting			0.115(0.058, 0.228)***	-2.163	0.105(0.052, 0.215)***	-2.251
Deep acting			17.770(7.322, 43.124)***	2.878	10.671(4.124, 27.611)***	2.367
Customer Cooperation					2.317(1.189, 4.515)*	0.840
Overall "hit ratio"	79.9%		86.9%		87.6%	
Chi-square improved	144.456***		92.397***		6.336*	
Likelihood-ratio test	268.659		176.262		169.926	
Cox & Snell R <sup>2</sup>	0.384		0.548		0.558	
Nagelkerke R <sup>2</sup>	0.512		0.731		0.744	

Note: OR= odds ratio; CI= confidence interval. \* $p < .05$

